

The news production process in confluence with political and social conflicts. The case of TV3 journalists and Catalonia's pro-sovereignty process

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Paper received on July 15 2022 and accepted on September 27 2022

Abstract

The Catalan pro-sovereignty process was a political and social movement that defended the right to decide and the independence of this territory, which led to a confrontation between Spain and the Catalan government. The Spanish and Catalan media played a crucial role in the press coverage due to their proximity to the conflict and, at the same time, they were at the centre of the public debate. This research uses TV3 [the Catalan public broadcaster] and its journalists as a case study to find out how the political and social context conditioned the journalistic account and what external and internal factors were involved. Through semi-structured interviews with eleven journalists, including writers and editors of TV3 news programmes, it is possible to identify different aspects that allow us to conclude that journalistic sources, work routines and the responsibility of TV3 as a public media outlet were the main factors that intervened in news production.

Keywords

Catalan Pro-sovereignty, TV3, News Production, Journalistic Routines, Political Journalism, Public Service.

Resum

El procés sobiranista de Catalunya va ser un moviment polític i social que va defensar el dret a decidir i la independència d'aquest territori i que va derivar en un enfrontament entre l'Estat espanyol i el Govern català. Els mitjans de comunicació espanyols i catalans van tenir un rol crucial en la cobertura mediàtica per la seva proximitat amb el conflicte i, alhora, van estar al centre del debat públic. Aquesta recerca pren TV3 i els seus periodistes com un estudi de cas per conèixer com el context polític i social va condicionar el relat periodístic i quins factors externs i interns hi van intervenir. Mitjançant les entrevistes semiestructurades a onze periodistes, entre redactors i editors dels programes informatius de TV3, es poden identificar diferents aspectes que permeten concloure que les fonts periodístiques, les rutines de treball i la responsabilitat de TV3 com a mitjà públic van ser els principals factors que van intervenir en la producció informativa.

Paraules clau

Procés sobiranista de Catalunya, TV3, producció informativa, rutines periodístiques, periodisme polític, servei públic.

1. Introduction

The Catalan pro-sovereignty process was a social and political movement based on the demand for the right to self-determination in favour of Catalan independence, which took shape, most notably, from 2010 onwards. It is considered that the event that triggered this movement was the ruling of the Constitutional Court on the Statute of Autonomy of Catalonia, while the elections to the Parliament of Catalonia on 21 December 2017 marked the culmination of the period following the referendum of 1 October. (Almiron, 2018; Carbonell, 2018; Gifreu, 2018). This movement was driven by pro-independence political forces and led to a confrontation between Spain and the Catalan government (Gagnon, Montagut & Moragas-Fernández, 2019).

As the conflict grew, so did the tension between the two opposing sides, with the percentage in favour of independence

increasing, reaching 48% in 2013 and remaining at around 40% during the period from 2010 to 2017 (CEO, 2016-2020; Palà, 2020). Conversely, there continued to be a percentage of the population that rejected Catalonia's independence and was in favour of it remaining an autonomous community of Spain, a fact that highlighted the increasingly accentuated polarisation of citizens (Burg, 2015).

This polarisation is compounded by three key factors that make the pro-sovereignty process an important academic phenomenon: its magnitude, its duration and its legal consequences. From a social point of view, it was a movement that attracted a large number of people in favour of Catalan independence and the right to decide (CEO, 2010), mobilised thousands of people on the streets, especially during the Catalan national days (Clua, 2014), and has been sustained over the years. The political aspect was marked by the confrontation between the Spanish and Catalan governments,

and between 2010 and 2017, led to the calling of four elections of the Catalan Parliament and two referendums with the aim of allowing Catalan society to decide its future. In the end, after the referendum of 1 October, several ministers of the Generalitat de Catalunya (i.e. the Catalan government) were imprisoned and some of them left Catalonia (Gifreu, 2018; Palà, 2020).

Meanwhile, the media devoted more and more attention to the conflict, placing themselves in the spotlight, and they became the target of criticism as to whether they were taking one side of the conflict or the other. This is because, from a social and political perspective, the importance of the media in the narrative of conflicts and their ability to influence the way people understand, conceive and interpret the reality that surrounds them has not been overlooked (Entman, 1993). This is where the basis of this study lies: understanding the narrative of the conflicts as a construction of meanings between the journalists and the surrounding context.

In a convulsive political and social context such as the one generated by the pro-sovereignty process in Catalonia, journalists were forced to talk about events that happened quickly and whose consequences could not be foreseen. This could have put greater pressure on professionals and, at the same time, caused the influencing factors in a newsroom to vary or become more pronounced. Most research on the pro-sovereignty process analyses the journalistic account of the conflict (Ballesteros, 2015; Cortiñas & Pont-Sorribes, 2009; Martínez & Álvarez-Peralta, 2016; Palà, 2018), but few focus on the place where these news items were being reported: the newsroom. The aim is to learn how and according to what criteria one story or another was created, whether it was intentional or not, what factors it depended on, etc.

To do so, TV3 is the chosen media outlet, because it has been a key player in the narrative of the pro-sovereignty process for three main reasons: for being the channel of reference for news during the period 2010 to 2017 in Catalonia (Corporació Catalana de Mitjans Audiovisuals, 2017); for being a publicly owned television channel and, consequently, for the need to focus on public service missions and commitment to ethical and democratic principles (Catalan Audiovisual Council, 2017), and, finally, for its geographical proximity to the conflict, since the area where the conflict took place coincided with its broadcasting area. These three premises, together with the magnitude of the conflict and its impact on Catalan society, make the news production of the pro-sovereignty process by TV3 a subject of academic relevance.

2. Objectives

In order to understand and identify the context that accompanied TV3's news production on the pro-sovereignty process, the aim of this research is to determine how TV3 journalists define, explain and argue their coverage of this conflict and, in this

way, to find out how news about the pro-sovereignty process was constructed and what the influencing factors were.

In order to achieve this objective, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the journalist-authors of the pieces analysed in order to answer three research questions. The first is to find out what time and format guidelines were followed by journalists when reporting on the Catalan pro-sovereignty process (RQ1); the second refers to what the main factors influencing their coverage were (RQ2); and the third aims to identify the degree of awareness that the editors had when it came to respecting the plurality of views involved in the conflict and, thus, to be able to know what criteria they used to cover the news (RQ3).

3. Theoretical framework

The article is based on the framing theory, an explanatory theory of the public opinion phenomena that argues that the media select certain aspects of reality and highlight them in a way that promotes a problem, a cause, an evaluation and a recommendation (Entman, 1993). In this respect, and in contrast to other theories of public opinion, framing conceives the construction of news as a negotiation process of meaning between journalists and the individuals who receive these messages (D'Angelo, 2002), in which the active or passive role of the individual is key to determining the extent to which they are influenced by the frames.

Using the cognitive perspective of framing as a reference, and as this study defends, individuals are capable of negotiating the meanings given by the media (Valkenburg, Semetko & De Vreese, 1999). This paradigm also focuses on the process of constructing frameworks, whereby the production of news becomes a key to understanding how these meanings work. With regard to theoretical concepts, it is therefore necessary to outline the premises that have been taken into account to study the context and the news production process in a newsroom, and to defend the role of journalists as key actors in the construction of the narrative of conflicts.

3.1 The news production process

The news production process is closely linked to the concept of journalistic routines. News is "the act of constructing the reality [...] and transforming everyday occurrences into news events" (Tuchman, 1983: 25), which, at the same time, depends on institutional processes and practices. Although the act of selecting information can be understood as a naturalised, automated and intuitive process that is linked to the professional's criteria and experience, it is also the result of an operational and symbolic mechanism that includes values, ideological lines and publishers (Túñez, 1999).

This is why there is talk of a certain *routinisation* in the news production process and it is defined as the creation

of “consolidated behavioural guidelines in the profession, assimilated by habit and usually carried out in a mechanical way [...] that can have repercussions on the message transmitted to the audience” (Túñez, 1999: 148).

This process of news creation is influenced by different elements that intervene and condition the work of journalists, whether through factors that derive from the newsroom itself or from external factors. According to the literature review carried out, the influencing elements to be highlighted are the journalistic sources used, the competition for audience between media outlets, the immediacy of the information, the journalist's degree of autonomy, the conversations between professionals and the style of the narrative.

The sources condition the story to a large extent, because it is difficult to detach oneself from the information that comes from the sources, especially in a current context in which the sources have multiplied and there are many news proposals (Túñez, Martínez & Abejón, 2010). This is why it is said that there is a dependency between sources and journalists, and that journalism professionals tend to adopt the story from the sources. This dependence between sources and the media is stronger due to the proliferation of press offices and consultants, sources specialised in constructing a story that favours their interests or what they want to make public (Túñez & Martínez, 2014).

Another element that intervenes in the process of creating content is the commercial orientation of the media outlet and the pressure to achieve high audience ratings, which automatically makes it compete with other media outlets to satisfy its audience. This issue is even more prominent in the case of commercial television stations, which obtain most of their funding from advertising and therefore want to produce whatever brings them the most financial gain. The journalist is important in this sense as a mediator between the news event and the audience, as he or she acts as a gatekeeper, analysing, interpreting and explaining what is happening (Rodrigo, 2005).

In the context of the digital revolution, the need to constantly update information conditions the time journalists have to prepare the news. Following on with the idea of competition between media outlets, priority is given to having the exclusive or being the first to publish a news item. This means that the pressure of immediacy leads to sacrifices being made concerning other aspects such as the quality of the final product or the contrast of the sources (Marcus, Salinas, Yáñez & Santa-Cruz, 2018).

The degree of autonomy that writers have also influences news production. This autonomy is conditioned by the social and political roles of the professionals, making it difficult for them to detach themselves from their own conceptions when writing content (Mellado & Van Dalen, 2014). In other words, the journalist is both an individual and a representative of a media outlet or institution, and it is this duality that comes into play in the writing process.

The journalist's decision-making autonomy is at the same time

subject to the editors or editors-in-chief, who are the people who choose the topics to be covered and, often, the approach to be taken. This is an organisational approach that is related to the editorial line of the media outlet and is also a mechanism of internal control of the media outlets, which means that journalists are conditioned by the hierarchical structure and external pressures (Marcus et al., 2018).

Conversations between journalists are another conditioning element, given the fact that news is commented on among employees is a form of self-legitimising the content (Túñez, 1999). There is an exchange of opinions and interpretations of current affairs between people who, in addition to their professional relationships, have personal relationships that lead to a social exchange that seeks a consensus on inclusions and exclusions on the subject.

Lastly, the journalist's style or way of narrating also plays a role in the construction of the story, because every event has a narrative voice, a story-teller capable of producing stories based on particular traits in order to turn events into attractive products (Tuchman, 1983). So, we return to the idea of framing referred to at the beginning of this theoretical section, whereby the journalist selects particular aspects of an event to end up producing a constructed reality.

4. Methodology

The methodology used for this research is the qualitative semi-structured interview. It is a data collection method or research technique that allows access to events from the past that would not be accessible in any other way (Blasco & Otero, 2008). It allows us to ask questions that are not observable and that can only be answered through the responses of the interviewees (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

Basically, the semi-structured interview is characterised by a series of questions on specific topics that are included in an interview guide and these are posed to the interviewee in a flexible manner so as to prompt new questions as the conversation progresses (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). It also makes it possible to focus on those questions that the interviewee wants to conceal, because they are deflecting or want to avoid answering them, but which are equally significant, because they reveal which topics are the most sensitive or delicate (Barbour & Schostak, 2005).

4.1 Interview script

The interview script was drawn up after carrying out a content analysis of the most popular TV3 news programmes during that period, *Telenotícies* (i.e. the TV news programme of TV3), the results of which were reflected in Palà's doctoral thesis (2020). A total of seventeen events related to the referendum of 9 November 2014 and 1 October 2017 were analysed, two of which were similar processes that allowed us to see the way in which the journalistic account of those years unfolded. Once the

results were obtained, the interview script was drawn up with the aim of finding out how the journalists covered the story and to be able to ask them questions based on these results.

The interview script is structured in four sections: (1) seniority and professional career in the company and records of the coverage of the two referenda, (2) conditions of the television format and decisions taken in the preparation of the journalistic pieces, (3) internal and external factors that influence the journalistic work and its incidence in the account of the sovereign process and (4) plurality and impartiality in public media. The interview script is attached as an appendix.

4.2 Selection of interviewees and coding of answers

The first decision to be taken to carry out the interviews was who to interview: defining the sample and deciding the criteria according to which some people were chosen and others were not, as they had to represent a variety of positions in relation to the subject of the study and shed light on the differences of meaning in the experience (King & Horrocks, 2010).

The population universe therefore included all those journalists who worked at TV3 between 2013 and 2017, and who wrote some of the journalistic pieces analysed. They are the authors of the analysis material and are the ones able to provide an explanation of all the issues related to the construction of the journalistic account in the first person.

Two filters were applied to identify the people who form part of this population universe. The first was based on content analysis, as the names and surnames of the people who signed the pieces were identified by viewing the material. The second filter was to obtain the list, from a member of the TV3 News management team, containing the names of all the journalists who were part of the Politics section of the TV3 News programme during the period under analysis. The resulting list was made up of 3 section heads, 4 deputy section heads and 27 editors.

Once the people had been identified, the selection criteria for the sample were twofold: the quantity of pieces that each person produced and the position they held. Firstly, the journalists to be interviewed were the ones who had written the most pieces and, therefore, the ones who had participated most frequently in reporting on the pro-sovereignty process. Secondly, it was prioritised that there should be representation from all of the managers involved, because there are different responsibilities and different decision making processes. When determining the number of people to interview, the Taylor and Bodgan (1984) "theoretical approach" was followed, which states that what is important is the potential of each case to help in the development of understanding, and not the number of cases.

With this idea in mind, fifteen people were invited to be interviewed, four turned down the invitation and eleven accepted it. The result was, therefore, a total of eleven people interviewed who held the following positions: the three editors of *Telenotícies* during that period, a head of the Politics section,

a deputy head of the Politics section, five editors of the Politics section and a news writer of the Society section.

Once the interviews had been conducted, they were transcribed in order to analyse the information. This involved a coding process that allowed the information to be grouped into categories according to a predefined scheme in order to interpret the ideas, concepts or themes discovered during the interview by analysing the content (Fernández, 2006). After several readings of the professionals' answers, this coding led to the identification of the results: a total of twelve items, which are discussed in the following section.

5. Results

In order to respect the anonymity of the interviewees, they are identified by an acronym and a number. The only difference is the job position, depending on whether it is news writer (R), head or deputy head of section (S) or editor (E), as this variable is to be taken into account when sifting the answers.

Twelve items have been coded, which are set out below in the following order: access to and treatment of journalistic sources (1); professionalisation of political sources (2); plurality and representativeness of actors (3); professional autonomy and hierarchical structure in decision-making (4); system for electing management positions (5); factors influencing news production (6); television protagonism of the pro-sovereignty process and flexibility in the length of news programmes (7); criteria for prioritising the news coverage of the process (8); challenges in the narrative of the conflict (9); perception of the two referendum periods (10); relations between the media and politics, TV3 as an object of criticism (11), and corporate identity and defence of public service (12). In each case, quotations from the interviews are shown to help illustrate how each question was argued.

5.1 Access to journalistic sources and the treatment of these sources

One item that emerges from the interviews is the access to and treatment of journalistic sources. Firstly, there is a discourse on what should be done, an aspect that, journalistically speaking, is ethical and, secondly, there are contradictions when it comes to considering that there has been easier access to sources due to the fact they are TV3.

There are journalists who consider that they have been able to obtain information without difficulties from Catalan sources because they are Catalan media (S1, R1), while others point out that this ease of access to government sources is not true, that they do not have "privileges" because they work for TV3 (R3 and S2).

While there is talk of a certain normalisation in terms of facilitating access to Catalan sources, there is also criticism of certain sources of the Spanish government. It is concluded that, in more conflictive cases, the opacity of the sources is

more evident. Journalists acknowledge that they had occasional difficulties during the days before and after the referendum of 1 October (S2, R1).

5.2 Professionalism of political sources

When talking about access to political sources, there is one item that journalists keep repeating: they have become professionalised through the press offices. In other words, journalists emphasise that these agencies act as intermediaries and, ultimately, they pass on the discourse that interests them to the media, which has first passed through many filters: “It’s information that is ready-made; somehow, you are heading towards making protagonists out of those who have already marked you beforehand and, whether you like it or not, that’s where you and all the media are heading” (R5).

Firstly, the interviewees are critical of this, because this fact restricts their information and makes it difficult for them to construct an alternative narrative. Secondly, because it is an artificial discourse that does not connect with the spectator; they consider that the professionalisation of sources makes politicians inconsistent with their discourse: “There are many more intermediaries, or all these intermediaries do their job, and this means that it is often complicated to understand” (R5).

5.3 Plurality and representativeness of actors

One of the questions raised in the interviews is the representativeness of the actors involved in the conflict: the aim is to find out what criteria were followed when deciding whether one actor or another should appear and how they were applied in practice. The data indicate that journalists, in general, talk about perceptions of plurality and balance of views, and therefore do not mention any pre-thought-out strategy.

There is a difference between the answers of the editors and section heads and those of the writers, since the first two rely on objective data to justify that their news is plural (such as the plurality reports of the Catalan Audiovisual Council or the polls of the Centre for Opinion Studies), while the writers report personal beliefs or feelings.

As for the criteria for deciding which actors appear in the news, the *Telenotícies* editors argue that the criterion is merely informative and that they adapt to the current situation, where everyone has the “same opportunities” (S1). They also take into account the geographical factor when talking about things that affect the Catalan region, and they point out that the time they have available to write a news item also has a bearing. Although they do not detail how the presence of the actors is distributed, they recognise that there is a tendency to spend more minutes talking about the political parties of the government than about the opposition.

5.4 Professional autonomy and hierarchical structure in decision-making

When it comes to knowing how the editorial team was managed and coordinated during the coverage of the pro-sovereignty

process, the discourse is consistent for all the editors: they describe an identical situation in which decisions are taken jointly, with the entire editorial team (editors, section heads and writers). In contrast, it is the editors who are more open to admitting that they have more decision-making power.

The general perception from the editors’ answers is that they enjoy professional autonomy when writing the pieces and can express their opinions freely. They recognise that the editor is ultimately responsible for the news items and that this means that they have to adapt to their decisions, but that they have room to express their opinions and reach a consensus on the news items: “Decisions don’t end up being made by just one person due to the fact that it is a good thing that there is a kind of counterbalance and consensual decisions” (S1).

5.5 System for electing senior managers

One of the questions that generates most reticence is whether the changes in the management of ‘Informatius’ (news programmes) have any effect on the editorial staff. Since this refers directly to their boss, the interviewees are more measured with their words, which can be seen in the fact that they speak less or are more cautious.

One of the writers argues that senior managers end up being elected “by the governing party, and that logically this has an influence on the outline” (R1). Other interviewees consider that the change of the heads of Informatius is noticeable in the way they work: “There are heads of Informatius who have a certain way of working, and others have a different way” (S1).

There is also widespread criticism of the system for electing the senior management of TV3, as they are elected by the CCMA’s Board of Governors (i.e. the ruling board of the Catalan Public Media). This criticism, however, is given by the editors and not by the writers, which leads to the conclusion that in this case the responses vary according to the job position of the person interviewed: there is greater resistance by the writers and more willingness and criticism by the editors.

Nevertheless, there is no will to fight it or to denounce it, but rather it is taken for granted that the system works like this and that it can only be changed from an individual position. They point out that they try to avoid any kind of influence that might come from management, so that it does not affect the content: “That it is the minimum possible to what is professional work from a strictly deontological and professional point of view” (E1).

5.6 Influencing factors in news production

The factors that condition the daily work of the journalists are aspects that are also taken into account in order to know how they were affected during the reference periods. In this sense, a wide variety of aspects come to light, ranging from external factors to the internal factors of the editorial process itself.

In order of importance, the factors identified are the following: budget cuts that lead to fewer human and technical resources; political surveillance during the period of the conflict; external

pressures from institutions or influential groups; media outlets that provide an intentional or prefabricated story; pressure from economic groups; self-censorship by the journalists themselves to avoid ideological positioning; comments from the audience in the form of complaints or suggestions about the contents of the news; the ideological tendencies of other colleagues; the time constraints of the television format; and, finally, professional experience as an advantage in order for their criteria to prevail.

5.7 Televised prominence of the conflict and flexibility in the duration of news broadcasts

The coverage of the pro-sovereignty process increased from 25% on 9 November 2014 to 49% on 1 October 2017 (Palà, 2020). Half of the journalists believe that there is a lot of talk about the *process*, and the other half believe that this is not the case or that they are talking about it in the right proportion.

Journalists who consider that there is excessive talk of the pro-sovereignty process do so by pointing out that it forms part of all TV3 programming, but not in the case of news programmes. In other words, from an informative point of view, they believe that it is justified and that it has had the necessary space, but it is in the television channel's other programmes as a whole that it seems that they talk too much about it: "I think we spend too much time talking about the same thing: you turn on the television at 8.00 a.m. in the morning and turn it off at midnight and we don't talk about anything else" (R4).

5.8 Criteria for prioritising news about the *process*

Out of all the journalists' answers, and above all those of the editors, since they are the ones who provide the most information on this issue, five aspects have been identified that they use to justify the news coverage they gave to the pro-sovereignty process in Catalonia.

One of these aspects is the good audience figures generated by the programming on the political-social conflict, as they admit that "there was an increase in the demand due to the interest in the pro-sovereignty process" (R6). They also refer to the political and social significance of the events and the consequences that followed, as they consider them to be unprecedented events.

A third element is the editorial line of TV3, since they offered content consistent with the programming of this medium: "If you see that the channel has made a commitment to a certain thing, you end up backing it" (E1). Also due to the fact that media competition forced them to act in advance, to be "the first" to talk about everything related to the pro-sovereignty process (E2).

Lastly, the conflict itself generated attractive elements for the audience, because they offered entertainment: "Television, to a certain extent, is a show; therefore, it has to be made in the most attractive way possible, without ever losing the show appeal" (E2). Some examples of these attractive elements are the images of the demonstrations or the tension during the referendum votes.

5.9 Challenges in the narration of the conflict

One of the issues that came up during the interviews was the challenges they faced when reporting on a conflict such as the one in Catalonia. In other words, there are journalists who refer to the particularities and difficulties of explaining the pro-sovereignty process in a communicative way, which could indirectly influence their writing.

The search for impartiality is the most frequently repeated item by the interviewees, because they admit that they wanted to ensure as much objectivity as possible, but at the same time they knew that "it is difficult in politics and it can't always be like that" (R3). Another element of difficulty is finding the right balance when it comes to explaining the events, i.e. neither underestimating nor magnifying what is happening, because the events not only had an important political and social transcendence, but also a judicial one.

Emotional distance is another factor that emerges from the interviews, as some considered that the emotional bond they had with everything that happened in Catalonia made it more difficult "to be objective and impartial" (E2). The fact that the pro-sovereignty process was led by certain political and social actors made it difficult to detach oneself from personalism, and specific faces ended up being associated with the events without being able to include all the agents and actors who participated in them.

5.10 The perception of the two referendum periods

One of the results that emerges from the interviewees' answers is that all of them perceived the two reference periods as "intense", speaking from a journalistic point of view, which led to an increase in the volume of work. This adjective, together with others such as "unprecedented", "unique" or "uncertain", are the ones most used to evaluate their work during those years (R1, R5, R6).

There is a general perception that the events were rushed and became so important in news terms that the editors and writers themselves were improvising and adapting as they went along. This coincided with a period of budget cuts that conditioned the day-to-day work of the editors: they had to work longer hours, but without the extra resources or additional staff.

5.11 Relations between the media and politics: TV3 as an object of criticism

During the referendum period of 1 October 2017, TV3 was criticised by some political sectors and media outlets. Some political leaders, in their speeches or statements to the media, accused TV3 of not being pluralistic and of defending the pro-independence stance. The interviewees were asked about this issue: the aim was to find out how they received the criticism and whether it affected their work routines.

Journalists with a higher level of responsibility are the ones who are most critical of this situation and consider that criticising TV3 is part of an electoral strategy, in other words, that it has political implications. In fact, in dealing with this issue,

there is outrage among the workers, who adopt a tougher and firmer stance than in the other issues dealt with. Some of the criticisms are that TV3 was “instrumentalised”, that it was used for “political gain” or that it was an “excuse” for the “political class”: “Television is very good as an instrument for complaining, for harping on about it, criticising it and demonstrating it” (S1).

5.12 Corporate identity and defence of the public service

Throughout the interviews, there are constant appeals to the values of public service. This means that there are certain themes that ultimately lead to the same idea, which is why it is considered that there is a conscience or a will to show that they are aware of what function they carry out as journalists. They see the fulfilment of their public service missions as an “obligation”.

For example, when they argue that it is their duty to cover all aspects of the conflict in the news item or that the limited time allowed by the television format when it comes to explaining the facts should not prevent rigour and depth, etc.

At the same time, the political uncertainty at the end of 2017 was transferred to the newsroom and made journalists more “prudent” when it came to managing their personal social networks, i.e. they were more “careful” with the content they published because they were part of TV3.

6. Discussion

This section relates the interviewees’ answers to the aspects linked to the production of news that have been discussed in the theoretical section. This makes it possible to answer the objective of this study: to determine how TV3 journalists define, explain and argue their coverage of the Catalan pro-sovereignty process.

The journalists’ answers reveal an idea that is repeated throughout the interviews: the feeling of belonging to a public media outlet. Although this item is not underlined by the interviewer, the writers take the opportunity to explain that they are part of a public media outlet and that this has consequences for their work routines. They relate these effects to the fact of being extremely cautious when publishing certain information (carefully checking sources), being curious about what is said (trying to be sensitive to all views and opinions) and avoiding any kind of personal ideology (in order to represent an editorial line).

When they talk about TV3, journalists use the first person plural to include themselves in the media, that is, they internalise their belonging to the company and feel responsible for it: “We are who we are”, “we, for being TV3”, “we are public television”. In this sense, they see themselves as a benchmark for communication in the Catalan sphere, which is why they go to extremes when they speak of pluralism and diversity, for example.

This internalised responsibility has to do with the gatekeeper

function of journalists, in other words, their ability to control information and the awareness that their actions have an influence. In this case, and contrary to what some studies argue (Túñez, 1999), gatekeeper awareness is not lost, but reinforced. Journalists know that their work has effects beyond the media and that what they say will be seen and questioned not only by the public, but also by political and social agents. That is why it is perceived that journalists themselves remember and reinforce their role as mediators in a context of political and social conflict.

By linking these aspects to one of the research questions, what degree of awareness do the writers have of the plurality of views involved in the conflict (RQ3), it can be concluded that this degree is high, as they continually refer to the term *plurality* as the obligation and responsibility to make all ideological positions visible. The writers argue that whenever they can, they try to include all views, both for and against the conflict.

Nevertheless, two difficulties arise that are related to the limits of the media outlet’s format and access to journalistic sources. Journalists admit that, on some occasions, they cannot include all the political views because the piece is too short. They also admit that they have had occasional difficulties in accessing certain sources.

The writers say that they are free to choose which political views appear and which have to be discarded due to lack of space, but ultimately it is up to the news editor to decide. When asked about the criteria for the presence and hierarchy of actors, they assure us that they follow the criterion of information and that no prior guideline or strategy has been established. This is not a conscious criterion and a deliberate way of doing things, but rather an improvisation and an adaptation to the current news situation.

With regard to the research question on which are the main factors that have influenced journalists in their coverage of the pro-sovereignty process (RQ2), the results show similarities with respect to other studies on professional routines and news production, and differences with regard to the specific context of TV3 (Tuchman, 1983; Túñez, 1999).

This means that almost all the factors identified as the ones that most condition production correspond to those argued by TV3 journalists: the journalistic sources and communication offices, the degree of autonomy of the journalist, the competition for the audience between media outlets, the conversations between professionals, the format of the media and professional experience.

Conversely, there are influencing factors that are only identified in this case study and that have to do with the political and economic context of the CCMA. One of these factors has to do with the impact of the economic crisis of 2008, which led to a reduction in staff at a time when political information about the pro-sovereignty process was increasing. The other conditioning factor is the fact that they belong to a public media outlet: they cannot simply prioritise what works for the audience, but they have to take into account their public service missions.

With regard to the time and format guidelines followed by journalists when preparing the news (RQ1), it can be concluded that these guidelines have become more flexible as the Catalan pro-sovereignty process has progressed. The editors of *Telenotícies* said that the news programmes had a longer duration because the current news required it. This decision is attributed to the TV3 management, which considered that the programmes had to be more flexible when it came to conceding more airtime due to the complexity of the political and judicial actions.

To conclude, one last aspect of the news production of the pro-sovereignty process worth mentioning is that almost all journalists point out the exceptional nature, intensity and uncertainty of the moment. The context that accompanies the production of news is therefore linked to factors beyond the control of journalists. They stressed that this was one of the most important moments in Catalonia's history in recent years, and this meant that they were constantly alert to new developments.

Furthermore, it ended up being the journalists who adapted to the situation and at certain times had to improvise in the preparation of the news. Firstly, this reduces the time taken to prepare the news, which can affect the final quality of the product, and secondly, it explains the difficulties they had to avoid constructing a prefabricated story. In short, it clearly shows the contradiction between what journalists want to do and what they can actually do, and the fact that news production is highly influenced by journalistic routines.

7. Conclusions

The significance of the Catalan pro-sovereignty process in the political, social and legal spheres seems unquestionable. Research such as this confirms that, during a conflict, the context of the media outlets is fundamental to understanding the narrative they construct and, at the same time, shows how complex it is for political journalism to be in tune with the interests of the media outlets and the objectivity of the news.

This study has made it possible to get closer to the place and the people who construct these stories. There are no other known surveys that have interviewed all the editors and writers who participated in TV3's journalistic account of the Catalan pro-sovereignty process, and this makes the analysis of the answers of the professionals interviewed particularly relevant for different reasons.

Firstly, to be able to corroborate that this television station was criticised by political parties and the media for questions of plurality and bias, and that, conversely, other actors defended it and made use of reports where it was agreed that this was not the case. Both attitudes are closely linked to political and commercial interests. It is a political war and, at the same time, a media war. This confrontation goes beyond the media in order

to win the story of the conflict and, therefore, to promote an ideological position. TV3 has not been an exception.

It is also clear that TV3 has had easier access to Catalan sources and to the Government of Catalonia (Generalitat de Catalunya), while it has had occasional difficulties in obtaining information from the Spanish institutions. At certain times, it has been disadvantaged and this has been due to a purely political issue: it has been conditioned by governmental interests when it comes to selling a certain story which, on some occasions, has made it difficult for professionals to access information.

This research shows that the political observation made of TV3 has at times been passed on to its employees, who have felt and experienced this pressure. This is considered to be a worrying aspect, especially if one takes into account that any means of communication should be exempt. The Catalan and Spanish communication system has independent bodies or entities dedicated to supervising and controlling the contents of the media. Should these measures not be sufficient, others must be implemented, but politics must never be a means of pressuring and conditioning the media, however indirectly.

Note

This research obtained a special mention in the XXXIII CAC Awards for research on audiovisual communication.

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Appendix. Complete interview script

You will now be asked a series of questions related to your work as a journalist in the political section of the TV3 news programme during a broad period of time, from 2013 to 2017.

- Could you tell us how long you worked in the political section of TV3 news between the end of 2013 and the end of 2017 (less than 1 year, 1 to 3 years or more than 3 years)? Do you think there was an “overrepresentation” of the Catalan conflict?
- Did you participate in the press coverage of 9 November 2014 and 1 October 2017?
- How do you remember these events from a journalistic point of view (volume of work, time allocated for delivery, atmosphere in the newsroom, etc.)? If the case of having participated in both referenda, do you remember them in a similar way?

In this research, a quantitative analysis was made of part of the content broadcast on TV3's Telenotícies related to the Catalan pro-sovereignty process, namely, aspects such as the journalistic sources used, the actors who appeared on a recurrent basis, the minutes devoted to talking about the process, etc. It is for this reason that some of the following questions refer to these items.

- Taking into account the results of the analysis of the content, the figures show that the number of minutes dedicated to talking about the pro-sovereignty process increased notably from 9 November to 1 October. What is the reason for this increase in media attention by TV3?
- Regarding the journalistic sources you used to obtain information, which were the most recurring, who provided them and how easy was it to access them?
- At any time during the period between 2013 and 2017 did you have any difficulties in gaining access?
- In relation to the actors who appear in the news reports, how was it decided to give prominence to one or the other and in what order for them to appear? Did your boss give you any instructions in this regard? [version for writers] / What guidelines were given to the writers in this regard? [version for section heads and editors].
- How many minutes did the pieces have to fill? Did these indications remain constant over time or did they vary? Did that affect the story you had to tell? [version for writers] / How many minutes were given to writers for their pieces? Did that affect the story you had to tell? Do you think that this could have affected the writers' reporting? [version for section heads and editors].
- Were all the pieces you produced supervised by the editor?

[version for editors] / As an editor or section head, did you review the pieces written by the writers? [version for section heads and editors].

- Are there internal factors, in other words, those within the newsroom, that could influence the creation of the journalistic content, be it the conversations with fellow writers, time constraints and the format, etc.? How do they influence you?
- What other external factors can condition the journalist's work and how does this affect your approach to your work?
- Could the fact that TV3 is a public media outlet that depends to a large extent on funding from the Generalitat (i.e. the Catalan Government) be an influential factor for you?
- Are there pressures from political parties, representatives of institutions or others trying to influence your work? If so, have you personally experienced this? Do you think that these pressures have increased during the period of the pro-sovereignty process?

This research has also analysed the journalistic discourse, taking into account a study that considers that there are generic frameworks when talking about social and political conflicts. What do you think are the main difficulties or the main challenges when covering a conflict of these characteristics?

- Do you think the story tends to define the two (or three) sides of the Catalan conflict, indicating winners and losers?
- Do you think it is possible to be plural and impartial in the narrative of a conflict such as the pro-sovereignty process?