

Politics, folklore and humour: the case of Sant Esteve de les Roures

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ABSTRACT

After the referendum on the self-determination of Catalonia held on 1 October 2017, the Guardia Civil sent the Supreme Court a report listing acts of alleged violence against police forces that had been sent to Catalonia to stop the referendum from being held. According to the report, the most violent events took place in the village of Sant Esteve de les Roures, a non-existent town. From that moment on, Sant Esteve de les Roures came to life online, as profiles were created for all the services and institutions of the town of 750,000 inhabitants, presided over by its mayor, Josep Orni. The aim of this paper is to trace the general public's spontaneous creation of Sant Esteve de les Roures, a town invented by the Guardia Civil, as an illustration of creativity and an example of a community overcoming a political crisis through humour.

KEYWORDS

Humour; politics; folklore; internet; Sant Esteve de les Roures

POLÍTICA, FOLKLORE I HUMOR: EL CAS DE SANT ESTEVE DE LES ROURES

RESUM

Després de la celebració del referèndum d'autodeterminació de Catalunya de l'1 d'octubre de 2017, la Guàrdia Civil va enviar al Tribunal Suprem un informe amb la relació d'actes de suposada violència contra els cossos policials que s'havien enviat a Catalunya per evitar-ne la celebració. Segons aquest informe, l'escenari dels episodis més violents havia estat el poble de Sant Esteve de les Roures, una població inexistente. A

partir d'aquell moment i de manera vertiginosa, Sant Esteve de les Roures va cobrar vida a Internet, amb la creació de perfils que mostraven tots els serveis i les entitats d'aquest poble de 750.000 habitants presidit per l'alcalde Josep Orni. El propòsit d'aquest article és resseguir la creació espontània i popular d'aquest poble inventat per la Guàrdia Civil com a exemple de creativitat i gestió d'una crisi política mitjançant l'humor.

PARAULES CLAU

humor; política; folklore; Internet; Sant Esteve de les Roures

REBUT: 8/06/2022 | ACCEPTAT: 23/09/2022

1. The origin of Sant Esteve de les Roures

On 1 October 2017, the Government of Catalonia held a referendum to gauge public support for the self-determination of Catalonia (the date would come to be known as 1-O)¹. The referendum was organised following an election in which supporters of the referendum gained the majority of seats in Catalan Parliament. The Government of Spain opposed the referendum on the basis of the country's laws and constitution at the time. Although Spain's Constitutional Court called for the suspension of the referendum, the Government of Catalonia continued efforts to organise the vote in accordance with the Law for the Referendum on the Self-Determination of Catalonia passed on 6 September 2017. More than two million people voted in the referendum, despite numerous acts of violence on the part of state security forces in an attempt to prevent the referendum from taking place, which caused multiple injuries and hundreds of bruises.² After the referendum had been held and Catalan parliamentary elections had been concluded on 21 December 2017, the Guardia Civil³ sent Supreme Court Judge Pablo Llarena a report detailing 315 acts of alleged violence or aggression against the Spanish police forces sent to Catalonia, when what happened was precisely the opposite. The report was made available to the newspaper *El Mundo*.

The investigators produced an extensive report, to which *El Mundo* was given access. It detailed an extensive list of “acts of aggression and damage to property, as well as serious resistance and intimidation” and highlighted the “inaction” of the Mossos d'Esquadra during these events (Urreiztieta & Escrivà 2018).⁴

The Madrid-based newspaper reported that the most violent events occurred in Sant Esteve de les Roures, a non-existent municipality in Catalonia.

Some of the most violent events took place in Sant Esteve de les Roures, where “one of the demonstrators, who had already attacked other agents, took advantage of a fallen and completely defenceless agent and brutally kicked him in the back of the head”. Also, in Sant Esteve de les Roures, the driver of a motorbike tried to run over a policeman and steal his official weapon (Urreiztieta & Escrivà 2018).

The news spread almost instantly, and from that moment on, profiles of organisations and residents of this new town based on the erroneous police report started appearing on Twitter. The name of the new town stems from the similarly named Sant Esteve Sesrovires, a real municipality in the Baix Llobregat region. The fact that a non-existent town appeared in an official Guardia Civil report prompted numerous jokes and the creation of profiles on Twitter parodying

1 This article is part of Grant PGC 2018-093993-B-I00 funded by MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033 and by “ERDF A way of making Europe”, and is part of the work of the Research Group GRILC (Grup de Recerca Identitats en la Literatura Catalana) of Rovira i Virgili University, recognized by the Government of Catalonia (2017 SGR 599). A preliminary version of this work can be found in Samper (2021).

2 See Samper & Oriol (2021) on the self-determination referendum and the rumours it created prior to the referendum.

3 The Guardia Civil is the Spanish police force responsible for civil policing under the authority of both the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Defence.

4 The Mossos d'Esquadra are the official police force of the Autonomous Region of Catalonia.

administrations, political parties and other organisations in the municipality, such as the town council, a university, the Guardia Civil itself, all kinds of citizens' associations and even some businesses. In April 2018, a little less than a month after the publication of the news, the fictitious town already had nearly 3,000 organisations on Twitter.

One particular event marked the turning point in the impact and growth of the fictional town. On 14 April 2018, the official profile of the Guardia Civil on Twitter responded to the profile of the Sant Esteve de les Roures Town Council, reproaching it for its lack of impartiality in a tweet in which it shared a video of a news item from the television channel La Sexta in which Guardia Civil officers were seen allegedly firing rubber bullets at immigrants.⁵



Twitter conversation between the Sant Esteve de les Roures Town Council profile and the official Guardia Civil profile.

This conversation legitimised the online presence of Sant Esteve de les Roures, obviously not the intent the Guardia Civil. The online presence then began to grow exponentially, partly as a humorous public reaction to the repeated errors of the Guardia Civil, but also as a kind of humour therapy for the events of the self-determination referendum of 1 October, in which the Spanish police forces sent to Catalonia sought to stop the referendum by force. According to journalist Antoni Piqué:

Sant Esteve de les Roures can also be seen as a social barometer – in the sense of a “social network” — for Catalan sovereignty, which has found itself in a rather sour mood since 1-O, at least on social networks. This contrasts sharply with the irony and general derision of the independentists prior to the referendum, when everyone generally made light of everything (Piqué 2018).

⁵ Because the account of the Sant Esteve de les Roures Town Council has been blocked, only the Guardia Civil's response is still available at this time <<https://twitter.com/guardiacivil/status/985101793175785472?s=20>> [date viewed: June 2022].

Another perspective views Sant Esteve de les Roures as an alternative to Tabarnia, the proposed new autonomous community including Tarragona and Barcelona, to prevent these areas from becoming republican in the event of a hypothetical declaration of independence by Catalonia.⁶ According to technology journalist Albert Cuesta:

In any case, the Roures phenomenon represents a much-needed reinstatement of humour in these days the country is going through and can be interpreted as a reaction to the unionist proposal of another much more artificial imaginary territory, Tabarnia. Indeed, it is hard to believe that all this inventiveness is entirely spontaneous, especially given the graphic quality of some of Sant Esteve's profiles. But analysis of more than 200 profiles revealed no clear pattern, only that nearly half of them were created on Wednesday the 18th (Cuesta 2018).

So, there's nothing to suggest — or at least it's not yet been proven — that the creation of all the profiles and the virtual community were based on some preformulated plan. And unlike Tabarnia, no public figure has taken a position at the helm of this community; actually, almost all of the Twitter profiles have remained anonymous to this day. In fact, as Blank points out, the internet specifically facilitates the formation of communities that share concerns or fears, or, in this case, a form of advocacy behind the curtain of humour:

The Internet has become a hybridized and ritualized space that hosts the symbolic contexts of participants within its virtual walls. By tapping into folkloric forms with analog precedents (including earlier technological devices), the Internet provides familiarity and accessibility to limitless information. No one has to be left in the dark. In the context of a tragedy or contentious event, the online venue serves as a symbolic place for collective rejuvenation while serving the intrinsic desires of the individual. Conversation and connectivity with others affirm that we are in fact alive and well, even if we feel wounded inside. Accordingly, folkloric expression on the Internet helps people to establish a common ground with others and reassure themselves that they will not be alone to face an unknown future by themselves (Blank 2013: 103).

⁶ Although this proposal gained momentum after the elections of 21 December 2017, in which pro-independence supporters were victorious, but with the political party Ciudadanos the leading force in Tarragona and Barcelona, the idea is older and can be traced back to 2011.

2. Sant Esteve de les Roures, a look at the town

The creation of Sant Esteve de les Roures was not a phenomenon that occurred exclusively on Twitter. In relatively little time, a Wikipedia-like open-content encyclopaedia was also created, devoted entirely to the town.⁷ The wiki provided complete information about the municipality,⁸ including, in November 2019, its population, mayor, and even its motto, as though it were a real place.

State: Catalonia

Region: Rouredà

County: Llarena Alta

Population: 750,000 inhabitants (approx.)

Borders Samarruga de la Punta, Vilassar d’Urgell and Sant Fruitós de la Segarra

Mayor: Hon. Mr Orni

Motto: We’re not made of wood; we’re made of iron!



Shield of Sant Esteve de les Roures in the wiki created for the town.

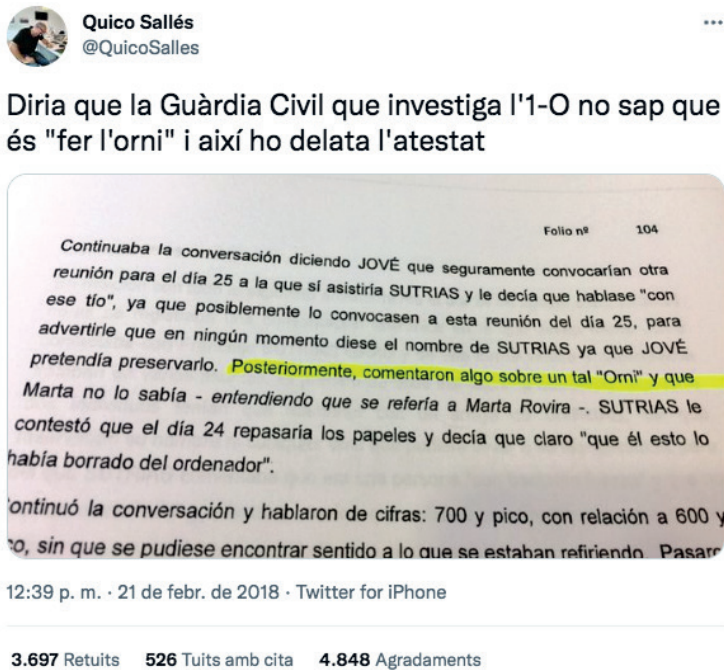


Map of Catalonia showing the region of Rouredà on the Sant Esteve de les Roures wiki.

⁷ Other encyclopaedias of this type have been created on specific subjects, such as Star Wars <<https://starwars.fandom.com/wiki/>>, The Lord of The Rings <<https://lotr.fandom.com/wiki/>> and Harry Potter <<https://harrypotter.fandom.com/wiki/>>, created by fans on Fandom, a website based on a philosophy of collaboration that hosts web pages free of charge using wiki technology.

⁸ The page is no longer available.

The name of the mayor, Mr Orni, is not attributable to chance and it's, in fact, another error. It comes from one of the statements on the meetings to prepare for the referendum of 1 October. As journalist Quico Sallés revealed in a tweet posted on 21 February 2018, the report referred to "a certain 'Orni'", thus personifying the Catalan expression *fer l'orni* meaning to feign disinterest. So, the name of the future mayor of the town, Mr Orni, was the result of a Spanish speaker's misinterpretation of the Catalan turn of phrase.



Tweet from Quico Sallés with the report on Mr Orni. Source:
<<https://twitter.com/QuicoSalles/status/966276087822127104>> [Tweet viewed: June 2022]

The list of institutions and entities in the wiki included all the profiles in the town. Some were duplicated in the sense that they represented the same entity, while others were only active at the time of their creation, and still others were deactivated shortly afterwards. Below is a list of these profiles ordered by type as of November 2019. Deactivated profiles were not included.

<i>Type</i>	<i>Number of profiles</i>	<i>Examples of profile types</i>
Government	25	6 councillors
Education	33	23 schools, 8 universities, 3 King Juan Carlos universities, 10 language schools, 8 faculties, 4 academies, 7 recreation venues
Healthcare	21	5 hospitals, 9 clinics, 19 mental health centres, 9 funeral homes, 11 alternative therapy centres, 9 veterinarians
Sports	109	8 squash clubs, 7 pétanque clubs, 6 golf clubs, 6 diving associations
Media	53	7 radio stations, 15 TV channels, 24 print media outlets
Culture	22	5 groups of <i>diables</i> , 13 human tower groups, 4 stick dancer groups
Music	36	
Public bodies	96	7 tourist offices, 9 museums, 12 legal bodies, 7 prisons, 24 law enforcement agencies, 12 security forces (Guardia Civil and military)
Foreign policy	41	22 foreign (but closer to home) policy bodies
Environment, Territory and Sustainability	49	
Transport	19	8 railways, 6 road network, 7 airports, 7 airlines, 5 taxi companies
Science	14	12 space agencies, 5 observatories
Technology	24	
Telecommunications	5	
Farming	14	
Retail	65	39 food shops, 9 supermarkets, 10 large supermarkets
Catering	61	6 fast food outlets
Industry	9	
Energy	7	
Port	11	6 fishermen

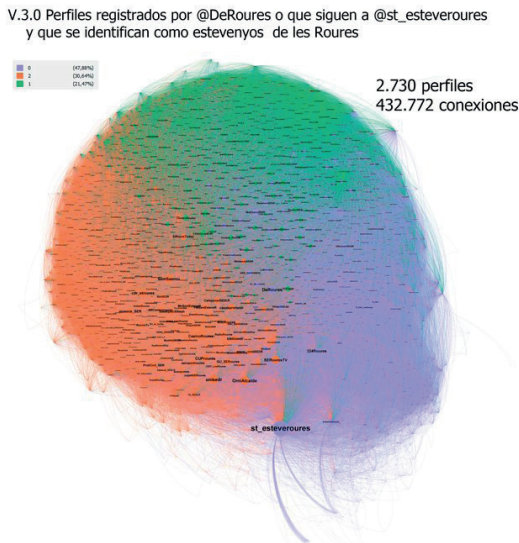
Services	84	8 computer companies, 19 publishing services, 17 magic/spiritual businesses, 26 pet and animal centres, 11 pharmacies, 9 hairdressers and beauty salons, 6 video clubs
Cinema	12	
Accommodation	28	5 campsites
Economy	22	
Associations	203	7 hiking associations, 12 LGBTI associations, 19 football clubs, 71 miscellaneous associations, 60 clubs, 9 motorbike associations
Trade unions	11	
Alcohol	18	
Leisure	49	35 brothels, 6 cannabis clubs
Drugs	6	
Art	8	
Individuals	139	49 names, 102 professionals and freelancers, 83 relocated celebrities, 28 politicians, 1 animated food product
Professional associations	16	
Political parties	58	
Tabarnia	6	
Religion	39	
Sister cities	11	15 entities from Arbog, 21 entities from Arenas de Mar, 2 entities from the city of Menorca, 6 entities from A Pesar de Mar
Non-sister cities	1	
Festivals	15	
Senior citizens	14	
Other groups	92	

According to the website, there were a total of 2,566 profiles. However, this is not the only way to determine the number of Sant Esteve de les Roures profiles. According to the Sant Esteve de les Roures census (Municipal Register of Institutions, Entities, Things, Good People and Riff-Raff of our Great Little Town. Our maxim is, IF WE DON'T FOLLOW YOU, YOU DON'T EXIST) there were 2,476 profiles.



Profile of the Sant Esteve de les Roures Register. Source: <<https://twitter.com/DeRoures>> [date viewed: June 2022].

Mariluz Congosto, a researcher specialising in the propagation of messages and defining users on Twitter, analysed the profiles in the Sant Esteve de les Roures register and profiles that followed the town council⁹ and identified themselves as residents of the town. The results showed 2,730 profiles with 432,772 connections, and three different user groups defined by how the users followed each other. There was obviously no agreement in calculating the total number of Sant Esteve de les Roures profiles, but all the estimates were around 2,500 profiles.



Sant Esteve de les Roures profiles according to an analysis conducted by Mariluz Congosto, May 2019. Source: <<https://twitter.com/congosto/status/1124235522270953472>> [date viewed: June 2022].

⁹ Account currently suspended, as mentioned before in note 5.

2.1 Two Sant Esteve de les Roures entities

Among the more than 2,500 profiles created on Twitter, two were of particular interest, both for their activity and for their interaction with other real and fictional profiles. These profiles created a sense of community, especially early on, in the months in which the Sant Esteve phenomenon began to blossom.

2.1.1 The Sant Esteve de les Roures Town Council

This was the first profile created, in March 2018. In November 2019, it had 35,852 followers. In its first tweets, it was announced as the official profile of the town council of the municipality and interacted with its first followers.¹⁰ On 18 April 2018, journalist Mariola Dinarès interviewed the mayor of Sant Esteve de les Roures on the programme Popap on Catalunya Ràdio.¹¹ That same day, a video filmed by the municipality's television station was posted in which the mayor explained the origin of the town.

Presentation of the profile of the Sant Esteve de les Roures Town Council and its first interactions with other users.



¹⁰ Although the account is suspended, user responses and interactions with the municipality can still be read: <https://twitter.com/st_esteve_roures/status/980044790313168896> [date viewed: June 2022].

¹¹ Interview available at: <<https://www.ccma.cat/catràdio/alcarta/popap/entrevista-exclusiva-a-l'alcalde-de-sant-estev-de-les-roures/audio/999662/>> [date viewed: June 2022].



Screenshot from the video on the municipality’s television station in which the mayor explains its origin. The video is no longer available.

2.1.2 The University of Sant Esteve de les Roures

The university of the invented municipality, whose motto is “Fortis et Sapiens Quam Quercus” (as strong and wise as an oak; *roure* is oak in Catalan), has its own Twitter profile (created in April 2018, currently with 5,962 followers)¹² as well as its own website¹³ with detailed information about the university.

The University of Sant Esteve de les Roures continues a tradition of higher education that dates back to the Modern Age. As a public university, it provides public services in the areas of teaching, research and knowledge transfer in its fields.

There is also a greeting from the rector, Dr Orni de Sant Esteve (the same name as the mayor and in the statement mentioned above), a course catalogue and a list of institutions and schools in the municipality for internships (linking to other Sant Esteve de les Roures profiles), as well as its history, which dates to the 17th century.

The Estudi General, the predecessor of the University of Sant Esteve de les Roures, was founded in 1641 by the President of the Republic of Catalonia, Hon. Mr Pau Claris i Casademunt, who granted Sant Esteve de les Roures the prerogative of bestowing degrees in grammar, rhetoric, philosophy and theology, law, and medicine. Instruction was provided by municipal trustees and the Church in the location of the current Les Roures building, which was constructed specifically to serve as a university

¹² <<https://twitter.com/unisedr>> [date viewed: June 2022].

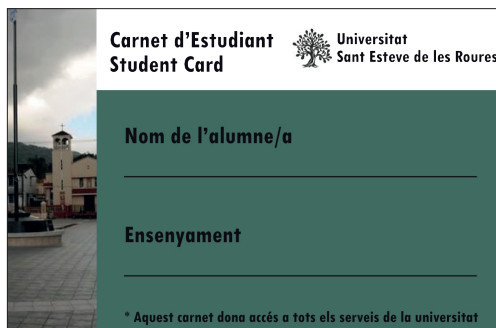
¹³ Address: <<https://unisedr.wordpress.com/>> [date viewed: June 2022].

campus. University studies were expanded, and with it the university's prestige, until 1717 when the University was forced to close due to the Nova Planta Decree and the loss of Catalonia's political identity.

The university has an online shop where visitors can buy T-shirts and notebooks with the university logo.¹⁴ It is also possible to download and personalise different documents: a university degree with the major of your choice, a student identity card, an employee identity card and a ballot to vote for Dr Orni in any electoral process.

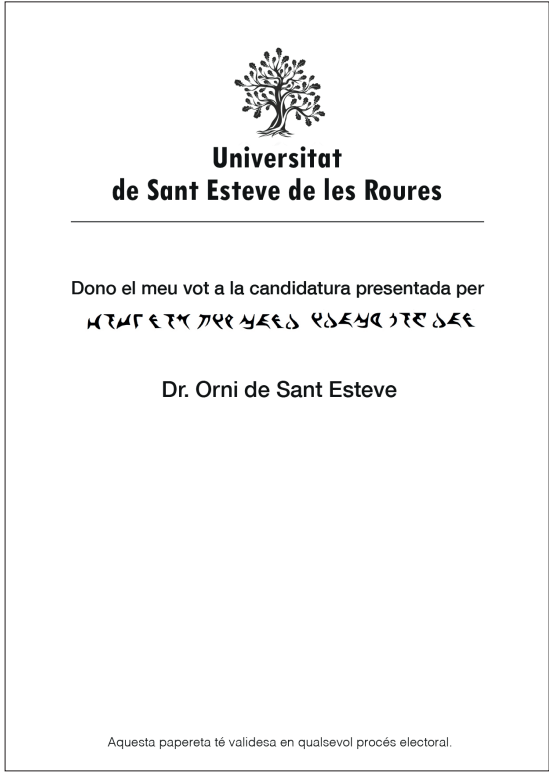


Customisable University of Sant Esteve de les Roures degree.



University of Sant Esteve de les Roures student identity card.

¹⁴ Address: <<https://unisedr.wordpress.com/botiga-de-la-usedr/>> [date viewed: June 2022].



Ballot to vote for Dr Orni de Sant Esteve in any electoral process.

The ballot to vote in any electoral process is also available in Klingon.¹⁵

One of the missions of the University of Sant Esteve de les Roures is to support society’s democratic processes to the best of its ability. In order to facilitate this process in elections where, in the view of voters, candidates do not represent the values of freedom and democracy enshrined in our republic’s constitution, the agreement of the Council of the USEDR of 4 May 2018 on the standardisation of ballot documents was published in the Official Gazette of the USEDR. As indicated, this agreement establishes the universal and transdimensional candidacy of the Magnificent Dr Orni de Sant Esteve in all manner of electoral processes. Ballots are available in Catalan and Klingon, and official sizes are 105×148.5 mm.

Sant Esteve de les Roures’ vibrancy is clearly evidenced in interactions with the profiles, especially in the first months after the birth of the phenomenon. This interaction has two central facets. Firstly, the various different profiles made reference to one other, which helped to build a virtual community that grew day by day, especially between March and May of 2018. This highlighted the “realism”

¹⁵ Klingon is an artificial language created by Marc Okrand and spoken by Klingons in the Star Trek universe.

of the fictional community. The town council and the university excelled in this by encouraging interaction between the different existing profiles. And, secondly, these same profiles also interacted with real profiles, public figures and entities that actually existed, as in the case mentioned above of the Guardia Civil. As Albert Cuesta explains:

One interesting facet is the volume of interaction generated by the digital municipality. Outwardly, some profiles seek visibility by offering services to popular tweeters. In other cases, they're public figures who challenge the town's society. Lluís Llach has offered to sign books; Empar Moliner is running for councillor of underwear; and Salvador Cardús is challenging the current mayor, Josep Orni (a reference to another overly creative judicial report). One of the most surprising turns in this case was the real Guardia Civil ridiculing and publicly insulting the town council of the fictitious municipality they had helped to invent. Interactions within the virtual municipality were also of interest. The school thanks civil protection bodies for helping in an evacuation following a fire, and Sant Esteve's four pharmacies arranged an out-of-hours pharmacy schedule (Cuesta 2018).



Example the University of Sant Esteve de les Roures interacting with other real and fictitious profiles.

3. Similarity with other non-existent places

Sant Esteve de les Roures is not an isolated case of a fictional location that for some reason has taken on a life of its own. Below, we'll have a look at a few others that can be traced back to certain mistakes.

3.1 Arralde

This locality in the Basque Country is the setting for the fictional Basque-language television series *Goenkale* (High Street), broadcast on ETB1 between 1994 and 2015. Judge Baltasar Garzón ordered police forces to prevent a ceremony honouring three Basque prisoners from taking place after the association Dignidad y Justicia (Dignity and Justice), formerly known as the Fundación Víctimas del Terrorismo (Victims of Terrorism Foundation), filed a complaint. The agents told the judge that the order had no criminal content, but the newspaper *ABC* reported it (Piqué 2018). Twitter user Jonathan Martínez recalled the case and asked for support to help make Arralde and Sant Esteve de les Roures sister cities.¹⁶

3.2 Gerri Adams de la Sal

According to a news item published in *El Confidencial Digital* in September 2019,¹⁷ the cultural association Lo Vent del Port, working with the political party Esquerra Republicana (Republican Left of Catalonia), was preparing a referendum to change the name of the municipality of Gerri de la Sal to Gerri Adams de la Sal in homage to Gerry Adams, the historic leader of Sinn Féin. According to the media, the mayor of the municipality denied the existence of such an initiative, but that didn't prevent the story from being published, only to be later retracted. According to an opinion piece by Jaume Clotet published in *Tarragona Digital*, the case can be traced back to an attempt to reveal the predisposition of certain Spanish media to publish news of any kind on the political and social situation in Catalonia without any contrasting views. In the words of Jaume Clotet:

The fact is that this Spanish media [*El Confidencial Digital*] is, one could say, a veritable academy of lack of rigour. I verified this myself a couple of years ago. Some friends of mine (to use a classic exculpatory expression) decided to check to what extent some state media's hysteria caused them to lose sight of their professionalism. At that time, the sovereignty votes were beginning and the atmosphere in the city was heated. My friends retouched an image of the entrance to Gerri de la Sal and put Gerri Adams on it. At the same time, they constructed a plausible story in which the townspeople, spurred on by independence fever and in solidarity with the Irish people, called for a referendum to change the name of the town Gerri de la Sal to Gerri Adams. They finished it with a plausible text and sent it to some media outlets in Madrid to see what would happen (Clotet 2015).

¹⁶ Tweet no longer available.

¹⁷ 'The mayor of Gerri de la Sal (in the province of Lleida) denies the claim that a referendum is underway to change the name of the town to Gerri Adams.' *El Confidencial Digital*, 16/09/2019 <<https://www.elconfidencialdigital.com/articulo/politica/Gerri-Sal-Lerida-referendum-Adams/2009091600000056302.html>> [date viewed: June 2022].

3.3 *Nambia*

On 20 September 2017, in a meeting with African leaders, then US President Donald Trump twice referred to “Nambia” as a country instead of Namibia. Humorous and critical reactions were swift (Taylor 2017) and included an appearance of the Republic of Nambia on Twitter (@NambiaOf) which thanked the US president for his gesture. “Did somebody finally mention me?”¹⁸ its profile read, “It’s about time we become famous. Thank you, Trump”.

3.4 *Veyshnorica*

In September 2017, Russia and Belarus, “the last dictatorships of Europe”, conducted a joint military exercise called Zapad (west) 2017. In the scenario of the exercise, Russia and Belarus were defending themselves militarily against incursions by the separatist state of Veyshnorica in western Belarus. The map depicting this fictitious enemy quickly circulated online and users began spreading memes and jokes on social media. In less than a day, Veyshnorica emerged as an alternative fictional country to the real Belarus (Astapova & Navumau 2018: 436).

Although not a real country, Veyshnorica had an elaborate political and economic structure described on social networks (Twitter, Facebook and VK, a Russian social network) and on its website. Civic artist Ales Mazur launched the website, which immediately became the focus of a project spearheaded by a group of activists. Symbols were immediately suggested, the history of this country was written, and its language was developed, a historical version of Belarusian written in Latin script (Astapova & Navumau 2018: 437). Aleh Larychau, a representative of the activist group that created the project, expressed his surprise at its impact and at people’s selfless involvement:

Larychau (2017) expressed his astonishment at how engaged these volunteers were, actively involved in writing the constitution and mythological history of Veyshnorica, suggesting further directions for the improvement of the website, and investing their free time and efforts into the implementation of these ideas in practice. Thanks to their efforts, the website quickly became a self-regulated creative environment where new ideas could be discussed, tested, and implemented, providing an opportunity for experiments in forming a full-fledged state (Astapova & Navumau 2018: 437-438).

Larychau also underscored the importance of humour:

There is nothing more serious than jokes. Through humour we may attract more people. [...]

Through humour and laughter we can raise serious questions. There are no other ways for it now (Astapova & Navumau 2018: 441).

Social media became a valuable tool for attracting public attention to this fictional country. Users posted fake news and parodies on social media that reached a large audience. The creators of Veyshnorica used fake news as a parody and as political satire (Astapova & Navumau 2018: 438-439), not to spread false messages for a political purpose. As Reilly (2012: 273) notes, “satirical fake news

¹⁸ <<https://twitter.com/NambiaOf/status/910612393008467968>> [date viewed: June 2022].

significantly reframed public discourse”. Similarly, “satirical fake news levels its critique against various actors and institutions”. Fictitious profiles that deliberately and openly publish fake news for humorous purposes would be a good example.

As Wedgwood (2000: 959) notes, “The cultural existence of a people or ethnicity—a collective sense of shared history and common fate—does not suffice for international recognition unless a group can also claim a territory”. This is where so-called cyber-nations come into play, nations that exist solely on the internet, examples of which include the Republic of Lomar, with 4,100 citizens, created by a computer systems administrator (Wedgwood 2000: 960); the Kingdom of Talossa, founded in 1981, with 50 citizens, which “claims a mythic connection to the Berbers of North Africa, and a language that favours the letter X and the umlaut. Its foreign policy is to recognize other micronations and its leisure activity its politics, holding mock elections every eight months” (Wedgwood 2000: 961). It also includes the Dominion of Melchizedek, which claims the territory of an abandoned Pacific island and additional territory in Antarctica (Wedgwood 2000: 961). Its founder, David Korem, says that “The more they talk about us, the more they write about us, the more real we become in the eyes of the world” (Wedgwood 2000: 963).

Another concept to consider in this same vein is the virtual nation, which combines imagination and historical immanence:

By ‘virtual entity’ we mean any legendary, fictional, imaginary or non-territorial entity, including those that can bring together substantial numbers of citizens in structures whose reality and permanence cannot be doubted (cited in Wedgwood 2000: 962).

Although Sant Esteve de les Roures shares some of the features of these cyber-nations or virtual nations, it cannot be considered one because it lacks, for example, unity or a common project shared by all the people involved in the community. As we have seen, the creation of the different Twitter profiles was not the result of a plan, as evidenced by the fact that many services and entities were created repeatedly. What they all have in common is that they would not exist without the internet. This is a clear example of contemporary folklore expressed through the tools we use today in interactions, which go far beyond direct contact between people, as referred to by Ben-Amos.¹⁹

It is tempting to note the advent of digital culture or cyber culture with computer technologies as the signal context for more considerations of ethnography rather than performance which suggests face-to-face communication. I have referred to the start of this movement earlier commensurate with the rise in popularity of the prefix “hyper” to imply an acceleration of information, and the cybernetic defiance of nature, characteristic of modernization and new communication technologies. Reference to “hyper” also questions connotative uses of human behaviour and the kind of cognitive thinking that is forced to react instantaneously to multiple messages, often in short symbolic statements or actions. The implication culturally is that, rather than being passive couch potatoes

¹⁹ A definition that Ben-Amos later qualified (Ben-Amos 2014 and 2020) to include changes that have taken place since his first proposed definition, created in 1971.

as predicted with the rise of television, prosumers—that is, those individuals who simultaneously produce as well as consume capital on multiple devices—are forced to be always wired, always on, and therefore continuously active and mobile, or in an analytical sense, in defiance of time being able to be hyper 24/7 (Bronner 2019: 290-291).

In this sense, the internet has perhaps changed the rules of the game, while folklore, unsurprisingly, has adapted to it.²⁰ Referring to memes, McNeill notes how digital folklore often blurs the separation between genres, but the process (the communicative act) is maintained on a larger scale.

Overall, one of the main things we find in digital folk culture is a blurring of the barriers between the levels of culture, so that we get mass-media techniques (film, photography, graphic editing, far-reaching broadcast, etc.) used in the creation and sharing of folklore. We also see a blurring between the genres of folklore, so that we have images and words and actions all coming together in a single form. Is an Internet meme something we say? Something we make? Something we do? Or all three? It's still very much a folk process, just on a different (and generally intriguing and exciting) scale (McNeill 2013: 85).

In addition to a sample of a community created in this current “hyper” context of social networks, the creation of Sant Esteve de les Roures is also a good example of the mechanisms that folklore offers us as a means to endure tragic and stressful situations through humour:

Joking gives people the ability to withstand the stress of tragic events while enabling mass culture to resist the constraints of the emotional control imposed by the media following a tragedy. Humorous expression and other symbolic rhetoric often surfaces in order to alleviate the tensions that may arise from the social anxieties at hand (Blank 2013: 9).

Sant Esteve de les Roures is also the sum of several factors, such as humour about the error in the police report, reacting to the violent actions of the police forces during the referendum of 1 October, and voicing opinions on Spain's reactionary role. As Alan Dundes explains:

Where there is anxiety, there will be jokes to express that anxiety. A society with political repression will generate an abundance of political jokes. Indeed, the more repressive the regime, the more numerous the political jokes (Dundes 1987: vii).

Josep M. Pujol, quoting Propp, gives us another clue about the role of humour, which he also interprets as a sign of intelligence:

Humour has two necessary conditions: spiritual or moral awareness, and external contradiction. But another, very important condition is missing (the two conditions I just referred to are necessary, but not sufficient): the contradiction must occur suddenly and be an authentic revelation to the intelligence, it must be an epiphany. Since humour always presupposes

20 As Josep M. Pujol said, “Understood as a particular kind of communicative act, we must admit that folklore, like matter, is neither created nor destroyed, only transformed, and we need not worry about its preservation as long as two speakers survive on Earth” (Pujol 2013: 272).

an immediate attempt to analyse and overcome a situation or reality, laughter will always be inherent in intelligent people. With laughter we express that we have ultimately found meaning in a rule of behaviour that's been violated (Pujol 2013: 282).

4. Life beyond the internet: the *Bestiari Rourenc*

The people of Sant Esteve de les Roures have gone beyond the virtual, reaching us in tangible form, for example, in the T-shirts and notebooks sold by the university.²¹ Another example of Sant Esteve de les Roures' life beyond the internet is the publication of the *Bestiari Rourenc* (Bestiary of Sant Esteve de les Roures). The book was written by Biel Cussó and illustrated by Sergi Llorens. It is the result of a crowdfunding project launched on 26 June 2018. Of the 4,000 euros initially requested,²² 7,752 euros were donated by 328 people on the Verkami platform.²³

The bestiary is “a collection in encyclopaedia form of the beasts that live or have lived near the village of Sant Esteve de les Roures” which includes “stories starring some of the creatures catalogued”. Although the profile that promoted the project, and was its origin, was anonymous,²⁴ in this case we know who created the book (i.e., the illustrator and the author) because they put their names on it, as we can see below.



Cover of the *Bestiari Rourenc* by Sergi Llorens and Biel Cussó.

²¹ More customisable T-shirts and a tote bag can be found here: <<https://www.latostadora.com/titivil>> [date viewed: June 2022].

²² <<https://www.verkami.com/projects/20757-bestiari-rourenc>> [date viewed: June 2022].

²³ Founded in 2010 in Mataró in the province of Barcelona, it is one of the best known and most used crowdfunding platforms in Europe.

²⁴ <<https://twitter.com/dibuixantsedr>> [date viewed: June 2022].

Some of the beasts related to Catalan popular culture refer to customs and traditions, such as the *aglanets*, shy creatures that live in oak trees. When the children of Sant Esteve de les Roures lose a tooth, they bury it at the foot of an oak tree. The next day they'll find the tooth replaced with a gift (a coin or a bag of nuts). Others are more unpleasant or frightening, such as the *centpeura*, which climbs up the legs of children's beds who don't want to go to bed and pinches and cuts off their toes. Others refer to specific festivals, such as the *cudrac*, which was born in the bonfires on the night of Saint John's Eve. The bestiary also includes stories about some of these creatures that illustrate their traits or some remarkable event. For example, the legend of Sisdits is an example of a confrontation with darkness; Pere Escombra refers to the legend of a scarecrow made of brooms that saves a boy from Sant Esteve from a fire and winds up being burnt, which led to the tradition of putting a scarecrow in home gardens and watering it when the weather starts getting warmer.

5. A town (still) in the news

The Sant Esteve de les Roures phenomenon really began to take off in the months following the publication of the Guardia Civil report that gave the municipality its name. After some time had passed, some of the profiles set up were no longer updated or lost their initial comic freshness. Sant Esteve de les Roures lived on, however, as the following two examples show.

Firstly, on the occasion of the local elections of 26 May 2019, Mariluz Congosto (2019) analysed messages sent by the residents of Sant Esteve de les Roures in relation to the elections in Barcelona, considering that the invented municipality had more than 35,000 followers and was the second most popular Catalan municipality on Twitter after the city of Barcelona itself. The data she analysed shows that:

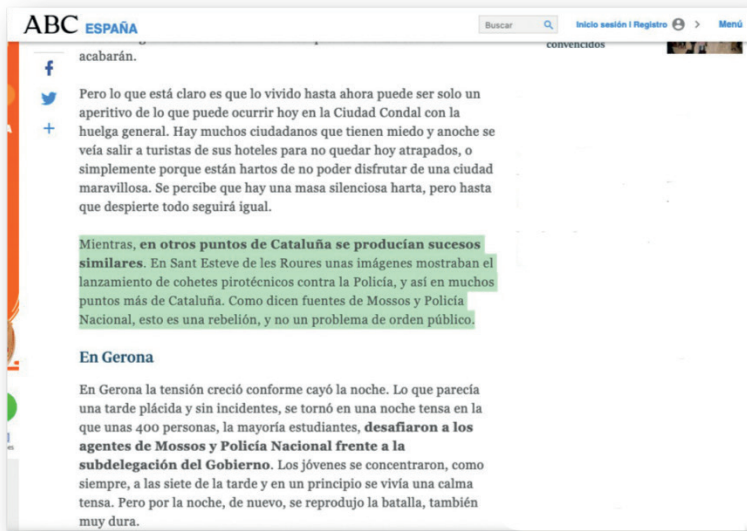
The followers of Sant Esteve de les Roures did not organise for the 26 May election campaign, although some of them eagerly supported Jordi Graupera (@JordiGraupera), Elsa Artadi (@elsa_artadi) and Quim Forn (@quimforn) in the Barcelona municipal elections. In general, they supported content from relevant pro-independence profiles and some humour profiles (Congosto 2019).

Congosto analysed the dissemination of content during the election campaign among the Sant Esteve de les Roures profiles, revealing that two fake profiles (@juliangrau and @anaoromi) were the most active disseminators. By far the most retweeted candidate was Jordi Graupera, followed by Elsa Artadi and Quim Forn. As for dialogue, which showed interaction between profiles (reach, mentions and comments), the result was similar but with a less marked difference, as Artadi and Forn were mentioned more frequently, which compensated for Graupera's reach.

For the second example, we need to go back to 19 October 2019. When covering events in Barcelona during the Catalan general strike on 18 October (called to coincide with the protests against the verdict of the 1 October trial),²⁵

²⁵ The protests against the court verdict in the Catalan independence process were a series of actions that took place in Catalonia following the publication of the verdict on 14 October 2019. The political defendants were unanimously convicted of sedition and embezzlement and the leaders of the civic organisations were convicted of sedition. The political response

the newspaper *ABC* reported on violence on the streets of Barcelona as well as in Sant Esteve de les Roures. In this case, the root of the misunderstanding was a video taken in Barcelona but posted on the Sant Esteve de les Roures Town Council Twitter's profile.



News item from the newspaper *ABC* on 19 October 2019.

6. Conclusions

As the saying goes, truth is sometimes stranger than fiction. Sometimes, a real detail can give rise to an entire imaginary world, as in the case of the municipality of Sant Esteve de les Roures. For a short time, this non-existent town – born of a single one-off mistake that took place exclusively online – had a multitude of services, shops and inhabitants (all virtual, of course) and absolutely no reason to envy other, very real places in this respect. Its existence cannot be explained outside of the specific context from which it emerged, not only in terms of its political and social dimensions, the complicated relations between Catalonia and Spain, which have been amplified in recent years due to the referendum on self-determination held on 1 October and its repercussions, but also because it could not have emerged without the existence of social networks and the internet.

Sant Esteve de les Roures is a good example of the power that humour can have, of how it works, and how, in this day and age, we can build communities by using imagination and ingenuity. Since time immemorial, Catalan popular culture has had a variety of fantastic places, from Mirmanda to Muntanya Blava, via the Illa d'Or, as Joan de Déu Prats and Maria Padilla write in their encyclopaedia *Indrets*

was limited to encouraging street demonstrations, while the citizen response was led by organisations such as the Democratic Tsunami, the Catalan National Assembly, Òmnium Cultural and the Committees for the Defence of the Republic (CDR).

fantàstics de Catalunya (Fantastic Places in Catalonia) (2019). This map should also include the municipality of Sant Esteve de les Roures, a town that was full of life for a few months and served as a humorous and critical vehicle for the difficult social and political situation in Catalonia.

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