

Net Activism as a Process of Citizen Emancipation. A View from some Experiences of Appropriating Digital Media in Spain

Net activismo como proceso de emancipación ciudadana. Un análisis desde algunas experiencias sociales de apropiación de medios digitales en España

Ativismo líquido como processo de emancipação cidadã. Uma visão de algumas experiências de apropriação de mídia digital na Espanha

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Fecha de recepción: 10 de enero de 2018

Fecha de recepción evaluador: 20 de enero de 2018

Fecha de recepción corrección: 30 de enero de 2018

Abstract

In the article, we will show how in Spain the appropriation and use of digital communication media has become another way of making politics. In our analysis, which is based on a bottom up approach - focused on individuals who have participated in this experience - we will explore how the appropriation and alternative use of media influence empowerment processes for people and social transformations, always bearing in mind that we are discussing media experiences that arise from social protest.

Keywords: Net Activism, Digital Appropriation, Social Movements, Citizen Emancipation, Spain.

Resumen

Teniendo como punto de partida experiencias sociales de acción colectiva en España, en el presente artículo iremos viendo como la apropiación y uso de los medios digitales de comunicación se convierte en otra forma de hacer política. En nuestro análisis, que se caracteriza por un enfoque metodológico desde abajo, exploraremos cómo estos procesos de apropiación de la tecnología digital influyen en los procesos de empoderamiento y cambio social.

Palabras clave: Net activismo, Apropiación digital, Movimientos sociales, Emancipación ciudadana, España.

Resumo

No artigo, mostraremos como, na Espanha, a apropriação e o uso dos meios de comunicação digital se tornaram outra forma de fazer política. Em nossa análise, que é baseada em uma abordagem bottom-up - focada em indivíduos que participaram dessas experiências -, exploraremos como a apropriação e o uso alternativo da mídia influenciam os processos de empoderamento das pessoas e transformações sociais, sempre tendo em mente que somos discutir experiências de mídia que surgem do protesto social.

Palavras-chave: Ativismo líquido, apropriação digital, Movimentos sociais, Emancipação cidadã, Espanha.

‘If nobody decides for you, then don't let anyone communicate for you!’. This is the name of the communication protocol drawn up by the communication committee of the 15M Group in Seville, a self-produced manual that forms, according to the document itself, a ‘tool for empowering communication and technological sovereignty’ (2011, p. 1). As this experience attests, accessing and spreading information has become one of the central issues of protest movements. In this article, we will provide an analysis based on empirical work carried out in Spain in order to understand the process in which people who protest make use of digital media to overcome unjustness and lack of information in the mainstream media.

One of the case studies chosen is the *indignados* (outraged) movement, which arose on 15 May 2011, hence the name 15M. Among other reasons, it was chosen because it has helped to reopen the debate on the relationship between social movements and new forms of technology, in academia and in society. This debate, we must not forget, peaked

during the first decade of this century following the anti-globalisation movements in Seattle (1999).

In fact, thanks to advances in technology and the integration of all the different forms of media we know (TV, radio, telephone, internet, satellite) into one digital platform, the protests of the *battle of Seattle* were a trigger for the expansion of the internet as a communication and coordination tool among the new global movements (Della Porta, 2007). New information and communication technology have therefore allowed for strengthening ties between media activism and political action, placing the processes of appropriating digital communication media by citizens under the lens of scholars of social change and resistance.

¹ In Spain, as in other parts of Europe, net activism, which includes those political experiences fuelled by the use of new technology, has been characterised by questioning the relationships of dominance, criticising the prevailing discourse with different modes (Pasquinelli, 2002). In the landscape of alternative digital media in Spain, experiences such as that of Nodo50.org, which was created in 1994, of Sindominio.net (1999) and of Lahaine.org (2002), to name a few, have opened new paths in the process of transforming the internet and new digital media networks, turning them from simple communication tools into communication spaces in which the Spanish protest experiences of the following years have been built (López Martín & Roig Domínguez, 2006). In our understanding, these alternative communication experiences, more than calling for true, objective, independent information, have been transformed into political fights in which the participants make demands, express themselves and spread images from their world, from their needs and desires, as the *indignados* movement claims in its communication protocol.

After all that we have seen up until now, we agree with Rodríguez (2001), when she says that studies on alternative communication experiences cannot be limited to their failure or success, in other words, on their ability to match the accessibility and distribution of information by the mainstream media. Using this reflection in the article, we will show how the appropriation and use of digital communication media has become another way of making politics. In our analysis, which is based on a bottom up approach - focused on individuals who have participated in this experience - we will explore how the appropriation and alternative use of media influence empowerment processes for people and social transformations, always bearing in mind that we are discussing media experiences that arise from social protest.

Spain: a half democracy

When studying alternative media in Spain, we need to put in context the importance that these experiences have had and continue to have for society. Firstly, the

Spanish political culture in Spain is marked by little dialogue between the political class and citizens. This is the result of the country's political history, which has been dominated by absolutism with democratic episodes (Sierra, 2012). During the three decades of the current democratic system, an effective dialogue between citizenship and institutions has not been established and, even worse, there are still legacies from Franco's military dictatorship, such as the monarchy, which were never submitted to a public referendum. This was the case in Italy, for example. Neither the political forces of the democratic transition of the 1980s, nor the successive governments of the democracy, have been interested in developing a public arena based on plurality and diversity of ideological trends. Instead, they fed a restrictive party system, characterized by concentrated economic, legal, political - and media - powers. In fact, Spain is defined by its having a political system that is essentially based on networks of patrons, in which elements of the dictatorship have not been eradicated (Sierra, 2012).

In this context, we must also consider the effects of the current economic crisis, which in Spain has stimulated social unrest due to the worsening of quality of life for most citizens and has increased disaffection with the political class, large pressure groups and economic groups in the country, weakening the progressive constitutional state model. This was the backdrop, against which those who felt disenchanting by the Spanish democratic model, and outraged by the privileges of the political class, began to protest. The *indignados* movement, which was made public with the demonstration on 15 May 2011 and strengthened in the aftermath of the violent repression of the Madrid camp two days later, is not only new on the Spanish political landscape but also an opportunity to open public spaces in the broader state.

Case studies

As we mentioned in the introduction, the analysis presented in this article is based on an empirical study that includes different experiences of Spanish protests. Turning to the *indignados*, we have focused on the experience of the camp in Seville, capital of Andalusia, the southernmost region of the peninsula.

What we want to highlight from the *indignados* movement is that it was marked by the involvement of normal people and by the fact it created and developed its own information system using new technology. These two elements are new on the Spanish political and media landscape, as is another characteristic of this citizens' movement: in spite of some common themes and the common sense of outrage towards the current political and economic situation, it is made up of camps that arose throughout the country, each creating their own practices and strategies for fighting. On some occasions, the movement was found in the neighborhoods of urban centers, on others, the movement moved towards communities on the outskirts. Sometimes, the assemblies were directed towards specific fights, for example against evictions.² Without a doubt, as we stated

before, all these experiences have been marked by the great participation of ordinary people³ and by breaking with the discourse and agenda of the mainstream media, by developing their own channels of communication.

The practice of net activism, which includes the process of appropriating and using new technology, did not begin with the *indignados* movement but has, rather, been developed thanks to the spread and massive use of digital technology and the internet. Similarly, social and cultural changes in Spain cannot be tied only to these recent social movements. They are the result of experiences of collective action that have taken place in Spain in the last thirty years (Tejerina, 2010). For this reason, we have decided to add to the analysis some local protests in which the community has risen up to defend its local area. The desire to associate a well-known movement like the *indignados* to other unknown experiences is based on the notion that activism through the media is a form of social mediation performed by subordinate groups, linked in social or collective movements that, regardless of the extent of media coverage, show views that differ from the hegemonic culture and politics. This is the source of our interest in analyzing which common elements characterize the process of appropriating new technology in citizen protest experiences.

The choice to include local environmental conflicts in the analysis is largely because, in terms of communication, these experiences clearly show the move from Web 1.0 (1999-2003) to Web 2.0 (since 2004), along with the process of appropriation by regular, ordinary people. The fact these protest experiences are protagonized by the residents of threatened areas, with little participation by political activists from large organizations, led to the media being useful primarily for keeping the people in the affected areas in touch, rather than spreading the discussion to the outside world. For this reason, we can see widespread use of radio, television and local newspapers, as well as word of mouth, phone, etc. The use of tools linked to Web 1.0 is also common, including static websites, -Bulletin Board Systems (BBS)- and, in turn, small mailing lists, which always have the main goal of keeping the local community informed, rather than communicating with those outside. The advances in Web 2.0 tools, on the other hand, have allowed the protagonists in these local experiences to interact with each other and work together as the creators of content, produced by them in a virtual community. Without the need for high costs or very specific knowledge, this has led to a break in the local nature of protests, and an increase in the number of people who create content. In fact, while with the traditional local media and Web 1.0, local activists were the ones who spread information, Web 2.0 allows anyone to take part, uploading videos to YouTube, spreading news on social networks, reporting abuse, etc.

In terms of the case studies, this analysis will focus primarily on the experience of the *indignados* and two environmental conflicts that are noteworthy for their diversity and development: the conflict in defense of the River Grande (which took place in the

District of Malaga) and the Association for Recovering the Riaño Valley (which took place in the District of Leon).

The citizens' movement that arose in 2006 to defend the River Grande against the construction of a small dam for drawing off water in Malaga is a representative example of local fights. In this conflict, after which the project was rejected, the whole community helped defend the river, for its symbolic, sentimental and identity value, since its waters are used to irrigate traditional vegetable gardens, and also for recreation. Throughout the protest, the movement developed different communication channels, including *classic* means such as information 'zines, websites, and even producing podcasts for local radios, which represent a hybrid of analogue and digital formats. Using new technology, the movement boosted cultural work in the community, surpassing the local limits of the conflict. The protagonists of this protest were empowered by new media, not only to communicate but also to share values and feelings, such as the bond to the area that united them.

The other case study we have analyzed has a unique quality of asynchrony that is so characteristic of the digital age, since the conflict took place at the end of the 1980s. In 1986 and 1987, eight villages in the north of León were evacuated, demolished and flooded to build a dam. The Riaño conflict is a metaphor for Spanish democracy: the dam built during the Francisco Franco dictatorship, when they began to seize the land, was never finished, until the first socialist democratic government, breaking the electoral promises made in the region, decided to finish the work started by the dictator. In 2007, after more than twenty years, some of those affected, who were young at the time of the protest but are now adults, decided to create a movement to recover the Riaño valley. Their main aim is to drain the reservoir and recover the submerged land to, according to them, 'desire a better future for all of us who love and live in, or not, the precious and maltreated land called La Montaña de Riaño' (Riaño, 2010, pers. comm., 19 August). The Platform for recovering the Riaño Valley runs its own blog that has, over the years, managed to be not only a place for information about the collective's initiatives, but also a place for renewing old ties, recovering the history of the valley and its people with video, photos, audio and other digital material. The appropriation and use of new technology in this case are also a way to continue the past, a continuity amidst the violence with which the residents' houses were evacuated and demolished. The residents of the flooded villages resisted that violence and resist again in the current fight to recover the valley. As we will see later on, the platform's collaborative and self-moderated weblog, Facebook and other 2.0 facilities have become a map of the self-organized memory of an area physically destroyed by the reservoir's water.

These cases are interesting not only because they represent the experience of many other similar cases but also because with the advances of Web 2.0 since 2004, there has been an enormous increase in the emancipating discourse of the internet among activists,

academics, researchers and intellectuals. In the following years, techno-optimists, not only in Spain, began to highlight new technology as a liberating force, with the move from atoms to bits. They rejected critical thought, dreaming up a Renaissance 2.0 in which the cultural paradigm would change in favor of a new humanism or they celebrated the triumph of the new dot-com economy, also known as the net economy (Formenti, 2008).

To finish, in the following section, we shall describe the methodological focus that has marked this research and has redefined the object of study, that is, net activism.

Method of the research: rethinking from the point of view of the subject

The analysis undertaken here is based on a comparative study of different cases, carried out using specific qualitative tools that allow us to understand the process of appropriating new technology through subjective categories and contextualized knowledge. In other words, we are able to understand ‘the motives that lead people to act in a certain way, paying attention to the context in which the action takes place’ (Coller, 2005, p. 20). Furthermore, focusing our work on the biographical experience and cognitive and emotive processes of the participants (Jasper, 2006 and 2011), we could not avoid using qualitative research techniques. For these reasons, as well as relying on ethnographic observation and consulting the digital material produced by the collectives, profiles on social networks such as Facebook, Twitter or N-1, this analysis includes in-depth interviews with the participants of the aforementioned cases⁴.

In accordance with the bottom-up approach, we have focused our attention on people who do not see themselves as activists, and who do not represent any political organization, but who participated in the movement by contributing their skills and/or will to the digital media project. The semi-structured interviews included strategies typical of biographical, individual, non-directive, not standardized, open, guided, in-depth interviews (Bogdan & Taylor, 1987). According to the biographical and narrative focus, we decided to use the episodic interview technique (Flick, 2000 and 2004) that ‘facilitates the presentation of experiences in a general, comparative way, at the same time ensuring that the situations and episodes are discussed from every angle’ (Flick, 2004, p. 119). Choosing the narrative method allowed us to interpret, understand and assign meaning to the protagonists' experiences of appropriating media.

Incorporating ordinary people and analyzing the reworking of the social and media situation that they produce and build themselves, has become one of the objectives of our study. Accepting this perspective from the point of view of the subject has meant subordinating the theory of knowledge in favor of practice, the everyday; it has meant accepting and acknowledging that this epistemology is being constantly transformed, just like social situations themselves.

To conclude, thinking about the practices of net activism from the subject gives new meaning to the process of appropriating media and the cultural change experienced by the protagonists, from the experience of people, from their biographies and from the elements of meaning that are important to them. It can be understood, then, that rethinking the practices of net activism from the point of view of the subject influences how we redefine the concept of alternative media, a category that is necessary for this analysis, and which shall be presented and elaborated in the following section.

Alternative media and net activism practices

The bottom-up approach applied to our analysis resets the focus on the broad definition of alternative media. As previously mentioned, the protagonists' appropriation and use of these media - whether they are analogue or digital - becomes an experience that reflects and expresses people's everyday lives, since it is directly tied to day-to-day life and people's ordinary needs (work, healthcare, education, demands for social rights and a national identity, etc.) or extraordinary needs (response to a conflict, defense against the threat of oppression, etc.). The experience of appropriation is, therefore, the product of motivation, which can be individual or collective. In fact, when observed from the bottom, it can be seen that these experiences of using alternative media are infused by a Do It Yourself (or DIY) culture (Spencer, 2008) that erodes dependence on professionals and intellectual elites, which are replaced by self-teaching, informal exercises and collective abilities. The use of DIY becomes an educational process, seen and experienced as much by the protagonists as the community addressed by the group, since the audience is always ready to participate in the media experience. In our case studies, for example, all those interviewed showed a sense of outrage and lack of confidence in the traditional media (newspapers, radio stations and television channels), since they did not reflect the situation they were living in. This led to people developing their own channels of communication, with contributions from everyone.

In this way, the roles and responsibilities between transmitter and receiver are blurred in alternative media, and it becomes difficult to put a boundary between them. This horizontal relationship is also reflected in the audience's direct access to the media, an aspect that pushes receivers towards the practice of self-publication, i.e., DIY. The alternative media therefore allow the audience to be directly involved in the production and distribution of their own messages, thereby avoiding the content being manipulated or turned into a product, as happens with the mainstream media.

As we have shown in the introduction, if the alternative media expresses the day-to-day life of participants, its effectiveness lies in its ability to expose hidden meanings and create an emotional identification between the person talking and the person listening. In fact, we can find confirmation in literature on the subject that narratives linked to these media minorities create identities establish the terms of strategic action and have an

influence on practice (O'Riordan, 2005). This identity process is one of the reasons for people's active participation in alternative media. The participants, in accordance with this view, are not simply consumers of the reflections of others, but create their own reflections with a view to changing the ways of building their way of life. In other words, it is they themselves who establish the framework for interpreting power and creative action.

Considering this, we can conclude that net activism is a practice that reflects collective action and generally manifests itself in producing digital alternative media - individual or collective - such as blogs, web portals, streaming radio stations, podcasts, etc. The projects that emerge from net activism are offline projects (Pasquinelli, 2002), that is, they are an expression on the net of action performed in the street, as the experiences analyzed here show.

To conclude, using the bottom-up approach to analyze the use of alternative media means reinserting the process of appropriating alternative media into the social construction of meanings provided by the protagonists of media practices, from their motivations and imaginations or, to use the words of Michel de Certeau, from 'the patchwork of everyday life' (2000, p. XLIX). Starting with these reflections, we will in turn present an analysis focused on two processes: the appropriation and use of digital media and the empowerment experienced by the protagonists in the case studied.

Appropriation practices as spaces for individual and collective construction

Analyses and studies on communication processes, focused on social and economic factors, as Manuel Castells points out in the first volume of *The Information Age* (1996), have brought access to information and information processing to the economic field. We share the idea that it is necessary to include dynamics from the social and economic system when studying information technology but we also believe that, in accordance with the point of view explained before, that other non-structural elements must be incorporated into the analysis of the appropriation process. As several authors have found, the participants' motivation in protests or social conflicts go beyond the material objectives of the protest and cost-benefit analyses (Wood, 2001). There are mechanisms and variables, such as emotional and moral responses, that are more evident in social conflicts than structural variables, and we must, therefore, bear them in mind (Jasper, 2011). From this standpoint it can be seen that, in the context of social protest, alternative media develop starting with a moment of breaking away from everyday life. In our case studies, these breaking points were the expropriation notices in Coín, the eviction notices in Riaño and, for the *indignados*, the violent eviction of the first camp in Madrid, as this witness confirms:

“after what happened at the camp in Madrid, when they violently evicted everyone [...] we spent three afternoons together at the *Setas* [the Metropol Parasol, a large wooden structure in the centre of Seville]. On the third afternoon, at the assembly that was held every day, it was decided that we would sleep and camp at the *Setas*” (Seville, 2012, pers. comm., 14 September).

What causes this breaking point is a cognitive-emotional process called moral shock, which is nothing more than the emotional response to an event or piece of information that provokes a reworking of the situation. Moral shock, which ‘occurs when an unexpected event or piece of information raises such a sense of outrage in a person that she becomes inclined toward political action whether or not she has acquaintances in the movement’ (Jasper, 1998, p. 409), creates a cognitive element, since ‘the information or event helps a person think about her basic values and how the world diverges from them in some important way’ (Jasper, 1998, p. 409).

Moral shock influences motivations to act and to participate, pushing people to do something and opening the path to what Gamson has described as the *injustice frame*, that is, the process that allows us to construct or unearth a feeling of injustice, in the words of the author: ‘the moral indignation expressed in this form of political consciousness’ (Gamson, 1992, p. 6). Framing the experience as an injustice and acknowledging that you are the victim of an injustice are processes that influence the motivation to act and strengthen the reasons for continuing to be involved in the conflict, which are less than material interests, cost-benefit analyses and speeches. The emotional responses that follow the break with everyday life and the feeling of injustice in our case studies helped to rework the values of the people involved, pushing them to participate in the conflict and in the media experience, as this witness tells us: ‘the need for a dedicated channel was evident. At the beginning it was transmitted live from the *Setas* [the place where the Seville camp was organized]’ (Seville, 2012). Looking at what may be the beginning of a conflict, we find the issue of information. As Hernández López and Báez Casillas (2006, p. 4) say, ‘disinformation and [a failure to] consult populations are part of the strategies adopted by government bodies to cause the localities to lose control - if they had it - over the management of their resources’.

Moreover, as we have discussed in other studies (Poma, 2010 and 2011), a lack of information is a problem related to the quality of democracy, since real democracy cannot exist without real transparency and informed citizens. In the cases studied, the people interviewed complain about the manipulation of information and the media siege that the mainstream media create around the fighting collectives, attempting to criminalize the participants or showing false or biased images of events, as we can see in the words of this interviewee from Coín: the media also created an enormous information siege, which was extremely difficult for us to break.

For these reasons, the people involved feel the need to search for other media in which they can make their voices heard. In the three cases, we find examples of cooperation and collaboration between communities and some local media: radio stations, newspapers, and in the case of Coín, also a local television station that, in addition to digital media (websites, blogs, etc.) and especially social networks (Facebook, Twitter, etc.), make it possible to overcome the media siege, as this interviewee told us:

“there are the mass media who control all information and it is they who decide what is published and what isn't. So however much you try, you always have to find alternative media. The good thing is that the internet is there [...] and you can do a lot of things that you couldn't before” (Coín, 2010, pers. comm., 26 May).

This type of use puts into question the central nature of this technique and usage, seen as a means for reproduction that allows the autonomy of the individual to emerge. The process of appropriation is experienced as an intentional act by the person who appropriates, it is not a concession by third parties or imposed by third parties, nor is it a prior concession of the thing which is appropriated. The individuals who appropriate that type of media are involved in a self-training and self-understanding process, so much so that many decide to get involved in creating an alternative form of media despite lack of experience in the communication area, as this interviewee at the Seville camp tells us: ‘I didn't have any experience in communication but I wanted to make a contribution with my work’ (Seville, 2010, pers. comm., 23 October).

By analyzing these experiences, we can deduce that the process of appropriating techniques and codes of communication is tied to other aspects that cannot be classified as purely technical. In this way, the process of appropriating new information and communication technology should not be seen only as the result of available resources or simply the accumulation of tasks; it is instead subsumed into people's culture and experiences, as well as the social context of which the media experience is part. Actually, in our case studies, creativity and the search for alternatives to the difficulties encountered were an important element in the appropriation process, in the words of another interviewee from the *indignados* group:

“at the beginning we had a neighbour in Encarnación Square [where the *Setas* are located] who let us use the internet, and also gave us electricity so that we could plug in our computers to sockets at the balconies on the upper floors” (Seville, 2012).

Turning our attention to the communication tools used, different platforms were used in our case studies, from social networks belonging multinational companies, such as Facebook and Twitter, to microblogging tools used with freeware, like the N-1 network and Identi.ca. It is interesting to see how the protagonists worked the potential that each 2.0 tool offered, depending on the target audience they wished to reach, as this witness tells us: ‘each tool - a blog, Twitter, Facebook - has its own audience. So, you have to

create a more integrated strategy and use them all' (Seville, 2012, pers. comm., 14 September).

It seems that in the appropriation process experienced by our interviewees, the ability to make digital tools 'ours' does not only involve the technical tasks of putting it together, but also the riskier but more rewarding one of redesigning communication models depending on the varied situation in which the medium is found.

For Riaño, for instance, the *Riaño vive* (Riaño lives) blog is a digital platform where, since 2007, the calls for justice have started to be made, leading to the creation of the Association for Recovering the Riaño Valley. The platform is a place where the pain and hopes of those who know or have lived in old Riaño come together and are shared. In the words of its creator, the blog responds to 'a need to quickly and relatively simply spread our ideas, desires and concerns to everyone' (Riaño, 2013, pers. comm., 03 March).

The use of Facebook, on the other hand, has created a link between people who, because of the pain caused by the loss of the village, had never returned to the area and had lost contact. Through Facebook, many people got back in touch, communicating, sharing images, photographs, experiences and emotions that had been shut away for 25 years. As one interviewee said: 'with Facebook, we have increased people's collaboration, although mainly symbolically, by sharing memories of the valley and life experiences from the past' (Riaño, 2013, pers. comm., 13 March).

Digital media have overcome powerlessness because they help share experiences and feelings with people who are not close by, and are able to create a relationship of empathy, vent their anger, share and spread values and raise awareness. In Riaño, for example, it was a YouTube video that awoke the thirst for justice among those affected and encouraged them to get organized once again, as we can see in this account:

"The internet was the medium that lit the flame to begin our action, when we heard, in autumn 2006, of the existence of a YouTube video called "*Riaño Vive, la lucha sigue*" [Riaño lives, the fight goes on [...]] We were shocked by seeing the images 20 years on, and it made us radically change the situation. We would like to thank once again the person who put that video online" (Riaño, 2013).

In conclusion, it appears that net activism actions are a model of appropriation, or rather, an *action* that requires adaptation, transformation and active reception, based on a different code, personal to the users that includes both the enjoyment of sharing and the obligation of learning. It is an appropriation model based on solidarity between participants, and the practice of sharing technical and economic resources, as well as knowledge. Net activism highlights a different form of media and social production performed by common people, in which imported products are combined with their own production, and in which other uses and meanings are created. Finally, following the

reflections by Michel de Certeau (2000), in the processes of appropriating digital media by ordinary people, thousands of ways are invented to escape dominant models, through which people can invent their own way of building the world.

Cultural change and empowerment

The process of appropriating alternative communication media that we have just described is only one of the experiences that people have during a social conflict that is able to produce change in them that goes beyond use of the digital medium. In our view, what these people experienced was a cultural change, in other words, it was the result of the processes of reworking and redefining values, beliefs and identities that led them to become aware of parts of the situation that until that moment they had not considered, changing their perception of it and acting in accordance; becoming empowered.

Among the many definitions of empowerment that we can find in writing on the subject, we have decided to refer to empowerment as ‘a social and psychological state of confidence in one's ability to challenge existing relations of domination’ (Druri & Reicher, 2005, p. 35). This concept is useful for analysing the appropriation of a communication medium, because it includes two levels of change, the individual and the social. This occurs because, as Dallago (2006, p. 11) writes, ‘the concept of empowerment underlines, in the political context, the close interdependence that exists between individual change and social change’. Actually, in our case studies, empowerment manifests itself in two main ways: at the communication level and at the political level.

In terms of communication, one of the most important changes propelled by the action of net activism that we have observed is the spread of the idea that communication is a common asset that cannot be the exclusive resource of the Spanish media oligarchy. This change has led the protagonists to reflect deeply upon the possibility of developing citizens' communication, as an interviewee here tells us:

“Another type of communication is possible by breaking away from what we have learned: breaking this register and creating your own register. It shouldn't be like anything else, it should be like you, and what you believe in, individually or as a group” (Seville, 2012).

Furthermore, in the interviewees' remarks, we have been able to see that being the key players in an alternative medium has led them to make a distinction between the practice of communicating and the practice of informing:

“informing is not communicating [...] I see information as if it was data, without judgements; I see communication as part of the person who has been through the experience, part of the protagonists and what they feel” (Seville, 2012).

We can say that in the experiences studied, the protagonists' main effort has been placing the centre of the experience on the social subjects and surrounding them with

tools for communication, making new technology a choice and not a necessary condition for communication.

As we said before, change inevitably also involves social and personal relationships. One of the most important aspects, in our view, is that the media experience allowed the interviewees to carry out a series of social relationships that led to them seeing the world in a different way, recognizing and respecting the diversity of people. In terms of the media experience, in some cases the appropriation of media allows personal and collective emotions, values and ideas to be shared, at other times it allows people to get back in touch, and to get to all those who have been lost along the way, as in the case of Riaño:

“We send a special message of encouragement to all those who have been hurt and outraged by their villages: Anciles, Éscarro, La Puerta, Huelde, Burón, Pedrosa, Salio and Riaño, who have not returned after their tragic and systematic destruction in 1987” (Riaño, 2013).

The appropriation of media also allows contact to be established with people outside the collective. These links serve to encourage those who fight, creating ties of solidarity, mutual help, as one woman interviewed expresses, ‘knowing other stories that are taking place and having other people with whom to save the world is important to me’ (Seville, 2012).

Empowerment, in its political sense, manifests itself in the legitimization of the fight as a way to be able to change the situation with which the person disagrees, by not delegating power or words, by believing that each person has the strength and ability to change the world. In these processes, digital media and social networks have become the channels for spreading ideas and values, and tools of change, as can be seen in the goals for which the Facebook group *Riaño Vive* (Riño lives) was created, through which it is hoped to:

“Make possible the recovery of the Riaño valley [...] An ambitious goal following the failure by all, but that does not discourage us. Now, more than ever, we know that we are right and that truth is on our side” (Riaño, 2013).

Conclusions

Analyzing the experience of these protagonists has allowed us to show that the concept of appropriation is a dynamic process that goes beyond the limits of reproducibility and heteronym. It is also an act in which the dichotomy between original and imitation is broken, in which there is innovation of practices, meanings and sometimes tools. The object of appropriation, regardless of the tool or platform used, involves a process of re-codification in which the new code comes from people's practical experiences.

As we have seen throughout this article, net activism is performed in a network - understood as a set of social relationships - because it moves away from the vertical structure that characterizes mainstream forms of media, tending instead towards the horizontal. Similarly, using the appropriation process, people reject the power of knowledge, showing that they do not need to learn all the technological codes of cyberspace but only those that allow them to be able to spread their messages. The appropriation of a form of digital media allows the danger of creating technological elites to be overcome. These elites are typical of contexts characterized by the exclusivity of knowledge, and this is resolved through the act of sharing.

Those involved in net activism are generally basic users at the start, that is, they have basic knowledge of new technology. They know how to use a word processor, e-mail and have basic knowledge about surfing the internet, for instance. The experiences of conflict or protest end up being the breaking points that create changes in demands from people who, starting out as simple basic users of the digital world, become the protagonists of the appropriation process. Because of this process, their technical abilities grow with the demands of the conflict itself.

From the survey performed in Spain, it can be seen that the alternative media experiences that have taken place throughout the country do, in general, reflect the conflict experience. This implies that net activism is characterized by an action space that is a physically defined, real area, i.e., its reference is a specific audience, as in our cases the participants can be found at the camp in Seville, the residents of Coín, or in Riaño, as those who fought against the dam and call for the recovery of the valley. These experiences, moreover, seek and propose new communication models, make hybrids of old and new media and break the difference between emitter and receiver. Lastly, in spite of the importance attributed to digital media, the protagonists attempt to encourage new forms of social and political participation in the social situation where the medium is found.

Finally, in our case studies in Spain we have seen how people, putting the central nature of techniques and use of digital media into question, go back to traditional ways of creating and experimenting, in which the appropriation of digital technology is carried out at a scale such that 'the distance between protagonists, producers and consumers of news are only an arm's length away' (MU, 2011, p. 10). In other words, new forms of communication are developed in these experiences that redesign the traditional circuit and focus on the social subjects who use different tools to communicate, within the movement and with the outside world.

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Notes

¹ In relation to European experiences, see the results of the DEMOS project, cf. *Democracy in Europe and the Mobilization of Society*, (Della Porta and Reiter, 2005). From the start, the *indignados* movement rejected participation by parties and organizations, and vetoed the use of any flags during its demonstrations.

² The mortgage law in Spain states that even if the occupiers leave the property because the mortgage cannot be paid, the debt to the relevant financial institution must still be paid off. Data shows that hundreds of evictions take place every day, that is, families are forced to leave their homes while their debt to the bank remains. This has had the direct impact of increasing the number of suicides, and the creation of a movement for dignified housing, which in Andalusia has taken the form of *corralas* - unused buildings that belong to banks and other financial institutions that are occupied by evicted families. For more information, cf. Stefox, 2013. In this research all the interviews are done under the condition of anonymity. For this reason, we will put only the place and the date after each testimony.