**Communication in the Spanish pensioners’ movement:**

**Imaginaries, ecologies and slow media practices**

Compared to youth protests, elderly activism and its communication strategies have received marginal attention in communication and social movements’ studies. However, the pensioners have been at the forefront of one of the most stable social uprisings in Spain since its outburst in January 2018. From the perspective of media imaginaries, practices and ecologies, this article analyzes the communicational dimension of this social movement addressing different aspects of its hybrid mediated and non-mediated communication forms. Methodology relies on in-depth interviews to the communication leaders of the most representative organizational platforms of the movement, as well as on an analysis of the uses and contents shared through social networks. Our research demonstrates that the pensioners’ communication imaginaries show a low degree of systematization, but their media practices are always strategic and combine classical repertoires and learning from recent techno-political movements such as 15M. Within a sort of slow activism, their pragmatic and demystified approach to ICTs lead them conceive communication in the long term with the aim of attracting new supporters and reinforcing internal emotional ties.

Keywords: pensioners, social movements, age, media practices, digital technologies, slow

**Introduction and objectives**

*On Monday, January 15 at noon, meeting at the town hall for a 0.25%*

Through this WhatsApp message Bilbao’s pensioners were called to mobilize against the loss of purchasing power in pensions after an annual increment freeze was announced by the Council of Ministers. In February 2018 protests spread all over Spain shaping a social movement that has so far attracted crowds in the main Spanish capitals and permanently in the province of Vizcaya/Bizkaia in the Basque Country[[1]](#footnote-1). Like other recent movements, its success is partly connected to the use of media, information technologies and social networks, which became essential to organize the protests and gain influence in the political agenda.

Diverse evidences show that the elderly activists do not live in the fringes but are willing to know or have already appropriated a wide range of media technologies with the goal of attracting participants inside and outside the movement. These “media repertoires” comprise a set of technologies including older and newer media, online and offline modes, as well as a continuum ranging from independent and radical platforms to consolidated and still powerful mainstream media (Treré & Mattoni, 2016). These tools have been used in both the “visible” and the “latent” stages of the movement (Melucci, 1994), and adopted “hybrid” formats, that is a diversity of technologies that cannot be analyzed from the reductionist, “single-medium” approach that characterizes literature on media activism (Treré, 2019).

However, the pensioners’ mobilizations have received little attention in the fields of media research (Harrington, Bielby & Bardo, 2014), social movements studies (Fillieule, 2013), and its intersection (Obregón & Tufte, 2017), especially if compared with the abundant literature around the anti-globalization uprising at the dawn of the 21st century, the anti-austerity protests since 2010, and other contentious and youngsters movements (Gerbaudo, 2016). This oversight is partly related to two factors that potentially introduce myths in media research. On the one hand, seniors are usually stereotyped as a marginal, excluded, and at risk of poverty group that is not very active but conservative in comparison to the youngsters (Fillieule, 2013; Levy, 2017; Vincent et al., 2017), although recent research has demonstrated that the participation decline in this age is associated more with deteriorating functional capacities rather than biological age (Melo & Stockemer, 2014; Amezcua-Aguilar & Sotomayor-Morales, 2021). On the other, media studies tends to treat age “as little more than a demographic variable” overlooking the different meanings of aging and, and assuming “homogeneity of older users/audiences” (Harrington, Bielby & Bardo, 2014: 2). Moreover, the popularization of concepts such as digital “natives” and “immigrants” (Prenksy, 2001) led to thinking that there is an unsolvable gap between youngsters with innate technological skills and elderly with difficulties to adapt to ICTs. Posterior studies have shown that this generational opposition is a myth since ICTs appropriation does not directly depend on age but on a range of factors including sociocultural and educative dimensions (Peral-Peral et al., 2015; Prenksy, 2019; Vittadini et al., 2013). In fact, the elderly has demonstrated a strong capacity to mobilize including older methods –posters, press releases, *escraches*, etc. - and new media repertoires such as the social networks.

The pensioners’ movement, also known as Marea Pensionista[[2]](#footnote-2), is part of a cycle of protests from 2011 onwards, whose 15M / *Indignados movement* stands as its milestone. 15M was defined as a “techno-political” (Treré et al., 2017), “networked” (Castells, 2012) and “rhizomatic” movement (Funke, 2015), and characterized by its intense and creative use of Web 2.0 (Fernández-Planells et al., 2013; Flesher, 2020; Treré & Mattoni, 2016). These features have been equally applied to a variety of recent techno-political movements that actively appropriated online technologies to organize protests and expand activist messages (Mattoni, 2013). This research analyzes the communicational dimension of the Spanish pensioners’ movement from the perspective of their media imaginaries and practices (Mattoni & Treré, 2014), and including comparisons with other recent movements. From a media practice perspective, we will analyze how this movement approached and used media and ICTs either from a more strategic and planned perspective, or from a more banal, mundane, informal and even unnoticed view (Treré, 2020). From the tenet of media imaginaries, we wonder if Marea Pensionista communication leaders addressed information technologies more cautiously or with the enthusiasm that characterized recent techno-political movements -15M, Occupy, etc.-, leading to the reproduction of technological myths, or the grand narratives and promises of progress, emancipation and democratization that often accompany the deployment of every “new” technology (Morozov, 2013; Mosco, 2004; Gerbaudo, 2017; Treré, 2019).

This paper is embedded in the research line of communication and social movements where media activism of retired and pensioners has not been approached yet as a phenomenon with its specific characteristics and its particular media practices. In this sense, we aim to start filling an important empirical gap. Even though the demonstrations of the elderly have been part of the anti-austerity cycle of protests departing in 2011 with 15M, the pensioners' movement has a distinctive physiognomy regarding their collective identity and demands, and also in terms of media uses and appropriations: their protesters tend to develop long-term communication strategies that articulate “new” and “old” media repertoires and which subordinate any media strategy to broader political objectives of citizen mobilization and internal cohesion.

Specifically, we will approach the research object -the communicational dimension of the Spanish pensioners’ movement- from three conceptual categories stemmed from reference literature on communication and social movements: (1) media imaginaries, that is, the set of ideas and perceptions about information technologies as tools of contentious political action; (2) media practices, or the uses and performances of pensioners regarding media and ICTs; (3) and media ecology, that is, the construction of a communication environment which is contextually shaped by the convergence of a wide range of media processes and messages, and which results in the intersection of different media platforms and social networks.

The article is organized as follows. First, we will introduce and describe the roots, collective identity and specific demands of Marea Pensionista. Second, we will describe the methodology and the field work. Third, the results are theoretically analyzed and discussed from the perspectives of media imaginaries, practices and ecologies. These categories are later problematized in the light of the emergent concepts of slow media and slow activism, which help to understand social movements which are not exactly hyper-connected, but are rather less technologically innovative, although still strategic, when approaching media and ICTs (Kaun & Treré, 2020: 618). This article ends with a set of conclusions and recommendations which invite to rethink the theoretical models that dominate in the analyses of media activism, steering clear of the recurrent technological myths, and interpreting it from the particular idiosyncrasy of every social movement.

**The pensioners’ movement and their platforms**

According to official data from the Spanish Ministry of Labor, Migration and Social Security, in March 2021 there were a total of 9,815,728 pensioners. This number has exponentially grown if we consider data from previous years as well as the rapid aging in the West since Mid-20th century (Justel, 1992). As the number of contributing workers for each pensioner diminished, the debate on the sustainability of pension funds blossomed, although stagnated between the opposite proposals of social-democrats and neoliberals (Vicente, 2018). Beyond controversies, the pensions are guaranteed by article 50th of the Spanish Constitution that states that “The public authorities shall guarantee, through adequate and periodically updated pensions, sufficient financial means for senior citizens”.

Since the transition to democracy, the defense of state pensions has been a common claim of the major Spanish trade unions. In 1995 the Congress unanimously approved the so-called “Pacto de Toledo” in which the parties represented in the Parliament are required to periodically suggest policies that ensure the sustainability of pensions. Even though the Agreement was renewed in November 2020, it is still questioned by the pensioners’ platforms (see Table 1) due to the conditions imposed for calculating the pensions and the neglect of gender inequalities and the precarious state of Spanish job market after two labor reforms in 2011 & 2013. Moreover, its lack of transparency, its advisory nature, and the exclusion of the pensioners’ platforms have been criticized.

The voice of the elders became noticeable after the “adjustments” and austerity measures approved by the socialist government to face 2008 economic crisis (Amezcua & Alberich, 2020). The pension cuts turned retired into one the most affected group of the crisis as they had to deal with a progressive price rise of basic food items, while sustaining family economies with unemployed or vulnerable members. This translated into a higher risk of poverty and exclusion (INE, 2020; EAPN-ES, 2020). In May 2011 a group of retired and elderly people started to protest integrated in the 15M. Demonstrating the intergenerational nature of the movement, they ironically called themselves the “Yayoflautas”, a portmanteau formed from the colloquial term “yayo” that refers to grandparents, and the word “flauta” or flute, which is pejoratively used to evoke young hippies with dogs and flutes (Candón-Mena, Montero & Calle, 2018: 577). Yayoflautas are still a very active group that defends welfare rights through a wide range of performances (Alonso, 2015).

Before 2018, the pensioners were an atomized, hardly cohesive collective with a rather dispersed vindicative trajectory (Escarpe, 2018). Yet, since January 2018, they started to articulate a movement stemmed from “indignation” and detachment from traditional parties and unions: “Behind this rebellion there are no dark interests to bring down governments […] What is there, simply put, is a number of people deeply and sincerely pissed off” (Tricio, 2019: 68). In fact, the pensioners share characteristics with the precedent the “indignados” movement and “Las Mareas”, a range of coordinated collectives that periodically protest against the privatization of public services- from 2012 onwards (Álvarez & Núñez, 2016). These features are, among others: their statewide scope, transversal orientation, and convergence with other movements focused on social rights (Amezcua & Alberich, 2020: 19).

The mobilizations started during the liberal-conservative government by Popular Party-PP, continued into two socialist PSOE governments, and reactivated in the aftermath of the state of emergency declared on account of the Covid-19, when the elderly was the hit hardest collective with the most severe symptoms, and the highest death rates (Zhang & Song, 2020). During the pandemic, the media reinforced “ageist” stereotypes connected to fragility, decline and dependence (Bravo-Segal & Villar, 2020). However, at the end of 2020 the retirees have not stopped activities but reinforced synergies with the medical staff protests and also with “Marea Residencias”, a movement that denounces the neglect of Spanish nursing homes. The pensioners’ movement is made up of diverse platforms that differ in their goals, scope, and organization. Though, their main connection is the demand of “dignified pensions”, as it is noticeable in Table 1.

Table 1. Description of the main platforms that the movement comprises

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Name of the collective** | **Starting year** | **Description** |
| Marea  Pensionista de  Catalunya (MPC) | 2012 | Platform created by retirees and 15M activists to protest against the Royal Decree 28/2012. It is the basis for COESPE. They claim for the automatic increase of the pensions in relation to the Consumer Price Index; the reestablishment of the retirement age at 65; and the derogation of the latest labor and pensions reforms. |
| Mesa Estatal  por el Blindaje  de las  Pensiones (MERP) | 2013 | Platform that integrates about 250 organizations including trade unions, minority parties, and other social collectives. It aims at promoting a constitutional reform that shield the pensions and bans both its privatization and the loss of purchasing power of the pensioners. Their members have to accept the MERP foundational manifesto. |
| Coordinadora  Estatal por la  Defensa del  Sistema Público  de Pensiones (COESPE) | 2016 | Transversal social movement characterized by non-partisanship, assembly-based methods, and autonomy at a regional level. It integrates about 280 local platforms in all Comunidades Autónomas (first-level Spanish regional political division). It includes small trade unions, organizations and collectives such as the yayoflautas. The members have to subscribe its organization modes and revindications. Its initial core was Marea Pensionista de Catalunya and other platforms in Canarias and Galicia. |
| Movimiento de  Pensionistas de  Bizkaia (MPB) | 2018 | Movement that integrates the main associations and platforms at the Bizkaian level: the Bizkaia Pensioners Coordinator (that belongs to COESPE); Nagusiak, the oldest pensioners platform (with over 50,000 members); the 15M movement; Pentsionistak Martxan (promoted by the abertxale leftist groups) and members connected to UGT and CCOO unions. |

Source: own construction

The pensioners’ contentious repertoires are partly drawn on an intense and collective use of the media. Their social networks are horizontally and self-managed, what also connects to the 15M media imaginaries and uses (Fernández-Planells et al., 2013). Likewise, certain organization patterns and hierarchies are noticeable, for example the existence of leaders or “digital vanguards” (Gerbaudo, 2016), whose observation and interviews are the basis of this paper.

Similar to previous techno-political movements, the indignation of the pensioners had been growing for a few years, but it burst, organized and reached participants and visibility at a state level from February 2018 thanks to the impulse of social networks and a positive image in the mainstream media.

**Theoretical framework and empirical background**

There is a large literature on the political participation of the elderly addressing aspects such as electoral behavior (Binstock, 2000; Goerres, 2009), the relations between age and institutional participation (Melo & Stockemer, 2014; Quintelier, 2007), their influence in the political and research agendas (Pratt, 1993; Yelaja, 1989), and the types of political participation regarding the type of activities and organizations involving older people (Binstock, 2006; Serrat et al., 2015). This literature has proven useful analyzing historical and paradigmatic experiences such as the Townsend and Ham and Eggs movements in the context of the 1930s US crisis (Amenta, Carruthers & Zylan, 1992; Hanne, 1998); the US Gray Panthers movement (Ciafone, 2019; Sanjek, 2009); the Raging Grannies in Canada (Sawchuck, 2009; Roy, 2004) and, more recently, Spanish Yayoflautas, the elderly and grandparents movement that originated around 15M (Alonso, 2015; Blanche-Tarragó & Fernández-Ardèvol, 2014; Schwarz, 2019).

Regarding Spanish pensioners, we find an incipient – albeit clearly insufficient - literature that addresses the phenomenon from the perspective of social movement studies. As one of its leaders and most visible figures, Alejos (2018) described the demands of the movement and exposed its dilemmas and conflicts; while researchers Jiménez-Sánchez et al. (2020, 2021) attributed its success to the construction of a recognizable collective identity which incorporated 15M legacy in terms of organization. From an ethnographic approach, Schwarz (2019) and Amezcua and Alberich (2020) highlighted how seniority-related issues like pension funds were also an important subject in the course of the *indignados* protests. However, Spanish seniors' movements have not just limited to vindicate decent pensions, but have also denounced the precarious living conditions of younger generations, have demanded an improvement in social, health and dependency services (Amezcua & Alberich, 2020), and shaped alliances with other movements and collectives such as women, refugees, and Spanish debates on memory (Schwarz, 2019).

As mentioned above, this paper is aligned within communication and social movements’ studies (Obregón & Tufte, 2017; Treré, 2019), a research line that burst to explore the use of technology in anti-globalization movements and which had subsequent developments focusing on movements in which communication and technologies played a key role such as the anti-austerity (Occupy, Arab Spring, etc.) and posterior global justice protests (#BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, etc.). In this line, this article intends to explore the place of media activism in the life course of the pensioners’ movement considering that the media imaginaries and practices of elderly communication leaders seem rather detached from the trend to technological determinism (Mosco, 2004; Morozov, 2013) that characterized the 15M. Framed as Facebook and Twitter revolutions, 15M and other anti-austerity movements blindly believed how activism might become more effective, engaging and democratic with the potential use of information technologies (Treré, 2019). Regarding the interactive potential of the Web 2.0, Gerbaudo (2016) criticized how studies erroneously referred to the apparent self-organized nature of social networks, while Boyd & Crawford (2012) unveiled how literature emphasized on their democratizing attributes and their presumably higher levels of intelligence and collective knowledge. These myths or “digital sublimes” demonstrate that the birth of every technology is always accompanied by promises and longings (Mosco, 2004), a fact that has recently lead into techno-centric approaches that forget historical and contextual factors, and the complex multi-faceted uses and appropriations of ICTs by civil actors (Treré, 2019; Mattoni, 2017).

**Materials and methods**

This research is based on qualitative methods that allow a deep exploration of the pensioners discourses through the meanings generated along an iterative and cyclical research process (Aspers & Corte, 2019).

Fieldwork has been divided into two main stages, the first focused on conducting interviews and the second based on a content analysis of pensioners’ movement social networks.

Regarding the first stage, 12 interviews to an intentional sample of key-respondents selected according to their responsibility in the communication of the movement, that is, people from the different platforms who played a prominent role in its communication strategies: from spokespersons to community managers (see Tables 1 & 2). We approached the interviews with the movement's communication leaders as expert interviews, understanding them as both privileged witnesses of an event and people who, taken together, display what happens within a population affected by a situation or event (Weiss, 1994: 17).

Two phases of 45 to 60 minutes phone interviews were conducted: the first took place between February and April 2019, and the second between May and November 2020. This last set of interviews aimed at “saturation” and “iteration”, a mechanism to validate and update data after the changes introduced by the Covid-19 pandemic. The age of the respondents is between 65 and 78, with the exception of Joanen Cunyat, 43 years old and spokesperson for the MERP. The informants accepted to be included in the article with their real names.

Depending on the communicational responsibility of the interviewees, the questionnaires included 7 to 12 questions to gather information on three dimensions: (1) the first related to his/her activist identity, perception of the movement and the platform/s, and the previous connection to unions, political parties, and social movements, although cross-movement activism was found in most cases; (2) the second approached their implication in the communication strategy, including questions on digital competences, (social) media uses and on the relation between the online and offline spheres; (3) the last battery of questions explored how they evaluated the interactions between protests and media repertoires, including mainstream media, social networks and other ICTs.

Interviews were transcribed and afterwards analysed with Nvivo following the principles of qualitative content analysis (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). More specifically, a semantic analysis of the sentences of our informants was carried out, conceptualized as a nucleus of meaning. These interview excerpts were categorized following a deductive procedure based on three conceptual categories stemmed from the literature review on communication and social movements: (1) media practices; (2) media imaginaries; (3) and media ecology (see Introduction and Objectives).

Finally, an analysis of the movement's social networks accounts contents was conducted between February 2018 and March 2021 coinciding with activity peaks periods of the movement. It consisted of the selection of the 5 highest circulation posts in each of the analyzed social networks (40 publications in total) that were posted at the movement's periods of time peak activity, these are, the days before and after the celebration of demonstrations. Subsequently, a classification system was established based on a typology of posts that allowed us to identify whether the post involved: (a) the call for a demonstration or any other type of contentious action; (b) the dissemination of any news published in the media: data, reports or studies related to the situation of pensioners in Spain or their claims; and (c) the proposal of debates on the main goals and demands of the movement.

With the purpose of contrasting and triangulating these data with the interviews, special attention was paid to three dimensions, in line with similar studies (Anonymized, 2017): (1) the main uses and contents posted on the networks; (2) the continuities between online and offline participation; (3) the similarities and differences with other recent movements. In the same period, the researchers participated in some demonstrations to maintain informal interactions with activists and leaders, whose personal accounts and online activity in social networks were also scrutinized. Table 2 shows the official online spaces that were also analyzed:

Table 2: Observed webs and social networks

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Platform** | **Social network / Web site** | | **Nr. of followers or subscribers (to 12/04/21)** |
| COESPE  [https://www.coespeweb.es](https://www.coespeweb.es/) | Facebook | www.facebook.com/COESPE | 19.861 |
| Twitter | @CoespeOficial | 4.392 |
| Telegram | 6 public channels of COESPE | 902 |
| MERP  [www.merp.es](http://www.merp.es) | Facebook | [www.facebook.com/merp.org](http://www.facebook.com/merp.org) | 5.301 |
| Twitter | @merp\_org | 433 |
| Marea Pensionista de Catalunya (MPC)  <http://mareapensionista.org> | Facebook | www.facebook.com/MAREA-Pensionista-  Catalunya-1135331159812043 | 2.350 |
| Twitter | @MareaPensiones | 725 |
| Movimiento  de  Pensionistas  de Bizkaia (MPB) | Facebook | Some webs are integrated in 15M Bizkaia  ([www.facebook.com/pg/M15MBizkaia](http://www.facebook.com/pg/M15MBizkaia)), but mostly local accounts (see Part 4.2) | 1.402 |

Source: own construction

As we have already indicated, the following lines present the results of our qualitative research discussed in the light of three central concepts of the literature on communication and social movements -media imaginaries, practices and ecology-, to which we will later put into dialogue with the notions, still under construction, of slow activism and slow media.

**Results and discussion**

***Imaginaries and media practices***

The interviews show that the pensioners’ communication leaders do not have a professionalized understanding of communication. They highlight the importance of media and ICTs to organize and disseminate the protests, as well as to create alliances with other movements. Though, they prioritize their political and strategic objectives before any communication plan: “Intuitively the strategic action plan has always been clear, but unclear in terms of communication and its methods” (Cabello, 18/03/19). Their testimonies are divided between those who place greater emphasis on the role of communication in the burst of the movement and the call for massive protests, and those who highlight the digital learning acquired in the latent phases and the subsequent strengthening of media activist skills. Moreover, the pensioners’ communication leaders progressively moved from certain amateurism at the dawn of the protests into a more strategic and targeted use of media and social networks, when protests consolidated. As examples, MERP and COESPE recommend their activists to communicate according to minimum agreements or rules, in special regarding the publication of posts on social media (Cunyat, 14/10/20; Laguna, 27/11/20), whereas MPB and MPC suggest their local platforms to create their own social media spaces “to reach neighbors, new actors and overcome the generational gap”, although this purpose “is hardly achieved” (Alejos, 02/04/19).

The concepts of media imaginaries (Treré, 2019; Treré, Jeppesen & Mattoni, 2017) and media practices (Couldry, 2004; Treré, 2019) are helpful to interpret the ordinary media and ICTs appropriations by elder activists, since the pensioners interacted, from the very first moment, as much with “media-objects” -mobile phones, computers, printed media, etc. - as with “media-subjects”: journalists, public administrators and other media and digital activists (Mattoni, 2012). Both notions point to the necessity of analyzing media activism departing from a historical and situated perspective that does not prioritize technologies over contexts, but instead analyses them from the perceptions, meanings, emotions and appropriations between people, movements and technologies (Stephansen & Treré, 2019: 13-14).

While there is not a unified understanding of the complex ways through which practices and imaginaries are combined, in the elderly’s media imaginaries technological networks are perceived as valuable resources to organize and disseminate the protests, as well as to adopt strategic decisions that cannot be taken in face-to-face meetings due to lack of time (Raes, 28/3/19; Rojas, 4/4/19). Social media such as Twitter and Facebook are considered ubiquitous channels to reach the whole population -and not only the seniors-, and their uses do not differ from other social movements: they help to coordinate the movement, spread contents and venues, and strengthen public debate. However, the pensioners acknowledge that they are highly dependent on instant messaging and chats in WhatsApp and Telegram. Treré (2019) labels these latter networks as “backstage” activist spaces in which people feel less constrained and exposed when creating a character or disseminating contents, in comparison to “frontstage” networks: posts on Facebook, streaming live broadcasts, etc. WhatsApp also serves to “mobilize pensioners who do not usual access Facebook or Twitter, but are regular users of WhatsApp” (Cabello, 08/03/19). In addition to the surprising oversight of “backstage” networks in media activism literature, the interviews, in special the ones taken in the second phase (May-November 2020), highlighted the role of video platforms to increase the morale, combat loneliness and integrate activists during the most restrictive phases of the Coronavirus lockdown (Rivera, 21/5/20). The pensioners also mentioned that video call platforms were new to them so they felt forced to learn their use to communicate with each other, and even to reach elders with physical impairments (Rojas, 16/11/20), and without facing any “unsolvable difficulty” in the adaptation process to these video platforms (Laguna, 27/11/20).

Concerning content production, the vertical and lineal uses of the Web 1.0 seem to coexist with the horizontal and participatory Web 2.0 practices (Jenkins, 2008). In this sense, Facebook and Twitter show an uneven media activity between those who are quite active and other pensioners that limit themselves to elaborate occasional posts and to reply to other posts. Their publications are mostly made up of propagandist, unidirectional messages that do not make any reference or pose dialogues with other activists and online profiles. Therefore, the pensioners’ online narratives create a self-referential discourse made up of both the pensioners’ opinions —through manifestos, comments, videos, etc.— and references to news published by mass media, and comments by social and political actors such as politicians, journalists, NGOs, etc. *Figure 1* represents an example of the above described ICT and media uses, in this occasion focused on the dissemination of unidirectional propagandist messages. On the left, a poster posted on Facebook explaining “the pensions' padlock” campaign (#ElCandadoDelasPensiones) and encouraging users to spread the poster in print and digital. On the right, a poster posted on Twitter calling for a protest action in front of the Congress in Madrid.

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| Imagen |

*Figure 1. Examples of propagandist messages in Facebook and Twitter.* Retrieved from: <https://www.facebook.com/merp.org/> and <https://twitter.com/Coorpenmadrid/status/1380248090926534658>

Regarding the pensioners’ imaginaries on the digital gap, the communication leaders do not share a unified conception. Nonetheless, they acknowledge the regular use of the emails, social media and instant messaging, and very little or no use of YouTube and Instagram, which some referred as “youngsters’ media” (Rivera, 4/4/19). They admit having diverse technological skills, from activists who had enormous difficulties to acquire technological competences to elders who “almost became community managers” (Laguna, 27/11/20). This ability does not seem to be related to age, but with a special interest in ICTs or with their own sociocultural levels, higher for the so-called “new pensioners”, around the age of 65. Whatever the case, they acknowledge that they had to adapt to social media and other ICTs forced by circumstances: “when we have to face a new need, we wake up and learn” (Laguna, 27/11/20). These results are in line with recent studies that show that the Spanish pensioners perceive themselves as capable to manage complex technological devices such as computers, tablets, smartphones, apps or social media (Obra Social La Caixa, 2017). Although Spanish older populations continue to be the most vulnerable to digital exclusion (Tirado-Morueta, 2021), they are normally interested in continuing to learn how to use these tools although with certain preventions regarding security and privacy (Casado-Muñoz, Lezcano & Rodríguez-Conde, 2015).

Lastly, some interviewees talked about the technological transfers between youngsters and seniors, which seem to be an interesting issue for further research although this dimension was not addressed by any specific question of our research questionnaire: “I knew nothing about communication, but I had to manage the Facebook account of my platform. A niece helped and explained everything to me. There are also young people in the movement, not many, but there are. They will become pensioners in the future and they will be even more hurt by this situation” (Rivera, 4/4/19).

***Media ecology***

A distinctive sign of the pensioners is the search for permanent connections with a whole range of media outlets: public, commercial and alternative; state, regional and local; etc. The concept of media ecology helps us understand the pensioners’ media practices from a relational and emotional perspective (Nardi & O’Day, 2000) that integrates both the political processes and the media contexts in which these practices actually take place (Postill, 2010). The interviewees agree on the relevant role played by “traditional” media to make the protests visible and increase the number of participants. Though, their perceptions fluctuate between positive and negative conceptions about the media. The negative testimonies consider that the ownership patterns and editorial lines of the media determine a higher or lower permeability to their demands. Another constant in the interviews is the mention of a classical use of the media as lobbying spaces to pressure on the political agenda. Thus, the first battery of questions (see Materials and Methods) showed that the leaders had previously participated in parties, associations or unions, at a time when there was no Internet, and the success of mobilizations depended exclusively on the press and broadcasting. A few respondents mentioned specific actions addressed to traditional media: The MERP lobbied the referential newspaper El País to publish different manifestos (Cunyat, 06/04/19), while COESPE created a complex structure of rotative spokespeople in charge of press releases, conferences, etc. (Alejos, 02/04/19).

Media ecology theories attribute a central role to sociopolitical and media contexts. In fact, the pensioners’ practices interact in hybrid physical and mediated/virtualized contexts in which classic and innovating logics live side by side (Chadwick, 2013). Some technological appropriations remind the past –such as the elaboration of manifestos and press releases– while others evoke more recent uses by techno-political movements such as the 15M: podcasts, video streaming, posts on social media, etc. (Álvarez & Núñez, 2016; Anonymized, 2017). Furthermore, it is impossible to isolate one technology from others, and one mobilization from those that came before or go after (Treré, 2019). The examples of these “hybrid media strategies” are multiple: from “escraches” at the houses and workplaces of politicians -coordinated through WhatsApp and Telegram-, to the MERP signature campaigns combining the periodical setup of street stands and online signatures at any time (Cunyat, 06/04/19). Some strategies are sophisticated in terms of information technologies. Rivera (04/04/19) points diverse COESPE mailbombing campaigns addressed to politicians or their Twitter campaigns to stop the approval of the Pan-European Pension Product (PEPP) (#NoPePP) in April 2019, and to incentivize the vote in the general elections of April 28 (#28VotoFuturoPensiones) and November 10, 2019 (#PensionesPublicas10N, #NuestroVotoCuenta10N, #10NVotaPensionesPúblicasDignas), without requesting the support to any political party.

Most respondents understand ICTs from a highly instrumental perspective because they consider technology is just a part, and therefore dependent, of a larger political plan: “We do not sacrifice our goals to get more visibility, but instead turn our goals into news” (Cunyat, 06/04/19). Many retirees agree that virtual sphere cannot be separated from face-to-face communication because “personal contacts almost always precede virtual connections”. Beyond social media, people tend to attend the calls “motivated for their indignation against the system or due to previous solidarity with the pensions’ cause” (Rojas, 04/04/19). The interviewees give importance to the emotional and therapeutic values of two strategies: the assemblies where decision-making processes are taken, and the performative actions which aim at appropriating the public space: “Our success is based on our symbolic presence in the streets through gatherings and demonstrations. We demonstrate every Monday and have weekly meetings to coordinate […] These spaces for meeting, dialogue and socialization are of enormous therapeutic value. We say that this movement helps us live longer” (Alejos, 02/04/19).

Face-to-face gatherings are even more important for the MPB, which does not have an official account on Facebook or Twitter. Instead, they invite local groups to create their own accounts aiming at creating a closer contact with people who are based in concrete territories. The platform insists on spreading direct messages through WhatsApp and Instagram as well as on the symbolic component of their gatherings, which caught media attention due to their persistence and perdurability (Rojas, 04/04/19). Other interviewees highlight the importance of symbols. The iconic image of the Bizkaia retirees gathered every Monday since January 15, 2018 at the entrance of the Bilbao City Council, with the river and a sculpture by Jorge Oteiza as backgrounds “is already part of our collective imaginary and our main identity sign” (Alejos, 02/04/19).

*Figure 2* shows a photograph taken during one of the many Monday’s demonstrations at the main entrance of the Bilbao’s City Council. The image shows a general shot of the demonstration with the river and iconic Jorge Oteiza’s sculpture as backgrounds. Images like this had a wide dissemination in the main Spanish' mainstream media and became an icon of the pensioners’ movement.

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| Imagen |

*Figure 2. Image of one of the pensioners’ demonstrations at the the Bilbao’s City Council.*Retrieved from: <https://twitter.com/MareasCiudadana/status/978276206889009155>

Other performative actions were the October 2019 mobilizations, in which two columns of pensioners arrived to the Congress of Deputies in Madrid after a walk of over 500 kilometers from the North (Bilbao) and the South (Rota) of Spain. Furthermore, the interviews offer a number of hints on the permanent, mundane and demystified use of the technologies, very often qualified as “simple tools”. Moreover, our questions regarding ICTs usually derived into references to face-to-face interchanges: assemblies, demonstrations, etc. The testimonies usually subordinated digital actions to the wider struggles in the streets and their impact on mainstream media. This questions the “self-organizing” potential of the networks and highlights the importance of the pensioners' narratives when they randomly refer to online and offline decision-making processes.

***The slow media / slow activism approach of the pensioners***

The pensioners’ media practices are far from the spontaneous and “ephemeral collective action” that characterizes hybrid performative practices such as the flash mobs, which have high visual impact but lack continuity and real results (Earl et al., 2015). On the contrary, the pensioners movement have reinvigorated as the Covid-19 crisis started to alleviate and in October 2021 they were able to bring together masses of activists along the country to protest against the imminent socialist government's pension reform. In fact, the pensioners constitute a movement which has been always conceived in the long-term. A number of interviewees indicated that social rights are never fully granted and today's struggles are the prelude to tomorrows. Furthermore, their imaginaries constantly evoke the power of group communication, the conflicting nature of assemblies, and even the talkative essence of many people at an advanced age. Asked about the uses of (social) media, their discourses usually overpass the strict limit of technologies to refer to the power of communication beyond any technology or mediation: “We might not be the best at managing social networks, but we, the elderly, have the quality of talking a lot […] and we have been doing it before this became a trend with the use of technology” (Tricio, 2019: 70).

Somehow, their orientation towards the future sustainability of the pensions system and the good quality of retirement and public services connects them to the “slow movement”, which advocates quieter and unhurried lifestyles and methods, and championing for the quality of life over running faster to do multiple things following the hectic pace of capitalism (Honoré, 2004). Opposing the tyranny of speed, ephemerality and immediacy of modern-capitalist cultures (Rosa, 2010), the slow movement has diversified throughout multiple fields -food, cities, tourism, design, work, etc.- and has recently started to influence communication and media studies. “Slow media” activism goes beyond the individual actions that help us to limit or control the way we use technologies. On the contrary, it calls for a structural cultural and political shift to vindicate the “dense culture” of face-to-face communication, the quality of media contents, and a rise of awareness about the uncontrolled rhythms of ICTs and media production, distribution and consumption (Anonymized, 2020; Rauch, 2018).

Limiting social media uses or approaching technologies more cautiously provide spaces for personal time and group conversations. Gladwell (2010) and others mistrust obsession with social media campaigns in favor of the traditional face-to-face relationships, which have historically sustained civil right movements. In fact, different studies have emphasized the role of digital media to bring protesters to street, but also the necessity of face-to-face encounters and demonstrations as the main tool to keep a movement alive, since “the most important medium of communication was actually unmediated, that is, people talking to each other” (Hammond, 2019: 901).

Moreover, the notion of “slow activism” has been recently coined to allude to the substantial differences between movements that practice a spectacle-activism in the short-term and those that manage their activity quietly and in the long-term. The second style is characteristic of movements which patiently pressure to demand their rights (Robins, 2015), even when their demands do not get a constant media attention given their low profile or peaceful character (Robins, 2014).

The respondents do not understand their claims as something immediate or circumstantial “that can be lost”, but instead aim at “structural and irreversible” changes (Ledo, 08/03/19) such as the constitutional shielding of the pensions. They also consider that their fights have to be undertaken by next generations, although they admit that their activities on social networks have not attracted many youngsters yet. One of the first performative-demonstrations at the moment of creating the MERP took place at the Reina Sofia Museum on 12 December, 2013. Under the motto “bring your own chair”, the MERP expressed: “we are here to shield the pensions and we are not moving; we are not in a hurry; we will not stop until we succeed” (Cunyat, 06/04/19). The pensioners’ media repertories are tested according to patient work, trial and error, and the exploration of as many strategies as seem to be useful (Laguna, 11/5/19), which are defining characteristics of slow activism (Robins, 2014; 2015).

Likewise, the pensioners consider that their movement can be characterized by a slow incubation period and important latency and less visibility periods -such as the pandemic- because “our activities and internal meetings never stop” (Cabello, 18/03/19). In addition, the majority state that their communication strategies address to creating stable solidarity networks, basically in the long-term. The latter was exemplified by most testimonies, and also by their motto “we are going slowly because we are going far”, which was the motto of the Mexican Zapatistas movement in the mid-1990s and also the 15M. The demands of pensioners imply profound structural and cultural changes, beyond the economic or political conjuncture. This is what Andrea Uña, spokesperson for the Pensioners' Movement of Bizkaia, said in an interview with Spanish public television: "What needs to be done? Equality policies, education, investing in nurseries and residences from the public sector and changing the values of this society"[[3]](#footnote-3).

This way of doing activism can also be observed in the alliances that pensioners have woven with groups that advocate deep and far-reaching social transformations. For example, the campaign #CandadoDeLasPensiones (pensions’ padlock), which calls for the shielding of public pensions in the Spanish Constitution as a fundamental right, has been supported by the platform Marea Roja de la investigación (red tide for science research) as part of his campaign #SinCienciaNoHayFuturo (there is no future without science) (See *Figure 3*).

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*Figure 3. Twitter from Marea Roja por la Ciencia supporting the #CandadoDeLasPensiones campaign.*Retrieved from: <https://twitter.com/marearojainvest/status/1356608901844729859>

Finally, a stress on collective action rather than on individual “connectivism” was also observed, given that the ICTs are aimed at promoting street resistance and “cooperative struggles” because the pensioners are always planning “how to mobilize the young or reach new collectives” (Rojas, 04/04/19). Even when social networks reinforce “connective” activism (Bennet & Segerberg, 2011), literature on media resistance has scarcely examined the digital literacy processes that take place between the young and the elder, or the way social movements try to reach new participant beyond current followers, as elderly do when appealing the youngsters.

**Conclusions**

Activism in the elderly is still a “black hole” in academic literature if compared to other research “subjects” (women, youth, black civil rights movements) and “objects” (anti-globalization, anti-austerity movements, etc.). This oblivion is associated as much to the attribution of vulnerability and conservatism (Fillieulle, 2013), as to the myths about digital gaps. Although the concept of “digital natives” has started to be questioned (Prensky, 2009), it still shapes pre- and misconceptions about the relation between the elderly and technology.

The interviews to activists at advanced ages help to question certain persistent myths in communication and social movements’ studies. On the one hand, the obsession of communication research with social networks has prevented academia from observing the persistent interplays and influences between activists and traditional mainstream media, as well as from paying attention to other low-cost technologies and interchanges (posters and fanzines, podcasts, live streaming, artistic productions, performances, etc.), and, in particular, to non-digital, non-analogic and non-mediated communication forms such as group gatherings and face-to-face communication. On the other hand, the pensioners we interviewed qualified ICTs and social media as “powerful” contentious repertoires. However, they claimed that any message or ICT appropriation is necessarily being subjugated to wider political programs and aimed at encouraging street activism. This seems to be a non-idealized but mostly pragmatic, strategic, and permanent use of any technological means at their disposal, from social networks to the video-streaming platforms that started to be used during the Covid-19 confinement. Furthermore, the pensioners’ communication leaders trend to prioritize “backstage” social networks —such as WhatsApp or streaming services— over “frontstage” (Facebook, Twitter), since their participatory character and easy usability seem to have a great penetration among retirees. In contrast to other techno-political movements, their strategies are very much orientated to persuade the mainstream media, which reminds the communication modes of “older” political parties and unions to which many older activists are still enrolled or sympathize, beyond their criticism of both.

Their complex hybrid media practices includes traditional communication —assemblies, media lobbying, face-to-face interchanges, etc. — as well as “newer” and more creative technological appropriations of social media, webs and other digital platforms. Nevertheless, the retirees give an extraordinary importance to performances, struggles on the streets and face-to-face meetings, qualified by many as the main instruments to shape the political identity of the movement. The pensioners characterize by the creation of a sort of media ecology where online media and face-to-face communication coexist, since they both aim at creating and maintaining strong emotional ties. However, their ICTs appropriation relies on the cultural, cognitive and activist idiosyncrasy of the elderly—which should be further researched—and is fundamentally aimed at (and subordinated to) achieving long-term goals within a sort of slow activism.

Even though the sample does not allow us to generalize results, this study constitutes an exploratory step forward for further research with a larger sample, for example, using surveys or including interviews to activists with no communicational responsibilities. Future studies should also review to what extent pensioners and elderly movements in other countries are examples of slow activism and can be annualized connected to other anti-austerity and techno-political social movements. Through the use of other methodological strategies, it would be interesting to keep on inquiring if they are characterized by more innovative or classical media imaginaries, and whether their uses of ICTs and social media remain banal/ordinary or strategic in the future. Besides, the knowledge transfer and the influences received from youth and techno-political movements should be deeper inquired. In any case, this article has approached the pensioners’ media practices and ecologies as strategic spaces to fight for an improvement of pensions and social welfare, and has unveiled that their “slow media” imaginaries that seem to oppose to the technocratic, ephemeral and inconsistent logic that characterizes digital society.

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2. The name is inspired by other “mareas” (tides), or social movements that emerged as a practical and sectorial applications of 15M ideals around the defense of public services such as education (Marea Verde/Green Tide), and health (Marea Blanca/White Tide) (Álvarez & Núñez, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Statements of Andrea Uña in *Los Desayunos* TV show from RTVE (02/03/2020): [https://twitter.com/Desayunos\_tve/status/1234396349812166657](https://twitter.com/Desayunos_tve/status/1234396349812166657?s=20) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)