

# E-Activism: New Media and Political Participation in Europe\*

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The demonstrations in Spain on March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2004 following the terrorist attacks in Madrid present an interesting challenge for political communication research. For the first time in the history of Spain, people employed communication technologies in order to create the dynamics of peaceful civil disobedience. Research on political communication has traditionally paid attention to the classic outlets in order to analyze the impact of media exposure on political affectation. Taking the cited framework as the main reference, this article compares the connection between political activism and the consumption of new and old media in European countries. Analyzing the use of these technologies is important because research on political communication has traditionally only focused on the classic media techniques to analyze the impact of media exposure on political disaffection. Therefore, using the March 13<sup>th</sup> demonstrations, this article compares the connection between political activism and the consumption of new and old media in European countries.

**Key words:** media malaise, political activism, political participation, mass media.

## *Activismo electrónico: Nuevos medios y participación política en Europa*

*Las manifestaciones en España del 13 de marzo de 2004, después de los atentados terroristas de Madrid, presentan un interesante reto para la investigación en comunicación. Por primera vez en la historia española los ciudadanos emplearon nuevas tecnologías de la comunicación para crear dinámicas de desobediencia civil pacífica. La investigación en comunicación política ha prestado tradicionalmente atención a los soportes mediáticos clásicos para analizar el impacto de la exposición mediática en la afección política. Tomando como referencia el citado marco, este artículo compara la conexión entre el activismo político y el consumo de nuevos y viejos medios en Europa.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The increasing use of new information and communication technologies has changed the very essence of political process in general and social mobilization in particular. Demonstrations in Spain on March 13<sup>th</sup> 2004, taking place after the terrorist attacks in Madrid and three days before general parliamentary elections, presented an interesting challenge for political communication research. For the first time in the history of Spain, and with few other examples around the world, 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 were 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 to pay attention to this specific situation, which has been considered of quite concern among experts given the widespread feelings of low identification with 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 in regards to 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 specifically characterising the ge-

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neral trend of contemporary western world's political culture. This process is described basically by the combination of, on the one hand, low levels of electoral turnout, political participation, political efficacy, political knowledge, and political understanding, and, on the other hand, a firm approval of democratic principles, and has been pointed out as a potential component of the 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, in one way or the other, has become a constant conviction among 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 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 of 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 the 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 traditionally paid attention to the classical outlets in order to analyze 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, such as 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 have been published lately taking 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 central idea throughout this paper could be defined in terms of the following questions: How is the use of the Internet related 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. Undoubtedly, the origins of these interpretations are found 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) 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 over 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 disaffec-

tion, 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 the 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 toward 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. It can be said 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 it can be concluded 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 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 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

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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, in order to develop this paper, we are going to focus on the so called non-conventional ways of political participation, and political activism, taking as a starting point the potential involvement of the new media in the process of political disaffection.

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 seems to be 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 (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; 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 20 European countries taking part in the European Social Survey (ESS). 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, 1963). For that reason, we distinguished three groups of countries: 1) The well established democracies of Western/Northern Europe<sup>1</sup> (Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, Denmark, Finland, France, United Kingdom, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden) 2) The countries of Southern Europe (Spain, Greece, Portugal and Italy) all of which, with the exception of Italy, are relatively young democracies. 3) The extremely young democracies in Eastern Europe (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia).

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<sup>1</sup> Due to data characteristics we couldn't introduce Germany in the analysis.

It is important to state that the approach chosen by this article does not assume the absence of other intervening variables. No socio-political event is just caused by one factor, but this research is focused exclusively on the impact provoked by the communication realm.

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 less politically inactive.

So far, there is no comparable data of exposure to political media content in those 20 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 hypotheses, 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 20 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 among the 20 countries concerning the relationship between exposure to media and political activism?

Finally, if there are differences among the 20 coun-

tries, and categorizing them in the three groups mentioned makes sense, the following pattern should occur:

H3: If there are differences among the 20 countries regarding 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 (ESS) 2002/2003. Starting in September 2002 and ending in September 2003 about 40.000 Europeans aged 15 years and older were 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 20 countries participating in the study. The exact procedure differed slightly from country to country. Table 1 shows the number of respondents and response rates in the 20 countries. The response rates differed from 34 percent in Switzerland to 80 percent in Greece. The problems introduced by the "non-response" were reduced by weighting the data<sup>2</sup>.

**Table 1**  
**Respondents / Respondents Rate in the European Social Survey 2002/2003**

	Respondents (n)	Response Rate %
<i>Western/Northern Europe</i>		
Austria	2.257	60
Belgium	1.899	59
Switzerland	2.040	34
Germany	2.995	57
Denmark	1.506	68
Finland	2.000	73
France	1.503	43
United Kingdom	2.052	56
Ireland	2.046	65
Luxembourg	1.552	44
Netherlands	2.364	68
Norway	2.036	65

<sup>2</sup> For more detailed information see [www.europeansocialsurvey.org](http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org)

Sweden	1.999	70
<i>Southern Europe</i>		
Spain	1.729	53
Greece	2.566	80
Italy	1.207	44
Portugal	1.511	69
<i>Eastern Europe</i>		
Czech Republic	1.360	43
Hungary	1.685	70
Poland	2.110	73
Slovenia	1.519	71

SOURCE: ESS 5.0

### *Independent variables*

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

**Table 2**  
**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>
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: ESS 5.0

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 characteristics of respondents like gender, age (year of birth) and education (years of education completed) and political interest which were controlled in multivariate analyses presented later.

Since this article is centered on new media, it has to be specified that even though the ESS data set discriminated between general and political consumption of television and press, the way Internet exposure was measured made it recommendable for the study to select those independent variables so as to get a coherent comparative approach.

#### *Dependent variable*

As already pointed out, non-electoral political participation, understood as different mechanisms or practices that citizens can bring into play in order to change the course of the political process, excluding the electoral participation, can be measured in several ways. Reason for which the item provided in the ESS was chosen and follow:

**Table 3**  
**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
- Deliberately bought certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons
- Donated money to a political organisation or group
- Participated in illegal protest activities

SOURCE: ESS 5.0

## FINDINGS

### *Political Activism*

H1 states that political activism will be highest in the well established democracies of Western/Northern Europe and lowest in the young democracies in Eastern Europe. Table 4 shows that this seems to be right. The twelve 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 ( $M = 1.98$ ,  $SD = 1.76$ ) and Norway ( $M = 1.93$ ,  $SD = 1.88$ ). With exception of the Czech Republic, the citizens of Eastern European countries are less active; thus, the most disaffected. Political activism is lowest in Hungary ( $M = 0.49$ ,  $SD = 1.94$ ) and Poland ( $M = 0.52$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ). Comparing the three groups of countries, we find an average mean of 1.61 in Western/Northern Europe, of 0.74 in Southern Europe, and of 0.67 in Eastern Europe. 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 4**  
**Political Activism**

	Mean	SD
<i>Western/Northern Europe</i>		
Austria	1.55	1.83
Belgium	1.47	1.70
Switzerland	1.92	1.92
Denmark	1.57	1.65
Finland	1.75	1.67
France	1.64	1.86
UnitedKingdom	1.52	1.68
Ireland	1.31	1.71
Luxembourg	1.56	1.76
Netherlands	1.14	1.50
Norway	1.93	1.88
Sweden	1.98	1.76
<i>Average</i>	<i>1.61</i>	<i>1.74</i>

<i>Southern Europe</i>		
Spain	1.11	1.83
Greece	0.56	1.24
Italy	0.77	1.51
Portugal	0.53	1.25
<i>Average</i>	<i>0.74</i>	<i>1.46</i>
<i>Eastern Europe</i>		
Czech Republic	1.12	1.46
Hungary	0.49	1.24
Poland	0.52	1.06
Slovenia	0.56	1.09
<i>Average</i>	<i>0.67</i>	<i>1.21</i>

SOURCE: ESS 5.0

### Exposure to media

H2 states that citizens of Eastern European countries will be less exposed to media in general while citizens of Western/Northern European countries will show the highest exposure levels. This hypothesis proves right to some extent, but not completely. Table 5 shows the percentage of respondents showing high levels of exposure to media. In our definition, these are respondents watching television more than two hours per day, reading newspapers more than half an hour per day, and "surfing" the Internet everyday.

The percentage of heavy users of television ranges from 61 percent in the UK to 28 percent in Slovenia. The percentage of heavy users of newspapers ranges from 68 percent in Norway to 20 percent in Greece. The percentage of heavy users of the Internet ranges from 35 percent in Denmark to 4 percent in Greece. Looking at the three groups of countries, we can see that in average exposure to media is lowest in Eastern Europe, with the only exception of newspapers.

**Table 5**  
Heavy Users of Media

	Percent heavy users of TV >2 hour per day %	Percent heavy users of newspapers >0.5 hours per day %	Percent heavy users of Internet >Everyday %
<i>Western/ Northern Europe</i>			
Austria	33	48	22
Belgium	44	35	18

Switzerland	26	51	25
Denmark	48	42	35
Finland	36	55	19
France	47	32	18
UnitedKingdom	61	48	18
Ireland	53	57	13
Luxembourg	47	38	21
Netherlands	51	52	22
Norway	37	68	25
Sweden	34	55	28
<i>Average</i>	<i>43</i>	<i>48</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>Southern Europe</i>			
Spain	51	30	9
Greece	58	20	4
Italy	48	34	10
Portugal	41	24	15
<i>Average</i>	<i>49</i>	<i>27</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>Eastern Europe</i>			
Czech Republic	52	45	8
Hungary	43	42	6
Poland	42	28	6
Slovenia	28	40	11
<i>Average</i>	<i>41</i>	<i>39</i>	<i>8</i>

SOURCE: ESS 5.0

In the case of television, there is no significant disparity between Southern Europe, where 49 percent of the population is considered heavy consumers of this outlet, and Eastern Europe, where the same value is 8 points below (41 percent). Regarding the exposure to newspapers, differences are somewhat much higher; 48 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 percent in Southern Europe and 39 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 22, while those from the south and the east are intense users in 9 and 8 percent, respectively.

To sum it up, on the aggregate level it can be stated that H2 proves to be right only in the case of the Internet and the newspapers, since the percentage of heavy users is the highest in Western and Northern countries (48 and 22 percent), but not in the case of television. This could be explained becau-

se general consumption of television is more biased to entertainment purposes in detriment to informational ones, as suggested by some prior studies (García Luengo, 2005; Norris, 2000).

#### *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. RQ 2 asks whether this holds true to the same extent in all of the countries. To examine this, OLS-Regressions were run for every single country. In the analyses, gender, age, education and political interest were control. Table 6 shows the results.

With respect to the control variables, in all 20 countries was seen a strong and significant influence of political interest on activism. In most of the countries, but Slovenia, it was found that the higher educated citizens were politically more active. In some countries of the west and north, younger people showed higher levels of activism. In the case of gender, it was found that male respondents were not always the most mobilized in terms of political participation, fact which can clearly be verified with the positive or negative sign of the 8 standardized coefficients, although in only 7 out of the 20 cases statistical significance was found.

More important, the influence of exposure to media is quite mixed, insisting that using this methodology is not possible to set the direction of causality. In most of the countries (all of them but Belgium, Spain, Italy, Hungary and Slovenia), a negative interaction between watching television and political activism was found: the higher the respondents' exposure to television was, the less they were taking part on the political process through non-electoral ways of participation. Hence, in none of the 20 countries is there a positive relationship between watching television and activism.

Regarding the printed media, in six Western democracies

(Denmark, Finland, France, Luxembourg, Netherlands, and Norway), a positive connection between reading newspapers in general and activism was found: the higher respondents' exposure to newspapers was, the more politically active they were. The same holds true in two Eastern European countries (Hungary and Poland) and in two of the Southern European countries (Portugal and Greece).

Concerning new media, in every country but two (Luxembourg and Portugal) there is a significant connection between the use of the Internet and the levels of political activism, and in all of the cases this is positive. The more citizens "consume" Internet, the more willing they are to take part on the political process through non-electoral actions.

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 (.115), while it is significantly lower in the case of television (.073) and newspapers (.044). Also the proportion of countries showing statistical significance is pointing in the same direction: in the case of television 5 countries out of 20 do not present significance, whereas in the case of newspapers this is increased to 10, and in the case of the Internet in only 2 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 activism is concerned - proves to be incorrect. If there is a statistical connection between exposure to media and 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 correlation between media consumption and non-electoral ways of participation depends of their nature.

**Table 6**  
**Causes of political activism in 20 European countries**  
- OLS-Regressions -

	Gender (fem)	Age	Education	Political Interest	Exposure to TV	Exposure to Newsps.	Exposure to Internet	R <sup>1</sup>
	β	β	β	β	β	β	β	
<i>Western/ Northern Europe</i>								
Austria	-,007	,029	,147***	-,309***	-,083***	,025	,081**	.182
Belgium	,014	-,047	,147***	-,295***	-,020	,001	,109***	.176



Switzerland	-,045	-,099***	,106***	-,325***	-,157***	-,021	,110***	.200
Denmark	,077*	-,105***	,084**	-,279***	-,126***	,091	,181***	.161
Finland	-,011	-,096***	,144***	-,285***	-,101***	,060**	,169***	.217
France	,004	-,049*	,173***	-,307***	-,053*	,053*	,118***	.227
United Kingdom	-,084***	-,073***	,181***	-,305***	-,084***	,023	,102***	.217
Ireland	,047*	,004	,108***	-,307***	-,060**	,023	,097***	.164
Luxembourg	,068	,003	,113***	-,293***	-,071**	,053*	,046	.157
Netherlands	-,077***	-,081***	,190***	-,235***	-,114***	,042*	,115***	.187
Norway	,005	-,111***	,104***	-,272***	-,137***	,047*	,183***	.203
Sweden	,075**	-,077***	,046*	-,339***	-,080***	,036	,114***	.183
<i>Southern Europe</i>								
Spain	,040	,015	,133***	-,246***	-,029	,043	,205***	.222
Greece	,067**	-,017	,057*	-,266***	-,079***	,052*	,071**	.126
Italy	,029	-,034	,087**	-,365***	-,011	,035	,102***	.207
Portugal	,028	,030	,088**	-,341***	-,048*	,089**	,017	.192
<i>Eastern Europe</i>								
Czech Republic	,101***	-,001	,080**	-,250***	-,072**	,034	,170***	.161
Hungary	-,017	,000	,108***	-,138***	-,043	,052*	,065*	.060
Poland	-,036	,003	,252***	-,165***	-,046*	,081***	,091***	.192
Slovenia	,036	,039	,040	-,275***	-,043	,026	,150***	.125

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

SOURCE: ESS 5.0

## DISCUSSION

The present study examines the influence of exposure to media on political participation. In former studies, different results have been obtained. Some analyses have shown that negative media content leads to political disaffection and, subsequently, to political inactivism. 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 regarding our dependent variable, we analyzed the relationship between exposure to media and political activism in 20 European countries.

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 extremely 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 does not have a positive influence on activism at all. This clearly contradicts the mobilization hypothesis. Secondly, exposure to newspapers has a positive influence on activism in half of the countries taking part on the ESS, and no significant connection in none of the directions in the other half. These results seem to support partially the mobilization hypothesis. Thirdly, the general use of Internet is profoundly connected to political activism, and in a positive way. This pattern seems to support the mobilization hypothesis as well.

Taken together, we could find support not only to media malaise theories but also to the mobilization hypothesis. On the one hand, mobilization theories state that exposure to media – regardless of its tone – mobilizes the recipients, which is true in the case of newspapers and the Internet, but not in the case of television. In this case, we should have found about the same results in all 20 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, relies at least on four categories; on the type of media outlet, on the kind of political disaffection dimension we are dealing with, on the country, and on the type of contents. Hence, the nature of the connection between activism and media exposure and its intensity depends on 1) if we are talking about television, radio, newspapers or the Internet; 2) whether we are analyzing institutional trust, political participation, political understanding and knowledge, political efficacy, democratic satisfaction, or, as 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 to the theoretical framework employed, we could assume, firstly, that political content is more negative on television than it is on 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 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 to listen to the radio, something that slightly distorts the traditional distinction (García L. Ó, 2005: 18).

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 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 deals with the Internet use, forced us to compare general use more than political contents consumption.

Conclusively, the limits of the theoretical framework have to be pointed out as well since they did not consider the consolidation of this new outlet due to the fact that the Internet was a non-existing communicational phenomenon. Nowadays we are encouraged to do so, since we cannot fully understand politics without the political communication processes that are taking place on 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. The assumptions here cannot be proven completely right until having comparable content analysis data for all of the 20 countries (coverage tone) and until having made distinctions regarding political contents by outlets (political vs. entertainment). Only when this is the case, can it be definitely said that the different results in different countries are really caused by different kinds of media content or media characteristics. In addition, we have to insist on the methodological limits of regressions in order to place the direction of causality. Thus, we do not know whether exposure to new media and printed press is an impulse for political activism, when there is a significant statistical connection, or that political activists are more inclined to consume Internet and newspapers. 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 in terms of political activism. This holds true in some countries. Future studies should further examine the causes of those differences.

It could also be argued that the dynamics of new socio-political activism need different kinds of media, and Internet can satisfy the necessity for quick and immediate information, as well as the need for instant and reasonably cheap means of communication (chats, e-mail). On March 13<sup>th</sup>, 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 with no central coordination, not previous strategy, or any previous scheme. The number of participants and their political and media impact have traditionally been the main dimensions of reference in measuring the success of these socio-political 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 for 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 of carrying it out. These new communicational processes are not under the control of the state, the political parties or the democratic institutions. They are mechanisms that belong ex-

clusively 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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