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# Populism and Independence Movements in Europe: The Catalan-Spanish Case

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**Abstract:** The most powerful countries in the world are immersed in a process of economic and cultural globalization. As an effect of action and reaction, there is an increasing emergence of nationalistic phenomena. This investigation undertakes an analysis of the current situation in Europe and places particular focus on the case of the Catalan independence movement, subjacent to the history of Spain, which has been growing notably in recent times. With 3600 articles reviewed, this study investigates the repercussions and communicative strategies from the point of view of the principal Spanish digital media. The results reveal two parallel universes, clearly differentiated by their perspective of the conflict, their contradictory headlines, and their parallel truths. This text presents key findings that are relevant for the study of political communication in the context of media studies.

**Keywords:** populism; nationalism; the Catalan independence movement; digital media; communication

## 1. Introduction

Currently the term “populism” is being used all across Europe, although there is no consensus on its definition. Different authors have highlighted populist leaders as diverse as Berlusconi in Italy, Kaczynski in Poland, Chávez in Venezuela, or Putin in Russia, as well as political parties as radically opposed as those of the extreme right *Front National* in France, *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* in Austria, *Dans Folkeparti* in Denmark, or parties on the left such as *Syriza* in Greece, *Die Linke* in Germany, or *Socialistische Partij* in Holland. These are just a few examples from the spectrum spread across Europe and the rest of the world where right and left wing movements have one element in common, namely, “populism.”

In political science, populism tends to be defined as a political strategy, style, or ideology (Mudde 2012), but it can also be understood as “a political strategy through which a personality centered leader looks for or exercises governmental power coming from direct, immediate, and non-institutionalized support from large numbers of general followers who are generally not organized” (Pontón Cevallos 2016, p. 165).

From a communicative point of view, a populist message needs to be aimed at the heart, appealing to emotions and sentiments. On the other hand, these messages ought to be simple in such a way that the whole population understands them, irrespective of their cultural or educational level.

In this context, the leader appears as a relevant element. This figure stands out above the institution itself, with a rhetoric where the language is so easy and accessible to all social and cultural levels

that even a child can understand. Another element is the situation of the citizens. This is unstable, and can be defined as a crisis situation where the people look to return to stability and an ideal climate is created, so that citizens have a predisposition to accept the leader's discourse. The leader always needs a culprit on which to base their discourse and on whom to lay the blame for the present situation that the people are enduring.

Evidently, the populism that is emerging in Europe is related to the economic crisis which arose in the U.S.A. in 2007 and which came to Europe in 2008. There is a generalization around this phenomenon in Europe, clearly led by the most radical right-wing parties, and it is finding fertile ground across all of this territory. Although, one cannot forget that populism is arising ever increasingly on the moderate right, and even on the center left, as a specific type of populism also exists on the left. Covering the ideologies from left wing to right wing in Europe, some cases can be highlighted, like Syriza and its leader Alexis Tsipras in Greece, who won the general election, or the French National Front. Extreme right-wing parties should also be highlighted, like Vlaams in Belgium, or the Freedom Party in Austria. These are examples of totally opposed political parties that have similar objectives and discourses, which guide the masses with a particular ideology different from the rest, bordering on radicalism, though with a totally populist discourse. For this reason, it can be affirmed that populism is a transverse political style. Extreme right-wing political parties grow because they exploit the feelings of insecurity in broad sections of the population, focusing on the problems of immigration, unemployment, insecurity, and corruption.

In crisis situations, identity ideologies re-emerge, coining the term nativism, which [Mudde \(2007, p. 19\)](#) defines as "an ideology which maintains that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group, 'the nation,' and that non-native elements (people and ideas) are fundamentally a threat for a homogeneous nation state." [Taguieff \(2007\)](#) directly relates native nationalism with populism as a style of political communication. One recent case of nativism in Spain was when the political party called VOX coined the term "the homeland" with the same meaning as nation given by [Mudde \(2007\)](#).

Populism is a dangerous approach, as it kills social, institutional, and political pluralism in democratic societies ([Villacañas Berlanga 2015](#)). It could be argued that populist leaders pretend to be benevolent dictators, but the fact remains that they are indeed dictators.

However, it is not sufficient just to demonize populism. It is necessary to understand the reason why it obtains so much social support. The best explanation of populism is the feeling of abandonment and injustice that is experienced by a wide range of groups of the working and middle classes within societies. For this reason, the solution to the rise of populism is a return to social and progressive politics.

This is why political answers are needed in response to economic, social, and political situations—answers that fight against economic crises, unemployment, the wage gap, political disaffection, or the loss of the state of well-being.

Currently, Catalonia is the European territory where nationalism and the search for independence are most prevalent. The community, with 7.5 million inhabitants, has attained a high cultural level, with the immersion of Catalan as the main language and of Catalan politics. Accounting for 20% of Spanish GDP, it is the wealthiest territory in Spain. For years, the conservative party *Convergència i Unió* (CiU) has been the governing party, though it now has a different acronym. Currently, Catalan leaders promote independence, and with it, the Catalan Republic along unilateral lines, having not been able to achieve approval for a referendum from the central government given that the Spanish Constitution does not provide for this.

The role of communication constitutes an essential element in social activism, especially models that induce emotional reactions, reinforcement of previous beliefs, or identification. Messages that are capable of focusing attention on the cause will ultimately motivate a previously sensitized audience to interact favorably with the source ([Pinazo-Calatayud et al. 2020](#)).

This review of the literature highlights the current European situation, with an analysis by country, paying particular attention to the influence that independence movements can have on the disintegration of countries.

This article also examines the role of the media in the construction of public belief and attitudes, as well as its relationship to social change. The research objective was to investigate the coverage and views of Spanish digital media. Based on the above, the following research questions are thus raised:

**RQ 1:** What populism and pro-independence feelings are reported in national digital press?

**RQ 2:** Could independence movements dismember Europe?

Focusing on the Catalanian independence movement in Spain as a particular case, the following research questions are proposed:

**RQ3:** To what extent are the media reporting the opposing vision of populism and pro-independence in Catalonia?

**RQ4:** Do the media focus on different aspects of the Catalanian case to enhance a vision more akin to their own editorial line?

This paper is divided into five sections. After this introduction follows a review of the existing literature, focusing on populism and offering an analysis of the current situation in Europe, with particular focus on the case of the Catalan independence movement. Secondly, the case of the conflict between Catalonia and Spain is addressed from the perspective of the Spanish/Catalan digital press via the use of an analysis of content approach. The fourth section deals with the empirical part and concludes with the evidence of two parallel universes, clearly differentiated by their perspective of the conflict.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Populism and the Pro-Independence Feeling

Costas (2017) in an article in *La Vanguardia* on 11th August asked the following question: “Which characteristics define populism? A review of the literature reveals five characteristics: (1) It offers policies knowing that they aren’t possible/viable. (2) It functions under the principle of us and them, friend or foe. (3) It uses sentiments more than reason. (4) It defends economic nationalism against globalization. (5) It appeals to the ‘people’ to substantiate its legitimacy.”

Frei and Kaltwasser (2008) proposed a classification based on three phases according to historical period, as is revealed in Table 1:

**Table 1.** Periods of populism.

Phases	First Phase: Populism as a Political Movement	Second Phase: Populism as a Stage in Latin American Moderation	Third Phase: Populism as the Logic of Political Action
Eras	End of C. XIX–beginning of C. XX.	Economic crisis of 1929–appearance of neo-liberalism at the start of the 1980s.	End of the Cold War–consolidation of the democracies.
Definition	Social movement based on agrarian ideologies and proposal of peoples’ participation without any type of intermediary.	Phase of transition, especially in Latin American countries, from an agrarian economy to an industrial economy, where charismatic leaders in favor of the people appear.	Democratic regimes become established, searching for coalitions, through a charismatic leader using methods of social conduction.
Examples	“Narodniki” (revolutionary movement in Russia, against Tsars Alexander II and III).	President J. Domingo Perón (1946–1955 and 1973–1974) and the “Peronism” movement in Argentina (1946–1955).	Vladímír Meciar, Prime Minister of Slovakia between 1993 and 1998.

Source: Frei and Kaltwasser (2008).

One of the definitions which best clarifies the concept, according to the investigations undertaken by [Freidenberg \(2013, p. 2\)](#), maintains that:

“Populism can be understood as a style of leadership characterized by a direct, charismatic, personalistic and paternalistic relationship between leader–follower, which does not recognize any organizational or institutional mediation, which speaks on behalf of the people, fosters the opposition to this as ‘the others,’ looks to change and re-establish the dominant status quo; where followers are convinced of the extraordinary qualities of the leader and believe that thanks to these, to the redistributive methods and/or the interchange the clientele has with the leader (materially or symbolically), they will be able to better their personal situation or that of the people around them.”

[Freedon \(1998, p. 750\)](#) defined populism as a “*thin ideology*,” which considers society as divided into two homogeneous and opposing groups, namely, “the pure people” and the “corrupt elite.” Populist leaders defend the theory that they are the *voz populi*—the “voice of the people,” unique for all of its citizens, thus reducing it to a monist ideology that rejects the existence of divisions of interests and opinions of the people. They also reject the rest of the political opposition, referring to them directly as a group that only pursues its own interests or those of the elite, which is extremely far from committing itself to the people ([Chesterley and Roberti 2018](#)).

The characteristics of the magnification of populism can be divided into four concepts ([Stanley 2011, p. 58](#)):

- The existence of two homogeneous units of analysis: “The nation” and “the elite.”
- The antagonistic relationship between “the people” and “the elite.”
- The idea of popular sovereignty.
- The positive valuation of the “people” and the denigration of “the elite.”

After analyzing the various definitions, several central concepts can form the basis for a broader definition of populism:

1. Social movements that possess symbolic features, based on massive popular consumption ([Taguieff 2002](#)). The ideological key to populism is rooted in the political use of the term “people” ([Antón-Mellón and Hernández-Carr 2016](#)). In the case of the “*procés*” (the political process in Catalonia), mass demonstrations with independence flags can be observed, where the leaders in their rallies launched the message “we do what the people demand” in their discourse.
2. Charismatic leaders who enjoy easy and direct communication with the masses, which awakens feelings of an emotional bond through simple slogans ([Rivas Leone 2002](#)). In the case of the last elections in the U.S.A., candidate Trump could be appreciated as a leader who was sure of himself and capable of saying what the people wanted to hear—in rallies or via social networks.
3. Solution through change, normally motivated by an economic crisis or simply due to the disenchantment of the citizens with government policies or due to a corrupt political class. This follows the argument of confrontation–solution–change by us, the saviors, and them, the enemies ([Abts and Rummens 2007](#)).

[Bachmann and Sidaway \(2016\)](#) argue that the Brexit vote was due to five key terms: Populism, nationalism, imperialism, fragmentation, and inequality—as happened in the U.S.A. with Trump and his slogan “make America great again,” where the most disadvantaged and disillusioned social layers of politicians made him president ([Bachmann 2013](#); [Bachmann and Sidaway 2016](#)). Similarly, Brexit defenders appealed to the feelings of the citizens by making them see that a United Kingdom free of European Union policies would once again be a great country.

References to emotions, feelings, and the search for polarization in digital and social media are increasingly visible in politics, particularly in the context of ideological fracturing of the media ([Boler and Davis 2018](#); [Happer and Philo 2013](#)). With the introduction of the term “post-truth,” a decisive change in the discourses toward emotionality can be detected. Objective facts are less influential in the formation of public opinion than appeals to feelings and beliefs.

In short, [Barthel and Mitchaell \(2017\)](#) argue that the media keep political leaders. In a society where post-truth acquires such an important role, polarized opinions, both of politicians and of the media, result in citizens being moved by their feelings in order to be confronted by their cultural identities or ideologies ([Brown 2017](#); [Fangen and Holter 2019](#); [Kemmers 2017](#); [Fairclough 2013](#)).

## 2.2. Independence Movements in Europe

One of the fundamental elements of communication which the Catalan Government, and mainly its president, in the period of the study has undertaken is the internationalization of the conflict.

The dismemberment of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia in the 1990s led to the creation of new states like Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Serbia, and, later, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The effect of this made European authorities afraid of an atomization of the different states within the Union. Thus, it is necessary to understand why it is important to analyze the current situation in Europe and the different types of independence movements that exist in each country. For instance, a problem in Spain could be a problem for the rest of the countries belonging to the European Union, especially upon seeing that an example of disintegration of the territory could result in the leaders of independence movements from various countries also seeking independence, and so breaking the spirit upon which the European Union (EU) was built. Although the United Kingdom is currently undergoing a process of separation motivated by Brexit, it is interesting to include it in the study, as the Catalan Government makes continual use of the Scottish referendum as an example.

As [Weiler \(2012\)](#) explained, the vision of the founders of the European Union—Schumann, Adenauer, de Gasperi, and Monnet—was based on surmounting separate identities and frontiers; ultimately, of differences, discrimination, and mistrust after the Second World War.

That is why the new Europe was based on a willingness to construct an even closer “union” amongst its peoples, thus representing integration as opposed to fragmentation. Though it has to be acknowledged that the resurgence of old and new national “egoism” not only makes it more difficult to achieve these objectives, but also increasingly affects more European countries, in many cases motivated by the crisis in the last decade. Societies are suffering transformations that debilitate solidarity, which is one of the basic pillars of the EU facing nationalistic identification ([Forner and Senante 2014](#)).

There are many pro-independence activities coming together in Europe, and this study analyzes the most relevant country-by-country (Figure 1).

### 2.2.1. The United Kingdom: Scotland and Northern Ireland

Since 2011, when it achieved a majority in the Scottish Parliament, the Scottish National Party converted this victory into a vindication for holding a referendum in order to achieve sovereignty. In this referendum, held in 2014, the pro-independence movement lost by 55.3% to 44.7%. Apart from the city of Glasgow, in the rest of the cities the result was in favor of remaining within the United Kingdom. One of the motives for the rejection of independence was the doubt over whether Scotland would be able to continue as part of the European Union. Currently, with Brexit and because of the United Kingdom leaving the European Union, the Scottish independence movement debate has reopened.



Figure 1. Independence movements in Europe.

The request for independence for Northern Ireland is an historic one. Currently the republican Sinn Féin, previously linked to the republican paramilitary group known as the Irish Republican Army (IRA), is the second most powerful force in Northern Ireland's parliament. After the Brexit referendum and the Northern Irish majority voting in favor of remaining in the EU, the independence movement parties have again asked for a referendum on independence, with the objective of remaining in the EU.

In both cases, the British government has rejected the possibility of a vote to leave the United Kingdom.

#### 2.2.2. Germany: Bavaria

Bavaria is the most prosperous German state (länder), which represents 15% of the population of the country, has its own language, and the majority of the population are Catholic, while the rest of the country is mainly Protestant. In a survey held in July 2017, the result was that one in three Bavarian citizens wanted independence from Germany. However, the Bavaria Party related to the independence movement only obtained 2.3% of the vote in the last election in the regional parliament. In the case of Bavaria, in January 2017, the German Constitutional Tribunal promulgated that German Fundamental Law would not permit the unilateral separation of its states.

#### 2.2.3. Italia: Padania (Northern Italy) and Tirol in the South

Padania was a term coined by the political party Liga Norte's (Northern League) leader Umberto Bossi in 1996 and is comprised of the most prosperous territories in Italy—Lombardy, Aosta, Piemonte, Liguria, and Veneto y Emilia-Romagna. It does not have its own language, culture, or identity.

Tirol, in the south, is a region which belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire until the end of World War I, when it came to depend on Italy. The predominant language is German. In the case of this territory, the factors that motivate nationalistic feelings are political, historical, social, and, above all, economic factors.

#### 2.2.4. France: Corsica

In France, there are different territories with independence movements, as in the case of Brittany, Roussillon, and the French Basque Country—but Corsica is, without doubt, of the most relevance. With its own language, The Corsican National Liberation Front (FNLC) has spent years demanding independence from France by means of attacks, as was the case with Northern Ireland or the Spanish Basque Country. Currently, the FNLC, as in the case of the IRA or Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA), has abandoned armed struggle. Nowadays, Corsica has the aspiration that the Corsican language become a co-official language, although, as yet, this has not been achieved.

#### 2.2.5. Belgium: Flanders

The case of Belgium is significant, as it looks at two very different territories. In the north is Flanders, where they speak Dutch and which is a prosperous area, and in the south is Valonia, where they speak French, and which is less prosperous. Currently, the conservative party Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA) promotes peaceful independence in Belgium.

#### 2.2.6. Spain: The Basque Country and Catalonia

The Basque Country, together with Navarra, are the only autonomous communities in Spain that administer their own tax revenues. The Basque independence movement had its highest growth due to the Francoist repression, with the terrorist organization ETA (founded in 1958) at its head. When Franco died and with democratic normality, ETA continued its armed struggle until 2011, when it declared an end to its armed activity. Currently, the ideological line of the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) in government is of an autonomous territory within the Spanish state.

Catalan nationalism, like Basque nationalism, has always been rooted within society. With the dictatorship of Francisco Franco, there was a persecution of the language, the culture, and the ideology of both communities, with the objective of making one Spain. The death of the dictator and the formation of the Spanish autonomous regions, combined with the promotion of cultural identities and languages, led to more nationalistic feelings in Catalonia

### 2.2.7. Other Independent Movements in Europe

Previously, we selected cases that were considered most relevant at the time of the study, although we must not ignore other independence movements such as in the Spanish case, in addition to Galician or the Balearic Islands, regarded as their own nationalities, or others included in the so-called Països Catalans (distributed in the states of Spain, Andorra, France, and Italy).

In the United Kingdom, since 1925, Plaid Cymru (or the Welsh Nationalist Party) has defended the independence of Wales. This party has served as a germ for other independence parties in Wales, although with little electoral representation.

Finally, in Italy, there are two more cases in addition to those indicated in the study. One is that of the Sardigna Natzione Indipendentzia party in the case of Sardinia, and the other that of the Movimento per l'Indipendenza della Sicilia or the Frunti Nazziunali Sicilianu–Sicilia Ndipinnenti in Sicily.

Taking into account these and the other nationalist currents in Europe, attempts have been made to reflect the most significant and those that currently have the greatest electoral representation and national and international repercussions. The evolution of nationalist currents or movements is in continuous change today, thus being a topic of interest for further research.

### 2.3. Case: Catalan Independence—Spanish Nationalism vs. Catalan Independence

In the case of regional nationalisms, there is a fight for autonomy or independence with respect to status in order to establish a homogeneous national identity. Normally, those led by the state use confrontation formulas against an imaginary enemy (Mandelbaum 2016), which can be internal, such as social, ethnic, or religious minorities (Kuhelj 2011), or external, such as against state institutions. As Mudde (2007) indicated, these nationalisms, in many cases, are not immune to nativism, xenophobia, or populism. The Catalan case, like the Escoses, is considered liberal, civic, and inclusive (Lepič 2017)

The unstable situation between Spain and Catalonia began much further back in time, developing and growing around the concept of nationalism. This concept seems to be divided between a political acceptance and another based on the identity of the people.

Since the first national problems, dating back to the end of C. XVIII, with the economic “injustices” and the withdrawal of privileges from the Catalan territory, a feeling of discontent on the part of Catalonia toward the Spanish state has only grown, almost always around questions of economics and identity (Moreno-Luzón 2006). Ultimately, the situation of discontent is far from having decreased since the beginning of C. XXI.

The president of the government, Catalan Pascual Maragall, belonging to the *Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya* (PSC), prepared in 2005 a proposal for the reform of the Statute of Autonomy of Catalonia. On May 10, the project reached the upper chamber of the Spanish Senate, who approved it without any modification, with votes against the *Partido Popular* (PP) and the abstention of *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (ERC). A year later, on 18 June 2006, Catalonia was submitted to a referendum. The result showed, with a 48.85% share, 73.90% in favor versus 20.76% against (Martínez-Herrera and Miley 2010). In the PSC and *Convergència i Unió* (CIU) referendum campaign, they defended the Si, while ERC and PP defended the No. On 31 July 2006, PP filed an unconstitutionality appeal against the new Statute of Catalonia before the Constitutional Court.

Despite the positive results of the referendum, it caused an electoral advance. On 1 November 2006, elections were held with a victory at the polls of CIU, although without a majority. President José Montilla (PSC) was elected to establish a tripartite coalition government between *Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya* (PSC), *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (ERC), and *Initiative for Catalonia Verds-Esquerra Unida i Alternativa* (ICV-EUiA).

On 28 June 2010, the Constitutional Court resolved the appeal of unconstitutionality, although the ruling maintained the definition of Catalonia as a nation, and declared 14 articles unconstitutional and reinterpreted the others in a restrictive manner. The modification of a law approved by the Catalans in a referendum was considered as unacceptable by CIU, which led to a change in the discourse of Catalan nationalism to the so-called “right to decide” of the Catalans (Martí 2013), causing popular protests and promoting the feeling of Catalan independence (Medeiros et al. 2015).

On 28 November 2010, elections were held and Artur Mas (CIU) was elected as President of the *Government of Catalonia* by simple majority. The PSC obtained its worst results and was forced to leave the government by not joining its ERC and ICV-EUiA partners to reissue the tripartite. The country was immersed in the economic crisis (Rico 2012) that led Artur Mas to establish, among other priorities, a new economic financing model. In the campaign and later, in the government of CIU, he caricatured the Spanish state as a thief who steals wallets from the Catalans. The negotiations between the president of Catalonia and Spain (Mariano Rajoy, PP) did not reach an agreement on the claims of the first to establish a fiscal pact.

Two years ahead of schedule, the 2012 Catalan elections were held in a context of economic recession, controversial austerity measures, growing political disaffection, and growing popular support for the independence of Catalonia (Rico and Liñeira 2014). The electoral campaign was marked by a strong plebiscitary character, since it was impossible to hold a referendum (Muñoz and Guinjoan 2012). For the first time, CIU campaigned for the independence of Catalonia. The consequence of these elections was a fully polarized Catalan Parliament in the territorial concept rather than in the left/right ideological one (Rico 2012).

On 26 October 2015, the XI legislature of the Parliament of Catalonia was constituted. An independent coalition won the electoral victory in the elections to the Parliament of Catalonia with 72 deputies—*Junts pel Yes* (62) and CUP-CC (10). *Junts pel Sí* is an electoral coalition formed by *Democratic Convergence of Catalonia* (CDC), *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (ERC), and *Democrats of Catalonia and Moviment d'Esquerres*, whose objective is the declaration of the independence of Catalonia.

In September 2016, the President of the Government of Catalonia, Carles Puigdemont, announced to the Catalan Parliament that a referendum would be held on independence for Catalonia in the second half of 2017, with or without the consent of the Spanish Government. At this point, the birth of the populist leader, into which this political figure had converted, became discernible.

In June 2017, it was announced that the referendum would be held on 1st October, asking the Catalan population the following question:

*“Do you want Catalonia to be an independent state in the form of a Republic?”*

In response to this question, the Spanish Government affirmed that the referendum would not take place, as it was considered illegal. Ignoring these declarations, the Catalan people prepared to conduct the referendum as planned, though now expecting the possible intervention of the Spanish Government.

The Catalan conflict has radicalized the Spanish panorama into two main groups; those who call themselves pro-independence or those who call themselves constitutionalists. With the former group, it is evident that all those who declare the necessity for a Catalan Republic identify themselves with the population and with this line of solving all of the territory’s problems. The latter group, the constitutionalists, defend the idea that the Spanish Constitution ought to be respected, and therefore its laws as well. Although these two groups represent the polarization that Spain is enduring, there is a third group which advocates a modification of the Spanish Constitution in order to give the Catalan people the power to vote in a referendum on independence, such as the one which occurred in Scotland.

### 3. Methodology

The analysis of the case of the conflict between Catalonia and Spain was addressed from the perspective of the Spanish/Catalan digital press, and to achieve this, it was necessary to delve deeper into the presentation of the information and treatment afforded by the press. The articles published in the principal Spanish digital media were analyzed by quantitative content and qualitative interpretive analyses.

The analysis of content permits inferences to be reproduced based on specific characteristics identified in the messages (Van der Meer 2016; Krippendorff 2004). This type of analysis allows the discovery of tendencies and the revelation of differences in content communication. Likewise, this allows the comparison of messages and means of communication, and the identification of intentions, appeals, and symbolic characteristics. To this effect, value and frequency analysis were used.

The discriminant characteristics of the analysis of content ought to be objective, systematic, and quantitative (Kassarjian 1977; Krueger and Casey 2000). Firstly, the investigators need to develop precise rules and categories of analysis so that analysts may apply the same body and content and generate consistent results. These rules and categories minimize subjective predispositions and the selective perception of the analyst (Krueger and Casey 2000). Further to this, the attribute of objectivity in the analysis of content separates it from literary criticism, due to the fact that the latter lacks repetitiveness (Kassarjian 1977). Secondly, the systematic application of objective rules upon each component of the content analysis and the guarantee of the relevance of the information for the questions of interest demonstrates the need for systemization. The strategies and the rules for analysis ought to be incontestably documented, clearly understood and articulated by each member of the investigation team (Krueger and Casey 2000). Thirdly, the requirement of quantification implies that “the datum may be subject to statistical methods, not only for brief and limited summary of the findings but also for interpretation and inference” (Kassarjian 1977, p. 10). The process of content analysis includes the categorization of articles into six main components: (1) Unification, (2) sampling, (3) recording/coding, (4) reduction, (5) infer, and (6) narration (Krippendorff 2004). The first four components constitute the process of the creation of computable data from raw texts (Krippendorff 2004). The last two use the information generated from the previous four components and help investigators to seek and generate possible answers to the questions in the investigation.

#### 3.1. Unification

This means dividing the text into units, which can be defined as “the systematic distinction of one segment of text which is of interest for analysis” (Krippendorff 2004, p. 83). Based on the questions of the investigation formulated for this study, the articles of the digital media were grouped together based on the relevant work on the subject. Therefore, based on the existing literature, 3600 articles published between 6 September and 6 November 2017 were reviewed (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Data sheet.

Universe	<i>La Razón, ABC, El Mundo, El Confidencial, El País, La Vanguardia, El Periódico de Cataluña, and el Diari Ara</i>
Units of analysis	A total of 3600 articles in the Spanish and Catalan press(400 from each newspaper)
Period analyzed	6 September–6 November 2017
Criterion for choice of units of analysis	Catalonian specials
Reliability	95% validation with two encoders

Source: Compiled by the authors.

The Catalan conflict began years ago and continues to this day. Evidently, representative dates of the *procés constituent* and of the declaration of the Catalan Republic by the then President of the Government of Catalonia, Carles Puigdemont, were selected, which is why the period between 6 September and 6 November was chosen, when the tension amongst the citizens and the media were at their highest.

### 3.2. Sample

The relevant sample method was chosen (intentional sample) for the study. This method “has the objective of selecting all the textual units which contribute to responding to certain research questions” (Krippendorff 2004, p. 119), developing a systematic hierarchy to reduce the number of units included in the analysis (Lee et al. 1994).

The simple selection of these eight newspapers is due to their editorial lines and readerships, which represent a vision that adapts to the system of the media designated as polarized pluralism (Hallin and Mancini 2004). The authors were conscious of the existence of other digital media but discarded them due to their having smaller readerships at the time of study.

### 3.3. Recording/Coding

Recording/coding provides a link between collected texts and the researchers’ thoughts (Krippendorff 2004). A well-developed registration process helps the researchers to organize and categorize the data and offer a brief general description of the information extracted from the articles. Using predetermined categories like organizational tools, the fundamental information of each article was registered on a coding sheet designed for the study. The coding sheet was developed based on previous studies that identified and reviewed the existing literature on a specific subject.

A coding sheet was devised where the information gathered was structured into four blocks, the first of these being dedicated to the variables of identification and the second to variables of information (Yanes Mesa 2004; González-Teruel 2015). In this type of study, the treatment the leader gives to the symbols in the images is of vital importance, as much in photographs as in videos. For this reason, a third block, referred to as variables of graphic composition, was designed. Finally, in terms of the collection of information from newspapers in their digital formats, one fundamental aspect is the link with other news items and the readers’ comments. Thus, the purpose of the fourth block was to test virality (de las Heras-Pedrosa et al. 2017) (Table 3).

The technical sheet for gathering data was divided into four blocks. Each one was analyzed with a different number of items, coded with consecutive sets of numbers in order to gain better processing and comparison of data. The statistical program applied for the data processing and analysis was SPSS 25.

### 3.4. Reduction

The usefulness in collecting, processing, and evaluating large quantities of information (Sánchez Aranda 2005) and its frequent use in the description of the components of media messages (Igartua 2006), converts this into the most appropriate method of investigation for this study. If this instrument of investigation were not available, it would be almost impossible to conduct a study of these characteristics (Berganza and Román 2005).

**Table 3.** Evaluation sheet.

Identification Variables	Date
	Newspaper
	News
	Links
Information processing variables	Type of information
	Presentation of information
	Treatment of the information
Visual composition variables	
	Importance of symbols in the image
Variable links with news	

Source: Adapted from (Yanes Mesa 2004) and (de las Heras-Pedrosa et al. 2017).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. A Vision from the Analyzed Digital Press

#### 4.1.1. Chronology of the Events in the Catalan Procés Constituent

The Spanish and Catalan newspapers have closely followed this conflict, providing daily information on the different events that have been happening. This research article aims to reflect the stance taken by each of these.

All of the media, without exception, highlight some key days in the period analyzed, focusing their articles on these events. For this reason, a chronology has been produced, which includes the most notable events of the Catalan procés constituent during the period analyzed, with the aim of understanding their importance (Table 4).

Table 4. Newspapers analyzed in the sample.

Day	Main Events
6/9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The Catalan Parliament with the support of the political parties <i>Junts pel Sí</i> and the CUP (<i>The Popular Unity Candidacy</i>) pass the law for the referendum.</li> <li>- The Law on the referendum of self-determination is linked to the independence of Catalonia.</li> </ul>
7/9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The Constitutional Court provisionally suspends the convening of the referendum.</li> <li>- The Law of Transience is passed in the <i>Parlament (Catalan Parliament)</i>. Additionally, the Electoral Court of Catalonia is formed.</li> <li>- State prosecutors announce legal action against <i>Parlament y Govern</i>.</li> </ul>
8/9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The Constitutional Court initiates a process of legal action against Carles Puigdemont and the rest of his executive team.</li> <li>- Request that the Civil Guard, National Police, and <i>Mossos d'Esquadra</i> (the Catalan regional police force) adopt the necessary measures to prevent the referendum.</li> </ul>
9/9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Jordi Turull encourages the printing of official material (ballot papers) from the website of the Official Diary of the <i>Generalitat</i> (Government of Catalonia).</li> </ul>
11/9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Multitudinous gathering for the <i>Diada</i> (Catalonia's National day) 2017.</li> <li>- The Spanish Government files action against The Catalan Law of Transience.</li> </ul>
12/9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The Constitutional Court suspends the Catalan rupture law.</li> </ul>
13/9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A judge closes the website of the <i>Generalitat</i> about that government.</li> </ul>
14/9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Police and Civil Guard arrive in Catalonia.</li> </ul>
20/9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The Constitutional Court condemns Forcadell and the Bureau of the Parliament of Catalonia</li> <li>- Operation Anubis (police operation to close specific websites).</li> </ul>
1/10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The referendum is held.</li> <li>- Clashes between voters and police. Hundreds injured. The "yes" vote obtains 90%.</li> <li>- Spanish President Mariano Rajoy uses police force to cut the illegal referendum.</li> </ul>
3/10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- General strike in Catalonia.</li> <li>- A forceful message from King Felipe VI, speaking of the seriousness of the situation of the pro-independence challenge.</li> <li>- The Catalan crisis produces the greatest decline in the Spanish Stock Exchange since Brexit.</li> </ul>
8/10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Demonstrations in Barcelona in favor of Spanish unity and the Constitution.</li> </ul>

Table 4. Cont.

Day	Main Events
10/10	- Puigdemont addresses the Catalan Parliament. - Declares a Catalan Republic and, with it, independence from Spain.
16/10	- The judge from the Spanish High Court, Carmen Lamela, decrees prison without bail for sedition for the President of the Catalan National Assembly (ANC), Jordi Sánchez, and the Òmnium Cultural, Jordi Cuixart, for “promoting” a siege against the Civil Guard on 20 September.
21/10	- Rajoy announces the application of Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution (to ensure the fulfilment of constitutional obligations by all autonomous regions).
25/10	- A total of 1501 companies abandoned Catalonia in October.
27/10	- Mariano Rajoy dissolves the Catalan Parliament and dismisses the Catalan Government. - Regional elections are called for 21 December.
30/10	- The ex-president and several members of his cabinet move to Brussels.
31/10	- Puigdemont declares that he will not return to Catalonia until he is granted judicial guarantees. - Puigdemont is summoned to declare before the Spanish judiciary.
2/11	- Junqueras and other ex-Government ministers are sent to prison. - The Spanish National High Court ( <i>Audiencia Nacional</i> ) subpoenas Puigdemont and his ex-ministers.
5/11	- Puigdemont and the ex-ministers hand themselves into the federal police in Brussels after the Spanish judiciary sent a European detention order. The judge releases them.

Source: Compiled by the authors.

#### 4.1.2. The Information or Disinformation in the Newspapers

The so-called “battle of the challenge of independence” has been fought on many fronts—political, judicial, business, in the streets, electorally, and, of course, on the communicative front.

During this period, the agenda setting of all of the mass media, including newspapers, led with the star subject of the day, “Catalonia.”

Broadly speaking, arguments that coincide with those lines of action studied and analyzed previously when speaking about populism can be observed in the press. Thus, firstly, as Canovan demonstrated (Canovan 1999, p. 7), “a form of politics is practiced based on a close link between political leaders and their followers.” This can be appreciated by the fact that many leaders of the *procés* attended demonstrations alongside their voters; for example, Puigdemont, who appeared, together with his party, at the protests against the arrests carried out. In the same way, just as Costas (2017) detected, “this works under the principle of us–them, friend–foe.” Puigdemont and his party made it appear that those who were not pro-independence were the enemy, amongst these, state security forces.

Secondly, in the same way, it can be appreciated that, as [Hermet \(2003, p. 8\)](#) declared, “this is done in a way that, achieving the objective, solves problems instantly, although in the long term.” In this utopia of the *procés*, businesses have been observed leaving Catalonia and no leader has sought a solution to this problem.

Thirdly, and to conclude, the assertion by [Weyland \(2001, p. 73\)](#) stands out: “The development of a strategy through which a charismatic leader governs without the counterbalance of state institutions.” The clearest example can be seen by Puigdemont, who, without being the president of the Republic of Catalonia, calls himself so and acts as such, knowing that he does not have international support and that this is contrary to the legality of the Spanish State.

Radicalization, and therefore two realities, can be seen in the mass media, if we compare *el Diari Ara*, *La Razón*, or *ABC*. The first is a pro-independence newspaper and left wing, and the others are constitutionalist and conservative.

In the first case, for *Diari Ara*, the pro-independence headlines and images were those which were represented by the multitudinous protests in support of the *procés* with *estelada* flags (unofficial flag to express support for Catalan independence) and acts of support and bravery by the citizens were always peaceful, while the Spanish state was represented by fear of the security forces attacking citizens with acts of violence. The judges, and in particular Spanish laws, were considered oppressors and an appeal was made to revolt. Catalonia, a wealthy territory, self manages better as a republic. From the data obtained from *Diari Ara*, it ought to be noted that the use of the figure of Puigdemont was what obtained greater prominence in its news articles, focusing a total of 64 images on this person. This newspaper put Catalonia at loggerheads with the Spanish State at all times. The message centered on the idea that the solution to all of Catalonia’s problems would be resolved through independence. It continually appealed to feelings and identity vis-à-vis the disdain towards the Catalan people from the rest of the Spanish people. The Francoist discourse was resurrected, positioning the Spanish Government as fascist, and national celebrations like Hispanic Day (*día de la Hispanidad*, 12 October) as a Francoist remora. Finally, it should be noted that it considered Article 155 as being a coup d’état against the Catalan institutions.

In the case of the newspaper *La Razón*, pro-independence news was treated in a more “derogatory” way, versus theoretical objectivity of “constitutionalist” news. Consequently, this also happened with the two leaders, Puigdemont and Rajoy. *La Razón* provided an image of reasonableness to the President of the Government, while Puigdemont was given a more chaotic image. It was in the opinion columns where the ideology of the newspaper could be seen more faithfully, with headlines like: “Puigdemont: A circus trapeze artist without a net” or “Puigdemont namby-pamby on Instagram.” On analyzing the images, a careful handling of Rajoy can be perceived, while those of Puigdemont tend to show unflattering gestures. Finally, *La Razón* provides its readers with numerous cartoons or satirical illustrations of the pro-independence challenge. The newspaper’s line advocates a united and strong Spain. It defends the millions of Catalans who find themselves repressed by the *Government* of Catalonia and who are too afraid to dare to speak. Of course, it is against a referendum because, according to the Spanish Government line, it is unconstitutional, and furthermore, the approval of an amendment ought to be held in all of Spain: “The decision of the separation or not of Catalonia corresponds to all Spaniards.” *La Razón* maintains the belief of the Government that on 1-O (1 October), the security forces did their job and only intervened in extreme cases. Article 155 is the only solution to counteract the attempt at a coup d’état against the Spanish State, which the *Government* of Catalonia, with Puigdemont at its head, made with the unilateral declaration of the Catalan Republic.

The newspaper *ABC* is a royalist, conservative, and Catholic newspaper, and therefore its editorial line was connected to these ideologies. The headlines and symbols used were normally of independence, the Spanish flag, and the monarchy as the main elements of its discourse. The most repeated news articles from this newspaper during the period previously mentioned were the referendum of the 1 October, the King’s speech on the issue of Catalonia two days later, and three days after the referendum when Josep Lluís Trapero was called to declare regarding the alleged crime of sedition.

On 1 October 2017 (1-O), a referendum for the independence of Catalonia was called by the Government of Catalonia autonomously, conducted illegally after having been suspended by the Constitutional Court on 7 September. With regard to this, it is noteworthy that a number of the news items were treated from a “constitutionalist” point of view, supporting Spanish unity and its Constitution. Another of the most prominent news stories during this period was that of 3 October and the speech by the King of Spain, dealing with independence and the Catalan referendum. The editorial line of this newspaper showed the King along with headlines like, “The King calls upon the State to defend itself,” “The King demands ‘the strong commitment of everyone’ to assure constitutional order,” or “The international press applaud the King’s ‘exceptional’ speech.” After 4 October 2017, following the referendum, the leader of the *Mossos d’Esquadra* (the Catalan regional security force), Josep Lluís Trapero, was called to declare regarding the alleged crime of sedition during the referendum. One news story which stands out is that of the headline, “The Pope confirms that he is against self-determination in Catalonia.” This piece of news leaves no doubt regarding another of the editorial ideologies of this newspaper—Catholicism.

*ABC*, like *La Razón*, supported the actions carried out by the state security forces on 1-O and supported them in the harassment they suffered, by citizens in favor of independence, in the hotels in which they were staying. These media reported with special emphasis on the violent movement of said citizens. The pro-independence leaders were portrayed as perpetrators of a coup d’état.

*El Confidencial*, which leans toward a center right doctrine and, apart from this, which does not give negative criticism to the independence movement, offered a neutral model of information and was sometimes apolitical towards the conflict. The pro-independence news items were treated from a perspective whereby it is the reader who interprets and creates their own opinions. With respect to the two main leaders, Rajoy lost prominence in the analyzed news items compared to Puigdemont, who stood out despite a more chaotic image of him being projected. The articles in this newspaper faithfully reported Puigdemont’s populist messages, casting him as the victim with regard to the non-integration into Spanish society and the anti-Rajoy feeling and Article 155; positioning the Spanish government as a “fascist government” and the European Union as a “club of the decadent.”

In the case of the newspaper *El Mundo*, special emphasis was placed on its vision with regard to the political leaders. *El Mundo* maintained a neutral stance with Mariano Rajoy. Although some of its articles denote certain criticism, the vast majority of them reflect full support of his management of the situation. A clear example of this was on 1 October when the important decision to send state security forces to assure that the referendum would not happen was attributed to him. On the other hand, when Puigdemont was referred to, the view was always negative and, as with the other newspapers, he was branded as chaotic.

Analyzing *El País*, it can be confirmed that 62% of the news was regarding independence and, from the treatment of the information, it can be shown that 62.6% was negative, 19.4% neutral, and 18% positive. Therefore, the problem of independence was covered, but on analysis, it can be seen that all of the headlines from this newspaper were in support of “constitutionalism.” Though it is true to say that the way the Spanish Government acted on 1 October was heavily criticized.

After analyzing the news published by the newspaper *La Vanguardia*, it can be confirmed that, as it considers itself to be a center right newspaper, its information and images were much more constitutionalist than pro-independence. It could be seen to be trying to maintain a neutral position on the subject, thus allowing the reader to draw their own conclusions. During the two months of the analysis, *La Vanguardia* published a larger number of constitutionalist news items (66%) compared to pro-independence news items (44%). The constructive criticism toward constitutionalism accounted for 27% of the total news items, and the negative criticism towards pro-independence formed 32%, compared to 41% neutral information. Therefore, after closer analysis of the results obtained, it can be affirmed that *La Vanguardia* maintained a center right line with regard to the information on the Catalan problem, but attempted to avoid clearly positioning itself on the constitutionalist side.

Another of the Catalan newspapers analyzed was *El Periódico*. In relation to the level of information, the frequent use of “appellative” news was observed, i.e., it contained persuasive elements with which it tried to influence the reader. The line pursued by these appellative pro-independence style articles exceeded those that were constitutionalist by 13 points. From this, it can be understood that the editorial line of the newspaper was inclined toward the pro-independence side. Negative views predominated in this newspaper, accounting for 46% of all news stories compared to 34% positive. It is interesting to highlight that many of the articles with a negative view were neither against pro-independence support nor constitutionalist support, but rather the politics which cause this feeling of patriotism and belonging to the nation, on the part of both the citizens of Catalonia and those from the rest of the Spanish territory equally. After analysis of this publication, it can be ascertained that it held a firm pro-independence stance and maintained every aspect of this ideology. Although its articles were varied and also dealt with subjects related to “constitutionalist” parties, it is evident that it had to adhere to current affairs, and it tended to view these from a somewhat critical stance, while at the same time extolling independence. As in the case of *Diari Ara*, its articles were very critical of the state security forces and of the Spanish Government. On the other hand, they extolled Catalan politicians who were for pro-independence. With respect to political leaders, this newspaper tended to use the image of Carles Puigdemont opposed against that of Mariano Rajoy, praising the former and showing him at his best, while highlighting the negative actions of the President of the Spanish Government.

It is noteworthy that, due to the conflict, readers’ comments in the articles increased exponentially. Newspapers like *El País* stand out, where there were thousands of comments per article, with opinions on both sides.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

It has been shown that media can play a central role in not only legitimizing certain courses of action, but also in the placing of trust, emotions, and credibility in particular versions of social policies, which coincides with [Happer and Philo \(2013\)](#) research.

The EU project, based on a pluralistic, multicultural, and multilateral vision of Europe, is totally contrary to independentist practices and the creation of states centered on rigid notions of internal uniformity and gravitating around the practices of nation-statism. ([Conversi 2014](#), p. 25). Contexts such as the identity of the territory, the politics, the economy, the linguistics, or the geography within which the political affiliations, territorial confrontations, or feelings found among citizens are forged are often not exclusively state or regional. Knowledge of this context is essential to avoid conflicts and to attain local, regional, national, and European aspirations ([Lepič 2017](#)).

In conclusion of the Catalan case, it might be argued that while the Catalan newspapers *Ara* and *El Periódico de Catalunya* have pro-independence tendencies, it is really *Diari Ara* that maintains a more radical view of the problem. They argue that the Spanish state led by a central government, security forces, and a fascist justice system are to blame for the Catalan problem. On one hand, these newspapers offer a view which casts Catalonia as the victim, where the rest of Spain wants nothing to do with Catalonia, while at the same time assuming the position of being the wealthiest territory in the country. The images shown are those of multitudinous demonstrations with *estelas*, pro-independence leaders attending rallies, and, above all, images of state security forces charging against peaceful civilians or their leaders arrested merely for having an opinion.

A contrary view of the above can be observed in *La Razón* and *ABC*, which extol the patriotic pride of being Spanish. Some headlines and subtitles reflect the good work carried out by the national police and Civil Guard, who defended attacks by separatists led by the CUP (the Popular Unity Candidacy) on 1 October and who, in the following days, were besieged in their hotels, unable to leave due to the protests of violent separatists. Furthermore, the law and the justice system are seen as fundamental elements in the defense of the Constitution. They highlight the Spanish flag and the demonstrations in support of the union for Spain, the departure of businesses from Catalonia, fearing a republic and the economic collapse of Catalonia, those aiming at a coup d’état who do not respect the laws and

who invent other tailor made laws, and children chased and harassed at school by their teachers and classmates for speaking Spanish or for being the children of police officers or Civil Guards. Evidently, *La Razón* applauded Article 155 and the progress that it implies towards a constitutional normality.

It can be confirmed that, although each newspaper shows its political tendency, half of the analyzed newspapers “try” to address their articles with a purely informative objective, leaving sensationalist or populist news so that the reader can reach their own conclusion—as is the case of *El Confidencial*, *El Mundo*, and *El País*, and *La Vanguardia*.

On the other hand, analyzing newspapers such as *La Razón* or *Diari Ara* in the days that this study lasted, the scene differs according to the reading of the newspaper. Contradictory headlines and parallel truths can be seen, being able to conclude that the most radicalized newspapers offer their audiences two parallel universes and each one shows their truth with respect to the conflict. They promote, on many occasions, populist movements, arguing in favor of the Spanish Government and/or the Government of Catalonia. These results agree with [Happer and Philo \(2013\)](#), who point out that the advent of digital media has shown the power to change public attitudes and behaviors, with information appealing to feelings and polarizing society with the continuous search for an enemy.

[Fairclough \(2013\)](#) posit that the media are, in essence, a disputed space in which most media groups can establish the domain of specific messages through agenda setting, creating the possibility of changes in attitude, behavioral response, and the formation of public opinion.

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