

## **The Fight for the Front Page: the Anglo-American Press and the Official Positions of the US/UK Governments in the Catalan Independence Story**

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### **Introduction**

The Catalan sovereignty process has marked a large part of the Spanish and EU media agenda and has resonated in the international media. In this paper, we analyse US and UK media coverage and the opinions of foreign correspondents regarding the Catalan independence movement in the period 2010–2017 and contrast them with the official position of the White House (US) and Downing Street (UK) on the Catalan issue.

The social and political events of recent times in Catalonia have converted this issue into a focus of European and world news. On 28 June 2010, the Spanish Constitutional Court (in its sentence STC 031/2010) ruled on a new Catalan Statute of Autonomy that had been approved by popular referendum in 2006 and rejected various articles as unconstitutional. Since then, Catalonia has experienced ongoing political and social tensions regarding the question of its autonomy.

We analysed the press representations of the positions of the Spanish and Catalan governments and the political confrontation between them, focusing on *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian* in the UK and *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* in the US. We also conducted an ethnographic analysis based on in-depth interviews with two Spain-based correspondents. And finally, we studied the official positions of the US/UK governments in the Catalan independence story through their press releases and press briefings.

The main objective of the research was to consider how the Catalan *Procés* was dealt with in foreign media, and, in particular, to examine how the UK and the US press viewed the political situation in Catalonia and how they covered the conflict between the Spanish and Catalan governments.

In order to understand the background to the Catalan conflict we need to remember what has happened over the last twelve years. The years 2006 to 2017 witnessed mass demonstrations demanding the right to decide the political future of Catalonia. In 2010, and after the afore-mentioned Spanish Constitutional Court ruling (sentence STC 031/2010), Òmnium Cultural mobilized 1.5 million people (1.1 million according to Barcelona City Police), under the slogan “We are a nation, we decide”. On the National Day of Catalonia (the *Diada*, celebrated annually on 11 September) in 2012, a further mass demonstration was held, attended by 1.5 million people according to both the organizers and Barcelona City Police, and 600,000 people according to the Spanish Government Delegation in Catalonia. Despite the discrepancies in numbers, most media were unanimous in acknowledging the *Diada* 2012

protest to be the most important demonstration ever to take place in Catalonia and one of the largest ever in Spain and even Europe (Alonso-Muñoz, 2014; Xambó *et al.*, 2014). The separatist movement was further bolstered by the Via Catalana human chain protests of the Diada 2013 and 2014 organized by the Assemblea Nacional Catalana (ANC).

The new political scenario was shaped by a strong social component that played a key role in the *Procés* and that ultimately led to snap regional elections in 2012. A watershed moment came with the celebration of a non-binding participatory process in the form of a “consultation” on 9 November 2014, in which some 2.3 million people voted. For the Diada of 2015, around 1.4 million people marched under the slogan “On the road to a Catalan Republic”, just days before elections to the Parliament of Catalonia (27 September 2015). The year 2016 was marked by Diada protests, which for the first time, were held in various Catalan cities such as Lleida, Berga, Salt, Tarragona, as well as Barcelona. This Diada, with the slogan “A punt” [Ready] was also different, however, in that it had been preceded by the announcement of a referendum for 1 October 2017, deemed to be binding by the Catalan authorities and illegal by the Spanish authorities.

During the 1 October 2017 referendum, 2,286,217 people voted, with 89% of those voting yes (2,044,038 people). Participation was 43.03% of the total census, which was declared universal from the early hours of voting. National police entered several polling stations and their charges resulted in 1,066 people injured according to data from the Catalan Department of Health.<sup>1</sup> On 3 October a general strike was held in Catalonia in protest against the police charges.

### **Theoretical framework and methodology**

The media contribute to the construction of public opinion by creating climates and transmitting a representation of the facts from which people construct their own symbolic reality. Indeed, the media occupy a strategic position in informing about realities that are not experienced firsthand (Pont-Bèrrio, 2015) and also help us to organize information and our thinking (Rodríguez Borges, 2011).

Berger and Luckmann (1968) have argued that everyday life is presented as an intersubjective world, that the construction of reality is social and is modified and recreated by humans. Reality is thus not immutable but continuously changes over time. Therefore, although the institutional world may seem definitive, it can be modified. Any social representation includes a system of values, ideas and practices with the specific function of establishing an order that guides individuals and that is also communicated through exchangeable social codes. This could also be viewed as the construction of the “meanings” that arise from human interactions and that are shared through the exchange of information (Castells 2015, 27).

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<sup>1</sup> See the full report of the Department of Health at: <https://govern.cat/salaprensa/notes-premsa/303722/comunicat-sobre-persones-ateses-carregues-policials-1-o> (All online references were accessed and checked between 11-03-2019 and 20-08-2019.)

This construction of meanings is linked to social identity, understood as a direct consequence of representations that are shared by a particular social group (Wagner *et al.* 1999, 100). Accordingly, identity is constructed from a young age by the mere fact of belonging to a specific group in a specific space and time. Within any given time and space, certain social representations will be in circulation, yet it will be contact with others which will model the social identity of each individual.

Identity is nurtured by the media through their power of social penetration. The theory of agenda setting refers to the influence exerted by the media in configuring public and governmental agendas (Entman, 2007). This concept was originally developed in the 1960s by McCombs. Initial results from McCombs and his co-researcher Shaw (1977) pointed to the influence of the media on reality, with agenda setting defined as a process of political consensus. For Wanta, Golan and Lee (2004), agenda setting refers to how the most important media issues reflect priority themes for the public and, thus, the impact of the media agenda on the public agenda. The setting of the agenda is obviously conditioned by journalistic production, as time and space constrain the choice of some topics over others.

The importance of the agenda setting theory is that it proposes that the media condition what the public thinks about and how (Entman, 2007), and this is conditioned in turn by diverse factors, such as geographical proximity and an individual's own knowledge of a subject. Wanta, Golan and Lee (2004) further argue that agenda setting acquires even greater importance when individuals do not have direct experience of the facts. This happens with news from other countries, as is the case with foreign media covering the Catalan *Procés*.

## Method

The object of study of this research was to analyse published opinions in the UK and the US. As *agenda setting* theory concludes, newspapers as agenda fixers are more influential than other media (McCombs, 2004). Our general objective is to identify the thematic and informational frameworks used to depict the social and political events marking the agenda in Catalonia and Spain in recent years. In addition, our hypothesis is that media discourses tend to deepen differences and conflicts, rather than provide in-depth information, contrast information from different sources and explain differentiated and mismatched positions.

To carry out our study, we chose four newspapers that had an informative-interpretative press profile and which represented a wide ideological scope. The resulting list included *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph* in the United Kingdom and *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* in the United States. Informative, opinion and interpretative articles (frontpage stories, editorials, articles and columns) that referred to Catalan-Spanish relations and Catalonia's determination to decide its political future were all included. The analytical method – Frame analysis – was conducted from a communicative perspective, following Entman (1993) and Kim *et al.* (2002), with a view to detecting the predominant frame. This frame analysis was conducted at three levels: (a) the right-to-decide issue; (b) the main protagonists associated with the right to decide; and (c) those frames that use the main sources quoted.

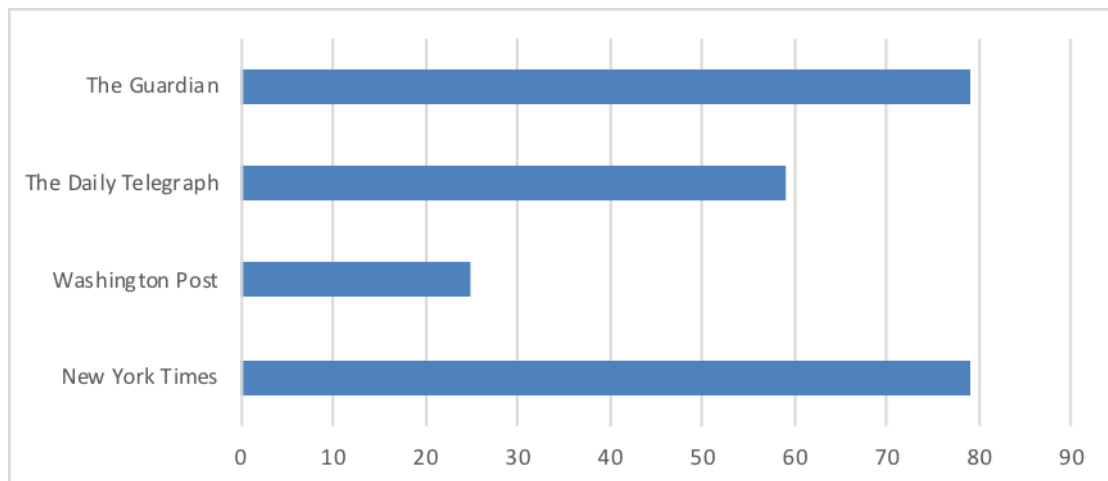
In relation to the agenda setting analysis, two indicators, each with their respective variables, were used to identify the media relevance of the Catalan *Procés* (Kiouisis, 2004): (a) attention; and (b) prominence. The attention variables were the total number of texts and the total number of words dedicated by each newspaper to the *Procés*, whereas the prominence variables included the article location in the newspaper and the accompanying graphics (if any).

An ethnographic study is used to complement the content analysis already described and is done after obtaining the results from the framing and agenda setting study. In-depth interviews were of an individual character and this technique allows us to obtain information not available with direct observation and to contrast the process of journalistic production (Tuchman, 1983, Wimmer-Dominick, 2011). The ethnographic research includes in-depth interviews with foreign correspondents in Spain for *The Guardian* and for *The New York Times* and who had covered the Catalan story consistently over recent years.

Finally, in order to ascertain the official position of the White House on the Catalan issue, the decision was taken to access the State Department archives which are available online. This extensive data base offers all press releases and the complete transcript of daily press briefings including both the comments made by the spokesperson at the time and the questions raised by the press corps. In recent months a State Department video archive has also been uploaded to the site to accompany these written transcriptions. In the case of the UK, similar information was available at the gov.uk website. However, as the information was much briefer, the search was widened to include press conferences covered by a public institution such as the BBC and the Spanish prime ministerial archives available at the La Moncloa website.

## Results

While all four newspapers gave wide coverage to the *Procés* (Figure 1), *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* published most articles (79 pieces). Most articles were published in 2016 and 2017, reflecting the growing tensions between the Catalan and Spanish governments regarding the Catalan decision to hold a referendum.

**Figure 1:** Articles published 2010–2017

Source: Research of the present authors

The greatest coverage coincided with five periods of great political activity: the 2012 elections, the consultation of 9 November 2014, the 2015 elections, the Diada 2017 and the independence referendum of 1 October 2017.

### Sources and actors

Regarding the US press, most of *The Washington Post's* sources were Spanish government (12%), Catalan and Spanish police (12%), referents from the Spanish cultural sphere such as intellectuals, journalists, and writers (12%), EU (12%) and academics (12%). Generally speaking, journalists were the most used sources by this newspaper (18%). The three main actors for *The Washington Post* were pro-independence Catalan people (18%), followed by the Spanish government (14%) and Catalan government (11%).

As for *The New York Times*, sources were mainly politicians. In the last two years (2016 and 2017), they represented the greatest number of sources used, 34% (US and German sources, to be precise), followed by anonymous sources (21%). Pro-independence voters were 12% of its sources. The actors were all Catalan people (18%), Spanish Government (16%), and the pro-independence people (13%) as the most important.

Finally, regarding the UK press, the most frequently used sources in *The Guardian* were the Spanish government (21.3%), the Catalan government (17.7%) and anonymous individuals (12.5%), whereas the most frequently featured actors were Catalonia and the Spanish government (18.9% each), Spain (13%) and the Catalan government (9.1%). As for *The Daily Telegraph*, sources were typically anonymous individuals (13.8%), mainly demonstrators or voters who reflected the climate of the moment. This newspaper typically gave a voice to separatists and unionists during elections, to political actors other than Carles Puigdemont, Artur Mas and Mariano Rajoy (13.8%) and to the Spanish government (7.7%). Four major groups of actors stood out, namely, the Spanish government (18.2%), the Catalan government (14.7%), Catalonia (14.4%), representatives of Spanish justice (9.9%) as well as Spain and separatists (9% each).

## Framing

Conflict was especially predominant in both the UK and US newspapers (over 50% in both). The framing hierarchy used by *The New York Times* prioritized conflict (58.2% of the articles), followed by responsibility frame (20.2%). The focus was mainly the political tensions and the radicalization of the positions between the Rajoy and Puigdemont/Mas administrations, with particular emphasis on the last two years of the study. Most of the articles had a neutral or ambiguous tone (84%) and their arguments were neither in favour nor against any part of the conflict.

*The Washington Post* also framed its coverage mainly as conflict (76% of its articles). The conflict was identified as one between both governments. Eventually this crisis opposes the Catalan versus the Spanish people. The second most important frame was human interest (12.6%). It could be observed that if at the very beginning of this crisis the conflict was situated by the newspaper between Catalonia and Spain, in the last year, 2017, the conflict is located between the two governments. The tone used was generally neutral or ambiguous (54%), followed by a negative tone in 40% of its pieces (according to Wimmer-Dominick, 2011).

The predominant generic frame used in *The Guardian* was also mostly conflict (71%), with responsibility featuring far less prominently than in the other newspapers (18.4%). The conflict between Catalonia and Spain was also represented in actions by the Catalan and Spanish governments and the Spanish judicial system. The responsibility frame predominated in the 2015 elections and referred to two main actors: the Spanish government, in terms of its immobility and reliance on legal solutions to a conflict understood by the newspaper to be exclusively political; and the EU, in terms of the demands addressed to it by the newspaper to take action regarding the Catalan question. A neutral tone (48.7%) prevailed over a negative tone (43.4%) in this newspaper.

As for *The Daily Telegraph*, its dominant frame was of conflict (72.5% of articles), especially that between Spain and Catalonia. It called on the EU to intervene and mediate in the crisis and criticized the two sides for their incapacity to engage in dialogue and their actions placing the Spanish state and the entire EU at risk. The secondary frame was, in fact, responsibility between both administrations Catalan and Spanish (11.6% of articles). A negative tone (52.2%) predominated somewhat over a neutral tone (44.9%).

## Ethnographic results

Our ethnographic study was based on in-depth interviews conducted individually between the 15 and 20 December 2017 with correspondents in Spain of *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*. The anonymization of correspondent names (for privacy reasons) does not affect the final result of the investigation. Their arguments and quotations are identified by the codes I01 and I02.

The correspondents indicated that the Catalan *Procés* was the most important foreign news story in Spain between September and October especially over the last two years (2016–2017). I02 stated that the Catalan political situation had been more important and newsworthy than Moncloa-

based Spanish politics. During all the years of our study I01 wrote more than ten *Procés*-related articles per month. I02 argued that in 2016 and 2017 an average of five or six articles per week were sent to editorial staff.

I02 suggested that three main themes have been top of the news agenda in recent years for Spain: Catalan nationalism, Ada Colau and tourism. I02 confessed that Spanish politics is covered relatively less than Catalan politics, adding that “politically speaking, Spain is not taken seriously”.

The correspondents interviewed indicated that the police charges of 1 October, the parliamentary session to approve laws for an independent Catalonia, the “deferred” declaration of independence (I02), the arrest of separatist leaders and Carles Puigdemont’s flight to Brussels were dramatic events that drew the interest of the foreign press. In some cases, news rooms had to call in reinforcements to be able to track the events as they unfolded on and after 1 October. The correspondents also indicated that they were “not concerned” (I02) about the possibility of being subject to external pressures from either the Spanish or Catalan governments.

### **A cul-de-sac, according to the correspondents**

The correspondents were of the opinion that the sociopolitical crisis between the Catalan and Spanish administrations required mediation given the current “uncertainty and stagnation” (I01). The solution to the conflict, viewed as lacking dialogue, was an agreed referendum and concessions by both sides. According to I02: “The country is split in two. I cannot see how the percentages on each side of the dividing line could shift the current balance. Another matter would be if independence was supported by 65%.”

The police violence of 1 October, the demonstrations and the flags displayed on balconies were the images that the correspondents most identified with the conflict. This was evidence – according to I01 – of how the conflict has polarized Catalan society between separatists and unionists and was, to a certain extent, reflected in the correspondents’ output during these weeks.

### **State Department and Downing Street agendas**

When analysing the prominence of the Catalan independence issue on the White House agenda, we can observe through the full transcriptions of the “Daily Press briefings” available online how the *Procés* incited interest among the Washington press corps and how the different press secretaries – of both the Democrat and Republican administrations – were forced to adopt a position which, while remaining relatively consistent over this seven-year period, does admit nuances, occasional ambiguities and more flexible positions as the story unfolds.

Catalonia emerges on the State Department agenda for the first time in late July 2010 as a result of a *domino effect* following the International Court of Justice’s ruling that the declaration of independence made by Kosovo in February 2008 did not violate international law. During the 22 July press conference held in Washington, assistant Press Secretary Philip Krowley declared that “the longstanding view of the United States is that [...] Kosovo is an independent state and its territory is inviolable” and called on states to

recognize Kosovo and for Kosovo and Serbia to “put aside their differences and move forward working together constructively to resolve practical issues to the betterment of the lives of the people”. Bearing in mind that this ruling came just two weeks after the first mass demonstrations regarding the Spanish Constitutional Court’s ruling on the revised Statute of Autonomy, the Washington press corps picked up on this to ask if this decision “could be used by certain nationalistic movements in the Basque country or in Catalonia as a base for their own political demands” and in consequence act as a “trigger” for more nationalistic movements in Southern Europe. Krowley’s answer was clear and predictable: the US considers the ruling to refer to “a set of facts unique to Kosovo” and which are “not applicable to any other situation”.<sup>2</sup>

Although the political movements in Catalonia were occasionally covered by the US press in the intervening years – particularly during the 2012 election campaign (Tulloch- Alonso 2014) – it was not until the 9-N referendum in 2014 that the *Procés* came up again in the White House. However, this time, rather than a direct stonewall position on the issue, the White House did not commit as to whether the referendum was illegal and did not offer a position on a “possible independent Catalonia”, preferring instead to refer to the standard response which regarded the issue as an “internal matter for Spain”.<sup>3</sup> This position is reinforced one year later in September 2015 after the King’s visit to the US when President Obama declared “as a matter of foreign policy, we are deeply committed to maintaining a relationship with a strong and unified Spain”. The mantra regarding the Catalan issue as an “internal Spanish matter” and the US interest in a unified Spain is a constant throughout the Obama administration.

However, the official position of the Trump Administration is both non-committal and, at times, simply confusing. In late September – in the run-up to the 1 October vote – President Trump told Prime Minister Rajoy that a nonbinding Catalonia referendum was an “internal matter”, but in doing so he somewhat contradicted his own State Department spokeswoman – Heather Nauert – who declared before journalists that the US “took no position on the referendum” and went as far as to say that “we will let the government and the people there work it out, and we will work with whatever government or entity that comes out of it”, a declaration which, unsurprisingly, was received with optimism in the pro-independence camp in Barcelona.<sup>4</sup>

Detecting confusion on this issue, the State Department press corps pushed for greater clarity on this issue and Spokeswoman Nauert was forced to face journalists once again to try to make the US position clear. In particular the press could not understand why the White House was so firmly against the referendum in Kurdistan – held on 25 September, just one week before the Catalan vote – but seemed to be more ambivalent on the same issue in Barcelona. The exchange between Nauert and the press is the longest in the State Department online archives on the Catalan issue, as the White House

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<sup>2</sup> US Department of State. Daily Press Briefing. 22 July 2010, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2010/07/145065.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> US Department of State. Daily Press Briefing. 10 November 2014, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2014/11/233921.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> *The Washington Post*, 26 September 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/09/26/trump-says-u-s-opposes-independence-bid-in-spains-catalonia-region/?utm\\_term=.0f1d7c471d78](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/09/26/trump-says-u-s-opposes-independence-bid-in-spains-catalonia-region/?utm_term=.0f1d7c471d78).



attempts to make verbal a complex position. On the one hand, the Trump Administration made it clear that Spain is a) a “great country”, b) a “tremendous ally” and c) “should remain united”, while at the same time declaring that the US understands “that some in Spain might want to hold a referendum” and that it was “up to the people to decide”. In an attempt to detect possible contradictions regarding this position and the White House’s outright opposition to the Kurdish referendum, journalists were told that, in the latter case, the decision was based on the fight against ISIS in Iraq and aiming to avoid further questioning on the issue, the press secretary refused to “compare one situation with another”.<sup>5</sup>

As the 1 October referendum hit front pages worldwide, the White House’s position was once again somewhat opaque. Drawn on the issue at the daily press briefing just 24 hours after the vote, Press Secretary Nauert focused on four aspects: i) the White House is saddened at the violence; ii) the US government will not be drawn on the need for international mediation; iii) the US encourages all parties to resolve their differences nonviolently and iv) pushes for the resolution of the issue in a way consistent with law.<sup>6</sup> The very next day, the issue was back on the agenda and once again the US position was flexible and open to interpretation. While reiterating its support for a “unified Spain”, the Trump Administration simultaneously defended “the right to free assembly”.<sup>7</sup> One week later – and with a new press secretary, Sarah Sanders, at the helm – the US position showed even greater ambiguity when, at the press briefing, Sanders declared that the Trump Administration would “welcome dialogue” between Spain and Catalonia’s leaders on the political future of the region. Asked to comment on President Puigdemont’s offer to seek international mediation rather than a declaration of independence, Sanders said “that’s up for the people of Spain and Catalonia to decide” and would certainly welcome “conversations between us and them going forward”.<sup>8</sup>

This open-ended and manifestly flexible position was realigned in the light of the 27 October declaration of independence. At a press briefing held on the very same day, State Department spokeswoman Nauert offered an official statement entitled “US support for Spanish Unity” which declared that

the United States enjoys a great friendship and an enduring partnership with our NATO ally Spain. Our two countries cooperate closely to advance our shared security and economic priorities. Catalonia is an integral part of Spain, and the United States supports the Spanish government’s constitutional measures to keep Spain strong and united.<sup>9</sup>

Since this statement was made, Catalonia does not appear in press releases on the State Department archives.

Unlike the nuances and sporadic ambiguities on the Catalan independence issue in the case of the Trump Administration, the position

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<sup>5</sup> A full version of the transcript is available online at:  
<https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2011/09/173972.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2017/10/274592.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2017/10/274630.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Nelson, “White House: Catalonia’s future is an issue for Spain, Catalans to Decide”, *Washington Examiner*, 10 October 2017, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/white-house-catalonias-future-is-an-issue-for-spain-catalans-to-decide>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/10/275136.htm>.

adopted by Downing Street regarding the *Procés* is one of constant opposition. This can be largely attributed to two basic factors: the influence of the Scottish referendum held in 2014 and the fact that – unlike the US case which passed from a Democrat to a Republican administration – 10 Downing Street remained in Conservative Party hands despite the change from David Cameron (2010–2016) to Theresa May (2016–2019).

Buoyed by the victory of the “No to independence” vote in Scotland, Cameron was pressed on the Catalan issue immediately after the 9-N referendum in Catalonia in 2014. At a speech before the Confederation on British Industry, the Prime Minister sent two messages to Spanish journalists. The first regarded the need for “unity” and the second respect for “legality”: “we want Spain to stay united – to stay together. And our belief about referendums is these things should be done through the proper constitutional and legal frameworks. They should be done within them, and not outside them.”<sup>10</sup>

The following year, Cameron met Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy immediately after the “Via Lliure” Diada of September 2015. At a press conference in La Moncloa, Cameron reiterated the UK position when reminding assembled journalists that the British position is made up of three main points: i) all countries are “better off together, stronger together, prosperous together”; ii) all those who want to “take a different path” have to obey the rule of law”; and iii) Catalonia will not form part of the EU if it chooses independence, “if one part of a state secedes, it’s no longer part of the European Union and has to take its place at the back of the queue behind those other countries applying to become members of the European Union”.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The full exchange between the Spanish journalist and David Cameron at the CBI reads as follows:

QUESTION: Yesterday Catalonia held a symbolic independence poll, against the advice from our constitutional court in Government to stop it. In your experience [...] what would be the advice for Mr Rajoy, our Prime Minister, on this sensitive matter, and as well to other European leaders and countries where nationalisms are defying their borders?

PRIME MINISTER: I would say to my friend Mariano Rajoy, and to everyone in Spain: Britain is a great friend and a great ally of Spain. We work very, very closely together with you in so many important forums, whether the EU or NATO. We’re great lovers of Spain. We want Spain to stay united – to stay together. And our belief about referendums is these things should be done through the proper constitutional and legal frameworks. They should be done within them, and not outside them.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/cbi-annual-conference-2014-prime-ministers-address>.

<sup>11</sup> The full text reads as follows:

“If I had a message I suppose it would be the same message I had in the United Kingdom situation, which is we are better off together, we’re stronger together, we’re more prosperous together, we should stay together. No two situations are the same; but I think it’s very important, and the President of the Government made this point, that whatever situation we’re faced with, it’s very important that countries, and governments, and prime ministers and indeed those who want to take a different path, all have to obey the rule of law and do things by the rule of law. I think that is very important. You asked a specific question about the situation with regard to the EU. This was asked during the Scottish referendum and there is a very clear answer, which is if one part of a state secedes from that state it’s no longer part of the European Union and it has to take its place at the back of the queue behind those other countries that are applying to become members of the European Union. That I think is the position set out by authorities from the European Commission all the way through to constitutional lawyers around the European Union. So, I think it’s pretty clear.”

The events of the 1 October 2017 did not introduce any nuances in the official UK position regarding Catalonia as governmental ministers rushed to make Downing Street's take on the issue clear to the press. On 11 October, the Minister for Europe, Sir Alan Duncan, met Spanish Ambassador Carlos Bastarache and issued a press release in which the UK minister declared the 1 October poll as "illegal". According to Duncan:

As Spanish courts have ruled, the poll on 1st October was not held within the Spanish legal and constitutional framework. Holding it was therefore illegal and an attempt to undermine the rule of law. We would not recognise any declaration of independence based upon it.<sup>12</sup>

A week later Downing Street issued a further press release detailing the content of PM Theresa May's phone call to Rajoy according to which May "reiterated that the UK is clear that the referendum had no legal basis and that any unilateral declaration of independence would be inconsistent with the rule of law. She added that the UK would not recognize any such declaration of independence by Catalonia".<sup>13</sup> The declaration of independence made on the 27 October was immediately rejected by Theresa May's official spokesman who made it clear that Downing Street would not recognize Catalan independence. According to the statement

The UK does not and will not recognise the unilateral declaration of independence made by the Catalan regional parliament. It is based on a vote that was declared illegal by the Spanish courts. We continue to want to see the rule of law upheld, the Spanish constitution respected, and Spanish unity preserved.<sup>14</sup>

However, it should be mentioned at this point that the Scottish Parliament distanced itself from Downing Street and, on 27 October, External Affairs Secretary of Holyrood Fiona Hyslop made an official statement in which she made three points: i) that her government "respects and understands" the position of the Catalan government; ii) that the people of Catalonia "must have the ability to determine their own future" and iii) that a "process of dialogue" was necessary to solve the crisis.

Six weeks after the events of 27 October, May insisted in her support for the Spanish Government's position on the Catalan issue. In a press release made on the 5 December 2017, a Downing Street spokesperson said: "Theresa May began by restating the UK's support for the Spanish Government on the issue of Catalonia – stating the rule of law must be upheld and the Spanish constitution respected."<sup>15</sup>

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<http://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/lang/en/presidente/intervenciones/Paginas/2015/150904rajoyandcameron.aspx>.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/minister-for-europe-meets-spanish-ambassador>.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-call-with-prime-minister-rajoy-17-oct-2017>.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-41783238> (checked 11-03-2019).

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-meeting-with-prime-minister-rajoy-5-december>.

### Concluding remarks

The Catalan political conflict has drawn the interest of the international press, specifically in the last two years of the study (2016 and 2017). The media paid special attention to the institutional events in which universal suffrage was determinant, whereas demonstrations and grassroots events received more uneven handling. It can be concluded that the media legitimize electoral processes over civil society events, irrespective of the numbers mobilized.

The international media analysed broadly endorsed the will of the majority of Catalans to vote in a referendum, although they considered that such a referendum had to be agreed between the Catalan and Spanish governments. *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph* were particularly incisive regarding this issue in view of the agreed Scottish referendum on independence. Most newspapers criticized the refusal of the Spanish government to agree on a referendum, but also criticized the unilateralism of the Catalan government.

The sources most used by the international correspondents were experts, especially university academics. Also relied on as sources to a lesser degree were journalists from the Catalan and Spanish media, followed by economists. These points to a conflict partly explained by and for the elites, given that few civil society entities were given a voice, like, for instance key associations such as Òmnium Cultural and the ANC. Therefore, the notion that the Catalan independence movement is above all a social movement was not reflected in the articles of the newspapers analysed, which instead tended to focus on strictly political aspects. The international media clearly identified three individuals as responsible for the conflict: Artur Mas and Carles Puigdemont, presidents in turn of Catalonia, and Mariano Rajoy, president of Spain.

Finally, the international media underlined the lack of dialogue between the two sides to the conflict and, consistently over the seven years analysed, reiterated the need to reach a negotiated solution. Of note is the fact that the articles in all the analysed newspapers were balanced in giving equal voice to both sides of the conflict. As for the correspondents themselves, they spoke of what they considered to be the presence of a clear intransigence from the central government, the uncertainty on the political horizon and a certain disappointment at the denouement to the Catalan story. Their personal views based on grass roots observation are closely in line with the editorial lines of their respective publications despite the distance.

An overview of the official White House and Downing Street positions on the Catalan independence issue and their interaction with the press allows us to reach both general and specific conclusions. Firstly, and in a wider sense, it is clear that the Catalan story benefits from a certain “knock-on” effect from an international political and diplomatic panorama which forced governments to take a position – and risk incurring contradictions – when declaring their stance on the recognition of Kosovar independence, the 2014 referendum in Scotland, and the September 2017 referendum in Kurdistan. Secondly, we can identify a certain volatility regarding the US position on Catalonia. The comparative coherence of the Obama Administration’s position – and its support for a “strong, united Spain” – can be contrasted with the erratic nature of the Trump

Administration's position which oscillates from "loyalty to Spain as a NATO ally", while simultaneously not taking a position on the referendum issue and supporting the Catalans' "right to free assembly". Thirdly, the variable nature of the US position is not shared by Downing Street, given the lingering hangover of the referendum campaign in Scotland, just three years prior to the 1-O vote in Catalonia.

### Acknowledgements

This work has been possible thanks to the public funding received from the Institut d'Estudis de l'Autogovern (IEA) for the project entitled "Catalunya als ulls del món. Anàlisi de la presència i construcció del relat del context sociopolític de Catalunya (2010–2015) a la premsa internacional" (Ref. GR/8/2015).

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