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Published online: 18 Jun 2013.

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Mobilization through online social networks: the political protest of the *indignados* in Spain

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The 15M demonstration (the origin of the *indignados* movement in Spain and the seed of the *occupy* mobilizations) presents some outstanding characteristics that defy the established principles of the collective action paradigm. This article develops some observable implications of the concept of connective action and tests them against the case of the 15M demonstration. Cases of self-organized connective action networks are expected to be different from traditional collective action cases with regard to the characteristics of the organizations involved, the prevalent mobilization channels and the characteristics of participants. Based on a comparative analysis of data gathered from participants and organizations in nine demonstrations held in Spain between 2010 and 2011, relevant and significant differences were found in the characteristics of the 15M staging organizations (recently created, without formal membership and mainly online presence), the main mobilization channels (personal contact and online social networks rather than co-members or broadcast media), and participants (younger, more educated and less politically involved). These findings help to understand the large turnout figures of this movement and have important implications for the mobilization potential of social networks, particularly as it can affect the political participation of the less-involved citizens.

Introduction

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

The emerging literature on online social media has so far mostly concluded that these networks complement rather than act as substitutes for traditional mobilization organizations such

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as unions, parties or mass media (Bekkers, Beunders, Edwards, & Moody, 2011; Bekkers, Moody, & Edwards, 2011; Skoric, Poor, Liao, & Tang, 2011). The more traditional debate on the consequences of digital media use for the mobilization of new participants or the reinforcement of super-activism has produced mixed evidence, mostly seeming to support reinforcement (see Van Laer, 2010 specifically regarding protest). The analysis of our case challenges both conclusions: in the massive protest event that took place in Spain on 15 May 2011, traditional mobilization agents played no role whatsoever, while intense use of digital media channels of mobilization was accompanied by significant differences in the socio-political characteristics of the demonstrators.

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

15M: The *Indignados* outburst and its context

On 15 May 2011, a week before the municipal and regional elections, about 130,000 persons in 50 cities in Spain went out to demand 'real democracy now'. This demonstration was not endorsed by any political party, large trade union or traditional political organization. It was organized by ad hoc platforms that operated mainly through online social media. The central platform integrated more than 400 organizations under the motto 'Democracia Real Ya!' (Real Democracy Now! – from now on DRY). After these demonstrations took place, some of the attendants camped in main city squares celebrating daily assemblies and organizing different committees that kept on working for over a month.[1]

An even more crowded demonstration called by the DRY platform took place on 19 June in response to the Euro-Plus Pact adopted by the European Commission, in order to adopt reforms intended to improve fiscal strength and competitiveness under the motto Toma la calle! ('Take to the streets!'). These country-wide events gathered over 250,000 people. This response showed the widespread support that the 15M movement enjoyed with Spanish public opinion, which was also reflected in general public opinion surveys.[2] The protest events of the *indignados* were still taking place months after the 15M and then expanded to other European countries and to the United States after the summer under the *Occupy* label (Hardt & Negri, 2011; Juris, 2012).

The context of these protest events was clearly shaped by the worldwide economic crisis, which had dramatic social and economic implications in Spain. Unemployment rates over 20% were the highest in Europe (Instituto Nacional de Estadística – INE, May 2011) and well above the EU average (9.3% Eurostat, July 2011). Unemployment for 16- to 25-year olds reached 44% (INE, 15 April 2011). As a consequence, people identified unemployment as the most important problem in Spain (mentioned by 83% of the sample of the April barometers of the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas – CIS), followed by 'economic difficulties' (mentioned by 47%). Moreover, 58% of the Spanish population believed that the economic situation was worse than the previous year and 70% expected next year to be the same or even worse. These figures reflect not only the consequences of unemployment regarding the diminished ability of families to sustain previous consumption patterns and to face financial duties, but also the deterioration of living conditions caused by government cutbacks in health care and education.

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

From an international perspective, expressions of social unrest in France and Greece in response to pension reform and the adjustment of public expenditure were highly visible in the months preceding the 15M protest. Furthermore, the particular trajectories and repertoires of the events in the Arab spring, as well as the Icelandic government's measures intended to identify political responsibility for the financial crisis, may have provided some expectations of potential change.

Massive protests such as those carried out by the *indignados* would come as no surprise in such a context, especially for a country which ranks in the first places in European statistics for protest participation (according to 2010 European Social Survey data, over 18% of the Spanish population had participated in a demonstration in the past 12 months). In fact, major expressions of social unrest related to economic policy had already been taking place and had been organized by unions and leftist parties.[3] However, there are at least three distinctive and peculiar characteristics of the 15M demonstration that deserve further attention and that were not to be found in other protest events. Additionally, these characteristics seem to be at odds with such a successful event, which managed to involve, in one way or another, as much as 10% of the Spanish population.[4]

Firstly, the protest slogan ('Real democracy now! We are not merchandise for bankers and politicians') reflects the movement's non-instrumental stance. Other large demonstrations taking place in Spain have had very specific claims, independent of particular issues, and related to changes in economic policy, regional self-government or policy changes such as those introduced in the abortion law. On 15 May, however, protesters criticized the functioning of democratic institutions and expressed their outrage against politicians and bankers. The demonstrators were arguing not only for social justice, but also for more participation, transparency, accountability and proportionality – all political and rather abstract, goals.

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

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

These three characteristics of the 15M seem to challenge the traditional conception of collective action itself. We have, apparently, no clear leadership, no involvement of main political organizations, no specific demands, no triggering event, no presence in traditional broadcast media, and still extremely high turnout levels. The concept of *connective action* (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) – in which communication through digital media plays a crucial role – may be of use to understand the intriguing nature of the 15M. Traditional leadership, resource mobilization and organizing roles could have been replaced by loose organizational linkages built around personalized action frames. In the next section, we discuss some of the empirical implications of the concept of connective action regarding the way personal communication technologies affect mobilization processes. We then assess to what extent the 15M was a case of connective action significantly different from other protest events.

Testing the implications of connective action

Different organizations, different mobilization channels, and different participants

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

Social media are expected to play a crucial role here by allowing large-scale mobilization processes to occur without involving formal organizations. At the same time, they allow citizens to play a more active role in mobilization processes. Individuals can rely on informal networks in order to get information about a demonstration, interpret it and spread the word through the expression of their involvement or identity; all of this at the expense of traditional mobilizing agents. Social networks have traditionally been considered important as recruitment channels for mobilization (Diani & McAdam, 2003). However, research into online social media is now starting to flourish, and is shedding light on the process of information diffusion and recruitment (González-Bailón, Borge-Holthoefer, Rivero, & Moreno, 2011), and on how social media tools change organizational dynamics (Segerberg & Bennett, 2011; Skoric et al., 2011), encourage the massive sharing of experiences between loosely coupled individuals (Bekkers, Beunders, et al., 2011; Bekkers, Moody, et al., 2011) and bring about political change (Howard & Parks, 2012). Online social networks accentuate the patterns of political protest that already existed before digital media (Bennett, Breunig, & Givens, 2008) and they are a crucial component of connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 22).

As a theoretical innovation, the concept of connective action sheds light on the interpretation of some protest events. However, the extent to which this concept can be considered a useful ideal type depends on the extent to which it can reflect and help us to understand the logic of distinctive

real cases. The analysis carried out in the previous section may make us think that this could indeed be the case. However, this single case analysis is limited to assessing the extent to which this protest event was significantly different from other protests that have taken place over the past few years. We will confront this question by developing some observable implications from the concept of connective action that allow us to assess the observable differences between collective action and connective action cases.

We, therefore, need to specify some observable implications of connective actions cases that would differentiate them from more traditional protest events. The observable implications we are interested in regard the organizations involved, the mobilization channels and, additionally, the characteristics of the participants. There are other implications that could be developed from the concept of connective action (such as, for instance, the way organizations behave and impose or not narrow frames of action, communication styles and diffusion patterns). The concept is rich and multidimensional, but given the comparative nature of this article, we need to focus on the three that we consider most important.

First, there should be significant differences in the characteristics of the organizations involved in the connective action cases when compared to collective action protest events. Bennett and Segerberg (2012, p. 16) argue that in the case of self-organized networks, the most clearly opposed to the traditional collective action, 'conventional organizations play a less central role than social technologies'. In collective action cases, mobilization depends on brokering organizations that facilitate cooperation. Although organizations are not absent from connective action in self-organized networks, there are reasons to expect that these organizations are of a different nature. Traditional collective action organizations are typically parties and trade unions, hence, old organizations, with formal membership and a large territorial offline presence. Conversely, typical connective action organizations are expected to be more recently created and, have an internet-based nature, and no formal membership.

Second, we would expect to find significant differences in the mobilization channels that led to the protest event, with a central role of social technologies. The logic of connective action implies an intensive role for digital media and personal networks that to some extent replace the functions of traditional media and political organizations in mobilizing protest. Specifically, we expect digital media, personal networks and online social media in particular to play a particularly relevant role in cases of connective action, while mobilization through organizational membership and traditional mass media would play a minor role compared to other demonstrations closer to the collective action type.

Third, we had expectations regarding a particularly relevant though less explored question: whether a change in the mobilization channels and in the role of traditional mobilizing agents would bring about a change in the socio-political profile of protesters. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) do not directly address this question, and this it is central to the debate about the consequences of digital media for political participation. If organizations and mobilization channels are different in connective action cases, then we would expect participants to differ as well. The profile of the typical collective action protester would be a party or trade union member, employed, male, middle aged, with high levels of political involvement and previous political participation (see, for instance, Walgrave and Van Aelst 2001). But if parties and unions are not central actors in self-organized networks, and mobilization comes through personal networks in social media and not from co-members from political organizations, the public participating in such cases of connective action may be significantly different from those participating in collective action protests: younger, less organizationally embedded, with lower levels of previous political experience.

The implication of the logic of connective action for who participates is a fundamental question which has been much discussed in the literature on the consequences of digital media. Can

these be expected to reinforce the participation of previous participants or mobilize new ones, such as youngsters or women, or people who are not members of political organizations? Internet use has been acclaimed for its potential to bypass organizational membership as it can bring together individuals in loose networks (Bennett, 2003; Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2005). However, for other authors, Internet use risks narrowing the mobilization potential for a public of experienced, organizationally embedded activists (Van Laer, 2010), given that online networks can be limited to established ties that can result in closed mobilization patterns. Internet use would in this case maintain participation inequalities (Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006) as it promotes a focused call to the organization's members and to more politically interested individuals or sympathizers with other movements.

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

To sum up, we suggest that if the 15M is a typical case of self-organized connective action networks, we will find significant differences in organizations, mobilization channels and participants when comparing it with other cases of traditional collective action protests. Organizations are expected to be younger, without formal membership, and mainly internet-based. Mobilization through social networks will be prevalent over traditional co-members mobilization. Participants are expected to be younger, less organizationally embedded, and less politically experienced.

Data

In order to systematically test these expectations about the distinctive character of the 15M demonstration, we need to compare this case closely with other protest events. Following the method explained in van Stekelenburg, Walgrave, Klandermans, & Verhulst (2012), we have gathered data on major demonstrations in Spain between January 2010 and May 2011.

All the demonstrations were expected to bring out more than 5000 participants onto the streets of Madrid, Barcelona or Galicia during the period of the fieldwork. Our sample of events includes, besides the 15M demonstration surveyed in Madrid, four others concerned with economic issues, three with the territorial/regional/linguistic conflicts which are central to Spanish politics, and one against abortion. Table 1 provides details of dates, issues, mottos, organizers, turnout and surveys delivered by participants.

In each demonstration, once the crowd had fully assembled, a team of field selected the people to be interviewed according to a random procedure (*n*th row, *n*th person) in order to avoid any potential selection bias. Interviewers then approached the individuals, completed a short face-to-face survey, and eventually handed in a postal questionnaire. Individuals were generally cooperative, and few refused to take part in the face-to-face survey. Response rates to the postal questionnaire ranged from 18% to 33%, and reached 35% for the 15M demonstration. This produced a database with information on the 2265 demonstrators who completed the postal survey.

This is an unusually rich data set that provides detailed information about participants' socio-demographics, political attitudes and the channels through which they had been mobilized. We completed the individual level data with additional information about the most important organizations staging the demonstration. We began our analysis by focusing on the characteristics of the mobilization process, including organizations and channels. Then we moved onto the question of who was demonstrating, by examining the socio-economic characteristics and the political backgrounds of the participants.

Table 1.   Surveyed demonstrations.

Issue/name of the demonstration	City	Date	Type	Main organisers	Turnout (police estimation)	Number of booklets distributed	Response rate (N)
Against the regional government's policy reform on Galician language use in schools. *Contra o Decretazo do Galego*	Santiago de Compostela	21 January 2010	Regional	*Queremos Galego* platform, including parties and unions	40,000	1000	32.4% (324)
Against government policy on the financial crisis. *Contra l'Europa del Capital, la Crisi i la Guerra*	Barcelona	28 January 2010	Economic	Labour Union CGT	1500	300	25.7% (77)
Against the reform of the abortion law. *Manifestación Pro-vida*	Madrid	7 March 2010	Abortion	Hazte Oir	10,000	871	31.9% (278)
Against the Constitutional Court silence on the Catalan self-determination Statute. *Autodeterminació es Democracia*	Barcelona	12 May 2010	Regional	Platform for the Right to Decide and organizations for independence, parties and unions	5000	730	41.9% (301)
Against the Reform of the current labour law. *Contra la Reforma Laboral*	Santiago de Compostela	30 June 2010	Economic	The two most important nation-wide trade-unions UGT and CCOO	6000	780	21.5% (168)
The Catalonian self-determination protest against the Constitutional court ruling against the Catalan Statute. *Som una Nació*	Barcelona	10 July 2010	Regional	Òmnium Cultural, Catalan parties and trade unions	62,000	980	32.2% (309)
General strike against the reform of the labour law	Madrid	29 September 2010	Economic	The two most important nation-wide trade-unions UGT and CCOO	40,000	900	29.10% (307)
May Day Labour March	Barcelona	1 May 2010	Economic	The two most important nation-wide trade-unions UGT and CCOO	7000	700	27.1% (180)
Against politicians, banks and the major parties response to the economic crisis. Real democracy now. *Democracia Real Ya*	Madrid	15 May 2011	Economic	Democracia Real Ya! platform	20,000	1000	34.5% (301)

Source: Own elaboration.

Organizations

The peculiar characteristics of the organizations involved and the importance of digital media and social networks made the 15M demonstration a distinctive event. Mobilization was not triggered by a particular incident, but by the joint coordinated action of many small actors and grievances around the DRY platform, which took place outside the scope of broadcast media. These coordinated actions would not have been possible without a privileged use of digital media (Garrett, 2006). The demonstration was not called by large traditional organizations, but by ad hoc platforms that acted as loose, flexible structures centred on a particular issue that linked people and small organizations without a specific long-term commitment or formal membership. Over 400 organizations with little experience in political activism converged on the DRY platform and played an active role in staging the demonstration and the activities that followed.

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

As happened in other surveyed demonstrations, a small number of organizations were widely identified by participants in terms of a long tail composed of multiple secondary organizations in a power-law distribution. However, the characteristics of the organizations staging the 15M demonstration were radically different from those of the other protest events.

Table 2 shows several important characteristics of the staging organizations of the 15M demo, and of four other important demonstrations that took place in Spain in the last two years. We used a limited but heterogeneous sample, including, as well as the 15M demonstration, another large demonstration that took place in Madrid related to the economic crisis (the general strike demo of 29 September 2010), two demonstrations regarding the regional conflict staged in Barcelona in May and July 2010 (*Autodeterminació es Democràcia, Som una Nació*) and the Pro-Life demo which took place in Madrid in March 2010. The profile of the organizations staging these demonstrations is compared here in terms of their average age, the existence of brick and mortar

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

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

Source: Own elaboration.

addresses (as opposed to internet-based organizations), and whether or not they have possibilities of formal membership.

As the data clearly shows, the members of the main organizations staging the 15M demonstration were younger than those of other protest events: their average age was less than three years, while in the other cases, their mean age varied from 10 to 43 years. Age undoubtedly reflects the involvement of either large unions (such as in the 29S demo) or the main political parties (such as in the *Som Una Nació* case). The organizations involved in the 15M demonstration were also mainly internet-based, as only 38% had a brick and mortar address, compared to 78–100% in other cases. Only 13% of them had formal membership or affiliation, while in the other demonstrations considered, at least 60% did so. Thus, the data showed substantive differences between the organizations involved in the 15M protest and those staging the other demonstrations.

Mobilization channels

Just as the characteristics of the organizations involved were different, so were the mobilization channels that conducted the stimuli that brought people to the streets. The first part of Table 3 shows information about how people came to know about the demonstration, who asked them

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

	All other demos (8)	Other economic issues demos (4)	Other Madrid demos (2)	May 15 demo
Mobilization				
Heard about the demonstration (%)				
… in alternative online media	26***	21**	29***	55
… in online social networks	17***	10***	10***	49
… in traditional media	56***	53***	68***	13
… through co-members	29***	45***	18***	8
Was asked to go to demonstration by (%)				
… friends or acquaintances	17***	14***	16***	30
… co-members of organization	21***	22***	13***	7
Is a member of organization endorsing the demonstration (%)	40***	61***	29***	4
Socio-demographics				
Year of birth (mean)	1965***	1966***	1964***	1971
Women (%)	43***	40***	46*	52
Education (mean scale 1–8)	5.0***	4.4***	5.4***	6.4
Unemployed (%)	8***	8***	8***	14
Political engagement				
Previous political participation (mean number, repertoire of 9)	3.6	3.9***	3.1***	3.5
Protest experience (mean, scale 1 – never to 5 – more than 20 previous demonstrations)	3.8*	4.1***	3.6	3.7
Previous violent acts (%)	2	3**	1.6	0.1
Organizational membership (%)	66***	73***	59***	48
N	2269	1057	910	325

Source: Own elaboration.
*Significant at 90% compared to the 15M demonstration.
**Significant at 95% compared to the 15M demonstration.
***Significant at 99% compared to the 15M demonstration.

to attend, and whether they were members of the organizations involved. We can establish a three-fold comparison. The first relevant comparison is between the 15M demo, and all other demos for which we have collected data. This allowed for a comparison of the characteristics of 15M participants and their mobilization processes with all other cases, regardless of the issue and the city where the protest took place. A second comparison is between the 15M demo and other demonstrations that had been called due to the economic crisis or which were related to economic measures taken by the government (demos 2, 5, 7, 8 in Table 1). This is probably the most relevant comparison, as by focusing on the issue we are in a better position to assess the distinctive character of this protest event. However, since not all the demonstrations surveyed took place in Madrid, we added a third comparison with the demonstrations that took place in the city of Madrid (demos 3, 7 in Table 1).[6]

Whatever comparison we made, the results were strikingly clear: 15M was something different regarding mobilization processes. Almost 55% of the participants had heard about the demonstration via alternative online media and 49% through social networks. In other demos, these percentages were 26% and 17%, respectively. Conversely, the role of traditional media as an information channel was very limited (8% of participants mentioned them in 15M demonstration versus at least 50% for other demonstrations). A very small percentage of respondents had heard about the demo via co-members of organizations (7% vs. an average of 29% in all other demonstrations). The difference here is particularly striking when compared to the other demonstrations generated by the crisis. The weakness of traditional organizations in the 15M demonstration was further exposed by the fact that the number of members of the organizations endorsing the demo among participants was far lower than in other cases (not reaching 5%).

Informal networks appeared to be far more important than organizational networks: mobilization took place via friends and acquaintances far more than in other cases.[7] Small organizations with fewer resources tapped into informal networks, given their limited membership. The use of highly personalized images,[8] mottos and guerrilla marketing techniques also reflected the organizational and resource dispersion as compared to the centralized branding which is usually a feature of traditional political organizations (such as the use of union flags, party promotional items or the diffusion of unique slogans).

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

Participants

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

Considering any of the three possible comparisons, 15M demonstrators were significantly different in socio-demographic terms: they were more likely to be women and unemployed; they were younger and more educated than participants in other demonstrations. These data indicated that, firstly, the peculiarities of the mobilization process had managed to promote the participation of social groups that usually tend to be underrepresented among protesters, such as women (which are only 40% of participants in other demonstrations related to economic issues where unions are the main mobilizing agents), or the unemployed (these account for only 8% of the participants in demonstrations staged by unions). It seems that the unemployed felt closer to the 15M demands than to the unions, which may be seen as representing the rights of those that already have a job.

Secondly, the privileged role of digital media certainly favoured the participation of young citizens, given that Internet use in Spain tends to be biased towards a younger public (Anduiza, Gallego, & Cantijoch, 2010), especially in the case of social networks (Urueña, Ferrari, Blanco, & Valdecasa, 2011). This, in turn, raised the educational level of participants, as youngsters have higher levels of education. Indeed, digital media may facilitate the political participation of younger citizens, but they will not correct the traditional bias that education introduces in political participation (Gallego, 2010; Verba & Nie, 1972) and particularly in protest (Barnes et al., 1979).

However, digital media may contribute to reducing participatory inequalities in a different way, by facilitating the mobilization of people with lower levels of previous political involvement. The peculiarities of the 15M may have increased the chances of participation of people who did not have an activist background and were not previously involved in political organizations. Indeed, differences in past protest experience and organizational engagement provided evidence against reinforcement effects regarding participation inequalities. In the 15M demonstration, people with less experience of previous protest events participated significantly more than in other 'bread and butter' protest events, and than in all the past events taken together. 15M demonstrators were less likely than any other protesters to have engaged previously in violent political acts (though differences were in most cases not significant). The levels of organizational involvement were also substantively and significantly lower (48% of participants were members of any organization, versus 79% for the other economic demonstrations).

This evidence supports the idea that the 15M call reached beyond traditional organizational networks. It seems that, in this case, the role of online media was not limited to producing reinforcements, as previous work has often found, but rather opened up an opportunity for the participation of people with lower levels of political involvement than participants in other protest events.

Many of the differences seen in individual participants in the 15M versus participants in other protest events may simply be the consequence of 15M protesters being younger. Indeed, younger individuals have higher levels of education, lower levels of organizational involvement and interest in politics, and are less likely to have participated in previous protest events. To assess to what extent there were significant differences in this demonstration, taking participants' age into account, we ran a multivariate analysis. Table 4 shows the results of a logistic regression analysis, using a dependent variable that took the value of 1 if the respondents participated in the 15M demo and 0 for participants in the other eight protest events.

The results confirm that the differences between 15M participants and protesters in other events are more than simply a consequence of age. The mobilization channels used and the socio-political characteristics of the demonstrator's significantly distinguished 15M demonstrators from the participants in other protest events, even when taking into account the effects of age. These results confirm that differences in the profiles of 15M participants were not explained exclusively by the fact that they were younger. Online social networks, alternative online media, and close-tie networks of friends and acquaintances were significantly more important mobilization channels for 15M demonstrators. Additionally, being highly educated and unemployed increase the chances of participating in the 15M. Conversely, involvement in organizations reduced the likelihood of being a 15M

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

	B	(S.E.)
Mobilized by online social network	1.219***	(0.194)
Mobilized by alternative online media	1.157***	(0.182)
Mobilized by friends or acquaintances	0.392*	(0.201)
Member of staging organization	−2.487***	(0.326)
Age (0 is 12, 1 is 88)	0.899*	(0.528)
Woman	0.124	(0.182)
Education (8 categories, 0 is no formal education, 1 is tertiary education)	4.718***	(0.520)
Unemployed/between jobs	0.638**	(0.306)
Political participation (10 item mean, 0 is none, 1 is maximum)	−0.44	(0.544)
Past protest experience	−1.561***	(0.565)
Organizational engagement	−0.472**	(0.192)
Interest in politics (4 categories, 0 is none, 1 is a lot)	−0.839**	(0.367)
Ideology (10 categories 0 is left, 1 is right)	−3.401***	(0.472)
Constant	−2.205***	(0.726)
N	1367	
r2_p	0.363	

Source: Own elaboration. The dependent variable is 1 if the individual took part in the 15M demo and 0 if she participated in any other protest event. Independent variables have been standardized to range between 0 and 1 in order to enable comparing coefficients. Unless otherwise stated, variables are coded as dummies (1 if the characteristic is present, 0 otherwise).
*Significant at 90%.
**Significant at 95%.
***Significant at 99%.

demonstrator versus a participant in any other protest event. Remarkably, interest in politics and past protest experience also had this negative effect. The mobilization potential of online media reached out to individuals with lower political involvement and less contact possibilities through movement or advocacy organizations or any other formal networks.

Conclusion

We had never before witnessed the large turnout figures that the 15M managed to achieve in street demonstrations without the involvement of any of the main political traditional organizations (parties and unions), without any significant prior presence in broadcast media, and without any particular triggering event. In this article, we have argued that this protest event can be considered a case of self-organized connective action network, with significant differences when compared to other collective action events. These differences help to understand the large turnout in spite of the absence of the usual suspects that explain high turnout in protests.

We have developed and tested three observable implications of the concept of connective action. Self-organized connective action networks are expected to be significantly different from traditional organizationally brokered collective action networks in at least three aspects: the characteristics of the organizations involved, the prevalent mobilization channels, and the characteristics of participants. Organizations are expected to be younger, without formal membership, and mainly internet-based. Mobilization through social networks is expected to be prevalent over traditional co-members mobilization. Participants are expected to be younger, less organizationally embedded, and less politically experienced.

These expectations are tested with data from 2265 participants randomly selected from 9 demonstrations that took place in Spain between 2010 and 2011, one of these being the 15M demo.

These individual data are complemented with information regarding staging organizations. The findings support the idea that this demonstration shows peculiar characteristics which defy some of the principles of the collective action paradigm, and that it can be considered a typical case of connective action.

First, the organizations staging the 15M demonstration were significantly different than those of other cases of traditional collective action. They were younger, less likely to have formal membership and a brick and mortar address than the organizers of other analysed protest events. Second, the success of the mobilization process was made possible by the privileged use of digital media and particularly the social networks that had produced a case of personalized digitally networked action. Mobilization through these media managed to channel collective outrage through many small organizations with little experience of mobilization and through networked individuals who responded to a common concern on interrelated issues. Third, as a consequence, unusual protest participants went out to the street. 15M demonstrators were younger, more educated, more likely to be women and unemployed than in other events. They had significantly lower levels of previous political activity and organizational involvement than participants in other demos. Outrage was effectively mobilized by a network of organizations and personal contacts, which managed to connect with unsatisfied but politically inactive individuals.

Although the comparative analysis of frames goes beyond the scope of this article, it is important to recall that what makes the 15M demonstration particularly interesting is a massive response through the adoption, diffusion and personalization of the broad frame of 'real democracy' within social networks. Diverse organizations that were united under the DRY platform managed to overcome their low profile in traditional media and their distance from powerful mobilization agents such as parties and unions in order to create enormous success in terms of turnout, territorial coverage and ability to incorporate new participants as the weeks went by.

Thus, in the already traditional debate about whether digital media promote mobilization of new participants or reinforcement of former activists, the 15M can be considered to be a paradigmatic example of mobilization. This happened, however, at the high cost of exposing the inability of parties and unions to satisfy the role they are expected to play in a democratic polity. Certainly, traditional intermediary structures, such as unions, parties and traditional mass media, are not yet redundant for large-scale political mobilization. But our case shows that their involvement is no longer a necessary condition for generating high turnouts at protest events.

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

Notes

1. A complete listing of the cities that organized concentrations can be seen at: http://acampadas15 m. blogspot.com.
2. Between 64% and 70% of the Spanish population reported to share the grievances of 15M and to sympathize with the movement (Barometer from the Gabinet d'Estudis Socials i Opinió Pública – GESOP, published in El Periódico 3 June 2011; Metroscopia survey published in El País, 5 June 2011; June 2011 Barometer from the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas – CIS).
3. The protest cycle started in January 2010 and reached a peak with a nation-wide strike in 29 September 2010 against a reform on the Labour Law (employment regulation flexibility) and changes to the public pension system. From then on, it gained momentum and public officials and health care workers kept up the climate of protest by demonstrating against cutbacks that affected them directly (30,000 persons in Barcelona on 14 April , 2011). The traditional Mayday event had also a significant turnout for a protest against local governments' retrenchment in public spending in education and healthcare programmes. Protest events regarding educational policy developed within a similar timeframe.
4. As much as 10% of the Spanish citizens report in the post election survey of 2011 having participated in any of the protest events organized within the 15M movement (CIS study 2920 available at www.cis.es). Specific analyses of the electoral consequences of the 15M can be found at Anduiza, Mateos, & Martin, 2013).
5. An analysis of the news coverage of the 15M demonstration in Google News for the Spanish and Catalan press in the 30 days preceding the event showed 12 results (search string 'Democracia Real Ya'). The same analysis for the demonstration called for the general strike of 29 September 2010 (search string UGT CCOO 'huelga general') showed 1740 results. Searches for other demonstrations that took place between 2010 and 2011 produced between 23 and 118 results. The search strings and results for this analysis can be provided upon request.
6. Note that two of the three demos in Madrid were related to the crisis and that one was against abortion. This latter demonstration had many differences with respect to the other two, so the group of demonstrators in Madrid was rather heterogeneous.
7. On the geographical diffusion of messages for the concentrations after the demonstration see http://15 m.bifi.es/.
8. Photographic evidence can be provided upon request.

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