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From Heroes to Traitors: Political Populism in the Catalan Independence Movement's Use of Social Networking Sites

De héroes a traidores: Populismo político en el uso de las redes sociales por el movimiento independentista catalán

Absctract
This study analyses how social networking sites can prompt or delay a political decision, regardless of the veracity of the messages shared. Specifically, focus is directed on the 24 hours from 26 to 27 of October 2017, when an unconfirmed piece of news substantially affected the framing of the political leadership of Carles Puigdemont, the then president of the Generalitat de Cataluña (regional government of Catalonia). Those supporting independence altered their perception of Puigdemont, breaking with the narrative of the hero to accuse him of betrayal. For its part, the discourse of the constitutionalists was similarly polarised. Finally, it should be noted that social networking sites relied on the messages published in the conventional media which, by way of the daily news and breaking news, shaped the public conversation.

Resumen
Este estudio analiza cómo los sitios de redes sociales pueden provocar o retrasar una decisión política, independientemente de la veracidad de los mensajes compartidos. Específicamente, la atención se centra en las 24 horas del 26 al 27 de octubre de 2017, cuando una noticia no confirmada afectó sustancialmente la estructura del liderazgo político de Carles Puigdemont, el entonces presidente de la Generalitat de Cataluña (gobierno regional de Cataluña). Aquellos que apoyan la independencia cambiaron su percepción de Puigdemont, rompiendo con la narrativa del héroe para acusarlo de traición. Por su parte, el discurso de los constitucionalistas estaba igualmente polarizado. Debe tenerse en cuenta que las redes sociales se basan en los mensajes publicados en los medios convencionales que, a través de noticias diarias y noticias de última hora, dieron forma a la conversación pública.

Keywords
Framing; social networking sites; Catalonia; Independence; populism

Palabras clave
Enmarcado; redes sociales; Cataluña; independencia; populismo

1. Introduction

The figure of Carles Puigdemont, President of the Catalan Government (Spain) between 2016 and 2017, is of special interest for political communication. His election as President in an urgently convened parliamentary session (on 10 January 2016) and his persistence in calling a unilateral independence referendum have converted him into a recurrent political figure in the crisis of the European Union (Politico, 2018). Puigdemont, a journalist by profession, is well acquainted with how public opinion is manipulated and has known how to convey a clear message ('Volem votar') in order to mobilize Catalan social actors in favor of greater self-rule and maybe even the region's legal separation from Spain. Since the events of October 2017, Puigdemont has been a fugitive from Spanish justice.

For some Catalans, Puigdemont is a hero of the cause for independence. The secessionists have resorted to many different digital platforms and associative networks to get their message across (Ordeix & Ginesta, 2014). For others, the former president is a traitor who has betrayed the Spanish Constitution—although it should be noted that before 18 March 2018, this constitutionalist group had done little to defend the unity of Spain and its constitution. But both groups have leveraged social networking sites (SNSs), consolidating polarized ideas and discourses, to convey their messages.

This situation of political uncertainty begs the question of how important developments are framed on SNSs. Thus, the question that this study poses is whether or not SNSs have the ability to change radically the perception of a public figure due to an unconfirmed news story. To analyze this question about political leadership, real or fake news and the shaping of public figures, the echo that the aforementioned political developments had on SMSs from 26 to 27 October, the most crucial dates, is analyzed here.

In the first section, the narrative of the hero in political communication and how this has evolved towards populism will be reviewed. In particular, what is of interest here is the conception of this narrative and its reworking on SMSs. In the second section, the method of analysis and the value of SMSs as tools for studying the framing of the secessionists and the collapse of the narrative of the hero in the wake of the failed referendum will be described. In the third section, the behavior of SMS users in relation to the reaction of the media, as well as the capacity that both possess to unify real and fake news, will be examined. And lastly, the results and conclusions will be discussed.

2. The narrative of the hero in political communication

The hero possesses the same attributes in the universal literature, for instance, he is 'a person who is admired for their courage, outstanding achievements or noble qualities' (The Oxford Dictionary, 2017). According to Encyclopaedia Britannica (2016), the hero is the main character in a story due to his skills, strengths and courage. Heroism is rooted in tragedy, that is, the moral mandate that obliges heroes to champion causes that they believe are just. It is not a romantic tragedy because the struggle for the common good holds the promise of certain victory. Heroes cannot renounce their mandate and that is why they ultimately take action. They defy the powers that be (Figure 1) thanks to the extraordinary qualities that they possess and manage to persuade those around them (de la Torre, 2010). The relationship between heroism and populism is of a performative and aesthetic nature (Moffit & Tormey, 2014): the action and discourse modify the public's subjective interpretation. Puigdemont has portrayed himself as a 'saviour' (del Rey Morató, 2007: 226) playing a leading role in all the political developments in Catalonia. As a result, he has become (for some) a celebrity of its cause for independence (Becker, 2013). The circumstance that have made it possible are based on political attitude: he became the President and promoted the referendum against the Spanish law. He managed personal social media accounts to show disobedience crafting a self-image of rebel (Figure 1). He has a defiant approach to political response coming from central government and judicial power, because the leader from the former referendum in 2014 were prosecuted. Puigdemont developed a hero narrative drawing an institutional distrust environment -including Spain and the European Union institutions – where his commitment represents direct democracy, and the voice of the people. Indeed, during the summer 2017, some members of the cabinet decided not to continue in office fearing judicial consequences of the referendum. That was a tipping point to divide between "distress" and "fearless" political leaders committed to be the founding fathers of the new republic.

The second aspect is the quest for the common good, a limitless show of generosity and courage. Come hell or high water, the hero pursues a promise of victory. It is a virtuous heroism that strives to and can change the course of events. The hero acts as social glue rallying the people around an impossible cause or symbolic action. Puigdemont is an example of how the public narrative is constructed. Largely unknown to the general public, despite the fact that he was the mayor of Girona when he stepped forward to champion the cause, he was named president unexpectedly and by accident.

The third point is the recognition of the other, the antagonist who the hero (Puigdemont) encounters along the way before reaching his ultimate objective. The former president gives social conflicts semantic meaning (Verón, 1985) when he points to a Catalan demos at odds with the rest of Spain. For Mouffe (2000), under populism the friendly antagonist shares the same symbolic and public space, although he disagrees with how political order should be instituted. Rather than seeking a consensus inherent to liberal democracy, the intention is to trigger a confrontation between political orders based on the desire for action. Under this context, Puigdemont's social media management explore direct reach with the independence cause, using public service media against plural voices, promoting web, apps and hashtags to construct the "hero" image against big powers. In particular, Twitter multiplied his digital exposition.

Figure 1: Puigdemont, a rebel against the Constitutional

The antagonist should not be confused with the traitor, that person who sacrifices the common good or cause for personal gain. Although the hero can become a traitor if he changes the destiny of those around him or renounces an exemplary behavior for the cause (Figure 2). Gallardo-Paúls (2016: 89) notes that the Internet user has an 'almost exhibitionist' will and the network's discourse is 'essentially monological, self-centered and egocentric'. The exhibitionist approach fits with the hyper-leadership style favored by Puigdemont. Consequently, he tends to make undiplomatic statements, rejects media outlets as mediators and oversimplifies complex analyses.

Figure 2: Rufián breaking the hero frame

The last element involves tailoring a narrative without scientific rigor or conceptual precision. Reason, legality or facticity collapsed; legitimating conspiracy theories breed for pro-independence audiences. It is an epic narrative that places the accent on action, rather than on reflection or on the consequences of the decisions made. The hero acts on an ethical impulse. The undesired repercussions affect the hero's reputation and the success of his mission. The former president bases his political activity on agitation on SNSs and through social movements which have retweeted his messages to such an extent that he has created his own information ecosystem. Hallin (2019) believes that this new media ecology is essential in the mediatization of populism:

In which the traditional media and traditional journalistic profession are no longer central to the flow of information in the way they were through the last decades of the twentieth century. It is a fragmented structure, in which different segments of the population are exposed to different facts, different spectra of opinion and different ideas about the legitimate boundaries of political discourse' (2018: 8).

The populist hero prefers huge demonstrations and multitudinous events organized around his figure and his cause, in line with other populists (de la Torre, 2017). Thus, Puigdemont has used the public service media, which are directly accountable to the Catalan government itself, to promote a vision of the Catalan question. He belittles the journalistic work of those who criticise his style of political management and representation and employs the media in the same way as other populist leaders: 'Twitter has been another platform for populist presidents to berate and harass critics. […] Presidential tweets patently reflect populism's antagonistic speech and "hostile media" attitude' (Waisbord & Amado, 2017: 1341). He avails himself of public spaces to magnify his discourse. He denounces the 'injustice' with which he is being hounded for 'political reasons'. And he wants to return to Barcelona, but fears retribution. These are the perfect ingredients with which to construct a message of heroism that dovetails with the polarization of Catalan society (CEO, 2018; Generalitat de Catalunya, 2017).

Figure 3: Catalan Elections results (21st December 2017)

The political hero takes the shape of a populist leader, a vague concept that operates on four levels: appeals to the people, anti-pluralism because society is homogeneous, access to power and attacks on the institutional liberal order (de la Torre, 2010; Müller, 2016). In political communication, the construction of the narrative of the hero is a rhetorical and stylistic resource that is resorted to during electoral campaigns, social mobilisations and 'political affectivity' (Arias Maldonado, 2016). As stated above, the role of social media in today's news media environment contributed to profile Puigdemont as a leader of the cause, a state-man, not a traditional politician. The self-image signals the consolidation of a united nation stigmatizing pluralism. Under the circumstances of digital narrative, Puigdemont's attitude fits with the conspiracy theories, where Spanish and European institutions work together against the Catalan independence. Attacking these institutions (Figure 1) he sends a message of "Catalan people" unity against the foreign institutions. As other populist leaders, Puigdemont neglects trust in media, as social media structure his own message without intermediaries.

Populism is identified with a leadership style revolving almost exclusively around the figure of the president, an antagonistic discourse and an obsession for media coverage (Waisbord & Amado, 2017: 1331). Populism is based on the power of persuasion of the political message that identifies a number of neglected social demands (independence), a victim (the good Catalans) and a leader (the former president himself) who is a hero because he has had the courage to confront the institutions. On SNSs, this behavioural pattern is repeated to gain visibility and buttress the presidential position: 'They have used the platform to bolster presidential communication just as they have done by resorting to media management tactics such as the frequent, long presidential national broadcast and press conferences with friendly journalists' (Waisbord & Amado, 2017: 1344). The political information cycle accelerates and blurs the boundaries between instantaneous messages (memes) and confirmed news, between information professionals and propagandists. In this context, the challenges are information leaks, the attribution of importance and the contextualisation of political information (Casero, 2018: 965).

Puigdemont's media activity apes that of classic populism. The vindication 'Volem votar' is an example of the 'empty signifier' (Laclau, 2005: 269) which encompasses all demands and acts as a tenuous link between different actors and social groups. For de Blasio and Sorice, exercising the right to vote is in tune with this exogenous dimension of political responsibility:

The same rhetoric on direct democracy tends to restore a principle of aggregation (as in Madison's conceptions of the representative method); it is no coincidence that populist movements and parties tend to reject the logic of participatory democracy or the methods of deliberation. This logic is sometimes rejected due to the presumed efficiency of technologies for the improvement of democracy. Considering the continuous and responsible participation of everyone, these movements prefer the episodic and decisive exercise of the referendum (the use of judicial or electoral instruments within representative democracies) (2018: 3).

The logic of representation at a referendum level dovetails with the mediated construction of reality by public figures who are worthy of the confidence of voters. They are authentic insofar as they connect with the emotions of SNS users (Enli, 2017).

3. Research method, questions and hypothesis

From 1 to 27 October 2017, Puigdemont became the champion of the Catalan cause, a turn of events that has converted him into one of the noteworthy figures in recent history. He managed to call and carry through a unilateral referendum and declare the independence of Catalonia off his own bat—although this declaration was shortly suspended. These political decisions, contrary to Spanish constitutional doctrine, converted him into the hero of the new republic. However, on 26 October, a leak implying that he had had a change of heart and had made a political volte-face converted him into a traitor for 24 hours on the same SNSs that he had leveraged during his term in office. What was important was not the actual leak (which was false, since regional elections had not been called), but the fact that such a call might have been envisaged. The journalist Enric Juliana clearly describes the frenetic activity on 26 October as 'the traitors' press conference' (2018a, 2018b). Santi Vila, a regional councilor and the only politician to have resigned after the unilateral declaration of independence, conceptualizes the idea of heroes and traitors in the regional cabinet in an identical fashion (2018).

Accordingly, the aim of this study is to determine how Puigdemont was converted from a hero into a traitor on SNSs and how he subsequently salvaged his prestige among those in favor of independence. It underscores the volatility of the secessionist frame, the viralisation of polarized messages and the credibility (or not) of the conventional media. The study's theoretical framework is supported by the academic literature and, more recently, by the experiments conducted by Shulman and Sweitzer (2017: 238), who have demonstrated that 'in a political context, novel political events or issues arise all the time, and when this happens, people are expected to arrive at a judgment even if little available information exists'. Their study is 'optimistic' as regards the relationship between ideology, attitudes and the processing of new information. While other authors hold that such activity is simulated, a sort of 'controlled interactivity' (Stromer-Galley, 2014). Finally, the question of time management a news media environment emerges as key argument. Bodker and Anderson (2019) explain how the populist communication style needs "politics of impatience", where Twitter creates a so-called "populist time". The notion includes a real-time approach to every news, the intense disintermediation based on the leaders' charisma and followers, and the impulsivity to share pre-politics messages based on values rather than in more elaborated ideas or viewpoints.

The research question is as follows: as Puigdemont characterized himself as a hero of the independence, can media impact partisan audience?

Three hypotheses are put forward:

H1. Partisan audiences are not interested in facts, when the political leader is considered a hero. Information disseminated through SNSs connect to two pre-existing polarized frames (secessionist and constitutionalist vote)

H2. The hero narrative signals political communication populism, and it needs more tweets than facts. Facts are less relevant as media repeat leaders' message. Under this condition, to develop a hyper-leader profile is an strategic activity in political communication.

H3. Fact-based discourse is less interesting than the conversation itself. Digital conversations in social networks is based on news media. However, the media shaped the conversation, although they were not the 'reading' source.

3.1. Research design

Framing is one of the most popular political communication research techniques (López & Pavía, 2018). In the classic definition proposed by Entman, 'To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described' (Entman 1993: 52). And for their part, Chong and Druckman (2007) note that the presentation of public affairs influences their comprehension. Frames do not operate in a vacuum, but reinforce the predisposition of individuals.

Framing is a method that 'essentially involves selection and salience' (Entman, 1993: 52). It has been used here to select the keywords that organise ideas and convey values, thus transmitting information inasmuch as this determines whether or not an event is newsworthy (Matthes & Kohring, 2008), and to make them more salient in order to identify the characteristics of such an event and to correlate some attributes with others. For Howard et al. (2011), grouping words serves to complete datasets, to map the relationship between the actors and to broaden lines of analysis. In both techniques, the author of the message, the sources quoted and the genre employed are identified. The authors of messages are relevant when the intention is to determine the importance of the conversation, regardless of whether they are the most mentioned users or the ones to whom most attention is paid by others. At this point, it is convenient to distinguish between institutionalised actors (political parties, associations, groups, etc.) and individuals.

The two techniques are present in individual (tweets) and social discourses (the media). A semantic content analysis reflects the hybrid media ecosystem and the distribution of power (Chadwick, 2013: 208): 'The hybrid media system exhibits a balance between the older logics of transmission and reception and the newer logics of circulation, recirculation, and negotiation'. Hashtag frequency and content illustrate the relationship between social media, news outlets and the powers that be, whether they be newspapers or political institutions. In the conventional press, the selection of frames is a technique that establishes a 'set of interpretative packages', from which editorial values and lines can be deduced. Internal structures of values and emotions, which are not only rational, play a role in the selection of individual frames. For Kahneman (2003), individual judgement not only draws on emotions but also on rational cognitive capacities. And, according to Shulman and Sweitzer (2017), the selection of simple frames increases the level of political commitment and the effectiveness of civic initiatives.

In contrast, the variables and interactions that influence the process of constructing meanings multiply on SNSs. The conversation's degree of centrality and the actors' specific importance in the creation of ideas, the standardization of hashtags and the evolution of conceptual trends are also assessed. Puigdemont's portray as a hero or a traitor (Figure 6) is not based on the references and messages sent via Twitter. Figure 8 shows how media participate in the conversation, shaping the topics and the frame: audience's tweets are connected to television brands (Al Rojo Vivo, Más Vale Tarde).

Twitter provides an intermediate frame because it combines individual emotions (user-generated content) with journalistic messages (media message sharing). It is an arbitrary frame more prone to polarization than to viralisation. In the negotiation of meanings, categories and discourses, a negotiation of authority and influence is observed. Alfred Hermida notes:

> Established elites transfer their institutional power to social media. But they operate alongside emergent, networked-sourced nodes of influence as ad hoc publics elevate certain actors on specific issues at specific times, within specific contexts and domains. A greater understanding of what forms of power play out on social media is essential to illuminating processes of networked gatekeeping, networked framing, and networked sourcing (2015: 2).

The tool for creating intermediate frames is the hashtag, keywords included in messages that serve to beat the algorithm in order to gain visibility, focus the conversation and engage with the community. In the case of populism, public discourse activates a range of values and basic sentiments. The hero, as the traitor, is dualized in antithetical values. As figure 4 and 5 shows, the binary image is clear: legal and law/people' voice; free elections/collaborator; Spain/National Catalan Assembly; and so on. Activating the discourse prefigures indulgence attitudes to not accurate information, and no fact-based evidence.

Hashtags are an effective way of generating social conversations on matters of common concern, without geographical or language barriers. They are also instrumenting of political commitment that require a minimum effort in exchange for highlighting participation in a cause. There is already plenty of scientific literature that has employed hashtags as a way of identifying conversations on social media and analysing salience (Thorson et al., 2016; Gerbaudo, 2012; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012). For Rambukkana (2013), hashtags ambiguously represent a semantic diversity inherent to hybrid information systems:

Hashtags are hybrids in the taxonomy of types of information. They are both text and metatext, information and tag, pragmatic and metapragmatic speech. They are deictic, indexical—yet what they point to is themselves, their own dual role in ongoing discourse' (2013:1).

In the Catalan context (Rodon, Martori, & Cuadros, 2018), there is a recurrent use of hashtags to frame the debate on sovereignty: #apunt conveys messages in favour of independence, while #diada conveys institutional or constitutionalist messages. In the same vein, Ballesteros remarks:

In a symbolic fashion, if geographical frontiers do not yet separate nations of law, they do indeed seem to determine de facto information nations characterized by their tendency to offer their own incompatible interpretations of political processes per se' (2015: 180).

Keywords filter content and broaden the scope of tweets. Doing so, Twitter became the public sphere for a large number of partisan voters. The platform articulates the sense of participatory culture, where public opinion, politicians and social movements coordinate protests. However, the choice of words and—by extension—the expression of the intrinsic values of users are less frequent. It is in this research context that this study makes sense. Partisan voters are polarized and engage through ingenious hashtags devoted to mix political issues, news, facts, and opinion (Figure 7).

3.2. Data gathering and sample

This study, typical of social science research through the prism of 'Internet time' (Karpf, 2012) and social sciences and big data (González-Bailón, 2013), is innovative insofar as it analyses live data: people tweet and update information on a daily basis, creating new hashtags and displaying new behaviours. The results, rather than static, are ever-changing.

The Politics Buzz tool was employed to gather data between 8 am on 26 October and 8 am on 27 October. All the messages were retrieved from Twitter, Facebook, digital forums or conventional news outlets. The study universe included 23,225 units, 94% of which were retrieved from SNSs. There were no geographical limits, but there were indeed language restraints: the messages selected were in Spanish, Catalan, English and Italian, a country where the Catalan issue has aroused huge interest (Juliana, 2017). Specifically, 94.54% of the messages were written in Spanish, followed by English (2.67%), Catalan (only 2.42%) and Italian (0.36%).

A Boolean search was employed to identify keywords on any SNSs or conventional news outlet with an online presence, while truncation was used to identify hashtags (tags) and trending topics, content shared and individual authors. A significant number of exclusions was established (by means of AND NOT) with an eye to eliminating false positives unrelated to the object of study. The search was performed on the descriptor 'traitor' in the four aforementioned languages: traido*, traici*, trait*, traïdo* or traïció*.

4. Result

The search yielded 23,225 unique results. Disaggregated by keyword, the first was 'traido*', with 11,910 results, followed by 'traici*' with 9,587, together representing 92.55% of the total. For their part, the Catalan keywords (traïdo* or traïció*) accounted for 9.41% of the search results. By theme, the cloud shown below (Figure 4) offers a visual representation of the importance of each one of the keywords. 'Puigdemont' was the most repeated keyword (8,703 results), although 'traición' was mentioned on 15,694 occasions. This was followed by the two burning political issues at the time: the application of 'Article 155' and 'elections' with 3,843 and 3,419 references, respectively.

Figure 4: Puigdemont, framed as traitor

In the tag cloud shown below (Figure 5), the font size represents the importance of the 212,729 messages retrieved with the tool.

Figure 5: Tag cloud (the greater the font size, the greater the importance)

#duiinminenteesp (Espejo Público, Antena 3) and #Arvcat (Al Rojo Vivo, La Sexta), the conversation's most relevant hashtags, referred to news programme content broadcast before midday. La Sexta's hashtag #reuniongovernarv figured among the most cited twice, the digital reality being more important than the audio-visual content per se, i.e. users continued to share the hashtag, even though it did not now have anything to do with the content originally broadcast by the channel.

These were followed by #ppsoe, representing the traditional stance of the two-party system in Spain, a hashtag with negative connotations since it portrayed the two parties as part and parcel of the political establishment, without drawing any distinctions. At a third level, there were hashtags relating to the process, such as #republicaara, #barcelona, #dui, #llibertatjordis and #traidores. And, lastly, the hashtags #diaduim4 (Las mañanas de Cuatro, Cuatro) and #elsmatinstv3 (Els matins, TV3), the former relating to a programme with the fifth largest audience share and the latter to one broadcast entirely in Catalan, in which context it is indeed a benchmark.

Table 1. Audience shares (%) on 26 October 2017

	Audience share from 7 am to 2 pm	Daily average
Antena 3	14.8	10.4
Telecinco	14.2	12.9
La Sexta	11.7	10
La 1	8.5	8.2
Cuatro	6.5	4.8

Source: Own elaboration using data released by Formulatv.com.

The time distribution of activity shows a peak between 12.11 am and 4 pm, when the news about the election call was leaked and the initial reactions of political and social actors were registered. During those four hours, Puigdemont was associated with political betrayal: the idea that he had renounced his political goals and had accepted the terms and conditions of the central government went viral. When the election call was denied at 5 pm, the viral bubble burst.

The conversation on SNSs corresponds to the timing of the events. The President convened a press conference at 1.30 pm to call elections, but delayed his appearance twice, until the news that he was not going to do so was leaked at around 3 pm. At that moment, the perception of betrayal began to fade and the frame disappeared. This evolution is also comparable with that observed in Figures 7 and 8, with #republicaara and #traidores peaking between 1 and 2 pm, before vanishing.

Figure 6. Evolution of topics over time (query: traido, traici, traïció, traïdo, trait)
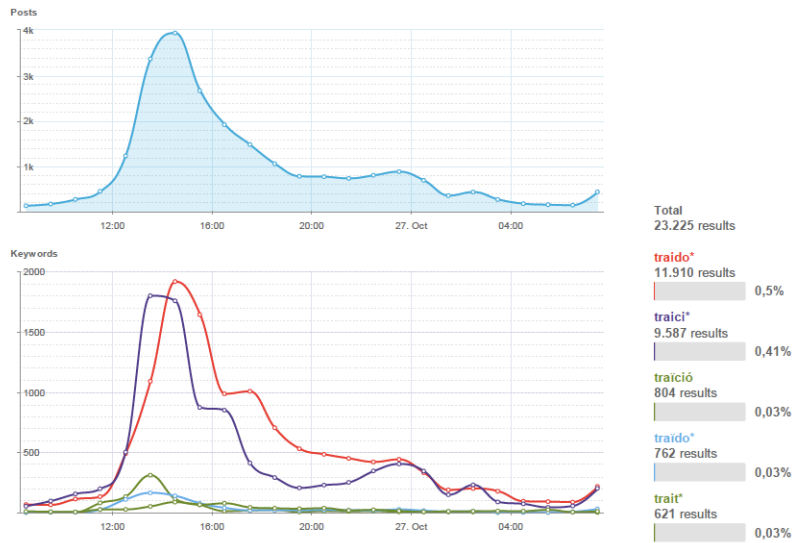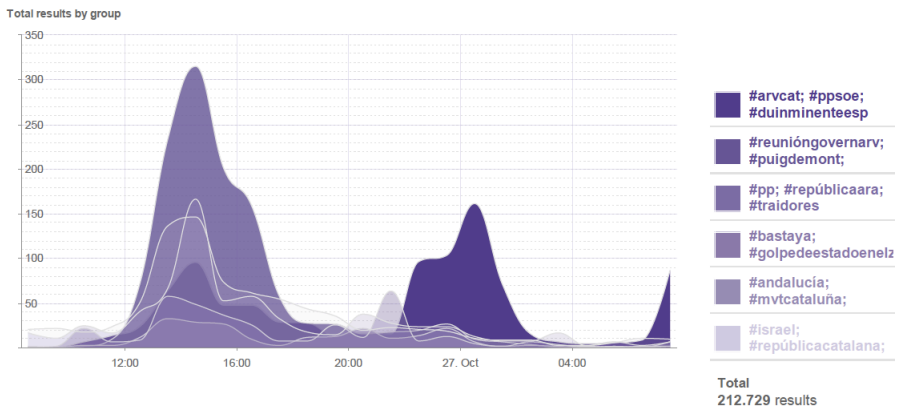

Figure 7. Evolution of hashtags over time

Figure 8. Evolution of hashtags relating to the unilateral declaration of independence

In relation to the distribution of content, Twitter accounted for 72.3% of the messages, the result of combining the 15,767 tweets, 67.9% of which went viral. Facebook came in second place with 5.155 posts, representing 23.6% of the total, followed by ForoCoches, with 296 posts (1.4%), the rest being symbolic (2.8%). These figures are equivalent to an estimated potential audience of 362.5 million unique users.

The results for the conventional media were comparatively lower, with 1,403 posts accounting for 6% of online activity. A qualitative perspective is essential in a rapidly changing media environment in which an increasingly more intensive use is being made of SNSs (Karpf et al., 2015: 1899). Thus, the 10 topics that generated the greatest amount of discussion through retweets (RTs), comments, shares, etc., will now be described below, since they include references to political leaders and news agencies and outlets. These topics generated 21,932 interactions distributed non-linearly. The first 25 accounted for 32,924 unique users, while those occupying from 26th to 50th place only represented 6,889.

The 10 most shared topics included seven references to conventional news outlets, a news agency, a political party and a Catalan deputy. El País was the news outlet leading the conversation with two related news stories. The first was an item in its 'latest live news' section with 3,971 interactions of all types. The most important of these occurred at 12.19 am with the announcement that President Puigdemont was willing to call elections.

The second newsworthy event was the publication of a book on Catalan history by the British historian and Hispanist John H. Elliot, with 1,934 interactions, primarily in the account of the journalist responsible for the story. While the second media outlet was Público, a benchmark left-wing publication in Spain. The item published in the newspaper's 'breaking news' section, associating the events in Catalonia with a resurgence of Francoism, totalled 3,678 interactions with Julian Assange standing out as a node centralising these concerns.

The third reference was Gabriel Rufián, a Catalan MP with a seat in the Congress of Deputies. His tweet created a clear frame that identified the traitors with the stillborn Catalan Republic, owing to the application of Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution. The traitors were members of the regional government who were unwilling to violate Spanish laws. On 24 October, Rufián posted a second tweet on the 'heroic mandate' emerging from the events of 1 October, with 996 interactions.

The Spanish news agency Europa Press, coming in fourth place, covered the legal developments and enforceability of the measures provided for in Article 155. For its part, Cadena SER, the radio station with the largest audience in Spain, contributed with two news stories, one political of its own making (1,970 interactions) and another with statements issued by the leader of the party Ciudadanos Albert Rivera (1,460 interactions). Ahora Podemos, the only political party in the top 10, generated 1,538 interactions with an interview with the Madrid leader Ramón Espinar, published in eldiario.es.

Lastly, La Vanguardia published two stories, one general and the other with images, figuring among the top 10. It was the only newspaper based in Catalonia that had a specific influence on the global conversation and its news stories were published in Spanish, not in Catalan, despite having a Catalan-language version. Although not in the top 10, the content coming in 12th place posted by Rosa Díez, a political leader without parliamentary representation since 2015, is also worth mentioning.

Figure 8. Evolution of hashtags relating to the unilateral declaration of independence

Author	Content	No. of interactions
El País	Breaking news	3,971
Público	News	3,678
Gabriel Rufián	Personal tweet	2,780
Europa Press	News agency	2,266
Cadena SER	Political news	1,970
El País	Current affairs (culture)	1,934
Podemos	Tweet	1,538
Cadena SER	Political news	1,460
La Vanguardia	Political news	1.224
La Vanguardia	Images of the day	1,111
		21,932

Source: Own elaboration.

Twitter emerged as the key channel, both economic and efficient when maximising the dissemination of content on the Web by means of RTs. These RTs are also valuable insofar as they are explicit, intentional and conscious acts of communication (del Fresno, Daly, & Segado, 2016) with the aim of reaching the largest audience possible. Due to its ease of use with mobile technology, Twitter acts as a sort of central nervous system of the Internet and as a means of inserting other media content (Grandjean, 2016). Preliminary studies have revealed the link between political protests and the intensive use of technology as

a source of information—not necessarily journalistic—and a form of expressing political ideas and of social mobilisation (Valenzuela 2013; Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2011; Tucker et al., 2018).

5. Conclusions

SNSs have become showcases for political communication revolving around the strong leadership inherent to media populism. They are used to inform and affect the production of internal and external frames. Thanks to their ability to help messages go viral and to establish frames, both the secessionists and constitutionalists have employed the tool with this discursive purpose in mind. Political agents disseminate hashtags in order that digital mobilization should have a real influence on the political agenda. Hashtags organise the digital conversation. Puigdemont's communication success rely on how conventional television follow his decisions via Twitter, receiving attention and bypassing truth-based news analysis. Audience share his view and decisions, picturing the Catalan leader as a hero of the republic. However, such exposure became fragile frame also because facts are not necessary to sustain a narrative. When other Catalan leaders framed Puigdemont as a traitor (see Figure 2), televisions were forced to report the commentary.

Although media effects are addressed in the academic literature—i.e. framing, priming and agenda-setting studies—there is still no consensus on their real repercussions on political life. Thus, this study has contributed to clarify that SNSs reproduce political communities and create their own meanings in light of the developments. The analysis of the decisive 24 hours from 26 to 27 October 2017 confirm that the messages circulating on SNSs had an impact on the internal and external perception of Puigdemont as a hero or a traitor of the fledgling republic. The 23,225 tweets retrieved under this intellectual frame, later confirmed by journalists and politicians, provide answers to the three hypothesis set out above.

In relation to H1, it has been confirmed that the two opposing groups in Catalonia expressed their vision of political reality by means of hashtags. Some framed the decisions made by Puigdemont as his betrayal of the republic, declared on 1 October, with a huge spike in online activity between 12.11 am (when the deputy Rufián posted his tweet) and 4 pm, when it was denied that regional elections had been called, after which the four-hour bubble immediately burst. The constitutionalist group employed '155' and 'elections' to convey their message at about the same time. In sum, the reality adapted to the pre-established frame and did not operate in a vacuum.

H2 has also been borne out. The first unconfirmed news about the election call within the bounds of the constitution triggered a wave of messages revolving around the idea of betrayal. This had a direct effect on the behaviour of Puigdemont, according to the subsequent accounts of journalists and politicians close to the former president. His transformation from a hero into a traitor, observed on SNSs and confirmed in the street, shocked him to the core. He had second thoughts and cancelled the press conference scheduled for 1.30 pm. The word 'traitor' then gradually disappeared on SNSs. This hypothesis is supported by the statements made by Santi Vila, the only member of the Catalan government to have resigned after the unilateral declaration of independence, during his appearance before the High Court.

H3 is the most interesting for studying current political communication. The impact of SNSs is enormous, but the content that goes viral is not original. Of the top 10 pieces of content shared, nine were generated by the conventional media. Their qualitative analysis reveals that digital users preferably consume content prepared, produced and distributed by the conventional media, since in eight out of the 10 cases the information was first published by news outlets and in another it was an interview with a regional leader released by a political party.

In a nutshell, this study is based on two approaches, the first involving theory. Even now at a time of sweeping digital transformations, framing studies are useful for modern-day political communication. Theory will ultimately evolve towards a hybrid research logic combining the general framing of the traditional media and that created by social media users. This evolution will lead to the disappearance of a type of study and use of framing (Cacciatore, Scheufele, & Iyengar, 2016), as new academic uses linked to artificial intelligence or big data emerge (Jungherr & Theocharis, 2017). This paper is relevant to that theoretical development inasmuch as H1 and H2 cast light on a burning political issue. The building of political heroes, in the conceptualisation inherent to populism in the digital age, requires an intensive use of SNSs, since they offer a shortcut for developing feelings, genuineness and confidence.

The second approach is the recognition of the importance—still enormous—of the conventional press in digital conversations. The impact of SNSs, in particular Twitter, on research on political communication has monopolised congresses, papers and academic works in recent years. While interest in the press and the legacy media has diminished, as if they were exclusionary realities. This work, through H3, has strived to

recover the idea of hybrid studies that associate political activity with digital conversations and journalistic reality. In the age of fake news, such an approach contributes to blur the populist tendency to control the message and the messenger. That is the paradox of framing oneself as hero or traitor in the populist time

To sum up, this paper has made inroads into populist political communication theory, has avoided the study of SNSs in isolation from their relationship with the conventional media and has contributed to a better epistemology of political leadership.

6. Notes

7. References

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