

# Falling on Deaf Ears? An Analysis of Youth Political Claims in the European Mainstream Press

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## Abstract

There is a growing body of work on the ability of young people and minorities to have their voices heard in the public sphere, particularly with advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the emancipatory expectations that ensued. Are all young people, in all their diversity, equally likely to have their political claims relayed by the mainstream press? Is the growing prevalence of social media communication reflected in mainstream media agenda setting? Does it contribute to political equality in terms of representation in the mainstream press? This article answers these questions through a large-scale political claims analysis in 45 newspapers across 9 European countries. It comes to confirm the theoretical underpinnings laid out by scholars like Herman and Chomsky with their analysis of media agenda setting and power relations, or Chantal Mouffe and her notion of agonistic pluralism and the need to address unequal access to the public sphere. Overall, our findings suggest that young people in general, but even more so disadvantaged youth socio-economic groups still seem highly misrepresented in mainstream newspapers, and that the increasing prevalence of social media communication does not seem reflected in mainstream media agenda setting.

## Keywords

mainstream press, mainstream media, youth, social media, journalistic routines, agenda setting, political claims, inequalities, public sphere, media sphere

## Introduction

Over the last decade, young people in Europe have oftentimes been labelled as the “lost generation”, or as “the first generation in living memory that will be worse off than their parents”. They are faced with significant challenges, many of which have drastically heightened since the financial crisis, particularly in southern countries (Lima & Arties, 2013). These include - but are not limited to - high levels of youth unemployment, precarious work, lack of affordable housing, or poor access to education. This state of affairs and the alarming figures that illustrate it is often represented in the media either as a decomplexified phenomenon, byproduct of the financial crisis, or as the fate of an apathetic, depoliticised young population (Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006). However, one ought to question not only

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what young people have in their power to tackle these challenges and stereotypes, but also the extent to which young people - in all their diversity - are salient in the mainstream media and have the opportunity to voice their political claims.

Authors like Herman and Chomsky (1988) have long theorized about the mainstream media and their editorial bias, maintaining that they have established a routine of privileging 'elite' sources, often linked to governments' press offices, institutions or large companies. This eclipses different realities that deviate from the normalcy established by the elites' hegemonic discourse, as well as severely limits conflict and diversity in the public sphere, which are essential for real democratic debate (Mouffe, 2005).

More recently, with the advent of the Web 2.0 and the subsequent emergence and widespread adoption of social media, there have been hopes that young people - seen as 'digital natives' - would have the opportunity to progressively escape a condition of political inequality through the adoption of new communication technologies and strategies (Xenos et al., 2014), diversifying the public sphere and calling the gatekeeping role of the mainstream media into question.

Today, based on these theoretical underpinnings and given the widely agreed-upon agenda-setting influence of the mainstream media, it seems essential to once again address young people's presence (or absence) in the media sphere as political actors, as well as the much-debated potential of the internet and social media in alleviating a condition of political inequality that youth in general, but even more so specific socio-economic groups, have traditionally been subject to.

This paper will do just that, by addressing the following questions: (i) to what extent does the mainstream media relay young people's political claims? (ii) which youth socio-economic groups are more - or less - likely to have their political claims relayed by the mainstream media? (iii) to what extent is the growing prevalence of social media communication reflected in mainstream media agenda setting?

Based on a large scale political claims analysis in 45 mainstream newspapers across 9 European countries, our data show that youth political claims are few and far between (despite our reliance on youth-related keywords in the searches); that the mainstream media still lack the defining features of diversity as a significant majority of these youth political claims come from more educated and socially-included young people; and that optimism regarding the potential of social media in contributing to political equality in the public sphere does not seem justified, at least when it comes to the mainstream press.

This article will start with a brief presentation of the theoretical framework, touching upon some of Herman and Chomsky's statements about the filters and biases of the mainstream media, as well as Chantal Mouffe's notion of 'agonistic pluralism'. These conceptual approaches will be completed by a brief overview of the literature on the impact of ICTs and social media on the flow of information and on news sourcing practices. This will be followed by a methodological section presenting the data collection and exploitation. The last section of the article includes a presentation of our findings, followed by a discussion and concluding thoughts.

## **Theoretical framework**

Previous works on mainstream media filters and biases provide an essential theoretical framework for analysing the salience of political claims from young people and disadvantaged youth socio-economic groups in the mainstream media. Drawing on Walter Lippmann's

concept of 'manufacturing consent', Herman and Chomsky (1988) analysed the way in which the mainstream media constituted themselves as tools of establishment propaganda. The advent of the internet meant that their work had to be re-edited and re-contextualised (Goss, 2013; Mullen, 2009; Mullen & Klaehn, 2010; Pedro, 2009; Zollmann, 2017), so that the bases of their critical reflection continue to be applicable today. It is particularly useful to look back at their five filters of editorial bias: the business structure, the dependence on advertising, the nature of the information sources, the external forms of control over content and the antagonistic logic with which reality is framed. For the purposes of this article, we will mostly dwell on their reflections on the sources of information and the antagonistic logic.

Regarding the sources of information, Herman and Chomsky maintain that the mainstream media have established a routine of privileging information sources that are linked to governments' press offices, institutions or large companies. Within this context, the actors that generate information outside these circuits are not considered as reliable sources and, therefore, their acts or claims are not recognized as newsworthy. The mainstream media have thus managed to give the impression that the veracity of information is directly linked to the status, power and prestige of the sources.

Regarding the antagonistic logic diffused through the mainstream media, Herman and Chomsky describe the way in which the mass media eclipse those realities that do not correspond to the normalcy established by the elites' hegemonic discourse. This means that the voices that do not fit the hegemonic standards of 'normalcy' or 'correctness' are silenced. The 'others', considered as anti-social or undesirable elements thus do not have the capacity of agency nor are represented in the mainstream media. In line with these claims, when looking at youth representation in the mainstream press, our findings point to a significant overrepresentation of young people who are more educated and socially included.

As we look at the prominence of different youth socio-economic groups in the mainstream media, it is also interesting to consider the work of Chantal Mouffe, her notion of 'agonistic pluralism', and her arguments regarding the importance of diversity and confrontation in the public sphere. Chantal Mouffe (2005) moves away from the Habermasian conception of 'public sphere', according to which public debate culminates with consensus. She maintains that some level of conflict should be recognized as necessary for real democratic debate. Her notion of 'agonistic pluralism' precisely encapsulates this idea of diversity that is constantly confronting social reality. According to her, the capacity to enrich democracy lies in the ability of different identities and voices to recognize each other in diversity. Therefore, she questions the belief that the public sphere can only be based on consensus and on the need for people to put their particular interests aside, since this always implies that the terms in which this consensus is expressed are the result of the hegemonic character of dominant groups. This paper suggests the absence - when it comes to the mainstream press - of a space in which this idea of agonistic pluralism can flourish and in which differences can be confronted and contrasted, as our data suggest a significant lack of diversity in the mainstream media's sources.

Studying the extent to which non-hegemonic groups and their political claims are represented in the mainstream media seems all the more important when considering the agenda-setting influence of the mainstream media. Indeed, the power of the media and its ability to tell the world what is important are issues that have been - from the early 20th century onwards - widely described in agenda setting research (from Lippman in 1922 to McCombs and Shaw's seminal article in 1972). In a well-known and compelling statement, Cohen (1963, p. 13) declared "The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about". Later studies have

extensively revisited this claim, oftentimes making it more encompassing by arguing that the media are not only successful in telling people what to think about, but also in telling them how to think about it, and thus, by extension, what to think (Page & Shapiro, 1992; McCombs & Shaw, 1993).

More recently, many have seen the development of the Web 2.0 as something that would reduce the power of the media and contribute to political equality in the public sphere. Indeed, the advent of the internet and social media have contributed to the increasing questioning of the role of the mainstream media in the configuration of the spaces through which information flows. The 'post-digital era', coined by some authors as 'hyperdigital' (Feixa et al., 2016) is, thus, characterised by the multiplication of discourses and information channels, as well as the increasing speed at which this information circulates. This 'hyperconnectivity' (Rovira Sancho, 2017) leads to greater complexity in the constitution of the public sphere, with information overload and new actors gaining weight in public debates.

However, from a media studies perspective, there is a growing concern that the mainstream media - despite the advent of the Web 2.0 - has not fully grasped nor adapted to the shift from mass communication to digital communication. There have been several works on the ways in which social media and the internet have changed and are changing traditional journalism, as well as on the extent to which journalists rely on social media in their sourcing and information gathering practices. While a number of studies claim that social media and digital technologies more generally are changing the way news are sourced and produced as well as power relations in terms of who gets to say what (Newman, 2011; Hermida, 2013; Broersma & Graham, 2012; Chao-Chen, 2013), others suggest that the use and prominence of social media and digital technologies in the mainstream press remain very limited and that they are mostly used as a 'backup' for traditional sources (Van Leuven et al., 2014; Tylor, 2015; Knight, 2012; Machill & Beiler, 2009; Lariscy et al., 2009; Clua et al., 2018). The analysis carried out in this paper seems to support these last studies, suggesting that the growing prevalence of social media communication is not reflected in the productive routines of the mainstream newspapers analysed here, nor does it seem to contribute to political equality in terms of whose claims are relayed.

## Methodology

This paper is based on a political claims analysis (Koopmans & Statham, 1999) in which we systematically studied - among other things - the actors intervening in public debates through mainstream media, the way their claims were raised, the issues that were raised, the policy positions and the frames that were advanced. In this study, the political claim was understood as a strategic intervention, either verbal or non-verbal, in the public space made by a given actor on behalf of a group or collectivity, expressing a political opinion and bearing on the interests or rights of other groups or collectivities.

For each country, five daily newspapers of national coverage were selected (45 in total). Only newspapers that fit the definition of Mainstream Media were included in the sample. All the newspapers had to be print newspapers of national coverage, with a high level of circulation and of generalist scope. The selection took into account the respective characteristics of each country's media landscape and tried to find the best possible equilibrium across the ideological spectrum.

We retrieved articles that were published between 2010 and 2016, and that included any or all of the following keywords (translated into 9 different languages): *young people*,

*adolescent\**, *student\**, *youth*. Within these parameters, the articles were randomly selected and political claims were identified and extracted through a systematised screening and coding process (for more information on methodology, see Euryka project, 2018).

Each team retrieved around 100 political claims per newspaper, amounting to a total of 4525 claims that were coded using a codebook. The codebook included - but was not limited to - variables such as the 'actor(s)' making the claim or the form through which the claim was made (i.e. the means of claim-making). A reliability test was performed on each variable of the study (Krippendorff, 2004). Results were above 0.70 on all the variables analysed in this paper (*actor* variable, 0.75; *form* variable, 0.95).

In order to see the extent to which the mainstream press relayed the voice of young people, we focused on the *actor* variable, telling us - among other things - when the claim was made by a 'youth actor' (see Figure 1). This variable also gave us the number of claims that were made by different youth actors from different backgrounds and socio-economic groups (see Figure 2). To see the way in which the political claims of these different types of youth actors were made, we focused on the *form* variable, telling us, for example, when the relayed claim was made through a direct declaration to the media, a demonstrative protest action or through social media - among others (see Figure 3).

## Analysis and results

This section will first present the data that illustrate the extent to which the mainstream press relays young people's voice. Secondly, we will look at the proportion of political claims from different youth socio-economic groups in the mainstream press, before moving on to the means through which these youth claims were made and picked up by the mainstream newspapers in our sample.

### 1. Young people's voice in the mainstream press

Despite the fact that political claims were coded only to the extent that they were about and/or made by young people, as well as the fact that the search terms used for retrieving the news articles were closely related to youth, we found that only 940 (20.8%) of the 4525 claims that appeared in the selected mainstream newspapers were made by young people (see Figure 1). Therefore, more than three quarters (79.2%) of the claims - while having young people as objects of the claims - were made by non-youth actors. These included - among others - state actors and judiciary (36.5% of the 3585 claims made by non-youth actors), education stakeholders (school and university teachers and management - 16.2%), or political parties and groups (12.8%).

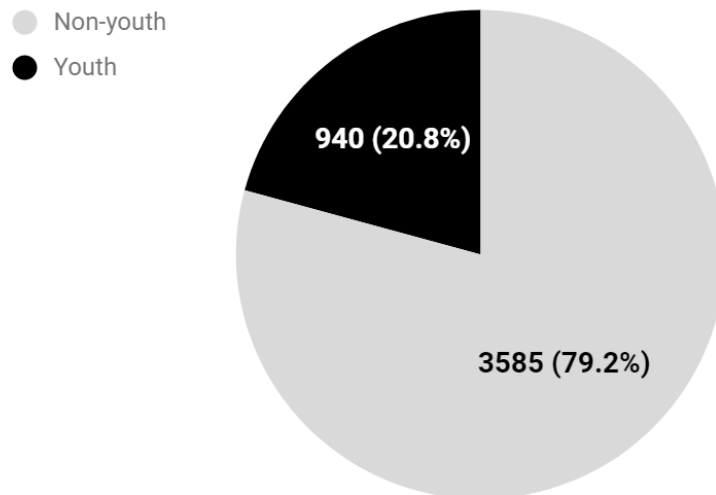


Figure 1. Number of political claims (n=4525) made by youth and non-youth actors

## 2. Youth socio-economic groups relayed by the mainstream press

In relation to the 20.8% of claims that were made by young people, the data analysis revealed significant disparities when it comes to the different youth actors or groups whose political claims were relayed by the selected mainstream newspapers (see Figure 2). This disparity is characterised by an overwhelming majority of students and members of youth branches of political parties, and a near-total absence of young people who could be characterised as unemployed, in poverty, or disabled - to name a few.

Indeed, out of the 940 claims made by youth actors, 396 (42.1%) were made by higher (27.6%) or secondary (14.6%) education students or graduates, and 182 (19.4%) were made by members of youth branches of political parties. On the other hand, only 6 (0.6%) of the 940 claims relayed by the newspapers in our sample were made by young people who could be characterised as being in poverty, suggesting a clear tendency of journalistic routines to favour young people who are more educated and socially included.

Despite the fact that youth unemployment in the EU stood at 20.3% in 2015 and 18.7% in 2016 (Eurostat, 2017), unemployed youth were the actors of only 0.8% of all the claims that were made by young people. On the other hand, higher and secondary education students or graduates and members of youth branches of political parties, taken together, were the actors of 61.5% of all the claims made by young people.

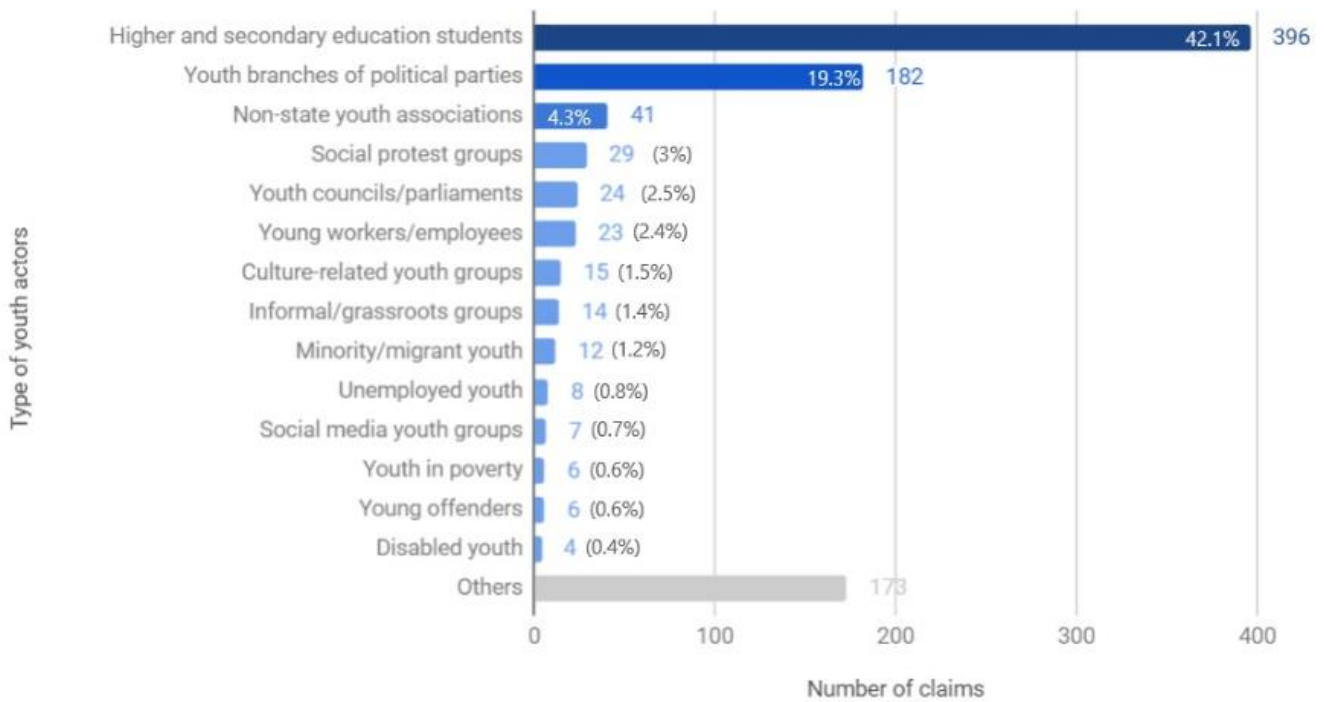


Figure 2. Number of political claims by different types of youth actors (n=940).

### 3. Ways in which the youth claims were made

Let us now go back to the question of how and if social media and digital technologies are changing the way news are sourced and produced, and look at the ways in which the youth claims were made. We found that while 325 (34.5%) of the 940 youth claims relayed by the mainstream press were made through interviews or direct declarations to the media, only 25 (2.6%) were made through social media (see Figure 3), suggesting that the growing prevalence of social media communication is not reflected in the way the mainstream newspapers in our sample relayed these political claims.

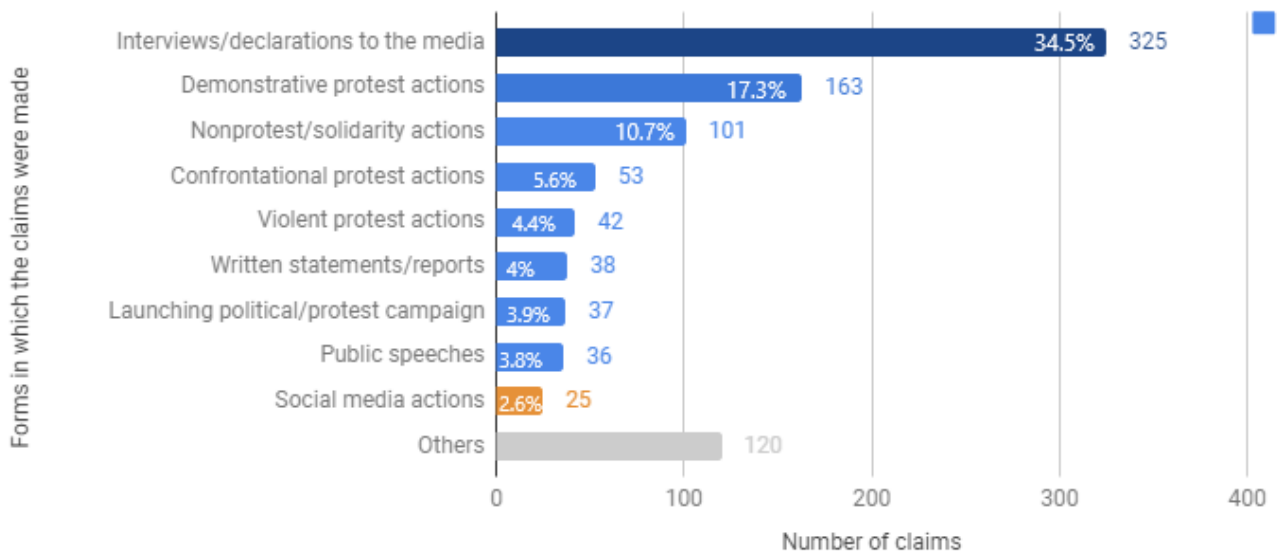


Figure 3. Number of youth political claims (n=940) by forms of action

Looking at the different youth actors of the claims that were made through interviews or declarations to the media, the disparity is no less striking. Indeed, almost half (45.2%) of the claims made through interviews or declarations to the media were made by students and graduates, while 23.1% were made by members of youth branches of political parties, representing together 68.3%. On the other hand, among the claims made through interviews or declarations to the media, only 3 (0.9%) were made by unemployed youth, 3 (0.9%) by social protest groups, and 2 (0.6%) by young people who could be characterised as being in poverty (see Figure 4). These figures once again support Herman and Chomsky's claims regarding the mainstream media's preference for 'elite sources', justify Chantal Mouffe's concerns regarding diversity in the public sphere, as well as mirror apparent inequalities in terms of access to media representation.

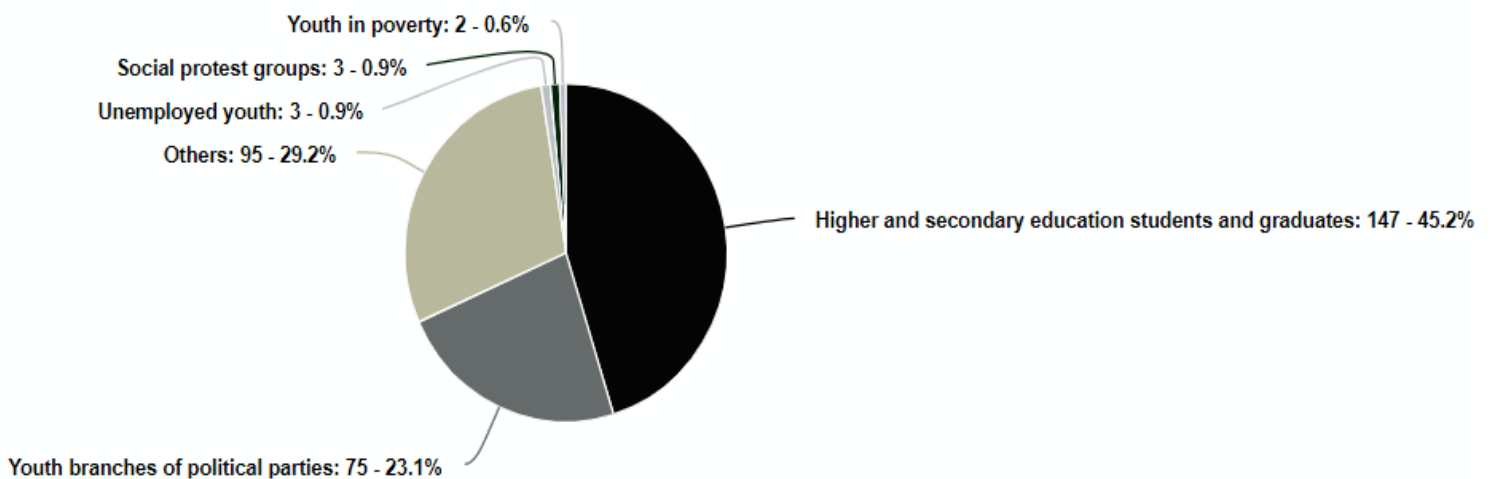


Figure 4. Number of interviews/declarations to the media (n=325) by different types of youth actors



## Discussion and conclusion

Throughout this article, we saw that: first, young people's voice represents a minority and that young people still seem misrepresented in the European mainstream press. The low proportion (20.8%) of claims made by youth actors could partly be due to the fact that young people's political activity increasingly takes place online, but that - as our data suggest - mainstream media seem reluctant to use social media sources. It also seems to support Herman and Chomsky's assertion that the mainstream media have established a routine of privileging elite sources that are linked to governments' press offices, institutions or large companies, at the expense of 'non-hegemonic' groups (in this case young people) and diversity.

Second, social inequalities seem reflected in (and reproduced by) the mainstream media, as we observed a clear tendency of the newspapers in our sample to relay the voice of young people who are more educated and socially included, at the expense of disadvantaged youth groups and diversity. These findings relate back to Chantal Mouffe's view on hegemonic relations and agonistic pluralism, as well as to Herman and Chomsky's idea of the antagonistic logic of mainstream media discourses. They not only illustrate the absence (at least when it comes to the mainstream newspapers in our sample) of an arena in which this idea of agonistic pluralism can take place and in which differences can be confronted, but also mirror substantial inequalities in the representation of different youth socio-economic groups in the mainstream newspapers analysed here. Within the framework of this study, their ideas have formed a useful theoretical basis to analyse how and to what extent the mainstream media take into account different young political actors and relay their concerns. Despite the hypothetical greater role and protagonism that could be assigned to young people - and disadvantaged youth socio-economic groups - as political actors dealing closely with the last decade's economic crisis (for example, in the face of worsening labour conditions), their voice - which is finding a place in digital culture and social media - still represents a minority and lack significance in the mainstream media.

Third, our results also suggested that the prominence of social media in the mainstream press remain very limited and - despite early optimism - these online applications do not seem to contribute to political equality when it comes to mainstream media coverage and representation. The low salience of claims made through social media could imply - among other things - that traditional ways of reaching sources are not compromised by the growing prevalence of social media communication. While the new media have developed and spread rapidly, and even though many scholars have claimed that social media are transforming journalism, our data suggest that their growing prominence is not reflected in the mainstream newspapers analysed here. This finding could suggest that, so far, the long-predicted potential of the World Wide Web and social media in the democratisation of the public sphere has not materialised, at least when it comes to the mainstream newspapers analysed here. This point illustrates Herman and Chomsky's idea of the mainstream media's rigid understanding of news sourcing. On the one hand, it remains to be demonstrated that the mainstream media have incorporated social media and its actors as 'serious' sources of information. On the other hand, the fact that social media discourse is more porous to 'non-hegemonic' information makes them less attractive from the perspective of the established canons of newsworthiness.

Although beyond the scope of this paper, the fact that no significant differences were found between newspapers of different editorial lines (e.g., between conservative and liberal newspapers) should encourage further research, not on the ideology of different news outlets but on the business models that govern them. To be able to make a leap forward in mapping

and understanding the mass media today, it would be necessary to take into consideration all the journalistic projects that, while not identifying with the mainstream press or depending on the interests of the establishment, have a wide circulation on digital platforms.

Last but not least, this study is based on and limited to a content analysis of political claims found in newspaper articles. A more comprehensive study could go further and take into account what journalists themselves have to say about journalistic routines and the questions addressed in this article as well as how these mainstream media are run and function on a day-to-day basis.

In light of this study, it is important to underline that one should not view the mainstream media as entities that are independent of the economic, political, social and historical context in which contents are legitimised and consensus reached. The extent (if any) to which social media and ICTs can and do alleviate political inequalities, as well as alter power relations and the way discourse is articulated in the mainstream media (and in the public sphere) represents an important and challenging topic that is worth studying.

## **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## **Funding**

The data presented in this article have been obtained within the framework of the project “Reinventing Democracy in Europe: Youth Doing Politics in Times of Increasing Inequalities” (EURYKA). This project is funded by the European Commission under H2020 (grant agreement no. 727025).

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