The 15M Movement. Collective and volatile actions in the political arena

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Abstract

From data obtained in a survey conducted in May 2011 to identify some characteristics of the media impact of Spanish 15M Movement, this paper presents a critical reflection on the role of new media, especially social networks, in the generation of massive social actions. As a result of current information processes, social networks have been positioned in the imaginary as informative multiplication scenarios, and as spaces that generate immediate social mobilizations. However, the rapid spread, spontaneity, immediacy and volatility that characterize these movements contrast with the lack of lengthy movements, which arise from deliberative processes, necessarily built on institutionalized public spheres. The article shows the opposition between the change in media consumption habits and the reception of information by citizens and their permanent apathy to action-mobilization. Thus, changes in the forms of communication, individualization, connection and multipresence keep unchanged collective action spaces, and can even reduce these spaces if they are not utilized properly.

Keywords

Communication; politics; social network; Spanish Revolution; participation

1. Introduction: ICT as tools for social mobilization for political purposes. From radio wave to SMS and, finally, the hash tag

Briefly reviewing the historical record of the most recent social mobilizations around the world which have had a political impact, we can see that there is a close relationship between these activities and the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), which we can define as:

> "*a diverse set of technological tools and resources used to transmit, store, create, share or exchange information. These technological tools and resources include computers, the Internet (websites, blogs and emails), live broadcasting technologies (radio, television and webcasting), recorded broadcasting technologies (podcasting, audio and video players, and storage devices) and telephony (fixed or mobile, satellite, visio/video-conferencing, etc.)*" (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2009).

Thus, since the beginning of the 21st Century, many social movements have a common denominator: the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), especially websites, blogs, emails, social networks and mobiles, accessible to citizens.

Below is a brief chronological list of such actions: i) the Second People Power Revolution (EDSA Revolution of 2001) organized by exchanging text messages that led to

the downfall of President Joseph Estrada in the Philippines; ii) the Night of the Short Messages, of March 13th, 2004 in Spain, that determined the change of government in the Spanish government during the elections held the very next day; iii) the impact of alternative media on the Internet to transmit information during the Orange Revolution that took place in Ukraine in 2004; iv) La Rebelión de los Forajidos (The Rebellion of the Outlaws) in Ecuador (2005), which could stand through the radio capital La Luna, which became the only media which channeled the social claim; v) the case of the Colombian group "Un millón de voces contra las FARC" (One million voices against FARC), which conceived and organized their mobilization through Facebook in 2008; vi) the Green Revolution in Iran (2009), that originated after the presidential election and developed on platforms such as Twitter; vii) The Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia (2010), which ended the 23-year presidency of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011, and was spread widely on social networks; viii) the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, which, after 30 years of the regime of Hosni Mubarak, Egyptians started the protests that ended with the resignation of the president; and, finally, ix) Spain's Indignant Movement[1] (2011), which represented public discontent with the political class.

Based on this, we can say that public involvement in social movements found, in ICT as social networks --for instance, Facebook and Twitter-- a tool to manage and disseminate important information. In fact, during its evolution, technology has always been used to spread ideas that can be transformed into physical demonstrations in the street, which is a transition from the virtual to the real presence in the streets.

So the question is: what kind of relationship can exist between this kind of ICT and the actual mobilization of citizens? Or to put it in the following manner: what is the connection between the bidirectional media, represented by the latest generation of technology platforms of communication, and social mass mobilizations?

In this context, Figure 1, which shows the penetration of different media in Spain, clearly distinguishes that television is still the most widely-used media. However, the use of the Internet has increased steadily over the last five years.

Perhaps this fact will allow us to understand why in 2004 the Plaza del Sol in Madrid was filled with people thanks to the technology of the Short Message Service (SMS) of mobile phones, while in 2011 the call was made mainly through social networks. Thus, *Facebook* and *Twitter* have become platforms of civic organization that allowed the exchange of communication between millions of people.

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[1]. According to Antonio Negri (2011), the 15M, the Indignants Movement, was articulated by different nodes of discontent: an association of activists computer, a network of activists of the right to housing, the community of people with mortgage seeking recognition through the media, various assemblies and urban groups and a network of "independent left" union, and a social movement (consisting of middle class people, in the broad sense) against crisis and poverty, through the middle class.

Figure 1. Evolution of media penetration and Internet users in Spain (2007 - May 2011)
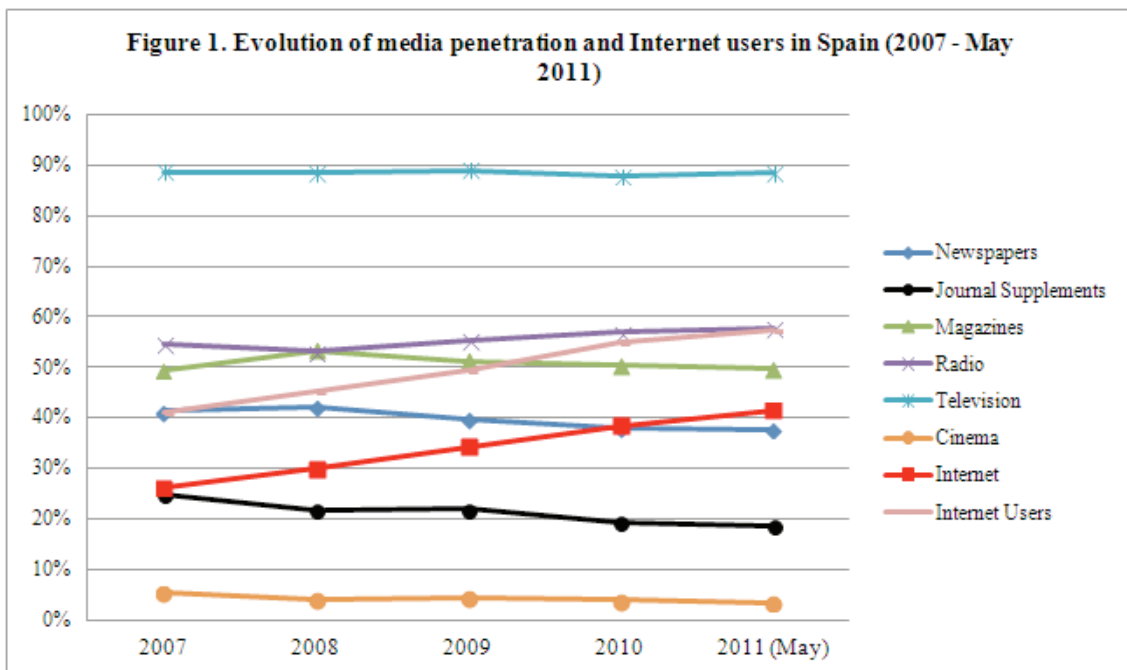
Source: Encuesta General de Medios (EGM) (May 2011, Spain). Percentage values

2. Methodology to test the connection between ICT and popular social actions promoted by ICT

2.1. Theoretical connotations

All of the aforementioned events define the scenario in which a new political actor is called into action and social mobilization trough invisible (but accessible) actors through ICT, especially social networks. A new political subject, that quickly gains strength as a mass movement, due to network-effect, and can influence public decision processes only if the mentioned actions have political effects. The examples above are multiplying on the platforms of Web 2.0, in which the actions proposed citizens who have been well received by a large number of users.

Furthermore, within this optimistic scenario of social ICT influence in politics, the discussion about the possibilities the Internet offers for approach and reconnecting people to the processes of public decision-making, and presents technology as an ideal tool to achieve those objectives, as well as tools that can strengthen the relationship between citizens and public institutions. Thus, it is considered possible there are scenarios where accountability and transparency are a fact, with the growing demand of citizens using ICT, understood in general terms, as everyday tools of work (Kahn and Kellner, 2004: 98-99).

In fact, Pierre Lévy anticipates the end of dictatorships with the advent of e-democracy (2002: 33), and Bentivegna (2006) recognizes the importance of ICT in the hands of society as a way to guarantee democracy, and identifies them as medicine against representation and political crisis prevailing in the West. This author also notes that the emergence of the Internet potentially allows citizens to reconnect with government

representatives, and how it generates high expectations for the renewal of democracy based on the Athenian model. In this sense, Bentivegna says the change brought about by the Internet is that, thanks to the network, politics crystallize in different spheres and contexts, and involves the loss of centre political orientation as a result of the collapse of traditional political institutions (2006: 332)

Thus, the so-called social media related to Web 2.0 platforms appear as real opportunities for individualized and mass protests expressed largely through user-generated content. In this regard, Häyhtiö and Rinne (2008: 26) indicate that political protests made through the Internet differ from traditional protests in terms of agenda, objectives, and duration and action lines. Meanwhile, Dalhgreen (2009, in: Breindl, 2010: 5) notes that this evolution is linked to the overall process of individualization that outlines new political practices: a change in which political connections are established following personal interests and choices are made based in every lifestyle, rather than traditional ideologies.

In this sense, Juris (2004) notes that the use of new ICT and the media turn out key elements for social activity aimed at the formation of social movements. Furthermore, Sey and Castells (2004) recognize that this new social ICT and the Internet play the role of motivator and driver in the sphere of public policy, provided people take advantage of their benefits. Meanwhile, Sassen (2007) describes the widespread use of digital networks by actors of business, public and civic initiatives. Therefore, the potential benefits of popular ICT are large and, in many cases, fully real.

However, from a neutral perspective, although the change brought about by new technologies strengthens the personalization of information and generates certain types of collective action motivated by Trending Topics, it should be noted that these are collective behaviours and actions guided exclusively by mass media trends, but in many cases, these are unrelated: "in cyberspace there is no unifying global village. What exists is a bombardment, without standards, of many messages that represent inconsistent and incompatible universes "(Zizek, 2006).

According to this author, these social movements mobilized through ICT are presented as widespread ignorance that stems from individual participation: "Why a democratic discussion in which most citizens involved, would lead to better results, if the majority remains in ignorance at the cognitive level?" (2006). The evolution of the above cases is a change in the ideological sense and in the mechanism of the action of traditional social movement: first, the rallying point of reflection of the historical human mobilizations is lost, and, second, people trust in the power of a large community of users participating permanently in real-time .

So, somehow we have a choice: the optimism of collective intelligence online (based on digital networks) of Pierre Lévy versus criticism by Zizek, who notes that "the general availability will cause a intolerable claustrophobia; excess options will be experienced as the inability to choose; the universal direct participant community, will exclude, with increasing force, those unable to participate "(2010: 167)

2.2. Case study: survey of the media impact of the 15M Movement

In order to characterize and evaluate the dilemma outlined above, it was decided to carry out a case study that provides a particular perspective on the practical aspects of the massive use of ICT -social networks- aimed at political change.

Specifically, it has carried out a field study that addresses the dissemination of information on the *15M Movement* through social networks. Thus, it was possible to calculate the impact of different communication platforms that reported on the *Spanish Indignants* protests. Measurement was taken from an online survey involving people who regularly use the Internet and who were invited to answer a questionnaire consisting of both open and closed questions designed to establish the importance of each media – new or traditional – as a primary source of information and as a means of expression.

The following table shows in detail the characteristics of the survey:

Figure 2. Technical details and sociodemographic characteristics of the results Online survey	
Universe	Internet users
Sample selection	Snowball sampling Invitation through email messages and social networking
Collecting data	Online questionnaire with open and closed questions
Sample size	549 valid responses
Sampling error	Error of ±4,27% for the global data, with an infinite population, and maximum uncertainty (p=q=50%), and confidence level of 95,5%
Fieldwork period	May, 20 – July, 26 (94% of answers between May, 20 and 31)
Minimum groups by gender, age, etc.	Not applicable
Weighing	Not applicable
Answer by genre	Women: 53,6% Men: 46,4%
Average age of respondents	37,8 years old
Higher degree of respondents	University: 63,4%
Main activity of respondents	Self-employment: 45,9% Student:24,4%
Country of respondents	Spain: 87,3%

Source: authors

3. Main results of the survey

3.1. New media and information consumption

The survey results corroborate EGM data reflected in Figure 1, as the dominance of television over other media as an initial source of a news event, but they also outline the growing use of other Internet-based digital media (Figure 3). In this sense, the results reveal a situation that questions the role of television over the use of social networks: the sum of results of *Facebook* (19%) and *Twitter* (10%) as an initial source exceeds television sources by 4 points. Thus, television lost -in this case study- its role as the main source of information.

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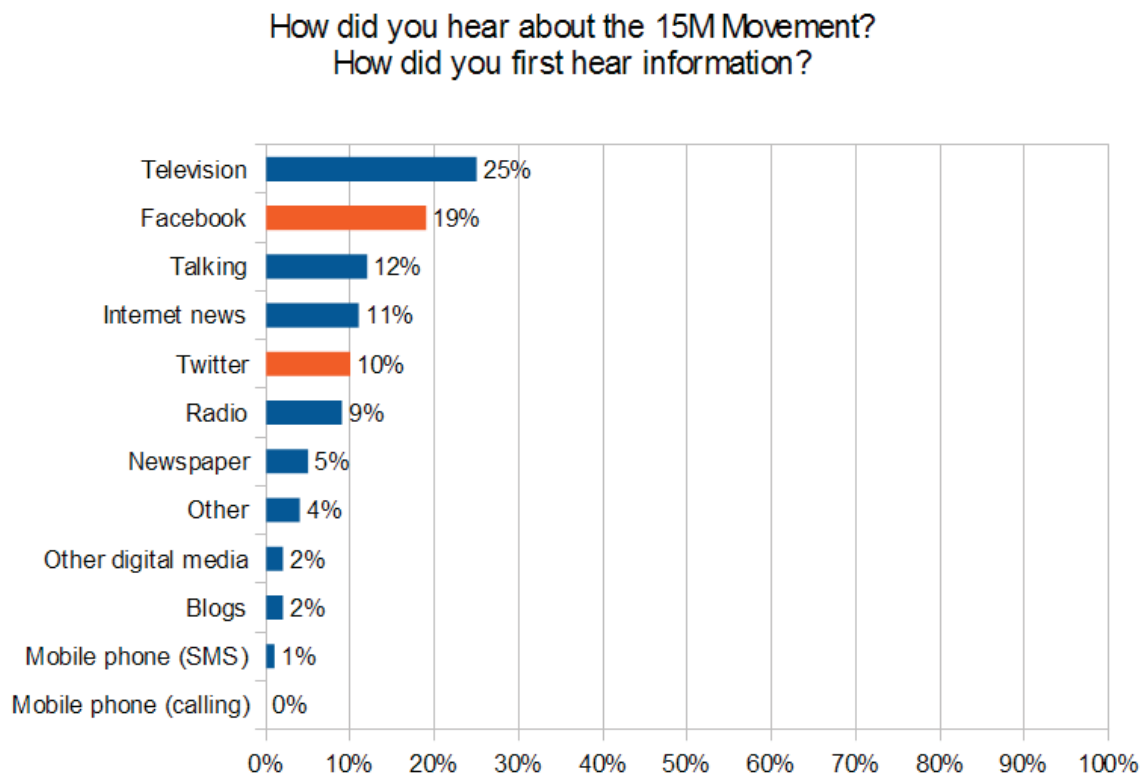

Figure 3
Source: authors. Percentage values and single choice

An interesting fact: almost no communication via SMS, which would imply a direct relationship between individuals, as in the Spanish case, 2004, mentioned above. This situation allows establishing that there is no additional, but media replacement. It's also worth noting the contrasts between the consumption of traditional press and the consumption of digital press. The survey shows how reading on screens has displaced the use of the printing press as a basic source of information.

However, the trend in the monitoring of informative facts presents a variation versus behaviour reflected in Figure 3: users are referred to the traditional media for more information, but do not leave social media to stay aware. Thus, we see both, a very significant increase in the use of traditional media, especially the press -print and digital- as a consolidation of *Twitter* and *Facebook* as tools to follow a news story. Figure 4 shows the trend of users seeking information about the *15M Movement*.
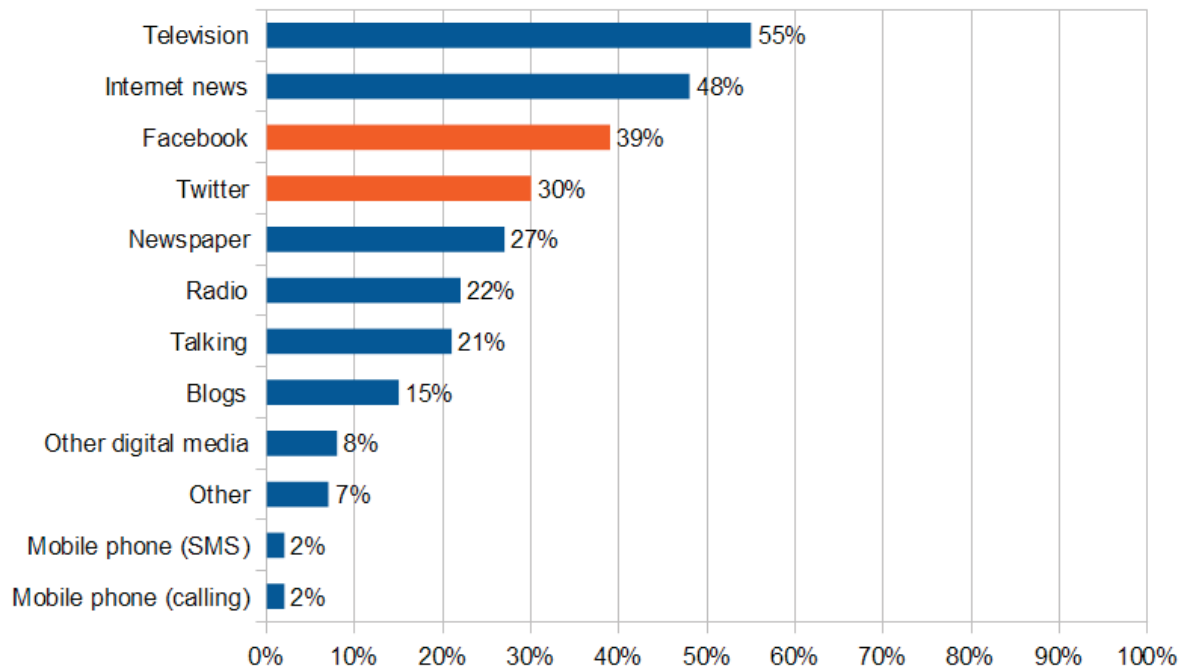
Figure 4
Source: authors. Percentage values and multiple choice

Thus, the graph shows a trend of growth of digital media (48%) in relation to television formats (55%). Also remarkable is the place to play again the press as a means to deepen a news event. Again, if we add behaviours using social networks included in the survey – *Facebook* and *Twitter* – the results indicate that 282 people out of 549 used social media platforms to track the Movement. The use of social networks (51%) is close to the value obtained by the television, which draws the dispute between these two media as media requested by users.

3.2. New media and information campaign

The use made of the information received is also a key issue to consider, taking into account the development of ICT as a social tool. The possibilities to create and disseminate information using different profiles, or through interaction with traditional media, allows users to be more involved in defining agendas in the spread of information as well as content generation.

Regarding the impact of *15M* in media, using information received by users allows us to identify certain features which define a change in the passive behaviour of the media receptor. Figure 5 shows the media used by the surveyed users to disseminate information about the *15M Movement* in the course of the news studied.

Through what media have you disseminated
the development of the 15M Movement ?

Media	Percentage
Facebook	45%
Talking	43%
Twitter	22%
None	16%
Other digital media	13%
Blogs	6%
Mobile phone (calling)	6%
Mobile phone (SMS)	4%
Internet news	4%
Other	3%
Newspaper	3%
Talking	3%
Radio	3%
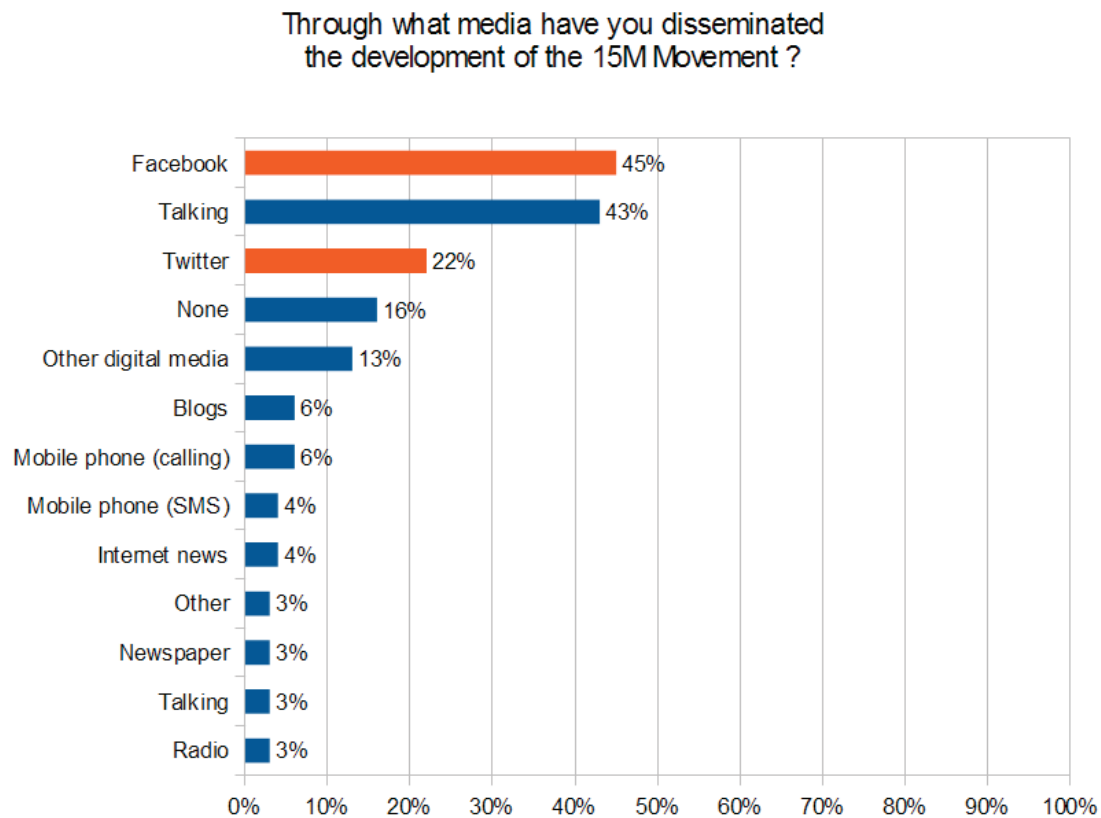
Figure 5
Source: authors. Percentage values and multiple choice

As shown, over 80% of respondents made some kind of dissemination of information during the development of the *Movement*. In this case, diffusion implies a clear link with social networks and, conversely, an almost complete decoupling of the traditional media (digital and written press, television and radio), as well as the media involving a direct bidirectional connection. Regarding the use of *Facebook* (46%), *Twitter* (22%) and other digital media (13%) a clear tendency of users is defined as disseminating information received through profiles created on digital platforms.

But if the chance users have to spread and reply information implies a move towards the exchange of content, the shift from mere information dissemination to the creation of information itself remains undoubtedly the unresolved factor for citizen empowerment. This can be seen in Figure 6.

Did you create information about the 15M Movement?

34%

■ Yes
■ No

66%

Figure 6
Source: authors. Percentage values and single choice

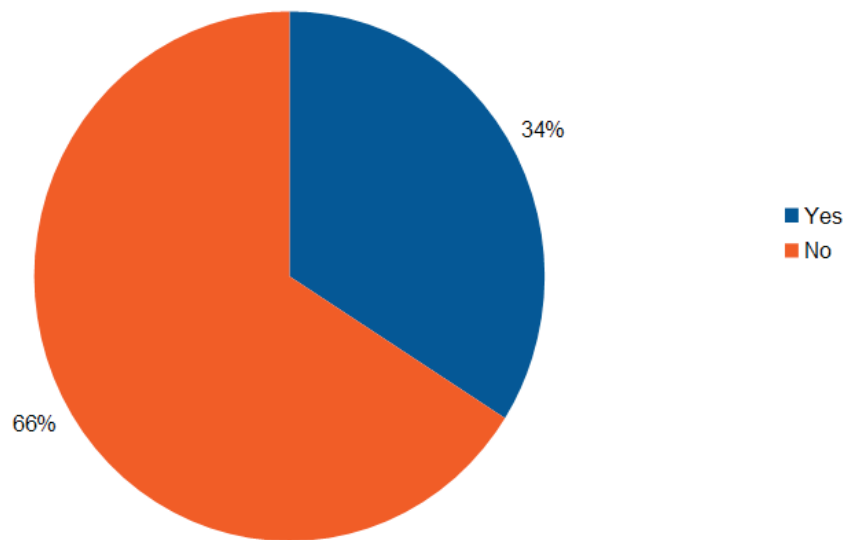Thus, one of the great advantages that researchers – within the optimistic paradigm described briefly above – attribute to ICT – associated with Web 2.0 – is that they make it possible for citizens to create and disseminate their own content. Therefore the need is recognized to promote the training and development of digital and media competences, which are more than critical consumption or finding and evaluating information, but includes the creation and dissemination of messages to ensure diversity content and, in general, the inclusion and participation of citizens in the public sphere[2].

In this sense, the answers about creating their own media content, allow for the detection of a behaviour that is tied to systems, formats and mechanisms of traditional media. As seen in Figure 6, only 34% of surveyed users generated new information content.

3.3. New media and social imaginary

The construction of the social imaginary based on new social ICT also reflects a behaviour – and action – regarding consumption and information processing. The effect of social networks feeds an emotional attitude in users, reflected both in a *hopeful* view of the possibilities of social mobilization promoted by ICT related with people, and in the absence of critical thinking within the social process. The definition given (in three words) by respondents (*Figure 7*) reflects mostly concepts associated to positive values and to historical transformative social movements, avoiding any negative word or critical position regarding the *15M Movement*.

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[2] Digital competence is recognised as one of the eight key competences for people to develop a Knowledge-based Society. See: European Commission (2006)

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Figure 7
The definition given (in three words) by respondents, regarding the 15M Movement

4. Discussion

In view of the historical and theoretical proposals submitted, and after the case study, three clearly defined fields of focus loom.

Field A. The online survey conducted shows that social networks reproduce the same trends of traditional media (radio, television and press). That is, citizens develop mainly two types of action: the first, carried by most users, is to act only as individual broadcasters of content produced by the mass-media, a task performed mainly through social networks; and they do this primarily through social networks.

Regarding the latter, which is practised by a minority of the users, this consists of producing information to be transmitted through the Internet. Thus, while the creativity of users is essential and should be recognized as a capability that reflects high levels of media literacy (EAVI, 2009), the production of news content generated by the user is limited, for now, to replicate the same formats and the same trends of information production of traditional media.

Thus, innovativeness (aims, interests, values, codes, conventions, etc.) that theory attribute to political practices in Internet platforms – one the bases of political participation on the Internet (Vedel, 2003) – is, according to the analysed case, limited to a few creative manifestations incapable of motivating scenarios for discussion, decision or actual impact on the definition of executive actions.

Field B. Clearly there is a change in media consumption, especially in the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century. However, this transformation is based mainly in the form of receiving alerts, which are no longer produced by traditional media such as television, radio or the press, but through social networks, which allow automatic

dissemination of information. The change does not mean the end of the newsflash, but its perpetuation second by second.

Similarly, the way users monitor news events has undergone an interesting transformation: the number of channels to find and receive information has increased. However, this does not guarantee the multiplication of different and complementary content, as would be expected in the very essence of democratic values, but causes viral replication of the same content through new channels.

Field C. The demonstrations that are generated through the Internet (and, therefore, acquire many of the characteristics of this medium: volatility, immediacy, speed, fickleness) stamped dangerous traits in social representation of mass mobilizations. First, they fail to organize a political and ideological structure that strengthens the social imaginary of the *15M Movement* and, second, those demonstrations generally respond to the way mass media works; and to fads that work from emotional contagion, but quickly become blurred due to its inability to affect the decision-making process. In this sense, the Internet allows just a great echo of any fact which apparently is in fashion, and therefore is also extremely ephemeral.

Therefore we can say that social events generated through the networks act as a *placebo* in a system that sees social media as channels for the expression of social discontent, as ways of legitimizing the actions and current political practices.

Thus emerges the idea of considering the 15M as something that has not been anything but a critical – systemic – expression against capitalism. An expression automatically legitimized in two fundamental ways: first, by allowing the expression of social protest within the limits of own social system. From where comes the second way: self-censorship attached to *15M Movement*, and according to this any disruption to the functioning of the political system is appreciated as violence by *15M Movement* and citizens.

5. Conclusion

The new media – and especially social networks – have become instruments of reception and exchange of information, changing the trend of passive consumption of media and tying penetration rates of television. In this sense, interviewed people found out about the *15M Movement* thanks to social networks, compared to the television. Also, people followed the news about these demonstrations via these popular ICT.

However, the transition from passive reception to massive social action for political purposes is still a task to be solved, as people do not create new information by themselves: basically, they echo what comes to them. The only progress so far has been experienced in the field of distribution and redistribution of information received through mass media that, in the same way that individuals have invaded the space of social media.

Thus, the results of our study allow us to say that, contrary to the optimistic visions that consider Internet, social networks and ICT as ideal tools that allow people to approach and influence public decision-making and to enhance public participation in the field public (and political), these hopes are still a pipe dream.

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According to the survey results, the majority of users in the survey only reproduced the contents of the mass media. Seen in the light of the most pessimistic theories, this is dangerous because it would only be a mere reproduction of news without contrast, the multiplication of "representations" disseminated through the mass media. We should also add the sense of people that they are part of a social movement, but this is false. So, this reinforces the idea that ICT can generate a placebo effect in terms of citizen participation in the public sphere and the defence of democracy and accountability of political actors.

However, the possibility of creating content generated by users expressed by some respondents, although still low, allows us to see a silver lining in communication and the political practices: as new technological advances and tools are easier to use, and as users get used to them (the younger generations are much more adept at creating media content) increased production and dissemination of alternative content to those produced by traditional media will be normal.

The analysis of the results allows us to affirm that access to ICTs and the Internet (via social networks) to find information does not guarantee the production and dissemination of materials themselves. Neither of these two factors (access and production) affects, at least in this case, the increased political participation of citizens. In conclusion, citizen participation in the public sphere through technology is not given automatically and proportionally, i.e., it's not enough to have technological equipment and to access it.

Demonstrations generated in social networks move from the virtual to physical presence in public squares, which act as new channels to express social discontent linked with positive values related to historical social transformations. To achieve that, it is necessary to promote training in digital and media competences.

With these instruments, social networks will be able to promote channels – as a form of communicative power – to structure a new public sphere capable of influencing the decision-making system (Habermas, 1996), and going beyond the promotion of trend topics and creating places where there is more democratic dialogue. ✎

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