MANAGING THE MEDIA AND POLITICIANS’ RELATIONSHIP IN THE CONTEXT OF THE INDEPENDENCE REFERENDUMS IN SCOTLAND AND CATALONIA

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According to the media system models established by Hallin and Mancini (2004) the relationship between the media and the political sphere is highly professionalized in Scotland whereas in Catalonia there is a closer relationship between both spheres. In that sense, it can be assumed that the way political parties are managing their media relationships in the context of the independence referendums can be divergent.

This article explores the relationship between the political and the media sphere from the perspective of the political public relations practitioners (also known as spin doctors) that manage media relations within political parties in Catalonia and Scotland. The goal is to analyse how these practitioners understand and control these relationships in a context of high political activity such as the independence debate in Scotland and the campaign for a possible referendum in Catalonia.

In this case, the tone of the relationship is perceived as hostile by spin doctors both in Catalonia and Scotland. However, the reaction to that perceived media hostility and the subsequent management of the communications strategy is different due to the characteristics of each media system model. Catalonia’s spin doctors frame their relationship with the media in a more polarized and radical frame whereas Scottish spin doctors frame those relationships in a context of a fair game. Therefore we can assume in general terms that the celebration of a referendum alters the power equilibrium between the political
and the media sphere resulting in an increased perception of media hostility towards political parties.

INTRODUCTION

How are political parties managing their media relations in a referendum scenario? Who are the big heads behind the political media campaign machinery in Scotland and Catalonia? During the past few years and due to the latest political developments, some scholars have compared the singularities and similarities of Catalonia and Scotland regarding their political systems and national identity. However Catalonia and Scotland belong to two different media systems: the Polarized Pluralist Model and the Liberal Model (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). These models determine that the relationship between the political sphere and the media sphere are different in both cases leading to a closer relationship between those two in Catalonia and a more professionalized and differentiated one in Scotland. Consequently, it can be assumed that the way political parties in Scotland and Catalonia are managing their media relationships in the context of the independence referendum can be divergent.

To understand better that divergence we will proceed as it follows. In the next section I will elaborate on the comparison between Scotland and Catalonia and the specifics of each independence referendum. Then I will review some of the theories about the uniqueness of referendum campaigns and the consequences they have for news media and political parties and the characteristics of each media system model. Following that I will analyse the data obtained from in-depth interviews with the Head of Media or Communications Director of political parties in Scotland and Catalonia. In the final section I will discuss the main findings and implications.

This paper is part of a larger study that analyses the main characteristics and professional identity of spin doctors in Catalonia and Scotland.
Catalonia and Scotland have been largely compared by scholars interested on topics such as nationalism or political autonomy (Solano, 2007; Greer, 2007; Keating, 1996; Moreno, 1988; Paquin, 2001). As described by Solano (2007), historically Catalonia and Scotland have used each other as political references. According to Geer (2007:15) these two countries “are often presented as easily comparable”. The main reasons for this easy comparison are because they are both middle-sized stateless nations; relatively recent autonomy and they are both exponents of a civic nationalism.

Furthermore, nowadays Catalonia and Scotland are undergoing similar political processes. In both cases, nationalistic political parties are now demanding complete independence for these territories. In Scotland’s case, these demands have been translated in the set up of a referendum that will take place on the 18th of September. Scottish citizens will be asked if Scotland should be an independent nation. The results of the referendum will be recognised by both Scottish and UK government. However in Catalonia’s case political parties and both governments in Madrid and Barcelona have not reached an agreement for the celebration of the referendum. Catalonia’s regional government has set up a date for an independence referendum on the 9th of November 2014. Nonetheless this referendum has only been approved by Catalonia’s Parliament but it is still illegal according to Spanish Constitution.

In the scenario of the celebration of a referendum in Catalonia, the results of the ballots will not be considered legal by the Spanish government. Catalonia’s scenario is certainly still in debate however in both cases the political media campaign for and against an independent country has already started. In that sense, despite the existing differences in the legal side of both referendums, there is space for comparing the implications and characteristics of their political media referendum campaigns and specifically the interplay between the political and the media sphere in those campaigns.

In the context of any election campaign the levels of interplay between the media and the political sphere are higher. Nevertheless, some scholars point out that nowadays there is little difference between the way politics is done
during election period and non-election periods due to what it has been called as the permanent campaign phenomenon (Blumenthal, 1982). This phenomenon has been described as the “perpetual campaign mode” in which every political movement (pollsters, media coverage, fund-raising, lobbying activities...) is done in the same intensity as in the election period (Ornstein & Mann, 2000). However the celebration of a referendum does not fit in the routine of the permanent campaign; the celebration of a referendum can alter the existing power equilibrium between the media and the political sphere (De Vreese, 2007).

The celebration of a referendum it is a challenge for the media systems of each country, implies high levels of uncertainty and complexity for political parties and an scenario of ambiguity for the public opinion (De Vreese, 2007). Focusing on the implications of a referendum in the relationship between the media and the political sphere, the first implication to consider is the infrequency of referendum campaigns. As a consequence media practices are less established than in election campaigns (Jenkins & Mendelshon, 2001).

The coverage of referendum campaigns is not only limited to political parties, as it happens in normal election periods, but also citizens and other key opinion leaders are the centre of attention of media coverage. In that sense, newsmedia can become a magnifying glass for smaller political actors or organizations that are not usually in the media spotlight (De Vreese, 2007). Consequently, some established power relationships between political parties and newsmedia can be altered.

For example, during referendum campaigns newsmedia might include civil society members and exclude traditional political parties from their political talk shows. This situation may annoy some communication directors or spin doctors that use those political shows as a way to get direct and less mediated coverage for their political leaders and now they have to “fight” for that space with new political actors. At the same time, this situation might also cause that some political parties perceive hostility from the media as they seem to pursue their own agenda as it is shown in the data obtained from our interviews. Certainly, the standards of balanced reporting during a referendum are
challenged and the only reporting criteria is Yes or No (De Vreese, 2007). In that dichotomy media tend to simplify the alternatives and some other intermediate or more elaborated positions are left behind. Precisely, that is one of the main complaints of spin doctors from smaller political parties in Catalonia and Scotland; they feel that because they do not fit in the established debate sides the media deliberately ignores them.

The role of the media in the referendum debate is essential since it constitutes the main source of information for citizens (Shuck & De Vreese, 2011). Thereafter any issue or topic that is highlighted by the media can immediately foster public debate (Bowler and Donovan, 2002). Some studies of second-level agenda setting affirm that the discourse adopted by the media in a referendum either yes or no is more effective in implementing public salience of arguments (Wirth et al., 2010). They also proved that the flow of arguments in the agenda-setting of a referendum campaign is a top-down structure that goes from the political parties to the media and finally to the public (Wirth et al., 2010). Given that relevance of the media in a referendum campaign it seems logical that political parties become more media-obsessed during referendum campaigns. As a consequence their communication strategy and their relationship with the media become one of their main concerns placing their Heads of Media or spin doctors on the front row of the campaign.

Political public relations practitioners, known as well as Head of Media or spin doctors, are responsible for the articulation of the relationship between the media and the political sphere (McNair, 2011). The role of these professionals is essential to determine the tone –from a negotiated understanding to cynicism and mistrust- of the relationship between the media and the political parties and the final meaning given to the political information received by citizens.

During Blair’s government, communication’s strategy became a big concern for journalists (Franklin, 2004). For some scholars, like McNair (2000) ‘spin doctors’ became a ‘fifth state’ in Blair’s period due to the big amount of power they acquired inside the government. Nowadays, in the post Alastair Campbell era, these professionals are the ones developing strategies so political leaders can be recognised by the media (Charon, 2004). Their knowledge of the media is
essential to anticipate, simulate and stimulate the actions of journalists (Esser et al., 2000).

In that sense, these professionals working side-by-side with political leaders are the key element that determines the tone and characteristics of the relationship between political parties and news media in western democracies. Specially, during referendum campaigns, the role of these professionals is essential to design, plan and execute the communication strategy that can determine the outcome of the ballots. These campaigns are designed on the basis of how these professionals understand and perceive the media landscape and their relationship with the different news media. Therefore their perceptions and attitudes towards the journalists and the news media will also determine the tone of the campaign and its outcome. In that intersection, some researchers point out that the characteristics of the media system strongly determine how political communication practitioners develop (Brown, 2003; Brants & Voltmer, 2011; McNair, 2000; Van Aleest et al., 2011).

To that point, one of the most important issues when comparing Scotland and Catalonia in terms of their media-politics system is that they belong to different media and political system models. Hallin and Mancini (2004) defined four models of media systems for modern democracies according to four elements: the development of media markets, political parallelism, journalistic professionalism and state intervention on media markets. Scotland (as part of the UK) belongs to the Liberal Media System and Catalonia (as part of Spain) to the Polarized Pluralist System.

The first one has been described as a scenario where commercial newspapers developed early, with a strong journalistic professionalism and where public media has played a central role in history with lower levels of political parallelism. Catalonia’s media system is characterized by weaker forms of journalistic professionalism, by a closer dependence between the media and by a political class that uses the media as means of ideological expression and by weaker development of media markets. According to that classification it can be assumed that the tone and characteristics of the relationship between politicians and the media are different in Catalonia and Scotland.
As it has been recognised “each era spawns different sets of relationships (between politics and the press) which are closely linked to particular configurations of social, political and economical forces” (Negrine, 1994:41) and in this case, referendum campaigns are a very unique moment in all democracies. The relationship between politicians and journalists has been theorised and classified as either adversarial, collateral, as a competition, as an exchange or as a constant negotiation (Casero, xxxx). Nevertheless it seems more appropriate to describe media-politicians relationships as an ever-shifting power balance (Davis, 2009) especially in the context of a referendum.

In general terms, the relationship between politicians and news media is always characterized by the clash between the interests of politicians of obtaining favourable coverage and the “fourth state professional norm, which, in the Anglo-American tradition, stress the need for journalist autonomy and an oppositional stance that holds powerful sources to account” (Davis, 2009: 205). Furthermore, in election contexts politicians complain more about the power of the media specifically when they feel the media are out to set the agenda (Brants et al., 2010).

Some of these relationship models are useful to understand the tone of the media-politicians exchange in general terms. Nevertheless, most of these models do not take into consideration the characteristics of each media system and the implications that they have for the relationship politicians-news media, which are quite important in a referendum context.

According to the model developed by Hallin and Mancini (2004), Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralist countries have high levels of political parallelism. But specifically in Spain levels of political parallelism have increased during the past decades resulting in “a division of most of the media in two camps” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004:104) left-wing and right-wing oriented media. Furthermore, the media has historically played an active political role seeking to defend their own agenda in remarkable events such as the democratic transition (Gonzalez et al., 2010). As a result, some scholars have pointed out that the reporting style of Spanish media lacks of plurality and it is usually simplified to “the favouring of one side over the other” (Díaz Nosty, 2006: 40).
Media-political parallelism is not only found in newspapers but also private and public broadcasting present high levels of alignment with political parties and government (Gonzalez, 2010). Public broadcasting services are controlled by political parties in government. Each political party represented in the parliament gets a seat at the board room of the public broadcast service; the number of representatives for each political party is linked to the number of parliamentary seats that each political party has. This system allows political parties with majority to control decisions made in the board room of public radio and television channels. Catalonia, like many other autonomous regions in Spain, has its own public broadcasting service operated under the same political structure. In addition, in Catalonia (Spain as well) the government not only buys institutional advertising in the media but they also distribute public economic subsidises to private owned media according to audience and readership quotes.

Given that scenario it can be assumed that “both journalists and media owners often have political ties or alliances” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004: 98). As it will be explained in the next section, two of the main reasons for the media hostility perceived by political parties and their spin doctors in Catalonia are the highly opinionated journalism or too-sided coverage and the economic and power ties between media outlets and political parties.

Media partisanship is not a unique Spanish or Catalanian phenomenon. In Scotland and in the UK generally “the press has always mirrored the divisions of party politics very closely” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004:208). Party-press parallelism can be found in both tabloid and quality newspapers, though not in broadcast media. In general terms, it can be assumed that “newspapers have traditionally wished to play a part in the political system and have never been reluctant to express a view on the ways of the world” (Negrine, 1994:53) not only in Scotland or in Catalonia but also in other western democracies.

However the main difference between party-press parallelism in Scotland and Catalonia is the economic dependence. In liberal media system countries such as Scotland the commercialization of the press freed them from the
dependency on the state or other political actors. In that sense, newspapers and its owners became independent political actors (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

Scotland has a smaller media market compared to Catalonia. There are three Scottish national newspapers (Daily Record, The Scotsman, The Herald); one private television channel (STV) and they have regionalised BBC television channels (BBC Scotland and BBC Alba) and radio stations (BBC Radio Scotland). Unlike Catalonia, they do not have their own public broadcast system and therefore they are dependent on the services of the BBC. BBC produces 500 hours of tv news and current affairs for Scotland annually (McNair, 2008).

During the past decades Scottish political journalism has increased and reached higher levels of professionalism due to the establishment of Holyrood Parliament and the post-devolution political scenario. To that point, the Scottish Parliament copied the UK lobby system and they encouraged the coverage of Scottish affairs by print and broadcast media (Schlesinger et al. 2001).

Despite having their own national newspapers, UK based newspapers have large number of readers in Scotland so during the 90s some of those newspapers created Scottish editions (McNair, 2008). One of the best examples of the different concept of party-press parallelism in Scotland and in Catalonia is The Sun. While in Catalonia party-press parallelism is a closed and defined system with almost no variations, in Scotland the parallelism newspaper-political party can change depending on the interests of the newspaper or the editorial group. In 1992 the Scottish Sun electorally supported the SNP but after the rise of the Labour both in London and Scotland they backed Scottish Labour.

It is not common for a newspaper in Scotland to change its party support but certainly there is more “flexibility” in terms of editorial lines because there is no economical dependency like in Catalonia. Despite this situation, Scottish spin doctors still perceive media hostility and bitterly complain about the political role of some newspapers. However their counter-strategy to that media hostility does not consist in adopting a confrontational attitude towards the media as some of the Catalan spin doctors do.
All these elements here described are determinant variables that affect the perception of the relationship politicians-media in the context of a referendum. There are few studies on the implications and consequences of referendum campaigns (De Vreese, 2007; Bowler and Donovan, 1998; Wirth et al., 2010). Especially there are no studies that analyse the implications of a referendum campaign on the relationship between the media and the political sphere. In this case, it doesn’t seem appropriate to use one of the existing theoretical approaches to understand the tone and characteristics of the perception of the relationship between politicians and the news media in a referendum campaign since they do not take into consideration the distinctiveness of each media system. It seems rather a simplification just to define the state of the relationship politicians-media under the dichotomy adversarial/cooperative (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995). In order to obtain data about the perceptions of that relationship in the context of the referendum campaigns in Scotland and Catalonia we designed a qualitative study based on in-depth interviews with the Head of Communications of each political party.

DATA ANALYSIS

As previously mentioned, this paper is part of a larger study that analyses the role, characteristics and professional identity of spin doctors in Scotland and Catalonia. As part of that study, we interviewed the Head of Media or Communications Director of each political party in Scotland and Catalonia. The goal was to obtain qualitative data through in-depth interviews with the professionals that are in charge of designing the communication strategy in each political party. A total of 20 heads of media and former heads of media were interviewed in Scotland and Catalonia between February and April 2014. We interviewed professionals from those political parties that are represented in the respective parliaments and from both governments. Finally we have so far gathered the views of four Scottish political parties and the Scottish government and the views of five Catalanian political parties and the Catalonian government.

For the purposes of this paper, the interviewees were asked about the implications of the referendum campaign in their daily work and in their
relationship with news media. The data obtained from the interviews has been coded and analysed using critical discourse analysis method (Scollon, 2001).

From the interviews it can be deducted that the celebration of the referendum in both Catalonia and Scotland has increased the levels of hostility in the relationship between the political sphere and the news media. In this case, the hostility is perceived by spin doctors that bitterly complain about the political agenda of the news media during the referendum.

The structure of the relationship between the different political parties and the media does not change in the context of a referendum. The main difference is that political parties perceive that the media adopts a higher political profile that is translated into more polarized and partisan editorial lines. In both cases it can be stated that there is an increasingly perception of hostility from the media towards the agenda of political parties. However the way that hostility is understood and managed is completely different in Catalonia and Scotland. To better analyse this situation we will first compare how spin doctors understand that hostility in both cases and then we will analyse their reactions to it.

**Understanding the perception of media hostility and its causes**

In the case of Catalonia there is a higher level of perceived hostility in both pro-independence and anti-independence political parties. Catalanian spin doctors from both sides draw a clear line between Spanish media and Catalanian media.

“In Catalonia all political parties have their voice in the media.... Spanish media have an ideological barrier based only on confrontational attitudes” (pro-independence political party)

“In Spain there are media pro-government, against government but there is a plurality of points of view. In Catalonia there is no plurality in the media” (anti-independence political party)

In Catalonia there are four newspapers exclusively edited in Catalonia (La Vanguardia, El Puntavui, El Periódico de Cataluña, Ara), two radio stations one private and one public (Rac1, Catalunya Radio), and two television channels
one private and one public (8tv, Tv3). Those are the ones considered Catalanian media in opposition to the Spanish media: five newspapers (ABC, Razón, El Mundo, El País, Público), five radio stations (Cadena Ser, COPE, ABC Punto Radio, Onda Cero, Radio Nacional) and five television channels (La Sexta, Antena 3, Tele 5, Cuatro, Televisión Española). This large media landscape has traditionally allowed political parties in Catalonia to use their influences in the different media markets according to their interests and aims (Castello & Montagut, 2010).

This “divided” media landscape is not new; it is the consequence of the democratic opening of Spain in the beginning of the 80s. However in the current scenario the division has become an issue for Catalanian spin doctors because they perceive it as pro-referendum/against-referendum. Therefore Catalanian-based media are considered by these professionals as pro-referendum media in terms of editorial lines and Spanish media as anti-referendum. In that sense, all Catalanian spin doctors when planning their communication strategy they do it according to the dichotomy Catalanian media pro-referendum/ Spanish media anti-referendum.

“They (anti-referendum media) are at war against us... Spanish media have decided that they want to stop any chances of Catalonia having a referendum”

In itself that division of the media panorama is not an issue, the problem arises when the different editorial lines are perceived as hostile by political parties. Spin doctors consider that behind those clearly defined editorial lines the media have a political agenda controlled by the opponent political parties.

“El Periódico is a newspaper that was more or less in favour of celebrating a referendum in Catalonia but lately it has changed... the chief editors of this newspaper are being pressured by the owners of the newspaper to change the editorial line because the Spanish conservative government is compelling them to do it”

As previously mentioned, the weak development of commercial markets in southern European countries has created not just stronger party-press parallelism but economic dependence of the state, political parties or other
private patrons (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). In that sense, Catalan spin doctors link the strong partisan editorial lines with the distribution of public media subsidises to private owned media on both sides. With no exception all these political communication professionals have complained and accused government and political parties from the other side of controlling editorial lines through the distribution of these public media subsidises. The accusations are always directed to the “other” side despite most of these spin doctors that belong to political parties that are in government make use of these media subsidises as part of their communication strategy.

“Pro-independence media have received a lot of public subsidises so they can say that Spain is a bad thing for Catalonia”

This is one of the most important differences between the hostility perceived in Catalonia and Scotland. In Catalonia’s case the hostility is linked to a pre-existing system of dependency on public media subsidises that are used as political weapons to influence over the editorial lines of private owned media. According to some of the spin doctors interviewed this political use of public media subsidises has increased lately due to the referendum scenario.

“Public subsidises to private owned media is a very serious issue because news media are editorially biased then... this is not new in Catalonia but it has increased because of the referendum debate” (Partido Popular, current Spanish party-government)

“Public subsidies change editorial lines and that is a fact” (PSC, former Catalan party-government)

Furthermore, the political use of public media subsidises also increases the levels of hostility perceived amongst those political parties that are left in the opposition or have lower levels of representation. Spin doctors from non-government political parties such as Iniciativa per Catalunya or Partit Socialista Català bitterly complain about this situation and how the media leaves them behind because they are not able to be part of the game.
“It is difficult to be part of the game. There are two main sides Yes or No and if you don’t fit in any of those sides, they (the media) don’t know what to do with you so you are left behind” (Iniciativa- Els Verds)

“Against that system there is nothing to do; you can only take advantage of their strength and try to sneak information as much as you can. However in Spain if you really want to communicate something you really need to have huge political power or a lot of money”

As a consequence their communication strategy is limited to sneak information in frames that are not as positive for them as the ones “controlled” by the bigger and more powerful political parties.

Media hostility is also perceived among Scottish political parties however Scottish spin doctors perceive that hostility in a different extent. First of all, only spin doctors working in pro-independence political parties perceive media hostility against them. Those political parties that have newspapers that have historically supported them do not complain about the complexity of the news media scenario in Scotland.

“Attitudes have become a bit stronger on the part of the media...Some newspapers are editorially very hostile to SNP’s objectives and that hostility will become much stronger as we can actually deliver what we can achieve”

Unlike Catalonia’s case, Scottish spin doctors do not draw such a clear division between media that belong to one side of the argument or the other. They make a distinction between right-wing conservative media that are completely against them and centre-left wing media that despite being against independence can sometimes be editorially favourable.

“The Daily Mail, the Daily Telegraph and the Daily Express they are the ones that have strong editorial stands against independence and they would then be tempted to become yet more critical of the SNP government”

Secondly, that media hostility is perceived as a result of the private interests of media outlets not as a result of the influence of public media subsidises or dark shadow power ties between newspapers and other political parties. For
example, all political parties recognise that the BBC has its own agenda and that sometimes it is frustrating for them because they cannot influence it.

“During election period or now with the referendum the BBC decides which topics are the most salient ones for the debate in their shows and you can just adapt yourself to it. Even though you might think that the topic of debate should be the NHS they decide instead something else such as higher education and they don’t care if any of the political parties have that on their manifesto”

In some points, Scottish spin doctors recognise that that media hostility they perceive can be considered as a normal issue and it is already part of their communication strategy. Historically, UK press and Scottish press have been strongly orientated towards the centre (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Therefore those political parties with non-mainstream or traditional ideologies are left behind in terms of party-press parallelism. This situation leads to higher levels of hostility according to Scottish spin doctors in the actual context of the referendum where uncertainty is a common feeling amongst these professionals.

Reacting to the perceived hostility

As it can be observed the way that media hostility and its causes it is understood in different terms in Catalonia and Scotland by political communication practitioners. Subsequently, there is also a divergence in the way these professionals respond to that perceived media hostility and thereafter manage the relationship between the party and the media in a referendum context.

In Catalonia’s case, there is a difference between government-parties and strong pro-referendum political parties on one side and smaller political parties and anti-referendum political parties on the other. In the case of the first ones, their spin doctors bitterly complained about the secret agenda of Spanish news media that deliberately started a war against them and their interests. Their reaction to that situation is as it follows:

“We never get positive coverage in those media...then I just go to the news media that are capable to reach my voters. I don't work with those that just want
to buy my message, I work with those who are willing to get my political message across”

“I tend to ignore them (belligerent anti-referendum media). They do not even give us the chance to do an interview; they say that there is nothing to talk about. Then it is very difficult to maintain a stable relationship with them”

The management of the relationship between the political party and the news media it is conditioned then by the perception that their spin doctors have on the levels of media hostility. As it can be observed in this case, the relationship between a political party and a newspaper can be non-existent if their spin doctor feels that the levels of hostility of this newspaper towards the party are too high. However this reaction to media hostility it is linked to the power position of these parties.

Smaller political parties and anti-referendum parties in Catalonia are not as reactive as the former ones. Even though their spin doctors perceive similar levels of media hostility against their political parties, they cannot “afford” to break up the relationship with any news media.

“One of the first things that I did when I started working for them as a spin doctor was to stop any critics to news media. So, if the smallest pro-independence radio asks for an interview, even though we are strongly against independence, we do it”

“Sometimes certain news media call us just to participate in one of the two pre-established sides of the debate and if we do not accept that we are out”

These attitudes are in line with a polarized media system based only on favouring one side over the other (Gonzalez et al., 2010). To that point again, Scotland is a different case. As previously mentioned, spin doctors accept certain levels of media hostility as a normal routine in the relationship between the political party and the news media. Despite that some of the political parties have their “own” media, communication strategies are not as hostile as the ones in Catalonia.
“The press is largely hostile anyway... I could adopt a very sort of aggressive stands with all of them all the time but it wouldn’t have too much effect”

“The coverage in some newspapers like the Daily Record the coverage has been by all means bad... but sometimes you can get a sympathetic hearing on a specific topic”

All Scottish spin doctors interviewed claim to have good relationships with news media despite they might not be editorially friendly and despite the uncertainty created by the referendum campaign. They all affirm that is their duty to respond to the needs of the media and to maintain a good relationship with them. Also, there are no pro-independence newspapers and that implies that the government, the Yes Campaign and the Greens are in need of media coverage at “any cost”. They cannot afford to break up a relationship with a newspaper just because their frame is not adequate for them.

Certainly, in a media system where broadcasting is obliged to remain impartial the relationships between the media and the political sphere seem to be understood in terms of a fair competition from this perspective. Therefore the response of Scottish spin doctors to the media hostility perceived during the referendum campaign does not affect their management of the relationship with the media.

DISCUSSION

There are few studies on the effects of referendum campaigns in general and specifically on the relationship between politicians and news media campaigns (De Vreese, 2007; Bowler and Donovan, 2002; Wirth et al., 2010). This study only analyses how that relationship is perceived by those who are managing the communication strategy within political parties; the views of those implied on the other side of the relationship have not been considered in this case. However, this research adds to the existing line of research that compares Catalonia and Scotland (Solano, 2007; Greer, 2007; Keating, 1996; MacInnes, 2004; Moreno, 1988; Paquin, 2001) and introduces the media system models created by Hallin and Mancini (2004) as a useful tool to understand the main differences between the two scenarios.
The goal of this paper was to explore how political public relations or spin doctors from Scotland and Catalonia understand and manage the relationship between political parties and news media in the context of an independence referendum. To that point it can be concluded that the referendum campaign in both scenarios has altered the power equilibrium media-politicians (De Vreese, 2007) and as a result spin doctors perceive higher levels of media hostility towards political parties in Scotland and Catalonia. Nevertheless, Scotland and Catalonia belong to different media system models and that has turned out to be a determining issue in how this media hostility is understood and managed by spin doctors in both cases.

In general terms, it can be stated that the relationship between politicians and the media is managed by spin doctors in terms of an ever-shifting power balance (Davis, 2009). In both cases, the shifting element in the management of the relationship media-politician it is linked to how the spin doctor or Head of Media perceives the level and tone of media hostility. Nonetheless in Catalonia’s case, media hostility is understood as a consequence of a system with strong ties between the political and the media sphere mainly based on the economic dependence of the media over public media subsidies.

This perception is a consequence of a media polarized system characterized by weaker forms of journalistic professionalism, by a closer dependence between the media and by a political class that uses the media as means of ideological expression and by weaker development of media markets (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Catalanian spin doctors perceive a higher level of media hostility and they draw a clear line between Spanish anti-referendum media vs. Catalanian pro-referendum media. As a consequence, the relationship between a political party and a news media can be non-existent if their spin doctor feels that the levels of hostility of this newspaper towards the party are too high.

Scotland has been described as a scenario where commercial newspapers developed early, with a strong journalistic professionalism and where public media has played a central role in history with lower levels of political parallelism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Accordingly, Scottish spin doctors do not perceive such high levels of media hostility in the context of the referendum
campaign compared to Catalonia. That point can be understood in the context of a media system where broadcasting is obliged to remain impartial the relationships between the media and the political sphere seem to be understood in terms of a fair competition from this perspective. Consequently, Scottish spin doctors maintain stable relationships with all news media despite their hostility towards the political agenda of the political party in the context of the independence referendum campaign.

The scope of this study is limited to the perception that political public relations or spin doctors have of their relationship with news media in the context of an independence referendum. A more nuanced and detailed picture of the relationship should include the views and perceptions of the professionals working on the news media in Catalonia and Scotland. For that reason, we hope that this study encourages further research that aims to better understand the complexity of independence referendums.
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