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Press coverage and civic engagement

Press coverage and civic engagement during the euro crisis: The case of the Indignados

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Three years after it spontaneously emerged in the squares of Madrid, Barcelona, and other major Spanish cities, the movement of the *Indignados* remains the most organized and vocal form of civic resistance to the ways European governments responded to the euro crisis. Initiated as a grassroots protest against austerity measures in Spain on 15 May 2011, the movement soon spread to Greece, with protesters taking over the Syntagma Square in Athens. The *Indignados*¹ was a response to the failures of the economic and political system to which it attempted to provide an alternative. It also brought to the fore the voice of European citizens, the people, who had hitherto remained to a large extent excluded from the political processes and economic decisions of European leaders.

The movement has been linked to the Arab revolutions of 2011 and has been celebrated as the predecessor of the Occupy movement (Oikonomakis and Roos 2013). It has also been extensively discussed in relation to the extensive use of social media by the protesters during the organization of the movement (Gerbaudo 2012). What we provide here is a discussion of the way the Spanish *Indignados* and Greek *Aganaktismenoi* were covered in the mainstream press in Spain and Greece. We argue that, unlike the dominant paradigm of protest coverage, the movement was overall favourably treated by the mainstream media. Despite this positive coverage, however, or perhaps because of it, the movement has arguably failed to visibly shape actual policy-making processes and established political institutions. By focusing on the spectacular and celebratory elements of the protests, press coverage might have indeed detracted public attention from the attempts of the *Indignados* to provide constructive political input and in the long run undermined its potential impact and legacy in popular imagination.

Covering the Indignados: The protests as a media event

Research on the dynamics between media and protest groups has repeatedly highlighted the use of established templates (McLeod and Hertog 1999) or frames (Gitlin 1980) in the reporting of protests (see McCurdy 2012 for a comprehensive review). Characteristics of this 'protest paradigm' (Chan and Lee 1984) are the focus on the controversial or violent aspects of the protests at the expense of their causes, the use of formulaic, violent images, and the reliance on official sources, which ultimately lead to the de-legitimization of the protesters' claims and even in their demonization (McLeod and Hertog 1999). Such framing of the protests, it is argued, is important as it significantly impacts public discourse and understanding (Gamson 1989, 2005).

What we propose here is that the coverage of the *Indignados* greatly differed from this well-researched and detailed framework of mainstream reporting. Not only did the reporting of the protests not comply with the negative templates of such coverage but both protesters and their actions were mostly celebrated in the national newspapers. According to our observations on a sample including the centre-right newspapers *El Mundo* and *Kathimerini* and centre-left *El Pais* and *Eleftherotypia* in Spain and Greece, respectively, this was evident in newspapers of both sides of the political spectrum.²

As in other cases of protests, the focus of the reporting was on the spectacle. However, what stands out in the protests of the *Indignados* was the construction of this spectacle not as controversial or dramatic but as a celebration. This celebratory reporting mostly focused on the heterogeneity of the protesting crowd, inclusive of people of different social strata, and age groups, ranging from unemployed youth to pensioners and disenchanted professionals. Constant press references to this heterogeneity ('*couples*', '*groups of friends*', '*small children with their parents*') constructed a colourful pastiche of protesters in stark contrast to negative images of them as destructors observed in other demonstrations (McLeod and Detenber 1999). Daily references to the increasing number of protesters during the first days of the movements in different cities further strengthened the construction of the protests as nationwide celebrations and legitimate democratic expressions of unrest.

Part of this colourful spectacle composed of diverse citizen voices was an emotional style of reporting. This emotionality was not only evident in the focus on the emotional reactions of the protesters, such as anger, optimism or bewilderment, but also in the abandonment of the detached reporting style in favour of a celebratory tone, usually

reserved for national ceremonial events (Dayan and Katz 1992). Expressions such as '*magical*', '*a miracle*', '*something new*', '*something that cannot be defined*' were used by the Spanish and Greek press, especially in the first days of the protests, to describe the spectacle of the protesters coming together to occupy the squares. In that respect, the protests were covered as media events, namely as ceremonial events that interrupted the routines of daily media flow and brought together national audiences, triggering a sense of media-induced solidarity (Dayan and Katz 1992).

Significant in the construction of this celebratory spectacle was the focus on the 'aesthetics of nonviolence' (Postill forthcoming) the movement represented both in Spain and in Greece. The peaceful character of the demonstrations was highlighted in the press, which constructed protesters as law-abiding but indignant citizens whose tools of resistant and revolt was the occupation of public spaces through sitting (*sentadas*) and camping (*acampadas*) and marches. A number of articles, especially in the Spanish press, were devoted to the description of the organization of the movement, the multiplicity of small assemblies and their transversal way of collaboration across different socio-demographic groups.

At the heart of this unconventional reporting of the protests both as a celebratory and a peaceful congregation of citizens was the focus on the independence of the movement from official party lines and political alliances. A reaction against the established political model and disenchanted from traditional processes, the *Indignados* defined themselves as opposed to the political system and its established parties and claimed to offer a democratic alternative to the political status quo. This character of the movement was highlighted and celebrated in the mainstream press as 'apolitical' (*apolitik*). The protesters were often described as devoid of political affiliation or even people that had never before participated in protests. The failure of Left-wing parties (such as the IU, ERC or PSOE in Spain and KKE in Greece) to capitalize on the movement was reported as a triumph of the *Indignados* to safeguard their 'apolitical' ethos. In a similar vein, the responses of the political parties were described as '*surprised*' and '*attempts to decode*' a movement that they found unsettling in so far as it was outside institutionalized political organizations and trade unions that could be politically amenable and therefore unthreatening.

Besides the positive light through which the *Indignados* were reported in the mainstream press, there was a second important way this reporting differed from traditional templates in the coverage of protest movements, namely the focus on the personal and the provision of space for the voices of individual citizens to be heard. Unlike the majority of media research that has pointed out the bias of traditional media to rely on statements from authorities and official sources (McLeod and Hertog 1999), our exploration indicates that the stories and voices of individual movement participants were at the forefront in the press coverage of the *Indignados*, especially during the first days of the protests. These stories were reported as illustrative of the heterogeneity of the protesting crowd and the apolitical character of the movement, as they focused on the particular circumstances and motives of the participants. Commonly starting by naming the protesters with phrases such as '*Ana, writer and librarian[...]*', '*Ramon, a civil-servant[...]*', '*Maria, a secretary until last year, and currently unemployed[...]*', these stories humanized the movement participants, creating empathetic links between them and the public and legitimizing their claims.

Another dominant theme in the coverage of the *Indignados* was the role of social media in the organization and conduct of the protests. What in the relevant literature has been described as the social media revolutions (Christensen 2011) was acknowledged in the press as another element of the '*novel*' character of the movement. This was especially the case in Greece, a country where internet penetration was at 53 per cent in 2011 (World Bank 2014)³ and social media only used by a young educated minority. Interestingly, by describing the role of Facebook and Twitter as tools for the coordination of the protesters, the press also took part in this process. By repeating the names of blogs and Facebook groups, as well as hashtags used by the protesters, such as #nolesvotes and #acampadasol, the press effectively turned itself into a loudspeaker of the movement.

In the meantime, there were of course differences in the ways the movement was reported in the two countries. As the occurrence and character of the protests varied, so did the coverage, not so much in terms of its content, which was overall positively predisposed to the protesters, but mostly in terms of its magnitude. The press coverage of the *Indignados* was much more extensive and persistent in Spain, where the movement originated. Although the initial coverage did not draw links between the different demonstrations across the country, considering them as more or less spontaneous and

idiosyncratic groups, the protests quickly gained popularity among the public and extensive press coverage. They began to be referred to as the 'Indignados' or '15-M' movement, positioned against the political class (*'políticos'*) and financial elites (*'banqueros'*), through slogans such as *'¡Democracia Real Ya!'* (Real Democracy Now!) and *'¡No los votes!'* ('Don't vote for them!'). The articles covering the movement varied, including not only correspondence from the protest sites but also extensive analyses, reflections on the causes of the demonstrations, their endorsement by public figures and the reactions of politicians. The coverage was significantly more extensive in the centre-left *El País*. Despite its initial focus on clashes, *El Mundo's* coverage also evolved to be more favourable and extensive after the first couple of days of the protests.

The Greek *Aganaktismenoi*, born as a direct response to the Spanish *Indignados* but with equally urgent claims and agenda, had admittedly a shorter lifespan both as a protest movement and in terms of its coverage by the mainstream media. The links to the Spanish movement were prominent in the Greek newspapers, especially during the first days of the *Aganaktismenoi* occupying public squares across the country. According to rumours triggered in social media and reported by the mainstream media as a fact, Greeks took to the streets after Spanish protesters were seen holding a banner with the phrase *'¡Silencio, que los griegos están durmiendo!'* (Silence, because the Greeks are sleeping!) (Oikonomakis and Roos 2013). This added a further dimension to the Greek movement and its coverage, as proving to the Spanish *Indignados* that the Greeks were not asleep became an issue of national pride. In the protests, this was illustrated through a banner that responded to the one the Spanish protestors had allegedly held, saying in Spanish, *'Estamos despiertos! Que hora es? Ya es hora de que se vayan!'* (We are awake! What time is it? Time for them to leave!). This banner figured in the media reports, along with comparisons to the Spanish movement and constant references to the increased numbers of Greek protesters. The political status quo, encapsulated in the concept of *'the Parliament'*, and the austerity policies imposed by the Troika and the Greek government were identified by the press as the targets of the rage and indignation of the Greek protesters. Another prevalent theme in the Greek press was the politics of the protest space. After the first days of the peaceful demonstrations, divisions among the protesters became apparent. While the upper part of Syntagma Square was occupied by the diverse 'apolitical' crowd, large part of which was participating in protests for the first time,

action-driven protesters with more evident political orientation, the hard-core part of the movement, congregated in the lower part of the Square (Tsaliki 2012).

A new paradigm for the relationship between media and social movements?

We have so far argued that the coverage of the *Indignados* challenged in a variety of ways the dominant 'protest paradigm' on the basis of which mainstream media tend to report social movements and demonstrations. An explanation of this overall positive media coverage should be approached within the context of the Euro crisis. A European problem with international dimensions, the crisis has questioned the sovereignty of European states. The austerity measures, unemployment, lack of regulation in the banking sector, and most of the other targets of the *Indignados'* revolt have generally been approached as problems caused and imposed by invisible international forces. Similarly, the framing of the movement as against the overall political system, as an impersonal and general force, and its conscious and determined detachment from political parties, including those of the Left that has so far been at the forefront of social movements, arguably rendered the *Indignados* in public discourse more of a signifier of citizens' discontent and frustration and less of a threatening political force for the establishment. The use of the word 'apolitical' in its ambiguity is indicative of this treatment of the movement, as the word can mean both politically non-partisan and disinterested in politics. At the same time, the press hardly managed to place the movement in direct dialogue with mainstream political processes and decision-making. In this context, the reporting of the movement of the *Indignados* acknowledged the presence of a new political subject in the arena of European politics, that of the 'ordinary citizens', the 'people'; but the way this voice was framed ultimately rendered it unthreatening to the political establishment. The reductionist way in which the movement was portrayed ultimately detracted from its potential as a constructive political interlocutor the establishment would need to engage with.

Also, the international character of the movement played a significant role in the way the *Indignados* was reported in the mainstream press. Emerging almost simultaneously in different European countries faced with similar economic and social problems, the movement was seen as a powerful momentum of citizen voices across Europe, defying any possible attempts to frame the protests within domestic politics and traditional media templates. Furthermore, as already discussed above, press coverage was also

underlined by a sense of civic or national pride, for the way citizens were pioneers in establishing new political formations in the case of the Spanish press, and the way the Greek people responded to the Spanish challenges in the Greek press. This sense of intra-national and international competition (between cities and countries) contributed to the celebratory and emotional coverage of the protests by the mainstream newspapers.

At the same time, the positive media reporting of the *Indignados* should not be overestimated. Despite the early enthusiasm, coverage of the protests and the movement had faded away by the end of summer 2011. In the Greek case, this change was also illustrated by the lack of voices of individual protesters that had dominated the coverage in its initial stages. Furthermore, clashes between the protesters and the police on the 28 and 29 of June, while new austerity measures were being voted in the Parliament, were seen as an all too familiar scenery and marked the end of the peaceful protests of *Aganaktismenoi*. In Spain, despite a resurgence of interest in the last week of July, when the *Indignados* occupied once more the Plaza de El Sol in Madrid, the coverage overall gradually diminished. This was not necessarily reflective of the movement itself. Although the protesters did gradually leave the squares they had occupied in May–June 2011, the *Indignados* remained active in many cities and towns in Spain. Even before the dismantling of the camps, the Spanish *Indignados* in particular had taken strategic actions to strengthen the grassroots movement through neighbourhood assemblies and alternative political platforms (Dhaliwal 2012). These practices and projects, some of which remain strong in the present, have not attracted equal attention by the press. An inherent preference of news media to consider newsworthy events rather than processes means that continuous and programmed alternative political engagement and civil resilience are bound to go unnoticed. If the *Indignados* in the squares made for a great spectacle, their follow-up actions have not and are therefore hardly reported. In this context, the coverage of the *Indignados* can be even seen as disempowering the movement, in so far as it fails to illustrate citizen action as capable of producing alternative political solutions (Kostopoulos 2013).

Despite, therefore, the challenges to the protest paradigm that we have illustrated here, the reporting of the *Indignados* is not to be seen as a complete overthrowing of media conventions in the coverage of protests and civil unrest. If the pro-establishment media bias detected in protest reporting by media research was not ostensible here in ways that

the media coverage of previous protests has been, the inherent media bias towards the spectacular contributed to the framing of the *Indignados* in a way that celebrated the peaceful spectacle of the protests but failed to illustrate the relevance of the movement beyond the expression of indignation and the occupation of public spaces. The *Indignados* were portrayed positively by the press because they provided a novel spectacle, which moved beyond traditional ways of protesting. The interplay between the national and international character of the demonstrations turned them into media events, celebrations of citizen solidarity. This coverage, however, did not manage to fully engage with the political character of the movement and the ways it positioned itself in relation to the political status quo, not only in terms of its manifesto but also in its actions, organization, and provision of political alternatives. In the mainstream press, the *Indignados* were the expression of citizens' frustration but never became a symbol of alternative political organization. This of course points to the inherent limitations of traditional media when it comes to the reporting of dynamic social movements such as the *Indignados*. Social media, such as blogs and Twitter, have recently taken up a significant role in representing citizens' voices and covering the protests. In so far as traditional media are the most widely used and trusted platforms of information, though, it is important to keep reflecting on their role in citizen empowerment.

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¹ The movement takes its name from a Stéphane Hessel's (2010) pamphlet '*Indignez-vous!*'

² The discussion is based on a thematic analysis of all stories on the Indignados published by the four papers from the emergence of the movement (16 May 2011) until the end of the summer (31 August 2011). Although nuances can be identified in the way this protest movement was reported, in particular during the first few days, largely press coverage followed a similar pattern across the newspapers analysed.

³ In Spain internet penetration was considerably higher, at 67.7 per cent (World Bank 2014).