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The rise of a new media ecosystem: exploring 15M's educommunicative legacy for radical democracy

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Abstract: This article explores the influence that the educommunicative dimension of the 15M Movement has had on the creation and consolidation of a new ecosystem of independent media. To this end, we rely on a document analysis of the movement's minutes and manifestos and on the review of the editorial principles and educational activities of a sample of independent media. We also draw on ten in-depth interviews with key journalists and activists who actively participated in the 15M. We argue that the movement's media activism had a clear educommunicative orientation that strengthened pre-existing media activism, opening windows of opportunity for media innovation. This contributed to the rise of a new media ecosystem of independent media characterised by three key elements: (1) synergies and mutual support; (2) the key role of the community of subscribers and users; (3) an educational agency with a public service orientation. Finally, we illustrate that this new media ecosystem displays a clear educommunicative orientation. This orientation is rooted in the imaginary and practices of the 15M and is based on the revitalised civic role of journalism and on the value of information for radical democracy. This article advances social movement studies by engaging a dialogue between an educommunicative perspective and a media ecology lens. It articulates the relevance of media as educational agents and explores the impact of a social movement in the creation and shaping of a new media ecosystem.

Keywords: 15M, social movements, educommunication, independent media, media ecologies, radical democracy

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Introduction and outline

The 15M –or *The indignados*– Movement was a cross-cutting social movement that emerged in Spain as a response to the consequences of the 2008 economic crisis (Flesher Fominaya, 2020). It protested against what was perceived as an obsolete political system that catered more to the interests of banks and financial corporations, than to the problems of citizens.

The first manifesto of the 15M, published on 7 March 2011, raised awareness around the economic and political situation in Spain and urged citizens to be actively involved in what they called an “ethical revolution”¹. In this first manifesto, not only a series of demands on specific issues –such as public health, housing policies and labor rights– were made public, but a symbolic imaginary oriented towards the construction of a more open and participatory democracy was expressed (Candón-Mena et al., 2018). After the 15 May demonstrations, this imaginary was further developed. In particular, the movement gave special importance to the role of communication and education processes in raising the awareness of citizens about their role as political actors, the promotion of democratic values and the expansion of spaces for participation in the public sphere: communication and education were, for *the Indignados*, the means through which a utopia of radical democracy could be reached.

While the communicative dimension of the 15M has been studied from different perspectives (Castells, 2012; Micó & Casero-Ripollés, 2014; Postill, 2014), the relationship between communication and education processes in the Spanish movement has received less attention. There are works that mention the relevance of learning in relation to prefigurative politics and deliberative democracy practices (Hernández et al., 2013; Razquin, 2017; Romanos, 2013) and a few studies have addressed this aspect from the paradigm of educommunication (Barbas, 2020).

This article digs deeper into this relationship, exploring the influence that the educommunicative dimension of the 15M Movement has had on the creation and consolidation of a new media ecosystem constituted by several so-called independent media. We refer to the media that emerged after the 15M’s outbreak and that altered the media ecosystem of political communication in Spain (Flesher Fominaya & Gillan, 2017).

We link the educommunicative orientation of the 15M with the principles and practices of independent media. We argue that the 15M’s media activism strengthened pre-existing media activism and its educommunicative dimension, and established the conditions of possibility for media innovation. We illustrate that the new independent media have coalesced into a media ecosystem sustained on a social contract between the media and its users, based on the value of information committed to social justice and democracy. Ultimately, we demonstrate that this new media ecosystem has a clear educommunicative orientation that is rooted in the imaginary and practices of the 15M for radical democracy.

The structure of the article consists of the following sections. We start outlining an interdisciplinary theoretical framework comprised of three research streams. Firstly, we

connect the symbolic-cultural perspective of collective behaviour theories with knowledge production and learning in social movements. We point out that a dialogue between these currents and the tradition of educommunication has not been established yet. Secondly, we look at the paradigm of educommunication and its conception of the media as educational agents and means of learning. Thirdly, we introduce the media ecology approach and blend it with the educommunication paradigm showing that every media ecosystem is always an ecosystem of knowledge and learning.

We then outline our methodology that combines the analysis of movement's documents with ten in-depth interviews with journalists and activists who contributed to the establishment of the independent media. Subsequently, we explore the influence of the educommunicative dimension of the 15M on the creation and consolidation of a new ecosystem of independent media. We illustrate our findings along three areas of analysis: (1) the educommunicative dimension of the 15M; (2) the influence of the movement on the strengthening of media activism and on the pre-existing educommunicative dimension; and (3) the key traits of this new media ecosystem, its educommunicative orientation and its implications for radical democracy. Finally, we reflect on the contributions of our article and sketch future avenues for inquiry.

Theoretically, this article brings three innovative elements to the study of social movements, communication and democracy: (a) it brings into dialogue an educommunicative perspective with social movement studies highlighting the relevance of the media as educational agents and means of learning; (b) it blends the educommunicative perspective with the media ecology approach to explore the impact of a social movement in the shaping of a new ecosystem of independent media; (c) it illustrates that this new media ecosystem has a clear educommunicative orientation. This orientation is rooted in the imaginary and practices of the 15M and is based on a revitalized civic role of journalism at the service of social justice and democracy. Hence, our findings also contribute to broader debates about the relationships between civil society, the media and deliberative democracy.

Social movements, knowledge production and learning processes

Social movements operate as pedagogical-political actors insofar as their pursuit of cultural transformation involves learning processes aimed at raising awareness and empowering citizens (della Porta & Diani, 2020). In order to ground this pedagogical-political perspective we connect theories of collective behaviour with both theories of knowledge production and learning in social movements.

In relation to the research currents in the field of social movement studies, we rely on the symbolic-cultural perspective of collective behaviour. This current focuses on the study of the processes, repertoire of actions and forms through which social movements generate a specific symbolic production, alternative to the dominant one, or in response to that symbolic production with which they seek to confront their ideas, demands or socio-cultural models (Gusfield, 1994). To carry out such production, social movements create their own media. These may generate changes in how people view the world, contributing to broader cultural transformations. In this sense, social movements use the media as pedagogical tools at the service of social change (Barbas & Postill, 2017).

From this perspective, contentious collective action has a cultural character but also a cognitive character (Holford, 1995). This allows us to connect the symbolic-cultural approach of theories of collective behaviour with works that address the production of knowledge of social movements and with the social movement learning current (Hall et al., 2012).

Some works explore the ways in which social movements create and transmit knowledge, as well as its variety and typology (Casas-Cortés et al., 2008; Chesters, 2012). Social movements are, in this sense, laboratories of knowledge production (della Porta & Pavan, 2017) or “epistemic communities” (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991). This approach has also been developed in works by currents closer to theories of collective behaviour (Laraña, 1996) and in recent contributions that comprehensively address the study of the 15M understood as a laboratory of political and democratic innovation (Feenstra et al., 2017; Flesher Fominaya, 2020).

Closer to Pedagogy, we find works more based on educational epistemologies, where explicit reference is made to the tradition of popular education understood as a social movement (Cox & Flesher Fominaya, 2009; Cox, 2014). These works incorporate an important part of the literature on social movement learning, illuminating a dialogue between both streams of research.

Social movement learning is a pedagogical research current which draws mainly on the tradition of popular and adult education, but that has been greatly influenced by new social movements studies (Finger, 1989; Welton, 1993). It recognizes social movements as rich learning environments. In recent years, important efforts have also been made to systematize this current of research and its encounters with other disciplines (Niesz et al., 2018; Kuk & Tarlau, 2020). In this regard, although we can find connections between scholars of social movement learning and scholars of social movement studies, who point out the centrality of the media for education and social change, there is no evidence of dialogue between these research currents and educommunication.

Educommunication paradigm

Educommunication emerged during the second half of the 1960s within the Latin American School of Communication, as part of the intellectual response to developmentalist policies driven by international institutions² in the context of the struggles of social movements against inequalities, poverty and illiteracy.

Its philosophy and practice are nourished by the work of Paulo Freire in the field of popular education (Freire, 1965, 1970); as well as the contributions of other authors dedicated to finding ways to articulate communication and education as a theoretical-practical tool for social transformation (Díaz, 1976; Prieto, 1979; Kaplún, 1985). Communication and education began to be seen as constitutive parts of the same training process with a strong socio-political component aimed at promoting awareness, empowerment and emancipation of the most disadvantaged populations.

Although there is no academic consensus when it comes to defining educommunication (Buitrago et al. 2017; Cohen-Montoya, 2021; Huergo, 2000), we rely on its epistemological development and its transdisciplinary nature to define it as a field of study focused on the relationships established between communicative and educational

processes in a comprehensive, dynamic and interdependent manner. We conceive educommunication as a unified conceptual tool for theoretical reflection and praxis. While this general conceptualization may have different practical concretions, we see educommunication as a paradigm which studies the communicative dimension of education and the educative dimension of communication. Within this framework, another strand of educommunication focuses on media literacy (Tyner, 2010), that is the educational initiatives focused on teaching and learning how to use the media and ICT. Media literacy aims to provide skills and knowledge to foster participation and civic engagement by using the media.

We understand educommunication as a form of socio-critical pedagogy that conceives the media as both educational agents and means and tools for learning how to participate in social and political processes. Hence, educommunication is engaged in empowering citizens by using the media and in promoting long-term cultural and social transformations. The epistemology of educommunication provides a paradigmatic positioning for the analysis and implementation of communication-education dynamics, developed by social movements, as part of their repertoire of actions aimed at expanding political participation spaces and develop practices of radical democracy.

The media ecology approach

Media and social movements scholars have increasingly started to rely on media ecology framework to make sense of the uses of communication technologies in protests, and more generally in processes aimed at social change and political transformation. The media ecology approach aims to disentangle the ‘communicative complexity’ of social movements by focusing on how activists engage holistically and critically with a wide ecology of media technologies to organize, mobilize, influence public opinion and pursue radical change (Treré, 2019; Foust & Hoyt, 2018). Inspired by the media ecology tradition that conceives the media as complex environments, the strength of this approach lies in its holistic gaze that does not privilege any specific technology, but instead investigate how activists, in their movement-related practices, make sense of, navigate and merge newer and older media formats, physical and digital spaces, internal and external forms of communication, as well as alternative and corporate social media. Even if within media ecology studies of protest movements, the educational dimension has been usually neglected, educommunication and media ecology share the critique of –and the necessity to overcome– the instrumental role of the media within collective action. They both focus on the role of the media and technologies as active agents that are able to (re)shape various dimensions and dynamics of social movements.

In this paper, we bring together these two conceptual lenses to foreground the importance of looking at the communicative complexity of social movements, in particular to the role of the media as means and tools for learning and socio-political transformation. Every media is an educational agent. Therefore, every media ecosystem is always also an ecosystem of knowledges and learning, that is an educational media ecosystem.

Methods

This article aims to explore the influence that the educommunicative dimension of the 15M has had on the creation and consolidation of a new media ecosystem constituted by several so-called independent media. To do this, we blend document analysis with in-depth interviews. The document analysis has been divided into two parts. The first part had three main objectives: (1) to identify discursive aspects in the minutes and manifestos of the 15M related to communication, education, citizen participation and democracy; (2) to identify projects and media created by the 15M; and (3) to identify training projects carried out by the movement.

Documents prepared by the movement at different times were reviewed (see Table 1). We also relied on ethnographic research carried out during the years 2014 and 2015 on the educational communication of the 15M, where 23 communication projects developed by the movement were detected (Barbas & Postill, 2017), and a list of alternative media hosted in the *15Mpedia* project site.

[TABLE 1]

We then reviewed the training projects carried out by three collectives that originated from the movement (see Table 2).

[TABLE 2]

The second part of the document analysis consisted in selecting a sample of independent media from the “Independent media platform” (Table 3). Their selection was guided by the following criteria: (a) the media should have emerged after the 15M; (b) they should cover all types of information (not specialised); and (c) they should include training projects among their activities. The selected media were *La Marea*, *El Salto* and *Cxt*. We carried out a review of their editorial principles and training activities.

[TABLE 3]

The ten in-depth interviews aimed at studying the perceptions of both journalists from the selected media and journalists who actively participated in the 15M on the educommunicative influence of the movement on the creation and consolidation of independent media. The questions focused on three fundamental topics: (1) the mutual influences between the 15M, media activism as well as independent journalism; (2) their public service orientation, that is, to what extent they position themselves and act as a service of public utility that helps to know and understand the world outside of partisan or economic interests; and (3) their educational agency, that is, the pedagogical intentionality of their journalistic action and its contribution to an informed and critical citizenship. Purposive sampling was combined with snowball or referral sampling, which helped to meet new informants (Gentles et al. 2015). The interviews were conducted in Spanish and subsequently translated into English by the authors of this article. Their duration ranged from sixty to ninety minutes. The final selection of the sample of informants and their related information are illustrated in Table 4.

[TABLE 4]

Transcribed interviews and documents were inputted and analysed with Nvivo following the principles of content analysis and thematic coding (Flick, 2018).

Findings have been structured following three categories of analysis that have been elaborated inductively from a dialogue between the aim of the research, the conceptual

framework and the data collected. These are: (1) the educommunicative dimension of the 15M; (2) the influence of the 15M on the strengthening of media activism and of its pre-existing educommunicative dimension; and, (3) the creation and consolidation of a new media ecosystem. These categories are explained and developed in the following section.

Findings

We present the findings structured according to the above-mentioned categories of analysis. We show that the movement had a clear educational intentionality that was largely channeled and developed through the media. Nevertheless, we state that the alliances between activism and independent journalism were already created before the emergence of the 15M. Moreover, we hold that the educommunicative dimension was inherent in the action of social movements and in the activist media, even if the 15M opened windows of opportunity for media innovation strengthening this dimension. Finally, we illustrate the existence of a new media ecosystem whose traits reveal the educommunicative legacy of the 15M.

The educommunicative dimension of the 15M

The 15M had a clear educommunicative orientation. Relying on the previous definition of educommunication, we appreciate that this orientation was expressed from the creation and appropriation of media as means and objects of learning. This was a key tool for the movement within its struggle to build a radical democracy. In the following lines, we disentangle these aspects.

The movement's founding manifesto which was disseminated on 20 May 2011 from the tent-city of *Puerta del Sol* in Madrid, already included concepts and ideas such as "participatory democracy", "direct democracy" and "popular access to the media, which must be ethical and truthful"³; likewise, platforms as *Democracia Real ¡Ya!* (*Real democracy, now!*) included several claimings referring to "citizen freedoms and participatory democracy"⁴ and a list drawn up by the *15Mpedia* project show that education, direct democracy and citizen participation were the most frequent proposals made by several 15M collectives⁵. Therefore, from the outset, alongside demands for a more inclusive and participatory democracy, there was a demand for education and criticism of the mainstream media.

The communicational dimension of the 15M became evident with the creation of the movement's own media and communication projects. As various authors have pointed out (Barranquero & Meda, 2015; Candón, 2014), one of the defining characteristics of the 15M was the importance given to communication; for that reason, the 15M was defined as a communicational movement (Barranquero, 2014). In the words of Tomás Muñoz, journalist at *Diagonal* and *El Salto* and 15M activist: "from the first moment it was clear to us that taking care of communication was strategic".

The frenetic and fruitful activity of the movement in the creation of a wide range of media and experimental communication projects, which made it possible to generate what Feenstra and Casero-Ripollés (2012) have defined as a hybrid information environment. This aspect represents an extraordinary change in relation to the hegemony of the mainstream media in Spain, and it exemplifies the cultural nature of the movement (Laraña & Díez, 2012; Candón, 2014).

We find a relationship between the communicational and educational dimension of the 15M, insofar as some of its communication projects possessed a pedagogical

intentionality oriented to change people's minds to generate socio-cultural transformations at a broader level (Laraña & Díez, 2012; Perugorría & Tejerina, 2013). In other words, some of these projects –e.g., *Audiovisol*, *Tomalatele* or *Ágora Sol Radio*– were created not only to spread information bypassing the filter of the mainstream media, but also to promote citizen education around economic, political, and social issues. In these cases, educational communication processes were developed, since media operated as means and tools of learning, in alignment with the epistemology of educommunication (Kaplún, 1985; Prieto, 1998).

Likewise, other researchers have underlined the pedagogical nature of the 15M in two ways. On the one hand, as a generator of informal education dynamics through the creation of spaces for participation where deliberative democratic processes were put into practice (Hernández et al., 2013; Razquin, 2017; Romanos, 2013). In other words, the construction of participatory democracy implied learning to participate and putting participatory processes into practice, in such a way that participation was both a tool and an objective in itself, as it is understood from popular education (Gil-Jaurena, et al., 2021) and from educommunication (Gozálvez-Pérez & Contreras-Pulido, 2014). As Pablo Elorduy points out, the 15M generated processes of citizen literacy in terms of political discussion and what in Spanish is known as *prácticas asamblearias* (*assembly-based movement organizing practices*); something that Javier Gallego defines as “a political university in the squares”. For Patricia Simón, the interaction between people from different backgrounds led to a multidisciplinary dialogue that influenced the way in which journalism related to public opinion. On the other hand, as an educational agent promoting more formalised education initiatives, that can be categorized as “pedagogical sovereignty” (Barbas & Postill, 2017). Many of those educational initiatives were oriented towards media literacy, insofar as the construction of participatory democracy required learning to participate and this implied, in turn, having specific knowledge and media skills to be able to engage also through the media and ICT. Therefore, as the movement developed processes of educational communication through media content production to educate, also carried out more formalized training initiatives which aimed teaching key media skills to people through the use of the media and ICT. In such cases, the media worked as both means and objects of learning *in themselves*, establishing a connection to media education studies (Tyner, 2010; Buckingham, 2013).

Table 2 shows key examples of the 15M's training initiatives, some of them aimed specifically at media literacy, such as: creation and development of online radio stations; activist uses of social media and digital devices; dissemination of demands and calls; coordination of actions; denouncement of police abuse; digital creation techniques; data security protocols, etc. During the movement's peak period (2011-2015) these types of training projects were very common. In line with the social movement learning approach, activists deploy a wide range of learning resources (Niesz et al., 2018; Kuk & Tarlau, 2020). Nevertheless, this approach has neglected learning developed through media practices. This signals the importance of the educommunication paradigm and the necessary dialogue with social movement studies.

The strengthening of the pre-existing educommunication dimension of media activism

Since late 2010 and early 2011, students joined housing rights activists and the free culture movement in the organisation of protests against the political system. This system was seen as incapable of responding to the huge increase of unemployment and

inequality. Moreover, the frequent cases of political corruption were also undermining citizens' trust in the institutions. These groups shared hopelessness towards representative democratic system, together with the need to raise people's awareness and promote forms of direct action.

Whereas mainstream media were not focusing on civil society's responses to the economic, social and political crisis in Spain prior the 15M's outbreak, independent media from Madrid, such as the newspaper *Diagonal* and the radio show *Carne Cruda*, did report on the citizens' mobilizations that would lead to the demonstrations on 15 May. On 4 May 2011, *Diagonal* published a news item reporting on the protest actions that would give rise to the 15M Movement. The headline read: *El 15 de mayo la indignación tiene un plan (On 15 May, indignation has a plan)*. *Carne Cruda* also reported on the social protests that were taking place in Spain, clearly positioning itself as an advocate of the people most affected by the crisis and calling for mobilisations. On 31 January 2011, they disseminated an editorial entitled *¿Qué hace falta para que nos encendamos? (What does it take to get us fired up?)* and on 11 May they interviewed the authors of the book *¡Reacciona! (React!)* to address the 15 May's demonstrations.

Diagonal was a newspaper created in Madrid that began to take shape in 2003 in the context of the alter-globalization movement and the demonstrations against the Iraq war (López and Roig, 2004). It was a reference for the social movements of the time and its forms of organization based on self-management and horizontality served as a model for some of the independent media that would emerge years later. *Diagonal* wove a dense network of relationships with activism and played a key role in journalists' training as Patricia Simón and Tomás Muñoz explained in the interviews. Many of these journalists later contributed to the emergence and growth of the 15M (M^a Ángeles Fernández); in a way, *Diagonal* became "the media of the movement, especially during the first weeks" (Tomás Muñoz).

Carne Cruda is a radio show that was born in 2009 with a clear activism orientation. Its creator and director, journalist Javier Gallego, points out that it is a show inspired by the spirit of activist and counter-cultural media. He refers to media as *Diagonal* newspaper and community-based and pirate radio stations (Javier Gallego). It was broadcasted on mainstream radio stations until 2014, when it began to be aired on the Internet funded through the contributions of its subscribers in collaboration with *elDiario.es*, one of the most important independent media to emerge from the outbreak of the 15M.

These two examples show that a connection between independent-activist media and the seeds of the 15M was already strong from the beginning. Likewise, the creative power that emanated from the 15M influenced the creation and characteristics of the independent media that emerged from then. From the point of view of Javier Gallego and Tomás Muñoz, the 15M permeated everything, including old and new media. Similarly, Clara Jiménez and Pablo Hernández point out the powerful influence that the 15M had on the creation of *Maldita.es*. Magda Bandera nuances this influence, remarking that activist and independent media already existed before the 15M and refers to the significance of community-based radio stations and newspapers such as the aforementioned *Diagonal* (2005), but also others as *L'Avanç* (1999) and *La Directa* (2006).

Indeed, activist and independent media already existed before the 15M. In addition, as Tomás Muñoz remarks, the groups who organised the protests that would trigger the

outbreak of the movement already had a long experience in activist communication due to their involvement in some flagship media projects of Spanish activism –*Nodo50*, *Sindominio* and *Diagonal*, among others– which usually organized workshops and training on media activism and counter-information (Tomás Muñoz). As studies of social movement learning have shown, activists often create and engage in learning environments (Welton, 1993). Thus, there were many people interested in deploying the possibilities of communication, including the creation of their own media as pedagogical tools (M^a Ángeles Fernández). This shows that the educommunicative dimension was already part of the activist media strategies prior to the 15M, even though such media practices had not been examined through educommunication so far.

It is important to consider this aspect in the context of the economic crisis to understand that the increase in activism and the creation of new independent media are two derivations of the same phenomenon, that is: the 15M as “a transversal social movement” (Javier Gallego) that strengthened the pre-existing educommunicative dimension of media activism and influenced the creation of an independent media ecosystem - as we will see in the next section. In this sense, the 15M opened windows of opportunity for media innovation: “the 15M promoted changes, it created vias, generated possibilities” (Javier Bauluz).

A new media ecosystem

The 15M emerged in the context of the 2008 global economic crisis, that hit the journalism sector hard. The drop in sales of the print newspapers and the decrease in advertising revenues damaged newsrooms. A significant number of journalists were forced to work under precarious conditions, or had to leave the field of journalism and look for jobs in other sectors. As Vanesa Jiménez clarifies, this also had an effect on the lack of freedom of journalists and on the loss of influence and credibility of the mainstream media. In this context, digital media such as *FronteraD* (2009), *Periodismo Humano* (2010), *Pikara* (2010) and *Cuarto Poder* (2010) emerged, attracting a significant number of readers due to their open content and coverage of topics that were not usually addressed by mainstream media (human rights, feminism, social movements, etc.).

As Javier Bauluz and Patricia Simón point out, “there was a need for people to read and listen to journalism that was different from traditional journalism, with a different approach” (Javier Bauluz). In addition, this approach was linked to an ethical commitment that implied “putting information at the service of the social interest” (Patricia Simón). This phenomenon has been analyzed in several studies (Peña-Ascacibar & Álvarez-Peralta, 2021; Tuñez et al., 2010; Rubio, 2014) and defined as the crisis and regeneration of journalism (Rius, 2018).

As the following excerpts from our interviews illustrate, most of our informants agree in pointing out a change in the media paradigm engendered by the economic, social and political crisis and a loss of legitimacy of the mainstream media: “People were not being listened to, society had many things to say that were not being transmitted in the media” (Clara Jiménez); “during that period the number of people who demanded another way of doing journalism increased” (Magda Bandera); “many people stopped consuming the information produced by the mainstream media” (Tomás Muñoz).

Another important event is represented by the wave of redundancies carried out during 2012 by some of the most important media in Spain, which despite leaving several hundred journalists unemployed, also represented an opportunity for innovation and

collective creation. As Pablo Elorduy and M^a Ángeles Fernández point out, this was a key aspect for the formation of a new independent media. More specifically, it allowed many journalists to get in touch with people with whom they did not usually share spaces for political participation, generating a creative force that was reflected in multiple initiatives including new media.

Between 2012 and 2018, media such as *elDiario.es*, *La Marea*, *Ctxt*, *Alternativas Económicas*, *El Salto* or *InfoLibre* emerged. Some of them in the context of the wave of the 15M protest in Spain and others not directly connected to the protests but influenced by them. Even if these media have particular origins and specific traits, they are all the result of the same economic, political and social earthquake that was channelled and expressed by the 15M. To a large extent, these media adopted some of the demands of the 15M. They knew how to interpret the claims of a significant part of citizens regarding the role of media within society. These media are committed to independence and to the empowerment of journalists, as well as the flourishing of their community of readers and subscribers. Through their critical approach, they have reclaimed the dignity of a journalism that is centred on public service. These media have created different business models, each with their own internal policies and funding strategies. Yet, as we will see below, we can identify some common traits among them, which leads us to consider them as a new media ecosystem with an educommunicative orientation that is rooted in the imaginary and practices of the 15M for radical democracy. Our research complements other studies that have already theorized about media ecologies and the *Indignados* (Treré, 2018; Feenstra & Casero-Ripollés, 2012; Flesher Fominaya & Gillan, 2017). More specifically, it further ground Flesher Fominaya and Gillan's (2017, p. 391) reflections on the ways the movement not only appropriated a multifaceted ecosystem of technologies,

[...] but provided a support base and impetus for the development of various critical media initiatives that attempted to put into practice alternative media business models [...]. While some such initiatives existed prior to 15-M [...], the supply of and demand for independent critical media increased in a virtuous circle, with mobilization enabling the emergence of independent critical 'mass' media, thus altering the media ecology of political communication in Spain.

Next, we shed light on the common elements that define this media ecosystem, namely: the existence of synergies and mutual support; the fundamental role of the community of subscribers and users; an educational agency with a public service orientation.

Synergies and mutual support

Many of the independent media that have emerged in recent years have been creating synergies and collaborations among themselves. This collaboration became more solid on 2 April 2020, when seventeen media joined together to call on the government to protect plurality and quality of information⁶. A few months later, on 8 September, sixteen of these media created the *Plataforma de Medios Independientes (Independent media platform)*⁷. It was created to advocate the interests and sustainability of independent media and as a tool for collaboration and mutual support. So far, the platform has not had a structured organisation with tasks and specific functions. However, in November 2021 they started to carry out new actions including joint manifestos, creation of common content and alliances to shape their own media agenda. While these newer actions fall outside the scope of this article, they represent key developments that will need to receive academic attention in the future. Vanesa Jiménez establishes a similarity between the imaginary of the 15M and the imaginary of this

platform. The aim of this platform is to serve as a tool for mutual support, as a means of making collective demands and develop concrete projects: “although we are very different, we have many things in common and we need each other” (Magda Bandera).

All of them share the need to practice a journalism at the service of society and not at the service of economic or partisan interests. Despite the difficulties derived from being small media and the self-imposed restrictions of their funding policies –which guarantee their autonomy and credibility–, many of these media are supported by an important community of subscribers and users whose role has been key to create and consolidate a media ecosystem in itself.

The community of subscribers and users

Independent media are largely financed by fees paid by their subscribers. This has a fundamental importance not only for the economic sustainability of the projects, but also for the added value that they bring. The process of crisis, citizens’ reactions and innovations, which we file under the umbrella of the “15M Movement”, fostered the generation of a specific kind of critical user with a clear civic engagement who contributes by paying subscription fees and/or acting as a node of information transmission, and who Javier Gallego defines as “an activist of the independent media”.

In this sense, Pablo Elorduy, Vanesa Jiménez and M^a Ángeles Fernández consider that the 15M created a mass of critical and committed people, who currently maintain their commitment through the support they give to independent media. In a way, we could say that, just as in the era of mainstream media hegemony readers established an emotional and ideological link with traditional newspapers, critical users have also established an emotional and ideological link with the independent media. Also, it is important to underline that independent media share subscribers and users, so that the mediaecosystem that has been created is characterised by a contract of trust between media and users based on a compromise between a way of doing journalism and a way of constructing society: “Our future lies in continuing to cultivate a relationship of trust and commitment with our readers, remaining faithful to our ethical principles and caring for information as a public service” (Magda Bandera).

Educational agency and public service orientation

Our informants agree that the kind of journalism they do, based on a public service orientation, was already there, before the 15M, because it constitutes the essence of journalism. In their opinion, the independent media are rescuing and dignifying a way of doing journalism based on civic engagement. Indeed, in our review of the editorial principles, we found clear references to this public service orientation and civic engagement (see Table 3), an aspect that was corroborated in the interviews.

For Vanesa Jiménez, these media have recovered an old idea of journalism: “it is a journalism of analysis and context; a journalism that has a critical component, that permanently questions and seeks answers”. According to the deputy director of *Ctxt*, “it is also a journalism that is very respectful of the readers, because it assumes that they are intelligent, educated, with a critical thought”. It is a journalism “committed to the people, to the citizens’ right to freedom of information and expression”. For this journalist, all this is –plain and simple– “doing journalism”, without tags.

Javier Bauluz, Magda Bandera and Patricia Simón also expressed similar arguments. The winner of the Pulitzer Prize stresses the value of public service journalism, since information should be at the service of citizens and not at the service of economic or

partisan groups. This remark is part of a climate of opinion that has spread among Spaniards since the 2008 crisis, especially in the wake of the protests of the Indignados. According to such view, mainstream media work at the service of economic and partisan interests and not at the service of citizens' needs. This was another trigger for the emergence of new journalistic projects in the context of the media paradigm change that we mention above. For the director of *La Marea*, "all media should be public service media. Working from the idea of public service journalism simply means being journalists, doing journalism with honesty and rigour". This is an idea with which the co-founder of *Periodismo Humano* and reporter for *La Marea* also agrees, when she underlines the value of journalism "as a pillar of public ethics". This way of understanding journalism is in line with the demands of the 15M in relation to the importance of the media in protecting and strengthening democratic values.

This public service orientation, revitalised by the key role played by the community of users, has a pedagogical intentionality insofar as independent media journalists aim not only to produce rigorous information, but also to contribute cross-cutting issues with a treatment that goes beyond the immediate or the stereotyped and polarised representation of reality. Eventually, they contribute to develop critical thinking among citizens. Patricia Simón points out that this topic is often present in the debates that take place in the editorial staff of *La Marea*. As Pablo Elorduy underlines, independent media have a purpose of "long-term pedagogy"; that is, it aims to contribute issues and approaches constructed as tools for the understanding of social complexity, planting seeds and fertilising the ground for major social transformations. Ultimately, independent media reclaim the essence of journalism in order to contribute to the improvement of our democratic system, and that is why they see themselves as pedagogical tools at the service of our society as a whole.

In short, the journalism of independent media is in alignment with the educommunicative approach that considers the media as educational agents and means and tools of learning, an approach that the 15M also deployed through its media production and its pedagogical sovereignty.

Furthermore, several media have enriched its educommunicative dimension by including training as part of their social action. It aims to provide knowledge on the topics we have already mentioned in Table 3 and to which we must add the activity developed by *Maldita.es* on media literacy to fight against fake news and disinformation. In this way, some independent media have turned into educational environments, putting into practice their pedagogical sovereignty with a high level of formality. Thus, they reinforce their civic engagement, weave alliances with civil society, and provide knowledge and tools that allow them to continue working for a fairer and more democratic society.

Concluding remarks

This article established a strong connection between the educommunicative dimension of the 15M and the new ecosystem of independent media. It demonstrated that the Spanish movement focused much of its activity on the creation of spaces for participation and the fostering of citizen awareness and engagement. As part of the same socio-political action strategy, several communication projects were created, and educational initiatives were launched. Therefore, based on the paradigm of educommunication, we show that the 15M had a clear educommunicative orientation.

Furthermore, we demonstrated the influence of the 15M on the strengthening of media activism and of the pre-existing educommunicative dimension, foregrounding the important role played by journalists and communication activists in the imaginary and actions undertaken by the movement. We observed that the creation of the independent media that emerged from 2012 onwards is one of the responses that both society in general and critical journalists in particular gave to the 2008 Spanish's economic, social and political crisis. We do not establish a cause-effect relationship between the 15M and the creation of independent media, but rather we highlight a strengthening of the educommunicative dimension of pre-existing media activism enhanced by a social phenomenon –the 15M Movement– that opened windows of opportunity for media innovation; windows of opportunity from which the independent media emerged.

This article demonstrates that independent media have formed a new media ecosystem characterised by three key elements: (1) synergies and mutual support; (2) the fundamental role of the community of subscribers and users; and (3) an educational agency with a public service orientation. Regarding the first element, we highlight the creation of the *Plataforma de Medios Independientes (Independent media platform)* as a long-term strategy to carry out joint projects and collective campaigns, and to weave alliances with civil society. Regarding the second, we underline the existence of an important shared community of critical subscribers and users, whose role is key both for the economic sustainability of the media and for their capacity to impact on society. Independent media and their subscribers have established an agreement of trust based on the value of information committed to social justice and democracy. Finally, the educational agency of the independent media is underpinned by a pedagogical dimension insofar as they aim not only to inform, but also to educate and provide tools for understanding the world and for social transformation. This pedagogical dimension is embodied in the choice and news treatment of topics and, in some cases, also in training initiatives provided by the media themselves in coherence with their journalistic ethics and civic engagement. In this way, independent media put their public service orientation into practice.

For these reasons, we consider that this new media ecosystem has a clear educommunicative orientation rooted in the imaginary and practices of the 15M and based on a revitalised civic engagement with journalism and the value of information for democracy.

Even if communication and social movement studies have incorporated interdisciplinary contributions that include tools close to social pedagogy, educommunication has been so far partially ignored. Educommunication paradigm opens up avenues of research that will allow for a deeper understanding of the key role of social movements and independent media as educational agents. At the same time, its combination with a media ecology approach has allowed us to foreground the prominence of the educational dimension within a new ecosystem, an aspect that was previously understudied. This combination has also contributed to expand the horizons of media ecology research and social movement studies. Our findings demonstrate that social movements are linked to the generation of independent critical media ecosystems with an educommunicative orientation for radical democracy.

Notes

1. The first manifesto was published firstly in a Facebook group's page, but it may be read from here: <https://bit.ly/3GJMadK>
2. Such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Bank, among others.
3. The first manifesto from the tent-city of Puerta del Sol: <https://bit.ly/3ma6tcF>
4. Claimings of the platform *Democracia Real ¡Ya!*: <https://bit.ly/31Vu7Tr>
5. List of the most frequent proposals made by several 15M collectives: <https://bit.ly/3yyo1nB>
6. The seventeen media outlets came together following the news that the government was studying measures to support the media in the midst of the pandemic crisis. The independent media thus published a manifesto for fear of not being included in these government measures. See: Ctxt (02/04/2020): <https://bit.ly/3m9PPKI>
7. The *Independent media platform* includes the following media: La Marea, El Salto, Ctxt, Carne Cruda, Público, Alternativas Económicas, Pikara, Mongolia, Crític, Nueva Tribuna, Praza, Nortes, Cataluyña Plural, Cuarto Poder and Luzes.

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