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Strategic communication applied to nation building in Spain: The experience of the Catalan Region



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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes how strategic communication is being used in the case of regions, “imagined communities,” or the so-called “stateless nations,” for nation-building purposes. It focuses on the case of Spain’s Catalonia region in the years since the devolution of power and approval of the Second Statute of Autonomy in 1979. The different successive Catalan governments have made intensive use of mass media campaigns and other soft power methods to enhance Catalan identity. Main efforts have focused on the promotion of the Catalan language, culture, sports, and symbols through public relations, mass media campaigns, the implementation of laws, and the deployment of public diplomacy tactics with the dual purpose of reaching internal audiences. Although a significant part of the Catalan population is alienated from politics, the overall outcome has been positive for Catalan nationalism: identification with Spain has decreased while dual Catalan/Spanish and Catalan-only identification has grown during this period.

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1. Introduction

Catalonia is considered part of a group of regions, “stateless nations” (Conversi, 1997; Gibernau, 2006), “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1991) or “virtual nations” (Tubau, 1999) such as Flanders, Quebec, and Scotland, that have a strong sense of identity, which they try to project both internationally and among their own citizens.

This paper argues that the use of strategic communication by the Catalan government, since the enactment of the Statute of autonomy in 1979, has been successful in creating a stronger Catalan identity in contemporary Spain.

2. Literature review

The concept of strategic communication has been defined as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission” (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007, p. 3). These organizations have a multidisciplinary vision of communication and tend to integrate public relations and other communication functions such as public diplomacy in their strategic communication efforts (van Dyke & Verčič, 2009).

Strategic communication seems an appropriate umbrella under which to analyze nation-building communication efforts because it permits the reconciliation of different conceptions regarding the relationship between public relations, public communication, and propaganda.

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The Catalan case combines mass media soft propaganda, and the promotion of sports, tourism, and cultural events for public diplomacy purposes with foreign audiences as well as to persuade internal publics.

2.1. *The triumph of soft power*

Soft power can be defined as the way “a country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries – admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness – want to follow it” (Nye, 2004, p. 5). But soft power also means the capacity of the country to attract its own citizens (Nye, 2002, 2004).

The Catalan regional government has been able to make the idea of being Catalan an attractive one among a majority of Catalans. The intensive use of public media, an example of soft power (Nye, 2004), is partly responsible for this success.

Despite the persistent use of soft power methods to create an exclusive Catalan identity perceived as different of the Spanish identity, the successive Catalan governments have conveyed a relative image of moderation in Catalonia and in the rest of Spain. For example, during the last three decades Catalan regional governments have reached agreements with the different national governments. Indeed, its current main speaker in the Spanish parliament, Josep Antoni Duran i Lleida claims to be much more moderate than the rest of his party. A proof of the double language of Catalan nationalism in the rest of Spain and Catalonia is ABC, historically the main conservative newspaper in Spain, awarded “Spaniard of the year” its main leader for more than two decades, Jordi Pujol, a fierce Catalan nationalist, in 1984.

There have been, however, examples of hard power, particularly the implementation of Catalan-only linguistic laws that have generated symbolic violence in some segments of Catalan society (Martínez-Herrera, 2002). Nonetheless, considering that Spanish is the first language for 55% of the Catalan population (Idescat, 2008), the reaction against these laws has not been as strong as might be expected.

3. Methods

This paper uses Catalonia as a case study for how the governments of regions work to be perceived as nations. The author uses a historical-critical method to investigate the connection between the strategic communication management in a nation-building process and the attitudes of the population since 1979. The paper applies a holistic approach that takes into account the interaction between mass media campaigns, public relations, public diplomacy, and government policies.

4. Analysis of results

4.1. *Soft power methods*

4.1.1. *Mass media campaigns*

Through the control of the autonomous public media apparatus, the Catalan government has framed issues, manufactured stories, and built slogans to achieve its goals.

The most common method has been the use of national territorial socialization tactics that question the legal frame of Catalonia as a region within Spain:

“TV3 [Catalan public TV] not only contributes to shore up the nation, but also to construct the myths and symbols of nationalism and to socialize them as those of all Catalonia. TV3 is more than a television station, since it not only aspires to entertain or inform, but also to nationalize [...] Thus if the objective is to construct the *països catalans* [Catalan countries], the weather maps will reflect these territories; if Catalan must be the only language of the country, the soap operas show a country in which—ignoring the socio-linguistic reality – no-one speaks Castilian” (Santamaría, 1999, pp. 50–51, in Etherington, 2003, pp. 265–266).

The Catalan government owns the main media conglomerate in Catalonia, Corporació catalana de mitjans audiovisuals (CCMA), a public broadcast service in Catalan with six television broadcast channels and four radio stations, among other companies. Its 2543 employees (CCMA, 2010) are equivalent to roughly 40% of the entire radio and television workforce in the region (Idescat, 2009).

With regard to television consumption patterns, the cumulative audience of the conglomerate of public channels represents 23% of the total (Baròmetre de la comunicació i la cultura, 2012). This data acquires more relevance if we take into consideration that 56% of the Catalan population says that their primary source for political information is main regional public channel TV3’s newscasts (Centre d’Estudis & d’Opinió, 2012).

The public radio broadcast system, Catalunya ràdio, also clearly leads audience rankings with approximately one third of the entire generalist audience (Baròmetre de la comunicació i la cultura, 2012). As part of its mission to promote the Catalan language, the Catalan government also offered important subsidies to RAC1, the second most listened-to radio, valued at 669,235 euros in 2010 (Lavozdebarcelona.com, 2011). Therefore, the regional government directly or indirectly controls two-thirds of the radio landscape.

The level of penetration of newspapers among Catalans is significantly low, with only 43% of the population reading some kind of newspaper (Baròmetre de la comunicació i la cultura, 2012). But certainly, the most prominent characteristic of the Catalan press is its high reliance on public funds via direct subsidies. In 2010 the Department of Culture gave out 10 million

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