Mobilization through Online Social Networks:

the political protest of the *indignados* in Spain[1]

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Comments welcome.

Abstract

This paper argues that the 15M demonstration (kick off of the *indignados* movement in Spain and seed of the *occupy* mobilizations) presents some outstanding characteristics that defy central principles of the collective action paradigm. We argue that intensive mobilization in digital media, and particularly social networks, managed to channel collective outrage through many small organizations with little resources or mobilization experience in this type of massive protests. This had implications for the social and political characteristics of the individuals that participated in the protest event. Based on a comparative analysis of data gathered in nine demonstrations celebrated in Spain between 2010 and 2011, we find relevant and significant differences in the characteristics of the 15M staging organizations (recently created, without formal membership and scarce resources), the main mobilization channels (personal contact and online social networks rather than co-members or broadcast media), and participants (younger, more educated but less politically involved). These findings have important implications for the mobilization potential of digital media and social networks in particular, as well as for the role of traditional political organizations.

Keywords: online social networks, protest, mobilization, political participation, collective action, digital media

Introduction

May 15th 2011 was the starting point of a wave of demonstrations that crossed Spain and expanded to other Western democracies. The low coverage in traditional media, the absence of traditional organizations, and the general nature of claims made, put forward the question of how these protest events managed to bring to the streets thousands of citizens. In this paper we use innovative empirical evidence to answer this question and to assess the extent to which this demonstration is qualitatively different than the ones that have been organized in response to the economic crisis or other relevant conflicts in Spain. Our main argument is that the 15M protests are a case of *connective action* (Bennet and Segerberg, 2012), which differs significantly in their mobilization patterns from other recent protest events. These differences, and particularly the intensive use of digital media, have, in turn, important implications for the mobilization of non-traditional protesters.

The emerging literature on online social media has so far mostly concluded that these complement rather than substitute traditional mobilization organizations such as unions, parties or mass media (Bekkers, Beunders, Edwards, & Moody, 2011, Bekkers, Moody, & Edwards, 2011, Skoric, Poor, Liao, & Tang, 2011). The more traditional debate on the consequences of digital media use for the mobilization of new participants

or the reinforcement of super-activism has produced mixed evidence, mostly seeming to support reinforcement (see van Laer 2010 specifically regarding protest). The analysis of our case challenges both conclusions: in the massive protest event that took place in Spain on May 15th 2011 traditional mobilization agents played no role whatsoever, while intense use of digital media channels of mobilization came along with significant differences in the sociopolitical characteristics of the demonstrators.

The article is structured in three sections. The first section analytically describes the characteristics of this protest event and its context. In the second part of the paper we discuss the implications that the distinctive nature of this connective action case should have for the characteristics of three crucial elements: mobilization agents, mobilization channels and demonstrators. We first develop our theoretical expectations, present our methodology, and then test them with original data comparing the 15M demonstration with other demonstrations that have taken place in Spain in 2010 and 2011. Finally, in the conclusions we discuss our findings and its implications of protest processes that are not completely dependent on resource mobilization.

15M: The *Indignados* Outburst and its Context

On May 15th 2011, a week before the municipal and regional elections, about 130,000 persons in 50 cities in Spain went out to demand "real democracy now". This demonstration was not endorsed by any political party, large trade union or traditional political organization. It was organized by ad hoc platforms that operated mainly through online social media. The central platform integrated more than 400 organizations under the motto "*Democracia Real Ya!*" (Real Democracy Now! – from now on DRY). After these demonstrations took place, some of the attendants camped in

main city squares celebrating daily assemblies and organizing different committees that kept on working for over a month.[2]

An even more crowded demonstration called by the DRY platform took place on June 19th in response to the Euro-Plus Pact adopted by the European Commission in order to adopt reforms intended to improve fiscal strength and competitiveness under the motto Toma la calle! ("Take the streets!"). Again, country-wide events gathered over 250.000 people. This response showed the widespread support that the 15M movement enjoyed among Spanish public opinion, which was also reflected in general public opinion surveys.[3] Protest events of the *indignados* were still taking place months after the 15M and expanded to other European countries and to the US after the summer under the *occupy* label (Hardt & Negri 2011, Juris 2012).

The context of these protest events was clearly shaped by the worldwide economic crisis, which had dramatic social and economic implications in Spain. Unemployment rates over 20% were the highest in Europe (Instituto Nacional de Estadística - INE, May 2011) and far from the EU average (9.3% Eurostat, July 2011). Unemployement for the population 16 to 25 years old reached 44% (INE, April 15th 2011). As a consequence, people identified unemployment as the most important problem in Spain (mentioned by 83% of the sample of the April barometers of the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas - CIS), followed by "economic difficulties" (mentioned by 47%). Moreover, 58% of the Spanish population believed that the

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[2] A complete listing of the cities that organized concentrations can be seen at: http://acampadas15m.blogspot.com

[3] Between 64 and 70% of the Spanish population reported to share the grievances of 15M and to sympathize with the movement (Barometer from the Gabinet d'Estudis Socials i Opinió Pública – GESOP,published in El Periódico June 3rd 2011; Metroscopia survey published in El País, June 5th 2011; June 2011 Barometer from the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas -CIS).

economic situation was worse than the previous year and 70% expected next year to be the same or even worse. These figures reflect not only the consequences of unemployment regarding the diminished ability of families to sustain previous consumption patterns and to face financial duties, but also the deterioration of life conditions due to government cutbacks in healthcare and education.

Along with the economic crisis, an increasing disaffection towards political elites was also central in the Spanish political context. Corruption scandals and the perception of political leaders as incapable of responding to the economic difficulties were the background to a general questioning of the system. Almost 50% of the respondents in the barometer of November 2010 (CIS) felt unsatisfied with the performance of democracy. The political elite and political parties were signaled as the third most important problem in Spain, following unemployment and the economic crisis. Such a negative view on politicians cannot be explained exclusively by the economic crisis, but should be related with the deeds of political figures. The perception of corruption as being generalized between political leaders grew more than 7 points between December 2009 and July 2011 (from 79 to 87%, according to the CIS Barometers). In April 2011, 67% of the population assessed the political situation as bad or very bad and only 3% affirmed it was good or very good.

The international context for the 15M can also be worthy to consider. Expressions of social unrest in France and Greece in response to pension reform and the adjustment of public expenditure were highly visible in the months preceding the 15M protest. Furthermore, the particular trajectories and repertoires of the events in the Arab spring, as well as the Icelandic government´s measures intended at identifying political responsibility on the financial crisis, may have provided expectations for potential changes.

Massive protests as the ones carried out by the *indignados* would come as no surprise in such a context, especially for a country which ranks in the first places in European statistics for protest participation (over 18% of the Spanish population had participated in a demonstration in the past 12 months according to 2010 European Social Survey data). In fact, major expressions of social unrest related to economic policy had already been taking place organized by unions and leftist parties.[4] However there are at least three distinctive and peculiar characteristics of the 15M demonstration that deserve further attention and that were not to be found in other protest events.

First, the protest slogan ("Real democracy now! We are no merchandise for bankers and politicians") reflects its non-instrumental stance. Other large demonstrations taking place in Spain have had very specific claims, independently of the particular issue, whether related to changes in economic policy, regional self-government or policy changes such as those introduced in the abortion law. On May 15th, however, protesters criticized the functioning of democratic institutions and expressed their outrage against politicians and bankers. The demonstrators were claiming for social justice, but also for more participation, transparency, accountability, and proportionality –all political and rather abstract goals.

Second, demonstrators (and public opinion) considered politicians and parties to be one of the main problems of the country and the protest was a reaction against the

[4] The protest cycle started in January 2010 and reached a peak with a nation-wide strike in September 29, 2010 against a reform on the Labor law (employment regulation flexibility) and changes to the public pension system. From then on it gained momentum and public officials and health care workers kept the protest climate by demonstrating against cutbacks that affected them directly (30.000 persons in Barcelona on April 14th, 2011). The traditional Mayday event had also a significant turnout against local governments' retrenchment in public spending in education and healthcare programs. Protest events regarding educational policy developed within a similar timeframe.

powerlessness of politics to prevent or cope with economic problems. This implies that the main traditional mobilizing agents, parties and trade unions, were not involved in this demonstration. Traditionally, turnout in demonstrations has largely depended on the extent to which traditional political organizations were actively involved mobilizing their supporters. In the demonstrations of the *indignados*, they played no role whatsoever. Party leaders perplexedly witnessed the event while asking who was behind it, while a leaderless mass marched with their own personally designed mottos in their own crafted banners.

Third, the 15M demonstration was unexpected for an informed citizen accessing traditional media. In contrast with other massive demonstrations the 15M call received low coverage in the upcoming days.[5] This can be explained because no parties or unions or large organizations were involved in staging the event and traditional media could not anticipate its success.

These three characteristics challenge the traditional conception of collective action itself. Traditional leadership, resource mobilization and organizing roles seem to have been replaced by loose organizational linkages built around personalized action frames. The concept of *connective action* (Bennet & Segerberg, 2012) –in which communication through digital media plays a crucial role- may be of use in interpreting this protest event. In the next section we develop the empirical implications to be found

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[5] An analysis of the news coverage of the 15M demonstration in Google News for the Spanish and Catalan press in the 30 days preceding the event showed 12 results (search string "Democracia Real Ya"). The same analysis for the demonstration called for the general strike of September 29, 2010 (search string UGT CCOO "huelga general") showed 1,740 results. Searches for other demonstrations that took place between 2010 and 2011 ranked between 23 and 118 results. The search strings and results for this analysis can be provided upon request.

if the 15M protest event is to be considered a typical case of connective action.

Testing the Implications of Connective Action

Different organizations, different mobilization channels, different participants

Bennet and Segerberg (2012) develop the concept of connective action as opposed to the classic collective action to account for new organizational dynamics of contentious politics in which communication plays a crucial role. The concept can be characterized by two main elements. First, political content takes the form of general frames that can be easily personalized and adapted to different reasons and concerns. Organizations do not link individuals and SMO looking for discursive congruency and consistency as in the *frame alignment* model (Snow, Rochford Jr., Worden & Benford, 1986) but individuals reinterpret grievances and re-create meaning in their social media networks. Second, personal communication technologies enable people to share cognitive resources and diffuse them across trusted social networks without formal ties or commitment to organizations or other forms of group membership. In this way, organizations loose the central role in resource mobilization that has been recognized as a central feature to mobilization processes for over three decades (Knoke & Wood 1981; McAdam 1986). While in connective action large-scale action depends on brokered organizations "bearing the burden of facilitating cooperation", connective action networks "self-organize without central or 'lead' organizational actors, using technologies as important organizational agents (Bennet & Segerberg 2012:17).

Social media are expected to play a crucial role here, by allowing to carry out large-scale mobilization processes without involving formal organizations. At the same

time they allow citizens to play a more active role in the mobilization processes and rely on informal networks in order to get informed about the demonstration, interpret it and spread the word through the expression of their involvement or identity, all this at the expense of traditional mobilizing agents. While social networks have traditionally been considered important as recruitment channels for mobilization (Diani & MacAdam, 2003) research on online social media is starting to flourish shedding light in the process of information diffusion and recruitment (Gonzalez- Bailón 2011), on how these tools change organizational dynamics (Segerberg & Bennet 2011, Skoric et al. 2011), the massive sharing of experiences between loosely coupled individuals (Bekkers et al. 2011) and even political change (Howard & Parks, 2012). Online social networks are expected to accentuate the patterns already found regarding the consequences of digital media for political protest before they existed (see Bennet, Breunig & Givens 2008) and they are a crucial element of connective action (Bennet & Segerberg 2012:22)

As a theoretical innovation, the concept of connective action sheds light on the interpretation of some protest events. However to what extent it can be considered a useful ideal type would depend on the extent to which it can reflect and help to understand the logic of distinctive real cases. The analysis carried out in the previous section would make us think that this seems to be indeed the case. However this single case analysis is limited to assess the extent to which this protest event is significantly different from other protests that have taken place in the past few years. We face this question by developing some observable implications from the concept of connective action that allow us to determine whether there are observable differences between collective action and connective action cases. Our observable implications regard the organizations involved, the mobilization channels and the characteristics of the

participants.

First, there should be significant differences in the characteristics of the organizations involved in the 15M when compared to other protest events that would not fit in the connective action type. In particular, we expected the organizations staging the 15M demonstration to be younger, have an internet-based nature, and no formal membership, while organizations staging collective action events would be older, have brick and mortar addresses and formal membership to a larger extent.

Second, we expect to find significant differences in the mobilization channels that lead to the protest event. The connective action logic implies an intensive role of digital media and personal networks that to some extent replaces the functions of traditional media and political organizations in traditional protest mobilization. Specifically we expect digital media, personal networks and particularly online social media to play a particularly relevant role in the 15M protest, while mobilization through organizational membership and traditional mass media should play a minor role compared to other demonstrations.

Third, we have expectations regarding a most relevant though less explored question: a change in the mobilization channels and on the role of traditional mobilizing agents would bring about a change in the sociopolitical profile of protesters. Thus, 15M participants are expected to be different from those in other demonstrations related to the economic crisis and in other recent demonstrations in Spain which followed more conventional mobilization patterns. The particular nature of the mobilization processes is expected to attract a different public than the usual organizationally-embedded protesters.

The literature on the consequences of digital media for participation inequalities has paid significant attention to whether these are expected to reinforce the participation

of previous participants or mobilize new ones, such as youngsters or women, or people outside political organizations. Digital communication channels have long been studied for their potential of changing the mobilization conditions for collective action, and this goes well beyond their effect over the participation of younger citizens. Positive effects have been signaled on their use for building consensus by getting out the message in order to persuade potential participants, and by providing a lower cost call to action which can get people to act (Garrett, 2006). Of particular interest to us, internet use has been acclaimed for its potential to bypass organizational membership as it can bring together individuals in loose networks (Bimber, Flanagan & Stohl, 2005; Bennett 2003).

However for other authors internet use has the risk of narrowing the mobilizing potential to a public of experienced, organizationally embedded activists (Van Laer, 2011), as online networks can be limited to established ties that would result in closed mobilization patterns. Internet use would in this case maintain participation inequalities (Di Gennaro and Dutton, 2006) as it promotes a focused call on the organization´s members and in more politically interested individuals or sympathizers of other movements.

Our expectation is that open diffusion processes based on online social networks and with a minor role of traditional political organizations are expected to have a mobilization effect rather than reinforcing the usual protesters. Thus we expect 15M demonstrators to have a socio-demographic profile that is less determined by the usual participation predictors (age, gender, interest in politics) and to be less involved in politics and civic organizations.

Additionally, we expect participants in this demonstration to be affected also by the issue-context. Had the economic crisis not occurred, we would probably have not witnessed the emergence of the DRY platform and the consequent development of the

15M protest events. Considering this context, we expect the profile of 15M protesters to match the most affected victims of the economic situation and the subsequent reductions in social policy benefits: the unemployed (especially first job seekers), workers affected by the raise in the retirement age, students who are suffering the consequences of cutbacks in education funds, and highly educated people with temporary uncertain jobs for which they are overqualified. We thus expect young, unemployed, highly educated people, particularly affected by the economic crisis to be over-represented among the participants in this demonstration compared to other protests.

Data

In order to systematically test these expectations about the distinctive character of the 15M demonstration, we need a systematic comparison of this case with other protest events. Following the method explained in Klandermans and Walgrave (2011), we have gathered data on major demonstrations celebrated in Spain between January 2010 and May 2011.

All demonstrations expected to bring out to the streets more than 5,000 participants in Madrid, Barcelona or Galicia during the period of fieldwork were surveyed. Our sample of events includes, besides the 15M demonstration surveyed in Madrid, four other regarding economic issues, three regarding the territorial/regional/linguistic conflict -which is central to Spanish politics-, and one against abortion. Among the four economic demonstrations, three were not surveyed in Madrid (*Contra l'Europa del Capital, la Crisi i la Guerra* in Barcelona*, Contra la Reforma Laboral* in Santiago de Compostela*, Mayday* in Barcelona). The general strike

of September 29, 2010 and the 15M demonstrations were multitudinous and both surveyed in Madrid (although both took place in many cities simultaneously). Among the territorial demonstrations, two of them, *Contra o Decretazo do Galego* in Santiago and *Som una Nació* in Barcelona, had very high turnout levels, and were staged by civil society organizations and political parties. Finally, we also surveyed a large Pro-Life demonstration that took place in Madrid.

(Table 1 about here)

In each demonstration, a team of field supervisors scattered all over it once the crowd was fully displayed, and selected the people to be interviewed according to a random procedure (nth row, nth person) in order to avoid potential selection bias. Interviewers then approached the individuals, completed a short face-to-face survey, and eventually handed in the postal questionnaire. Individuals were in general cooperative, with small rejection in the face-to-face survey. Response rates of the postal questionnaire were between 18 and 33%, and reached 35% for the 15M demonstration. This has produced a database with information regarding 2,265 demonstrators that completed the postal survey.

Through the postal questionnaire participants provided detailed information about their socio-demographics, political attitudes, and also about the channels through which they had been mobilized. Their responses allowed to identify the most visible organizations involved in the demonstration according to the demonstrators. For these organizations we have gathered additional information regarding some relevant characteristics. We start our analysis with the characteristics of the mobilization process, including organizations and channels. Then we shall move to the question of

who demonstrates, looking at the socioeconomic characteristics and the political background of the participants.

Organizations

The peculiar characteristics of the organizations involved and the importance of digital media and social networks make the 15M demonstration a distinctive event. Mobilization was not triggered by a particular incident, but by the joint coordinated action of many small actors and grievances around the DRY platform, which took place outside the scope of broadcast media. These coordinated actions would not have been possible without a privileged use of digital media. The demonstration was not called by large traditional organizations, but by ad-hoc platforms that acted as loose, flexible structures centered on a particular issue that linked people and small organizations without a specific long-term commitment or formal membership. Over 400 organizations with short experience in political activism converged in the DRY platform and played an active role in staging the demonstration and following activities.

According to our survey, the protesters identified 27 organizations as the protest organizers of the 15M demonstration, but only four of them account for 88% of the responses. These are the DRY platform itself –mentioned by 53% of the sample-, *Juventud sin Futuro* (Youth Without a Future) –mentioned by19%-, ATTAC (Association for the Taxation of financial Transactions and Aid to Citizens) –mentioned by 8%- and *No Les Votes* (Do Not Vote For Them, a very recent movement which encouraged not voting for the major parties because of their adherence to the Copyright Directive **-** *Ley SINDE* in Spain-) –mentioned by 7%.

As it happens in other surveyed demonstrations as well, a small number of organizations are widely identified by participants and a long tail is composed by

multiple secondary organizations in a power-law distribution. However, the characteristics of the organizations staging the 15M demonstration are radically different from those of the other protest events.

Table 2 shows several important characteristics of the staging organizations of the 15M demo, and of four other important demonstrations that took place in Spain in the last two years. We have considered a limited but heterogeneous sample, including, besides the 15M demonstration, the other large one that took place in Madrid related to the economic crisis (the general strike demo of 29th of September 2010), two demonstrations regarding the regional conflict staged in Barcelona in May and July 2010 (*Autodeterminació es Democràcia, Som una Nació*) and the Pro-Life demo which took place in Madrid in March 2010. The profile of the organizations staging these demonstrations is compared in terms of their average age, the existence of brick and mortar address (as opposed to internet-based organizations), and whether or not they have possibilities of formal membership.

(Table 2 about here)

As the data clearly show, the main organizations staging the 15M demonstration were younger than those of other protest events: their average age was less than 3 years, while in the other cases mean age varies from 10 to 43 years. Age undoubtedly reflects the involvement of either large unions (such as in the 29S demo) or main political parties (such as in the *Som Una Nació* case). The organizations involved in the 15M demonstration were also mainly internet-based, as only 38% had a brick and mortar address, compared to 78% to 100% of other cases. And only 13% of them allowed for formal membership or affiliation, while in the other demonstrations considered at least

60% did. Thus the data show substantive differences between the organizations involved in the 15M protest and those staging the other demonstrations considered.

Mobilization channels

Just as the characteristics of the organizations involved were different, so were the mobilization channels that conducted the stimuli that brought people to the streets. The first part of Table 3 shows information about how people came to know about the demonstration, who asked them to attend, and whether they were members of the involved organizations. We can establish a three-fold comparison. A first relevant comparison is between the 15M demo, and all other demos for which we have collected data. This allows comparing the characteristics of 15M participants and their mobilization processes with all other cases, regardless of the issue and the city where the protest took place. A second comparison is between the 15M demo and other demonstrations that have been called due to the economic crisis or related to economic measures taken by the government (demos 2, 5, 7, 8 in Table 1). This is probably the most relevant comparison, as holding the issue constant we are in a better position to assess the distinctive character of this protest event. However, since not all surveyed demonstrations took place in Madrid, we add a third comparison with the demonstrations that took place in the city of Madrid (demos 3, 7 in table 1).[6]

Whatever comparison we take, the results are strikingly clear: 15M was something different regarding mobilization processes. Almost 55% of participants had heard about the demonstration via alternative online media and 49% through social

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[6] Note that two of the three demos in Madrid were related to the crisis and one was against abortion. This latter demonstration had many differences with respect to the other two, so the group of demonstrators in Madrid is rather heterogeneous.

networks. In other demos these percentages are 26 and 17% respectively. Conversely, the role of traditional media as information channels was very limited (8% of participants mentioned them in 15M demonstration versus at least over 50% in other demonstrations). A very small percentage of respondents heard about the demo via co-members of organizations (7% vs. an average of 29% in all other demonstrations). The difference here is particularly striking when compared to the other demonstrations generated by the crisis. The weakness of traditional organizations in the 15M demonstration is further exposed by the fact that the number of members of the organizations endorsing the demo among participants is far lower than in other cases (not reaching 5%).

(Table 3 about here)

Differences between organizational networks (Table 2) and diffusion patterns (Table 3) respond to a completely different picture in the mobilization potential. Informal networks appear to be far more important than organizational networks as mobilization took place via friends and acquaintances far more than in other cases.[7] Small organizations with fewer resources tapped into informal networks, given their limited membership and associational potential. The use of highly personalized images,[8] mottos and guerrilla marketing techniques also reflect the organizational and resource dispersion as compared to the centralized branding which is usually the case in traditional political organizations (such as the use of union flags, party promotional items or the diffusion of unique slogans).

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[7] On the geographical diffusion of messages for the concentrations after the demonstration see http://15m.bifi.es/

[8] Photographic evidence can be provided upon request.

To sum up, the organizations involved and the mobilization process that took place for the 15M demonstration were very different than those observed in other protest events. Traditional organizations were practically absent, while loose online platforms with very different mobilization strategies played a major role, standing on social networks, alternative media, and personal contact. The lack of formal ties within the organizations in the platform compensated a rather closed mobilization with the power of social networks, as these established incidental ties between people who happened to focus their attention on a shared concern. Young and small organizations with a short experience in political action managed to connect with wider audiences and bring together a major turnout.

Participants

We expect that these peculiarities of the mobilization process have significant consequences for the profile of the participants involved in the demonstration, as some individuals may be more receptive to these informal mobilization strategies than to the closed traditional organization´s mobilization messages.15M organizers mobilized informal networks that transcended organizational frontiers, and in this way they were not limited to the *usual* protesters. This means that 15M participants are expected to be different from those in other demonstrations in terms of their socioeconomic characteristics and also of their previous political involvement. This is shown in the second part of Table 3.

Considering any of the three possible comparisons, 15M demonstrators are significantly different in socio-demographic terms: they are more likely to be women and unemployed, they are younger and more educated than participants in other

demonstrations. These data indicate several important things. First, the peculiarities of the mobilization process managed to promote the participation of social groups that tend to be underrepresented among protesters, such as women (which are only 40% of participants in other demonstrations related to economic issues where unions are the main mobilizing agents), or the unemployed (that are only 8% of the participants in demonstrations staged by unions). It seems that the unemployed felt closer to the 15M demands than to the unions, which may be seen as representing the rights of those that already have a job.

Second, the privileged role of digital media certainly favored the participation of young citizens, given that internet use in Spain is biased towards younger publics (Anduiza, Gallego & Cantijoch, 2010), especially regarding social networks (Urueña, Ferrari, Blanco & Valdecasa, 2011). This, in turn, raised the educational level of participants, as youngsters have higher levels of education. Indeed, digital media may facilitate the political participation of younger citizens, but it will not correct the traditional bias that education introduces in political participation (Verba & Nie 1972, Gallego 2010) and particularly in protest (Barnes, Kaase et. al. 1979).

However digital media may contribute to reduce participatory inequalities in a different way, by facilitating the mobilization of people with lower levels of previous political involvement. The peculiarities of the 15M may have increased the chances of participation of people that did not have an activist background and were not previously involved in political organizations. Indeed, differences in past protest experience and organizational engagement provide evidence against reinforcement effects regarding participation inequalities. In the15M demonstration people with less experience in previous protest events participated significantly more than in bread and butter protest events, and than in all the past events taken together. 15M demonstrators are less likely

than any other protesters to have engaged previously in violent political acts (though differences are in most cases non significant). The levels of organizational involvement were also substantively and significantly lower (48% of participants were members of any organization, versus 79% for the other economic demonstrations).

This evidence backs the idea of a mobilization call that reached beyond organizational networks. It seems that in this case the role of online media was not limited to produce reinforcement, as previous work has often found, but rather opened up an opportunity for participation of people with lower levels of political involvement than the participants in other protest events.

As many of the differences obtained in the profile of the 15M participants with respect to other events can be a consequence of age (younger individuals have higher levels education, lower levels of organizational involvement and interest in politics, and are less likely to have participated in previous protest events), we ran a multivariate analysis in order to assess to what extent 15M demonstrators where different only because they were younger. Table 4 shows the results of a logistic regression analysis using a dependent variable that took the value of 1 if the respondents participated in the 15M demo and 0 for participants in the other eight protest events.

(Table 4 about here)

The results from the multivariate analysis confirm the differences between 15M participants and protesters in other events beyond age. Mobilization channels and socio-political characteristics of the demonstrators significantly distinguish 15M demonstrators from the participants in other protest events, even when taking into account the effect of age. These results confirm the idea that differences in the profiles

of 15M participants are not explained exclusively by the fact that they were younger. Online social networks, alternative online media, and close-tie networks of friends and acquaintances were significantly more important mobilization channels for 15M demonstrators. Conversely, involvement in organizations reduced the likelihood of being a 15M demonstrator versus a participant in any other protest event. Education, being unemployed, and, remarkably, interest in politics and past protest experience reduce the chances participating in the 15M demonstration versus the others. The mobilization potential of online media reached out to individuals with lower political involvement and less contact possibilities through movement or advocacy organizations or any other formal networks.

Conclusion

The data analyzed in this paper, a case study of the 15M protest and a comparison with 8 other demonstrations that took place in Spain between 2010 and 2011, provide evidence backing the idea that this demonstration shows peculiar characteristics which defy some of the principles of the collective action paradigm and thus can be considered a typical case of connective action. The 15M demonstration in Spain was qualitatively different when compared to other protest events regarding three related aspects: the characteristics of the staging organizations, the mobilization process and the characteristics of the participants.

We have so far never witnessed the turnout figures that this movement managed to achieve in street demos without the involvement of any of the main economic and political traditional organizations, considering this was not a demonstration that responded to a particular triggering event. The whole process took place outside the

reach (and to some extent against) political parties and unions. Moreover, the organizations staging the 15M demonstration are significantly younger, less likely to have formal membership and a brick-and-mortar address than the organizers of other analyzed protest events. The success of the mobilization process was possible by the privileged use of digital media and particularly social networks that have produced a case of personalized digitally networked action. Mobilization through these media managed to channel collective outrage through many small organizations with little mobilization experience and through networked individuals who responded to a common concern on interrelated issues.

As a consequence, unusual protest participants went out to the street. 15M demonstrators were younger, more educated, more likely to be women and unemployed than in other events. They had significantly lower levels of previous political activity and organizational involvement than participants in other demos. This is a major achievement, as outrage was effectively mobilized by a network of organizations and personal contacts which managed to connect with unsatisfied but politically inactive individuals.

Most certainly in our case, technology enabled organizational alliances and the establishment of activist networks as in other mobilization processes in the web 2.0 era. But what makes the 15M demonstration particularly interesting is a massive response through the adoption, diffusion and personalization of the broad frame "real democracy" in social networks. Diverse organizations united under the DRY platform managed to overcome their low profile in traditional media and their distance to powerful mobilization agents such as parties and unions in order to have an enormous success in terms of turnout, territorial coverage and ability to incorporate new participants as weeks went by.

Thus, in the already traditional debate of whether digital media promote mobilization of new participants or reinforcement of former activists, the 15M can be considered a paradigmatic example of mobilization. This happens, however, at the high prize of exposing the inability of parties and unions to satisfy the role they are expected to play in a democratic polity. If in the literature traditional intermediary structures, such as unions, parties and traditional mass media are not (yet) considered redundant for large scale political mobilization, our case shows that they are not a necessary condition, at least to get high turnout protest events.

Many questions remain open. One of them is to what extent the 15M can be considered a prototypical case, that is, expected to become typical: what are the chances for the 15M mobilization pattern, which promotes personalized, leaderless action rather than organizational coordination, to become more and more frequent? This is particularly relevant in the European context, in which the use of online networks is not a response to restricted communication or closed regimes. As online social networks expand while traditional political organizations loose membership and citizens' support, we expect these cases of connective action to become more frequent in contexts where significant grievances are perceived. But even more important than this will be the extent to which these loose networks of organizations and individual participants will be able to uphold their momentum, articulate specific demands and continue to influence the political agenda.

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Table 1. Surveyed demonstrations

Issue / name of the demonstration	Surveyed city	Date	Type	Main organisers	Turnout (police estimation)	Number of booklets distributed	Response rate (N)
Against the regional government's policy reform on Galician language use in schools. *Contra o Decretazo do Galego*	Santiago de Compostela	21.01.2010	Regional	*Queremos Galego* platform, including parties and unions	40,000	1000	32.4% (324)
Against government policy on the financial crisis. *Contra l'Europa del Capital, la Crisi i la Guerra*	Barcelona	28.01.2010	Economic	Labour Union CGT	1,500	300	25.7% (77)
Against the reform of the abortion law. *Manifestación Pro-vida*	Madrid	07.03.2010	Abortion	Hazte Oir	10,000	871	31.9% (278)
Against the Constitutional Court silence on the Catalan self-determination Statute. *Autodeterminació es Democracia*	Barcelona	12.05.2010	Regional	Platform for the Right to Decide and organizations for independence, parties and unions	5,000	730	41.9% (301)
Against the Reform of the current labour law.	Santiago de	30.06.2010	Economic	The two most important	6,000	780	21.5%

Contra la Reforma Laboral	Compostela			nation-wide trade-unions UGT and CCOO			(168)
The Catalonian self-determination protest against the Constitutional court ruling against the Catalan Statute. *Som una Nació*	Barcelona	10.07.2010	Regional	Òmnium Cultural, Catalan parties and trade unions	62,000	980	32.2% (309)
General strike against the reform of the labour law	Madrid	29.09.2010	Economic	The two most important nation-wide trade-unions UGT and CCOO	40,000	900	29.10% (307)
May Day Labour March	Barcelona	01.05.2010	Economic	The two most important nation-wide trade-unions UGT and CCOO	7,000	700	27.1% (180)
Against politicians, banks and the major parties response to the economic crisis. Real democracy now. *Democracia Real Ya*	Madrid	15.05.2011	Economic	Democracia Real Ya! platform	20,000	1000	34.5% (301)

Source: Own elaboration

Table 2. Profile of the main organizations staging five of the major demonstrations

	Number of organizations reported by more than 1% of the respondents	Percentage of organizations with a brick and mortar address	Mean age of staging organizations (std. dev) in years from foundation to 2011		Organizations with membership or affiliation possibilities
15M	8	38%	2.9	(1.3)	13%
29S, general strike	7	86%	43.3	(12.6)	100%
AED, regional	9	78%	21.5	(5.5)	78%
Pro-Life	10	70%	9.9	(2.9)	60%
SUN, regional	9	100%	43.2	(9.3)	100%

Source: Own elaboration

Table 3. Mobilization channels, socio-demographic characteristics and previous

engagement of demonstrators

	All other demos (8)	Other economic issues demos (4)	Other Madrid demos (2)	May 15 demo
Mobilization Heard about the demonstration (%)				
… in alternative online media	26***	21**	29***	55
… in online social networks	17***	10***	10***	49
… in traditional media	56***	53***	68***	13
… through co-members	29***	45***	18***	8
Was asked to go to demonstration by (%)				
… friends or acquaintances	17***	14***	16***	30
… co-members of organization	21***	22***	13***	7
Is a member of organization endorsing the demonstration (%)	40***	61***	29***	4
Sociodemographics				
Year of birth (mean)	1965***	1966***	1964***	1971
Women (%)	43***	40***	46*	52
Education (mean scale 1 to 8)	5,0***	4,4***	5,4***	6,4
Unemployed (%)	8***	8***	8***	14
Political engagement				
Previous political participation (mean number, repertoire of 9)	3.6	3.9***	3.1***	3.5

Protest experience (mean, scale 1 –never- to 5 -more than 20 previous demonstrations-)	3.8*	4.1***	3.6	3.7
Previous violent acts (%)	2	3**	1.6	0.1
Organizational membership (%)	66***	73***	59***	48
N	2,269	1,057	910	325

Source: own elaboration.*** significant at 99%, ** significant at 95%, * significant at 90% compared to the 15M demonstration.

Table 4 – Logistic regression explaining participation in the 15M demonstration vs. all other demonstrations

	B	(s.e.)
Mobilized by online social network (dummy)	1.219***	(0.194)
Mobilized by alternative online media (dummy)	1.157***	(0.182)
Mobilized by Friends or acquaintances (dummy)	0.392*	(0.201)
Member of staging organization (dummy)	-2.487***	(0.326)
Age (0 is 12, 1 is 88)	0.899*	(0.528)
Woman (dummy)	0.124	(0.182)
Education (8 categories)	4.718***	(0.520)
Unemployed/between Jobs (dummy)	0.638**	(0.306)
Political participation (10 item mean)	-0.44	(0.544)
Past protest experience (dummy)	-1.561***	(0.565)
Organizational engagement (dummy)	-0.472**	(0.192)
Interest in politics (4 categories)	-0.839**	(0.367)
Ideology (10 categories 0 is left, 1 is right)	-3.401***	(0.472)
Constant	-2.205***	(0.726)
N	1367	
r2_p	0.363	

Source: own elaboration. The dependent variable is 1 if the individual took part in the 15M demo and 0 if she participated in any other protest event. Independent variables have been standardized to range between 0 and 1 in order to enable comparing coefficients.. *** significant at 99%, ** significant at 95%, * significant at 90%