The Evolution of Political Communication in Spain: From Traditional Media to Digital Mobilization (2011–2024)

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Abstract

Over the past decade, Spain has undergone a profound transformation in the field of political communication. From the analog campaigns of the early 2010s to the hyper-segmented, data-driven strategies of the 2020s, political actors have continuously adapted to technological disruptions, electoral volatility, and shifting public expectations. This article traces the evolution of these communication strategies between 2011 and 2024, offering a longitudinal and practice-informed analysis. Drawing on direct professional experience in public administration and political consultancy, it reflects on the incorporation of social media, the institutionalization of political advisors, the rise of microtargeting and big data, and the recent turn toward authenticity and narrative in digital campaigning. The Spanish case illustrates how political systems with complex territorial structures and ideological fragmentation manage the challenges—and opportunities—of digital communication in a polarized democratic context.

Keywords: Spain, political communication, digital campaigning, social media, big data, electoral strategy, microtargeting, public affairs, political consulting, democratic innovation

1. Introduction: Thirteen Years of Disruption — Political Communication in Spain, 2011–2024

The evolution of political communication in Spain over the past thirteen years has been both turbulent and transformational. Between the general election of 2011 and the most recent electoral cycles of 2023 and 2024, Spain has moved from a paradigm dominated by **traditional media, hierarchical party structures, and mass broadcast logic** to one shaped by **platform capitalism, algorithmic targeting, fragmented publics, and influencer-driven discourse**. Political communication in this period has not merely changed in form—it has undergone a **paradigm shift**.

This article is both a **chronicle and a critical reflection** on that transformation. It offers a longitudinal, interdisciplinary, and practitioner-informed analysis of how the Spanish political system adapted—or in some cases, failed to adapt—to the pressures of technological disruption, electoral volatility, and cultural reconfiguration. As someone who has lived through and participated in this shift from multiple vantage points—first as a politically engaged citizen during the 15-M movement, then as a public servant and communications advisor within Spanish institutions, and later as a consultant and academic—I write from a place of **both analytical distance and experiential proximity**.

At its core, this study explores the central question: **How has the practice and meaning of political communication changed in Spain between 2011 and 2024, and what does that reveal about the evolving nature of democracy itself?**

1.1 A Country in Transition: 2011 as the Critical Juncture

The year **2011** represents a critical juncture in contemporary Spanish political history. It marked the convergence of multiple overlapping crises:

- **An economic crisis**, triggered by the global financial collapse and intensified by domestic housing and unemployment woes.

- **A political legitimacy crisis**, as major parties—PSOE and PP—suffered declining credibility amid corruption scandals and perceived incompetence.

- **A generational and cultural crisis**, as younger Spaniards faced precarious futures in a system seen as closed, elitist, and indifferent.

The **15-M movement**, also known as the *Movimiento de los Indignados*, exploded in this context. It was not merely a protest against austerity—it was a **refusal to accept the communicative logic of establishment politics**. Its slogan, *"No nos representan"* ("They don't represent us"), captured not only a political disconnect but a **discursive rupture**: the movement eschewed the top-down, spokesperson-driven approach of party politics in favor of horizontalism, collective authorship, and digitally mediated coordination.

What set 15-M apart was its **mode of communication**. Protesters used livestreams, Facebook events, Twitter hashtags, and open-source platforms to coordinate, express, and narrate their dissent. In a sense, 15-M **prefigured a new media ecology**—a decentralized, participatory, and post-broadcast environment where message control was no longer possible and authenticity emerged as the most valuable currency. The irony is that while political parties were still relying on scripted debates, press conferences, and print manifestos, the political culture was already being reshaped by a generation that had grown up on YouTube, forums, and social media.

This rupture created a **lag**—a temporal and epistemic gap—between how citizens communicated and how politics continued to operate. The 2011 general election, in which the Partido Popular obtained an absolute majority, was still conducted within the logic of **mass media campaigns**, with television and print press as the primary battlegrounds. But that election was also the **last of its kind**. What followed was a decade of catch-up, adaptation, resistance, and redefinition.

1.2 Political Communication as a Cultural System

To understand the evolution that followed, it is essential to view political communication not merely as a technical activity—message creation, media planning, audience

targeting—but as a **cultural system**, in Clifford Geertz's terms. Political communication encodes values, legitimizes authority, performs identity, and tells stories about the nation and the self.

In this sense, the evolution of communication strategies in Spain over the past thirteen years is more than a timeline of media use. It reflects:

- A **crisis of representation**, in which traditional party labels and ideological binaries (left vs. right, central vs. peripheral) have lost clarity.

- A **crisis of trust**, wherein citizens no longer assume that institutions speak in good faith or for the common good.

- A **crisis of mediation**, where the authority of journalists, editorial boards, and public broadcasters has been displaced by influencers, partisan micro-outlets, and algorithmically curated feeds.

Political communication has thus become a **contested site of symbolic power**, where campaigns are not just about winning votes but about constructing realities. In this new context, **authenticity, virality, emotion, and identity** have replaced credibility, rational debate, and party loyalty as key currencies of influence.

1.3 Method, Memory, and Reflexivity

This article adopts a hybrid methodology: part **historical reconstruction**, part **discourse analysis**, and part **autoethnographic reflection**. It traces how the tools, languages, and logics of political communication have changed over four overlapping phases:

1. **The analog baseline** (2011): The last broadcast-dominated campaign.

2. **The rise of digital populism** (2014–2016): The social media explosion and party system fragmentation.

3. **The age of strategic datafication** (2019–2023): The integration of big data, microtargeting, and CRM platforms.

4. **The saturation point** (2023–2024): The return to authenticity and narrative amidst digital fatigue.

Alongside this empirical structure runs a second layer: the **personal, lived experience of a political communicator**. Having worked inside ministries, consulted for campaigns, and advised on public policy communication, I bring an **internal view of how decisions are made, how narratives are crafted**, and how campaigns often wrestle with both **technical sophistication and political insecurity**.

This reflexivity matters. Much of the literature on political communication is written from the outside, treating parties as monolithic entities and voters as passive audiences. But communication strategy is a social process, shaped by intra-party tensions, limited

resources, public backlash, and the unpredictable rhythms of media cycles. This article seeks to restore that **messy complexity** to our understanding of how political meaning is made.

1.4 Why Spain? Why Now?

Spain is not an outlier. Many of the trends described here—platformization, emotionalization, consultantization—are present across Western democracies. But Spain offers a **particularly rich case** for three reasons:

- **Territorial and linguistic diversity** complicates message consistency and forces multi-layered strategies. What works in Madrid may backfire in Barcelona or Bilbao.

- **Party volatility** means that electoral loyalty is weak, and narrative control must be earned anew in every cycle.

- **A vibrant but polarized media landscape** ensures that no message is interpreted uniformly—every claim enters a battlefield of frames.

Moreover, Spain is a **democracy in tension**: consolidated in formal terms, yet constantly challenged by regional demands, economic precarity, and institutional distrust. In this context, political communication becomes not just a tool of persuasion, but a means of **holding the democratic project together**—or tearing it further apart.

1.5 Objectives and Structure of the Article

This article aims to:

- Map the major shifts in Spanish political communication between 2011 and 2024.

- Analyze how new technologies (social media, CRM, AI) have reconfigured campaign strategy.

- Reflect on the ethical, cultural, and institutional consequences of these shifts.

- Provide a practice-based perspective that complements existing academic literature.

The structure of the article is as follows:

- **Section 2** outlines the pre-digital communicative ecosystem of 2011, setting the historical and institutional baseline.

- **Section 3** analyzes the rise of social media and the explosion of new political brands.

- **Section 4** discusses the professionalization of political consultancy and its institutionalization in public bodies.

- **Section 5** explores the role of big data, voter profiling, and strategic segmentation.

- **Section 6** reflects on the most recent campaigns and the emerging turn toward authenticity and saturation management.

- **Section 7** concludes with theoretical and practical reflections on the future of political communication in Spain and beyond.

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2. The 2011 Baseline: Analog Politics and the Last Breath of Broadcast Era Campaigns

The 2011 general elections in Spain represent a turning point in the recent history of political communication—a moment when traditional broadcast logics still dominated, but their limitations were beginning to show. At the surface, the electoral process followed a familiar script: candidates debated on television, manifestos were distributed in print, and voters were largely expected to choose between two major political forces. Yet beneath this apparent normality, Spain was experiencing a profound cultural and communicative shift. In hindsight, 2011 was the **last full electoral cycle of the analog era**—and the first one to reveal the **cracks in that system**.

This chapter reconstructs the political communication environment of that pivotal moment. It does so by exploring five interlocking dimensions: (1) the institutional structure of party communication; (2) the media ecosystem and its blind spots; (3) the status of digital tools within party strategy; (4) the impact of the 15-M movement as a counter-communicative force; and (5) the emerging generational divide in political discourse and media consumption. Together, these threads reveal a political class caught between inertia and irrelevance—unprepared for the communicative revolution that would follow.

2.1 Institutional Inertia and the Hierarchies of Message Control

Spain's two dominant parties at the time—Partido Popular (PP) and Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE)—were built around **vertically integrated, hierarchical organizations**. Their internal communication systems reflected this structure: centralized, formalized, and designed for **command-and-control message discipline**.

In 2011, party communications departments were typically composed of press officers, spokesperson coordinators, and media liaisons—trained professionals focused primarily on shaping coverage in newspapers, television, and radio. Strategic innovation was rare. Communication was reactive and defensive, often reduced to damage control during scandals or managing "photo opportunities" during campaign events. Creativity was not rewarded—**predictability was**.

This model echoed the institutional logic of **mass party systems** as theorized by scholars like **Katz and Mair**: parties acted as gatekeepers of political information, embedding themselves in both the state and the media. Communication was a tool of **legitimation, not persuasion**—meant to reinforce loyalty, not expand the base. In a largely stable two-party system, winning elections was about message control, not experimentation.

However, by 2011, this model was faltering. The economic crisis had shattered public trust. Long-held assumptions about voter loyalty were eroding. And a new generation of citizens—raised on participatory culture and digital media—was no longer receptive to the old top-down methods. The inertia of party communication systems would soon prove fatal.

2.2 The Broadcast Media Regime: Dominance, Deference, and Decline

Spain's media ecosystem in 2011 was still governed by the principles of **broadcast journalism**. Television was the single most important platform for campaign visibility, and **flagship evening news programs** on RTVE, Antena 3, Telecinco, and La Sexta commanded massive audiences. Editorial boards of national newspapers—*El País*, *El Mundo*, *ABC*—played a key role in shaping public debate and campaign narratives. Radio, particularly Cadena SER and COPE, held sway in both urban and rural regions.

Political actors treated these outlets with deference. Securing a favorable editorial, managing interviews with prime-time anchors, and participating in televised debates were the holy trinity of electoral communication. The influence of journalists was considerable: many acted as **informal advisors**, off-record confidants, and crisis managers for parties.

This regime, however, was showing signs of fatigue:

- **Media trust was declining**, particularly among younger audiences, who increasingly saw newspapers and TV news as partisan or obsolete.

- **Concentration of ownership** was accelerating, with major groups like PRISA and Mediaset exercising enormous editorial influence.

- **Lack of interactivity** meant that media consumption was largely passive, unidirectional, and disconnected from the growing culture of online engagement.

Moreover, the media system itself was in crisis. The 2008 financial crash had devastated advertising revenue, leading to newsroom layoffs, sensationalism, and an increasing reliance on political spin. Public broadcasters, particularly RTVE, faced accusations of government influence. As journalism lost its watchdog role, many citizens turned elsewhere for information and community—**first to alternative blogs and forums, later to social media**.

In short, while television and print remained powerful in 2011, they were already **losing cultural legitimacy and communicative relevance**—especially among the very citizens whose trust democracy needed most.

2.3 The Marginal Status of Digital Tools in Party Strategy

Despite the availability of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, political parties in 2011 **underutilized digital communication**. While most had official accounts, these were rarely integrated into the core strategy. Digital teams, where they existed, were under-resourced and low in the hierarchy. Posts were used to **replicate traditional content**—photos from rallies, links to manifestos, excerpts from speeches—not to foster conversation or engagement.

Several factors explain this:

- **Lack of understanding** among senior party leaders, many of whom saw social media as a threat to message control.

- **Fear of trolling, ridicule, or scandal**, particularly after a few viral missteps (e.g., awkward candidate videos, poorly phrased tweets).

- **Overconfidence in legacy media**: why take risks on Facebook when you have the front page of *El País*?

This strategic myopia meant that parties failed to **see the communicative potential of interactivity**. They treated social media as a megaphone, not as a space for storytelling, feedback, or experimentation. Moreover, digital data was not yet valued: voter profiles were based on **static polling**, not on behavioral analytics or real-time sentiment tracking.

Thus, as Spain entered the second decade of the 21st century, its political class remained trapped in a **broadcast mindset**, unable to harness the tools of the platform society emerging around them.

2.4 The 15-M Movement: The Emergence of a New Communicative Ethos

If the 2011 elections represented the last gasp of broadcast logic, the **15-M movement** symbolized the birth of a new communicative era. What began on May 15, 2011, as a protest against austerity and democratic dysfunction quickly morphed into a **symbolic reappropriation of the public sphere**, both physical and digital.

15-M was defined by its **semiotic innovation** as much as its political demands. It gave rise to a new language of political expression:

- **Memes, slogans, and banners** that captured complex critiques in humorous or emotionally charged imagery.

- **Livestreamed assemblies** and decentralized coordination via Facebook groups and hashtags.

- **Physical occupations** (e.g., Puerta del Sol in Madrid) that were constantly mediated through digital platforms, turning protest into **global performance**.

Unlike traditional parties, 15-M activists rejected the polished aesthetics of professional politics. Their communication was **messy, pluralistic, and often chaotic**—but deeply authentic. They were not selling a candidate or policy; they were narrating **a different vision of democracy**, one built on participation, horizontality, and digital co-presence.

Crucially, the communicative practices of 15-M were not confined to protest—they became the **blueprint for a new generation of electoral actors**, most notably Podemos, who would later professionalize this ethos while preserving its cultural roots.

2.5 Generational Division and the Crisis of Representation

The failure of mainstream parties in 2011 to connect with younger voters was not merely a technical failure—it was a **generational rupture**. For Spaniards under 35, the experience of economic crisis, unemployment, and political disenchantment was accompanied by a sense of **disconnection from the symbolic universe of party politics**.

Where older generations looked to newspaper editorials, televised debates, and political speeches for cues, younger citizens sought meaning through:

- Digital platforms (YouTube, Twitter, forums like Forocoches).

- Cultural production (music, memes, micro-influencers).

- Collective identity performance (hashtags, occupations, assemblies).

The communicative idioms of these spaces—irony, remix, participation, affect—were entirely alien to traditional political actors. Parties were speaking one language; voters were speaking another.

This division would later become one of the defining challenges of Spanish democracy: how to **reconnect institutional politics with digitally mediated publics**, not only through technological upgrades, but through deeper shifts in tone, structure, and strategy.

2.6 2011 as Prehistory: The End of Political Normalcy

In sum, 2011 was the **end of political normalcy** in Spain. It was the last campaign run under the illusion that control, centralization, and broadcast dominance were sufficient for democratic legitimacy. It was also the year that revealed, through the insurgency of 15-M, that another model was possible—and urgently needed.

Within three years, Spain's party system would be upended. Within five, social media would become the central battlefield. Within ten, data analytics and microtargeting would shape campaign decisions. But in 2011, none of this was visible to the political elite.

The contrast between the **institutional communication model** and the **emerging digital civic culture** would become the central drama of Spanish political communication for the next decade—a drama this article seeks to narrate.

3. The Rise of Social Media and the Fragmentation of Political Discourse (2014–2019)

Between 2014 and 2019, Spain experienced a period of **unprecedented political volatility**, institutional disruption, and communicative transformation. These years witnessed the **collapse of the two-party system**, the rapid emergence of new political formations like **Podemos**, **Ciudadanos**, and later **Vox**, and the definitive entry of **social media** into the core of political strategy.

This period was not merely about technology adoption—it marked the beginning of **a new communicative logic**, one rooted in networked engagement, emotional resonance, personalization, and immediacy. This logic reshaped not only how parties campaigned, but how voters thought about politics, how media reported on electoral contests, and how legitimacy was performed in the digital age.

This chapter explores this transformation across five interlocking dimensions:

1. The collapse of communicative hegemony and the crisis of the "center."

2. The rise of new political actors and their digital-first strategies.

3. The transformation of political language, emotion, and aesthetic.

4. The changing role of journalists and the hybridization of media ecosystems.

5. The beginning of audience segmentation and platform-specific messaging.

3.1 The Collapse of Communicative Hegemony and the Crisis of the "Center"

Following the 2011 general elections, it became increasingly evident that the **two-party equilibrium** that had defined Spanish politics since the 1980s was unraveling. PSOE and PP, once capable of securing 70–80% of the vote between them, now faced a **trust deficit** they could no longer bridge with traditional communication.

While both parties maintained their structural advantages—national reach, organizational depth, and media access—their **discursive authority was eroding**. Citizens no longer accepted the premise that political representation must be filtered through two large, ideologically anchored organizations. The discourse of the "bipartidismo" became a symbol of **political stasis**, **corruption**, and **elitist detachment**.

This discursive collapse created space for **new actors**, who positioned themselves as outsiders—not only in terms of policy, but in terms of how they **spoke**, **looked**, and **interacted**. Crucially, these actors understood that **to be new politically, one had to be new communicatively**. Their emergence marked the end of communicative hegemony and the rise of **polyphonic, fragmented discourse**.

3.2 Podemos, Ciudadanos, and the Invention of Digital Political Identity

The most significant early entrant into this new field was **Podemos**, founded in early 2014 and initially rooted in the culture of the 15-M movement. The party's communication strategy was **revolutionary**, not simply because it used social media, but because it:

- Treated **digital platforms as primary political arenas**, not just tools for amplification.

- Created a **clear, emotionally charged narrative**: "the people vs. the caste" (*la casta*).

- Positioned its leader, **Pablo Iglesias**, as a political brand—charismatic, anti-system, culturally literate, and visually distinctive (long hair, rolled-up sleeves, anti-suit aesthetic).

- Invested in **audiovisual production**, launching its own YouTube programs like *La Tuerka*, which blurred the lines between news, opinion, and political narrative.

Podemos mastered **multi-platform storytelling**, using Twitter to provoke debate, YouTube to build depth, and Facebook to share viral slogans and videos. Unlike traditional parties, it understood that **emotional connection** and **cultural relevance** were more effective than formal policy proposals in mobilizing disenchanted voters.

Simultaneously, **Ciudadanos** (C's), which began as a regional anti-nationalist party in Catalonia, reinvented itself as a **pro-European, centrist alternative** to both the PP and PSOE. While less populist in tone, Ciudadanos also adopted a **modern, polished digital aesthetic**: clean visuals, short-form explainer videos, and a focus on the personal brand of leader **Albert Rivera**.

Together, these two parties changed the grammar of political communication in Spain. They showed that **media presence and narrative control could substitute for organizational depth**. They also redefined the tempo of politics—**always-on, emotionally charged, and visually performative**.

3.3 Vox and the Weaponization of Emotion and Virality

While Podemos and Ciudadanos captured attention in the mid-2010s, the **late-decade breakthrough of Vox** introduced a new model: **culture war communication**, heavily dependent on **emotional mobilization, polarization, and social media virality**.

Vox emerged as a far-right alternative that weaponized:

- **Anti-immigration rhetoric**.

- **Spanish nationalism** (in response to the Catalan independence movement).

- **Anti-feminist and anti-globalist discourse**.

- **Digital outrage** as a strategic resource.

Unlike traditional parties, Vox did not seek mainstream validation from legacy media. It **embraced marginality** and found success by:

- Generating emotionally provocative content designed for **algorithmic virality**.

- Using **Telegram and WhatsApp** to bypass fact-checkers and reach loyal base voters.

- Posting **hyper-edited videos** of speeches, rallies, and confrontations that could be shared in bite-sized, decontextualized formats.

Vox's rise signaled a new phase in Spanish political communication: one where **truth, coherence, and deliberation** gave way to **spectacle, fear, and narrative warfare**.

3.4 A New Political Aesthetic: Affect, Authenticity, and the Meme-ification of Discourse

The 2014–2019 period saw not only new actors but the **redefinition of political aesthetics**. Traditional political language—formal, technocratic, policy-heavy—was increasingly displaced by a **style centered on emotion, personality, and cultural reference**.

Podemos spoke of "dignity" (*dignidad*), not GDP. Ciudadanos framed itself around "common sense" and "the future of our children." Vox promised to "reconquer Spain." These were not policy proposals—they were **moral and symbolic universes**, compressed into slogans and imagery.

Aesthetic shifts included:

- **The informalization of leader imagery**: selfies, casual dress, behind-the-scenes footage.

- **Direct-to-camera vlogs**, replacing long speeches with short, intimate video messages.

- **Memes, GIFs, and emoji-rich content** designed for rapid social circulation.

- **Pop culture references** (TV shows, sports, internet slang) as communicative tools.

These choices were not cosmetic. They reflected a **new model of political legitimacy**, where voters judged not just ideology, but **tone, mood, and affective resonance**. Leaders became **influencers**, parties became **brands**, and platforms became **battlegrounds for attention**.

3.5 Media Hybridization: From Gatekeepers to Reactive Amplifiers

As political discourse migrated to digital spaces, Spain's traditional media underwent a process of **hybridization**. Journalists who once set the agenda increasingly became **reactive amplifiers**, reporting on what had already gone viral or trended on Twitter.

This new media logic had several effects:

- It **flattened the distinction** between official statements, rumors, and social media posts.

- It rewarded **conflict, controversy, and novelty**, making it harder for measured voices to gain traction.

- It reduced the editorial capacity of newsrooms, which relied more on **Twitter screenshots and viral quotes** than in-depth investigation.

Traditional media tried to adapt by launching podcasts, video explainers, and fact-checking units, but often struggled to match the **speed and emotional charge of social media-native content**.

The hybridization of media ecosystems also meant that **traditional journalistic authority eroded**, particularly among younger voters, who now sourced political information from Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube influencers with minimal connection to formal political institutions.

3.6 Early Experiments in Microtargeting and Platform Strategy

By the late 2010s, Spanish parties had begun to experiment with **audience segmentation**, inspired by Anglo-American campaign models. While full-scale microtargeting was still limited by data protection laws and technological capacity, parties started to:

- **Tailor content by region, age group, and ideology**.
- **Use Facebook's advertising tools** to deliver platform-specific messages.
- **Experiment with A/B testing** on slogans, images, and emotional tone.

These practices were nascent but significant. For the first time, parties began to **treat voters as differentiated publics**, each with specific needs, fears, and cultural references. The age of the **mass political message** was over. In its place was a growing emphasis on **tailored narrative ecosystems**, each optimized for engagement and shareability.

3.7 Conclusion: Fragmentation, Innovation, and the End of Discursive Uniformity

Between 2014 and 2019, Spanish political communication ceased to be a centralized, stable field. It became **fragmented, rapid, and emotionally charged**. New parties emerged not because they had better policies, but because they understood the **aesthetics and tempo of digital culture**.

Social media was no longer an accessory—it was the main stage. Political actors were no longer just representatives—they were **performers, narrators, and emotional entrepreneurs**. Media no longer filtered meaning—it accelerated polarization and spectacle.

What emerged during this period was a **new communicative normal**—one where politics was personalized, mediated through algorithms, and dependent on the capacity to produce viral affect. This new normal would become the basis for the next evolution: the full integration of **data, analytics, microtargeting, and behavioral strategy**, which would define the 2019–2023 cycle.

4. The Institutionalization of Political Consultancy and the Professionalization of Strategy

Political communication has long served as the connective tissue between institutions and the public. But in Spain, from 2015 onward, this space of mediation has undergone a profound reconfiguration. Campaign communication has evolved from reactive, personality-driven media relations into an advanced, highly engineered strategic architecture—defined by metrics, emotional framing, audience segmentation, and omnichannel branding. This transformation has not occurred in isolation. It is the result of institutional necessity, global influence, and internal fragmentation. What was once partisan and intuitive is now outsourced, standardized, and analytically optimized. At the center of this shift is the growing role of **political consultants**: the new designers of political narrative, behavior, and identity.

4.1 From Party-Centric Communication to Consultant-Centric Campaigning

Until the early 2010s, Spanish political communication was dominated by the internal machinery of party apparatuses. Secretarios de comunicación coordinated message control, managed press releases, scheduled interviews, and responded to crises. Campaigns largely revolved around the personal authority of party leaders, manifestos, public rallies, and the occasional televised debate.

However, the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and the eruption of the **15-M movement** revealed deep fractures in public trust and political representation. When **Podemos** and **Ciudadanos** entered the scene around 2014–2015, they brought with them a different communicative grammar: short-form storytelling, platform-native messaging, meme-ready visuals, and emotionally resonant slogans that could be iterated in real-time. This shift marked the beginning of a **post-broadcast campaign logic**.

Established parties were forced to adapt. But rather than restructure their internal communications, they turned to **external professionals**: brand consultants, digital media firms, data analysts, and former journalists. These actors brought with them not only new

techniques, but a new worldview: politics as content, voters as users, campaigns as narratives.

Traditional functions were redefined: the campaign manager became a campaign architect; the spokesperson was flanked by media trainers and social media teams; strategy was no longer the domain of ideologues, but of **specialists in digital engagement, emotional psychology, and consumer behavior**.

4.2 The Consultant's Role: Strategic Advisors, Narrative Authors

Today, consultants occupy a liminal but central space in political life. They are neither public officials nor elected figures, but they often **decide the shape and scope of political discourse**.

Their responsibilities include:

- **Narrative construction**: Crafting emotionally resonant story arcs that encapsulate a party's purpose—often simplified into binary contrasts (new vs. old, people vs. elites, order vs. chaos).

- **Behavioral mapping**: Segmenting the electorate using behavioral insights, polling data, and sentiment analysis to fine-tune outreach and anticipate voter reaction.

- **Visual communication**: Designing not just logos and slogans, but also leader aesthetics, lighting, wardrobe, and background staging to elicit visual coherence across formats.

- **Media choreography**: Determining the pacing and sequencing of content release across platforms, ensuring alignment between televised statements, digital content, and press engagement.

Importantly, consultants shape not only what parties say, but **what they do not say**— what is omitted, what is euphemized, and what is strategically delayed. They act as **gatekeepers of visibility**, deciding which voices, values, and frames are elevated—and which are suppressed.

4.3 Institutional Capture: When Strategy Enters the State

The influence of consultants no longer ends with election night. Increasingly, they follow politicians into **government institutions**, embedding themselves within ministries, press departments, and public agencies.

Once in office, leaders are expected to maintain the **same communicative discipline** they exhibited during the campaign. As a result, **governance becomes a continuation of campaigning by other means**.

- Government departments adopt **brand manuals**, complete with color schemes, logo variations, tone guidelines, and voice consistency protocols.

- Legislative initiatives are announced via **cinematic teaser videos**, followed by multi-platform rollouts and sloganized hashtags.

- Crisis management becomes a **performative ritual**, with prepared statements, "authentic" behind-the-scenes footage, and controlled leaks designed to pre-empt public reaction.

This shift has birthed the "**performative state**": an apparatus that governs as much through **symbolic storytelling and emotional performance** as through policy enactment. It also means that **public institutions are increasingly structured around strategic visibility**, not just public service.

4.4 The Consultant Class: Circulation and Influence

What emerges from this transformation is the rise of a **new political class**: consultants who possess no electoral mandate but wield substantial influence. They move between campaigns, governments, think tanks, NGOs, and media outlets with remarkable ease. Their currency is strategic literacy—fluency in digital engagement, audience psychology, visual design, and data analytics.

Their backgrounds are diverse: marketing, journalism, political science, and increasingly, **behavioral economics and UX design**. Their loyalties, however, are often fluid. Many work for parties with opposing ideologies, adapting narratives to fit different brand needs. What unites them is not a political worldview but a **strategic paradigm**: a belief in message architecture, data-informed decision-making, and emotional optimization.

This class, often invisible to the public, shapes how Spain thinks about itself—what it fears, what it hopes for, and what it remembers. Yet it is **rarely subject to institutional oversight, public accountability, or democratic scrutiny**.

4.5 Strategy as Operating System: The Logic of Total Messaging

The cumulative effect of this professionalization is the emergence of a **"total messaging system"**: an integrated, always-on infrastructure for political narrative management. Within this system, everything is pre-mediated, everything is content.

Its core features include:

- **Sentiment dashboards**: Real-time tracking of voter emotions across Twitter, Instagram, Telegram, and news outlets.

- **Crisis playbooks**: Pre-authored response templates for every conceivable scandal or backlash.

- **Cross-platform coordination**: Ensuring that messaging is coherent across Facebook ads, TikTok videos, press conferences, and printed flyers.

- **Visual branding kits**: From candidate wardrobe to stage lighting, every visual element is pre-designed for shareability.

This logic increases coherence, adaptability, and message penetration—but it also **flattens spontaneity, suppresses ideological complexity, and narrows the range of legitimate expression**. Politics becomes modular and performative. Leaders become vessels for narrative flows—not autonomous agents.

4.6 Global Comparisons: Spain in a Transnational Field

Spain's consultant-driven politics reflect broader global trends, but with local specificities. In countries like the United States and Brazil, political consultancy has long operated as a multi-billion dollar industry. Spain, by contrast, entered this landscape more recently—but has quickly adapted global methods to its multi-party, regionalized context.

Key differences:

- **Regulatory framework**: Spain's electoral law and GDPR restrictions limit certain forms of microtargeting and data harvesting.

- **Fragmented party system**: Unlike two-party systems, consultants in Spain must adapt strategies for a wide range of ideological and territorial parties.

- **Civic memory**: The 15-M movement and Spain's experience with authoritarianism foster deep skepticism toward overly managed or polished political discourse.

Nonetheless, Spanish firms now routinely exchange techniques with international peers. Consultants migrate across borders. Case studies are translated into templates. Campaigns are **globalized, stylized, and interlinked**.

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5. The Datafication of Political Communication and the Rise of Microtargeting (2019–2023)

Between 2019 and 2023, Spain entered a new phase in the evolution of political strategy: the full-scale datafication of political communication. Campaigns no longer merely adapted to digital platforms — they were restructured from the ground up around **predictive analytics, behavioral segmentation, and algorithmic feedback loops**. This era marks the transformation of the citizen from an ideological subject to a **data profile**, and of political discourse from persuasion to **calibrated emotional activation**.

In the pre-digital era, political messaging was largely universal: parties crafted messages meant to appeal to broad swathes of the population. Even early digital campaigning — such as during the 2011 or 2015 cycles — relied more on reach than on targeting.

By 2019, however, Spanish political parties were fully engaging in **behavioral profiling**, drawing heavily from marketing, social media metrics, and electoral psychology. This meant:

- Building **voter typologies** not just by geography or class, but by emotional triggers and online behavior.

- Using **A/B testing** across Facebook and Instagram to determine which headlines, colors, or tones generated better engagement.

- Partnering with **data analytics firms** to combine census data, consumer preferences, and digital footprints.

The key shift was from demographics to **psychographics** — targeting people based on how they felt, feared, or fantasized, not just who they were.

Microtargeting in Spain coalesced into a hybrid ecosystem spanning platforms and practices:

- **Facebook and Instagram Ads**: Micro-campaigns for specific issues or identities, delivered to narrowly defined user segments.

- **WhatsApp and Telegram**: Decentralized, semi-encrypted message chains, especially effective for conservative and far-right narratives.

- **Programmatic ads**: Automated ad buying in digital spaces, shaped by browsing habits and inferred ideological leanings.

- **Content localization**: Targeted video and image campaigns tailored to urban neighborhoods, generational cohorts, or political subcultures.

Some of this infrastructure was outsourced to private firms, while larger parties — especially PSOE and PP — began building **in-house digital units** capable of real-time message adjustment.

- **Vox** aggressively embraced data-driven messaging early. Their 2018 Andalusia campaign and 2019 national surge relied heavily on WhatsApp chains, Telegram channels, and Facebook ads designed to provoke — using nationalism, anti-feminism, and anti-immigrant sentiment. Their messaging was short, meme-friendly, emotionally extreme, and spatially precise.

- **PSOE**, by contrast, adopted a more centralized and analytics-based model. Campaigns under Pedro Sánchez employed **sentiment monitoring dashboards**, real-time media tracking, and targeted ads based on age, gender, and urbanity. Each subgroup received carefully tuned content: emotional appeals for elderly

voters, feminist narratives for young women, institutional continuity for moderates.

- **Local elections**, especially in Madrid, Barcelona, and Valencia, saw the rise of **hyperlocal digital campaigns**. Candidates used neighborhood-level search data, keyword trends, and real-time event targeting to respond to micro-concerns — from bus routes to housing availability.

The speed of microtargeting's adoption has far outpaced public debate and legal oversight. Key concerns include:

- **Opacity**: Most citizens are unaware of what personal data is used or how it determines the political messages they see.

- **Manipulation**: Targeting exploits emotional vulnerability — particularly fear, resentment, or anxiety — rather than encouraging informed deliberation.

- **Asymmetry**: Major parties with greater funding access superior data tools, deepening electoral inequality.

- **Fragmentation**: Public discourse becomes privatized. There is no shared agora, no common space for democratic disagreement.

Although Spain's data protection authority and electoral commission have issued some guidelines, enforcement remains limited. European-wide regulation under the **Digital Services Act** may help, but practical implementation lags.

A new political figure is emerging: **the algorithmic candidate** — one whose discourse, wardrobe, posture, and tone are all shaped by real-time feedback mechanisms.

- Language is modified based on which words perform best.

- Public statements are modeled on previous posts with high engagement.

- The persona becomes a hybrid product of narrative consultants and platform metrics.

This process creates a candidate who is responsive, adaptive, and "authentic" — but only in the **predictive, performative sense** of the term. Real debate gives way to emotional resonance. Identity becomes aestheticized and scripted.

Microtargeting achieves what strategy always desired: efficiency, focus, conversion. But it comes at the price of **shared political space**.

- Voters see different messages.

- Opposing arguments never meet.

- Debates are replaced by emotionally curated filter bubbles.

The citizen becomes a **data silo**, and politics becomes preemptive — not about persuasion, but about **nudging behavior** before it is even consciously formulated.

Datafication is not inherently anti-democratic — but left unchecked, it erodes the conditions for **common deliberation and public accountability**. A democratic response will require:

- Independent oversight of political ad systems.

- Mandatory transparency for all targeted messages.

- Civic education on data use and behavioral profiling.

- Investment in **shared civic platforms** not governed by opaque algorithms.

The task is to reclaim data as a **public good**, not a private weapon.

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6. The Mediatization of Governance and the Permanent Campaign (2019–2024)

Parallel to the rise of microtargeting, Spain's public institutions underwent another transformation: the **full mediatization of governance**. Between 2019 and 2024, ministries, mayors, and agencies no longer governed in the shadows of bureaucracy. They became **permanent participants in the digital attention economy** — managing not only policy, but mood, rhythm, and narrative coherence.

The distinction between campaign season and governing season has dissolved. Political actors are now **always communicating**, always visible, always strategizing.

Examples include:

- Weekly video capsules showcasing legislative "achievements".

- Government accounts using Instagram stories, TikToks, or podcasts to "explain" policies.

- Continuous hashtag campaigns aligned with government reforms (e.g. #SpainCan, #EqualCountry).

Performance replaces cadence. Visibility becomes **a proxy for legitimacy**.

To sustain this visibility, ministries have restructured internally:

- **Digital communications teams** now produce branded content weekly.

- **Narrative consultants** craft long-form thematic arcs for major reforms.

- **Data teams** monitor emotional sentiment and adjust communications in real time.

Institutions no longer merely explain — they **storyboard, perform, and remix** their identity through content. Policy becomes audiovisual; governance becomes aesthetic.

Mediatized governance relies not just on being seen, but on being **felt**. Every policy must align with an emotional register:

- Climate policy is framed as generational justice.

- Feminist reforms are pitched as national liberation.

- Welfare expansion is tied to human dignity.

These framings create resonance — but they also risk **emotional manipulation**, reducing complexity and suppressing dissent.

Public officials are increasingly asked to perform **symbolic labor**:

- Participating in livestreams, photo ops, or behind-the-scenes reels.

- Tweeting reactions during parliamentary sessions.

- Performing "spontaneity" on camera.

Their effectiveness is now **measured in metrics**: likes, reach, engagement. This affects not just ministers, but even technical staff — visibility becomes a condition of institutional relevance.

As institutions rely on private platforms (Meta, X, YouTube), they cede **informational sovereignty**:

- Algorithms determine who sees what.

- Platforms can demonetize or demote government content.

- Public communication becomes hostage to foreign corporate rules.

A few governments have explored alternatives — public video platforms, Mastodon servers — but these remain marginal.

Mediatization reshapes democracy itself:

- Citizens are recast as passive audiences.

- Dissent becomes reframed as negativity or disloyalty.

- Deliberation is replaced by affect management.

The challenge is to create institutions that are **legible and visible**, without becoming **performative simulations** of politics.

Spain's governance model has entered the age of **strategic performance**. Visibility is now structural. Narrative is policy. Ministers are performers of mood, coherence, and continuity.

This reality demands new democratic tools:

- Literacy in media logic.

- Transparency in communicative infrastructure.

- A commitment to building **inclusive visibility** — one that does not erase dissent, flatten identity, or commodify public voice.

If democracy is now mediated, it must also be **re-imagined — and re-defended — within that mediation**.

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7. Conclusion: A Decade of Transformation and the Challenges Ahead

The evolution of political communication in Spain between 2011 and 2024 reveals more than just a shift in tactics or platforms. It maps a deeper **recalibration of the democratic experience**, shaped by the convergence of emotional politics, data infrastructures, mediatized governance, and strategic consultancy. While these changes mirror global trends, Spain's case is distinguished by its **historical memory, territorial pluralism, and post-crisis institutional fragility**, making it both exemplary and idiosyncratic.

Over the past decade, we have witnessed a **triple mutation** in Spanish political communication:

1. **From ideology to emotion**: Political messaging has shifted from programmatic appeals to emotionally resonant frames designed to activate identification, fear, or hope.

2. **From broadcasting to segmentation**: Campaigns no longer address a general public but operate through microtargeted, fragmented communications driven by data.

3. **From governance to performance**: Public institutions now operate under the logics of visibility, virality, and symbolic labor, blurring the line between administration and campaigning.

These transformations have brought clear gains in **efficiency, clarity, and responsiveness**. They have allowed political actors to engage new generations, personalize policy framing, and respond dynamically to crises. Yet they have also introduced new forms of **opacity, inequality, and symbolic centralization**, with consultants and algorithms increasingly mediating the core of democratic life.

As **artificial intelligence**, **deepfakes**, and **synthetic content** become normalized, the next frontier will not only be technical but deeply normative. How do we safeguard **deliberative pluralism** in a world of engineered consensus? How do we uphold **collective meaning-making** in an ecosystem built for personalization? And how do we ensure that communication remains a **space of democratic co-authorship**, not merely a terrain for behavioral prediction?

Spain, like other democracies, stands at a crossroads. The tools of the last decade must now be critically assessed, publicly debated, and ethically reframed. Future political communication will depend not only on the creativity of consultants or the speed of data systems—but on the **capacity of democratic cultures to reclaim agency** over the infrastructures that increasingly shape political subjectivity.

What is ultimately at stake is not simply how parties win elections—but how societies imagine themselves, relate to one another, and decide together what is worth saying, doing, and becoming.

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