Chapter 6
Internetworked Social Movements and the Promise of Politics: A Case Study of the 15M Movement

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ABSTRACT
This chapter analyses the Spanish social movement of the 15M, and the influence of Information and Communication Technologies on it. Drawing a distinction between liberal and republican citizenship, the first part of the chapter discusses the interactions between technology and social movements in terms of political participation. This part compares and contrasts characteristics of online-based interactions with offline mobilisations in Spain. The second part of the chapter compiles a set of features that can be found in current Internetworked Social Movements, and its meaning from the perspective of political engagement. The chapter concludes that ICTs contributed to the recuperation of republican politics with current examples that suggest that forthcoming movements will promote this kind of participation.

INTRODUCTION
Lately, citizen mobilizations have shaken Eastern and Western societies. The wave of protests known as the Arab Spring led to diverse changes in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt or Syria. Some months later, the echo of those civilian protests carried out in Arab Countries led to the so-called ‘Occupy Movement’ in the United States (De Soto, 2011).

In Europe, one important movement of this kind took place in Spain, between May and June 2011. In the context of an ever-expanding economic crisis, the Spanish government ruled in favour of the economic elites, while ignoring citizens’ requests for transparency and means of effective participation. In Madrid, after the 15th May demonstrations (carried out in several cities throughout the state), under
the slogan “We are not politicians’ and bankers’ merchandise” (Democracia Real Ya, 2011), a group of people decided not to leave, but to stay and camp in the main square of the city, Puerta del Sol. And so the 15M movement began.

In a matter of hours, following an online announcement via Twitter, anonymous people started gathering in Puerta del Sol demanding social justice and real democracy. Remaining in the square had no specific purpose, but those camping quickly identified similarities with the persistent protests at Tahrir Square, in Egypt. Before dawn, the police evicted the few people who had remained and were asleep at that time. By the next evening, 16th of May, more protesters, up to a hundred, gathered spontaneously in the same location as the previous night. After a new eviction, 17th of May saw hundreds of people mobilised, outraged by the prohibition of public meetings in Puerta del Sol. From that moment on, regular, diverse and anonymous people occupied the place. The public square quickly became an open space in which anyone could talk, debate and engage in political matters, ignoring political parties, mass media, and trade unions. In order to achieve this, party or ideological identification was left aside, overlooking their ideological differences while favouring fundamental closeness based on citizenship and human rights: in this sense, the 15M has been regarded as a “truly unprecedented process of social politicisation” of “ordinary people” (Fernández-Savater, 2013b).

This process was made possible, to a big extent, through an online organisation of the demonstrations that took place the 15th of May, and through the use of alternative and activist digital media during the protests (Candón, 2011; Lievrouw, 2011; Tascón & Quintana, 2012; @Dataanalysis15m, 2013). However, ICT were not only used for organisation during (and after) the camping days. The 15M took advantage of the skills of hundreds of media workers (journalists, technicians, etc.) engaged in the protests, willing to apply their knowledge in the movement (Requena, 2011). Thus digital technology and media use exceeded YouTube uploads or mailing lists: everything was recorded via live video streaming (SoITV), there were daily radio programs (Ágora Sol Radio), new webpages were created, and joint blogs (e.g. Al Final de la Asamblea) multiplied (@Dataanalysis15m, 2013).

These technologies, in combination with current social movements, have led to what Langman (2005) termed Internetworked Social Movements. As they develop and change through everyday practice, they open new opportunities for techno politics (i.e. politics through the use of new technological platforms and devices), encouraging new ways of approaching citizen action. Departing from the case study of the movement, this chapter is dedicated to the understanding of how the emergence of different digital technologies has changed social movements and individuals’ perceptions and behaviours in terms of political participation. In order to do so, the chapter first explores the connections between the 15M movement and Internet-based interactions, as well as its connection with the concept of political participation from a republican tradition perspective, a tradition that considers citizens’ engagement in public affairs as the basis of civic virtue (Bakardjieva, 2009). In the second part, the main characteristics of digitally mediated citizen mobilizations are collected, connecting them to their meaning in terms of political participation. Finally, the chapter outlines current and forthcoming social and political movements that can benefit from this paper, whilst also suggesting further research topics within the field of techno political participation.

This is achieved following an inductive research strategy, carrying out an in-depth case based analysis on the 15Min Madrid, a movement that shares many characteristics with other phenomena (such as Occupy Wall Street), thus making it a relevant case to understand similar movements.