

ARTICLE

# ANALYSIS OF THE SOCIAL AND MEDIA DEBATE DURING THE CATALAN INDEPENDENCE REFERENDUM



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**ABSTRACT** – This research includes an analysis of the media frameworks built around the Catalan government's attempt to organize the referendum for independence from Spain on Oct 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017. Based on previous studies on the use of pragmatic and symbolic frameworks during independence processes, the objective is to identify the main interpretive frameworks, actors, and actions that starred in the symbolic battle over national identities, comparing (1) the media coverage of the referendum in two national, two international, and two regional newspapers with (2) the social debate on Twitter. The comparative quantitative analysis shows how the media prioritized emotional information and historical aspects, with notable differences between the national media and the social debate on Twitter. The coverage in international

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newspapers, however, was more similar to the debate on Twitter and had a notable influence on framing this public issue.

**Key words:** Symbolic power. Symbolic representation. Catalonia. Framing. Twitter.

## ANÁLISE DO DEBATE SOCIAL E MIDIÁTICO DURANTE A TENTATIVA DE REFERENDO NA CATALUNHA

**RESUMO** – Esta pesquisa inclui a análise das estruturas de mídia construídas em torno da tentativa do governo catalão de organizar o referendo pela independência da Espanha em 1º de outubro de 2017. Com base em estudos anteriores sobre o uso de estruturas pragmáticas e simbólicas em processos de independência, o objetivo é identificar os principais marcos interpretativos, atores e ações que protagonizaram a batalha simbólica pelas identidades nacionais, comparando (1) a cobertura midiática do referendo em dois jornais nacionais, dois internacionais e dois regionais com (2) a conversa social no Twitter. A análise quantitativa comparativa ilustra como a mídia priorizou a informação emocional e os aspectos históricos, com diferenças notáveis entre a mídia nacional e a conversa do Twitter. Jornais internacionais, no entanto, foram mais parecidos com a conversa no Twitter e tiveram uma influência notável no enquadramento desta questão pública.

**Palavras-chave:** Poder simbólico. Representação simbólica. Catalunha, enquadramento, Twitter.

## ANÁLISIS DEL DEBATE SOCIAL Y MEDIÁTICO DURANTE EL INTENTO DE REFERÉNDUM DE INDEPENDENCIA EN CATALUÑA

**RESUMEN** – Esta investigación incluye el análisis de los marcos mediáticos construidos alrededor del intento del gobierno catalán de organizar el referéndum de independencia de España del 1 de octubre de 2017. Basado en estudios previos sobre el uso de marcos pragmáticos y simbólicos en los procesos de independencia, el objetivo es identificar los principales marcos interpretativos, actores y acciones que protagonizaron la batalla simbólica sobre las identidades nacionales, comparando (1) la cobertura mediática del referéndum en dos diarios nacionales, dos internacionales y dos regionales con (2) la conversación social en Twitter. El análisis cuantitativo comparativo ilustra cómo los medios priorizaron la información emocional y los aspectos históricos, con notables diferencias entre los medios nacionales y la conversación de Twitter. Los diarios internacionales, sin embargo, fueron más similares a la conversación en Twitter y tuvieron notable influencia en el enmarcado de este tema público.

**Palabras clave:** Poder simbólico. Representación simbólica. Cataluña. Framing. Twitter.

## 1 Introduction

The media and the social debates on social networks are articulators of an increasingly polarized and emotional public sphere concerning controversial subjects, such as the attempt to hold the Catalan independence referendum on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017 (Gagnon et al., 2019; López-Olano & Fenoll, 2019; Algaba & Bellido-Pérez, 2019;

Xicoy et al., 2017). The media and the social networks, notably Twitter (Moragas-Fernández et al., 2019; Hernández-Santaolalla & Sola-Morales, 2019; Arce et al., 2020; Carrasco et al., 2018), intensified the debate with such radically opposing arguments that the referendum attempt has been defined as “a totally polarized media war” (López-Olano & Fenoll, 2019, p. 2).

This analysis of the referendum attempt adds to the research which, over the last few years, has studied how digital and media communication have shaped the events which marked the tense relationship between Spain and Catalonia since, at least, the decision of the Constitutional Court regarding the Catalonia Statute of June 28th, 2010 (Perales-García & Pont-Sorribes, 2017; Alonso Muñoz, 2014; Ballesteros, 2015a, 2015b; Lejarza et al., 2015; Castelló & Capdevilla, 2013).

Taking these previous studies as a starting point, this article conducts a quantitative content analysis based on the theoretical assumptions of framing theory regarding the independence referendum attempt called on October 1st, 2017, with the aim to identify the frames, actions, individuals, and images involved in the referendum attempt. This article integrates, on the one hand, a study of the Catalan, national, and international printed media as well as the social debate which took place on Twitter. The large number of samples which we have read in order to carry out our research (901 press articles and 3.822 Twitter posts) makes this a methodical and rigorous study of how the traditional media (in this case printed) and the social networks (specifically Twitter) interpreted the events that occurred between October 1st and October 8th, 2017.

This research does not focus exclusively on either the press (Vellón, 2020; Pont-Sorribes et al., 2019; Dubois & Villeneuve-Siconnelly, 2019; Perales-García & Pont-Sorribes, 2017; Cartes-Barroso, 2018; Dorado & Sixto-García, 2021; Xicoy et al., 2017; Irala-Hortal, 2020) or on social networks (Anderson, 2019; San Cornelio & Gómez Cruz, 2019; Carrasco et al., 2018; Hernández-Santaolalla & Sola-Morales, 2019; Gil Ramírez, 2019) as other previous studies have done, but instead includes both, in their textual and visual dimensions, which allowed us to establish diverse comparatives of the regional/national/international axes and/or the press and Twitter, which enriches the exploration of the discursive and communicative complexity which characterized the events of October 1st. As can be seen, this comparative

approximation has been less frequently employed in the field of communication research in Spain (Pérez Curiel, 2020).

Accordingly, outside of scientific journals, the analysis of the Catalan representation in the international press carried out by the Diplocat public/private consortium deserves a special mention. The 2019 report (Perales-García & Pont-Sorribes, 2020) showed the interest of the international press regarding the Catalan question, with the publication of 584 articles mainly concerned with the conflict between Catalonia and Spain. The tendencies detected in this report showed an important change concerning 2020 (Capdevila et al., 2021) due, among other things, to the changes in the informational rationale brought about by the covid-19 crisis, which produced an increase in the number of articles (rising to 1.021), but a decrease from 50% in 2019 to 31.54% in 2020 in those focusing on Catalonia. As shown in this report, the main subject was the covid-19 crisis, followed by sports and cultural topics, with the independence conflict lying in fourth place.

For the above reasons, the main aim of this work has been to analyze the media construct of the event based on an analysis of the main hashtags which dominated the public debate on Twitter as well as the media coverage in the leading national and international newspapers (The New York Times, The Guardian, El País, El Mundo, El Periódico and Ara). This study is theoretically based on research into the symbolic capacity to define social reality which the media possess (Berger & Luckmann, 1968) and on the framing theory method (Entman, 1993; Van Gorp, 2005; Aalberg et. al, 2012). According to Entman (1993) the meaning of the framing process carried out by the media is the following:

Framing means selecting certain aspects of perceived reality and then further highlighting them in a communicative text, such that it promotes a particular definition of the problem, an interpretation of the causes, a moral assessment and/or a suggested solution to the matter described. (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

In order to outline the idea of frames, we turn to Reese (2001, p. 11), who conceives of them as “organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, and that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world”. Based on the symbolic significance which defines each frame, the meaning of a given reality is actively constructed. The study specifically lies on

one of the four lines of research into the news frames highlighted by D'Angelo (2002, 2012): namely, the identification of the thematic units known as frames. In this case, we will assume the deductive position of frame analysis (de Vreese, 2005), which stipulates the previous establishment of frames as analytical variables, partly based on previous studies (Castelló & Capdevila, 2013). Thus, when taken as dependent variables, “frames are contained within the news and are the result of production processes in the communication media” (Igartua & Cheng, 2009, p. 728).

Our main aim in this study was to identify the main approaches/frames of the units of analysis and how these were articulated by the main actors involved, their actions, and their images. To do so, we deductively applied the symbolic analysis framework to the case of the Catalan referendum attempt, using previous studies related to this research topic (Ballesteros, 2015a, 2015b; Castelló & Capdevila, 2013).

According to these objectives, we formulated the following research questions:

RQ1. What were the main frames, subjects, and actions reported in the Catalan, Spanish and international press?

RQ2. What were the main frames, subjects, and actions that dominated the public debate on Twitter?

RQ3. What were the main similarities and differences between the media coverage in the press and the public debate on Twitter?

RQ4. What role did images play?

## **2 Brief contextualization of the referendum of October 1st, 2017**

The referendum attempt which took place on October 1st, 2017, in Catalonia, was a turbulent period that awoke enormous interest on social networks, as well as concern among the public due to the tension between the Spanish and Catalan governments (Pérez-Curiel et al., 2020). Our aim in this study was not to analyze the enormous complexity of the socioeconomic circumstances surrounding this event, and so we will only give a brief description of a situation which has been explained in greater detail in works such as Cetrá and Harvey (2019), Marcet et al. (2014), Ordeix and Ginesta (2013), Xicoy et al. (2017).

In general, the relationship between Spain and Catalonia has historically been complex, but a turning point in this tension came

with the decision of the Constitutional Court in 2010 to reject various articles in the Statute of Autonomy of Catalonia of 2005 which aimed to obtain more sovereignty for Catalonia, and which had been passed by both the Catalan and Spanish parliaments (Xicoy et al., 2017). This annulment brought about an increase in separatist feelings, with a subsequent wave of protests and demonstrations within Catalonia, and “provoked disappointment and frustration with the expectations of greater self-governance” (Ballesteros, 2015b, p. 163).

Eventually, this rejection of various articles in the Statute of Autonomy, together with other factors such as the economic crisis of 2008 and the lack of legitimacy of the political class due to corruption scandals, gave strength to a pro-independence movement backed by more radical political movements and a strongly organized mobilization within the civil society (grassroots movements) (Ordeix & Ginesta, 2013). This movement denounced the fault in the model of the autonomous regions, the plurinational character of the Spanish state, and the right to decide for the Catalan citizens (Ordeix & Ginesta, 2013). Therefore, the demonstration held during the Diada of 2012, a public holiday in Catalonia, was one of the largest in history: “Since July 2010 and the Diada of 2012, nothing has been the same in Catalonia” (Xicoy et al., 2017, p. 1041).

As a result of the annulment of certain articles in the Catalan Statute, the former president of Catalonia, Artur Mas, set in motion two initiatives to attempt to consult with the Catalan citizenry over the future of the region (Llorca Asensi, 2015, p. 54). First, he presented a formal request from the Catalan Parliament to the Spanish government asking to be allowed to hold referendums (an option set out in article 150.2 of the Spanish constitution). He also set in motion the passing of a law in the Catalan parliament which would allow a consultation known as the “Participatory process over the political future of Catalonia”. Unlike the referendum, this consultation was not meant to be binding, i.e., it did not oblige the taking of any posterior decisions (Llorca Asensi, 2015, p. 55).

Although both initiatives were rejected by the Constitutional Court, the consultation took place on November 9th, 2014, and the main leaders behind it were sentenced by the High Court of Justice of Catalonia for disobedience and prevarication (Julve, 2017). According to Cetrá and Harvey (2019, p. 608), the consultation of November 9th, 2014, meant a “major shift in the traditionally moderate stance of the party on the constitutional question, which

consisted in pushing for more autonomy without renouncing participation in state-level politics”.

Finally, another landmark event before the illegal referendum of October 1st took place on September 6th, 2017, when the Catalan parliament passed a law allowing the referendum to be held (The Law on the Referendum on Self-determination of Catalonia), as well as the Law of Juridical Transition and Foundation of the Catalan Republic, popularly known as the “Rupture with Spain” laws, which were passed during an emergency session. These laws did not fulfill the precepts established by the Catalan Statute and were again suspended by the Constitutional Court. Despite this, on October 1st, 2017, an attempt was made to hold the Catalan referendum. This was declared illegal by both the Spanish government and the European Union (European Commission, 2017), as it did not follow the precepts of the Spanish Constitution. Furthermore, the international observers pointed out that it lacked basic electoral guarantees (Pérez, 2017). For example, there was no official census or control; the ballot boxes were opaque and were not sealed; the violent police intervention did not allow a normal development of the event; there was neither a central electoral commission nor an official vote-counting system; some of the voting slips were printed at home by citizens, etc.

To end these contextual notes on the event analyzed in this paper, it should be noted that the Spanish Constitution presents a mononational concept of the state (Cetrá & Harvey, 2019) in which the Spanish nation is indivisible and indissoluble, and was designed such that it could not be modified, making it exceedingly difficult to call for referendums, according to Aguilera de Prat (1992, pp. 138–139): “The constitution is especially rigid and the existence of two forms of referendums to change it expresses the concern of political groups that it was made to preserve, in essence, their work (...) It is a referendum that is not meant to be used”. Therefore, the political system of representation consolidated since the Spanish Constitution of 1978 makes it very difficult to reform the constitutional text and any consequent legal reserve of a possible consultation; hence, the illegal nature of the referendum attempt which took place in Catalonia on October 1st, 2017.

### **3 The media coverage of the Catalan conflict and the role played by social networks**

As pointed out in the introduction, the media coverage and the role that social networks played during the Catalan referendum attempt awoke enormous interest among the scientific community. This interest is justified, partly, by the fact that political conflicts are built upon communication (Castelló, 2012) and therefore an analysis of this type of event is a reliable way of approaching the social construct of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1968). In other words, analyzing the media (be it traditional or digital) is of both scientific and social significance, as communication is not only limited to representing reality but is also able to construct it.

Previous research has noted that both the media coverage and the debate on social networks were marked by the existence of two media systems and, in general, two distinct political positions which supported one or the other of the two main sides involved in the events that day: the pro-unionists and the pro-independence movement (Gagnon et al., 2019; Arce et al., 2020). Hence, the media clearly favored one or the other of the two sides involved and their different ideologies determined their attitude (Vellón, 2020). The polarization expressed in the media debate was so intense that López-Olano and Fenoll (2019, p. 2) spoke of it as a “media war situated on either side of the ideology”, which did not encourage either critical thought or contextualization, and which respected neither a code of ethics as a whole nor international norms (Dorado & Sixto-García, 2021).

This led to a media coverage characterized by high emotions and feelings as well as the conflict frame (López-Olano & Fenoll, 2019), which dominated the national and international media coverage (Pont-Sorribes et al., 2019; Dubois & Villeneuve-Siconnelly, 2019) and the discussions on Twitter concerning the conflict (Moragas-Fernández et al., 2019). In this respect, according to Carrasco et al. (2018), the pro-independence movement showed a higher mobilization on social networks than the pro-unionists, which was explained in the previous section as being due to the grassroots nature of the mobilization of the Catalan citizens.

Therefore, it can be said that polarization was a defining aspect of the social debate which took place on Twitter, the social network which awoke the highest level of interest among its users (Moragas-Fernández et al., 2019; Hernández-Santaolalla & Sola-



Morales, 2019; Carrasco et al., 2018; Pérez Curiel, 2020), possibly due to its conversational nature. Far from diversifying the positions held or considering alternatives to the pro-unionist or pro-independence stances held by the political parties, the citizens' movement, and the media, the same logic characterized the debate on Twitter, both during October 1st (Hernández-Santaolalla & Sola-Morales, 2019), as well as during previous key events, such as the passing of the Catalan Referendum Law (Moragas-Fernández et al., 2019).

High emotions and feelings, together with the "rejection of rationality" dominated this social network (Hernández-Santaolalla & Sola-Morales, 2019; Arce et al., 2020), with a clear dividing line which made a rational debate and interchange of ideas virtually non-existent. The study carried out by Arce et al. (2020) based on the reaction on Twitter (hashtag #ElDilemaSalvados) to the TV program Salvados, rebroadcast exactly one year after the failed consultation attempt, showed that the public debate was still dominated by two clearly diverse groups who directly opposed the arguments of their political opponents, even provoking fear among the public, who fully trusted their own polarized groups, among whom there was hardly any contact, debate or exchange of ideas. This polarized distancing was nothing new and did not appear from nowhere on October 1st, as shown in the study conducted by Esteve del Valle and Burge (2018) into the use made by the Catalan parliament of Twitter in 2013 and 2014, in which this trend was detected.

It may therefore be said that, according to the existing literature published so far, both traditional and social media showed certain common patterns in the discourses with which they constructed the events of October 1st, a communicative approach that also awoke interest in the images posted on Twitter (San Cornelio & Gómez, 2019) and in the press (Irala-Hortal, 2020), fake news (Coromina & Padilla, 2018), hoaxes (Aparici et al., 2019), and in other social media used to a lesser degree during the consultation, such as YouTube (Gil-Ramírez, 2019a, 2019b) and Instagram (Cartes, 2018).

#### 4 Methodology

We employed a two-fold methodology in this study. On the one hand, we include a content analysis of the information published by a representative sample of the online editions of the Spanish

national media (El País and El Mundo), as well as the international media (The Guardian and The New York Times) and that of two Catalan regional newspapers (La Vanguardia and Ara).

The selection of these media outlets responds to the interest in finding out to what extent the geographic area – international, national, or regional – could be significant when providing different coverage of the event. In order to make the selection, we used as a criterion the relevance of these newspapers within their corresponding geographic areas, in terms of circulation and diffusion. Regarding the international online media, The New York Times, a daily newspaper that is a global reference for many readers, follows a liberal editorial line, despite being a US publication. The Guardian, on the other hand, is a British newspaper, positioned on the left of the political sphere of British political opinion.

As for the Spanish online media, the El Mundo newspaper is defined as being a liberal center-right publication, often critical of the left and peripheral nationalism. The Spanish newspaper El País is defined as an independent publication, with a European vocation and a defender of pluralist democracy, held as a reference for the left and the center-left. As for the regional newspapers, La Vanguardia is one of the leading publications in Barcelona and currently follows a conservative editorial policy. Finally, Ara, a left-wing pro-independence newspaper published in Catalan in Barcelona, has always been firmly committed to using a digital format. Its circulation increased significantly during the months before the referendum attempt.

The analysis period coincided with the coverage offered by the aforementioned online media concerning the Catalan referendum. In total, 901 units of analysis were subsequently identified and analyzed, with each of the news articles published by the aforementioned online media outlets between October 1st (the date set for the referendum) and October 8th being considered as a unit of analysis. Table 1 shows the distribution of the news. It can be seen that within the sample analyzed the national media included the highest number of articles related to this event (559), followed by the regional media (278), and finally the international media (64).

**Table 1***Distribution of the analyzed news articles*

| Medium             | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------------|-----------|------------|
| El Mundo           | 289       | 32.1%      |
| El País            | 270       | 30%        |
| La Vanguardia      | 264       | 29.3%      |
| Ara                | 14        | 1.6%       |
| The New York Times | 23        | 2.6%       |
| The Guardian       | 41        | 4.6%       |
| Total              | 901       | 100%       |

At the same time, to measure the public debate generated by the Catalan referendum attempt, we focused on the social network Twitter, which fosters the proliferation of peripheral public spheres (Sampedro & Resina, 2010) and which allows the opening of debates traditionally limited to the central public sphere. Furthermore, we started from the premise that Twitter transforms the public sphere both on a structural level, by increasing citizen participation, and on an influencing process level (Moragas et al., 2019). Hence, as previous studies have shown, ideological polarization is a key component, so it is possible to detect, in some cases, sounding boards regarding the flow of communication regarding certain controversial events, such as the Catalan referendum attempt (Esteve & Borge, 2018).

We, therefore, considered it necessary to analyze the public debate on Twitter on an event as controversial as the Catalan referendum. In order to follow the debate, we carried out a manual search on Twitter of the most commonly used hashtags during the days surrounding the event, using the Twitter search engine. At first, up to eight hashtags associated with the Catalan referendum were identified. However, to limit ourselves to the object of study, we only chose those hashtags which made a direct reference to Catalonia, the referendum, or both (and their different meanings). Based on these parameters, we analyzed all the tweets which contained one of the four main hashtags #catalanreferendum, #cataluñareferendum, #referendum, and #cataloniareferendum.

In this case, the sample was limited to the first three days after the call for a referendum, from October 1st to October 3rd, 2017. The reason for shortening the analysis period of the public debate on

Twitter, compared to the period analyzed in the online media, is that, after October 3rd, certain contamination of these hashtags occurred concerning topics that were unrelated to the Catalan question, and so increasing the size of the sample would have generated distortion. The unit of analysis focused on each posted tweet which included one of the aforementioned hashtags. By taking into account the methodological contributions of previous studies (Esteve Del Valle & Borge Bravo, 2018), we employed the tweet collection method using the Twitter search engine until we had identified a total of 5.056 tweets, of which we excluded all retweets, as well as those with inappropriate content, obtaining a final sample of 3.822, analyzed tweets. Table 2 shows the distribution of published tweets under each of the hashtags included in the analysis sample:

**Table 2**

*Distribution of the analyzed hashtags*

| Hashtag               | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----------------------|-----------|------------|
| # catalanreferendum   | 1290      | 33.8%      |
| # cataloniareferendum | 1029      | 26.9%      |
| # referendum          | 1031      | 27.0%      |
| # cataluñareferendum  | 472       | 12.3%      |
| Total                 | 3822      | 100%       |

With the analysis sample of the online media as well as the selected tweets, we then carried out the quantitative content analysis, following two different analysis protocols, one for the online media and the other for the social debate. The coding sheets used in each case, despite containing a series of specific variables, also shared certain common variables allowing us to perform a subsequent comparison. Among these specific variables, we included those of a descriptive type (publication date, author of the publication, gender), as well as those units of analysis which contained audiovisual elements (photos, videos, graphics, and/or links) and whether or not this content reinforced the dominant discourse. Regarding the common variables, following a similar parameter, we included the three key categories of our study based on the previous empirical research conducted by García-Jiménez et al. (2014), into the construction of symbolic power in online and offline contexts:

a) Primary and secondary subjects: police, Spanish law enforcement agencies; police, Catalan law enforcement agencies; ordinary Spanish citizens-Spanish civil society (citizens, NGOs, etc.); ordinary Catalan citizens-Catalan civil society (citizens, NGOs, etc.); ordinary international citizens-international civil society (citizens, NGOs, etc.); Spanish authorities (politicians, government, parliament, etc.); Catalan authorities (politicians, government, parliament, etc.); international authorities (politicians, government, parliament, etc.); Spanish experts (university professors, researchers, lawyers, political scientists, political mediators, etc.); Catalan experts (university professors, researchers, lawyers, political scientists, political mediators, etc.); International experts (university professors, researchers, lawyers, political scientists, political mediators, etc.); Spanish media; Catalan media; international media; not applicable.

b) Primary and secondary actions: aggression by the Spanish majority towards the Catalan minority (physical, institutional, legal violence, etc.); aggression by the Catalan minority towards the Spanish majority (physical, institutional, legal violence, etc.); both sides (Catalan and Spanish) are equally involved in the violence; the Spanish majority is trying to resolve the conflict (call for dialog, negotiation, peace, etc.); the Catalan minority is trying to resolve the conflict (call for dialog, negotiation, peace, etc.); both sides (Catalan and Spanish) are equally trying to resolve the conflict; the international community is trying to resolve the conflict; economic consequences; judicial measures or political actions; not applicable.

c) Interpretative frameworks, i.e., the journalistic or social narrative approach based on the semantic macrostructure included in the text (news and tweets). This uses framing theory as a multidisciplinary paradigm that enables us to perform a global study into the effects of the media on individuals, and whose evolutionary development as a theoretical perspective has been defined as a multi-paradigmatic paradigm (D'Angelo, 2002) which requires integrative approaches among the different perspectives that clarify the divergences detected among the studies labeled under this theory (Marín & Zamora, 2014; Ardèvol-Abreu, 2015).

Within the different framing models identified by De Vreese (2005) – specific and generic – this study opted for the use of the first (issue-specific frames), as the identified frames refer to specific recurring aspects of a particular topic, as in the case of the referendum,

non-applicable to other cultural contexts, and which offer a recurrent characterization when it comes to the media coverage of the topic. In order to identify these frames, we consider “the presence and absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Following other previous research, the frames have been conceived as organizing devices of journalistic, ideologically neutral messages, generated without the concurrence of influences outside of media contexts (Valera, 2016). Thus, a deductive approach was taken to propose the following specific frames:

- Referendum as conflict. The referendum is neither desirable nor legitimate and is one of the most severe tests experienced to date by Spanish democracy.

- Possible referendum. The referendum is both desirable and a right of the Catalan people. The Catalan people have the right to choose their destiny (through self-determination or by any other means).

- Undecided. The referendum is neither a right of the Catalan people nor a threat to Spanish democracy. The news/tweet does not clearly state whether the referendum is either positive or negative.

In order to perform the statistical analyses, we used the SPSS version 20 software. We specifically performed frequency analyses and created contingency tables with their corresponding statistical significance. Once the results had been obtained, we went on to compare the two databases and to extract conclusions that reveal how the Catalan referendum attempt and the failed declaration of independence were represented.

## **5 Results**

We now display the results obtained in this study, first distinguishing between those which refer to the symbolic content analysis represented by the Spanish online media, and then comparing them with the specific analysis of the social debate on Twitter. In both cases, the proposed outline is to be followed, based on the key variables of the study: approaches, subjects, and most significant actions.

## 5.1 The symbolic representation of the referendum in the online media

The analyses of all the publications concerning the Catalan referendum and the declaration of independence attempt specifically published by the online media analyzed from October 1st to October 8th, 2017, show significant differences regarding the coverage received. Thus, as shown in Table 3, the El Mundo newspaper published the highest amount of information during the chosen period, with a total of 289 articles, followed by the El País newspaper, with a total of 270 articles, and La Vanguardia, with 264 articles.

**Table 3**

*Distribution of the publications of each online media outlet*

| Online media       | Frequency | Percentages |
|--------------------|-----------|-------------|
| El Mundo           | 289       | 32.1%       |
| El País            | 270       | 30.0%       |
| La Vanguardia      | 264       | 29.3%       |
| The Guardian       | 41        | 4.6%        |
| The New York Times | 23        | 2.6%        |
| Ara                | 14        | 1.6%        |
| Total              | 901       | 100%        |

From a chronological perspective, the day with the highest number of published articles was October 1st, i.e., the day of the referendum, followed by October 2nd, the day on which most online media outlets showed the scenario that resulted from the events of the previous day. If we analyze these results according to the media type, we see that both the national and international media published the highest number of articles on October 2nd, giving more importance to the consequences of the referendum than on the referendum itself. However, the Catalan regional online media gave more importance to the events of October 1st (39.2%), considering the preparations for the referendum to be more important.

By focusing on the dominant frames, the vast majority of online media outlets considered the referendum to be a conflict, compared to a scarce 9.9% who were undecided, and 5.5% who saw the referendum

as being something possible and positive. As shown in table 4, the percentage of those who considered the referendum as a conflict was highest in the national media (85.7%) and the international media (96.9%) than in the Catalan regional media (78.8%). The relationship between the type of media in the main frame was statistically significant (Pearson's chi-squared test  $\chi^2=20,307$  Sig.,0009).

**Table 4**

*Main frame according to media type*

| Frame                  | Media type     |                     |                      |
|------------------------|----------------|---------------------|----------------------|
|                        | National media | International media | Regional/local media |
| Referendum as conflict | 85.7%          | 96.9%               | 78.8%                |
| Possible referendum    | 4.1%           | 1.5%                | 9.3%                 |
| Undecided              | 9.8%           | 1.6%                | 11.9%                |
| N/A                    | 0.4%           | 0%                  | 0%                   |
| Total                  | 100%           | 100%                | 100%                 |

As for the main subject that dominated the publications, the data show that the online media chose to give more prominence to the political authorities than to the other possible players. Therefore, the presence of the Spanish authorities (31%) was much higher than that of the Catalan authorities (19%). The citizens, for their part, were given less prominence, with a higher presence of Catalan citizens (14%) than those of the rest of Spain (4.3%). In this case, we also detected statistically significant differences regarding the type of media (Pearson's Chi-square  $\chi^2=65,524$  Sig.,000), with the national media giving more prominence to the Catalan authorities (20%), while the international media gave more prominence to the Catalan civil society (34.4%). In the case of the regional media, the presence of the Catalan authorities was considerably higher than the other players (18.3%).

Regarding the most prominent action performed by the leading protagonists, it was observed that this had more to do with the offering of solutions than with the violent actions themselves. Nevertheless, we found that the presence of the aggression action was also significant. As shown in Table 5, there are statistically significant differences regarding the type of media (Pearson's Chi-square  $\chi^2=109,928$  Sig.,000). Thus,



for the national media, the most prominent action was that “Spain is trying to resolve the conflict” (28.4%), while the international media focused more on the action “Spanish aggression towards Catalonia” (31.2%). For the regional media, however, the most prominent action was that “Catalonia is trying to resolve the conflict” (21.9%).

**Table 5**

*Main action according to media type*

|   | Media type |               |          |
|---|------------|---------------|----------|
|   | National   | International | Regional |
| Spanish aggression against Catalonia                          | 11.6%      | 31.2%         | 20.5%    |
| Catalan aggression against Spain                              | 15.9%      | 1.6%          | 4.7%     |
| Both parties are involved in the violence                     | 4.7%       | 20.3%         | 4%       |
| Spain is trying to resolve the conflict                       | 28.4%      | 10.9%         | 18%      |
| Catalonia is trying to resolve the conflict                   | 12.9%      | 18.8%         | 21.9%    |
| Both parties are trying to resolve the conflict               | 4.3%       | 1.6%          | 2.9%     |
| The international community is trying to resolve the conflict | 5%         | 4.7%          | 10.4%    |
| Economic consequences   | 12%        | 7.8%          | 13.7%    |
| Judicial measures or political action                         | 1.3%       | 0%            | 1.1%     |
| N/A   | 3.9%       | 6.2%          | 25%      |
| Total   | 100%       | 100%          | 100%     |

By focusing on the audiovisual content of the publications, we observed that the majority included some type of visual content to illustrate the information (86.1%). More specifically, there was an especially high number of photographs (70.8%), followed by videos (20.8%), links (2.9%), and graphics (2.3%). These audiovisual resources were mainly used to reinforce the main content of the article (97% of the cases), which means that, broadly speaking, the main focus of the photography coincided with that of the written publications.

The audiovisual content, as with the written texts, mainly revolved around the frame of the referendum as a conflict compared to the other two frameworks. As shown in Table 6, the national and international online media more often chose the conflict frame (96.8% and 85.7% respectively), compared to the Catalan regional online media (78.8%), in which the undecided frame stood out (48.6%). However,

it should be noted that, on this occasion, the relationship between the type of frame concerning the type of media was statistically non-significant (Pearson's Chi-square  $\chi^2=22,307$  Sig.,009).

**Table 6**

*The dominant visual frame according to media type*

|                          | National media | International media | Regional/local media |
|--------------------------|----------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| Referendum as a conflict | 85.7%          | 96.8%               | 78.8%                |
| Possible referendum      | 4.1%           | 1.6%                | 9.4%                 |
| Undecided                | 9.8%           | 1.6%                | 11.8%                |
| N/A                      | 0.4%           | 0%                  | 0%                   |
| Total                    | 100%           | 100%                | 100%                 |

Such consistency among the reports also led to an agreement regarding the main protagonists, considering that, as with the textual content, the audiovisual content mainly featured the Catalan citizens (25.5%) and the Spanish authorities (21.1%). However, with the audiovisual content, the prominence given to the Catalan civil society was even higher, especially in the international (53.5%) and Catalan media (27.6%) compared to the national media (22.7%). A curious fact, however, is that the Spanish police hardly appeared in the images in the Spanish online media (7.7%) but did so more frequently in the international (18.6%) and Catalan regional media (10.8%). This relationship between the main subject of the photo and the media type was also statistically significant (Pearson's Chi-square  $\chi^2=66,876$  Sig.,000).

In general, we identified in the audiovisual content the same three main actions as in the textual content, with each given the same prominence: the idea that "Catalonia is trying to resolve the conflict" (15.9%), "Catalan aggression against Spain" (13.9%) and "Spanish aggression against Catalonia" (10.1%). However, in this case, there were significant differences regarding the media type; while for the national media the most significant action of the audiovisual content was "Catalan aggression against Spain" (18.8%), the international media mostly saw the events as "Spanish aggression against Catalonia" (19%) and the regional media as "Catalonia is trying to resolve the conflict" (21.6%).

## 5.2 The social debate on Twitter regarding the Catalan referendum

A study of the tweets published during the analysis period based on the hashtags included in this research showed that the majority came from anonymous users of the Twitter social network (80%). The debate generated by media professionals (5.9%) and by politicians and political parties (1.3%) came far behind. This does not mean that politicians did not voice their opinions on Twitter, but rather that they did not use hashtags to create a thread, using Twitter as a tool for spreading their ideas rather than for social debate.

Broadly speaking, it can be seen that most tweets (45%) included a frame based on the idea that the referendum was either possible or desirable and that the Catalans had the right to choose their destiny. This clearly characterized and, by extension, conditioned the debate on Twitter under the aforementioned hashtags. To a lesser extent, there appeared other interpretations of the event, such as that the referendum was a conflict (5.5%) or that it was an unresolved issue (18.3%).

However, by differentiating the frames of the tweets according to the authors of the publications, as shown in table 7, the tweets published directly by politicians or by political associations (56%) or by anonymous citizens (48.3%) and celebrities (55.6%) were those that more often insisted that the referendum was a possible and desirable option compared to those written by journalists and media professionals, who chose less committed stances. This relationship also turned out to be statistically significant (Pearson's Chi-square  $\chi^2=190,192$  Sig.,000).

**Table 7***Frame of the tweet according to the author of the publication*

|                             | Author of the publication                    |  |                      |  |             |
|-----------------------------|--|--|----------------------|--|-------------|
|                             | Journalist/<br>communication<br>professional | Non-<br>professional<br>journalistic<br>user/citizen | Non-<br>identifiable | Politician<br>or political<br>associations | Celebrities |
| Referendum<br>as a conflict | 5.8%   | 5.6%   | 6.2%                 | 2%   | 0%          |
| Possible<br>referendum      | 15.1%  | 48.3%  | 36.7%                | 56%  | 55.6%       |
| Undecided                   | 14.7%  | 19.3%  | 14.7%                | 6%   | 16.7%       |
| N/A                         | 64.4%  | 26.9%  | 42.4%                | 36%  | 27.8%       |
| Total                       | 100%   | 100%   | 100%                 | 100%                                       | 100%        |

The Catalan citizens appeared in 36.6% of the conversations, making them the main subject of the debate. To a lesser extent, the main protagonists also included the politicians and the authorities, with a greater presence of the Spanish authorities (15.9%) than the Catalan authorities (5.5%). The police and the security forces (especially the Spanish), however, occupied the third position in the ranking.

As for the main subject, we analyzed the main developed action. In this case, we observed a high percentage of tweets (approx. 30%) in which the main action was impossible to classify as the hashtag was used simply as an unbiased framework for humor or to link to other neutral content (news, opinion blogs, etc.). Following this consideration, we identified two actions with a higher frequency: on the one hand, actions that underpin the idea that “Catalonia is trying to resolve the conflict” (23.5%), followed by the possible existence of “Spanish aggression against Catalonia” (21.8%).

By crossing the main subject of the tweets with the main developed action, we observed interesting and significant differences. Thus, on the one hand, in the case of the tweets posted by anonymous citizens, rather than dealing with the violence, these tended to refer to the efforts being made to resolve the conflict, although, depending on whether the authors were Catalan or Spanish, these efforts were considered to have been made by either the Catalans or by the Spanish.

In the same vein, we found differences between the tweets about the Spanish political authorities and those about the Catalan political authorities. In the first case, these were related to the idea of Spanish aggression against Catalonia, while in the second case, the idea of violence was replaced by the efforts made by Catalonia to resolve the conflict. Thus, the Spanish security forces were mainly associated with the action of Spanish aggression against Catalonia (74% of the cases). However, when referring to the Catalan police, the idea of aggression was substituted for the idea that “Catalonia is trying to resolve the conflict”.

Finally, special mention must be made of the differences found when the protagonist was the media itself, considering that, despite representing a residual proportion, in the case of the national media, both actions were chosen indistinctly, while the Catalan media chose to highlight the attempts on the part of Catalonia to resolve the conflict. However, when the international media was the main subject of the publications, the violent aggression on the part of Spain against Catalonia was emphasized, as well as the efforts of the international community to resolve the conflict.

As with the content in the online media, we also analyzed the visual content of the tweets. The results showed a rather significant presence of visual material (43% of the tweets analyzed contained some type of audiovisual content), either in the form of photos (48.3%), links (31.3%), or videos (20.2%), which served to reinforce the main content of the textual information (in 88.7% of the cases). As with the news, the most notable main subject of the audiovisual content was also the Catalan citizens, who mostly believed that “Catalonia is trying to resolve the conflict” (43.2% of the tweets). In this case, the main focus of the photos concerned the idea that the referendum was possible (in 62.3% of the cases analyzed).

## 6 Conclusions

The analysis of the main players involved, the actions, and the frameworks built around the attempt by the Catalan government to organize the referendum on independence from Spain that took place on October 1st, 2017, led to important conclusions to be considered regarding how the media and social debate was produced.

The comparative empirical analysis of the media coverage in the leading national, international and regional press showed significant differences during the week of October 1st to October 8th. While the national online media paid more attention to this issue, giving more importance to the consequences of the referendum than to the event itself, the Catalan regional online media chose to focus more on the preparations for the referendum.

Moreover, although the dominant frame was, without a doubt, the referendum considered as a conflict rather than the idea that the referendum was something possible or the undecided frame, the national and international media highlighted this approach more than the Catalan regional media. Nevertheless, there were slight differences among the national media, who mostly interpreted the referendum as being an undesirable and unlawful conflict that had to be resolved, compared to the international media, who saw the event as a conflict due to the aggression and the police baton charges that occurred that day. These results support those of the previous studies gathered in the literature review (López-Olano & Fenoll, 2019; Pont-Sorribes et al., 2019; Dubois & Villeneuve-Siconnelly, 2019).

The protagonists were mostly the political authorities compared to the other players involved such as the citizenry itself, which had a much lower presence, with only the international online media giving somewhat more importance to the Catalan civil society. These political authorities were mainly seen as offering solutions to the conflict, and so the main action that summarized the interpretation of the event was that “Spain is trying to resolve the conflict”, followed, less frequently, by the idea that “Catalonia is trying to resolve the conflict”. We also found noteworthy examples of actions associated with the aggression that occurred, but only in the international and Catalan regional media.

The visual content offered by the online media served, in the same way, to illustrate the information and to reinforce the dominant content of the news items that dealt with the idea of the referendum as a conflict. In the photos, however, more prominence was given to the Catalan civil society and the Spanish authorities, while the international and Catalan media also gave prominence to the Spanish police. The concept of mutual aggression had a larger presence, especially in the national and international media.

Our analysis of the social debate on Twitter under the selected hashtags, with strong participation from anonymous Catalan citizens, showed that the majority of the tweets included a framework based on the idea that the referendum was a possible and desirable fact since, from this perspective, the Catalan people had the right to choose their destiny, which could be explained by the larger presence of the pro-independence movement on Twitter (Carrasco et al., 2018). To a lesser extent, other interpretations appeared, such as the referendum as a conflict (illegal, violent, or undesirable) or the undecided frame.

This provided a novel contribution to our study, which has shown that there was a more positive type of focus on Twitter than that gathered so far. Therefore, the larger presence of the Catalan civil society may be related to the fact that the two most relevant actions were those that underpin the idea that “Catalonia is trying to resolve the conflict”, as well as the possible existence of “Spanish aggression against Catalonia”. By contrast, the tweets featuring anonymous citizens dealt with the efforts made to resolve the conflict rather than the violence, efforts which, depending on whether the citizens were Spanish or Catalan, were attributed to Spain or Catalonia respectively, a clear polarization which we had also seen in a review of previous studies. On the other hand, when the Spanish security forces appeared in the tweets, these were mainly associated with the action of Spanish aggression against Catalonia. However, when the protagonists of the tweets were the Catalan police, the idea of aggression was replaced by the idea that Catalonia was trying to resolve the conflict.

The visual discourse of the tweets was considerable and served to reinforce the dominant discourse of the publications, to such an extent that the most significant main subject in the audiovisual content was the Catalan citizenry, who mostly appeared showing, as the main action, the fact that “Catalonia is trying to resolve the conflict”, underpinning the main discourse of the photography which held the belief that the referendum was possible.

Ultimately, the comparative analysis of these different scenarios – that of the online media and Twitter – revealed important differences among the frames represented concerning the event. In the first case, the media prioritized the idea of conflict and aggression, while in the second case, maybe conditioned by the

larger presence of anonymous Catalan citizens as protagonists, the idea that the referendum was a desirable and acceptable fact was highlighted, through a gentler discourse focused on Catalan efforts to resolve the conflict. The results obtained from this study have ratified the results of previous studies (Moragas-Fernández et al., 2019; San Cornelio & Gómez, 2019), while also providing new contributions, especially when it comes to offering a specific classification of frames for simultaneously assessing the interpretative frameworks used in the online media as well as in the social media.

The main limitation of this study was its temporal scope, restricted to just one week, as well as the absence of other elements in the quantitative content analysis such as the study of the main topics or the tone of the published tweets. For these reasons, we propose that future studies include a complimentary analysis of the different events that have created tension between the Central and Catalan governments in order to favor the diachronic comparative study of frameworks, subjects, and actions.

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