Polls, Public Demonstrations, Election Results, and the Media:
The Events of March 11 in Spain

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Abstract

This article analyzes how an accelerated public opinion formation process took place in Spain, how this was reflected in various areas (the media, social manifestations, opinion polls and election results), and the extent to which it was aided by the development of the new communication technologies which allow greater public access to information, a wider range and variety of sources and the rapid spread of information and opinion amongst a public organized into networks.

Key words: Spanish Public Opinion. Social Networks. Terrorism. Mass Media System.

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1. Introduction

On March 11, 2004, Spain suffered the most savage terrorist attack in its history: 192 dead, more than 1,500 injured, and a state of shock that affected the whole country and had profound international repercussions. Public opinion very quickly began to ask questions about the unknown factors surrounding the terrorist attacks, trying to find rapid answers because of the proximity of the general elections of March 14. In all the main representations of Spanish public opinion (the mass media, opinion polls, public demonstrations, etc), an intense debate took place over who was responsible for the attacks. This debate had an impact, although it is difficult to say how great, on the result of the General Elections of March 14, the purist and most important expression of public opinion. The nature of this debate was clearly governed by two main determining factors:

- **Two information strategies:** Starting on the very same day as the attacks, once early data began to cast doubts in one sector of public opinion that ETA was responsible, a position which the Government strongly defended, and suggested that possibly Islamic terrorists were involved, public were bombarded with information and disinformation provided, to a greater or lesser extent, by practically all the participants in the process (the Government, the political parties, the national and foreign media, the secret services, the general public and even the terrorist groups themselves), in an attempt to clarify who was responsible for the attacks. Such a clarification would obviously influence the election result. If the attacks were the work of ETA, the public could point to the success of the antiterrorist policies of the PP Government, and give it their support. At the same time, they could vote against the principal opposition party, the PSOE, because of the pacts they had made within the regional Government of Catalonia with a separatist party, Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC), the leader of which had admitted a few weeks earlier to having held talks with the Basque terrorist group ETA. However, if the attacks were the work of Al Qaeda, the PP Government might receive a punishment vote because of its strong support of the US/UK led invasion of Iraq in 2003, which, according to public opinion, would have provided a motive for an Islamic terrorist attack.

- **Over-information of the public:** The consumption of the mass media in Spain rose dramatically, as did that of the media which might be describe as being "outside the mainstream media", such as the thematic television channels, the foreign media (mainly in digital form) and an undetermined number of channels of communication available on the Internet. Finally, an unusually high volume of traffic was noted in the area of technologically mediated

interpersonal communications, especially the Internet (via e-mail, chats and forums) and mobile telephones.

Taking into account the above, the chronology of events can be summarized as follows[1]:

Thursday March 11
- 7.37: First attack on the commuter trains, which connect Madrid to the suburbs. Within the space of a very few minutes there are explosions in three more trains.
- 9.30: Juan José Ibarretxe, President of the regional Government of the Basque Country, appears before the media to read a strongly worded communiqué against ETA.
- 10.30: Arnaldo Otegui, leader of Batasuna, the political wing of ETA, denies that this terrorist group is behind the attacks.
- During the morning of 11 March, the President of the Government, José María Aznar, summons the directors of the main Spanish newspapers to claim that ETA is behind the attacks. These newspapers quickly bring out a special edition blaming, in some cases (such as *El País*) the attacks on ETA.
- 13.31: Ángel Acebes, minister of the Interior, singles out ETA as being responsible for the attacks.
- 14.40: Appearance of José María Aznar, in which he cites no specific terrorist group.
- 17.25: The Foreign Minister, Ana Palacio, orders the Spanish ambassadors to defend the hypothesis that ETA is responsible and also orders Inocencio Arias, ambassador to the UN, to blame ETA for the attacks in his appearance before the UN Security Council.
- José María Aznar holds a second round of talks with the editors of the Spanish press, at which he reiterates that he is absolutely sure that ETA is behind the attacks.
- 20.20: Ángel Acebes informs the media that a van has been discovered in Alcalá de Henares (Madrid) with seven detonators and a tape containing verses of the Koran in Arabic inside. However, he states that ETA "is, at the moment, the main line of investigation".
- 20.30: King Juan Carlos I appears before the cameras. Like Aznar, he talks only of "terrorists" without naming any specific group.
- 22.00: The Cadena SER radio station announces that "three distinct sources from within the antiterrorist forces" have told this radio station that a suicide bomber had taken part in the attacks (although no proof was ever found). This obviously adds weight to the Islamic hypothesis.

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1. Source: The Author.

Friday March 12

- 11.30: Second appearance of José María Aznar, in which he reiterates that ETA is the most likely hypothesis, but "no line of investigation has been abandoned".
- Throughout the day, various political opposition leaders begin to accuse the Government of a lack of transparency and manipulation of the news.
- 18.00: The public television channel of the Basque Country (ETB) broadcasts a brief telephone communiqué from ETA denying any participation in the attacks.
- 18.40: Ángel Acebes refutes the credibility of ETA's statement: "We do not believe them".
- 19.00: Anti terrorism demonstrations take place all over Spain, involving a massive twelve million people (of a total population of 40 million).

Saturday March 13

- The *La Vanguardia* newspaper publishes a story explaining that the police investigation points towards Al Qaeda, and that there is "certain unease" within the Spanish security forces with regard to the Government's information policy.
- 14.30: Ángel Acebes: The investigation "progresses in both the established directions", but ETA is the "priority".
- 15.05: Just as Acebes finishes his appearance, the Cadena SER announces that, according to its sources, the National Intelligence Centre (Spanish secret services) have abandoned the ETA hypothesis and are working almost exclusively in the direction of Islamic terrorism.
- 16.30: Jorge Dezcallar, director of the National Intelligence Centre, denies the information given by Cadena SER.
- 18.00: An increasing number of people (around 5,000), summoned by SMS messages, gather in front of the PP headquarters in Madrid to protest against the concealment of information about the responsibility for the attacks. Within a few hours, this phenomenon is repeated in many Spanish cities. The demonstrations go on until after midnight.
- 20.10: Ángel Acebes announces the detention of five people (three Moroccans and two Indians) suspected of being involved in 11th March attacks.
- 21.00: Mariano Rajoy, presidential candidate of PP, calls a press conference to denounce the public demonstrations in front of offices of the PP as illegal.
- 21.30: Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba, spokesperson for the PSOE, accuses the Government of hiding information: "the Spanish people deserve a Government that doesn't lie to them".

Sunday March 14

- 00.45: Ángel Acebes announces the discovery of a videotape in which a man, claiming to be a military spokesperson for Al Qaeda in Europe, claims responsibility for the attacks.

- During the morning, the PP candidate, Mariano Rajoy, and the president of the Government, José María Aznar, are insulted by bystanders as they are on their way to vote. Others, however, shout encouragement.
- 20.00: Strong rise in turnout for the elections, 75'7%, seven points higher than the 2000 general elections.
- 22.00: PSOE wins the elections with 42% of the votes, five points more than the PP.

As can be seen from the above, the development of events leads to a continuous weakening in the position of the Government, at first determined to defend the position that ETA was responsible but later forced to a first qualify, and finally abandon, this position as the information and opinions broadcast by some of the media, political leaders and the general public, as well as the data provided by the Government itself, undermined the original hypothesis.

2. The media

Within a very brief time scale, the public felt impelled to consume and digest large quantities of news, in order to form an opinion on who was responsible for the attacks, and, in many cases, extract the political consequences. Although we are not always able to work with totally reliable data, we can make an initial study of the consumption of media at various levels, which, together with the more concrete data (television and digital media) covers not only the period of March 11, 12, 13 and 14 but also the corresponding days of the previous week (March 4, 5, 6 and 7). Thus, we can offer a more complete picture of the consumption of information and the influence of the March 11 attacks on this consumption in the various media.

2.1. Mass media

The audience studies of the mass media in Spain currently tend to cover a period of several months, as is the case of the *Estudio General de Medios* (EGM) for the early part of 2004. The EGM shows a moderate rise in the consumption of the press, which varies between 4% (*El Periódico*) and 10% (*ABC* and *La Vanguardia*). The rise is significantly greater where radio is concerned (24.1% higher in the Cadena COPE, 18.1% in Onda Cero, and 16% in Cadena SER). Whilst the rise affects all the radio stations in general, it also

helps to consolidate the predominance of Cadena SER (with 5,702,000 listeners compared with 2,551,000 for Onda Cero and 1,972,000 for Cadena COPE), the most important station openly critical of the PP Government.

Although this data can in no way be applied to the period analyzed here (from March 11 to 14, 2004), it would appear that the need to acquire information quickly diminished public reliance on the press (whose digital versions, however, generally unaffected by the time constraints of the paper editions, showed a substantial increase in audience), whilst increasing public consumption of radio, which, thanks to its immediacy (it offers the public access to the latest news almost instantaneously, even more quickly and with more flexibility than television) and wide availability make it an ideal medium for mass consumption contexts such as the one we are dealing with, given that it can be complemented by any other of the media, and is available virtually anywhere).

In the case of television, we have access to concrete data, which show a notably greater consumption than normal:

Table 1: Audience figures for TV news broadcasts from March 4 to March 7.

News Broadcast	March 4	March 5	March 6	March 7
Telediario 1 (TVE)	3,220,000 (25.7%)	3,057,000 (24.5%)	3,195,000 (25.7%)	3,287,000 (27.5%)
Telediario 2 (TVE)	3,800,000 (25.3%)	3,558,000 (25.9%)	3,005,000 (23.8%)	4,092,000 (25.2%)
Antena 3 Noticias – 1	2,630,000 (21.1%)	2,727,000 (21.8%)	3,508,000 (28.2%)	2,865,000 (24%)
Antena 3 Noticias – 2	3.179,000 (22.8%)	3,338,000 (25.1%)	2,340,000 (19.1%)	2,820,000 (18.1%)
Informativos Telecinco 1	2,535,000 (21.1%)	2,481,000 (20.7%)	2,284,000 (19.7%)	2,313,000 (20.8%)
Informativos Telecinco 2	2,270,000 (17.8%)	2,225,000 (18.5%)	2,170,000 (19.1%)	2,993,000 (21.1%)

Source: Sofres.

Table 2: Audience figures for TV news broadcasts from March 11 to March 14.

News Broadcast	March 11	March 12	March 13	March 14
Telediario 1 (TVE)	4,857,000 (35.1%)	4,385,000 (32.9%)	4,003,000 (29%)	3,659,000 (28.8%)
Telediario 2 (TVE)	3,977,000 (22.2%)	4,738,000 (28.6%)	4,072,000 (27.2%)	5,151,000 (28.9%)
Antena 3 Noticias – 1	3,386,000 (23.4%)	2,799,000 (20.4%)	3,776,000 (26.7%)	3,177,000 (24.9%)
Antena 3 Noticias – 2	3,406,000 (21.7%)	3,530,000 (22.8%)	3,020,000 (21.1%)	2,774,000 (17.2%)
Informativos Telecinco 1	2,669,000 (18.8%)	2,846,000 (21.4%)	3,094,000 (23.2%)	2,949,000 (24.4%)
Informativos Telecinco 2	-	2,220,000 (13.8%)	2,968,000 (22.4%)	2,821,000 (18.8%)

Source: Sofres.

As can be seen there was a considerable rise in audience figures compared to those of the previous week. If we add that, as well as the normal news bulletins, all the channels broadcast news flashes and a series of special programs about the attacks, the public demonstrations of March 12 and the election results, all of which had high audience figures, we can conclude that there was considerable public interest in acquiring information.

The audience concentrated mainly on the news broadcasts of the publicly owned television company, TVE (as usually happens with major news stories), although a slow decline in this leading position can be observed from March 11 until Election Day on March 14. The privately owned channel Tele 5 (whose news programs tended to be critical of the PP Government), however, show the inverse process to that of TVE, a gradual rise in audience for its news broadcasts, and even the highest audience figures –by a narrow margin– of all the TV companies in their Election Special broadcasts on the night of March 14.

Finally, throughout this period, and on March 11 in particular, the Internet showed a considerable rise in news traffic, probably higher than that of any of the other media.

A study of the mass media in Internet depends largely on the data provided by the OJD (Oficina de Justificación de la Difusión). Unfortunately, the OJD has no data for some of the most important digital media (*El País Digital* and *La Vanguardia*), and so this study is limited to the main papers for which we have data (*ABC*, *El Mundo*, *El Periódico*), as well as some of the particularly influential regional titles (*Avui*, *Diario de Cádiz*, *El Correo*, *El Norte de Castilla*, *Heraldo de Aragón*, *La Voz de Galicia* and *Levante-EMV*) and the data for *Libertad Digital* (the most important of exclusively digital papers –with no printed version– in terms of audience), *Vilaweb* (the largest digital medium in Catalan), Antena 3 TV and the Cadena SER, the most important Spanish radio channel which was crucially important in broadcasting information about the unknown factors regarding the responsibility for the attacks. Compare the figures for individual visits between the dates of our study and the equivalent days of the previous week:

Table 3: Digital media audience figures from March 4 to March 7.

Media	March 4	March 5	March 6	March 7
ABC	91.616	76.195	51.507	58.715
El Mundo	1.173.088	1.036.220	697.402	766.793
El Periódico	128.304	113.356	80.798	103.006
Avui	10.715	12.392	9.292	9.644
Diario de Cádiz	11.462	11.684	9.896	11.217
El Correo	53.268	50.873	30.510	31.933
El Norte de Castilla	16.135	15.407	9.478	9.714
Heraldo de Aragón	15.737	9.895	7.118	8.781
La Voz de Galicia	41.527	40.170	24.777	26.788
Levante – EMV	7.516	7.011	4.710	5.546
Libertad Digital	45.554	27.902	26.027	28.342
Vilaweb	56.858	45.027	28.282	29.922
Antena 3 TV	37.420	31.710	27.620	32.589
Cadena SER	73.910	72.565	59.967	67.679

Source: OJD.

Table 4: Digital media audience figures from March 11 to March 14.

Media	March 11	March 12	March 13	March 14
ABC	379,450	296,223	202,106	225,242
El Mundo	3,010,535	2,616,505	1,710,159	2,169,994
El Periódico	265,665	256,126	180,636	241,666
Avui	45,572	23,578	28,486	29,722
Diario de Cádiz	25,268	20,966	15,894	14,727
El Correo	218,322	153,514	70,766	69,769
El Norte de Castilla	27,719	25,333	19,327	15,342
Heraldo de Aragón	36,161	29,958	15,877	17,735
La Voz de Galicia	104,446	95,833	49,882	64,664
Levante – EMV	13,044	11,965	8,891	9,353
Libertad Digital	105,673	91,227	59,004	77,641
Vilaweb	93,831	88,440	65,897	67,375
Antena 3 TV	80,237	70,805	29,001	45,465
Cadena SER	453,539	234,033	216,251	231,574

Source: OJD.

In virtually all cases, we observe a huge rise in audience figures on March 11 (several times higher than those of the previous week) concentrated on the most important media. This rise in audience figures tends to diminish after March 12, although the figures are always much higher than normal. In other words, the Internet users turn to the mass media for information about the attacks themselves, but less so in the following days, when the focus of the news shifts towards who was responsible for the attacks.

2.2. Alternative sources to the mass media

As well as a considerable increase in consumption of the mass media, the public made use of other sources, such as blogs, contra-information sites, bulletin boards, etc. which spread information obtained not only from the Spanish mass media, but also from other, less publicly visible, media (e.g. the international press), and which became spaces for discussion, allowing the

public to exchange views, that finally contributed to the accelerated formation of opinion and the subsequent political implications.

The main function of these types of media at this time were a) select and reproduce the most relevant information concerning the responsibility for the attacks which had previously appeared in the mass media; b) interpret the movements of the various social actors with regard to the attacks and the responsibility for them; c) generate a multidirectional flow of information and opinions among the readers; d) contribute to the process of formation of opinion. Moreover even if we admit that these sites were clearly partisan in many cases (Sampedro and López, 2005: 130-131), probably more so regarding the participation than in reading articles and messages in the debates, it is fairly easy to observe the plurality of points of view, and the change in direction of the majority opinion.

Especially interesting is a study of the technologically mediated forms of interpersonal communication. Here we can more clearly observe the interaction of the public with the information, the way they briefly became "secondary sources", reproducing and distributing all kinds of information about the attacks and exchanging opinions, in particular, with regard to the responsibility for them (Sádaba and Roig, 2004: 207). Unfortunately, it is too complex a job to make even a minimally reliable record of these forms of interpersonal communication. Even in the case of the bulletin boards, which, because they are public and because the postings can be recorded on the Internet for posterity, are the easiest form of interpersonal communications to study, the problems involved in making a minimally representative analysis are numerous: many bulletin boards erase postings from their databases a few days after publication; many others, either because they are of minority groups or of too specific nature, have too infrequent postings to be taken into account in this research (even though they show a substantial rise throughout the period analyzed). Finally, the publication systems of bulletin boards are so extremely varied, that for our analysis we have opted to set some very general parameters from which we can make comparisons.

Therefore, we shall remove specific audience data, replacing them with the number of daily postings, and then dividing these into two: the first figure being the number of initial messages of new threads, the second being the total number of postings (including the initial messages). Within these basic parameters, the data in the following tables[2] are taken from five bulletin

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2. Collected directly by the author.

boards, which, in turn can be subdivided into: a) General portals (the "Actualidad Nacional" forum from Terra.es[3] and the "Elecciones Generales" forum on Ya.com.[4]); b) Digital newspapers (the "Política" forum on Elmundo.es[5], the only one with a sufficient frequency of postings); and c) Alternative news portals (the"Areópago" forum from La Página Definitiva[6] and "El Debate", from the news portal Iblnews)[7].

Table 5: Messages in bulletin boards from March 4 to March 7.

Forum	March 4	March 5	March 6	March 7
Areópago	21/256	17/183	3/30	7/35
Terra.es: Actualidad Nacional	108/375	79/338	47/238	42/197
El Mundo: Política	2/8	5/19	1/1	2/4
Ya.com: Elecciones	267/587	267/499	204/488	200/334
Iblnews	80/201	66/314	58/251	44/269

Source: The Author.

Table 6: Messages in bulletin boards from March 4 to March 7.

Forum	March 11	March 12	March 13	March 14
Areópago	48/302	48/259	63/352	58/315
Terra.es: Actualidad Nacional	217/653	282/848	526/1,706	557/1,797
El Mundo: Política	10/45	15/78	19/125	16/109
Ya.com: Elecciones	513/1,313	467/1,374	1.091/2,669	2.389/4,938
Foro Iblnews	234/1,423	236/1,283	332/2,182	289/1,974

Source: The Author.

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3. http://www.terra.es/actualidad/foro/portada.cfm?idforo 136&nivel 1
4. http://foros.ya.com/SForums2/ D readforum F 52628 O 0
5. http://www.elmundo.es/cobranded/forolibre/forolibre.html
6. http://www.revistadebolsa.com/foros/foro.php3?BoardID 2
7. http://iblnews.com/foros

In common with the other communication models previously analyzed, in the bulletin boards there was also a rise, in this case in the number of messages posted, following the attacks, which in some cases was double the normal number. The number of postings after March 11, however, far from decreasing over time, actually increased[8].

In other words, while the public at first preferred the mass media to any of the digital media (as their prime interest was in obtaining quick and reliable information about the attacks themselves), from the moment the discussion of who had been responsible displaced the attacks as the centre of attention, the public not only tended to seek more disperse sources of information, but also showed an enormous interest in discussion, the exchange of ideas and opinions with regard to a theme which had become clearly crucial: the responsibility for the attacks.

In this context, the public, sufficiently supplied with information from various sources, begin first to discuss, often in an extraordinarily heated context, and, finally, to take part in a collective process of formation of opinion (Sierra, 2004: 111). The themes of debate in the bulletin boards, normally very wide-ranging, concentrated almost exclusively on the attacks and the responsibility for them. Only on March 14, and even then in a way closely related to the attacks, did the public begin to analyze the election results.

The styles of argument vary according to the type of forum (generally much angrier and less informative in the more popular bulletin boards on the general portals), but a similar trajectory can be observed in all cases, and clearly demonstrates that, at least in this area, the formation of opinion took place extremely quickly:

- Obviously, in the early moments the public, stunned by the magnitude of the attacks, describes its mutual state of shock and strives to exchange data about the number of victims and the explosions themselves.

- However, later in the morning of March 11, after the statement of Arnaldo Otegui (spokesperson for Batasuna) denying the implication of the terrorist group ETA in the attacks, the first doubts begin to appear. Although the majority of participants in the bulletin boards accept

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8. It needs to be pointed out that in one case –the "Elecciones Generales" forum on Ya.com- the rise in postings can be attributed to the specific theme of this forum, and is not only due to the consequences of the attacks themselves and the discussion about the responsibility for them (after all it␣s precisely the "Elecciones Generales" forum which shows the largest rise, of all those analyzed, as election day approaches).

the Government line and tend to agree with the hypothesis that ETA is responsible[9], some people begin to suggest that the attacks were the work of Islamic terrorism.

- Also on the morning of March 11, the first political consequences of the attacks begin to emerge. At first, these assume that ETA is responsible, and presuppose a weakening in the position of the PSOE and the nationalist parties. The forum users who are openly supporters of these parties take little part, but when they do, it is to urge people not to change their intended vote, as this would be "letting yourselves be influenced by the terrorists".

- However, in the same way that high-speed political interpretations appear in favor of the PP when the ETA hypothesis seems highly probable, from the moment in which data becomes available which might call into question this hypothesis, political judgments, also on occasions very vehement, emerge against the Government. In particular, the evening appearance of the Minister of the Interior, Ángel Acebes, in which he announced the discovery of a van in which had been found seven detonators and a tape containing verses of the Koran in Arabic, becomes the crucial moment in which the opinion of the participants in the bulletin boards begins to change. Hence, on the very same day, we find a direct association between the attacks (in this case attributed to Al Qaeda) and the support of the PP Government for the military intervention in Iraq, and constant criticisms, in particular, directed against the president José María Aznar.

- At any given moment, the information supplied by the various media (including some unconfirmed or even clearly false information) has immediate repercussions in the bulletin boards, and is used to provide support to the hypotheses favored by one side or another. The very anonymity permitted by the majority of the bulletin boards gives rise to an infinite number of abuses in the treatment of the information and in the publication of opinions, both in the form (in many cases openly insulting towards ideological rivals) and in the content (there is often lack of journalistic rigor not only in the opinions but also in the publication of information, often false or distorted, about the attacks). However, it is worth mentioning here that the main goal of the vast

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9. According to our data, the message with the largest number of replies and readings, of those analysed, was the one entitled "ETA atenta en Madrid", published in the "Elecciones Generales" forum of Ya.com on the morning of 11th March and which showed no less than 200 replies and a total of 4,804 readings.

majority of participants in the bulletin boards is not just the search for reliable information but also the interpretation of this information according to the political sympathies of the participants.

- On March 12 the discussions continue, increasingly favoring the hypothesis of Al Qaeda, and particular emphasis is given to the alleged concealment of information by the Government. The question of the responsibility is foremost in the discussions, with a profusion of data and opinions, and speculation about the election results, which now appear to be unfavorable for the PP (even by those participants who favor this party).

- On March 13 the conviction that Al Qaeda is behind the attacks is widespread, and is supported by three factors: a) the revelations of the Cadena SER made in the early afternoon to the effect that the Centro Nacional de Inteligencia, has abandoned the ETA hypothesis, denied shortly afterwards by the director of the CNI; b) the apparent manipulation of the news by the Government, reported by an appreciable number of participants; and c) the revelations made by Ángel Acebes during the evening of March 13 (the detention of various Moroccan and Indian citizens) and in the early morning of March 13 to14 (the discovery of a video in which an alleged spokesperson for Al Qaeda assumes responsibility for the attacks), which seems to verify the said hypothesis.

- Due to the events described above, a large number of the participants, envisage a weakening of the PP in the elections of the following day, and even predict a victory for the PSOE. The demonstrations in front of the offices of the PP which took place in the late evening of March 13 are strongly criticized by many of the participants (especially those who identify themselves as PP voters), but are also seen by many others (in this case voters of the PSOE or the minority parties) as a clear symptom of what we might call the "disclosure of fraudulent information" supposedly practiced by the Government during this period.

- Finally, March 14 saw the coming of age of a tendency, still in its infancy on previous days, to use the bulletin boards as propaganda spaces. The calls to vote, and to vote for a particular party (or even, to vote against certain political options) are constant. Speculations on the election results (generally seen as detrimental to the PP) also abound. From the moment the PSOE victory is officially announced, two opposing interpretations of the results appear which are still being argued months later: one interpretation being "a victory over the manipulation

of news" which the Government had theoretically tried, and the other being "a victory for the Al Qaeda terrorists".

3. Public demonstrations

The public opinion formation process developed throughout these four days, especially in the area of public demonstrations, and it developed in various ways, for different reasons, with different objectives in mind and, finally, even following clearly different concepts of the structure of society. Here we will provide a general overview of the main demonstrations that took place during this period, placing special emphasis on organized versus unorganized demonstrations. This study does not aim to be exhaustive but merely to illustrate the main general models of behavior.

3.1. Organized demonstrations

Here we refer to the gigantic demonstrations which, with the slogan "For the victims. For the Constitution. For the defeat of terrorism", took place on Friday March 12 in a host of cities and towns all over the country and involved a massive twelve million people. These demonstrations were the result of a totally centralized convocation by the Government (without the prior agreement of the political opposition) on the same day as the attacks, a convocation that was propagated at high speed via the mass media. This is, therefore, a hierarchic model of convocation, carefully organized as a civic response to the brutal attacks of March 11.

Inevitably, one must make a political interpretation of these demonstrations, particularly of the slogan chosen for them. The allusion to the Spanish Constitution cannot be considered gratuitous. It is clearly linked to one of the central themes of the electoral campaign of the Partido Popular, and with one of its most solid and most reiterated principles (the defense of Spanish Constitution against its enemies, real or imaginary), and implies the censure of all those political parties and social groups in favor of modifying the Constitution (particularly the nationalist parties). Moreover, this slogan helps to give credit to the Government's hypothesis that ETA is behind the attacks[10].

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10. It is hard to see how an attack carried out by Islamic terrorism can be considered to be a direct attack on the Constitution. However, the attacks carried out by ETA can (and should) be seen as just that, given that the primordial objective of this terrorist group is the independence of the Basque Country and Navarre from the rest of Spain, and hence, the rupture of the current Constitution, explicitly rejected by ETA.

However, as soon as the public demonstrations begin, the slogan, decided on a few hours after the attacks, appears questionable in the eyes of the political opposition and a part of the general public, who are beginning to question not only if the attacks were carried out by Islamic terrorism (in which case the allusion to the Constitution would be senseless), but also whether the Government is trying to divert attention away from this possibility by some obscure information strategy (of which the demonstrations of March 12 were a part) which some people even label as deliberate manipulation. In other words, the slogan of the demonstration is read not as a confirmation of the responsibility of ETA, from which the public would extract the appropriate political consequences, but as yet another attempt to avoid the danger that the public might extract other political consequences, detrimental to the Government, related to a different kind of terrorism, Islamic terrorism (i.e. the idea that the attacks took place as a consequence of Spain's support for the invasion and occupation of Iraq the previous year), with which would tragically close the circle of the, also, massive demonstrations against this support which took place in Spain in 2003.

Hence, as a consequence of public suspicion of Government's information policy, of the state of political nervousness experienced after attacks and two days before the elections of March 14 and of the idea (maybe not yet a majority idea, but fairly strong amongst the public) that the responsibility for the attacks can be attributed to Islamic terrorism, the demonstrations take on a significance to the main one of the rejection of terrorism. This added significance is extremely negative for the Government, which receives (directly in the Madrid demonstration, indirectly in many others) the message "before voting we want the truth" and other similar messages. The Government's communication strategy, regardless of how intentional this is perceived to be, works against them: as Umberto Eco correctly pointed out (2004), the message that the Government sends to the general public is not so much "we are sure it was ETA", but "we are afraid it might have been Al Qaeda".

This idea, very widely circulated via interpersonal communication, difficult to detect by the mass media, but at the same time feeding on material provided by the same mass media, very quickly becomes established in the general public and has political effects on the elections which, though difficult to identify exactly, have obvious consequences: the loss of the Government by the Partido Popular. It also gave rise to the appearance of a surprising and highly controversial phenomenon: the mass protests of March 13 in front of the offices of the PP.

3.2. Unorganized demonstrations

We consider "unorganized public demonstrations" to be those that occur without the intervention of a recognizable, centralized convoking body (i.e. a specific public institution, public organization, or group of organizations) (Durandin, 1995: 229-230). Although, even today, there are many suspicions as to the origin of this convocation, it would appear excessively hazardous to lay the blame on any political party or particular organization, and in any case it appears unquestionable that, regardless of who was responsible for the convocation (the author of the SMS message which started the chain), not only did this message spread in a decentralized, unsystematic and uncontrollable way by means of a whole host of interpersonal communications, in particular those needing technological mediation, that is email and SMS messages on mobile telephones, but also these technologies allowed the original message to spread much more quickly and to reach many more people from much more diverse backgrounds than cases in which interpersonal communication is restricted to traditional versions (face to face communication and, at most, that produced in telephone conversations) (Sampedro, Alcalde, and Sádaba, 2005: 258; Castells, Fernández-Ardèvol, Linchuan, and Sey, 2006: 311).

Neither must we ignore the enormous importance of the mass media in divulging and reinforcing (voluntarily or not) these demonstrations, simply by making them visible to the general public, and also that of political leaders, such as Mariano Rajoy or Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba, who appeared before the media as a result of the demonstrations. The immediate effect of the combined action of political representatives, interpersonal communication and the mass media was to increase the overall dimensions of the demonstrations, in a kind of mirror effect in which the information broadcast by the media and the political declarations were later transmitted through the interpersonal communication channels, causing an increase in the number of demonstrators for a period of several hours and, at the same time, extending their presence in the mass media, as a major focus of news.

These concentrations have their origin in a traditional mechanism of mobilizing public opinion, the rumor, used throughout history as a means of protest against various forms of power (Monzón, 1992: 182). It would be extraordinarily enlightening at this point to make a brief mention of the work of Tamotsu Shibutani (1966), which studies the origin of rumors as a search for stability: *when there is a lack of information, the people invent the news*. According to Shibutani, the rumor is "a form of communication adopted when a group of people find themselves in an ambiguous situation and attempt to construct an acceptable interpretation of this situation, using the

available intellectual resources (…) it pays little attention, therefore, to the problems of distortion which occur in a serial transmission, but rather to the social interaction which takes place between people caught in inadequately defined situations. In order to act intelligently these people seek *news* and the *rumor* is, above all, a type of news" (1966: 17).

Why do these protest demonstrations happen? Fundamentally, because of a *crisis of credibility* in the Government, whose handling of the news is seen by the public as a deliberate manipulation, designed to avoid defeat in the general elections (Castells, Fernández-Ardèvol, Linchuan, and Sey, 2006: 315). What in another context might be interpreted merely as involuntary errors of communication, a few days before a general election becomes a conscious attempt of manipulation: the Government is trying to get to election day maintaining at all costs the hypothesis that ETA is behind the attacks, which is beneficial to them, and the protests emerge as a product of this rumor, to prevent the Government attaining the objective of its hypothetical manipulation (a victory in the elections). As Shibutani suggests: "The rumor is a substitute for news. In fact it is news which does not pass through institutionalized channels (…) but emerges from a *discrepancy* between the information which is deemed to be necessary and that which is available (…) Far from being an pathological circumstance of the individual, it forms part of peoples' attempts to find solutions to the demands of their lives" (1966: 62).

Faced with unsatisfactory information, the public generates counter information (Gerstlé, 2004: 233). Part of the public, suspicious of the Government's intentions in advancing the ETA hypothesis as the most likely, unable to satisfy their need to acquire information from that offered by the mass media, which, at first, logically tends to follow the Government hypothesis, begins to give much weight to information that allows them to doubt this hypothesis, information not necessarily obtained from the mass media. As Dader points out: "Collective anxiety or uncertainty when faced with a situation which is confused or dramatic for the majority of people, brings into play improvised channels of communication, which may even substitute the official or habitual channels, such as the 'mass media'" (1992: 265).

Furthermore, the rumor spreads with unusual power and speed, making full use of the information transmitting potential offered by the communication networks (not in vain, according to Shibutani, when collective excitement is intense, the speed of construction of the rumor is only limited by the physical access to the channels of communication through which it flows), and emanating from a model of society, the "network society", which is organized very differently to traditional societies: overcoming (at least par-

tially) the obstacles of time and space, the spread of information in many directions (and also by the public use of interpersonal communications), occasional changes in the traditional relationships within the social surroundings of the individual, etc.

The call to protest, born of and organized via technologically mediated interpersonal communication, and made more powerful by the mass media and the presence of various social actors (especially political leaders), passes through several stages of development:

- Before the time announced for the demonstration in front of PP headquarters in Madrid (it is important to highlight that the original gathering was only called in Madrid), its circulation is widened by a call to action emanating from certain counter information websites, which also help to spread the effect throughout the country by arranging similar gatherings in the main Spanish cities, as well as the extension of the original message (protests in front of the PP headquarters in Madrid) to include other cities (greatly helped by the fact that the places chosen for the demonstrations are not certain streets or emblematic places which would need to be specified for each town but simply the local PP offices).

- From the moment the demonstration in front of PP headquarters in Madrid begins, the mass media contribute, voluntarily or involuntarily, to widen the impact of the demonstrations, both in numerical and geographical terms. At first, only two Spanish television channels, the Catalan TV3 (which covers only some of the Catalan speaking areas of the country) and the thematic channel CNN+ report the Madrid protest. The general television companies ignore it. However, foreign televisions show much greater interest: Euronews, BBC News, CNN International provide live coverage of the demonstration (although the Spanish media could have avoided broadcasting this kind of action for fear of contravening electoral law, this would obviously not affect the foreign media). As far as radio is concerned, the attention given to the Madrid protest is also uneven, the Cadena SER again leading the way. Finally, in the case of the digital media we find early references to the protests in various models of communication. Hence, there is a spread of the demonstrations brought about by the mass media, in combination with the original protest calls made via interpersonal communication systems. (Cavada, 2004).

- Thirdly the protests grow in size, duration and location, due to the appearance of an unexpected and probably involuntary figure:

Mariano Rajoy, the PP's leading general election candidate, who comes before the media at 9.00 pm (all the evening news programs show this appearance) as General Secretary of the PP, to ask the people protesting in front of the headquarters of the PP in Madrid (and also beginning to congregate in other Spanish cities) to refrain from doing so. The effect obtained is exactly the opposite for three reasons: a) the appearance makes the demonstrations "official" in the eyes of both the public and the mass media; b) it paves the way for the appearance, at 9.30 pm, of Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba, spokesman for the PSOE, who, in front of the mass media, directly accuses the Government of withholding information; c) it generates an effect contrary to the desired one in those more ready to a accept as true the hypothetical "manipulation of the news" by the PP and probably incites them to join, or at least support, the protest demonstrations.

- From this moment on, the demonstrations develop in all the most important centers of population, in an unusual imitation of the massive demonstrations of the previous day. The figures are by no means comparable (the largest demonstration, in Barcelona, involved fewer than 10,000 people), but then neither are the birth of the demonstrations, nor the circumstances in which they took place. It is extraordinarily difficult to draw conclusions about the effects of the demonstrations on the intention to vote of the following day, as these appear contradictory although pointing towards a change of the vote in one sense or another.

Table 7: Pre-electoral opinion polls.

CIS	PP 42.2% (**176 seats**)	PSOE 35.5% (**131 seats**)
La Razón	PP 43% (**171–176 seats**)	PSOE 37% (**135-141 seats**)
ABC	PP 41.3% (**170-174 seats**)	PSOE 37.4% (**131-135 seats**)
El Periódico	PP 42.5% (**169-173 seats**)	PSOE 37.3% (**135-140 seats**)
El Mundo	PP 42.1% (**168-173 seats**)	PSOE 37.6% (**138-144 seats**)
El País	PP 42% (**168-172 seats**)	PSOE 38% (**134-141 seats**)
La Vanguardia	PP 41.4% (**162-167 seats**)	PSOE 39.2% (**143-147 seats**)
Cadena Ser	PP 40.5% (**161-166 seats**)	PSOE 38% (**140-145 seats**)

4. Opinion polls and election results

The various opinion polls published before March 11 were unanimous in forecasting a PP victory in the elections, although there was ample discrepancy in just how large this victory would be:

The results of these opinion polls left no room for doubt: the PP would win the elections with a difference of between 13 and 45 seats (between 1.3% and 7.5% of the votes). These polls merely corroborated the general feeling, held by the mass media, the public and the political parties themselves, that the elections, unlike the 2000 elections, were decisive. It was not so much a case of who would win the elections (the PP), but whether they would do so with or without an absolute majority.

The polls corroborated this feeling but with nuances. Although they suggested a probable victory for the PP, most of them agreed that this would be a victory without an absolute majority (176 seats), even more so as election day approached (the most favorable poll for the PP, the one organized by the Centro de Investigaciones sociológicas , CIS, was published a week before the others). Furthermore, in some cases (the polls held by Cadena SER and *La Vanguardia*) the indications suggested a draw rather than a narrow victory for the PP.

We should not try to extrapolate consequences from the figures published in opinion polls, but neither should they be ignored. The polls for the pre-election period before 11th March did, indeed, forecast a PP victory but also clearly showed that the PP were highly unlikely to repeat their absolute majority of 2000. All the polls showed a narrowing of the gap between the PP and the PSOE compared to a starting point that was much more favorable to the PP, and the minor discrepancies of degree between polls did nothing but confirm the probability of a result where neither side would obtain the required 176 seats.

Table 8: Polls taken outside polling stations.

Tele 5	PP **169 seats**	PSOE **141 seats**
Antena 3	PP **153-161 seats**	PSOE **152-159 seats**
Cadena SER	PP **154-160 seats**	PSOE **151-159 seats**
TVE	PP **150-154 seats**	PSOE **154-158 seats**

Although there is still no clear tendency, a comparison between these data and those of the polls taken on Election Day outside the polling stations, may help us to shed a little light on the impact of the March 11 attacks on the election results:

As can be seen, the more or less clear PP victory forecast by the pre-electoral polls is reduced to a virtual draw (slightly favorable for the PP in two polls, and for the PSOE in another). There is just one startling exception: the poll conducted by Demoscopia for Tele 5, which showed results very similar to those forecast in the pre-electoral polls. What was the reason for the distortion between the Demoscopia poll and the others? Precisely because, due to the negative experiences of using polls taken outside the polling stations in previous elections, Demoscopia had decided to substitute them with a pre-election poll of similar characteristics to those to those shown in Table 11, but with the advantage of working with data much closer in time to election day... and the tremendous disadvantage of having collected this data before March 11.

Although this data should be viewed with caution, it would appear that the events of March 11 had a beneficial effect, although hard to quantify, on the electoral hopes of the PSOE in two ways: on the one hand, the increase in turnout, and on the other, the appearance of the famous socialist "hidden vote", converted into an "anti-Aznar vote".

The turnout figure of 75.7% was much higher than that of the 2000 election (68.7%) and similar to that of the 1996 election (77.4%). Such a high participation favored the PSOE because traditionally in Spain the communities, provinces and townships where the PP tends to win the majority of the votes have higher turnouts than those where the left win the elections. Moreover the PP voters and tend to be more disciplined, voting systematically, whether the elections are decisive or not in contrast to what happens in the strongholds of the parties of the left, whose voters are traditionally less liable to turn out than the those of the PP and tend to abstain except when the situation is deemed to be crucial.

This phenomenon can be seen in the analysis of the turnout data for the autonomous communities, which show a rise in turnout compared to the 2000 elections of 12% in Catalonia and 11.2% in the Basque country (communities where the PSOE won by a wide margin), for example, compared to 5.2% in Castilla – León and 6% in Galicia (mainly PP areas). It can also generally be seen when studying data for the electoral districts and municipalities that traditionally favor one party or another. In 2000 those areas (particularly in the

large cities) where the PP won the elections usually showed higher than aver-age turnout figures, in a context in which the general turnout figure was very low. Neighborhoods such as Salamanca or Retiro in Madrid, Sarrià in Barcelona, Pla del Real in Valencia or Triana in Seville, or provincial capitals such as Murcia, Vitoria or Salamanca are a proof of this. However, the left wing areas, as well as an almost systematically lower turnout than the PP strongholds, also showed a higher than average increase in abstention. This happened, for example, in Puente Vallecas (Madrid), Ciutat Vella (Barcelona), Este (Sevilla) or Poblats Oest (Valencia), and in municipalities such as Santa Coloma de Gramenet, L'Hospitalet de Llobregat or SanlYcar de Barrameda (López, 2004). In the 1996 and 2004 elections, on the other hand, both of which had high turnouts, the rise in these areas is inverted: although the absolute data are still generally higher in the PP strongholds, the rise is much smaller than in the traditionally left wing municipalities and neighborhoods[11].

What is the reason for this increase in turnout, particularly amongst the left wing public? Moreover, to what extent is it a result of the attacks and the way they were reported by the media, the political maneuvering and the participa-tion of the public in the demonstrations? Again, there is no clear answer. However, we can suggest the following:

1) The attacks had a powerful influence on the turnout at the elections, on those people, regardless of their political tendencies, who were going to abstain but who finally decided to vote. This increase in turnout, which we cannot quantify (although it seems clear that without the attacks the turnout would have been lower, but still higher than in 2000, as the pre-election polls suggest), favored, as we have explained, left parties[12].

2) The increase in participation could well be attributed to the participa-tion in the elections of the new voters, and the young voters in general, a par-ticipation that was generally against the PP, as had clearly been seen in the antiwar demonstrations of 2003, and again in the demonstrations of March 12 and 13.

3) In addition to the attacks themselves, the way the Government managed the crisis was, in the eyes of a large part of the general public, a compendium

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11. Source: Ministerio del Interior of Spain, http://www.mir.es

12. The post-electoral poll of the CIS in March-April 2004 shows 10.6% of those questioned claimed to have decided their vote after the attacks of March 11; in answer to more specific questions, 9.4% of the PSOE voters, but only 1.5% of PP voters, say they voted for these parties "because of the attacks of March 11th and the consequences thereof".

of all the worst facets of four years of a PP Government holding an absolute majority (Romero, 2004): authoritarian and with a monopoly of the truth, the hypothetical manipulation of the news, and the surprising pro-American change in foreign policy which led the PP Government to give its unconditional support to the invasion of Iraq in March-April 2003, despite the fact that the majority of public feeling (around 90%, according to the polls) was against such a measure.

So, given that election campaigns are fundamentally a tool to capture votes on election day (votes which are usually more or less decided before the election campaign begins), it was the attacks and, above all, the Government's handling of them, persuaded a large part of the general public to vote, or change their vote, at the last minute to what was effectively an "Anti-Aznar vote". Hence, those who were going to abstain voted PSOE, PP voters abstained or voted for other parties (we should keep into consideration that although the turnout rose by 7%, the PP lost more than half a million votes), and the voters of the other parties (particularly the small nationalist parties) gave their support to the PSOE, not so that the PSOE would win the elections, but rather to prevent the PP winning, i.e. to punish the PP and particularly José María Aznar.

5. Active public, multiple sources

The society that witnessed the stupefying events of March 11 has evolved considerably compared to the traditional model of a passive public crowding around a few mass media. The public is no longer content merely to receive its information from a closed list of sources, and hence works to find more credible news sources (not necessarily part of the mass media). The mass media themselves have also evolved thanks, above all, to the development of the new technologies in digital format.

If we study the means of obtaining information available to the Spanish public in 1997, just ten years ago, (a limited number of large television channels, radio stations and printed publications), it is surprising to see just how far they have advanced since then:

- As well as the traditional television stations, the public has been able to access a whole range of thematic television channels, both national and international, delivered via cable or satellite television. There has also been an uncontrollable rise in the number of local television stations, specially enhanced by the recent development of Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT) in Spain.

- To rival the large national newspapers and the local dailies, a new type of free press (almost unknown ten years ago) has appeared which, in a relatively short time, has achieved a privileged position in readership figures, putting in danger both the influence and the advertising revenue of the commercial newspapers and, by virtue of their being free, widening their potential audience to include a sector of public that, traditionally, had shunned the news in printed form.

- Moreover, all these media have developed digital versions on the Internet to a greater or lesser extent (press more than radio and radio more than television), which, although it might be said that, to date, they have yet to adapt satisfactorily to the rules (and possibilities) of the new medium (Díaz Noci and Salaverría, 2003), does make the information available on the mass media available to new sectors of the public.

- However, as well as reproducing, and even extending, the more traditional media, the Internet has spawned a wide range of exclusively digital media, some forming part of the traditional mass media and other being totally dissociated from them, but all combining to create a new and infinitely richer public space on the Net alone, than that offered by all the more traditional mass media.

- Finally, Internet, and other digital technologies, have made possible powerful and rapid systems which reproduce in one way or another interpersonal communication: as well as "face to face" communication and its telephonic analogy, it is now possible to establish interpersonal communication systems both on the Internet (public and private chats, bulletin boards, emails, etc) and by other means, particularly the systems of communication made available by the mobile telephone.

In crisis contexts such as the one following the March 11 attacks, where the public obtains information from a wide variety of sources, many of which are not part of the traditional mass media, technologically mediated interpersonal communication provides enormous powers of mobilization. The experience of March 11 and the events thereafter point us towards a model, developed in the sixties, the "diffusion in J of information" (Dader, 1992: 264-265). This model becomes fully operational when dealing with "events of very high general interest general and, at the same time, high personal implication" (1992: 265), which paradoxically "imply a much more intense use of other channels of information (…) different from the 'mass media'. In the first stages, at least, of such situations, the possibility of influencing the public or of the direct impact of hypothetical acts of persuasion is much more viable

using the media of interpersonal communication than using the mass media "
(1992: 264). Although the consumption of mass media is considerably high-
er than normal, they are no longer the only possible source, nor even the main
one: the public complements the information offered by the mass media with
that obtained and interpreted from other sources, and from there establishes a
vigorous public debate in a context of networked society from which a major-
ity opinion emerges.

It could be argued, and rightly so, that, these new technologies do not real-
ly represent an increase in plurality of the mass media, the majority being
mere evolutions of media already in existence, but, even so, their importance
should not be ignored. However small the impact on public opinion of each
of these media might be, their sheer number, and their ability to form wider
communication structures, compensates for their small individual weight, and
they develop pluralism (Boix, 2002: 135) from a double perspective: quanti-
tatively and also transversally, in that the mass media are no longer the exclu-
sive occupants of the public space, and neither is this public space the same
one in which public opinion was traditionally formed (Sampedro, 2000: 42),
as it is much more global in character, with regard to the origins of the media
(this would explain, amongst other things, the development, in recent years,
of an emerging "international public opinion", which was seen in action in
2003 against the invasion of Iraq).

6. Conclusions

Throughout this work, we have looked back on the behavior of the main
representatives of public opinion (the vote and the political parties, opinion
polls, the media and social demonstrations) in relation to an event of crucial
importance, the March 11 attacks, and what happened immediately after them
had a more or less clear effect on these representatives. From our analysis, we
will attempt to outline what March 11 implies in terms of changes in the
behavior and effectiveness of these representatives of public opinion and in
the process of forming public opinion itself:

Policonsumption of the media

In this context of a broad multiplicity of information sources, in the hands
of a public potentially well able to select their information, the major news
stories (such as 9/11, the invasion of Iraq and March 11 itself, made even
more important due to the election campaign) give rise to the proliferation of
the phenomenon of public policonsumption of media.

A television *zapping* style culture, more extended where there is a greater variety of media, allows part of the public to put together a *personalized* view of the facts, instead of letting the mass media do it for them (Bennett, Lawrence, & Livinsgton, 2007). This kind of public, with a higher than average interest in political affairs, well able to act as "leaders of opinion" in their environment, and with healthy degree of general skepticism towards the mass media, oppose the classical model of public which tends to accept as true the information obtained via these media. However often the policonsumption of the media might merely lead to the systematic reaffirmation of the readers' original ideas, the greater availability of information, and the fact that the public can choose from such wide range of sources, complementing their information by means of the various forms of interpersonal communication, allows us to discern a more plural, more diverse, and less hierarchical outlook (Yildiz, 2003: 278), until now unheard of in the major events, like those which interest us here.

Official summoning and spontaneous demonstrations

March 11th is also a landmark in the area of social demonstrations due to the development of a virtually new phenomenon: the formation of *flash mobs* (Rheingold, 2003), groups of protesters usually brought together by means of various forms of interpersonal communication, in a decentralized and spontaneous manner. As we mentioned earlier, the *flash mobs* may be considered, to a certain extent, to be an evolution of the rumor as a way of expressing public opinion. Although the rumor is often open to various forms of manipulation, and usually has little or no journalistic rigor, one must not underestimate its value as a way of mobilizing public opinion, especially against the establishment. Throughout history, examples of how the rapid spread of rumors may constitute an immediate prelude to a popular uprising, occasionally a successful one, are plentiful.

The *flash mobs*, whilst obviously not identical, are similar in nature to the rumor, but adapted to the social conditions in which they develop, i.e. using the media in two ways; (both as an instrument of convocation, and as the main channel used to publicize, either immediately or later on, their activities) and forming part of a context of communication in networks. In the same way that the demonstrations of March 12 are a product of the mass media (i.e. they are summoned hierarchically, by centralized official channels), the *flash mob* is the result of a convocation by means of networked communication media, particularly those in the area of interpersonal communication.

Accelerated process of public opinion

On March 14, three days after the attacks, the Spanish General elections, with a high turnout, gave the PSOE a surprise victory. "Surprise" if we consider the parameters before March 11, but perhaps less so after the events of the following three days. Although the time lapse between the attacks and the elections was very short, the intensity of the experience, the proliferation of data and public interest in knowing, interpreting and debating the facts and the maturity of Spanish public opinion, shown the previous year after the emergence of the antiwar movement, gave rise to an accelerated process of formation of public opinion; accelerated, because it took place at high speed, passing through all the phases of the process of formation of opinion (culminating in the vote), in a kind of "race against time" in the period between the attacks and the elections (Eco, 2004). Moreover, it was a process that shaped a still latent public opinion, intrinsically different to the "traditional" one: a public opinion governed at almost all stages by the rules and consequences of communication in networks (Habermas, 1998: 440-441; Sampedro, 2000: 20).

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