



Josep Gifreu

Media and elections in Catalonia:

a split scenario?

Catalonia presents a particularly rich and complex political and media scenario for studying the political communication and behaviour of the leading actors in electoral processes. On the basis of systematic study of the last four electoral campaigns for the Parliament of Catalonia (1995, 1999, 2003 and 2006), this article raises a question about the appropriateness of the present scenario of intermediation between parties and citizens in Catalonia, an intermediation that the mass-based democracy entrusts to the media system in particular.

In the wake of the Transition, the new Catalan political culture has been taking shape over the years of democratic government and Catalonia's status as an autonomous region, above all through the mechanisms of political interaction between the three main actors that are presently recognised in all comparative research: political parties, the public mass media and citizens. This article, which sets out to be an exploratory essay on the basis of the aforementioned studies, will focus on an analysis of the mass media —one vertex of the triangle of political communication formed along with parties and citizens— which is to say, on the structural and structuring functions of the media's discursive and news-supplying intermediation in the electoral campaign.

THE IMPERTINENT QUESTION

The question of interest that gives rise to the main argument and reflection here has a preliminary formulation that can be put very simply: what importance do the most influential branches of the media attribute to elections to the Catalan Parliament?

Someone, some day, had to pose this “impertinent” question about the media scenario that legitimates the unfolding of the objectively most important electoral process in Catalonia. I refer to the process that leads in each legislature to renewing the trust of Catalan electors in the one hundred and thirty-five members of Parliament and, accordingly, in the formation of a ruling majority in the Generalitat (Government) of Catalonia.

From the calling of elections through to voting day, the three main actors in the campaign —political parties, mass media and citizens— activate the resources they have available so as to participate with a view to their own benefit in the electoral contest. The official calling of elections, which, in Catalonia, is the personal prerogative of the President of the Generalitat, sets off the totality of activities of the

three actors I have mentioned, although starting out from the basic initiative of the parties. Within a highly competitive framework, the parties and coalitions present their candidates and programmes to the public for the consideration and deliberation of electors. The nature of the publicity and public deliberation on candidatures and programmes is nowadays mainly —but not uniquely— what is exercised by the mass media and especially those of recognised influence within the electoral corpus.

The question that I am interested to formulate for the Catalan context of electoral campaigns in general and the autonomous campaigns for election to the Parliament of Catalonia in particular is this: are not the electoral results for the Parliament of Catalonia in good part conditioned by the singular media system that has been present and hegemonic in Catalonia since the Transition? In other words, might not a different correlation of cover and influence of the media in Catalonia have brought about another political culture and possibly an evolution that would differ from the present constellation of political forces in the Parliament and the Generalitat?

The establishment of a quasi-causal relationship between the structuring of the mass media —property, cover, audiences, language, regulation, and so on— and the conditioning of a particular political culture is postulated for the different groups in the milieu of political communication. To the extent that the media are attributed with basic functions in the intermediation between candidates and electors and, more generally, in the essential circulation of electoral messages in campaigns, a certain kind of organisation and regulation of the public activity of the media would have an effect on the very characteristics of the intermediation. And if this is true for the activities of political communication between elections it is even more so in the pre-campaign period and especially during the election campaign itself. In Catalonia, as is known, the campaign only lasts two weeks, since it comes under Spanish electoral law, which determines its duration. Thus the degree of “condensation” or “intensity” of electoral messages in the fortnight of the campaign would seem to be determinant to a high degree in such key results as index of participation and voting decision.

THE MEDIA AND “CATALAN OBEDIENCE”

The formation of the Catalan party system derives from the Transition and the evolution of the correlation of political forces over the early years of democracy and political autonomy. With few substantial changes, political representation in the Parliament of Catalonia, which affects the formation of majorities in the Generalitat as well as political representation at other levels, in particular in the Cortes Generales (the legislature of Spain in the form of a bicameral parliament) of Madrid, has consolidated into five parties or coalitions.

■ This set of studies refers to the past four campaigns for election to the Parliament of Catalonia, which took place respectively on 19 November 1995 (19-N-95), 17 October 1999 (17-O-99), 16 November 2003 (16-N-03) and 1 November 2006 (1-N-06). The studies are carried out at the initiative of the UNICA research group of the Pompeu Fabra University, with the collaboration of researchers in different universities, while also receiving financial support from a number of institutions, in particular the Bofill Foundation (see bibliographical references at the end).

As happens in other autonomous communities of the Spanish State, in Catalonia, the positioning of the different parties in their competition for the vote has historically gravitated around two key axes: the national axis (Catalonia-Spain relations) and the social axis (right-left relations). In the political jargon of the Transition, people spoke in Catalonia of parties of “Catalan obedience” and parties of “Spanish obedience”. The former were defined by having their ultimate decision-making organs in Catalonia itself and the latter by their relations of dependence *vis-à-vis* the party leadership in the Spanish sphere (whether it was a centralised party like the Partido Popular [PP] or one of federal structure like the Partido Socialista Obrero Español [PSOE]). According to the electoral studies I have mentioned above, the axis of Catalonia-Spain relations becomes the preponderant one, the focus of attention and interest in all electoral contests.

I shall not discuss at this point whether the high degree of multipartism in the Parliament of Catalonia (a sixth party grouping has joined the present legislature) is “richness” or an “anomaly”. I am only interested in setting the question mark squarely over the front of media intermediation.

The generally overlooked —or consciously ignored— question can be summed up thus: does not the hegemonic system of media in Catalonia contribute substantially to upholding the ascendancy of the national Spanish axis in the campaigns and favouring a subsidiary view of Catalan political culture with respect to Spanish political culture?

Responding to this question entails bearing well in mind what the structuring of political mediation shaped by the big branches of the media in Catalonia consists of. If we apply here the final decision-making model to the activities of the media as an instrument of political communication, we confirm that a very considerable part of the media with massive influence in the Catalan electoral body is of “Spanish obedience” (and the language of the majority is Spanish). It is true that the media with more limited scope of cover and influence (for example, some local branches of the media, specialist reviews, blogs by certain personalities, et cetera) can have substantial influence among particular groups. Nevertheless, when we speak of media intermediation in the campaigns, we must focus the analytic attention on the language of the big names that, as far as communication is concerned, necessarily refer to the “public at large” or to relevant groupings of individuals with the capacity to vote and/or influence the vote of others.

If we ask how many sections of the media fulfil this requisite in Catalonia, we would hesitate over where to locate the strip of separation between the media of recognised influence in this matter and those that are not deemed to be of relevant influence. What would not be in doubt would be those branches of the media situated above this strip,

The hegemonic system of media contributes to uphold the ascendancy of the Spanish outlook and favours a subsidiary view of Catalan political culture

the position occupied by the big media entities that specialise in printed, audiovisual and digital material. Some conventionally accepted indicators —basically those derived from audience studies— offer an objective basis for assessing the degree of impact and presumably social and political influence that part of the media can achieve among citizens. To be more precise, analysis of the big branches of the media present in Catalonia over the past twenty years leads us to consider, in general terms, an evolution that, at least as a working hypothesis, makes one think of a progressively increasing presence of media of “Spanish obedience” over the media of “Catalan obedience”.

During the Transition, for example, the dailies distributed in Catalonia were almost all published in Catalonia itself. Nowadays the paid press of Spanish origin accounts for about 10 per cent. If we count the free newspapers, the proportion greatly favours “Spanish obedience”. In any case, and as a whole, the “big press” has resisted the irruption of Spanish communication groups. Until when? With the radio, if we pay attention not to the number of generalist channels but to audience figures, the result is a draw between the two types of stations. On the Internet, evaluation of this dynamic is a tricky matter because of the novelty of the medium and lack of knowledge as to the practices of electors, at least in relation with the processes of political intermediation.

I shall leave until the end my scrutiny of the medium-of-all-media, television, which is still predominant in political campaigning. Television has been, and will be for some years, the preferred medium of parties and citizens as the central scenario of mass political mediation. The polls keep repeating, over and over again, that electors are mainly informed through television. For example, in the 2003 campaign for election to the Parliament of Catalonia, three out of four citizens declared that they had followed the campaign “every day or almost”, or “quite often”, on television (Vox Publica). The obvious question is: if some 80 per cent of Catalan electors follow the campaign on television, why not undertake a thoroughgoing examination of the structure that determines which TV channels have the most influence, what cover they give of the campaigns and what political orientations they adopt with regard to the different political options? This line of research and reflection is yet to be carried out. Not only with television but also with other kinds of media —daily paid press and free press, kiosk publications in general, radio— and, in particular, with the recent field of new practices that has been opened up by the Internet.

CATALAN ELECTIONS AND RELEVANCE

My first question raised the matter of the relevance attributed by the big branches of the media to elections to the Parliament of Catalonia. I shall now inquire into the characteristics and cover of the campaigns in the big branches of the media. The index of cover of an electoral campaign by one section of the media would give the measure of attribution of public relevance in a specific campaign. This index still has to be defined. However, from the standpoint of political journalism and electoral communication, I am in no doubt that an index of this type would be very helpful in evaluating what overall role is exercised by the media in relation with a political community and its processes of shaping the vote.

Table 1. News Coverage in the leading newspapers of the two weeks of electoral campaigning for the Parliament of Catalonia (1995-2006)

Elections	Avui			El País			El Periódico			El Punt			La Vanguardia		
	U	P	E	U	P	E	U	P	E	U	P	E	U	P	E
1995	182		11	160		2	178		2	117		2	163		1
1999	325		8	240		1	351		4	537		4	305		1
2003	328	6	3	224	11	3	256	11	9	253	6	2	346	9	2
2006	265	24		190	17		275	26		230	19		294	18	

Key: U = units of information and opinion related with the campaign; P = units of front-page information on the campaign; E = editorial articles related with the campaign

When it comes to calling elections, all the media involved in the political process have their resources (human, economic, technical, programming, and so on) for the best news coverage of the campaign. What kind of news coverage of campaigns (and pre-campaigns) for the Parliament of Catalonia have the most influential branches of the public media offered in Catalonia?

Table 1 quantifies and compares the principal data on attention (in units of information) given to each of the four campaigns in the five newspapers of biggest circulation in Catalonia. We can see that the

maximum attention so far was concentrated in the 1999 elections—and we aptly titled the corresponding report *La campanya més disputada* (The Most Contested Campaign)—when Pasqual Maragall stood for the presidency of the Generalitat against Jordi Pujol. In the 2003 elections, when the substitution of Pujol as President of the Generalitat was at stake, the media cover was again very notable, although slightly less than the previous elections. This attention dropped considerably in the last elections of 2006, with the significant exception of *El Periódico*, and there was a notable increase in the work of reinforcement or priming in the front-page news of all the newspapers. Noteworthy here is the fact that the newspaper that comes in last is *El País*, the only one of the five of “Spanish” scope and with its decision-making headquarters in Madrid. Again, it is significant that *La Vanguardia* is the newspaper that devoted fewest articles to the Catalan electoral contest.

If we focus on the big-audience television channels in Catalonia, the coverage of campaigns for the Catalan Parliament presents a number of characteristics that require a more complex and nuanced diagnostic effort. Table 2 shows the comparative results of the quantification of units of information present in the television news of greatest audience in Catalonia. In the last week of October 2003, the totality of these news

Televisions are the main source of mass information that affects the social, political and motivational processes of the voting decisions

Table 2. News coverage by the leading TV channels during the month leading up to elections for the Catalan Parliament (1995-2006)

(Number of news units in the evening news programmes on television)*

	Pre-campaign				Campaign				Total			
	1995	1999	2003	2006	1995	1999	2003	2006	1995	1999	2003	2006
Antena 3	4	3	2	10	24	65	38	61	28	68	40	71
Tele 5	10	6	1	4	25	40	14	12	35	46	15	16
TVE1	9	14	1	7	32	104	74	72	41	118	75	79
TVE-Cat	20	52	39	53	60	89	80	77	80	141	119	130
TV3	39	52	55	38	78	95	78	88	117	147	133	116

* The TVE-Catalunya news programme is the one broadcast at midday since this was the only one of the Catalan Circuit of TVE (Spanish Television) that was comparable with the evening news programmes of the other channels.

broadcasts reached an average audience of almost two million viewers. This overall figure is in keeping with the surveys done on the main source of political information declared by the Catalan electorate, which was television for more than 70 per cent.

Thus, there can be no doubt that television is the main source of mass information that affects the different social, political and motivational processes with regard to electoral behaviour and voting decisions. How, then, are the coverage and follow-up of electoral campaigns for the Parliament of Catalonia structured by the leading television channels in Catalonia?

Table 2 clearly shows a two-way split or separation, one between the channels in the Catalan domain and those in the Spanish domain and the other between the public and private channels. The Catalan channels broadcasting in Catalan (TV3 and TVE-Catalunya) are the ones with the widest and most complete coverage of the four election campaigns under study. The contrast with the two private Spanish channels (Antena 3 and Tele 5) is very considerable, especially in some cases (for example, 88 units of TV3 for 12 of Tele 5 for 2006; 80 of TVE-Catalunya for 38 of Antena 3 for 2003). Channel 1 of TVE, a public entity with Spanish coverage, is situated in an intermediate position (while in 1999 it notched up 104 units, in 1995 the figure was only 32). However, the most eloquent contrast becomes patent in the two weeks prior to the campaign, which is to say the latter fortnight of the pre-campaign (opened at the time of calling elections): the Spanish state channels practically ignored the Catalan electoral process. For example, in 2003, the three Spanish state channels together and over a period of two weeks only devoted four units of news to the Catalan electoral process, while the figures for TV3 and TVE-Catalunya are 55 and 39 news units respectively.

“CATALAN OBEDIENCE” A FACTOR OF BALANCE

It has been possible to keep confirming this contrast or split under different headings and with a range of nuances throughout the four campaigns studied here. For example, in that of 1995, of the five heads of the lists (Pujol, Nadal, Colom, Ribó and Vidal-Quadras), only Pujol managed to attain a marked presence throughout the month prior to the elections (including the campaign) on Antena 3 (8 appearances) and on Tele 5 (11 appearances); the rest only managed one appearance or none at all.

In other words, for the 24 per cent of Antena 3 viewers and the 17.9 per cent that Tele 5 had at the time in Catalonia, apart from Pujol, there were no other Catalan leaders... As for the campaign of 2006, there was very little change in this situation.

Another important indicator that should be borne in mind is the distribution of time and attention given by each channel to the different options and candidates. In general and in view of the experience of these years, it is only thanks to the electoral obligations of the public service (in accordance with the Electoral Law) that all the parliamentary groupings now have proportional amounts of time (the “electoral blocs” regulated by the Electoral Board and discussed by professionals in recent years) in the news programmes of the public channels.

Longitudinal research across the four campaigns confirms the conclusions, in this regard, of the first study of the 1995 campaign. We confirmed then that the maximum intensity of electoral coverage corresponded to the television channels that shared the dual characteristic of being public and under the autonomous jurisdiction of the Generalitat, which is to say TV3 and TVE-Catalunya. The daily average of electoral information on these two channels during the campaign tends to coincide with the number of political groups in parliament. In contrast, the intensity is much less in the private stations and they still tend to focus their scant attention on only some candidates, the best-known ones (as was the case of Jordi Pujol until the campaign of 1999), and on the political formations most likely to interest the Spanish public. The case of TVE1 would merit a special study because of its double condition as a (Spanish) state and public channel, frequently subject to directives of governments in Madrid (PSOE government until 1996, PP government until 2004 and, again, PSOE as of 2004).

In the case of generalist and highly influential radio stations, everything leads one to suppose that a model of election coverage resembling that of generalist television would apply, although with some variation. The only systematic study of the radio in electoral campaigns that could uphold this hypothesis is the one we carried out for the 1999 elections. The sample included morning news programmes of the four most influential generalist stations: Catalunya Ràdio, COM Ràdio, SER and COPE. The conclusions on the kinds of radio coverage of the campaign highlighted the fact that only the Catalan public channels, which is to say Catalunya Ràdio and COM Ràdio, offered constant reporting of the pre-campaign and the campaign and that, while these two stations maintained a certain balance between the different political formations, the two private channels exacerbated the confrontation between CiU and PSC-CpC*.

TWO MODELS OF INTERMEDIATION

In this exploratory essay, I have focused only on the operations and characteristics of the coverage of Catalan electoral campaigns by the most influential branches of the media. However, there is a whole diverse series of indicators to be explored, both

■ * The former reference is *Convergència i Unió* (Convergence and Union), which consists of two parties, the centrist/conservative *Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya* and the smaller *Unió Democràtica de Catalunya* (along Christian Democratic lines); the latter is the *Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya* (Socialists' Party of Catalonia) and *Ciutadans pel Canvi* (Citizens for Change) [translator].

quantitative and qualitative. By way of a first inventory I should like to mention some of these indicators that have been examined in studies dealing with, for example, the big issues of the electoral and pre-electoral agenda; the appearance of the heads of the election lists in television news; the prioritisation (priming function) of some candidates and parties in news summaries and front pages of the newspapers; the more or less camouflaged party bias of newspapers as expressed in editorials and opinion columns, et cetera. I believe that it is highly likely that a comparative study of these indicators would reinforce, with resounding proof, the basic hypothesis argued here respecting the biased structure in Catalonia of the media system of political and electoral intermediation.

In brief, the media scenario of political intermediation present in Catalonia since the Transition presents a structure of media facilities that may favour biased intervention in the processes of intermediation. Independently of the use of language —also a determinant matter in mediation, but not directly dealt with in electoral studies— it would seem that two models of media intermediation are profiled: on the one hand is that represented by the daily newspapers, with decision-making structures (business and professional) mainly

The media scenario of political intermediation in Catalonia presents a structure of media facilities that may favour biased intervention

located in Catalonia itself and, on the other hand is the hegemonic model of television with decision-making centres (public and private) in Madrid, with Spanish coverage and tending to consider that the elections to the Catalan Parliament are of a secondary nature and only worthy of attention if they might affect the formation of majorities in Madrid (the high rate of abstentionism in the Catalan elections might be deemed to be

a direct effect of such media coverage). An intermediate model between these two poles could be what I have described in the case of radio. We are yet to learn in greater depth how the incipient model of political and electoral mediation emerging with the Internet is evolving and therefore how to define it.

To sum up, the branches of the media with significant social influence in Catalonia are not neutral, indifferent or innocent actors in the electoral contests over forming the government of the Generalitat but, as I have attempted to show, they adopt a role not just of intermediaries but also of interested parties, frequently with concerns that are external to the governance of Catalonia. This is why the political parties and the men and women who are citizens of Catalonia should be aware of the price —both electoral and political— that they may have to pay for the deficiencies of the scenario that pertains to the intermediation of the influential branches of the mass media ■

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