'Independence 2.0':
Digital Activism, Social Media and the Catalan Independence Movement

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Abstract

This article examines the role and use of social media in the ongoing movement for Catalan independence by focusing on two pro-independence civil society organisations, *Feministes per la Independència* (FxI) and *Òmnium Cultural* (OC). Drawing upon elite interview data with representatives from both organisations and Catalan parliamentarians, it posits that social media platforms serve as crucial vehicles for these civil society organisations, particularly in terms of empowerment, mobilisation, organisation, participation and resistance. The increasing salience of digital activism in Catalonia is such that social media platforms have become fundamental pillars of the independence movement, helping to overcome state-imposed institutional obstacles as well as internationalise the issue across transnational networks. The analysis, however, also reveals a darker side to engagement with social media including the proliferation of biased narratives, dissemination of misinformation and trolling. On the basis of these reflections, the article concludes that while engagement with social media entails risks, hitherto such platforms have proved to be highly effective and will continue to be pivotal in promoting and generating support for the independence cause.

Keywords: Catalan independence, Digital activism, Social media, Feministes per la Independència, Òmnium Cultural.

Introduction

The Catalan push for independence has remained central to the ongoing constitutional quagmire between the Spanish state and Catalan government since 2010. Support for independence in Catalonia has consistently creeped upwards in recent years, with support for holding a referendum even higher. Since 2012, successive Catalan governments have supported the pursuit of territorial independence, but Spain's main political parties including the *Partido Popular* (PP), the *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE) and *Ciudadanos*, remain resolute in their opposition to a referendum on the break-up of the Spanish state.

The increasing support for independence in Catalonia has been spawned by the growth of civil society organisations sympathetic to the pro-secession cause. As Crameri (2015: 99) notes, 'civil associations have been the principal protagonists at key moments in the evolution of Catalonia's recent progress towards majority support for secession'. These civil organisations have been 'highly effective in terms of spectacle, publicity generation and attention seeking activity', including the organisation of demonstrations and the 2017 independence referendum (Dowling 2018: 101). The success and effectiveness of civil organisations in mobilising pro-right to decide supporters and engaging in wider debates on independence has been aided by the use of the internet, social media and other web 2.0 technologies. Indeed, in the face of the refusal of the Spanish government to engage with the independence issue, Gabriel Rufián, a pro-independence and technologically-savvy politician, has described social media as 'the tanks of the twenty-first century' (Gazengel 2017). Others posit a similar line of argumentation to the extent that for one scholar 'without social media and the internet, the Catalan

independence movement could not possibly have progressed so far in such as short space of time' (Crameri 2014: 27).

Adopting a comparative case study approach (Yin 2014) and utilising elite interview data, this article examines the importance and use of social media by two pro-independence civil society organisations in Catalonia: *Feministes per la Independència* (FxI) and *Òmnium Cultural* (OC). Both organisations provide an interesting and helpful comparison in that they both support Catalan independence and have established presences on social media platforms, but differ in terms of other factors such as wider objectives, resources, longevity and membership size. OC, for instance, was founded in 1961 as a predominantly cultural organisation concerned with the diffusion of Catalan language and culture, whereas FxI is a much more recent organisation, founded in 2013 to increase the presence and voice of women and women-specific issues in the Catalan independence debate.

This article is organised as follows. Firstly, a discussion of the relevant theoretical literature related to social media and civil organisations is offered. The second section looks at the development of the Catalan independence movement with specific focus on the contemporary nature of the debate. The third section provides a brief overview of the methods, data and cases used in this article. The fourth section provides the empirical analysis and focuses on elite views on the role and importance of social media for FxI and OC and how these organisations utilise it to convey their pro-independence message. Section five offers some comparative conclusions. As this section will show, for both FxI and OC social media are seen as a crucial vehicle of engagement, mobilisation, organisation, participation and resistance, used to increase support for independence, internationalise the cause, and at the same time, advance the specific cultural and social agendas of the associations. Section six concludes.

Civil Organisations and Social Media

In recent years, there has been an explosion in the use of social media (among them, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter) to engage with topics in the political sphere. Part of what has come to be called 'Web 2.0', the term for how the internet has developed to facilitate greater interactivity between users in recent years (O'Reilly 2007), social media have proved to be useful tools in elections and referendum campaigns for both the electorate and political leaders (Bruns et al. 2015) as well as in other political and social movements such as the Arab Spring (Howard and Hussain 2013) and the Occupy Movement (Constanza-Chock 2012). Social media have provided social movements and civil organisations with greater opportunities to engage with supporters, coordinate with other movements and communicate their message to the wider public, both nationally and internationally (Della Porta and Mattoni 2015).

For Shirky (2011: 1), social media present people with 'greater access to information [and] more opportunities to engage in public speech'. This, he argues, has resulted in social media becoming 'coordinating tools for nearly all of the world's political movements' (Shirky 2011: 2). Social media ensure that movements and civil organisations can communicate information in a quick and efficient manner (Elantawy and Wiest 2011) while simultaneously reducing the costs of organisation and collective action (Earl and Kimport 2011). Castells (2012: 11) claims that social movements operate in a 'new public space, the networked space between the digital space and the urban space, … a space of autonomous communication. The autonomy of communication is the essence of social movements because it is what allows the movement to be formed, and what enables the movement to relate to society at large beyond the control of the power holders over communication power'. This means, therefore, that many social

movements and civil organisations view having a social media presence as essential. Social media platforms have been fundamental to the growing salience of this civil and networked 'counterpower', providing a means through which the dominant forces of states and institutions - both nationally and internationally - can be challenged and resisted (Castells 2012). Such counterpower structures facilitate the organisation of the citizenry into movements of engagement, empowerment, liberation and resistance (Tucker et al. 2017: 48). Social media platforms are not the cause of such counterpower networks, but as Castells (2016: 10) notes, they are not unimportant either: 'they constitute the space where power is played out and ultimately exercised'.

'Digital activism' has thus become part and parcel of modern political campaigns, social movements and contemporary political activism (Joyce 2010). Independence movements are no exception. Cox (2008: 48) points out that secessionist movements often embrace web technologies and social media tools to use them 'as effective organising, agitation and propaganda tools in order to win support for their causes amongst both co-nationals and others'. He continues, 'the extensive use of the Internet by a variety of stateless nations and diaspora (including Tamils, Palestinians, Kurds and Tibetans, to name only a few prominent examples) provides just one instance of the dependence of today's state-seeking nationalists on the new communication technologies' (Cox 2008: 48). In Western Europe, the Catalan and Scottish movements are cases in point. Social media and other web technologies played a central role in the 2014 Scottish independence campaign which witnessed 'unprecedented levels of online dialogue' (Tickell 2014: 406). Both sides of the campaign capitalised on the cost-effective, campaigning and communication opportunities offered by social media and continued to do so long after the vote was held (Buchanan 2016). In this vein, the use of social media by pro-independence Catalan organisations is symptomatic of the wider proliferation of digital activism in all corners of the world, ranging from issues related to race (Carney 2016), sexuality (Jensen and Irmgard 2014) as well as more localised social issues (Hermida and Hernández-Santaolalla 2018).

The use of social media in such campaigns, as aforementioned, relates to reduced costs and the ability to communicate information quickly, but is equally rooted in what has been termed the 'inherent democratic capacities' of communication technologies (Loader and Mercea 2011: 759). In this vein, social media serve as vehicles of communication and organisation, facilitating the collaboration of peoples committed to, or at the very least interested in, a specific cause and thus forging a virtual collective identity. The extent to which these collective identities are necessary as a pre-requisite for mobilisation remains contested (Flesher Fominaya 2019: 439), but analysis has shown that online interaction does indeed foster a robust sense of collective identity which can even precipitate offline mobilisation (Harlow 2012).

Notwithstanding the optimism and hype regarding the use of social media as a democratising tool, some scholars remain cautious and sceptical about its democratising effects. Morozov (2011: xvi; emphasis in original), for instance, criticises 'cyber-utopians' for 'a populist account of how technology empowers the *people*', while Fuchs (2012: 794-795) takes a similarly critical position paying particular attention to what he terms 'techno-euphoria' as relates to the 'assumption that contemporary social movements emerged from and are largely based on the internet and live and act through digital media' (see also, Earl 2019). Continuing a similar line of argumentation Bradshaw and Howard (2017: 4) explain how 'social media platforms are threatening democracy', while Tucker et al (2017: 47-48) posit that while social media is often framed as 'a technology of liberation' it can equally be used as a tool by authoritarian and anti-democratic forces 'to muzzle critics and shut down or distort the

information space'. The proliferation of fake news, online trolls and professional bots underline this point (Rainie et al. 2017).

It is a truism that civil organisations and wider social movements are not a new phenomenon, but in recent decades there has been something of a resurgence in groups seeking to disrupt the status quo (Tarrow 2011: 9). To this end, social media have become key mechanisms utilised by different political and social movements to champion their causes. It is important, therefore, to eschew 'the utopian optimism' that often surrounds analysis of social media and other web 2.0 technologies vis-à-vis digital democracy, but this does not detract from the fact that they remain essential and innovative tools that have created 'alternative or counter public spheres that can offer a new, empowering sense of what it means to be a citizen' (Dahlgren 2004: xi)

The Catalan Independence Movement

Historically it has been the Basque not the Catalan sovereignty movement that has agitated Spanish elites over its place and role within the Spanish state. More recently, however, support for Catalan independence has steadily increased insofar as support for independent statehood is no longer considered a marginalised opinion confined to the fringes of the political sphere. This secessionist turn is most evidently manifest in the shifting sands of Catalonia's electoral arena. Pro-independence and pro-right to decide majorities have formed the Catalan government since 2010, but the anti-independence vote has also increased. *Ciutadans,* an anti-independence and self-described anti-nationalist party (Rodríguez Teruel and Barrio 2016), has grown increasingly popular in Catalonia and the rest of Spain, securing 25.4 percent of the vote and 36 seats in the 2017 Catalan election, more than any other political party. Electoral arithmetic thwarted the party's chance of forming government and with 47.4 percent of the vote, pro-independence parties once again secured a majority of pro-independence parliamentarians.

The growth in support for Catalan independence occurred in the aftermath of the 2010 ruling by the Constitutional Court on Catalonia's Statute reform. Despite receiving the support of the Spanish Parliament (albeit after a protracted and controversial process of amendments), the Catalan Parliament and ultimately the Catalan electorate in a referendum, the final Statute was legally challenged by a number of political actors, including the Spanish Ombudsman, five other autonomous governments and the PP and was ultimately referred to the Constitutional Court (Colino 2009). The Court's final judgement found 14 of the referred articles unconstitutional and narrowed the interpretation of a further 27 (STC 31/2010). This not only increased complaints of politicisation and a centralist bias in the Constitutional Court (Casanas Adams 2017), but precipitated a spike in support for independence, which has continued to grow, albeit remains below the 50 percent mark.

Civil society organisations have been instrumental in propelling 'territorial issues to the top of the political agenda' in Catalonia (Alonso 2018: 460). Organisations such as *Assemblea Nacional Catalana* (ANC) and OC remain the principal protagonists in this regard, albeit smaller organisations such as FxI have played an important role, too. As one politician put it, 'the fact that the leaders of the ANC and OC were arrested for the role they played in organising the independence referendum shows how influential civil society organisations have become' (Interview with *Junts per Catalunya* MP). In the face of the intransigence of Spanish political elites to discuss the territorial issue, the role of grassroots organisations has been pivotal in keeping the issue alive and influencing Catalan political elites into taking a more consciously pro-independence stance on the topic. This, for instance, was most clearly seen in the case of

Convergència i Unió (CiU), which in the aftermath of the 2012 demonstration calling for independence, shifted its party's territorial stance towards an overtly pro-independence platform. Debate remains, however, as to whether the independence movement constitutes a 'bottom-up' or 'top-down' structure (Crameri 2015: 103).

For all interviewees in both OC and FxI, the independence movement is a largely bottom-up endeavour. This opinion is also shared by most pro-independence politicians. For one *Candidatura d'Unitat Popular* (CUP) representative, the movement was very clearly bottom-up given that demonstrations in favour of independence 'forced political institutions to sit up and take notice of this demand' (Interview with CUP MP). On the other hand, a PP parliamentarian described the movement as top-down, believing that 'the government propelled the movement by using its influence and power to convince Catalans to support the right to decide and/or independence' (Interview with PP MP). This view was reiterated by a *Ciutadans* MP: 'groups like Omnium and Assemblea have only been successful because of the resources given to them by the *Generealitat*. They're not civil society organisations, they're government-influenced ones' (Interview with *Ciutadans* MP). Others, however, see merit in both arguments and consider the movement as multidimensional: 'it is true that the bottom current influenced the top, but from 2012 it's also true that the role of the government was fundamental to maintaining the level of mobilisation in favour of independence because they put all public services, communications, civil servants and all the structures of the government at the service of this movement' (Interview with *Catalunya en Comú* MP).

In modern political history, 2017 remains one of the most turbulent years in Catalan-Spanish relations. The referendum on Catalan independence, despite being declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court went ahead notwithstanding the harsh response by the *Guardia Civil*, the Spanish national police, to disrupt the vote (Cetrà et al 2018). Over 90 percent of those voters able to vote cast their ballot in favour of independence and led the Catalan government, under the then President Carles Puigdemont, to declare independence then immediately suspend it in return for negotiations with Madrid. This attempt to use the vote as leverage in negotiations, however, had very little effect as the Spanish government refused to enter into negotiations vis-à-vis independence and instead applied Article 155 of the Constitution to suspend Catalonia's autonomy and impose direct rule from Madrid. In the event, Catalonia's regional autonomy was suspended, the *Generalitat* deposed and several of members of the Catalan government and the leaders of ANC and OC were remanded in custody on suspicion of rebellion, sedition and misuse of public funds, while others, including the deposed President, fled to other European countries. As detailed above, elections for the Catalan Parliament were held in December 2017. Notwithstanding the growing electoral support for *Ciutadans* which secured most seats, the combined seats of the parliament's pro-independence forces saw yet another pro-independence coalition return to government. The replacement of the PP with the PSOE as the ruling party in the Spanish Congress in June 2018 instigated an initial détente in centre-periphery relations, but as Cetrà et al (2018: 140) note, for many pro-independence supporters, it remains 'game on rather than game over'.

Methods, Data and Case Selection

This article adopts a comparative case study approach (Yin 2014). The case selection follows the most similar systems design (Przeworski and Teune 1970) in that both groups operate in Catalonia and advocate independent statehood for the territory. The empirical analysis is based upon 15 interviews, 4 with representatives from FxI, 6 from OC and 5 with politicians from

the main political parties represented in the Catalan Parliament. Interviews were conducted in either Spanish or Catalan at different periods between 2016 and 2018 and interviewees ranged from founding associates, member of the directive board, territorial branch presidents and a number of activists. All interviewees were guaranteed anonymity thus reference to each interview is given by number (e.g. Interview 1, FxI).

As discussed in the introduction, a comparison of FxI and OC provides an interesting study into how organisations with similar end goals but other differences utilise social media to promote the pro-independence cause. Both organisations have an established presence on a number of social media platforms, but the fact that they differ quite significantly in terms of longevity, size, resources and wider objectives makes the comparison both plausible and interesting. FxI and OC are just two of a number of pro-independence civil society organisations in Catalonia. Analysis of the impact of such grassroot campaigns is steadily evolving, albeit the ANC as the largest organisation has tended to be the main focus (see Crameri 2015). Hence, in focusing on FxI and OC this paper contributes to the evolving literature on the Catalan independence movement as well as provides a valuable contribution to the discussion around social media and digital activism among civil organisations. Data was analysed in an iterative manner, including movement back and forth between the interview transcripts and secondary literature to identify themes, codes and categories until plausible explanations to the research topic emerged.

Feministes per la Independència

FxI is a feminist organisation formed in 2013 which campaigns on a range of issues including, women's rights, social justice, democratic quality and sustainability of life. The organisation was formed by a group of women active in Catalonia's core feminist organisation, *Ca la Dona*. These women viewed the secessionist process developing in Catalonia as a process that failed to take women's rights and women-specific issues into consideration and thus created an organisation to champion women's issues and ensure an established female presence in the ongoing debates on Catalonia's constitutional future. According to one of the organisation's founding members, FxI is 'the only [Catalan] organisation that campaigns for independence with a feminist position as a core principle' (Interview 3, FxI). The membership base of FxI is relatively small with around only 120 members, 30 of whom are considered to be 'the inner group of activists' (Interview 3, FxI). FxI collaborate with many other organisations, including ANC, OC, *Ca la Dona* as well as others in Catalonia, Spain and abroad (Interview 1, FxI).

The principal remit of FxI is 'to promote and engender change in the economic, political and social institutions of Catalonia, primarily through support for an independent Catalan state' (Interview 2, FxI). Issues related to social justice, democratic quality and other topics such as environmental policy and immigration are thus central to some of the main campaigns and events spearheaded and promoted by FxI. This is evident on the organisation's social media platforms which are predominantly used to promote events, protests and increase awareness of certain issues and stories. FxI have a number of social media platforms, among them Instagram and Twitter. The latter platform has just over 1,500 followers and is the most prominent social media tool employed by the organisation. FxI has two webpages, a general blog page that contains an array of information related to the activities of the organisation and another blog specifically designed to detail the policy platforms of the organisation regarding an independent Catalonia.

The rationale behind FxI's use of social media can be divided into five categories: to communicate and inform followers of FxI-organised activities and initiatives; to comment and share opinions on news stories or events; to increase the visibility of FxI and its cause beyond its core membership; to attract new members, and finally, to maintain contact with women's groups in Catalonia, Spain and internationally (Interviews with all FxI participants). Having a presence on social media is considered essential by FxI in terms of promoting the position of the organisation on certain issues as well as communicating these positions to group members, followers and the wider public. Indeed, for one interviewee, it was 'unthinkable for any group not to be present in social media' (Interview 3, FxI). In this vein, the presence of FxI on social media was viewed as important to raise awareness of women-specific issues and social issues more broadly and thus increase awareness of 'women's rights and feminist issues in the constitutional debate' (Interview 3, FxI). Social media enable the organisation to further illuminate its main objectives, namely 'challenge existing patriarchal power structures and unfair policies and make a strongly feminist case for Catalan independence' (Interview 4, FxI).

While there is general agreement that social media are important tools, particularly in relation to the reasons discussed above, they are largely considered as mechanisms to facilitate and complement rather than replace more traditional communication settings, such as public meetings. One interviewee posited that while she considers social media 'useful', she continued that 'it cannot replace the personal relationships in women's groups which are also important and essential' (Interview 1, FxI). This was further discussed by another interviewee who noted that while social media were indispensable tools for the organisation, 'face to face meetings' remained the central component of FxI's communication activities (Interview 3, FxI). Social media, thus, are considered important tools that provide a platform for FxI to raise awareness of several issues and thus 'gender' the debate. But, while it is essential to increase the visibility of feminist issues and raise awareness of current injustices, offline activism, which in the case of FxI involves public and private face-to-face meetings and events, remains the most prominent mechanism to bring pro-independence feminists together. Social media thus play a prominent role in the overall media and communication strategy of FxI, but this 'feminist social media activism complements rather than replaces one-to-one and group interaction' (Interview 4, FxI). The same interviewee, however, pointed out that 'generational issues' were also in play here, 'younger feminists tend to be less dismissive towards the use and reach of social media' (Interview 4, FxI).

FxI's use of social media, however, has not been without issues. One interviewee believed that while social media were indeed essential components for political and social organisations in the modern world, 'the use of social media often entails more risks than advantages' (Interview 1, FxI). Such risks include removing the personal relationship aspect considered 'core' to women and feminist groups (Interview 1, FxI). Social media indisputably help the organisation disseminate information to its followers and the wider public, but face-to-face encounters in smaller gatherings are prized over the communicative reach of web technologies. Part of this, as discussed by other interviewees, was a result of the increased risk of being trolled (Interviews 2 and 3 FxI). Increasing the organisation's profile via social media meant that 'we are sometimes bullied by trolls as other feminist groups are, and we have also been victims of hateful comments, as other pro-independence groups are' (Interview 3, FxI). The uncontrolled nature of social media undoubtedly facilitates this abuse and moreover enables users to do so anonymously. As a feminist and pro-independence organisation, FxI are not just victims of hostile gendered abuse, but also face a backlash from anti-independence supporters, thus increasing the likelihood of them being trolled compared to other pro-independence organisations.

Social media are oft-described as having empowered women and feminist ideas (Baer 2015), but as the evidence from FxI underlines it also creates the conditions for it to be systematically and unfairly attacked and undermined often anonymously and unfettered. Fotopoulou (2016: 1) succinctly encapsulates this dilemma, noting that the increasingly 'digitally saturated environment' of the modern world illuminates 'perhaps the most important tension for activists in the digital era', caught 'between vulnerability and empowerment'. As this discussion here attests, this is also the case for FxI, and for one interviewee merely underscored the obstacles and challenges that lay ahead in 'the construction of a new country free from patriarchy and a limited conception of self-determination, for feminists and independence supporters' (Interview 2, FxI).

Òmnium Cultural

OC is a largely cultural organisation founded in 1961 by a group of Catalans widely associated with the industrial bourgeoisie and Catalan intelligentsia. Despite the Francoist dictatorship, of which Catalan nationalism was a *bête noire*, the organisation was permitted to operate in Catalonia (save 1963-1967, when it operated clandestinely). The main aim of OC – the diffusion of Catalan culture and language – is achieved through a range of sponsored events, including the promotion of literary awards and grants for the teaching of Catalan (Interview 5, OC). More recently, OC has played an immanent role in the 'right to decide' campaign and the subsequent push for Catalan independence. OC is one of the biggest civil society organisations in Catalonia and to date has over 167,000 members and 41 territorial branches including representation in Valencia and Mallorca, more concretely known as the *Països Catalans,* (Catalan Countries). The internal structure of OC is organised by a National Directive Board (*Junta Directiva*), headed by a president, currently Jordi Cuixart, despite his arrest and incarceration for his alleged role in the planning and organisation of the 2017 referendum.

Although initially conceived as a cultural organisation in recent years OC has become much more politically overt in its constitutional vision, albeit initially, and in comparison to other organisations such as ANC and FxI, it sought to strike a more conciliatory tone towards the issue emphasising the right to decide rather than independence *per se*. OC has played an immanent role in the organisation of demonstrations and events in favour of holding a referendum and independence and in the actual organisation of the unofficial referenda that took place between 2009-2011, 2014 and more recently in 2017. The fact that OC's incumbent president, Jordi Cuixart, was arrested on charges of sedition, underlines the perceived important role the organisation plays in the Catalan political sphere. As one OC representative put it, 'Jordi became one of the leading figures and public faces of the sovereignty movement, hence his arrest' (Interview 10, OC).

OC's webpage is available in a number of languages (Catalan, Spanish, English, French and German) and contains a range of media (photos and videos) related to the activities of the organisation, including defending the use of the Catalan language in public schools and promoting different cultural and political events sponsored by OC (both at a national and municipal level), with links to some of its social media platforms: Facebook, Flickr, Twitter and YouTube. OC has a central Twitter account with about 285,000 followers as well as a range of accounts to represent the territorial branches of the organisation. These accounts are used 'to share photos and videos of events, including demonstrations, workshops and award ceremonies', (Interview 6, OC), 'to encourage the participation of OC members in upcoming

events' (Interview 5, OC) and 'to pass comment on some of the stories developing in the Spanish and Catalan arena, most with a political focus' (Interview 10, OC).

There was broad consensus among those interviewed that social media are used because they provide an easy and efficient way to disseminate information. For one interviewee, while OC relies on traditional methods such as meetings, protests and demonstrations, 'the use of social media have shown to complement' the other methods used by the organisation, such as public meetings and demonstrations (Interview 7, OC). Indeed, another interviewee argued that debates, meetings and talks were important but they often only involve members, whereas social media provide another method 'to reach more people and communicate and transmit messages, reflections and opinions in a more direct and quick way' (Interview 9, OC). The fact that OC has circa 167,000 fee-paying members but more than 285,000 followers on Twitter and more than 315,000 Facebook 'likes' underlines this point.

For OC, one of the principal reasons that social media are considered useful is the ability to communicate information related to the principal aims of the organisation. Analysis of the organisation's Facebook, Flickr, Twitter and YouTube accounts demonstrate this. The promotion of Catalan language and culture, for instance, features prominently in many of the photos on Facebook, Flickr and videos uploaded on YouTube. Here, the organisation visually documents many of the events and projects they are working with to promote and defend Catalonia's language and culture taking place throughout the Catalan territory. The Twitter account also contains a great deal of information related to these events, but focuses more prominently on the political issues advanced by the organisation: social cohesion, better democracy and ultimately Catalan independence. As one interviewee noted, 'Twitter is by far the biggest asset for us in terms of social media. It provides us with an alternative approach to state-sponsored conventional politics, allowing us to promote the Catalan cause easily, cheaply, but more importantly expand our reach' (Interview 10, OC).

Enquiring about the effectiveness of social media in promoting OC's aims also illuminated two other interesting points. First, there was emphasis on fostering a participatory environment. According to one interviewee, social media are important for the organisation to create 'an enhanced feeling of belonging'; participation on social media, in sharing opinions and events, increase OC members and followers' sense of inclusion in the organisation (Interview 5, OC). This was reiterated by another respondent who believed that one of the key strengths of OC was that it 'is a participatory organisation and its members continue to be the main protagonists' (Interview 6, OC). In this vein, social media networks are seen as important to ensure that both members and non-fee-paying followers on social media are able to contribute to debates and feel part of the wider cultural, social and political movement that OC has become. For OC, as is the case for other civil organisations, social media platforms facilitate the creation of 'imagined communities' (Lutz and du Toit 2014: 92) and in turn foster a more open and encouraging participatory environment, thus increasing the potential for both online and offline participation (Enjorlas et al 2012).

Further to this, some interviewees considered social media effective and essential in growing support for Catalan independence. For one interviewee, with support for independence still below the 50 percent mark, OC has to continue 'to fight to raise support for independence' and this, therefore, requires tools such as social media 'to maximise contact with a greater number of people' (Interview 7, OC). Other interviewees explained that in this regard, 'social media have been central tools in attracting support for Omnium, especially from young people who are more inclined to use applications like Twitter and Facebook' (Interview 5, OC). Another interviewee echoed a similar point: 'social media have clearly been important for us to grow

our membership in recent years, and you can see that quite clearly in the numbers of young people who have joined Omnium and come to our events' (Interview 10, OC). In this vein, social media have not only become a vehicle through which OC has sought to increase its membership, but has also become a tool to specifically target young people. Youth activism has become a central component in the Catalan independence movement (Wilson-Daily and Kemmelmeier 2019), hence it is unsurprising that for some, 'using social media really helps tap into that youth demographic interested in contributing to the national construction [of an independent Catalonia]' (Interview 6, OC).

Akin to FxI, OC interviewees also discussed some of the perceived drawbacks of using social media, particularly trolling. For some, this was simply dismissed as part and parcel of the course and the 'fluid dialogue' that exists over Catalonia's constitutional future (Interview 8, OC), while for others this was testament to one of the major risks of social media: 'it enables all sides of the debate to promote a particular narrative' (Interview 7, OC). Evidently, this allows OC to promote its own specific agenda, but such social media forums also provide anti-independence supporters with a legitimate platform to challenge but also discredit pro-independence arguments. This, discussed one interviewee, was most clearly seen 'in the explosion of bots and accounts created with the sole objective to silence supporters and stifle real debate on the issue' (Interview 10, OC). At the same time, the unfettered control and access to social media also facilitates the dissemination of misinformation about the independence cause: 'the spread of misinformation on social media about independence opens up a number of questions about democracy and freedom of speech' (Interview 8, OC). Social media is oft-praised for its ability to facilitate legitimate debate and thus the sharing of alternative discourses (Loader and Mercea 2011: 759), but as the point discussed here shows, simultaneously risks the distribution of biased narratives and misinformation.

Comparative Analysis

Engagement with social media, the internet and other web 2.0 technologies has been a boon for FxI and OC. Despite significant differences in terms of membership size, resources and principal objectives, both organisations share similar uses and perceptions towards social media. The groups see social media as essential tools of communication, but also platforms that facilitate feelings of empowerment, mobilisation, organisation, participation and resistance. As one interviewee put it, 'social media enable organisations, whether they are for or against Catalan independence, to mobilise the citizenry into engaging with the debate, whether that is sharing a hashtag or photo or taking to the streets in one of our events' (Interview 10, OC). A similar sentiment was shared by a FxI activist who believed 'digital tools like social media are crucial to promote our message. I would still be a feminist and a pro-independence supporter without Twitter, but it does help to communicate initiatives and opinions and work with other organisations in Catalonia and elsewhere' (Interview 4, FxI). In this respect, social media have also become important mediums for internationalising the Catalan independence cause. This was an objective discussed by both groups, but was particularly prominent in discussions with OC representatives in their campaign to discredit the arrest and detention of OC president, Jordi Cuixart. In the aftermath of the 2017 referendum, both FxI and OC have stepped up efforts to garner international support for the independence cause as well as put the actions and rhetoric of the Spanish government and state institutions under the international microscope.

In line with analysis on digital activism (see Cammaerts 2015), both organisations view social media as important tools of political mobilisation, providing structures to 'bring together individuals who share the same ideas on certain topics' (Interview 2, FxI). For FxI and OC, this creation of an 'imagined community' was a significant asset of social media platforms, 'joining together like-minded people … basically, people of different ages and diverse backgrounds with the goal of supporting the right to decide of the Catalan people and to be an independent nation' (Interview 1, FxI). Social media are thus viewed as an efficient vehicle to provide the structures for a more inclusive and participatory way of doing politics. There was much discussion among interviewees in both organisations of the importance of creating a virtual network and thus enhancing the collective identity of the participants of the movement.

As discussed supra, despite the benefits social media entail for both FxI and OC, a number of drawbacks were identified. Although for both organisations there was general consensus that such shortcomings were part and parcel of political movements in the modern world, they illuminate the dark side of activism in the digital media age. In both cases, the issue of trolling was discussed in detail by a number of interviewees, but this was a particular cause for concern for FxI which are the recipients of abuse from anti-independence trolls as well as misogynists. As a result, some FxI activists remain sceptical about the use and importance of social media and continue to prize face-to-face gatherings as the principal strategy for organising and meeting other members. This, as discussed by Kavada (2010: 111), is unsurprising given 'online discussions tend to be more prone to conflict than face-to-face contact'. For OC, the same issue was prevalent, albeit trolling was limited to the organisation's support for independence. This, as discussed by one interviewee, was seen as a part of the course of conducting a political campaign in the modern era, but was considered an intractable challenge in terms of managing the spread of misinformation (Interview 8, OC). A presence on social media enables organisations to correct and challenge misinformation shared online and offline, but the same time, 'this is a real worry and challenge, especially nowadays when most people use social media as an outlet for news' (Interview 10, OC). The 'dark side of social media' cannot be underestimated (Baccarella et al 2018).

For FxI and OC, the use of social media illuminates the Janus-faced character of digital activism. The growing salience of such platforms has been seized upon by both organisations, albeit attitudes towards social media and its impact vary. Social media, however, have become a key component of the wider media and communication strategies for both organisations. This, for instance, is much clearer in OC than FxI, but this is primarily a result of the wider reach OC has given its primary role as one of the main pro-independence organisations in Catalonia. This also means, therefore, that OC has much more access to more traditional media outlets such as newspapers, television and radio, but as pointed out by one interviewee, engagement with social media platforms 'is not at the expense of other media forms' (Interview 8, OC). At the same time, however, the capacity of social media to serve as a tool of real time communication underlines its increasing importance in the fast-paced setting of Catalan and Spanish politics. Furthermore, social media were considered more advantageous than other media forms because 'we are able to bypass the pro-Spanish and biased media that do not want the independence project to succeed' (Interview 1, FxI). A similar sentiment was shared by an OC representative who believed 'social media presents opportunities to overcome institutional hurdles imposed by the Spanish government' (Interview 9, OC). Hence, while the use of social media is not promoted at the expense of engagement with other media forms, the current configuration of traditional media such as newspapers and television, increases the relevance of social media, particularly as a tool of communication and resistance.

Conclusion

This article has examined the relationship between social media, civil activism and the Catalan independence movement through focusing on two pro-independence civil organisations in Catalonia. The analysis confirms the important and pivotal role social media have played and will continue to play in the Catalan independence movement, offering civil organisations like FxI and OC an entrenched platform from which to promote their cause. Both organisations have been astute in harnessing the potential of social media to become tools of empowerment, engagement, mobilisation, organisation, participation and resistance. Platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have enabled the diffusion of different messages, facilitated the synchronisation of action and created the perception of a virtual community with a collective identity. Tellingly, social media have become a key component of the wider media and communication strategies of the organisations. As discussed above, part of this is rooted in the fact that engagement with social media is considered necessary to stay relevant in the modern world, but more specifically to the Catalan case, also provides a medium through which pro-independence supporters and organisation can bypass the hegemony of mass media discourses which is perceived as pro-Spain and thus anti-independence. The discussion, however, also revealed a less positive side to social media use. Given the rise of social media as a tool of news consumption (at the expense of more traditional media), the exploitation of social media to disseminate false information or silence pro-independence supporters is a very real worrying trend.

For FxI, there was general consensus regarding the benefits of social media for the organisation, albeit the extent to which social media facilitates the 'gendering' of the independence debate requires more detailed research. Unsurprisingly as would be the case in most civil organisations, there are disparate attitudes towards the use of social media, but in the case of FxI this is most clearly informed by the negative experiences related to 'gendertrolling' (Mantilla 2013). At the same time, social media is conceived as a tool to complement rather than replace the traditional face-to-face interactions which remain 'the most valuable way for us to address our social and political agendas' (Interview 2, FxI). FxI's reach on social media is more limited than, for example OC, but it has managed to capitalise on the opportunities offered by platforms like Twitter to encourage digital feminist activism and thus 'attract new members to the group and connect to other groups' (Interview 3, FxI).

OC's experience with social media is along similar lines to FxI, although the organisation is much more entrenched on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Consequently, OC has much wider reach in terms of civil activism, increasing the opportunities for the organisation to advance the independence cause through social media. While the independence cause dominates most social media platforms used by the organisation, its commitment to advancing Catalan culture, particularly the celebration of the Catalan language remains central to its activities including on social media. To a much greater extent than FxI, social media have become successful recruitment and mobilisation tools for OC, increasing membership online and in the organisation itself and harnessing e-mobilisation into more tangible outputs, such as attending offline events. This, as discussed supra, was described by interviewees as a 'participatory strategy', reinforcing a collective identity among online and offline users to increase civic engagement (Interview 6, OC). Akin to FxI, social media have also been used to connect OC with other pro-independence and cultural organisations across Catalonia and beyond. This transnational reach has proved very helpful in internationalising the territorial conflict, particularly as relates to the arrest and incarceration of the organisation's president.

The internet, social media and mobile communication have come to play an increasingly pivotal role in the mobilisation of political and social movements around the world. From

political leadership campaigns to the Occupy Movement, the Arab Spring to Catalan independence, digital activism has become an entrenched feature of modern politics. In the case of Catalonia, social media have been an important and effective tool for pro-independence organisations, albeit the extent to which it has effected change or created a durable activist network requires further research. Moreover, a more detailed study examining both the dark side of social media use would be a valuable contribution to this evolving literature, specifically with regards to the increasing polarisation of Catalan politics and how this is played out and facilitated by social media platforms. Social media do indeed play an important role in the Catalan independence debate and have served as important tools of coordination, mobilisation and exchange of information. It remains unknown whether the independence movement will achieve its ultimate objective, but whether it does or not, social media and other web 2.0 technologies will continue to play a fundamental role.

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