

‘Go and get’em!’: Authoritarianism, Elitism and Media in the Catalan crisis

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Abstract

The Catalan independence movement has already attracted a great deal of scholarly attention, mostly in the political science and law fields and, to a lesser extent, in cultural studies. However, there has not yet been a political economy of communication approach to one of Europe’s most serious territorial crises. Amongst the most salient characteristics of this conflict is the belligerent role taken by the Spanish media elite. They have aligned with the state’s position, and even reinforced it (rather than acting as a watchdog). In some respects, the media elite have become an arm of the state as proponents of a ‘Go and get’em’ stance towards political dissidents. This article considers the links between this compromised news media reporting and state authoritarianism in Spain. I also assess the unity of Spain’s power elite, as described by C. Wright Mills (1956). In this context, mainstream media helps to shape authoritarian capitalism.

On February 12, 2018, the evening news of Spanish state television (TVE) reported on the Catalan National Assembly (ANC), one of the civic associations seeking independence for Catalonia. The ANC leader was announcing that the organization was mobilizing to support “brave actions”. As he was speaking in Catalan, on-screen text captions with the Spanish translation were displayed. The Spanish-speaking audience was offered, however, a creative translation of his words: instead of ‘brave actions’, the captions said that the ANC was preparing mobilizations to support “violent actions” (Vilaweb, 2018a). No later rectification was offered even though the news segment was replayed several times that night.

As Lakoff (2004) has stressed, the framing of a debate is crucial. Frames, the mental structures that shape the way we see the world, have been comprehensively theorized in media studies. Framing the movement for independence in Catalonia as violent by TVE was by no means an exception. As I will review in this article, Spanish state-owned and mainstream commercial media[1] overwhelmingly aligned with a ‘Go and get’em!’ frame which includes justifications for the use of force in Catalonia and hate speech against Catalan independentism[2]. However, what most of the framing literature does not address are the political economy pressures which bring the media to choose a particular frame.

In this respect, political economists of communication face the difficult challenge of linking the power relations behind media systems with media content choices. The analysis presented here attempts to make such a connection in the case of the Catalan crisis. By the ‘Catalan crisis’ I mean the political turmoil experienced in Spain and Europe once the Catalan regional government organized a referendum of self-determination on October 1, 2017. Subsequently, they unilaterally declared independence of Catalonia from Spain. In response, the Spanish state launched a political, police, judicial and media campaign against Catalan citizens that abused fundamental human rights – including, as we shall see, the rights to freedom of expression, information, demonstration, association and assembly. This article explains, from a Catalonian perspective, how the media elite contributed to the erosion of fundamental rights across Spain.

Theoretical framework

The author of *The Power Elite* (1956/2000), American sociologist C. Wright Mills, is considered the first major contributor to elite studies since the so-called European ‘classical elitists’ established the field (i.e. Max Weber, Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca and Robert Michels) (López, 2013). As Davis and Williams remind us (2017), before Mills, German-born Italian Michels addressed concerns relevant to media scholars. He investigated, for example, how elites could frustrate democracy by using communication to manipulate ‘the masses’. However, Michels’ move from Marxism to Fascism (he became Mussolini’s ideologue in the last years of his life) has generated controversy. Mills, in contrast, has strongly influenced the critical political economy of communication field, even though his standpoint can be oversimplified. In this respect, one writer refers to a “radical functionalist account” in which “the media serve to reproduce social power hierarchies in systematic ways” (Hardy, 2014: 199, commenting on Herman and Chomsky, 1988; a simplification also implied by Davis and Williams, 2017). Political economists of communication have developed an essential corpus of research demonstrating how media elites are connected with the political economy of capitalism. As Vincent Mosco explains, this includes “how media elites produce and reproduce their control over the communication business” (2009: 190). It is also important to consider how media elites influence general elite discourse networks (e.g. Winseck and Jin, 2011).

The Millsian research paradigm must acknowledge the massive material changes of globalization, financialization and digitalization over recent decades. However, as Davis and Williams (2017) point out, the core of this paradigm still operates and can be employed in a more international context. In this respect, the research evidence points not to a unified structural elite but rather elite diversity and fragmentation (Wedel, 2017). However, this does not mean that elites cannot cooperate or collaborate (such occurrences have been documented by research on neoliberal and climate change denial knowledge networks) (Almiron, 2017). One must acknowledge here that elites themselves are susceptible to influence from media organizations and dominant ideologies (Davis, 2003).

This article, on the Spanish media elite and the Catalan crisis, recognizes the limitations of Mills’s theory and the need to avoid “totalising claims” in the political economy of communication (Hardy, 2014: 206). Thus, my purpose is not to identify homogeneous elites systematically influencing media; it is to explore the intricate reality of how power is negotiated such that (already weak) democratic practices are undermined in an environment of neoliberal financial capitalism.

To this end, I will first introduce the crisis and consider the turn of the Spanish state towards authoritarianism. An extended discussion on such matters is necessary because the conflict at stake

is structural and deep-rooted. From a critical political economy perspective, it is important here to address the wider social totality and historical context (Mosco, 2009).

Secondly, I will review the alignment of Spanish media elites with the authoritarian shift of the government (in relation to other political elites along with economic and military elites). To this end, a literature review on the media coverage of the Catalan crisis has been conducted. The topics of Catalan independence and the Catalan crisis have so far received only moderate attention from communication scholars. Consequently, all relevant works identified in Spanish, Catalan or English have been considered. Overall, the corpus mainly includes the press, although television and radio are also analyzed. All major mainstream media are included and several methodological approaches are considered: critical discourse analysis, framing analysis, textual analysis and qualitative content analysis.

Finally, I examine the political economy of the Spanish mainstream media in light of power elite theory. The discussion highlights that: there is a political parallelism in Spanish mainstream media biased towards the right; the intertwining of Spanish mainstream media with financial capitalism is so strong that media elites are necessarily aligned with financial elites; and this neoliberal-financialized mainstream media has un-democratic roots. I then propose that the power elite concept as defined by Mills is valid for the Spanish case. However, when one considers political, economic, judicial and military elites, it is clear that the general elite structure is not unified or homogeneous. Rather, there are vested interests and shared dependencies grounded in financialization, neoliberalism and authoritarianism.

This article does not set out the arguments for or against the independence of Catalonia. Rather, it considers the issue within an analysis of Spanish media elites and media content from a political economy of communication perspective.

The conflict

There are many narratives of ‘the Catalan crisis’ in circulation. One tells the story of a wealthy region wanting to separate from a poorer state for selfish economic reasons. However, a close look at the supporters of Catalonian independence shows that, although medium and small Catalan companies support a referendum on independence, Catalan economic elites have fiercely lobbied to stay in Spain (Fernández, 2017; Font, 2014; Picazo, 2017). On the other hand, the economic crisis that began in 2008 reduced social mobility and living standards and increased economic vulnerability for a significant number of Catalans. Here, one might expect a desire to leave Spain in search of a better life. In 2016, Spain was the third most unequal country in the European Union (Oxfam Intermon, 2018). Yet, statistics show that a number of Catalans who have experienced downward social mobility oppose independence (CEO, 2018). Framing this conflict as rich against poor contradicts reality since the wealthiest in Catalonia, as well as many of its less affluent residents do not favor independence at all.

Another circulating narrative is that of exclusionary nationalism whereby Catalans supposedly wish to expel non-Catalans. However, Catalan national consciousness is closer to the kind of inclusive cosmopolitan nationalism found in similar stateless nations such as Quebec and Scotland (Guibernau, 2007). Studies have shown that some stateless nationalisms like those of the Catalans and the Basques “have experimented with multiculturalism to make diversity a new marker of national identity” (Jeram, 2013: 225). A further narrative depicts the Catalan movement as an elitist project driven by a small number of politicians with vested interests. However, only two minor left-wing parties

(center-left ERC and extreme-left CUP) supported independentism before 2010 (when the issue of independence was brought into mainstream Catalan politics by a plurality of grassroots civic groups) (Cramer, 2015).

The aforementioned narratives over-simplify the Catalan crisis and they are in conflict with reality. While acknowledging that there is no single way of addressing such a multidimensional crisis, any rigorous analysis should at least consider the following three issues: the historical relationship between Catalonia and Spain; the causes of the rise of the Catalan independence movement; and the Spanish state's shift towards authoritarianism. Together, they provide the context for this article's communication analysis.

Catalonia within Spain: a permanent struggle

Catalonia is not simply a construction of Catalan nationalism; it is a reality born, like any other, out of various cultural, political, social and economic struggles (Bamberg and Kerevan, 2018; Dowling 2017b; Harris, 2014; Sobrequés, 2007). The first mention of a Catalan polity can be found in the 9th century. It is with the marriage of Ferdinand and Isabel in the 15th century and the consequent union of the (Catalan) Crown of Aragon with the Crown of Castile that a struggle emerges between the Catalan and Castilian projects. It is important to note that at first the union of the two monarchies did not create a unified Spanish state, language, culture or economy; the two crowns had radically different political cultures. For instance, Castilian demands "for racial and religious purity were at odds with the Mediterranean multi-culturalism" (Bamberg and Kerevan, 2018: 39). This was to change, however, after the War of Spanish Succession (1702–1714), enabling the ascent of the Bourbon dynasty to the Spanish throne. In 1714, after Barcelona was besieged and violently occupied, Spain imposed a centralized state model inspired by French absolutism. The overriding objective was to create a unified nation through force. Because the exercise of such force threatened the erasure of Catalan identity, some have described it as "an act of deliberate ethnic cleansing" (Bamberg and Kerevan, 2018: 47). In short, Castile (Elliot, 1990) banned all traditional Catalan political institutions, rights and language.

However, a 19th century industrial and bourgeois revolution in Catalonia did not occur in the rest of Spain. This strengthened Catalonian political identity in the context of the Romantic revival across Europe. 'Catalanism' emerged, first culturally and then later as a political project. During the early decades of the 20th century this political movement "sought Catalan leadership in Spain rather than the break-up of the country" (Dowling, 2017a). But the underlying concept of a modern multinational state continued to be unshared by the Madrid elite.

In the 1930s, anti-Catalan sentiment (as well as sentiment against other sub-national identities in Spain) grew within the Spanish political, intellectual and military milieus, including democrats and fascists. Amongst the latter, violent and phobic opposition to sub-nationalism was inspired by the fascism that proliferated in Europe throughout the interwar years [3]. It is telling that both of the coup d'états in Spain during the first half of the 20th century (headed by Primo de Rivera in 1923 and Franco in 1939) sought to repress any multinational concept of Spain and to prevent the loss of more territories (after the independence of former Spanish colonies) (Strubell, 2016). The political ideologies behind both coups had the erasure of political and cultural sub-national identities as a primary goal. The terror and ultra-nationalist ideology of the Franco régime lasted for four decades. After the dictator's death in 1975, the so-called 'transition to democracy' was piloted by the elite of the Francoist regime (Gallego, 2008). Thus, the legal underpinnings of the new constituent courts

emanated from the Francoist courts system. It was through the Law of Succession that Franco appointed Juan Carlos de Borbón as his successor in 1966 and it was the Francoist courts that proclaimed him king in 1975. A real restoration of democracy should have restored a Republic, as this was the form of government Franco's rebellion had overthrown. This is why a number of authors consider the current Spanish monarchy to be the successor of Franco (Del Toro, 2018; Elordi, 2013; Gallego, 2008; Gil Matamala in Fernández and Gabriel, 2017).

Likewise, the Court of Public Order (Tribunal de Orden Público), in charge of repressing behavior considered as political crimes by the Fascist regime, was abolished in 1977. But the National Audience (Audiencia Nacional), currently in place, was created in the same building and with the same judges. Similarly, the most repressive police brigades remained untouched. Certainly, the death of Franco did not bring about the end of the institutional, para-police and extreme-right violence, as suggested in the myth of an exemplary, peaceful Spanish 'transition to democracy' (Baby, 2017).

In this context, the military elites forced into the Spanish 1978 Constitution three principles devised to block all national aspirations within Spain. These were the indissoluble unity of the Spanish nation, the unquestionability of the Monarchic system and the indisputable right of the military to influence and intervene in Spanish politics if any of the former two were at risk (LP, 2015).

The elite piloting the Spanish 'transition to democracy' also opted for silence. As Aragonese remembers (2017), there were no trials nor even condemnations of the dictatorship and no references either to the anti-Francoist opposition or the victims of Francoism. This contrasts sharply with the dissolution of fascist regimes in other European countries during the 20th Century [4].

These developments led to the creation of a legal culture combining elements of the old Francoist system and the new democratic one. The general result is sometimes called 'sociological Francoism' in reference to the social characteristics that survived the old regime (Reig, 1999). Central among these was the phobia against multiculturalism. In a sense, the Franco regime remains in the structures of the state, its ideology and in the views of many political representatives. At present, it is still possible to draw an organizational chart from the winners of the civil war. Their descendants occupy the same positions in the judicial system, political offices, armed forces and the economic elite of Spain (Barcala, 2015; Salellas, 2015).

After the long, dark night of Fascism, Catalonia found a place for itself in the new Spain as an *autonomía*, a semi-autonomous system allowing for some degree of home rule. With few exceptions, Catalan political parties backed the Constitutional pact, along with all the taboos embedded in it, in the belief that this could help transform Spain. In practice, however, self-rule depended on the politicians in office in Madrid and on a number of Constitutional Court rulings. Spanish conservatives – usually backed by center-left Spanish Socialists – soon revealed that they did not share the plural vision of Spain allegedly agreed to in the Constitutional pact. And, the recentralization and Hispanicization of Spain reemerged as one of the core themes of the right Popular Party (former *Alianza Popular*). The cutting back of regional powers became a declared political aim (Losada and Maíz, 2005).

In 2006, the main Catalan parties, from nationalists on both the left and right, to socialists and post-communists, completed the draft of a new Statute of Autonomy in order to consolidate future regional powers. The new statute was approved in the Catalan parliament and by the people of Catalonia in a referendum, but the Popular Party sent the Statute to the Spanish Constitutional Court. In 2010, they "annulled or disfigured" substantial parts of it (Strubell, 2016: 7).

Following this, Catalan public opinion increasingly supported the holding of a referendum on whether Catalonia should become an independent state. Since 2012, on September 11, the Catalan

National Day, demonstrators have taken to the streets and roads of Catalonia to show popular support for independence. At the apex of this support, 60% of those polled stated that they would vote in favor of independence (CEO, 2014); 85% were in favor of having a referendum on the matter (Rico, 2016). On November 9, 2014, with the help of civic organizations, the Catalan government scheduled a non-binding referendum to consult Catalan citizens on the issue – 2.3 million people voted (37% of the population) and 81% of this number gave support to independence. This popular sentiment finally materialized in the Catalan Parliament. Since 2015 the majority of seats in this unicameral legislature have been occupied by independentist parties.

After persistent refusal from the central government in Madrid to hold a legal plebiscite similar to those in Quebec or Scotland, a binding referendum was unilaterally organized by the Catalan government with the financial and logistical help of civil organizations. On October 1, 2017, more than two million people managed to vote, in spite of Spanish police violence against voters, and 90% voted in favor of the independence of Catalonia. Shortly thereafter, there was a symbolic declaration of a Catalan Republic by the Catalan President Carles Puigdemont. On this basis, a call for dialogue and political negotiation with the central government was made. The latter, however, refused any negotiation, cancelled self-government in Catalonia, established an undeclared state of exception in the region (Antich, 2017) and forced new regional elections. In these elections, the pro-independence parties again won the majority of seats. Subsequently, the Spanish government and the judicial system repeatedly obstructed the forming of a government by the independentist majority and launched a joint campaign of repression (Binnie, 2018).

The rise of the Catalan pro-independence movement

The preceding account provides an understanding of how the Catalan independence movement came about. As most scholars point out, the Catalan independence movement arises from a desire to protect and encourage one's own culture, the feeling of having a different political project and disappointment with the economic relationship with Spain. But these factors did not substantially change public opinion until 2010, when the constitutional court ruled against the 2006 Catalan Statute of Autonomy. Today, it is clear that the court's decision triggered the rise of Catalan independentism. According to jurist Javier Pérez Royo, with this ruling the court ignored the subsequent referendum and thereby the people's voice. According to the Constitution, the people had the final word on statutory changes, therefore the government's refusal to recognize this broke the constitutional pact (Pi, 2017). This has been a common grievance of the Catalan independence movement and it reveals frustration at the lack of any real political agency. In this respect, the 2010 ruling can be seen as the first coup de force by the regressive forces in Spain toward recentralization [5]. Beyond this, several emotional factors were involved.

Firstly, there was a refusal to engage in real political dialogue on the part of Madrid. Inflammatory rhetoric from some unionist politicians (amplified or fueled by the media) equated Catalan independentists with fascists, mafia, Nazis, terrorists and other similar actors (Pelay, 2018; P.R., 2013). Secondly, the recentralization sought by the government directly threatened the relative autonomy of Catalonia. Since 2006, more than 40 Catalan laws have been appealed to the Spanish Constitutional Court by Spanish political parties (mostly the Popular Party). The vast majority of them have been totally or partially annulled. The bulk of these regulations were concerned not with independence but with the social policies and tax collection needed to handle the economic and financial crisis (Clapés, 2017).

Thirdly, central government in Spain has experienced an erosion of credibility due to repressive activities in the Basque country and major political corruption within the two mainstream parties, PSOE and the Popular Party. There has been a corruption scandal in Catalonia involving the right-wing party formerly in government (Catalan News, 2017), however, two of the three pro-independence parties (ERC and CUP) have been virtually corruption-free in their entire history. These contrasting circumstances played an important role in the independentist imaginary. There were reminiscences of the Spanish state's dirty war against Basque ETA members in the 1980s (Woodworth, 2003) [6] combined with an awareness of how Spanish political parties were over-dependent on the banking sector (Sánchez et al., 2017) and the private corporate sector (mostly through revolving doors) (Montero, 2016) [7].

The shift towards authoritarianism

It is not news that countries in southern Europe have huge democratic deficits because of their recent authoritarian past. Against this background, it is worth noting that Spain in particular was the last to liberate itself from fascism. How such a past is dealt with reflects the quality of contemporary democracies (Pinto, 2010) and their associated media (Hallin and Manchini, 2004). In Spain, legacies of the fascist regime are visible both at the sociological and structural level – Francoism was not so much dismantled as covered with a democratic veneer (LP, 2015). The foundations of Spanish democracy actually explain the contemporary lack of judicial independence and the high levels of political corruption. These legacies reflect what Preston (1995) has called the ‘institutionalized pillage’ of dictatorship.

Since 1996, when conservative José María Aznar arrived in office, regressive forces have gained influence within Spain's fragile democracy. Several important episodes illustrate this, but the events of 2015 clearly tipped the balance toward democratic regression. In that year a profound revision of Spanish criminal justice was conducted by the Popular Party, the party in office. This led to the approval of a law for the protection of citizen security. It was the prototype of a gag law enacted in direct response to the anti-austerity movement in Spain. The primary aim was to demobilize and frighten activists. In just the first two years of enforcement, more than 34,000 sanctions related to the rights of assembly, meeting and expression were imposed (Bayona, 2017). Changes in the penal code that accompanied this legislation allowed judges to sentence up to fourteen Spanish rappers to jail for their songs in the first three years of its enforcement. In some cases, this was simply because the lyrics had criticized the Spanish royal family (Loughrey, 2018). An editorial in *The New York Times* put it simply: “Spain's new gag law disturbingly harkens back to the dark days of the Franco regime.” (NYT, 2015).

In the same year, the Catalan independentists won the majority of seats in the Catalan Parliament, thus triggering the deactivating mechanisms against the movement (Strubell, 2016). According to Strubell, the mechanisms in 2015 and 2016 were driven by a confrontational narrative based on the indivisible unity of Spain. In practice, hundreds of local councils were taken to court for infractions such as introducing local referendums or removing Spanish flags. There were significant efforts to divide Catalan society into opposing sides, including the promotion of unionism at the grassroots level. The population was frightened by various tactics which included the media airing threats from the military. Furthermore, the Spanish government activated an international diplomatic offensive ‘predicting catastrophe’.

Certainly, the Spanish media played a prominent role in the application of several of those mechanisms. They engage in what Strubell calls a “dirty war” against independentism. For instance, accusations against pro-independence politicians were “made not in the courts but in smear press campaigns (arising from police sources, not journalist investigation)” (Strubell, 2016: 13). This maneuvering was later confirmed by other observers (Marco, 2017).

After the October 1, 2017 referendum, the Spanish authorities and judiciary launched a further escalation of repression. It is worth remembering that the ‘crimes’ of which Catalan independentists were accused included conducting a referendum, organizing a non-violent electoral program and non-violent protesting in the street. Since then, the violation of freedom of expression and other human rights has been denounced by a number of observers and participants. [8]

Many in the media labeled the abandonment of cold repression for a more open, heavy-handed approach as a shift towards authoritarianism (ACN, 2018b; Alzamora, 2018; Clua-Losada, 2017; Nazca and Reuters, 2017; O’Grady Walshe, 2017; Ramoneda, 2017; Requejo, 2018). We shall now examine this view from a political theory perspective.

First, as Andrew Heywood reminds us (2014), in a democracy, authority rests on legitimacy, and in that sense it arises ‘from below’. However, unquestioning obedience to the Spanish Constitution and the ‘empire of law’ as demanded by the Spanish government undermines this type of authority. This is because the Spanish Constitution does not have popular legitimacy. The majority of current voters in Spain did not vote for it (ARA and IC, 2014) and the majority of Catalans were not supportive either (CEO, 2018). The Constitution was shaped under the threat of a military coup and was changed in line with the needs of elites. It was modified in 2011, without a referendum, to allow a restriction on public investment (in order to appease financial interests) (Uriás, 2017). Similarly, the obedience to the judiciary requested of Catalan independentists is illegitimate once the system abandons a purely legal stance – that is, once the judicial elites prevent the investiture of legitimate candidates in the Catalan Parliament on the grounds that they favor a certain political project (Tomás, 2018). Forced obedience to such elite decisions is a sign of government ‘from above’ and thus a sign of authoritarianism, in particular of state authoritarianism, which Heywood (2014) defines as “a ‘tough’ stance on law and order” (92).

The Spanish state’s reaction to the pro-independence movement also fulfills the second trait of authoritarianism highlighted by Heywood. Instead of “obliterating the distinction between the state and civil society”, as is the case with governments from below (Heywood, 2014: 79), the Spanish State is concerned with repression of the opposition and, as a consequence, political liberty. In spite of their non-violent methods, Catalan independentists were treated as terrorists. They were put in pre-trial detention and accused of crimes that were reminiscent of fascist rule, such as rebellion and sedition. They were threatened with long prison sentences and jailed in prisons hundreds of kilometers away from their homes. This forced their families to make unnecessarily long trips. Among other measures, the state repression included severe limitations on the freedom of expression, measures aimed at controlling communications and information about Catalonia (Mèdia.cat, 2018b), and the use of the police against the unarmed civil population (Baquero and Navarro, 2015). The whole pro-independence movement was effectively criminalized through the equation of ideological dissidence with violence (Ara, 2018).

Because the two parties in office in Madrid during the political repression have a marginal representation in the Catalan Parliament (the Popular Party and the Socialist Party had respectively, 8% and 12% before the 2017 December polls and 4% and 14% afterwards), the judicial repression

against Catalan independentism can also be seen as a sign of political authoritarianism. It enables the Madrid government to undemocratically rule over the will of a majority of voters in Catalonia.

Of course, the will of Catalans is plural. According to the regular surveys made on political choices in Catalonia, voters of the majoritarian pro-independence block define themselves within a spectrum that goes from center-right to extreme left, with a majority of pro-independence voters located in center-left positions. On the other side, voters of the unionist block locate themselves within a spectrum that goes from extreme-right to center-left. The largest unionist party, *Ciudadanos*, gathers the largest proportion of voters defining themselves as extreme-right. The third player, the leftist coalition *En comú Podem*, aligned with Republicanism is neither pro-independence nor pro-unionism. They have received votes from citizens locating themselves between the center-left and extreme-left (CEO, 2018). Whatever right and extreme-right means for voters, it is clear that the unionist block incorporates more rightist elements than the Republicans (whether the latter are pro-independence or not).

On the independentist side, the antifascist and democratic roots of the three pro-independence parties are undisputed, with one of them (ERC) having been severely repressed by the Franco dictatorship. On the unionist side, only one party (PSC, the Socialist Party of Catalonia) has similar democratic roots, while the other two parties in the block have significant ties with the extreme right and even fascism. The Popular Party was founded under another name, *Alianza Popular*, by one of Franco's former ministers and has never condemned either the dictator or extreme-right street violence. *Ciudadanos* won most votes in the December 21, 2017 elections in Catalonia, but was unable to form the majority needed for government. They have usually been portrayed in the international media as a centrist, liberal reformer party [9], however, closer inspection reveals that many of its stances are conservative or even reactionary. Whether in the Catalan or Spanish Parliament, *Ciudadanos* usually votes in line with the Popular Party on social and economic issues and fiercely competes with it in Spanish patriotism and rhetoric (it has been actually defined by some as a "Serbian-style, fanatically nationalist" party; Vilaweb, 2018c). By way of example, it has advocated the denial of public health care access to immigrants and has voted against restoring the inheritance tax, which targets mainly large estates (Muñoz, 2015). *Ciudadanos* is also anti-feminist (Peirano, 2018). Like the Popular Party, it advances the preeminence of Spanish language and culture against the presumed threat of minority languages. *Ciudadanos* and the Popular Party support *Societat Civil Catalana* (SCC), a unionist Catalan platform linked to the extreme right in Catalonia and Spain (Borràs, 2015). *Ciudadanos* is thus a combination of old Spanish conservative politics (involving the defense of traditional cultural practices such as bullfighting) and new right politics (involving a commitment to neoliberal economics). At the same time, *Ciudadanos* emphasizes populist rhetoric and themes, and claims to be the voice of the common citizen. The rise of *Ciudadanos* in direct competition with the Popular Party as the leader of Spanish patriotism has fostered the reemergence of right-wing extremist violence (Borràs, 2018; El Nacional, 2018b; Staff, 2017).

Thus, the Spanish state's shift toward authoritarianism can be attributed to at least three factors: the legacy of the Francoist regime (embedded in the values of political, economic and judicial elites); high levels of corruption within the conservative party in office; and Spain's economic dependence upon Catalonia. Around 20% of the Spanish economy would disappear if Catalonia gained independence (Henley, 2017).

The cooperation of the media in the rise of authoritarianism and right-wing extremist ideologies in Catalonia and Spain is unambiguous. The question that remains is what the precise nature of the relationship between them is, a point we shall now turn to.

The mainstream media in the Catalan struggle

The media can play an enormous role in legitimizing or delegitimizing a political project, particularly in countries like Spain, where there is a strong political parallelism between media and politics (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). What follows is a review of the mainstream media in Spain with respect to the (de)legitimizing of the Catalan independence movement. Three main periods can be identified for this task: 1976 to 2006, 2006 to 2013, and 2014 onwards. These three periods reflect a turn in media coverage due to the major political events mentioned previously.

1976-2006: From recovery of democracy to the 2006 Statute

From the recovery of democracy in 1976 to 2006, Catalan independentism was not present in the media simply because this sociopolitical movement was yet to be born. Before 2006 only two left-wing political parties in Catalonia, the *ERC* and the *CUP*, had independentist ideas in their programs and these had only marginal representation in the legislature. At the same time, independentism was supported by less than 13% of the population (CEO, 2005). Nevertheless, the Spanish media did address nationalism, self-determination, independentism and the relationship between Catalonia and Spain.

Few works specifically explain how the Spanish media addressed Catalan independentism and nationalism during this first period. However, studies by Giró (1999, 2002) and Perales (2012, 2016) detail the representation and (de)legitimizing of Catalan identity in some major Spanish newspapers during the two first decades after Franco's death. Their findings fully correlate with the political parallelism described by Hallin and Mancini (2004). They identified the Mediterranean polarized model, in which the media outlets and media content reflect political party divisions. Accordingly, all the press analyzed in these studies aligned with the two mainstream political parties in Spain (Popular Party and *PSOE*), rejected self-determination and negatively portrayed independentism. In short, in line with Francoism's aversion to the national minorities in Spain, mainstream newspapers of this period opposed non-Spanish national aspirations and framed them as conflictual.

For example, during the transition to democracy in Spain (1976-1979) the right-wing press (including *ABC* and *La Vanguardia*) openly extolled the memory of Franco and negatively labelled all non-Spanish national aspirations as 'nationalist'. Spanish nationalism, by contrast, was positively labelled as 'patriotism' (Perales, 2016: 129). In parallel, *El País* tolerated the Catalan identity as long as the region contributed to the construction of the Spanish nation. The term 'national' was positioned as a synonym for 'state' or 'Spanish' and any aspiration to independence in Catalonia was denied representation (Perales, 2016: 126).

In this period, Giró and Perales found traits that would be replicated and amplified in later coverage of the independence movement. Firstly, the press often constructed arguments "against reason" or "excluding reason", as these authors put it, when addressing Catalan nationalism and identity (as well as other non-Spanish identities). Secondly, the press routinely violated the principle of cooperation by failing to provide: a proper quantity of information; quality information (for which journalists have reliable evidence); information which is relevant (related to the topic); and information which is clear (not obscured or ambiguous) (Giró following definitions by Grice, 1975 and Charaudeau, 1989).

Thus, hostility against minority nationalism in Spain spread across the mainstream, state-wide press from the very beginning of the democratic transition.

2006–2013: Coverage of the first stage of the ‘procés’

In this period, the political struggle around the 2006 Catalan Statute of Autonomy and the Constitutional Court ruling that annulled or disfigured substantial parts of the text fostered the independence movement. The latter emerged from a number of grassroots organizations (Cramerí, 2015) to the point where Catalan independentism became a primary topic in the media.

Ricard Gili’s (2017) study of the Spanish press for the period 2006–2015 refers to a disconnection from reality. Because none of the mainstream newspapers recognized the massive support for a referendum of independence, they denied its legitimacy. Gili’s findings also show a violation of the principle of cooperation (although his study did not use this concept). Instead of providing clear, unambiguous facts and then interpreting them in a relevant way, the newspapers under study supported only those facts that would fit a favored narrative. In this respect, Gili observed an important difference between the newspapers published in Madrid and Barcelona. Catalan outlets tended to remember the causes that informed and explained the massive marches for independence. These causes included the ruling of the Constitutional Court on the Statute, economic grievances, the re-centralization of the Spanish state with the Popular Party and the state’s refusal to accept a citizen-initiated referendum of self-determination. To varying degrees, the newspapers published in Madrid failed to provide any context. They tended not to acknowledge the reasons for the social mobilization in Catalonia in advancing the independence cause and minimized the role of the citizenry. Responsibility for the independentist turn was entirely attributed to the political elite. Interestingly, *El País* maintained a comparatively moderate stance regarding Catalonia’s desire for self-government. Towards the end of this period they even argued for more Catalonian self-government and for funding to fix the problem.

The split in press coverage between Madrid and Barcelona is also confirmed in other research that has analyzed specific events of the period (Alonso, 2014; Ballesteros, 2015). In addition, a study comparing the British press coverage of the 2006 Scottish elections and the Spanish press coverage of the 2007 Catalan elections revealed marked differences. In contrast to the Scottish case, Spanish media discussion about the Catalan contest was largely negative, and the independence cause was often trivialized (Castelló and Capdevila, 2012). Furthermore, the 2010 radio coverage of the Constitutional Court judgement showed a direct correlation between the stances of particular stations and those of political parties (Montagut, 2012).

Overall, research on this period shows increasing hostility from right-wing newspapers in alignment with the sharpening tone of right-wing politics. The right-wing media generally neglected the need to separate information and opinion and to provide the proper quantity and quality of information. The 2014 public consultation announcement raised the temperature of coverage. By the end of this period, accusations of ‘sedition’ and ‘coup d’état’ had started to become standard in *ABC* and *El Mundo* (e.g. *ABC*, 2013; Jiménez Losantos, 2013; Tertsch, 2013). This kind of coverage anticipated a language war that would spread after 2014. However, respect and even moderate support for the pro-independence movement can still be found in some state-wide dailies at the beginning of this period. Examples include *El País*, from Madrid, and *El Periódico* and *La Vanguardia*, from Barcelona. This stance would, however, come to be progressively abandoned by the three newspapers.

2014–2018: Coverage of the second stage of the ‘procés’

After the non-binding referendum of 2014, mainstream media narratives in Spain expressed unprecedented levels of hostility against Catalan independentism. Such was evident in the right wing media and, to a certain extent, the rest of the mainstream media. This situation worsened after the 2015 elections (in which the independentist parties won the majority of seats in the Catalan Parliament for the first time), the October 1, 2017 referendum, and the new elections imposed by the Spanish government at the end of 2017 (these also produced an independentist majority in the Catalan Parliament). The escalation of hostility paralleled the Spanish state’s shift toward authoritarianism.

This period has barely been researched. Available studies find that right-wing dailies escalated their hostility over time and that other, ambiguously positioned newspapers, such as *El País*, began to follow this tendency. Eventually, by the end of 2017, no single state-wide mainstream outlet held a non-hostile stance towards the pro-independence movement. Some authors have labelled this media alignment with the Spanish authoritarian turn as a form of ‘state-journalism’, akin to that which operated during the Franco dictatorship (Serés, 2017).

Other studies (Martínez and Álvarez-Peralta, 2016; Moragas-Fernández and Capdevila, 2017; Reguero et al., 2015; Requejo et al., 2016) show the negative connotations that Spanish media associated with the pro-independence movement. There were multiple references to violation of the law and other derogatory disqualifications. *El País* and *La Vanguardia* progressively incorporated self-contradictory stances. *El Periódico* was giving support to Catalan and Scottish nationalism at the beginning of this period before changing its position. Later, in 2015, *El País* delegitimized independentists by comparing the relationship between Catalonia and Spain with that of a couple “where alleged abuse does not entitle the claim to separation, but rather questions the role of the victim” (Moragas-Fernández and Capdevila, 2017: 30).

Finally, a study on regional news from mainstream national radio and television news programs in January and February 2017 showed that Spanish news and reporters routinely treated Catalonia-related issues with a critical tone. They offered a permanent negative image of the autonomous Catalanian community and more specifically of its Government, regardless of the topic addressed (López et al., 2017). This has also been confirmed by other studies. For instance, research into mainstream media coverage during the August 2017 terrorist attacks in Barcelona showed how the anti-independence stance of Spanish media “produces a biased analysis of facts that are unrelated to the process” (Planas, 2018). Similarly, the antipathy towards anti-independentist sentiment was seen to inform “fierce criticism” of Scottish nationalism in the cartoons of almost all mainstream Spanish newspapers during the 2014 Scottish referendum (Requejo et al., 2016).

From mid-2017, a growing harshness in the tone of the Spanish media narrative became visible as the referendum was approaching – and finally celebrated – and as Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution was invoked to suspend home rule in Catalonia. Hundreds of Catalan independentists were prosecuted, a number of its leaders were imprisoned and the liberties and freedoms of people not aligned with Spanish nationalism were threatened.

Because of the legacy of Francoism, mainstream media do not address the possibility of a democratic deficit in Spain. Consequently, they deny the political agency of Catalans and the emancipatory character of the pro-independence movement. In this respect, such coverage contains a unified narrative that blames Catalan politicians (e.g. *El Mundo*, 2017b, *El País*, 2017c), the Catalan school system (e.g. Cervilla, 2017) and the Catalan public media (e.g. Domínguez, 2017) for manipulating and indoctrinating millions of people.

The ‘Go and get ‘em!’ spirit pervades a mainstream media language which contains metaphors of war, calls for the use of force, justifications for violence, and hate speech. In a radio interview, for example, after the Spanish government suspended home rule in Catalonia, the president of the Press Association of Madrid, the most important association of Spanish journalists, called explicitly for the use of force by the Spanish government against political dissidence in Catalonia (Forn, 2017).

In the first week of December 2017, around 50,000 Catalans traveled to Brussels to demonstrate for the recovery of self-government and the liberation of the first group of imprisoned politicians and activists. What Reuters described as a rally by a “good-natured throng” (Rossignol, 2017) was framed on the front page of *El País* as an expression of “hatred” (Sánchez, 2017). The newspaper employed a strong judgmental stance. Negative verbs and adjectives were used to qualify the march and the movement, as were metaphors evoking non-existent violence (“aggressive”, “onslaught”, “out of control”). On the Antena 3 Television channel, there were attempts to associate Catalan grassroots organizations with guerrilla warfare (El Nacional, 2018a). War metaphors in the media are actually aligned with the government spirit, as the Spanish Prime Minister Rajoy made apparent when he publicly thanked “the majority of the media in the country for their defense of the national unity” in a January 2018 press conference (Forn, 2018).

This sort of language is abundantly present in *El País*, where Catalan independentist politicians are regularly the subject of editorials (and opinion columns) containing a rhetoric that was previously typical of the right-wing online media or mainstream right-wing newspapers alone. After 2017, *El País* went from describing a decision of the Catalan government as a “Parliamentary coup” (El País, 2017a) to directly calling Catalan politicians “participants in a coup d’état” (El País, 2017b), “sectarian”, “populist” and as displaying “factionalism” (El País, 2017c, 2018). Catalan president Mas was characterized as a “populist caudillo” (Bassets, 2016) and President Puigdemont as exhibiting a “xenophobic arrogance” (El País, 2017c). A reading of the editorials of this newspaper shows a persistent concealing of context and repeated ad-hominem attacks against Catalan independentist politicians. This mirrors the dehumanizing rhetoric employed by the right-wing press, far-right online sites, members of some Spanish political parties and the military (for a list of similar insults up to 2014, see Vilaweb, 2014). In 2014, for instance, the conservative *ABC* compared Nazism to Catalan independentism in an article entitled “Euphemisms: from the Nazi ‘work camps’, to the Catalan ‘right to decide’” (M.P.V., 2014). Such rhetoric against Catalan independentists generates prejudice simply on the grounds of group membership (in this case a political group). Such outright discrimination can be considered a form of hate speech.

While the international media reporting on the October 1 referendum described the subsequent pre-trial imprisonment of political opponents as repression and violence, the mainstream Spanish media congratulated the government (see a summary comparing Spanish and international coverage of 1 October in Saeed, 2017). For example, on the day of the 2017 referendum when more than 1,000 voters were injured in a police crackdown, *El País* published an article titled “Where is the disproportion?” (Ovejero Molina, 2017). The editorial page of *La Razón* stated “Stand strong against the coup” (La Razón, 2017). The Spanish mainstream media had actually been requesting the Spanish government to take tougher action against Catalonia in the years and months leading up to the referendum. Back in 2014, *ABC* published the editorial “Against nationalist totalitarianism” and argued for an imposition of “authority” (ABC, 2014). In May 2017, *El Mundo* published the editorial “Catalonia: Apply the law with all its consequences” (El Mundo, 2017a). Prime Minister Rajoy was accused of indulgence and told to cut off dialogue with Catalan pro-independence leaders. In September 2017, a few weeks before the referendum, another *ABC* editorial declared that “The law

is fulfilled or imposed” and that it was insufficient to appeal to the courts to stop the Catalan “insurrection” (ABC, 2017b).

Misinformation about the Catalan reality, Catalan politics and the pro-independence movement is also widespread amongst the Spanish mainstream media. Examples include the reproduction of false data, manipulation of reality and the fabrication of fake news. The narrative of Spain as a historical victim and Catalonia as the assailant is a common theme in reportage of on the pro-independence movement. In a 2009 editorial, the *ABC* referred to a recurrent “threat against the rest of Spain”. The *ABC* editorial recalled the 1934 declaration of a Catalan State by Lluís Companys, which ended with the execution of the Catalan president by the fascists (ABC, 2009).

Such discourse is associated with a narrative of violence which has been shared and nurtured by the Spanish authorities and the Madrid-based media. The TV channel Telecinco, for instance, took the words of Catalan students who were criticizing the police violence during the October 1 referendum out of context such that they appeared to be referring to independentists (Directe, 2017). The discourse of violence was also strongly encouraged by *El Mundo*. They reproduced Civil Guard reports on alleged independentist violence without alerting the reader to basic errors, such as non-existent villages or incorrect arithmetic. News reportage generally lacks an accurate discussion of the civic protest activities that get labelled as ‘violence’ by the Spanish police (Ureiztieta and Escrivà, 2018). The Spanish mainstream media did not alert their readers to the biased understanding of protest exhibited by the paramilitary forces. Also unmentioned was information about the head of the judicial brigade of the Civil Guard in Catalonia. He posted dozens of tweets revealing fundamental ideological prejudices which were incompatible with the kind of objectivity required in police investigations (Bayo and López, 2018). In contrast, the mainstream media denied their audience information about the unionist violence from October to December 2017. Approximately 100 people were injured in Catalonia by unionist violence, including 30 journalists (Mèdia.cat, 2018a).

The mainstream media have also produced fake news stories which harm the image of the institutions of Catalonia. *El Periódico*, for instance, ran a story about the alleged negligence of the Catalan police during the terrorist attack of August 2017 (in which they responded proficiently without the help of the Spanish police). The prestige of the Catalan police was damaged (Hernández, 2017) by means of what later emerged as a fabrication (Vilaweb, 2017; Vilaweb, 2018b). In 2017, *El País* disseminated a piece of fake news which discredited the pro-independence movement by blaming Russia and Venezuela for interfering in the crisis (Alandete, 2017). The UK parliament refuted this fake news in a report (Catalan News, 2018).

The mainstream media in Spain also harshly criticizes the Catalan public broadcaster (CCMA) and its channel TV3. The CCMA is blamed for indoctrinating the audience and of exhibiting a lack of plurality in spite of reports confirming the opposite (CAC, 2017; CAC, 2018). In contrast, the mainstream media underreports the lack of independence and the high degree of news manipulation on the part of the Spanish state broadcaster (Eldiario.es, 2017).

The mid-2017 to mid-2018 period is thus characterized by an apparent alignment between mainstream media views and Spanish government viewpoints. This has entailed calls for stricter policing and the employment of violence against Catalan independentists.

Mainstream media and authoritarianism in Spain: a discussion

The question that matters here is why the mainstream media strongly supported the Spanish state’s abandonment of democratic legitimacy, including violation of the freedom of expression. Is this lack

of responsibility by the mainstream media a cause or a consequence of the shift to authoritarianism in Spain? My response will address what the literature tells us about political parallelism in the Spanish mainstream media. I will then discuss the intertwining of Spanish mainstream media with financial capitalism. Finally, I will examine the non-democratic roots of the Spanish mainstream media.

Political parallelism biased towards the right

Right-wing media organizations have always held a prominent position in the Spanish media system. This may explain why digital communication in the 1990s fostered a successful community of far-right, online-only press sites. These were unparalleled on the left in terms of funding, site numbers and visits to them (Almiron, 2006; Pineda and Almiron, 2013). In the 2010s, a number of left, online-only newspapers were successfully established, but the anti-left slant remained dominant in the Spanish digital sphere (Labio and Pineda, 2016). The right-wing community of online-only newspapers features a strong bias against Catalan nationalism and Catalan identity in general. Slanted coverage includes insults, hate speech and fake news. Meanwhile, a Catalan pro-independence online-only press grew and consolidated to provide a stance that was only marginally evident in traditional Catalan media outlets.

The general shift towards right-wing narratives and tone was not equally evident across all mainstream media. In this respect, the Spanish media system has been characterized in terms of polarization such that it reflects national political divisions and conflicts (Hallin and Mancini, 2004).

From the previous review of the research literature, we can see how the language, narratives and strategies of the extreme-right press on the Internet links with the most read Madrid-based newspapers (*El País*, *El Mundo*, *ABC*, *La Razón*), radio stations (at least COPE), the two major commercial television broadcasters (Antena 3 and Telecinco) and one of the Barcelona-based mainstream newspapers (*El Periódico*). Both of the Barcelona-based mainstream newspapers (*La Vanguardia* and *El Periódico*) went from supporting the right of Catalonians to decide on independence in a referendum to a position of ambiguity and ambivalence followed by various degrees of antagonism against the pro-independence movement (with more hostility on the part of *El Periódico*). Further studies are needed, but the current analysis shows that the Barcelona-based mainstream newspapers have also moved towards the center and center-right of the spectrum in terms of arguments and narratives related to Catalan independentism.

While all the mainstream media aligned with the radical stance against Catalan independentism advanced by the three main political parties in Spain during this period (Popular Party, the Socialist Party and *Ciudadanos*), the views represented by Catalan independentism are missing in all mainstream media. This means that the arguments of the pro-independence movements do not appear in any influential outlet with a state-wide scope that is published in Spanish. This blind spot within political parallelism is also found in the case of the left-wing party *Podemos*, which also has no mainstream media organization supporting its views. Thus, political polarization of the mainstream media is no longer fully representative of the actual political spectrum. Consequently, it is the views of the Spanish political elite which predominate via the Popular Party, the Socialist party (PSOE) and *Ciudadanos*. As indicated, alternative views (such as those of Catalan independentism and *Podemos*) have no mainstream representation. This meant, by the end of 2017, that the political views of citizens represented by 55.5% of the members of the Catalan Parliament and 31.3% of the members of the Spanish Parliament were not reflected in the Spanish mainstream media.

The political parallelism that does occur incorporates rhetorical competition for Spanish patriotism (this includes derogatory messages against Catalan independentism). It is *Ciudadanos* that is winning more support from the traditional right-wing media or even from newspapers like *El País*. Throughout the period under review, the mainstream right-wing media, particularly the press, have become increasingly hostile to the Popular Party and increasingly laudatory of *Ciudadanos* (this reflects the failure of the conservatives' strategy to destroy Catalan independentism). This is particularly true for the three most influential newspapers (*ABC*, *El País*, *El Mundo*). Another important factor is the rise of a libertarian new-right in Spain increasingly supportive of *Ciudadanos* through the think tank *Fundación para el Análisis y los Estudios Sociales* (FAES) led by former prime minister J.M. Aznar. FAES had cut its ties with the Popular Party because of the latter's 'lukewarm' reaction to Catalan independentism (Cué, 2014).

All of this confirms that 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.

Thus, any attempt to explain the democratic deterioration of the Spanish media system must take into account the non-democratic legacy of the Spanish state, and the advance of a neoliberal political economy within which the Spanish media system has evolved. Critical trends include globalization, the growing precarity of journalists, increasing concentration of media ownership, and financialization.

The intertwining of Spanish mainstream media with financial capitalism

In the late 20th century, the vested interests of media organizations and the corporate system were transformed by the financialization of capitalism. As media corporations became absorbed by financial capitalism, their ownership structures concentrated further in an environment of greater instability and competitiveness. Consequently, news content became further distanced from social responsibility criteria. The media's investigative and watchdog role was thereby reduced (Almiron, 2010).

At the global level, media corporation links with the financial system made it difficult for journalists to denounce the 2007–8 global financial crisis that began in the US, and later spread to Europe and the rest of the world. At the national level, the Catalan crisis may offer us an example of how financial interests may further contract journalistic responsibility.

During the Catalan crisis (2010–2018), most of the mainstream media in Spain belonged to three big Spanish conglomerates (Prisa, Vocento and Planeta). Two large Italian groups (Mediaset and RCS) were involved in broadcasting and two small Catalan groups (Godó and Zeta) published the two newspapers of reference in Barcelona (see Table 1). All of them, without exception, held strong ties with the corporate and financial elite. During the Catalan crisis, all parent companies of the Spanish mainstream media were closely involved with the banking system through ownership, board representation and/or debt. Thus, several parent companies of the Spanish mainstream media (Prisa, Vocento, Mediaset, RCS) had stockholders from all of the top Spanish banking entities, international banks and investment or hedge funds. Prisa, for example, has had a London hedge fund as the majority stockholder since 2016. Some directors of the parent companies also served on the boards of other Ibex 35 companies in Spain [10]. Godó's chairman, for instance, was director of CaixaBank, Planeta's chairman was director of Banco Sabadell and Vocento's chairman was also director of the major Spanish construction company Ferrovial. Every parent company of Spanish mainstream media

organizations had financial debts that compromised their business to a greater or lesser extent. In the case of Prisa, for instance, the impact of its debt brought about changes in its board of directors, who have been increasingly replacing independent directors with representatives of financial investors and creditors.

In short, the three main Spanish media groups (Prisa, Vocento and Planeta) were strongly intertwined with the same economic and financial elite who had publicly positioned themselves, as mentioned, against the independence movement in Catalonia. They were fearful that the Catalan independence movement was a threat to business activity. By the spring of 2018 all but one Catalan company in the Ibx 35 (including the two big banking entities CaixaBank and Banc Sabadell) had relocated their headquarters outside of Catalonia.

Those Italian media groups that own mainstream media in Spain (Mediaset and RCS) have also been deeply interconnected with the Italian and international corporate-financial elite. The two Catalan media groups, much smaller in size than the rest, have experienced similar problems (a reduction in advertising revenues, increasing competition and reductions in sales and subscriptions). However, despite comparatively lower levels of financial indebtedness, their financial troubles have affected journalistic production. The financial problems of Zeta group led to a nearly complete dismantling of this media conglomerate. In the spring of 2018, it was negotiating the sale of its flagship brand, the traditionally left-wing *El Periódico* newspaper, to right-wing conglomerate Vocento, the owners of *ABC* (one of the newspapers that has been the least reasonable in its coverage of the Catalan crisis). Zeta's banking creditors (Santander, BBVA, CaixaBank and Sabadell mostly) were no longer interested in financially supporting the group after years of imposing severe conditions that radically harmed the journalistic culture. The financial troubles of the Godó group were mostly linked to the plight of their audiovisual assets. Its flagship newspaper, *La Vanguardia*, has experienced major changes in its editorial line over recent years. See Table 1 for Spanish mainstream media ownership details.

Table I. Owners of the mainstream media in Spain

Company	Headquarters	Listed	Mainstream media assets	Ownership (most relevant stockholders)	Financial debt (April 2018)
Grupo Prisa	Madrid	Yes	<i>El País</i> , SER	Amber Capital, Rucandio, Telefónica, International Media Group, HSBC, CaixaBank, Banco Santander	1.5 billion € (Main creditors: CaixaBank, Banco Santander)
Grupo Vocento	Bilbao	Yes	ABC, COPE	Ybarra, Luca de Tena, Bergareche, Aguirre and Castellanos families, Victor Urrutia Vallejo, M ^a del Carmen Careaga Salazar	175 million € (Main creditors: BBVA, Banco Santander, Kutxabank, Bankia, Caixa, Banco Santander, Bankinter)
Grupo Planeta	Barcelona	No	Antena 3 TV, La Sexta TV, <i>La Razón</i> , Onda Cero	Lara Family	1.4 billion € (Main creditors: Banco Santander, BBVA, CaixaBank, Bankia, Banco Sabadell)
Gruppo Mediaset	Roma, Italy	Yes	Telecinco	Berlusconi Family, Vivendi Group	1.4 billion € (Main creditors: UniCredit, UBI Banca, Mediobanca, Intesa Sanpaolo, BNL)
RCS MediaGroup	Milan, Italy	Yes	<i>El Mundo</i>	Cairo Communication, Mediobanca, Diego della Valle, UnipolSai, Unipol, Pirelli	287 million € (Main creditors: Banca IMI, Intesa Sanpaolo, Banca Popolare di Milano, Mediobanca, UBI Banca, UniCredit)
Grupo Godó	Barcelona	No	<i>La Vanguardia</i>	Javier de Godó	41 million € (Main creditor: Caixabank)
Grupo Zeta	Barcelona	No	<i>El Periódico</i>	Asensio Family	100 million € (Main creditors: Banco Santander, CaixaBank, BBVA, Banco Sabadell)

Source: Author's compilation based on corporate webpages and annual reports.

The un-democratic roots of Spanish mainstream media

The links of the Spanish mainstream media with the financial and business elite are not their only feature. The origins of the Prisa, Vocento, Planeta and Godó groups are clearly located in the old regime, with founders (or their descendants) maintaining control until 2018.

In the case of Prisa, the founding family still retained a very important stake in the company's ownership as of 2018. It is worth remembering that the founder, Jesús de Polanco, was a successful, Catholic, Falangist entrepreneur in the Franco regime (Cabrera, 2015). He hired Juan Luís Cebrián as the editor in chief of *El País* at the end of the dictatorship (1975) because the latter had the "perfect

pedigree” for the Francoist leaders attempting to lead the political transition: “He was a child of the regime, of the Salamanca neighborhood, of well-off bourgeois families” (Seoane and Sueiro, 2004: 53). Cebrian’s father, a lifelong Falangist, had occupied prominent positions in the media system under Fascist control.

In Vocento, a conglomerate created after the merger of two centenary media groups, we can still find the founding family within the ownership structure. The creator of ABC, Torcuato Luca de Tena, was a Catholic, pro-monarchy, Spanish patriot who combined his political stance with the editorial line of the newspaper. ABC has strongly opposed Catalan identity since its origins (Medina, 1995) and was embedded into the Movement Press (*Prensa del movimiento*) during Franco’s dictatorship. The Movement Press was the only legally allowed Spanish journalistic group during the Franco dictatorship and belonged to the regime’s only party, the *Falange Española de las JONS (Juntas de Ofensiva Nacional-Sindicalista)*. The founders of ABC were awarded aristocratic titles by King Alfonso XIII in 1929 and King Juan Carlos I in 2003, including the highest such title in Spain (*Grande de España*).

The Planeta group is still owned by the Lara family. Its founder, José Manuel Lara Hernández, who died in 2003, also held an aristocratic title (*Marqués de Pedroso*), granted by the King of Spain, and participated in the Spanish Civil War on the Francoist side. At the end of the war, he entered Barcelona as captain of the Spanish legion and actively participated in the political repression in Catalonia. Lara Hernández became head of the Vertical Union of Graphic Arts, the only legal union, which was controlled by the Francoist regime during the dictatorship (El País, 2003).

The Godó group is grounded in the century-old newspaper *La Vanguardia*, which was also embedded into the Movement Press under Franco. The strong and public support of Javier de Godó, the owner of the group, for the Spanish monarchy is well-known. Like the founders of Vocento, he belongs to the Spanish aristocracy through two titles, Count and *Grande de España*, both awarded by the King of Spain.

All of this is relevant to understanding the values which complement financial capitalism and neoliberalism within the Spanish media system. The links with financial capitalism cannot by themselves explain the shortcomings of the Spanish mainstream media during the Catalan crisis. The same links are found everywhere in financialized capitalist democracies. However, the Spanish mainstream media groups’ historic links with the old regime may help explain the outlets’ behavior. Here, it is worth taking a closer look at the political outlooks of the Spanish media moguls. (For a detailed account of Prisa, including its competitors, see Balcarce, 2018.)

The consequences for journalists of aristocratic ownership in media groups are exemplified in two cases. Vocento certainly contains among its journalists, opinion columnists and editors with a set of values distant from accuracy, context and consistency on Catalan issues. Yet, while speaking at a public event in the fall of 2017, shortly after the October 1 independence referendum, Vocento’s Chairman, Catalina Luca de Tena, declared that the ABC newspaper cultivates “concord” and works “with and for the truth”. The idea that a strategy of ‘Go and get ‘em’-style belligerence can be equated with ‘concord’ may seem implausible. But such sentiments are consistent with the view of Vocento’s chairman that “loyalty to the Crown and the defense of the unity of Spain define and string together the centennial history of ABC” (ABC, 2017a). The “unyielding defense of bullfighting” that Vocento media exhibits as a core trait of Spanish patriotism reflects the values embedded within Vocento’s ownership (ABC, 2018)

The mainstream newspaper published by Godó, *La Vanguardia*, changed its stance from neutral to moderately pro-independence from 2000 to 2013. In 2013, the editor in chief was removed and

replaced by a new editor opposed to Catalan independence. Some Spanish media reported that Count Godó ordered this replacement out of fear of losing his aristocratic titles due to the editorial stance of the group's flagship (Planas, 2017).

The Planeta group shows how media ownership can advance political lobbying within key national and international trade organizations. The Lara family, with one of the biggest fortunes in Spain, has regularly lobbied against Catalan independentism in economic circles (e.g. EFE, 2015). The owners of Planeta also purchased 5.7% of *El Periódico* from Zeta group in 2016. This allowed a member of the Lara family to sit on the board of directors of this formerly leftist newspaper. In the past, it had supported the right of Catalans to have a referendum on independence. The anti-Catalan profile of Planeta may explain the radical shift in the newspaper's editorial line (while the purchase was being discussed and thereafter).

The Prisa group offers another illustrative example of how media moguls influence media companies and media content. Before April 2018, the most financialized media group in Spain could be considered the province of mostly a single man: Juan Luis Cebrián, the executive in various positions of power in Prisa for more than 40 years. He had had the 'perfect pedigree' for the Francoists and was appointed as editor in chief of *El País* in 1975. It was Cebrián who promoted and conducted the financialization process within Prisa while in control of both the company (Almiron and Segovia, 2012) and the editorial line of *El País*. The personalized rule of Prisa did not reflect any modern criteria of democratic governance. Cebrián made a fortune through salary compensations and shares despite the group's ruinous financial performance over the last decade (Semprún and Romera, 2018). Joseph Oughourlian, the leader of the investment fund that became Prisa's largest stockholder in 2018, forced Cebrián out of executive positions in the company. Oughourlian has suggested that Cebrián's methods and values were authoritarian and that he had undermined the editorial independence of *El País* for decades (Oughourlian, 2017; Cano, 2017). Using the same language as the right-wing press to refer to the Catalan independentists ("seditious", "criminal", "insidious"), Cebrián's articles included requests for the Spanish government to take tougher action against Catalan independentists and open support for the *Ciudadanos* party. There was contempt for grassroots democracy and movements such as the *indignados* (Cebrián, 2018a, 2018b).

One should also acknowledge here a major influence on mainstream media which is aligned with global trends. Neoliberal think tanks have become increasingly prominent actors in the dissemination of ideas and narratives elsewhere (Stone, 2013) as well as in Spain (Planells, 2017). Spanish research shows that pro-capitalist and pro-market think tanks are well represented with considerable resources. One specific organization, FAES, stands out as the most successful (Parrilla et al, 2016). This think tank (led by former Prime Minister J.M. Aznar) was linked to the Popular Party until 2016, when it cut formal ties. As mentioned, Aznar and FAES have become increasingly close to *Ciudadanos* in its campaign to exhibit more Spanish patriotism and criminalize the Catalan independence movement. This think tank has published more reports on Catalan independentism than any other organization in Spain (up to 22 by April 2018). All of them, without exception, have been very hostile towards Catalan identity, Catalan nationalism, Catalan politics and the Catalan independence movement. FAES was funded during the Catalan crisis by the financial and business elite as well as by public subsidies. It represents, through the figure of its leader, Aznar, the continuation of what has been called the authoritarian and anti-democratic tradition of Spanish capitalist liberalism (González, 2008). FAES was amongst the most mentioned think tanks in the media between 2012 and 2016 (Planells, 2017) and it is not unreasonable to think that its belligerent narrative against Catalan independentism has nurtured, or at least reinforced, the mainstream media narrative.

Elites (including media) with vested interests and undemocratic values

Mills defined the power elite as “composed of political, economic, and military men”; it is an inter-institutional elite that is “frequently in some tension: it comes together only on certain coinciding points and only on certain occasions of ‘crisis’” (Mills, 1956/2000: 276). This does not mean that the powerful are united in a conspiracy. Instead, when necessary, they work together to maintain their privileges – for them, a crisis is anything that could threaten this dominance. Mills thought we should overcome the “simple” Marxian and liberal views that make “the big economic man the *real* holder of power” and “the big political man the chief of the power system” respectively. It is to avoid these “oversimplified” accounts that Mills use the term “power elite” (Mills, 1956: 277). Returning to Mills’ writings helps us to understand how the Spanish mainstream media engaged with the Spanish state’s shift towards authoritarianism. This is because, as Mills explained, there is not a simple elite at the top, rather several groups with similar vested interests act together to influence the media system.

In accordance with this argument, the Spanish power elite includes the government and the judiciary, business/financial leaders, the military, the knowledge and information elite, and the most influential right-wing think tanks. They are not a homogeneous pack and may compete or even clash with each other, although they do act together as well. The easy temptation for the analyst is to infer that the Catalan crisis mobilized all of them to work in conjunction. However, this implies a plot, which is not the case. There may be some relevant planned actions by some members of the elite, but there is no overarching strategy of machination. In the case of the media elites, research reveals a deep web of vested interests and shared dependencies, on the one hand, and a lack of established democratic values, on the other.

This web of vested interests and dependencies is intricate but discernible. Similarly, the lack of democratic values is obscure yet also traceable. The latter constitutes the main problem in regard to the Catalan crisis. I have maintained that this cannot be blamed on the independentists alone. As described, the Catalan independence movement started as a reaction against the Spanish government’s violation of fundamental democratic principles. The Spanish state modified the Catalan Statute in 2010 and consistently forbade a referendum. When there is no democratic state authority, only coercion keeps people united. This is the basic definition of authoritarianism, which in Spain takes the form of a merger between neoliberalism and the fascist inheritance.

However, Mill’s theory needs to be complemented by political economy analysis – including an examination of the structural links among Spanish elites – if the Catalan crisis is to be fully understood. This analysis, as sketched here, illustrates the undemocratic roots of the mainstream Spanish media system. It is shaped by political, judicial, business, financial and military elites. In 1976, when democracy was restored in Spain, there was no purge of Franco supporters either at the State level – including senior civil servants, police chiefs, judiciary system or military system – or in the economic and media sphere. Also significant was the social support for Francoism that continued through associations such as the Foundation Francisco Franco. Spain is actually the only democracy that has not carried out any investigation into the state terrorism of its former dictatorship, in spite of the United Nations’ repeated requests for the Spanish government to draw up a national plan to search for the missing, to revoke the 1977 Amnesty Law and to pave the way for cases of forced disappearance to be investigated and judged by the courts (Junquera, 2013). The Spain born after 1976 inherited the structural corruption of the old regime as well as its ideological aversion to multiculturalism, multinationalism and multilingualism.

Thus, although there is no major conspiracy and the influence of financialization has no political color, there is an ideological alignment of the elites towards authoritarianism because of their common roots within old regime values. Spanish capitalism is dominated by a narrow circle of descendants from the former Francoist oligarchy. They are funded by bank debt and are only weakly committed to democratic institutions. Across the media system, financial debt prevents the media groups that have emerged after the democratic transition from escaping this pattern. In fact, the analysis reveals that it is not financialization that has caused the media to abdicate their responsibility and become ideologues of state authoritarianism; rather, this abdication of responsibility is what first allows the financialization to occur. Likewise, it is not the authoritarian turn of the state that corrupts the media, but the lack of solid democratic values underlying the media corporations (plus their financial and political sponsors). This direct or indirect lack of solid democratic values can reasonably be considered the main cause of the grotesque ‘Go and get’em’ behavior of the Spanish mainstream media during the Catalan crisis.

Endnotes

- [1] By mainstream media I refer in this article to the most influential Spanish-language media in Spain at the state level in terms of their audiences and reach.
- [2] ‘Go and get’em’ is the translation of ‘A por ellos’, the slogan shouted by patriotic Spanish citizens gathered in different cities of Spain to encourage the paramilitary forces on their way to repress the referendum of October 1, 2017 in Catalonia. This expression was first used by supporters of the Spanish National Football team and reproduced in the media. It has been described by some authors as the rebuilding by the Spanish press of a “banal” Spanish patriotic sentiment after the international victories of the Spanish National Football team (Resina and Limón, 2014: 329).
- [3] By way of example, on the Republican side, Juan Negrín, president of the Government of the Second Republic between 1937 and 1945, stated that he was “not waging war against Franco so that a stupid and parochial separatism may spring up in Barcelona” (Callejas, 1977). Even renowned and leftist poet Antonio Machado, through his heteronym Juan de Mairena, despised alternative identities different to the Spanish by recommending to always “distrust those who claim to be Galicians, Catalans, Basques, Extremadurans, Castilians, etc., before Spaniards. They are usually incomplete, insufficient Spaniards, from whom nothing great can be expected” (Machado, 1937: 7). On the Fascist side, for instance, Ramiro Ledesma Ramos, founder of the national-syndicalist movement in Spain, spared no effort in advocating the use of force against Catalonia and disdaining democratic decisions, even if majoritarian (Ledesma Ramos, 1931).
- [4] Whereas no Spanish government has yet apologized for the execution of Catalan president Lluís Companys, Germany and France have apologized several times for their cooperation in the handover of the exiled politician, which ended in his execution by the pro-Franco authorities. Germany even granted a lifelong pension to Companys’ widow (Sesé, 2018).
- [5] Spain has been strongly criticized by the Council of Europe’s Group of States Against Corruption (GRECO) for not meeting the basic standards of judicial

independence (Council of Europe, 2016). This finding is consistent with the results of the European Commission's EU Justice Scoreboard, on the basis of which the Commission places Spain under observation for deficiencies in its judicial system (latest published scoreboard: European Commission, 2017).

- [6] The state violence deployed against ETA members included an uncovered state of exception in the Basque country which lasted until the ETA group's surrender of arms. For decades, this state of exception and war against terrorism entailed a considerable weakening of the democratic guarantees of citizens under what was called the 'everything is ETA' doctrine. This referred to the criminalization of political dissidence by the courts and political rulings which served to outlaw parties and organizations, to close newspapers and to imprison members of the left-wing Basque independentist movement despite the fact that none of them had used violence. All of this was justified under the pretext that they had acted on the orders of the armed organization. The Spanish state's reaction toward Catalan independentism since 2015 is seen by some Catalan independentists as the reemergence of this doctrine.
- [7] To the erosion of credibility must also be added the discredit of the Spanish Monarchy, including royal corruption, banking and hunting scandals (Schonfeld 2014; Couzens, 2015; AFP, 2016) and the backing of political repression against Catalonia by King Felipe VI in October 2017. There are of course other emotional issues involved in the growing independentist push in Catalonia.
- [8] Including UN rights experts (Jones et al, 2017), Amnesty International (AI, 2018), the European court of Human Rights (ACN, 2018a), PEN International (PEN, 2018), hundreds of jurists from around Spain (Escobar, 2018), a hundred international scholars (White et al, 2018) and international journalists (e.g., Minder, 2018), among others.
- [9] There have been exceptions, however. For instance, *The Guardian* called *Ciudadanos* "The *Podemos* of the right" (Kassam, 2015). Open Democracy labeled the rhetoric and policies of *Ciudadanos* on immigration as "typical of the far right" (Bair, 2015) and parts of the French regional press have openly called the party "extreme right" (Gasquez, 2018).
- [10] The Ibex 35 is the benchmark stock market index of the *Bolsa de Madrid*, Spain's principal stock exchange.

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