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The language of secessionist activism: Discourse and dialogue on Twitter¹

ABSTRACT

Nowadays, Twitter is used by politicians to communicate directly with citizens, due to the Internet's ability not only to inform, but to establish a dialogue and mobilize publics. The present research explores the use of Twitter as a medium of communication and debate in the rise of the Catalan independence movement. To attain this objective, the official profile of the Generalitat's ex-president Carles Puigdemont is studied during the month before the referendum date. Through a quantitative and qualitative analysis of his tweets, it is observed if he seeks to mobilize the audience, as well as influence their opinion on the right to decide, and their voting intention. In addition, we aim to approach the response he obtains from the social audience. Based on citizens' reactions to his tweets, the research analyses these users' impressions; whether they support the separatist theses, and if the consequent debate entails a tone of rupture or tension.

KEYWORDS

social networks
Catalonia
social audience
independence
movement
mobilization
politainment

1. Translated into English
by Iván Risueño Neila.

2. According to CIS (Sociological Research Center), within the list of concerns for Spanish, the sovereignist process in October 2017 was found second only to unemployment. <https://www.europapress.es/nacional/noticia-preocupacion-independencia-cataluna-duplico-visperas-dia-da-cis-20180925152356.html>.

INTRODUCTION: THE CATALAN QUESTION AND THE POWER OF NETWORKS

In recent years, the Spanish political landscape has been greatly affected by the secessionist challenge of Catalonia, which has become a key issue for Spanish citizens,² in terms of the illegal referendum on independence that was held later, on 1 October 2017, by the top Catalan leaders. A referendum constitutes the most representative act of direct or participatory democracy, since it involves a popular consultation in order to ratify formally a concrete political question. Therefore, its resulting success or failure is linked to the ability of political leaders to mobilize voters.

In this case, the politician who acted as the standard-bearer of the sovereignist cause was the then-president of the Generalitat (Catalan government), Carles Puigdemont. One way Puigdemont communicates his policy agenda, as well as his actions and opinions, is through Twitter, positioned as an important platform for political representatives since it leaves behind the traditional intermediation of the media to reach and address the masses (Jensen 2016). International research has revealed the following main findings: Twitter offers additional possibilities for information in democratic processes; it also turns out to be an effective platform for political deliberation in which citizens reflect their preferences, this way resulting in a thermometer to gauge public opinion (Ampofo et al. 2011; Jungherr 2016; López-Meri et al. 2017). Social networks are an essential part of contemporary political mobilizations as they become a space for mass coordination and self-communication (Flesher and Gillian 2018; Castells 2009). Civil society thus finds a platform that influences political strategies, in a context of hybrid media in which political parties adapt their content and discourses in order to be accepted by social movements and benefit from the multimodality and interactivity of the Internet (Chadwick 2007).

However, there are also warning voices: the threats that Twitter may pose through the propagation of political ideals; the inappropriateness of this platform as a true axis of political deliberation (Mancera and Helfrich 2014), or the fragmentation and polarization of the debate (Hahn et al. 2015). In the Catalan context, Carrasco et al. (2018) conclude that the usage of Twitter among public institutions and civic associations is limited to its function as a channel for dissemination and not conversation, while Puig (2016) highlights the rise of disruptive discourse movements by so-called 'Twitter trolling'.

This article analyses the usage of Twitter by Carles Puigdemont during a critical month for the aforementioned secessionist cause (September 2017), with the aim of determining the main characteristics of his discourse and rhetoric, and observe his search for mobilization to obtain the majority of favourable votes. As a second objective, we study the reactions that his messages provoked in the social audience: the impressions from private citizens, the priority issues and their support or rejection of his theses as a leader of the independence movement. In addition, this work explores the existent and potential signs of rupture, tension or social agitation within the debate. The methodological tool we have employed may be useful for future research on civil mobilization, sovereignist issues and the polarization of debates on social media.

POLITICS AND MOBILIZATION IN THE MEDIA: YESTERDAY AND TODAY

Politics and media have been closely linked since their very inception. Prime examples are the role of the political press, or party press, in the birth and consolidation of English parliamentarism in the seventeenth century, or the

struggle for control of newspapers during convulsive periods such as the European liberal revolutions or the American War of Independence. This connection has also been essential for the mobilization of citizens during the industrialization of the early twentieth century, where the majority of working-class left parties and anarcho-syndicalist organizations equipped themselves with newspapers to disseminate their political ideas and promote social action (Cotarelo 2013).

Then radio joined the press, becoming a true means of indoctrination, propaganda and mobilization of the masses, as shown by its intensive usage in totalitarian regimes. Ever since that time, the idea that the media have a powerful effect on the masses has developed (Strömbäck 2008). From the 1960s onwards, television has transformed the political life of rulers and the governed so far, in a way that today almost all political events are televised. The hegemony of the audio-visual leads to 'videodemocracies' and to an abuse of this medium, turning the political debate into a trivial show. The consequences of the spectacularization of the 'new politics' are the excessive personalization of candidates and their appeal to people's emotions, giving rise to the era of *politainment* (Berrocal et al. 2014).

However, the true revolution in politics, concerning mobilization and social action, started with the arrival of the Internet and the development of social network sites at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Thanks to these platforms, users can create and distribute content, collaborate, interact and dialogue as well. These new tools and formats broaden the extent of campaigns, participation and activism (Durántez-Stolle and Martínez-Sanz 2019; Fenoll and Cano-Orón 2017).

Political campaigns on the Internet evolved over time and can be classified into different periods. According to Gomes et al. (2009: 5) the first stage is located in the 1990s, when political parties began to make use of e-mails so as to spread political propaganda: this is the period called *proto-web*. In Spain, it was precisely the Catalan parties PSC and CiU³ that in 1995 experimented with the digital environment; the rest of the country did it the following year (Gamir 2016). The second stage is *web campaigning*, with Internet sites intentionally created by each party for the elections, as a container of campaign-based information. Over time, the contents were progressively adapted to the Net, exploiting its resources, via including dynamism with videos and hyperlinks.

The current period, the so-called *post-web* campaign, has 2008 as a key date, when 2.0 web technologies came about (blogs, social networking sites, streaming technologies, etc.). The *post-web* campaign makes use of different platforms that facilitate information traffic, quickly and on a large scale, where it is possible to share photos, videos and updates on the spot, without relying on one particular site. These novel methods of circulation became apparent after the presidential elections of 2008 in the United States, when the role played by social networking sites such as YouTube, Facebook or Twitter proved to be a key factor for a then unknown Barack Obama to become president.

In Spain, the precedent of this political mobilization via the Internet was triggered by the victory of candidate José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero a few years earlier, in 2004. Mancera and Pano (2013) point out that the exchange of emails among Internet users was essential to the successful citizen protests against the government's lack of transparency on the perpetrators of the Madrid bombings on 11 March 2004, and to the subsequent victory of the Spanish Socialist Party's candidate. After Obama's 2008 triumph, Spanish politicians began to communicate increasingly with their constituents through different social platforms. During the general elections of 2011, the most prominent platform was

3. Spanish acronyms for Catalan Socialist party and Convergence and Union, the latter being the conservative nationalist party, par excellence, whose leader within the secessionist tipping point was Puigdemont.

4. Madrid is Spain's official capital city and the seat of the national Government, which somehow turns it into the axis of the official opposition to the independence movement.

Twitter: a large mass of candidates opened or updated their profiles. The usage in most cases was mainly based on 'the release of value judgments by politicians and candidates, the retweeting of information emitted by the media, and the dissemination of news generated by other communication platforms' (Baeza 2012: 243). Moreover, Twitter serves to listen and connect to the citizens, engage with them and mobilize them (Moragas 2016). The logic of interactivity and horizontal communication within the Internet helps the dissolution of boundaries between a distinctive sender and receiver. Private citizens are now *prosumers* of political information whose source is not exclusively the campaign teams (Munir 2018). The network itself promotes and encourages the debate, discussion and activism in current democracies, but the distance and a certain anonymity in digital communication can easily lead to hooliganism and a tendency to insult. In this vein, researchers such as Hernández-Santaolalla and Mármol (2017) have come to define Twitter as a space for 'social execution'.

The use of this social network as a public forum has had special relevance in convulsive socio-political moments, such as the vote for Brexit in 2016, or the celebration of the referendum for Scottish independence in 2014. Regarding the former, studies have shown the ability of Twitter to identify the topics of discussion, reflect socio-economic concerns, and predict the results of the voting (Khatua and Khatua 2016; Llewellyn and Cram 2016). Also, its potential to mobilize youth, traditionally less interested in political matters, has been highlighted (Sloam 2018). Nevertheless, the creation of a real debate has been less than expected, because echo chambers and spirals of silence are produced in some groups: users who only receive opinions similar to their own, due to the structure of their relationships within the network (Hänska and Bauchowitz 2017). Regarding the latter, the debate on Twitter about the Scottish referendum was defined by Lachlan and Levy (2016) as verbal violence or trash talking; whereas Pedersen et al. (2014) validated its use as a 'second screen' during televised debates.

THE ISSUE OF CATALAN SOVEREIGNTY IN THE MEDIA

In this context of powerful networks and the role of Twitter as a debate scenario, the Catalan independence movement developed, reaching its peak in the referendum on 1 October 2017. For several years prior to that, the sovereignist process had been reflected in the media, moving from the media agenda to the public opinion, although with discrepancies coming from both the editorials of each media outlet and the protagonists. This is described in a study by Ballesteros (2015), which shows that within the proposal of the popular consultation on the political future of Catalonia (9 November 2014) the conflict framework was the one 'publicized' by national media. Thus, the Madrid press⁴ as a whole promoted a conflict frame of maximum intensity five times more than the Catalan press.

Other studies have identified a dichotomy where the nationalist side frames the independentist process as 'firm' and 'negotiating', while the non-nationalist side considers the opposite (Lejarza et al. 2015). These divisions of opinion have been described as an extreme polarization between the independentist and constitutionalist blocks (López-López et al. 2018). Similarly, *El Siglo de Europa*⁵ refers to the fact that all the protagonists involved in the *procés* (the process towards independence) are seen as either heroes or villains, while Puigdemont himself is depicted as a messiah, or a martyr for the cause. The politicians involved in the *procés* have made use of Twitter with emotionally charged arguments, while among the citizens the tendency to attack prevails over debating

(Hernández-Santaolalla and Sola-Morales 2019). The existence of echo chambers and polarization in communication flows is also reproduced among Catalan members of parliament (Esteve and Borge 2018). However, other research has suggested that Twitter, in the case of the Catalan independence issue, generated significant conversations concerning the reasons for and against secession; in addition, certain collaborative attitudes could be observed among individuals with radically opposite opinions (Balcells and Padró-Solanet 2019).

Likewise, other studies highlight the importance of these digital platforms for two main functions: pro-independence civil organizations, regarding their capacity for participation, organization and mobilization, and the fact of internationalizing the issue. Accordingly, the aforementioned works conclude that social networks are essential to promote support for the independentist cause (Anderson 2019). In 2016, Moragas analysed the usage of Twitter by the most relevant politicians and compared the metaphors used in discourses on the independence of Scotland and Catalonia: in both cases the prominent metaphor was that of travel or path, followed by conflict and family/love/friendship (Moragas 2016). This doctoral thesis highlights the polarization of stances and the lack of dialogue, and examines which users replicate the behaviour or discourses of certain political leaders (Moragas 2016).

López-López et al. (2018) have explored the communicative strategy employed by Puigdemont through his Twitter narrative after the independence referendum. They conclude that the transmediation of Puigdemont's character during exile has made him the unexpected 'ultimate winner' of the electoral process convened by Rajoy (December 2017), the tipping point of which became evident when thousands of citizens showed their identification with the Catalan leader by wearing a mask representing his face.

This article examines the aims and resources used by former president Carles Puigdemont in his messages, and the response of citizens participating in the debate, in order to verify if there is polarization or violence in the observed responses.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives, questions and hypotheses

The main objective of the investigation is to analyse the discourse of the independentist politician Carles Puigdemont through his official Twitter account in the month before the referendum date, and the response he obtains from the public. Specifically, the following research questions are posed:

- Q.1. What is the purpose behind Puigdemont's publications during the month prior to the 1 October referendum?
- Q.2. What linguistic, visual and digital resources does he use in his discourse?
- Q.3. What kinds of messages achieve the highest rates of response and virality?
- Q.4. What bias, formulation and purpose do user responses adopt?
- Q.5. Are there any signs of tension or violence in the debate?

The starting hypotheses are:

- H.1. Carles Puigdemont employs Twitter in an informative and unidirectional way, that is, without taking advantage of Twitter's affordances with regards to interactivity and virality.

5. Available at <http://www.elsiglodeuropa.es/siglo/historico/2017/1212/Index%20Politica%20Tema%20Portada.html> and <http://www.elsiglodeuropa.es/siglo/historico/2017/1214/Index%20Politica%20Tema%20Portada.html>.

- H.2. Carles Puigdemont's discourse urges citizens to participate in the referendum by appealing to the emotions and desires of independence supporters.
- H.3. The public's interest in Puigdemont's messages on the referendum exceeds other concerns regarding current issues or events.
- H.4. The comments generated by Puigdemont's messages are polarized and show a tendency towards both emotiveness and aggressiveness.

Design and materials

This research retrieves data through the computer tool *supermetrics* out of all the messages posted by Carles Puigdemont on Twitter, excluding simple retweets. During the month prior to the indy referendum on 1 October 2017, his official account gathered a total of 97 tweets, which have all been analysed ($N=97$).

In addition, a selection of the responses to these messages has been carried out, choosing for each message the first five direct comments according to their order of appearance. Once collected, the total number of comments analysed amounts to 485, giving rise to a non-probabilistic convenience sample based on the visibility/relevance criterion – the more visible, the more likely to receive interaction. To verify the reliability of the research, a test was carried out on a sample of tweets ($N=5$) and replies ($N=25$), which showed the concordance of results between four different coders. Two of the four researchers extracted users' responses without having logged in to their accounts on the platform, while the remaining two did so without logging out. The results of the test served not only to check the concordance in the application of the analysis sheet, but also to detect possible deviations within the collection of this sample of responses, without finding, in this regard, significant differences between the four researchers.

Method

The research combines quantitative (content analysis) with qualitative methods (linguistic discourse analysis). It is based on a content analysis of the tweets, structured and systematized in mutually exclusive categories that deeply delve into the analysis of both the textual discourse in Puigdemont's messages and the citizens' responses. On the quantitative side, in addition to a descriptive analysis through the usual statistics (mean, mode, minimum, maximum and standard deviation), relationships between different variables were sought via SPSS (Mann-Whitney U test, Kruskal-Wallis, Spearman's rho, Chi-square with Cramer's V, and contingency coefficient, as applicable). The data collection and its coding were undertaken by four researchers, after carrying out a pilot test on five of the main units to be analysed, in order to observe concordances and discrepancies and increase the internal validity of the study, as mentioned above.

Analysis template: Categories and main authors

A matrix analysis template, divided into four categories, was elaborated to give an account of Puigdemont's tweets:

- *Recording data and scope* collects the date of publication of the tweet and the number of comments, retweets and 'likes' received, besides identifying

Recording data and scope

Publication date

Number of comments/
retweets/'likes'

Type of tweet

Authored by himself (own initiative)

Listening to society (comment on other actors)

Size

Study/analysis of the image

Type

GIF, meme, photography, video, others

Protagonist

Secondary/supporting actors or elements

Type of space

Public, private or intimate

Capture

Selfie, spontaneous or contrived

Other elements

Text study

Semantic construction

Nouns, adjectives, adverbs, verb tenses

Language

Topic

Catalan independence (call for vote; campaign rallies; right to decide/self-determination; other); other topics – not linked to Catalan independence

Intent (based on López-Meri et al. 2017)

Proposal, attack, defence, gratitude, blanket statement, presence indicator, appeal for vote, media agenda, dialogue with the citizen, political agenda, achievement, forecast, warning, call for mobilization

Media objects

URLs, mentions, emoticons, hashtags

Symbolic role (based on García-Beaudoux and D'Adamo 2006)

Great communicator, figurehead, whistleblower, visionary

Effect of the message

Agreement

Degree of aggressiveness

High, with certain indications, or non-existent/
not applicable

Own elaboration.

Table 1: Content analysis sheet applied to Puigdemont's tweets.

the type of message – if it is posted at the initiative of its author (authored by himself), or it is the response to another user’s tweet, this way showing interest in other conversations (listening to society) – and its size. With the sum of these three elements of interaction, the total reach and audience interest are calculated in the analysed tweet.

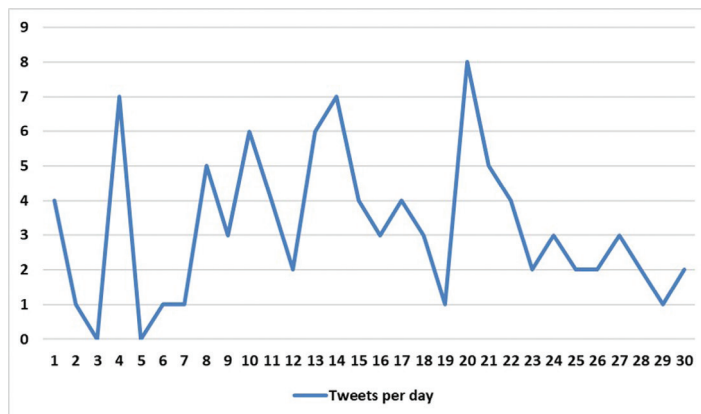
- *Study of the text* (García-Beaudoux and D’Adamo 2006; López-Meri et al. 2017) analyses the different semantic components (nouns, adjectives, verb tenses); language; topic; intent; the presence and typology of the media objects somehow specific to social networks (URLs, profile mentions, emoticons and hashtags); it also interprets the role adopted by the sender (great communicator, figurehead, whistleblower or visionary).
- *Study of the image* (Quevedo et al. 2016; Selva and Caro 2017) distinguishes the type of visual element that shapes or accompanies the message (GIF, meme, photography, video, among other types) and locates the protagonist, in addition to possible actors or relevant secondary elements. Likewise, it focuses on analysing the kind of space represented via those images, and how it has been captured.
- *Effect of the message* (Durántez-Stolle and Martínez-Sanz 2019) indicates if there is agreement between the text and the visual elements, and if there is aggressiveness within the message.

Furthermore, a coding sheet is configured to analyse audience responses, using the same categories as the previous one, albeit highlighting two differences: the variable ‘Symbolic role’ is eliminated and the variable ‘Bias’ added, which allows for the recognition of their stances regarding Puigdemont’s opinion: in favour, against or neutral/indefinite.

RESULTS

Characteristics of of Carles Puigdemont’s Twitter discourse

Carles Puigdemont, president of the Generalitat during the analysed period, posted his own messages on Twitter throughout September 2017, with the mere exceptions of 3 and 5 September (Figure 1).



Own elaboration.

Figure 1: *Tweets per day published by Puigdemont in September 2017.*



Twitter.

Figure 2: Example of Puigdemont's tweets.

Regarding the type of messages, 67 per cent of Puigdemont's tweets are at his own initiative, the rest being comments on information or messages that reaffirm his theses, released by different social agents, which include media outlets, political figures, activists and bloggers.

The average size of the messages is eighteen words, an appropriate figure to effectively express ideas on Twitter. The longest messages consisted of 27 words and the shortest were limited to two. The shortest ones were used to evaluate news on events related to the *procés*, while the longest were argumentative or opinionative (see Figure 2).

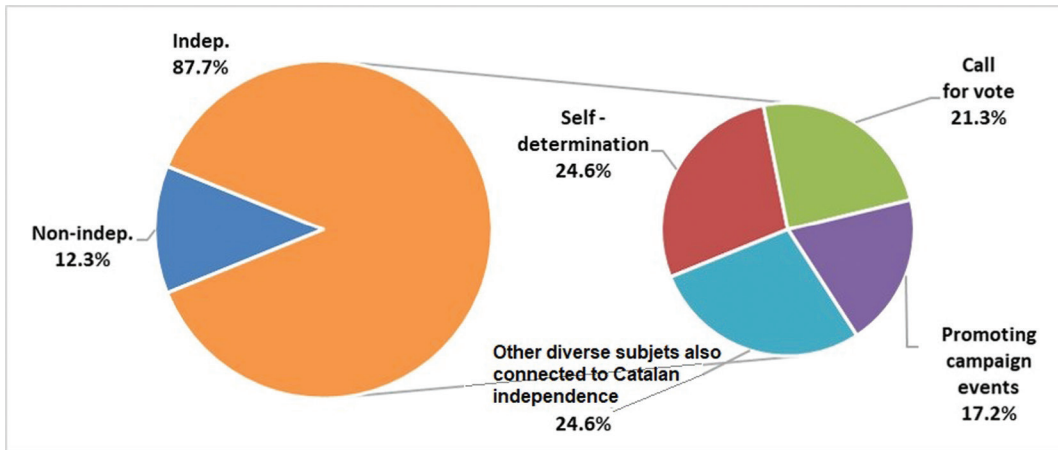
The relationship between the type of tweet (namely: messages at his own initiative or comments on other users' tweets) does not affect the amount of interaction received by the message itself, except for the field 'comments' (Mann-Whitney U test with significance <0.05). Those posted strictly at his own initiative obtain a higher average (442 comments) than those typified as 'listening to society' (199).

From a linguistic standpoint, the majority of nouns used in Puigdemont's posts relate to the events taking place at that moment: referendum in Catalonia, and the stances taken by Spanish State concerning this region: 'referendum', 'article', 'democracy', 'freedom' and 'thanks'. On the other hand, most frequent adjectives and adverbs were: 'No', 'where', 'very', 'everything' and 'Catalans'.

Regarding verbs, most were in the present tense – 'it is', 'we go on', 'it seeks', 'there is' and 'it has' – followed by those expressed in the past tense – 'it has been/it was' and 'we did/made', in the future tense – 'you will find', 'we will not accept' and 'we will vote', the infinitive forms, and certain gerunds with a noun-function (or after a preposition) – 'to put/putting', 'to assume/assuming' and 'to decide/deciding' (or more specific cases in line with the latter, such as the corresponding infinitive or gerund for verbs 'determine' or 'self-determine'). Among the most used tenses and forms, a total of 153 verbs were written in the present, 53 in the past, 21 in the future and 51 in the infinitive.

Finally, regarding the language in which the messages were published by Puigdemont, most of them are written in Catalan, although there are some posts in Spanish (8.1 per cent) and other languages (English, 8.1 per cent and French, 3 per cent).

With regards to the content, the independence movement prevails in the tweets posted during the month prior to the 1 October referendum. In fact, only 12.3 per cent of the messages dealt with subjects unrelated to the self-determination of Catalonia. When disaggregated into sub-topics, the number



Own elaboration.

Figure 3: Topics of the published tweets.

of references to the independence movement almost equals those of the right to self-determination (24.6 per cent) and the call for vote (21.3 per cent), while those dedicated to promoting campaign events reached a percentage of 17.2 per cent. Likewise, 24.6 per cent of tweets address other diverse subjects also connected to Catalan independence.

Through the Mann-Whitney U test we found that the success of non-independence issues is much lower than that of secessionism ($p < 0.05$): specifically, the former achieves half of all interactions in contrast with the latter. In addition, when the subject of the tweet includes the call for vote, there is a statistically significant connection with its social scope.

The same applies if we focus on the messages that have the purpose of dialogue with the citizen with regards to the achieved reach. The Mann-Whitney U test ($p < 0.05$) verified that the willingness to listen is more effective than the unidirectional emission of the information. The media object most used by Puigdemont is the hashtag (38.5 per cent). These data suggest that he wants his thoughts to be sorted and adhere to other issues or structures, for greater reach. This is followed by mentions of different profiles and URLs. The profiles correspond to political institutions, public figures, media outlets and activists in a clear allusion to the reaffirmation of his independentist ideas. URLs are varied and belong to media outlets or correspond to YouTube videos that redirect to news channels and blogs. In order not to 'contaminate' his tweets with informality, Puigdemont includes hardly any emoticons in his messages (4.2 per cent).

Regarding Puigdemont's symbolic role adopted within his messages, *great communicator* predominates, followed by *whistleblower*, *figurehead* and *visionary*. In turn, there are no statistically significant relationships between the leader's role and the outreach of his messages (Kruskal-Wallis test). However, it is striking that the average number of interactions is higher in cases in which he acts as *visionary* (mean: 17.615), *whistleblower* (mean: 12.411) or *figurehead* (mean: 12.387) as opposed to that of *great communicator* (9.854), the latter being the most frequent role played (57.4 per cent of messages).

The visual elements most used by Puigdemont are videos and photographs. He never includes 'memes' or GIFs in his posts. The prevailing type of scenery, and the whole view (or most of it) – including the elements and

surroundings on the posted images – reveal most of them as public (97.1 per cent) rather than private (2.9 per cent) or intimate (non-existent). The type of capture is spontaneous (41.2 per cent) or contrived (58.8 per cent); while it should be noted that there are no selfies. Last, there is no aggressiveness in most of Puigdemont's tweets (61.8 per cent), although it proves high in 20.6 per cent of the messages, and shows certain signs in 17.6 per cent. Moreover, there is a statistically significant correlation between the degree of aggressiveness of the message and the interest of the audience (Spearman's $\rho = 0.285$, $p < 0.01$).

Citizens' responses to Puigdemont

Of the 485 comments analysed, the descriptive statistics concerning their outreach are calculated, understood as the sum of variables that indicate interaction: comments later received, plus retweets and 'likes' achieved.

Based on the foregoing, a comparison is made between two subgroups of comments, set out of variable 'bias', and distinguished only in terms of positive (those supporting Puigdemont) versus negative (those rejecting him). It's outstanding that, although the positive tweets receive more retweets and likes, those negative actually generate more debate.

The relationship between variable 'bias' and the amount of interaction achieved is demonstrated by the Kruskal-Wallis test ($p \leq 0.01$), both in the total outreach and in each of its three components. Within the comments showing a higher interaction, it is observed that the positive comments with the greatest outreach are based on text, whereas most of the successful negative ones are based on images. The analysis of the person deixis in the tweets allows us to affirm that the users tend to a repeated use of the polite address of 'you' (*Usted* in Spanish and *Vostè* in Catalan) in allusion to President Carles Puigdemont. In addition, from the semantic analysis carried out, the use of linguistic forms such as appellations, related to the type of direct communication that Twitter favours, is also extracted. The tweets published by citizens include mocking terms such as 'catalufo' (pejorative word for 'Catalan') or 'puigdemonio' (another pun, by putting together 'Puigdemont' and *demonio*, the Spanish word for 'demon'). Despite everything mentioned, good manners and the use of non-violent vocabulary prevail.

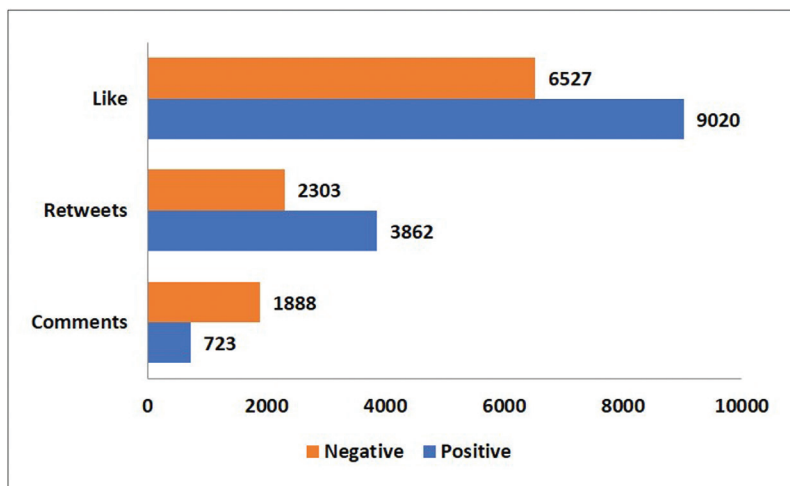
The most frequently used adjectives follow the same pattern as the nouns, stressing the opposition between political stances. In this way, there is the predominant allusion, via gentilics, to Catalonia ('Catalan', in the male and female Spanish forms, and plural form as well) and Spain ('Spanish', in male and female form, and plural form as well; anyhow: it does not exclude the

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Sum	Average	Standard deviation
Comments later received	485	0	142	2840	5.86	11.84
Retweets	485	0	651	7052	14.54	49.80
Likes	485	0	951	18,762	38.68	85.69
Total	485	0	1645	28,654	59.08	132.50

Own elaboration.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of comments from the social audience.

6. 'ARV' is the acronym of 'Al Rojo Vivo' (translatable to 'Red Hot'), a popular political talk-show on Spanish channel Sexta TV.



Own elaboration.

Figure 4: Amount of interaction received from comments according to bias.

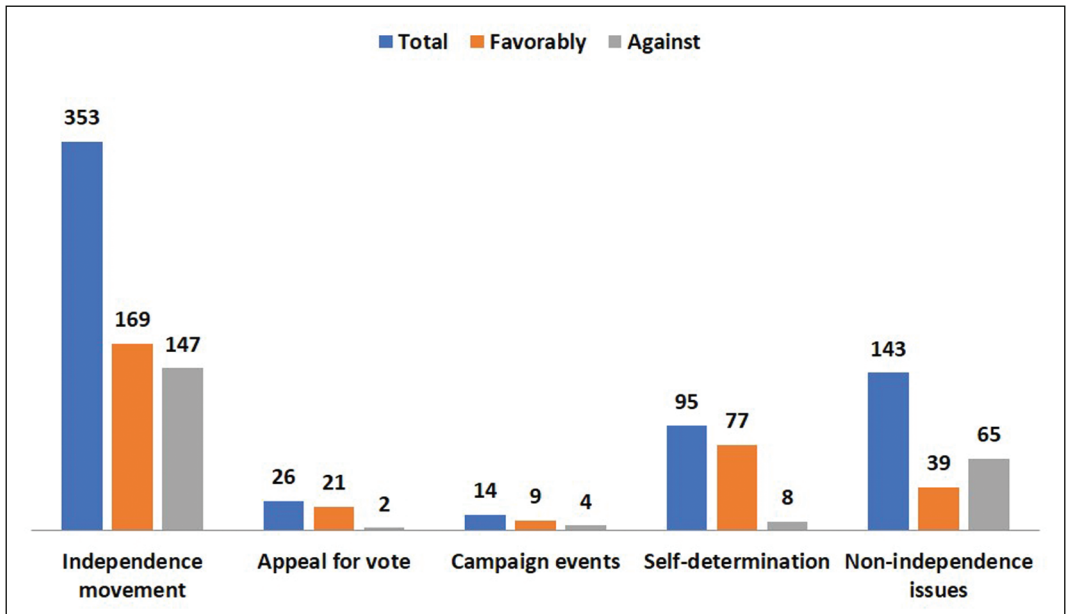
corresponding nouns, also gentiles: 'Catalans' and 'Spaniards'). Many other syntactic functions reinforce the intent to encourage and call for mobilization ('ahead', 'everybody' and 'proud'), or to exemplify the malaise ('shameful' or 'coup leader', the latter actually consisting of two nouns, of which the former, 'coup', is the one identifiable under an adjective function, this way equivalent to Spanish adjective 'golpista').

Time deixes are expressed mostly in the present tense and the most reiterated verbs suggest action, such as 'go', 'vote', 'say' or 'must' – a formula that denotes obligation or warning. From the point of view of the intentionality of the message, the negatively-biased comments denounce, accuse, demand justice and ask for punishment for those actions against the law, while the positively-biased messages advocate the cause of independence, thank their leaders for what they are doing and demand the right to self-determination.

The distribution of comments within the audience, according to language, demonstrates the dichotomy of opinions regarding the Catalan issue and its limited international scope. Of the audience's messages addressing the independence movement, 91.6 per cent are formulated in Catalan or Spanish, showing quite similar figures (Catalan, 52.4 per cent, Spanish, 39.2 per cent) while comments in English or another language stand at around the 4.1 per cent. However, the correspondence between language and support or rejection of Puigdemont's theses, a hypothesis demonstrated by Chi-square with a significance lower than 0.001 (Cramer's V=0.464), shows that the negative comments are written in Spanish (78.9 per cent) while the positive ones are in Catalan (67.3 per cent).

As shown by the following figure, the dominant issue found in the comments is the independence movement itself: seven out of ten messages, be they for or against, overtly refer to the *procés*. More specifically, within the secessionist side, the right to self-determination stands out. With regards to intentionality, the majority of negative comments seek to attack, insult or warn; while the positive ones thank, comment or defend the cause.

Along with the text, this study has assessed the appearance of the typical objects on social networks, underutilized in general terms. It is noteworthy



Own elaboration.

Figure 5: Priority issues in the responses to Puigdemont.

that all of them – links, mentions, emoticons and hashtags – remain more frequent among the comments supporting Puigdemont than within the critical ones. URLs were only inserted in 6 per cent of the messages based on text. These web addresses were primarily used to either redirect the users to news published in the media or link them to websites that promoted the referendum.

Mentions to other Twitter profiles (8.1 per cent) and the use of emoticons (9.3 per cent) were scarce too. The hashtag is the most used object, present in 12.6 per cent (59) of the messages. The heterogeneity of forms proves remarkable, especially in the most repeated tag, allusive to 1 October. Other hashtags prioritize the action of voting, the call for referendum, or the desired consequence, with expressions such as: #holanoupais ('Hello, brand new country'), #PaïsosCatalans ('Catalan lands'), #freedom or #independence (directly posted in English). Non-independentist citizens also manifested, although to a lesser extent, their position via hashtags, both in Spanish and Catalan: #TensionCatalunyaARV,⁶ #DimiteixYa ('resign now', in singular); #1oEstafaAntidemocràtica ('1oAntidemocraticFraud'); #golpista ('coup leader'); #ConMigoQueNoCuenten ('Don't count on me'); #Decadencia ('Decay'); #HolaCàrcel ('Hello, Prison') or #vergonya ('shame').

Only 16.5 per cent out of the 485 comments from private citizens employ a visual element: in its majority, photographs. It is surprising how the use of the memes mostly entails the tendency to mock and criticize the independence movement and its representatives.

Regarding the protagonist among these elements, the particularly striking contradiction is that in 23 of the 80 cases, the limelight of the image lies in a text, which is used as a way to either include more text than usual or show the original source of the message. In addition, there is the remarkable presence



Twitter.

Figure 6: Example of memes in comments.

of private citizens (eleven cases) besides police, flags, ballots, ballot boxes or handcuffs, etc.

Last, certain degrees of violence were observed in the messages, determining the dependency ratio between the 'aggressiveness' variable and the 'bias' variable ($\chi^2 p < 0.001$, contingency coefficient = 0.479). Although most messages do not show it, the percentages of negative comments with significant levels of aggressiveness (13.7 per cent) and those merely showing aggressiveness (17.6 per cent) are much higher than those of positive ones (2 per cent and 5.1 per cent, respectively). This aggressiveness is manifested mainly through insults and comparisons with fascism.

This situation is unbalanced due to the fact that the analysed messages are direct replies to Puigdemont's tweets, showing that people in his favour do not usually employ insults, while those opposing him tend to do so. To observe whether there is this aggressiveness from the independentist users, future investigations would have to examine how these citizens respond to those with whom they disagree.

Correspondence between Puigdemont's discourse and that of the social audience

Messages by Puigdemont that generated the greatest interest are those that explicitly referred to the referendum, as proved by the audience's comments, where the predominant topic revolves around the right to self-determination. Puigdemont mostly uses Catalan language, but there are significant examples of posts in English, trying to make Catalan sovereignty an international cause. However, almost half the audience's responses that he receives are in Spanish, while English or French constitutes a minority, which shows to what extent the issue is of national – rather than international – interest.



Twitter.

Figure 7: Examples of aggressiveness in comments: insults and mockeries.

Despite Puigdemont's moderate tone identified in the semantic analysis of his messages, when the intents of emitter and respondents are compared, coincidences are detected in the most reiterated options: the verbal attack – regardless of its political sign – and the blanket statement. Additionally, either insult or offense by the Catalan leader are found negligible, while regarding the audience, these forms are present in one out of ten comments.

The signs of aggressiveness and belligerence are more obvious in messages with negative bias than in positive ones. However, the aggressiveness underlying the messages by Puigdemont is non-existent in nearly two thirds of them. The various and diverse media objects of the tweets are used heterogeneously, and quite sporadically in the case of the public. The mention of profiles and the use of hashtags denote strategy and, therefore, previous reflection. Emoticons, however, clearly relate to a more relaxed and light-hearted style, minimizing seriousness from the issue at stake, which actually explains why this is rarely observed in Puigdemont's communication, while it is the second most used option within the users' comments.

Despite this, there is a notable coincidence in the prominent role that both actors assign to the media. Puigdemont makes use of articles by the media to reinforce his discourse, as much as he mentions specific profiles of journalists and media endorsing his cause. Similarly, whenever the social audience complement their texts with links, they also take what media release in order to bolster their arguments.

The analysis of the visual elements indicates that video turns out to be the most continuously employed resource by Puigdemont, since practically half his messages contain one (48.8 per cent). The majority of videos show the independentist leader alone, within a context of institutional communications, always in a formal outfit and displaying the Catalan flag. On the contrary, his discourse lacks GIFs or memes, more light-hearted and humorous forms of communication (when compared to videos). Quite the opposite happens in the messages of those who respond to his tweets: they prefer 'other images' (screenshots, collages or cartoons), photographs, memes and GIFs, over the rarely used videos. These elements reinforce the characteristics that define the specific communicative style of each actor. Puigdemont's displays are moderate, self-restrained, or inhibited, with everything under control, while the private citizens' style proves more direct, passionate and spontaneous. Moreover, they use humour as a distinctive feature within the negative comments, exemplified through memes that ridicule, mock or parody the ideological opponent.

CONCLUSIONS

After having analysed all the messages published by Carles Puigdemont during the month prior to the referendum and having solved the research questions in the results section, we now contrast the hypotheses. The first hypothesis can be confirmed to a certain extent: although Puigdemont prioritizes Twitter as a mere instrument to inform, without responding to the public, it is true that he does listen to the users to locate convergent opinions and quote them to reinforce his theses. On the other hand, the dialogue with the citizenry is barely present in his messages, despite the fact that it has statistically been proven that this purpose, when compared to others, usually reaches greater interaction from the audience. In addition, he neither exploits nor benefits from – in terms of gaining more diffusion – the virality of elements such as memes, in exchange for not reducing the formality of his communication, despite his rather sporadic usage of hashtags, mentions and links.

The second hypothesis is verified too: Puigdemont urges citizens to participate in the referendum by appealing to separatist emotions and desires. Some of the most successful messages on Twitter were either about where to vote on referendum day or aimed at relating the referendum to the right of freedom and democracy *per se*. It is also observed how coincident the leader's and users' discourse and rhetoric become, in the most recurrent topics, intents, wording and hashtags. Argumentation through data is not frequent, in contrast with the common tendency to spread the opinion of supporting users. The satisfaction of the separatist public with Puigdemont's political actions can be seen as a display of gratitude, which is often the only purpose of the response.

Regarding the third hypothesis, we can conclude that there is a statistically significant positive relation between the issue of the 'independence movement' and the audience interest in it, which Puigdemont leverages, building almost 90 per cent of his messages on that axis. Likewise, when the message includes a 'call for vote', its success is confirmed again, with a much higher average of interactions than posts that do not include this issue.

Finally, the fourth hypothesis (polarized, passionate and aggressive audience) is verified as well. Puigdemont's public has a more informal, direct and emotive tone than himself: users are prone to attacking, and express themselves through insults as well as humour, especially in the negative tweets. The relationship between bias, language and aggressiveness in the messages is verified too: a majority of messages in Catalan are in his favour, while those in Spanish are against him, the latter also proving to be more belligerent. However, this should be put to further consideration, as the only comments or responses analysed here are the ones directly addressing Puigdemont, and not the indie supporters' responses to their opponents, which might as well show no exception to this aggressive tone.

In line with the results of the abovementioned international research (Ampofo et al. 2011; Jungheer 2016; Flesher and Gillian 2018), this study agrees on the usefulness of Twitter as a platform for political deliberation that allows for citizens to reflect their preferences and for politicians to call for mobilization. In accordance with Chadwick (2007), this study also assumes that the messages published are adapted to the social movements they are supported by, in this case contents with a clear intention to call for vote; and associating the referendum with freedom and democracy. Finally, in accordance with other research (Baeza 2012; Carrasco et al. 2018; Moragas 2016), it is observed that the dialogic possibilities of Twitter are not fully exploited, but

mainly used as a simple dissemination tool by Puigdemont and his public, with polarization and aggressiveness; a platform where negative opinions generate a higher amount of responses than positive ones.

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