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Ignorance and Political
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Ignorance and Political Representation in the Net On Public Infosphere and the Spanish ‘Indignants’ Movement

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to explore the case of the Spanish ‘indignants’ movement of May 2011 as an example of the structural changes occurring in the public sphere after the emergence of a new type of social movement characterized by the widespread use of the ICTs. First I focus on the ideological dimension of discourse of the ‘indignants’ movement, so as to reconstruct the protesters’ self-image. They thought that ICTs were playing a prominent role in a wider trend towards a regeneration of democracy, but they were rather misguided because they lack an accurate description of what really happened. In the second part of this paper I will challenge some features of my case study, emphasizing three basic elements of a democratic public sphere. I aim to call into question the idea that a ‘truly’ democratic public may be hosted by the emergent communicative environment.

Keywords: Public Sphere, Social Movements, Participation, Political Information, Digital Democracy, E-democracy, ICTs

I. Himmler Mouse wearing a Euro-Hat

The Spanish ‘indignants’ were described by the public opinion as a social movement that emerged on the net. Not an old style peasant revolt, like those of the *Ancien Régime*, and not even a movement originating from the ‘civil society’, organized and politically aware, like those of the 90’s, but something *essentially* different, with a revolutionary aura. It was described by protesters and observers as a ‘wikirevolution’, because it circulated on Twitter and Facebook well before the conventional media notice its existence, notwithstanding its several tens of thousands of enthusiastic followers. Its nearest precedent in Spanish political history was the movement that exploded seven years before, in the afternoon of March 13th, 2004, two days after the terrorist bombing at the Atocha railways station, which caused nearly two hundred victims, just a day before the legislative elections, when a massive number of SMS messages ignited huge spontaneous protests of angry citizens demanding transparency. Those protests provoked a political turmoil that changed the electoral results, punishing the former Government that tried to manipulate evidence regarding responsibilities for the terrorist attack.¹ In the 13-M movement, in 2004, as in the 15-M movement, in 2011, it was impossible to distinguish real voices of people marching in the streets and virtual ones crowding the electronic agora. Public opinion entered a state of extreme agitation. The public

¹ Enrique Gil Calvo, *11/14 M. El cambio trágico: de la masacre al vuelco electoral*, Adhara, Madrid 2005.

sphere, in its multiple layers, formal and informal, was contaminated by a shared emotion. Boundaries between the 'real' and the 'virtual', the 'common' and the 'private', the 'general' and the 'particular' became fluid.

The aim of this paper is to explore the case of the Spanish 'indignants' movement of May 2011 as an example of the structural changes occurring in the public sphere after the emergence of a new type of social movement characterized by the widespread use of the ICTs. First I focus on the ideological dimension of discourse of the movement, so as to reconstruct the protesters' self-image. They thought that ICTs were playing a prominent role in a wider trend towards a regeneration of democracy, but they were rather misguided because they lack an accurate description of what really happened (§2-3). In the second part of this paper I will challenge some features of my case study, emphasizing three basic elements of a democratic public sphere. I aim to call into question the idea that a 'truly' democratic public may be hosted by the emergent communicative environment (§4-7).

II. The 'indignants' demands

The central demands of the movement converged in the slogan 'We are not represented'. Indeed, this is not a sophisticated revolutionary agenda, but rather an effective way to bring into the public eye the idea that parties and trade unions were not defending the interests of the social groups that were paying the highest price for the 2008 crisis: unemployed, young people and immigrants. That slogan was printed in red letters on a poster that covered an entire building at the 'Puerta del Sol', in Madrid, showing the face of Heinrich Himmler, the Nazi Commander, with Mickey Mouse's ears and wearing a hat with the Euro symbol stamped on his forehead. This amazing image was exposed at midnight on May 21st, the precise moment when the measures banning political activism in the immediate time before the elections (24h) entered into force. The crowd in the square covered their mouths with bandages and, after a minute of silence, uncovered them and began to shout: 'the voice of the people is not illegal'.



A few days before, the evening of May 15th, in Barcelona, in a similar atmosphere, the virtual encounters became real when thousands of people gathered around dozens of blank banners, lay down on the street, where everybody could write their own feelings. A protester reported: «There was an emotion floating in the air, a sense of leisure and relief, a therapeutic touch. Everyone was happy. At the end of the rally, in the Parc de la Ciutadella, I looked around and realized that I was not alone. «Most of us were carrying a banner which belonged to someone else».²

It is easy to imagine that the echo of what was happening in the streets was reverberating immediately on the net. The movement had ‘occupied’ simultaneously the real and the virtual space. It succeeded in transforming both spaces into a genuine *tabula rasa* on which everything could happen, even the ‘unexpected’: that people could ask for ‘real democracy’. «I clicked ‘I like it’ with passion», writes our witness. There was an explosion of political talk on the blogs. Ordinary people were able to discuss «without representatives, without party labels, just voicing the undeniable complaints against politicians and bankers. And a plea for unity». Then, the witness concludes:

We behaved in the streets exactly in the same way we did on net. It was a widespread, transversal movement, one in which everyone was entitled to take their own decisions, and where the technical work of the software designers was essential to ponder the common. We were demanding anonymity while we were making an experience of real and free participation,

² Alba Muñoz, Del síndrome Wikileaks a la democracia 2.0. Las redes sociales y el 15M, in: A. Fernández Savater *et alii*, *Las voces del 15M*, Los panfletos del linces, Madrid 2011, 37.

producing something that was collective. No one represented us, but we felt represented by that amorphous mass, in permanent mutation. It was not chaos but sheer participation. And we were not in a hurry, since we were thinking about what could be the best tools to use to participate in the society in which we are expected to participate. We did not realize before that day that Internet was generating a new social legitimacy, teaching us how to organize ourselves in a natural way, confronting the democratic institutions of the 21st century. On the Internet, we were active, we selected and disseminated, and we criticized whatever we liked; the opposite of what usually happens in current politics, which is one-way, just like television: take it or leave it. Streets returned to the network what came from the network, but with a physical, necessary and definitive social experience which multiplied its strength because at the same time we have been transformed by it. At the camp [in Puerta del Sol] we discovered that freedom is not competition, an individual crusade, but lies in the 'collective'. And that the Internet is also present in the street.³

The entire phenomenon was predictable and, at the same time, surprising. It was predictable because of the disenchantment and resentment caused by the economic crisis in which the country entered several years ago, resulting in a dramatic erosion of social expectations. Many needed an escape valve to express 'indignation'. In fact, if news about the movement opened a window in the international mass-media even for just a few seconds it was not due to the 'novelty', nor to the number of citizens who joined the movement, but because it was a somehow 'expected' event, or at least not completely unexpected. But, at the same time, it was a surprising event, and not just because of the imaginative language chosen, including the image of Himmler Mouse, but because the entire event was perceived by the protesters, and by the general public, as something unexpected. Everybody who was 'there' felt to be attending a 'unique' event, which has the power of changing the course of history. And for those who were not there, it was 'obvious' that conventional media would inform them about something that was happening at that moment and that everybody perceived as 'new'.

III. What about e-democracy?

Let us explore the protesters' perception about the revolutionary features of their movement and, particularly, about the role of ICTs in that context. What can we say about the image they had of 'real democracy'? Is it reasonable to share the indignados' expectancy of a democratic improvement in the shifting of public debate from the physical to the virtual agora?

Roughly speaking, the outcome of the widespread application of communication technologies to the political debate is supposed to be the emergence of a new kind of public sphere, characterized by horizontality of interaction, dissemination of information and control, and redistribution of social influence. It is obvious that it would be misleading to take these results for granted and, especially, their implications regarding a 'deepening' and

³ *Ibidem*, 41-3.

‘strengthening’ of democracy. We should consider that we might have other upshots equally relevant for democratic aspirations. Changes related to new technologies could be more superficial than we think and not really modify the basic structures of opinion and democratic will formation. People chat, bloggers talk, information flows, images circulate, but political processes could remain approximately the same. Moreover, other consequences of the upcoming age of net-society are equally possible. We can easily agree that technologies can promote attitudes and behaviors, but there is no evidence that the new ‘stage’ in democratic evolution we are approaching is going to be as democratic as expected and desired. Moreover, there is a conceptual difficulty: it cannot be asserted in advance that by moving to the infosphere, ‘democracy’ remains the same. Whatever the changes, conceptual frameworks are needed in order to assess continuity and discontinuity between the two stages of democratic evolution. Ancient democracy, e.g. in Athens, became the modern liberal and representative democracy, and now a ‘third great transformation’ of democracy⁴ in the post-national and informational political constellation would be in the offing. Can we claim, from a normative perspective, that we are witnessing the commencement of a new kind of (democratic) public sphere? Is there something specifically ‘democratic’ in the kind of changes we are facing?

By turning back to our case study, we can easily recognize a clear dissonance between protesters perception of the movement and its political significance.⁵ Behind the enthusiasm, we find a phenomenon that is hard to grasp because of its ambiguity. There are, at least, three main symptoms of instability which deserve our attention.

The first problem is the protesters obstinate apprehension about the consistency of their action. They expressed the need to clarify what they were demanding, because in fact there was no previous agenda, no ready-to-use design of what ‘real’ democracy should ‘really’ look like. Some considered these worries to be a sign of authenticity and meaningful commitment, while other regarded them as evidence of ingenuity and disinformation. There is something paradoxical in this situation. After days of talking, and despite the ‘alternative’ attitude that constantly prevailed in the assemblies, the movement adopted a very conventional list of proposals: electoral law reform in order to introduce open lists in the elections, more attention to the fundamental rights recognized in the Constitution, abolition of unjust and discriminatory legal norms, income tax to defend the poorest, abolition of privileges for

⁴ Robert Dahl, *Democracy and its critics*, Yale UP, New Haven 1989.

⁵ Obviously, this assessment should be contrasted with observational data that are not available. However, the overall impression is that the new circuit of alternative participation is not as ‘independent’ as we might assume from the traditional political processes. Realistically, we could say that it is one of its many reflected images. As a matter of fact, the movement was shaped by the proximity of the elections, which excited the media and brought attention to the discontent in the public.

politicians, rejection and social condemnation of corruption, control of banking activity and financial markets, participative and direct democracy in which citizens can take an active part, dismissing of nuclear power plants, etc. In its anxious search for ‘concreteness’ — they wanted ‘real democracy, right now’, ‘Sol-utions, right now’ — the (alleged) revolutionary character of the movement seemed to vanish. The illusion of immediacy, always powerful on the net, became a dangerous snare: it opened the way to frustration. The easiest reply to such an overdose of political romanticism, on Twitter or otherwise, with a simple gesture of the hand, could be to say: ‘You see: it is worthless!’

The second problem is the need for organization, clearly perceived by the protesters. Reminiscent of old communist fantasies, people at the camp created from the outset a number of ‘commissions’ in order to manage the occupation of the Puerta del Sol and other places throughout the country. This search for ‘organization’ is closely related to the virtual dimension of the movement. In the text quoted above, our witness talks about the responsibility of experts, technicians of the web who have the expertise to produce the instruments needed — in protesters’ words — to ‘ponder the common’ (sic!). This recalls a tricky aspect in the standard theory of democracy. It is not as easy as indignados believed to develop discursive tools to ‘balance’ interests and values within the domain of public reason.⁶ But, every complication seemed out of place at the camp site. People were persuaded to talk ‘freely’. They thought to have learned from the net how to organize communication in a ‘natural’ way. ‘The Internet is on the street’. It is not difficult to understand why, as soon as emotional tension started to decline, ‘spontaneous’ organization faded and blogs became outdated. ‘We are moving to the neighborhoods’, ‘we will camp into the consciousness’, said the last indignants when the camp was dismantled.

The third problem is related to the expressive nature of the movement. Willingness to participate in a potentially boundless arena pushed rational argumentation into the background. Network communication is characterized by the constant and arbitrary mutation of interpretative frames. There is little room for giving and taking reasons. Communicative performances are mostly reduced to their iconic value. It is worth observing, at this point, that there are many differences between the former ‘new’ social movements and the ones emerging today in the infosphere. In the previous generation, political claims retained a certain degree of homogeneity, as long as they were related to the demands of specific (marginalized) groups, with their own interests. Those movements spoke on behalf of the general interest, i.e. as they said, on behalf of the ‘common’ good. On the contrary, what we

⁶ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, Columbia UP, New York 1996.

have now is a situation that can be described — in Habermas’ terms, but well beyond his intentions⁷ — as a world of ‘communication without subject’. In our example, we may ask: who are ‘they’, the ‘indignants’? Are the individuals who were present at the rally — with their private interest and desires, experiences and rights — the same ‘persons’ when they enter the virtual space or go to the ballot box? I think that the answers to these questions are not far from obvious. Behind whatever the protesters do, behind every action performed in the street or in the net, in the private or in the public realm, there is a shifting hypertext that modifies its meaning.

IV. Framework: ascending legitimization and material culture

In a case like the one we are talking about an assessment that focuses exclusively on short term consequences would be superficial. It would be unwise to only consider massive changes occurring in communication devices, amazing ease of informative dissemination, increased opportunities for participation or the improved performance of agencies in public administration. It would also be simplistic to be seduced by the novelty and assert that technological revolution leads directly to the birth of a ‘new’ public sphere.

In what follows some of the characteristic aspects of our case study will be identified and set in a broader context. The purpose is to explore the protesters’ attitude towards the ‘democratic’ character of the new infosphere. We must focus on citizen’s self-determination⁸ so as to identify three basic structural elements of every democratic public sphere: (1) the *subject* — that is the ‘public’ who is supposed to participate; (2) the *rules* which govern the process of opinion- and decision-making; and, finally, (3) the *practices* that characterize the functioning of democratic society.⁹

V. A phantom public and a de-structured community

In a dispersed political network, like that of the indignants movement, what is the citizens’ role in a democratic public? As we already know, indignants did not feel represented by

⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *Between facts and norms*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1996.

⁸ The basic condition of political equality without which can say that there is no democracy at all; see, among the many others, Michelangelo Bovero, *Contro il governo dei peggiori. Una grammatica della democrazia*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2000.

⁹ The background to understand our case study is the disturbing inconsistency between frameworks of political communication and the ‘material culture’ which determines the transition to the ‘Networked’ society. Peoples’ demands and hopes do not flow into the Web of ‘water channels’, which regulate the ‘stream’ of political power. Note, by the way, that adjustments between practices and material resources do not go in just one direction. Ideals and values behind political action are not independent from social, economic and technological conditions of the environment and, vice versa, the material environment is partially related to culturally determined behavior patterns. For an approach to the concept of ‘material culture’, Fernando Broncano, *La melancolía del ciborg*, Herder, Madrid 2009.

conventional democratic institutions. But, what alternatives do they see? The virtual agora should not be compared with that of the ancient Greeks, or with that of the enlightened civil society that flourished in the early Modern Age, and not even with the 1848 revolutionary assemblies that took place in Paris. In the network society there is a far-reaching trend towards fragmentation that should be considered. There could be many kinds of virtual communities, but they all are going to be fragmented communities of dispersed selves. This is a long-lasting topic in contemporary sociological literature¹⁰, as well as in democratic theory.¹¹ My observation here is that: public that emerged in our case study was not *substantially* different from those fragmented and dispersed ‘phantom publics’ we had in the old days of mass politics.

Indeed, the central features of our virtual public replicates those that Walter Lippmann pointed out in describing the state of public opinion in the early 1920s.¹² Following Lippmann’s suggestions, it is unlikely that cyber-citizens may have a strong political commitment, since they do not have enough information to deal with the huge amount of data offered by the Internet. Far from fortifying the public spirit, the informational overload is likely to produce a defensive reaction. Citizens are once again reduced to ignorance, a new kind of ignorance, and forced to withdraw from the public arena. The rational response is to become ‘deaf’ to unbearable informational opportunities, just as the attention to the facts and the appetite for theory is not unlimited. Modern society, says Lippmann and we can easily echo his remark in the context of the Net-society, is not transparent, at least not to everybody. Partial sections within society are visible to another sections, series of events are intelligible for particular groups, but not for others, and life is too short to pursue omniscience.

So, what is the main difference between the public in mass-society and the one in the net-society? There is more than one difference for sure, and this is not the right place to summarize a whole century of public opinion studies. Nonetheless, I will try to outline a crucial change we are dealing with, stressing not only the inadequacy of Lippmann’s analysis, but rather the weakness of the traditional responses he received from adversaries, advocates of participatory democracy. In his famous reply, John Dewey¹³ faced the difficulties raised by Lippmann arguing that the deep inconsistencies between patterns of socialization and material progress in industrial societies would disappear once the migration from the Great Society to

¹⁰ Z. Bauman, *In search of politics*, Stanford UP, Stanford 1999; Ulrich Beck, *Individualization*, SAGE, London 2002.

¹¹ Robert Putnam, *Bowling alone. The collapse and revival of American community*, Simon & Schuster, New York 2000; Donatella Campus, *Comunicazione politica*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2008.

¹² Walter Lippmann, *The phantom public*, Harcourt, Brace, New York 1925, *passim*.

¹³ John Dewey, *The public and its problems*, Holt and Company, New York, 1927, *passim*.

the Great Community took place. Given the disintegration of small communities that provided psychological stability to individuals, and realized the proliferation of amorphous and inarticulate, fuzzy and scattered publics, Dewey faced the problem — ‘primary’ and ‘essentially intellectual’ — of the making of a democratic audience. He assumed that ‘ties’ that bind men in action are numerous, strong and subtle enough to sustain human communication. And this is precisely the point. In the Networked society, the tools used to construct a democratic public are becoming ever more inadequate than they were in the early 20th Century. Mass-media has been radically challenged and has given up its educational goals. ‘Physical tools’ for communication have been enhanced to such an unimaginable degree, but thoughts and aspirations have never become — as protesters hoped — truly ‘common’. Rephrasing Dewey, the ‘public’ remains eclipsed and formless, lost in a spasmodic search of itself, embracing its shadow rather than its substance.

Previous observations can be summarized as follows: there can be no democracy without a public. Is it thus reasonable to claim that the ‘indignants’ movement is the ‘real’ public that lies behind a ‘real’ democracy? Let us answer this question by following Dewey, once more. In *The public and its problems* Dewey argued that communities can be stable without being static, so they can evolve without disintegrating. In a similar way, it could be argued that, in the present day, the innumerable and complex flows of virtual associations can converge in a space in which the many particular experiences and the various conflicting interests could be challenged and discussed, fueling smaller and intimate unions of human beings who live in close contact with each other. This sounds like the utopia of a Virtual Great Community. Is it an adequate description of what is really happening? And if not, what is left?

Dewey pursued a dream of commonality in which stabilization of the public was ultimately located at the local level, in the short distance, where face-to-face communication would still be possible. He was persuaded that happiness can only be found in the enduring ties with others, where interpersonal links go beyond the conscious experience to form an enduring endowment. Needless to say, this is an experience that cannot be associated to the instant and ephemeral encounters that our ‘indignados’ depicted. It is true that protesters camped out at the Puerta del Sol, with the revolutionary charm of the ‘first time’, thought that they had found that magic that sometimes springs from ‘face-to-face’ encounters. But these are not the kind of long-lasting and profound commitments Dewey was talking about. We live in a time of instant surfing. The ‘Technological era’ is increasingly far from being ‘absorbed’ into a new ‘human era’ as the one Dewey envisioned, in which the public can solve its most urgent

problem: that of finding and identifying itself, revealing a completeness, a variety and freedom that is unseen in present social associations.

Actually, I would add, ‘community’ is not the most pressing challenge in contemporary democracies, but instead the aspiration of creating an ‘auditorium’ for significant communication, a ‘forum’ in which communicative actions can be conducting to ‘understanding’.¹⁴ Putting aside moral and technical issues about communication, what is needed is to clarify what reasons citizens may have to communicate and to make sense, in a critical way, of the information that circulates in the communicative space. Without that motivation, voices tend to accumulate and overlap randomly, becoming *e-noise*, and access to information and transparency — the great political values, and hopes, of the infosphere — are likely to be neutralized. Without a *democratic public*, information cannot circulate and costs of selection of information increase exponentially, becoming untenable for individuals. In that situation, cyber-cascades and echo-chambers proliferate¹⁵, and polarization of opinion is doomed to become endemic. The digital divide is no longer between those who are connected to the Web and those who are not, but is an *internal gap* between who have the know-how for surfing on the Net, putting data into contexts, and the massive and disseminated people of data consumers, confined to the remote periphery of a structurally asymmetric communication system.¹⁶

VI. The movement’s voice and its representation

The second stage in the construction of a democratic infosphere regards political representation. It has been proved in history that without a ‘constitution’, i.e. a set of publicly recognized rules which determines who governs and how, democratic government cannot be achieved. It is a conventional point in literature that, in a context of increased social complexity and institutional ungovernability, those rules tend to become ineffective.¹⁷ And it is obvious that massive dissemination of the ITCs can multiply these effects.

Once again, indignants’ motto was, precisely, ‘We are not represented’. They felt that politicians did not speak in their name, but also that others could eventually do better. Early on, the movement raised the debate about the different ways to institutionalize participation,

¹⁴ I borrow these terms from Chaïm Perelman, *Traité de l’argumentation: la nouvelle rhétorique*, PUF, Paris 1958; Jon Elster, The Market and the Forum, in: *Contemporary political philosophy: an anthology*, eds. R. Goodin, P. Pettit, 1997; and Jürgen Habermas (note 7).

¹⁵ Cass Sunstein, *Gong to extremes. How like minds unite and divide*, Oxford UP, New York 2009.

¹⁶ Here my nearest references are Cass Sunstein, *Republic.com 2.0*, Princeton UP, Princeton 2009; Matthew Hindman, *The myth of digital democracy*, Princeton UP, Princeton 2009; and Manuel Castells, *Communication Power*, Oxford UP, Oxford 2009.

¹⁷ For a survey on democracy and complexity, see Danilo Zolo, *Il principato democratico*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1996; James Bohman, *Public deliberation: pluralism, complexity and democracy*, MIT Press, Cambridge 2000.

but their responses were not particularly original: open lists, proportional representation, anti-corruption rules, elimination of privileges for politicians, and effective separation of powers. More important than this is observing how the movement insisted in subscribing the ideal of *specular correspondence*, according to which a political system is ‘more’ democratic when it is able to ‘reflect’, like a mirror, the will of the people.

The fundamental trouble of representation — the question of whether and how it is possible that the will of the ‘multitude’, which is by definition ‘absent’, could ‘appear’ and become ‘present’¹⁸ — has not been completely resolved despite the range of institutional resources developed over the last two centuries. The significant point here is the following: the protesters’ narrative was not able to recognize the structural change that occurred in the public sphere when a centralized scheme of legitimization — based on the central role and the supremacy of the legislature — was replaced by a radically decentralized and horizontal scheme of decision-making (and law-making). When the focus of democratic will disappeared, the ‘mirror’ people used to view their own image reflected into disappeared as well. Thus, the presence of the new ICTs is just one among the several factors, perhaps the trigger, but not the only relevant factor, that leads to a change in political representation.¹⁹ Representation evolves in parallel to the transformation of ‘material culture’, that is according to economic and social infrastructure, institutional apparatus, instruments of social control, channels of production and reproduction of knowledge, and so on.

A brief survey of the history of political ideas proves that point. There is no need to explain the reasons why the classical model of representation, coming from Burke and Sieyès, declined with globalization. In the old days, the ‘natural’ representative — the ‘best’ men of each territory and each group of interest — deliberated with their peers to discover the ‘real’ national interest. But, can we assert that something akin to a general will awaiting to be ‘discovered’ really exist? Likewise, the proposal of John Stuart Mill, with his faith in the educational virtues of the Supreme deliberative body, faces similar worries. In a situation of high social complexity, what reasons could we have to assume that the ‘best’ interest of a part of society, is going to be compatible with the interest — or the happiness — of the other parts? Moreover, today the standard liberal model, stretching from Madison to Schumpeter, is not less controversial than the participative one. Even in the case of Schumpeter, who is always skeptical on this issue, a certain degree of epistemic competence is needed. Citizens should be

¹⁸ Here the standard reference is Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Ch. 16.

¹⁹ On the different layers of democratic representation, Jane Mansbridge, Rethinking representation, in: *American Political Science Review*, 97 (2003), 515-528.

able to identify who are the best administrators of their interests. This is the minimal condition for the exercise of an effective control over representatives' performances.

In the network society, it seems to me that the crucial point is to know if citizens can make use of the new communicative potential they have in the infosphere, avoiding the current trends towards personalization and spectacularization of politics, which characterize present audience democracies.²⁰ It is possible to emphasize the contra-hegemonic nature of the new virtual and spontaneous mobilizations, but we should not forget that spaces of communication can be easily 'colonized' by narratives that simply replicate the contents found in the conventional mass-media system. Power is likely to be destabilized in an environment with a highly fragmented public, unable to satisfy the primary demands of social integration. Finally, this is the only acceptable interpretation we can make of the *hopeless aphasia* of the indignants, who have proven to enjoy a remarkable capacity of producing powerful icons, but yet are absolutely trivial when they try to articulate their own discourse. This aphasia must not be attributed to the evil will of a system which hides information and conspires against the people.²¹ The tangle is elsewhere. Purely *horizontal communication* faces its own limits when it fails to produce any substantial change in the (unequal) distribution of 'communicative power'. What is at stake in the transition to the mass-society to the democratic infosphere is a problem of authority: the anarchic proliferation of Networks does not make us more free and equal.²²

VII. Epistemic snares in the making of a democratic (info)sphere

The reading of the many blogs that flourished around the 15-M provide us an exhaustive — and, frankly, a bit boring — picture of the 'voices' the system supposedly fails to represent. Unfortunately, the lack of *quality* cannot be compensated by increased *quantity*. In response to that criticism, emphasis can be put in the affirmative value of participation. It is a good thing, it must be said, that everybody talks, whatever they say, because people 'feel' better if they do talk and, in the long run, all that 'stuff' reinforces political trust. However, the disproportionate emphasis on the therapeutic and iconic dimension of participation challenges

²⁰ Bernard Manin, *Principles of representative government*, Cambridge UP, New York 1997.

²¹ For Networks and conspiracies, see Peter Ludlow, *Rethinking Conspiracy: The Political Philosophy of Julian Assange*, at <http://commonsenseatheism.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/Ludlow-Rethinking-Conspiracy-the-Political-Philosophy-of-Julian-Assange.pdf> (accessed: February 2th 2012).

²² These questions lay behind the problems of political legitimacy in the infosphere, and refer to the practices of recognition of epistemic authority. The emergence of the ICTs have already modified the balance of authority between the single citizen — the individual who surfs the net, the neighbor we are talking with by the corner, the academic or the expert who writes on the mass-media, each voter that express his opinion — and the many intertwined epistemic communities who has the necessary resources to ponder information and express a reliable opinion. The catalog of issues about which the individual have 'the last say' is becoming shorter and, correspondingly, the power of institutions that administrate information in becoming larger.

the quality of the democratic process. If the only valuable thing is to talk, and nobody cares about what the others say, the distance between what people ‘merely’ say and the ‘serious’ conversation among the experts is doomed inevitably to increase. And this is not — I suppose — what supporters of *e-participation* are looking for.

At this stage of the argument we should carefully reflect about ignorance and, especially, about the new ‘forms’ of ignorance that emerges in the information society. It is not ignorance that the network communication system can correct by itself, increasing the volume of information, improving the tools of recovery or the performances of communication facilities. What characterizes this form of ignorance is a shift in the sources of epistemic authority.

Again, let us take a quick look at the past: Ignorance and education are crucial factors in the development of democracy ever since the Greeks. Without going back that far, we should stress Rousseau’s thesis about the infallibility of the general will, which implies a deep epistemological and educational commitment: every citizen, if properly educated, could make the ‘right’ decision that all members of a democratic society would accept. The mathematical reframing of this stance leads to Condorcet’s theorem. The hypothesis is that citizens — each single citizen or the average citizen — are more likely to be right than to be wrong in judging matters that affect their interests. The liberal translation of this idea focused on the capacity of each single citizen to be the best judge of his own affairs. The elitists later criticized this assumption by emphasizing that, in modern societies, Government should be in the hands of technocrats and educated bureaucrats with a strong sense of responsibility. For the rest of the people it is perfectly rational to calculate, according to the circumstances, what the appropriate level of *disinformation* in public affairs should be. Information is a costly good that everybody cannot afford.

Turning back to the infosphere, my suggestion is the following: the ideal of a network of communication, horizontal and anarchic by ‘nature’, purely transparent, generates a form of ignorance which is neither blameworthy — the ignorance of who consciously remains in lifelong immaturity, in Kantian terms —, nor educated — the Socratic ignorance — as when someone says: ‘I do not think I know what I do not know’ —, but rather rational.²³ The information overload to which ‘netizens’ are exposed bears a radical challenge for democracy: the individual — the citizen, the voter — encounters an increasing difficulty to elaborate his or her own opinion. Democracy is ‘dying for information’. The overwhelming increase of information created by the Web thwarts the emancipatory potential that could be attached to *e-democracy*. This is so both from the point of view of the individual — what

²³ For a typology of the forms of ignorance, see Ernesto Garzón Valdés, *Algunas reflexiones sobre la ignorancia*, in: *Isonomía* 11 (1999), 129-148.

would participation mean if there is no autonomous opinion? — and from the point of view of the political system, since institutional devices of transparency are systematically overridden by the abysmal difference between citizens who have the resources to manage the information, and citizens who do not. The key is the capacity to transform (‘upgrade’) information into knowledge, assessing the ‘truth’ of the messages, the ‘soundness’ of opinions, elaborating significant narratives, those are needed to ‘give an account’ of data and ‘match’ the experience.²⁴ And this is precisely what indignants movement lacked.

VIII. Deliberation, agency, and motivational force

What are then the prospects of democratization on the blogosphere? How democratic are experiences of participation like those we are dealing with? I already suggested that these questions should be answered by looking at some structural features of a democratic public sphere: the social ties that transform the multitude into a public, the rules of according to which someone is authorized to speak on behalf of the other, and the epistemic conditions needed for citizens’ opinion to become an autonomous opinion.

Without straying away from the Spanish example, I shall indicate just two main perspectives we may use to analyze the movement and assess its significance for the improvement of democracy. Then, I will point out two conflicting forces which are going to determine the final outcomes.

On one hand, the first perspective concerns the opportunities that political and social actors may have to *democratize the Network*, participating in formal or informal, conventional or non-conventional manners. There is a delicate question here, since not every enhancement of the movement can be interpreted as a ‘triumph’ of democracy. This is no more than a prejudice, which appears in two different ways. First, in the populist version, democratization originates in the citizens’ right to access the places in which political authority resides, the right to have a ‘voice’ and be ‘heard’, in accordance with the idea that all views are equal and decisions should be taken by simply counting heads. Second, in the elitist version, the aim is to enhance discussion within the different partial sections of the fragmented network, in government institutions, civil society organizations, epistemic communities, etc., because — this is the point — educated deliberation leads to the *right answer*. Elitist encourage control among peers and foster the leadership skills of the best, the few who ‘listen’ and ‘respond’ to

²⁴ I rely on Luciano Floridi, Semantic information and the network theory of account, in: *Synthese* 184 (2012) 3, 431-454.

the outsiders' interests.²⁵ In this situation, the only information that is due to the public — and the only information the system is rationally required to give — is that which allows them to understand how well expert communities do their work, since there is a general need to preserve peoples' trust in the system. To summarize, the idea of a natural tendency that leads spontaneously from social movements to democracy is misleading. A movement is democratic or not depending on its capacity to empower citizens' autonomy.

On the other hand, we should take into consideration the potential of partial deliberative publics, like those that flourish within and around the movement, to produce legitimacy *by themselves, auto-referentially, without the support of a comprehensive public sphere*. There is one more disturbing prejudice to confront here, which is the faith in the horizontal and anarchic proliferation of self-referring publics, lacking any external control. If the give and take of reasons loses its distinctive openness, 'public' conversation fails to produce legitimacy. The point here concerns not only the 'atomization' of the individuals in the Networked society, but also the informational basis of legitimacy. Confined within themselves, lacking any external feedback, fragmented communities begin to *spin in the vacuum*. This observation could be taken as a general rule. Consider, on a small scale, the conversation among citizens who only see the 'world' through the limited number of links that appear on their screens. There is no need to insist in how damaging this could be for a democratic process of political self-determination. But consider as well, on a larger scale, the functioning of the global network of financial markets, which is extremely isolated from its environment. This kind of network is mainly responsive to the information produced by itself. This can make the system stronger, but also can determine its failure. Actually, far from being a marginal cost, offset by the overall benefits, the absence of reliable external control in the long term can jeopardize the stability of the system. The turning point is when the increased volume of internal information begins to intensify uncertainty and system instability, that is, when the system loses the capacity to control its own information. In the political realm, the lesson seems to be that democracy requires information, but the increased complexity arising from multiple and dispersed publics make democracy fragile.²⁶

Therefore, instead of offering a steadfast answer about democracy in an latest social movement, like the Spanish 'indignados', two basic dimensions of analysis should be explored: capacities and openness. Any further assessment needs to take into consideration two opposite *motivational forces* as well; forces that lead our Networked societies in the

²⁵ For an appraisal of these technocratic positions, Stephen Turner, *Liberal democracy 3.0*, SAGE, London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi 2003, 125-6.

²⁶ Fernando Broncano, *Entre ingenieros y ciudadanos*, Montesinos, Madrid 2006, 47.

opposite directions of a strengthened and a weakened democracy. On the one hand, there is a compulsion towards an *authoritarian regression*, be it technocratic, populist, or both. Here the temptation is to restrict the anarchical proliferation of virtual communication, *compressing* the public space, in order to balance the information overload that threatens social integration. This does not necessary means to reduce the volume of information available to citizens. It is sufficient control the instruments they need to *select* information. The cost we pay in following this strategy is the surrender of political equality. On the other hand, we have the force that comes from the *citizens' malaise*, and particularly, from the feeling of a systematic mismatch between their everyday experience in a world saturated with information, and the interpretive frames used to describe peoples' desires and aspirations, interests and needs. Which one of these two conflicting forces — the one that leads to a new authoritarian involution and the one that fosters democratic conversation — are going to prevail? This is not a suitable place for prophecies.

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