

Comparing Digital Protest Media Imaginaries: Anti-austerity Movements in Spain, Italy & Greece

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Abstract: This article presents findings from an empirical study of repertoires of contention and communication engaged during anti-austerity protests by the *Indignados* in Spain, the precarious generation in Italy, and the *Aganaktismenoi* in Greece. Drawing on 60 semi-structured interviews with activists and independent media producers involved in the 2011 wave of contention, we bring together social movement and communications theoretical frameworks to present a comparative critical analysis of digital protest media imaginaries. After examining the different socio-political and protest media contexts of the three countries translocally, our critical analysis emphasizes the emergence of three different imaginaries: in Spain the digital protest media imaginary was *technopolitical*, grounded in the politics and political economies of communication technologies emerging from the free culture movement; in Italy this imaginary was *techno-fragmented*, lacking cohesion, and failed to bring together old and new protest media logics; and finally in Greece it was *techno-pragmatic*, envisioned according to practical objectives that reflected the diverse politics and desires of media makers rather than the strictly technological or political affordances of the digital media forms and platforms. This research reveals how pivotal the temporal and geographical dimensions are when analyzed using theoretical perspectives from both communications and social movement research; moreover it emphasizes the importance of studying translocal digital protest media imaginaries as they shape movement repertoires of contention and communication; both elements are crucial to better understanding the challenges, limitations, successes and opportunities for digital protest media.

Keywords: anti-austerity; social movements; digital media; social media; protest media; media imaginaries; protest cultures; Indignados; Aganaktismenoi; Spain; Greece; Italy.

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1. Introduction: Toward Complexity in the Analysis of Digital Protest Media

If two decades ago, the study of social movement engagement with digital technologies and the role of alternative protest media could be considered nothing but an interesting micro-niche in the academy, the last ten years have witnessed an astonishing flourishing of the field, in part because of the hype over social media and big data, and in part because of the intensification of globalized protest. The

influences are felt in two fields of research: communications technology and social movements. While the social movement literature has typically either neglected or downplayed the role of communication within social movements, the new wave of digital activism literature does exactly the opposite: it is often not only media centred (which is to a certain extent understandable) but also media-centric, attributing more power to media platforms than to the histories, socio-political contexts, and protest cultures of the social movements that use them. Both approaches have associated risks. The first risk is that “by concentrating our gaze solely on new forms of mediation of radical politics, we are seduced by the thrills and excitement of revolutionary possibilities on offer [by technologies] and forget the politics itself” (Fenton 2015, 347); the second is precisely the converse, namely we risk examining only the politics of social movements, neglecting the technological affordances and communicative actions of specific contexts. This paper therefore puts communication technologies literature into dialogue with the literature of social movements, both in conjunction with empirical research in which our participants spoke as much about anti-austerity protest movements as about their uses of digital protest media and technologies. Taking this approach, the first research bias we aim to correct for is the tendency toward a media-centric analysis in digital activism research.

Moreover, much of the research on the political potential of digital media has either praised the revolutionary possibilities offered for extending creativity and increasing participation (Jenkins 2006) and even altering the balance of power in the network society (Shirky 2011; Castells 2009), or quite the opposite, it has criticized the structural and political limitations of platforms deeply embedded in the exploitative mechanisms at the heart of communicative capitalism (Dean 2005; Fuchs 2013; Curran, Fenton and Freedman 2012). Our analysis therefore aims to correct for a second bias found in the oversimplification of this binary logic; we do so by considering the communicative complexity of contemporary social movements (Treré and Mattoni 2016) through a critical analysis of digital protest media imaginaries emergent in different socio-political contexts of mass movement mobilizations.

Furthermore, research on the 2011 wave of contention in Europe has demonstrated the need for comparative, translocal analytical frameworks in researching digital activism (Vatikiotis 2016; Couldry and Hepp 2015; Kyriakidou and Olivas 2014). We therefore compare digital protest media imaginaries in anti-austerity protests that occurred in three Southern European countries: Spain, Italy, and Greece. While differing in some aspects, the anti-austerity protests in these three countries belong to the same “protest cycle” (Tarrow 1998) or “protest wave” (Koopmans 2004), with collective action frames and repertoires of contention travelling from one country to another through mechanisms of thin diffusion (Gerbaudo 2013; della Porta and Mattoni 2014). Acknowledging the similarities, here we pay close attention to the differences characterizing these three 2011 anti-austerity mobilizations, in particular their divergent digital protest media imaginaries. Engaging a systematic comparative translocal approach, we attempt to correct for a third bias in digital activism research toward hyper-localized analysis, which has obvious shortcomings in a globalized network society (Castells 2000).

This article is structured as follows: first, we describe the methodology employed to gather and analyze interview data regarding Spain, Italy and Greece. Next, we introduce our analytical framework introducing the concept of digital protest media imaginaries. We then present our comparative analysis across the three countries. In conclusion, we consider the key political and communicative outcomes of this analysis.

2. Methodology

Our methodology was developed with the aim of comparing mobilizations against austerity in different European countries, paying particular attention to the social movement and communication assemblages that developed and sustained them. We conducted in-depth interviews with social movement and media activists in Spain, Italy and Greece, people who played key roles in organizing and producing media about the anti-austerity protests, including journalists, web managers and developers, social media curators, graphic designers, media activists, and precarious media researchers.

The interviews were structured to gather data both on the anti-austerity protests and on the mediation and communication flows that sustained and influenced them. Semi-structured interviews of an hour and a half allowed researchers to familiarize themselves with the social movement situation, to become acquainted with physical organizing spaces, and to discuss specific activist digital media technology uses and practices. A snowball sampling strategy was used to select approximately 20 participants per country (Italy N=19; Spain N=20; and Greece N=21), covering a range of social movement organizations: from well-established radical activist groups to informal groups of newly politicized individuals; from traditional hierarchical social movement organizations to horizontal, grassroots social movement groups such as anarchist, free culture, or hacker collectives; from non-activist social media users to very experienced tech activists; and from inexperienced citizen journalists to unemployed professional journalists contributing to alternative media.

The resultant data set was coded and analyzed with ATLAS.ti software, considering the following crucial dimensions of digital protest media: the historical trajectories of each of the three anti-austerity protest mobilizations; the protest cultures that characterized each mobilization and their concomitant media practices; and the formative, emergent digital protest media imaginaries. In this paper, we present the results based on the last dimension, using the first two dimensions to inform our understanding of the context. In the next section we propose a theoretical framework to ground our analysis.

3. Analytical Framework

Our empirical analysis aims at understanding how different socio-political and cultural contexts intersected with *digital protest media imaginaries* that emerged during protests in Spain, Italy and Greece, in particular regarding social media but also examining other digital information and communication technologies (ICTs).

Once a neglected dimension of social movement research, culture is now recognized by many social movement scholars as a key lens through which the dynamics of collective action can be scrutinized (Polletta and Jasper 2001; Jasper 2014). In the social movement literature, definitions of culture vary greatly, ranging from Weberian conceptions that stress values, beliefs, and systems of meanings, to narrower understandings centred on schemata of cognition or action frames (Baumgarten et al. 2014). Recognizing the importance of the cultural dimension of protest, scholars working at the intersection of social movements and digital media have explored the linkages between protest cultures and media cultures from different perspectives. Some have focused on the cultural logic of networking in contemporary cyber-movements (Juris 2008; Wolfson 2014). Others have tackled the mutual influence between protest cultures and digital cultures within the Global Justice Movement (Kavada 2013) or the Occupy movement (Costanza-Chock 2012).

Yet others have explored media ideologies (conceived as systemic beliefs about power, media and communications) held by activists regarding the use and effectiveness of specific social media platforms (Comunello et al. 2016).

Rather than communicative logics, cultural representations or media ideologies, in this paper we focus on ways in which activists perceive and imagine media technologies, drawing on the literature on media imaginaries. Scholars in this field investigate the “imaginary matrix” (Cabrera 2006) of communication technologies (Flichy 2007; Gitelman 2006; Marvin 1988; Mattelart 2003; Mosco 2005), highlighting ways in which the introduction of any new technology tends to lead to binary utopian vs. dystopian imaginaries that shape and are shaped by people’s conceptions of the relationship between technology and society (Marvin 1988). This literature pays particular attention to the mythical dimension of digital media, scrutinizing the “digital sublime” (Mosco 2015) in relation to the material dimension of media, to reveal ways in which these two dimensions deeply influence one another.

Media imaginaries are largely disregarded in the research on media activism (for a notable exception, see Barassi 2015), but they are worth studying because they reveal how digital protest media platforms operate as sites for the realization of multiple political potentialities, values, desires and ideals. Digital and social media activist practices are embedded in wider media and protest ecologies, fuelling and being fuelled by digital protest media imaginaries. Treré and Barassi (2015) have shown that media imaginaries are not separate or evanescent realities, but have material consequences for political practice: the ways in which digital technologies are imagined, including how specific perceived meanings, values, capabilities, and ideologies are ascribed to them, shape the practices developed to engage with them and can thereby configure distinct types of digital activism, leaving others aside. It is also imperative to move beyond just social media imaginaries, as digital protest media practices and desires far exceed what is currently offered by corporate social media platforms, with the recent wave of movement participants actively engaged in creating blogs, websites, radio, podcasts, video activism, online comedy, digital documentaries, and more. Thus we define *digital protest media imaginaries* as the multilayered ways in which social movement actors enact particular values, ideologies, assumptions, desires, and attitudes in their media practices based on their conception or vision of the opportunities and limitations of particular communication technologies, beyond what the material affordances of the technologies themselves or their intended uses might indicate (Nagy and Neff 2015).

In the next section we will map out the socio-political and cultural contexts of the 2011 wave of anti-austerity movements in Spain, Italy and Greece to provide context for our analysis of the different digital protest media imaginaries that have both shaped and been shaped by media practices in a translocal dialectical tension.

4. Socio-Political & Cultural Contexts: 2011 in Spain, Italy & Greece

In Spain, the 15M or Indignados movement that emerged in 2011 represented the culmination of a social movement process, both a climax in its own right and a refinement of the repertoires of contention of previous mobilizations. As Barba and Sampedro (2011) have shown, the 15M Movement learned from its predecessors to combine online and offline activism strategies to strengthen and motivate movement actors. As such it represents one of the most powerful examples of a social movement originating from a digital media call to action on a non-corporate website, the *¡Democracia Real YA!* platform designed and run by alternative media activists, with the slogan, “We are not commodities in the hands of the politicians and

bankers.” It can be characterized as a refinement and an improvement because previous movements were strong but nonetheless unable to build consistent momentum. The 13M demonstration in 2004, in response to the electoral manipulation of the terrorist attacks of 11M, where mobile phones played an important role, did not manage to coalesce into a social movement, disappearing the morning after. The subsequent Movement for the Right to Housing that emerged in 2006 broke through this intermittence, and demonstrated the ability of digital media, in particular the combination of websites and emails, to organize, mobilize and provide resources for activists. Despite the capacity of these movements to bring together significant multitudes in the streets, they were politically neutralized.

In 2009-2010, however, we can locate a historical shift in the wave of contention, signalled by the protest against the so-called *Sinde Law*, a repressive Internet copyright law heavily contested online by hacktivists, lawyers, bloggers and other activists whom Postill calls *freedom technologists* (2016), a loose grouping of activists who have played a prominent role in the Spanish context¹. The *Sinde Law* protests, unlike those of 2004 and 2006, resulted in the formation of a broad-based social movement, albeit one that operated almost exclusively online. Moreover it served as a test-bed, a precursor to the digital media practices, experiences, and imaginaries of the 15M or Indignados Movement. The Indignados of 2011 thus represent the most recent heirs in this line of social movements, producing another climax in an intense decades-long history of mobilizations in Spain, the culminating actions in a flow of civil disobedience iteratively materializing almost every five years over the past twenty years (Sampedro, Duarte and Manuel 2011).

In Italy, conversely, the year 2011 marks an implosion, a collapse of anti-austerity mobilizations, rather than the culmination of years of activism seen in Spain. While the Italian struggle against austerity began before the Spanish movement, it followed a path of radicalization then fragmentation, which can be divided into three phases, as outlined by Zamponi (2012). The first phase began in 2008, with the *Anomalous Wave* student movement and its slogan “We won’t pay for their crisis.” This phase shares commonalities with the Indignados, particularly the use of non-violent civil disobedience and the critique of neoliberal austerity measures. In the second phase (2010-11) increasingly politicized students filled the squares protesting against the neoliberal restructuring of post-secondary education, denouncing the social conditions of the ‘precarious generation’ of Italian youth, and making demands for radical sociopolitical change. In this phase, we witness a radicalization of the movement: their repertoire of contention evolves from university occupations to blockades of highways to clashes against police violence. This phase ends with the global day of action against austerity—October 15, 2011—which, in Italy, represented a failed attempt to apply an Occupy or *Indignados* framework, largely due to tensions between different groups and coalitions. Featuring violent clashes between protesters and police, which have become normalized during mass demonstrations, this mass protest also featured disruptive clashes between different social movement factions.

¹ “I use the term freedom technologists to refer to those political actors – both individual and collective – who combine technological know-how with political acumen to pursue greater digital and democratic freedoms. Indeed, freedom technologists regard the fate of the internet and of human freedom as being inextricably entwined. Far from being the techn-utopian dreamers or ineffectual “slacktivists” of a certain strand of internet punditry, my anthropological research shows that most of them are, in fact, techno-pragmatists; that is, they take a highly practical view of the limits and possibilities of new technologies for political change”. (Postill, 2016: 149).

For most of our interview participants, this day represented the death of every possibility for building a broad-based movement in Italy. Around the same time, the weak Berlusconi government was replaced with the technocratic administration of Mario Monti, which numbed the movement. 2011 in Italy thus marks the reaffirmation of parochialism, and the subsequent third phase (2012-13) is characterized by a fragmented social movement landscape comprised of different social movement factions with disjointed claims and disjunctive sites of struggle. There was ultimately no adoption of a clear self-defined movement identity that we saw with the *Indignados* or *Occupy* (We are the 99%).

In Greece the 2011 wave of protesters, following the Spanish example, proclaimed their collective indignation. This followed on the heels of the month-long riots in 2008 in Athens, Thessaloniki and other cities, sparked by the December 6th police shooting of 15-year-old student Alexandros Grigoropoulos in Exarcheia, Athens (Vradis and Dalakoglou 2011; Dalakoglou 2012). High school students engaged in civil disobedience walkouts, university students occupied buildings, and workers' unions called for a general strike (Rocamadur 2011). This wave of protest escalated for months, and then partially subsided. However, soon neoliberal policies would deepen the economic crisis in Greece: in 2010, the government was forced to accept the first of several austerity bailout and structural adjustment programs imposed by the EU, the IMF and the European Central Bank (Sotirakopoulos and Sotiropoulos 2013), a capitulation met with protests and riots in many Greek cities. In early 2011, prompted by the provocative viral meme by the Spanish *Indignados* accusing the Greek people of sleeping (Ibid., 446), an anonymous Facebook call went out for a protest gathering in Syntagma Square on May 25th. This came not from seasoned activists, but from a small group of what one interview participant called "hipster activists," who did not belong to any traditional organization or political affiliation. To everyone's amazement, twenty-five thousand people converged. Following the model of Tahrir Square in Egypt (Ibid.; Aouragh and Alexander 2011), they did not just gather for one event, but created a local micro-community with the square becoming an occupied *acampada* for several months, thus initiating the Greek *Indignados* or *Aganaktismenoi* movement (Prentoulis and Thomassen 2013, 171). The occupation of the square in Athens, according to our interview participants, soon split into two segments, with the more liberal participants, and even some right-wing nationalists, camping and protesting closer to the parliament buildings, while the radical left, including anarchists and autonomists, camped at the far end of the park, organizing according to general assemblies and working groups, including a media working group. Greek mobilizations developed a protest culture of horizontalism and self-governance that saw the creation of specific types of activist interventions such as theatre occupations (e.g. EMPROS in Athens), factory occupations (e.g. VIO.ME. in Thessaloniki), social centers and squats organized into productive co-operatives, social services including medical care offered collectively by unemployed professionals, and alternative media projects such as the Press Project instigated by unemployed journalists. While media activism was highly mobilized, and the spirit of indignation against austerity was certainly shared with Spain, the 'freedom technologist' or free culture approach emergent in the Spanish context did not take hold in the translocal mobilizations of the self-proclaimed *Aganaktisemenoi* or *Indignados* of Greece.

Here we note similarities and differences among contexts in the three countries, paying particular attention to their specific political and economic contexts as well as to the unfolding of particular protest events in each country. In Spain, May 15, 2011

saw the culmination of a long process of learning by the *Indignados* (Romanos 2013), who sparked the Greeks to action on May 25th. Also in Spain, the consequences of the Great Recession were aggravated by neoliberal policies adopted by both centre-left and centre-right governments under pressure from electorally unaccountable institutions such as the European Central Bank, and by speculation in the financial sector. Similarly, in Greece the crisis was sparked by a bailout of the state, which was itself bankrupted by crony capitalism. In Greece and Spain, anti-austerity movements advocated for better democratic practices, with the Spanish *Indignados* in particular opposing capitalism (Sotirakopoulos and Ntalaka 2015, 78-79). The global day of action in October in Greece and Spain brought with it a measure of hope and success, whereas in Italy the same mobilization ground the movement to a halt.

These divergent outcomes can be understood through an analysis of the cultural context in which the specific forms of protest developed. In a comparative study of anti-austerity mobilizations, Andretta and della Porta (2015) have shown that while the precarious generation was almost equally present in Italy and Spain, in Spain it was able to build a more radical and cohesive collective identity—as self-proclaimed *Indignados*—based on a more informal, digitally-integrated movement network, while in Italy the social movement's embeddedness in more formal, traditional networks that relied on older protest logics prevented the formation of a broader collective identity. The same patterns emerge from the analysis of our interview data. In the Italian context, the organizational logics and identitarian traits of the older generation prevailed, remaining static, and never fully embracing the model of longer-term square occupations, or the collective subject-position of indignants or the 99%. The newer generation of activists was not able to emancipate itself from the influence of entrenched social movement actors, including both informal and more formal institutionalized ones.

In Greece, despite a long tradition of general strikes, groups, networks and individuals from all walks of life mobilized around the collective identity of *Aganaktismenoi*, similar to the *Indignados* of Spain, quickly abandoning the limitations of traditional top-down institutional organizations, such as unions and NGOs, in favor of the occupied square model initiated in Tahrir Square, and copied by Occupy and the Spanish *Indignados* to generate participatory, directly democratic processes for social movement organization and action. Andretta and della Porta (2015) point out the importance of considering the specific tendencies of civil society in each context. In Spain in 2011, decentralized grassroots organizing prevailed, resonating with libertarian traditions and giving value to “discursive public opinion” and “deliberative democracies” (Sampedro and Lobera 2014). In Italy, clashes among the three main nodes of the earlier global justice movement (eco-pacifists, anti-neoliberals, and post-autonomists) partially contributed to the failure of the October 15, 2011 global day of action against austerity, and produced a weak opposition to Mario Monti's government. While organized civil society in Italy may be stronger, it is extremely structured, even when it comes to less institutionalized grassroots activism, while in Spain and Greece it is perhaps weaker, but more autonomous and horizontal, in part influenced by the long history of anarchist movements in both countries. Thus, in the Spanish scenario there was more space for the construction of an inclusive horizontal collective identity when a new protest culture demanding a more participatory and transparent politics emerged fueled by the 15M protests. Whereas in Italy, the fragmentation of social movement actors together with the less permeable, static, top-down tendencies of movement

organizations impeded the development of a cohesive collective identity or unified protest culture.

Greece is similar to Italy and Spain in terms of its relative propensity toward protest: all three have a higher incidence of protest than other European countries, but what is perhaps a key difference is that Greece has a long history of general strikes with one almost every year in the past decade (Rüdig and Karyotis 2013, 492). They also have an astonishing number of protests: in 2010, “7,123 demonstrations took place in Greece” (497), with 4,268 in Athens alone (498). The weak civil society of pre-crisis Greece, and in particular the perceived apathy of young people who receive no civic education in school, is thus overcome by the *Aganaktismenoi* movement, partly shaped by its crucial precursor, the December 2008 youth-led anti-police-brutality riots, organized by a highly mobilized youth-oriented civil society networked through social media, who took these networks offline into the streets and squares (Theocharis 2011; Milioni and Panos 2011).

In 2011 they did so not just through protests and square occupations but also through the construction of collectives, cooperatives, voluntary organizations and other non-institutionalized civic and communicative actions. Interestingly, the 2010-11 wave of contention in Greece was not dominated by youth, but rather by experienced middle-aged social movement actors in the 45-54 year-old range, which comprised the largest group of strikers and protesters (Rüdig and Karyotis 2013, 506). The younger activists of the precarious generation who became active in 2008 worked side by side in 2011 with the more experienced middle-aged activists from the global justice movement. Perhaps because in Greece anti-austerity mobilizations were not limited to the precarious generation, as in Italy, but were intergenerational like the Spanish Indignados, the *Aganaktismenoi* were able to carry forward the wave of anti-austerity protests in Syntagma Square and beyond, integrating emergent social media practices of the younger generation into a well-established horizontal and decentralized protest culture of the older generation, and this despite having one of the lowest internet penetration rates in Europe at 68% in 2016, with only 30,000 Greeks having Twitter accounts still in 2011 (Theocharis 2016, 4).

Here we see a clear picture emerging of the socio-political context and protest cultures in Spain, Italy and Greece. We now move on to consider how these contexts shape the very different digital protest media imaginaries in the three countries.

5. Comparing Digital Protest Media Imaginaries

In Spain, the digital activism of the 15M represented the refinement, culmination and enhancement of previous movement tactics, giving birth to *technopolitics*, a sophisticated form of communicative action that is a complex blend of technological knowledge and digital expertise used for radical political purposes with the technology itself seen as a site of contestation (Toret et al. 2015; Sáez 2011). It is key to note that the term *technopolitics* is defined and used by tech media activists themselves. *Technopolitics* in the Spanish mobilizations included: massive mobilization of hackers before, during and after the protests; key contributions of bloggers, citizen journalists, academics, micromedia entrepreneurs, and tech-lawyers (the so-called *freedom technologists*) throughout the anti-austerity protests; and the strong connection to a *free culture* milieu through the lessons and repertoires of the *Sinde Law* protests rooted in a non-hierarchical, collaborative and open spirit (Fuster Morell 2012; Postill 2016). Drawing attention to the strong connection between free culture values and the 15M digital protest media imaginary, one of our interview participants remarked:

It is not just that the hackers tell the people what to do, it is much more than that: it is a hybridization so strong between the technopolitical practices and the dynamics of the movement that it reaches a point where it is part of the same DNA [SP05].

The Free Culture Movement in Spain can thus be understood to have contributed to the 15M movement in several key ways (Fuster Morell 2012), in particular: by influencing the agenda of the movement in relation to information and knowledge policies and practices; by situating the digital commons as a pivotal topic and a crucial site of contention (Fuster Morell and Subirats 2012); and by shaping the movement's organizational logic through horizontal, decentralized coordination that relied heavily on digital media while following a hacktivist logic or ethos (Milan 2015).

Technopolitics includes practices such as the tactical appropriation of corporate social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Galis and Neumayer 2016), used in an effective combination with tools for internal communication like pads, WhatsApp and Telegram in order to coordinate actions, build trending topics that influence public opinion, direct the mainstream media agenda, and control the protest narrative in the public sphere. But, critically, it also means imagining specific kinds of anti-capitalist technological alternatives. In Spain, activists created their own radical media, the N-1 alternative social media platform, as well as the *¡Democracia Real YA!* website, they created, shared and utilized free and open-source software, and they advocated for technological infrastructure sovereignty and self-determination where feasible. Finally, in Spain the technopolitics of the Indignados had a notable *prefigurative* character, consisting of the experimental development of prototypes or micro-utopias (Gutiérrez 2013) that point toward alternative futures by creating them in the here and now. Communicative transparency, self-determination and knowledge sharing were pivotal, manifesting in a strong component of “radical media education” consisting of a never-ending flow of online tutorials, seminars and peer-to-peer skill-share workshops about digital media tactics². According to our interview participants, almost every protest, squat or camp action was accompanied by a sophisticated decentralized but coordinated media strategy that included clear and simple explanations on how best to adopt and spread a series of Twitter hashtags, the most favourable hours to create a trending topic for a particular campaign, the lists of pads that were covering that specific topic, the Facebook groups created to mobilize around a particular set of grievances, and more.

It was not only that every single protest action had its digital counterpart; it was that every campaign would be simply unimaginable without its related online components—they were intrinsically connected as part of the same technopolitical process or ‘part of the same DNA’ as our interviewee suggested. The profound embrace of technopolitics can therefore be seen as the prime characteristic of the Spanish digital protest media imaginary, an imaginary where the technical insights of media activists, who argue that “corporate social media have to be used because now most of the people are there, but we have to use them wisely” [SP07], meets the hands-on, experimental attitude of the hacker and free culture milieu [SP06], co-existing with the prefigurative creation of alternative networks and infrastructures

² As an example, see this online guide on Twitter activism and social media campaigns: <https://ciberactivismosol.wordpress.com/2014/03/18/twitter-para-activistas-como-conseguir-una-buena-campana-en-redes-sociales/>. The guide was also translated into Italian: <http://www.dinamopress.it/news/twitter-per-attivisti-istruzioni-per-una-campagna-vincente>

[SP04], all underpinned by discourses of technological autonomy from corporations and the state³. In this digital protest media imaginary, the technological and the political are intrinsically integrated—technology is political and politics are technological—and the possibilities of this intermixture are fully realized.

In contrast, Italian digital protest media imaginaries reflected the fragmented and parochial landscape from which they originated. While interviewees acknowledged that in recent years various powerful mobilizations with a strong digital component had flourished in the Italian context (e.g. The Purple People, the People of the Wheelbarrows, Teatro Valle in Rome, and Macao in Milan), the use of digital media during the Italian anti-austerity mobilizations appears as a divided landscape of isolated platforms and voices, each one belonging to a particular coalition or local group (e.g. infoaut.org, milanoimovimento.com, global project.info, dinamopress.it, etc.). These groups and their digital counterparts favoured more traditional, old logics of both media and protest movements, lacking the free and open-source digital networks of the free culture movement, and disconnected from the prefigurative futuristic digital political logics and radical technopolitics of hackers and techies. Italian digital activism was instead constituted by factionalization, ideologues, and territorialism, all with defined perimeters and gatekeepers. Part and parcel of the old communicative logic, the Italian digital protest media imaginary is marked by a deep scepticism regarding the effectiveness of social media platforms for political action, accurately rejecting them as capitalistic perhaps, but then not developing autonomous platforms in their stead. In the following illuminating excerpt, an Italian activist compares the Spanish and Italian attitudes toward digital technology in political activism:

We [Italians] have always had this idea that the media do not make the movements, but are just means of communication. They [Spanish activists] always thought that the Internet creates a movement, but I guess we'll never think that. It's a different approach: they are post-ideological and they started from the indignation, while for us the indignation was never enough: the web indignation made us laugh, we called them 'keyboard lions', those activists on Facebook all the time. [IT05]

This attitude toward digital technology seems to be one of arrogant perplexity and resignation, not experimentation and empowerment, where digital media are envisioned as something only used "because you have to," and then just as a "means of communication," while more important things are imagined to be organized elsewhere and otherwise—activists should not spend so much time on their keyboards. Underpinning this attitude is the argument that Facebook and Twitter are not properly political arenas because they do not leave enough space for the development of coherent thought, something that "real politics" demands [IT11]. This idea tends to be endorsed by more experienced, older activists in Italy, while younger ones are more keen to appropriate newer media, but in Italy this new generation of activists found it difficult to overcome the general trend toward scepticism, and their relevance within the ranks of Italian activism was relatively weak, with the older generation maintaining a position of power.

An old activist logic regarding the use of digital media, therefore, can be seen to include both a general aversion to embracing technological innovation, and a (mis)understanding of digital platforms as functioning just like 'old media', with more

³ On the development of autonomous platforms, see in particular the reflections developed by 15M engaged academics on the issue of technological sovereignty (Candón Mena 2012; Hach and Franco 2010).

emphasis on their broadcasting or ‘point to many’ (and thus centralized and hierarchical) capabilities, neglecting or perhaps actually rejecting their ‘peer-to-peer’ (and thus horizontal and decentralized) possibilities, or the potential inherent in what Shirky (2008) calls ‘here comes everybody’. Finally, the fragmentation of the Italian digital media imaginary was in part due to the strong presence of the 5 Star Party/Movement that perhaps catalyzed the energies of social movements, with a discourse of participatory horizontalism, while simultaneously and contrarily engaging in systematically authoritarian and anti-democratic practices, thereby failing to integrate the previous generation of top-down activists with the precarious generation of horizontal social media users (Treré and Barassi 2015). This co-optation of the digital protest media imaginary by the 5 Star Party/Movement was able, as one activist put it, to “defuse the digital power of social movements precisely in a period where more spontaneous rebellions were flourishing around the world” [IT12]. Therefore the characteristics of fragmentation, digital scepticism and traditional, old communicative logics served to shape the digital protest media imaginary in Italy that can best be labelled *techno-fragmented*.

In Greece we see a third type of translocal mobilization that is not entirely consistent with the collective autonomy and technopolitics of the Spanish Indignados, nor as fragmented and incoherent as the communicative imaginary of the Italian movement. In Greece over two million people participated in the anti-austerity movement (Sotirakopolous and Sotiropoulos 2013, 448), with activists developing a pragmatic approach to digital protest media. The 2008 protesters used Twitter extensively to provide live-tweet updates, using them to track the protests and riots, and working in conjunction with the established Indymedia Athens site, which provided a platform for longer articles, images and videos (Miloni and Panos 2011). By 2010-11, active Facebook usage within the general population had surged, and in 2011, the main protest media website was the Indignados of Syntagma Square Facebook page, with 80,000 followers. Key Twitter hashtags included: #RBnews (radio bubble news), #greekrevolution and #antireport. The activists we interviewed imagined various digital media platforms to have specific interconnected potentialities, which they would harness with particular objectives, exploiting what they saw as different technological opportunities. As one activist states:

Of course there are differences. Twitter is the king of protest reporting, because it’s faster, direct... But then when you want to comment on what has happened Twitter is problematic because it doesn’t give you enough space to post and you need longer posts. You may need to write an article and publish it through a blog or a website, and maybe after that you link it through Twitter. Or even if you don’t have time or don’t have enough materials to write an article you write a post on Facebook that can be something in between. [GR21]

Here we see the digital protest imaginary shaping up in the form of a network of various platforms envisioned to serve different purposes, when in fact the technological affordances of the platforms are not so distinct. In reality, Facebook could be used for brief live updates, or Twitter, blogs and activist-run websites could be used for action calls, etc. In addition to using social media, “the blogger community was very organized 2008-2011” [GR10], providing a space where longer articles were written in a collaborative journalistic process. Some saw corporate platforms such as Facebook offering a more general audience or wider reach than activist sites like Indymedia or radical hashtags such as #antireport, so they chose Facebook to organize mobilizations, and to engage in public debates. These decisions were based on what they imagined it offered, largely ignoring the political

economy of Facebook, including its capitalist ownership model, facilitation of state surveillance, and the limitations and control imposed by its algorithms, on the one hand, and on the other hand, different technological affordances for adaptation or reconfiguration that went unexplored. While media activists produced and distributed digital texts, audio, images and videos in other spaces (e.g. according to our interview participants: the widely influential 2011 film *Debtocracy* the magazine *Unfollow*, the Omikron satirical video projects, and various digital community radio stations), Facebook was purposefully used as an aggregator for the alternative media self-produced and self-representative content of the movement (e.g. articles written by Indymedia Athens, then cross-posted or linked on Facebook), as well as for directly posting action calls and debating strategies and tactics. Twitter was used less in 2011 than 2008, as several interviewees found that Greek Twitter had been taken over by trolls.

Greek media activists seized the means of production of representation in several platforms, using them for what they imagined they could achieve in a practical goal-oriented attitude. While more experienced activists such as those involved in Indymedia Athens did discuss the technopolitics of platforms (Miloni 2009), particularly when the site was shutdown by the administration of the university that housed it (Croeser and Highfield 2015), the free culture technopolitics of Spanish media activists was not fully actualized by the protest culture that evolved in Greece. Contributing to this utilitarian approach to media was the fact that several mainstream media outlets in Greece were shut down, and newly unemployed professional journalists migrated to contribute to activist media and movement mobilizations; these professionally trained journalists did not come from the anarchist or anti-capitalist media activist milieu of Indymedia's alternative journalists, but nonetheless they adopted some of their values and corresponding practices. The Press Project, for example, a collective of unemployed professional journalists, was quickly accepted as being autonomous movement media by the general assemblies, and was the only video group, according to our respondents, allowed to film those large meetings.

Interestingly, these divergent media practices never came into conflict, where there seemed to be a sense that people would use whatever worked for them, being active on digital media platforms they felt comfortable with; the intensive skillsharing and comprehensive communicative strategizing of the technopolitical media activists in Spain was largely absent. The pragmatic imaginary in Greece that envisioned media practices through the imagined communicative affordances and limitations of specific forms or platforms of digital protest media, reveals both an understanding of the political exigencies of digital technologies, while still consisting of some (mis)perceptions shaped as much by objectives, desires, attitudes, protest cultures, or past alternative media experiences, rather than the actual technological opportunities, barriers, or political economies of the forms or platforms engaged. For example, there was a marked absence of analysis of the potential of state surveillance of the movement through Facebook, or the fact, as noted in social media labour scholarship, that social movement actors posting on Facebook are engaged in free labour for the capitalist exploitation of Facebook, garnering massive profits for the corporation (Brophy and de Peuter 2007; Cohen 2013; Dean 2014). Therefore we can characterize the digital protest media imaginary in the Greek 2011 wave of contention as largely *techno-pragmatic*.

In summation, Greek social movement actors envisioned the diversity of digital media opportunities much more techno-pragmatically than the divisive techno-

fragmentation in Italy, but they did not go to the depths of technopolitical engagement evident in Spain, where the technological elements of media production were seen as a site of political contention in and of themselves, and a key sociotechnical dimension of the movement itself.

6. Conclusion

In this article we have discussed how translocal digital protest media imaginaries can reflect specific socio-political contexts and translocal protest media cultures. We have considered three specific interrelated dimensions of analysis in order to bring together social movement and digital media theoretical frameworks, attempting to correct three biases in the scholarship: the media-centric bias in communications research that tends to neglect social movements; the ahistorical bias in media research that risks ignoring the socio-political and cultural conditions; and the hyper-local bias in social movement studies that ignores the global network society. We have done so by comparatively analyzing the translocal anti-austerity protests with specific emphasis on digital protest media imaginaries in the 2011 wave of contention in Spain, Italy and Greece.

Our analysis reveals that in Spain the 15th of May 2011 saw the culmination of a decades-long process of organizing and protesting by groups and networks that coalesced to become the *Indignados*, who sparked the Greeks to action ten days later on May 25th. While the global day of action against austerity in October in Greece and Spain brought with it a measure of achievement and hope, in Italy the mobilization that day ground the movement to a halt due to insurmountable tensions between different groups and coalitions. While in Spain there was more space for the construction of an inclusive and horizontal collective identity when the new political culture of the *Indignados* emerged, in Italy fragmentation in the sphere of civil society, combined with its impermeable and static nature, hindering the emergence of a collective protest culture that could bring together a range of political actors or issues. Meanwhile in Greece, activists embraced the cohesive collective identity of *Aganaktismenoi*, effectively integrating the youth movement arising in the 2008 anti-police brutality protests together with citizens who were middle-aged and older from the strong history of general strikes and the global justice movement, and taking up action frames translocally from the *Indignados* of Spain and other global movements such as Tahrir square in Egypt.

This analysis casts light on the three different digital protest media imaginaries that emerged in the countries examined, imaginaries clearly linked to the specificities of their social, political and cultural contexts: the powerful *technopolitical* imaginary of Spain, where the political and the technical are imagined by activists to be intrinsically and inseparably linked; the demobilizing *techno-fragmented* imaginary of Italy, dominated by digital scepticism and traditional old movement logics; and the ad hoc *techno-pragmatic* imaginary of Greek activists who used digital media more cohesively than in Italy, but without the technopolitical savvy and experimentation of Spain's free culture influence. We have thus shown that the "imaginary matrix" of communication technologies (Cabrera 2006), in other words, the assumptions, visions and attitudes toward digital media used for protest and mass mobilizations, are shaped by a complex array of socio-technical, political, historical and cultural factors that cannot be reduced to simple explanations only centred on the technological affordances and communicative characteristics of online platforms (Mosco 2005; Reestorff 2014).

Taking our reflections a step further, we argue that digital protest media imaginaries—and perhaps media imaginaries in general—can contribute to shape protest cultures, media practices, social movement organizational structures, and the potential for a movement to define its objectives and achieve its outcomes, particularly when they are able to align these imaginaries closely with their social movement objectives. We do not imply that media imaginaries developed during the anti-austerity phase directly impacted the political formations that followed, as this conception would be problematically techno-deterministic, but we do suggest, along with other scholars, that there is an “elective affinity” (Romanos and Sádaba 2015) between specific media imaginaries and forms of deliberation and organization. This is evident if we look at the Spanish context, where the Indignados wave of activism paved the way for the subsequent *mareas* (tides) or smaller campaigns on specific issues such as education, public health, and culture. It also played a role in shaping *Party X*, *Podemos* and *Ganemos*, the party-wave that challenged established political parties by relying on innovative communicative strategies that blend digital deliberation platforms with traditional media where “technological mediation has modulated the transition from movement to party by generating an environment of horizontal deliberation, distributed participation and decentralized structure that reduces the visible differences between the two” (Ibid., 1). Whether this intensity of horizontal participation in political parties will be maintained over the long term remains an outstanding question worthy of investigation.

In the Italian context, contrary to Spain, the fragmented media imaginaries neither inspired nor produced innovative forms of sociotechnical action and the social movement sector remains divided, with only timid attempts to innovate at the level of digital communicative practices. The 5 Star Movement still dominates the scene, and grassroots communicative power remains largely dormant. Whereas in Greece, we see Syriza, a coalition party of the radical left, taking power in 2015, along with civil society impacts in terms of collective self-organization, both engaged with communicative innovations. One might debate whether the emergence of political parties out of broad-based social movements provides a voice for the movement, or conversely demobilizes it, with only certain leaders gaining power, and perhaps risking further co-optation by the top-down political process, however that takes us beyond these findings so must be left as a question for future research.

We have demonstrated the importance of multidisciplinary research for studying social movements and their communicative practices: we need the toolbox of social movement theories and methods, and here even cultural studies has been useful, even if we sometimes overlook these fields in the haze of fascination with big data, tweets and posts. Social movements and media activists are now digitally integrated, where media activists and alternative journalists work in similar contexts with social movement organizers, which can shape the characteristics of their contention and communicative repertoires and outcomes in similar ways.

Further studies will need to look closely at the dynamic interrelations between digital protest media practices and imaginaries, and their consequences for the political and organizational dynamics and outcomes of social movements and grassroots political parties. As research on digital protest media practices expands beyond a superficial fascination with social media and big data, it will be crucial to fine-tune the reflections on the infrastructure, imaginaries, protest cultures and historical trajectories that sustain and shape media activism and social movements, preferably in a comparative perspective that can shed further light on their translocal similarities, differences, challenges, and achievements.

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