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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the ideological profile of the Spanish online-only press regarding feminist and LGBT issues. We perform a content analysis of opinion columns sampled from the most popular Spanish online-only newspapers. The analysis focuses diachronically in two moments: May 2011 and June 2016. The coding sheet includes feminist and sexual identity-related categories such as the mention of women and women's rights, abortion, traditional family, LGBT identities, or the role of Catholicism. The Spanish press' conservatism or progressiveness is measured by computing frequencies of mentions and their positive/neutral/negative valuation. Results indicate a more plural scenario regarding the traditional conservatism of Spanish digital media, with online-only opinion paying more attention to women and non-normative sexualities. Findings are discussed and contextualized pertaining to the current wave of feminist activism in Spain, and the emergence of left-leaning online-only newspapers.

Ideology and feminist issues in the press

The journalistic representation of issues relating to women and LGBT people is a consolidated field of study, as well as an important topic in the context of feminist politics. According to Amit Kama, "Women's increased visibility in the media and the use of non-stereotypical images are both central to enhancing women's social and economic power in society. Similar arguments are now being made about gays and lesbians in the media" (2002, 206). The representation of women and LGBT in journalism has become a significant research topic, on the grounds of the identity-building role of the media, as well as the prevailingly androcentric representation (María Isabel Menéndez 2013). According to Rosalind Gill, news is "a cultural product that reflects the dominant cultural assumptions about who and what is important", determined by factors such as gender (2007, 114). In this context, as Spanish authors Ana Bernal-Triviño (2019) and Nuria Varela (2017) indicate, the media propagate symbolic violence that helps to create a hegemonic sexist discourse whereby women are subordinate. Likewise, journalistic coverage on men and women has been traditionally asymmetrical, "unequal, unfair and, in many occasions, pejorative and discriminatory" (Juana Gallego 2013, 36) on women.

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As to LGBT—or "queer", "a shorthand to refer to 'lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender'" (Gill 2007, 69)—issues, the need to study media representations relates to real-world developments, since it is claimed that changes in LGBT coverage "would reveal concrete advances in the political agendas and life conditions of LGBT communities" (Kevin G. Barnhurst 2003, 23). On the other hand, media depictions of women's and LGBT issues have become even more relevant in the context of "popular feminism", a 21st-century, media-driven form of feminism: as Sarah Banet-Weiser observes (2018), popular feminism —which was anticipated by women's liberation and LGBT movements, among others— benefits from digital media. These trends relate to the effects of media representation: as Soraya Giaccardi, Monique L. Ward, Rita C. Seabrook, Adriana Manago and Julia Lippman (2016) note, the media contribute to a greater or lesser acceptance of gender roles, which affects both women and the LGBT community. Gaye Tuchman (1978) stated decades ago that there are two basic modes of "symbolic annihilation" of women by the media: either by portraying them in stereotyped gender roles or by directly ignoring them—the latter mode being supported by more recent empirical findings indicating a dramatic under-representation of women in global news (Sue Thornham 2007).

In particular, there is a body of knowledge on the presence and depiction of women in the press from the viewpoint of Feminist Studies. Charlotte Adcock content-analyzed the presence of women in the media coverage of the 1997 UK general election, noting a "structural marginalisation of women" (2010, 142). In a similar vein, Iñaki Garcia-Blanco and Karin Wahl-Jorgensen researched the representation of female politicians on French, Italian, Spanish, and UK newspapers, and found that a majority of the news stories referring to women ministers focused mainly on "their gender, rather than on their experience, or any policy-related issues" (2012, 428). Deirdre O'Neill, Heather Savigny and Victoria Cann (2016) focused on the image of British female MPs in the British press throughout a period of twenty years, and they found that, by 2012, the gap between women and men was widening.

Aside from politics, a study by Chris Patterson, Carol Emslie, Olivia Mason, Gillian Fergie and Shona Hilton (2016) pointed out that, although most drinkers in the UK are men, drinking binges are more often associated with women in the UK media. Sen Jia, Thomas Lansdall-Welfare, Saatviga Sudhahar, Cynthia Carter and Nello Cristianini's study on the representation of women on English-language online newspapers, indicated that mentions of men predominate in all thematic categories, with the exception of "Fashion" (2016). In Spain, María P. Matud Aznar, Carmen Rodríguez-Wangüemert, and Inmaculada Espinosa Morales's study of mainstream newspapers *El País* and *El Mundo* (2017) revealed that only 7.8% of news pieces focused exclusively on women as protagonists. Regarding this same country, Bernal-Triviño (2019) points out that the press has traditionally framed news on violence against women in a sensationalist way, especially when reporting sexual violence. In Norway, Helle Sjøvaag and Truls Anduve Pedersen's study of the representation of female voices in the press indicate that "the only source function where female voices are overrepresented compared with male voices […] is when females appear in the news as children, or as friends or family of other sources" (2019, 223). Other studies link the depiction of LGBT issues with the representation of women (Adolfo Carratalá 2016; Kama 2002)—although Queer Theory's focus on gender identity is open to debate within the feminist movement (Ana De Miguel 2015; Julia Serano 2013), LGBT goals have often been related to feminism (Karen M. Booth 2019).

These findings indicate that women are underrepresented in the press, and, when they appear, they tend to be depicted in banal and/or family-related contexts. However, traditional media are not the only media susceptible to examination in terms of the ideology that they convey. Today, print outlets coexist with the online-only press, that is, newspapers and magazines that are published exclusively online, and that should be differentiated from digital editions of newspapers and magazines that have a hard copy version. Even though the ideological implications of the online-only press have been analyzed with less intensity than traditional media, some studies have already approached this newer form (David Brock 2005; Janet Steele 2009). More systematic analyses of online-only newspapers can be found in Núria Almiron (2006), who examined Spanish newspapers and revealed a lack of plurality among the most popular media. In 2013, another study concluded that the Spanish digital native press maintained a fundamentally conservative or right-libertarian tendency (Antonio Pineda and Núria Almiron 2013). The study relied on an analysis of the main online-only newspapers in May 2011, and corroborated Almiron's previous work. Further work pointed out that the appearance of left-leaning outlets may be related to a progressive ideological shift in Spanish media (Aurora Labio and Antonio Pineda 2016).

These trends lead us to the issue of media pluralism, which underlies the discussion on the representation of ideologies in the media. According to Kari Karppinen (2013), pluralism should be understood as a normative value relating to the distribution of media power. Karppinen draws on Nancy Fraser's concept of public sphere democratization, addressing it as a key question for media pluralism, insofar as it would reduce power asymmetries (1990). Additionally, and since media pluralism is a multi-dimensional concept—it can refer "to the extent that media contents reflect and serve the demands and opinions of the public, or it can refer to the general diffusion of media power in society on the level of ownership, economic structures and political influence" (Karppinen 2013, 88) —different levels have been distinguished, such as Thomas Gibbons (1998) distinction between *external pluralism*, which refers to diversity regarding media ownership and structure, and *internal pluralism*, which pertains to the plurality of media content. On the basis of the structure/content differentiation, nuances can be found in the concept of pluralism *per se*; hence, authors like Lesley Hitchens (2006) and Des Freedman (2008) employ the term "pluralism" to address the economic structure of the media and its context, whereas "diversity" refers to media content. Another distinction regarding pluralism can be found in Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini 2005, who draw on Sartori's political-science differentiation between *polarized pluralism* (characterized by the existence of anti-establishment political parties) and *moderate pluralism* (a more stable, centric political order). The former model implies that newspapers are identified with ideological tendencies, with strong traditions of advocacy and commentary-oriented journalism; the latter leads to less instrumentalized, more commercialized, and/or professionalized media.

Besides theoretical nuances and taxonomies, technological and societal factors have influenced pluralism. According to Beata Klimkiewicz 2016, 83), "The traditional concept of media pluralism is being challenged by the configuration of media systems and societal transformation resulting from the impact of digital revolution, convergence and multiplicity of media platforms and services." This brings us back to the online-only press, a form of journalism that is developing in the context of a technological revolution. The

new online press should engender an enhanced media pluralism that broadens the ideological spectrum and, therefore, the heterogeneity of information (Hans Stange Marcus, Claudio Salinas Muñoz, Constanza Yáñez Duamante and Eduardo Santa Cruz Achurra 2018). In fact, with the online-only press, the concept of pluralism began to be revisited and linked, not only to media ownership, which still plays a key role (Gillian Doyle 2015), but also to indicators such as the presence of minority voices (Tim Dwyer and Fiona Martin 2010). In this vein, the digital press has contributed to media pluralism by developing "opportunities to be heard" (Peggy Valcke, Robert G. Picard and Miklós Sükösd (2015), 2), and, at the same time, by allowing social issues to be treated from different ideological stances.

Research object and aims

Notwithstanding the abovementioned studies, there is a research gap regarding the representation of women and LGBT issues in the online-only press. One of the few studies in this respect is Joke D'Heer, Justine Vergotte, Sara De Vuyst and Sarah Van Leuven's analysis of the depiction of women in the Canadian digital-native outlet *Vice*. They found that female actors are underrepresented in comparison with male actors, "although the gap between both groups is less pronounced compared with traditional media" (2020, 9). Ruth Mateos de Cabo, Ricardo Gimeno, Miryam Martínez, and Luis López (2014) included an online-only outlet—the right-libertarian *Libertad Digital*—in their study of the representation of women in four Spanish digital newspapers, and concluded that "the online press is helping to perpetuate underrepresentation, gender stereotyping, and discrimination of women" (2014, 69).

We aim to fill the research gap pertaining to the way feminist issues are represented in the Spanish online-only press. In this regard, Spain is an interesting object of study, since it is one of the Mediterranean countries defined by a polarized pluralist media model. According to this model, the news media are "characterized by a high degree of external pluralism, in which media are seen as champions of diverse political ideologies" (Hallin and Mancini 2005, 298). Therefore, the majority of newspapers are positioned on one side or the other of the ideological spectrum.

On the other hand, online-only newspapers are particularly relevant for studying the relationship between journalism and ideology. The emergence of internet outlets has provided opinion sources for strongly partisan publics—as showed by "confidential" digital journalism, which is consumed primarily for ideological reasons (María Sánchez González 2008). Pertaining to journalistic genres, we focus on *opinion* articles, on the grounds that ideology and politics are at the core of journalism of opinion (Silvio Waisbord 2006).

Additionally, Spain has witnessed deep changes in recent years that may have influenced the representation of social groups. Towards the middle of May 2011—that is, a year of global protests, revolutions, and political change—citizen movements began to flourish, which made way for the so called "15-M" (May 15) movement, a mobilization crystallized in the popular protests of May 15 2011 (Leonarda García-Jiménez, Rocío Zamora-Medina and Rebeca Martínez-Fernández 2014) hence predating initiatives such as Occupy London and Occupy Wall Street. Regarding feminism, 15-M reacted against the alliance of neoliberalism and patriarchy, and was related to building strategies of political

intersectionality to challenge oppressions (María José Gámez Fuentes 2015). 15-M activity crystallized in the rise of a new political party, Podemos. A self-regarded feminist party (Podemos, n.d.), Podemos emerged in 2014 and widened the spectrum of the political mainstream on the left. Its presence has transformed Spanish politics, to the point where in the 2019 general elections, Podemos finished fourth amongst the main national-level parties. Paradoxically, 2011 was also the year of a general election which handed victory to the conservative Popular Party (PP), the main Spanish right-wing party. Moreover, new rightist forces have arisen, such as the pro-market Ciudadanos, and the ultraconservative VOX. In fact, these two new right-wing parties, alongside the PP, have particular non-feminist proposals for women (Laura Martínez-Jiménez 2020). While Ciudadanos "explicitly supports a pro-capitalist 'liberal feminism'" (Martínez-Jiménez 2020, 5), VOX stands for a clear-cut ultra-conservative anti-feminist position "brought about in response to recent waves of feminist advancement in Spain as evidenced by the historical 8 M demonstrations in 2018" (Stuart J. Turnbull-Dugarte 2019, 2). Hence, it could be said that VOX has entered Spanish political life by influencing the agenda and embodying a reinforced patriarchal offensive.

Political changes coexist with feminist and LGBT activism. After the patriarchal and homophobic dictatorship of Francisco Franco (1939–1975), the feminist and LGBT movements begun to organize themselves to vindicate their rights. The most relevant political advances for women and the LGBT community were made during the progressive administrations of the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE): Felipe González's government repealed the law criminalizing homosexuality in 1995, while the Socialist administration of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero legalized homosexual marriage, LGBT adoption, and gender identity for trans people (Juan María Terradillos Basoco 2020). The Spanish LGBT community is still calling for an end to anti-LGBT violence and discrimination, as well as a wider gender identity law (Kerman Calvo and Gracia Trujillo 2011; RTVE.es/agencias 2019). As to feminism, three years after the death of Franco, the movement demanded the inclusion of women's rights in the new Spanish constitution of 1978, while the divorce law was passed by the reformist right-wing government of Adolfo Suárez (1976–1981) in 1981. Later on, the Rodríguez Zapatero administration passed legislation on abortion and protection for victims of gender violence (Anna Caballé 2013). More recently, Spanish feminists have called for the eradication of structural oppression, violence against women, the gender pay gap, and sexual harassment (Nuria Varela 2019).

Political changes and social activism have influenced a cultural and social climate in which feminist and LGBT issues are being considered in a more positive light. The development of Spanish democracy has brought about a remarkable opening towards sexual diversity, with issues like gay marriage receiving wide social support in the 2000s and 2010s (Juan Ramón Guijarro-Ojeda and Raúl Ruiz-Cecilia 2019). Additionally, the attitude towards women's and gender issues in the 2010s was backgrounded by a decades-long process of social change that has made family structures more egalitarian (Salustiano Del Campo and María Del Mar Rodríguez-Brioso 2002), as well as a left-oriented ideological evolution that prompted society to take more progressive stances in the 2010s, according to recent sociological data (Antonio Antón 2019).

The abovementioned post-2011 mobilizations were also accompanied by a change in the Spanish digital mediasphere, with a discourse that offered the population alternative sources (Ashifa Kassam 2014). That discourse relates to the appearance of some post-2011

leftist outlets, since after that year the emergence (or reconversion) of digital newspapers such as *Público.es, eldiario.es* and *infoLibre* is detected. The paper version of *Público.es* was first published between 2007 and 2012; readapting to its current format, it came into being as an online-only newspaper in June 2012, in an edition that managed to maintain itself as a "proposal from the left" (Pascual Serrano 2012, 10). On the other hand, *eldiario. es*, which appeared in September 2012, defines itself as "a voice to the many citizens in Spain who are drowning in a news environment that is less and less diverse" (eldiario.es 2015). Finally, *infoLibre* aspires to an independent, progressive, internationally-spirited journalism, and defines itself as "an informative and civic proposal that was born at the moment the economic crisis threatened democracy and journalism alike" (infoLibre 2015).

Keeping in mind recent changes, the discontent with conservative policies, and the appearance of progressive media, we aim to study whether the discourse of Spanish online-only journalism has become more plural since 2011 by considering feminist and sexual identity-related issues. Thus, the following research question can be formulated:

RQ$_1$. *How are feminist and LGBT issues represented and valued in Spanish online-only opinion journalism*?

RQ$_1$ may be deepened if we consider that previous literature has already addressed the ideological implications of the online-only press. On the one hand, some studies point out a predominance of conservative or ultra-conservative digital newspapers (Almiron 2006; Pineda and Almiron 2013). On the other hand, more recent research indicates that the hard-right panorama has become more nuanced (Labio and Pineda 2016). Such changes problematize the formulation of clear hypotheses pertaining to the predominant stance of the press in the period that witnessed the birth of a left-leaning outlets, insofar as this pluralism could have changed how social issues are addressed. Therefore, our second research question addresses changes in media biases:

RQ$_2$. *Was the representation of feminist and LGBT issues in Spanish online-only opinion journalism more plural in 2016 than in 2011*?

Methods

This paper's methodology follows previous work on the representation of ideology in online-only opinion articles (Labio and Pineda 2016; Pineda and Almiron 2013). Consequently, content analysis (Klaus Krippendorff 2004) is used as a data-gathering technique. To operationalize ideological representations, the widely debated concept of ideology (Lyman Tower Sargent 1996) has been understood as a set of ideas that provide a basis for political action, and is related to power systems (Andrew Heywood 2007). From the viewpoint of the ideological spectrum, the *progressive/conservative* axis was used. Progressivism implies advocating social change and liberal policies that lead to equality and personal development; conservatism opposes change and defends traditional values, religious faith, and the family institution (Ángel Rivero 2016; Heywood 2007). Regarding feminist issues, conservatism is characterized by the belief that "the appropriate place for women is in the home; a strong opposition to abortion; support for required prayer in

schools; and opposition to the teaching of sex education and evolution, among other subjects" (Tower Sargent 1996, 111), whereas progressivism advocates freedom, gender equality, and sexual diversity. On the basis that conservatism and progressivism imply different attitudes, we rely on a set of themes and issues that conform research categories. Some categories come from the scheme used by Rachel Gisselquist and Chappell Lawson (2006) in an analysis of political content, but we have added specific categories to adjust the analysis to our aims. The analytical variables include the opinion column's main theme, and a set of feminist and sexuality-related categories that refer broadly to women, family, non-normative sexualities, and religion (see Tables A5 and A6 for a complete listing of the items). We draw on the idea that the combination of interrelated socio-cultural categories works as a sign of construction of the image of a social group. Thus, religious beliefs, for instance, may determine media opinions about same-sex marriage (Carol M. Liebler, Joseph Schwartz and Todd Harper 2009).

Frequency analysis was chosen (Krippendorff 2004), and the basic coding units were words. The coding sheet computed the mentions of words, and included an evaluative item to the journalists' general value judgment—favorable, unfavorable, or neutral (cfr. Daniel Lerner, Ithiel Pool and Harold D. Lasswell 1951–52, 721)—regarding the coded words. For example, when an opinion writer states that the Roman Catholic Church is "undemocratic" ["antidemocrática"] and "hates women" ["odia a las mujeres"]—as does Víctor Arrogante (2016) in *El Plural*—such judgment may be coded as unfavorable regarding Catholicism. In any case, the criterion is the value attributed to a term in the context of the whole article. Thus, the notion of context units (Krippendorff 2004) is relevant, since coders may consider other parts of the text—like sentences or paragraphs —to infer the value.

Four-week samples were chosen from opinion columns published in May 2011 and June 2016—the four-week sampling period has already been used in analyses of the press and news media (Doris A. Graber 1972; Steve Paulussen 2004). The contexts of the sampled time spans must be considered. As a regional and local election period, May 2011 was chosen on the assumption that political opinions would surface more strongly during an election season. President Rodríguez Zapatero did not announce his withdrawal until the end of the following July, but tension was already high in the spring. Pertaining to the second wave of our analysis, national elections took place on the 26th of June, a fact that made June 2016 a month characterized by an extreme politicization of public opinion. Mid-2016 was also a period by which time the PP's austerity measures had already been transforming Spain for years, hence presenting a scenario of social discontent.

Two databases were used for sampling: the Oficina de la Justificación de la Difusión (Spanish Audit Bureau of Circulations, OJD), which tracks and verifies press circulation figures, and Alexa Web Service—which delivers web analytical insights. Regarding the 2011 sample, the initial count of newspapers taken from OJD and Alexa was filtered on the basis of Alexa traffic ranking in Spain (Table A1).

As to the 2016 sample, Alexa provided the rank depicted in Table A2.

The 2011 sample consists of 242 opinion articles. In the case of outlets with a strong opinion section, a systematic random sampling was performed, with different *k* intervals (Krippendorff 2004) that were applied to obtain similar samples throughout the news-papers. Accordingly, 29 articles were provided by each outlet in most of the cases.

A similar method was applied to the 2016 sample, where the number of columns from each newspaper was 27, thus resulting in a final sample of 270 units. The first coding phase was performed by four post-graduate students. On the basis of several agreement tests, the coding sheet was progressively refined until a 0.83 two-coder agreement was attained by using Krippendorf's α. Since new coders were selected regarding the 2016 sample, a new reliability test was performed in early 2017. In this case, the average agreement was even higher (α = 0.97).

Results

Feminist and LGBT-related issues are commonly regarded as social and cultural topics. Table A3 (see Appendices) sheds light on the degree of relevance of socio-cultural issues in the context of the different topics addressed by the opinion columns. In the tumultuous political context of May 2011, cultural and social issues play a very secondary role: culture is the main focus of only one column (0.41% of the sample), whereas social issues is the main theme of six articles (2.47%). These figures contrast sharply with the weight of the main topics of the columns: Spanish national politics, and the economy, which together amount to more than 50%. Regarding political ideology, socio-cultural issues do not seem to be distinguishing factors: as Table A3 shows, the ultra-conservative *MinutoDigital.com* focuses on social issues as much as the progressive *El Plural*. The June 2016 data (Table A4) do not indicate a substantial change: in spite of an increase in the number of columns that focuses primarily on cultural and social issues (five and ten, respectively), their frequency is still irrelevant compared to the influence of national and international politics. In any case, it is worth pointing out that a new left-leaning newspaper, *eldiario.es*, comprises 40% of the society- and culture-focused columns in 2016.

Tables A5 and A6 show data on the frequency and depiction of specific themes in 2011 and 2016, respectively. Generally speaking, progressive *El Plural* is the newspaper that addresses feminist and LGBT themes more frequently in both 2011 (33 mentions) and 2016 (39 mentions). The prevalence of progressive outlets is considerably enhanced in 2016, with *eldiario.es, Público.es, infoLibre*, and Catalonian-nationalist *Vilaweb* accounting for more than 60% of the total of mentions. Moreover, online-only opinion seems to be much more interested in sexual identity-related topics in 2016 than in 2011—in fact, the number of mentions almost doubled in these five years. Pertaining to the most-addressed issues, the main themes in May 2011 are religion and women; in June 2016, the discussion of Catholicism was still strong, and it was mentioned as much as the "Homosexuality/ lesbianism" category. As to the journalists' attitude towards the coded terms, the representation of themes like women and Catholicism indicates a polarization of attitudes, to the extent that neutral mentions never outnumber the sum of positive and negative mentions.

Although the attitude towards contraceptives is quantitatively irrelevant—if not inexistent—in both 2011 and 2016, the most important information about feminist themes relates to the representation of women and women's rights; in this regard, the new picture is shocking. The "Women/women's rights" category was almost invisible in 2011, when it was addressed by only two newspapers. As way of illustration, *El Plural* published a piece that advocated a longer paternity leave, so that men would take a greater share of responsibility for raising children—according to the writer of the piece, "Increasing just

maternity leave without increasing paternity leave will only mean that employers will be increasingly more reluctant to hire women" ["Aumentar únicamente los permisos de maternidad sin aumentar el permiso de paternidad sólo supondrá que los empresarios serán cada vez más renuentes a contratar mujeres"] (Beatriz Gimeno 2011). In 2016, the "women" category skyrocketed to 93 cites, thus accounting for 57.76% of the total of mentions of social issues. The category is mentioned by nine different newspapers, and the valuation is overwhelmingly favorable: 73 positive mentions, 19 neutral mentions, and only one negative mention—by free-marketeer *El Confidencial*—with *Vilaweb* leading the favorable depiction of women. As way of example of such a favorable view, one *infoLibre* column mentions feminism, and links it to equality (Paloma Bravo 2016).

The issue of abortion—one of the obsessions of Spanish conservatives—is scarcely addressed: it receives only three mentions in both 2011 and 2016. Abortion had one negative and two neutral mentions in 2011, the former in a *Libertad Digital* column: "Degradation of social health: We are not at the tail end of Europe in almost everything. As to drugs, alcoholism, family, marriage, school failure, abortions, criminal population, domestic violence, and other social health indices, Spain 'occupies' a relevant position" ["Degradación de la salud social: No estamos a la cola de Europa en casi todo. En drogas, alcoholismo, fracaso familiar, matrimonial y escolar, abortos, población penal, violencia doméstica y otros índices de salud social, España "goza" de un puesto relevante"] (Pío Moa 2011). The opinion on abortion has changed in a progressive way, with no negative mentions and two positive depictions in 2016. In this connection, *infoLibre* refers to the way in which the Catholic Church blocks abortion: "The bishop's string quartet asked the citizenry to vote for those parties defending religion as a study module and tighter abortion laws" ["El cuartero de cuerda obispal pidió el voto para los partidos que defienden la asignatura de religión y ponen obstáculos al aborto"] (Raquel Martos 2016). The evolution of the attitude towards abortion must be understood in the context of another analytical category: "State intervention in personal decisions/Prohibitions". This indicator of social libertarianism received six negative mentions in 2011 and, interestingly, only one negative mention in 2016. This indicates that the evolution of opinion in a progressive direction does not manifest itself homogeneously in every category.

Given that Spain was ruled by a National-Catholic dictatorship for decades, the representation of religion proves interesting. Aside from the fact that laicism is mentioned neutrally, or no mentioned at all, the representation of Catholicism is remarkably favorable in 2011 (10 positive mentions by *El Semanal Digital*), while other religions only obtain three positive mentions and are depicted negatively by *Libertad Digital* (four negative mentions) and ultra-rightist *MinutoDigital.com* (six negative mentions). Such a positive depiction is exemplified by *El Semanal Digital*'s notion of "a Catholic society that is an integral part of Europe's idiosyncrasy and reality" ["una sociedad católica que forma parte importante de la idiosincrasia de Europa y de su propia realidad"] (Ricardo Chamorro 2011). In 2016, however, opinion has diversified, with 16 negative mentions and only three positive. For example, criticism against the Catholic Church relates to feminism and LGBT issues in an article by *El Plural*, where the Church is depicted as opposed to gender equality and critical of the "gay empire" ["imperio gay"] and "certain feminist ideologies" ["ciertas ideologías feministas"] that are instrumental in an alleged attack on the family institution, in the words of Bishop Antonio Cañizares (cited in Arrogante 2016). The

attitude towards other religions, which receive five positive mentions and no negative mentions, is also more open.

Religious-traditionalist stances are historically linked to the institution of the family. The data show that the representation of this cornerstone of social conservatism underwent changes as well. In 2011, the term was not mentioned at all; in 2016, the "traditional family" category received three negative mentions. As way of example, poet Luis García Montero (2016) describes the traditional family in *InfoLibre* in the following terms: "Conservative thinking wields the idea of the family in their social debates to impose traditionalist customs: submissive women, prohibition of abortion, marital fidelity … " ["El pensamiento conservador esgrime la idea de la familia en sus debates sociales para imponer unas costumbres tradicionalistas: mujeres sumisas, prohibición del aborto, fidelidad conyugal … "] Inversely, the "gay marriage" category went from being negatively addressed in 2011 to being no mentioned in 2016. In this line, the depiction of LGBT themes changed: while homosexuality/lesbianism was addressed neutrally in 2011 by libertarian and progressive newspapers alike, opinion columns depict the "homosexuality/lesbianism" category in a positive light in 2016 (14 mentions, by *El Plural, eldiario.es*, and *infoLibre*). Moreover, bisexuality and transsexuality are added to the media agenda—they were not mentioned in 2011—and receive positive valuations by *eldiario.es, Público.es* and *El Plural*. In this regard, the title of one *eldiario.es* piece, "Queers, lesbians, bisexuals, and trans, always in the crosshairs" ["Maricas, lesbianas, bisexuales y trans, siempre en el mundo de mira."] (Ruth Toledano 2016), summarizes the fight against homophobia that was taking place in 2016. However, it should be highlighted that right-wing newspapers, such as *Libertad Digital, El Confidencial* and *MinutoDigital.com*, did not address feminist or LGBT issues favorably in 2011; a trend that continued in the conservative opinion columns published in 2016—with the exception of the libertarian-leaning *OKDIARIO*.

Discussion and conclusions

On the basis of the results, online-only newspapers emerge as a relevant research object regarding the role of the press in polarized pluralistic systems such as the one found in Spain. Online-only opinion is polarized pertaining to social issues, thus indicating that the traditional politicization of the Spanish press continues.

For the media, gender is governed by politics and hierarchies, according to a viewpoint whereby sex, class, race, and gender are vectors of oppression (Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen 2012). In this regard, the Spanish online-only press may be understood as a thermometer of political tendencies, as well as a space open to new viewpoints that widen the margins of mainstream politics and give voice to oppressed groups. Such a widening should be understood in a context in which people of all ages are resorting to online news outlets increasingly more to stay in tune (ONTSI 2019), with approximately 5% of Spaniards using the online-only press as their main information source (Avelino Amoedo 2019). If we consider at the same time that it is mostly younger people in Spain who get their news online (Katerina Eva Matsa, Laura Silver, Elisa Shearer and Mason Walker 2018), online-only journalism emerges as a mediasphere that is susceptible to moving towards groups in which it is precisely the younger citizens who usually play a key role. In this context, the increase in pluralism in Spanish online-only outlets may be related to the impact of the

digital revolution, which is challenging the traditional concept of media pluralism (Klimkiewicz 2016).

Regarding our first research question, the data indicate that feminist and LGBT issues are represented in online-only opinion on the grounds of the newspapers' political ideologies. However, the crucial fact is that the role of women is much more talked about today—the mentions of women and women's rights increased 620% between 2011 and 2016—thus challenging the traditional media underrepresentation of women. This relates to our second research question: to discern possible changes in the context of the rise of new movements and media. In this respect, the left-leaning media have promoted a more diverse scenario in 2016, in comparison to 2011, as far as women and sexual freedom are concerned. In the theoretical context of pluralism, this scenario can be understood as an example of the growing *diversity* in media content (Hitchens 2006). This conclusion differs from previous studies that pointed out the predominance of a marked anti-left opinion until 2011 (Almiron 2006; Pineda and Almiron 2013). According to a tradition of right-wing journalism, in 2011 conservative or very conservative ideologies were being cherished by opinion writers (Pineda and Almiron 2013). However, in 2016 progressive positions are finding a place in online opinion, hence contributing to a more egalitarian representation of women. In this respect, the evolution of the Spanish online-only press is in line with D'Heer, Vergotte, De Vuyst and Van Leuven's study about *Vice* (2020) which indicated that the gap between men and women is less pronounced compared with traditional media. In any case, the changes as to a more positive representation of women have depended more on the emergence of left-leaning outlets, than on a global shift affecting newspapers across the board.

This enhancement of the ideological spectrum—which can be understood as an example of *internal pluralism* pertaining to media content (Gibbons 1998)—is consistent with the change pointed out by Labio and Pineda (2016) regarding the representation of politics and economics in the online-only press. Although we must be cautious in generalizing from one-month samples, the data indicate that the online newspapers that flourished in the turbulent 2011–2016 period—such as *eldiario.es, infoLibre*, and *Público.es*—challenged the predominance of right-wing views about women and sexualities. This is coherent with the notion that newspapers like *infoLibre* and *eldiario.es* were created to advocate social justice and to serve people's needs (Ana Virginia Rubio Jordán 2014).

These conclusions lead us to media pluralism. Our data reinforce Hallin and Mancini's notion that Spain is distinguished by a polarized pluralist model; in this regard, the diversification of the ideological spectrum by online-only outlets actually reinforces the model's pluralism. According to Karppinen (2013), pluralism relates to the distribution of media power; the enhancement of the Spanish ideological spectrum can be understood in terms of a realignment of power relationships fueled by the Spanish feminist and LGBT movements and their impact on the media. This interpretation relates to Freedman's notion of diversity (2008), which addresses the media's ability to express social differences by maximizing the choices offered to audiences; in the same vein, the Spanish media market is expressing differences relating to women and sexual freedom. If we take into account the technological variable, our study illustrates how online-only newspapers have enhanced the ideological spectrum and, therefore, the heterogeneity of information (Marcus, Salinas Muñoz, Yáñez Duamante and Santa Cruz Achurra 2018). Our analysis is also in line with the notion that the concept of media pluralism has to be revisited, and linked to indicators such as the presence of minority voices (Dwyer and Martin 2010). Newspapers such as

eldiario.es, infoLibre, and *Público.es* exemplify the way in which the digital press contributes to pluralism by offering opportunities to be heard (Valcke, Picard and Sükösd 2015) and, at the same time, by allowing women's issues to be addressed from different perspectives, while giving voice to groups that are not heard in right-wing media contexts.

The fact that Spanish conservative contexts have remained unchanged in a five-year period reinforces the idea that the digital press is increasing its pluralism, instead of shifting ideologically. It is no coincidence that women's and LGBT issues were addressed very seldom by leading right-wing newspapers such as *El Confidencial* or *Libertad Digital* in both 2011 and 2016, thus showing that conservative stances on these issues have not changed. At the same time, rightist newspapers are not conveying a conservative counter-discourse about sex and gender. Hence Spanish right-leaning media may be behaving differently than conservative outlets from other countries. In a context where previous studies have found arguments against gay marriage in the British press (Adam Jowett 2014), the disappearance of negative views on gay marriage in Spanish newspapers indicates that the issue is losing steam amongst conservatives. Likewise, abortion—an issue which generates polarization in religious political cultures like that of the United States—does not seem to be a great concern for Spanish rightist media. As a result, abortion and homosexuality are becoming core issues of the center-left and left-wing press.

Our findings also relate to the context of contemporary Spain. A fringe movement for decades, feminism became institutionalized with Rodríguez Zapatero's Socialist government in 2004—the first government formed by the same number of men and women. However, the victory of the Popular Party in 2011 entailed a regression in the government's commitment regarding feminism. The conservatives tried, for example, to make the Abortion Law more restrictive, thus generating a huge demonstration known as "El Tren de la Libertad" ("The Freedom Train") in 2014, which sparked feminist activism. Spanish society was moving forward and fighting for women's rights, to the extent that a new feminist "wave" was born (Varela 2019). Feminist mobilizations provided a breeding ground which culminated with the massive—and widely covered by national and international media—March 8 2018 protests, which were linked to a feminist strike planned for the International Women Day (Inés Campillo 2019). To sum up, in the mid-2010s a new feminist wave heralded a more pluralistic media representation of women. Such a wave, together with Spain's tradition of activism and a more progressive cultural climate, may help to explain the increase in the number of opinion columns about women. Still, it must be determined whether the rise of the political ultra-right in the late 2010s—a brand of patriotic-reactionary extremism embodied by VOX—is changing the way the media react to this wave of unabashed conservatism.

This paper has attempted to contribute to the scholarship on online-only media and the way they represent feminist and LGBT issues. Given the relevance that digital journalism is acquiring in the media landscape, more research is needed to delineate the ideological biases of newspapers that have not been included in this study, as well as comparative studies between Spanish online-only journalism and that of other countries. In this regard, additional research on online-only journalism can help us to discern whether digital-native media are raising the awareness on feminist issues and sexual freedom, or they are just echoing the notion that "the news media are still very much male-dominated" (Jia et al. 2016, 8).

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Disclosure statement

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Appendices

Table A1. Top online-only Spanish newspapers by traffic at May 31 2011 (source: Pineda and Almiron 2013).

Newspaper	Online since	URL	Position in Alexa's Traffic Rank
1. Libertad Digital	2000	www.libertaddigital.es	85
2. El Confidencial	2001	www.elconfidencial.com	100
3. El Confidencial Digital	2001	www.elconfidencialdigital.com	721
4. El Semanal Digital	2000	www.elsemanaldigital.com	793
5. La Vozlibre	No data available	www.lavozlibre.com	834
6. Diariocritico.com	2004	www.diariocritico.com	891
7. Nació Digital.cat	2005	www.naciodigital.cat	906
8. El Plural	2005	www.elplural.com	1.101
9. VilaWeb	1996	www.vilaweb.cat	1.135
10. MinutoDigital.com	2004	www.minutodigital.com	1.466[a]

[a]The traffic rank of *Minuto Digital* was consulted on June 10th, 2011.

Table A2. Top online-only Spanish newspapers by traffic at February 9 2017.

Newspaper	Online since	URL	Position in Alexa's Traffic Rank
1. El Confidencial	2001	www.elconfidencial.com	34
2. eldiario.es	2012	www.eldiario.es	66
3. Público.es	2007	www.publico.es	115
4. El Español	2015	www.elespañol.com	116
5. Libertad Digital	2000	www.libertaddigital.com	121
6. OKDIARIO	2015	www.okdiario.com	182
7. VilaWeb	1996	www.vilaweb.cat	553
8. infoLibre	2013	www.infolibre.es	651
9. El Plural	2005	www.elplural.com	721
10. Nació Digital.cat	2005	www.naciodigital.cat	735

Table A3. Main topics frequencies (2011).

	Libertad Digital	El Confidencial Digital	El Confidencial Digital	El Semanal Digital	La Voz Libre	Diariocritico.com	Nació Digital.cat	El Plural	VilaWeb	MinutoDigital.com	Total
Economy	1	2	1	2	2	0	1	2	0	0	11
National Politics	11	20	7	16	12	4	12	19	1	13	115
International Politics	2	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	1	1	7
Cultural Issues	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Social Issues	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	2	6
Terrorism	2	1	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	2	8
Mass Media	1	1	0	2	1	1	2	0	0	0	8
Environment	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Religion/Church(es)	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	2
Crime	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Other	5	1	6	1	8	3	7	4	4	0	39
Undetermined	8	3	12	4	5	3	5	1	3	2	46
Total	30[a]	29	26	29	29	12	29	29	10	20	243

[a] Libertad Digital's 30 mentions are due to the fact that one opinion column presents two main topics.

Table A4. Main topics frequencies (2016).

	El Confidencial	El Español	El Plural	eldiario.es	Público.es	infoLibre	Libertad Digital	Nació Digital.cat	OKDIARIO	VilaWeb	Total
Economy	1	0	1	0	3	0	0	1	0	1	7
National Politics	18	11	17	11	10	14	10	6	14	10	121
International Politics	2	3	3	3	8	4	3	1	2	1	30
Cultural Issues	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	3	5
Social Issues	1	1	0	4	1	0	0	1	1	1	10
Terrorism	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mass Media	2	2	1	1	1	0	2	0	0	0	8
Environment	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Religion/Church(es)	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Crime	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	4
Other	1	1	0	0	0	0	4	6	0	3	15
Undetermined	2	8	3	4	4	9	8	11	10	8	67
Total	27	27	27	27	27	27	27	27	27	27	270

Table A5. Frecuency and ideological characterization of themes (2011).

Theme		Libertad Digital	El Confidencial	El Confidencial Digital	El Semanal Digital	La Voz Libre	Diariocritico. com	Nació Digital. cat	El Plural	VilaWeb	MinutoDigital. com	Total
Catholic Religion	Positive	0	0	0	10	0	0	0	0	0	0	10
	Negative	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	5
	Neutral	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	6	0	0	8
Other religions	Positive	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	0	0	3
	Negative	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	10
	Neutral	2	0	0	3	0	0	0	2	2	1	10
Laicism	Positive	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Negative	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Neutral	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	0	0	4
Traditional family	Positive	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Negative	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Neutral	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Gay marriage	Positive	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Negative	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
	Neutral	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Homosexuality/lesbianism	Positive	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Negative	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Neutral	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	3
Bisexuality	Positive	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Negative	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Neutral	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Transexuality	Positive	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Negative	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Neutral	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Women/Women's rights	Positive	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	14	0	0	14
	Negative	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Neutral	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Contraceptives	Positive	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Negative	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Neutral	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Abortion	Positive	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Negative	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	Neutral	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
State intervention in personal decisions/Prohibitions	Positive	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Negative	2	0	2	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	6
	Neutral	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	3
Total of mentions		10	0	4	18	1	1	4	33	2	9	82

Table A6. Frequency and ideological characterization of themes (2016).

		El Confidencial	El Español	El Plural	eldiario. es	Público. es	infoLibre	Libertad Digital	NacióDigital. com	OKDIARIO	VilaWeb	Total
Catholic Religion	Positive	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
	Negative	0	0	14	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	16
	Neutral	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Other religions	Positive	0	0	0	0	2	3	0	0	0	0	5
	Negative	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
	Neutral	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Laicism	Positive	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Negative	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Neutral	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Traditional family	Positive	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Negative	0	0	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	3
	Neutral	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Gay marriage	Positive	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Negative	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Neutral	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Homosexuality/lesbianism	Positive	0	0	7	5	0	2	0	0	0	0	14
	Negative	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
	Neutral	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	4
Bisexuality	Positive	0	0	1	5	4	0	0	0	0	0	10
	Negative	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Neutral	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Transexuality	Positive	0	0	1	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	6
	Negative	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Neutral	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Women/Women's rights	Positive	0	0	8	18	10	6	0	0	7	24	73
	Negative	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	Neutral	0	2	1	3	1	3	0	1	6	2	19
Contraceptives	Positive	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Negative	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Neutral	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Abortion	Positive	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	2
	Negative	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Neutral	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
State intervention in personal decisions/ Prohibitions	Positive	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Negative	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
	Neutral	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Total of mentions		1	3	39	37	18	18	1	1	13	30	161