

**NEW MEDIA AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN SPAIN AND ITS
EUROPEAN CONTEXT;
RECONSIDERING MEDIA MALAISE THEORIES**

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Abstract

Demonstrations in Spain on March 13th 2004, taking place after the terrorist attacks in Madrid, presented an interesting challenge for political communication research. For the first time in Spain's history, and with few other examples in that moment, people employed communication technologies in order to create the dynamics of peaceful civil disobedience. The events generated a debate as to the intensity with which citizens are willing to take part in the political process through non-conventional mechanisms of participation; this took place especially in a political climate in which the expansion of disaffection attitudes has been deep enough to increase the preoccupation, not only of scholars but also of politicians.

Research on political communication in general, and on the field of media effects in particular, has been traditionally paying attention to the classical outlets in order to analyse the impact of media exposure on political affection in general. Explanations from this discipline suggest some contrasting arguments around this issue that has been configured as a constant in the academic debate; the relationship between the mass media and political commitment. On one hand, we find authors that accuse the media and the way they present politics of causing citizens' disaffection. On the other hand, some recent analyses state that political information in the media – regardless of their tone – lead to an informed and engaged public.

Taking the cited framework as the main reference, this article compares the connection between political activism, as one of the dimensions of political affection, and the new and old media in 25 European countries categorized in three groups: The western and northern countries, known as stable democracies with high levels of activism, the southern countries, and the young democracies in eastern Europe.

Introduction.

The increasing use of new technologies of the information and communication has changed the very essence of political process in general and social mobilization in particular. Demonstrations in Spain on March 13th 2004, taking place after the terrorist attacks in Madrid, are a good example of this dynamic, and presented an interesting challenge for political communication research. For the first time in Spain's history, and with few other examples in that moment, people employed communication technologies in order to create the dynamics of peaceful civil disobedience. The events generated a debate as to the intensity with which citizens are willing to take part in the political process through non-conventional mechanisms of participation; this took place especially in a political climate in which the expansion of disaffection attitudes has been deep enough to increase the preoccupation of academics.

Many political scientists have called attention to this specific situation, which has impeded quite concern among experts given the widespread feelings of low identification with the political process. Professionals, as well as scholars, have focused their efforts on understanding the complex developments through which we have derived in this particular guideline of conduct with respect to the public; the specific nature of these situations has to do with the low rates of political participation in general, with the negative evaluation of governmental performance, with a low degree of political knowledge and interest, and with an extended lack of identification with public institutions.

The concept of political disaffection is having a lot of significance today since it is characterising specifically the general trend of contemporary western world's political culture. This process is described basically by the combination of, by one hand, low levels of electoral turnout, of political participation, of political efficacy, of political knowledge, of political understanding, and, by the other hand, a firm approval of democratic principles, and has been pointed out as a potential component of political system's instability.

Social sciences in general, and political and media sciences specifically, have explored the causes of these behavioural patterns and have developed a theoretical

framework to face this challenging phenomenon. The belief that the processes of political communication have substantially altered citizen's political and civic engagement, to one way or the other, has become a constant conviction between scholars and journalists, especially in the North American context.

Nevertheless, the development of political communication as a discipline suggests some contrasting explanations around the relationship between the mass media and political engagement. On one hand, we find some authors that accuse the media of "narcotizing" the citizens, who are increasingly less participative and less trusting political institutions and are, in the terms of Robert Putnam, disaffected democrats (Robinson, 1976; Patterson, 1994; Fallows, 1996; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Putnam & Pharr, 2000; Putnam, 2000). On the other hand, some recent analyses state that the empirical evidence points out in an opposite direction (Holtz-Bacha, 1990; Newton, 1999; Norris, 2000).

Research on political communication in general, and on the field of media effects in particular, has been traditionally paying attention to the classical outlets in order to analyse the connection mentioned before, that is, the impact of media exposure on political affection. However, as we have already revealed, the development of new media outlets, the Internet, has extended the possibilities of study. We can find a good example of this direction through the increasing number of research works that has been published lately that took into account the Internet (Wilkins, 2000; Uslaner, 2000; Norris and Sanders, 2001; Shah, Kwak and Holbert, 2001; Price, Goldthwaite, et. AL., 2003; Rusciano, 2003; Sherr and Jenkins, 2003; Lee and Chen, 2004)

Hence, the idea that is going to vertebrate this paper could be defined through some questions that are going to be formulated in the following lines: How is related the use of the Internet to the level of political disaffection? Is it playing a significant role in any of its specific dimensions? Are new media fostering the non-electoral forms of participation in politics?

Literature Review

Theories of Media Malaise

The process by which the theories of media malaise were generated is somewhat imprecise. Without a doubt, we find the origins of these interpretations in the considerations of Kurt Lang and Gladys Lang (1966). They were the first to suggest that a connection existed between the proliferation of network news and the extension of these feelings of disconnection with the political process. From their point of view, the way the television covered the news of a political nature could affect the fundamental orientations of the electorate towards public institutions, including the government. Television broadcasts, they argued, accentuate the conflicting elements of the political process, which feeds the public cynicism. Nevertheless, “*the Langs proved an isolated voice at the time, in large part because the consensus in political communication was that the mass media had only minimal effects on public opinion*” (Norris, 2000: 5). As a result, a new set of reflections began gradually to question the dominant paradigm during the sixties. The idea that the mass media had more weight than had been thought previously began to be voiced by several publications; Paul Weaver, for example, assured that the television news formats fomented “*detachment (at best) one of the cases or cynical rejection (at worse) toward the political institution of the nation*” (Weaver, 1972: 74).

Nevertheless, 1976 was a crucial year in the development and later consolidation of the theory of media malaise. During this year, Michael Robinson popularised the term *videomalaise* arguing that preferring television in contrast to newspapers as source of political information causes political disaffection. In order to explain the growth of videomalaise the author pointed out six interrelated factors: 1) the anomalous magnitude and shape of the television news audiences, 2) the public perceptions of the credibility of the networks, 3) the interpretative character of television news coverage, 4) the stress on negative elements of the television news reports, 5) the emphasis on the conflict and the violence in network reporting, and 6) the anti-institutional theme of news programs on television (Robinson, 1976: 426). All these elements came together to foment political disaffection, frustration, cynicism and malaise of the general public.

This perspective, which became consolidated at the end of the eighties and the beginning of the nineties, makes special sense in the North American political context.

Television news in the U.S. do, indeed, present political life in a more negative way than newspapers do (Robinson & Sheehan, 1983). Political disaffection in the U.S. increases parallel to an increase in negative news stories about politicians and political institutions in American television (Lichter & Amundson, 1994) but also newspapers (Patterson, 1993). Thus, the main studies that provided theoretical strength to the positions of media malaise in the North American context focused rather on the negative media content in general than on differences between television and newspapers (Patterson, 1993; Schudson, 1995; Fallows, 1996; Cappella and Jamieson, 1997). In summary, the theories of media malaise maintain two central assumptions: 1) the processes of political communication via mass media have a significant impact on the civic engagement of the citizens; 2) this impact takes shape in a negative direction or, in other words, the lack of social commitment towards the political process is determined by the process of political communication.

Theories of Political Mobilization

The position presented before is modified by a set of scientific works whose results have been grouped under the label of theories of political mobilization. Even though these new interpretations do not eliminate all the previous contributions, they propose substantial nuances that question the central argumentation of the videomalaise. In other words, they suggest that contemporary mass media have a significant impact on the public – this point is shared with the media malaise position – but this influence is produced in a positive direction, that is to say, maintaining and promoting democratic participation.

The theories of political mobilization appear on the academic scene with a great influence in the nineties (Holtz-Bacha, 1990; Norris, 1996; Newton, 1999; Norris, 2000), right after the publication of some research conclusions. We could say that the first works in this line arise as a result of the contrast of the media malaise hypotheses. To some extent, this interpretation considers that by simply differentiating some analytical categories we can conclude that the media malaise theories are not strictly applicable as they were formulated. Fundamentally, mobilization theories underline that “*we need carefully to disentangle the positive and negative effects of different media, messages, audiences and effects*” (Norris et al., 1999: 99). In this sense, for example,

the group of regular consumers of television news and habitual readers of political press are – regardless of tone of media coverage – more inclined to be informed, interested and committed to political life. On the contrary, citizens exposed to sensationalist contents usually present significant levels of political disaffection, cynicism and alienation.

Finally, it is vital to mention the importance of a theory that, although framed within the theories of the mobilization, acquires a special status, since its considerations entail significant advances with respect to the general assumptions; the theory of the Virtuous Circle (Norris, 2000). In spite of proposing a similar perspective to the contributions of the theory of political mobilization and objecting to the conclusions of the media malaise, the theory of the virtuous circle, stated by Pippa Norris, goes one step further and provides a more complete theoretical elaboration. As a result of the examination of empirical evidence derived from data analysis of the United States and Western Europe, one of the main assumptions of this theory resides in the following statement: the attention to the news in general is not configured as a factor that contributes to the erosion of the support for the political system. On the contrary, those consistently exposed to news and electoral campaigns are revealed as most knowledgeable in political terms, as most trusting of the government and the political system, and as the most participative in electoral terms.

In conclusion, Pippa Norris assures that the process of political communication could be understood as a virtuous circle since, in the long term, it reinforces the activism of the activists. Indeed, given that this mechanism works in a circle, like a spiral, we can observe a double directionality; the most politically informed, those who trust more and are more participative, are those who are more exposed to the media coverage of public issues. Those that are more exposed to the to the media coverage of public issues are made more committed to the political system. This assumption implicates that we cannot prove causation or, in other words, the direction of causality remains unresolved. It is supported by empirical data which shows that especially regular readers of political newspapers are less disaffected than people not reading the political press. In contrast, watching television news does not seem to have the same positive effect (Holtz-Bacha, 1990; Newton, 1999; Norris, 2000).

Study Framework and Hypotheses

Both contradicting hypotheses have mainly been examined in the U.S. context and seem to be supported by empirical evidence to the same extent. But not all of the studies have paid attention to the increasing importance of the Internet and introduced this new outlet in their models. Therefore, taking as a starting point the potential involvement of the new media in the process of political disaffection, we are going to focus on the so-called non-conventional ways of political participation, specifically on the political activism.

Additionally, as a research strategy we are going to deal with the latent differences between countries in the European context (Klingemann, 1999) since when it comes to political disaffection, Europe is divided in three parts. In Western and Northern Europe, citizens are rather engaged but not to the same extent as 20 years ago. In Southern Europe citizens are traditionally rather disaffected, and in the new democracies in Eastern Europe only a minority is engaged in political life. Different countries have also different media systems (Norris, 2004), and different journalistic cultures (Cohen et al., 1996; Donsbach & Patterson, 2004). Furthermore, in different countries there are different states of political affairs – political decisions, legislative bills, economic growth etc.

Therefore, in our study we are examining the relationship between media exposure in general and political activism in 25 European countries taking part in the European Social Survey (ESS4-2008). Those countries can be grouped with respect to their area of location which also means to group them with respect to their democratic history. Studies comparing different political cultures state that the level of political disaffection is connected to the democratic tradition (Almond & Verba, 1965). For that reason, we distinguished three groups of countries: 1) The well established democracies of Western/Northern Europe¹ (Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Denmark, Finland, France, United Kingdom, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway and Sweden) 2) The countries of Southern Europe (Spain, Greece, Turkey and Portugal) relatively young democracies. 3) The quite young democracies in Eastern Europe (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, Russian Federation, Ukraine).

¹ Due to data characteristics we couldn't introduce Germany in the analysis.

As we have already shown, the three groups of European countries traditionally show different levels of political disaffection. This leads to our first hypothesis:

H1: The groups of countries differ in their citizens' levels of political disaffection. Citizens living in the Eastern European countries will be more politically inactive. Citizens in the Western/Northern European countries will be more active politically.

Thus far, there is no comparable data of exposure to political media content in those 25 countries. If the assumptions of the mobilization hypothesis are correct, citizens living in areas with high levels of political disaffection should show the lowest levels of exposure to political media content. Therefore, our second hypothesis is:

H2: The groups of countries differ in their citizens' level of exposure to media. Citizens living in the Eastern European countries will show the lowest levels of exposure. Citizens in the Western/Northern European countries will show the highest levels of exposure.

As we already pointed out, when taking a look at the empirical data that has been published, we cannot be sure which one of the hypothesis, media malaise or mobilization, is correct. In other words, we cannot be sure whether the relationship between exposure to the Internet is positive or negative, and – because there is not much comparable research – whether the direction of relationship is the same in all 25 countries. Therefore we pose the following research questions:

RQ1: Is the relationship between exposure to media and political activism positive or negative?

RQ2: Is there any difference between the 25 countries when the relationship between exposure to media and political activism is concerned?

Finally, if there are differences between the 25 countries, and categorizing them in the three groups mentioned makes sense, the following pattern should occur:

H3: If there are differences between the 25 countries when the relationship between exposure to media and political activism is concerned, the differences should be larger between groups than within groups.

Method

Data comes from the European Social Survey (ESS4) 2008. Starting in 2008 and ending in 2009 almost 55.000 Europeans aged 15 years and older had been interviewed face to face. The project was jointly funded by the European Commission, the European Science Foundation, and academic funding bodies in each participating country. Addresses were randomly selected in all countries participating in the study². The exact procedure differed slightly from country to country.

Independent variables

The questionnaire included questions on respondents' exposure to media in general and specifically to political contents. They were:

TABLE 1
Independent Variables

| | General |
|------------|--|
| TV | <i>"On an average weekday, how much time, in total, do you spend watching television?"</i> |
| Newspapers | <i>"On an average weekday, how much time, in total, do you spend reading the newspapers?"</i> |
| Radio | <i>"On an average weekday, how much time, in total, do you spend listening to the radio?"</i> |
| Internet | <i>"How often do you use the Internet, the World Wide Web or e-mail - whether at home or at work - for your personal use?"</i> |

SOURCE: ESS4.

In all the cases, the possible answers, presented on cards, ranged from 0 (*"no time at all"*) in grades of half an hour to 7 (*"more than 3 hours"*). Additionally, the questionnaire included socio-demographic characteristic of respondents like gender, age

²European Union countries - Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom; non-European Union countries: Norway, Switzerland, Russian Federation, Turkey, Ukraine.

(year of birth) and education (years of education completed) and political interest which will be controlled in multivariate analyses presented later.

Dependent variable

As already pointed out, non-conventional political participation, understood as different mechanisms or practices that citizens can bring into play in order to change the course of political process, excluding the electoral participation, can be measured in several ways. In that case, we have chosen the item provided in the ESS data set, which was:

TABLE 2
Dependent Variable

“There are different ways of trying to improve things in [country] or help prevent things from going wrong. During the last 12 months, have you done any of the following?”

- Contacted a politician, government or local government official
- Worked in a political party or action group
- Worked in another organisation or association
- Worn or displayed a campaign badge/sticker
- Signed a petition
- Taken part in a lawful public demonstration
- Boycotted certain products

SOURCE: ESS4

Findings.

Political Activism.

H1 states that political disaffection will be lowest in the well established democracies of Western/Northern Europe and highest in the young democracies in Eastern Europe. Table 3 shows the percentage of people that developed at least one of the alternatives of political activism for each country and it proofs H1 completely to be right. On average, in Western/Nothern European countries almost 60 percent of the citizens declared to be politically active; meanwhile, in Eastern Europe the same dimension is 21,25 percent, less than a half, almost one third less. Southern European countries present an slight higher percentage, but quite similar (21,75). The ten countries with highest levels of political activism, our indicator of political disaffection, are located in Western and especially Northern Europe. Activism is highest in Sweden

(71%) and Norway (68%). With exception of Czech Republic and Spain, were the proportion reaches 31% and 33%, respectively, citizens of Eastern and Southern European countries are less active, the most disaffected. Political activism is lowest in Bulgaria (13,7%), Turkey (13,8%) and Portugal (14,1%).

Interestingly, standard deviations do not differ that much, although the value is higher when the group of countries is more active. This means that the differences between respondents within the three groups are more or less the same.

Table 3
Political Activism

| | % | (n) |
|--------------------------------|--------------|------|
| <i>Western/Northern Europe</i> | | |
| Belgium | 48,9 | 895 |
| Switzerland | 54,3 | 824 |
| Denmark | 63,2 | 586 |
| Finland | 66,6 | 732 |
| France | 55,4 | 919 |
| United Kingdom | 52,8 | 1106 |
| Germany | 58,1 | 1148 |
| Netherlands | 45,1 | 972 |
| Norway | 68,5 | 487 |
| Sweden | 70,8 | 526 |
| <i>Average</i> | <i>58,37</i> | |
| <i>Southern Europe</i> | | |
| Spain | 33,2 | 1712 |
| Greece | 26 | 1528 |
| Turkey | 13,8 | 2053 |
| Portugal | 14,1 | 2024 |
| <i>Average</i> | <i>21,77</i> | |
| <i>Eastern Europe</i> | | |
| Czech Republic | 31,4 | 1351 |
| Hungary | 19,8 | 1228 |
| Estonia | 23,6 | 1252 |
| Bulgaria | 13,7 | 1906 |
| Latvia | 23,3 | 1501 |
| Romania | 17,5 | 1684 |
| Russian Fed. | 16,8 | 2037 |
| Slovakia | 29 | 1255 |
| Ukraine | 18 | 1470 |
| Poland | 18,8 | 1304 |
| Slovenia | 21,9 | 994 |
| <i>Average</i> | <i>21,25</i> | |

SOURCE: ESS4.

Exposure to media.

H2 states that citizens of Eastern European countries will be less exposed to media while citizens of Western/Northern European countries will show the highest exposure levels. This hypothesis proves right to some extent but not completely.

Table 4
Heavy Users of Media.

| | TV % (> 2 hour per day) | Newspapers % (> 0.5 hours/day) | Internet % (Everyday) |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|
| <i>Western/Northern Europe</i> | | | |
| Belgium | 47,6 | 33,7 | 41,7 |
| Switzerland | 30,9 | 48,4 | 43,9 |
| Denmark | 44,1 | 43,2 | 58,4 |
| Finland | 35 | 56,7 | 46,3 |
| France | 49,3 | 29,7 | 42,5 |
| United Kingdom | 60,5 | 44,5 | 40,2 |
| Germany | 45,5 | 47,6 | 36,4 |
| Netherlands | 45,7 | 46,5 | 55 |
| Norway | 35,5 | 63,3 | 61,8 |
| Sweden | 33,3 | 56,5 | 55,7 |
| <i>Average</i> | <i>42,74</i> | <i>47,01</i> | <i>48,19</i> |
| <i>Southern Europe</i> | | | |
| Spain | 38,9 | 22,8 | 24,1 |
| Greece | 54,5 | 22,8 | 18,3 |
| Turkey | 58,9 | 32,9 | 11,3 |
| Portugal | 46,5 | 24,5 | 22,4 |
| <i>Average</i> | <i>49,7</i> | <i>25,75</i> | <i>19,08</i> |
| <i>Eastern Europe</i> | | | |
| Czech Republic | 54,8 | 33,5 | 27,1 |
| Hungary | 45,3 | 33,5 | 28,7 |
| Estonia | 54 | 51,8 | 44,7 |
| Bulgaria | 65,9 | 39,1 | 18,3 |
| Latvia | 62,4 | 35,7 | 34,6 |
| Romania | 67,3 | 28,8 | 18,8 |
| Russian Fed. | 56,2 | 33,1 | 11,3 |
| Slovakia | 52,4 | 37 | 23,5 |
| Ukraine | 51,6 | 33,7 | 6,4 |
| Poland | 40,8 | 33 | 33,8 |
| Slovenia | 30,1 | 34,6 | 37,5 |
| <i>Average</i> | <i>52,8</i> | <i>35,8</i> | <i>25,88</i> |

SOURCE: ESS4

Table 4 shows the percentage of respondents showing high levels of exposure media. In our definition, these are respondents watching television more than two hours per day, reading newspaper more than half an hour per day, and “surfing” the Internet everyday. The percentage of heavy users of television ranges from 67,3 percent in Romania to 30,1 percent in Slovenia. The percentage of heavy users of newspapers ranges from 63,3 percent in Norway to 22,8 percent in Greece and Spain. The percentage of heavy users of the Internet ranges from 61,8 percent in Norway to 6,4 percent in Ukraine. Looking at the three groups of countries, we can see that in average exposure to media is higher in Northern/Western Europe, with the only exception of television. However, differences could be found among the media outlets.

In the case of television, there isn't a significant disparity between Southern Europe, where 49,7 percent of the population is considered heavy consumers of this outlet, and Eastern Europe, where the same value is less than 3 points more (52,8 percent). Regarding the exposure to newspapers, differences are somewhat much higher; 47 percent of people in Western and Northern Europe are exposed to newspapers more than 30 minutes a day, while the same dimension is only 27,75 percent in Southern Europe and 35,8 percent in Eastern Europe. Finally, the variation concerning the new media, the Internet, is also quite deep; citizens from the group of countries of the west and north of Europe are heavy users of the Internet in a percentage of 48, meanwhile those from the south and the east are intense users in a 19 and 26 percent, respectively.

To sum it up, on the aggregate level we can state that H2 proofs to be right since Western/Northern Europeans, are heavy media users in the case of the Internet and the newspapers, but not in the case of television, where in the other two groups this value is slightly higher. However, we can also say that H2 is wrong in the sense that Eastern countries show almost 10 points more than Southern countries in the case of newspapers and Internet. We can finish by saying that those dynamics have changed in recent years, probable as consequence of the improvement of high technologies applied to media, that has been specially intense in those countries where few years ago were more underdeveloped.

The influence of exposure to media on political activism

RQ1 asks whether the relationship between exposure to media and political activism is positive or negative. RQ2 asks whether this holds true to the same extent in all of the countries. To examine this, we run OLS-Regressions for every single country. In the analyses, we control gender, age, education and political interest. Table 5 shows the results.

With respect to our control variables, we see in all of the 25 countries a strong and significant influence of political interest on activism. In most of the countries, with the exception of Norway and Sweden in the North, Greece and Turkey in the South, and the Russian Federation in the East, we find that higher educated citizens are politically more active. In few countries of the East and North, only in Norway and Poland, younger people show higher levels of activism. In the case of gender, we found that male respondents are not always the most mobilized in terms of political participation, actually this is only identified in Bulgaria and Latvia (both in the East), a fact that can clearly be verified with the positive or negative sign of the β standardised coefficients, although only in 6 of the 25 cases statistical significance could be found. Women are politically more active in some Nordic countries (Sweden, Denmark, Finland) and the UK.

More important, the influence of exposure to media is quite mixed. In most of the countries, 16 out of 25, we find a negative influence of watching television on political activism: The higher respondents' exposure to television, the less they are taking part on the political process through non-conventional ways of participation. In North/Western European countries, only two cases (The Netherlands and the UK) are not showing any significance, but in the rest, we can underline Germany and Denmark where the intensity of this dynamic is particular (β coefficients of $-.138$ and $-.109$). In Southern Europe, only in Portugal there is no significance, but even if the values are not really high in the other three cases, we can observe a negative connection. In Eastern countries is where the relationship between television exposure and activism is less visible: there is only statistical significance in less than a half of the cases, although we can find the clear case of Latvia, where the β coefficient reaches $-.138$. Hence, in none of the 25 countries there is a positive influence of watching television on activism.

The connection of the exposure to radio and activism is quite blurred. We can only identify 3 cases out of 25, where there is a positive significance: France and the UK, in the North/West, and Turkey, with a value of .104, in the South. In none of the Eastern countries coefficients present any association.

Regarding the printed media, only in six democracies (Denmark, Germany, Spain, Portugal, and Romania), we find a positive influence of reading newspapers in general on activism: The higher respondents' exposure to newspapers, the more politically active they are. However, the values of the coefficients are never reaching the .100.

In what concern to the new media, in every country but five, and all of those placed within the Eastern cases (Romania, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Slovakia and Ukraine) there is a significant connection between the use of the Internet and levels of political activism, and in all of the cases this is positive. The more citizens "consume" Internet, the more willing to take part on the political process through non-conventional actions. Northern/Western and Southern countries show this positive association in every single case, being Finland (.179), Germany (.176) and Turkey (.170) the democracies where this connection is more intense.

In general, at the aggregate level, Internet is the most influential media outlet on the level of people's political activism. Taking the mean of the coefficients as a reference, this connection is higher in new media (.099), while is significantly lower in the case of television (.087), radio (.028) and newspapers (.039). Also the proportion of countries showing statistical significance is pointing in the same direction: in the case of television 9 countries out of 25 are not presenting significance, when in the case of radio is 21, in the newspapers this is decreased in 1 (20), and in the case of the Internet only in 5 countries of the sample media exposure is not statistically connected to activism.

Taken together, H3 – stating that differences between the three groups of countries are larger than differences within the groups when the influence of media exposure on political disaffection is concerned – proofs to be incorrect. If there is an influence of exposure to media on activism, it is not only in the same direction within the groups, but also in the same direction between the groups. That is to say that even if the levels of activism and media exposure vary between the group of countries, the

connection between media consumption and non-conventional ways of participation is parallel.

Table 5
Causes of political activism in 25 European countries
- OLS- Regressions -

| | Gender (Male.) β | Age β | Educ. β | Political Interest β | Exp. to TV β | Exp. Radio β | Exp. News.. β | Use of Internet β | R ² |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------|------------|------------|----------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|----------------|
| Western/ Northern Europe | | | | | | | | | |
| Belgium | ,000 | -,019 | ,094*** | -,246*** | -,068** | ,013 | ,021 | ,142*** | ,142 |
| Switzerland | -,032 | -,056 | ,143*** | -,216*** | -,094*** | -,005 | ,032 | ,123*** | ,144 |
| Germany | -,023 | ,035 | ,098*** | -,253*** | -,138*** | ,029 | ,049* | ,176*** | ,181 |
| Denmark | -,117*** | ,065 | ,148*** | -,215*** | -,109*** | ,015 | ,072** | ,124*** | ,170 |
| Netherlands | ,022 | -,028 | ,106*** | -,218*** | -,052 | ,030 | ,040 | ,132*** | ,123 |
| Norway | -,062 | ,082* | ,039 | -,262*** | -,071* | ,012 | ,030 | ,104*** | ,104 |
| Finland | -,101*** | ,004 | ,122*** | -,220*** | -,081*** | ,008 | ,054 | ,179*** | ,160 |
| France | -,038 | -,042 | ,108*** | -,289*** | -,085*** | ,061** | ,041 | ,103*** | ,169 |
| UK | -,094*** | -,022 | ,109*** | -,310*** | -,034 | ,062** | ,014 | ,086*** | ,164 |
| Sweden | -,123*** | ,009 | ,065 | -,283*** | -,080** | ,009 | ,052 | ,114*** | ,144 |
| Southern Europe | | | | | | | | | |
| Spain | -,047 | ,004 | ,077** | -,260*** | -,062** | ,030 | ,075*** | ,064* | ,138 |
| Greece | -,026 | -,015 | ,062 | -,296*** | -,059* | ,002 | ,033 | ,124*** | ,128 |
| Portugal | ,010 | -,022 | ,216*** | -,097*** | -,035 | ,056* | ,059* | ,082** | ,129 |
| Turkey | -,051 | -,016 | ,032 | -,220*** | -,068** | 104*** | ,025 | ,170*** | ,121 |
| Eastern Europe | | | | | | | | | |
| Poland | ,020 | 105** * | ,202*** | -,169*** | -,099*** | -,040 | ,038 | ,130*** | ,144 |
| Bulgaria | ,054* | -,019 | ,122*** | -,148*** | -,054* | ,023 | ,051 | ,113*** | ,086 |
| Hungary | ,008 | -,044 | ,138*** | -,183*** | -,004 | ,053 | ,001 | ,122*** | ,091 |
| Latvia | ,068** | ,018 | ,115*** | -,182*** | -,138*** | ,020 | ,048 | ,100** | ,098 |
| Romania | ,053 | -,017 | ,098*** | -,224*** | -,031 | -,047 | ,069** | ,061 | ,085 |
| Russian Fed. | -,011 | -,021 | ,027 | -,209*** | ,007 | ,013 | ,021 | ,057* | ,053 |
| Czech Rep. | -,017 | ,039 | ,117*** | -,245*** | -,048 | ,022 | ,049 | ,059 | ,100 |
| Slovenia | ,038 | ,014 | ,146*** | -,197*** | -,065 | -,016 | ,049 | ,072 | ,103 |
| Slovakia | ,041 | -,023 | ,121*** | -,137*** | -,079** | -,053 | -,042 | ,036 | ,056 |
| Estonia | ,013 | ,067 | ,108*** | -,185*** | -,089*** | ,006 | ,002 | ,091* | ,095 |
| Ukraine | -,057 | ,061 | ,076** | -,192*** | -,034 | ,010 | ,055 | -,025 | ,045 |

p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001

SOURCE: ESS4.

Discussion

The present study examines the influence of exposure to media on political disaffection. In former studies, different results have been obtained. Some analyses have shown that negative media content leads to political disaffection. This has been called the media malaise hypothesis. Other studies have shown that exposure to political media content – regardless of its tone – leads to informed and mobilized citizens. This has been called the mobilization hypothesis. To examine, which of them holds true, we analyzed the relationship between exposure to media and political activism in 25 European countries taking part in the European Social Survey.

The countries differ in their political systems and in their democratic tradition as well as in their journalistic cultures. Our results show clear differences in the levels of activism between the countries. Respondents from the well established Western/Northern democracies show high levels of political activism. Respondents from the younger democracies in the South show lower levels of the same dimension while respondents from the quite young democracies in the East show the lowest levels of non-conventional political participation.

When it comes to the influence of media exposure on activism, we find strong patterns. Firstly, watching television has not a positive influence on activism at all. This clearly contradicts mobilization hypothesis. Secondly, exposure to radio and to newspapers has a positive influence on activism in some of the countries taking part on the ESS. These results seem to support mobilization hypothesis. Thirdly, the use of Internet is profoundly connected to political activism, and in a positive way. This pattern seems to support mobilization hypothesis as well.

Taken together, we could find support not only to media malaise theories but also to mobilization hypothesis. By one hand, mobilization theories state that exposure to media – regardless of its tone – mobilizes the recipients, which is true in the case of radio, newspapers and the Internet, but not in the case of television. In this case, we should have found about the same results in all 25 countries. Why was this not the case?

It has to be said that the verification of one theory or the other, from the experience of the empirical evidence accumulated, at least relay on four categories; on the type of media outlet, on the kind of political disaffection dimension we are dealing

with, on the country, and the sort of contents. Hence, the nature of the connection between disaffection and media exposure and its intensity depends on 1) if we are talking about television, radio, newspapers or the Internet; 2) if we are analysing institutional trust, political participation, political understanding and knowledge, political efficacy, democratic satisfaction, or, in this paper, political activism; 3) the case we are taking for developing the study; 4) and whether we are referring to political information or entertainment.

Given the results presented before, and according on the theoretical framework employed, we could assume, firstly, that political content is more negative on television than in the newspapers and the Net, and/or, secondly, that television is an outlet more used in order to find entertainment than information.

Finally, we have to admit the limits of research on this area of the political communication. Analysts can find difficulties in collecting comparable data on political media content. In this sense, it has to be underlined that the nature of the outlet of reference, the Internet, involves extra complications, as for example the overlapping effect: one could use the internet in order to read a digital version of a newspaper, to watch the news broadcast, or even listen to the radio, something that slightly distorts the traditional distinction.

Consequently, given the nature of the data set used, we could only deal with exposure to media in general, that is, total media consumption by outlets. In the case of television, radio and printed press, data allowed us to distinguish between sort of contents, which was not the case for the Internet. Therefore, the characteristics of the data, and specifically the item that is dealing with the internet use, forced us to compare general use more than political contents consumption.

Conclusively, we have to point at the limits of the theoretical framework as well, that has not been considering in their consolidation this new outlet, since the Internet was a non-existent communicational phenomenon before. Nowadays we are encouraged to do so, since we cannot fully understand politics without the political communication processes that are taking place in the Internet. The consolidation of new media outlets amplifies and involves a challenge in media research.

Of course, this analysis is only a first step. We cannot prove our assumptions to be right completely without having comparable content analysis data for all of the 20

countries (tone of coverage), and without having distinctions regarding political contents by outlets (political vs. entertainment). Only when this is the case, we can definitely say that the different results in different countries are really caused by different kinds of media content or media characteristics. Nevertheless, comparing the relationship between media exposure and political activism in different countries leads to valuable results. Exposure to media content is not necessarily “narcotising” the public. This holds true in some countries. Future studies should further examine the causes of those differences.

Also could be interpreted that dynamics of new socio-political activism needs from other different kinds of media, and internet can satisfy the necessity of quick and immediate information, as well as the need of instant and reasonably cheap communication ways (chats, e-mail). On March 13th 2004 activists provided a good example of this dynamic in Spain. With the use of video cameras, cell phones and the Internet, they kept in touch constantly, in a loose social web. Connecting regularly with foreign mass media through the Net for accurate and veritable information, citizens were organized without any central coordination, without a previous strategy, without a prior scheme. The number of participants and their political and media impact were traditionally the main dimensions of reference in measuring the success of these movements. This has been modified by the development of new information and communication technologies, and their direct use in this field.

The development of new technologies offers tools to civil society in transferring the *watchdog* function to citizens. This task has traditionally been performed by the media, but in certain situations of institutional blockage they are incapable to complete satisfactorily. These new communicational processes are not under the control of the state, the political parties or the democratic institutions. These are mechanisms that belong exclusively to the citizens, who are able to demand responsibility from politicians. These developments show that new technologies are not necessarily elements of suspicion or distrust, as suggested by some pessimistic scholars. On the contrary, sometimes they can provide tools to facilitate a real intensification and extension of democratic principles and civic commitment.

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