

Leftward Shift, Media Change? Ideology and Politics in Spanish Online-Only Newspapers After the 15-M Movement

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The year of 2011 was one of global change, provoked by an economic crisis that brought neoliberalism into question. In Spain, the activity unleashed by the “15-M” movement culminated in the formation of Podemos, a party that has provoked a political earthquake. Simultaneously, several alternative left-leaning online-only newspapers have erupted in Spain. This article focuses on whether these changes were accompanied by ideological/political shifts in Spanish online-only opinion journalism between 2011 and 2014. A sample of 541 opinion columns was content-analyzed. Results indicate that digital journalism criticizes the establishment, broadens the ideological spectrum, and distances itself from bipartisanship. However, the shift is fundamentally conveyed through the attack and defense of political parties without generating a clearly radical journalism.

Keywords: online-only newspapers, opinion journalism, ideology and the press, Spanish media, 15-M movement

Ideology, Politics, and the (Online-Only) Press

The relationship of the press with ideology and politics is a well-consolidated field of study. For example, van Dijk’s (1995) discourse analysis has become a classic reference in the study of ideology and the press. The phenomenon has also been explored from the critical perspectives of cultural studies and the political economy of communication. From the perspective of British cultural studies at the Birmingham School, the critical analysis of the concept of ideology is a central theme in Stuart Hall, who points out that the media reproduce “the hegemonic ideological discourse in an effective manner,” thanks to the “metaideology” that maintains that the press is free of political and economic influences (Downey, Tittley, & Toynbee, 2014, pp. 879–880). A plethora of literature from the field of political economy considers the media as an instrument of ideological manipulation, spanning texts such as the now classic

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works of authors such as Schiller (1973) and Herman and Chomsky (2008). The idea that the media are related to the ideology of the economic, political, and social system is a common thread throughout a tradition that anchors its roots in some of the Marxist writers who are particularly well known for their work on ideology (Althusser, 1977). As various authors have argued, the media maintain direct and indirect links to power (Bagdikian, 2004; Curran, 2002; McChesney, 1999) and therefore reproduce the values of the capitalist system, values that include a bipartisanship in which both parties are faithful to neoliberal principles (Jacobs, 2013) in Western democracies.

There is also a tradition of empirical studies on the ideological role of the press, from the reflection of French colonial politics and the justification of the Empire at the end of the 19th century (Ríos Sanchis, 2000), to the proliferation of ideological and political press during the Second Spanish Republic (Checa Godoy, 2011), to the tradition of the revolutionary press, from the French Revolution to current anticapitalist Spanish newspapers such as *En Lucha* (Zhu, 2011, pp. 39–41). A leftist component has also been observed in the Norwegian daily *Klassekampen* [Class Struggle], which has evolved from a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist perspective to left-liberal positions (Rucht, 2013). Regarding the right-wing press, Smith Pussetto, García Vázquez, and Pérez Esparza (2008) point out the presence of the free-market ideology in the newspaper *El Norte* from Monterrey (México); and Brock (2005) has analyzed the role of the *New York Post* or *The Washington Times* serving the American right in the last decades of the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st century. Also at the beginning of the 21st century, the editorials of influential writer George F. Will reveal a conservative meta-ideology (Goss, 2005, pp. 417, 419).

Print newspapers are not the only media susceptible to examination in terms of the ideology that they represent. In the current media environment, print newspapers coexist with the online-only press, that is, newspapers and magazines that are published exclusively online, and that should be differentiated from digital editions of newspapers and magazines that have a hard copy version. Even though the ideological implications of the online-only press appear to have been analyzed with less intensity than traditional printed media, there are some studies covering this newer form, including studies looking at the phenomenon of “confidential” digital journalism, which is consumed primarily for ideological reasons (Sánchez González, 2008), or examining the hard-right bias of sites such as the successful WorldNetDaily (known today as WND; Brock, 2005). On the other hand, previous work on the native digital press has analyzed three Spanish-language newspapers (*Hispanidad*, *Rebelión*, and *Minuto Digital*), revealing them to be extremist publications that enhance the prevailing partisanship of mainstream media (Reig & Labio Bernal, 2006). From another point of view, Steele’s (2009) article examining the online newspaper *Malaysiakini* [Malaysia Now] analyzed how an independent news portal can challenge political authoritarianism. Almiron’s (2006) work examined Spanish digital newspapers from a structural approach, and inferred their tendencies by looking at their data and corporate links, which revealed that the most popular media did not present a very pluralistic scenario. In 2011, Pinilla García pointed to the different ways news sites such as *Rebelión* and *Libertad Digital* reacted to the 15-M movement in Spain, and in 2013, a study concluded that the Spanish digital native press maintained a fundamentally conservative or right-libertarian tendency (Pineda & Almiron, 2013, p. 571). The study relied on an analysis of the main online-only newspapers in May 2011 and corroborated Almiron’s previously cited work.

Beyond examining the biases these kinds of publications may have, studying them proves relevant for considering the relationship between journalism and politics. As De Waal and Schoenbach (2008) indicated, “nonpaper” news sites seem to increase “the number of societal topics even for those not particularly interested” (p. 171). Keeping in mind that the emergence of Internet news outlets has transformed the journalistic market in Spain (Salaverría Aliaga, 2008), the conclusions of some of the abovementioned work on the media can be better understood if one considers that Spain is one of the Mediterranean countries defined by a polarized pluralist media model (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Thus, the majority of the main online-only newspapers are positioned on one side or the other of the political spectrum. Although the digital native daily *El Confidencial* intended to cover different points of view from its inception (Álvarez, 2014), outlets such as *Minuto Digital* and *El Imparcial* are critical of left-wing political parties and viewpoints, and *El Plural* leans in favor of the Partido Socialista Obrero Español [Spanish Socialist Workers Party; PSOE], the main center-left party in Spain. One could also consider the links (Escolar, 2013) between the Partido Popular [Popular Party; PP], the main Spanish conservative party, and the relevant libertarian-conservative newspaper *Libertad Digital*.

The creation of a conservative digital media apparatus meshes with the idea of constructing a right-wing political agenda, which is more present in systems like that of the United States (Meagher, 2012), but which began to make sense in Spain when the PP first reached power (Labio Bernal, 2006). In the words of Serrano (2012), “the right can count on economic groups willing to spend—and lose—all the money necessary: as stockholders, as advertisers, as sponsors” because they “are playing ideological defense for the maintenance of a model that benefits them” (para. 15). As a matter of fact, the defense of a capitalist model has been a constant in Spain, during periods of conservative and social democratic-controlled governments alike, and the mainstream media have always aligned with one faction or another of this ideological duopoly (Reig, 2004; Reig & Labio Bernal, 2006). However, the media panorama experienced a series of changes after the onrush of the economic crisis in 2008 and, more specifically, after the events that followed in 2011.

From 15-M to Podemos

The year 2011 was one of protests, revolutions, and political change on a global level egged on by an economic, political, and ideological crisis that brought into question the legitimacy of neoliberalism (Fuchs, 2014). In Spain, toward the middle of May 2011, citizen movements began to flourish that made way for the so-called “15-M” movement. In a context of economic crisis and generalized discontent with austerity measures, a gradual mobilization began to gestate that crystallized in the popular protests of May 15, 2011 (García-Jiménez, Zamora-Medina, & Martínez-Fernández, 2014). That date marked the day thousands of Spaniards mobilized in 60 cities to protest against the political class, the economic institutions, and the media. The final message, based on an ideology that was critical of the capitalist system (Pinilla García, 2011, p. 197) and against the traditional Spanish two-party system (García-Jiménez et al., 2014), demanded a more participatory democracy and changes to the system to end market abuses. The 15-M movement is without precedent in the new century and provoked a series of sit-ins and demonstrations that extended to more than 50 cities.

Paradoxically, 2011 was also the year of a general election that handed victory to the conservative PP, giving it an absolute majority. At the beginning of 2012, Castells analyzed what the new stage in political “consciousness” of 15-M meant. The conservative victory represents

a debacle for the Socialists and exemplifies how people are fed up with representatives who supposedly look out for the interests of the Little People. As well, it’s clear that the crisis is only going to get worse and that no one knows how to manage it. Faced with this, people start to look for their own solutions, counting on networks of solidarity which are growing more numerous, supporting actions of protest wherever they appear. (Castells, 2012, para. 5)

Years of conservative policies—accompanied by a media echo chamber supporting austerity measures—have not moved public opinion to the right. To the contrary, there has been a slight shift to the left: In May 2011, the ideological self-identification of the average Spaniard was 4.93; in July 2014, this dropped to 4.57 (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2015) on a scale where 1 is the position more to the left and 10 is the position to the right. In this context of disconnect between the traditional political class and the citizens, the socialist-left party Izquierda Unida [United Left; IU] substantially improved its electoral results in the November 2011 general election. But, more relevantly, the activity unleashed by 15-M crystallized in the emergence of a new political party, Podemos, which caused a shockwave in the Spanish panorama. Podemos emerged in January 2014, taking up part of the 15-M demands, and widened the ideological spectrum of the political mainstream on the left, originally situating itself beyond social democracy. The name of the party itself, *Podemos* (“We Can”), embodies the spirit of the “collective” or the “community” (Hands, 2011, p. 162). With only five months in existence, Podemos won five seats in the European parliamentary elections of 2014. Its presence has transformed Spanish politics to the point where, in the December 2015 general election, Podemos finished third behind the two main parties.

Journalism, Political Change, and Online-Only Newspapers

Even though 15-M received different responses on the part of the mainstream Spanish media (Pinilla García, 2011, p. 208), Castillo Esparcia, García Ponce, and Smolak Lozano (2013) confirm that in the conventional and digital press the movement was treated as “a populist event and not well-analyzed” (p. 88); in addition, there was a decrease in news coverage after May 22, when the elections took place in Spain. According to Rucht (2004), when the media ignore a social movement, there can be four ways people react to it: abstention, attack, adaptation, or alternatives. The first two reactions imply renouncing media coverage or criticizing media bias; adaptation implies looking for coverage by established media by adjusting to journalistic news values (Rucht, 2013). The fourth strategy implies “creating and/or using *alternative* media” (Rucht, 2013, p. 258) an activity that is easier in the digital age. When movements encounter biased treatment by traditional media, initiatives that challenge the system generate their own journalistic spaces (Groshek & Han, 2011). There are journalists who actively identify with the movement and create cooperative models (Carroll & Hackett, 2006) or, in other cases, pursue mixed models. We consider this tendency as typical of communication and social movements, when movements implement their own media, from broadcasts on free radio to daily newspapers, as occurred at the end of the 1970s and the early 1980s (Rucht, 2013, p. 255). In this context, the concept of “alternative press” should be

distinguished from the notion of community media, and also from what is considered in some of the literature as “radical media.” Alternative media encompasses a wider range than radical media and is free of revolutionary connotations (Hardy, 2014).

As a response to crises, mediated public spheres may challenge political and social hegemony (Salter, 2012). In Spain, the mobilizations that emerged after 2011 were accompanied by a modification in the digital media, with a political discourse that, as reported in *The Guardian* (Kassam, 2014), offered the population alternative sources. The concept of alternative press may be related to the appearance of some post-2011 leftist outlets given that after that year the emergence (or reconversion) of digital newspapers such as *Público.es*, *eldiario.es*, and *infoLibre* is detected. Even though there was already an ideologically leftist online-only press—such as the anticapitalist, pro-15-M news site *Rebelión* (Pinilla García, 2011, pp. 198, 212)—the new outlets emerged in parallel to the recent transformations experienced in Spain. This new press does not act on the margins of the power of the state or of the markets (Hardy, 2014); in fact, several of these publications use different forms for financing themselves, from worker cooperatives to subscriptions and traditional advertising. The case of *Público.es* is the least typical because its paper version was first published in 2007 and closed in 2012. Readapting to its current format, the publication came into being as an online-only newspaper in June 2012 in an edition that managed to maintain itself as a “proposal from the left” (Serrano, 2012, para. 10). On the other hand, *eldiario.es*, which appeared in September 2012, defines itself as “a voice to the many citizens in Spain who are drowning in a news environment that is less and less diverse” (*eldiario.es*, 2015). *eldiario.es* is financed through a mixed model in which the workers own 70% of the company. They also generate additional revenue from subscriptions and advertising. Finally, *infoLibre* aspires to an independent, progressive, internationally spirited journalism, among other characteristics. Financed by members and advertising, the newspaper defines itself as “an informative and civic proposal that was born at the moment the economic crisis threatened democracy and journalism alike” (*infoLibre*, 2015, para. 1).

Keeping in mind the recent social and political changes, the discontent facing austerity policies, and the appearance of left-wing newspapers, this article aims to study whether the discourse of Spanish online-only journalism has experienced an ideological and political shift to the left in recent years. The conceptual framework that supports this objective is mainly Rucht’s theory on social reaction in the form of alternatives. When facing a dominant ideology, movements and left-leaning opinion trends will seek alternatives that provide a more progressive journalism. This would imply a secondary research objective: to ascertain whether the hard right panorama made evident by studies that confirmed a predominance of conservative or ultraconservative digital newspapers (Almiron, 2006; Pineda & Almiron, 2013) has become more nuanced.

To achieve these goals, we focus on opinion articles on the grounds that ideology and politics are at the core of journalism of opinion (Waisbord, 2006). In addition, opinion is a predominant feature of Spanish digital newspapers in general (Sebastián, 2009, p. 42) and a relevant aim for Spanish online-only “confidential” outlets in particular (Salaverría Aliaga, 2008). As a result, we formulated the following research questions:

RQ1: Has there been any shift in the ideological orientation of Spanish online-only opinion journalism between 2011 and 2014?

RQ2: Has the appearance of new outlets challenged the predominance of right-wing opinions in Spanish online-only journalism?

Method

Our methodology follows previous work on the representation of ideology in online-only opinion articles (Pineda & Almiron, 2013). The method of content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) was used in this study. To operationalize empirically an ideological shift, the widely debated concept of ideology (Tower Sargent, 1996) has been specifically understood as a set of ideas that provide a basis for political action, and is related to power systems (Heywood, 2007). For example, "conservatism" and "libertarianism," as political ideologies, may be understood as different sets of beliefs that justify different ways of distributing power. These sets of beliefs compose different attitudes toward themes and issues. In the case of conservatism, positive attitudes toward private property can be found regarding economics, at the same time as traditionalist social values such as the family are advocated. This traditionalism is not necessarily shared by libertarianism, an ideology that adopts an extremely liberal posture on social and cultural issues at the same time as it promotes radical, antitax, and procapitalist ideas in the economic sphere.

Regarding the coding units, some categories are present in the scheme used by Gisselquist and Lawson (2006) in an analysis of political content dealing with various issues, although we added our own categories to adjust the analysis to the Spanish context, among other things. In any case, economics and politics were regarded as key variables, insofar as new movements and parties criticize both the political system and economic policies. In addition, attitudes toward economic and political themes count among the most relevant indicators of ideological positioning. For the block on economics, we took into account the mentions that were made toward 33 items that we considered essential to assess the degree of interventionism of the state or the defense of the free market to which the publications make reference, support of the free market being ascribable to conservative/libertarian economic ideologies. The consideration of the public sector in relation to health care, pensions, subsidies, regulations, the welfare state, taxes, spending, and unemployment benefits, among other things, make up the block that is referred to as state intervention in the economy. Big business and private property, the business class/management, deregulation, cutbacks, or economic globalization serve to represent the libertarian axis. Thus, the libertarianism/statism axis was used to operationalize the categories that could define an opinion as "rightist" or "leftist" regarding economics.

The politics variable revolves around the specter between conservatives versus social democrats through the analysis of 38 items, such as the main political parties in Spain. Catalanian and Basque independence and Spanish nationalism also were measured as political indicators. In addition, we included issues from the Spanish political agenda such as the autonomous communities, the government, democracy, republic versus monarchy, civil servants/bureaucrats, and the 15-M movement, among other themes that allow for the ideological standing of the newspapers to be placed either closer to or farther away from conservatism (right) or social democracy (left). Thus, pertaining to politics, the "rightism" or

"leftism" of opinions was defined through categories such as patriotism—an enduring feature of the Spanish right wing. Another category that helped to define a right-wing or left-wing position was the sympathy for conservative, liberal, or socialist parties. In addition, and to reinforce the analysis of the political bias, we included a variable that referred to the general impression of the perceived political aims of the columnists—basically, whether they attack or defend political parties.

Frequency analysis was chosen (Krippendorff, 2004), and the basic coding units were words (e.g., *public spending*, *workers*, or *civil society*). The coding sheet also included an evaluative item to the journalists' general value judgment—favorable, unfavorable, or neutral (Lerner, Pool, & Lasswell, 1951–1952, p. 721)—regarding the coded words. The criterion for codifying a political attitude was the value attributed to a term in the context of the whole article. Consequently, the notion of context units (Krippendorff, 2004) is relevant given that coders may take into account other parts of the text (e.g., sentences or paragraphs) to infer the value.

Four-week samples were chosen from opinion columns published in May 2011 and July 2014 to obtain two synchronic images of the main trends of Spanish online-only newspapers; the four-week sampling period has been used in other content analysis studies of the press and news media (Graber, 1972; Paulussen, 2004). The contexts of the sampled time spans should be taken into account. As a regional and local election period, May 2011 was chosen on the assumption that ideological and political opinions would surface more strongly during a national election season. Socialist President José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero did not announce his withdrawal until the end of the following July, but tension was already high in the spring. Pertaining to the second wave of our analysis (July 2014), as 2014 European elections took place in late May, collecting opinion articles two months later gave us a balanced overview of the political shock wave produced by Podemos. In addition, mid-2014 was a period by which time the PP's harsh austerity measures had already been transforming Spain for more than two years, hence presenting a scenario characterized by new political forces and social discontent. Thus, the 2014 coding scheme included a category on 15-M, as well as three political parties that had recently gained media attention: the abovementioned Podemos, the ultraconservative Vox, and the pro-market, anti-Catalan nationalist Ciudadanos.

Two databases were used for sampling: the Oficina de la Justificación de la Difusión [Spanish Audit Bureau of Circulations; OJD], which tracks and verifies press circulation figures, and Alexa Web Service, which delivers Web analytical insights and has already been used as a source for academic research (Steele, 2009). Regarding the 2011 sample, the initial count of almost 50 Web-only newspapers taken from both OJD and Alexa was filtered on the basis of Alexa traffic ranking in Spain (see Table 1).

Table 1. Top Online-Only Spanish Newspapers by Traffic on May 31, 2011.²

Newspaper	Online since	URL	Position in Alexa's Traffic Rank
1. <i>Libertad Digital</i>	2000	www.libertaddigital.es	85
2. <i>El Confidencial</i>	2001	www.elconfidencial.com	100
3. <i>El Confidencial Digital</i>	2001	www.elconfidencialdigital.com	721
4. <i>El Semanal Digital</i>	2000	www.elsemanaldigital.com	793
5. <i>La Vozlibre</i>	No data available	www.lavozlibre.com	834
6. <i>Diariocritico.com</i>	2004	www.diariocritico.com	891
7. <i>Nació Digital.cat</i>	2005	www.naciodigital.cat	906
8. <i>El Plural</i>	2005	www.elplural.com	1,101
9. <i>Vilaweb</i>	1996	www.vilaweb.cat	1,135
10. <i>MinutoDigital.com</i>	2004	www.minutodigital.com	1,466

As to the 2014 sample, the procedure was similar. The OJD interactive website was the main source used to search for generalist newspapers. On the basis of a list of more than 30 outlets that matched our criteria, the Alexa traffic rank was taken into account for selecting the 10 most-read sites (see Table 2).

The 2011 sample consisted of 267 opinion articles. In the case of outlets with a strong opinion section, a systematic random sampling was performed, with different k intervals (Krippendorff, 2004) that were applied to obtain similar samples throughout the newspapers whenever possible. Accordingly, 29 articles were provided by each outlet in most of the cases. A similar method was applied to the 2014 sample, in which the number of columns from each newspaper ranged between 27 and 28, resulting in a final sample of 274 units. Codification was performed by four postgraduate students. On the basis of several agreement tests, the coding sheet was progressively refined until a two-coder agreement of .83 was attained using Krippendorff's alpha. Because one of the coders was replaced regarding the 2014 material, a new reliability test was performed in early 2015. In this case, the average agreement was even higher ($\alpha = .92$).

² Source.Pineda & Almiron, 2013. The traffic rank of *Minuto Digital* was consulted on June 10, 2011.

Table 2. Top Online-Only Spanish Newspapers by Traffic on November 7, 2014.

Newspaper	Online since	URL	Position in Alexa's Traffic Rank
1. <i>El Confidencial</i>	2001	www.elconfidencial.com	32
2. <i>Público.es</i>	2007	www.publico.es	84
3. <i>Libertad Digital</i>	2000	www.libertadigital.com	92
4. <i>eldiario.es</i>	2012	www.eldiario.es	111
5. <i>Nació Digital.cat</i>	2005	www.naciodigital.cat	240
6. <i>VilaWeb</i>	1996	www.vilaweb.cat	363
7. <i>El Confidencial Digital</i>	2001	www.elconfidencialdigital.com	413
8. <i>El Plural</i>	2005	www.elplural.com	426
9. <i>infoLibre</i>	2013	www.infolibre.es	487
10. <i>e-Notícies</i>	2000	www.e-noticies.cat	1,295

Results

Given that this study aimed to compare the press at two moments in time, and mainly in function of two variables, we comment on the results according to the 2011 and 2014 data in reference to each variable. Thus, we present first the results of 2011 on economic issues and then the results of 2014 on the same issues, and so on. Nonetheless, it is worth commenting on the rankings of the publications. Comparing Tables 1 and 2, it seems that the emergence of *Público.es*, *eldiario.es*, and *infoLibre* took the alternative leftist press to the top of the Alexa ranking: The first two occupied the top-four positions in 2014, which contrasts with the 2011 ranking, which was dominated by the rightist *Libertad Digital* or *El Semanal Digital*, whose opinion sections seemed to vary between rightist and social-democratic positions (Pineda & Almiron, 2013, p. 570). The ranking of the progressive *El Plural* did not change, and the pro-free-market *El Confidencial* occupied a privileged position in both 2011 and 2014. In addition, the strength of the Catalanian press was notable in both years, with sites such as *Nació Digital.cat* or *VilaWeb*.

Economic Terms (2011)

Regarding the terms that reveal an ideology in the economic sphere, the May 2011 data indicate a somewhat diffused position, as can be observed in online Supplemental Table 1 (available at <https://www.dropbox.com/s/7sp62q0xc64ygia/Supplemental%20Table%201%20.pdf?oref=e&n=16409880>).³ The progressive *El Plural*—one of the newspapers that comments more frequently on economic themes—adopted neutral positions on issues such as public pensions, and *Libertad Digital*'s antitax and antiunion stances revealed right-wing positions—for example, a column in *Libertad Digital* said that trade unions reject the relaxation of labor laws because such a relaxation would take power away from them (E. J. González, 2011). These positions were shared by newspapers such as *El Semanal Digital*. There was not a single positive mention of organizations that represent workers, the social safety net was considered more unfavorably than favorably, and there was a total absence of positive mentions about unemployment benefits. Furthermore, the antiunion bias found in *Minuto Digital* indicates that ultraconservatism was compatible with rightist economic attitudes. In any case, in 2011, newspapers appeared neutral to both workers and capitalism, which could indicate a distancing with respect to social class issues. And even though business people were also represented in a primarily neutral way (on 15 occasions), there is the paradox that *Libertad Digital* is the only outlet to mention the business class negatively. More significant, issues such as public spending and full employment did not receive a single positive mention in a context in which the economic crisis was already ravaging Spain.

Economic Terms (2014)

If we compare the former with the treatment of economic issues in July 2014 (see online Supplemental Table 2, available at <https://www.dropbox.com/s/3iccde4v3hw3x0u/Supplemental%20Table%202%20.pdf?oref=e&n=16409880>), opinion tended toward a neutral position, even though positive mentions ($n = 8$) of the public sector and negative mentions ($n = 13$) of taxes stood out. This last bit of data, along with the absence of positive mentions of public spending, indicates that some echoes of fiscal conservatism remained even after the emergence of 15-M. Thus, *Libertad Digital*'s eight positive mentions of "capitalism" reveal that this newspaper was continuing to wave the flag of economic libertarianism. The climate in 2014 seems to be characterized by a more socially minded attitude: There was not, for example, any negative mention of social programs, the consideration of public pensions or full employment was more positive, and the favorable mentions of cutbacks and/or reductions in public spending were reduced to zero. In ideological terms, the 2014 panorama could be interpreted as shifting somewhat toward progovernment, interventionist positions. Besides, and even though labor unions appear to be described negatively, the opinion of these organizations was less pejorative than in 2011. The references to capitalism, on the other hand, show the differentiation that existed among publications: Whereas the economic system was considered as highly positive in *Libertad Digital*, both *Público.es* and *infoLibre* make negative references to the system. In the same sense, whereas *infoLibre* expressed

³ Online Supplemental Tables 1–4 and in-text Tables 3 and 4 are also available in a graph format (Figures 1–6) through an external Dropbox link, where the reader can access the visualization of the data in graph bars and enlarge the Figures (available at <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/0wtbglufq7kvfad/AAB0svfHOPv3GrnYW4toah6ba?oref=e&n=16409880>).

negative opinions toward the business class, private companies were highly supported by *El Confidencial Digital*: A horizontal reading of online Supplemental Table 2 on the item "Private companies/Big business" clearly indicates that all of the positive mentions on big business ($n = 31$) came from *El Confidencial Digital*, which had an opinion section with positive mentions about competition or the business class and none about such issues as unemployment benefits. One example whereby *El Confidencial Digital* advanced the cause of big business can be found in an article by Jorge Díaz-Cardiel (2014) that stated, "The business world is not only an environment to make money and develop society economically: thanks to profit-making, big companies like Telefónica can fight child labour" (para. 1). In any case, it is remarkable that leftist newspapers such as *infoLibre* or *eldiario.es* were particularly aseptic when considering the economy, with fundamentally neutral mentions on matters such as subsidies, the market, or privately held companies. This should be related to the fact that only one of the leftist outlets, *infoLibre*, was itself among the four newspapers that most addressed the economy. The three Catalan sites included in the sample (*Nació Digital.cat*, *VilaWeb*, and *e-Notícies*), on the other hand, showed a paucity of discussion of economic issues in the era of austerity.

Political Terms (2011)

Concerning political themes and institutions, it should be noted that, in general, digital sites mentioned political terms much more than economic terms; in fact, the former were six times more abundant than the latter in both May 2011 and July 2014. In any case, the 2011 data indicate a panorama that was clearly tilted toward what would be considered, in its context, rightist positions: Spanish patriotism and attacks to the PSOE and IU (see online Supplemental Table 3, available at <https://www.dropbox.com/s/flbu7mfgq4a8ija/Supplemental%20Table%203%20.pdf?oref=e&n=16409880>). So, in 2011 the term *patriotism* received five positive mentions and nationalism/separatism received 29 negative mentions, to which we may add the total absence of positive mentions in the case of the Partido Nacionalista Vasco [Basque Nationalist Party] or nationalist Catalan parties such as *Convergència i Unió* [Convergence and Union] or *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* [Catalonian Republican Left]. At the same time, the mentions of the rightist national party *Unión Progreso y Democracia* [Union, Progress, and Democracy] were more positive than neutral. The case of the PP is interesting given that it was fundamentally mentioned in a negative light by two newspapers: progressive *El Plural* and ultraconservative *MinutoDigital.com*. However, it was positively mentioned by *El Confidencial*, *El Semanal Digital*, and *Diariocrítico.com*. An example of a positive consideration of the PP was a column in *El Confidencial* in which Federico Quevedo (2011), in addition to systematically attacking the PSOE, stated that the PP remained "focused on the citizens and the difficult economic situation, lending deaf ears to the provocations from the socialists" (para. 1). Particularly, *El Semanal Digital* seemed to have a right-wing agenda that mixed patriotism, antinationalism, and political conservatism. In this line, and although the PSOE is positively mentioned by *El Plural*, the party amassed 138 negative mentions compared with 16 positive mentions, and IU was not positively mentioned even one time. The 2011 data also indicate a political tendency against the state, the government, and civil servants/bureaucrats (these three institutions combined received 24 negative mentions), whereas civil society was represented in a positive or neutral light. This antigovernment libertarianism is compatible with a radically negative vision of politicians, who received negative mentions from all of the publications (except *Nació Digital.cat*).

Political Terms (2014)

In 2014 (see online Supplemental Table 4, available at <https://www.dropbox.com/s/mmesl8qw5rvkj9/Supplemental%20Table%204%20.pdf?oref=e&n=16409880>), Catalan nationalism was a widely debated issue: The three Catalan outlets included in the sample made in general positive references, and most negative comments came from *Libertad Digital* and *El Confidencial*. In general, the opinion climate in 2014 showed greater sympathy to nationalisms. There were numerous references to the PSOE (more than 200, and many of them neutral), but with a strong counterweight of negative mentions (81, compared with barely five positive). Even a left-leaning outlet such as *Público.es* criticized the PSOE: In Arturo González's (2014) words,

The PSOE runs the risk of having become a relic. Because of its own mistakes, and because of the emergence of new options more in tune with the need for change that is felt by all Spanish people, or a large number of them. (para. 2)

Notwithstanding, in comparison with 2011, the critical charge against the PSOE lessened. However, in the case of the PP, there were no positive references (in 2011, there were positively valued 14 times), but there were 96 negative mentions, almost doubling the figure from 2011; remarkably, not even the right-wing press defended the PP. The consideration of the Catalan center-right *Convergència i Unió* was also consistent with this tendency, even though to a lesser degree, with the negative valuation dominating. The socialist-left IU received 12 positive valuations compared with only three negative ones, even though the neutral tone still predominated. Something similar occurred with the Catalan left-nationalist *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya*, which received eight positive mentions and four negative ones.

Whereas Vox and Ciudadanos were practically ignored by most of the media in July 2014 (with the exception of *e-Notícies*, which mentioned Ciudadanos four times), the number of references to Podemos is remarkable. The party was mentioned 125 times, although 30 were negative—coming from *El Confidencial*, *infoLibre*, and *e-Notícies*. Podemos was the party that received the most positive valuations ($n = 17$), coming from both *Público.es* and *El Plural*. However, 15-M was barely mentioned, and fundamentally in an aseptic way (7 neutral mentions). Not coincidentally, the only positive mentions the movement received came from *Público.es*. The negative valuations the government received in 2014 reached 37 mentions, compared with only six positive mentions, and the references to the state were fundamentally neutral ($n = 110$) or negative ($n = 19$). However, these data—which respond to the antistatist tendency that was already present in 2011—should be understood in a context in which negative mentions about politicians have been cut in half compared with 2011. The notion of “democracy” appeared with a high frequency of positive mentions ($n = 54$, 12 more than in 2011). The monarchy versus republic debate, on the other hand, was mitigated in 2014, and neither of the two political systems received positive mentions.

Political Aim of the Columns (2011 and 2014)

Tables 3 and 4 provide more precise information relevant to the general impression on the columnists' political aims. In May 2011, the impression is diaphanous (see Table 3): Opinion journalism was mainly a tool for attacking what in Spain is traditionally considered to be the political left. In line with online Supplemental Table 3, the PSOE and IU were attacked (especially the former). The conservative PP was also attacked, but received a more balanced treatment; in fact, it was the most defended party. On the other hand, the relevance that Spanish nationalisms had in 2011 was manifested in the negative representation of the Partido Nacionalista Vasco and Convergencia i Uni6.

Table 3. Perceived Political Objective of Opinion Columns (2011).

	Libertad Digital	El Confidencial	El Confidencial Digital	El Semanal Digital	La Vozlibre	Dianoctrico .com	Naci6 Digital.cat	El Plural	Vilaweb	MinutoDigital.com	Total of times
No political objective	3	9	10	2	5	0	11	5	2	1	48
PSOE	Attack	9	4	1	6	6	1	1	0	13	42
	Defend	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
PP	Attack	1	0	0	0	2	1	0	4	1	14
	Defend	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
IU	Attack	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
	Defend	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
CiU	Attack	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	3
	Defend	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
PNV	Attack	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	4
	Defend	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
UPyD	Attack	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Defend	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Total of mentions	19	14	12	8	13	3	14	11	3	23	120

In July 2014 (see Table 4), the analysis indicates that traditional mainstream parties were criticized considerably, with the PP at the lead, receiving 31 negative references, followed by PSOE ($n = 16$) and Convergencia i Uni6 ($n = 5$). Rightist parties such as Uni6n Progreso y Democracia and Ciudadanos were also attacked, whereas Podemos maintained the same values of defense and attack; remarkably, this emergent party was not defended or attacked in the measure in which most traditional parties were. Although Podemos was defended by *infoLibre* and *P6blico.es*, it did not receive total support. An example of opinion defending Podemos can be found in *infoLibre*, in which Marc Pallar6s (2014) highlighted the democratization generated by Podemos, and that this party wanted politics to "abandon party apparatuses and return to the people" (para. 6). Only IU appears as a force that was not attacked but neither was it especially supported.

Table 4. Perceived Political Objective of Opinion Columns (2014).

		El Confidencial	El Confidencial Digital	infoLibre	Público.es	El Plural	Nació Digital cat	Vilaweb	e-Notícies	Libertad Digital	eldiario.es	Total of times
No political objective		11	5	7	5	3	11	10	3	7	8	70
PSOE	Attack	1	2	0	2	2	3	1	2	1	2	16
	Defend	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	1	0	0	3
PP	Attack	0	1	1	5	12	0	1	4	0	7	31
	Defend	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
IU	Attack	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Defend	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
CiU	Attack	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	0	1	5
	Defend	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	2
PNV	Attack	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Defend	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
UPyD	Attack	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
	Defend	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Podemos	Attack	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	2	1	0	5
	Defend	0	0	1	1	2	0	0	1	0	0	5
Ciudadanos	Attack	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
	Defend	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Vox	Attack	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Defend	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
15M	Attack	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
	Defend	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total of mentions		12	11	9	14	22	16	13	19	9	18	143

Discussion and Conclusions

This article has attempted to shed light on the ideological and political leanings of Spanish online-only opinion journalism in a context of profound social change. In this sense, and if the traditional media are characterized by “political bipolarism,” specified in the “social democratic line” or the “liberal-conservative right” (Reig, 2011, p. 208), online-only journalism seems to distance itself from the support of the two-party system. Facing the hegemonic bipolar discourse, in recent years, alternative left-leaning media have appeared that offer a primarily negative image of the PSOE—that is to say, the party that supposedly represents Spanish social democracy. Even though the large parties received the most attention in 2014, the wide attention received by newcomers Podemos is distinctive.

Consequently, the Spanish online-only press may be understood as a thermometer of political tendencies, and it is also a space open to new options that can widen the margins of mainstream politics: We must not forget that Podemos proposed, during the 2014 European elections, a citizen audit of the debt, an end to fiscal paradises, and participative budgets in the European Union (Pero, *¿Qué Propone Podemos?*, 2014), among other initiatives. If we consider that it is mostly younger people in Spain who get their news online (Seoane & Saiz, 2007), online-only journalism emerges as a media space that is susceptible to moving toward new movements in which it is precisely the younger citizens who usually play a key role.

The social mobilization in recent years has been one of the pillars of Podemos as an antineoliberal alternative (Castillo, 2014). Rucht’s idea that social movements will seek alternative media was confirmed

by our study, but only in an indirect way: The scant attention given to 15-M contrasts with the mentions received by Podemos, which indicates that new opinion trends tend to receive media space when they enter into contact with the political sphere. This is in line with the data provided by García-Jiménez et al. (2014), which indicate that the predominant information on 15-M in traditional Spanish newspapers such as *El Mundo* and *El País* “had to do with the relationship between the social movement and traditional political parties” (p. 2548). As Rucht (2013) points out, “With the rise and expansion of the Internet and its related tools of communication, the dependency of protest groups on established media seemed to be a matter of the past” (p. 262); in the case of online-only newspapers, there is no clear evidence that leftist media directly provide “tools of communication” to advance the cause of movements that are critical of capitalism.

However, and although 15-M does not seem to be central, the data would indicate an indirect connection between journalistic opinion and elements linked to social discontent in the context of the movement, such as the repudiation of the political class or the effects of the cutbacks (Taibo, 2011). Given that public sector cutbacks have been a key theme in recent years, there are indicators of a certain identification in opinion comment with the ideas expressed in the demonstrations known as *mareas* (waves or surges) or *escraches* (activists concentrating at the home or workplaces of individuals they wish to denounce), and with rallies and strikes in certain sectors. Thus, the online press echoes the criticisms made by 15-M (García-Jiménez et al., 2014), a fact that indicates that online newspapers have kept up with social changes, and are able to respond to what Carroll and Hackett (2006) call media democratization, which implies “the connection between processes of progressive change in the media and those in other social spheres” (p. 84). Albeit in an indirect manner, the new online-only press may have helped “To Mobilize Popular Power” (Mayor Zaragoza, 2014), as the title of one of the sampled columns from *infoLibre* reads.

Aside from these indirect links to social issues, the tendency to attack the two-party system and the traditional political class lines up with the weariness people feel with their political representatives, as pointed out by Castells (2012). What in May 2011 was primarily a journalistic anti-PSOE machine has evolved into a critique of the two major parties. What is more, the opinion journalism of 2014 could be interpreted fundamentally as an attack on the PP’s conservative government. Therefore, the rise of left-leaning outlets can make a difference with respect to the political sympathies of the Spanish traditional press, where newspapers such as *ABC* or *La Razón* support the PP government.

Regarding the main aim of our study—to discern possible ideological changes in digital journalism within the scenario of the economic crisis—it must be highlighted that there were signs of discord with respect to the traditional conservatism of Spanish digital media, a conservatism reflected in economic attitudes such as antiunionism or tax criticism. It has been pointed out that newspapers such as *infoLibre* and *eldiario.es* were created to advocate social justice and to serve people’s needs instead of business needs (Rubio Jordán, 2014). This stance explains the results of our study, insofar as online-only opinion was less fiscally conservative in 2014. In the context of the global economic crisis, the fact that there were no favorable mentions of reductions in public spending in 2014 contrasts with the stance adopted by international media such as BBC News Online, which has advocated cutting public spending (Salter, 2012).

As a result, this analysis differs from former studies that confirmed the predominance of conservative digital media in Spain with a marked antileft opinion until 2011 (Almiron, 2006; Pineda & Almiron, 2013).

Our first research question can be answered by stating that there was a certain shift to the left in online-only opinion journalism between 2011 and 2014. In 2011, the conclusions on the leanings of Spanish digital media indicated that conservative or very conservative ideologies were being cherished by opinion journalism (Pineda & Almiron, 2013, p. 571). For instance, in its opposition to taxes, in 2011, *Libertad Digital* could be interpreted as adopting a libertarian/conservative attitude in terms of economics. In 2014, however, conservatism and ultraconservatism lessened. Although we must be cautious in generalizing from one-month samples, our comparative analysis indicates that the digital newspapers that flourished in the age of austerity somehow challenged the predominance of right-wing opinions, thus answering our second research question.

In any case, the idea of a "shift to the left" must be understood as something mostly related to the political sphere. In other words, Spanish left-wing digital opinion seems to be more political than ideological. The online-only press was not much more radical in 2014, but it was strongly critical of the PP's handling of the government and, up to a certain point, the political class. To this we can add the positive consideration of organizations that are to the left of the two-party system, such as IU. However, publications such as *Público.es*, *eldiario.es*, or *infoLibre* did not produce an opinion journalism that offered a systematic critique of capitalism and the free-market ideology; it is remarkable that the business class, for example, received a negative consideration in the columns of *Público.es*, and at the same time the antitax dogma (a central element of fiscal conservatism) seemed to be quite strong.

Our results are not only in line with the notion that Spanish journalism is politically partisan (Sebastián, 2009, p. 41); what is more, online-only newspapers emerge as a relevant field for the study of the role of the press in polarized pluralistic systems such as the one found in Spain (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). In addition, the politicization of commentary leads us to interesting questions regarding the image of independence that some outlets want to project. For instance, *El Confidencial's* editor Nacho Cardero stated, "We are not tied to any big media group or any political party" (cited in Penketh, Oltermann, & Burgen, 2014, para. 9). However, in 2011, *El Confidencial's* columns gave nine positive valuations (and zero negative mentions) to the PP, but left-leaning parties did not receive a single positive consideration.

This article has attempted to contribute to the scholarship on online-only newspapers. The analysis shows that digital-only journalism is a productive object of study with a consolidated tendency toward politicization and a spectrum of opinions that can go beyond mainstream print newspapers. Given the relevance that digital journalism is acquiring, more research is needed to delineate the political biases of newspapers that have not been included in our sample, as well as comparative studies between Spanish online journalism and that of other countries. Another interesting line of research could be a comparative analysis of left-wing digital outlets and non-online-only newspapers such as the weekly *Diagonal* or the biweekly *La Directa*, which give voice to social movements that resist global capitalism (Zhu, 2011, p. 41), to see up to what point the focus on economic issues differs in both types of newspapers.

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