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Digital media, youth practices and representations of recent activism in Portugal

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Abstract: In recent years we have witnessed in several countries the rise of new and unexpected forms of collective mobilization and activism. The main goal of this article is to discuss the role played by digital devices and online platforms in how activism is currently being represented and practiced by young people. Our reflection is empirically grounded on a recent exploratory research project carried out in Portugal. This project, using an array of qualitative methods (ethnographic observation, in-depth interviews, etc.), had as its main purpose to explore young people's digital activism. In this article we will discuss this project's findings, analyzing not only the uses of digital media within a set of activist practices, but also the social representations built around this issue by different social actors participating in several activist groups.

Keywords: Social movements, activism, digital media, internet, youth, Portugal

1 Introduction: A new cycle of protest in Portugal

In recent years we have witnessed the emergence of new forms of collective mobilization and activism across different geographical contexts. Among the innovative aspects we find the use of digital equipment and media as crucial

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resources for political and civic mobilization. The dynamics created on the internet thus seem to be increasingly headed for the streets, fostering distinct forms of public participation. Conversely, what occurs on the streets also tends to be absorbed by digital networks in a communication circuit which is hybrid and complex in nature (Castells, 2012; Dahlgren, 2013; Milan, 2013; Penney and Dadas, 2014). These are practices in which young people have played a prominent, though not exclusive, role as the visible face of widespread discontent, as evidenced by the recent public demonstrations in Portugal and other European countries and the rest of the world (Tejerina, Perrugoría, Benski, and Langman, 2013).

The 2012 bailout of Portugal and the intervention of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the European Commission (EC), which became known as the "Troika", gave rise to various protests, leading to the creation of new platforms and activist groups as well as the mobilization of individuals ordinarily unaffiliated with any political groups or organizations, or any activities of a political nature (Baumgarten, 2013). This was a new protest cycle, in which social movements and emerging platforms were created outside the direct influence of political parties and trade unions, even if some of their members had (or still have) a history of involvement with political and civic organizations (Accornero and Pinto, 2015; Baumgarten, 2016).

The "Geração à Rasca" ("Desperate Generation") protest, which took place before the Troika's intervention on March 12, 2011, is a good example of these dynamics, since it was convoked by a group of friends on Facebook, and for the first time the power and impact of digital media as a trigger for a number of events became visible. This demonstration is considered one of the most prominent in Portuguese society in recent years. It was spearheaded by young people whose main cause was bound with anti-austerity demands (Estanque, Costa, and Soeiro, 2013). However, the present essay is not focused strictly on the anti-austerity movements.

Furthermore, unlike what has been the predominant trend in the latest literature on digital activism (Fernandez-Planells, Figueras-Maz, and Feixa, 2014; Juris, 2012; Micó and Casero-Ripollés, 2014; Milan, 2015; Penney and Dadas, 2014; Postill, 2014; Theocharis, Lowe, and García-Albacete, 2015; Treré, Jeppesen, and Mattoni, 2017), the focus of this article is not just on the protest and mobilization that emerges in the more troubled political times, but rather on day-to-day activism. In other words, activism that is characterized by a set of practices of a logistic and organizational nature, as well as by several initiatives of a political and civic participation. Subsequently, we propose an analysis that takes into consideration a broadened taxonomy of the 'activist work', as is described by the activists.

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Our analysis is based on an exploratory research project on forms of activism and public participation of young people in Portugal (2014–15).[1] Methodologically, a qualitative approach was adopted, articulating offline research (in-depth interviews, observation of events and documental collection) and online research (observation and analysis of digital platforms). The present analysis is based essentially on 36 in-depth interviews conducted with young activists of different profiles, following a 'snowball' sampling strategy (see 'Methods'). Our chief initial question was: Is digital equipment changing traditional forms of activism in Portugal? And if so, what are the features of this digital activism – what forms does it assume? Attempting to answer this basic question gave rise to a host of other subsidiary questions: What are the existing uses and 'representations' of digital media within the sphere of activism? What is the relationship between digital (online) activist practices and other traditional (offline) forms of activism? Despite our specific focus on the Portuguese context, we believe that the questions it raises and some of the conclusions that we have drawn can contribute to the current theoretical debate around the impact of digital media on political participation, establishing a parallel with other empirical terrains recently studied.

2 Youth, digital media and political participation

Studies dealing with young people's political involvement have been reformulating their premises over the past few years, mostly by broadening the definition of political, public participation and the public sphere (Dahlgren, 2009). In doing so, the traditional portrait of youth disaffection has been replaced by an alternative view of displacement (Loader, 2007), according to which political participation has not disappeared, but has been transferred to other forms and channels of expression. In contrast with the political and civic apathy that apparently characterizes contemporary youth, we should stress the importance of non-conventional forms of public participation, through non-institutional channels or which is not usually connected with traditional political activity (Dahlgren, 2007; Dahlgren and Olsson 2007a, 2007b; Loader, 2007; Olsson and Dahlgren, 2010). In this context, digital media, especially the internet, may function as a crucial resource, a vehicle of expression and activism (Lievrouw, 2011; Postill, 2012, 2014) for different socially relevant issues (not necessarily

1 "Networked youth activism: Digital media, social movements and participatory culture among young activists".

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coincidental with the political agenda), and also as a way of mobilizing similar preoccupations, organized as networks (Castells, 2009), through sharing specific relevant problems and concerns (Loader, 2007; Van de Donk, Loader, Nixon, and Rucht, 2004). According to Loader, Vromen, and Xenos (2014, p. 143), we are looking at a "networked young citizen", with the following profile:

> Networking young citizens are far less likely to become members of political or civic organizations such as parties or trades unions; they are more likely to participate in horizontal or non-hierarchical networks; they are more project orientated; they reflexively engage in lifestyle politics; they are not dutiful but self-actualizing; their historical reference points are less likely to be those of modern welfare capitalism but rather global information networked capitalism and their social relations are increasingly enacted through a social media networked environment.

The above profile suggests a shift towards a new paradigm in young people's political and civic engagement, notably in the way information and knowledge is obtained and shared (Bennett, Wells, and Freelon, 2011; Dahlgren and Olsson, 2007b). Different authors have pointed out the prominent role of digital technologies and networks in young people's activist practices, namely as tools for social and political struggles, for NGOs, new social political and cultural associations, informal groups for social justice, and ecologist and solidarity groups, etc. (Banaji and Buckingham, 2013; Dahlgren, 2013; Feixa, Saura, and Costa, 2002). The above examples correspond to distinct forms of mobilization, connected to multiple pleas and different modes of organization, which have been termed the "new, new social movements" (Feixa, Pereira, and Juris, 2009). Prominent youth participation in such movements constitutes a crucial dimension for understanding young people's engagement in the public sphere, especially if we consider these movements' ability to integrate participation at different levels – locally/globally; collectively/individually; "virtually"/"in the streets" (Feixa and Nofre, 2013).

The importance of the digital in collective mobilization is not entirely new; it has been highlighted since the events that followed the neo-Zapatista uprising in the mid-90s (Rovira, 2009), and was fully consolidated during the first decade of the millennium with the movement against the war in Iraq and the alter-globalization movement (Feixa et al., 2002; Juris, 2008; Sommier, 2003). More recent protests, linked to the financial and economic crisis in Europe and the rest of the world, and also associated with democratic demands in the Maghreb countries (especially in Tunisia and Egypt), have further emphasized the potential of digital technologies for mobilization, giving them a role that is not merely supplementary but which is truly alternative to political and civic intervention (Feixa and Nofre, 2013; Fernandez-Planells, Figueras-Maz, and Feixa, 2014; Penney and Dadas, 2014; Postill, 2014; Theocharis, Lowe, and

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García-Albacete, 2015; Treré, Jeppesen, and Mattoni, 2017; Van Laer and Van Aelst, 2010). The decentralized and interactive nature of these tools, associated with the potential to generate and disseminate information and to promote interaction and networks around common interests, proved crucial in the protests that emerged in 2011 and continued over the following years. In a sense, contemporary spaces of protest cannot be conceived but as hybrid spaces, located within the multiple connections that are established between the internet and the streets (Castells, 2012).

After reviewing the literature that has been addressing the relation between digital media, the internet and ways of political participation and activism, we can consider three levels of articulation.

On a first level, we find uses related to the disclosure and dissemination of information addressed to the general public and not only to activists. This use does not require particularly sophisticated technical skills, and focuses foremost on the propagation of messages on websites, blogs or Facebook pages which can be shared with a potentially interested general audience. In this case, virtual space acts as a showcase that enables the explanation of arguments, projects and causes, and the relaying of information and knowledge. This dissemination can occur at an extremely fast pace. The construction of certain "global causes", which originate from a specific context but have extended support networks throughout the world, has been one of the most interesting consequences mentioned in the literature (Della Porta and Mosca, 2005; Juris, 2008). Examples of this are the internet presence of the MST – Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (Sáez, 2004) or the EZLN – Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, considered the first informational guerrilla, with a wide range of supporters and followers alike worldwide (Castells, 1998; Rovira, 2009). Also included in this category are initiatives that do not originate in specific groups, but are conveyed by alternative news broadcast projects, particularly through the action of organizations that collect and/or filter information, making it available in compiled form in portals, websites or mailing lists, as is notably the case of Indymedia (Atton, 2004; Juris, 2004).

Secondly, we find a whole set of practices involved in building networks and collective organization (Calle, 2005). The accelerated flow of information, achieved synchronously by means of new information technology, allows for concerted collective action on several levels. Besides information or ideological debates, various websites also convey specific repertoires of action and modus operandi for carrying out different actions that can be modularly transposed and adapted so as to be reused elsewhere in the world. From the alternative performances and aesthetics typified in demonstrations, a world of activities is disseminated in virtual space and can be adapted and reproduced in the most

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varied contexts. In view of this, some authors (Gerbaudo and Treré, 2015; Milan, 2015) have emphasized the relevance of these circuits and of social media in the construction of "collective identities", insofar as they enable an accelerated and efficient collective identification with certain slogans, images or ideas disseminated via the internet, such as emblems or common causes. More specifically, in the case of young people the internet has been "understood as a resource to their alternative political identities" (Dahlgren and Olsson, 2007b, p. 74), in contrast to how traditional media are seen, as part of their political engagement (Dahlgren and Olsson, 2007a).

Finally, there is a more transgressive and technologically sophisticated level of protest action repertoire taking place in virtual space itself, whether consisting of the reproduction of common offline tactics or the finding of forms of conflict specific to virtual space. Cyberspace emerges, in this sense, as an arena for protest action. Among the most common action repertoires, we can highlight some that reproduce common offline tactics, such as the proliferation of online petitions or virtual demonstrations. We also find action repertoires that require greater technical expertise and tend to have a higher degree of disruption: leaks and disclosure of private information; dissemination of circumvention techniques such as website mirroring, which makes it possible to get around censorship; mail bombing (consecutively sent e-mails that can have the effect of blocking electronic mailboxes); web sit-ins and DDOS or denial of service attacks (bombarding certain websites with so many requests that they literally stop working, or at least become much slower due to excessive traffic) or defacing (changing the home page of a particular website by replacing the original content with a provocative message) (Cibergolem, 2005; Padilla, 2012; Van Laer and Van Aelst, 2010). It is in this context that the concept of Hacktivism can be included. Decentralized collectives and initiatives such as Anonymous have been prolific in this type of action, although it is not yet widespread (Stryker, 2011).

Unlike international literature on the subject, which is abundant and has been increasing, there are not any empirically-based studies dealing with digital activism in Portugal. Such shortage of data becomes even more blatant when we consider the more recent political context (nationally and internationally), during which digital activism assumed a relevance that cannot be ignored. This gap in the literature has in some way justified the exploratory nature of the study, with epistemological repercussions, especially in choosing a qualitative methodology quite open to new issues and sufficiently flexible to allow for new lines of research (see "Methods").

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3 Methods

Our analysis is based on an exploratory research project. Fieldwork was conducted between March and November 2014, following a qualitative approach based on a mixed method strategy. As an exploratory project, we chose to follow an inclusive strategy that sought to cover various types of activism centered on different causes (political, ecological, social, etc.). This seemed to be the best option, considering the almost total inexistence of empirical studies that might provide us with a basis for identifying different trends or practices in digital activism in Portugal. In this way, we have privileged a conceptual construction and theoretical discussion, which have been simultaneously articulated with the empirical data gathered.

Besides witnessing and following up on various events (demonstrations, meetings, venues) and online observation, we have also conducted 36 in-depth interviews with young activists. Given their in-depth nature, interviewees were granted a certain amount of latitude to frame their discourse around the topics or episodes that they personally deemed more significant. Nevertheless, a schedule for the interviews was drafted with consideration given to two major themes. The first of these concerned 'activist practices' (initiation in the field, activist record, description of the movement, etc.), while the second had to do with the 'digital uses' (engagement with digital tools, types of platforms used, tasks performed, etc.). The sampling method relied on a 'snowball' strategy, which allowed us to reach young people engaged in diverse activist causes. Exploratory information obtained online and presence at particular events were both of utmost importance in identifying our interviewees. The criteria for selection of the interviewees included the nature of engagement with activist practices (leaders of groups but also lesser-known participants), the area of the activist practices (ecology, LGBT, anti-austerity, etc.) and age (we interviewed young people and young adults between the ages of 20 and 35).[2] The interviews were put through a process of qualitative content analysis in two large blocks that corresponded to the two major themes of the interview. The first topic concerned 'activist history and political participation', in the attempt to understand the individual positioning and different social actors' involvement in Portuguese activism. The second topic dealt with 'practices and representations within digital activism' as a way to understand how the digital is used in the various tasks involved in activist work, as well as to gauge the different opinions on these dynamics.

2 With two exceptions of interviewees in their early forties, corresponding to the groups' leaders or activists involved for quite a long time in particular groups.

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4 Digital activism in Portugal: The internet and digital media as tools

4.1 Activist work: Between the offline and the online

In our analysis we approached the internet and the digital devices as 'tools' or resources at the service of social movements and political participation, used to promote internet-supported action repertoires (Van Laer and Van Aelst, 2010). From the interviews that were conducted, it becomes clear that the use of the internet and different digital tools in activist work is a fairly natural occurrence, a situation arising from the fact that digital technologies are nowadays fully assimilated in everyday life. This confirms a "normalization" affect already identified by other studies (Banaji and Buckingham, 2013). As such, and despite a few cases where some resistance is found, the fact is that digital tools are likely to be incorporated in the sphere of activism just as they are included in other spheres of social life (at work, in social relationships, in leisure, etc.).[3] At the same time that there is an adaptation of certain practices and formats of 'making' activism to increasingly familiar ways of using media and certain digital platforms, these features are also applied to 'old activist formulas'. In any case, we are faced with an obvious transformation in the ways activism is thought out and executed, thereby changing the practices of social movements that exist within the national context, particularly those that have come about since 2011 and have taken advantage of the new digital resources to achieve mobilization, mainly in what concerns communication processes (both internal and external), the strengthening of network ties, the coordination and organization of protests, and collective action in general (Baumgarten, 2016; Campos, Pereira, and Simões, 2016).

From interviewees' discourses we found that the implementation of digital tools (technologies, digital platforms and the internet) in activist work is directly associated with different dimensions and procedures of this work. Consequently, it was deemed important to create a taxonomy of what we have defined

3 The pervasiveness of these specific uses can be explained by the very evolution of internet penetration in the country, throughout various layers of the population. According to the data provided by Obercom (2015), internet access by Portuguese families has increased in the last decade: In 2002, only 15 % of families had internet access in their homes, while in 2014 that number had increased to 65 %. However, these numbers show significant asymmetries in terms of region, education level and age. In what concerns the latter asymmetry, the young population has the greatest internet access, which suggests clear generational differences: 99.4 % at the ages 16–24, versus 23.1 % at the ages 65–74 and 41.9 % at the ages 55–64.

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Table 1: Dimensions of activist work.

Dimensions	Description
D.1 – Debate and reflection	Activities of an internal nature (intended primarily for activists belonging to a particular group) which seek to promote sharing and reflection on the causes they defend or which they are directly associated with.
D.2 – Organization and logistics	Backstage work involved in organizing events or in developing certain initiatives of variable dimensions.
D.3 – Mobilization	Actions that aim to encourage participation and adherence to the cause of a certain movement/group, mobilizing not only its supporters but also those who are unaware of it or not particularly sensitive to it.
D.4 – Communication	Collective communication campaigns aimed at disseminating a variety of messages and at reaching different audiences ranging from the cause's supporters to an undefined audience.
D.5 – Recruitment	Actions aimed at seeking out new people for the cause.
D.6 – Propaganda and public representation of the collective	Processes involved in ideological communication and in creating a public image for the collective.
D.7 – Social networks	Processes of creation, perpetuation and consolidation of networks, both individually and collectively, with national or international actors.
D.8 – Public events	Public events organized by the collective or where it or someone on its behalf participates, targeting a number of its strategic aims (protest, publicizing the cause, etc.).

as 'dimensions of activist work'. In order to develop this taxonomy we relied primarily on descriptions made by activists. These dimensions are obviously interconnected, and in many cases overlap. However, from an analytical point of view it makes sense to differentiate between them, in that it allows us to more clearly assess the role assigned to the various digital media in contemporary activism. All these dimensions refer to various levels of conventional activist work as it is traditionally seen and described by the various actors. In this sense, we could regard them as 'pre-digital practices'. This does not invalidate the fact that they are currently designed and implemented while taking into account the existing new tools, which matches the results that we have found in other studies (Milan, 2013; Penney and Dadas, 2014). We would highlight eight dimensions (Table 1).

In this paper, for each of the dimensions mentioned, we took special notice of the communicational processes involved, striving to understand how the

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relations between offline and online communication circuits were established. As can be expected, digital resources are preferred in procedures involving long-distance communication and interaction, in which case they have a number of advantages. Thus, we can glimpse, in a simplified way, the existence of two communication circuits; an 'internal' one involving members or supporters of the collective, and an 'external' one involving undifferentiated individuals with no affiliation to the movement. Certain digital tools (e-mail, Facebook, etc.) are used for internal communication. The following excerpts are illustrative in terms of "debate and mobilization" (D.1), "organization and logistics" (D.2) associated with certain "public events" (D.8), and boosting/maintaining "social networks" (D.7):

> I think nowadays it's very easy for people to have a civic intervention like that because they don't need to travel physically to the associations' headquarters in order to do this work, they can communicate virtually. (D.1, Activist, "Bichas Cobardes")

> We have organized demonstrations without once meeting, and have brought in people who didn't know us, because to reach people Facebook often suffices. We write the manifestos, write some letters, take some pictures, have the event on Facebook, invite people, make it interesting and we justify it because it's interesting and people show up. (D.2/D.8, Activist, "Bichas Cobardes")

> We create Facebook events for everything, and whenever something is happening, it will be on Facebook. Everything that's about to go down, I know I'll find an invitation for (it) on my computer (…) I use it a lot for that, and also there are always going to be so many likes, and so many shares, and then these will link to the feeds of so many other people. (D.7, activist, "Precários Inflexíveis")

Other tools (blogs, websites, Facebook, etc.) aim at wide-ranging processes, being used for purposes of "communication" (D.4), "propaganda and public representation" (D.6), "recruitment" (D.5) or "mobilization" (D.3) of citizens:

> I think it's essential. I think this is totally structural for us. Ah … In other words, a good deal of our trademark, our intervention capacity, derives from our very obligation to communicate with people every day about what's happening and about our specific issues, both things. (D.4/D.6, Activist, "Precários Inflexíveis")

> Both social networks and the internet as computer-mediated communication are ultimately essential in the dissemination of information (…) the ability to reach people, but they are also the offset in a society where people are increasingly isolated, where there are no town squares any more, or spaces where people can have human interaction (…) it's daily computer-assisted interaction, which is a contradiction in terms. (D.3/D.5, Activist, "Que se Lixe a Troika"; "Attac Portugal")

We find that digital tools participate differently in each of these activist practices, and that the importance and centrality they occupy keep changing. In

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other words, there are activities/stages of activist work in which it is essential to use certain tools and digital circuits, as they (a) facilitate the processes/work or (b) ensure greater efficiency and better results (higher probability of success). Therefore, we can say that there has been an integration of these new resources in what previously were instituted procedures and forms of action, but this integration is carried out by taking into account an assessment of the benefits and disadvantages that such integration entails. This assessment is generally thought out in light of the connections between the online and offline practices involved in 'making' activism, although we consider that in most cases this duality can be questioned since it does not reflect a true separation of dimensions that tend to be strongly interrelated and dependent. So the internet and digital media are complementary to more conventional or 'pre-digital' practices of 'making' activism, as can be seen from the following excerpt:

> I always see the internet as a complement, as an instrument for streamlining some processes for dissemination, mobilization, but always an instrument that is complementary to all the others. That is, formerly you knew that there was a checklist, so to speak: You needed to make a sash, a poster, you needed to make a flyer and now on the checklist you need to create an event on Facebook, it is necessary, that is, it is more a complement, it doesn't replace other practices. (Activist, "Mayday")

The variety of platforms/tools that are used is extensive, but a few stand out in the respondents' discourse. The most frequently mentioned is Facebook. The preponderance of Facebook is basically due to two factors. Firstly, it is a widespread platform, which is central to the daily life not only of activists, but also of those belonging to its social media networks. In other words, it is not used because it is particularly qualified for activist action but because: (a) It is familiar, (b) it is widespread, and (c) it has a huge capacity for the expansion/multiplication of information. Secondly, this is a multi-purpose tool with varied capabilities, which enables it to perform several of the abovementioned functions. From a strategic point of view, it is therefore quite useful, responding to what seems to be most prized by respondents: the ratio between the economy of means/processes and the impact/success of results. Facebook seems to be associated with a new communication paradigm in which traditional offline processes lose some importance[4], to the extent that digital options make it possible to achieve significant results with a more economical use of resources. We therefore speak of new communication realities that are taken into account

4 We are thinking of relatively common processes of those movements' communication strategies, such as the handing out of leaflets, the putting up of posters, etc., which have become less efficient (much more tiresome and less far-reaching).

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not only by activist groups, but also by more traditional political actors, who are becoming more hybrid in their repertoires, mixing "old" and "new" media (Chadwick, 2013).

> Even collectives always have a communication group. We always form a communication group that makes decisions regarding Facebook; for example, they decide on the frequency of Facebook posts, i.e., at noon this text will be released, in the evening, when there's more traffic, we'll post the video we did with JP Simões' statement, the next morning we post some more people who signed. (Activist, "RDA69")

> Actually, there are many collectives at the moment in the LGBT movement that perhaps wouldn't exist if Facebook didn't exist. Maybe it's a bit controversial to put it like this, but collectives like the *ActiBistas*, for instance, operate mainly through their Facebook page, such as with articles about bisexual visibility, with mini-interventions at that level. These very small collectives with no means (...) it wouldn't be possible for them to exist if they didn't have this medium there, close at hand, that they could use as they liked (Activist, "Colectivo ActiBistas")

Thus, we find that from a practical standpoint, digital media provide an array of solutions and facilitate activist work. We could say that activist practices easily incorporate the internet and its different digital platforms. Nevertheless, we were equally interested in exploring the representations surrounding this object – a topic which we will develop in the next paragraph – an issue less explored in existing studies predominantly focused on practices and the instrumental uses of ICTs.

4.2 Activism 2.0: Opportunities, challenges and resistances

We have found that digital tools and the internet are generally welcomed by activists, not least because, as these resources are incorporated into the day-to-day lives of individuals, there is a certain 'naturalization' in their application to specific activist militancy practices. However, not everything can be considered positive in this area. We could summarize the representations of the digital by speaking of opportunities, challenges and resistances that it generates. There is an essentially utilitarian view of these resources that points to the opportunities that they open up to us; not only to new forms of activism but also to improving/enhancing existing activist practices. We had the opportunity to observe in greater detail some of these aspects, namely regarding the facilitation of communication processes, interaction, mobilization, recruitment, etc. Indeed, we were able to subsume all such situations under one general attribute – increasing the practice of activism for non-institutional social actors. Digital media enable the creation of parallel information circuits, with 'empower-

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ment' for those who do not have a great capacity for expression in the public arena (Milan, 2013). This is particularly important for small groups that defend minority causes (for example: polyamory, queer, etc.). Through their strong presence in the digital public sphere, they can influence the political agenda and become vehicles of "counter-information", questioning "hegemonic thinking" or "dominant narratives" (Dahlgren, 2013):

> The internet has challenged a certain dominance of speech (...) formerly to take information to many people who needed a well-oiled party machine or a newspaper and today you don't have this. (...) On Facebook you can see just that; many people have been politicized in these last three years and widely through the internet. (Activist, "RDA69")

Mainstream media are generally presented by those interviewed as being partial, ideologically motivated/conditioned or controlled by companies, making it difficult for minority and disruptive causes to find a space in that universe. Therefore, for most activists, digital media can fulfill an emancipatory, democratic and participatory function, something which can be used strategically by activist collectives. This does not rule out a 'dark side'. There is no 'naive view' of the emancipatory and democratic power of the digital media, since almost everybody expressed doubts concerning digital media, highlighting some of the less positive effects caused by their use. If there is great potential to be exploited from the use of digital media, they also pose a number of challenges. One of the aspects our respondents most emphasized concerns the balance between traditional and 'virtual' ways of being a militant and carrying out activism. Activism requires commitment and physical effort, as well as presence and the ability to mobilize for events. While the digital, on the one hand, amplifies the field of activism (mobilizing more people, allowing for greater participation, etc.), on the other hand, it also runs the risk of distorting activist militancy and weakening it. Indeed, one of the challenges is precisely to overcome the effortlessness of what many interviewees have defined as "click/like activism" or "couch activism", which is viewed as an indulgent practice that has little to do with serious activist activity. This gap between the online and offline dimensions is considered dangerous, since social change and the objectives of different activist groups can only be achieved through offline events, where citizens can share and mobilize. The street is still the symbolic reference space for activism.

> The internet is very useful to facilitate access, superficial commitment, that's what it is for many people. But in order to have a stronger commitment it's not (...) and often provides many people with an excuse for not participating physically. I remember Facebook events where everyone was very committed to going and so on and then, when you get there, there's no one (...) and in that sense I think it can be deceiving on one side,

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> even if it is very good for spreading information. I think that, mainly, it is to spread information. (Activist, "Precários Inflexíveis")

Another major challenge, somehow linked to the first, has to do with not overvaluing the online to the detriment of street action. Despite being important, social networks – particularly Facebook – are understood by many as a type of 'bubble', since they exist within a 'closed-circuit' that favors certain networks (friends, activists, etc.). This issue is important, insofar as we may consider there to be two types of target 'audiences' for activist messages. Firstly, there is the more restricted public, made up of 'activists, sympathizers and militants for causes' and people connected online, for whom Facebook, e-mails, blogs, etc., work well. Secondly, there is 'the rest of society' – the non-differentiated public, particularly the info-excluded – who are more difficult to reach, persuade and mobilize, and who are not reached by information disclosed through restricted activist networks[5]. The challenge is therefore to use digital media and traditional/mainstream media strategically, in order to get the message across to the widest possible number of people.

> Each one of us ends up living in a bubble and we, on Facebook and on social networks in general, end up living completely submerged, we create an alternative reality surrounded by people who share our interests. Bursting other people's bubbles is very hard if people are not in the mood, it's not because they see you on Facebook that they will be interested, unless a hyper viral video shows up. (Activist, "No hate ninjas")

Another major challenge is to manage and filter a large quantity of information in the increasingly complex media ecosystem. During the interviews this issue was frequently linked to the multiplication of digital platforms, a situation which leads to a certain "saturation of inputs" or to an "excess (and fragmentation) of information". Facebook and other digital platforms foster a culture of constant renewal, transience and multiplication of information. Information inputs abound, and sometimes do not allow for a denser/more detailed consideration of information, particularly in terms of corroborating the truth and reliability of contents. This is a frequent concern:

> But, that's it, that's another disadvantage on the internet, it's volatile and could be hegemonic, and the next moment it's not; what's viral and what's not. An insignificant thing turns into something completely viral, a really important thing expressed using the wrong words or the wrong image (...) And, on the other hand, the constant creation of spotlights that at some point make people a bit ... They are resistant or stop reacting, such is the velocity at which we reproduce information (...) it also makes people insensitive. (Activist, "Precários Inflexíveis")

5 In this case the mainstream media function best.

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Finally, another challenge is to create ways of using the digital that work on the margins of the control and surveillance systems of the more powerful actors, particularly the state and large corporations. This derives from the recognition of digital media's ambivalence: If there is an emancipatory and democratic character involving empowerment through these tools, these technologies also seem to enable the development of enhanced means of monitoring citizens and their actions. Thus, many resort to specific tools that sabotage the recording and monitoring by certain entities.

> Suddenly, that came up as something new and the encryption, for example, we had a colleague who was a hacker, really paranoid about encrypted communication and he ..., there was this TV show, there was a series of seminars and workshops about how to protect yourself on the computer, (against) surveillance – right. As a matter of fact, I didn't participate, but there were others about live streaming, about how to document, to implement skills, right? (...) There was a need to react, let's say, to the hegemony of information control, which corporations and governments have. And so, the only way is to create a backup, let's say of activism, of people who master information and communications systems and those technologies without being controlled, so quickly controlled. (Activist, "Que se Lixe a Troika")

5 Conclusion

Nowadays the importance of the internet and other digital technologies in a wide range of everyday practices is indisputable. Among them we can include the area of public intervention. In a sense, it is impossible to think of current forms of political and civic mobilization without thinking of the use of various digital tools. The present study aimed to answer a general question: Have digital tools altered traditional forms of activism in Portugal? And if so, what are the features of this digital activism – what forms does it assume?

The data from our study seem to confirm the existence of a new activist profile, noticeable in the case of young people, with similar characteristics to the ones described by Loader, Vromen and Xenos (2014). In this sense, our research confirms the literature on this subject: A gradual integration of digital media in contemporary forms of political participation and activism, particularly in the case of young people, reveals that the Portuguese case matches the characterizations of other contexts (Banaji and Buckingham, 2013; Feixa and Nofre, 2013). For activists, the connection between physical space and digital networks is a natural phenomenon, underlining the idea – already pointed out – of the hybridity of these new forms of protest and civic action. Nevertheless, since this is the first study of this matter in Portugal, these are pioneer

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results which reveal some particularities that, in some cases, are contrary to what has been observed concerning the recent situation of digital activism in Southern Europe[6].

One of the most relevant and innovative aspects of our research comes from highlighting the dimension of representations, which is something that has not been sufficiently dealt with in most of the research that focuses mainly on the practices/uses of media[7]. Taking advantage of the qualitative nature of this study, we have explored images and opinions around digital activism and the importance of the internet for civic and political participation, thus producing new data that may be useful for future comparative research.

As far as the uses of digital media and the internet are concerned, we found that different platforms and digital media are used for their strategic potential in performing specific functions. However, it also became clear that in order to reflect on the uses of digital media for activism we must consider the interconnection between certain 'pre-digital' (offline) and digital actions.

We also found that digital tools participate differently in each of the dimensions that make up what we have designated as 'activist work' – ranging from the dissemination of information for mobilization and recruitment to logistics, propaganda, and the setting up of networks and events –, with the importance and central aspect varying in each of these tasks. In a certain sense, we can say that specific activities or stages of activist work clearly benefit from digital tools and circuits, while others may more easily distance themselves from such tools. In this sense, digital media allow the creation of new practices that make 'old formulas' somewhat obsolete or less effective. As an example, we may highlight the role of platforms such as Facebook for the mobilization of militants, and the broadcasting of information or propaganda, which have become much more useful than billboards or fliers, both of which have far greater economic and logistic costs for smaller groups.

Besides the 'uses' we also questioned the social 'representations' around the different digital media and platforms, revealing how they are critically appropriated. As such, despite the 'naturalization' of the use of digital tools, a certain critical understanding regarding their use is equally present, which results both from the circumstances around various uses as well as their actual

6 Such as the low usage of Twitter compared to what is reported by other researchers for the Spanish or Greek contexts, for instance (Fernandez-Planells, Figueras-Maz, and Feixa, 2014; Micó and Casero-Ripollés, 2014; Theocharis, Lowe, and García-Albacete, 2015), which may be explained by the low penetration Twitter has had in the Portuguese case.

7 In this sense, we are approaching the "media imaginaries" that have recently been addressed by Treré, Jeppesen, and Mattoni (2017) in the case of the protests triggered by the anti-austerity movement in Southern Europe.

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evaluation. Indeed, if, on the one hand, these tools appear to show emancipatory and participative potential when fulfilling what is meant to be their supposedly democratic vocation, they will raise doubts and resistance, on the other hand, which is derived from the fact that they distance themselves from reality, both because they generate a kind of 'parallel world' of easy and inconsequential participation (the so-called 'couch activism' being the best example), and because they foster an overload of information whose relevance becomes difficult to sieve through.

In sum, the answer to our initial question has two different interpretations. On the one hand, there have been obvious transformations, which even if not altering the activities in themselves, have modified their impact as a result of being part of digitally-mediated processes of communication. These contrast with previous ways of organizing activism and mobilization. On the other hand, we can see obvious continuities and links between the online and the offline, with the former being seen as an extension of the latter. This continuity does not mean that the uses of the digital for activism may not be considered innovative; but rather that there is no rupture between the practices before the digital and those after it, defining a more complex setting for understanding activism and mobilization.

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