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## Political Regimes and the Use of the Internet by Social Movements

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper connects the Political Opportunity Structure Theory with scholarly advances on social movements' behavior on the Internet in order to understand the impact of the political regime on the strategies that regime dissident movements use on the Internet. It is articulated around three expectations: in non-democratic regimes dissidents will prefer to act online rather than offline compared to those in democratic regimes. They will not deploy mobilization strategies so often as their counterparts in democracies. And they will use the net mostly for diffusion, whereas online strategies in democracies will be more diverse. The study relies on website analysis and semi-structured interviews with activists of two organizations of Chávez's opposition in Venezuela and two organizations of the *Indignados* movement in Spain. It concludes that there is no connection between the use of the online sphere and the political regime, although the regime impacts the use of mobilization. Diffusion was the main strategy for all movements. This was driven by the political regime in Venezuela, but the results in Spain show that the media environment is not open in democracies either. Although the Internet was able to empower the dissidence discursively, it could not do so for acting in the street.

## Introduction

Manuel Castells described the Internet as the place where the “fearful” of the world should overcome their fear and unite to fight against the power structures<sup>2</sup>. This overcoming, he argued, comes from losing a sense of solitude. The communicative and aggregative power of the net<sup>3</sup>, then, turns into transformative power. This idea lies behind many analyses of social movement scholars describing the Internet as an empowering medium for social groups. If movements are vehicles of popular demands (Snow, Soule, & Kriesi, 2004, p. 3), understanding how can they become stronger is understanding how the civil society can become stronger vis-à-vis the state.

But states differ one from another. If, like many scholars claim, the Internet is embedded in the offline world (Hara & Estrada, 2005; Lerner, 2010), its empowerment of social movements' may also vary. Yet, which contextual elements are important remains unexplored. A fundamental starting point is the political system. This paper asks how the political regime impacts the online strategy of dissident social movements.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a revised version of an MA-CIS thesis at the University of Zürich and ETHZ, supervised by Daniel Kübler (Chair on Research on Democracy and Public Governance) and Hanspeter Kriesi (Chair of Comparative Politics).

<sup>2</sup> Castells, M. (2011). *Comunicación, Poder y Democracia*, Retrieved 15 November 2011. <http://www.vilaweb.tv/xerrada-integra-de-manuel-castells-a-lacampadabcn>.

<sup>3</sup> The term *net* will be used in this paper as a synonym of Internet.

It adopts a comparative perspective between democratic and non-democratic systems. By focusing on structural aspects of the regime (instead of the common accent on Internet policies), the answer could advance the theories of the interplay between movements' environment and their use of the net. It may also give an idea of the empowering capacity of the net, which should be inversely proportional to the impact of the state on movements' tactics.

Given the immature state of the field, this study is exploratory. Still, the theory and hypotheses are embedded in the community advances. In particular, they depart from the Political Opportunity Structure, which connects several aspects of the political context to movements' behavior (McAdam, 1999 as cited in Fuchs, 2006; Tarrow, 1999). This paper borrows two of them: repression and institutional openness.

Two case studies have been conducted. With a lively civil society, despite the erosion of democracy in the later years, Venezuela provides data for a non-democratic state. The *Indignados* movement in Spain, which questions the democratic character of the country's institutions, is the case under study in a democracy.

### **Social Movements and their context**

The Political Process Theory, which emphasizes the contextual constraints and possibilities faced by social movements, is one of the most relevant approaches in the study of movements' behavior. Its main theoretical asset is the Political Opportunity Structure (POS) (Kriesi, 2004). Five elements define the opportunities of a movement: the relative openness of the institutionalized political system, the stability of elite alignments, the elite alliances, the states' capacity and propensity for repression, and the divisions among elites (Mc Adam, 1996 as cited in Fuchs, 2006; Tarrow, 1999).

Two elements of the POS are considered the most relevant dimensions for answering the research question at hand. The first one is the institutional openness. It defines the accessibility of the political system (Kriesi, 2004). Elections or the degree of separation of powers, for example, positively increase the system openness (ibid; Tarrow, 1999). The second element is repression. Given that the research question is concerned with movements trying to overthrow the regime (and, by extension, its political elite), the elites become a constraining factor in all contexts. As Bueno de Mesquita, Smith et al. (2003, p. 15) point out, "different circumstances influence the choice of political-selection institutions, but in each case we believe that such choices are motivated by the interest politicians have in holding onto office". This may lead to concessions,

especially in democracies. But it will not lead to giving up privileges, in any political regime. To differentiate institutional openness and repression levels, a dichotomous approach to political regime (democracy vs. non-democracy) is considered sufficient.

### **Social Movement Strategies**

McLaughling (2003) identifies three types of strategies deployed by dissidents: internationalization (seeking support from transnational actors), mobilization (seeking support from national actors) and regime support erosion. The choice between them is driven by rationality (Morris, 1993) and it is affected by several factors. The behavior of others (ibid; Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008; Della Porta & Rucht, 1995; Tarrow, 1999) or the decentralization of a movement (McCammon, 2003) are two of them. From the POS, Kriesi (1995) stresses repression and success chance as the main factors.

Departing from Kriesi, the political regime can impact the rational calculation of movements. Institutional openness is linked to policy influence (Kriesi, 2004); that is, it can impact strategy success. Through elections and the separation of powers, for example, democracies have a bigger potential for being open than non-democracies. Higher incentives for action can be expected. Political responsiveness does not need to contradict the fact that elites will try to keep their privileges. Bueno de Mesquita, Smith et al. (2003) suggest that in democracies politicians will choose policies that maximize their gains and their chances to stay in office, that is, to win elections. Then, dissidents in democracies can obtain *partial* concessions, but a systemic change will be difficult.

Given that scholars have found a lower propensity for repression in democracies compared to non-democracies (Davenport, 2009), the costs of action and organization will be lower in the first case. This may impact action frequency and movements' tactical repertoire. The political regime may also impact costs through institutional actions. Unlike autocracies, democracies have mechanisms to ensure that options such as petitions are respected. Thus, in non-democracies movements will be pushed to use costly actions outside the institutional framework.

A final point relates to diffusion opportunities. Media bias affects the choice of strategies, even in democracies (see for example Wolfsfeld, 1984). However, one can argue that censorship imposes higher constraints in non-democracies, since media bias is not only intrinsic to media, but an effect of legal or political constraints.

## **Internet**

One of the most prominent students of the net is Manuel Castells. He argues that power is increasingly based on communication as it relies on the narratives that populate people's minds. In this sense, the net represents a great challenge for the institutionalized powers and a great opportunity for social movements as it enables many more actors to effectively distribute their messages (Castells, 2007).

Decentralizing communication (Harlow & Harp, 2011; Smith, McCarthy, McPhail, & Augustyn, 2001) can even help surpass media gatekeeping (Harlow & Harp, 2011). The Internet's network shape (Langman, 2005; Platon & Deuze, 2003), its low cost (ibid; Adams & Roscigno, 2005), the contraction of time and space and the possibility of anonymity (Chen & He, 2009) would be reasons behind this. With the Internet, movements can offer their version of themselves and their actions (Downing, 2001 and Rodriguez, 2001 as cited in Harlow & Harp, 2011). However, there are also skeptics who claim that their messages cannot succeed in their dissemination because the net is affected by the outer unequal sociopolitical context (Warf & Grimes, 1997).

Bimber, Flangin et al. (2005) suggest that the Internet facilitates three tasks of collective action: identifying supporters, communicating and coordinating. But the opportunity for social movements to decrease their costs is perhaps the most acclaimed advantage. Garrett (2006) found that the net decreases participation costs (see also Hara, 2008) and that it can accelerate the diffusion of movements.

When non-democratic regimes are under study, the controversy over the advantages of the net rises. Much of the debate comes from the perception that the Internet is neutral; that is, it can serve the state as much as the dissidents (Danitz & Strobel, 2001). To whom it finally favors will depend on the interplay between actors and on actors' use of the net. Diani (2000), for instance, argued at the same time that the cyberspace is a safer space for dissidents and that the state can enhance its control. In fact, monitoring and censorship are central in the study of movements' use of the net in authoritarian regimes (Garrett, 2006). Generally, these are not seen as fixed barriers but as dynamic elements in the interaction between dissidents and states. While dissidents try to surpass censorship by acting online, the state tries to prevent it, motivating new online tactics by movements and so forth (Lysenko & Desouza, 2010; McLaughlin, 2003).

Hachigian (2001), however, finds that Internet users can exercise self-censorship. Still, she finds that dictators' attempts to regulate the net are made difficult when they want to obtain benefits (eg. economic) from it (see also Hartz Søraker, 2008). Moreover,

savvy users can use the net without being traceable (ibid) and put a group online (Lysenko & Desouza, 2010). For Lerner, the decentralized nature of the net poses problems for authorities to track down unwanted discourses and their authors (2010).

McLaughlin (2003) and Danitz and Strobel (2001) found that dissidents used the net mostly for internationalization and framing. McLaughlin also found that mobilization occurs in some cases. Why it occurs only in some cases remains to be answered.

On the downside, diverse authors have noted that the digital divide may reproduce the inequalities of the offline world (Danitz & Strobel, 2001; Kreimer, 2001). Moreover, social movements' exposition online can turn into vulnerability in front of their opponents (Kreimer, 2001). Nevertheless, this will depend on the movement's control over what they show on the net. Finally, Danitz and Strobel (2001) question whether online actions can substitute physical campaigns and lobbying.

The combination of these elements and the political regime departs from the premise that the use of the net depends on how the net modifies the POS. Those elements that it cannot modify will act as constraints offline and online. For instance, the Internet can reduce organizational costs and it offers a range of low cost online actions. However, no impact has been reported on the institutional openness or on offline action risks. Finally, the Internet modifies diffusion costs, but not offline media plurality.

## **Hypotheses**

It has been suggested that the level of repression in non-democracies means that costs of offline action are higher than in democracies. However, the online action costs are relatively low for movements in both systems. Consequently, the differential between online and offline costs is higher in non-democracies. In this sense, the Internet offers a more significant opportunity for movements in those regimes. Although online monitoring and censorship can distort this similarity, they can be surpassed by a savvy user (Lysenko & Desouza, 2010). Then, one can expect a preponderance of the Internet in the tactics used by movements in non-democracies relative to that in democracies:

(1) *Dissident social movements in non-democracies will prefer to act in the online arena rather than acting in the offline arena, whereas those in democracies will be equally prone to act online or offline.*

But which tactics will dissidents deploy online? McLaughlin (2003) distinguished three categories: mobilization, support erosion and internationalization. The use of the net for mobilization generally implies the existence of an offline action. Higher costs

due to repression and lower incentives are expected in non-democracies compared to democracies. Support erosion entails provision of framed information and can be seen as an equivalent of diffusion. Here the net can effectively reduce physical risks of offline diffusion and offer an alternative in closed media contexts. Thus one can expect it to be a key platform for pursuing this strategy in non-democracies. In democracies, dissidents can diversify their channels without facing high risks, alleviating the weight of the net. For internationalization, the net has proved very helpful across regimes. ATTAC or the Zapatistas are two examples. So it will not be covered by this paper.

(2) *Challengers in non-democratic states will be more hesitant to use the net for mobilization when the action is not taking place exclusively online than their counterparts in democratic regimes. Challengers in democratic states will often use the net for mobilizing their constituencies.*

(3) *Challengers in non-democratic regimes will mainly rely on diffusion as their online strategy, whereas challengers in democratic regimes will be more capable of diversifying their actions online.*

These hypotheses integrate McLaughlin's (2003) results on dissidents' use of the net in dictatorships with different oppressive levels. While diffusion was stable across his cases, mobilization was not. The study of context not as a source of variance in Internet policy but as a source of variance in dissident strategy hopes to explain this difference.

## Methodology

Two case studies have been conducted: regime dissidence in Venezuela and in Spain. While the Spanish *Indignados* offers data for a non radical, pro-democracy movement in a democracy, Venezuela is a case of a non-democratic state with a visible opposition. Several factors were controlled for. As external factors; the allies and opponents system (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008; Della Porta & Rucht, 1995; Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996) and the economic context (Nollert, 1995). As internal elements; the structure of the social movement organization (SMO) (McCammon, 2003), its base (Curtis & Zurcher, 1973; McAdam, 1986; McCarthy & Wolfson, 1996), its life point (Curtis & Zurcher, 1973; Tarrow, 1999) and its ideology (Aminzade, 1995). Four dissident SMOs were studied together with two environmental ones that served as controls.

Table 1. Studied SMOs		
	Dissident organizations	Environmental organizations
<b>Venezuela</b>	Fuerza Solidaria Movimiento Demócrata Liberal	Azul Ambientalistas
<b>Spain</b>	No Les Votes Democracia Real Ya	Ecologistas en Acción

The data collection process used two techniques: website content analysis and semi-structured interviews with SMOs activists. The website analysis is double. On the one hand, a compilation of actions was done (both reported offline actions and actions for which participation was asked through the web). On the other hand, an Internet Usage Index (IUI) was elaborated. This index is an adaptation from that created by Kies, Mendez, Scmitter and Trechsel (2004) to study the use of the net by political parties. Some elements are also taken from Zhou, Reid, Qin, Chen and Lai's index for extremist groups (2005). The index ranges from 0 to 1, being 1 the maximum exploitation of the net. It has 7 dimensions. In the core of the index are the areas of diffusion and mobilization. Other areas have been kept to draw a more complete picture: recruitment, bilateral interactivity, multilateral interactivity, networking and repression denounce.

These two analyses were applied at five instances. The three first cover the SMOs' website, Facebook and Twitter. The analyses were done between 1<sup>st</sup> January 2012 and 12<sup>th</sup> February 2012. The fourth instance (*Internet*) is a mixture of the three previous ones. The fifth corresponds to website data without time restrictions. This design is limited to those uses of the Internet which are publicly available.

Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted. They intended to capture: (1) movement background (2) relevance of the net for the SMOs' strategies; (2) strategies deployed online; (3) functionality of the net for the strategies (whether online or offline); (4) impact of regime characteristics on the connection between Internet and strategies and (5) impact of confounding factors. See the Annex for information on the interviews means and the interviewees. The interviews have been analyzed by classifying the relevant parts according to their topic and comparing them across cases. More details on the interviews and the IUI can be found in Mohedano Roldán (2012).

### **Case studies: Venezuela**

Venezuela has experienced a deterioration of its democratic quality under Chávez's presidency (Freedom House, 2011; Marshall, 2010), especially at the end of the 2000s. Constitutional reforms have been used to concentrate powers in the executive and the judiciary has lost its independence (ibid). Although the vote is free, the electoral law benefits the ruling party and the National Electoral Center (NEC) is biased in favor of the government (Brandler, 2006; Freedom House, 2011).

Constitutionally, the Venezuelans have the right of petition (article 51); legislative initiatives; and the right to ask a referendum to derogate bills and decrees with power



law (article 74) or revoking any elected politician (article 72) (Cortes Constituyentes, 1999). But freedom of speech and assembly have been threatened (Freedom House, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010) and repression is high (Cingranelli & Richards, 2010; Gibney, Cornett, & Wood, 2010).

Media censorship has also expanded. The governmental control of TV and radio stations and the withdrawal of permissions for private media has escalated (Freedom House, 2011). The government has issued laws to limit media content under social and political instability pretexts (eg. Social Responsibility in Radio, TV and Electronic Media Law, Resortemec) and journalists' physical and legal insecurity has risen (ibid).

Venezuela has an Internet penetration rate of 35'8%, with ten million users (The World Bank, 2011). Those concentrate in the middle-high class of the capital and a few more states (Guasch & Ugas, 2007). In 2007, the only company providing Internet service was nationalized (Reporters Without Borders, 2010). Online censorship and monitoring have since occurred (ibid). Yet, some of the most popular social network accounts belong to Chávez opponents (ibid).

In the political scenario, a key event was the referendum to revoke Chávez. The impugnation of many of the signatures collected to convoke it and suspicions about the results created distrust on the NEC. But the truly traumatic event was the provision by the NEC of the list of signatures to the government. The government used it to punish the signatories (Brandler, 2006). It was even published online (Corrales, 2006). According to Acosta (2007), the blow off of the results, the lack of trust in the institutions, the internal conflicts, the fear and the governmental pressure demobilized the opposition until 2007, when students protested against media censorship.

In economic terms, despite the implementation of social programs, inequality and poverty remain high (Acosta, 2007; Corrales, 2006). Moreover, the financial crisis has hit the oil exports that sustained the economy. Together with nationalizations, this has caused a contraction of the economy (Emerging Markets Monitor, 2009; Palmer, 2010). Despite a generalized dissatisfaction, Chávez maintains high support (Brandler, 2006).

#### *SMOs description*

Fuerza Solidaria (FS) was born in 2001. It is a right-wing group centered on its president, a former presidential candidate. Its governing organ is chosen democratically. But once it is elected, there is no further participation of the basis. Their power base is formed by middle class professionals. FS president was imprisoned in 2002 and in 2010

until 2011. Since 2010, the organization has focused on denouncing his detention. Before, FS was very active establishing international contacts and organizing street acts.

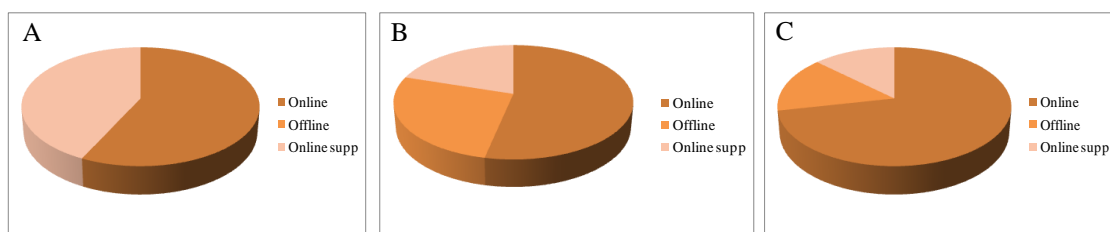
Movimiento Demócrata Liberal (MDL) was created in 2007 but its origins lay on a frustrated attempt to create a political party in 2001. The party was, according to the group, robbed. This created mistrust in the Venezuelan system. MDL characterizes itself as horizontally organized although the main lines of work are defined by its leaders. In their power base people between 20 to 45 years predominate. MDL is a liberal group, both in political and in economic terms. Their proposal is double: creating a federal state and establishing an alternative electoral register. FS and MDL are more skeptical to use institutional means than the left-wing dissidence, introducing a bias in the study.

Azul Ambientalistas (AA) is an environmental organization with 25 years of experience. It operates in a project-based manner. For each project, a leading team is established. They claim to be neutral in ideological, religious and sociopolitical terms.

*Environment perception and the online and offline spheres*

FS and MDL describe the Internet as a political arena as well as a tool for supporting street actions: *“the Internet is useful for complementing the actions in the tangible world, but also for creating new political spaces”* (Interviewee 1). Despite intensively using the net to diffuse their street acts, AA characterized it only as a political arena.

The website analysis of the SMOs’ actions suggests only a little displacement to the online sphere. As Figure 4 shows, the online and offline action distribution does not correspond to that expected in the first hypothesis. Dissidents use both spheres in a balanced way. A significant portion of those offline actions are supported by the Internet (“online supp” in the graph). The weight of online actions for AA reflects their extensive use of the Internet for diffusing position statements.



**Figure 4. Online, offline and online supported activities reported on the website and social networks by (A) FS, (B) MDL and (C) AA**

Two perceived inefficiencies of the net explain the persistence of offline actions. For MDL the limited Internet user rate makes it necessary for them to use the street: *“I see*

*myself forced to look for a way to bring my message to the other two thirds of the population that have no access to this action sphere*” (Interviewee 3). For FS it is a political need: *“We must continue going out to the streets to defend our principles and ideas and resist repression in the best possible way. The alternative is staying at home and decline in the fight”* (Interviewee 1). While the first one reflects an instrumental limit, the second one reflects FS’s conceptualization of the net. In line with Castells (2007), for FS the power of the net is its capacity to modify action by spreading ideas. But these ideas need to be translated into physical action.

FS’s quote presents another relevant point: repression is resisted, not fought back. Both dissident SMOs shared a feeling of impotence before the exposition to offline repression. They also reported that repression impacts their acting and success capacity. But this perceived risk was not identified as a reason to act online, generally. However, within the net there is an empowerment feeling. Interviewee 3 claimed that an online state attack could be responded by improving shields on the net. Yet, this empowerment has not spilled over onto the street. In other words, the Internet is not considered useful to improve offline security. The situation is different for AA. Although it has also experienced authorities’ hampering of offline mobilization, they have a feeling of agency. Judicial means, legality and public opinion pressure are the weapons that they mention. FS and MDL conceive the judicial path as useless, given a perceived bias.

FS: *“The national authorities are sequestrated by the government, what makes almost useless turning to them to realize denounces.”* (Interviewee 1)

AA: *“We are not friends of turning the other cheek, we also defend ourselves (...). [The authorities] sometimes disturb, but we also have our lawyers and we know well the citizen laws.”* (Interviewee 5)

Dissidents also felt defenseless before social opponents. FS identifies Chávez supporters as its main opponent and their response affects FS’s capacity to act offline: *“it is one of the factors that we mostly consider, because some of those pro-government groups are armed and are violent”* (Interviewee 1). MDL accuses the left opposition from collaborating with the regime and it directly opposes them. Moreover, MDL reports pressures and physical attacks from them. Because MDL criticizes the left opposition, the *chavists* have sometimes backed them up. But they also pose risks that are considered in action design. On the other hand, none of the SMOs’ allies seemed to impact their strategy design. AA was the only group with elite alliances, supporting the assumption that this was not a relevant factor for dissidents.

In short, it is opponents and state repression what imposes major costs on offline action. For MDL repression derives into popular fear that impedes them to pursue mass offline actions. It also imposes a slow growth of the SMO, which translates into a weakness that limits their offline acting capacity. Repression also forces the group to soften actions and statements: *“Regime civil servants have made “courtesy calls” to my father (...), recognizing that we had to soften the tone of our actions”* (Interviewee 2). The online strategy to face this relies on online recruitment, rather than on online action.

Nevertheless, MDL considers not to be experiencing systematic persecution. Still, they believe that the state tries to make street action difficult and that the levels of freedom and security offline are low. But this is not seen as a cause for deserting from offline action. FS has experienced judicial persecution, including the imprisonment of their president, and repression in street actions. This has led to a steep decline in their actions. Importantly, the centrality of the president in FS may have intensified this effect. MDL and FS have resorted to internationalization as a protective strategy. Another common tactic is to stress the legality of their actions. The aim is to maximize legal security and to create confidence among people. The net seems of little relevance.

However, the net is generally perceived as a secure place. Interviewee 3 claimed that the security that the net offers by avoiding physical exposure is cancelled by a high criminality rate. This makes not even home a safe place. Nevertheless, the interviewee also believed that personal attacks suffered could have been avoided using the net. Interviewee 2 pointed to how the net provided safer headquarters. For FS, mobilizing their constituency online is safer. AA, felt completely secure and free online and offline.

Thus, the expected decline of offline action due to repression and the perception of online security are supported. But the mechanism linking both elements did not occur. Two possibilities arise: first, the Internet is not so much more secure as to abandon the street; second, the net is an inefficient political arena. Under a rationalist perspective, if the Internet offers possibilities of secure action, as it seems to be considered, the first perspective would be improbable. Moreover, even if both were considered as equally risky spheres, it would still be necessary to explain why the street is preferred.

The dissidents did not mention the Internet as a resource to face the hostile environment, despite identifying advantages in it for decreasing risk. Thus, there is also no strategic connection between offline repression and Internet actions. Yet, this can be put into question. First, FS and MDL have used the net for denouncing attacks. Second, MDL claimed that if the intensity of repression would rise, they would use the net for

mobilizing against it. Third, MDL is considering creating an electoral register through Facebook, to overcome people’s fear to check in. This is based on the security that Facebook has proved to them. Fourth, to overcome a limited power base, MDL recruits through the web. But these uses of the net are oriented towards protecting street action rather than towards avoiding it, although the Facebook project points in this direction.

*Offline street action, online mobilization and environmental constraints*

Table 2 reflects the IUI. Table 3 shows the mobilization dimension of the IUI, which reflects the attempts of the SMOs to engage net users in different actions. The numbers show that, despite acting offline, dissidents’ use of the net for mobilization is low.

**Table 2. Internet Usage Index by sections and general value for FS, MDL and AA**

	FS	MDL	AA
Diffusion	0,60	0,73	0,63
Bilateral Interactivity	0,38	0,50	0,63
Multilateral Interactivity	0	0,13	0
Networking	0,57	0,29	0,14
Recruitment	0	1	0,5
Mobilization	0,27	0,35	0,69
Denounce	1	1	0
Internet Usage Index	0,40	0,52	0,53

**Table 3. IUI mobilization by tool for FS, MDL and AA**

	FS	MDL	AA
Website	0,27	0,27	0,50
Facebook	0	0,12	0,24
Twitter	0	0,16	0,28

Unexpectedly, the actions reported on the net revealed that SMOs mobilization took place mostly offline. What seems supported is that institutional actions are rare. They are seen as legitimizing the regime and as useless, due to an institutional bias.

*“[I]t is us who reject this path because we do not recognize the institutions” (Interviewee 2)*

*“I have issued several demands for the right of petition (...). Around half a hundred I have handed in, but up to now any of those entities (...) have given us this right” (Interviewee 3)*

The perception of incentives for offline action is mixed. FS considers the street as necessary, what may indicate a certain belief on effectiveness compared to the net. But MDL disregards the idea that the regime may care about street protest, although it is seen as effective for recruitment.

The offline actions used are also diverse. FS called for some demonstrations, but only before the imprisonment of their president. MDL has called people to ask the removal of their names from the electoral registry. They distribute propaganda and organize formation activities. Repression affects the choice of those actions. According to MDL, fear (and media censorship) impedes them to acquire the critical mass that assures them protection and negotiating capacity before the government when engaging

in mass acts: “[i]n such conditions we cannot venture to make street events because well, we would be totally undefended before the actions of the regime” (Interviewee 4).

Despite some timid attempts for online mobilization, the net has been only partially used for mobilizing outsiders to the group (either online or offline). FS considered that mobilizing the net was easier and less risky, but no attempts have been identified. MDL tries to mobilize the net for diffusion by trying to recruit Twitter activists. However, a more ambitious project is the creation of an alternative electoral register by Facebook. It hopes to get online the participation that they did not get offline: “A way to generate trust so that people do not fear such register is (...) creating a register based on individual accounts opened in Facebook” (Interviewee 4). The advantages of the net mentioned are masking activists and avoiding traceability or physical attacks.

Although the Internet is identified by MDL as its mobilization channel, its usefulness for mobilizing offline is considered “little, given the apathy, the mistrust, the dejection, the high degrees of surrender, it is not a problem of MDL, it is a problem of the context” (Interviewee 2). This quote makes evident that the Internet has not been able to overcome offline constraints. Nevertheless, new limitations enter the picture. It is not only fear, but also a social state of mind that is interpreted as preventing such mobilization. This analysis is not shared by FS, for whom repression is the key element.

AA did not identify security as an element in their strategic calculations and choices. Both online (social networks) and offline (activists) means are used for mobilization (neither MDL nor FS reported a use of offline mobilization channels). Both mass and non mass offline and online actions have been done. Only AA has engaged in lobbying.

#### *Media censorship, online diffusion and recruitment*

All SMOs relied heavily on the net for diffusing their ideas and organizations, as the IUI reflected (table 3). In fact, diffusion dominates the actions that were carried on online (table 4) and those that were reported on the net but carried off offline (table 5). AA’s lower values reflex its engagement in lobbying, judicial action and mobilization.

**Table 4. Diffusion as a percentage of online actions for FS, MDL and AA**

	FS	MDL	AA
<b>Internet</b>	100%	98,23%	84,85%
<b>Website</b>	100%	100%	84,62%
<b>Website 2012</b>	100%	100%	88,89%
<b>Facebook</b>	-	100%	90,00%
<b>Twitter</b>	-	97,50%	69,23%

**Table 5. Diffusion as a percentage of actions reported on the net for FS, MDL, AA**

	FS	MDL	AA
<b>Internet</b>	100%	93,60%	69,57%
<b>Website</b>	91,37%	94,74%	60,61%
<b>Website 2012</b>	100%	94,12%	54,17%
<b>Facebook</b>	-	100%	69,23%
<b>Twitter</b>	-	92,05%	61,11%

All the interviewees confirmed the relevance of the Internet for diffusion and the relevance of diffusion among the Internet strategies. The three SMOs referred to technical communicative advantages of the net, such as permanent or real time diffusion. The dissident SMOs also mentioned the overcoming of censorship of offline channels (Interviewees 1, 3) and the avoidance of manipulation (Interviewee 3).

The relevance of diffusion lies in the power of ideas to impact action and in its usefulness for recruitment. Many of MDL's members entered the organization after exploring their website and social network accounts. According to MDL, the flow to the website responds mostly to a strategy they devised. MDL sends communiqués to online and offline media to later on diffuse the link with the publication in social networks and direct the interested audience to the website. Here, the relevance of the net is double. It allows propaganda diffusion and it offers a more plural media scene, with digital newspapers, which reinforces MLDs propaganda opportunities.

Indeed, media are a key actor. For MDL offline media silence does not only impact the strategies they develop. It impedes offline diffusion and it negatively impacts their success capacity. The media panorama is perceived as biased, although this bias is characterized differently. AA attributes media silence to a lack of understanding, although they also perceive zeal to protect the government from negative information. For FS, it is caused both by ideological bias and fear to retaliation. MDL makes a similar interpretation, although they claim that the fear to state retaliation is also reinforced by the left opposition in order to silence liberal positions or statements criticizing them. Both FS and MDL have reported defamation from media outlets.

AA: *"The environmental topic, because it is not understood or because it involves different levels of government, is very often silenced"* (Interviewee 5)

FS: *"The pro-official media attacks us fiercely, and the independent media very often do not dare to publish for us because they fear retaliation from the government"* (Interviewee 1)

This lack of media plurality has led to little media access for the three SMOs. Nevertheless, AA perceived a tendency of inclusion driven by higher social pressure regarding environmental issues. The success of MDL's efforts to gain media space has been more moderate. They have been accepted in some TV stations, especially at the regional level, and the press and the radio have been a bit more receptive. But digital media are the most prone to publish them. The efforts for getting offline space are due to audience limits of the net. However, the Internet appears as a more open channel:

*“we have found fewer restrictions in Venezuela through the Internet than through the traditional media”* (Interviewee 3).

AA reported that the lack of media access did not impact their action design. But for MDL it means insufficient offline diffusion that affects the SMO's growth. Additionally, MDL sees media access as a tough barrier to jump. But all SMOs see the solution in the social networks: *“we are forced to turn to social networks, to Twitter, Facebook, etcetera, etcetera, to be able to diffuse our information”* (Interviewee 4). This was surprising in the case of FS given the limited use it makes of them.

The case of AA shows how the Internet serves diffusion regardless of whether media silence is due to governmental censorship or to media lack of interest. Importantly, all SMOs considered that online diffusion was effective, although not absolutely sufficient.

### **Case studies: Spain**

Since 1978 Spain constitutes a stable democracy. According to Freedom House, the political and civil rights are fully guaranteed and respected (2011). Representatives are elected by free and open elections and the separation of powers is constitutionally granted and it is effectively applied (ibid). However, some doubts have been casted on the functioning of the judiciary (ibid). Constitutionally, the rights to petition (article 29) and popular initiative (article 87.3) are granted (Cortes Españolas, 1978).

Spain oscillates between rare and extensive repression, depending on the source. The US State Department and CIRI's data minimize repression levels (Cingranelli & Richards, 2010; Gibney et al., 2010). But Amnesty International and Freedom House report higher repression levels (Freedom House, 2011; Gibney et al., 2010). Freedom House also claims a risk on media freedom driven by legal action against some journalists for defamation (eg. against the King) (2011). Nevertheless, the overall environment is considered free (ibid; Cingranelli & Richards, 2010). Neither online censorship nor monitoring have been reported (Freedom House, 2011). The Internet penetration rate is 66.5%, with around 30'5 million users (The World Bank, 2011).

In the recent years, the economic crisis has shaken the Spanish political arena. The unemployment has rocketed and in 2010, austerity measures started to be taken (Éltető, 2011). Meanwhile banks were rescued with public funds. Simultaneously, cases of corruption mushroom in the ranks of all parties. Trust in politicians sank (Norwegian Social Science Services, 2010). In this context, the *Indignados* movement appeared in May 2011, lead to sporadic camps all over Spain for over two months.



### *SMOs description*

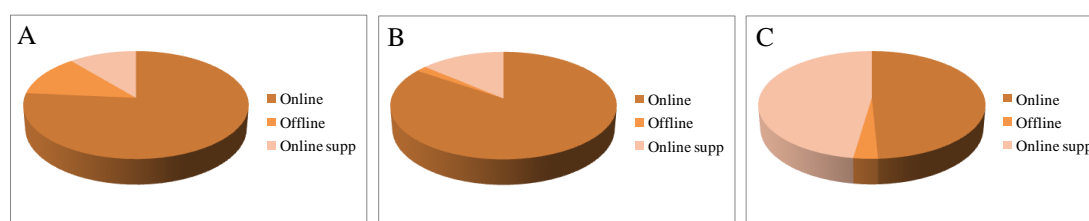
No Les Votes (NLV) was founded online in 2011 after unsuccessful attempts to prevent a law on intellectual property rights online. Their failure was attributed to a democratic deficit based on a two-based party system which would facilitate corruption. As a result, NLV's target became increasing parliamentary plurality by asking people to vote small parties. It is a horizontal organization coordinated through open e-mail lists. Decisions over strategies are taken in an atomized way, depending on the support of activists. When the *Indignados* appeared, NLV merged with it (Abellán Bordallo, 2011). Their power base is diverse, although people from the left predominate.

DRY was born in 2011 as a platform of organizations and individuals in favor of citizen mobilization. The target was the organization of a demonstration the 15<sup>th</sup> May 2011 to protest against a perceived democratic deficit. This deficit was the consequence of an alleged cooptation of politicians by financial and economic powers. With time, DRY became an independent organization. The SMO is horizontal. Decisions are taken in an online *agora* after deliberation and voting. The agora is open to all members. Their power base is very diverse although young and left-wing people predominate.

EeA is a 10 years old confederation of ecologist groups that has created its own identity. The local, regional and confederative groups work autonomously. They coordinate yearly in an assembly open to all the members. The power base is diverse.

### *Environment perception and the online and offline spheres*

All SMOs expressed a dual vision of the Internet as a political sphere and as a tool supporting offline actions. Figure 5 shows how the relevance of the Internet (compared to offline actions) was bigger than expected as most of the actions reported on the net were online actions. Also significant are the offline actions supported online.



**Figure 5. Online, offline and online supported activities reported on the website and social networks by (A) NLV, (B) DRY and (C) EeA**

These results are not driven by a rejection to use the offline sphere, but by the weight of online diffusion. Repression does not seem to play a role either.

The interpretations over security differ slightly among the groups. DRY understands that there is freedom and security both online and offline. DRY and NLV suspect police infiltrations online, but they are unconcerned about it: “*we do not really know if there are infiltrated people from the police, we suppose there is, because this is normal that there are, and it is not something that really worries us, you know?*” (Interviewee 9). This attitude may reveal trust on the institutions as protecting them from arbitrary use of the acquired information. In addition, DRY does not deem their actions as dangerous. Interviewee 8 described the Internet as a freer space than the street but this was linked to not needing permissions to protest. In this sense, it reflects a lack of bureaucratization of the net or how the state’s capacity to order the public sphere is limited within it.

NLV’s diagnosis resonates Castells’s (2007) view of the exercise of power through intellectual means. For NLV neither freedom nor security are guaranteed because the expansion of the state under paternalistic pretexts limits the capacity of free thought and extends control measures. This situation is shared by the online and offline spheres. In this sense, freedom is dependent on the intellectual capacity to break state framing. And the security vis-à-vis the state depends on escaping the *big brother’s eye*. This is linked to a goal of NLV: education against manipulation. Through this, it would be affecting the relevance of online strategies by stressing information diffusion.

None of the groups mentioned fear to participate among the population as a relevant factor. Only Interviewee 9 and EeA pointed to the legality of their actions to minimize risks and to maximize participation. This resembles FS and MDL’s strategy but it is isolated in the Spanish dissidence. Only NLV mentioned the need to accept risks. But risks seem unimportant for determining strategies. NLV’s strategies were driven by its ideology, based on hacker principles like autonomy. “*The principle of autonomy is so strong that you allow having the enemy at home. (...) and if it is the enemy who slips in, well, then what we will do is attacking him directly*” (Interviewee 6). The quote also shows a feeling of agency online. Only EeA reported censorship, but it was allocated to individuals rather than to the system. EeA’s concern was the passivity of against social pressures and attacks. There would be, then, indirect repression by denying protection.

Repression and risks are also absent in the choice between online or offline actions. EeA and Interviewee 7 commented that the net offered better identity protection, but Interviewee 7 did not use this option. Against repressive events, DRY used judicial denounce. Interviewee 8 considered this strategy effective if the case was a scandal. In other words, there is a trust on legal institutions, albeit limited. A second action was the

online diffusion of events and communiqués: “we tried to send lots of information out to defend, through the Internet” (Interviewee 9).

Apart from the state, NLV and DRY see media as an opponent. For NLV media support the political and economic powers in order to take their share of the cake. Only EeA has alliances with politicians. In three instances SMOs’ behavior was impacted by other actors’ reactions. First, NLV increased diffusion to face disqualifications. Second, DRY created a security group to assure that demonstrations were pacific and to minimize the risk of police intervention. They also offered contact information of lawyers in case of detention. Third, the groups engaged in online denounce. In none of them is there a swing from offline to online action. Nonetheless, repression impacts the intensity of the use of the net to protect offline action by promoting online strategies, like denounce. The reason why SMOs engage in this resonates again Castells’s (2007) idea that the net allows breaking hegemonic framing: “The possibilities that the Internet offer, of direct communication for us, explaining our version, that otherwise would not appear... this is indeed a place where somehow we are protected” (Interviewee 8).

This moderate connection between action and authorities’ behavior is supported by the fact that only DRY connects security concerns to strategy. The most relevant impact is the creation by DRY of its own network online. It served as a protection against infiltration and to optimize internal communication and decision-making. However, NLV and DRY only mentioned their manifestos and goals as limits to actions.

*Offline street action, online mobilization and environmental constrains*

Table 6 portrays the IUI of the three SMOs. The mobilization potential is relatively high for all of them, although NLV stays far behind DRY. Two factors explain this. First, NLV has declared to be weak on the street given its origin online. Second, DRY assumes the street actions of its hundreds of affiliated associations.

**Table 6. Internet Usage Index by sections and general value for NLV, DRY, EeA**

	NLV	DRY	EeA
<b>Diffusion</b>	0,93	0,78	0,83
<b>Bilateral Interactivity</b>	0,5	0,13	0,88
<b>Multilateral Interactivity</b>	0,63	0,25	0,50
<b>Networking</b>	0,57	1	1
<b>Recruitment</b>	1	1	1
<b>Mobilization</b>	0,54	0,89	0,69
<b>Denounce</b>	1	1	0,50
<b>Internet Usage Index</b>	0,72	0,74	0,78

**Table 7. Mobilization by tool for NLV, DRY, EeA**

	NLV	DRY	EeA
<b>Website</b>	0,46	0,65	0,65
<b>Facebook</b>	0,24	0,60	0,36
<b>Twitter</b>	-	0,40	0,16

All the organizations mobilize mostly through their website (Table 7). Only DRY balances the website and Facebook. All SMOs considered the net as effective for mobilizing as for diffusing. NLV alone claimed that it was more useful for diffusion, although it considered the net decisive for its potential to mobilize: *“Had No Les Votes not used the Internet, the capacity that we would have had for mobilizing the people I believe would have been very, very low”* (Interviewee 7). Another mobilization tool mentioned by DRY and EeA was mass media. DRY considered TV coverage of the camps as key for the big participation enjoyed. When media diffusion decreased, the net was crucial to maintain participation. The network of allies proved also useful. For EeA, activists were also important. In any case, the choice of channels followed a double logic: NLV and DRY use of the net was connected to their strong position there. Second, channel diversity was looked for in order to cover a wide audience.

The analysis of the actions showed that 30% of the mobilization efforts of NLV were for online actions, 50’54% for DRY, and 59’10% for EeA. The high result of these last two is due to an intensive use of non-flooding e-mails. NLV’s result contradicts the interview data, as NLV affirmed that it concentrated on mobilizing online. This can be understood if one considers the relatively high number of offline actions done which do not require big numbers, such as propaganda distribution. In any case, the expectation that there would not be a preference for acting online is supported. The reason why the net was used for mobilizing was its effectiveness: *“In half an hour you can join 3.000 people in a square, as happened in Barcelona with the eviction”* (Interviewee 8). This quote also provides an example of how the mobilization strategy on the net can be used to protect street action. In that case, repression sparked online mobilization strategies. Why repression acted here as a catalyst and in Venezuela as a disincentive might be linked to the fear factor and to the SMOs expectations over people’s reaction.

In short, repression costs seem low. Regarding incentives, NLV considered the effectiveness of offline and online action as *relative*. For EeA the effectiveness of an action depends on how it is planned, its goals and its nature. Then although incentives exist, EeA displayed more agency while dissidents were more skeptical. This would coincide with the assumption that elites would not provide big concessions to them.

All the organizations engaged in confrontational strategies and mass acts. Product boycott, public disorders, demonstrations, public meetings or property occupation are found in the repertoire of the SMOs. But institutional actions were also deployed. EeA and DRY have used signature collection. DRY has also mobilized to hand in protest

letters to the presidency of polling stations. After seen the call on DRY’s website, the Central Electoral Committee tried to prevent the polling stations from accepting the letters. But, the electoral province authorities accepted them. This case constitutes the only reported drawback of mobilizing through the net. According to DRY the damage was symbolic. Even more important is that NLV’s main strategy is an *electoral boycott* against the two biggest parties. Dissidents’ choice between confrontational or institutional actions depended on ideology and effectiveness. Potential repression was again irrelevant: “*We are learning something from this [police repression], but no, no... it is not a reason to say we don’t do this, not at all.*” (Interviewee 8).

Finally, like in Venezuela, the only organization lobbying is EeA. But for NLV, small parties are potential temporal allies. As one of NLV’s targets is increasing the parliamentary seats of small parties, those have sometimes adopted their claims. This questions the accuracy of the assumption that dissidents could not ally with elites. Still, those parties are seen as power-seekers who do not understand NLV’s message.

*Media censorship, online diffusion and recruitment*

The three SMOs used the net to present their organization and ideas. But offline means were sometimes relevant too: propaganda distribution, own printed media (DRY and NLV) and mass media diffusion played a role. Nevertheless, social networks, websites and blogs were considered useful by all the groups.

**Table 8. Diffusion as a percentage of online actions for NLV, DRY, EeA**

	NLV	DRY	EeA
<b>Internet</b>	59,38%	87,40%	63,94%
<b>Website</b>	41,67%	78,72%	57,90%
<b>Website 2012</b>	25%	50%	100%
<b>Facebook</b>	75%	90,26%	82,93%
<b>Twitter</b>	-	83,05%	89,47%

**Table 9. Diffusion as a percentage of actions reported on the net for NLV, DRY and EeA**

	NLV	DRY	EeA
<b>Internet</b>	36,92%	74,23%	72,60%
<b>Website</b>	25%	59,68%	60,45%
<b>Website 2012</b>	5,88%	33,33%	100%
<b>Facebook</b>	78,57%	78,21%	66,67%
<b>Twitter</b>	-	70%	68,85%

Tables 8 and 9 provide data on the relevance of the Internet for diffusion. The low percentage of diffusion actions for NLV is surprising. This is partly due to the coding rules used for aggregating actions. In order to consider an element an action of diffusion it had to include at least a diagnosis or a prognosis. The website from NLV is often used to aggregate information of interest. But this information is not framed. This is linked to one of NLV’s goals: providing unbiased information to promote independent thinking.

In general, these numbers reflect that diffusion activities are crucial in SMOs’ repertoire. But their weight is even higher when only online activities are considered.

This indicates that the Internet is an important asset for diffusion. The usefulness of the net for diffusion was heavily stressed by the three SMOs. EeA and NLV pointed to its capacity to filtrate content not by power relations but by quality. Other identified advantages are speed, geographical dispersion, direct communication and avoiding manipulation: *“When those who explain the affairs are 4,5,10, it is much easier to manipulate them (...) than when there are hundreds or thousands of people explaining something”* (Interviewee 7). DRY and NLV commented the usefulness of this diffusion for recruitment. This recruitment was considered part of Internet’s nature (its capacity to bring people together) and not only an intentional use given to it. Nonetheless, DRY also attributed to media part of their growth during the camps period.

SMOs’ media coverage was unequal. NLV suffered media silence. DRY received much attention during the camps. Afterwards, they felt marginalized. They also reported disqualifications coming from right-wing media outlets. EeA perceived an increase in media coverage and considered media access limitations as universal. Only dissidents linked silence to media interests and their alleged support to the established powers.

The strategies regarding media silence differed among the organizations. EeA combined the social networks with offline diffusion and the cultivation of relationships with the media. DRY tried to correct disqualifying media statements soon after the camps started. But it has finally opted for abandoning any counterstrategy and focusing on creating its own content. Finally, NLV’s strategy was to pursue no strategy at all and to concentrate on the net. Nevertheless, they noted that reaching certain relevance online could open media’s doors. NLV’s approach builds in two assumptions: (1) the net is neutral, making diffusion success rely on quality; (2) the net is plural, correcting media manipulation. Then, the value of the net responds to internal characteristics (neutrality and plurality) opposed to those of media, becoming an emancipative tool.

DRY: *“It has been much more practical than traditional media because in traditional media (...) actually we cannot control what is published so much... and through the Internet people can get in the Internet and this way they can look up our message as it is”* (Interviewee 9)

NLV: *“Internet’s own nature is that it does not matter that the media gets to know it”* (Interviewee 6)

None of the groups identified a relationship between the way media treated them and the way they used the Internet. Nonetheless, DRY recognized that without the initial media coverage, they would have intensified the mobilization campaigns.

## **Venezuela and Spain: points of convergence and divergence and their implications**

This section systematizes the results around the hypotheses and theoretical assumptions. Opposing the first hypothesis, the offline sphere was used by all SMOs. For some the online sphere was more relevant, but no connection seems to exist with offline repression or with the regime. Dissidents in non-democracies continue using the street in order to compensate for insufficiencies of the net. Those being audience limits, or the perception that street action is more satisfactory. This supports Danitz and Strobel's claim that the net cannot substitute physical campaigns (2001).

What received partial support was the idea that the Internet was able to protect activists, as mentioned by Lerner (2010). All dissident groups saw security advantages on the net. However, only one of the Spanish SMOs introduced this advantage into its strategies by increasing denounce and creating an internal online network. And only one of the Venezuelans had a project to use the protection of the net to enhance action security. Then, the connection between online security and movements' strategies to diminish risk is weak. But it may occur in both regimes. Interestingly, AA and EeA were the only groups that did not point to security advantages of the Internet. This may indicate that the political context makes dissidents more aware of these opportunities and flexibility on what the net offers to each group, according to its needs.

Finally, the Spanish SMOs felt more empowered against offline repression. This empowerment came from trust in judicial action and online denounce. Online denounce was also deployed by the Venezuelan SMOs, but it was not translated into a feeling of agency before state repression. In this case, the Internet was not capable of protecting activists in oppressive regimes as much as was expected.

The assumption that the environment was more restrictive for Venezuelan dissidents was fully supported. If this is linked with the previous paragraphs, four possible conclusions appear: first, SMOs are not exploiting the Internet in an optimal way; second, the Internet protection power is restricted by its limitations; third, the Internet is a second rank political arena unable to substitute the street; fourth, the POS is not applicable to the use of the net or it must be applied in a different way than depicted here. Which option provides for a better understanding of the results cannot be said with the data at hand. However, although the fourth option is plausible, it is weakened by the support received by the other hypotheses even though it is not completely conclusive.

The second hypothesis received support in general terms. Although FS and MDL used the net for mobilization, their mobilization potential was small. In addition, they

engaged in events for small groups. Those may also be risky, but their exposure and required participation are smaller. Repression and people's fear and dejection effectively discouraged Venezuelan dissidence from mobilizing. The Internet has not impacted much this. MDL's approach is to patiently wait until the Internet and media provides them with a powerful base. Thus, the introduction of the net in mobilization strategies occurs either for small acts or for the long run, as its aggregative power has proved slow for them. However, recruitment is higher online than offline. So the net's slow speed is still an improvement. Nonetheless, the context seems to define better whether movements will mobilize or not than whether they will do it online or offline.

The assumption on costs was supported. Only for Venezuelan dissidence repression meant a burden big enough to condition street acts. At the same time, Venezuelan dissidents stressed the need to cope with risks and faced population's fear to overtly oppose Chávez limits. The net did not help changing this. The Facebook alternative register is an attempt to solve this. But it would not mobilize the street, but the net.

The evidence regarding the incentives varies. In Venezuela, action incentives existed. But they were low and they seemed to be linked to organizational advances or moral strength rather than success. Nonetheless, in the long term, MDL was confident on the realization of its proposal. The incentives for Spanish groups were not very high, but they existed both for institutional and confrontational action. However, why engaging in risky actions without a strong belief that they can change things? The answer may rely on identity or on the need to demonstrate strength (Interviewee 8). These factors may also help understanding why the first hypothesis was not supported. In the first case, the paper could benefit from including identity aspects. In the second case, a wider perspective is needed where mass acts are considered an action within a bigger strategy. This would be consistent with analysis of McAdam (1983) and Tarrow (1999).

Finally, with regard to the third hypothesis, the six SMOs were unsatisfied with their media coverage. Nevertheless, some differences existed. Both AA and EeA saw a positive tendency in media attention. MDL and FS were more concerned by the impact of media silence than the other groups and felt that it imposed a barrier. Media ideology or interests were considered a relevant factor by MDL, NLV and DRY. But censorship or self-censorship due to fear was only argued in Venezuela. The response to this differed between dissident SMOs. The Venezuelans tried to gain media space. The Spanish diminished the relevance of media for the group. Given this mixed context it is difficult to say that in Venezuela dissidents have fewer channels than in Spain.



The six SMOs argued that the Internet was their channel of diffusion par excellence in front of media silence –or as a rejection to media (NLV, DRY). Thus, the third hypothesis is only half supported. The mechanisms foreseen for the Venezuelan regime dissidence hold. But the Spanish SMOs and AA were forced to see on the net their main communication channel too. The hypothesis also said that online strategies were more diverse in democratic states. Given the major use of the net for mobilization in Spain, this is supported. Nevertheless, it seems more indicative that diffusion is the first function that all the groups associate to the Internet. The results in Venezuela of this and the second hypotheses support those of McLaughlin (2003). Additionally, the framework here may explain why diffusion online is a common strategy while mobilization differs among his cases, in line with the repression levels of the states.

Several mechanisms connecting the offline and online spheres can be extracted from these comparisons. Repression impacted the use of online mobilization. First, repression is able to paralyze an SMO. Second, it instigates fear on the population, making online efforts for mobilization useless. This is reinforced by the need to be sure that participation in a protest action will be big enough as to provide protection to activists (MDL). Third, repression promoted denounces. This can break dominating discourses over repression, exposing the events from the dissidents' perspective (Spain). Then, three options may be at play: first, authorities are punished by the system; second, the regime support is weakened (McLaughlin, 2003); third, activists are attracted as a backup to the place where others are being repressed. The lack of online strategies of FS and MDL may lie in their belief that authorities do not react to any of those options.

What is clear is that the net is not enabling oppressed SMOs breaking the barriers to mobilization. Then, its aggregative power may be more easily exploited in a friendly context. However, events like the uprisings in Egypt show that this may not always be the case. What facilitates that the net can be used for mobilization in non-democracies is a question for future research. Maybe it is a matter of slowly accumulating supporters, as MDL suggests; of interconnecting the offline and online networks (Díaz, 2011); or of establishing a network-shaped movement (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2001).

A final mechanism has already been described: in Venezuela, regime censorship and threats to media limit the access of dissidents to media space, forcing them to use the Internet for diffusion. In Spain, media interests are the cause. This is no news. Still, it shows that neither the context nor the strategies differ much between political regimes. Instead they seem to vary more between types of movements. These can be understood

in terms of salience of the organizations, but also in terms of their goals. The focus on salience would build on Wolfsfeld's perspective (1984), while the focus on content is closer to McLeod and Hertog's (1999, as cited in Harlow & Harp, 2011) claim that media tend to support the authorities. In any case, SMOs' view does not coincide with that outlined by Internet skeptics with regard to the limits of the net's diffusion power.

## **Conclusions**

Combining the POS with results of previous studies on social movements' use of the Internet, this paper has unveiled some connections between the political regime and dissidents' use of the net. But it has also found unexpected limitations of this linkage. The connection between the political regime and movements' online strategies is mostly driven by the level of insecurity created by the state. Repression strongly affected the use of mobilization within the net, countering the optimism of authors like Castells in the linkage between aggregative and transformative power of the Internet (2010, 2011). Offline repression also affected the type of actions for which SMOs mobilized online. The media context made online diffusion a common strategy across all regimes. But media interests, and not only regime censorship, limit dissidents' media access. Finally, the relevance of the online sphere and the offline risks and costs seemed disconnected.

This means that the Internet has empowered regime dissidents in discourse diffusion in Spain and in Venezuela vis-à-vis the states *and* the media. This does not imply that the battle is fought in equal terms, but that the terms have improved for them. They experienced a *discursive* empowerment. Admittedly, this empowerment will go as far as the Internet penetration rate and the interconnection of the offline and online networks. However, the net has proved less useful against repression. It has eased mobilization in Spain, but not in Venezuela. In this sense, the *street* empowerment capacity of the net is unequal, indicating that its usefulness is bigger in low risk offline contexts.

This study is an initial approach to the mechanisms linking the political system with online SMO strategies, but a more in-depth analysis could help clarify gaps and detail those connections. A more complete answer to why movements decide to use the online or offline sphere is needed. An exploration of the net's limits, including identity and emotional aspects is also necessary. Also, the role of society deserves more attention. How do Internet users react to SMOs' online strategies in different regimes? How does this impact SMOs calculation? These questions need to be tackled to better understand how the political regime impact dissidence online strategies.

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## Annex - Interviews

### A. Interviewees organization and tasks and interviews date and means

	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Means</b>
<b>Interviewee 1</b>	Fuerza Solidaria	President assistant	14 <sup>th</sup> February 2012	E-mail
<b>Interviewee 2</b>	Movimiento Demócrata Liberal	National political director	9 <sup>th</sup> February 2012	E-mail
<b>Interviewee 3</b>	Movimiento Demócrata Liberal	Webmaster and federal coordinator	31 <sup>st</sup> January 2012	Mail, Instant messages
<b>Interviewee 4</b>	Movimiento Demócrata Liberal	Regional director	27 <sup>th</sup> January 2012	Video conference
<b>Interviewee 5</b>	Azul Ambientalistas	Executive director	30 <sup>th</sup> January 2012	E-mail
<b>Interviewee 6</b>	No Les Votes	Co-founder	26 <sup>th</sup> February 2012	Video conference
<b>Interviewee 7</b>	No Les Votes	Co-founder	21 <sup>st</sup> February 2012	Voice conference
<b>Interviewee 8</b>	Democracia Real Ya	Member of the communication commission	8 <sup>th</sup> February 2012	Voice conference
<b>Interviewee 9</b>	Democracia Real Ya	Member of the communication commission	31 <sup>st</sup> January 2012	Voice conference
<b>Interviewee 10</b>	Ecologistas en Acción	Social network responsible	18 <sup>th</sup> January 2012	Voice conference