

From Invisibility to the Public Sphere: The Hybrid Media Strategy of a New Party (Podemos, Spain, 2014–2015)

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How does a new party manage to move from invisibility to occupying a central position in the public debate? How does it gain the attention of the mainstream media and recognition by the public and the institutions linked to sociopolitical and economic power? This article examines the media strategy followed by the Spanish party Podemos in its first year of activity. We apply quantitative and longitudinal methods to analyze the attention paid to Podemos by television channels, newspapers, online press, and digital networks. Results show that the party prioritized antagonistic talk shows, infotainment, and self-produced television programs, which combined to create a viral presence on digital networks and led to its leaders appearing on mainstream TV channels. This hybrid strategy took the party from media invisibility to the central public sphere, though traditional dependence on favorable opinion polls and electoral success were also relevant.

Keywords: hybrid media strategy, new parties, Podemos, public sphere, Spain

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On the European election night of May 23, 2014, the party delegates that follow the counting of votes after the polls are closed were in shock. For the first time in decades, the two majority parties, the center-left Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) and center-right Partido Popular (PP), barely reached a combined support of 50% of the electorate, while the sum of their votes usually had approached 80%. A new party, unknown to many of the delegates present in the counting, emerged as the fourth most voted choice after the post-Communist Izquierda Unida: Podemos.

European elections are considered by political scientists as "second order" contests (Reif & Schmitt, 1980), as they traditionally register a lower turnout than national elections. Since the connection between the results and the formation of a government is not clear at the EU level, many voters seize the elections to the European Parliament to cast a protest vote against the national government, or to choose minority or issue parties that would not be so successful if the elections had a more tangible outcome.

In this article, we argue that Podemos, the left leaning party that embodied the demands of the Indignados movement in Spain, used a hybrid media strategy to reach power: It used social media to grow among its potential supporters, and then entered the political talk shows of more mainstream TV channels to rhetorically fight the right-wing pundits. The video excerpts of such clashes would in turn be transformed into viral content online, further increasing the appeal of its main leader, university lecturer Pablo Iglesias, as the candidate of the unemployed youth and the disenchanted older voters.

Despite being second-order elections, the success of Podemos at the European contest should not be underestimated: Public TV in Spain only covers parties with parliamentary representation, so the five Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) who were elected under the Podemos list had now a legitimate reason to demand to be heard beyond the online bubble of their core constituency. Increased media interest in the emerging party gave more presence for its leader Pablo Iglesias in political talk shows and interviews, becoming a popular icon with his ponytail and casual dressing.

This jump from niche following online to popular prevalence on mainstream TV is all the more surprising if we consider that Podemos was established as a political party in January 2014, only four months before the European elections. The timing, however, was not the product of pure chance. For the European Parliament elections, Spain forms a single constituency, which gives minority parties a bigger chance to get seats than in a national election, where electoral constituencies are set at the province level, resulting in a less proportional representation. If there was a window of opportunity for a new political party to emerge, it was the European Elections of 2014.

The origin of Podemos as a party is embedded in the spirit and claims of the 15-M (short for May 15, 2011) Indignados movement, who attributed the 2008 crisis to the bipartisan system that had alternated government between the PP and PSOE until that time (Tormey & Feenstra, 2015). Unemployment doubled from 11.3% in 2008 to 20.0% in 2014 and 2015, and youth unemployment reached 44.4% the following year (Eurostat, 2020). Spain became "one of the European countries with the most unequal distribution of wealth" (Consejo Económico y Social, 2015, p. 68). In 2014, almost one in three Spaniards was in a situation of exclusion and material deprivation, second only to Greece (Consejo Económico y Social, 2015, p. 75). In this context, economic precariousness turned into criticism of political parties.

During the 13-month period considered in this study (from January 2014 to January 2015), 45% of Spanish people considered corruption and fraud the most important of the three main problems affecting the country, reaching a peak of 63.8% in November; 27.6% cited financial problems, and 24.9% mentioned political actors in general (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2014a). In early 2008, before the financial crisis, only 6.5% of Spaniards thought that “the political situation” (that is, the institutional situation) was unsatisfactory (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2008). Five years later, that percentage had risen to 50% (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2013), reaching a historic high of 60.9% in 2014 (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2014a). Concurrently, there was a growing “interest in politics”: At the beginning of the century, 25% of the population showed “great or sufficient interest” (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2000), rising to 33% with the 15-M movement (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2011), and reaching 38.5% before the 2015 general elections to the national parliament (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2015b).

Podemos succeeded where other parties failed, whether these were new or traditional political actors opposed to bipartidism. This was the case for Partido X (X Party) and Izquierda Unida (United Left, [IU]), respectively. In this study, we claim that Podemos was successful in taking advantage of the synergies between digital media and traditional television, becoming a notable case of the political affordances of hybrid media systems (Chadwick, 2013).

Public Spheres, Media Strategy, and the Case of Podemos

Studies on the role of the public sphere in politics point to the coexistence of more than one public sphere (Calhoun, 1992; Curran, Fenton, & Freeman, 2012; Sampedro, 2021b). While there is certainly a main or central public sphere, this is surrounded by marginal and peripheral others that can affect it. Recent studies overcome the dichotomy of old versus new media, supporting the need to develop a holistic approach to address the hybrid flows rising from the entanglements of power, systems, and media logics, taking an activist media perspective into account (Billard, 2020; Chadwick, Dennis, & Smith, 2016; Treré, 2019).

The normative ideal envisions a central public sphere linked to peripheral “sphericules” created by sectors of civil society (Gitlin, 1998). But this ideal does not withstand empirical evidence, at least in the Spanish case. Fishman (2019) questions the quality of democracy in Spain for not including social and political actors from the margins in the central public conversation, severing those other “circles of conversation” from the main sphere (pp. 196–212). The exclusions of political-media debate in Spain traditionally responded to the bipartisan editorial alignment of the mainstream media (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Mattoni & Ceccobelli, 2018), and this traditional parallelism between established media and political parties led to an antagonistic polarization (Hernández & Fraile, 2014; Sampedro & Seoane Pérez, 2008). This emphasis on the discursive differences between the PP and PSOE concealed the fact that these parties maintained similar structural and socioeconomic policies.

Podemos was founded in a context of systemic crisis that, beyond its economic dimension, affected even the Spanish monarchy, with King Juan Carlos abdicating in favor of his son in 2014. This was a propitious opportunity structure for new electoral options that would break voting patterns and prompt a new party system (Llera, Baras, & Montabes, 2018). At its nationwide launch in January 2014, Podemos

presented itself as a participatory party, open to all citizens, which aimed to channel the outrage of the 15-M movement into a "rhetoric against the established order" (Rodon & Hierro, 2016, p. 15). This is despite the fact that Podemos has since undergone a transition from its initial antagonistic relationship with the political order to a regenerative, agonistic approach (Franzé, 2017). In its formal registration as a party (March 11, 2014), Podemos aspired to "turn indignation into the political power," as read the title of its manifesto. The founders claimed the need for "a candidacy available to the wave of popular indignation that astonished the world" ("Intelectuales y Activistas," 2014). Within a few months of its launch, Podemos gathered 1.25 million votes in the 2014 European Elections.

The rise of Podemos to the political-institutional realm with such unprecedented intensity for a newly created political formation has attracted scholarly interest. Previous research suggests three main explanations. First, a sociohistorical approach, which disregards the financial crisis while emphasizing institutional disaffection (Orriols & Cordero, 2016). Second, a technopolitical perspective, which considers Podemos a transmedia party, adapted to the new communicational context (Casero-Ripollés, Feenstra, & Tormey, 2016). The third is complementary (Casero-Ripollés, Sintés-Olivella, & Franch, 2017) and offers an explanation in terms of populism (Torreblanca, 2015), as the party's initial discourse overcame classical ideological schisms in favor of setting an alleged unitary entity ("the people," "those below") against the elite ("the caste," understood as those of privileged lineage, "those above").

The party converted citizens' disaffection into political capital (Mudde, 2007), at least at the beginning. For that purpose, it applied an innovative media strategy: a sequential and symbiotic combination of self-produced videos, viral content in digital networks, and presence in mainstream conventional media and formats, such as television talk shows (Sampedro, 2015). According to Rendueles, Podemos managed to "intervene where political consensus is managed in Spain: on television and radio talk shows" (Hernández, 2014, para. 5). Scholarly interest has mainly focused on the relevance of digital tools as preeminent media in Podemos's communication (Borge Bravo & Santamarina Sáez, 2016; Casero-Ripollés, Feenstra, et al., 2016; Casero-Ripollés et al., 2017; Gelado-Marcos, Puebla-Martínez, & Rubira-García, 2019; Pérez-Arozamena, 2015; Suau-Gomila, Pont-Sorribes, & Pedraza-Jiménez, 2020). It is our aim to broaden the scope and focus empirically upon the role of television and how it interacts with nonhegemonic or peripheral media, in line with recent studies that point to the crucial role of media coverage for a new party (Van Spanje & Azrout, 2019).

Before the establishment of Podemos as a political party, those who would later become leading members unfolded a two-stage media strategy. They began with self-produced television programs, such as *La Tuerka* (Producciones CMI, 2010), presented by Pablo Iglesias, the first secretary general of Podemos, who designed this TV program as an intellectual action lab (Producciones CMI, 2013); it was also where he trained for major media. The program was being broadcast a few months before 15-M movement (May 15, 2011) by local channels in the Madrid area (Tele K and Canal 33) and Público TV, the digital channel by the leftist digital newspaper *Público*. Other (future) founding members, such as Monedero, Bescansa, and Errejón appeared on several Latin American television shows (see Table 1). Iglesias also presented *Fort Apache* (Producciones CMI, 2013), a TV program on Hispan TV, an Iranian digital channel aimed at the Spanish-speaking world, from 2013.

In a second stage, they extended their appearances to not-so peripheral television channels. Iglesias employed a conversational-confrontational style against his opponents, particularly on the conservative national and cable television channel Intereconomía. He later admitted to considering himself a provocateur (laSexta Noticias, 2016). The showdown with the right-wing national-populist journalist Jiménez Losantos enabled Iglesias to achieve greater fame and access to major TV channels. As Iglesias himself admitted, "If it weren't for Intereconomía, I wouldn't have reached the stage of national TV" ("Pablo Iglesias," 2014, para. 1). The following analysis focuses on the media activity of Podemos after these early stages, from the party foundation to its first year of existence.

Research Design

Object of Study and Hypothesis

Under the Spanish electoral system, the smaller the constituency, the greater the majority needed, and the majority of constituencies are small, followed by the medium sized. This makes it difficult for small parties—even more so for new ones—to obtain representatives, particularly in national elections (Penadés & Santiuste, 2013). European elections, on the other hand, are organized on a single national constituency, thus offering a better opportunity, provided the candidacies are known among the electorate. The analysis focuses on the turning point of Podemos's media presence and strategy in the first year of its implementation, which includes the European elections (May 2014).

Specifically, the study covers a period of 13 months: from the party's foundation (January 2014) to its greatest mobilization in the "March for Change" (January 2015). This latter event—which gathered 100,000 people in Madrid—is not merely a landmark in the mobilization capacity of the party; it also coincides with its highest voting intention in the opinion polls, only 6.4 points behind the PP in second place (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2015a).

Before addressing the analytical relevance of Podemos's first year, it is important to note the characteristics of the Spanish media ecosystem in 2014: (a) television penetration capacity was 88.6% of the population (Asociación para la Investigación de Medios de Comunicación, 2014); (b) 29.8% read the print press; and (c) the Internet, with a 60.7% penetration, constituted an essential and growing communicative space. This setting constitutes the background to understanding media activity.

The hypothesis is that, in a hybrid media system, new parties can move from the peripheral public spheres at their disposal—which, in the early 21st century, are mostly digital—to the central public sphere. In Chadwick's (2013) understanding, contemporary media systems are "hybrid" in the sense that new and old media are in constant interaction, with users, contents being exchanged or overlapped in cooperative or competing arrangements, leading to a mutual influence. In this context, an insurgent party can use social media to amplify its message until it cannot be avoided by mainstream media (Zhang, Wells, Wang, & Rohe, 2018).

This proposition is organized in four subhypotheses:

- H1: Television, as the hegemonic media in a hybrid system, was a key element in making Podemos visible.*
- H2: The party followed a transmedia communication strategy that leveraged the interaction between digital and traditional media.*
- H3: In accessing the mainstream media system, Podemos met with resistance, due to the traditional bipartisan bias in the former.*
- H4: Despite the mainstream media bipartisan bias, Podemos traction among the audience enabled its eventual access to the central public sphere as a catalyst of income.*

Methods

The period of analysis covers the first year of Podemos (from January 2014 to January 2015). Quantitative and longitudinal methodologies are applied to analyze the attention paid to Podemos by television channels, newspapers, online press, and digital networks. Radio, despite being a relevant media (61% penetration, according to the Asociación para la Investigación de Medios de Comunicación, 2014), demonstrates considerable limitations for empirical analysis and had to be excluded from the study. As compared with television, which still enjoys a wide societal reach, radio in Spain is becoming a matter of middle-aged and older men (males comprise 60% of the audience; Asociación de Investigación en Medios de Comunicación, 2018).

Television

To address the reference media of the central public sphere, the analysis focuses on the national and public broadcasting entity Televisión Española (TVE), specifically by studying pieces with the word "Podemos" found in its digital archive. Seventy units of analysis were collected. For nonlinear TV products in peripheral public spheres, the analysis included, on the one hand, YouTube, the most relevant Internet site in Spain (Asociación para la Investigación de Medios de Comunicación, 2014); the same strategy of searching the word "Podemos" was followed. Given the personalist feature of the party, the names of the foremost leaders at the time ("Iglesias," "Bescansa," "Monedero," and "Errejón") were included in the search. The data set includes the program *La Tuerka* (Producciones CMI, 2010), Podemos's most successful self-produced format. *La Tuerka* (Producciones CMI, 2010) enjoyed more media resonance than *Fort Apache* (Producciones CMI, 2013) or the party's official YouTube channel, which was activated on January 17, 2014, but did not thrive until September.

Print and Online Press

For the print press, the analysis covers the four benchmark newspapers for political information in Spain: *El País*, *El Mundo*, *ABC*, and *La Razón*. Data were extracted from the digital archive MyNews by searching "Podemos" in the headline and first paragraph of news pieces. For the online press, the analysis covers seven outlets: four online editions of the print newspapers with the most online users (*elpais.com*, *elmundo.es*, *abc.es*, and *20minutos.es*), and three relevant native digital news media (*elconfidencial.com*, *publico.es*, and *eldiario.es*). All the selected media cover a wide ideological spectrum, including perspectives from the left, center, and right (Asociación para la Investigación de Medios de Comunicación, 2014; Newman, Levy, & Nielsen, 2015). Of the three native digital media, the liberal *elconfidencial.com* has the greatest penetration; *El Mundo*, *ABC*, and *La Razón* fall further to the right. *Publico.es*, which backed Podemos since its inception, and *eldiario.es* are both situated to the left of *El País*. Although *20minutos.es* is less ideologically defined, it took an editorial distance disassociated from bipartidism, as did the exclusively digital newspapers.

Social Media

The analysis was conducted on the official Facebook and Twitter accounts of Podemos, along with those of their four main political opponents: PP, PSOE, Ciudadanos [Citizens] (Cs), and IU. This comparative analysis identifies when the parties began to make significant use of social media and when they resorted to using them more intensively. As in the case of YouTube, social media audience-data are extracted from Fanpage Karma.

Results

Television

Table 1 shows the timeline of the TV presence of the foremost leaders of Podemos. Their first appearances occurred before the founding of the party (especially after 15-M movement). The data show three phases: (1) media invisibility (2006–11), virtually limited to two Latin American countries, with Monedero as the leading figure; (2) prevalent presence of Iglesias (2012–13) who, after the release of *La Tuerka* (Producciones CMI, 2010), and *Fort Apache* (Producciones CMI, 2013), became a talk show guest on the Intereconomía channel and made his first appearance on national channels (La Sexta and Cuatro); and (3) the leap from peripheral public spheres to the central public sphere in 2014, when the four main leaders accessed large national channels, including TVE's most viewed channel (TVE1) and Telecinco. *La Tuerka* (Producciones CMI, 2010) was the turning point for Iglesias to make his debut as a talk show guest on peripheral channels with public impact. After the 2014 European elections, his television exposure increased. An opinion poll of October that year (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2014b), released in early November, consolidated Podemos in the central public sphere as a party with the potential to even win a hypothetical national election.

Table 1. First TV Appearances of Bescansa, Errejón, Monedero, and Iglesias.

Date	Protagonist	TV program and channel		
11/20/2006	BESCANSA	VTV (Venezuela)		MEDIA INVISIBILITY
6/5/2007	MONEDERO	VTV (Venezuela)		
12/31/2007	MONEDERO	A3 Internacional		
3/6/2010	MONEDERO	CNN+		
9/10/2010	MONEDERO	TV Pública (Argentina)	<i>La Tuerka</i> starts	
3/26/2011	IGLESIAS	<i>La Noria</i> -T5	airing	
6/13/2012	ERREJÓN	T5-Telesur (Venezuela)		FIRST TELEVISION APPEARANCES
8/7/2012	IGLESIAS	RT		
9/23/2012	IGLESIAS	<i>La plaza en llamas</i> -Canal 33		
12/12/2012	MONEDERO	<i>La tarde en 24h</i> -TVE	<i>Fort Apache</i> starts	
3/6/2013	MONEDERO	Al Rojo Vivo-La Sexta	airing	
3/12/2013	MONEDERO	RT		
3/28/2013	IGLESIAS	VTV (Venezuela)		
4/25/2013	IGLESIAS	<i>El gato al agua</i> -Intereconomía		
4/27/2013	IGLESIAS	<i>Dando caña</i> -Intereconomía		
5/12/2013	IGLESIAS	<i>La Sexta Noche</i> -La Sexta		
5/14/2013	MONEDERO	<i>Más vale tarde</i> -La Sexta		
5/15/2013	IGLESIAS	<i>El cascabel al gato</i> -13TV		
6/12/2013	MONEDERO	<i>El gato al agua</i> -Intereconomía		
11/20/2013	IGLESIAS	<i>Las mañanas de Cuatro</i>		
12/11/2013	ERREJÓN	VTV (Venezuela)		
5/22/2014	IGLESIAS	<i>Al Rojo Vivo</i> -La Sexta	European elections	
6/10/2014	MONEDERO	<i>Más vale tarde</i> -La Sexta		
7/4/2014	IGLESIAS	<i>Debate Europa</i> -TVE		
7/30/2014	MONEDERO	<i>Las mañanas de Cuatro</i> -Cuatro		
8/15/2014	MONEDERO	Canal 9 (Argentine)		
9/18/2014	BESCANSA	<i>Al Rojo Vivo</i> -La Sexta		
9/22/2014	ERREJÓN	<i>La Sexta Noche</i> -La Sexta		
10/26/2014	IGLESIAS	<i>Salvados</i> -La Sexta		
11/3/2014	MONEDERO	PFV-EiTB		
11/8/2014	MONEDERO	<i>Tiempo nuevo</i> -T5		
11/16/2014	IGLESIAS	<i>El Objetivo</i> -La Sexta		
12/6/2014	IGLESIAS	<i>La noche en 24 horas</i> -TVE		
1/10/2015	BESCANSA	<i>La Sexta Noche</i> -La Sexta		
2/26/2015	ERREJÓN	<i>Al Rojo Vivo</i> -La Sexta		
5/11/2015	IGLESIAS	<i>Espejo Público</i> -A3		
6/3/2015	MONEDERO	<i>Al rincón de pensar</i> -A3		
6/16/2015	MONEDERO	<i>La Sexta Noche</i> -La Sexta		
6/23/2015	IGLESIAS	<i>Los Desayunos</i> -TVE		
10/14/2015	IGLESIAS	<i>Al rincón de pensar</i> -A3		

10/28/2015	IGLESIAS	<i>El Intermedio</i> –La Sexta
11/3/2015	IGLESIAS	<i>El Hormiguero</i> –A3
11/10/2015	MONEDERO	<i>Salvados</i> –La Sexta
3/7/2016	IGLESIAS	<i>Dos días y una noche</i> –A3
3/10/2016	MONEDERO	<i>Espejo Público</i> –A3
6/10/2016	ERREJÓN	<i>El Hormiguero</i> –A3

Note. Only the first appearance of each leader is taken into account.

The coverage given by TVE, a reference channel of the central public sphere, shows that the European elections proved to be a landmark. Before this event, TVE published only one piece about Podemos on its website, that same May of 2014; whereas after the European elections, news about Podemos were published by the broadcaster every month. Having experienced media silence and blackout, the party that even criticized core aspects of the post-Franco transition to democracy and the political regime constitutionalized as a result in 1978 (Kornetis, 2014) became a newsworthy actor and received considerable coverage. In the case of TVE, the broadcaster published nothing on Podemos until May 26, 2014. Between then and January 31, 2015, Podemos was covered in 69 news items.

Iglesias alone began to receive media attention in 2011 and 2012 (see Table 1), and this presence increased after 2013, especially in talk shows on the Intereconomía channel (*El Gato al Agua*, Grupo Intereconomía, 2005; *Dando Caña*, Grupo Intereconomía, 2010) and 13TV (*El Cascabel*, Trece, 2013), two peripheral conservative digital channels. He made fewer appearances on talk shows on Cuatro (*Las Mañanas de Cuatro*: Mediaset España, 2006) and La Sexta (*La Sexta Noche*: Atresmedia, 2013; *Al Rojo Vivo*: Atresmedia, 2011), whose audiences were mainly left wing. Table 2 shows the intense activity of Iglesias as a talk show guest in 2013. Almost all the videos in which he starred obtained many more visualizations than the average on the *La Tuerka* YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/user/LaTuerka>).

Table 2. Confrontation of Iglesias in TV with More Visualizations in La Tuerka.

Date	Confrontations (Iglesias versus...)	Program (channel)	Audience ^a
09/2012	Álvaro Paraleda	La Plaza en Llamas (Canal 33)	323
11/2012	Alberto Sotillos	La Plaza en Llamas (Canal 33)	178
01/2013	Percival Manglano	La Plaza en Llamas (Canal 33)	39
04/2013	Jiménez Losantos, Alejo Vidal...	El Gato al Agua (Intereconomía)	698
05/2013	Alejandro Cao, Fernando Díaz...	El Gato al Agua (Intereconomía)	306
05/2013	Alfonso Rojo	La Sexta Noche (La Sexta)	220
05/2013	Eduardo García, Fernando Paz...	El Gato al Agua (Intereconomía)	258
05/2013	Francisco Granados, Cristina López...	El Cascabel al Gato (13TV)	205
05/2013	Alfonso Rojo	La Sexta Noche (La Sexta)	150
05/2013	Isabel Durán, Hermann Tertsch...	El Cascabel al Gato (13TV)	23
05/2013	Fernando Paz	El Gato al Agua (Intereconomía)	335
06/2013	Percival Manglano	La Sexta Noche (La Sexta)	422
06/2013	Fernando Paz	El Gato al Agua (Intereconomía)	64
06/2013	Francisco Marhuenda	La Sexta Noche (La Sexta)	884

Note. ^a Thousands of visualizations of *La Tuerka* on YouTube (data gathered on June 2019). Source: *La Tuerka* channel on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/user/LaTuerka>).

Self-produced programs (*La Tuerka* and *Fort Apache*) combined with talk shows on local and digital television, then mainstream networks, allowed Podemos to gain a symbolic capital that it exploited politically with the financial profit generated by Iglesias's TV activity. The symbiosis between his media performances and the viewing figures paved the way to mainstream TV channels. A particularly remarkable example is an interview on the late-night news program *La Noche en 24 Horas* (RTVE, 2014). The program, broadcast by TVE's least-viewed channel, tripled its audience share from 0.8% to 3.1%, reaching nearly half a million viewers. In fact, audience share increased for all programs in which Iglesias participated between May 2014 and February 2015 (Gallardo-Camacho & Lavín, 2016).

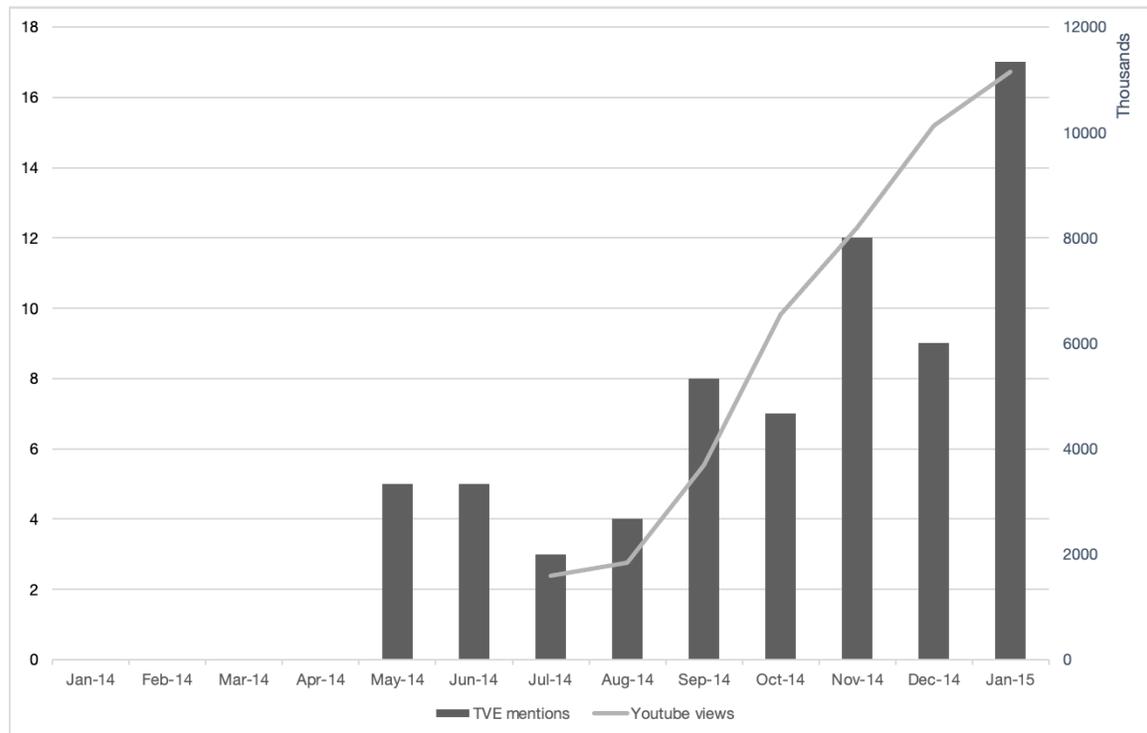


Figure 1. Mentions to Podemos in TVE versus views on Podemos-related YouTube channels.

Note. Views on YouTube are the sum of the channels *La Tuerka*, *Fort Apache*, and *Podemos*. Data on TVE comes from RTVE's digital archive; data from YouTube was gathered by Fanpage Karma.

Television was key in the popularization of Pablo Iglesias as a recognizable figure for the Spanish electorate. At the time of the 2014 European elections, with practically no coverage on TVE, Iglesias was known by 50% of the population, while Podemos was only familiar to a meager 5% (Rendueles & Sola, 2015). Therefore, it was private TV channels like *La Sexta* that made him a familiar face among those interested in politics. But this would not have been possible if Iglesias had not shown himself as a viable TV product in marginal political talk shows, which became known to journalists and producers through their viral circulation in social media. The debates presented by Iglesias in obscure TV channels were the ideal training for his later challenge to right-wing pundits in their own talk shows. Iglesias's clashes with their nemeses were amplified by social media, reached mainstream TV producers, and were eventually reenacted for larger audiences.

Interestingly, Iglesias's performance at well-known TV talk shows like *La Sexta Noche* (Atresmedia, 2013) are among the most watched online, too. Social media was not just used to make the figure of Pablo Iglesias known to TV producers but also to make Iglesias's appearances on mainstream TV viral, as these could be easily shared by politicized viewers among their less politically engaged acquaintances. In this way, the hybrid interplay of traditional TV and social media worked as a virtuous circle for Podemos. Figure 1 shows the parallel growth of mentions to Podemos in the public broadcaster TVE (linear TV) and the increase in Podemos-related YouTube views.

Print and Online Press

During the first four months analyzed, the print press ignored Podemos. The 2014 European elections mark the first media explosion. Before May 26, only *La Razón* published news on Podemos: two articles, and both in the same month of May. The opinion poll conducted in October 2014 (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2014b) to gauge voting intention in a hypothetical general election marked the next phase of news coverage throughout the rest of the study period. This subperiod corresponds to the full integration of Podemos in the media agenda, with a continuous and significant presence in the press. News coverage of Podemos increased over time, without substantial differences among newspapers (ranging from a total of 314 news items in *La Razón* to 219 in *El Mundo*). Besides the two tipping points mentioned, there are two other key events that attracted media attention: the constituent Assembly at Vistalegre stadium (October–November 2014) and the March for Change (January 2015).

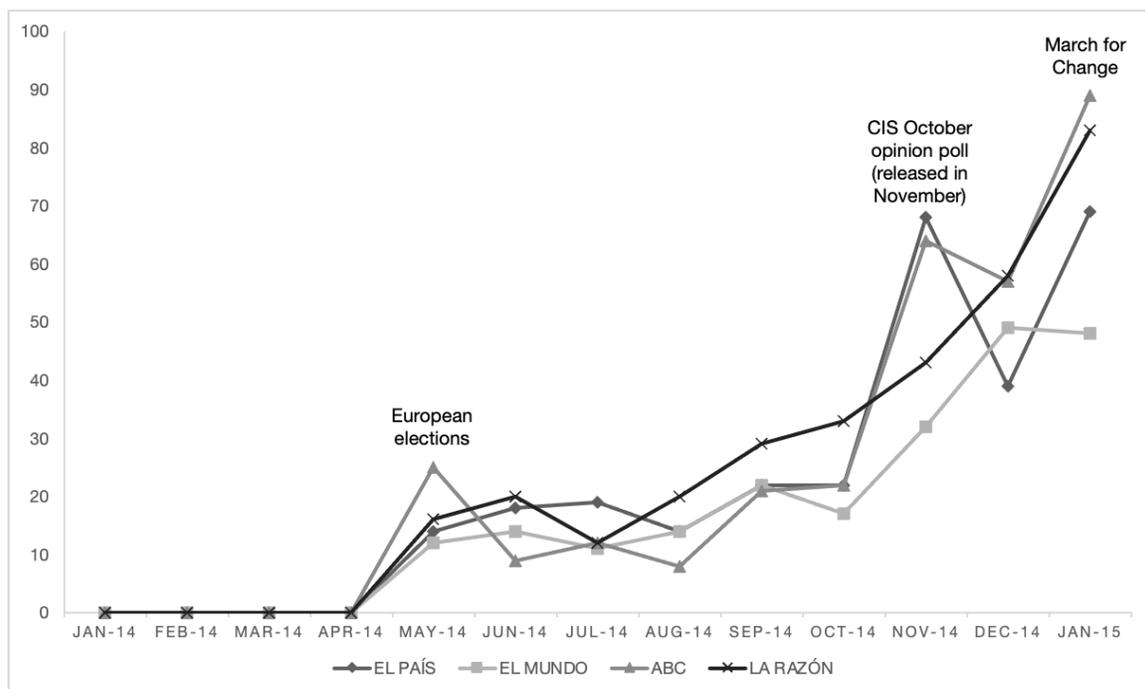


Figure 2. Stories about Podemos in national print dailies. Source: MyPage News.

With regard to the digital press, the online versions of four print newspapers (20minutos.es, abc.es, elmundo.es, and elpais.com) and three exclusively online news media (elconfidencial.com, eldiario.es, and publico.es) are considered. Figure 4 shows the news coverage of Podemos in all of them. It reveals that the volume of online information is much greater than in the print press (see Figure 3), in some cases even more than double. Eldiario.es was the one publishing the most news items (1,541), followed by 20minutos.es (1,054), elmundo.es (803), elconfidencial.com (709), publico.es (632), abc.es (603), and elpais.com (475). In the digital press, Podemos was almost invisible until the European elections, as it had been on TVE (Figure 1) and in the print newspapers (Figure 2). The first news about Podemos appeared on

January 17, 2014, in *publico.es* and *eldiario.es*. The number of news items on digital media before the 2014 European elections (from January 1 to May 24, 2014) was limited: *publico.es* (53 news items), *eldiario.es* (39), and *20minutos.es* (27), although it must be noted that the audience and influence of these three were far smaller than those of the other digital newspapers; they were publishing fewer than 10 news items each during this initial stage.

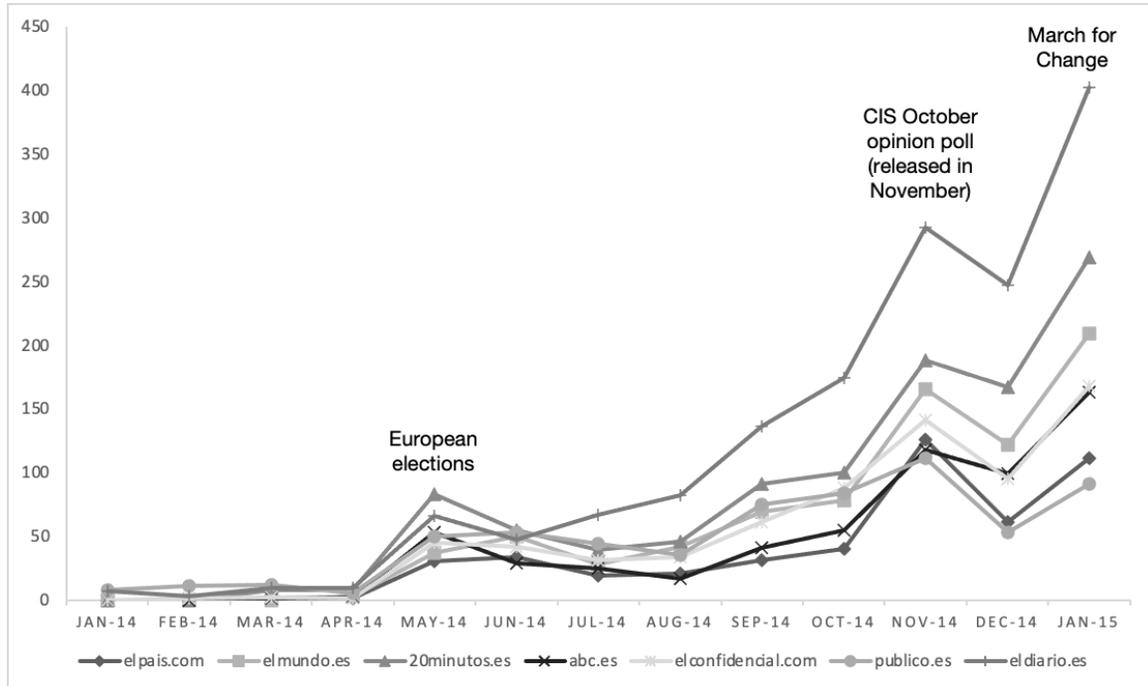


Figure 3. Stories about Podemos in national digital dailies. Source: MyPage News.

After the European elections, Podemos started to receive wider media attention. From the election day on May 5 to June 2014, when this attention began to decline, the hierarchy of coverage is repeated, ranging from *eldiario.es* (95 news items) down to *elpais.com* (54). The Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (2014a) opinion poll again marked a new focal point, with increasing news coverage until the end of the study period.

Social Media

Podemos launched its first tweet and its first Facebook post in January 2014, coinciding with its public presentation at a packed Madrid theater. The activity of both accounts would be quite limited until April 2014, on the eve of the European elections. Both accounts would register a spectacular increase in followers after the surprising results in the polls. Therefore, it would be fair to say that an institutional landmark (5 MEPs) intrigued a wider audience, who began to follow in social media a party they might barely have heard of before the mainstream media buzz around its impressive electoral showing.

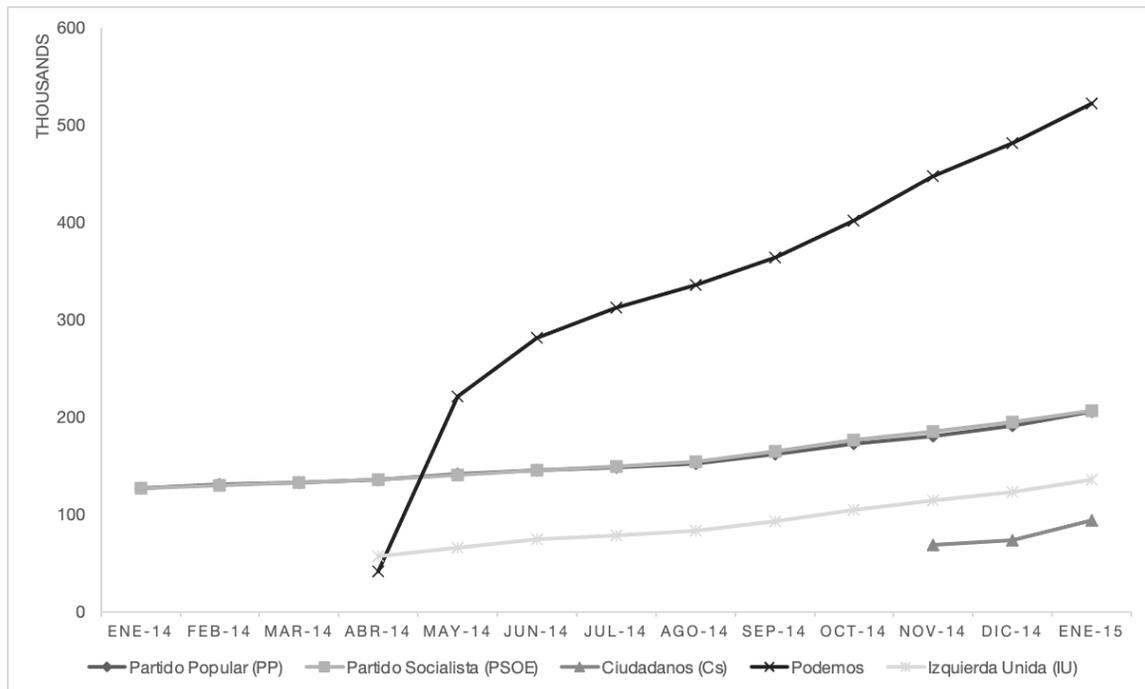


Figure 4. Twitter followers of main parties with national scope. Source: Fanpage Karma (2014–15).

Figure 4 shows the substantial increase of followers of the Podemos Twitter account, reflecting once again the milestone of media attention around the European elections. In less than two weeks, the party increased its followers almost fivefold, from 51,842 (May 25) to 254,265 (June 5). The subsequent rise is less striking, but nevertheless sustained and higher than any other Spanish party with national scope.

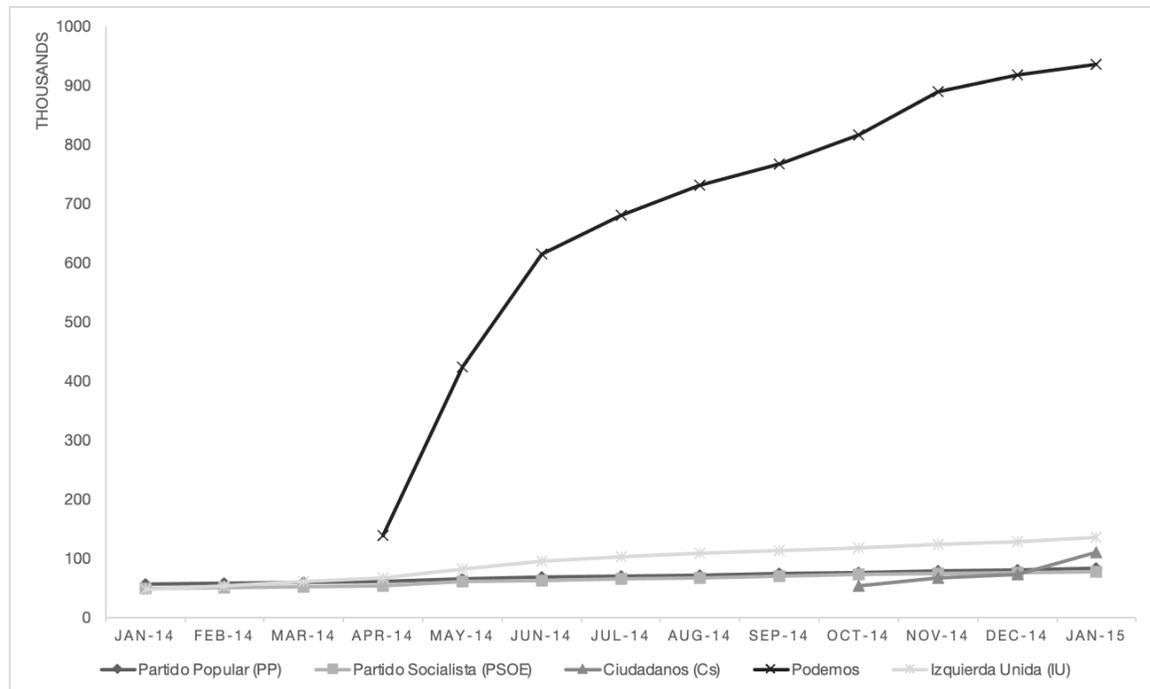


Figure 5. Facebook followers of main parties with national scope. Source: Fanpage Karma (2014–15).

Figure 5 depicts the evolution on Facebook of followers of the main Spanish parties with national scope. The extraordinary growth in followers parallels that of Twitter, with Podemos crawling at an exponential rate while their rivals remain flat. Each social network allowed the party to enter a crucial sphere: Twitter opened the doors of political and journalistic debate, while Facebook offered access to the social conversation among friends and family members.

Hybrid Interactions

Figure 6 shows how the number of mentions to Podemos in the news media (print, online, and public broadcaster TVE) goes hand in hand with the number of party followers on social media (Twitter and Facebook).

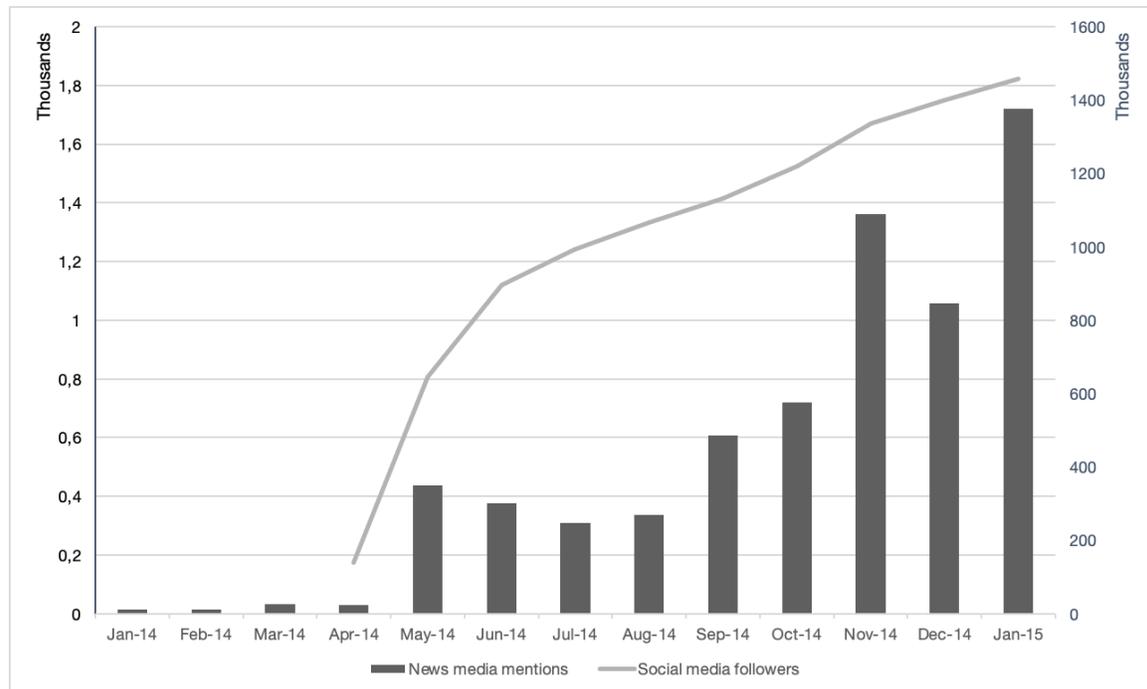


Figure 6. News media mentions to Podemos versus followers of Podemos on social media.
Source: MyPage News, rtve.es, Fanpage Karma (2014–15).

Each variable belongs to a different order of magnitude, but are depicted in a single chart with a primary axis (media mentions) and a secondary axis (social media followers), both expressed in thousands. Media mentions (each bar represents the number of news about Podemos each month) begin in the tens and then grow up to the hundreds after the May 2014 election results, reaching up to nearly a couple of thousands by early 2015. The followers of Podemos on Twitter and Facebook are close to 140,000 in April 2014, right on the eve of the elections to the European Parliament. They surpass the 1 million barrier in August 2014, and add half a million more by the end of January 2015.

The mainstream media show themselves as highly reactive to external shocks: the election results of May 2014, the CIS poll placing Podemos neck to neck with the PP and the PSOE in November 2014, and the March for Change of January 2015 that swarmed the Plaza del Sol in Madrid. These three events lead to a spike in mentions to Podemos in the print and digital press, as well as in public broadcaster TVE. Interestingly, the growth in mentions is mirrored by the increase in social media followers. Be it out of curiosity, or as a means of signaling hope for radical change to their own networks of friends, users of Twitter and Facebook turned Podemos into the most followed party among those with national scope, easily surpassing the established bipartisan duet of PP and PSOE.

Twitter and Facebook users are hardly representative of the general population, but the mainstream media are likely to reach most of the electorate. The fact that Podemos does well on both fronts, and that its growth in media mentions and social media followers go up in parallel, could be interpreted as the result

of a hybrid media strategy, appealing simultaneously to a core constituency (social media followers) and a broader, perhaps older, audience (that of mainstream media).

Discussion

The results show that the two milestones which propelled Podemos into the central public sphere are institutional in nature: electoral representation (the five MEPs elected in May 2014) and leadership in opinion polls, with unprecedented poll results at national level, made public in November that year (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2014a). Once a political force has formal representation in a parliament, it is impossible to ignore even for the most conservative media outlets. However, institutional representation was a success largely attributable to a media strategy that drew on social media amplification to call the attention of mainstream political talk show producers, who saw in Iglesias a viable TV figure.

As Podemos became a magnet for audiences, it turned out to be a newsworthy and profitable item regardless of its disaffinity with the editorial lines of the mainstream media. Ironically, the political economy of commercial news outlets, reliant on advertising income, fueled the visibility of an actor that criticized the media at the slightest opportunity.

Podemos used social media as neither an isolated nor a collateral tool, but as an integral part of its political strategy of communication. It combined social media sites in a hybrid system with the threefold function of informing, mobilizing, and interacting (Casero-Ripollés, Miquel-Segarra, & Alonso-Muñoz, 2016). Iglesias himself acknowledged that social media have enabled new means of democratic participation (RTVE, 2011).

Regarding the digital press, these outlets have an uneven affinity with Podemos. *Publico.es* was so close to the party that it even hosted programs conducted by its most recognizable figures (Iglesias and Monedero) on its website. Meanwhile, *eldiario.es* had a tone closer to the discourse and demands of the 15-M movement than to Podemos as a party; *20minutos.es* was less ideological, carefully keeping a broader appeal for its less politicized audience.

No matter their differences, the three sites (*publico.es*, *20minutos.es*, and *eldiario.es*) took an editorial stance dissociated from the bipartisan system. In fact, the digital press that emerged after the 15-M movement is critical of the bipartisan establishment, and has helped to broaden the ideological spectrum of the Spanish media system (Labio & Pineda, 2016). Their business models allowed them more independence. *Eldiario.es* is an online-native daily that gathered the more intellectual voices of the 15-M movement and is run by a limited society of journalists, and *20minutos.es* is a free paper that belongs to a foreign corporation and seeks transversal audiences. Journalistic control over the editorial line of *Eldiario.es* and the more popular and less ideological audience of *20minutos.es* made both newspapers more receptive to a political force such as Podemos. *Público* displayed an editorial line attuned to Podemos.

The right-wing *elmundo.es* and *elconfidencial.com* paid even more attention to Podemos than the left-oriented *publico.es* and *elpais.com*. Although valence framing was not part of this research (it did not address whether the coverage was positive or negative), it is fair to say that these conservative and liberal

outlets adopted a more negative approach toward the early Podemos (Sampedro, López-Ferrández, & Carretero, 2018). In the case of *El País* in print, its limited coverage compared with the others may be explained by its role as the benchmark progressive newspaper during the transition to democracy from the Francoist dictatorship (Imbert & Vidal-Beneyto, 1986), which may have made it less receptive to a political force that was disputing the predominance of the PSOE on the left.

Conclusions

The relevance of television is not to be dismissed in hybrid media systems that incorporate new digital media and leverage their interactions with broadcast television. In fact, six years after the foundation of Podemos, the leader of the ultra-right party Vox acknowledged that his formation had

failed to appreciate the capacity of legacy media to form public opinion [in relation to its disappointing results in the 2019 general elections]. . . . We thought that social media were putting our message across more clearly than they have succeeded in doing. ("Santiago Abascal," 2019, para. 4)

The Spanish party that claimed to have the support of Trump had disregarded the fact that the most highly evolved political animal in the digital ecosystem began to work on the electorate in television studios (Poniewozik, 2019; Sampedro, 2018).

This study confirms that television was the hegemonic medium in the Podemos media strategy (H1), a fact that the literature, concentrated on the party's digital strategy, tends to underestimate. Before 2014, the party founders' only media presence was on peripheral television channels. Their appearances on foreign TV channels (from 2006 to 2010) encouraged them to create their own programs (most notably, *La Tuerka*). Latin American channels served as test bench and training ground to meet the challenge of debating on live national television. Despite being a hostile terrain, Iglesias considered television the main instrument of political socialization (Iniciativa Debate, 2004). The mainstream media prioritized the consolidated political parties, so Podemos leaders had no other chance than to deploy a strategy of spectacular and contentious discourse to generate media impact.

In the video *Militar en los medios* [Being an activist in the media] (Attac TV, 2012), Iglesias explained his audio-visual strategy. Relying on Gramsci's theory of hegemony, he argued that the media construct public discourse. The left traditionally disregarded television, though people were mostly active in the media, not in the parties. Iglesias, however, assumed that new political actors emerge through media visibility, mostly through their salience on contentious political talk shows (LaTuerka, 2013). This counterhegemonic media strategy took place between 2012 and 2013, thus before the party's foundation, mainly via talk shows, with Iglesias as a guest, and on local and digital television programs in the peripheral public spheres. This participation in peripheral programs was successful because it echoed beyond the audiences of the programs themselves. In 2014, Iglesias started appearing on channels with a wider reach and broke the audience share records of several prime-time programs, achieving high media visibility.

The analysis shows that Podemos developed a transmedia communication strategy (H2). The party relied on the impact of peripheral television to reach citizens, and used digital media—both YouTube and social media (Facebook and, especially, Twitter)—to proactively create a viral message. Additionally, thanks to ideological affinity and/or economic interest, it was able to attract early news coverage in the digital press, particularly *eldiario.es*, *publico.es*, and *20minutos.es*. This indicates that Podemos leveraged a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013) and the synergies among diverse but symbiotic media outlets (Chadwick et al., 2016).

In this way, from initial invisibility, the party entered the peripheral public spheres, and from there was able to access the central public sphere. However, Podemos did not achieve a mass media presence until 2014, when the election of five MEPs gave the party political representation and the status of an institutional actor. The party's appearance in mainstream media outlets occurred simultaneously in print newspapers, the digital press, and the public broadcaster TVE. There is no reason to think that the major private television stations behaved any differently. The quantitative leap can even be appreciated in the presence of Podemos on social media networks.

It is thus confirmed that the party's hybrid strategy led Podemos from media invisibility to the central public sphere. However, the data also reveal a more nuanced interpretation of our main hypothesis—namely, that the institutional dimension of politics matters. Traditional dependence on favorable opinion polls and electoral success is still relevant in determining access to the central public sphere. The hegemonic media was extremely resistant to new political actors, perhaps particularly in the case of forces critical of the evolution of the political system and the constitution itself (H3). This resistance was broken with the institutionalization of the party. In contrast to what occurred in the peripheral public spheres, Podemos's entry into the central public sphere seems to be a media reflection of an institutional event rather than the results of its media action: The elections compelled the mainstream media to report on Podemos, and favorable opinion polls consolidated its presence. In other words, the party's entry into the central public sphere was an indirect effect of its media strategy.

Regardless of the media's political and economic reservations about reporting on Podemos, the party's impact through peripheral TV channels, the synergies of different media in a hybrid system, and its electoral results seem to have compelled the television and press of the central political sphere to let it in. At the same time, Podemos became profitable in terms of audience (H4). Regarding political viability, future research would need to conduct valence frame analyses. The valence of the coverage can be expected to correspond to the editorial line of each media outlet, according to left-right affinity (Durán, 2018) and position vis-à-vis the bipartisan system.

The media coverage of Podemos in the near future could also confirm the existence of at least two dynamics, which we have noted and may need to be taken further in subsequent studies. Firstly, the differential partisan use of digital networks and platforms for impact in the mainstream media, to gain public attention and legitimacy while interacting with other sociopolitical actors and power institutions. Secondly, the existence of two (or more) colliding public spheres in terms of their receptivity to new political forces. Digital media may be more prone to concede visibility to new formations than the traditional media. A study

of the coverage of equally new but liberal parties such as Ciudadanos would clarify whether the media's reticence responded to the new or to the antiestablishment nature of the early Podemos.

Certainly, further research on the hybrid media strategies of Podemos and other emerging parties is needed, paying particular attention to their electoral and institutional evolution and the changing dynamics of the media and political party systems (Sampedro, 2021a).

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