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## **When Geopolitics becomes Moral Panic: El Mercurio and the use of International News as propaganda against Salvador Allende's Chile (1970-1973)**

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**Abstract:** This article analyses how geopolitics was used to create moral panic during Salvador Allende's government in Chile (1970-1973) and examines the type of recursive devices -such as geopolitical strategic narratives- were employed by El Mercurio to advance specific discourses that intended to undermine the legitimacy of Allende while mobilising the public agenda towards the political right. Our thesis is that this was done by selective and framed use of international news in ways that somehow created moral panics by bringing geopolitics into the realm of the general public. In so doing El Mercurio invisibilised important elements and effects of US Foreign Policy while highlighting similar elements and effects of the Soviet Foreign Policy. Our thesis is that in doing so, Allende's government became associated with the 'Red Scare' and subsequently associated with the communist threat. This theme, we argue, remains relevant in times in which there continues to be a prevalent strategic narrative of enemies and foes in international news that continues to be used to create fear and mobilise public opinion towards the right of the political spectrum.

**Keywords:** Chile, El Mercurio, Moral Panics, Propaganda, International News

### **Introduction**

In the midst of the Cold War, the use of propaganda was central to the efforts of both the Soviet Union and the United States in their proxy battles to win the hearts and minds of the people (Franco, 2009; Saunders, 2013). Therefore, it was no coincidence that professional journalism, with its claims of objective reporting and detachment from propaganda, managed to achieve in the West a hegemonic position amidst the rise of the Cold War politics. It was then that professionalisation became the dominant paradigm thanks to the fact that Western politics and society embraced a common set of aspirations marked by individualism, moderate social liberalism, deference to authority, strong belief in government, the free market, and anti-communism (Waisbord, 2013, p. 39). Nowhere was this truer than in Chile in 1970, where, despite intensive efforts from the US to prevent so, a socialist government led by Salvador Allende had come to power thanks to the popular vote (Davis, 1985; Sigmund, 1977). These efforts had important and powerful allies in Chile itself, paramount among them the leading newspaper in that country.

Indeed, even before his election, a ruthless campaign to destabilise his candidacy and later to overthrow his government had taken place with the support of El Mercurio (Goldberg, 1975; Kornbluh, 2000; Sigmund, 1974), the largest newspaper and most influential media outlet at that time (Délano, M., Luengo, A., & Salazar, M., 1983; Mattelart, A. & Mattelart, M. &

Piccini, M., 1970). Part of this campaign consisted in promoting the idea of the Unidad Popular government as a time of chaos and anarchy. The other part was selling to the public the notion of the Soviet/Communist menace associated to the Unidad Popular government that would ultimately undermine the democratic institutions and freedom in Chile. To be sure, the 'Red Scare' was pivotal in mobilising large sections of the public –particularly the middle class– against Allende and what he supposedly represented (Power, 2000; Sigmund, 1977).

This article analyses how this 'Red Scare' (Hagedorn, 2007; Schrecker, 1998; Pilger, 2002) was articulated in the daily news in the Chilean press and examines how 'geopolitical strategic narratives' (Miskimmon, Alister, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, 2014) were employed by the newspaper *El Mercurio* to advance specific discourses that intended to undermine the legitimacy of Allende while mobilising the public support towards the political right.

Our thesis is that this was done by the selective and framed use of international news in ways that somehow created moral panic, therefore bringing about geopolitics into the realm of the public's daily lives. In so doing, *El Mercurio* made almost invisible in its news agenda important elements and effects of US Foreign Policy while, on the other hand, highlighting similar elements and effects of the Soviet Foreign Policy.

It is important to recognise that several authors have studied the role of *El Mercurio* in influencing and shaping public opinion in Chile (Délano, M., Luengo, A., & Salazar, M., 1983; Sunkel, 1986). However, they have mostly concentrated on how the newspaper reported home affairs. Some of these researchers have concluded that the newspaper not only colluded with the dictatorship in suppressing news against that regime but that it also actively collaborated with the military regime in the violation of human rights (Garay Vera, 2007; Lagos, 2009). Moreover, studies looking at the role of *El Mercurio* during the whole period of Allende's administration (Alvear, 1987; Durán, 1982; Fagen, 1974; Garay Vera, 2007; Garcés, 2013), have highlighted that it opposed the Unidad Popular government from the start. During this period, they point out, its editorial approach was one that supported the traditional elites and that questioned the reforms implemented by the Allende administration.

Durán (1982), for example, argues that *El Mercurio* assumed not only an advocacy role to save Chile's 'soul' –which in its view was linked to the free market society–, but also, correspondingly, undertook a propaganda function; something that our data confirms. He goes to claim that *El Mercurio* contributed with the 'agitation' against Allende's administration. This propaganda function, according to him, was 'mostly subversive agitation' and took the form of a call for political mobilisation around home affairs.

However, as we will argue here, it is important to recognise that the newspaper also used international news to perform this function of ‘agitation’, a topic that so far has not received sufficient attention by researchers. Indeed, our thesis is that geopolitics was used to create moral panics. In so doing, Allende’s government became associated with the ‘Red Scare’ and therefore framed as a Soviet ally and as a threat to democracy. This all in order to create fear among the Chilean public, undermine popular support towards Allende and facilitate his electoral defeat or overthrow.

We believe that this underlining theme remains relevant in times in which there continues to be a prevalent strategic narrative of enemies and foes in the international news. To be sure, the utilisation of geopolitics to create moral panics continues to be a perennial practice among news media outlets around the world (Klein, 2007; Pain, 2009). Argumentative tones and identity of ‘foes’ might have changed (Tibi, 2002; Wodak, 2013), but the overreaching ‘power of nightmares’ (2004) continues to confer influence to elites by means of planting fear in the public imagination. Moreover, as the menace of the Soviet advance in Europe and a world nuclear holocaust has now been substituted in the public imagination, thanks in part to the media, by the relatively gains of ISIS in the battle field of the Middle East and the global War on Terror that is waged against real and imaginary enemies.

On the other hand, while *El Mercurio* perhaps no longer has the monopoly it once had over the gathering and dissemination of international news in Chile, the news agenda in that country and others in the region continues to be dominated by a small group of news media outlets and news agencies based in key metropolis. This despite the fact that we live in an era in which the densification of the media ecology have brought about a multiplicity of channels, which nevertheless has not necessarily translated into a more diverse landscape of news sources and worldviews (Boczkowski, Pablo J., and Martin De Santos, 2007; Carpenter, 2010). Even media outlets that presumably respond to a distinctive geopolitics, such as Russian Television (RT) and Al-Jazeera, continue to operate within the boundaries of what Walter Lippmann (1922) called the ‘news consensus’ (Chong, 115-116; Gerhards, Jürgen, and Mike S. Schäfer, 2014; Yablokov, 2015) that is characterised by the intersection between geopolitics and the news agenda.

In the case of Chile, these ‘news consensus’ are still overwhelmingly determined by *El Mercurio* and its affiliated media outlets, which continues to collude with, subordinate to and mandate political action with the elites in that country. Often referred to as ‘*el Decano*’ (the dean), it continues to set the news agenda and the tone of news coverage for the rest of the media in that country. Therefore, this analysis of how editors and journalists in *El Mercurio*

used international news to articulate 'anti-Allendista' discourses not only allow us to understand better how the newspaper was able to set at the time the political agenda under the façade of 'objectivity' but also helps us explain present trends in the Chilean press.

The use of geopolitics and its associated conflicts to create moral panics continues to be, we argue here, a feature of modern journalism; one that is a pivotal part of the wider cycle of communicative action and propaganda. This because despite all the technological and structural changes, the fundamental constitutive elements of news production remain linked to the structures of power in similar if not more concentrated manners as they were in the past.

In this sense, geopolitics has been and continues to be the defining element in the selection and framing of international news (Kielbowicz, 1986; Mody, 2010; Smith, 1981). By this we mean that the prerogatives of foreign policy and international interests in each country where the media is based is what defines, for journalists and news editors, what international news ought to be published and how it is presented to the public. To be sure, from hundreds of thousands of dispatches that arrive to the newsroom through the news agencies services and correspondent systems, only a handful of them are selected and published. This selection follows a specific logic and that logic is guided by these prerogatives.

To be sure, geopolitics is a key definer in the process of international news selection and this is to some degree the norm within most newsrooms from around the globe (Kim, J. H., Su, T. Y., & Hong, J., 2007; Vujakovic, 2002). Consequently, geopolitical prerogatives tend to play a crucial role in setting the news agenda for the media, as is the case of New York Times in the United States (Friel, Howard, and Richard A. Falk, 2004; Herman, Edward, & Chomsky, Noam, 1984).

From 1917 onwards the geopolitics defining the news agenda of the leading newspapers in the Western media has been characterised by the 'Red Scare' or what Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky called the 'anti-communist filter' (1988, p. 29). This bias has been used in the past to mobilise the public against progressive and left wing political movements. Anthony Read (2009), for example, documents how the media in Europe and the US deployed orchestrated campaigns that presented the Soviet Union as a menace. Equally important is the way in which later on McCarthyism defined journalism objectivity for decades, that is as a virulent anti-communist exercise in defence of freedom (Maras, 2013, p. 130) and how this set the tone subsequently for what was reported about the world in the US press. In many cases, the geopolitics of fear against the 'other' (particularly in relation to communism) enabled and legitimised orchestrated campaigns that created moral panics in Latin America among certain sectors of the population (Power, 2015).

Moral panics is often reserved in the scholarly work to issues of crime, law and order (Cohen, 2002; Hier, 2011; Thompson, 2013). This because it is traditionally understood as process of arousing social concern over an issue, especially in the light of news media framing of these issues. It is nevertheless a wider phenomenon historically connected to ‘fear’ of particular groups of people or ideas (Bourke, 2005; Robin, 2004) and which is closely linked to the emergence of both modernity (Plamper, Jan, and Benjamin Lazier, 2010) and the society of risk (Beck, 2010 [1998]; Bernstein, 1996; Luhmann, 1993). In politics, moral panics was particularly present in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century after the Soviet Revolution of 1917 and its aftermath around the world, which was subsequently used by governments in the United States and Europe to impose draconian measures against left-wing movements, political parties, unions and journalists, justified all by the need to ‘re-establish order’ (Hagedorn, 2007; Read, 2008), bring about political stability and stop the spread of Soviet communism.

Mass news consumption, still then a relatively new phenomenon, caught the attention of these politicians who foresaw its ability to create fear among the public (Altheide, 2002; Altheide, 1997; Altheide, David L., and R. Sam Michalowski, 1999). In so doing, framed news is able to create social anxiety, which can be capitalised to mobilise the public in a particular direction or to legitimise certain policies. Some scholars have examined the creation of anxiety among the public with regards to issues arising from the news coverage of the Cold War (Goode, 2010; Ungar, 1990). They point out how the fear towards Soviet communism –which was perceived both as a threat to ‘our way of life’ and as a national threat to the United States and its allies- saw its height during the so-called Second Red Scare, between 1950 and 1956, referred to as the McCarthyism era. This was a time characterised by a series of accusations of subversion and treason against politicians, intellectuals and journalists in the United States (Fried, 1997; Schrecker, 1998).

Scholars and historians have underlined how McCarthyism originally derived from Harry S Truman’s foreign policy and views regarding the geo-political confrontation with the Soviet Union (Freeland, 1971). It was an orchestrated anti-communist campaign led by U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy (1908-1957) in order to denounce publicly the infiltration by communists and Soviet agents of the different levels of US institutions and society and the potential widespread of communist subversion around the globe.

However, according to scholars such as Athan Theoharis (1977), it was in realty an attack against the New Deal in order to undermine the reputation of many of its supporters in the administration, in the congress and in other levels of public life. By accusing them of communist sympathisers, this strategy would allow a return to more neo-liberal policies with

limited government intervention in the social and economic issues. This would later become clearer under the presidency of Richard M. Nixon (1969-1974), who had been a staunch participant in the McCarty era to propel his own political career (Fried, 1991; Mitchell, 1998), both in terms of his domestic and foreign policy.

It was because of this that the McCarthyism had a life span that extended beyond its origins in the US and why it was kept alive for a much longer period in Latin America (Chilcote, 1990; Franco, 2009), particular by right-wing elites with close links to the mainstream media. In this context, the Chile of the times of Salvador Allende was not only a key scenario for the proxy battles of the Cold War but also a crucial space for the confrontation between the continuation and expansion of progressive redistributive Keynesian policies against what would become over the years the neo-liberal paradigms that dominates today.

All in all, Chile and other countries in the region remain today subject to the type of psychological operations that demand the manufacturing of moral panics. If anything, this way of presenting the news and doing politics have become more prevalent in our times. This is the departure point of our inquiry, one that sees the use of geopolitics to create moral panics as a plausible theoretical framework that can help understand not only the past but also the present. After all, moral panics research continues to invert the traditional focus away from the deficiencies of the deviant, and attends more to the definers of deviance: the labellers rather than to those labelled -as well as looking at the interplay between the 'deviants', the agents of social control, the media and the general public. By studying 'moral panics' in the context of the articulation and selection of international news in *El Mercurio* at that time, we aim at producing a better understanding of the process of agenda-setting in the political scenarios of today. We believe that by contextualising our analysis within the parameters of this body of research we will be better placed to understand the intersection between international news and domestic politics.

There is an important body of work that has dealt with the function of agenda setting of international news (Althaus, S. L., & Tewksbury, D., 2002; Golan, 2006; Wanta, W., & Hu, Y. W. , 1993) as well as a classical theoretical framework that has explored the use and determinants of international news by news media outlets in the West (Chang, T. K., Shoemaker, P. J., & Brendlinger, N., 1987; Galtung, J., & Ruge, M. H., 1965; Harcup, T., & O'Neill, D., 2001). Equally important, in our case, is to mentioned the works that have been carried out in relation to the use of international news by Latin American and Chilean media outlets (Diaz Rangel, 1976; Lozano, J. C., Gomez, E., Matiasich, A., Alfonso, A., Becerra, M.,

Machadosilveira, A., 2000; Mayorga Rojel, 2004; William Porath, María Constanza Mujica H., Francisco Maldonado, 2012).

However, only a handful of works have actually looked at the use of international news by the media in Chile during the Unidad Popular government (Délano, M., Luengo, A., & Salazar, M., 1983; Mattelart, A. & Mattelart, M. & Piccini, M., 1970). In these studies, the authors have found that there was a high level of trust among readers of *El Mercurio* in relation to international news, this despite recognition of partisan and bias coverage in other news beats. This claims of objectivity (Sunkel, 1986, p. 101) and comprehensiveness in the treatment of international news allowed *El Mercurio* to assert its role as ‘*El Decano*’ of the Chilean press and therefore self-positioning itself as a part of the ‘great press’ –in the tradition of other world-leading newspapers such as *The Guardian*, *The Times* and *The New York Times*. This is something that, as we will argue here, needs to be exposed for what it is: nothing else than a political myth that for too long has been left unquestioned.

## **Methodology**

To examine the use of international news to create moral panics by *El Mercurio* during the Unidad Popular government (1970-1973), we carried out content analysis of that newspaper during that same period. In so doing, we aimed at exposing the discursive strategies used by the newspaper to frame the international events being covered during that time. Most of the data in this piece derives from content analysis techniques as described by Klaus Krippendorff (2013) in order to make ‘replicable and valid inferences from texts to the context of their use’ (2013, p. 24). We adopted this approach given the potential controversy that historical revisions have tended to generate in the past in the area of communication and media studies (Curran, 1990; Lugo-Ocando et. al. 2011).

Our sample derived from a total universe of 1096 editions of the overall period of 1970-1973. We adopted a systematic sampling of the front pages of *El Mercurio* and use it to examine the relationship between categories (nodes), each one identified in the figures presented here. The first front page selected for the sample was that of September 5, 1970, the day after the presidential elections of Salvador Allende. Thereafter the rest of the front pages were selected at constant intervals until completing a sample of 110 front pages. In our case, the unit of analysis was *El Mercurio* and the sub-units were a total of 472 news articles published in the front pages. We undertook what was broadly a quantitative analysis of front pages by carrying out content analysis as described by Krippendorff (2013), Matthes and Kohring (2008) and



Riff et.al. (2014). That is by examining how frequency of words and relation between words and terms help the media frame news in particular ways.

Several authors have justified the used of front pages as elements of the newspapers that allows the researcher to explore what the media wants to say to their audiences (Kress, G., & Van Leeuwen, T., 1998). These same authors have used them in the past to examine the relationship between politics and news media. This because the front pages ‘reflect the worldview of the dominant class’ that control and influence the mainstream media (Mattelart, A. & Mattelart, M. & Piccini, M., 1970, p. 83), despite occasional deviations from the norm (Conboy, 2013, p. 97).

We then conducted a close reading of hard news articles reporting specific events such as those relating to the former Soviet Union and particular conflicts where geopolitics played an important role in defining the topic and angle of the news, this in order to look for hermeneutic consistency. The aim was to expose the rhetorical strategies used to frame the events being covered.

### **International news**

It is worth highlighting, as one of our key finding, that international coverage was the second most important news beat with over 46% of all news in the front pages being international and almost 60% of it relating to political violence. This is particularly important given the role of *El Mercurio* as the main provider at the time of international news for the general public. Indeed, the newspaper had almost a monopoly on international news to the point that the key Western news agencies and news media outlets such as Associated Press, Reuters, AFP and the New York Times had their Chilean bureaus and correspondents based in *El Mercurio*'s headquarters in Santiago. For these international media outlets, *El Mercurio* was not only their main client but also their main source of information and a significant support for their daily operations. The end result is that the newspaper was not only the main reference for international news for Chileans but also the main provider of news from Chile to the outside world. It played, in other words, a fundamental role as a ‘gatekeeper’ of international news flows, a fundamental function of journalism that determines which piece of information gets through and which is discharged (White, 1950, p. 383).

In fact, as few Chilean newspapers had overseas correspondents, their access to international news at the time depended mostly on the provisions offered by Western news agencies. This was also the case with most newspapers in Latin American countries in that period, which were all dependent on these same news agencies to provide international information to their

audiences (Boyd-Barret, 1980, p. 12; Diaz Rangel, 1976, p. 173). This was a situation exacerbated by the fact that the commercial news media would not trust state-controlled news agencies such as Prensa Latina from Cuba or TASS from the USSR whose outputs were considered neither objective nor professional.

In addition to this, the process of sub-editing and filtering international news was carried out not by journalists or sub-editors –as in many other news beats- but by those editors at the top of the hierarchy in the newsroom in El Mercurio who were ideologically close to the newspapers' owners (El Diario de Agustin. 2008). This may give us an idea of the importance assigned to the section and editing of international news within the editorial policy of that newspaper. To be sure, researchers who have examined international news coverage by El Mercurio in that era have pointed out that from 120.000 words that its newsroom received in average every day from the news agencies, only 9 words went effectively out to the public. The rest were selectively omitted during the editorial process.

Some scholars have already described that published dispatches from news agencies such as UPI and AP, that dominated the then Chilean news market, made particular emphasis on issues related to the Cold War and events that highlighted the Soviet Union as a threat to Western democracy and freedom (Mattelart, A. & Mattelart, M. & Piccini, M., 1970, p. 59). Our own data not only confirms this in relation to the front pages but also shows that specific events were completely invisible. For a Chilean only reading El Mercurio during that period, the Vietnam War barely existed as it was hardly mentioned in the paper during that era. Indeed, as incredible as it might seem, in our sample of front pages we found no mention to the Vietnam War (although we were able to find some mentions inside the newspaper but in all cases with a very pro-US angle). This same sample points at over 80% all of international news published in the front pages of the newspaper coming from one of these leading news agencies.

The news stories produced by these news agencies are characterised by what Herman and Chomsky called the 'anti-communist filter' (1988, p. 39). This concept applies also to the framing of international news by El Mercurio during the Allende administration; one that was heavily determined by the Cold War as a political and cultural background to the process of news selection. Our data shows that almost 78% of the international news published in the front pages of El Mercurio regarding political violence was associated with either the Soviet bloc or left-wing guerrilla operating in Latin America and other terrorist groups such as ETA and IRA (see figure No. 1). Furthermore, a closer examination of what these articles said show that these issues were linked to destabilization attempts of the Soviet Union in developing countries, something that corresponds with similar studies around news agencies outputs during the Cold

War (Boyd-Barret, 1980; Cohen, 1963; Diaz Rangel, 1976; Mayorga Rojel, 2004; Weaver, David H., and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, 1984).

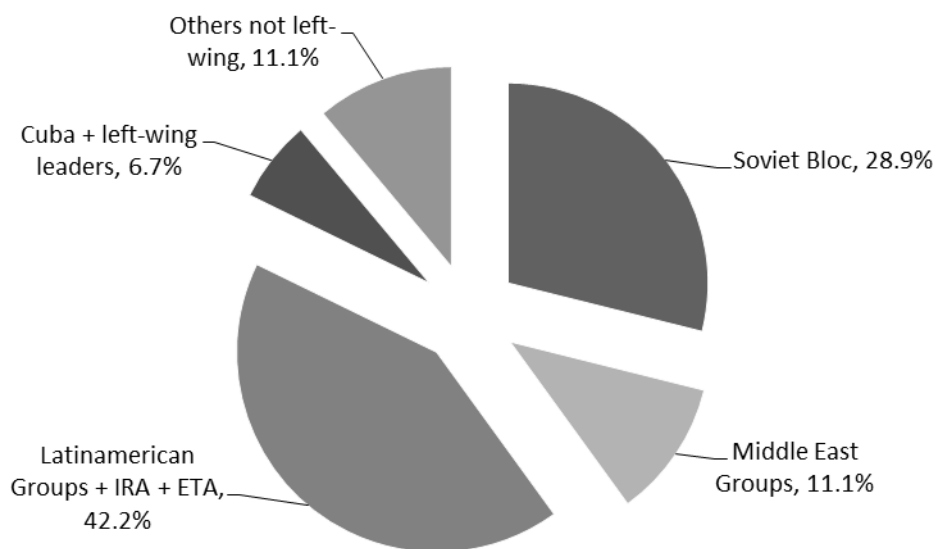
International news, in most of these dispatches, was used to frame the Allende administration in terms of the wider conflict between the ‘democratic’ and ‘peaceful’ West against the ‘Red’ Soviet menace. This in a time in which Fidel Castro had come to power in Cuba and guerrilla struggles were taking place in Central and South America (Lugo-Ocando, 2011, p. 38). Consequently, international news in the front page during the period studied here (1970-1973) tend to refer to events related to violence, disorder and chaos in the context of the Cold War and these being driven by the Soviet Union’s geo-political agenda to impose Marxist ideology. More often than not, these news stories appeared on the same days as other national stories that also referred to violence, chaos and disorder associated with the Allende administration, creating a link between one and the other in the mind of the reader as they were unified by visual display and editorial presentation. As Garcés highlights, the way in which the ‘communist threat’ was portrayed in the coverage of El Mercurio during that period tended to emphasise how radical communists were infiltrating the armed forces and other key institutions of society (1976, p. 263).

The ‘Red Scare’ was articulated in terms of geopolitical narratives even in relation to domestic events as to allow displacing ultimate responsibility for chaos and violence to the Allende administration and/or its followers by linking them to the Soviet Union. For example, in a failed military coup attempt against Allende known as The Tanquetazo -or Tancazo- on June 29, 1973, led by lieutenant colonel Roberto Souper and the Armoured Regiment No. 2, El Mercurio editorialise in its front page that,

The uprising of a military group of June 29, rapidly brought under control by members of the armed forces, became an unexpected revelation of the amount of weapons and military equipment held by [left-wing] clash groups, which demonstrated their effectiveness in different ways. It became evident that the militant units in the factories as well as other groups, which constantly express their support for the government, were in possession of substantial stocks of weapons in different magnitudes and willing to confront civilians and military elements as soon as they received orders from their leaders. This situation would have happened if the regular troops following legitimate orders had not controlled in two hours the rebel military group Armoured Regiment No. 2. Moreover, the President said on that occasion in a radio call (...) that workers should occupy worksites and go to the centre of the capital and wait for weapons if necessary. His exact words were: "I call the people to take every industry, every business, be alert, tipping the centre, but not to be victimized, the people shall take to the streets, but not to be strafed, do so with caution, with anything you can find in your hands. If the time comes, the people will have *weapons*" (...) *this provision of arms, whose origin could not be other than the arsenals of war of the nation or stock piles that could have been received as a donation from countries closely linked to the revolutionary enterprise of the government.*<sup>1</sup>

Yes, El Mercurio did condemn the coup attempt but it did so by firstly praising the military for its ‘opportune’ intervention to prevent the coup and secondly by denouncing the

government for encouraging left-wing groups and factory workers to arm and fights in the streets in case it had happened. In so doing, the newspaper also denounced the presence of weapons donated by ‘countries closely linked to the revolutionary enterprise of the government’, presumably the Soviet Union and Cuba. This in a time in which the ‘discursive Conversation’ –that gives the meaning to social language in a particular context- (Gee, 2014, p. 72) was defined by the geo-politics of Cold War and anti-communist views. Moreover, quantitative data support this observation as a great deal of the international news published regarding political violence and terrorism was represented to be mostly associated with either the Soviet bloc, the Cuban influence or the left-wing guerrilla operating in Latin America,



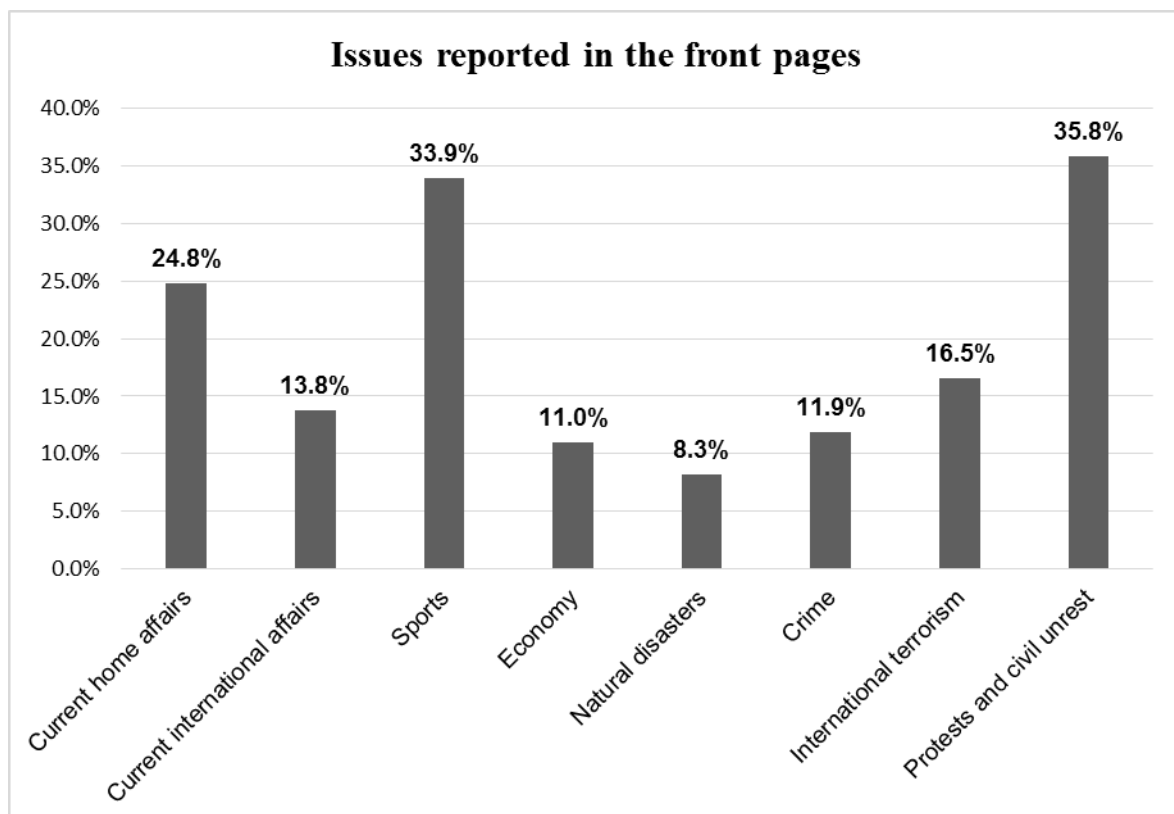
[Figure No. 1]

This graphic also shows how much of these topics were displayed on the front page at that time. The data highlights ‘conflict’ as a key element of most international news items displayed in the front page, which corresponds to findings of similar studies about other countries (Chang, Tsan-Kuo, Pamela J. Shoemaker, and Nancy Brendlinger, 1987; Galtung, Johan, and Mari Holmboe Ruge, 1965; Van Dijk, 2013). In the case of Chile, however, conflict and chaos were associated to Soviet communism.

In most of these front pages, the newspaper highlighted unrest as a predominant feature in both its main national and international stories and in many cases these stories were consistently displayed alongside, presumably as to create a conceptual link between them. Over 35% of the

front page news was associated with street protests and unrest while 16.5% had a news item associated with what the newspaper defined as ‘international terrorism acts’, which in most cases were reported to be carried out by left-wing groups or with the support of the Soviet Union. The intention was clear, to associate these type of news –around the ‘Red Scare’- with chaos and disorder from around the world happening also in Chile.

Furthermore, the close reading of the international news in that period suggests that it was effectively used to frame the Allende administration in terms of the wider conflict between the ‘democratic’ and ‘peaceful’ West against the ‘Red’ Soviet menace that was creating this chaos as shown in the case of The Tanquetazo. This was carried out in a time in which Fidel Castro had come to power in Cuba and guerrilla struggles were taking place in Central and South America. Moreover, let us not forget, that journalistic objectivity was still then in Chile embraced and practiced in ‘McCarthyism’ terms, that is as a virulent anti-communist exercise in defence of freedom (Maras, 2013, p. 130) and consequently used to articulate an idea of impending chaos closely associated with the ‘Red Scare’ as fact,



[Figure No. 2]

In effect, as our sample indicates, in almost all the editorials published in the front pages during this period, 'chaos' is closely associated with the Allende administration or the left-wing sectors that supported him and in many cases linked to the international process of destabilisation carried out by the Soviet Union and Cuba.

### **Moral panics**

It is important to highlight at this point that the ability of *El Mercurio* to exercise influence on Chile's public opinion was partly due to the trust that many people had that it practiced 'objective' and 'professional journalism and that it was part of the world 'great press'. At the time, the newspaper was seen -by many- as offering the most comprehensive and solid coverage of international affairs. Indeed, there is little doubt that the coverage of international news played a pivotal role in awarding legitimacy to the newspaper as a main reference for readers at that time. To be sure, a study from Testmerc (Délano, M., Luengo, A., & Salazar, M., 1983, p. 30) indicated that international news was the second most read section of that newspaper among audiences.

Thanks to this, the newspaper became the window to the world for most Chileans, which gave it unprecedented access to the public at large and profound influence in shaping the public imagination even among those who did not read that paper. In the fact, the newspaper was able to reach a diversity of segments among readers that traditionally held political and class positions different to that of the paper's owners. This included 90% of university students and academics –traditionally associated with the intellectual left- and groups on the lower stratum such as 26% of the blue-collar worker and 46% of poor and peasant women, which became part of the core readers of the paper (Mattelart, Armand and Mattelart, Michèle, 1970).

What our own evidence suggest is that the newspaper used its international coverage to frame national events during the government of Allende as part of a communist advance, which followed the tradition of the 'Red Scare' and McCarthyism. It did so by articulating stories that represented the West in terms of 'liberty and order' while associating the Soviet bloc with authoritarianism at home and anarchy abroad. Teun A. van Dijk calls this the strategy of positive self-presentation and negative presentation of the others, which he claims is a typical discourse strategy to displace responsibility (2009, p. 369).

Thanks to this displacement, *El Mercurio* was able to create a strong association between the situation in Chile under the Unidad Popular government and the international Marxist ideology that Allende and his supporters supposedly represented (Moss, 1973). This strategy of

associating the Allende administration and supporters with international communism was not new and in fact had been a main feature of the electoral campaign of 1964 (Salazar, 2011); one that had been also used in Greece and Italy after WWII to deter socialist and communist candidates from coming into power (Miller, 1983; Samatas, 1986). To be sure, Edward Korry, US ambassador in Chile during the Allende administration, recognised years later that the US had used in Chile the same anti-communist strategies perpetrated by the CIA in Italy after the war (Documentary on Salvador Allende, 2004). This strategy based on fostering moral panic in order to mobilise through fear continues to be effective even when the great powers and the great press confront new foes in new scenarios in the context of the War on Terror (Cole, 2003). This because fear remains an intrinsic part of most hegemonic efforts of the past and, arguably, it will remain as such in the foreseeable future.

## Conclusions

In 1968, when still a senator, Salvador Allende wrote a letter to the then director of *El Mercurio*, René Silva Espejo to complain about the way the newspaper reported international affairs,<sup>2</sup>

Today Chile continues to live under a bourgeois democracy; with all its faults is undoubtedly one of the countries in America in which the civic struggles still make sense. However, increasingly the ability of popular movements to access to power through democratic means is been reduced in Chile and *El Mercurio* bears a great responsibility for this. Because of its implacable, but clumsy, defence of its own interest and constant deviation from the truth that ultimately denies a great number of Chileans a *different life (...)* *We believe, mister director, that every time that violence is unleashed in the world scenario by imperialism, your own cultural background cannot make it forget what Vietnam [war] represents, which seems not to exist for El Mercurio despite that is evident [as a conflict] for the Pope [in Rome]* (Arrate, Jorge and Hidalgo, Paulo, 1989, p. 430).

Perhaps, one might speculate, President Salvador Allende had some intuition about the power of international news on Chile's political imaginary. Not so much in terms of the number of people who read international affairs but how international news can help frame the national events in the wider context of global power and struggles.

In this piece, we have shown how international news was effectively used to create moral panics to make people associate what was happening in Chile under Allende with the Soviet communist threat from abroad. By doing so, *El Mercurio* intended to mobilise public opinion against Allende and his government of *Unidad Popular*. There is little doubt also, looking at this evidence, that this was an orchestrated and systematic effort from the part of the newspaper which emulated similar strategies used in the past both in Chile and in other countries where progressive movements were in the verge of accessing power.

To what degree was this strategy effective or not is a matter of discussion. Although it is evidently clear that the use of international news as part of communicative action, that is as part of the propaganda efforts, was pivotal in creating a specific imaginary among the Chilean people, it is less evident how much was it able to translate into political mobilisation. After all, and despite widespread destabilisation efforts, Allende and his Unidad Popular government managed to increase their share of votes in both the municipal/local elections of April 1971 - in which the UP got 50.86%- and the parliamentary election of March 1973 -in which the UP got 43% of the votes- (Corvalán, 2003; Martínez, 2009). Future research might focus on this aspect of audience research in the face of the possible declassification of US government documents in the near future such as polls and research commissioned by the US Embassy in Santiago and the CIA at the time. This might shed further light of this tragic episode of our history that many want to forget but that nevertheless tells us a lot about our present society and the excesses of the media today.

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<sup>1</sup> El Mercurio (Julio 8, 1973). *La Responsabilidad del Gobierno*. Editorial. El Mercurio. Page 3.

<sup>2</sup> The letter was in response to the news coverage given to the expulsion of the Bolivian-based guerrilla group Ñancahuazú by the Frei administration. Ñancahuazú had entered Chilean territory escaping from a coordinated operation between the Bolivian army and the CIA to capture Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara. Needless to say that the Chilean government was cooperating with that operation.