

# **Masking Political Engagement: Television Coverage of a Mass Demonstration in Barcelona**

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## **Reference.**

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## **Abstract**

This article analyzes how statewide and regional public television in Spain handled the demonstration held on 11 September 2012 (National Day of Catalonia) in Barcelona under the slogan “Catalonia, a New European State”. The author performed a content analysis of 58 news programs and a narrative analysis of 89 stories. The results indicate that the majority of the channels offered limited coverage of the demonstration. The television narratives also minimized the role of citizen agency in the achievement of goals through democratic participation and displayed a depoliticized account. The author argues that the coverage of the march and its consequences resulted in a masking of citizens’ political engagement; far from promoting an understanding of why the march was so massively supported, it instead presented a story on politicians’ strategy. The author relates this case with a wider trend of media coverage of citizens’ protests in a Western post-democratic context.

## **Keywords**

Democracy; Demonstrations coverage; Mediatization; Political conflict; Public Television; Television News

## **Introduction**

In this article my aim is to explore how public television channels in Spain, both regional (known as autonomous) and state, dealt with the information about the mass demonstration that took place in Barcelona on 11 September 2012 (the National Day of Catalonia). The event gathered together between 1.5 million and six hundred thousand people in the streets clamoring for self-determination.<sup>1</sup> Applying regular television journalistic practices, the analyzed channels offered very different reports of this demonstration, in some cases clearly minimizing it and in others ignoring its acute political significance. The different ways this political event was shown on television also presented opposing interpretations of the meaning of the role of citizens in processes of profound political restructuring.

One of the main ideas being advocated here is that the television news emphasized the role of politicians and their subsequent statements and counter-statements, while playing down the importance of the popular mobilization in Catalonia. Apart from this journalistic focus on statements, the political and economic reasons behind the mobilization were scarcely explored. Instead, secondary aspects or even some that were exogenous to the organization of the event were highlighted. One of the largest demonstrations since the advent of democracy in Spain was not properly reported, nor was it explained so the viewer could understand the context, or make sense of the motivations and goals of the participants. The discussion of this case is developed within a theoretical approach that progresses

bordering relevant concepts as media framing, the mediation and mediatization of conflicts, and the media logic that drives processes of masking politics or hiding injuries, in this case of a national community.

### **The Media and Conflict**

Among the conditions necessary for a democracy to be operational are not only a system of political freedom and freedom of expression, but also an ethical and responsible functioning of the media, especially those that are publicly owned. This should not be taken for granted, even in the case of a public space in a society where freedom of expression is guaranteed. In this context, Neil Washbourne (2010: 9-12) describes some of the ways the media hinder, threaten and even put to an end democratic politics, including the trivialization of politics, promotion of apathy among citizens and fomenting public mistrust of their representatives. The trivialization of political issues, politically biased explanations, excessive stress on presenting news as entertainment, electoral focusing and framing centred on the conflict between candidates can lead to what Joseph Capella and Kathleen H. Jamieson (1997) call a “spiral of cynicism”, with a consequent loss of democratic quality.

But more than the framing of conflict as an inherent narrative of political news, perhaps what has a greater negative impact in promoting public apathy is the presentation of these narratives as pure strategies, i.e., through the so-called strategic or game framing (Aalberg, et al., 2013, Lawrence, 2010), in which political strategy becomes the main narrative engine of the news stories. When this tactic is adopted, the classical scheme drawn up by Robert Entman (1993) to define the interpretive frameworks (problem definition, causality, moral judgment and suggested solutions) becomes a narrative not only of easy consumption, but also often with a Manichean structure and superficial treatment. The result is that this hinders a deep understanding of complex political issues.

In the present case, it is clear that the coverage of a political demonstration involves a dual dynamic of mediation and mediatization. According to several authors (Couldry 2008, Hjarvard 2008, Strömbäck and Esser 2009), the two concepts should be differentiated since mediation does not consider the transformative capacity of the media, or the interdependence of all social and cultural spheres of the media system, understood in a very broad sense. In other words, the media mediate the event so that the public not in personal attendance can access information through the media accounts (among others). Overall, the core idea in the concept of mediatization is the consideration of media as “agents” (Hjarvard 2013) and not only as mere “mediators” of society. But considering the difference between mediation and mediatization should not bring us to understand these processes as separate. Indeed, the mediatization only progresses as a process when mediation starts working through the account of events. Therefore, and as Castelló (2012a) and de Vresse (2014) state, mediatization and media framing are linked processes in the sense that journalistic frames “transforms” politics into the media logics. Demonstrations in particular are mediatized events in that they have been transformed by adapting to media treatment, and their organization takes into account multiple elements to provide suggestive images and messages that work to achieve certain aims. Yet we can also consider when viewers’ watch the journalistic coverage of the event *as mediatization*, because it is through this story that the public constructs an understanding of what this social effort means. Therefore, the analysis of mediatization must take in account the mediation of politics, because it is the mediation that rules mediatization logics.

The mediatization of political conflicts, which is part of what Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999) named *mediatization of politics*, is particularly significant in how these conflicts are presented and, above all, whether they are socially defined as “political” or not. Socially constructed concepts like “risk” or “conflict” are constituted *within* (and not only *through*)

communication processes, rather than being merely transmitted by the “medium” of the media and public sphere. As Simon Cottle stated (2006a; 2006b), the mediatization of the conflict entails the media *acting* within this controversy and not limiting themselves to *reporting* on it. Further, it must be added that *reporting* is *acting* on the controversy. In his ordering of media theories about political conflict, Cottle describes that in the *media contest* paradigm, the dynamics are complex enough to include different voices and viewpoints on a given controversy. The power of media to obtain information would, in a sense, assure diversity and limit control by authorities or economic powers in democratic contexts. The position I adopt here would fall between what Cottle terms the *media contest* and the *media culture* paradigms, as I focus on the study of representation, while avoiding the media centrism criticized by Cottle (2006: 28), since these complex processes of building meaning are not operating exclusively *in* the media.

Media logic (Altheide 2013a), especially that of television and the mainstream media, is governed by a complex web of industrial, commercial and ideological criteria, which intervene in narratives and how they are expressed. This process can be observed not only in stories about political conflict, but also in reports on social risks (i.e. the legalization of weapons, social violence or crimes, health problems, drug issues), or other areas where the definition of a fact or event as “a risk” or “a conflict” has political, economic and legal implications. In these processes, certain meanings or interpretive frameworks of an event or issue are often highlighted, while others are discarded or blurred. This trend has been observed in UK politics and journalism by Lewis et al. (2005: 5), when observing that “leading political parties and the news media have helped to impoverish popular ideas about politics”, and “at the same time, the news media have, for some time, attached negative value to the conflicts that are at the very heart of political debate”. Nick Couldry (2001, 2012) suggests that it is precisely in highly mediated societies where, not only are the messages

and information on various topics inflated, but also where a mechanism of media's "hidden injuries" operates. These injuries refer to a gap between the mediated representation and social reality, both political and private, and to the capacity and power of the media to devalue ordinary citizens, as well as their claims and arguments, as the sites of meaning and value (Couldry 2001, 161).

Adding to this discussion, David Altheide (2013b, 98-102) recently introduced the concept of *shielding risk* to refer to "the strategic use of dominant cultural symbols, narratives and communication formats to deflect and often negate claims about risks." Here, shielding implies shadowing or hiding a specific frame by emphasizing other narratives and understandings of a controversial social or political issue. This phenomenon is evident when the media act by making controversies invisible, or even "protecting" the public from them; so when media coverage avoids or even denies the existence of a risk or a conflict, the consequences of citizen actions are minimized. I graft this consideration to the study of "political conflict" in that the media also tend to shield conflict when they deflect or even negate existing citizenship claims. In this way, the media downplay the agency of citizens as subjects who intervene in processes of political, economic or social reform. In the case of the television coverage of demonstrations, the political system is "protected" in the coverage; meanwhile the political aims of citizens tend to be masked. The result is that "politics" is a sphere reserved for "politicians." Applying the meaning that Peter Dalhgren (2012) assigns to the "civic subject", good journalism should be capable of helping to understand the political actions of these subjects as rational, reflexive, transparent and contingent. Good journalism should not dilute civic voices into a mass that seems to be reacting in a manipulated or a monolithic manner that follows certain political leaders.

There are two ontological debates related to the constitution and use of political conflicts by the media and in public communication. First, historically, the concept of "conflict" has

been seen as “a problem”, which is usually related to an undesirable situation that needs to be eradicated and is gradually considered as an anomaly in the functionalist approach (for an early articulation of this debate, see Lewis Coser 1956); in the media, conflicts are usually stories that should not have occurred, involving troublemakers and solvers. Second, there is the social context of the depoliticization of governance, which some authors have identified as post-democratic (Crouch 2005). Depoliticization is a strategy that has been used by governments and political parties (mostly neoliberal) in issues like immigration (Cunningham 2014) or natural resources (Hogenboom 2012, Ureña 2012) or food production and consumption (Maessele 2013), and basically implies depriving a given controversy or social activity of its political meaning. Once the discourse of depoliticization is established, it is considered that the issue should be managed or solved in other arenas (for example, as a mere economic or legal issue). The media can obviously underline these discourses, even when covering a demonstration as political expression. As I defend in this article, depoliticization can be even a process imbued in reports on citizens’ participation in demonstrations. Lewis et al (2005, 17) noted that despite demonstrations can be seen as the “epitome of active citizenship” and a “hallmark of a democratic society”, they are often represented as a kind of exceptionality of a silent majority. These authors also note that journalism often focus on violent incidents and clashes with the police: “The protester is thus lurching from the role of citizen to the role of criminal”. Here, the mechanisms to depoliticise a political event tends to focus the stories on economic aspects (via a “crisis”) or on legal consequences of specific attitudes (via “violence”), meanwhile politics and political thought are reserved for politicians’ statements. Hence, the binomial concept of “political conflict” is in many cases avoided or not tackled in the public sphere as such.

### **Contextual and methodological notes**

The Spanish broadcasting map includes television corporations in the Basque Country (1982), Catalonia (1983), Galicia (1985), Andalusia (1989), Madrid (1989) and Valencia (1989)<sup>ii</sup>, followed by other regional television channels in the Canary Islands, Aragon, Murcia, and so on. This regional media structure in the country affects the media discourses related to any type of conflict: “The existence of established political communities in the Spanish panorama involves the preparation of ideologized discourse for consumption by these communities” (Castelló 2012b, 225). This system, today experiencing a severe financial crisis, has espoused political and regional pluralism towards the coverage of political current affairs in the languages of the stateless-nation territories, namely: Catalonia, Basque Country and Galicia.

There have been various studies carried out on Spanish regional television from the perspective of political economy (Corominas and López 1995; López et al. 1999; Miguel de Bustos and Casado 2012). Even so, comparative analyses of regional television channels regarding the content of their programming, the discourse they articulate on political news, and their cultural specificities related to genres are fewer or almost non-existent. The importance of this is that more than constructing “structural” communication spaces, regional television channels in Spain have also been building “symbolic” communication regions, with audiences becoming accustomed to proximity accounts of current affairs.

Within this context of television broadcasting, on 11 September 2012 hundreds of thousands of people congregated in Barcelona under the slogan, “Catalonia, a New European State.” Held to celebrate the National Day of Catalonia, the event became one of the most significant demonstrations since democracy was reestablished in Spain in 1977 after Francisco Franco’s dictatorship (1939-1975). The political consequences of the protest were immediate, and the media repercussions were felt on a global scale. The day after the demonstration, the Catalan President Artur Mas (2012b) made a solemn declaration in the

Catalan Parliament about the need to provide Catalonia with the “structures of a state”, while all the political parties stated their position towards the demonstration. Mas then went to Madrid, where he spoke of holding a referendum in Catalonia (Mas 2012a). He also met with the organizers of the demonstration, the association *Assemblea Nacional Catalana* (Catalan National Assembly, ANC)<sup>iii</sup>. Within four days, the demonstration of 2012 in Barcelona had become a political turning point, driven by the citizens towards a referendum for self-determination. The governing moderate right-wing political coalition for Catalonia, *Convergència i Unió* (CiU) took a standpoint clearly in favor of a referendum. At the time of writing, Catalan Government is studying how to carry out a referendum (scheduled for November 9<sup>th</sup> 2014) despite the fierce opposition of the Spanish Government.

The study corpus comprised 58 news programs, each averaging 50 minutes, with an approximate total of 48 hours of television. These programs included the mid-day and evening news broadcasts between 11 and 16 September 2012 for the five largest regional television channels outside of Catalonia, as well as the national Spanish television station (TVE). The regional stations included were Canal 9 of Valencia (C9), Canal Sur of Andalusia (Csur), *Euskal Telebista* of the Basque Country (ETB), *Telemadrid* of Madrid (TM) and *Televisión de Galicia* (TVG)<sup>iv</sup>. The Catalan public station (TV3) was excluded for its continuous coverage of the event throughout the time period studied and because the objective of the research was, precisely, to analyze how the issue was reported in other regions of Spain.

Our method was inspired by other systematic studies (Ellis 2006; Robertson 2010) that combine quantitative data and a narrative analysis to study TV news. For the quantitative analysis, on each day and each channel we recorded the amount of time dedicated to the demonstration in Barcelona and/or its immediate political consequences (e.g. declarations or meetings), as well as how the story was placed in relation to others, in order to weigh the

importance of the story relative to others in the same broadcast. The quantitative data provided the basis for conducting the qualitative analysis. This included a formal reading of the news content and narratives, taking into account the position of the topic in relation to other issues (a macro-level of analysis) and the internal structure of each story (a micro-level of analysis).

## **Results**

News of the demonstration of 11 September 2012 and its subsequent events were presented as something unusual, decontextualized, and even dangerous by the national and regional television stations. The coverage on each case, however, was notably variable. While some regional channels (e.g. Andalusia) practically ignored the event, others (e.g. Madrid) tried to contain it in a narrative that stressed the discourse of Catalans as manipulated people and focused on minor radical incidents. In one case, that of Basque TV (ETB), which diverged from these positions, a deeper analysis and context was found, as it tried to explain the complexity of the political situation through a range of sources and news stories.

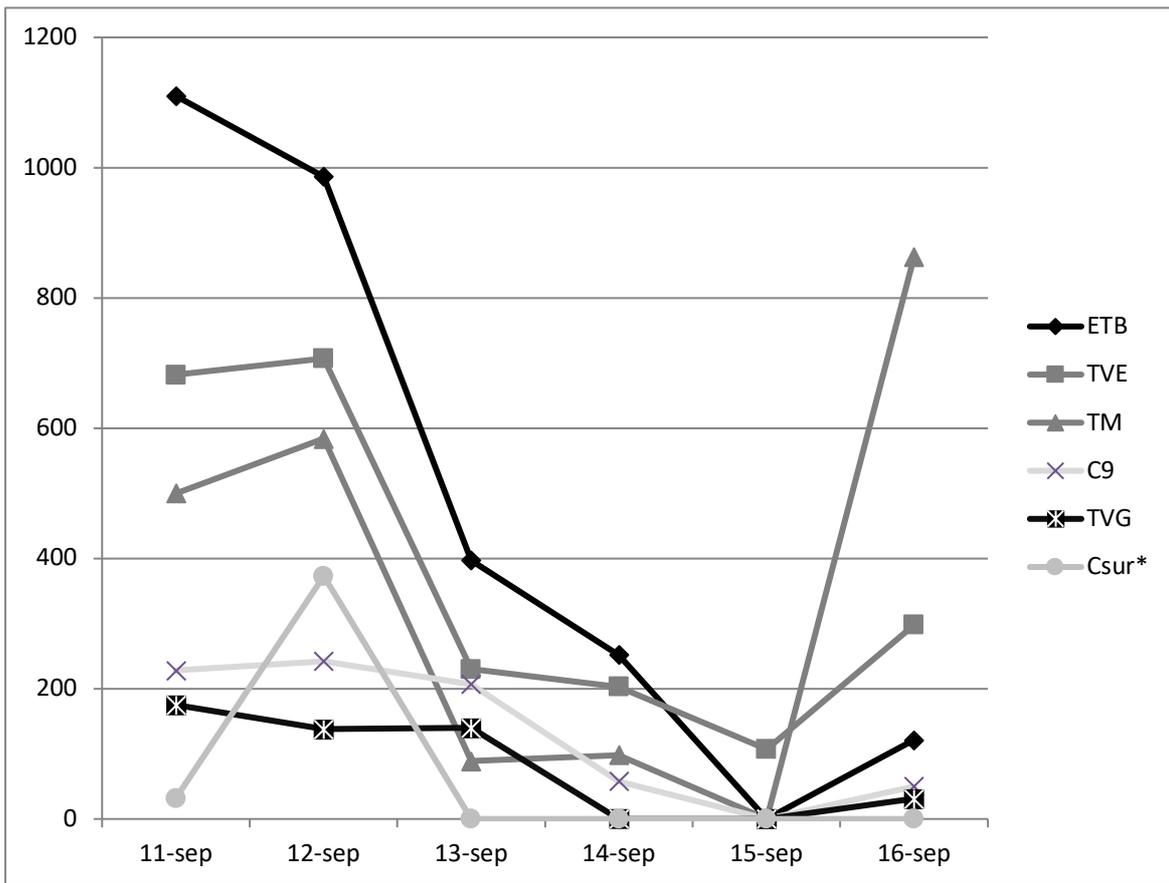
### *Quantitative data*

Over the six days studied, the television channels broadcast a total of 89 television pieces that dealt with the demonstration or its direct political consequences for a total of 148 minutes. Yet most of the stories and time dedicated were broadcast on only two stations: ETB and TVE. Together they were responsible for 56.2% of all the news stories broadcast and 57.2% of the total time. The other channels lagged behind, with Canal Sur of Andalusia having the sparsest coverage.

The data also reveals a decreasing interest in the topic over time. Except for ETB and TVG, all the channels gave more weight to the news the day after the demonstration (12 September) –when politicians offered some statements– than on the evening it took place.<sup>v</sup> Thereafter the coverage among all the stations continued to decline, both in quantity and placement until it virtually disappeared from most of the stations on day four of the conflict. On the first day, TVE included information on the National Day of Catalonia from minutes 18 and 19 in each of the editions, relegating the specific news about the mass demonstration in Barcelona to minute 20. After receiving criticism, the management of TVE had to provide explanations, admitting an “error of judgment”, while the News Board<sup>vi</sup> issued a report, qualifying the error as “bad practice” (Gómez and García de Blas 2012).

In the case of ETB, its Teleberris not only provided a large amount of information on the issue, but also generally placed the news in the first position, from minute 5 of each news program (after the titles, headlines and introduction) or very soon after the first stories (at minutes 10 or 14). The television channels from Madrid (TM), Valencia (C9), Galicia (TVG) and Andalusia (CSur) provided different amounts of information that decreased during the week, and the story was generally relegated to a secondary or even tertiary status. In Valencia, the issue disappeared from the headlines on the evening of the 12<sup>th</sup> (day 2), the only channel not to include the topic in the headlines that day (even though the information was placed at minute 7). By Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> September, the issue was “dead” for all the regional television channels, while TVE timidly maintained it. On Sunday 16<sup>th</sup>, because of some declarations by the leader of the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (Spanish Socialist Party, PSOE), it was again timidly placed on the agenda, especially by Telemadrid.

**Figure 1. Time by channel and day (in seconds)**



\* On 15 and 16 December Canal Sur did not broadcast an evening news program.

If we observe all the information offered per channel, it is apparent that a regional channel such as ETB (that broadcasts for the Basque Country) offered more global information than the public channel La1 (that broadcasts for the whole of Spain, including Catalonia). It is also notable that throughout the week, the Andalusian Canal Sur dedicated little more than six minutes of information to an issue that can be regarded as of considerable importance – particularly when taking into account the high population of Andalusian immigrants and their descendents that live in Catalonia, and the persisting links between this population and Andalusia. Finally, the contrast between the weight given by Telemadrid and that offered by Canal 9 is notable: while the former addresses an audience living in the Community of Madrid, the latter is directed at the Valencians, people of another region with strong cultural

and economic ties with Catalonia. It can therefore be seen that coverage of the event based on geographical or cultural proximity, usually a key aspect of journalistic criteria of newsworthiness, was even contradictory.

### *Qualitative analysis*

The qualitative analysis included the six stations. Narrative analysis focuses on the relationship not only between subjects and actions, and also about the topics and issues (themes) and their ordering (structure). We distinguished two levels of analysis: a macro-level, which considered the larger overall structure of the program and the relationship between the specific stories on the demonstration and the whole storyline, and a micro-level, which focused on the news story structure, and subjects and topics within the stories. Beyond the insignificance granted to the demonstration in Barcelona by TVE on the first day and the political and professional repercussions of this “error of judgment” for its directors, the narratives of Telediario by La1 offered little context or explanation for the event. At a macro-narrative level, TVE’s news about the demonstration usually appeared after stories on the granting of conditional freedom to members of the terrorist group ETA (TD1, 11/09/2012; TD2, 12/09/2012; TD1 and TD2, 13/09/2012), the recession and public debt (TD1 and TD2, 14/09/2012), or the apologies to the victims of ETA (TD1, 16/09/2012). Therefore, the macro-narratives of La1 placed the story behind other news related to terrorism, recession, or economic problems. The Spanish public channel narratives usually concluded with declarations from political leaders, such as the spokesperson for the Government of Spain. On several occasions, these *resolvers* pointed out that the priority for Spain is unemployment (TD1, September 12, 2012) or that it was necessary to think more in terms of “Europe” and less in terms of division (TD1, September 12, 2012; TD2, September 15, 2012). One added

that “the Government is working to guarantee public services in Catalonia out of loyalty” (TD2, September 13, 2012), and focusing on the public deficit (TD2, September 14, 2012).

The micro-narratives of the breaking news TVE tended to present the demonstration and the declarations of Catalan political leaders in the analysis section of a story in which the Catalan politicians and their claims were part of the problem. In contrast, the official versions of the event from the Spanish Government and the governing party (Partido Popular, People’s Party, PP) were included in the stories’ resolution. The general story thus presented a Catalan government and Catalonian politicians determined to “divide” the country, and a Spanish Government working to improve the economy and employment, getting the country out of recession and ensuring public services “out of loyalty” (which by omission leads to its antonym in the sphere of disloyalty). The concepts of “threats” (“amenaza”) or “challenges” (“desafío”) on the lips of political leaders of the PP and PSOE contrasted with the scarcity or lack of those representing the demonstration organizers, the participants, or the other political forces that favored a referendum.

The narrative of the statewide public television was reinforced by the regional channel Telemadrid (TM). Based in Madrid, TM serves the political center of Spain and a region with a large demographic proportion of the state as a whole. Among the regional channels, TM was second after the Basque channel in the amount of time dedicated to the topic. Unlike TVE, TM dedicated individual pieces to historical context to reinforce a particular story about the relationship between Catalonia and Spain. For example, a feature on the floral offering to Rafael Casanova edited images of institutional commemorative acts with images of others who burned photographs of the King of Spain in 1714 Felipe V and King Juan Carlos I (EFE/Ara 2013)<sup>vii</sup>. These effigy burnings were significant because, in Spain, the burning of flags or any insults to the King’s image are considered “invectives to the Crown” and can be punished by two years in prison. The stories did not successfully explain exactly

where and when these incidents took place. Later, experts reported that in 1714, “the Catalan population were strong supporters of Felipe”, and that “possibly not one single Catalan identifies with what there is now” (TN2, September 11, 2012). Flag burning again was a focal point of the TM narrative on the second day. In that micro-narrative, the incident directly linked radical groups with the official appearance of President Mas (TN3, September 12, 2012). For the Madrid channel, the story of the demonstration was explained in these images; even the presenter began the story with the phrase, “We are going to look at three images that say it all”:

The independence demonstration ended, as you can see, with the burning of the Spanish flag. Today it is the President of the Generalitat Artur Mas who speaks of providing Catalonia with the structures of a State. He does it by challenging with symbols. Without the Spanish flag, as you can see (Telenoticias, 12 September 2012, 3rd edition).<sup>viii</sup>

The radical act of flag burning was thus associated with the absence of the flag at the institutional speech of President Mas; and this was within a story that concentrated on the Catalans rising up against Spain: “The same Spain from which they are asking for a bail-out of five thousand and twenty-three million Euros” (TN3, September 12, 2012). In this narrative, the Catalans were presented as a collective that bites the hand that feeds it. The images of symbolic violence were highlighted. However, recent reports have suggested that the burning of flags and images of Spanish kings could have taken place during another meeting, and not the main demonstration (EFE/Ara 2013). In the words of other journalists, the demonstration was explained as an example of civic attitudes (Pi 2012), and overall, the stories in mainstream media did not specially highlight altercations or acts of violence (eg. see Burgen 2012; Goodman 2012; Minder 2012; or, Piñol 2012). TM’s macro-narrative

jumped to one story covering the King's next visit to Barcelona (to inaugurate a new terminal at the port), and thus contrasted the anti-statist protest with a pro-statist story on the region. Another story showed some survey data on voting intentions in Catalonia. The program ended with an extensive analysis piece, with opinions from experts and journalists. This piece made an effort to present the demands for independence as something irrational and even visceral. A story about Mas's upcoming visit to Madrid to discuss the Fiscal Pact with the Spanish President Mariano Rajoy was framed as a charity mission, stating Mas "will come to Madrid, not to request independence, but to ask for money" (TN2, September 16, 2012).

In stressing certain elements of the demonstration, TM provided a narrative that depoliticized the expression of the participants. It did this by situating the event in the economic, or even the criminal-legal sphere, while framing Mas' actions as a crude political strategy to improve Catalonia's finances. An issue of flag burning in radical actions that were not clearly attached to the main demonstration, masked the political meanings in citizens' public claims in the streets; this focus avoided a richer explanation for the reasons behind the demonstration and its context.<sup>ix</sup>

The Andalusian, Galician and Valencian television channels clearly offered fewer narratives than TVE and TM did. Like Canal Sur in Andalusia or TM, Valencian Canal 9 has a magazine-style news program. During that week, Canal 9 tended to give priority to positive news on the PP-led regional government, information that in the words of President Rajoy contrasted sharply with the "trouble" ("lío") and "the dispute" ("disputa") in Catalonia. On the macro-level, Canal 9 also emphasized the burning of a flag in the midday news broadcast (NT9, September 11, 2012), which was also out of context, since the mass demonstration took place later that afternoon. As already mentioned, these images were apparently not directly related to the demonstration or the institutional acts of 11 September.

A connection was nevertheless established by running a piece on these events, which, in this case, took place the night before. In the studied period, the most interesting day on Canal 9 was perhaps September 12, when the demonstration was quickly tied to Spain's international problems. After reviewing the repercussions of the event in international media, the story concluded: "Now Spain has more than just debt problems." In this way, the demonstration was clearly shown to be the source of the problem.

Overall, the Valencian TV chose to give a little information and hardly any context was offered. The declarations of central government MPs were prioritized and little background was provided to help understand the Catalan situation in political, economic or cultural terms. The macro-narratives also placed the issue in a sequence with autonomous community deficits, economic confidence, and issues related with terrorism in the Basque country. The viewer does not hear any Catalan politician, other than the declaration by President Mas. As on the other channels analyzed, it was not possible to evaluate the internal complexity of Catalan politics, or ideological nuances and standpoints in relation to the demonstration.

The Telexornal offered to the Galician audience minimal information on the demonstration and its political repercussions. The longest reports were on the day of the march and the day after, including images from the Catalan television channel. The pre-eminent subjects at the micro-narrative level were politicians representing the Catalan government, the socialist opposition and the Spanish government. The Galician politicians were situated very differently, with the President of the Xunta (the Galician parliament), Núñez Feijoo (PP), presented as the *rectifier* of a radicalized Mas. The Spanish politicians almost invariably appeared as the solutions to a problem generated by the demands of the Catalan President. The micro-narratives made the claim by the Catalan government seem absurd and evacuated the demonstrators' visions of Catalan society and politics.

Andalusian television provided only token coverage of the event. As with the others, the channel used the demonstration as an opportunity to promote regional President José Antonio Griñán (Socialist Party) as a defender of regional interests. Compared to other channels, however, there were more critical allusions to the central government (ruled by the conservative PP), highlighting the fact that Spanish president Mariano Rajoy “did not make any declarations” in regards of the Catalan demonstration.

Only ETB offered exceptional coverage of the demonstration, the political reactions to it, and the consequences of it in Catalonia. On the day of the demonstration, the Basque public channel sent a correspondent to provide a live report. The organizers of the demonstration, the civic organization ANC, were named. These names should have been essential from a journalistic point of view, but they were omitted in the stories by most of the other autonomous television channels. ETB more accurately differentiated between the official acts that morning and the mass demonstration that afternoon. Tangible information evidenced the scope of public participation: 1.5 million people, 300 notable journalists, 20 accredited foreign media sources. ETB followed Mas’s English-language address—an unusual but important effort to communicate to an international public (TB, September 11, 2012).

In the following days, reports covered Mas and the reactions of various parties extensively, moving the main narrative to Barcelona, while also making comparisons within Basque politics. The shift to a Basque viewpoint did not prevent journalists from accurate fact-checking; one anchor even corrected himself on the air. The coverage notably included information on the context, political agenda, and background of the situation in Catalonia. In addition to the official sources, it gave a voice to diverse Catalan parties, such as those which were backing independence, and included the opinions of Basque political organizations (TB, September 12, 2012). ETB was the only television channel that gave

voice directly to the ANC (TB, September 14, 2012), the organizers of the demonstration, their goals and values. The flag burning images, indeed irrelevant if compared with the overall peaceful march, were conspicuously absent to give a prominence to the participants' voices and reasons.

### **Concealing a political conflict**

Through a variety of mechanisms, the demonstration held on September 11 2012 in Barcelona was minimized or narrated in such a way that its political meaning was displaced. From this case study, I conclude that public TV coverage masked politics, by concealing political meanings in their mediation and mediatization. The quantity of television stations' protest coverage was less related to the cultural or geographical proximity of their audiences, and more related to other ideological imperatives that were driven by non-journalistic concerns. To illustrate, the highest regional coverage of the conflict was in the Basque country, while Valencia, a neighboring region sharing a cultural and political history with Catalonia, had some of the lowest coverage. With the exception of ETB, the quality of journalistic coverage was similarly poor. Stories omitted the presence of the organizers as some of the main actors in the unfolding events and gave scarcely any explanatory information about the participants. The television channels replicated a Manichaean discourse that posited the Catalan politicians and the demonstrators part of the *problem* and the politicians of the central and/or regional Governments as the best *solution*. Citizen voices were masked and became pawns of the institutional or official sources.

TVE combined an initial strategy of minimizing the political conflict, with a secondary strategy of bending the narratives around the demonstration. At first, station officials explained that their lack of coverage was an "error of judgment" (Gómez and García de Blas, 2012), but the subsequent increase in coverage only concurred with a rigid narrative

formulated by government officials. TVE's excessive deference to officials is not exceptional among Spanish stations (García 2003; Gómez 2006; O'Donnell and Castelló 2011; Piedrahita 2010; Retis, Lamuedra and Matilla 2010). In January 2013, the European Council raised concern over political interference in Radio Televisión Española. The Council placed Spain alongside Hungary, Italy, Romania, Serbia and Ukraine, as countries in which public television companies are under high levels of political pressure (Doncel 2013).

In general, the mediation of the mass demonstration resulted in a story that neglected the political expression of the citizens in favour of emphasizing the role of political leaders, their political party tactics, and other extra-political arguments about the economy. The main narratives restricted citizens' agency, while highlighting anecdotal or lateral events. These provided little information about the political, economic and social context that would decode citizens' expression. I consider these narratives as evidence of the "hidden injuries" imposed by the media (Couldry, 2001, 2012), on an entire community of people which mobilized to participate in politics. By stressing politicians' tactics or other anecdotal aspects of those days, the media masked the expressions of civic subjects in the public sphere.

The result of this type of depoliticization is that "the political" is reserved as a sphere for politicians, while organized citizens are excluded from the political logics. This is part of a wider professional phenomenon in Western societies, where almost everything is susceptible to being explained in economic and financial terms. When showing citizen mobilization and protests, these narratives (ab)use the plasticity of images (squares and streets colorfully occupied) at the same time as (re)moving their political significance or displacing it towards stories of shocking violence. In other occasions, the reports just focus on an anecdote of an unusual, funny or disgusting placard or behavior of some of the demonstrators, so one cannot see the forest for the trees.

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<sup>i</sup> September 11<sup>th</sup> is the National Day of Catalonia and commemorates the defeat of Barcelona by King Phillip V of Spain in 1714, during the War of Spanish Succession, which led to the loss of the self-governance of Catalonia. The figure was 1.5 million according to the Catalan Government and six hundred thousand according to the Spanish authorities.

<sup>ii</sup> Valencian TV public corporation was closed by the regional government on November 2013.

<sup>iii</sup> ANC is a civic association fostering the independence of Catalonia. More info available here: <http://catalanassembly.org/>, last access March 26 2014.

<sup>iv</sup> The specific channels analyzed were La1 (Telediario at 3 and 9 pm), ETB2 (Teleberri Mediodía, Teleberri Noche and Teleberri Fin de semana), TVG1 (Telexornal Mediodia, Telexornal Mediodia FDS, Telexornal Serán, Telexornal Seran FDS), Telemadrid (Telenoticias 1, Telenoticias 2 and Telenoticias Fin de Semana), Canal 9 (NT9 1a ed, NT9 2a ed.), Canal Sur (Canal Sur Noticias, midday and evening editions). On 15 and 16 December Canal Sur did not broadcast an evening news programme. The Basque channel analyzed was ETB2, which broadcasts in Spanish.

<sup>v</sup> The only exception to this rule was on Canal Sur, which issued a very short piece (32 seconds) on the protest on the first day but then stopped prominent coverage.

<sup>vi</sup> The News Board is an internal organism of TVE's workers that controls quality and professional practice.

<sup>vii</sup> Casanova was a Catalan military commander and war hero of the 1714's defeat of Barcelona.

<sup>viii</sup> Generalitat is the name to refer the Government system of Catalonia, which dates from XII Century.

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<sup>ix</sup> The trans-program macro-narrative of Telemadrid has gone so far as to link images of Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler and Artur Mas in news programs (see García 2013; Roger 2013), in a comparison on their communication strategies, which was reported to the European Parliament by means of a parliamentary question by various MPs (European Parliament 2013).