

Patriotic Journalism in Fake News Warfare: *El País*' Coverage of the Catalan Process

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Abstract

Patriotic journalism is a well-documented practice occurring during scenarios of international violent conflict or in response to national security threats. This article combines a framing analysis of patriotic journalism with a consideration of how fake news accusations operate as a floating signifier in political struggles. These approaches are applied to the Spanish newspaper *El País*' coverage of the non-violent Catalan secessionist process towards independence. On this basis, three propositions are explained. Firstly, elite media may attempt to set the news agenda by positioning certain topics as national security threats. Secondly, elite media may apply strategic narrations to frame the Spain-Catalan issue as a conflict between two equal and homogenous parts by demonizing “them” and personalizing “us”. Thirdly, elite media can use fake news accusations to legitimize patriotic journalism practices by positioning the media outlet in question as a safeguard of truth and democracy. Exploring these propositions illuminate, first, the ultimate interests and strategies of news media groups applying a fake news accusation frame; and second, the alignment between the State and the information economy in times of conflict and crisis.

“We are brutally suffering from the great lie of the [Catalan] process”. Supporters of this movement are “fascists, cynical, cheaters [...], ETA [1] terrorists” that have perpetrated “a coup d’état”, but “the movement behind the referendum [has] been beheaded”. “This is Catalonia, but what is happening entirely belongs to the fake news world” and the “Russian [global] machinery” of fake news that “acted with Trump and the Brexit”. These are all literal quotes published by Spanish elite media *El País* when reporting on the Catalan process in October 2017 and the frustrated referendum on the independence of Catalonia on 1 October 2017. How and why did *El País* categorically oversimplify the Catalan movement and connect it to the global fake news machinery?

This article discusses how patriotism may be closely connected with the global phenomena of fake news as a well-embedded practice within socio-political, economic and (news)media systems. We take an institutionalist approach, which focuses on “how technologies, markets and the state interact to shape the development and arrangement of communications media in any given time or place” (Winseck, 2016: 81). We consider how fake news is a floating signifier that can be used either by media conglomerates and states to misinform or to divert attention from matters that might threaten the political and economic system. Here, the employment of Liebes’ patriotic journalism frames (1992) by Spanish elite media *El País* is analysed in relation to coverage of events in Catalonia during October 2017.

At the centre-stage of journalism “lies a simple yet formidable ambition: telling the public about the world” (De Maeyer, 2019: 23). According to their normative public service role (Singer, 2013) and their centrality as configurators of the public agenda in democratic societies, the media must fulfil crucial duties. As Bødker highlights, a “democratic society depends on robust and independent news organisations” (2019: 83) capable of “educating and engaging the entire citizenry” (Benson, 2019: 149). Therefore, socially responsible media organizations should provide useful information and guidance that citizens require to understand public affairs and to participate in the community on an informed basis (Christians et al., 2009; Serazio, 2019). Journalism’s public mission to enlighten in democratic societies is clearly stated in many fundamental codes of the profession including UNESCO’s International Principles of Professional Ethics (Articles 1–2), the International Federation of Journalists’ (IFJ) Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists (Article 1), the 1.003 Resolution on the Ethics of Journalism from the Council of Europe (Article 17), and the Deontological Code of the Journalistic Profession from the Spanish Federation of Journalists Association (FAPE) (Articles 2–3).

Journalism is not a game without rules (Fengler et al., 2014). From a social responsibility perspective, media organizations are “moral actors, that is, entities endowed with a conscience and ethical intentionality” (Luengo et al., 2017: 1147). Thus, the practice of journalism operates under a set of ethical values and norms including “truthfulness, freedom, objectivity, diversity, and...social solidarity” (Christians et al., 2009: 83). These standards are crucial to media practitioners as they provide “legitimacy and credibility to what they do” (Deuze, 2005: 446). However, since journalists do not work in a vacuum but are inseparable from “the larger structural system in which they operate” (Plaisance et al., 2012: 654), it is indispensable to map out the myriad cross-cutting forces that have disrupted contemporary journalism.

Patriotic journalism is a well-reported practice used by elite, mainstream and independent media in modern democracies when the home country faces periods of war, military conflict, terrorism, or threats to national security (Nossek, 2004; Ginosar, 2015). Since the development of news media and journalism are inextricably linked to the development of democracy and human and social rights, patriotic journalism does function as a tool to defend domestic democracy (or the national

interest) against genuine threats. However, patriotic journalism cannot be maintained for long and it does not necessarily comply with journalism's norms and values (Berkowitz, 2000).

At a normative level, Nossek is straightforward in outlining the incompatibility between patriotism and professional news values. There is an inverse relation between professional news values and the national identity of the journalist and the journal's editors. The more national the report is, the less professional it will be, that is, the closer the reporters/editors are to a given news event in terms of national interest, the further they are from applying professional news values (2004). Specifically, scholars position patriotic journalism against journalism's core values and norms such as neutrality and objectivity (Hertog, 2000), critical journalism (Katz, 1992; Barnett and Roselle, 2006), information (Schudson, 2002) or independence and the possibility of alternative narratives (Ginosar and Cohen, 2019).

In sum, the application of patriotic journalism may both protect the home country's democracy, but it can also damage journalism's watchdog function (which is essential for the functioning of democracy). It is not the objective of this article to consider elite media compliance with journalism's norms and values during the Catalan dispute, but to establish the connections between political-economic and technological factors in the application of patriotic frames (when there is no foreign, violent or authoritarian threat).

Patriotic journalism would today be applied within a capitalist economy shaped by the internet, the technology of information, and globalization, which are challenging the traditional norms and practices of the profession (Tumber and Zelizer, 2019). As Waisbord (2019: 210) underlines, "the proliferation of information platforms brought about by the digital revolution coupled with the collapse of the advertising-funded model has transformed press economics." Alongside globalization and digitalization, the influence of financialization processes on media groups and boards has grown dramatically in the recent years (Costa e Silva, 2015; Noam, 2018). This has created normative tensions arising from "an increased emphasis on capitalistic profitability" (Almiron, 2013: 30). Thus, "If democracies have to be protected, then corporate media also must be protected from interests devoid of social responsibility" (Almiron and Segovia, 2012: 2914). Many newsrooms across the board have closed their operations or have been downsized (Bugeja, 2018). In this unstable context, organizations that manage to stay alive "grapple with dwindling resources" (Örnebring, 2019: 226). Constrained newsroom budgets translate into "less investigative reporting, more reliance on public relations, and more office-bound, derivative journalism" (Curran, 2019: 192), a combination which ultimately restricts opportunities for journalism's watchdog function to operate adequately. Consequently, the crisis of the content-based media in general and journalism in particular has brought a higher reliance on "internal resources" to create stories, as well as the capitalization and concentration of newswire services (Reuters, Associated Press) (Winseck, 2016).

As posited by Winseck, the information infrastructure of the 21st Century is being rebuilt for an all-IP networked world" (2016: 97). Data is the new currency in the internet economy, which consists of accumulating, storing, processing, and disseminating data by the internet and digital media giants (Winseck, 2016). The internet economy is affecting journalism dramatically. Authors such as Jenkins (2006) or Deuze (2009) have celebrated the convergence culture that comes with the digital media. Journalism practices can benefit from the greater diversity of media content and sources—social media, blogs, and websites—along with the acclaimed participatory culture that comes with digital culture. However, this celebratory literature does not address the political economic context, that is, "the consequences of the lack of resources and of resource inequalities" (Hardy, 2017: 19) which come with new business models. First and foremost, technological

corporations such as Google, Facebook, or Amazon (along with many nationally based corporations from the ICT, energy, and consultancy sectors) have become global conglomerates with strong neoliberal and technocratic biases (Boyd and Crawford, 2011). They have the exclusive power to influence the political economy of countries and regions and to maintain comprehensive control of the production process—content creation, intellectual property or branding—and the consumption process. Such corporations may employ complex and opaque data mining techniques to track users and ultimately target them (Hardy, 2017). The internet-based economy has brought the commodification of content production, distribution, and social interaction among users, followers, and influencers. This reinforces the alignment between media and cultural industries, on the one hand, and financial and economic elites, on the other.

In this context, media practitioners have become inextricably bound by escalating pressures to optimize the monetization of online traffic. This creates “greater demands in terms of publishing platforms, technology, content and workloads” (English, 2016: 1002). The lines between facts, comments, interest-driven content, branded content, comment as news, partisan news, and fake news have become increasingly blurred (Karlsson et al., 2017). Capitalizing on conflict, media organizations have nurtured “polarized over moderate views” (McCluskey and Kim, 2012: 566), thus restricting citizens’ opportunities to obtain a multifaceted account of the political world. Altogether, the growing alignment with political and economic interests (Almiron, 2018; Luengo et al., 2017) has slackened journalism’s commitment to “inform and keep those in power accountable” (Richardson, 2017: 1).

This cluttered and complex environment has brought the rapid and problematic expansion of fake news (Vargo et al., 2018; Hameleers and Van Der Meer, 2019), which represents the latest “existential challenge to journalists dealing with an audience losing its faith in what journalism does” (Richardson, 2017: 1; Serazio, 2019). In the current hybrid news system, the propagation of fake news by legacy media and newer actors (Giglietto et al., 2019) “can eventually lead to false beliefs or factual misperceptions, posing vexing problems on democratic decision-making” (Hameleers and van der Meer, 2020: 230). Along with digital platforms and social media, newspapers have also been argued to be “strong on spreading fake news and spin”, especially in those territories where media are “relatively weak” and “servile” (Singer, 2020: 9). Further, fake news accusations are arising as a strategy to undermine individuals, entities, places, or ideas in the geopolitical, economic, and media battlefields.

This article is guided by the following questions: how did *El País* apply and articulate patriotic journalism and fake news frames in the coverage of the Catalan process during October 2017? What were the political and economic factors influencing the frames employed to cover such events? To answer this question, we review the political and economic conditions of Spain and the Spanish news media system in relation to the positioning of Catalonia. Second, the events of 1 October are described and coverage by *El País* is explained. Third, the concept of patriotic journalism is reviewed and applied to this case study through a framing analysis, which incorporates an analysis of fake news. Finally, we present a tentative model to account for the political and economic factors influencing the application of patriotic journalism and fake news strategies.

Methodology

Our primary objective is to find connections between political and economic factors and the use of patriotism and fake news accusations by *El País* to cover the so-called Catalan process. We analyse

the political-economic system inherited after the death of Franco and developed in Spain during the transition to democracy. We also analyse the role played by the media during transition and trace the ideological, financial, and professional development of *El País* as part of the media conglomerate Grupo Prisa within the internet economy.

All news stories published by *El País* during October 2017 on the Catalan process were retrieved from *El País*' online archive (<https://elpais.com/archivo/>). The sample totals 751 stories, which are classified into journalistic genres. To have a baseline for comparison, we counted the number of stories published by *El País* on the second most covered topic during October 2017 (the #MeToo movement) and the number of stories on the most covered topic during October 2018 (the Spanish Catholic Church abuse scandal). The comparison between these two topics is considered only as a numerical indicator in regard to how salient and exceptional the Catalan topic was for *El País*. In other words, those two cases form an approximate baseline to gauge the intensity of coverage of the Catalan topic compared to the second most covered topic that month.

We will define the concepts of patriotic journalism and fake news and present the findings of a framing analysis from a sample of 30 stories randomly selected from the total sample (751). Frames are a crucial mechanism to influence others as they can be understood as “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation of selection, emphasis, and exclusion by which symbol handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual” (Gitlin, 1980: 7). Two coders, trained on Liebes' frames of patriotic journalism (1992), performed the framing analysis as follows. First, each coder was assigned a pool of 30 stories randomly selected from the total sample. Second, each coder conducted the framing analysis individually, including the possibility of assigning no frames or assigning two frames. Third, Cohen's κ was run to determine if there was exact agreement between the two coders on these 30 stories. The results show a strong agreement between them, with $\kappa = .915$, $p = .000$. There was disagreement concerning two stories. A third coder assigned frames to these two stories and, since their judgment coincided with either of the two coders in both stories, the third coder's judgment was accepted. The framing analysis is explained with connections to the political and economic factors previously mentioned.

The Catalan Process

Spanish elite media –El País

The political system in Spain is a polarized, pluralist system (Albæk et al., 2014) characterized by high political parallelism, commentary-oriented journalism, late democratization, state intervention, and clientelism. In this type of system, media owners are usually affiliated with or close to political parties, and thus the news media is part of the political structure (Hallin and Mancini, 2017). As Hallin and Mancini contend, “Spain's pacted transition to democracy produced a political process centred around party elites” (2017: 160). Consequently, the news media's political coverage focused on the actions of political parties and acted as their spokespersons (Baumgartner and Bonafont, 2015). Admittedly, the Spanish transition to democracy was to a great extent favoured by a tacit journalistic consensus to both respect the recent past (dictatorship) and unequivocally take steps towards democracy through calling for a written Constitution (1978) and free democratic elections (Montero et al., 2008). As shown by Perales-García (2016), during the transition, most of the right-wing press exalted the dictatorship period.

From that moment on, a model of state based on a constitutional monarchy and 17 equal autonomous communities was out of the question for all Spanish media. Instead, they fuelled a

continuous endorsement of the Spanish transition's power structure involving the King, the political parties, and private sector institutions (especially the telecoms, banks, energy, and infrastructure development corporations). These are the relevant factors for grounding the internalization of national-centred convictions in relation to journalism's norms and values, the adoption of an editorial policy based on an homogeneous conception of the nation, and an intolerance of cultural domestic diversity as well as pluralistic national aspirations (eight autonomous communities are recognized as historical nationalities: Aragón, Galicia, València, Andalucía, Catalunya, Baleares, Canarias, and Euskadi) (Perales-García, 2016). Basque terrorism (with national aspirations for Euskadi) was ("is" - despite having ceased violence in 2011 and being officially dissolved since 2018) used to scapegoat all peripheral or alternative political options. This general historical context made things easier for Spanish media to denigrate "nationalist" aspirations and promote Spanish "patriotism" equalized as the "state" (Perales-García, 2016).

In addition to this historical political alignment of media and state, Spanish media corporations are characterized by financial dependence and a high concentration of corporate private actors (Almiron, 2009; Almiron and Segovia, 2012). We now draw special attention to mainstream media *El País* as part of the media group Grupo Prisa—"the largest and most influential media conglomerate in Spain" (Almiron and Segovia, 2012: 2894).

El País, founded in 1976, traditionally positioned itself as a left-wing media organization following Spain's transition to democracy (1976-1979) (Montero et al., 2008). It is a subsidiary of the major media and communications conglomerate Grupo Prisa and is connected to political power in Spain (Almiron, 2018), as will be explained later. *El País* is the second most read newspaper (AIMC, 2019: 45), while its website receives more than 19 million unique users per month (*El País*, 2017). Headquartered in Madrid, *El País* is one of the "most influential Spanish-language media organisations in Spain at state level in terms of audience and reach" (Almiron, 2018: 60).

As a top-tier, general information newspaper, *El País* adheres to a set of principles that "aim for in-depth and comprehensive coverage and are written using moderate and emotionally controlled language" and "are less inclined to use more ethically dubious reporting practices" (Franklin et al., 2005: 29). *El País* is widely recognized for keeping high professional standards and for placing a remarkable emphasis on accountability throughout its lifespan (Seoane and Sueiro, 2004). As an indicator of its status and consequent responsibilities, *El País* pioneered the introduction of traditional media accountability instruments in the Spanish landscape, including an in-house stylebook (*Libro de Estilo*) in 1977 and an internal ombudsman's post in 1985.

Grupo Prisa's links with politics and power run parallel to *El País*' strong reputation as "a bastion of the reinstatement of democracy in Spain during the 1981 coup d'état" (Almiron and Segovia, 2012: 2894). *El País* also built a positive reputation in the Spanish and Catalan societies during the 1980s and 1990s (Prado, 2015). The conglomerate has had preferential access to the banking system since the years of financial crisis after 2008. This contributes to a growth model based upon debt and puts "financially driven or speculative actors" in the position to influence management (Almiron and Segovia, 2012). As reported by Almiron (2018), Grupo Prisa's main creditors (amounting to €1.5 billion in 2018) are CaixaBank and Banco Santander. CaixaBank is a Catalan-funded entity which had always been headquartered in Barcelona. But, as a response to the events of October 2017, this bank relocated its headquarters outside Catalonia.

In sum, media concentration in the digital economy, political and economic connections, and ideological polarization create the conditions for political, economic, and financial powers to restrain non-conservative stances by *El País*. Almost a decade ago, it was observed that this

“threatens to reduce even more the levels of professionalism, content quality, and pluralism in the Spanish media system” (Almiron and Segovia, 2012: 2913). It is important here to consider the extent to which the three main Spanish media groups (Prisa, Vocento and Planeta) are highly dependent on the same economic and financial elites (Almiron, 2018).

Catalonia 1 October 2017

Catalonia is a region in the north-east of Spain containing almost 1,000 villages/towns spread across 32,000 km² with its own culture, language, and traditions. Out of a total population of 7.5 million, reports consistently demonstrated that 80% of the population over voting age were in favour of calling a binding referendum on independence (Guibernau, 2014; Micó and Carbonell, 2017). The figure for a “yes” vote oscillated around 50%. Against this background, a coalition of pro-independence parties won the elections held on 27 September 2015 when the binding referendum was the main government proposal on its electoral manifesto. The Spanish government initially took no action against the proposed referendum after September 2015 but repeatedly claimed that the law would be upheld [2].

On 1 October 2017, a transatlantic ship with a huge image of the cartoon character Tweety Pie plastered on its side anchored in Barcelona Harbor (see Figure 2). The ship was to be home for several thousand police officers and riot police as hotels across Catalonia had already been fully booked by the Spanish government. In total 15,000 professionals arrived from the rest of Spain in addition to the mobilization of thousands of Catalan police officers. Working under the command of the Spanish government, the objective of the operation was to prevent a potential mass mobilization of 5.5 million voters from depositing a “yes”/“no” vote in the ballot boxes for the Catalan referendum (on whether Catalonia should become an independent state). The Catalan government with the support of major social and cultural entities organized the referendum.

On 1 October, polling stations were crowded with voters from very early in the morning. In response to the police presence, voters formed human masses that blocked the Spanish police from breaking through. The police then began to use force in an attempt to confiscate the ballot boxes, most of which were hidden or moved. The Catalan police [3] did not act against voters, but just stood still or facilitated the free movement of people. At the end of the day, 1,000 people were injured, the entrances of thousands of state schools had been damaged and hundreds of thousands of Catalans and Spaniards were shocked and incensed (BBC, 2017). The internet and social media platforms were full of incendiary comments.

Coverage intensity of the Catalan process in El País

El País published 751 stories about the Catalan process during October 2017, which resulted in an average of 24 stories per day. *El País* steadily published stories about the Catalan Process every single day of October 2017, reaching 41 stories on 3 October. Undoubtedly, many actual events were occurring during October 2017 in Catalonia, but the coverage was rather exceptional compared with the second most covered topic—the #MeToo movement. The latter was the most covered topic a year later—October 2018 (see Figure 1).

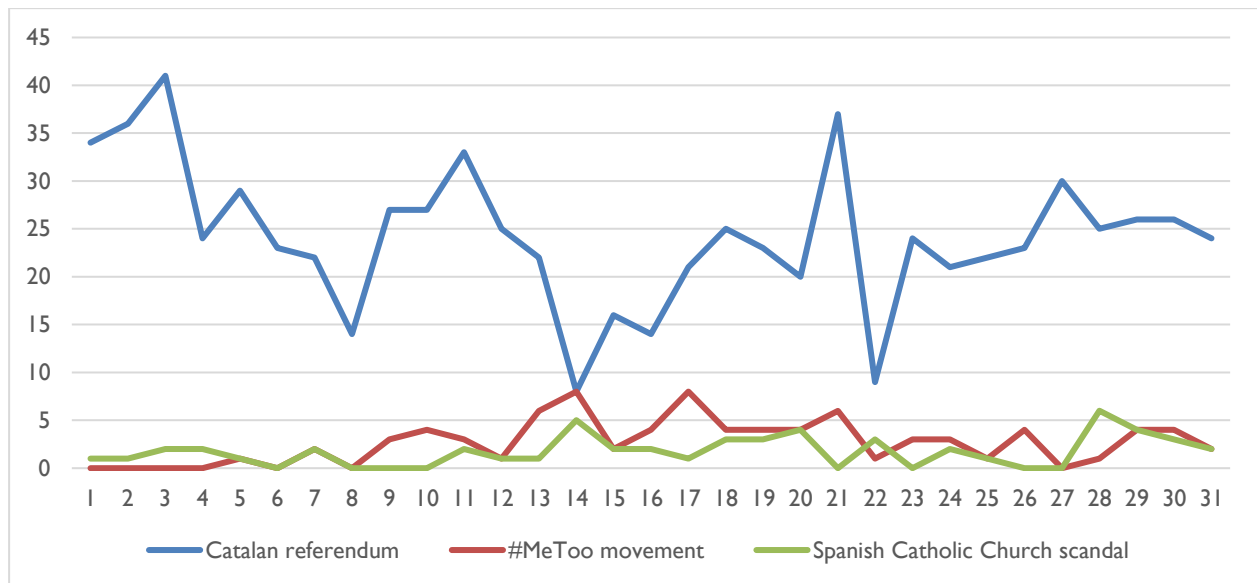


Figure 1. Evolution in the intensity of coverage of the Catalan Process and #MeToo movement (first and second most covered topic in October 2017), and the Spanish Catholic Church scandal (the most covered topic in October 2018).

As can be seen in Table 1, the difference between the first and second most covered topics in October 2017 is remarkable: 751 stories about the Catalan process and 83 stories about the #MeToo movement. One year later (October 2018), a central topic in *El País* was the Catholic Church sexual abuse cases in Spain after Pope Francis accepted the resignation of seven bishops on 21 September 2018. This topic accounted for 54 stories during the whole month. We compare these topics here only to gauge the exceptional intensity of coverage given by *El País* to the Catalan movement (see Table 1).

Table 1. Total distribution of the news coverage of the Catalan Process and the #MeToo movement in October 2017, and the Spanish Catholic Church scandal in October 2018.

Days of October 2017 and 2018	Catalan referendum	#MeToo movement	Spanish Catholic Church scandal
1	34	0	1
2	36	0	1
3	41	0	2
4	24	0	2
5	29	1	1
6	23	0	0
7	22	2	2
8	14	0	0
9	27	3	0
10	27	4	0
11	33	3	2
12	25	1	1
13	22	6	1
14	8	8	5
15	16	2	2
16	14	4	2
17	21	8	1
18	25	4	3
19	23	4	3
20	20	4	4
21	37	6	0
22	9	1	3
23	24	3	0
24	21	3	2
25	22	1	1
26	23	4	0
27	30	0	0
28	25	1	6
29	26	4	4
30	26	4	3
31	24	2	2
Total	751	83	54

The unique prominence of stories in the case of the Catalan referendum (751 versus 83 for the #MeToo movement compared to 54 for the case of sexual abuses in the Spanish Catholic Church a year later) raises doubts about how original or “new” the stories actually were. In fact, 70.71% of the total sample were reports (531); a remaining non-negligible 29% was comprised of: annual reports (4.13%), editorials (3.2%), galleries (2.13%), infographics (0.4%), and opinion articles (19.44%) (see Table 2). Most importantly, out of the 531 fact-based stories, 30%—159 reports—were simplified and inaccurate news about other news. In other words, this was fake news. All the data indicate *El País*’ inflated focus on the Catalan process and show how the newspaper managed to direct attention towards this topic at the expense of accuracy.

Table 2. Genre distribution of the total sample of news published by *El País* about the Catalan process during October 2017.

Genre	Quantity	%
Annual report	31	4.13
Editorial	24	3.20
Gallery	16	2.13
Infographic	3	0.40
Opinion article	146	19.44
Report	531 (159 news about other news or fake news)	70.71 (30)
Total	751	100

Overall, one can conclude that *El País* had an interest in setting the public agenda on the Catalan process by giving full coverage to the Catalan movement and publishing many opinion articles and a wide range of related stories, as well as stories from other stories. Since *El País* and Grupo Prisa, along with all the main media groups in Spain and major corporations, had made public their position against Catalan autonomy (Almiron, 2018), the intensity of the coverage concerning the issue is not surprising. *El País*' strategy was to position the Catalan process as a remarkable negative development for the country.

Patriotic Journalism

The concept of patriotic journalism emerged in response to coverage of the Vietnam War and the first Gulf wars (Hallin, 1986), and has since been applied in the context of major threats to national security in western countries (as posed by instances of violence, military conflict, and acts of terrorism) (Nossek, 2004; Ginosar, 2015). Ginosar proposes four indicators of (tribal) patriotic journalism:

- (a) journalists adopt the governmental/elite framing of the crisis;
- (b) journalists avoid criticism of their government during the confrontation;
- (c) journalists express solidarity with their national community; and
- (d) journalists ignore the other side ("the enemy"), its narratives, and its positions (2015: 292).

The application of patriotic journalism by journalists and reporters thus entails the inclusion of the interests of the nation as a primary criterion in the process of news gathering and reporting (Berkowitz et al., 2004). Ginosar's indicators of patriotic journalism are aligned with patriotic journalism's frames as defined by Liebes (1992). This article applies Liebes' six frames defined as follows:

- Excising: "not showing the other side of the conflict (the enemy)"
- Sanitizing: "avoiding showing blood, destruction, victims, etc."
- Equalizing: "not addressing the power inequality between 'our' forces and the enemy's"

- Personalizing: “portraying the humanity of the two sides asymmetrically”
- Demonizing: “describing the enemy as demonic, evil, or not human”
- Contextualizing: “minimizing the broad context of the conflict and focusing on episodes within it”

The excising frame was evident in *El País* during October 2017. Extra prominence was given to voices supporting the Spanish government and ignoring the other side. On the one hand, *El País* reported intensively on the details of personal experiences from supporters of the Spanish government. For instance, three days after the referendum, a story in *El País* reported that teachers in schools were “indoctrinating” children by playing fragments of the Mel Gibson film *The Patriot*. In this story, a witness states that “most of the staff meeting is spent by pro-independence teachers confronting the other half” and that “one has to remain silent when a separatist gets in” [4]. *El País* also reported in another story how the children of Spanish police officers (the State’s law enforcement agency keeps around 3,500 police officers in Catalonia, who obviously live there with their families) were being told ironically that “you should be happy about what your dad did yesterday ... the only thing they do is beat people”. A parent was then reported to have said that those words “hurt like punches”. Connected to this, another story reported that the mayor of a small-town council had been “insulted and almost injured [for not being a separatist]” [5].

The newspaper refers to injured people or people being attacked as “man who falls down”, “voters” or “participants in the referendum” [15] (see Figure 2). This photographic report of the police actions on 1 October described the images as “police using shields to prevent people from approaching the voting tables” (image 5 in the link), “a man confronting a police officer” (image 10), or “a police officer dissuading a woman from approaching a polling station” (image 15) (see the images online) [15]. Thus, while *El País* did put a name and a face to victims and reported their feelings and emotions, they did so selectively. This was evident in the period from February to May 2019, when *El País* reported that the Spanish police officers had been threatened by hateful stares and from members of the public spitting on them [16]



Figure 2. Police brutality on 1 October 2017. Image 1 (top left): the transatlantic where thousands of riot police were hosted in the Barcelona Harbor; image 2 (top right): “a man that falls down” (see gallery in endnote 15); image 3 (bottom left): riot police beating voters in polling places; image 4 (bottom right): a voter bleeding.

Wolfsfeld et al. (2008) coined the concept of an “ethnocentric mode of journalism”, according to which information may flow in a “victim mode”, that is, “highly prominent news stories, high levels of dramatization, the personalization of victims, ethnic solidarity stories, and demonization of the enemy” (Ginosar and Cohen, 2019: 8). This occurs when the so-called victims are on one’s own “side”. This contrasts with the defensive mode of reporting when victims are on the other “side, that is, “low prominence of news stories, an analytical perspective, depersonalization of the victims, and justification of the violence” (Ginosar and Cohen, 2019: 8). The contrast between the vocabulary and language used for each side will be further illustrated in the demonizing frame.

Following a sanitizing frame, *El País* referred to the violent actions of the Spanish police as “interventions” or “incidents” [6], or even as “textbook interventions—fast, effective, without a drop of blood and no images of violence to open news bulletins” [10]. On 2 October, *El País* published a column asserting that police interventions had been proportionate, as there were only “two people hospitalized,”—one of them “a poor elderly man [with a clear patronizing tone] who suffered a heart attack”—out of two million voters. The column made a distinction between people “treated by doctors or emergency services” and “injured” people [7].

El País builds upon the logic of two equal sides, that is, it equalizes the power of the so-called “separatist movement” or the Catalan government and the Spanish State. In doing so, separatists are framed as an enemy that violently threatens the nation, hence the political process is explained using war or terrorist vocabulary [8] [11]. *El País* denies the complexity and variety of the Catalan movement by tarring all supporters with the same brush (as a mass of hate-filled, manipulative/manipulated radicals). In fact, the movement was comprised of multiple, overlapping groups of

socialists, self-government supporters, Catalanists, and separatists from a wide ideological spectrum. *El País* also connected the Catalan movement with terrorism, presumably to justify violent actions against them. For example, a story on 2 October stated that the movement behind the referendum had been “beheaded” (an expression used three times) [9], a type of expression that usually refers to groups of terrorists, particularly ETA in the Basque Country. In an interview published the same day, the interviewer asked a witness whether “there were Basque youngsters” among the protesters at schools on 1 October [10]. *El País* later reported that the separatist leaders were in favour of “riots” [11].

Remarkably, the alleged social rupture or clash is always reported as occurring within Catalan society or the Catalan police (“The *Mossos*, cut in half”) [12], never within Spain as a whole. We should note here that the fact that the second most populated and richest region of Spain (Catalonia) is represented by a parliament with a majority of independentists indicates a social rupture within Spain as nowadays conceived. This is the case not only because Catalonia is Spain, but also because one can easily find a clear divide between “nationals” and the “others” across Spain (as is evident within the Basque Country or with movements in Galicia, Valencia, or Baleares). Instead, *El País* places this divide within Catalonia, where one can find a diversity of positionings independently of the national divide.

El País applies the demonizing frame by labelling separatists as “fascists, cynics, cheaters,” “ETA terrorists” and “participants of a coup d’état”. The Catalan media is “dumb” [13] and the actions of the movement are an “insurrection” [14], “prostitution of democracy” or a “clumsy/rude manipulation” [13]. Presenting others as violent or dangerous builds on two previous frames too: excising the other side and equalizing the two forces, in the sense that the state faces a “demonic” well-organized force. In fact, *El País* sometimes adds adjectives to separatists and political leaders. To provide some examples, the Catalan political process is named as “desafío” (defiance) or “deriva” (drift), demonstrations are named as “tumultos” (turmoil), the referendum (proposed and made public in three different electoral programs and voted by a majority of Catalans) is labelled as “breaking the rules of the game,” the Spanish Constitution is called “carta magna” (the Great Charter of the Liberties in medieval Latin) or the “imperio de la ley” (rule of law over any political principle such as tyranny and arbitrariness). In particular, the Spanish constitution is referred to from a religious and devotional standpoint through reference to the norm of “consagra” or the consecration of Spain’s rights and obligations. This type of language used by *El País* to refer to independentists and independentists’ actions runs counter to the normal journalistic practice of keeping the use of adjectives low.

Scholars have explained that a “paradigm repair” by journalists and news media organizations occurs as soon as conflict or threats are diminished (Bennett et al., 1985; Berkowitz, 2000; Plaisance and Skewes, 2003). Paradigm repair is a sort of confession in which journalists and news media outlets admit to having applied patriotic journalism and declare this period to be over (Berkowitz, 2000). The purpose here is to restore journalists’ credibility, image, and reputation (Bennett et al., 1985; Berkowitz, 2000). In times of patriotic journalism, normative ideals, and professional judgement emerge as opposing forces in the newsroom (Hanitzsch, 2007). Therefore, journalists may also employ role normalization to redefine their work (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017). As will be shown in the following section, *El País* uses fake news accusations as a strategy for both recontextualization of the whole topic (the Catalan movement) and paradigm repair.

The framing analysis provided here reveals how the reported connections between the *El País*’ media group (Prisa) and the Spanish political and economic power structure may have influenced

editorial decisions. Those connections entail general rules such as a homogeneous conception of the nation, veneration for the powers that be, equalizing terrorism and national aspirations, and having contempt for separatists (Perales-García, 2016). All of this shows in stories that focus on the disruptive influence of Catalonia but not on the disruptive influence of Spain. The King's discourse is positioned in support of corporate and political interests, and separatists are insulted with the same language applied to terrorists and fascists. The use of patriotic journalism by *El País* is thus associated with the defence of political and economic interests.

Fake News

Conceptualization of fake news

On 11 January 2017, nine days before being officially named as the 45th president of the United States of America, Donald Trump accused CNN's Jim Acosta of representing a "terrible organization" and stated, "you're fake news." The term post-truth had already been named as the Oxford Dictionary's word of the year in 2016, and in March 2017 Associated Press included the term in its style guide. There are many definitions of fake news: "false stories spreading on social media. ... viral posts based on fictitious accounts made to look like news reports" (Tandoc Jr. et al., 2018: 3-2), "news with intentional false content and lacking in real facts" (Albright, 2017), "stories specifically involved misleadingly edited or contextualized quotes" (Haigh et al., 2018: 17) or "deliberately constructed lies, in the form of news articles, meant to mislead the public" (Sullivan, 2017). In this respect, all objectives behind fake news strategies are injurious (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017) since fake news is, conceptually, the opposite to true news (Tandoc Jr. et al., 2018). However, these definitions are only the surface of a much more complex reality with technological, geopolitical, economic, and journalistic interests at stake (Farkas and Schou, 2008).

Fake news arises from the economic crisis of traditional journalism (Curran, 2019), and is said to violate the profession's morality and the relatively recent ideal of objectivity (Schudson, 2003). Fake news creators attempt to reproduce the genre conventions and format of journalism (Elgan, 2017). For Wardle (2017), fake news is part of a process of disinformation, derived from other (real) news and is an imitation of the formal pattern, content, actors, and actions that comprises real news (Balmas, 2014). Objectivity refers here more to the professional practices of reporting, editing, and writing than the concept of neutrality. To put it clearly, storytelling has become an important feature of today's news pieces because of a hybrid environment which blurs the boundaries between facts, comments, ideology, and entertainment. In this regard, Haigh et al. suggest that narrative should not conflict with objectivity since the former "can assist readers to inform themselves, but it can, at moments, deliberately or unintentionally mislead or misinform" (2018, 2065).

Importantly, fake news flourishes in today's technologically mediated society shaped by the immediacy of information flows (Chadwick, 2013; Usher, 2018). As a result, journalists and news outlets may not have the time to check facts thoroughly. Instead, they are constantly adapting and feeding the flow of news (Watanabe, 2017). The "cult of speed and live reporting" (Neveu, 2016: 451) has become the defining trait of "ASAP journalism" (Usher, 2018), a hyper-accelerated news culture that impacts upon the quality of news output. As Zelizer (2018: 112) points out, the need for immediacy "diminishes and simplifies the news, often while sacrificing accuracy, intensifying information overload, and muddying the potential for productive deliberation".

But, most importantly, as Hirst puts it, the fake news topic “brings into sharp relief a critical analysis of the news industry and of journalism” (2017: 82). More specifically, the normative approach to journalism as a fourth estate, free from ideological and political-economic constraints, is misleading when it comes to explaining the interests behind the fake news phenomenon. Those creating fake news and those denouncing fake news can equally benefit from it. When creators and denouncers have a shared interest in disseminating fake news, their actions feed into each other. Fake news producers may agree with the content but be most interested in its dissemination; whereas denouncers may disagree with the content while also being interested in its dissemination. Reilly points out that “some fake news producers ensure that the revelation of fakery is built into the architecture of their work” (2018: 141).

A real-time hybrid news media system is disrupting traditional political meanings and forcing politics and the news media to share strategies (Chadwick, 2013; Tenenboim-Weinblatt and Neiger, 2017). The field of political communication operates within a media system in which technology and social networking sites allow real-time data about messages’ impact and response. In turn, the media system becomes a highly politicized arena in which media logics are strongly influenced by ideology, resulting in widespread homophily, polarization, and eventually hate speech and fake news.

Framing the Catalan process through fake news

Fake news as a global entity can be defined in three ways: “a mechanism by which the powerful can clamp down upon, restrict, undermine and circumvent the free press” (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017: 6); a politically charged insult against the whole information system and the conglomerate of interests of which the news media are part (Haigh et al., 2018; Nielsen and Graves, 2017; Tandoc Jr. et al., 2018; Wardle, 2017); and a key driver connected with data management, geopolitical conflict, and the commodification of users' communities (Winseck, 2016).

As pointed out by Farkas and Schou (2008: 299), fake news “is being mobilised as part of political struggles to hegemonize social reality”. Fake news as a global phenomenon aligns well with the idea of a “floating character of truth” and with the argument that a post-truth era based on speed, political polarization, and entertainment has arrived (2018: 309). Furthermore, international conflict along with societal and political crisis enable alternative epistemologies (Lewandowsky et al., 2017) or conspiracy theories to “become historical narratives that may spread through cultural transmission” (Van Prooijen and Douglas, 2017: 323).

Framing the Catalan political discussion as a manipulative process that involved false information and was connected with (Russian) fake news became a recurrent theme in *El País*’ coverage of the topic [17]. During October 2017, 3.5% of the articles (26) published by *El País* exclusively covered the supposed manipulation and irregularities of the referendum [18]. The referendum was at the same time being tagged as illegal, irregular, “cheating”, as a “coup d’état”, and as “not happening” [13]. Not mentioned in this context was the fact that 15,000 anti-riot police officers were trying to prevent voters from voting, often beating and pushing them aside. As will be seen, *El País* was playing the patriotic frame to defend the nation from the referendum and the fake news accusations frame to undermine the Catalan side.

El País would claim repeatedly that the referendum was not legally binding, but then it would scrutinize the process and call for irregularities. It would also report that “our” 15,000 anti-riot police officers were operating and that thousands of “their” voters were being removed from polling stations (with not much violence), but then it would denounce the fake news disseminated by the

“independentist” side (including social media, public media [TV, radio], private media, or international media). *El País* would publish the results of the referendum and judge the low participation as a reason to doubt any conclusions that might be drawn from these results, but then it would emphasize that the referendum had not taken place and that democracy had prevailed.

To promote scepticism about the referendum, *El País* described a “document from the [Catalan] vice-president ...” as “lies or half-truths” in the headline, and as “infested with falsehoods, imprecisions and distortions” in the lead [20]. In addition, *El País* published a report in which the author wrote that “there was no savagery on the part of the police” and that images of this consisted of “falsehoods dismantled [by *El País*]” [21]. The previously mentioned distinction made by *El País* between “injured people” and “people treated by doctors” was reinforced a day after on 2 October in an editorial entitled “How many were really injured on October 1st?” In the section “*El País* Truth - Facts” [22], it was conveyed that the amount of injured people had been inflated, which is a way to either change focus or to sanitize the violence experienced by victims.

On 21 October, *El País* entitled a story “The great lie,” and stated in the lead that “this is Catalonia, but what is happening entirely belongs to the world of fake news” [23]. Furthermore, a steady stream of stories suggested that “Russian networks” and “ultranationalist media supporting Trump” were spreading fake news to “break Spain” [24] and weaken the European Union [25]. *El País* also reported a “2,000% increase in the activity of Russian networks in SNS in favour of the referendum” [19]. A story from a month earlier had warned that “the machinery of Russian distortion now penetrates the Catalan crisis The global network that acted with Trump and the Brexit now focuses on Spain” [26]. Neither *El País* nor any other media, the Spanish Government or the Supreme Court (which ruled on the Catalan process trial in October 2019), or any other institution has ever provided proof of these accusations.

As noted by Hirst (2017), Putin and Russia are always the first to be blamed for obvious reasons, but fake news are usually part of a broader political issue: “to define fake news (...) as a conspiracy to spread Russian influence in the West, does not provide a lens for examining the broader issue of truth and meaning in the public sphere” (2017: 85). The generic and superficial way of using fake news has been mobilized as a political accusation by Trump to “destabilise politics in order to take advantage of the resultant confusion” (2017: 85). Regardless of the reliability of *El País*’ sources, it tried “patriotically” to undermine the Catalan process by denouncing a Russian interference through a fake news accusation. At the end of the month, *El País* claimed in an editorial to have “unmasked the ‘fake news’ of separatists” [27]. Their purpose was to give the impression that its position as “a bastion of democracy” had been reaffirmed.

In addition, months later, during the trial of the Catalan process, *El País* discussed “fake news and interferences” [17]. However, no mention had been made about these interferences during the trial and no such mention was made in the final sentencing on 14 October 2019. Thus, major fake news accusations were brought with no significant evidence. These accusations served to delegitimize the Catalan movement and reinforce the newspaper’s position as rigorous, neutral, and professional. This would counter any criticisms of the newspaper concerning its deployment of patriotic journalism.

Final Thoughts

Patriotic journalism is a well-documented practice during international violent conflict or in response to national security threats. Patriotic journalists give a prevailing role to their “own”

country and openly depict themselves as “us” by imposing patriotic journalism frames over facts. Such news stories contribute to the sense of belonging in a national community (Schudson, 2003; Borden, 2005).

This article has explored how elite media may apply patriotic journalism as part of information warfare (fake news). At a normative level, the overuse of patriotic framing strategies by *El País* failed to comply with the *El País* Newsroom Statute (Article 3.3), the *El País* Style Guide (Article 1.3), along with other major codes of the profession such as those promoted by the Council of Europe (Article 3) or the Federation of Journalists Association (FAPE) (Article 17). In addition, the language and narratives of hatred and confrontation contravened the code promoted by the Union of Journalists in Madrid (Article 6), which stresses that journalists should “acquire an ethical compromise for peace”. In short, *El País* heavily capitalized upon conflict. By failing to offer a multifaceted account of Catalan-related events in order to broaden citizens’ knowledge about the issue, and by focusing on confrontation, manipulation, and fake news, *El País* contravened the public’s right to receive a comprehensive and contextualized coverage of the events. This right was established in *El País*’ Newsroom Statute (Article 3.2) and the *El País* Style Guide (Article 1.2) as well as in other major codes of ethics promoted by UNESCO (Articles 1–2), the IFJ (Article 1) and the Council of Europe (Article 17).

We have explained how *El País* positioned the Catalan process as a national threat with relevant quantitative data and remarks concerning the exceptional intensity of coverage. To this end, our conceptualization of patriotic journalism and fake news shows how the Catalan process was also framed as a conflict with two equal forces. The sanitized violence of “ours” contrasted with the demonized actions of “them”. Associating the Catalan movement with fake news was designed to justify defence of the *patria* (understood as dominant political and economic interests). The patterns of coverage and the editorial decisions manifested in the exercise of framing are influenced by Grupo Prisa’s financial and economic interests, which have a strong conservative and neoliberal leaning. These are shared among the other two media groups in Spain. As Almiron (2018: 54) observes: “In Spain, the media-politics relationship is a two-way flow oriented towards the narratives of the right – with no influential counter-alternative. The Catalan crisis reveals that mainstream media content reflects the convergence between neoliberalism and the Spanish Fascist inheritance”.

We have summarized our arguments in a model (Table 3), which could be used to interpret other cases on patriotism and fake news practices.

Table 3. Model on patriotic journalism and fake news.

	Objective	Strategy	Actions
1 st level	To position the process as a national security threat	Prominence	795 stories/month
2 nd level	To defend the <i>patria</i> (political and economic interests)	Frames and strategic narration	-Equalize (e.g., conflict) (5) -Excise (e.g., tar with the same brush) (2) -Demonize (e.g., fascists) (4) -Personalize (e.g., glances of hate of the common people) (3)
3 rd level	To defend/repair journalism norms and values (paradigm)	Fake news as a floating signifier and fake news accusations	-Sanitize (e.g., man that falls down) (7) -(Re)contextualize the topic as a fake news issue (e.g. Russia wants to break Spain, the EU, the system) (14) -Section e.g., “ <i>El País</i> Truth – Facts”

Elite media can give full attention to a certain important topic with the objective of constructing it as a national security issue. This can be evidenced in the prominence of stories (Amazeen, 2014; Vargo et al., 2018). This is the model’s ground or first level.

A second level concerns the strategic narration of the Catalan process in terms of applying the patriotic frames. This includes establishing an “us and them” duality such that “our war” or “their war” are turned into “our news” and “their news”, respectively (Liebes, 1992; Nossek, 2004). Patriotic frames also excise the diversity of Catalan people involved and demonize them as radicals or common fascists. These and other ad hominem attacks are combined with partial truths and overgeneralizations (Lewandowsky et al., 2017), as well as personalizations of their “own” victims (e.g., police officers physically or psychologically hurt) and depersonalizations of “their” victims. National elite media thus represent the state’s position and complements its strategic narration of events with comment-oriented stories (opinion articles) and the constant use of emotional adjectives (Nossek, 2004).

The third level of the model shows how elite media contextualizes the Catalan cause as a fake news campaign against Spain (and supranational entities such as the EU or even the global system) perpetrated by Russian machinery. From this perspective, the images and stories of eventual violence can be sanitized, and the coverage’s legitimacy can be advanced retrospectively (and juxtaposed favourably against the shortcomings of patriotic journalism). Under this schema, journalism’s norms and values can be repaired (Berkowitz, 2000; Plaisance and Skewes, 2003). Thus, elite media, such as *El País*, presents itself as the leading opponent against Catalan/Russian fake news by, for instance, creating a section entitled “*El País* Truth – Facts”, with content that supposedly unmasked the “fake news” of separatists. Overall, the endeavour to denounce fake news shows a desire to lead the critique of fake news discourse in order to hegemonize social reality (Farkus and Shou, 2018). This entails the safeguarding of truth, democracy, and the home country from fascists and fake news threats. In other words, fake news is a floating signifier that is used strategically to *mask* (justify, repair) the application of patriotic journalism. Paradoxically, this move actually overlooks journalism’s norms and values just as they are threatened by new forms of news delivery whereby digital technology corporations take the lead over traditional content-based conglomerates. The general result is to preserve the political-economic system. Figuratively, elite media associates both the home country and the journalism profession with the *patria* and sanitizes both the real physical violence committed by “us” and the symbolic damage done by the media to

the profession's norms and values—freedoms of speech and publication against the encroachment of censorship.

Our analysis can be used to observe and analyse these practices concerning other controversial topics in different countries (Huawei and Covid-19, to name a few). Such research necessitates the consideration of political and economic factors that might influence news coverage of these kinds of topics.

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Endnotes

- [1] A now dissolved terrorist organization in favour of the independence of the Basque country from Spain and behind nearly 1,000 murders in the late 20th century.
- [2] To add a short update to the article, it should be noted that the seven politicians and two social leaders in prison since October 2017 were found guilty on 14 October 2019 of 9 to 13 charges of sedition and given lengthy prison sentences.
- [3] *Mossos d'Esquadra* is the law enforcement agency of Catalonia. It was created in 1983 by the *Generalitat de Catalunya* (Catalan government), thanks to the transfer of competences on security by the Ministry of Domestic Affairs. The agency was named after a historical Catalan security body from the XVIII century.

- [4] [“Está habiendo un *adoctrinamiento* de los que convocan la huelga.... Es una locura, hay medio claustro enfrentado al otro medio. Cuando viene un independentista, te callas”], 4 October, report. Available at: https://elpais.com/ccaa/2017/10/03/catalunya/1507047534_017939.html?rel=mas
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- [6] [“La mayoría de *incidencias* se produjeron tras la apertura de los lugares designados por la Generalitat como colegios electorales y con las *intervenciones* de Policía y Guardia Civil para cerrarlos o retirar las urnas”] 2 October, report. Available at: https://elpais.com/politica/2017/10/01/actualidad/1506832232_706322.html
- [7] [“Los más de 800 son en realidad personas "que han sido atendidos por los médicos". Es claro: que alguien acuda a un médico no quiere decir que esté herido o enfermo”], 2 October, opinion article. Available at: https://elpais.com/elpais/2017/10/02/opinion/1506950604_759842.html
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- [9] [“Rajoy recurre a la fuerza policial para descabezar el referéndum ilegal”], 2 October, report. Available at: https://elpais.com/ccaa/2017/10/01/catalunya/1506820373_674242.html
- [10] [“Y, aun así, pese a una intervención policial de manual—rápida, efectiva, sin una gota de sangre ni imágenes de violencia para abrir los telediarios—,el aire se quedó oliendo a azufre.... Una situación de tensión así puede acercar a la causa del referéndum a los más indecisos y radicalizar a los más jóvenes. ‘Se ha dado cuenta de que había jóvenes vascos?’”], 2 October, report. Available at: https://elpais.com/ccaa/2017/10/01/catalunya/1506873136_037134.html
- [11] [“Los organizadores del referéndum ilegal del 1-0 se mostraron partidarios de que hubiera disturbios.... Ey, que vienen con los tanques, que estos payasos de Rajoy de mierda han declarado la guerra...”], 10 October, report. Available at: https://elpais.com/politica/2017/10/09/actualidad/1507577705_588429.html#?id_externo_nwl=newsletter_diaria_manana20171010m
- [12] [“Los Mossos, partidos por la mitad”], 5 October, report. Available at: https://elpais.com/ccaa/2017/10/04/catalunya/1507108779_072116.html
- [13] [“Hoy estamos también ante un golpe de Estado.... Pero las formas de este nuevo golpe son radicalmente distintas, aunque ahora también hacen uso de la coacción y comparten comportamientos fascistoides...que recuerdan las prácticas cínicas y tramposas habituales de los etarras en otros tiempos. ...la *burda manipulación* de la opinión pública (incluyendo el papanatismo de muchos medios de comunicación internacionales)”], 5 October, opinion article.

Available at:

https://elpais.com/elpais/2017/10/04/opinion/1507136513_566831.html

- [14] [“[La Generalitat] han socavado la armonía y la convivencia en la propia sociedad catalana, llegando —desgraciadamente— a dividirla.... “El resultado, ha incidido, es que ‘hoy la sociedad catalana está fracturada y enfrentada’.... El Rey Felipe VI se ha dirigido a los españoles en una alocución excepcional ante la situación de emergencia que vive España con la *insurrección* de la Generalitat en su intento de desagregar Cataluña del Estado y la convulsión social derivada de la celebración del referéndum ilegal”], 4 October, report. Available at: https://elpais.com/politica/2017/10/03/actualidad/1507049494_875682.html
- [15] [“Un hombre cae al suelo durante la carga policial en la escola Mediterránea de la Barceloneta (Barcelona)... La policía evita con sus escudos que la gente se acerque a una mesa de votación en Barcelona.... Un hombre se enfrenta a un Guardia Civil a las afueras de un colegio electoral en Sant Julià de Ramis, Gerona.... La policía disuade a una mujer de acercarse al lugar de votación en la escola Mediterránea de la Barceloneta (Barcelona)”], 2 October, gallery. Available at: https://elpais.com/elpais/2017/10/01/album/1506841911_271083.html#foto_gal_1_27
- [16] [“El odio de la gente corriente.... Un guardia civil dice que lo que más le dolió, más incluso que los escupitajos o que le llamaran hijo de puta, fueron las miradas de odio”], 22 March 2019, report. Available at: https://elpais.com/politica/2019/03/21/actualidad/1553193654_894736.html
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- [18] 1 October, report. Available at: https://elpais.com/ccaa/2017/10/01/catalunya/1506822634_717493.html
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