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## Old and New Media Logics in an Electoral Campaign: the Case of *Podemos* and the Two-Way Street Mediatization of Politics

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### Abstract

In Spain, the 2014 European Elections saw the unexpected rise of a new party, *Podemos*, which obtained five European Parliament seats only 3 months after its formation. In the Spanish National Elections in December 2015, this party obtained 20.66% of the votes, which made it the third biggest party. Our objective was to analyse the old and new elements of *Podemos*' communication and campaign strategies. The methodology followed herein used this new party as a strategic case study by a qualitative approach. The analysis focused on three key fronts: 1) the role of communication; 2) mediatization of politics; 3) use of digital media. The results suggested that *Podemos*' 2014 electoral campaign combined presence on broadcast television and use of intense digital media to boost citizens' engagement and self-mediation. Accordingly, it was established as a new transmedia party. This case also demonstrates that mediatization can also occur in two-way street dynamics, that is, from politics to the media, where the former generates an influence on the latter. This finding opens the door to help overcome the media-centric vision. Finally, we discussed future questions about the influence on other political actors' communication strategies in different parts of the world from an international perspective.

### Keywords

Political Parties, Electoral Campaigning, New Technologies, Internet

### Introduction

In Spain, the European elections held on 25 May 2014 had an unexpected result: *Podemos*, a new political party, received more than 1,245,948 votes (7.89% of the total), and it won five seats in the European parliament.<sup>1</sup> This party, formed only three months before these elections, had the fourth best showing in a dynamic political context in which new political parties, closely linked to the activist movement 15-M,<sup>2</sup> participated for the first time.

Because of 15-M, Spanish politics has been marked by an explosion of activism since 2011 (Castells 2012; Micó and Casero-Ripollés 2014). This activist movement has been diluted on the public scene, but it has led to the development of new activist-based political parties that emerged from 15-M's grassroots and its claims. The two key initiatives in Spain are, nationally, *Podemos*, and, locally, the *Común* parties, *Zaragoza en Común*, *Ahora Madrid*, and so on, which were inspired by the example of *Barcelona en Común* (Tormey 2015; Tormey and Feenstra 2015). Despite their differences, these parties share a political agenda based on anti-austerity measures and constitutional reforms in a political context marked by a crisis of confidence in the traditional parties.

From an ideological perspective, *Podemos* could be perceived as a new left-leaning populist party similar to other populist parties, such as *Syriza* in Greece. Furthermore, it shares common elements with *Movimento 5 Stelle* in Italy, particularly the monolithic 'the people' concept in antagonistic opposition to 'the elite' (Rodríguez-Aguilera de Prat 2015; Mudde 2015). However, in its organisational structure, *Podemos* promotes network dynamics similar to other parties now arising in Europe, such as the *Pirate* parties in Iceland, Germany, and Sweden, which are pioneering Internet-based decision-making structures. Last, *Podemos* is at the forefront, with other parties, such as *Die Linke*, in redefining and rethinking the left and its (media) tactics, messages, and concerns.

In the national elections in December 2015, *Podemos* obtained 20.66% of the votes, making it the third largest party in Spain, behind *Partido Popular* (28.72%) and *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (22.01%), and ahead of *Ciudadanos* (13.93%) and *Izquierda Unida* (3.67%)<sup>3</sup>. *Podemos* is one of the first and most successful cases of a new political party stemming from a protest movement. This study focuses on the

central role of *Podemos*' communication processes and its ability to campaign in the various areas of mainstream and digital media.

The framework that drives this study is mediatization theory, which suggests that mainstream media, particularly broadcast television, has a strong influence on politics. Currently, though, this perspective co-exists with the growth in digital media. These media enable the potential for a more diverse, fragmented, chaotic, open, and polycentric environment that may also affect political communication in important ways (McNair 2006; Chadwick 2013).

Our main argument is, on the one hand, that *Podemos* is a transmedia political party having strong activist roots; it combines logics of older and newer media as its organizational backbone. On the other hand, the party builds an innovative communication strategy to drive mediatization in a reciprocal way, surpassing its unilateral conception. In this manner, the political party is driving the media to cover them in particular ways such that the former generates an influence on the latter. This finding challenges the media-centric vision of mediatization theory.

The objective of this study is to analyse the old and new elements of *Podemos*' communication and campaign processes. The specific goals of the study are as follows:

- (1) Analyse *Podemos*' political and communication strategies in the context of the 2014 European elections campaign
- (2) Examine how the mediatization of politics works in *Podemos*' political and communication strategies during its campaign
- (3) Consider the use of social and digital media as communication tools during *Podemos*' campaign

## Methods

This study uses *Podemos* as a strategic case study to examine the role of communication in this political party. A qualitative methodology is employed to observe and understand elements of continuity and discontinuity. Eight sources and materials were used for the analysis, as follows:

1. The content of the section 'Debates and opinion' of *Plaza Podemos* on the main party website (<https://plaza.podemos.info/debates>)
2. Political documents generated by *Podemos* and available on its website, such as the guide of the Circles, the FAQ document on the Circles, and *Podemos'* electoral program or political statutes (<https://plaza.podemos.info>)
3. The contents of *Podemos'* Facebook page and Twitter account (<https://www.facebook.com/ahorapodemos/>; @ahorapodemos)
4. The blog '*Otra vuelta de tuerka*' (Another Turn of the Screw) by Pablo Iglesias and published in *Público.es* (<http://blogs.publico.es/pablo-iglesias/>)
5. Those statements and public interventions made by the founding leaders of *Podemos* (Pablo Iglesias, Iñigo Errejón, and Juan Carlos Monedero) at conferences, rallies, and political events that are available on YouTube
6. News media output on *Podemos* published by Spanish mainstream media, such as *El País*, *El Mundo*, *Infolibre*, *La Marea*, *eldiario.es*, and *Público.es*
7. Newspaper opinion editorials, interviews, and papers published in scientific journals by the leaders and promoters of *Podemos*
8. Divulcation books about *Podemos*

The study period begins when the party was launched (17 January 2014) and ends at the 2014 European election campaign (from 16 March to 25 May 2014, inclusive). This period was selected to carefully examine the point when the project was

consolidated and became highly active in terms of communication. *Podemos* is a highly dynamic phenomenon with constantly evolving internal dynamics and formal structure. This study focuses only on the first stage of the party's existence.

## **Literature review: Politics and activism faced with the media and digital tools**

### *The mediatization of politics*

Mediatization theory explains how political communication works (Strömbäck and Esser 2014). The theory is based on the key role of mainstream media, particularly television, in contemporary society as the major intermediaries for access to social knowledge. This position gives the media the ability to condition all of society's spheres (Hjarvard 2013; Hepp 2013). From this perspective, mediatization holds that mainstream media significantly influence societies and democracies. This premise has important consequences for political communication. The citizens' perceptions and knowledge of politics are highly mediated. Thus, the event representations created by the media and disseminated through news outlets could have relevant effects on citizens' perceptions of politics.

The mediatization theory is grounded in a tradition that advances the idea that media have strong effects. In this sense, it continues a tradition initially driven in the 1960s and 1970s with other approaches, like agenda setting, or later framing, priming and indexing. However, other frameworks suggest that the media have minimal effects on political communication. This paradigm emerged in the 1940s and 1950s with the importance of interpersonal communication and the two-step flow model based on the preponderance of opinion leaders (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955), and was taken up again in the 1980s and 1990s. Nowadays, the fragmented media environment that emerges from the increase in digital media facilitates the further supply of information, the many

options for the public to choose, and greater selective exposure. For these reasons, Bennet and Iyengar (2008) argue that the future of political communication will be defined by minimal media effects. However, other scholars argue that the strong effects paradigm remains in the centre of the field (Holbert *et al.* 2010).

Today's media environment is changing with not only the rise in digital media, but also the transformation of social and political structures, which affect the press-politics relationship. Political actors can bypass the mainstream media using digital platforms (Schulz 2014). Citizens and other social actors can create and disseminate political content to become potential sources of information (Castells 2009), which result in flows of information that are relatively more fluid and difficult to control (McNair 2006) and a more diverse, fragmented, and polycentric communication environment (Chadwick 2013). This development is opening a fault line in the mediatization of politics because digital media can contest the rules of broadcast television.

However, several critical authors propose that mediatization is a poorly defined concept (Deacon and Stanyer 2014; Lunt and Livingstone 2016). The main criticism lies in its media-centrism. It bestows the media with an unassailable leading role as a catalyst of social change, and it overlooks the influences of non-media factors (Deacon and Stanyer 2014). The media are perceived as institutions of extraordinary power with strong effects on all types of political and social practices. The media's influence is also perceived as encompassing and affecting all the other social spheres in unilateral, non-reciprocal relationships. Therefore, in this context, we must understand the contention that politics depends on the central functions of the media according to mediatization theory (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999). This contention generates negative views of the

media's influence on politics because it highlights the media's perverse effects on politics (Livingstone 2009).

Along these lines, mediatization assumes that political actors have no other option than to adapt to the media's rules and criteria (Strömbäck and Esser 2014). Political actors cannot avoid doing so if they desire public visibility. Yet, Deacon and Stanyer (2014) maintain that alternative reactions and responses are possible. Another concern is that mediatization focuses almost exclusively on classical types of mass media and does not account for the media in the digital environment (Jensen 2013).

#### *The use of digital media in electoral campaigns*

Digital media introduce certain novelties into electoral campaigns because they offer new tools for political communication. Recently, institutional political actors who have incorporated digital media into their communication strategies have engaged in a rapid process of adaptation (Lilleker et al. 2015). The integration of these tools has increased in campaigns to the point of becoming something natural and quotidian that is taken for granted as 'mundane Internet tools' (Nielsen 2011). The generalised use of digital media in campaigns has been stressed since the 2008 US campaign led by Barack Obama, which marked an inflection point (Bimber 2014).

The body of literature demonstrates that digital media are part of the total campaign mix and do not function in an isolated way (Enli and Moe 2013). Rather than substituting for the mainstream media and their logic, digital media are added to the arsenal in the communications system. Parties and candidates synergistically combine online and offline tools, merging their communications into a hybridised environment. Campaigns do not abandon their traditional tactics and tools; they enrich them with the new logics and possibilities of digital media.

Digital media offer new potential to political communication and electoral campaigns. Lilleker and Vedel (2013) synthesize them into three functions: to inform, to mobilise, and to interact. Web 2.0 permits candidates and parties to produce and disseminate their messages, launching processes of self-mediation (Cammaerts 2012). Social media makes it possible to mobilise supporters in quick, inexpensive, and efficient ways. One consequence is organisational hybridity (Chadwick 2007), through which parties adopt digital network repertoires previously considered typical of social movements, only to emerge as new hybridised organisations. Digital media also offer new ways for citizens to participate in political discourse (Castells 2009), although, according to the literature, its use by institutional political actors is limited in campaigns. These institutional actors are more likely to offer controlled interactivity in which participation is simulated (Stromer-Galley 2014).

### **Communication in *Podemos* as the backbone of its political project**

Many analysts agree that *Podemos*' electoral success is difficult to separate from the aspect of communication, which is the backbone of its project (Postill 2015; Sampedro 2015). Unlike conventional political parties, which employ their communication strategies as instrumental elements at the end of the political decision-making process, *Podemos* situates communication at the core of its political strategy. Thus, from the beginning, communication is integral to the political process and to any political activity driven by this transmedia party.

This approach could largely be explained by *Podemos*' understanding of politics based on discourse theory and the importance of hegemony (Howarth 2005; Errejón 2011). This is a neo-Gramscian perspective, which asserts that political activity is a struggle to dominate 'common sense' and assumes that social and political facts are

framed by certain discourses. The dominant discourses generate a hegemonic sense that establishes legitimacy and the social support of citizens for policies, parties, and political leaders. This perspective takes a constructivist approach that, following the theories of Laclau (1990) and Mouffe (1995),<sup>4</sup> asserts that discourse creates political identities constructed by conflict and oppositional relationships based on differentiating 'us' from 'them' according to Carl Schmitt's friend-enemy scheme.<sup>5</sup> The significance of discourse to construct identities and impose hegemony situates communication as a strategic tool of great importance to *Podemos'* political action.

### ***Podemos' strategic positioning in the face of mass media***

The founders of *Podemos* were a group of academics at the Complutense University of Madrid<sup>6</sup> who often explained the value of communication to the political project and the need to know, the uses of it to their benefit, and the requirements of broadcast television. Pablo Iglesias, Secretary General and the main leader of *Podemos*, noted the following:

What many people never imagined is that we reflected very much on our intervention in the media, that it never depended on us, and that we took years getting ready for it.

[...] We began by assuming the audio-visual field, which made up the most important areas of political socialisation. [...] I always say that people do not become members of political parties, unless they do so in the media. (Rivero 2014: 95–96).

Therefore, *Podemos'* choice to participate and intervene actively in the media was not by chance; it was a well-devised strategy. This transmedia party understands

that mainstream media are central spaces for the socialisation and politicisation of citizens. Iglesias summarised this stance:

90% of political discourse is an audio-visual tool, 95% of leadership is an audio-visual tool, 95% of an electoral or political campaign is an audio-visual tool, and 95% of what a political organisation can state is an audio-visual tool.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Podemos' jump to the media***

*Podemos'* strategy for broadcast television was implemented in two stages. The first was the creation of an alternative television program in community media. One of *Podemos'* main goals was to mobilise angry voters through mainstream media and prepare outlines and speeches questioning the discourses of conventional parties. This goal led the party to create an alternative television program as 'a place for training' and to enter mainstream media later.

In November of 2010, the founders of *Podemos* created a political television talk show named *La Tuerka* (The Screw). The director and anchor of the program was Pablo Iglesias. The talk show was broadcast as alternative media, first on two community-based television stations (Tele K and Canal 33) and, then, on Público television through online streaming. After each broadcast, the content was disseminated via social media, particularly YouTube, following a hybrid logic that allowed for wide dissemination of the content to the public through virality (by March of 2016, the YouTube site had more than 37.3 million hits).

Social media made it possible for *La Tuerka* to achieve wide exposure and notoriety because it overcame the limitations of local community television. The talk show focused on political and economic issues, such as the effects of austerity, the

influence of the Catholic Church in Spanish society, the quality of Spanish democracy, and police torture, with a particular focus on topics that had been silenced by (or received scant attention from) mainstream media. The program's format was based on a search for controversial and provocative arguments to generate an audience.

*La Tuerka* had a clear and strong political purpose linked to social movements that comprised counter-discourses to the usual conversation established by the Spanish political elites. The founders of *Podemos* considered this program as a space in which arguments and 'distributed ammunition' could diffuse in the battle to create and reproduce political hegemony (Torres Rodriguez 2015). Consequently, to construct counter-hegemony, *Podemos* assumed the operating rules and formats of mainstream media. Iglesias clearly exposed this position in a statement:

We do what a political party should do. We are delivering arguments to what Gramsci said that a party had to do as an organic intellectual: arm many people in their workplaces, in their centre study, in the bar, with friends, with family ... to act as a supporter. [...] We are doing what a political party should do: produce ideology through a new mechanism that is television.<sup>8</sup>

*La Tuerka*'s audience success, particularly from its dissemination via social media (in March of 2016, its YouTube site had 115,320 subscribers<sup>9</sup>) and Iglesias' controversial character, encouraged invitations to the *Podemos* leaders to participate in political talk shows on free-to-air national television networks in Spain. Thus, the second stage of *Podemos*' leap to mainstream media was activated.

On 25 April 2013, Iglesias appeared on the political television talk show, *El Gato al Agua* (Intereconomía), for the first time.<sup>10</sup> This extremely conservative program

provided Iglesias with acknowledgement and an audience. The appearance indicated that a decisive step had been taken because, shortly after, he was invited to appear on commercial television programs with large audiences, such as *La Sexta Noche* (La Sexta Television) and *Las Mañanas de Cuatro* (Cuatro Television). Iglesias' televised speeches were prepared by a team that provided him with arguments and examples (Torreblanca 2015). The idea was to use the rules of broadcast television to their advantage because Iglesias answered provocations and attacks with speech aiming to influence the audience with clearly alternative political content emphasising criticisms of the established parties and referring to them in the framework of a 'caste' (Dader 2015).

*Podemos'* experiences in television are reminiscent of the prevalent infotainment tendency. Because of that style, commercial television networks welcomed *Podemos*, recognising that Iglesias' controversial nature and willingness to confront conservative commentators would increase audiences (Sampedro 2015). *Podemos* and television benefitted from this relationship in that the former gained visibility and public recognition whereas the latter economically profited. A complicit partnership developed between these two actors typical of the relationship between media and political populism (Mazzoleni 2014). Similarly, Iglesias' later appearances on commercial television were broadly diffused on social media in a hybrid form, which echoed his message and amplified his visibility (Toret 2015).

### **Mediatization of politics in *Podemos***

The founders of this new political party stressed the importance of recognising mainstream media as fundamental outlets for the political socialisation of citizens. Iglesias stated that 'Television talk shows are much more important than debates in

Parliament' (Rivero 2014: 98). *Podemos'* diagnosis is clearly related to the importance of mainstream media for current political communication. The party heavily invested in participating in television talk shows as a springboard for jumping to the centre of the political debate. Iglesias considers this a lesson to the 'traditional left', which scorned this area and he stated that 'It is senseless going to such debates. It is counterproductive. We will continue what we've always done, chatting with 12 people ...' (Rivero 2014: 99).

The 2014 European election campaign was merely an opportunity to implement the political communication that its members had been practicing for years (Torreblanca 2015). During the campaign, *Podemos* employed two key elements linked to the process of mediatization for attracting media attention: (1) simplification of the message and appeals to the emotional aspects of politics and (2) construction of media leadership and promoting Iglesias as an electoral brand.

### ***Simplifying the message and appealing to the emotional aspect of politics***

During its campaign, *Podemos* opted for a clear, direct message that connected with the critical mass that identified with 15-M. The party's strategy centred on identifying the actors responsible for national corruption and the economic crisis, hence its repetitive and constant appeal to 'the caste' as an essential construct and point in its discourse and communication strategy. Spain's complex political context, with a high incidence of discrediting the political class and strong concerns about corruption and fraud,<sup>11</sup> made this message particularly effective. The message was used to unify, in which identification of 'us' and the 'people', as opposed to the 'elite' and the 'caste', was sought. In fact, this strategy is key to *Podemos'* communication and political strategies. The party aims to impose a new distinction between the top (elite) and bottom

(common) people to replace the classical political distinction between left and right (Errejón 2011).

*Podemos'* founders claimed that translating complex political diagnoses into simple, straightforward concepts and sentences was important. The party noted that, along these lines, preparations for *Podemos'* interventions in the mainstream media were always preceded by one question: 'Are you going to talk for the left or for people?'<sup>12</sup> That is, when faced with the choice of a relatively more intellectual or comprehensive discourse, the second option was chosen as a way to reach larger audiences and fit into the culture of broadcast television (Dader 2015). *Podemos* prioritised the creation and diffusion of popular statements addressed to ordinary people and used all of its available discourse tools to that end (Palao 2015).

This strategy included using emotions as mobilisation mechanisms. The name of the party, *Podemos*, referred to 'We Can' or to mottos, such as '*Si se puede*' (Yes, it is possible), to appeal to the emotions of the people who identify with 15-M. Its motto for the 2014 European elections was 'When was the last time you felt excited about voting?'<sup>13</sup>, reflecting the use of emotions to target people feeling dissatisfied with traditional political parties in a complex political context. The party also employed an emotional discourse on digital media. Sixty-two per cent of the posts published by *Podemos* on Facebook during the electoral campaign included emotional content, mainly positive emotions, such as hope or enthusiasm, linked to posts about ideological and programmatic party issues (Sampietro and Valera 2015). Iglesias explained the approach when he pointed to passion plays as key to popular empowerment processes. He further stated that:

Politics [...] is not just about diagnosing, and with clarity, when identifying problems, but with one crucial aspect [...] related to collective awareness and emotion [...]. What we [*Podemos*] have tried to propose, as a gesture of imprudent boldness and pure impudence, is the possibility of generating an instrument that thrills.<sup>14</sup>

### ***Constructing media-based leadership and promoting Iglesias as an electoral brand***

*Podemos*' successful 2014 European elections campaign is closely linked to Iglesias' personal popularity. *Podemos* strategically employed him as a political personage, a tactic broadly discussed in political theory (Tormey 2005; Flesher Fominaya 2007), in its mainstream media projection and visibility. Regarding media-based leadership, Iglesias stated:

I believe that a leader complies with the same tasks as a television spot does, or a sticker, a poster, or a book, or like the way we produce music, the type of culture we construct [...]. It is a political communication tool to contest power in the field of ideology.<sup>15</sup>

Iglesias' idea of leadership includes being a good television communicator, a personage capable of bringing his or her message to political debates with clarity. Leadership is understood in strategic and communication terms and as a mechanism to project *Podemos*' politics to larger audiences. One aspect of initiatives claiming to redistribute power and responsibility that occasionally generates internal tension with the base is the dimension of internal organisation. One key instance of the party's use of leadership during the electoral campaign was its decision to change the logo on the voting paper in the 2014 European elections at the last moment. *Podemos* opted to

replace its logo with a picture of Iglesias' face, a decision made by the person in charge of the campaign, Errejón, who stated:

The decision, never made before in Spain, of placing his face on the voting paper as the most well-known communication sign, was highly criticized for its purism as being decisive in elections in which most voters decided who to vote for on the last day. (Errejón 2014: 1).

The decision was motivated by the *Podemos*' founders' pragmatic attitude to opt for the mediatization of politics and to follow the parameters of political marketing as an electoral strategy. Errejón concludes that 'Pablo Iglesias' media-based leadership was a *sine qua non* condition and it precipitated a process of popular excitement and aggregation'.<sup>16</sup> In the two months before the European elections, only 6% of Spanish citizens were aware that *Podemos* existed, but 50% were familiar with Iglesias (López García 2015).

### **Social media as a natural space for *Podemos***

The use of social media in the 2014 European elections campaign was another key factor in *Podemos*' rapid development. Social media were a natural space for this new transmedia party in tune with the social movements from which it emerged. The *Podemos* team included 15-M members who had extensively experimented with an activist use of social network sites (SNS) through hashtags, circulating information, and organizing events. Eduardo Fernández-Rubiño (2015: 80–81), *Podemos*' head of social media, defended the relevance of 15-M as a test laboratory, stating that 'we have lived

an experience which has led us to conceive SNS as our own habitat to politically intervene in’.

Data regarding *Podemos*’ growth on SNS reveal a noticeably superior mobilisation capacity in this setting relative to that of conventional parties.<sup>17</sup> During the first three months of the party’s existence, its presence on Facebook and Twitter was similar to that of the major parties. Since the electoral campaign until today, the difference between *Podemos* and the other parties has grown significantly.<sup>18</sup> Regarding traditional parties and SNS, Fernández-Rubiño (2015: 86) explained:

No one has ever stopped and really thought about the idiosyncrasy of SNS. These parties conceive social networks as a loudspeaker for questions that arise, which are decided somewhere else. They make a direct diversion that does not respect, as it were, the peculiarities of this medium.

### ***Digital media as an organisational tool: The Círculos***

SNS played an important part regarding communication and internal organisation because these were the foundations on which the party’s organisational structure was laid during its establishment and in the 2014 electoral campaign. The principal manifestation of this was the *Círculos* (Circles).

The combination of traditional and new political logics in the *Círculos* made it an attractive area for *Podemos* to concentrate its communication and organisational innovations. The *Círculos* were the basic political units through which *Podemos* was organized and that shaped its structure and the groups of people whose main objective was to encourage political participation and attract people to it. In this respect, it is

important to emphasise its openness: It was not necessary to be registered with *Podemos* to participate in its activities because, as Iglesias stated in his blog, ‘spare no one’.<sup>19</sup>

The *Círculos* could be territorial regarding a city or neighbourhood, or it could be sectorial when managing a particular policy area, such as healthcare or education. Their growth has been remarkable. In the 2014 European elections, *Podemos* had 200 *Círculos*, which had increased to 800 by October of 2014, reaching about 165,000 registered people.

The *Círculos*’ appearance was initially spontaneous and chaotic because it developed from a call by party promoters asking citizens to form circles *en masse*. Initially, the party leadership had little control over these units. Along with some basic guidelines that claimed a need to preserve the *Podemos* DNA and avoid overlapping onto another *Círculo* in the same area or sector, the only requirement to initiate a *Círculo* was a minimum of five members, validation by the party leadership following a protocol<sup>20</sup>, and submission of an online form<sup>21</sup>.

The *Círculos* had complete political autonomy and were sovereign regarding policy decisions, but they needed to respect *Podemos*’ political strategy as defined by the party leadership. The *Círculos* had four key functions: (1) promote discussion and political dialogue among participating citizens as a ‘school of democracy’, (2) contribute to the collaborative development of party manifestos by proposing measures and amendments, (3) select and support people in party primaries to represent *Podemos* in elections, and (4) spread the ideas of *Podemos* among citizens. Public debate within the *Círculos* developed the political ideas associated with *Podemos* and spread the message across society during the 2014 European elections campaign. The *Círculos* ‘became an essential fuelling element in territories and during the campaign’ (Toret 2015: 130).

However, the role of the *Círculos* has been redefined as the process of party institutionalisation has advanced from an insurgent stage of great effervescence to an established stage following the evolution of political populism (Mazzoleni 2014). Increased centralisation and monitoring of *Podemos* policy activities by the national leadership have diminished the importance of the *Círculos*. Currently, the members apparently feel abandoned and disillusioned because their proposals, debates, and actions hardly matter to the party leadership for defining the political strategies. This change is leading to a demobilisation of party supporters, which was evident in the decreased participation during the primary. Thus, the 43% of registered members (107,488 people) who voted for Pablo Iglesias as Secretary General in November of 2014 declined to 15.5% (59,723 people) of registered members who participated in the July 2015 primary for the Spanish general elections of 20-D.

The horizontal structure and collaborative nature of the *Círculos* generally mirror that of social movements, particularly the 15-M. At the beginning of its activities, which were linked to the 2014 European elections, members apparently believed that these units were having real political effects as platforms for the expression of political opinions and forums where members could be heard. However, despite their potential for citizen empowerment, the evolution of the *Círculos* has generated criticism.<sup>22</sup> Their assembly characteristic has led to ineffectiveness in the debates and in political action efficiency, which tend to feature apparently endless discussions and poor results. Furthermore, in some cases, the operations of many *Círculos* have created monopolisation of activities by small groups of members, which challenges the *Círculos*' principle of openness and horizontal nature.

The newer logics linked to digital media have an important role in the political and communicative activities of the *Círculos*. SNS were key tools for organizing and

publicising their activities. Facebook was the principal instrument through which the assemblies were convened. These assemblies were open to the public, and they were held in the streets and other similar locations because many *Círculos* did not have stable physical headquarters in which meetings could be held. The preferred spaces for organising and mobilising were the digital networks. Digital media contributed to extending the *Círculos*, supporting their efforts for calls, discussions, messages, and political activities to reach a diversity of individuals. Twitter was used to propagate messages and stimulate digital conversations. TitanPad and Telegram were used to coordinate some campaign launches, Reddit was used to activate debates and discussions among the people, and Appgree was used to vote for measures to elaborate the collaborative electoral program.

Using new media enhanced the decentralisation logic in the creation of SNS profiles. Each *Círculo* became responsible for employing its own accounts on digital platforms. The principle of openness led to the proliferation of hundreds of accounts on social media carrying the *Podemos* brand, in some cases resulting in concurrent accounts on Facebook or Twitter for a single *Círculo*. Each one decided autonomously regarding the community managers of these networks, which created a chaotic dynamic (McNair 2006) among digital media spaces for citizens' political participation. *Podemos* managed to promote a connective logic among its actors (Bennett and Segerberg 2012), in which multiple nodes interact freely and autonomously in the creation, promotion, and diffusion of their individual political agendas.

The use of SNS by the *Círculos* led to organisational hybridity (Chadwick 2007) within *Podemos*. The newer digital media logics created transference and transplantation to *Podemos* of the processes, repertoires, and dynamics of the performance of social movements, particularly 15-M.

## **Conclusions**

### **Examining *Podemos*' contributions to political communication from an international perspective**

*Podemos* is a clear and highly representative case of a new type of political party being observed in several democratic countries. These new left-leaning populist parties are linked to recently launched social movements in affluent democracies that are facing crises of trust in their established political parties. These new parties are focusing on anti-austerity political agendas and measures. The political communication model that they employ is a strategic case study that is extremely interesting because of its two principal novelties that strongly influence politics from an international perspective. First, their structures comprise traditional and new media logics, and such composition defines them as new transmedia party. Their communication strategies redefine the way we understand political mediatization because they open up a two-way street outside the dominant media-centric vision.

*Podemos*' campaign strategy in the 2014 European elections consolidated a multidimensional or multi-layered strategy linked to techno-politics, which efficiently combined numerous actions and communication spaces (Toret 2015). *Podemos* managed to move forward within two separate spaces (mainstream media and digital media) to mobilise citizens using a constant combination of and feedback from these two types of interaction. Thus, *Podemos* was established as a new transmedia party that moved among types of media, logics, while privileging communication as the central feature in its political action.

The party also used digital media to boost citizens' engagement and empowerment by promoting connective action through the *Círculos* (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). *Podemos* linked SNS to political participation and citizens' self-communication. Via these digital platforms, it provided its bases with voice and offered its digital networks to citizens to activate their political self-mediation.

The findings provide new insights into the emergence of mediatization. It moves thought away from the notions that mainstream media are innately powerful over political actors (Deacon and Stanyer 2014) and that mediatization is a unidirectional and non-reciprocal relationship between the media and politics, meaning politics that are inevitably influenced and colonized by the media. The case of *Podemos* demonstrates that mediatization could occur in a disaffected way to promote two-way street dynamics; e.g. from politics to the media, in which the former influences the latter.

Thus, non-media factors also are influential and can activate this process, which can be found at several analytical levels in *Podemos*. From the macro-level perspective, a change emerges in the party system through the brusque appearance of a new populist political organisation arising from social activism, which drives democratic regeneration and rejects the political elite, to become an indispensable factor. In the meso-level view, the incorporation of digital media into the communication strategies of political parties is essential to generate citizen participation in transmedia dynamics that expand and enrich the party's message through media and networks. Another strategic factor is to 'hack' the media from knowing how the political economy of communication works, particularly on television. *Podemos* is aware of Pablo Iglesias' personal popularity and his controversial and polemic interventions in political talk shows, which helped to increase audiences and, thereby, television networks' advertising revenues. This benefit made *Podemos*' leader an attractive product for

television, and it provided him with access to mainstream media. Indeed, television helped him to become a well-known star in Spanish politics.

Finally at the micro-level, Pablo Iglesias' use of new political communication tools, based on the creation of his own alternative television program (*La Tuerka*, which he directed and anchored), the activation of specific YouTube sites and other SNS profiles to expand the message in viral disseminations, and the appeal to emotions and/or message simplification, all played significant roles. The combination of the effects at these three levels, and the centrality of digital media, created the two-way street mediatization of politics.

*Podemos'* campaign strategy in the 2014 European elections suggests that adapting the rules and criteria of mainstream media is not the only possible response. Without abandoning the paradigm of mediatization, other reactions and communication strategies are possible. This finding comprises significant originality because it introduces a new interpretation of the concept, which clears the way to surpass the media-centric vision that has dominated research. The process is not only an asset of the media. Other actors, such as mainstream political parties, political leaders, and new grassroots parties, also could be active agents towards achieving their goals, as this case demonstrates.

Therefore, the mediatization process does not necessarily mean that the media system colonizes the political system. Media-conscious politicians, such as Pablo Iglesias, could mediatise for their political purposes (Birkner 2015), primarily as a way to legitimise and influence journalistic agendas. There could be other cases of new political leaders who approach the populist style, such as Donald Trump, Bernie Sanders, Jeremy Corbyn, and Alexis Tsipras, who could be studied from this perspective to understand emerging communication strategies.

These findings problematize the notion of strong effects inherent to mediatization theory, and highlight the interdependent nature between political actors and mainstream media. This is possible because: 1) the changes in society linked to the economic crisis and lack of faith in the political system 2) lead to the appearance of new populist parties such as *Podemos*, in conjunction with 3) the rise of digital media. These phenomena manifest the prominence of exogenous and non-media factors in the mediatization of politics. Two-way street mediatization demonstrates another interpretation of this process. The ways *Podemos* strategically maneuvered *vi-a-vis* the media suggests that the media is not necessarily powerful on its face. There is a complex negotiation and even manipulation of the agenda of the mainstream media. Thus, our analysis of *Podemos* lends support for the arguments of Bennet and Iyengar (2008). We note, though, that other forms of media influence, such as agenda setting, indexing or priming, may still be important.

*Podemos'* strategy challenges the mediatization of politics theory (Mazzoleni and Schütz 1999; Strömbäck and Esser 2014) by demonstrating that this theoretical approach must be reconceptualised to expand its dimensions, to incorporate the rise of digital media in political communications, and to recognize the emergence of hybrid dynamics (Chadwick 2013). This strategic case study poses questions and offers new directions for research on the role of digital media and new populist parties in election campaigns. Should we anticipate a contagion from the *Podemos'* style infecting other political actors and other countries? The answer to this question considers three possible futures. The first scenario is that the *Podemos* experience encourages other social movements to borrow the framework of parties whose purpose it is to participate in the electoral and representative process. This could be an option for activists in transnational movements like Occupy or for the Mexican movement #YoSoy132. This

option relates to the possibility of outsiders completely entering institutional politics, which was the case with 5SM, the ‘Común’ parties, and *Podemos*.

*Podemos*’ ability to inspire this contagion depends on its capacity to maintain a balance among several logics. *Podemos*’ early stages managed to appear as so-called ‘horizontal’ to horizontals. At the same time, this party deployed the traditional repertoires of political performance, or so-called ‘vertical’. This strategy sought to appeal to the hearts and minds of ordinary voters. Of course, there are unanswered questions begging for further research into *Podemos* and its possible international reproductions. Is it possible to maintain the tension and balance between the two tendencies over a long period? Will the further development of outsiders’ transmedia parties, with their increasing institutionalisation, be able to consolidate the novelties of a participatory SNS and interactive model, or will the mediatization of politics determine future party structures?

The second scenario is that the communication strategy influences other traditional left-wing parties mired in identity crises. Corbyn’s success in the Labour party has demonstrated how the so-called ‘outside’ is rapidly becoming the so-called ‘inside’ of a traditional party, using a discourse that resonates as an antidote to elite-driven politics. Some similar trends can be found in Sanders’ struggle within the US Democratic Party. In Spain, the PSOE responded to *Podemos*’ success with a new communicative strategy and by sometimes assuming that one must accept the rules of the mainstream and digital media to better reach one’s opposed public and to keep the mediatization of politics in one’s favour.

Last, a third future could be one in which right-wing parties adopt some transmedia elements to strategically promote two-way street mediatization and to bend transmedia logics to their electoral benefit. The Alternative for Deutschland discourse

accuses governors of being traitors and Donald Trump's rhetorical and xenophobic anti-establishment diatribes in the US are two examples of this. The outcomes of these three scenarios include increased organisational hybridity (Chadwick 2007), through which established parties adopt the digital network repertoires previously considered within the purview of social movements, and the latter could take on a party structure. In this case, new organisations with hybrid forms and transmedia styles could emerge. The *Podemos* case is relevant because it is a pioneer of these possible changes in political communication and democracy, which will certainly emerge in other parts of the world.

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## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> <http://elecciones.mir.es/resultados2014/99PE/DPE99999TO.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.publico.es/politica/pablo-iglesias-presenta-metodo-participativo.html>

<sup>3</sup> [http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2015/12/20/actualidad/1450627692\\_212116.html](http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2015/12/20/actualidad/1450627692_212116.html)

<sup>4</sup> This matter has been thoroughly studied by *Podemos* members, particularly Iñigo Errejón, whose 2012 doctoral thesis was entitled, 'The struggle for hegemony during the first MAS government in Bolivia (2006–2009): A discursive analysis'. Retrieved 20 June 2015 from <http://eprints.ucm.es/14574/1/T33089.pdf>

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- <sup>5</sup> Laclau and Mouffe's influence on *Podemos* was widely analysed in Luke Stobart's series on *Podemos—Left Flank—* and José Antonio Palao's blog *La Suficiencia de la Obvio*.
- <sup>6</sup> Members of *Podemos*' promoter group include Juan Carlos Monedero, Pablo Iglesias, Iñigo Errejón, Carolina Bescansa, and Luis Alegre. See the following article to read more:  
[http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2014/11/15/actualidad/1416083204\\_351563.html](http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2014/11/15/actualidad/1416083204_351563.html)
- <sup>7</sup> Retrieved 15 March 2015, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nfK2BI4NjGM> (minutes: 13:22–13:45)
- <sup>8</sup> Retrieved 20 June 2015 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o3me4hDrbzU>
- <sup>9</sup> On 24 March 2016, the numbers of subscribers to YouTube channels of the major political parties in Spain were PP (7,491), PSOE (10,207), Ciudadanos (19,220), and Podemos (69,978). The YouTube channel of La Tuerka had 115,320 subscribers in this period.
- <sup>10</sup> Retrieved 10 June 2015 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5dKkeGybvFw>
- <sup>11</sup> Since 2009, surveys of the *Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas* (CIS) (Sociological Research Centre) have noted a steady discrediting of the Spanish political class. Retrieved 9 June 2014 from  
[http://www.cis.es/cis/opencms/ES/11\\_barometros/indicadores.html](http://www.cis.es/cis/opencms/ES/11_barometros/indicadores.html)
- <sup>12</sup> Retrieved 15 March 2015 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yizw-RySZnI> (minutes: 2:07–2:11)
- <sup>13</sup> Retrieved 20 March 2015 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=unFxEn2gcTs>
- <sup>14</sup> Retrieved 15 March 2015 from  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eDYDSQIF0go> (minutes: 1:03.28–1:05.12)
- <sup>15</sup> Eduardo Muriel '*Cinco claves del éxito de la campaña electoral de Podemos*' (The five keys to *Podemos*' successful electoral campaign), *La Marea*, 26 May 2014. Retrieved 19 December 2014 from <http://www.lamarea.com/2014/05/26/cinco-claves-del-exito-de-la-campana-electoral-de-podemos/>
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.

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- <sup>17</sup> Shortly after the European elections, *El País* published an article on the importance of *Podemos*' social networks. Retrieved 5 June 2015 from [http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2014/05/28/actualidad/1401305050\\_166293.html](http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2014/05/28/actualidad/1401305050_166293.html)
- <sup>18</sup> On 24 March 2016, Podemos was 1,046,108 followers in Twitter, Partido Popular-PP was 511,096, and Partido Socialista Obrero Español-PSOE was 402,091. On Facebook, Podemos was 1,061,108 likes, Partido Popular was 139,243, and Partido Socialista Obrero Español was 121,497.
- <sup>19</sup> <http://blogs.publico.es/pablo-iglesias/760/circuitos-podemos/>
- <sup>20</sup> <https://files.podemos.info/Nvuzas93bt>
- <sup>21</sup> <https://participa.podemos.info/es/circuitos/validacion>
- <sup>22</sup> See, for example, this debate in *Plaza Podemos*. Retrieved 10 December 2015 from <https://plaza.podemos.info/debates/313>

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