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Media polarization in the Catalan independence process. A comparative study of its treatment by RT

La polarización mediática en el proceso de independencia en Cataluña. Estudio comparativo del tratamiento en RT

Abstract	Resumen
The Catalan procés has undergone intense polarization in the media, both in the traditional media and the social networks, where the Russian corporation RT has been accused of supporting the independence movement. From a quantitative perspective, we have carried out a comparative analysis of the coverage of the Catalan procés in Facebook by the corporations RT, BBC and DW. In spite of RT's proximity to the independence movement, the results do not reveal significant differences between the media corporations. Even so, users' reactions to publications in Facebook suggest sympathy for Catalan independence.	*El procés catalán ha experimentado una intensa polarización mediática, tanto en medios tradicionales como en redes sociales, donde la corporación rusa RT ha sido acusada de apoyar al independentismo. Desde una perspectiva cuantitativa, realizamos un análisis comparado de la cobertura en Facebook del procés catalán en las corporaciones RT, BBC y DW. A pesar de la proximidad de RT con el independentismo, los resultados no revelan diferencias significativas entre los medios. Asimismo, las reacciones de los usuarios a las publicaciones en Facebook sugieren su simpatía por el independentismo.*

Keywords	Palabras clave
Catalonia; independence; RT; Facebook; misinformation	*Cataluña; independencia; RT; Facebook; desinformación*

1. Introduction

1.1. Informing abroad: RT, DW and the BBC

International broadcasting by radio and television corporations is considered to be an integral part of diplomacy, playing a crucial role in promoting a country's interests through different media, which increases trust in them as international players (Gass and Seiter, 2009). The British and US Americans have traditionally had a role in this field, promoting their cultures through the BBC World Service and the US Information Agency. The German DW (*Deutsche Welle*) also falls within this model of public media designed for abroad, created in different languages, publicly financed and with an obvious purpose: to promote the funding countries' foreign policy interests and branding strategy (Lowe & Yamamoto, 2015).

When the channel CNN burst onto the scene in 1991, it marked a natural change that international broadcasting would follow from then on. Emerging power countries such as Japan, China and Qatar launched corporations in order to have their point of view present amid global events, too. The launch of RT, initially *Russia Today*, is to be found in that recent phase. It has been broadcasting in Spanish since 2009. Its chief editor, Margarita Simonián, said that its ultimate aim is to provide an alternative point of view to the one given by Western media (Yablokov, 2015). Without a doubt, propaganda is one of the most relevant aspects in the media's remit, beyond conspiracy theories (Chomsky & Herman, 2001).

Even the most classic example of these corporations, the BBC, which was inaugurated almost a century ago to provide audiovisual information and which would go on to create a model to follow in Europe (Lopez-Olano, 2017), has received criticism: Philip Schlesinger (1987: 137) spoke of the myth of its independence and recalled an affirmation by one of its editors: "If you pick the right people, you'll surely get the right decisions". In the BBC, debates about Europe invariably concentrate on a vision that considers the continent to be a problem for the United Kingdom, particularly in terms of national sovereignty (Mair, Tait & Keeble, 2014). Others have also railed against liberal and conservative fantasies about the cooperation's independence (Mills, 2016). However, for Al-Rawi (2017), compared to RT, both the BBC and DW are seen as public broadcasting services that are more independent from their governments, both originating in well-established Western democracies. RT is seen as a propaganda tool in the hands of Vladimir Putin's all-powerful government to serve foreign policy interests.

Beyond conventional TV broadcasts by satellite (and by radio by the BBC), these corporations designed to have an influence abroad spread their news today mainly via the Internet and social networks, which sits perfectly with their aim for global and international reach.

1.2. The case of the *procés* and how the media deal with it

In the itinerary we are proposing from global to local, we shall address a highly polarised conflict: the one occurring in Catalonia as regards the protest for independence from Spain by part of Catalan society. This challenge, which has a long history and has had political consequences beyond Catalonia's borders, has been described as an accumulation of irresponsibilities. It began in 2006 with the prior appeal of unconstitutionality regarding the Statute of Catalonia (Amat, 2017). The so-called *procés*, which culminated in the key date of the failed referendum for independence on 1 October 2017, has played out in a difficult, heated media environment: the application of the hypothesis of selective exposure (Stroud, 2010; Mutz & Young, 2011) among Spain's geographically central and periphery media outlets has caught the attention of Lidia Valera (2018), clearly revealing the sharp segmentation of audiences corresponding to their national identities. This polarized phenomenon in the Spanish press as regards the matter has a long track record, with those who consider the *Diada* (Catalans' national day) of 11 September 2012 to be a point of inflexion (Xicoy, Perales García & Xambó, 2017). Within the theories on framing, other authors have claimed that polarization with the use of the context of conflict has been used in three out of four news items on the matter (Ballesteros Herencia, 2015). Jordi Amat (2017) has also considered that the process for sovereignty began with the political work group entrusted with drafting a renewed *Estatut* (Catalan Statute).Without a doubt, the impact of the media and its power and influence via the possibility of shaping audiences is a classic example in communications studies since Harold D. Lasswell's theory of the hypodermic needle (1985), nuanced later by the theory of limited effects (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1948) and established by the authors of the Agenda Setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

The *procés* has provided a social and media feeding ground since the phenomenon appeared up to today, and it has not remained untouched by the wave of disinformation produced globally (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018). Furthermore, one of the immediate consequences of its polarization is precisely mistrust towards traditional mass media. The writer Eduardo Mendoza (2017), for example, has denounced the false idea that has been created outside Spain that what is happening in Catalonia is a direct result of the

influence of the dictator Francisco Franco in Spanish politics, 43 years after his death. Del Fresno García and José Luis Manfredi (2018) also consider that, within the patterns of disinformation used, there is the construction of a perception of Spain as a dictatorship or an undemocratic country, and that this disinformation has formed part of the entire process to construct the pro-independence world's version of reality. The latter article has studied tweets siding with the Catalan independence cause by the so-called *hacktivist* Julian Assange, precisely a collaborator with the Russian media corporation RT.

Accusations have abounded about disinformation tactics being orchestrated in order to favour the independence supporters in the media within the Kremlin's orbit, which includes RT. The Government of Spain clearly said that there was proof that private and public groups from Russia intervened in the conflict (Emmot, 2017). German intelligence also stated that Russia supported the Catalan independence movement in the days leading up to the referendum (EFE, 2018). Reports from consultants and think tanks have followed, such as the one from the Centre for Advanced National Defence Studies (CESEDEN): "the Kremlin is taking advantage of the Catalan challenge to destabilise; in order to do so, it is using a policy aimed at generating confusion in the social networks along a similar line to the one used to influence the recent elections in the USA" (Baques, 2018: 38). The group of experts created by the European Commission with the explicit aim of combating Russian propaganda, EUvsDisinfo, also states that Madrid (meaning the Government of Spain) was accused of creating an artificial conflict by pro-Putin media, which repeatedly described police action as brutal and absolutely useless (2017). During the climax of the crisis on 1 October, Russian media stirred up the atmosphere with numerous news items about violence and repression, tanks and bombings (Alandete, 2019). In a prior study based on posts disseminated in Facebook by the three corporations (RT, DW and the BBC) (López-Olano & Fenoll, 2019), we can detect a considerable rise in the number of publications by RT in covering the *procés*. We can also confirm that the information provided by RT in the weeks during the crisis regarding the plebiscite was closer to independence stances, whereas DW and the BBC gave coverage that was more favourable to the Spanish constitutional bloc.

1.3. News, users and the social networks

Carrying out a study today on a media outlet's political influence involves studying its uses and customs via the social networks, where interaction with users takes on a predominant role. With this in mind, we must remember that two thirds of online news consumers prefer to access the news via platforms that work with algorithms such as search engines and news aggregators, as well as through the social networks (European Commission, 2018). And if we are talking about political influence via information, despite some news items anticipating a crisis for Facebook, the network created by Mark Zuckerberg 15 years ago remains in notoriously good health in this field. According to the Pew Research Center in 2018, 68% of adults in the United States access news via Facebook. In Spain, the Association for Media Research (*Asociación para la Investigación de Medios de Comunicación*) revealed that in 2019, 45% of press readers accessed the news exclusively via the Internet.

The recognised capacity for the Internet and social networks to enable users to choose what they read, see and hear also interacts with our psychosocial tendency to seek proof that confirms our preconceptions — the so-called confirmation bias. The power and reach of the social networks has a lot to do with the social construction of the audiences themselves that consume mediatised information via these communication channels. Added to this tendency, there is the well-known phenomenon of homophily, which pushes us towards congregating together with other users/individuals who think and are like us, or who have similar interests, including in politics (McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Cook, 2001), while also avoiding information that does not match what we know and like to hear. For example, Facebook users tend to assimilate only affirmations that confirm preconceived ideas, while apparently ignoring the refutations (Quattrociocchi, Scala & Sunstein, 2016). The ultimate consequence of this confirmation bias is the creation of "echo chambers", a situation in which the two stances in a dispute only communicate with their peers, thereby destroying debate and consensus. These echo chambers, in which sound reverberates without being able to get out or allow anything in from outside, are a metaphorical description of the situation in which beliefs are amplified and reinforced by communication and repetition within a closed system. Moreover, people only dialogue with others who have similar thoughts without being exposed to opposing visions and arguments; each of the specific groups finds itself more restricted to its own perceptions and points of view. This fragmentation of the media ecosystem leads to polarisation in the sense of segregated spheres (Sunstein, 2001; 2009; 2018).

Another turn of the screw is that it is not even our own decision that leads us to see content reinforcing our points of view, but algorithms that observe us, learn from our replies and feed us with information that increases our dependence. That is what Eli Pariser (2011) describes as the "filter bubble". Furthermore, Facebook seems to be a source of information that is more contaminated than twitter or the Internet in

general, since it favours personalisation of news in the so-called "Daily me", totally determined by the theories of echo chambers and filter bubbles (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018). With this situation, it seems obvious that digital expansion is certainly not moving towards greater diversity and pluralism in the media (Doyle, 2016). However, there are authors who think that the echo chamber effect is not really so powerful, since the diversity of media in the Internet reduces its influence. They also recommend doing studies not based only on Twitter (Dubois & Blank; Abisheva, Schweighofer, Serdült & Schweitzer, 2015). In this field, there are studies that determine the relationship between the characteristics of Catalan political parties, the way of posting on Facebook and the reactions of their followers (Borge & Esteve del Valle, 2017), or which produce different degrees of polarisation in Twitter, more so in the retweets than in the mentions (Esteve del Valle & Borge, 2018).

Interaction in Facebook is somewhat more complicated to study. Users have been able to comment, share or react emotionally to a post since 2016, when Facebook introduced differences into the "likes" with six emojis that enable them to show the following emotions: like, love, "ha ha" (funny), "wow" (surprising/shocking), sad and angry.

Digital media users usually comment to show disagreement with a news item (Fenoll, 2017). In the same vein, other authors indicate that Facebook users mostly share posts that anger or disappoint them (Larsson, 2018), as well as those that deal with local and conflictive matters (Trilling, Tolochko & Burscher, 2017).

On the other hand, reactions with emojis are used more often when referring to positive emotions or for communicative etiquette (Tian Dulcinati, Galery & Molimpakis, 2017). In any case, in order to study them we must always take into account contexts in which their meaning changes, such as when they are used ironically.

2. Questions/hypotheses

Taking into account all of this background, especially the conclusions put forward in the aforementioned previous study in which we have already analysed the relationship between RT, DW and the BBC in the period immediately around the crisis of the independence plebiscite on 1 October 2017, we shall now put forward the following hypotheses and research question referring to a period some months later, with undoubted news intensity but much less than occurred in the first sample period studied. So, in this study we wish to confirm if these discrepancies in the three corporations' editorial line are still being maintained by firstly analysing the quantification of posts disseminated via Facebook:

H1: RT has greater coverage of the Catalan conflict than the other corporations.

In addition to the number of posts, we also wish to study whether the content of the posts favours one of the two parties in the conflict (Spanish constitutionalists or Catalan independence supporters):

H2: RT's coverage is closer to Catalan independence stances.

We also put forward a Research Question asking whether the supposed bias in posts influences users' subsequent interaction with them:

RQ1: Is users' interaction related to the post's ideological bias?

3. Method

The study uses a quantitative perspective to respond to research questions. The news posted in Facebook by international media corporations using Spanish is analysed: *BBC Mundo* (BBC), *Deutsche Welle Español* (DW) and *RT en Español* (RT). All of the posts (*n* = 13671) published by these three corporations from 11 March 2018 to 10 June 2018 were downloaded.

Table 1 shows a timeline of the most relevant events related to the *procés* occurring over this period. The period analysed includes the three months immediately before the new Government of Catalonia took up office, presided by Quim Torra, which put an end to the application of Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution. This meant an end to the intervention by the Government of Spain in Catalonia's autonomy, in force from 27 October 2017 following the declaration of independence proclaimed by the former President of Catalonia, Carles Puigdemont. This period began with a demonstration in Barcelona in favour of a Catalan Republic, covers the legal vicissitudes of some independence-supporting Catalan politicians and includes the swearing-in and formation of a new Government of Catalonia. It therefore provides a suitable context to analyse the three corporations' coverage and to compare their positions regarding the Catalan conflict.

Table 1. Timeline of events

11/03/2018	Demonstration in Barcelona in favour of a Catalan Republic.
23/03/2018	Marta Rovira (ERC) flees to Switzerland after failing to appear before the Supreme Court Judge Pablo Llarena.
23/03/2018	The Supreme Court Judge Pablo Llarena sends the presidential candidate for the Government of Catalonia (*Generalitat*), Jordi Turull, to prison, along with Carme Forcadell and three former *consellers* (regional government department heads).
25/03/2018	The German police arrest Puigdemont, who is sent to prison in Neumünster.
06/04/2018	The German judicial system rules that Puigdemont be released and discards the crime of rebellion.
04/05/2018	The Parliament of Catalonia approves a legislative reform to be able to swear in Carles Puigdemont remotely, which is subsequently suspended by the Spanish Constitutional Court.
10/05/2018	Puigdemont designates Quim Torra (of the JxCat party) as candidate for president of the *Generalitat*.
14/05/2018	Torra is sworn in as the president in the second vote.
15/05/2018	Meeting between Mariano Rajoy and the leader of PSOE, Pedro Sánchez, in which they agree to defend the law in Catalonia.
19/05/2018	Torra includes two former *consellers* in preventive prison custody in his government, as well as another two who have fled to Belgium.
20/05/2018	The Spanish Government blocks Torra's designations and continues to apply Article 155.
29/05/2018	The President of the *Generalitat* signs a new decree to name *consellers*, replacing those who are in prison and who have fled to Belgium.
01/06/2018	In the *Generalitat*'s Official Gazette, the Spanish Government publishes the decree naming the vice-president and *consellers* who will form the Government of Catalonia.

Source: the authors.

The unit of analysis is a post. The posts were downloaded using Netvizz 1.6 software (Rieder, 2013) and were stored in a database in SPSS software, where they were codified for subsequent statistical analysis. Netvizz enables the post's content to be downloaded automatically together with information about the date of publication and level of user engagement (number of comments, shares and reactions).

To ascertain the frequency at which the Catalan conflict appeared in the corporations' coverage and confirm whether the first hypothesis is met, the *post theme* variable was defined. In making the variable operable, a two-phase content analysis method was used that combined automatic and manual analysis strategies. Firstly, using WordStat 7 automatic analysis software (Provalis Research, 2017), all of the posts published by the three corporations were analysed (*N*= 13671) and those that mentioned matters or politicians related to Spain were located. In order to do so, a dictionary was created that was capable of automatically detecting posts whose content contained the main Spanish demonyms and the names of the political stakeholders involved. In the second phase, these posts were analysed manually to determine whether they should be classified as "Catalan conflict", "Other Spanish themes" or "Themes from other countries". In this stage, posts were correctly identified that contained demonyms such as *Spanish* or *Barcelona* but which belong to the categories "Themes from other countries" ("Spanish is the first official language of Puerto Rico") and "Other Spanish themes" ("FC Barcelona lost the Cup Final").

The study is based on the assumption that RT's coverage is closer to independence stances (H2). In order to confirm this hypothesis, the *Independence bias* variable was used, based on the methodological approach specified in a previous study (López-Olano & Fenoll, 2019). Using this variable, the positioning of a post as regards the Catalan conflict is classified on a nine-level Likert scale.

The lowest end of the scale (1) classifies information items addressing demonstrations, statements or actions providing aspects that are critical of the independence movement and using negative adjectives or connotations. Following this are posts focusing only on demonstrations, statements and actions in favour of the Spanish state, where the journalist uses positive adjectives or connotations. After that, there are news items or posts dealing with demonstrations, statements or actions providing negative aspects of the independence movement via neutral coverage. Fourthly, there is neutral coverage of demonstrations, statements or actions in favour of the Spanish state or the unity of Spain. The middle of the scale (5) classifies posts with balanced information representing both positions equally. Sixth place classifies neutral coverage of demonstrations, statements or actions providing a negative image of Spanish institutions. After that there are news items using neutral coverage of demonstrations, statements or actions in favour of independence or favourable to Catalan institutions. In eighth place there is coverage of demonstrations, statements or actions criticising Spanish institutions, using negative adjectives or images with powerful symbolism. The highest level (9) of the independence bias variable is for news items using positive adjectives in coverage of demonstrations, statements or actions in favour of independence or favourable to Catalan institutions.

Finally, to determine whether the users' interaction is related to each corporation's ideological bias (RQ1), the results from the independence bias were correlated with the different types of user interaction on the three corporations' Facebook pages (comments, shares, likes, loves, "ha-ha"s, "wow"s, sad and angry).

The quantitative analysis was codified by the two authors, who each analysed 50% of the posts. In order to ensure the research can be replicated and validate the intercoder reliability, a test was carried out before the final codification in which the codifiers analysed a common sample comprising 12% of the posts (n=37). The result for Krippendorff's Alpha coefficient (0 = no agreement, 1 = total agreement) was very good in the two variables analysed: post theme (a = .89) and independence bias (a = .82), above the threshold of .70 recommended by different authors (Igartua, 2006; Neuendorf, 2016).

4. Results

In order to confirm whether RT was giving greater coverage (more items) of the Catalan conflict than the other corporations, we drew up a contingency table with the frequencies and percentages of posts for each theme according to the media corporation, and we used the Chi-square contrast statistic. The results of the test refute the first hypothesis [χ^2 (4, N = 13671) = 97.83, p < .001]: RT did not have significantly more numerous coverage of the Catalan conflict than the other broadcasters. As can be seen in Table 2, DW is the corporation with the greatest number of posts related to the *procés* (63 posts), followed by RT (38 posts) and the BBC (10 posts).

According to the analysis of the corrected typified residuals, only the percentages for the BBC and DW provide statistically significant post frequencies. DW is the corporation with the greatest percentage of posts about the *procés*, whereas the BBC dedicated a markedly lower percentage to the Catalan matter, focusing its coverage mainly on informing about other countries. News dealing with other matters related to Spain obtained a similar coverage in the three corporations.

Table 2. Post theme by media corporation*

		Media corporation			
		RT	BBC	DW	Total
Post theme CAtalan conflicto	Count	38	10	63	111
	%	0.6%	0.2%	2.2%	0.8%
	Residual	-2.2	-5.7	9.4	
Other matters SpainCount		82	57	48	187
	%	1.3%	1.2%	1.7%	1.4%
	Corrected residual	-.2	-1.3	1.7	
Other countries	Count	5957	4694	2722	13373
	%	98.0%	98.6%	96.1%	97.8%
	Corrected residual	1.5	4.5	-7.1	
Total	Count	6077	4761	2833	13671

* No box has a count lower than 5. The minimum expected count is 23. Source: the authors.

However, it should be remembered with these data that Carles Puigdemont's geographical location in Germany, which took up much of the information in the period, obviously resulted in being included in the German corporation DW's agenda, which would give a greater number of posts on the Catalan matter. Graph 1 shows each corporation's posting frequency on Facebook from March to June 2018.

Graph 1. Each corporation's posting frequency
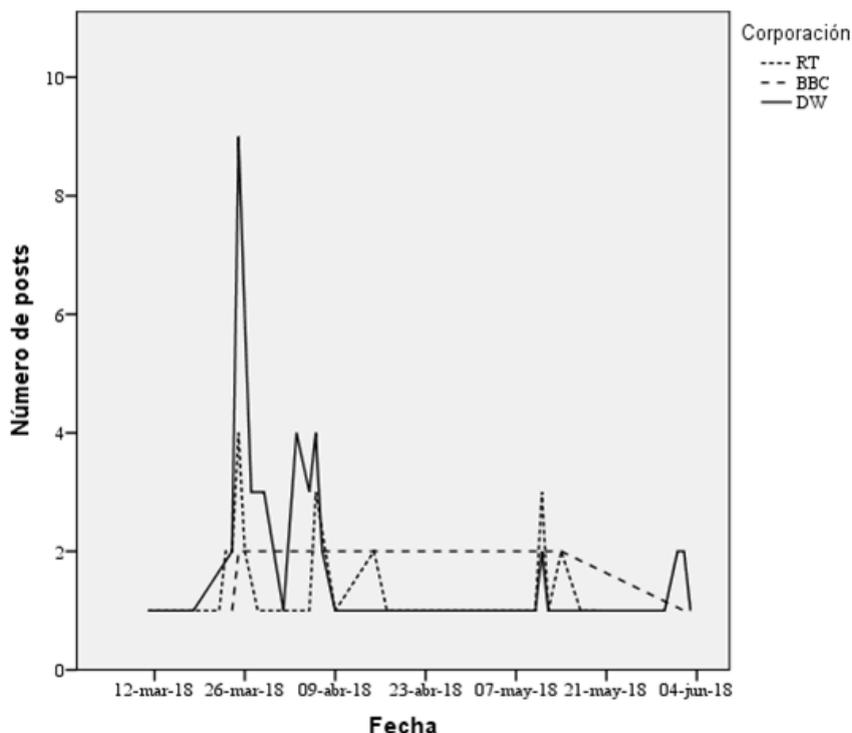
Source: the authors.

DW's coverage soared as of 25 March 2018, when Carles Puigdemont was arrested in the German *Land* (federal state) of Schleswig-Holstein upon request by the Spanish judiciary. Afterwards, there is a second peak of posts during the first week of April 2018, when that Land's public prosecutor ordered that Puigdemont be released from the Neumüster prison. As can be seen in Table 3, almost two thirds of DW's posts mention Puigdemont's arrest, compared to a third of the posts by RT.

Table 3. News about the arrest of Puigdemont in Germany by media corporation

		Media corporation			
		RT	BBC	DW	Total
Catalan conflictOther themes concerning Catalonia	Count	25	4	24	53
	%	65.8%	40.0%	38.1%	47.7%
Puigdemont´s arrest	Count	13	6	39	58
	%	34.2%	60.0%	61.9%	52.3%
Total	Count	38	10	63	111

Source: the authors.

In order to confirm whether RT's coverage is closer to independence stances, we ran a one-way ANOVA test where the dependent variable is the level of the post's bias towards Catalan independence and the independent variable is the corporation that posts it. The results indicate that there are no statistically significant differences between the three corporations [$F(2, 112) = 1.20$, $p = .304$] and there is no sharp bias in their coverage. However, slight nuances can be seen between the corporations (Table 4): RT has an editorial line somewhat closer to independence stances, whereas the BBC has less favourable coverage.

Table 4. Mean independence bias by media corporation

	Media corporation		
	RT	BBC	DW
	Mean	Mean	Mean
Independence bias	5.36	4.80	5.06

Source: the authors.

Compared to the aforementioned study prior to the period immediately around the independence referendum (López-Olano & Fenoll, 2019), we can see that although the biased trend could be seen beforehand, it softened along with the softening journalistic tension as regards the call for independence. Even so, within the nuances, the bias already detected in the same direction continues to appear.

In order to learn whether the users' interaction is related to the post's ideological bias, we carried out a correlation analysis between the variable measuring the post's level of bias and the level of participation generated. The results only show a significant, positive correlation in users' reactions to posts by RT and DW (Table 5).

A post's proximity to independence stances does not generate a greater number of comments or shares. On the other hand, RT's users use more reactions such as "wow" ($r = .478$, $p < .001$) and "ha ha" ($r = .420$, $p < .01$) when the posts address matters closely related to the independence movement, such as the live broadcast of the protests and demonstrations in Barcelona following Puigdemont's arrest.

Table 5. Correlation between the post's Catalan independence bias and the type of participation

	Comments	Shares	Likes	Loves	Ha ha	Wow	Sad	Angry
RT	*r* .242	.171	.239	.058	.420**	.478**	.026	.225
DW	*r* .235	.248	.324**	.293*	.310*	.068	.000	.126
BBC	*r* .171	.134	.127	.103	.163	.085	.186	.351

**. $p < .01$ *. $p < .05$. Source: the authors.

Albeit tendentially, we also found a significant correlation among the reactions from DW's users, who used emojis of *like* ($r = .324$, $p < .01$), "*ha ha*" ($r = .310$, $p = .014$) and *love* ($r = .293$, $p = .02$) more often, especially in posts dealing with the German judicial system's refusal to hand over Puigdemont that were unfavourable to Spanish constitutionalism.

5. Discussion and conclusions

After analysing the data gathered, the first conclusion is that RT maintains information related to the independence crisis in its agenda, though its coverage is not significantly greater than that of other corporations. The percentage and absolute frequency of publications dedicated to the Catalan conflict by the Russian cooperation are currently above those of the British Broadcasting Corporation. On the other hand, the German corporation DW dedicates a percentage of posts to the Catalan dispute significantly higher than that of the other two.

These data must be understood in the context of an event that occurred during the period of analysis that clearly influenced the frequency of posts the different corporations put on their Facebook pages: the arrest of the former president of the Catalan Government, Carles Puigdemont, in German territory. In its coverage of the Catalan conflict, news on this sub-theme reached 62% of the total in DW. If we look at the proportion by RT compared to the BBC, we can see that news about Puigdemont's arrest in the Russian media corporation only came to 34%, whereas in the British one it reached 60%.

As for analysis of the content and bias in posts concentrating on information about Catalonia in the three corporations, we can see a slight, statistically insignificant difference in stance in the period analysed, which sways towards the independence movement in RT and DW whereas the BBC sides with Spanish constitutionalist postures. As seen in Table 5, these results are in keeping with those obtained in a similar analysis carried out on the corporations' coverage of Catalonia during the last quarter of 2017 (López-Olano & Fenoll, 2019). RT's bias reached its peak coinciding with the referendum of 1 October 2017, then after fading it was maintained in the period analysed in this study, which covers until June 2018. The bias in the other corporations, on the other hand, maintained the values in the different periods of the two studies at a very similar level.

Table 5. Mean bias towards Catalan independence and number of posts about the Catalan conflict by corporation and period

	Corporation					
	RT		BBC		DW	
Period	M	n	M	n	M	n
01/09/17-31/12/17	5.33	236	4.29	223	4.61	166
01/10/17-02/10/17	6.37	41	4.35	26	5.46	13
11/03/18-10/06/18	5.36	120	4.80	67	5.06	111

Source: the authors.

As for the research question, significant results have been found as regards bias in the posts analysed and users' interaction with the posts. It is worth noting that the proximity of the media corporations towards Spanish constitutionalist or Catalan independence stances does not generate negative reactions. None of the tools at the users' disposal to show their anger (angry emoji) or disagreement with the information (comments and shares) give a statistical association with the corporations' positions.

However, we do find a correlation between users' positive reactions and information favourable towards the independence movement. In other words, information that is more positive towards the *procés* generates a greater number of positive reactions among the users, though it does not increase the number of shares or comments. These results coincide with the conclusions by Larsson (2018), in which news that makes the users happy tends to be shared less and leads to fewer comments.

The lack of connection between bias in coverage and an increase in the number of shares may also be due to the fact that the three corporations' users are to be found globally, going beyond the borders of the Spanish state. As pointed out by Trilling, Tolochko and Burscher (2017), one of the factors that has most influence on users as regards sharing a news item is its spatial proximity to the subject matter. Thus, the lack of relationship between the variables may suggest that the corporations' audience are mostly users of a different nationality than Spanish.

In RT, the posts with a coverage closer to Catalan independence stances get more positive reactions such as "wows" and likes, especially during the live broadcast of the protests and demonstrations in Barcelona after Puigdemont's arrest.

In DW we can also find an association, albeit a more moderate one, between the post's bias and the users' reaction: posts more favourable to Catalan independence get more positive reactions such as likes, "*ha has*" and loves. With the German corporation, this trend appears more strongly in posts unfavourable towards Spanish constitutionalism, above all when informing about the German judiciary's refusal to hand Puigdemont over to Spain.

The British Broadcasting Corporation is the one that dedicates least space to covering the Catalan conflict, with a position slightly closer to Spanish constitutionalism, which does not generate any kind of significant interaction among the users.

To sum up, the data analysed shows the importance of news on the conflict regarding independence in RT's agenda, the slight direction of this corporation's bias, and the significant difference compared to the climax period of 1 October obtained in the analyses in previous studies. This would seem to place RT as comparable to its counterparts in a situation as a moderate corporation, but even so, close to the destabilisation campaigns by pro-Putin Russian media denounced by different authors cited in the text.

One of the main limitations of this study has been the coincidence of Carles Puigdemont's arrest in Germany. Although the Catalan *procés* is happening mainly outside the geographic scope of the three corporations, the involvement of the German judiciary in the crisis may have interfered with the study's results. Furthermore, in evaluating the users' reactions to the posts made by the corporations, we cannot exactly determine whether the use of reactions such as "ha ha" or "wow" have a positive connotation in line with the editorial line of the information, or if they are used ironically and negatively in disagreement with the news. In this sense, future research should analyse the users' reaction in other matters to confirm the patterns of use of the different reactions.

6. Acknowledgement

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