



**REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS
DEMANDS RESPECT
FOR THE FREE EXERCISE
OF JOURNALISM
IN CATALONIA**

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FOR FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

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Local journalists and foreign correspondents denounce cyberbullying campaigns in social networks and propaganda pressure from the Catalan government.

The organization is urging that no judicial procedures be used to intimidate Catalan media.

Journalist harassment on social networks is not exclusive to any ideology. In all countries concerned by its activity, including Spain, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) receives complaints about online insults, intimidation, and threats against members of the press. “Cyberbullying” has unfortunately become a common phenomenon, affecting all political trends. However, the growing escalation of tension between the separatist Catalan government and the national executive, on account of the October 1 unilateral referendum, seems to have reached undesirable extremes for the free exercise of journalism in Catalonia.

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In response to complaints from Catalan, Spanish, and foreign journalists about harassment on social networks seemingly instigated and/or aided and abetted by Catalonia’s authorities, as well as repeated pressure on the part of certain communication officers of the Catalan autonomous government, Reporters Without Borders sought the opinion of the complainants, as well as of other journalists from non-separatist media. Complaints about “cyberbullying” and “pressure from power,” almost unanimously supported by testimony and evidence collected during this past summer, were the basis of this report. However, recent developments in Catalonia during the second half of September could not be overlooked in this document, which had been ready for publication before such events happened. Reporters Without Borders strongly condemns the use of legal procedures with intimidating purposes against Catalan separatist media, following Spain’s Constitutional Court ruling that declares the holding of referendum illegal and prohibits any form of publicity about it.

“The climate for the free exercise of journalism has been tremendously corrupted by extreme polarization in Catalan politics and society. The regional government’s eagerness to impose its own narrative to the local, Spanish, and international press has crossed red lines, and the intimidating maneuvers of the central Spanish government has certainly not helped. Both sides should understand that the best sign of a democracy is a free press, with journalists who seek truthful information and feel no need to self-censor,” says Pauline Adès-Mevel, RSF’s head of the EU-Balkans desk.

The social breakdown: towards a radicalization of the conflict

The rise of small groups from the violent extreme right has been one of the undesirable but predictable consequences of the radicalization of the Catalan conflict, a radicalization that the secessionists seemed to seek in order to grab international attention and force a negotiation with the Spanish government for a legal referendum. This was a move to which Mariano Rajoy has drastically reacted. Extreme violence and tension have overtaken numerous demonstrations and mobilizations, beginning with the illegal referendum of October 1, in which the intervention of the Spanish National Police and the Civil Guard resulted in hundreds of injured civilians, according to information exclusively confirmed by the Catalan Government. Among those wounded by law enforcement officials, RSF has identified several journalists, including **Xabi Barrena**, of *El Periódico de Catalunya*, who was beaten and kicked by the National Police while filming officers storming the Ramón Llull school, and **Sofia Cabanes**, editor of *NacióDigital* in the region of Terres de l'Ebre and contributor to the regional *EFE* agency, who was also attacked by agents of the Civil Guard during an assault in Sant Carles de la Ràpita (Tarragona).

Photojournalist **Jason N. Parkinson**, working for the *Verifeye* Media agency, warned the UK branch of RSF that he had been repeatedly beaten on the leg by police officers while covering the assault and eviction of civilians at the Sanit Gervasi school in Barcelona. The outrage triggered by the brutality of police attacks on pro-independence authorities and supporters resulted in two days of mobilization, including a “national strike” (which, strictly speaking, was not technically a strike) with enormous levels of tension for the Spanish press, as in the case of **Jesus Badenes** from the *Diari* of Girona, who was beaten unconscious by a stranger. The rebukes, insults and acts of aggression against Spanish TV reporters kept mounting, prompting, in certain cases, the intervention of the police in an effort to protect the victims. This was reported by **Antonio Garcia Ferreras**, the well-known presenter of the political debate and information show “*Al Rojo Vivo*”, of La Sexta TV channel, who had to leave the Catalan Parliament, together with his team, being escorted by the Catalan police, to avoid being attacked by a group of separatists who chased them with insults and death threats and threw beer at them. **Ana Cuesta**, also from La Sexta, had to be protected by the Catalan police while she was reporting on a group of separatists protesting outside a hotel where members of the Spanish police were staying. Her colleague **José Yélamo**, in turn, was intimidated and harassed by the crowd to the point that David Fernández, a well-known politician of the anti-capitalist party CUP, had to intervene so as to prevent greater abuse.

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The unprecedented and dangerous levels of tension that have been reached in the increasingly fractured Catalan society, have further poisoned the already rarified atmosphere in which journalists have been operating. During the massive street mobilization of the so-called “silent majority” on October 8, **Laura Catalan**, a reporter from Catalan public television, as well as several journalists from the Spanish channel *Tele5*, were met with insults and direct aggression. At the doors of the National Audience, where the chief of the Mossos d'Esquadra, Josep Lluís Trapero, was testifying, an individual snatched the microphone from TV journalist **Marta Viladot**, spat into it and shouted: “I am a Catalan and you disgust me”. Protesters managed to interrupt a live report by journalist **Mikel Valls** during the *Tele5* live morning show “*Programa de AR*”, while other spontaneous groups of protestors interrupted live programs on *Catalunya Ràdio*. Humiliating, insulting and harassing journalists, especially those working for TV media, in order to protest their presence in situ, has become a dangerous method – for both supporters and detractors of secession – to express their overwhelming anger. This has transformed the free exercise of journalism in Catalonia into a risky and complex task, to an extent not recently seen in Spain. RSF regularly updates its information about attacks against the press identified in Catalonia, and notes with alarm the increasing gravity of the situation.

Public radio and television channels questioned

Some of the anger manifested by civilians against the television channels of Spain and Catalonia results from what the public considers to be, on both sides, a blatant manipulation of information. While private channels have the right to endorse any editorial line of their choice, RSF does notice a clear bias in news reporting coming from both *RTVE* (Spanish Public Radio and Television) and *TV3* (Catalan public television) in favor of the central and regional governments, respectively. The information councils of *TVE* and *RNE* (the independent professional bodies that watch over good journalistic practice in public television and radio) have publicly complained about the intentionally calamitous coverage of the illegal October 1 referendum provided by Spanish public media, and have even asked for the resignation of the news directors, supported by complaints from the newsrooms. RSF has supported all statements issued by these information councils, regretting the lack of an equally active professional watchdog in the *CCMA* (Corporació Catalana de Mitjans Audiovisuals), which includes *TV3* and *Catalunya Ràdio*.

On October 10, the same day that the President of the Government of Catalonia, Carles Puigdemont, made a watered-down declaration of independence at the Catalan Parliament, journalists **Joan López Alegre** and **Ignacio Martín Blanco**, regular anti-separatist participants in *TV3* and *Catalunya Ràdio* political debate programs, announced in *El País* newspaper their decision to cease to appear in either media. Their text is a devastating, sad and revealing portrait of the enormous deterioration that is affecting the free exercise of journalism in Catalonia. “As regular participants in the Catalan media, representing what has been ignominiously called the ‘Unionist quota’, we have come to the conclusion that our presence in the debate programs of *TV3* and *Catalunya Ràdio* is counterproductive, since it only serves as a pretense of equanimity”, the journalists say. “When reality is reduced to a single theme – secession – and debates become so one-sided, the presence of a unique participant who is opposed to the thesis of the discussion only serves the purpose of reinforcing the idea that his position reflects, indeed, that of a minority, or even just a fraction of Catalan society. Under such conditions, the dissident, no matter how hardened he may be, ends up inevitably becoming a reluctant collaborator of the separatist project, or merely a fool in its service”, added **López Alegre** and **Martín Blanco** before concluding: “ We would rather give up our paychecks than continue enduring the emotional stress of being part of this Spain-hating circus, and the moral burden of thinking that our presence is legitimizing it”.

Journalism is not immune to the current alarming breakdown of Catalan politics and society; on the contrary, it is the subject of direct collateral damage from such tensions. RSF calls for a cooling of tension that has overtaken the region and for the soonest possible restoration of an environment ensuring respect for journalists to inform, and for citizens to be informed.

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A very active movement on the Internet

From the outset, the separatist “procés” has enjoyed very visible support on social networks. Developments have been closely followed by a large number of active users, who pay special attention to articles written by Spain-based foreign journalists. “El món ens mira” (the world is watching us) is one of the slogans brandished by the separatist movement, aware that international support is key to the success of its cause. “*There is huge appetite for news about Catalonia; the story has great impact and garners lots of interest;*” explains **Mathieu de Taillac**, Madrid correspondent for the French newspaper *Le Figaro*. “*On social networks, especially Twitter, as soon as we write something on the subject, we know that we are going to be interpreted one way or the other, because the subject is very sensitive, sometimes even a bit obsessive!*” he adds.

There’s a common feeling among correspondents that, whatever they write, their news stories will be examined under a microscope both by the supporters and the leaders of the independence movement, and that they will be ignored (if not liked) or used (if liked) to glorify the “procés.”

“*They are attentive to everything that is published; that’s their way of taking advantage of communication in order to have more weight in the debate,*” declared **Elise Gazengel**, Barcelona-based reporter for the French public television channel *France 2* and for the Spanish online newspaper *CTXT*.

Julia Macher, correspondent of several German media in Barcelona, corroborates the disproportionate attention paid to the subject. “*I do have the impression that there is a very close and organized scrutiny of everything we do by the separatist movement. Articles are followed, evaluated and often commented upon, including ‘corrections’ (which sometimes go beyond the topic of the piece). Among all the topics I cover, the Catalan story is undoubtedly the one most closely scrutinized in Catalonia, although lately I am almost getting more worried about respect for freedom of expression in Spain,*” she says, referring to the ban affecting all public activity related to the unilateral referendum, by order of the Public Prosecutor’s Office.

“*On social networks, everything becomes more aggressive and unpleasant. Separatism is an even more sensitive issue, because it has a very strong emotional component and because it relies heavily on media as a battleground, especially at the international level. I think it is being given too much importance. An article in *Le Monde* is not going to change things in Catalonia. It is the people and their leaders who must solve their own problems, not the press,*” argues **Henry de Laguérie**, Barcelona-based correspondent for French media outlets such as the *Europe1* radio or the newspaper *La Dépêche du Midi*.

Following Donald Trump's victory in the US presidential elections, **Ryan Heath**, Brussels correspondent for the Politico.eu website, shared an article on Twitter about some "Trump moments" to be expected in 2017, in which populist causes featured prominently. The Catalan unilateral referendum was among them. The separatist "trolls" started harassing him almost instantaneously. **Heath** was also admonished by separatist congressmen, as well as by Joan Maria Piqué, current Director of Communication and Foreign Press Secretary of the Catalan government, who was the press officer of Arturo Mas at the time.



Last January, Politico.eu's journalist **Tunku Varadarajan** wrote an article entitled "Twelve characters who will make your life hell in 2017." Included in the list was Carles Puigdemont, the president of the Catalan government. Once again, the fury of the separatist cyber hooligans was unleashed. Insults, accusations of incompetence, and invective of all sorts flooded Varadarajan's Twitter feed. He recounted his unpleasant experience in an article in the *ABC* newspaper. "A message, retweeted by many, said: 'What the hell would an Indian with a UK passport, working in the US, know about our old Europe?' Another one said: 'You act like a sepoy, but this time you are serving Spain, not Britain. Shame on you!' Others called me a mercenary on the payroll of Spain, a lackey of the Spanish Crown and, most amusing of all, some questioned my right to comment on Catalonia for being a Real Madrid supporter," explains the Politico.eu journalist and former Spain correspondent of *The Times*.

Pressure from the Catalan government

One of the main complaints raised by journalists, along with cyberbullying on social networks, is separatist politicians and press officers “editing,” or “correcting,” or showing excessive interest in what is published about Catalonia abroad. “*I’m amused that the head of public relations of the Catalan government and former press chief of Artur Mas thinks that daily whining about Ada Colau is a good strategy. Trolling me on Twitter with comments such as ‘Look at this shit that’s happened in BCN,’ is not the kind of sophisticated political communication that I expected from Junts Pel Sí.*” The *Guardian* correspondent **Dan Hancox** wrote last year on Twitter, apparently fed up with the propaganda coming from the Catalan government press office.



At the beginning of last year, **Cristian Segura** from *El País* summarized in an article the complaints of some Spain-based correspondents who had become annoyed by what they considered “pressure” exerted by the Catalan Government on the foreign press, with the aim of forcing them to present a favorable image of the “procés.” Since then, several have shared with RSF’s Spanish section their concerns and fears of being “lynched” on social networks if they focus on the issue of independence in a way that does not please either the regional authorities or the separatist rebels.

Elise Gazengel confirms the propaganda pressure reported by her colleagues.

“I receive entirely different treatment from the Catalonia government press office depending on whether I request something as a correspondent of France2 or as a member of a Spanish media outlet. I have, for example, been waiting for six months for an interview with the former president Artur Mas for CTXT. If I ask for something for French TV, the reaction is very different,” she laments.

As already pointed out in the above mentioned *El País* article, **Gazengel** is not the only correspondent caught between the “enthusiastic” pressure from the regional government and the negative pressure from the critics on social media. *“There is a Whatsapp group for correspondents from the government’s head of communication where we not only receive information and invitations, which is normal, but also ‘recommended readings’ of articles favorable to the ‘procés,’ Clarifications, and even corrections,”* she explains.

“Generally, the treatment is professional and amicable. I do not have the impression that some rather critical reports that I have published have had any direct impact on my relationships at an institutional level. There is, however, on the part of one particular government officer, a very clear propagandistic drive expressed via Whatsapp messages, recommending articles and in some cases even suggesting ‘proper terms to be used’ (for example, to clearly differentiate between Catalan police and Spanish

police). I'm rather astonished by that, and I try not to have my work contaminated by it," says German correspondent in Barcelona **Julia Macher**.

"In 2015, I suffered attacks by some high-ranking officials from the Catalan government or others close to it. I have been disproportionately criticized for having expressed doubts on issues related to independence or to certain government actions. Basically, you get discredited and singled out. In no case have I received insults or threats. But this way of criticizing someone on social media is very unpleasant, because high-ranking government officers are followed by thousands of people who later harass you. Because of their official status, their comments function as the green light for thousands of 'trolls,' who then feel empowered to criticize in turn. I do not give importance to troll attacks, but I do get worried and upset by comments from people in office. However, I want to point out that such attacks have come from very specific people, and do not at all represent a widespread practice," explains **Henry de Laguérie**.

In the case of this French correspondent, as in those of **Julia Macher** or **Elise Gazengel**, there is a vulnerability which makes the correspondents more susceptible to receiving pressure from authorities: they are all freelancers, and all based in Barcelona, thus having to deal on a daily basis with those whose behavior they complain about. Madrid-based correspondents (the vast majority) can keep a greater distance from the subject. *"Although this has allowed me to reflect on my role as a journalist – social media encourages the endless production of opinion and I am a reporter, not a columnist or an editorialist – I also admit that these attacks are quite damaging because as a freelance correspondent one is pretty isolated and can't rely on the support of an entire newsroom,"* explains **Henry de Laguérie**. *"At one point, when I really felt unprotected, I reported the situation to the French consulate, so that they were aware of the behavior of some people who are supposed to be paid to help us in our work,"* he admits.

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Spanish police seize ballot boxes in a polling station in Barcelona
© AFP PHOTO / PAU BARRENA



Institutional propaganda

«RSF considers that categorizing journalists according to their political leanings and making lists of supporters or detractors of a cause is more typical of totalitarian regimes than of democratic systems.»

RSF has been able to verify and attest to the truthfulness of this abusive practice. In his Whatsapp's mailing list for correspondents, Joan María Piqué, Director of Communication for the Catalan government, takes the opportunity to link articles, recommend certain documentaries, or provide data, all of which contain a strong political bias. "So far, the Spanish government has announced its intention to prosecute and condemn 72 of the 135 members of the Catalan Parliament, 12 members of the Catalan government, 700 mayors and about 50,000 volunteers. If these threats materialize, the Government of Spain would be exceeding the number of people punished by Erdogan's coup d'état," was his recent message to correspondents, in Spanish and English.

"I learned that for a while there was a project – fortunately abandoned – to create a group of correspondents 'more closely related to the separatist cause.' I think it is dangerous to set up groups of journalists according to their ideologies, nor do I appreciate the fact that the authorities know too much about us and may keep tabs on our ideological positions," says **Henry de Laguérie** and then follows up with a startling revelation to RSF: "I have had access to a document written by press officers of a governmental advisory body which contained the list of all the foreign correspondents based in Spain, with comments such as 'very sensitive to the Catalan subject' or 'very critical of independence.'"

RSF considers that categorizing journalists according to their political leanings and making lists of supporters or detractors of a cause is more typical of totalitarian regimes than of democratic systems.

The French journalist acknowledges, however, that this kind of attitude, so incompatible with the freedom of information, only occurs in specific cases. "On several occasions, through social media, I have been able to count on the support of various important players in the separatist camp, who do not endorse such finger-pointing practices. This makes me think that the problem is not secession in itself (although it is a very passionate subject that can generate heated debates), but the little respect that some show towards the mission of the press. In Spain, our role is not really respected. We are forced to take sides, perhaps because the press here is very politicized, but I do not see why I should have to show my political colors as a journalist," explains **de Laguérie**.

Brussels correspondents: the other frontline

Propaganda pressure, but above all, the frequent tactic of “targeting” certain journalists to have them “lynched” and harassed by separatist “cyber hooligans,” does not only take place on the “frontline” of Spain where the foreign correspondents covering the Catalan story are usually based. It also extends to a more distant battlefield of the “procés,” in Brussels. The possibility – repeatedly sustained by representatives of various EU bodies – that Catalonia may be left out of the Union following any eventual independence, is a thorny issue for the Catalan government, which in turn uses the age-old technique of “killing the messenger.” Spanish correspondents in Brussels, especially the Catalans, or others who write for the Catalan media, often face the wrath of the government’s press office when they report “uncomfortable truths” about the breakaway process.

Quite recently, the European Commission President, Jean-Claude Juncker, voiced somewhat ambiguously the possibility that the EU might respect a “yes” to independence in a referendum. Although the Commission reiterated several times that Juncker was not referring to the unilateral referendum of October 1, but to a hypothetical consultation agreed with the Spanish state, and although it reaffirmed the EU’s commitment to the Constitutional Court, a wave of interpretations in favor of the “procés” was already under way. Government officers from Junts Pel Sí, media outlets, editorialists, and legions of secession supporters on social media celebrated Juncker’s alleged support for the October 1 referendum results.

The day before, *La Vanguardia* had published an interview with Juncker by **Beatriz Navarro**, Brussels correspondent for the *Catalan daily*. “*The final word rests with the Courts and the Constitutional Court*,” headlined the journalist, paraphrasing the Commission’s president. The response of the government’s Director of Communication, Joan María Piqué, was to target the correspondent with a pulverizing tweet: “What Juncker says and thinks, is what Bea Navarro says that he says and thinks.”



*“He publicly targeted me on Twitter following the controversy over Jean-Claude Juncker’s comments about Catalonia’s independence, which some interpreted as an endorsement of the October 1 referendum and its results. The day before, I had published in *La Vanguardia* the most extensive and clear interview ever given by Juncker on the Catalan subject, and his positions had been very clear (‘On the Catalonia issue, we must listen to the Constitutional Court and the Courts’), quite the opposite to what the separatists claim the president of the EC meant. The confusion surrounding Juncker’s statements gave [Joan María Piqué] the opportunity to publicly target me and question my professionalism on a sensitive subject. I have lost count of the number of replies I received, some of them insulting,” recalls **Beatriz Navarro**, who*

emphasizes, in contrast, the massive support she received. “The general reaction of readers, followers, colleagues and my own company was overwhelming,” she adds.



Beatriz Navarro confirms how sensitive it is for journalists to approach the “Catalan theme” on social networks. “As soon as you tweet some comment or article, whether it’s your own or somebody else’s, you have everyone on your back, both the secession supporters (mostly) as well as those who are radically opposed [to independence] and who use the same unpleasant tone. I have suffered scorn and slandering, and especially unpleasant comments, but it never went as far as intimidation. If you are on Twitter or some other social network, the dialogue with the readers or followers is part of the deal, provided it is done in a polite and respectful manner,” she says.

The journalist’s outraged reaction was shared by numerous colleagues of hers in Brussels, who came to her support, some of whom were then in turn reprimanded by the Director of Communication of the Catalan government. Such was the case of **Claudi Pérez**, head of the Brussels bureau of *El País*.



“Joan Maria Piqué made a contemptuous comment about an article in which I explained Juncker’s position on the Catalan referendum, which was clear: the Commission would accept the referendum result if, and only if, that referendum were legal; the Commission will abide by what the Constitutional Court and the Courts say, and, in any case, an independent Catalonia would be left outside the EU. My interpretation of an equivocal and debatable sentence pronounced by Juncker, was

that it had been a slip of the tongue. That's how I wrote it, after talking to several sources on his team. In the days that followed, two vice-presidents of the European Commission confirmed what I had said. But Piqué's comment – and it was not his first one on the subject – was enough to make the attacks even worse. Similar situations have happened to colleagues of mine in Brussels. And the modus operandi has always been the same," explains **Claudi Pérez**.

"Using social media entails accepting your readers' comments. The good ones and the bad ones. The problem arises when the bad ones become nasty and when an official source encourages such kind of comments. Without reaching the level of intimidation, the avalanche of responses, often bordering on insult, make journalism very difficult," added the *El País* correspondent and bureau chief in Brussels.

Most correspondents report that they have also received numerous attacks by anti-independence "trolls" and supporters of the Spanish far-right, although almost all agree that these appear to be less organized. "I have also been insulted because I am suspected of being a French journalist who has embraced the separatist cause, and I have been the victim of threatening gestures by right-wingers during the October 12, 2016 rallies in Barcelona, like some of my colleagues," says **Elise Gazengel**. "From my experience, the independence movement is not particularly aggressive on social networks, although it is true that I am not very active in them," says **Martin Tonner**, Southern Europe correspondent for the Danish daily *Berlingske*.

"I do have the impression that monitoring is meticulous and very organized within the separatist camp," explains **Julia Macher**. "And that, in general, pressure is much greater on the Catalan and Spanish journalists, to the extent that the term 'neutrality' has become a curse," she adds. This impression seems to be shared by all correspondents who have spoken with RSF: everyone agrees that those who suffer most from the fury of "cyber-journalism" on social networks and from political and institutional pressure are the Catalan journalists working for media whose editorial line does not advocate sovereignty.

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Protesters stand in front of Spanish National police officers during a demonstration at Puerta del Sol square

© AFP PHOTO / JAVIER SORIANO



Catalan journalists: stuck with an unenviable role

On April 25, *El País* journalist **Cristian Segura** published an exclusive report revealing that the singer/songwriter and now congressman of Junts Pel Sí (the alliance of separatist parties that governs Catalonia), Lluís Llach, had given a series of lectures, in which he warned that officials who did not comply with the new Catalan legality once the Law of Legal Transiency was passed would be punished and “many of them will suffer.” An initial error in editing the piece, (the journalist wrote the headline without quotation marks, but the newspaper thought it was a literal statement and added quotation marks) although quickly fixed, led to one of the greatest cases of harassment of a journalist on social networks that RSF has recently observed. “*I have been writing things these days that I just wish to forget quickly*,” tweeted **Cristian Segura**, after three days of receiving uninterrupted insults and slandering remarks, as well as salvos from politicians and journalists who support independence.

*“I do not want to make a mountain of it. I try not to give it much importance, in the sense that social networks are a kind of dumping site for emotions. And when one touches upon an issue as deeply cherished as the national sentiment, it is typical of the human condition that many will feel stirred by it,”*says the journalist.



However, **Segura** acknowledges to have paid some personal price for it. “I’ve had to take tranquilizers and, yes, I have relatives who cry because they do not understand some of the crap that has been written against me. I feel weary and eager for this matter to go away so that I can breathe some fresh air,” he told RSF. Although he has disabled notifications on his Twitter account, hardly a day goes by without him being reviled. “My profile can often be provocative – although I never disrespect or challenge anyone. It can contain some ironic touches, so I assume that someone who doesn’t think much or who considers that independence is an essential goal in their life, might go for the jugular,” he explains..



Although targeting and harassment on social media affects all political trends, ideologies and parties, RSF attaches greater gravity to those instances coming from spheres close to power, because they have much greater impact in terms of self-censorship and intimidation. **Cristian Segura** was haunted by journalists, the director of a largely independent digital media as well as politicians. Quim Arrufat, a prominent leader of the anti-capitalist leftist group CUP, accused him of manipulating the news and of “sowing hatred,” while Jaume Asens, the deputy mayor of Barcelona, accused *El País* of performing “a gawkish manipulation” in order to incite Lluís Llach’s lynching. A video showing Llach pronouncing, word for word, what Segura had transcribed in his article, was not enough to make online insults stop, nor politicians rectify their comments.

“Threats of this kind, I can count them on the fingers of my hand, but the last one came from a journalist from a digital newspaper who wrote on Twitter that, after independence, I would never work again,” says Segura. “The independence movement is much more aggressive than others, because it is based on one of the most dangerous feelings that exist: the nationalist sentiment. The alternative left can also be aggressive, because it shares something with the separatists: both have the feeling that this is their historical moment, which enflames many passions,” he adds.

An organized movement?

The profile of the easily-triggered nationalist who gets quickly stirred by what he interprets as lack of respect for the homeland and/or its representatives is already known among Catalan journalists as “els hyper ventilats,” or “the hyper ventilators.”

“They often show up on my Facebook wall and they rant on and on,” explains **Siscu Baiges**, a journalist specializing in solidarity issues, who writes for El Diario.es, and is a university professor and a member of an activist NGO in the communication field. “It is not uncommon to see members of the Catalonia government or of organizations linked to or subsidized by it, also appearing on my Facebook page to reproach me for my criticism of the ‘procés,’ with the typical ‘I did not expect it from you,’” says **Baiges**, who plays down ironically the dangers of finger-pointing. “As I have never been invited to a public television or radio show in Catalonia, I am not worried that they might not do so from now on either.”

Like many other local and foreign journalists, **Siscu Baiges** believes that separatist “cyber hooliganism” is an organized movement. “The movement has an ‘army of hyper ventilators’ who are nothing more than a tool of the Catalan government to engage in whatever is the most convenient struggle at any given time. I believe, in fact, that they even hand out slogans and material to get the most out of each one of the causes that they promote. What I do not know is how far that government cesspit is from the president’s office,” declares the reporter.

Siscu Baiges is not the only one to believe that behind Twitter harassment lurks a hand that orchestrates the cyberbullying. In an article published by *El País* last February, investigative journalist **Oriol Güell** showed how just a few accounts of how the PDCAT (a Catalan right-wing party, heir of the CiU) triggered a “tsunami” to discredit the mayor Ada Colau for the installation at the Fossar de les Moreres (a place that pays homage to those killed in the War of Succession) for an exhibition that they considered unworthy of the location. After only five hours of Twitter harassment, they pushed the City Council to dismantle the exhibition. “An investigation based on network traffic data, carried out by a specialized company, reveals how only three people – supported by a dozen anonymous accounts (known as trolls), some party militants, and a few influential opinion makers set off a perfect storm that eventually circulated 19,000 messages on the net and achieved more than 39 million potential impressions. The true figure was actually much higher, since the study only takes into account the messages that contain the word ‘Fossar,’” revealed **Güell** in his article. Unsurprisingly, this revelation turned the journalist himself into a target of the stalkers. On this occasion, they aimed their darts against not only him, but also against his partner.

Target from above, then lynch from below

Age and experience seem to help non-separatist press people play down the importance of online abuse and put up with the trolls in a valiant way. “*This nationalistic hooliganism... Good thing it hits me as an older man. If it had happened when I was young man, I would have died*,” jokes **Guillem Martínez**, a seasoned journalist, screenplay writer, novelist, and current editor of the digital newspaper *CTXT*. **Martínez**’ command of the sarcastic style, and the surreal touches that he adds to his news reporting of the “procés” have won him legions of fans and, naturally, detractors.



“I would not identify those vociferous blabbermouths with the independence movement, which is in itself vast and varied. They seem to constitute a very specific audience, engaged in the monitoring [of journalists] and the defense of the current Catalonia government. I call them “procéssists,” because the timing and themes of their ranting are closely related to the agenda of the ‘procés’ in which this separatist government is engaged,” he says.

In early June, when the press was summoned for the important announcement of a unilateral referendum to be held on October 1, **Guillem Martínez** was neither invited nor accredited. When *CTXT* addressed the Catalan government press office on the subject, they were told that the announcement constituted a news event, and that “*opinion journalists were not invited*.” Faced with the protests of Martínez’ colleagues – “*those who first supported me were the foreign correspondents*,” he points out – the government eventually approved his accreditation, but the decision was communicated to *CTXT* overnight and not to him personally, thus he did not find out about it in time to attend. “*To argue that I am not a journalist, but an opinionator – because my opinions don’t coincide with those of the government, I suppose – is quite exotic and resulted in an avalanche of insulting messages, once again inspired by an extreme right narrative. On this occasion, I did receive personal threats*,” he explains.



"Everything that is happening in Catalonia reminds me of the Aznar era and what I experienced during the last great nationalist wave of Spanish propaganda. Many people and journalists were convinced that Spain was waging a war against evil and that the press was part of the crusade. Anyone not writing in favor of the government was identified as evil. In those days, when there was no social media, pressure was exerted by telephone, letter, or mail. I received a death threat then, as I did now in Catalonia. Writing in this kind of environment is not very encouraging," he adds.

The greater the depth of the events that shake Catalan society, the greater appear to be the clashes arising from the way journalists talk about them. After the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils on August 17, *El Periódico de Catalunya* revealed that some months ago, the CIA had warned the Mossos d'Esquadra (the Catalan police) of the possibility of Daesh committing an attack in Las Ramblas. From the start, legions of tweeters and separatist politicians launched a huge harassment campaign, recently denounced by RSF, against the head of the newspaper, **Enric Hernández**. The last straw in this shocking climate of intimidation was a press conference given by the interior minister of the Catalan government, Joaquim Forn, and the chief of the Mossos d'Esquadra, Josep Lluís Trapero. While acknowledging the existence of the CIA warning, they disagreed with the source who revealed it, and publicly expressed disagreement with the newspaper director and the journalist **Luis Mauri**, present in the room, in an intimidating tone. RSF considers it improper that a public official, who is supposed to be completely neutral with the press, should publicly reprimand journalists, especially when such a reprimand comes from a high-ranking police officer.



Since then, the director of *El Periódico* has not stopped receiving threats (some of them death threats), campaigns on Change.org with his name translated from Catalan to Spanish to declare him persona non-grata, requests on Twitter to cancel his account, or calls from individuals, opinion makers, and even a municipal political group, such as Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya, for readers to cancel their subscriptions to the newspaper. **Enric Hernández** defended himself in an article that recounts the facts revealed by the controversial scoop *"despite the discredit campaigns, the boycott attempts, and even the threats."*



→ Spanish police officers seize ballot-boxes in a polling station in Barcelona

© AFP PHOTO / PAU BARRENA

“We do not consider journalists to be sacred figures who cannot be questioned on social networks. We know, too, that mere ‘cyber hooliganism’ against the press exists in all countries where we operate, and that it is exercised by supporters of all parties and ideologies. However, Reporters Without Borders is particularly concerned about cases when such actions emanate from spheres of power, and wants to warn of their consequences. When a politician, especially one who is in office or closely related to power, points a finger at a journalist, that politician is voluntarily or involuntarily unleashing a legion of detractors against the journalist and giving him the inevitable feeling that silence might be a better option. The impact of ‘cyberbullying’ in terms of fears for professional career damage is much greater when it comes from structures of power. This is not desirable in any democratic society,” says **Pauline Adès-Mevel**, head of the European Union and Balkan desk of RSF.

Towards self-censorship

Resilient though a journalist may be to online harassment or to the more or less subtle pressures from power and its environment, Reporters Without Borders finds that, in every case denounced around the world, such maneuvers end up having some kind of impact or effect, thus fulfilling the initial objective of silencing a dissident voice through a formula that never fails: self-censorship. All journalists who have participated in this report confess to self-censorship in one way or another and several recognize having dropped a story, or wishing to do so, or even leaving Catalonia.

"I hesitated a lot before publishing this article. Lately, I have been writing in fear, too much concerned with what others will think about it. Self-censorship is winning the battle, and that horrifies me," wrote the well-known reporter **Jordi Évole** in one of his recent columns of *El Periódico de Catalunya* entitled "Let's slander the neutral." He then explained how an earlier article on the politicization of the Barcelona and Cambrils attacks had earned him a slanderous comment in a separatist online newspaper (*El Nacional.cat*) and applauded the correction that followed, made by the director, on **Évole's** request.

A few days after publishing his column, *Súmate*, the umbrella group of Spanish-speaking separatists – to which ERC congressman Gabriel Rufián belongs, and whose spokesman is the former CUP congressman Antonio Baths – published an unfortunate tweet, in the form of a "wanted" poster, showing **Évole's** face and the following text: "Neutral *El Periódico* newsman, last seen on Twitter." Following the ensuing avalanche of criticism, *Súmate* withdrew the tweet and apologized, pretending not to have understood the message in **Évole's** column.



"I do censor myself, no doubt. I spend ten times more thinking about what I will say on social networks about separatist parties than about those who are not. In this sense, they have achieved their goal. I have reduced my presence on social media, but I have not completely left because I think it is addictive and because it would be a small personal defeat," admits **Cristian Segura**, editor of *El País*. *"I am a university professor and member of a social activism NGO in the communication field. I often censor myself, because I do not want my work or my organization to suffer any damage as a result of this debate,"* acknowledges **Siscu Baiges**.

« I try not to censor myself when I write news stories, but I realize that I strive to be as much to the point as possible and, sometimes, I already mentally prepare a possible defense against eventual criticism from the separatist camp »

"For the sake of my own mental health, and so as not to waste any more time than I have already squandered on the subject, I have stayed away from social networks for a few days, but I will go back, of course," says **Beatriz Navarro**, correspondent of *La Vanguardia* in Brussels. "I almost never publish information on the Catalan subject on Twitter, unless there's some very significant news development, so as to avoid unnecessary comments, corrections and insults," explains France 2 correspondent and Spanish media journalist **Elise Gazengel**. "On Twitter, I do notice that I think twice before commenting on a story, or before retweeting something. I try not to censor myself when I write news stories, but I realize that I strive to be as much to the point as possible and, sometimes, I already mentally prepare a possible defense against eventual criticism from the separatist camp," admits **Julia Macher**.

"It is irritating, but it goes with the territory. I believe that those of us who defend the Web's neutrality and freedom of expression must have a certain degree – a very high degree – of tolerance towards behaviors of this type on social networks," says **Guillem Martínez**, who believes that such a "very high degree" of tolerance was surpassed by what the Súmate organization did to **Jordi Évole**, a comment he defines as "slight fascist licentiousness."

"On Saturday, I tried to forget about everything for a while and went to the presentation of the book 'Every Desk, a Vietnam: On the Practice of Journalism,' with **Enric González** and **Claudi Pérez**. They were asked if they were worried about the type of criticism that is being hurled around on social networks these days. With a sneer, and after a brief silence, **Enric** said he wasn't. He said journalists should not be mindful of the roar in the stadium. That they should push ahead without looking up at the grandstand. I thought that we were paying too much attention to what is being said to us, even if we are subjected to daily lynching," concluded **Jordi Évole** in one of his latest columns in *El Periódico*.

"For a journalist, playing down 'cyber hooliganism' can lead to a phenomenon close to alienation, which occurs in other scenarios of pressure and abuse. While it is true that, at least for the moment, we need to accept it as a reality that will not go away and that we must develop tools to protect ourselves from, we at RSF draw two red lines that should never be crossed nor ignored. The first is harassment coming from spheres of power and its surroundings; and the second is self-censorship," says **Pauline Adès-Mevel**, head of the EU and Balkan Desk of RSF.

Anonymity as a symptom

A clear sign that self-censorship is breaking new ground and that freedom of information may be suffering from political tension is the fact that some journalists prefer to remain anonymous when asked if they want RSF to make their vision and/or their complaints public.

"Nothing or nobody prevents me from giving my name, but lately, in Catalonia, any statement, fact or gesture becomes a tool for political manipulation, both by one side and by the other, so I do not want to mix in my identity, or my agency, in any manipulation campaign," explains the correspondent of a major European news agency.

"I prefer not to be quoted for two reasons: I do not want to become a protagonist and I really consider troll harassment as part of our trade. We are in the public arena and journalists are subject to criticism," says a Spanish correspondent in Brussels, who agreed to share his opinion with RSF. *"Rather than direct insults and slandering, what I have suffered from separatist politicians and organizations is what I call the 'clarion call syndrome.' A separatist politician retweets you or quotes you by criticizing your opinion – in a way that may in itself not be slanderous or insulting, but still making it clear that he does not like what you have said, or that he openly disagrees with you – and then the chase is on for his followers, who are the ones who will begin to throw the insults. Obviously, I cannot say that there is a coordinated action among the politician's followers, nor that the politician himself was seeking to intimidate, but I do believe that he should be more aware of the consequences that such an act may have,"* he says.

« When I wrote, after the terrorist attacks, that there were contacts between Belgium and the Mossos d'Esquadra about the Imam of Ripoll, I was called 'anti-Catalan' and my newspaper was asked why I was still employed. »

"When I wrote, after the terrorist attacks, that there were contacts between Belgium and the Mossos d'Esquadra about the Imam of Ripoll, I was called 'anti-Catalan' and my newspaper was asked why I was still employed. Someone dug out a video of a talk I gave a few years ago at the launch of a book on bilingualism written by a friend of mine. My words, in fact, were clearly in favor of mastering and speaking two languages, but now I am being accused of objecting to linguistic immersion. Because my friend is a Ciudadanos activist, I am also accused of being a member of that organization, to which I have never belonged," explains the correspondent of an important European publication who prefers anonymity. *"I do not want to attract more harassment, or be called anti-Catalan, because I am not. If I receive more online pressure, it will be impossible for me to do my job as a journalist,"* he adds.

A toxic environment for the free exercise of journalism

The unprecedented tension created by the recent action of the national police in Catalonia, aimed at complying with the suspension of the referendum issued by the Constitutional Court, and the constant challenges that the central and Catalan governments have been exchanging, have only aggravated a climate that was already quite unhealthy for the freedom of information in Catalonia.

The public rallies of the second half of September were the scene of unpleasant, tense, and intolerable abuse of journalists who were simply carrying out their duty of information, especially those from Spanish television channels, during their live reporting. "Manipulative Spanish press" was the slogan repeatedly chanted by the protesters, while journalists were barely managing to deliver their live reports on camera. In several cases, protesters intimidated reporters, snatched their microphones, shut down their cameras, or insulted them. One of the most talked-about cases, but by no means the only one, was that of **Hilario Pino**, news anchor and reporter for *La Sexta* [see video: http://www.lasexta.com/noticias/nacional/un-manifestante-pro-referendum-interrumpe-el-directo-de-hilario-pino-arrancandole-el-microfono-de-las-manos_2017092059c2b7760cf2fc375537dcb2.html]

The TVE Council of News, an internal body of journalists that watches over the independence and good practice of the national television network, recently denounced

an incident concerning one of its reporters and her subsequent harassment on social networks, demanding her dismissal. Intimidation of journalists from television networks has been widespread. In this case, a student of the University of Barcelona explains in detail how the crowd boos and shouts at a *La Sexta* reporter, right before her live connection, how she can be seen getting very nervous and how, to reward her for the fear that she went through and for her courage, they then sing a song to her.

Here are some examples of the dozens of live connections made by Spanish television broadcasters in questionable conditions:

https://www.youtube.com/embed/O5M1tni_C8s?start=54
http://www.telecinco.es/elprogramadeanarosa/Boicot-conexiones-AR-Cataluna-manipuladora_2_2439705057.html
<http://www.lavanguardia.com/television/20170922/431463980283/uab-manifestacion-referendum-reportera-la-sexta-boig-per-tu.html>
http://www.lasexta.com/noticias/nacional/gritos-de-prensa-espanola-manipuladora-dificultan-el-trabajo-de-los-medios-en-el-campus-de-bellaterra_2017092159c3b3c80cf201a8c2c4e111.html

On the other hand, a demonstration by the Spanish far-right outside the headquarters of the National Assembly of Catalonia (ANC) was especially rough on journalists, as recounted by French correspondent **Elise Gazengel**, who was threatened by one of the demonstrators. All Catalan journalists concur in highlighting the insidious violence of Spanish right-wingers in the demonstrations they hold in Catalonia. *"I personally know colleagues who have received death threats and I have received insults and threatening gestures,"* says the French journalist.

"Extreme right-wing groups are violent throughout Europe, but the point here is for civil society not to reproduce authoritarian reflex actions against journalists and to let them do their work in peace, no matter what media they work for. We are concerned about the intimidating videos against television reporters that we are receiving from Barcelona, and we condemn them," said **Pauline Adès-Mevel**, head of the EU-Balkans desk of RSF. *"We call on the Catalan authorities to prevent the stigmatization of the Spanish press as being responsible for a situation whose only authors are the politicians on both sides. Pointing fingers to the press was typical of the electoral campaigns of Trump and other reactionary movements,"* she concludes.

RSF ASKS NOT INTIMIDATE CATALÁN MEDIA

On September 15, several Catalan media, mostly digital ones, were visited by agents of the Guardia Civil delivering a notification of the Superior Court of Justice of Catalonia, warning the directors that their media would incur criminal liability if they spread advertising or propaganda regarding the October 1 referendum suspended by the Constitutional Court.

Several national police officers in civilian clothes visited the offices of *Nació Digital*, *El Nacional.cat*, *Vilaweb*, *Racó Català*, *Llibertat.cat* and *El Punt Avui* in a notification tour, which, in some cases, did not go beyond standard procedure, but in others went as far as involving identity checks of the news editors. Such was the case of *Nació Digital*: the director's refusal to allow the Civil Guard officers to enter the newsroom without a search warrant, and the policemen's pictures taken by some of the editors (shot from behind and without the intention of rendering the individuals recognizable) prompted the officers to carry out identity checks of the journalists present in the newsroom. "They did not look too proud of what they were doing," said *Nació Digital* editor **Sara González** to radio station *RAC1*. "They were angry for two reasons: for having been denied access to the newsroom and for having been reminded of our right to inform," she added. "Upset at having been photographed, and invoking their right to privacy, the policemen submitted the journalists to identity checks and photographed their national identity cards."

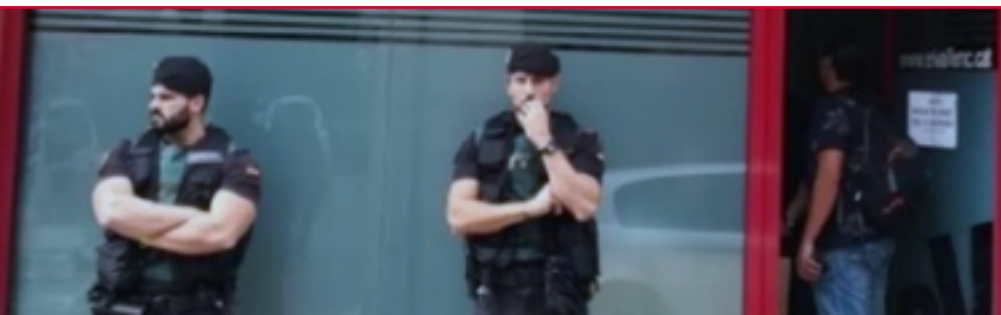


RSF considers that, while the delivery of notifications or summons was indeed required by law, the execution of the procedure bore an intimidating twist, due to the simultaneous nature of the operation across all media and to the possibility that such visits might carry consequences in application of the "Gag Law" that prohibits taking photographs of policemen and state security officers, as well as other acts of "disobedience."

Random identity checks of journalists also occurred during the coverage of the separatist demonstration outside "El Vallenc," the digital newspaper from the locality of Valls (Tarragona), whose newsroom was searched by the Civil Guard to requisition material related to the referendum as well as fingerprint records registered in several points of Catalonia, with the same purpose.

RSF believes that the police must be very mindful of distinguishing between the application of sanctions – supported by judicial sentences – to those media that indeed carry publicity and propaganda for the referendum, and harassment of those whose editorial line and ideology are in favor of it.

Likewise, the organization expresses its concern about the manipulation of information denounced by workers of the TVE regional center in Catalonia during the coverage of the demonstrations that took place outside the Ministry of Economy in Barcelona, while high-ranking members of the Catalan government were being detained in its premises. RSF frames this complaint about information bias together with hundreds of similar cases that the RTVE Council of Information has repeatedly highlighted, while at the same time regretting the lack of equivalent safeguard bodies in Catalan public media which might be similarly active in denunciation, transparency and criticism



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