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Commodification and Digital Political Participation: The “15-M Movement” and the Collectivization of the Internet

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Abstract

The objective of this article is to analyze an emerging process in the network society: the commodification of the Internet and political communication. This strategy of technological capitalism is becoming increasingly present in the lives of citizens around the world, and it represents a new challenge for critical thinking. In this article we will show the debate around this process and we will point out a few examples. However, despite the existence of this process of commodification, society is not taking a passive attitude. On the contrary, we have cases of social movements, such as the Spanish 15-M, which identified this process and designed a strategy to try to reverse it. However, and despite the efforts of this movement, many of the achievements of the 15-M against commodification have lost their validity. In this paper we review the current state of the debate on the commercialization

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of politics and, through a qualitative study, we show how the 15-M defined this process and established instruments to fight it. In the conclusions we discuss this process and show its current situation in Spain.

Keywords

Digital political participation; 15-M Movement; commodification; social movements; social change; cultural change (Source: Unesco Thesaurus).

La mercantilización y la participación política digital: el “Movimiento 15-M” y la colectivización de internet

Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es analizar un proceso emergente en la sociedad red: la mercantilización de internet y la comunicación política. Esta estrategia de capitalismo tecnológico está cada vez más presente en las vidas de los ciudadanos de todo el mundo y representa un nuevo desafío para el pensamiento crítico. En este artículo mostraremos el debate sobre este proceso y señalaremos algunos ejemplos. Sin embargo, a pesar de la existencia de este proceso de mercantilización, la sociedad no está adoptando una actitud pasiva. Por el contrario, existen casos de movimientos sociales, como el español 15-M, que identificó este proceso y diseñó una estrategia para tratar de revertirlo. No obstante, pese a los esfuerzos de este movimiento, muchos de los logros del 15-M contra la mercantilización han perdido su validez. En este trabajo revisamos el estado actual del debate sobre la comercialización de la política y, a través de un estudio cualitativo, mostramos cómo el 15-M definió este proceso y estableció instrumentos para combatirlo. En las conclusiones discutimos este proceso y mostramos su situación actual en España.

Palabras clave

Participación política digital, movimiento 15-M, mercantilización, movimientos sociales, cambio social, cambio cultural (Fuente: Tesaurus de la Unesco).

A mercantilização e a participação política digital: o Movimento 15-M e a coletivização da internet

Resumo

O objetivo deste artigo é analisar um processo emergente na sociedade conectada: a mercantilização da internet e da comunicação política. Essa estratégia de capitalismo tecnológico está cada vez mais presente na vida dos cidadãos do mundo inteiro e representa um novo desafio para o pensamento crítico. Neste artigo, mostraremos o debate sobre esse processo e daremos alguns exemplos. Contudo, apesar da existência desse processo de mercantilização, a sociedade não está adotando uma atitude passiva. Pelo contrário, existem casos de movimentos sociais, como o espanhol 15-M, que identificou esse processo e desenhou uma estratégia para tentar revertê-lo. No entanto, embora os esforços desse movimento, muitas das conquistas do 15-M contra a mercantilização têm perdido sua validade. Neste trabalho, revisamos o estado atual do debate sobre a comercialização da política e, por meio de um estudo qualitativo, mostramos como o 15-M definiu esse processo e estabeleceu instrumentos para combatê-lo. Nas conclusões, discutimos esse processo e mostramos sua situação atual na Espanha.

Palavras-chave

Participação política digital; movimento 15-M; mercantilização; movimentos sociais; mudança social; mudança cultural (Fonte: Tesouro da Unesco).

Introduction

The rise of the network society is a central theme in twenty-first-century research in sociology, social anthropology, economics and political sciences (Castells, 1999; Miller & Slater, 2000; Benkler, 2006; Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Substantial and ample academic literature has been developed that addresses the extent to which the expanded use of digital technology affects political participation (Rheingold, 2002; Wilson & Peterson, 2002; Surowiecki, 2005; Juris, 2006; Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Bennett, Segerberg, & Knüfer, 2017). These studies are based on middle-range theories (Boudon, 1991) that seek to integrate “big theories” about social and cultural change and empirical studies. This paper is framed in this common line of enquiry and will attempt to bring together a general theory, a middle-range theory, and an empirical case to move forward the study of how political activists frame the role of digital technologies for political participation in a context of network society.

Here we take the concept of *commodification* as a general theoretical framework for socio-economic and culture change. Commodification refers to the transformation of ideas, services and other concepts into commodities and was coined by Polanyi (1944) to analyze the development of industrial capitalism. Over the last few decades, Polanyi’s theory has generated an interesting and extensive theoretical debate among social scientists (Gudeman, 2001; Block, 2003; Maucourant, 2006). According to experts, the neoliberal system that defines the policies of most developed countries is reactivating a commodification strategy and extending it to new areas (De Castro & Pedreño, 2012), one of which is politics.

From as far back as 1942 Schumpeter argued that politics is organized as a competition for votes and is based on a limited offering of candidates and programs (political market). We have stated in previous works that, in a network society, where the Internet is one of the most central resources for social and political interactions (Castells, 1999), the commoditization of politics is also affecting collective action and non-conventional political participation (Robles et. al, 2015).

In this context, we will consider social movements, following in the footsteps of classical works such as those by Melucci (1989) and Laraña (1999) as reflexive agents that offer society a diagnosis of—and a set of alternatives to—collective problems. Given that social movements are reflexive agents and that nowadays these movements have to face the processes of social and technological change, how do these agents understand the ways in which new technological structures are incorporated into society? Thus, reflexivity will play the role of a middle-range theory connecting the general theories about social change and the discourses of the activists (Diez & Laraña, 2018).

We take this set of theories as inspiration to examine an empirical case. Our hypothesis argues that, nowadays, some social movements have identified and are evaluating, as reflexive agents, the commodification process that affects the collective action. At the same time, these social movements are creating mechanisms that allow them to operate outside of this process. The 15-M movement will be considered here as an example of this kind of movement. Our hypothesis is useful to study social movements in the context of a network society, as it allows us to describe the strategies used by social movements to adapt to (and sometimes hold out for) new technological contexts.

To achieve our objectives, we will proceed as follows: First, we will offer a general theoretical framework about the concept of commodification and the current debate about its meaning in the context of a network society. Then, we will summarize middle-range theories on the Internet and social movements, and we will support the idea of social movements as reflexive agencies. Next, we present the results of our fieldwork, which are based on a set of interviews with activists from the 15 May protests in Spain (the 15-M Protests). Using these interviews, we will demonstrate how the idea of the commodification of political participation remains a constant within this movement and how this commodification fosters a reactive strategy. We conclude by describing how the 15-M Protests offer a diagnosis of, and solution to, the problem of commodification on the Internet.

The Commodification of Collective Action

In a long tradition of studies on social movements, numerous publications use middle-range theories (Boudon, 1991) to link empirical results and general sociological and social anthropological theories (McAdam et al., 1999; Gibb, 2001). In addition, in studies regarding social movements and the Internet, we find middle-range theories such as normalization theories (Ward & Gibson, 2009) or theories focused on the logic of collective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). However, these studies do not always clearly specify the principles of the general theories with which they are linked. Our study tries to avoid this constraint by summarizing the characteristics of our general theory and its implications for our case study.

Our work is inspired by Polanyi's book, *The Great Transformation*, particularly by his review of the concept of *commodification* and the current debate about the extension of this commercial process. From a classical perspective, commodification refers to the transformation of goods and services—in addition to ideas and other concepts—into commodities. A commodity is a good or service produced by human activity and slated for sale on a specific market. One of Polanyi's most well-known theses offers an argument regarding how the development of capitalism is accompanied by a three-stage process of commodification: the commodification of land, work, and money. From his perspective, this commodification process becomes the social, political, and economic foundation of the new social system, which is impossible unless the government proposes laws that favor the development of this process and the new economic institutions that accompany it.

The concept of commodification has inspired the work of a significant number of authors, who have tried to discuss the social effects of the commercial economic system in recent decades. For example, Russell (2008) notes how, during the second part of the 20th Century, the market economy transformed the realm of intimacy into a commodified sphere. Accordingly, within the households of developed countries, an adoption process of the very means of production is developing alongside a growing process of externalized services, both of which then transform this private environment into a productive unit.

According to different authors, the political system has also been affected by this process. After World War II, the so-called “political market model” was consolidated. This model seeks a balance between liberal democracy and the market system through the articulation of the following principles: an oligopolistic system of party competition, the intervention of the state through social protection policies, new information technologies (especially TV as mass media), and a market that penetrates everyday life thanks to mass consumption and advertising. All these factors will create a conception of conventional political participation based on the idea of a political market. For authors like Schumpeter (1942), citizens participate politically by choosing (consuming) their preferred political party.

Building on previously mentioned seminal works, further studies have delineated the various boundaries that the market system has been traversing since its inception. However, all these boundaries revolve around a common axis: The development process of the market system is based on converting these varied activities, objectives, and ideas—which were not originally developed for commercial purposes—into commodities; in other words, this process seeks to convert things such as land, work, and private lives into commercial products. In this sense, Polanyi’s thesis acquires particular salience.

With the advent of the 21st Century, the role of digital technologies has become pivotal. These technologies have been earmarked as being the means to take a further step in the process of commodification (Han, 2017). This is not exclusive to the Internet. Indeed, several authors have elaborated upon how this process has evolved within the context of other technologies, such as television (Smythe, 1981). However, in recent decades, the liberal development of digital technologies has enabled the commodification of social and creative expression (Han, 2017) and—most important to the objectives of this study—the expression of political demands and political action itself (Robles et al., 2015). Taking Polanyi’s thesis as reference, we consider that this process is structured around four factors that enable and affect the commodification of collective action: the sociopolitical context, technological development, the role of the government, and the role of business.

We will attempt to describe the social factors involved in this process, which are primarily defined by the notion of public disaffection in major western democracies. We understand this disaffection to be a subjective feeling of inefficiency, cynicism, and a lack of confidence in the political process, public representation, and the democratic institutions. However, this disaffection does not question the democratic political regime (Torcal & Montero, 2012), which is of particular importance within the context of the global economic crisis.

Within this context, some authors have understood the Internet as being a vehicle of technological and political opportunity for citizens (Robles, et, al., 2016). In fact, according to a survey conducted as part of Project CSO25556, which was financed by Spain's Ministry of Science and Innovation, approximately 60% of Spanish citizens consider the Internet to be a tool with which they can influence power. In other words, the Internet is conceived of as a tool that enables citizen involvement in political matters, a context in which they might otherwise feel alienated. Thus, the first factor focuses on how, within the context of public disaffection, citizens perceive the Internet as being a mechanism through which they can express themselves and participate politically.

However, the technologies in which citizens place their confidence can be defined as public-private partnerships. The primary platforms and networks in which Spanish citizens express themselves, coordinate collective action, and/or socialize politically, are dual online spaces, i.e., both public and private. They are public because anyone can access them, but they are also private because their governance remains in the hands of business enterprises. Most tools used by Spanish people for political purposes belong to international businesses, such as Google, Microsoft, and Facebook. These businesses dictate the rules of the new political game, which involve the commodification of the space in which political demands are made. However, in a traditional public space (on the street, for example), politics remains regulated by public laws, and citizens have rights and responsibilities; by contrast, the new public space is regulated by market rules.

As emphasized by our second factor, this commodification is even greater thanks to a technology known as Big Data (Han, 2017). Modern digital businesses are able to store and systematize information on every single movement initiated by citizens on the Internet. We call this systematic and massive warehousing of political expressions and actions “political Big Data.” Indeed, online participation is produced in public-private spaces, in which each and every political expression is collected and stored for potential commercial use.

The commodification process that we describe herein is produced as part of a set of governmental measures intended to strengthen the private sector on the Internet. For example, within the framework of our third factor, we find that the Spanish Congress enacted the Sinde Law (Ley Sinde) in February 2011, which was created to prosecute “illegal” Internet downloads, with the support of every major political party, namely the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE), Partido Popular (PP), and Convergència i Unió (CiU). Near the end of his term, former Spanish president José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero announced the rescission of this law as a result of, among other reasons, the online pressure from various collectives and citizen groups against it. Although a repackaged SindeWert Law (Ley SindeWert) is moving forward, citizens have not stopped expressing, more or less belligerently, their discontent. At an international level, measures such as the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA), the PROTECT IP Act (PIPA, or Preventing Real Online Threats to Economic Creativity and Theft of Intellectual Property Act), and the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA)³ have generated similar outrage.

According to all this process, in recent years we have observed a proliferation of private online tools that offer space for activities such as coordination, collective action, decision making, and the expression of political demands. Tools such as Appagree and Civitana enable citizens to engage in political activities on their smart phones or their wireless laptops in a quick

3 ACTA is an international, free-access treaty that protects intellectual property rights on the Internet. SOPA and PIPA are tools developed by the United States’ government to protect copyrightable intellectual property on the Internet.

and precise manner from almost any location. We have seen how the private sector considers such political action to be a growing commercial market. The development of such tools is yet another step in the commodification process. These tools are specially designed for political participation and thus are more efficient in collecting information about their activist users.

In short, commodification is a cross phenomenon in the development of capitalist societies. As Polanyi points out, this phenomenon is characterized by the transformation of any activity, idea or social process into a commodity. We have seen how commodification has been increasingly transforming society and how, in recent years, it also seems to be affecting the collective action that social movement organizations have made on the Internet.

Social Movements and the Internet. The Middle-Range Theories and the Idea of Reflexive Agents

The literature about the Internet and social movements is extensive and fruitful. In it we find heterogeneous analytical strategies that focus on issues as diverse as the effect of the Internet on the organization of social movements (Juris, 2006), the individualization of participation (Segerberg & Bennet, 2011; Bennett, Segerberg, & Knüfer, 2017), the democratization of organizations (Cottle & Lester, 2011), and the Ethnographic Approach to Digital Media and Social Movements (Coleman, 2010). However, for the purposes of our work, we use another classic middle-range theory: the conception of social movements as reflexive agents (Laraña, 1999; Diez & Laraña, 2018). Thus, the concept of *social reflexivity* will help us link the Internet and social movements to even broader theories regarding social change, such as those addressing the commodification process.

As has been previously said, there is a wide selection of literature regarding information and communications technologies (ICTs) as interactive tools for social mobilization processes (Juris, 2012; Loader & Mercea, 2011; Earl & Kimport, 2011; Horning, 2017). In general terms, we can posit that these

studies consider this transformation from two perspectives—one that is organizational and another one that is strategic.

First, the Internet is transforming movements into online organizations. As Juris (2006) affirms, the Internet not only provides movements with a technological infrastructure, but also fortifies their organizational logic on the basis of network-like configurations, using multiple channels that are radically decentralized to facilitate coordination and communication; however, such configurations run the risk of having weaker and less cohesive structures (Mosca & della Porta, 2009).

The dynamics and effects of social mobilization on the Internet normally engage with such “programming/reprogramming and linking” mechanisms via platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. However, the current discussion revolves around whether participants need to prefabricate these processes or whether they simply stumble upon them accidentally (Watts & Dodds, 2007). Certainly, there is a relative consensus regarding how social networks on the Internet continue to have some type of programming—whether premeditated or accidental—and (most importantly) a group of activists who stand out from the masses and become visible symbols of events, protests, and social movements, whether they wish to or not (Postil, 2014; Torres, 2015; Sunstein, 2017).

As noted above, a second aspect highlighted by the studies of social movements and the Internet is the transformation of communicative strategies. The Internet has reduced many movements’ dependency on traditional media and on the cultural codes, values and social and political interests that the traditional media implicitly transmit. As a result of alternative networks, we see the beginning of what Juris (2006) calls “an informational utopia”—a combination of movements’ strategies that not only maximize Internet resources but also seek to develop tools to organize, inform, and counterprogram the established media networks (Downing, 2000; Rodríguez; 2001; Harlow & Harp, 2012).

This task is not easy, given that the established networks are multimodal, diversified, and omnipresent; in addition, they are designed to cap-

ture public opinion, limiting the impact of expressions that are independent of, or that diverge from, such networks. However, as Castells (2009) argues, as self-communication among the masses expands, there are ample opportunities for social movements to enter into public spaces, either via alternative communication networks with greater autonomy or via mass media by adapting their language and modes of interaction.

Notably, movements can benefit from one of the most prominent and visible aspects of the Internet in the social sphere: its instantaneous reshaping of perceptions of space and time into “real time.” Importantly, this reshaping greatly facilitates mobilization. Rheingold’s (2002) *Smart Mobs* raises the possibility that making decisions on the fly makes Internet users reluctant to divide their lives into temporal slots. He also questions whether we have dissociated the definition of “presence” from physical space and then develops the concept of a social network, which projects itself beyond a single, particular space. As Ito (2005) notes, actions are certainly projected beyond a specific space, as people are always present insofar as they participate in group communications. Users can remain linked to the social network even when simultaneously participating in other events that do not require their physical presence. Empirical and theoretical studies have thus far presented a common perspective based on how the Internet can affect social movements’ activities and actions. All these studies have advanced an understanding of the processes that transform the structures of these political organizations in their objectives and their coordination efforts.

However, despite the important legacy of these studies, they mostly provide us with knowledge regarding periods of organization and execution for collective action (Della Porta & Mosca, 2005; Juris, 2012; Vicari, 2014; Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). In this sense, the literature might be read as covering the dimension that refers to the protest process, in Tarrow’s terminology. According to Tarrow (1994), collective action cycles pass through another equally important period: the latency period. During this period, social movements dedicate their efforts to, first and foremost, re-elaborating and reflecting upon their objectives as well as to the most urgent social problems from their particular perspective. Using different terminology, they

create or reflexively re-elaborate the framework defining their particular movement (Snow & Bendford, 2006).

The study of the relationship between the Internet and social movements during this latency phase may, for example, focus on questions regarding the degree to which this medium facilitates a process of collective discourse. However, from the perspective of constructivist logic, the Internet can also be taken as an object of collective reflection. In the general context of the network society (Castells, 1999; Benkler, 2006), technology transforms itself into a fundamental component of social order. Reflecting on this technology necessarily involves discussing one of the social and political foundations of this new social model. Therefore, instead of analyzing how the Internet affects social movements' activities and structures, we focus on how social movements view the Internet.

In so doing, we refer to the classical concept of *movements' social reflexivity*, which is understood as a collective mechanism of self-analysis. From this perspective, these organizations function as laboratories of ideas in which content is shared and re-elaborated and in which processes and transformations that affect society are discussed (Melucci, 1989; Laraña, 1999; Diez & Laraña, 2018). In our particular case, one of the landscapes of greater social reflexivity in current movements focuses on offering updated ideas regarding the social role of technology. Our middle-range theory, which attempts to link our data and our more general theories, is in itself social reflexivity.

A Case Study of the 15-M Protests and the Commodification of Political Participation

The empirical study created for this article intends to delve into the opinions and attitudes of the 15-M Activists with regard to the use of online communication tools, such as Twitter and Facebook. We are particularly interested in identifying their perceptions of the role that the Internet plays in the general process of social change, their opinions about the sociopolitical effects of current Internet development, and the alternatives to this process. From our point of view, the approach taken by the 15-M is very useful to

advance the study of one of the most important processes of collective action in recent Spanish political history (Romanos, 2013, 2017).

In general terms, Spain is a country in which citizens put considerable faith in the Internet as a political instrument. Recent studies have shown that one half of Spanish citizens believe that the Internet increases their ability to exercise influence over authority (65.5%), whereas only 20% disagree with this assertion (Robles et al., 2015; Robles et al., 2016). Another characteristic highlighted in this descriptive analysis is the pervasive nature of these beliefs in Spain; Spanish citizens of various ages and educational backgrounds share this belief in similar proportions. This finding is relevant because it demonstrates the extent to which Spanish citizens believe that the Internet is capable of empowering them politically and that it can act as an instrument of change.

However, in this study we have focused on the collective that we have generically regarded as the “digital cyber activists of 15-M or the 15-M Activists.” This collective consists of people who have played a—directly or indirectly—fundamental role in the policy making of the movement’s on-line communication, based on their protagonist roles on social networks or their coordination efforts. During the most active moment of the 15-M Movement, this organization created a commission to coordinate communication between the movement and society. This commission was formed by young experts in social networks and played a central axis in this process of collective action. All the interviewees for this study were part, to some extent, of this commission. For this reason, they are key informants for the purposes of this research.

The way of contact was through “the snowball” technique. That is, we got in touch with a person who was part of this commission, this activist introduced us to other people and, from these new contacts, we expanded the network of interviewees.

The objective was to “saturate” certain profiles (age, level of studies, etc.). Once we had contacted enough young activists with a high level of study, etc., we proceeded to select only activists from this committee who

had different profiles. In this way, we made sure to have a heterogeneous sample of 15-M technology activists.

The segmentation variables that we employ to select the activists with whom we have worked are gender, age, and any previous roles in organizations or social movements. The technique for information collection consisted of in-depth, semi-structured interviews. We designed a script for the interviews through which we asked all the interviewees about the same topics. In general terms, we asked about his/her activist career, his/her first experiences with communication through digital networks, and his/her opinion about the relationship between technologies and politics and strategies to improve society through technological tools.

In this study, we conducted a total of twelve interviews, and we have excerpted a set of testimonies. In the next section, we offer the results of our fieldwork and an analysis of the interviews. This analysis is based on a selection of the opinions offered by interviewees and the theoretical background summarized above.

The empirical analysis

The first analytical theme involves the central thesis of this article: the commodification process in the context of the network society. In interviews with the 15-M activists, this discourse is strictly linked with ideas about what is common and what is shared. According to one activist's opinion, as shown in the excerpt below, publically accessible content plays an enormous role on the Internet, but it does so only at the expense of common content. This opinion is relevant because it offers a portrayal of a notion of an ideal technology, according to the interviewed activists—a technology free of domination. It also yields clues about how the interviewed activists perceive the development of the Internet and its limitations.

First, it is important to note that the activist is sharing with us an exercise of reflection on the process of development of the Internet. This is precisely the type of activity we wanted to look at across our interviews and emphasizes the idea of social movements as reflexive agencies. However, it

is even more interesting to note that this reflection is made about a broader process related to technological and economic change.

One of the most important lines of research in the study of the network society emphasizes the role of the so-called “peer economy” (Benkler, 2006). From this point of view, the economy of the network society is characterized by the ability of citizens to share content, services and products via the Internet. “Sharing” would be the central value in the new networked economy. Here we see that this activist made a critical reading of this process of social change and notes that “sharing” is a way to destroy that which originally has no owner (the kind of society that he/she is trying to preserve). This is, from our point of view, a very clear definition of *commodification*. The first step in the commodification process is to eliminate communal property, and the second is to force citizens to share or to rent the taken resources.

Interviewee 4, a male activist from Madrid, said

That which is shared is devouring that which is common, and the difference between the common and the shared is that what is shared doesn't belong to anyone and what is common belongs to everyone. These days we are tired of seeing and witnessing how they steal things that belong to everyone all the time.

Polanyi (1944) describes how this process occurred: the first time was with land, thanks to the *Enclosure Acts*. As is well known, the Enclosure Acts were a series of Acts of Parliament in the United Kingdom, which enclosed open fields and common land in the country, creating legal property rights to land that was previously considered common. Just as Polanyi (1944) maintained, commodification is impossible without government action, which strengthens this process using favorable and legal recourses. In the next excerpt, the interviewee mentions concerted legal actions approved by the Spanish government, i.e., the Sinde Law (Ley Sinde), and the United States government, i.e., ACTA. In both cases, their objectives were to guarantee authorship rights on the Internet and to limit access to the Internet content.

Interviewee 5, a female activist from Madrid, said

First, the mercantilization of the Internet space has to do with the fact that...at the time that I started, when I experienced how businesses during the dot-com bubble suddenly built portals such as TERRA back then and supersaturated every space with publicity, we saw how certain content was favoured according to publicity interests. Later, when I saw things more clearly, we then saw the Sinde Law and ACTA.

What the interviewee is pointing out here is very important for the purposes of this article. Her opinion allows us to state that the 15-M activists were aware of the role that the Spanish government and other governments around the world were playing in the commodification of the Internet. It is, therefore, proof of the reflective nature of this movement because 15-M activists are a warning of the social and economic processes that affect citizens of the network society. Similarly, it is proof that these activists are pointing to those responsible for this process. These types of activities have been described by constructivist theories as basic strategies of social movements (Melucci, 1989; Laraña, 1999).

Up to this point, activists have shown us how the 15-M becomes a reflexive agent that offers society a diagnosis on the process of the commodification of the Internet and the role of governments in the development of this process. All of this fits in with the first part of our hypothesis. That is, the capacity of 15-M, as a reflexive agent, to identify and evaluate the process of commodification. However, the discourse of the activists interviewed goes further and will now align with the second part of our hypothesis: the commodification of collective action.

The commodification of the Internet will advance, in the words of the same activists, until it reaches the same expressive actions and mechanisms of various social movements and collective action processes. According to the activists interviewed, participation via various social networks means sharing information, strategies, and plans that can potentially be transformed into commodities. Previously, we noted the role of the concept of “political Big Data” to theoretically explain the way in which the actions and political ex-

pressions of citizens are transformed into commodities. From this point of view, the capacity of current computer systems allows them to collect and organize large volumes of information that are subsequently offered in the market as a commodity. This explanatory concept, inspired by the work of Han (2014), can be identified in the discourse of the 15-M activists. In the following excerpt, the interviewee posits that the information that movements pour onto the Internet is transformed into a commodity that businesses use for “their end,” i.e., to generate profit. Through this process, the values and the original sense of the political actions of citizens are subsumed by the logic of the market and, largely, sold out.

Interviewee 8, an activist from Barcelona, said

In many cases, businesses such as Facebook or Google store all the information we [the activists of the social movements] post there, and then they traffic that information. I mean, they sell it to countries or simply allow governments and businesses to use the information for their objectives.

The costs of transforming political ideas and political activism into commodities are high and may include persecution in non-democratic political contexts. The following passage is an excerpt from an interview when the activist is discussing the political use of the Internet in authoritarian countries, such as China or Iran:

We know of cases in which businesses—be it for money or for purposes of government collaboration—have put the lives of activists who are devoted to freedom at risk.

However, the consulted activists propose a wider framework with which to interpret the problem. From their perspective, the commodification of political participation is not produced only for the commercial use of the information posted by movements on social networks, such as Facebook. According to an explanation from one of the participants, there is an important increase in public resources (maintaining the sense of the word previously used) that are incubated by private businesses to channel activist participation. Again, in this case, a surge in instruments operating in a

manner similar to Appgree (<http://www.appgree.com/en/>) or to Critizen (<https://www.critizen.com>) in Spain, offer tools to both organizations and citizens with which to facilitate coordination, to search for consensus, or to agree on demands regarding various social and political topics.

What the interviewee is pointing out here is a further step in the commodification of collective action. Commercial interest in the political activities of citizens has led to the emergence of a set of private and commercial tools that provide citizens with services in order to participate politically. This circumstance has, from our point of view, important consequences, such as the transformation of a traditional political space, regulated by the State, into a political space that is governed by the rules of the companies that offer these services. Now, it is not only political information that is gathered from generic social networks, but new services have also been specifically created to collect information about such actions.

Interviewee 3, a female 15-M activist from Madrid, said

On the other hand, here we have these new tools that offer you the ability to participate in everything. Those businesses that own these tools are the ones with commercial interests.

From our perspective, Interviewee 3 encapsulates this discourse in the following statement: “It is impossible to tear down the master’s house with the master’s tools.” This phrase, which may well be a slogan for our interviewees, implies that the Internet obeys the will of real political and economic powers. The question then becomes, “What are the alternatives that activists can offer or exploit once this diagnosis regarding the commodification of the Internet is found to be accurate?”

As has occurred with numerous social movements in recent years, the 15-M activists aggressively used the Internet as a tool to coordinate collective action and/or to inform the public about its objectives, among other things. This evidence, which was also gathered during these interviews, concerns the theses regarding the Internet’s impact on social movements, as detailed in this work.

However, this movement presents a peculiarity that is strictly linked to the discourse of Internet commodification, particularly regarding political participation through this medium. Specifically, the movement created an online space for alternative interactions operated and controlled by the movement itself.

According to the interviewees, the Internet spurred the 15-M protests. These activists argue that the Internet is a reference area for the development of the movement, as it has become a key vehicle in constructing the diagnostic framework regarding Spain's political and social reality. It is particularly relevant in this regard that, within this "original" diagnosis of the movement, laws stipulating and protecting intellectual property rights related to Internet content (such as the Sinde Law) had already been passed. According to Interviewee 3,

The 15-M [protests were] convened by a group of people who communicated via the Internet. Thus, these protests occurred in cities throughout the nation simultaneously as in the fight against the Sinde Law and the "Don't vote for them" movement, and I believe that this was one of the ways in which the discontent was channeled.

Additionally, in keeping with the study of social movements and the Internet, we find participant testimony in which this medium is discussed as being of particular importance for the operation and organization of collective action. In this sense, we can see how the Internet in general—and social networks in particular—first become catalysts for unrest and "indignation" and then become a "breeding ground" for direct action. Interviewee 2 said

I remember a period beginning in March when I would receive—through my email or my Twitter account or whatever—news of this nature in which you would see how people were upset and that there was a predisposition for mobilization and that there were more people talking politics on the Internet and sharing information regarding political topics, which called people to mobilize. This kind of breeding ground urging people to go out into the streets would not have been possible without the Internet. Mass and corporate media do not disseminate such information—or they provide no space for it.

However, one of the elements that differentiate the 15-M protests from other protests in Spain is the central role played by the commodification of the Internet, both in its discourse and in its practices. As the activists interviewed have shown, Internet commodification occurs through two convergent processes. On the one hand, we see the proliferation of that which is shared, and on the other, the commercial purposes that private industry imposes on the content that activists create via the Internet.

For this reason, the 15-M protests chose to create a tool, N1, which achieved two of the collective's goals. N1 is a social network that was created during the height of the movement's activity, and its fundamental objective was to channel the discourse and activity of citizens linked with the movement in one way or another. Operated by the organization, N1 allowed authority over, and control of, the content rights shared by the activists, while simultaneously offering activists the chance to autonomously operate their interactive space. Certainly, this tool was believed to empower the movement in terms of online participation and action, as noted by Interviewee 10:

N1 was created as a space to share our interests and to expand our audience in terms of our objectives and demands. We created a network that we operated ourselves in order to control the medium at every moment.

The creation of this network is an example of collective action whose aim is to collectivize one of the main assets of the Internet: information. This action represents an act of active resistance against the commodification of Internet represented by the Political Big Data and clearly identified in the discourse of activists. The 15-M is a social movement that thinks and acts in the context of the network society because it identifies one of the main problems of this process of social change (the commoditization), identifies those responsible (the market and the government of Spain), and offers an alternative (N1).

This alternative demonstrates the ways in which this process of collective action adapts itself to the landscape of the network society described above. In this sense, N1 is the crystallization of a reactionary and innova-

tive strategy against the commodification of the Internet; the movement could thus operate reflexively, and this reflexivity extends beyond the diagnosis of social problems into the realm of offering a tangible alternative. This movement, as an example of the disagreement with de commercial values of the net, uses the N1 network to respond to the system.

Conclusions

This article aimed to analyze some of the discourse developed by social movements—specifically the 15-M protests—to elucidate the perception and opinions of activists about the social and political role of the Internet. To do so, first we have drawn from the diagnosis (big theory) developed by various authors with regard to the process of commodification; in this regard, we draw from Polanyi (1944), in general, and from Han (2017) and Fuchs (2012), specifically, in terms of Internet commodification, and then we take the conception of social movements as reflexive agents (middle-range theory) to connect the general theory with our case of study.

The ideas that follow have inspired our work. In general terms, some authors noted that one of the market system's basic strategies involves transforming objects, ideas, or other things into commodities. Theoretical literature demonstrates that this process, instead of slowing down, has continued to progress in recent decades. Thus, following Polanyi's (1944) diagnosis regarding the transformation of land, work, and money into commodities, other authors have demonstrated how this tendency has reached the landscape of private life (Russel, 2008), television audiences (Smythe, 1981), the Internet (Fuchs, 2012), and even collective action (Robles et al., 2015), among other realms. In addition, the idea of social movements as reflexive agents enables us to provide a dynamic picture of the society in which social groups are able to provide answers to the threats that affect them. This is largely what Polanyi (1944) proposed through his concept of *double movement*. As a result of the above, our hypothesis argues that nowadays some social movements have identified and are evaluating, as reflexive agents, the commodification process that affects collective action.

In empirical terms, the activists interviewed for this work offer us an interpretation of the process of technological change based on the common-versus-shared polarity.⁴ For these activists, the Internet increasingly operates as a mixed good. These types of goods are not exclusive to one particular consumer; however, they also do not seem to be equally beneficial for everyone and some agents appear to benefit greatly from their existence. In other words, we all share the information circulating on the Internet but, in doing so, a capital gain is generated for technology companies that organize and trade the information. Much like toll roads, mixed goods imply a certain commercial exchange; thus, the Internet is available for everyone but also relies on the support of the industries operating in that sector (for example, roadways rely on the businesses that operate them). Thus, the Internet relies on those businesses that create and sell online tools.

The activists regard the information superhighway as a toll information superhighway. Payment occurs not only from Internet publicity but also when service-provider industries exploit the information that citizens in general—and activists in particular—provide. This process embodies the particular commodification that we defined in our theoretical background and that the activists interviewed confirmed in their interviews; technologies such as “political Big Data” and government support via copyright protection make this type of commodification possible.

This process implies a variety of costs. Essentially, political participation will not exclusively occur in public and politically regulated spaces (for example, the marketplace or town square). It will increasingly occur in public-private spaces that operate under the supervision of private industry. In terms of their rights as citizens, political agents will find themselves defenseless against the decisions made by those who operate these new participatory spaces.

For these reasons, among others, activists demand an Internet that is constituted as a different type of good. In other words, they demand that

4 From the interviewees' perspective, the Internet's very nature makes it impossible for it to become a repository for opposition resources, which are understood as resources that, once used by one specific user, cannot be used by other people. This circumstance helps it to maintain a certain level of democracy with regard to media access.

the Internet be a good that maximizes majority use. According to Ostrom (2002), there are different types of goods. From our perspective, the good that best encapsulates the concept described by the activists in our interviews is the “common” good, and it refers to goods that are managed by a group of people or by a variably dispersed community. The 15-M Activists not only demanded an Internet based on this notion of a common good but also created an online tool, N1, for the express purpose of serving as a shared good.⁵ The real advantage of N1 is that it allows citizens to use and depend on a tool created and managed by a collective whose benefits remain solely in the service of the greater interest (in this case, the interests of 15-M). Thus, contrary to popular belief and from a cyber-optimistic perspective of the Internet’s role in political participation, some movements are beginning to reveal and question the intertwined and political-commercial fabric that these tools camouflage. Moreover, discovering this underlying fabric pushes movements to design new and alternative means of communication that place these movements in (dis)accordance with the Internet.

However, several years after the 15-M, the current situation of this process, as well as the life of the technologies developed by this movement, have changed a lot. First of all, the demands of the 15-M movement have been, to a large extent, included in the proposals of the “Podemos” political party. In this sense, this movement has made, as the ecologist movement did, a transit of the streets to the parliament. This, to a large extent, helps the aspirations of the 15-M to have a greater presence in the field of representative politics but, at the same time, it supposes a loss of horizontality and direct participation of citizens in the challenges that affect Spain.

On the other hand—and what is most important for this work—the N-1 platform, which is the central axis of the 15-M strategy to fight against commodification, is currently a tool with very limited use. To explain this situation, technical and political reasons can be adduced. In technical terms, N-1 was a very unintuitive and unfriendly tool to use. This circumstance made it very difficult for large groups of the Spanish population to begin

5 N1 risks becoming a resource known as an “association joint.” In other words, it might become a resource controlled or administered by a group—in this case, by the very activists at the forefront of the movement.

to use it intensively. On the other hand, as “Podemos” was replacing the socio-political mission that the 15-M was leading, other commercial tools began to be used. Among these, we highlight some commercial and private tools, such as “appgree.” This circumstance blurs, to a large extent, the technological achievements of 15-M and its capacity to oppose the commercialization of the Internet.

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