POLITICAL PARTIES AND GRASSROOTS PARTICIPATION:

Digital media practices in the Spanish Podemos

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Abstract:

The creation and rapid growth of the Spanish political party Podemos has created high expectations among citizens who want to participate in politics beyond voting. With a strategy that combines analogue and digital media, the party has emerged as the third biggest party in the last general elections, June 2016. Podemos has been conceived as a hybrid between a political party and a social movement, striving for winning the elections while relaying on grassroots activism through decentralised groups called “circles”, which operate locally and interact with the party via digital media. Although the potential of digital media for participation has been many times stressed, how the circles use these media depends highly on ongoing power relations and struggles within the party. Through semi-structured interviews and participant observation, this research analyses the perceptions of seven participants in two Podemos circles from the perspective of media practices, and looks into the potential of digital tools for political participation and the way ongoing power relations affect this participation. The results show that media practices within the circles are limited by the position of power of the leaders, who make use of analogue media to convey unidirectional messages that can hardly be countered via digital media. Furthermore, the research analyses the existence of relevant tensions in Podemos as a party that promotes citizen participation within a hierarchical, top-down organisation.

Keywords: Podemos, participation, digital media, analogue media, media practices, circles, power relations
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1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the economic crisis in 2008, social unrest has led to massive demonstrations and new grassroots movements. One of the most unique responses to the crisis took place in Spain in 2011: the 15M or Indignados Movement burst amidst austerity policies and politicians’ corruption scandals, the main slogan being “They do not represent us”. As a movement that demanded “real democracy”, the 15M rejected institutional politics while promoting other forms of interactions between citizens. Through the occupation of main squares and the use of digital technologies for fluid interaction between participants, the movement sought to expand the ways in which people engage politically.

Although the 15M brought about an unprecedented politicisation of the Spanish society (Fernández-Savater 2011), it did not succeed in bringing substantial changes at the political representation level, which has been dominated by centre and right wing parties for the last decades. In 2015, however, the political party Podemos was created as a tool to channel citizens’ outrage expressed in the 15M. Since its creation, Podemos has been portrayed as a movement, as a platform and as a party (Castro 2014), as a political hybrid initiative that seeks to obtain parliamentary representation in order to do “new politics” (Collado 2015).

With their purpose of promoting citizens’ participation and boosting their impact by achieving parliamentary representation, Podemos has adopted a twofold tactic. On the one hand, emulating the spontaneous political engagement of 15M camps, Podemos has prompted the creation of “circles” (i.e. territory or issue-based activist groups), in a network that quickly spread all over the country (Bonet i Martí & Ubasart i González, 2014). On the other hand, Podemos has gained its popularity through prime-time TV debates, where its leaders (the majority being political science teachers at Complutense University in Madrid), show a well-structured, catch-all discourse, refusing to define themselves in terms of left/right ideology (Rodríguez, 2014; Rubio, 2014).

In order to avoid oligarchical tendencies common in other political parties, Podemos’ promise of changing traditional politics has been heavily based upon transparency and the use of ICT at different levels. Whether for diffusion, deliberation or voting purposes, the party has so far relayed on online platforms to achieve their purposes (Toret 2015).

Adopting both analogue and digital media, the communicative strategy of Podemos combines many-to-many processes with unidirectional and viral contents (tv-tailored arguments, tweets, coordinated hashtags, memes, and many others in constant renewal). However, electoral ‘timings’ and strategies seem to be at odds with slow and

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1 Proving that, rather than witnessing the “death of old media”, old and new seem to coexist (Couldry 2012:52)
engaged political debate, without which participation remains incomplete. In this double-paced process, having grassroots movements and politically engaged citizens on one side, with casual voters on the other, the use of media tools and strategies vary considerably. In this scenario, although Podemos bases its work on enhancing participation on a bottom-up approach (amending the political programme, creating workshops, spreading the word, and so on) the plurality of these spaces of deliberation can often outpaced by mediatised top-down decisions of the leaders of the party.

Podemos has constantly claimed its “new” nature vis-à-vis old parties. In so doing, the use of digital media\(^2\) as opposed to top-down, corporate-controlled analogue media has been fundamental. However, as a party that aims at bringing grassroots practices into parliamentary politics, Podemos merges elements from both realms in a combination that shows relevant tensions in terms of media practices and decision-making processes.

### 1.1 Aim and research questions

The purpose of this research is to explore the interaction between old and new media practices in the decision-making processes within Podemos, as well as the power relations between activists in Podemos circles and those leading the party.

As an emerging political party that takes its force from social movements, it is relevant to look into how institutional and grassroots structures interact through ICT, and how “politics from bellow” can eventually reach institutional politics. The research questions that guide this research are the following:

1. How do activists and supporters perceive the potential of digital media vis-à-vis traditional media as tools to promote participation within Podemos?

and

2. How do ongoing power relations and struggles affect participatory media practices in Podemos?

### 1.2 Structure

This degree project focuses on how Podemos’ activists and supporters perceive participation through digital media. The section that follows is a literature review of core issues and debates relevant for the analysis. These topics are the 15M as an internetworked social movement that has introduced new forms of political participation in Spain; an overview of the diverse alliances between political parties and social movements that have taken place before Podemos in Europe and South America; and

\(^2\) Understood as “institutionalised forms of, and platforms for, producing, disseminating and receiving content” through digital means (Couldry 2012:15)
current uses of digital media for participation. After the literature review, the case of Podemos is presented, looking at its main characteristics in terms of structure and mechanisms for participation. The next section presents the theoretical framework of media practices and participation, followed by the section of methodology. In this part of the project, data collection, interview procedure, ethics in research and quality in research are presented. The results from the interviews are then presented and analysed, leading to a discussion on the main findings and its relevance in dialogue with presented theories. The concluding section summarises the main findings of the chapter, along with the limitations of the study, the contributions and a note on future lines of research on Podemos.
2. Literature review

2.1 15M and new forms of political participation

One of the consequences of a global economic crisis that has affected millions of people in different countries has been the burst of numerous protests and social movements that, although distant from each other, have some characteristics in common. The Spanish 15M, along with the US’ Occupy, the Greek Syntagma and Istambul’s Gezi Park protests have been regarded as part of a new form of social movement3, shaped and enabled through digital technologies (e.g. Castells 2012).

The last decades of the XXth century witnessed the creation of contemporary (or “new”) social movements, characterised by a shift from working-class and nationalistic goals towards issue-based and intersecting objectives such as women’s rights, global solidarity or environmental protection (della Porta and Diani [1998] 2006). These social movements depart from traditional approaches, focusing the struggle not over material needs but "over the control of cultural patterns" (Touraine 1985:760; also Offe 1985). Following this evolution, recent movements have been characterised by the abundance of performative symbolic actions, individual subactivism (Bakardjieva 2009), civic cultures (Dahlgren 2005), and other forms of political action that do not fit within previous frameworks (Mascheroni 2013).

As society and technology evolve, so do social movements and their relationship with digital media (understood as a combination of digital artefacts, practices and institutional arrangements [Lievrouw 2011:5]). These new forms of activism benefit greatly from ubiquitous technologies at reach; bridging and mixing traditionally separated areas of life, such as private and public or work and leisure (Couldry 2012). Moreover, the ongoing individualisation of social action, which is undermining the collective dimension of social endeavours, has been further emphasised by digital media that permit a higher level of interaction between individuals (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). From this perspective, digital media do not only reinforce collective endeavours by providing technical resources, but they also shape the way individuals act and engage into social action. Connective action, as Bennett and Segerberg (2012) call it, is thus not about strengthening organisations as much as it is about individualised, loose and easy-to-appropriate frames and discourses, a feature fundamentally fostered by digital technologies.

The notion of internetworked social movements, originally coined by Langman (2005) - and later reformulated as simply networked social movements (Castells 2012) -, responds to this new type of social action marked by the hybridisation of areas of life and forms of activism. Broadly speaking, the term stresses the addition of information

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3 Understood in this text as processes in which actors who share a collectively identifiable identity linked by informal networks are involved in conflictual relations with defined opponents (della Porta and Diani [1998] 2006:20-21)
and communication technologies (ICT) to the general framework of social movements. On a closer look, and based on the most recent experiences in Europe and the US, there are some recurrent traits with regard to the use of and relationship with these technologies. First and foremost, these movements are characterised by using ICT not only as a means for communication (i.e. part of what Bennett and Segerberg [2012] called “collective action”), but also as performative practices that shape the way movements exist and work (Candón 2011, Lievrouw 2011). For instance, these movements have been primarily based on horizontal and open networks (Castells 2012), while promoting a commons practice and the use of collective intelligence (Padilla 2012). These characteristics are not only traits of the social movement itself, but also technical features that shape, to some extent, the practice of the movement (Castells 2012). Moreover, although these movements are sometimes supported by explicit membership, the ubiquity of digital technologies allow them to rely on casual, often anonymous participation from anyone willing to take part in given activities, thus permitting loose memberships or contributions (Padilla 2011). Loose participation ties are also prompted by the hybrid nature of these movements, highlighted by their ability to merge older and newer media, as well as online and offline repertoires⁴ (Chadwick 2007). Finally, movements such as Occupy and the 15M do not only contest mainstream uses of technology, but they also aim at specific cultural and political transformations, opposing individualisation and competition with inclusive citizenship and cooperation (Figueras 2015).

2.2 Political parties and social movements

Social movements such as the 15M have had a limited influence at the institutional, decision-making level, reserved for parliamentary groups and political parties. As it is commonly assumed, political parties and social movements pertain to differentiated realms of political action. In contrast with social movements, formed by informal networks that get involved in conflictual relations, political parties are institutionalised groups for political representation, which gain their support via elections, and represent citizens through parliamentary politics (Rohrschneider 1993). However, these fields are many times mingled, interconnected and informed by each other: movements can join partisan coalitions, introduce new forms of collective action, engage into electoral mobilisation and polarise political parties internally, among others (McAdam and Tarrow 2010).

This close relationship between parties and movements has led to various types of coalitions throughout the last decades. Several South American countries after the long neoliberal period at the end of the XXth century have experienced the success and limitations of these coalitions. Countries such as Bolivia, Venezuela and Brazil have, in

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⁴ Understood as “a limited set of routines that are learned, shared and acted out through a relatively deliberate process of choice” (Tilly, in Chadwick 2007:285).
its different versions, managed to combine grassroots movements with institutional initiatives, overthrowing neoliberal governments and shifting their agenda in favour of social demands (Anria 2013). However, the success of these parties needs to be nuanced, as they have progressively renounced to many of their promises in order to keep power and stability. For instance, Bolivia’s MAS (the government party) has implemented relevant reforms in social areas and fundamental rights but, in the same time, the relationship between social actors and the government has shifted from a bottom-up support and organisation towards a top-down co-optation by the government (Anria 2013). In a similar way, Brazil’s government (Worker’s Party, formed by trade unionists and social movements) have changed its initial participatory bases for a robust and vertical apparatus (Hunter 2010). Moreover, these left-wing governments have not completely broken with neoliberal policies they criticised from opposition, thus creating further tensions with the social movements that prompted their electoral victories (Terhorst et al. 2013). Finally, there is a high risk for the social movements to loss their autonomy vis-à-vis the State and other power structures (Böhm et al. 2010).

In recent years, the relationship between movements and parties has taken new forms in countries such as Spain, Italy and Turkey. With the advent of the Occupy-like movements, the idea of bringing these movements’ ideals into institutional politics has been considered in several countries. For instance, the Italian Occupy PD and the Turkish Occupy CHP (named after the parties PD and CHP) have been coined as social movements within organisations (della Porta et al. 2015), a phenomenon by which certain members of these parties tried to confront institutional closure through more inclusive forms of participation. In so doing, they adopted forms borrowed from the Occupy repertoires, such as horizontal and inclusive assemblies and a discourse against institutional closure. However, it did not work as expected, and both movements vanished after few months, amidst a general lack of support from fellow party members.

The experiences in South America and Europe respond to an ongoing need of social movements taking political action into institutions and beyond traditional (catch-all) parties. In this sense, Collado (2015) describes the emergence of citizen-parties that draw on a culture of local action. They engage into politics through everyday struggles, assembly-based participation, horizontal networks, autonomy of its distributed nodes, and strategies that ultimately favour the social in front of the economical. The municipal initiatives that have multiplied in the last years in Spain are a consequence of such politics.

As it will be further presented, the creation of the Spanish party Podemos echoes both South American and European initiatives, and its design as a citizen-party (at least formally) has relied upon citizen engagement, a transversal discourse and a use of digital media that largely surpasses the rest of the parties in Spain (Collado 2015).
2.3 New and old forms of media for participation

Whether it is through movements, parties or individually, digital media has brought about substantial changes in the ways people communicate. As politics is a fundamentally communicational realm, the implications of new media for political participation are numerous and still to be discovered (Dahlgren 2013, Toret 2015, Chadwick and Stromer-Galley 2016).

Political parties have used digital media both to reinforce old trends and to implement some newer ones. Their repertoire hybridity permits higher flexibility in the design of appealing campaigns (Chadwick 2007). Closeness to potential voters, innovative ways of citizen funding and a relatively loose control of the party’s discourse (accepting citizen-generated contents, memes and the like, which allows participants to take ownership of the campaign) benefit an image of newness in traditional parties. However, this flexibility does not entail a change in the balance of power within parties. In fact, despite the hybridity of the media system, power is still exercised by those able to control information flows in order to achieve their goals (Chadwick 2013). Moreover, as Hands (2011) reminds us, enabling technologies alone do not guarantee that they will be used accordingly. Often, new technologies are used to underpin old ways of political marketing, giving a sense of freshness to practices that dismiss the actual potential of digital tools (Hands 2011:200).

Despite the old-fashioned ways in which parties use digital technologies, there are numerous opportunities for political participation that do not necessarily have to do with representation. As Couldry (2012:276) points out, the incitements to participate in politics are directed not to ordinary democracy, as much as they are towards various forms of counter-politics: controlling or vetoing, to name some. In his overview of these forms of participation, Dahlgren (2013) uses the term of “alternative politics” as efforts towards social change by democratic but extra-parliamentarian means. As institutional politics struggle to maintain its legitimacy, other practices have been developed through digital media that engage citizens into political action, many times related to identity or cultural politics rather than traditional politics (Dahlgren 2013:14).

These trends contribute to the creation of new political actors, both networked and individual, considered by Couldry as a “new reserve of political action” (Couldry 2012:271). At the individual level, these new actors are no longer just party or opinion leaders, but also individuals with no apparent authority that can, however, gain an unexpected status by acting online (Couldry 2012:268). Current individualisation processes are transforming political action into an individual rather than a collective matter (Dahlgren 2013:52). In turn, these processes are opening new areas traditionally detached from political contestation (culture, identity or lifestyle). Bakardjieva (2009) uses the term “subactivism” to refer to the ways in which individuals engage politically through traditionally private areas of life: through consumption, symbolic communities, civil society activities around music or sports, and so on (Dahlgren 2013:54).
Either through political parties, extra-parliamentarian means or subactivism, participation in public matters requires something more than mere engagement. If the latter is connected to potentiality and subjectivity (Dahlgren 2006:24), participation refers to some level of activity derived from engagement. In this sense, participation via the media\(^5\) is closely related to (and goes beyond) deliberation.

As Couldry asserts, media are entangled with power relations (Couldry 2012:16), and thus media by themselves do not hold specific power for democratisation. This fact has been repeatedly pointed out when discussing the so-called digital divide: an uneven access to information and communication technologies that keeps some countries underdeveloped. However appealing this techno-determinist approach might seem\(^6\), several authors have stressed the shortcomings of such framework, as it overlooks relevant concerns on market expansion (using ICT as a cover for renewed capitalism) and literacy (access without the ability to use these media is pointless) (Pieterse 2010:168). In other words, by considering progress and access inseparable, “the concept of the digital divide serves to conceal the political nature of technical systems” (Uimonen, in Granqvist 2005:286).

Regardless of the political system or country where these technological changes are applied, power is still unevenly distributed, and thus the relations and struggles that it creates shape the media, regardless of their potential for participation. In this sense, Dahlgren (2013) stresses the idea that participation is not mere access to media, but that it also entails some degree of actualisation of power relations (also Couldry 2012:272). According to Dahlgren (2013:48), these power relations take place within a three-tiered public sphere (from up to bottom, the elite, the mainstream and the societal spheres), connected by different and asymmetrical lines of communication and influence.

The challenge new parties and movements are facing is thus to see “if, how, and to what extent political expression from the lower tier makes its way to the middle and top tiers” (Dahlgren 2013:49). In other words, for participation in and through political parties to be fully accomplished, this participation needs to somehow actualise the relations of power that currently rule between citizens, media, institutions and decision-makers.

\(^5\) Dahlgren (2013) uses the notion of “participation via the media” as opposed to “participation in the media”, the latter being the mere creation of contents in the terms designed by media corporations (e.g. updating one’s Facebook profile).

\(^6\) An approach that somehow re-edits the classic developmentalism (Pieterse 2010:170).
3. Case presentation: Podemos

The spontaneous creation and the progressive evolution of the 15M movement has been closely connected to the widespread distrust of institutional politics, in constant growth for the last decade. As corruption scandals, lack of transparency and ongoing misrepresentation occurred, numerous initiatives took over from below, not aiming at taking the power in the parliament, but rather displacing it to grassroots movements.

The lack of confidence towards institutions of political representation has been materialised in initiatives like the decentralisation or multiplication of the 15M assemblies all around the country, issue-based movements (tides or “mareas”) that aim at transversal collaborations between ideologically-distant people, and the reinforcement of already-existing grassroots platforms (Sánchez, 2013).

However, all these initiatives found themselves nearly powerless vis-à-vis decision-making spheres. Although mobilisations had been widespread and varied, little had changed in terms of laws and policy. In this context, a group of left-wing intellectuals, supported by the minority party Izquierda Anticapitalista (Anticapitalist Left), created Podemos as a party that could continue the 15M’s politics through institutional means.

Podemos has designed a discourse that shifts from the left-right cleavage to a more transversal approach that confronts people and the powerful (López 2015, also in Kioupioklis 2016). The concept of “new politics” has been used as an ambiguous term that enables loose identification from citizens with divergent or even opposed political views. Besides promoting more participation for citizens, Podemos has aimed at political regeneration through mechanisms against corruption (López 2015).

“New politics”, as portrayed by Podemos, has been a double-sided concept that can be understood both as specific ways of doing politics (resembling the 15M’s forms of participation in opposition to mere representation) and as progressive policies that can counter ongoing degradation and privatisation of public services such as education or health. As Ramos Pérez (2015) asserts, Podemos promotes representation as mandate, that is, as a temporary delegation of citizens’ sovereignty in order to carry out given policies. Internally, the party has also tried to show their particular nature by promoting transparency, accountability and gender parity (Ramos Pérez 2015). According to the organisation document in force, the party’s aim is to put participation in the center of Podemos, “not only in its development but also in its effects” (Podemos 2014). In this sense, Podemos has shown a permanent interest in bringing social movements’ demands

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7 The process from the creation of Podemos as a political initiative to its constitution as a political party was slightly more complex.
8 However, its discourse has not been accepted equally by all demographic groups: potential voters are politically active, digitally literate, they consider political class and corruption to be the biggest problem in the country, leftish, young, precarious and atheists. In the same time, class, level of studies and gender do not seem to play an important role (Fernández-Albertos 2015)
9 The word to refer to “policy” and “politics” is homonym in Spanish.
and culture into institutions, succeeding where initiatives such as the aforementioned OccupyPD and OccupyCHP failed.

This participation has been promoted both through digital and more traditional forms. In terms of physical, face-to-face participation, the party has encouraged the creation of the Podemos circles, autonomously created spaces for local activists and supporters. Although mainly territorially based, other circles have been created around specific topics, such as feminism, education, environment, animal rights and many others. The figure of the circles resembles that of the 15M’s local assemblies, and aim at promoting decentralised participation (Bonet i Martí & Ubasart i González, 2014). The design, decision-making power and role of these circles are still a matter of debate. The party has undergone relevant changes in its structure since its creation, fully formalising it after the so-called Vistalegre Congress, where the structure of Podemos was finally formalised (see figure 1). Since then, the organisation is divided in three main blocks, which differentiate between the State-level structure, the territory-level structure and the circles. Beside the Democratic Guarantees Committee, there are three main authorities that interact and shape the power relations within the party: the Citizen Assembly, the Citizen Council and the circles.

The Citizen Assembly is the highest authority in Podemos, and all people who are registered in Podemos form it. This registration does not entail any type of fix membership, nor it is incompatible with other party memberships (Podemos 2014). According to this document, the Assembly decides over the party’s agenda and elects the Citizen Council, among others.

The Citizen Council is the political direction authority, with executive power (the interviewees referred to the Council with alternative names such as “the leaders”, “the promoter group”, “central” or “Pablo’s team”). The Council is currently formed by the most visible members of Podemos, such as Pablo Iglesias (General Secretary), Iñigo Errejón and Carolina Bescansa. In practice, it is the Citizen Council the authority that makes most of the decisions. The General Secretary, as the head of the Citizen Council, holds the institutional and political representation of the party, as well as additional competencies. Territorially, Podemos replicates its State-level structure. Therefore, there are geographically delimited equivalents of the Citizen Assembly and the Citizen Council.

The third block is that of the circles. The circles can be either territory-based (neighbourhoods, towns and cities) or sector-based (issues tackled in Podemos’ electoral platform). Although the introduction to the organisation document underscores the fundamental role of the circles, their competencies are limited to making inquiries and promoting debates within Citizen Councils and Assemblies. When it comes to decision-making, the circles are sovereign within their area of activity. According to the document that contemplates the creation of the circles, these gather periodically in publicly announced meetings, discuss topics that will make it to the electoral platform.
It is the circles’ duty to be in touch with different civil society actors, such as local social movements and initiatives that resonate with Podemos’ principles (Podemos 2014).

When it comes to digital means for participation, Podemos has been the first Spanish party in using tools such as Appgree or Reddit (Velasco 2014, Asri 2014). Used for given occasions, Appgree is a smartphone app that enables debate and decision-making among large amounts of users. Reddit, a social news networking service, has been used by Podemos through an ad-hoc created forum (Plaza Podemos -Podemos Square-), where any person can register and engage into debates around the party, specific policies and so on. Based on the understanding of participation as rational debate, Plaza Podemos gives an idea of how political conversation can evolve on principles of karma, popularity and so on, making the popular posts more visible and vice versa (Fenol et al. 2016). However, this system is far from perfect, as it permits organised groups taking control of debates. As these authors have analysed, dissidence is silenced through negative votes (finally penalised as trolling), even if the topics are relevant for the
discussion. There is, therefore, some degree of misuse of Reddit as a place for discussion, changing it into a place for ideological reaffirmation (Fenol et al. 2016:29).

Podemos has taken advantage of the proliferation of online platforms and local circles to promote participation, but they complement rather than substitute traditional means. Despite techno-optimistic theories that advance a new era in which representation is no longer needed, or in which it is not the central piece of political action (Haro and Sampedro 2011), representation still plays a fundamental role in Podemos. Both the circles and Plaza Podemos play a relevant role in the coordination, organisation and the networked action of Podemos and its supporters. However, the primary tool to hold the party’s leaders accountable is still voting as part of the Citizen Assembly (Podemos 2014).

In this sense, digital media do not seem to change old campaign techniques and, in many cases, they reinforce them. Either in the case of old parties or in those who are branded as “new”, the opportunities that digital media provide are not fully utilised. Instead of using it as a multidirectional channel with which to communicate with supporters and opponents, messages are usually unidirectional, self-promotional (Flores et al. 2015:120).

As Collado (2015) notices, Podemos is built upon a tension between radical democratisation (bottom-up participation, strong democracy) and catch-all parties’ strategies (loose meanings, ambiguity). In this sense, although Podemos shows relevant traits of the so-called citizen-parties presented above, it can also be considered as a form of populism, formally democratic and radical but organically directed towards power (Collado 2015).
4. Methodology

4.1 Theoretical Framework

This paper analyses citizen participation in newly formed Spanish political party Podemos through the media practices framework. By adopting this framework, the paper underscores the importance of media in order to engage politically, looking at what people do with media (Couldry 2012). The concept of media practices is especially useful in a complex political scenario where institutional politics and activism interplay, as it allows us looking into interactions both with media objects (e.g. how people interact with mobile phones, apps or laptops) and with media subjects (e.g. journalists, politicians or activists), as well as the outcomes that emerge from them (Mattoni and Treré 2014).

Looking at media practices allows us to look into regular actions that are driven by needs of coordination, interaction, community, trust and freedom (Couldry 2012:94). These needs often lead to the creation of digital artefacts that have, in turn, provided new opportunities for political participation at various levels, from individuals to organisations. However, these artefacts by themselves do not guarantee a certain practice. Following Lievrouw, digital media are not only the material artefacts, but also the communication practices that are developed when using these artefacts and the social arrangements around practices and artefacts (Lievrouw 2011:7). In this sense, how media evolve does not only depend on certain technologies, but also on intersecting power relations between technological, economic, social and political forces (Couldry 2012:44).

These power relations play a fundamental role in how citizens engage politically as well. Political parties and representation are based upon uneven relationships between those who elect (i.e. citizens) and those who are elected (i.e. professional politicians). In order to assess the quality and characteristics of citizen participation in and through political parties such as Podemos, it is necessary to understand that the material and discursive elements of participation are shaped through institutions, technologies, identities, and attributes of communication at interplay (Dahlgren 2013:23). As such, political participation has a component strongly dependent on communication skills and a mastery of genres and technologies.

A framework that combines theory on participation and on media practices allows a look into information and communication technologies that analyses their use while critically assessing its value within ongoing power struggles.
4.2 Philosophical view

I adopt a perspective based on epistemological constructionism, as I believe that knowledge about our world is constructed through assumptions and previous experiences, and thus research does not seek to claim absolute truth (Maxwell 2013:43). Social phenomena cannot be understood independently from its context, nor can it be analysed through objective and fixed rules (Flyvbjerg 2001). Since the research is based on interviews to individuals with diverse backgrounds and insights, interpreting and analysing them as partial and incomplete accounts within a broader phenomenon is necessary.

As a researcher and activist with an ongoing interest in the object of study, my assumptions and standpoint might entail a certain bias. However, in line with Maxwell (2013:45), I argue that it can also be an opportunity to enrich the research with additional insights and hypotheses. Moreover, the knowledge and experience acquired through the years allow a look into the phenomenon that exceeds analytical rationality and that benefits from the researcher’s judgment and knowledge of the context (Flyvbjerg 2001). In this sense, I have been able to follow the phenomenon attentively, looking at the characteristics of the party and being myself part of a Podemos Circle, and thus can provide more informed interpretations on Podemos and its interviewed participants’ insights.

4.3 Data collection

As the main focus of this project is on the perceptions of Podemos’ activists in regards to ICT for participation, the primary data is gathered from semi-structured interviews with seven supporters and activists. Interviews are a basic tool to generate knowledge, and they are especially useful when beliefs, emotions and attitudes of participants are under research (Della Porta 2014:228).

In order to gain insights of the extent to which Podemos’ “new politics” promotes citizen participation, the interviews were centred on the perceptions and understandings of everyday participants. Focusing on topics and areas that have an interest not only from a scholarly point of view but also for everyday activism within the party foster activists’ willingness to cooperate and to share their thoughts with a researcher (Hintz and Milan 2010).

Citizen participation cannot be understood, however, in absolute terms (Dahlgren 2013:21). Instead, it should be seen within a continuum that goes from mere representation (typical of minimalist approaches) to stronger participation forms (maximalist approaches, typical of republicanism or radical democracy). Determining the degree of participation promoted by the party is one of the objectives of these interviews.
Podemos has pioneered the implementation of digital tools for political participation within parties in Spain. Nevertheless, how citizens use these tools and how this participation contributes to ongoing decision-making processes are questions that still need to be debated, and for which participants’ input seem essential.

4.4 Selection process

The interviewees were chosen from two circles from the autonomous community of the Basque Country, in the northern of Spain. Those are the territory-based circles of Hernani and Rentería, two middle-sized towns that had been active since mid-2014. The choice of circles was made based on their availability and the readiness of its members to be part of the study. For many years, Basque politics had been marked by the nationalist agenda, and thus there was little room for left-wing and State-level politics. With the advent of the 15M, regarded as many of them as the turning point in Spanish politics, their interest in politics increased. When Podemos was finally created in 2014, many citizens from Hernani and Rentería engaged into politics for their first time, and the party managed to earn 30% and 37% of the votes during the last general elections, respectively.

During the first months of its existence, I was part of the circle of Hernani, and that led to a relationship with most of its members, based on respect and trust. When preparing this project, I contacted the group and all members showed interest and willingness to share their thoughts and perceptions. This willingness is, when it comes to activism, hard to achieve, as activists often mistrust the researcher and do not share the same motivations (Hintz and Milan 2010). This was certainly not the case with the members of Podemos in Hernani, perhaps due to the fact that they had known me long before I introduced my research interest.

Snowballing from my contacts in the circle of Hernani, they provided me with a contact from the circle of Rentería, whom put me in contact with two more people afterwards. Three participants in total, one of which declined to participate, alleging that he had very limited notions of digital media, and that he rarely used any of the tools mentioned in this research, except Whatsapp. The other two expressed their willingness to take the interviews, and both shared relevant insights on the topics, thus completing the previous five interviews.

The number of interviewees was not initially settled, but it was decided as they were carried out and their content reached the point of “saturation of knowledge”, i.e. when the interviewees’ answers start to be redundant or add little to what you already know (Weiss, in Della Porta 2014). Although more diversity in terms of age and location would have been beneficial in order to achieve more concluding results, the availability of the interviewees, along with the predominance of participants between 30 and 55
years old, made the sampling slightly more homogenous. Out of seven participants, there were four female and three male, between 36 and 43 years old, with education that ranged from high school to university, and only two of them had been politically engaged before they got in Podemos. Quite remarkably, although Podemos has avoided employing traditional tags as “left” and “right”, all seven interviewees considered themselves leftish at various degrees.

Finally, and beside their membership to specific circles, three of the interviewees held some type of political responsibility at the institutional level. Concretely, Interviewee #5 was a member of the province-level political group of Podemos, while Interviewees #1, #3 and #6 held a local-level position, thus contributing both at the Podemos circle and at the City Hall.

I started the interviews by shortly introducing the topic of research, and thanking their participation in it. In addition, they were informed about the interviews being recorded. As the identity of the participants would give no additional value to the results of the research, their anonymity was explicitly guaranteed. Nevertheless, all the interviewees seemed to accept their names being mentioned. After a short introduction, and based on the participants’ answers, a number of topics were introduced through various questions. These topics included their motivation to participate in Podemos, their use – both as individuals and as a circle- of digital media, their perception of the weight analogue media has within Podemos, or their participation habits, among others. The questions were formulated in a slightly different way in each case, according to the direction the conversation was taking, as well as the vocabulary used. Finally, all interviews were held in Spanish and, after coding and analysing the answers, relevant fragments were translated to English.

The interviews were complemented with participant observation. As a member of the circle of Hernani over ten months, regular meetings, conversations with supporters and gathered knowledge on different processes have allowed me to become familiar with the dynamics and vocabulary of the members of the circle, thus being able to clearer formulate the questions and to better understand the answers they provided.

Beside the primary data collected from the interviews, secondary data has been used in order to better understand a phenomenon like Podemos and its media practices. However, given the newness of the party, most of the material available corresponds to newspapers, and only a handful of articles have been published on peer-reviewed journals. The former refer mostly to specific and contextual issues, while the latter analyse from a social and technopolitical perspective, the importance of Podemos or other similar phenomena.
4.5 Quality in research

All the interviews were accurately represented in the research, taking into consideration not only the contributions that supported certain hypotheses but also those that contradicted them, thus avoiding anecdotalism (Silverman 2010). In order to avoid misunderstandings that would have compromised the validity of the data, all the unfamiliar concepts were explained, making sure that the questions were understood in the same way by both the interviewer and the interviewee.

The biggest part of the secondary data used was retrieved from sources such as peer-reviewed articles or renowned authors. In some cases, and due to the newness of the object of study, some sources were retrieved from analogue and digital journalist media. These were mostly used for contextual rather than for theoretical purposes.

4.6 Ethics in research

The interviews were held with written or oral consent of the participants, as they were informed about the purpose of the research and the way data was going to be handled. All of them participated voluntarily, and indeed showed their disposition to help in the process of snowballing to find more interviewees that would be interested in taking part. Before each interview, the participants were informed about the general topics that were going to be tackled, as well as about the interviews being recorded and registered for analysis. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured, although all participants posed no objections to their identities being disclosed. As their names hold no relevance for the study, they were named after the order of the interviews (Interviewee #1, #2 and so on). Finally, all interviews were treated impartially, and all of them contributed to the research in a neutral and impartial way.
5. Analysis part I

In this section, the data gathered from the interviews is presented in different thematic blocks (use of digital tools, role of analogue media, digital media for participation within Podemos and its implications in terms of citizen engagement), summarising the general ideas and complementing them with illustrative quotes from the interviewees.

5.1 A short note on “new politics”

Most of the vague terms used throughout the interviews (e.g. digital technologies) were explained and clarified, making sure that they were understood in the same way by the interviewer and the interviewees. There are, however, some concepts that have been repeatedly employed by Podemos, and that needed further reflection, rather than a settled definition that would condition the answers of the interviewees. Mainly, the two concepts that were further discussed are “new politics” and “participation” (the second of which will be tackled later on). Asking interviewees about these concepts allowed them to reflect on how such terms are commonly used, how they understand them and, ultimately, the normative assumptions that these concepts carry within.

When asked about “new politics” (as opposed, generally, to “old politics” or “politics as usual”), most of the interviewees found it rather hard to define, and they preferred to resort to concrete examples or situations in which politics could be regarded as “new”. “Newness” cannot be defined but through its opposite, this being the current political scenario that Podemos seeks to overcome. According to interviewees, this “newness” would mostly be related to some type of “citizen power” (Interviewee #1), which ultimately rejects the professionalization of politics. Corruption (practices that typically emerge through years of working within a party without external control) would be unconceivable from a new politics perspective, and politicians would be in constant communication with society and social movements. Interviewee #4 settled the border between old and new politics in “the very moment in which people become institutionalised and disconnected from those who vote for them”. Interviewee #3 stressed the need for openness and access to anyone as necessary preconditions for new politics, adding afterwards, “I do not think Podemos is new politics. It is rather new people doing traditional politics”.

5.2 Overview of the digital tools used by the circles

Among the interviewees, there is a widespread use of instant-messaging apps such as Whatsapp or (more commonly) Telegram, considered appropriate for short conversations for which fast reaction is needed. They access them through smartphones and laptops, thus making it easier for them to be available at any time. Although these apps are considered a fundamental tool for the everyday work within the circle, almost
all of them nuanced that it is not recommended to start delicate discussions on them, as they can trigger never-ending conversations and misunderstandings: “Digital means are good to reach many people quickly, but there are too many people…sometimes people misinterpret [what is discussed]” (Interviewee #3). As Interviewee #6 noted, “[these tools] are also dangerous because they become ineffective, frustrating, and so on. [They are] good tools that should not substitute offline meetings”. In this sense, all interviewees agreed on the need of meeting personally periodically, where “important issues” can be discussed and decisions can be made.

When it comes to platforms with public visibility such as Twitter and Facebook, the circles as a whole use them for diffusion purposes rather than for discussion, neatly differentiating their profiles and opinions as activists from the official discourse held by the circle. Each Facebook and Twitter account is used as a public relations extension, where unidirectionality is generalised and opinions of by-passers are rare. This is an issue that concerned Interviewee #1, who considered that digital visibility works at the expense of face-to-face interactions.

Surprisingly, two of the most celebrated tools used by Podemos, Appgree and Plaza Podemos (Reddit), were widely known but rarely if ever used by the interviewees (only Interviewee #7 had used it in the past). When asked, lack of time or interest was the main answer. There are other means for debating and organising (offline meetings or mail); therefore, these platforms do not seem appealing for many people. Interviewee #5 added “there are tools, but people are not comfortable using digital means. New tools appear, but I am not sure whether they are effective or not”. The circle of Hernani had tried out some additional tools, such as a forum and Loomio10, but they ended up abandoning them in favour of Telegram’s immediacy (Interviewee #2). The circle of Rentería, in contrast, still uses Loomio for “internal, concrete decisions” as well as Google Groups to spread information (Interviewee #6). Access to digital media is not the same in all ages, however, and the convenience of certain tools needs to be assessed according to their purpose and their target audience:

“[Digital media] are getting closer, correctly in my opinion, to what everybody uses; and debates on Loomio and others have been left aside for those who know more. I know there were many complaints. There are people that do not even have an electronic mail” (Interviewee #1)

Some other initiatives have succeeded in terms of supporters’ engagement. The platform designed for massive voting within Podemos (“Participa”, i.e. Participate) is well known by the circles of Rentería and Hernani, and its members have used it at every election process11. Being the main tool for participating in substantive decisions

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10 “An easy online tool for group decision making” (www.loomio.org), similar to a forum, with some added features aimed at facilitating deliberation.
11 Internal election processes. The platform is accessible at participa.podemos.info, and it is activated whenever such processes are ongoing.
of the party, several members stressed the importance of voting. Considered appropriate for specific issues, the opinion about the platform was generally positive (“fast and effective for one-time issues”, in Interviewee #3’s words), although few of the interviewees stressed the ups and downs of its design. “It is improvable, and it is improving”, summarised Interviewee #6. According to Interviewee #2, “the quality of the voting processes has ranged from very bad to relatively good”, due to the fluctuating criteria regarding access, authentication and system of election. For instance, some elections implemented an authentication system through SMS (in a way that each voter is connected to the phone number submitted) while others allowed voters changing their ID number, thus opening new opportunities for fraud. Furthermore, many interviewees criticised the use of the so-called “voto en plancha”, a system that allowed citizens voting, by just a click, whole lists of candidates, without further reflection. These decisions, asserted Interviewee #2, were designed to benefit some groups and "were not in the essence of Podemos”.

5.3 The role of analogue media

Despite the extensive use of digital media within the circles and from the circles outwards, the weight analogue media have in the success and strategy of Podemos is still crucial. When Podemos was largely unknown, TV exposure of the party leader Pablo Iglesias led to a rapid increase of popularity; and, for the elections to the European Parliament, his image was so popular that it was used as the logo for the ballot. Employing TV to gain visibility was considered useful by Interviewee #6, who noted, “people remember the face they see on TV”. Similarly, Interviewee #5 acknowledged, “we cannot ask people to read the whole electoral platform. It is true that people vote for [the face] they know”. Another interviewee summarised it:

“it is ideal to use the most charismatic [person] to transmit the message on TV. And there, it is true, we need to take advantage of Pablo Iglesias’ team for the circles to transmit our message through those media. It is the ideal structure, because you reach a lot of people, but you need to work on the form as well” (Interviewee #1)

“To work on the form” is, for Interviewee #1, reinforcing the channels for the circles’ participation through TV, as nowadays only some groups control the access to it. In fact, TV is a double-edged sword, as Interviewee #2 pointed out. When it comes to discussing ideas within the party, there is a lack of equality between political contenders, as access to TV is held by only few of them, criticising the fact that “TV exposure has made some groups within Podemos have advantage over others” (Interviewee #2). For instance, when it comes to internal elections through the aforementioned platform Participa, the design of the voting process, accompanied with the TV exposure of one of the groups, made this group earn close to the hundred percent of the votes (Gil 2015). In this sense, some interviewees demand more openness in
terms of access to TV shows, where different groups can introduce their approaches and contribute to an informed debate. Instead, what some of them noted was “too much centralism” (Interviewee #2) in favour of those commonly known as “the promoter group”. Moreover, and as noted by other participants, Interviewee #3 acknowledged that the use of TV by some groups has diminished the opportunities for equal deliberation, as “Pablo [Iglesias]’s face makes the debate stay aside, and people directly vote for him”. Interviewee #7 explains through a practical example:

“The use of [traditional] media completely conditions the vote, because [what you see on TV] rings a bell, you see her, and you see her again, and when you voting, she looks familiar, even the name. And [media] say good things about her and, if she is in Podemos, you assume she is skilled. (…) We cannot compare [the weight of TV and that of digital media]. Traditional media convey the same or almost the same message, but digital media…you need a device, a data service, and the knowledge to use them. In contrast, you can open the newspaper and read through it” (Interviewee #7)

Deliberation within the circles is not followed by further debate among citizens. Since voting via Participa is not subject to circle membership, any citizen is a potential participant in the decisions taken using this platform. This fact, although appealing for those looking for openness within political organisations, is not free from shortcomings. Due to the enormous reach of analogue media, TV appearances transcend far beyond circle meetings, favouring leaders’ charisma in front of idea discussion: “people that watch TV [but do not participate in their local circles] are not as informed. You cannot explain anything in depth because they do not show up at the meetings” (Interviewee #7).

5.4 The role of digital media

When asked about how they use digital media to participate within Podemos, the answers varied. While all of them acknowledged the existence of channels that connect (albeit through several intermediaries) the circles with decision-making spheres, these channels do not receive unanimous appreciation.

Interviewees #5 and #6, who hold now political positions within institutions, acknowledged that new media are helping people reach out, although the success of these communications depend on each circle and person, as well as on the intermediaries that work as gatekeepers. In this sense, Interviewee #2 confirmed that these gatekeepers exist and that it benefits the well functioning of the party. According to him, it is important that not all matters can reach decision-making spheres, as it would lead to saturation of the means and lack of efficiency.
On the other hand, despite the wide range of opportunities that digital media open, most interviewees highlighted that communication between circles and the Citizen Council is mostly one-directional, as a channel to inform about decisions that have been already taken, or to provide the circles with technical and logistics-related information. More specifically, the flux of information had been constant and abundant during the different elections campaigns, for which the circles received substantially more attention than during times of latency. In this sense, Interviewee #3 declared, “nowadays, the circles are there just to stick posters on the walls”. The procedure for circles’ interlocution with the Citizen Assembly and the Citizen Council (from both State and territorial levels) is contemplated in the organisation document (Podemos, 2014). However, this interlocution takes the form of “enquiries” that can either be taken into consideration or dismissed. Interviewee #7 laments:

“The circles have an outstanding potential, but [the leaders of Podemos] do not fully believe in that potential people have. [The discourse of citizen empowerment and participation] has ended up in mere words. (…) I have met such intelligent people in the circles, with such a great potential…”

Throughout the interviews, participants showed their interest in participating not only in political campaigns but also in debates around ideas and policy. However, most interactions with higher spheres have to do with logistics. When political debate arises, or when there is a certain complaint about a given decision that was not consulted, participation seems to fall short: “there are channels for [a complaint] to be transmitted to the Citizen Council, but it is not clear whether or not this complaint affects. The leaders hold most of the power, and they are looking more and more like the hierarchical traditional parties” (Interviewee #3). It is common among organisations that rapidly grow in size, like Podemos, to mutate from flexible forms of organisation to a much more bureaucratised apparatus. In the case of Podemos, the circles and the leaders in the Citizen Council are mediated by territory-based Citizen Councils and representatives who, according to Interviewee #7, fail to facilitate interaction between different actors: “They do not do their job for intermediation (…) This group of people do not touch the ground, and they do not give the chance to participate”. Interviewee #2 seemed more optimistic, acknowledging that the current Autonomous Citizen Council is managing the circles’ participation remarkably better than the former team.

The circles, as it is mentioned in the organisation document, are the ones that will best control and assess the public office’s performance (Podemos 2014). However, as a party that aims at taking the power back to the people, some practices are too deeply rooted in traditional politics and, as Interviewee #7 conceded, it is not easy to eliminate such practices:

“It reminds me of this book I read, about a small religion created after Luther. They are oppressed for fighting against a corrupt system that they do not like, and they have some values…and you see how they slowly become in what they
do not like. And you can see that it’s more and more vertical, and they end up becoming what they hated the most. I think it’s a simile: we have created our own bubble to protect from the savage siege that we are suffering, and in the end it is very hard not to become what you are fighting against. We have things that we do not like instilled, and they finally emerge, and it is very hard to fight to change that” (Interviewee #7)

In the same vein, Interviewee #4 boldly stated, “there is no way to change things from bottom-up. Nowadays, at least”. Interviewee #2 showed slightly more optimism, acknowledging the difficulties of intervening in political decisions, but considering that “it is possible, if there is massive public outcry and union”. However, as the organisation chart is designed nowadays, there are few ways in which this union can take place. Interviewee #4 considered that, although each circle has effective means to reach the spheres right above them, there are no channels for inter-circle coordination, thus rendering circles weak. Finally, another participant remembered, “there was an attempt to creating a coordination organ for circles [of the Basque Country], but it did not work and it was boycotted” (Interviewee #7).

5.5 Participation

Whether or not Podemos has promoted some type of participation is a question interviewees could not easily answer to. At the level of political discourse, some considered, there are explicit attempts to make citizens participate through online voting or by encouraging them to join local circles. When confronted with more specific situations, the extent of this participation is not that clear. Interviewee #7 rhetorically asked, “is there a real interest in creating means of participation? Or it is just about seeming participatory?”.

As one of the basic concepts that has been used since the creation of Podemos, the interviewees were asked about what they understood for “participation”, a term often employed in political discourse but rarely defined. Interestingly enough, all participants seemed to have a clear idea of what participation should be, while considering that Podemos is nowadays not as participatory as it could. Interviewees stressed different dimensions of participation. Most of them referred to individual conceptions of participation, asserting, for instance, that participating is “donating your free time, sacrificing your time for others” (Interviewee #4), or that it has to do with “being concerned about something, getting involved and committing to it” (Interviewee #3). Two of the interviewees (#5 and #6) pointed at other elements of the concept. Interviewee #6 differentiated between intervening or making one’s voice heard, which is done individually, and deciding, which should be a collective effort. Interviewee #5 went further, pointing at the need of some effect of participating: “if you take part, it has to be with an output. If not, people demotivate”. 
In this sense, Interviewee #6 considered, “if decisions are made unilaterally, and especially if they are made against the circles’ will, it leads to erosion. If I cannot contribute, I quit”. Similarly, Interviewee #3 confirmed that “participating without effect makes you get bored and tired”. While Podemos has gone, in just two years of existence, through several phases in which the quality and depth of participation have fluctuated, there is a general feeling of the need of going back to the beginning, when Podemos circles flourished all around the country. As Interviewee #7 put it, “we have gone backwards (...), if we had gone towards more participatory, people would have been more engaged”. It is not the case and, according to Interviewee #4, demotivation “is already happening, because people see that it does not make any difference”.
6 Data analysis: digital media limitations and tensions in Podemos

The following section analyses the data presented above, gathered in two blocks. The first block analyses the data from the perspective of the media tools and practices, while the second one looks into the uneven balance of power that affects these practices within Podemos. Drawing on the comments and perceptions of the interviewees, the section concludes with an overview of the emerging tensions that a party like Podemos is facing in terms of their media practices and participation.

6.1 Media practices and tools for participation

Current technologies provide a wide range of tools to communicate with others either in real time or deferred. It is not surprising that the participants of the circles of Hernani and Rentería make extensive use of some of them. However, these tools hardly substitute traditional practices within activist groups, and communication and debate between individuals are still largely dependant on periodical meetings, where misunderstandings are not as recurrent as they are on Telegram or even Loomio. As the skills of participants are diverse, there is a general difficulty in regards to finding the right tools for deliberation and decision-making, thus participants preferring traditional means, which ultimately slows the digitalisation process down.

In some cases, this process of digitalisation is purposely left aside. Despite the various uses tools such as Facebook and Twitter can have, which allow high-level interaction, these circles make a rather unidirectional use of them, somehow reproducing the practices they overtly dislike from traditional parties. In other words, these circles make a general use of digital media as extensions of traditional means (Hands 2011). Moreover, as relaying too much on the digital is detrimental to physical meetings, the sociability needed for political engagement (Dahlgren 2013) is compromised. This is especially prominent during election peaks, during which clear messages that lead to little or no debate are the main publishable content (Sampietro and Ordaz 2015). In this sense, the circles use of digital media contrasts with the strong opinions their participants hold in regards to the need of enhancing participation within Podemos.

The remarkably rare use of platforms such as Plaza Podemos and Appgree show that, even if some tools seem to technically fit the purposes of a political party, these purposes are not achieved when put into practice. In this sense, the pitfalls of such tools (that permit, in some cases, partisan misuse and silencing opposition [Borge and Santamarina 2015]) and their abundance make potential users reluctant to invest their limited time on learning their functions. The difference between those who “know more” (as Interviewee #1 calls them) and those who do not even have electronic mail is unbridgeable, and thus only a reduced amount of media ends up being used. Only instant messaging and mail are widespread; and, as Interviewee #2 acknowledges, they are not free from misuse, duplicities, and inefficiency. It is not only a characteristic of
those on the other side of the digital divide that lack the necessary literacy to use digital media to their biggest potential (Pieterse 2010:177): access and promotion to some of these tools have been designed top-down, overlooking the specific needs and literacy levels of the citizens they were planned for. As a consequence, many of the more advanced tools remain marginal, dramatically reducing their effectiveness.

As Toret (2015) or Fernández (2015) rightly noted, Podemos is a party that has relayed on online platforms for its circle-based functioning. However, its use has been neither complete nor balanced. The general perception of the interviewees shows that, while Podemos has mastered unidirectional and top-down means of communication and organisation, other processes have progressively shrunk. As several interviewees regretted, inter-circle communication is informal and it lacks official channels for coordination and debate; bottom-up interactions are rare and hardly effective when it comes to political issues; and analogue media still hold most of the power vis-à-vis digital media. While Podemos’ leaders use the former to convey their message (most of the times univocal, repetitive and mass-tailored), the vast diversity of voices and opinions that the circles show through the latter are silenced or deemed secondary. Paraphrasing Interviewee #7’s words, leaders do not seem to fully believe what circles are capable of, and thus they are used as mere loudspeakers of what the core group decides. Following the Bennett and Segerberg’s (2012) distinction of collective and connective action, Podemos seems to lean towards the former (digital media for mobilisation of resources) rather than towards the latter, leaving little room for discourse re-appropriation or more individualistic forms of everyday participation (Bakardjieva 2009).

These tensions between what digital media can bring about and what they are really used for illustrate the concerns of the scholars who warn that technologies alone do not bring change (Pieterse 2010, Hands 2011, Morozov 2013). Digital media can be largely adapted to endeavours that have little to do with participation and openness. In this sense, while all the interviewed members showed their willingness to engage into more participatory, plural, collaborative and creative politics, the leaders follow a blueprint that compromises the circles’ input or, at least, reduces their insignificance.

According to the participants, the relationship between the leaders and the circles is close to inexistent. Although the circles hold periodical meetings, and much work is done (in form of documents, manifestos, speeches and so on), this has no further effects. At this point, the circles are somehow forced to work within the confines of their territory alone, or to engage, when possible, into what Couldry (2012:276) calls counter-politics: controlling what the leaders decide and declare, or even denouncing lack of inner democracy when needed. The ongoing bureaucratisation of the party makes it hard to reach the high spheres of power, while top-down communication flows constantly. Following Dahlgren’s (2013:48-49) three-tiered representation model, Podemos seem to operate in two tiers (the weak, lower tier of the circles and that of the leaders) that interact downwards but rarely upwards.
Podemos has implemented relevant new forms of citizen engagement through digital media, as many of the interviewees assured. If only for the huge amounts of people that are nowadays engaged into politics, the creation of the party contributed to an otherwise motionless political scenario in Spain. In this sense, Podemos has managed to implement many digital tools and strategies that other parties have explored (Chadwick 2007, Chadwick and Strom-Galley 2016), plus some others. However, the abundance of tools at reach shows that access alone cannot be equalled to participation, as this access varies greatly depending on age, education and socioeconomic status. If what some of the interviewees pointed out is to be considered, it is fair assuming that more (or better) tools will not necessarily foster political engagement and participation.

The 15M, as the phenomenon that led to the creation of Podemos (and that triggered the interest in politics of most of the interviewees), showed that democratising ways of using the media were possible (Figueras 2015). The potential of digital media in Podemos is compromised without promoting features such as their openness and the use of collective intelligence. Some traits, like loose membership, are indeed promoted, but this membership has no further impact than that of voting through their own platform, or showing their support on social media. Many times, the way participants are using media resemble what Dahlgren (2013) refers to as “participation in the media”, which give an appearance of engagement through the creation of contents that hardly enhances the discussion of ideas.

6.2 Power relations that condition participation

Throughout the interviews, the participants showed some degree of disappointment in terms of the means of participation that Podemos had enabled during its two years of existence. In one way or another, the interviewees held high expectations towards a political project that, although still novel, has started to show characteristics that resemble traditional politics and parties of the establishment: centralism, verticality and lack of interaction with its basis, among others, which can be summarised in what Interviewee #3 called “new people doing traditional politics”.

Even if many members of the circles of Hernani and Renteria acknowledged the existence of tools that encouraged participation, they were aware of the thresholds and limitations these tools were designed with. The complaints regarding the voting processes on Participa (as mentioned by Interviewee #2 and #7) show that, far from being inherent to the technology used, the shortcomings of such platform are due to political decisions that affected access to information and possibilities for deliberation.

The proliferation of multiple internetworked social movements in the years prior to the creation of Podemos has created high expectations in terms of what digital media are able to bring about by their mere existence (Castells 2013). Digital technologies,
however, are not neutral, but rather political (Dahlgren 2013). The context in which these tools are implemented is as relevant as the tools themselves. According to the interviewees’ account, Podemos has neglected much of the potential of these media, adopting only those features that best serve their short-term goals, in line with minimalist approaches of democracy. Even if the affordances of the media show a promising scenario for participation, these will be shaped by the technical, social and political economy contingencies of each tool (Dahlgren 2013:56-57). As Couldry summarises it, “there is a big difference between the basic possibilities for using technology and how it comes to be used in practice” (Couldry 2012:41, stress in the original).

The strong criticism these technical decisions have gained (also in Borge and Santamaria 2015, Gil 2015) suggest that a political organisation that actively strives for horizontality and openness needs to address two aspects of the use of digital media. On the one hand, it is important to find and implement the software that will technically allow large-scale deliberation and decision-making. On the other hand, Podemos needs to set the norms and values that will inform the use of these tools, encouraging participatory practices through publicity, informed deliberation and equal opportunities for all: as Interviewee #7 summarised, not only seeming participatory, but really promoting participation.

Equal opportunities, however, cannot be completely guaranteed as long as there is an uneven access to analogue media, as Interviewees #3 and #4 noted. There is a centre of power from which the general discourse emanates (Dahlgren 2013:32), which results in domination of ones over the others. In this sense, it is not fully relevant whether or not the circles use digital media extensively. Instead, the question revolves around whether or not this usage affects the decisions of the leaders at all. While the circles’ only media tools rely on the digital realm, leaders tailor their message for TV and use social media to reinforce it, rather than to utilise the many opportunities these media offer for multidirectional interaction. The expectations of Interviewee #1, who considered that TV should be used for the circles’ benefit, have been largely unmet, as exposure to analogue media is limited to a few.

The fact, many times stressed, that those with access to TV and newspapers hold a greater power position (that strengthens with each public appearance) have a significance that goes beyond acknowledging that traditional media are alive and well (Couldry 2012:52). According to the perception of several members of the circles, it seems that traditional and digital media do coexist. However, this coexistence is not always that of a hybrid landscape (Chadwick 2013). Media convergence between analogue and digital means is underway (Dahlgren 2013:37), but it is far from being complete, as each media keep their own language, their own audience and even their own agenda. In this scenario, the scope for action is certainly limited for the circles, only able to reach their most immediate audience.
In the eyes of Interviewees #3, #4 and #7, it is not surprising that such barrier between those holding the access to traditional media and the rest has led to a progressive disconnection between leaders and circles, and between members and the party. If, in the beginning, the circles were aimed at carrying the weight of some type of grassroots activism, a nexus between the apparatus and the streets (as Interviewee #1 put it), they have been slowly abandoned by many citizens who were once willing to take part in the project. Participation is reinforced through the practice of participating. In the same way, a participation process that fails to reflect the input of those participating cannot be considered fully successful or meaningful (Dahlgren 2013:27). The discourse of participation is constantly present in Podemos, but it is not accompanied by effective practices that will take advantage of the circles’ potential.

Not everybody has left, though, and the fact that many participants still fight for the principles that inform “new politics” shows some level of confidence in the transformative potential of the circles. Internally, periodical meetings and a long-lasting presence of core members can set the grounds for mutual confidence and comradeship, often leading to a friendship, noticeable in both circles. The ties these circles have created reinforce the politicisation of those participating, and they can pressure for a more open organisation and more horizontal practices. As some interviewees noted, things can be improved, and they are slowly improving. For instance, the design of the voting process in Participa has changed as debates, confrontation and trial-and-error implementations happened. For the most recent general elections in June 2016, Podemos formed a coalition with other left-wing forces, as it had been long-demanded by the basis of the party. Locally, the way in which some local initiatives (such as Ahora Madrid or Guanyem Barcelona) have succeeded show that the grassroots and the institutional can cooperate and give shape to stronger forms of participation, closer to the “culture of local-making” that the 15M developed (Calle 2015). Whether or not these changes can be attributed to grassroots pressure or to mere political opportunism is hard to determine. Similarly, it is not clear whether digital media as tools for counter-politics are effective: most of the interviewees agree that, although necessary, their influence is still limited and they will not change current power relations in the short run.

Podemos has been regarded as a party that promotes representation as mandate (Ramos Pérez 2015). However, this conception is vigorously contested by many of the interviewed members. As the power relations between circles and leaders are still unbalanced and favour the latter while neglect the former, it is not clear whether this mandate is being fulfilled or not. Following Calle’s (2015) political party typology, Podemos shows traits of citizen-parties but also of new populisms. Although it has been branded as “new politics” and it has gained enormous support by opening up to citizenship as political actors, the steps taken in the last two years suggest that, far from creating mechanisms for participation, Podemos is crystallising a top-down vertical structure in which the basis are significant only to the extent they contribute to the leaders’ route map.
6.3 Podemos as an articulation of tensions

As a hybrid phenomenon that seeks to bridge two traditionally separated realms (i.e. social movements and informal politics on one side; political parties and institutional politics on the other), Podemos has faced emerging tensions. According to the interviewees’ account, these tensions, far from being solved, have intensified over the months.

From its very design, Podemos has tried to balance the logics of representation with the logics of participation, with uneven results (Borge and Santamaria 2015). If participation through the circles can be multiple and diverse, and the potential of the multitudes can lead to unexpected outcomes, the logics of representation seems to require a solid structure that encapsulates this diversity into a rigid blueprint. The centralising turn Interviewee #2 noted is a consequence of this weak balance between letting people participate while remaining coherent and consistent as it is expected from political parties. In the same way, it uncovers the ongoing tension between the centre of power, in Madrid, and the diversity of the periphery, from which is difficult to create a significant impact on Podemos as a whole. When Interviewee #3 laments that “Podemos is not ‘new politics’”, or when Interviewee #4 points out the institutionalisation of the party, they remark that one of the core elements of the party, i.e. citizen participation and bottom-up mandate, is missing. However, as Podemos bases its potential in the myriad of voices and ideas it claims to represent, keeping the “tension between control and interactivity” (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley 2016:3) alive and balanced is necessary in order not to become “old politics”.

This tension can also be found on the uneven power relations between the different actors around Podemos. As circles render useless vis-à-vis the disproportionate power of the leaders, their activity is ceasing or being limited to local issues. The registered citizens who are entitled to take part on the massive voting processes held via Participa without having to participate in their local circles make the balance of power even sketchier. They are hard to delimitate and, although they are appealingly named as Citizen Assembly (see figure 1), their sole input is in form of a vote whenever there is a voting process ongoing. Following the rationale of the party, this feature makes Podemos a more open initiative where anyone can take part. In practice, however, the blurred lines between who is in and who is out of Podemos are discouraging a consistent activity of those who consider themselves members or activists within circles. As the bargaining power of circles shrinks, it becomes clearer that the design of this triple-edged party leaves little to no-room for circles to have a significant role in Podemos.

It is a common trait of both political parties and social movements that they do not succeed to mobilise activists and supporters during periods of latency as much as they do during high peaks during which participation (either in form of votes or otherwise) is
crucial (della Porta and Diani [1998] 2006). As a hybrid between these two worlds, Podemos fails to keep its supporters engaged beyond election campaigns. The perception that “the circles are there just to stick posters on the walls” (Interviewee #3) shows that the circles’ usefulness is now limited to certain peaks, and that they are used as workforce rather than as actual participants in politics. Practices such as interlocution, collaboration and shared decision-making have been left aside (or postponed) in favour others that are considered more urgent. The politicisation that the 15M brought about and that Podemos initially sought to underpin is not encouraged in the everyday practice of the circles. As the efforts are put on the institutions and on representation, periods of latency seem to be, in the eyes of the leaders, little more that the time between elections. If Podemos really seeks to promote participation of ordinary citizens, there is a need to address the tension between the periods of latency and high activity peaks, enabling forms of everyday politics through the circles and their participants.

Last but not least, the tension between analogue and digital media has fundamental implications in terms of participation within the party. The triumph of the digital over the analogue was too prematurely heralded, and the predominance of the latter in current politics is still far from disappearing. Digital media might be open for anyone to participate, but access to TV or newspapers is certainly limited. Very much connected with the logics of participation mentioned above, digital media offer a high degree of unpredictability, an open, multidirectional flux of ideas of anyone that escape from the leaders’ control. In turn, analogue media provide security and a platform from which to send slogan-type messages that will reach the masses.
7 Conclusions

7.1 Answering the questions

The purpose of this research was to explore old and new media practices interact in the context of Podemos and its decision-making processes. As ongoing power relations between leaders and circles’ participants condition these media practices, the research also aimed at exploring these relations as perceived by the members of the circles. After interviewing the seven Podemos members from the circles of Hernani and Rentería and analysing the content of these interviews from the perspective of media practices and participation, the questions that have guided the research can now be answered.

“How do activists and supporters perceive the potential of digital media vis-à-vis traditional media as tools to promote participation within Podemos?”

Digital media hold a great potential for participation in political parties that is, however, still not used at its best. There is a generalised acknowledgment of the potential of online tools in terms of accountability, of information transmission and even of mass decision-making. As new tools are created every day, some are considered useful-and are used accordingly- while others are dismissed. However, and although the circle members interviewed find digital media useful, they are just a complement that cannot replace face-to-face interactions. Whether it is due to a lack of expertise of these tools or because of the inherent disadvantages of remote interactions, some media practices have been fostered while others are neglected. More specifically, these practices have rarely moved beyond instant messaging and mass-communication via social media.

Analogue media (and especially TV) still play a fundamental role in terms of their potential to reach out and convey simple messages. From this perspective, the role digital media can play is still reduced if not marginal, often as a reinforcement of analogue media practices (unilateral, one-to-many messages that allow no feedback) rather than for counterbalancing the weight of TV. These media, although undoubtedly useful for Podemos as a whole, have shown relevant shortcomings when it comes to contributing to well-informed political debates among citizens. Whatever participatory practices are promoted via digital media, they do not seem to permeate the practices of traditional media.

Rather than complementing each other, the realms of the analogue and the digital seem to operate in distant spheres most of the times. Although they might sometimes overlap, they still serve different purposes, use different language and promote different agendas.

“How do ongoing power relations and struggles affect participatory media practices?”

The limits the circles have to face in terms of participating via the media show that the practices that emerge from the use of digital technologies are necessarily affected by the
technical decisions of those holding positions of power. In the case of Podemos, the party has shown some willingness to implement promising tools for participation. However, far from promoting informed debate and equality among participants, these tools have reedited ongoing power structures. The uneven access to analogue media perpetuates unequal interactions between circles and leaders, keeping the former far from decision-making processes. Implementing new digital technologies without addressing the technical decisions and the rules for participation create an illusion of formal participation that does, however, not actualise power relations.

The extensive use of digital media by Internetworked Social Movements suggest that, although the technical preconditions for a more open participation exist, they do not match with a party’s hierarchical and bureaucratic needs. This tension between the grassroots and the elites (and the resulting tension between digital and analogue media) remains unsolved within Podemos.

In such scenario, media practices are participatory only to the extent that they permit a low level of engagement within the party, far from maximalist approaches of democracy. As a consequence, those who want to participate demotivate, and the circles progressively disappear or cease their activity.

7.2 Final remarks

As a party that wants to bridge the gap between social movements and political parties, Podemos needs to find a balance that will allow grassroots participation while keeping a robust core at the institutional level. However appealing optimist views are in terms of the potential of digital media to change and democratise political parties (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley 2016:3), they are not always fulfilled. The process by which citizens or internet activists help shape the party can also end up in its opposite, co-opting and minimising the effects of these activists. Past initiatives in Europe and in South America warn us about the risk of Podemos neglecting its basis and sacrificing participation in favour of institutional success. In this sense, there is a widespread perception that the party is somehow reediting the hierarchical traits of traditional parties, resorting to participation as a rhetorical resource rather than as a core principle.

While it is not clear if the party will be able to successfully implement tools for open and horizontal participation, the centralist and hierarchical drift within Podemos show that top-down practices hinder participation through the circles and that they have demobilising consequences in the long run. Whether or not the Podemos will earn the “new politics” tag will depend on the party’s ability to strengthen the circles’ role (to leaders’ detriment) and promoting more democratic structures that take advantage of digital media, not only for massive access but also for a constant actualisation of power relations.
7.3 Contributions

The scholarly material around Podemos has been continuously increasing since its creation in 2014. The novelty of the initiative has sparked the interest of academics in Europe and around the world. This project contributes to the growing body of research on the topic, emphasising the plurality of voices that conform the basis of the party rather than focusing the attention on the more visible leaders of Citizen Council.

As much of this material has been focused on the media tactics of the leaders in Podemos, there is a lack of research in terms of media practices within the circles. Being a crucial element in the configuration of Podemos and its double nature as a party and a movement, putting the focus on the circles provides the opportunity to better understand the role of grassroots activism in the endeavour of reaching institutional power.

Digital technologies are gaining weight all around the world, and whether or not they will contribute to developing and democratising countries is still open for discussion. The ongoing debate on the digital divide and the need to look into the social dimension of technologies (Granqvist 2005) is tackled tangentially in this research, but the promises and dangers of a perspective that centres its attention into technological solutionism (Morozov 2013) replicate in countries that share few characteristics with the Spanish case. This research contributes to the debate, acknowledging the potential of such technologies without overlooking their risks and limitations. Even if the particular phenomenon of Podemos is set within a country with a democratic parliamentary system, looking into how power relations shape the use of digital media (and how analogue media still play a dominant role) can be valuable for the understanding of forthcoming initiatives in other parts of the globe and, specially, in developing countries where the implementation of ICT co-exists with weak States, poverty and corruption.

7.4 Limitations

Podemos is a party that seeks to represent a social majority. As such, its circles welcome contributions of people from diverse ideologies and backgrounds that cannot be encapsulated in a single degree project. Focusing on two circles –from the hundreds that currently exist- poses some limitations in terms of generalizing the results to the whole universe of circles in Podemos.

Time and geographical limitations have also played a significant role in the choice of interviewees, whose gender and background diversity contrast with their narrow age range. Interviewing older members (who, according to the participants in the research, make little use of digital media) and, especially, younger ones (who are digital natives
and, as such, can take greater advantage of these tools) would have contributed to a more comprehensive image of the phenomenon, increasing its validity.

7.5 Future Research

The results of this paper are based upon a limited amount of interviews, localised in an autonomous community with its own particularities. Future research could compare and contrast these results with further interviews to members of other circles around the country. Undertaking such interviews could reinforce the conclusions presented in the paper, or add new nuances that will bring further complexity to the field of participatory media practices within political parties. Similarly, it would be highly beneficial to track the changes that Podemos will undergo in the future, analysing the circle members’ perception and its evolution in a longer time span.

Although the current research is focused on media practices rather than on the specific tools used by Podemos and its circles, a closer look into these tools would provide a more comprehensive view of digital media for participation. As some interviewees acknowledged, using some media over others depended not only on their usefulness, but also on their complexity and on the skills of the members who were not familiar with many of them. Analysing the processes of adaptation of activists using new media could provide relevant insights into the field.

Podemos is an ongoing political project in constant change. Given its recent creation, many features are still flexible enough to be moulded into something considerably different to what this paper shows. For instance, during the period in which the interviews were taken, the leaders of the party created a new campaign called “Activa tu Círculo” (Activate your circle), as an attempt to give a boost to the hundreds of circles around the country. The evolution of such initiatives and the ones to come in the future will need to be scrutinised to assess the extent to which Podemos can bring a real change to Spanish politics.
8. References


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