

EDITORIAL

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Discourses, actors and citizens in the communicative construction of conflicts: The Catalan case

Beyond being a dispute of great magnitude, which since 2010 has confronted the Catalan government and the Spanish state, the Catalan political conflict is also a conflict constructed through the media. That is, the Catalan conflict is a mediatized conflict, in which the logics and the tempo of politics and media have been overlapping and intermingled. Moreover, the Catalan case presents other features that make the situation even more complex in terms of communication: (1) the coexistence of two similar but territorially differentiated media systems; (2) the high level of politicization of both public and private media; (3) and the existence of a mobilized civil society that has become a key actor of the conflict by organizing demonstrations and other offline and online mobilization actions.

Two years after 1 October 2017 the conflict is currently at its tensest political and social moment, since the prison sentences for Catalan leaders were announced on 14 October 2019. This special issue of the *Catalan Journal of Communication and Cultural Studies* sets out that, despite the fact that a major dispute is still underway and a political solution has yet to be found, scholars can provide significant insights on the communicative aspects of the Catalan case. The issue,

entitled 'Discourses, Actors and Citizens in the Communicative Construction of Conflicts: The Catalan Case', aims to do so by gathering different studies that deal with what could be a paradigmatic case of a media-built conflict.

As Guest Editors, we are aware that the flames of the conflict could lead to a chronological lack of distance when analysing it, but we also believe that scholars can contribute to the reflection on the political situation with an approach that can stand above the media 'noise' of the last two years. Actually, as we will elaborate on, political polarization and hence discursive polarization constitute a clear backdrop for the creation of two political communities, the independentist and, similarly, the unionist, who have constructed a space for an intense discussion and political debates taking place within their own borders.

These two communities have been fuelled by their media of reference (Micó and Carbonell 2017; Almiron 2018; Valera-Ordaz 2018) and the dynamization role of social media, where citizens have found a path of their political activism online, either through the publication of tweets, the viralization of iconic images of the conflict or the use of humorous resources such as memes. This sort of activism has also been materialized through the work of civil society organizations, who have acted as first-order mobilizing agents and, therefore, have become key political actors in the configuration of the public debate in Catalonia (Cramer 2015). These organizations have occupied a media space that has sometimes overlapped or gone beyond the traditional role of political parties. The exceptional nature of the Catalan conflict has also had a media impact at the international level, but the information on the political situation in Catalonia was either adapted to the territorial context of the foreign country that was covering it or covered with the restrictions imposed by the standard/usual journalistic routines, where the centrality of institutional and political information sources and the use of the generic framework of conflict have downplayed the complexity of the Catalan case.

All in all, despite also being seen as a useful conflict-solving tool, communication is an active component of the conflict itself. So, it is paramount to study how media articulated the conflict and the way in which politicians and citizens made use of them for achieving their political engagement or objectives. Since we cannot understand the communicative dimension of the conflict without paying attention to the context in which it is taking place, the following sections present a brief contextual note on the Catalan case and on the arguments of the contending blocks to finally go back to the role of media, as a means for introducing the articles that make up this special issue.

THE CATALAN CONFLICT: A BEFORE AND AN AFTER 1 OCTOBER

Although the Catalan conflict can be traced back to 2010 (Serrano 2013; Guibernau 2014; Liñeira and Cetrà 2015; Moragas-Fernández and Montagut 2019), at the time of editing this special issue its pivotal point in political and communication terms was, without doubt, 1 October 2017. The very same date and the days before the celebration of the non-binding referendum were marked by the presence of security forces in the streets and the use of excessive police force on the day of the vote. Therefore, 1 October represents a before and an after in the Catalan political situation, a kind of full stop in the so-called *procés*, a political process understood as the transition from autonomism to independence, which was promoted by pro-independence political forces, and has also initiated a tumultuous period of confrontation between the Spanish state and the Catalan government, popularly

known as ‘clash of trains’. The end of Catalonia’s political ‘journey’ – which was by far the main metaphorical frame used for referring to the Catalan political process within a wide political spectrum (Moragas-Fernández et al. 2018) – has given rise to alternative narratives that indicate how traditional frames used for conceptualizing the conflict are being reformulated (Capdevila et al. 2019). What occurred in the Catalan parliament after 1 October, including the Catalan declaration of independence – which was neither official nor effective – prompted the Spanish government to apply Article 155 of the Constitution¹ and call for an early regional election in Catalonia.

A change in the political landscape became obvious after the 21 December 2017 regional elections, but also in the way different actors involved in the conflict shifted their communication strategy. Such a change was conditioned by a reality that eroded prevailing narratives. In these elections, the pro-independence bloc regained its plurality in the Catalan parliament, albeit it had lost two seats whereas Ciutadans, the Citizens’ party, became the main single party in the legislative assembly. However, political disagreements and tensions among pro-independence parties and the impossibility for Carles Puigdemont to be sworn in as the new president of the Catalan government contributed to postponing the inauguration of the new parliament until May 2018. Quim Torra was sworn in as the 131st president of the Generalitat on 14 May 2018, fifteen days before a vote of no confidence was held in Madrid, leading to the removal of the Popular Party of Mariano Rajoy in favour of the socialist Pedro Sánchez, who then became the new prime minister of Spain. Sánchez committed himself to engaging into a series of negotiations with the Catalan government. At the same time, the pre-trial detention and prison sentences of Catalan social and political leaders who organized the referendum, combined with actions of political leaders who are currently living outside Spain – and are considered to be in exile by supporters of the independence movement – contributed to the fragmentation of the narratives and a repositioning of political communication strategies. In a complementary manner, one should mention a change in the role played by civil society organizations since 2012. All of these transformations are reflected on political discourses conveyed by the media, be it Catalan, Spanish or international, and by activities on social media.

The Catalan conflict has also been considered among the main factors that have led to reconsideration of the consensus derived from the Spanish transition to democracy (Montagut and Araüna 2017) that most political leaders named the ‘1978 Regime’. Together with the end of the two-party system, in which the right and the left were the main protagonists, the project of breaking with the territorial model inherited from the 1978 democratic constitutional reform, known as the State of Autonomies, put the Spanish political system under significant stress. The recent unrest in several Catalan cities after the announcement of the rulings in October 2019 is a clear example of this.

The compelling need to reform the 1978 Regime was also triggered by the economic crisis and the 15M movement led by the *Indignados* in 2011, which made visible the weaknesses of a territorial model that looked for new ways to respond to political tensions and to provide answers to rampant economic and social problems. The emergence of federal options or the defence of a self-determination scenario clashed with a new state nationalism that is no longer banal (Billig 1995) and needed to be politically put into motion through the adoption of a new Spanishness. In this context of high conflictivity – not only in Catalonia but also throughout Spain – we saw, for the first time in Spain, far-right parties entering democratic political institutions. As the *Catalan question* has not

1. The 155 article of the Spanish Constitution states that in case any regional government ‘doesn’t comply with the obligations of the Constitution or other laws it imposes, or acts in a way that seriously undermines the interests of Spain’, the national government can ask the Senate to vote on the use of the measure. The Constitution states that an absolute majority must approve the article’s use. If this happens, as it was the case for Catalonia, the national government may adopt the necessary methods to force a regional government to comply to protect the said interests.

receded since – rather, the conflict has increased –, this special issue aims at providing feedback and insights regarding the main vectors of the communicative construction of conflicts in Catalonia.

THE CATALAN CASE: PACTISM, SELF-DETERMINATION REFERENDUM AND INDEPENDENCE

The way a political or a social issue is formulated has major implications on the nature of a debate. Current tensions between Catalonia and Spain confirm this observation. Failing to convince a majority of the Catalan population that they should do without their desired revised Statute of autonomy in 2006 – negotiated and agreed to by the main protagonists in Madrid and Catalonia – the central state, following an appeal for unconstitutionality, withdrew its support to the political deal and used its power to defend the constitutional order. Of course, a major tug of war followed in which pro-Spain and pro-Catalonia forces made use of specific arguments to disqualify positions adopted by their political opponents.

If the adoption of a constitutional language, founded on the concept of pactism, preceded the State of autonomies in Spain in 1978 and the revised Catalan Statute in 2006, the more recent period did away with such a tradition, as the Constitutional Tribunal rendered a decision abandoning several clauses that had been agreed upon during the constitutional negotiations leading to the approval of the reformed statute.

Political tensions have been at a high ever since, leading the central state to flex its muscles several times by adopting a series of measures to prevent the regional parliament of Catalonia to pass laws that might activate a process of political disconnection. Both sides are attempting to advance arguments that could disqualify their counterparts. On one side of the equation, central institutions are arguing that they are there to protect the constitutional order against ‘evil nationalist forces’ that intend to take Catalonia outside of the continuing constitutional monarchy. On the other side of the equation, the Catalan parliament is arguing that there has been a fundamental ‘violation of the constitutional pact’ that led to the democratic transition and confirmed the essential contribution of historic founding nations to the transformation of Spain as a federal society. The argument goes that Madrid has clearly failed to meet its constitutional obligations towards Catalonia both as a minority nation and as a political subject and, for these reasons, actions such as holding a referendum on the future of Catalonia within Spain or even independence cannot be banned. Indeed, the decision whether or not to hold a referendum is said by the government of Catalonia to reside in the hands of its sovereign historic nation, whereas the government in Madrid frames the question differently, arguing that there exists only one political nation in Spain and that the will of the latter resides in central state institutions, associated with the notion of constitutional monarchy.

In a way, the main position of the central state is to argue in favour of political stability, accusing its counterpart of undermining the economy and creating clashes between citizens, whereas the central position adopted by the regional parliament is to argue in favour of the legitimacy of its political claims on behalf of the Catalan people. In such a fierce political confrontation, arguments of legitimacy (power of arguments) made by the Catalan parliament can hardly stop arguments of power made by Madrid. In other words, the majority nation – the *Staatsvolk* – is in most cases able to determine the course of action.

MEDIATIZATION OF THE CATALAN CONFLICT

As pointed out at the very beginning of this introduction, political conflicts are constructed through communication (Castelló 2012). Therefore, the field in which this communication takes place becomes a central issue in media studies, and indeed can be considered as an expression of the conflict itself.

The current Catalan political conflict provides an opportunity to study how a particular case reflects the dynamics established between political actors, media and citizens in the public sphere (Castelló and Capdevila 2015; Ordeix and Ginesta 2014; Perales-García and Pont-Sorribes 2017; Pont-Sorribes et al. 2018; Xicoy et al. 2017; Micó and Carbonell 2017; Moragas-Fernández et al. 2018; Dekavalla and Montagut 2018). In this context, the three-year period that stretches from 9 November 2014 until 1 October 2017 has seen a dialectical escalation between those political actors supporting independence and those who do not, leading to a scenario of intense polarization, accompanied by a deep crisis of political legitimation (Gagnon and Sanjaume-Calvet 2017; Cetrà et al. 2018).

This scenario has been supported by media actors and resulted in several debates on journalism ethics and standards, political communication practices, *fake news* as a propaganda tool, the influence of Catalan and Spanish media system features in inciting the before-mentioned polarized discussion, the role of international press media in framing the conflict and the discourses and narratives constructed around the issue by politicians, media and citizens.

Beyond the public discussion about the political conflict, the Catalan 'process' has also acted as a catalyst of organizational communication of popular demonstrations and protests, bringing special attention to the role of social networks and apps as mobilization tools. Moreover, the Catalan conflict has also generated comparative analyses with other European regions and international contexts, such as the Québécois, with whom it shares similar claims. This special issue reflects on these questions through five research articles of the Catalan conflict from the fields of public opinion, internationalization of the conflict, digital activism and representations through humour and 'infotainment' formats. The issue closes with the sharing of contrasted points of view about the Catalan conflict from prominent thinkers.

The first article entitled 'We need to talk: Willingness to speak out about Catalonia's secession' (by Balcells and Padró-Solanet) acts as a starting point, inviting the reader to delve into the conflict from the perspective of public opinion. By focusing on a survey carried out by the Centre d'Estudis d'Opinió (CEO) in 2015, which was specifically designed to test phenomena such as the spiral of silence, the authors discuss the way in which pro-independence and pro-union supporters act or express their opinion in both private and public environments, concluding that differences between both sides' willingness to talk are minimal. Results suggest a confrontation of opinions rather than a spiral of silence. The second article 'Independence 2.0: Digital activism, social media and the Catalan independence movement' (by Anderson) also looks at online environments as a mobilization space and puts forward the idea that social media platforms have become a crucial vehicle for civil society organizations. By interviewing both civil society leaders and Catalan members of parliament, Anderson shows that social media have become fundamental pillars of the independence movement, helping to overcome state-imposed institutional obstacles and to internationalize the issue across transnational networks. Nevertheless, the author highlights a darker side to engagement with social media, which includes proliferation of biased narratives, dissemination of misinformation and trolling.

The third and the fourth articles, 'The coverage of the international press in framing the Catalan sovereignty process: Analysis of ten leading EU and US newspapers 2010–2017' (by Pont-Sorribes, Perales-García, Mauri i de los Ríos and Tulloch) and 'Framing Catalonia: Evidence from Québec media' (by Dubois and Villeneuve-Siconnelly), provide results on how foreign media view the Catalan political situation. The former analyses the main newspapers in France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom and the United States between 10 June 2010 and 4 October 2017, and establishes which were the main genres, frames and journalistic sources employed when referring to the sovereignty process in Catalonia. The content analysis is complemented by in-depth interviews with foreign correspondents working for leading international newspapers in Spain. The authors conclude that the conflict frame was widely shared by all newspapers analysed for illustrating the sovereignty process, and they refer to the role attributed to the European Union as an actor that should mediate the current situation. The latter focuses on the coverage of French-language newspapers in Québec during the four months previous to the 2017 Catalan Independence Referendum, and sheds light on the way the political conflict was depicted and the influence of their own national reality when commenting on the ongoing situation. The main results highlight the dominant use of the conflict frame as well and point to the low number of direct references to the current Québec sovereignty movement and the presence of a 'projection effect', which highlights how local independence experience could bring solutions to the Catalan case.

The use of humour when reporting on the Catalan conflict is central in the following two articles. In 'Metaphors for comic relief: Satirists' self-reported contribution to democratic dialogue in difficult times' (by Fuentes), the popular TV programme *Polònia* is taken as a case study for analysing how entertainment can play a central role in making democratic coexistence possible in situations of conflict. In doing so, the author interviews the show's founding members and analyses a sample of scripts. The results illustrate that *Polònia* uses a verisimilitude-oriented language rather than the veracity-oriented language of journalism and that, rather than informing the citizens, it aims at converging life experiences of both citizens and politicians with regards to the exercise of power. The use of digital memes in the online edition of the main Spanish newspapers is the object of the study of 'iMemes and polarization: Twitter users' stances regarding Catalan Independence Referendum and Catalan Regional Elections 2017' (by Algaba and Bellido-Pérez). In their article, the authors aim to identify features of anti-propagandistic critical discourse in the imemes created by users as a tool for political engagement during the Catalan Independence Referendum and the early elections of 21 December 2017. While the use of imemes is portrayed as a resource by which the Spanish population could express their surfeit of Catalan political news – turning the hegemonic propagandistic discourse into humorous situations – the authors also conclude that, when it comes to the imemes selected by the main Spanish newspapers, there is a certain correspondence between their ideology and the alignment of the pictures selected by them.

The viralization of images through social media is also the core of an article in the Viewpoint section focusing on the role that images have played in the Catalan conflict. 'Image-sharing and iconicity on social media during the Catalan conflict (2017)' (San Cornelio and Gómez Cruz) is part of an ongoing research that aims to develop a framework for the analysis of visual practices on social media in the course of creating and re-signifying images. By analysing the pictures taken in the Ramon Llull Primary School from 1 October 2017 until 3 October 2017, the authors argue that images – especially those shared on social

media – are part of the political agenda and, consequently, constitute an essential instrument to understand and portray political manifestations in this digital age.

Finally, our intention was to close this special issue on the mediatization of the conflict not without widening our horizon to other fields that could contribute with a broader and more contextual look at the Catalan situation. Therefore, we are honoured to present two texts that invite to reflect on the Catalan conflict from a contemporary history and a political science perspective. In the first one, Andrew Dowling shares some critical thoughts on the way the independence process has been carried out over time. Dowling is a contemporary historian working in the Hispanic Studies Department within the School of Modern Languages of Cardiff University and published *The Rise of Catalan Independence: Spain's Territorial Crisis* in 2018 with Routledge. His brief essay summarizes the key elements in the discourse building process on the Catalan conflict from a critical perspective. Taking into account controversial factors such as the clash between ethno-cultural identity and civic manifestations, the simplification process of the pro-independence ideological vocabulary or the media role, Dowling points out the complexity under which the Catalan conflict is framed.

The second reflection is entitled 'An algorithm for Catalonia' and is authored by Daniel Innerarity, professor of political philosophy and Ikerbasque research professor at the University of the Basque Country, author of influential books among which *Politics in the Time of Indignation: The Crisis of Representative Democracy* (Bloomsbury 2019). By way of an epilogue, Innerarity contributes to this special issue with a valuable reflection, and even with a possible solution, on the Catalan conflict.

As we have detailed throughout this introduction, the ongoing Catalan conflict is complex. This complexity resides both in the origins of the conflict itself – the end of a pactist tradition after the 2006 Statute crisis – and in the reasoning on which the claims for independence or for an insoluble unity of Spain are based. The struggle between different political forces and construction of the arguments that they confront is built through concurrent discourses and rendered visible by the media. This special issue has sought to shed some light on the public perception of the conflict and the way the media have framed it, but also on the role that traditional and new media have played as empowering tools for mobilization of citizens and for democratization. Although we are aware of the limitations of communication studies strategies to appraise such a controversial issue, and we know that more topics related to *fake news*, big data and network analysis, agenda setting or sociology of communication may have missed in order to shed light on some aspects of the debate, we believe that the contributions to this special issue have helped significantly to deepen our knowledge on the many layers of the Catalan conflict.

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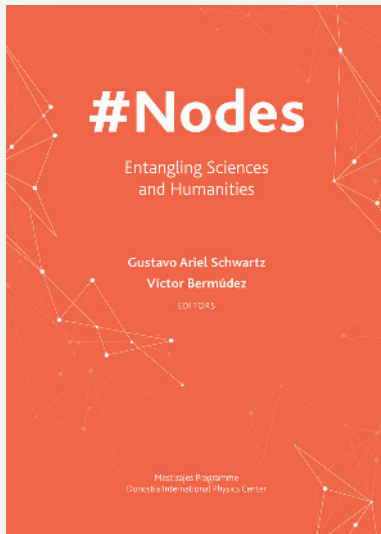
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#Nodes

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Edited by Gustavo Ariel Schwartz and Víctor Bermúdez

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