**Covering the EU at local level: A multiple-case study in Germany, the UK and Spain**

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**Abstract**

In recent years, European journalists show a preference for opinionated stories in a growing movement triggered by the acceleration of the political information cycle in the digital sphere. This research aims to analyze how reporting the EU meets quality standards, comparing the coverage of EU affairs in local media from Germany, the United Kingdom (UK) and Spain. We content-analyze all the published news items on European issues, collected over a one-year period (2018-2019). Local media are selected because of their relationship with democracy in nearby communities. Based on a corpus of 1,093 news stories, the results show that the number of statements was high; meanwhile, we detected a negative bias in every media outlet of the sample, but some differences were also found linking to national contexts. Likewise, our study provides evidence on the shaping of low-quality news about the EU, arguing that this practice could boost a polarized climate.

**Introduction**

In recent decades, the value of facts seems to have lost importance to opinions within the public opinion of Western countries (Munive, 2006; Otto et al., 2021). Journalists

themselves show a preference for opinionated stories in a growing movement driven by the homogenization and acceleration of the political information cycle in the digital sphere (Casero-Ripollés, 2018). Since the emergence of online news consumption, journalism has ceased to be key in the process of providing political knowledge to citizens, who tend to inform themselves through social media (Strauß et al., 2021).

As a consequence of the rise of digital platforms, journalism is more focused on political leaders than on public policies in Europe (Baisnée, 2014). In this context of personalizing news coverage, news production has become extremely competitive in the pursuit for spectacular stories (Carlson, 2018). Although production and distribution today involve a new dimension of players such as digital opinion leaders or fact-checking organizations, politicians and journalists still occupy a central position in the public debate of Western countries (Chadwick, 2017).

The European Union (EU) is one of the main international targets of disinformation. The journalistic treatment of the EU institutions has never been easy due to their intrinsic complexity, but some recent phenomena such as the European debt crisis, refugee management, and Brexit have spurred the EU's legitimacy problems (Krzyżanowski, 2019). The literature even argues that exposure to media content favors a worsening of the public's view of the Union (Brosius et al., 2019), increasing the feeling of remoteness towards it.

The news coverage of the EU is characterized by a high frequency of official sources (Martins et al., 2012), which result in the genesis of a journalism of statements that could be limited to transferring the interests of the political class to citizens. Politicians and journalists have always lived in a relationship of mutual dependence, in which a spiral of cynicism emerges (Brants et al., 2009). At European level, this gives rise to contradictory currents of mistrust and mutual cooperation, triggering journalistic

coverage that is highly dependent on EU institutions (van Spanje and de Vreese, 2014). The development of this cynicism can lead to politics being seen as something distant, in a perception that favors the decline of electoral participation.

Despite the fact that most of the EU legislation is applied locally, there is little research on the role of local media in European integration (Scharkow and Vogelgesang, 2010). For this reason, this study compares the journalistic treatment of the EU in local media in Germany, the United Kingdom, and Spain. The objective is to conceptualize the hypothetical role of low-quality news about the EU, insofar as the European project is emerging as especially sensitive to disinformation (Wagner and Boczkowski, 2019).

Our research is nourished by journalistic quality criteria, analyzing the relevance of news items, their diversity, personalization, and negativity. This quality works as a broad standard that allows the presence of opinion content to be quantitatively assessed and, therefore, of a journalism of statements that contributes to lessening the importance of the verified facts. Specifically, the notion of quality is referenced from the point of view of local journalism, which has strong particularities to which a cold and distant subject such as the EU is added in this case.

**Theoretical framework**

*Reporting the EU in troubled times*

European citizens have traditionally perceived the existence of a democratic deficit around the EU (Goldberg and de Vreese, 2018), as there is no correct allocation of

responsibilities between voters and the political class. This problem is linked to a lack of Europeanization of news coverage (Heft, 2017). Poor journalistic treatment has been further exacerbated by the proliferation of disinformation (Nelson and Taneja, 2018; Kermer and Nijmeijer, 2020), revealing the media as being incapable of building European identity in recent historical processes such as the refugee crisis and Brexit.

The institutional component of EU players means that European news also belongs to the sphere of political journalism. This area has been dealing with a post-truth situation in recent years, forcing news pieces to adopt polarized positions in order to gain the public's approval (Carlson, 2018). The EU is hardly prone to conflict (Kelemen, 2020), hence the coverage of this topic calls for a strong national orientation (Esser et al., 2012; Heft, 2017). The communication deficit already detected in the Union of 15 Member States (Machill et al., 2006) seem to be increasing in recent years.

With regard to journalistic impact, the volume of data regarding the EU does not directly influence the collective assessments of its working (Marquart et al., 2019), but it influences the use of certain conceptual frameworks referring to the idea that the crisis has exacerbated mistrust in European institutions (van Spanje and de Vreese, 2014). However, some of these sensitive issues, such as climate change, the economy, and immigration, are now emerging as central issues capable of mobilizing voters (Braun and Schäfer, 2022).

Another feature of reporting the EU is its dependence on official sources. It is difficult for the media not to reproduce the messages of experts, particularly in economic matters (Arrese and Vara-Miguel, 2016). Limited transparency in the European decision-making process affected the quality of journalistic sources in the past (Boomgaarden et al., 2011). Studies on this notion of quality have been oriented towards public corporations (Fraile and Iyengar, 2014), which are frequent in Europe,

but they have barely gone beyond these very unique media (Otto et al., 2021) and the legacy media (Frangonikolopoulos and Papapadopoulou, 2021).

Although the literature emphasizes barriers to effective communication, there are also recent contributions highlighting the ability of leading media to promote solidarity rather than antagonism regarding Europe (Theocharis and Walter, 2018). The added difficulty lies in the fact that the European project itself often carries negative news (Brosius et al., 2019).

*Local media in a context of distrust*

Since the 1980s, news coverage of politics has experienced increasing personalization, accompanied by high doses of negativity (Kuhn and Nielsen, 2014). This global willingness does not prevent national journalistic cultures from continuing to play a fundamental role in the shaping of news (Hanusch and Hanitzsch, 2017), including the local press, which maintains its public service function (Jenkins and Nielsen, 2020). Therefore, this research develops a comparative analysis of several European countries.

The importance of local media lies in their capacity to generate social cohesion (Leupold et al., 2018). Local and regional information shows a strong commitment to the territory to which the media is attached (Jerónimo, 2015), delving into the issues occurring in that geographical space and encouraging political participation, as it operates as a forum for discussion (Ferreira, 2012). Moreover, the local press enjoys a high level of identification with the public, as a result of greater accountability (Izquierda Labella, 2010). However, this connection with the audience, which allows to

develop products according to their interests (Harte et al., 2018), has not prevented a crisis in the local media business model (Hayes and Lawless, 2018).

Following on from the above, precariousness reverts to a progressive instability of the sector, which is increasingly less professionalized and dependent on volunteers (Williams et al., 2015). Another difficulty of local journalism is its excessive dependence on institutional sources such as local councils (Morais et al., 2020). The lack of distance from sources correlates with the higher qualification of some local politicians (Shaker, 2014), who try to control the public agenda.

Conversely, the local press fulfills the journalistic objective of weaving ties of belonging in its area of dissemination (Novy et al., 2012), despite recurrent criticism of its poor quality. Surveys indicated that in Europe, 60% of its inhabitants preferred local media to their national counterparts for information (Möhring, 2015). However, it is true that nowadays there is a journalistic disaggregation, in which the audience reads this press for issues such as politics or events, leaving social issues to one side (Newman et al., 2021).

The EU is a topic far removed from local journalism. In this line, it seems relevant that these media approach national and international events such as the EU from a local perspective, in the sense of explaining how they affect the territory closest to the citizen (Rivas-de-Roca et al., 2020). News covering the European project can benefit from the huge revitalization of the local press (Negreira et al., 2022), as it is rooted in the closer contact of this specialization with the audience.

*Quality criteria for printed media*

Our study analyzes the coverage of the EU in the framework of quality standards. This concept of quality is weak and multidimensional, linked to different media traditions (Mompart et al., 2013). From the German tradition, the criteria of diversity, relevance, and professionalism are alluded to. Relevance connects with the importance of information, meanwhile the last point is related to neutrality and factuality (Schatz and Schulz, 1992). These items work as markers that allow information to be classified.

Regarding diversity, local news items not only have to be comprehensive and meet the information needs of the people, but also provide a diverse and balanced content. This well-balanced approach refers to the concept of diversity, which means a diverse representation of society in media coverage. Following van Cuilenburg (2007) and Steiner et al. (2019), the concept includes diversity of issues and diversity of people and groups. The plurality of issues is required to foster a well-informed citizenry, whose voters must be familiar with many topics (Leidenberger, 2015).

The assessment of quality depends on audience expectations to some extent (Mompart et al., 2013), but the news reception could suffer from cultural clashes that threaten its development (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). The fact that the EU is a democratic system leads us to prioritize the social function of the media as a criterion of quality in our research, that is, it is based on the analysis of how news contributes to a better democratic knowledge of the European project. To this end, we use the parameters of relevance and diversity recognized by the literature, but two new variables of personalization and negativity are introduced, which have to do with professionalism and the desire to be as neutral as possible.

**Research Questions**

The endemic problems of European news items mean that the EU institutions could become the subject of inaccurate and unspecialized news stories. Thus, our study seeks to examine the coverage of the EU through the presence of opinionated stories, assuming that there are divergences from country to country. Three states are selected that correspond to different media systems (Hallin and Mancini, 2004): the professionalized journalistic culture in Germany, the liberal and conflictive to the power system in the United Kingdom, and the polarized model of Spain.

Actually, the model of Hallin and Mancini gives an outstanding operationalization, since this was a seminal proposal that compared media systems in Western countries through the relationship between politics and media. The model has been further developed, being still valid for comparative studies (Hallin and Mancini, 2017). Considering the analyzed three countries, in Germany there is a democratic corporatist model, marked by high newspaper circulation, neutral commercial press and strong professionalization, where high political parallelism and elite oriented press are trends in Spain (polarized pluralist model). For its part, the UK is a borderline case according to authors and has some features of liberalism and polarization to contrast with continental Europe.

As there is little research on the role of local media in the circulation of European news, we pose the following research questions to explore the news coverage:

> RQ1. How much attention and, therefore, relevance does the local media attribute to the EU?
>
> RQ2. How diverse is the coverage regarding the EU?
>
> RQ3. Is the personalization of European news high?

RQ4. Is negativity capable of affecting European news in the local field?

**Method**

*Research Design*

This research carries out a multiple-case study, applying a content analysis. The aim is to compare the journalistic treatment of European affairs in local media in Germany, the United Kingdom, and Spain. The sample includes the digital contents of six newspapers, two per country: *Berliner Zeitung* and *Berliner Kurier* (Germany), *London Evening Standard* and *This is Local London* (United Kingdom), and *Diario de Sevilla* and *Sevilla Actualidad* (Spain). Hence, we cover three densely populated cities belonging to countries that have a different historical relationship with the European project. This ranges from Germany as an EU founding member to Spain, which joined in 1986, as well as one country (the UK) that was leaving the UE at that moment through Brexit, after a long-lasting Euroscepticism.

Moreover, the sample choice of specific media was made on the basis of audience and plurality. According to rankings, they were some of the most read newspapers on the Internet for each city, but we also try to combine traditional newspapers with digital native news media in each country. In the case of Spain, Seville was chosen instead of Madrid due to the traditional absence of local media in the Spanish capital. As mentioned above, the democratic importance explains the selection of the local area, where topics of interest are set for a geographical community of citizens (Williams et al., 2015).

All news pieces on the EU published over one year, from 1 July 2018 to 30 June 2019, are analyzed. This achieves a time frame that includes the four annual meetings of the European Council, the elections to the European Parliament, and the annual approval of the EU budget. A certain volume of pieces is ensured during the time analyzed, as a study by months would face the difficulty that European project is not a significant producer of information.

In addition to that, these keywords in the texts were employed to collect all news stories on EU: "European Union", "EU", "European Commission", "European Parliament", "EU/European institutions", and "Brexit". The latter was chosen because of the importance of the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU in 2018 and 2019; meanwhile, the Commission and the Parliament were added as they are probably the institutions best known by the public.

The results obtained for the different items are processed statistically, using the IBM SPSS Statistics version 28. We consider the four key moments in the content analysis process according to Blanco Leal (2008): pre-analysis, coding, inferences, and computer processing. First, pre-analysis phase begins with the literature review, searching for the theories that have marked its development, and the application of a pilot test to obtain the agreement data. A pretest of 5% of the sample -55 units of analysis- was conducted between three researchers.

Krippendorff's alpha coefficient (0= no agreement, 1= perfect agreement) yielded a valuable level of reliability ($\alpha$= 0.81), given that it was above the recommended 0.70 for all variables (Neuendorf, 2002). It should be noted that all the material was coded by a single person, ensuring a certain homogeneity in the results. We also provide the levels of inter-coder reliability achieved in the pretest for individual variables that require interpretation.

To devise our study, an analytical data sheet on content analysis (Krippendorff, 2012) is created, including categories for each of the variables estimated as relevant in the proliferation of opinionated news. This document has four sections around the main criteria defined: relevance, diversity, personalization, and negativity. A total of 1,093 journalistic pieces met the requirements set by this study, being analyzed through the data sheet.

*Operationalization*

The defined variables were operationalized through various categories:

a) Relevance. The number of news items published by each media allows us to obtain a first quantitative overview of the degree of sensitivity that these media outlets have towards European affairs.

b) Diversity ($\alpha= 0,85$). The focus of the news piece, the number of sources, and their type serve as categories that delve into the concept of diversity, and consequently plurality, of journalistic coverage.

c) Personalization ($\alpha= 0,82$). Framing of the headline, presence of individuals in the headline, and presence of these politicians in the body text. The goal is to find out to what extent the information moves around specific people.

d) Negativity ($\alpha= 0,75$). Bias of the message about the EU and news topic, as according to the literature there are certain topics that promote Euroscepticism (Kuhn and Nielsen, 2014).

The results of these indicators are mainly cross-referenced in frequency tables by media, but the orientation of the headline is also used as a variable to know its distribution. Statistical significance results are included from bilateral tests, which seek

to find significant differences between columns (Bonferroni correction). We carry out a z test for the pairwise comparison of column proportions, being the null hypothesis that the two columns were equal. The analyses are based on newspaper level, and not on national level since the results are not statistically significant on national one.

In the case of contrasting population proportions, the Z test for independent samples was used to verify hypotheses regarding whether there are differences between two proportions from independent samples, which are those that are examined individually.

$$\text{Z-test} = \frac{(x-\mu)}{(\vartheta/\sqrt{n})}$$

Where:

X: sample mean

$\mu$: population mean

$\vartheta$: population standard deviation

N: number of observations

This test tests the following hypotheses:

• H0 (null hypothesis) = the percentages of both populations are equal.

 • H1 (alternative hypothesis) = the percentages of both populations are not the same.

Thus, when the Z test yields a result lower than the corrected α, the null hypothesis is rejected. This means that there are significant differences between both populations in the analysed variable. When we run multiple hypothesis tests at once, the probability of getting a false positive is higher. The type I error raises with increasing number of comparisons and that we can find a falsely significant difference only by chance.

Such a case is known as the family error rate: 1- (1-α)n, where n is the number of total tests and α is the level of significance for a single hypothesis test. To correct this error rate, the Bonferroni correction was used, consisting of dividing the level of significance by the number of comparisons made two by two, minimizing the probability of committing a type I error. The formula employed is described as follows:

$$\alpha_{\text{corrected}} = {}^{\alpha_{original}}\!/_n$$

$\alpha_{original}$: p-level of 0.05

n: total number of comparisons made

In such a way that the Alpha used in the z test was the $\alpha_{\text{corrected}}$

**Results**

*Relevance of the EU issues*

The main unit of analysis of this research corresponds to the journalistic piece on European affairs, published by the six selected media. Following the parameters set in the research design, 1,093 units have been found, which are subject to a content analysis. The information is distributed relatively evenly between countries, with a noteworthy presence in the United Kingdom, but the differences have been greater between the media in each state:

- Germany: 336 pieces. 271 in *Berliner Zeitung* and 65 in *Berliner Kurier*.

- United Kingdom: 431 pieces. 276 in *London Evening Standard* and 155 in *This is Local London*.

- Spain: 326 pieces. 50 in *Sevilla Actualidad* and 276 in *Diario de Sevilla*.

An observation of these news items illustrates that a good part of these journalistic texts has been written by agencies, which denotes a lack of active work in the media. Moreover, these European pieces are often placed in political sections, omitting markers referring to the local or regional scope. This implies a formal remoteness of these facts from those that affect citizens in their daily lives.

The number of news items on the EU is revealed as limited at the local field, as all the selected newspapers published less than 300 pieces about the subject on their websites over the course of a year. Concretely, the results seem extremely low in *Berliner Kurier* (65) and *Sevilla Actualidad* (50), which are the media in the sample with the lowest level of economic resources.

*Diversity*

The use of different approaches in European news, understood as the geographical framing to which the news piece is subject, implies a way of diversity. It is also based on the premise that the combination of several frames can be useful for the understanding of usually complex subjects. For this purpose, the frequency of distribution of the frames created in the analysis sheet for each media is analyzed (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Distribution of media pieces according to the approach (%). *In **bold** are the results with a 0.05 significance level, based on bilateral tests for the proportion of columns (Bonferroni correction).

| | Local | Regional | National | European | Proximity + National | Proximity + Europe | National + Europe | Local + National + EU |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (A) *Berliner Zeitung* | 3.3 | 2.2 | 5.2 | **48.0 *BCDE** | 0.4 | 3.0 | 28.8 | 9.2 |
| (B) *Berliner Kurier* | **15.4 *ADF** | 3.1 | **12.3 *F** | **27.7 *CD** | **3.1 *A** | 4.6 | 16.9 | 16.9 |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (C) *London Eve. Stand.* | 6.5 | 2.2 | **37.7 *ABEF** | 6.5 | 0.0 | 2.5 | **38.8 *BEF** | **5.8 *C** |
| (D) *This is Local London* | 3.2 | 5.8 | **29.0 *AEF** | 11.0 | 0.0 | 5.3 | **39.4 *BEF** | 6.5 |
| (E) *Sevilla Actualidad* | **18.0 *ADF** | 8.0 | 2.0 | 10.0 | 0.0 | **38.0 *ABCDF** | 14.0 | 10.0 |
| (F) *Diario de Sevilla* | 3.3 | 3.6 | 3.3 | **44.9 *CDE** | 0.0 | **13.4 *AC** | 25.0 | 6.5 |
| Total (overall average) | 5.5 | 3.4 | 16.6 | 28.5 | 0.3 | 7.5 | 30.5 | 7.8 |

The European approach is predominant and significant in *Berliner Zeitung* (48%), *Diario de Sevilla* (44.9%) and *Berliner Kurier* (27.7%), whereas the combination of national and European news operates in the British media (39.4% in *This is Local London* and 38.8% in *London Evening Standard*). These percentages are closely followed in the United Kingdom by the strictly national perspective, which is typical of its political and journalistic tradition.

Accordingly, one example of news item with a national approach is "British strawberries could be a rarity next year due to Brexit", published on *This is Local London*. On this matter, British data on national approach are statistically significant compared to most of the newspapers in the sample.

Local approximation only appears with some frequency in *Sevilla Actualidad* (18%) and *Berliner Kurier* (15.4%). For its part, the "informative localization" approach ("proximity" and "Europe"), which can be interpreted as a strategy for bringing together local interests with the EU, is mostly observed in *Sevilla Actualidad* (38%). Its performance is statistically relevant in comparison with the other newspapers. In contrast, there is a greater overall presence of another mixed approach: the one that mixes national and European policy in all research media (30.5% of the total).

National issues are important in shaping EU reporting, even in local media, to the extent that the national perspective prevails over that of proximity in these matters. Given that we are dealing with local newspapers, the greatest deficit is that there is no

connection with proximity, and there is a link with the national sphere, despite the fact that local news constitutes the space of action of the newspapers in the sample. Moreover, each media has a series of preferential practices, reflected in the use of few formulas with high percentages.

Another criterion of diversity is in the sources. Firstly, their quantity serves as a classical principle, although the type of those sources has a more relevant influence on the notion of plurality. Journalistic standards traditionally require a minimum of two sources, which should be higher on difficult topics such as the EU (Baisnée, 2014). Table 2 shows the distribution of the volume of sources in the sample media.

**Table 2.** Distribution of the volume of sources by media (%). *In **bold** are the results with a 0.05 significance level, based on bilateral tests for the proportion of columns (Bonferroni correction).

|  | No sources | One source | Two sources | Three sources | More than three sources |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (A) *Berliner Zeitung* | 7.0 | **44.6 *BCDF** | 19.9 | 16.6 | 11.8 |
| (B) *Berliner Kurier* | **29.2 *ACDF** | 13.8 | 35.4 | 12.3 | 9.2 |
| (C) *London Eve. Standard* | 4.3 | 18.1 | 24.6 | 24.6 | **28.3 *ABEF** |
| (D) *This is Local London* | 7.1 | 20.6 | 25.8 | 17.4 | **29.0 *ABEF** |
| (E) *Sevilla Actualidad* | **32.0 *ACDF** | **42.0 *BCD** | 16.0 | 8.0 | 2.0 |
| (F) *Diario de Sevilla* | 9.8 | **30.4 *C** | 30.8 | 16.3 | 12.7 |
| Total (overall average) | 9.5 | 29.0 | 25.4 | 18.0 | 18.0 |

According to the data, a greater number of sources is observed in the United Kingdom (28.3% of news pieces with more than three sources in *London Evening Standard* and 29% in *This is Local London*). The use of three sources is statistically significant with the German and Spanish media. British news about the EU demand from a greater volume of direct references to give a voice to the players involved, usually non-European.

In the sample as a whole, the most common practice is between one (29% of the total) and two sources (25.4%) in all countries. However, it is concerning to note the high percentage of news pieces without sources in *Berliner Kurier* (29.2%) and *Sevilla Actualidad* (32%), again both significant. Consequently, the findings regarding the volume of sources are ambivalent across the media. The most common practices are to resort to one or two sources, which borders on the required limit, but there are also significant percentages of a non-appearance of references. As a trend by country, a greater use is found in the United Kingdom, whilst in Germany and Spain, few sources are used to build their European news.

With regard to the type of these sources, it is a variable that makes it possible to assess the determining factors of these references. Six items have been developed, whose distribution by newspaper is shown in Table 3. Firstly, a certain plurality in the modality of sources is perceived in the sample as a whole. In addition to the lack of references in *Berliner Kurier* and *Sevilla Actualidad* seen in Table 2, here the regular use of international organizations as a source of information in *Diario de Sevilla* (27.2%) stands out significantly. This result denotes the foreign nature of their news on the EU.

**Table 3.** Distribution of the type of sources according to the newspaper analyzed (%). *In **bold** are the results with a 0.05 significance level, based on bilateral tests for the proportion of columns (Bonferroni correction).

| | Experts | Internat. body | National body | Local /reg. body | Politicians | Other |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (A) *Berliner Zeitung* | 8.2 | 6.6 | 1.8 | 1.1 | **56.1 *BEF** | 19.2 |
| (B) *Berliner Kurier* | 9.3 | 9.2 | 0.0 | 1.5 | **29.2 *E** | **21.4 *CDF** |
| (C) *London Eve. Standard* | **9.7 *F** | 4.3 | **8.0 *A** | 0.7 | **57.2 *BEF** | 15.9 |
| (D) *This is Local London* | 3.2 | 3.2 | **11.6 *A** | 2.6 | **57.4 *BEF** | 14.8 |
| (E) *Sevilla Actualidad* | 2.0 | 10.0 | 8.0 | **20.0 *ABCDF** | 6.0 | **22 *CDF** |
| (F) *Diario de Sevilla* | 3.2 | **27.2 *ABCD** | **17.0 *AC** | 3.6 | **26.1 *E** | 13 |
| Total (overall average) | 6.4 | 11.1 | 8.8 | 2.7 | 45.1 | 16.5 |

On the other hand, it is worth highlighting the use of national bodies by *Diario de Sevilla* (17%), *This is Local London* (11.6%) and *London Evening Standard* (8%), all of which obtain some statistical significance (Table 3). Also noteworthy is the use of local and regional bodies in *Sevilla Actualidad*, which accounts for 20% of its news and significantly differentiates it from the other newspapers, despite being a media that regularly used the European approach.

The use of politicians as a source is the most common category (45.1% of the total), only being less in *Sevilla Actualidad* (6%). It is the preferred practice in *This is Local London* (57.4%), *London Evening Standard* (57.2%), *Berliner Zeitung* (56.1%) and *Berliner Kurier* (29.2%). We also observe statistical differences towards the Spanish media. As can be seen, the value of politicians as a source in the London newspapers is remarkable, something that fits in again with the United Kingdom's own declarative journalistic culture, which is very focused on actors (Henkel et al., 2019).

Politicians and, to a lesser extent, international and national bodies, are the top sources in the framework of this research. This implies that European information is clearly institutionalized, focusing on bodies and political figures rather than other players such as experts. Moreover, there is a lack of references to local and regional authorities.

*Personalization*

Headlines are the gateway to written journalistic content, a fact that could have been reinforced by digitization and mobile news consumption. In this study (Table 4), politicians are less relevant than thematic elements in configuring the headlines (25.5%

of the sum of the two variables on actors compared to 74.5% on thematic issues).

However, non-EU actors are significantly represented in the British media (23.9% in *London Evening Standard* and 32.9 in *This is Local London*).

**Table 4.** Distribution of the headline frame by media (%). *In **bold** are the results with a 0.05 significance level, based on bilateral tests for the proportion of columns (Bonferroni correction).

|  | EU actor | Non-EU actor | European affairs | Non-European affairs |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| (A) *Berliner Zeitung* | 6.6 | **19.9 *E** | **62.4 *BCD** | 11.1 |
| (B) *Berliner Kurier* | 1.5 | 13.8 | 40.0 | **44.6 *A** |
| (C) *London Eve. Standard* | **9.8 *F** | **23.9 *EF** | 29.3 | **37.0 *A** |
| (D) *This is Local London* | 5.2 | **32.9 *AEF** | 34.8 | **27.1 *A** |
| (E) *Sevilla Actualidad* | 2.0 | 2.0 | 46.0 | **50.0 *AD** |
| (F) *Diario de Sevilla* | 1.8 | 13.8 | **55.4 *CD** | **29.0 *A** |
| Total (overall average) | 5.5 | 20.0 | 46.3 | 28.2 |

The orientation towards state policy may cause *London Evening Standard* to be the newspaper with the least references to European affairs in its headlines (29.3%). Likewise, *Berliner Kurier* and *Sevilla Actualidad* have slightly higher thematic percentages of issues that are not strictly European. In contrast, two of the media in the sample prioritize international issues in the headlines of their pieces on the EU: *Berliner Zeitung* (62.4%) and *Diario de Sevilla* (55.4%), both with significant differences compared to British media.

For instance, *This is Local London* published the headline "Jeremy Hunt condemned by politicians and diplomats Soviet jibe at EU", which mentions a non-EU actor. Conversely, the news item "*La Eurocámara aprueba que la UE prohíba ciertos plásticos de un solo uso*" (The European Parliament approves that the EU prohibits some single-use plastics) illustrates how *Diario de Sevilla* focuses on European affairs.

It is striking that there are newspapers such as *Berliner Kurier* and *Sevilla Actualidad* that preferably build news regarding the EU from headlines about non-

European issues. This reflects how the EU influences national and local political actions, whilst also being addressed tangentially, perhaps because it is felt that such non-European issues may better attract the interest of the audience. Beyond the media framing, the declarative level of the headlines is analyzed through the presence of textual citations in the headline. That information is compared with the orientation of the headlines to obtain possible trends that explain the use of citations in the header of the journalistic pieces (Figure 1).
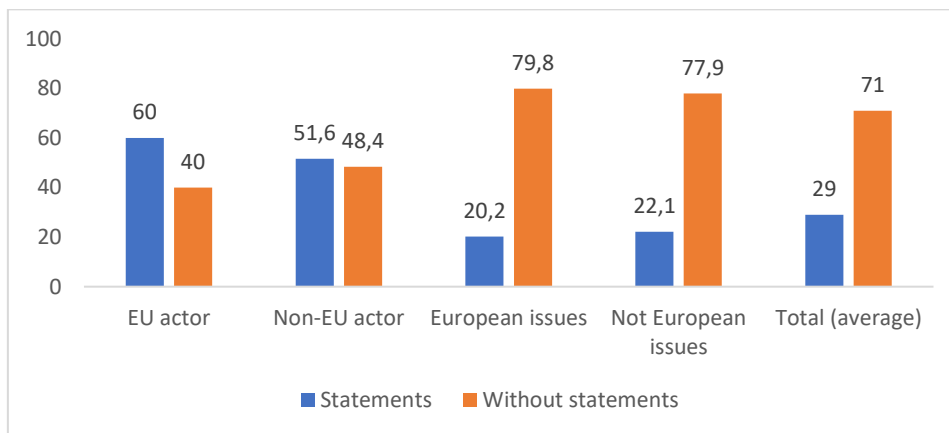


**Figure 1.** Frequency of textual citations according to the orientation of the headline (%).

The data reveal that the use of statements in the headline is linked to the reference to specific actors, whether European (60%) or not (51.6%). This finding is reasonable, since the textuality is characteristic of politicians who make specific judgments. In the sample as a whole, most headlines (71%) lack these textual citations, as news pieces built around specific leaders are in the minority.

The appearance of individuals with different approaches towards an issue can contribute to a greater wealth of viewpoints in journalism and are also related to a certain personalization of European issues common in Western democracies. The divergence in the presence of individuals in the bodies of text is greater (Figure 2), observing some common patterns between countries.
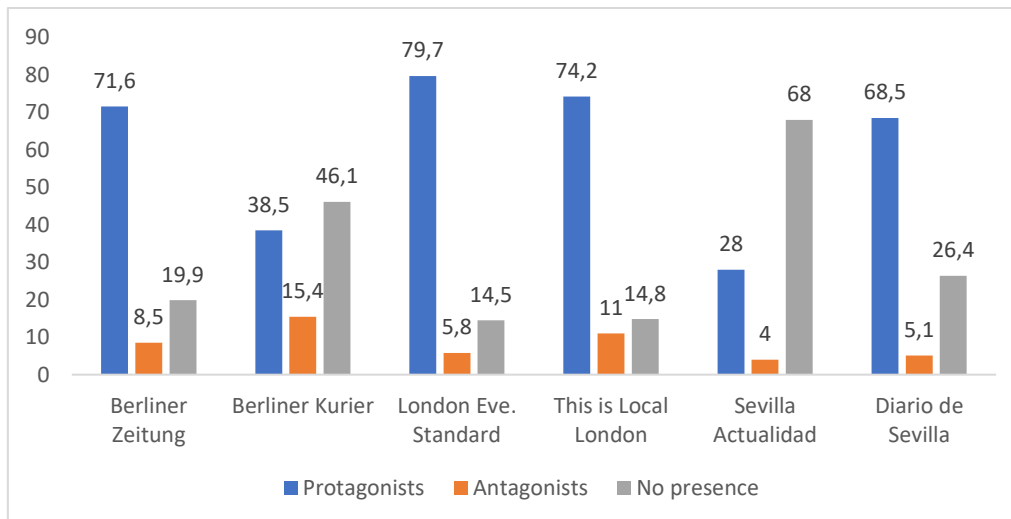
**Figure 2.** Frequency of presence of individuals in the texts by media (%).

The information is mainly built from protagonists (69.3% of the total), especially in the United Kingdom (79.7% in *London Evening Standard* and 74.2% in *This is Local London*). Once again, a personalist practice is detected, which is typical of the political and journalistic cultures of the British country. *Berliner Kurier* and *Sevilla Actualidad* are the two media in which this trend does not occur, with 46.1% and 68% of news items having no presence of individual players, respectively.

The use of antagonists is minimum with slight exceptions in the more sensationalist newspapers in this study: *Berliner Kurier* (15.4%) and *This is Local London* (11%). Priority is attributed to leaders outside the European institutions, as in the case of the British newspapers that mention national actors because of its preference for this approach, or individuals are directly omitted. Some citations of antagonists are the headlines "Steve Bannon creates right-wing 'supergroup' intended to undermine European Union" (*London Evening Standard*) or "EU warns Trump: motor tariffs could lead to £230bn retaliation" (*This is Local London*).

Following the above, Steve Bannon and Donald Trump are non-EU actors that orchestrate a negative vision of the European project. Regardless of this finding and the

scarce presence of individuals in two sample media (*Berliner Kurier* and *Sevilla Actualidad*), most journalistic pieces analyzed feature protagonists, European or on a closer area. The news items "Junckers US-Reise: Altmaier warnt vor hohen Erwartungen" (Juncker's US trip: Altmaier warns against high expectations) published by *Berliner Zeitung*, and "Evening Standard comment: Macron and May: the powerful and powerless" posted by *London Evening Standard* could be identified as good examples. This trend contrasts with the low personalization of the headlines.

*Negativity*

Table 5 shows the predominance of the topics of Brexit (39.6%) and economy and trade (16.4%), which refer to two aspects that have been the biggest crises in the European Union in recent years. Brexit is very important for *Diario de Sevilla* (37.7%), showing the significance between 2018 and 2019 of Britain's exit from the EU as a topic of European politics, even in media outside the United Kingdom.

**Table 5.** Thematic distribution according to the newspaper analyzed - block 1 (%). *In **bold** are the results with a 0.05 significance level, based on bilateral tests for the proportion of columns (Bonferroni correction).

| | EP Elections | Brexit | Economy + Commerce | Social Policy + Migration | European Projects | Other |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (A) *Berliner Zeitung* | **24.3 *F** | 17.3 | **30.7 *E** | **11 *C** | 1.8 | 14.9 |
| (B) *Berliner Kurier* | **46.2 *ACDF** | 10.8 | **21.5 *E** | 6.1 | 1.5 | 13.9 |
| (C) *London Eve. Standard* | **14.2 *F** | **62.3 *ABEF** | 15.9 | 3.2 | 0.0 | 4.4 |
| (D) *This is Local London* | 9.1 | **64.5 *ABEF** | 14.8 | 3.9 | 0.0 | 7.7 |
| (E) *Sevilla Actualidad* | **26.0 *DF** | 6.0 | 10.0 | **12.0 *ACD** | **22.0 *ABF** | **24.0 *CD** |
| (F) *Diario de Sevilla* | 9.4 | **37.7 *ABE** | **21.4 *E** | **11.3 *C** | 4.3 | 15.9 |
| Total (overall average) | 17.2 | 39.6 | 5.9 | 7.9 | 2.7 | 26.7 |

One of the characteristics of thematic distribution is that it is configured with a certain plurality between media. Elections to the European Parliament, held in May 2019, are referenced in *Berliner Kurier* (43.1%) with strong statistical significance, followed in frequency by *Sevilla Actualidad* (22%). Therefore, the coverage of these elections has presented notable divergences in terms of volume.

There is also a finding of interest in "European projects", as the Spanish media concentrate the majority of references (22% in *Sevilla Actualidad* and 4.3% in *Diario de Sevilla*), which is typical of a country interested in these funds. *Sevilla Actualidad* is also significant compared to the rest of the media that contain this item. It is the other way around in the United Kingdom, with no mention in its two media, which are likely to ignore the issue of projects in the face of Britain's exit from the EU and the zero impact that these initiatives will have on its territory.

The tone of information about the EU is a fundamental tool to understand whether journalism practiced with the institutions is evolving towards a certain Euroscepticism. Thus, categories have been generated to collect positive, neutral, negative, and mixed messages about the European project for each of the selected media (Table 6).

**Table 6.** Distribution of media pieces according to their tone of the message about the EU (%). *In **bold** are the results with a 0.05 significance level, based on bilateral tests for the proportion of columns (Bonferroni correction).

| | Positive | Neutral | Negative | Positive / negative |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| (A) *Berliner Zeitung* | **33.2 *CD** | 38 | 12.5 | 16.2 |
| (B) *Berliner Kurier* | **29.2 *D** | 44.6 | 12.3 | 13.8 |
| (C) *London Eve. Standard* | 15.9 | **57.2 *A** | 15.6 | 11.2 |
| (D) *This is Local London* | 11.0 | **58.1 *A** | **23.9 *AEF** | 7.1 |
| (E) *Sevilla Actualidad* | **30.0 *D** | **62.0 *A** | 4.0 | 4.0 |
| (F) *Diario de Sevilla* | 22.1 | **56.9 *A** | 11.6 | 9.4 |
| Total (overall average) | 22.5 | 52.0 | 14.3 | 11.3 |

The tone of the message with the European project is mainly neutral. (52% of the total). However, there are nuances, as the German and Spanish media also tend to have positive messages. This is the case with *Berliner Zeitung* (33.2% of pieces with a positive perception), which is significant compared to British newspapers, *Berliner Kurier* (29.2%) and *Sevilla Actualidad* (30%), which are of statistical interest in relation to *This is Local London*.

In comparison, the British press seems to be oriented towards negativity, particularly in *This is Local London* (23.9%). On the other hand, the combination of positive and negative evaluations is more frequent in the German-speaking media in the sample (16.2% in *Berliner Zeitung* and 13.8% in *Berliner Kurier*), within its general tendency towards neutrality.

In view of the results, the neutral tone appears to be a priority in information about the EU. Negative approaches typical of Euroscepticism are avoided. The local news in this study does not so much follow the tendency towards dissent observed in recent years around Europe (Oleart 2021). However, the aforementioned thematic agenda of the media could also be indicative of a pessimistic approach towards the European project.


**Discussion and Conclusions**


This article has explored and analyzed the journalistic treatment of the EU in local media in several European countries, in order to define the role of opinionated stories in

their news coverage. Based on an extensive content analysis, this study provides four interrelated contributions, which respond to the research questions.

Firstly, evidence is provided on the low degree of relevance given to the EU in the local media. News about this political subject is scarce, being very rare in local newspapers with few economic resources such as *Berliner Kurier* and *Sevilla Actualidad*. Moreover, most of this information is produced by agencies and is located in sections for political content. These findings imply that the media do not do their own work on European issues, and that they are not formally considered within their own markers (local, regional, etc.) of proximity.

Our second contribution refers to the level of diversity of European news. Each media has a range of preferred practices in terms of news focus, concentrating its framing by own conditioning factors. This would explain why the British media are nationally oriented, whereas the German media move towards a European orientation when reporting on the EU. Proximity is once again the main forgotten aspect. For its part, the number of sources as a criterion of diversity points to a limited plurality, although there are differences by country, with the United Kingdom using a higher number of references. In all countries, politicians are the central source. This finding, together with the importance of international and national bodies, shows the extent to which European news seem related to EU institutions.

Thirdly, our study broadens the understanding of the presence of individuals in journalistic pieces, after finding a certain personalization in the diversity of sources. The conclusions on this point are ambivalent. In the sample as a whole, the headlines are scarcely personalized with a tendency to present them more oriented towards specific topics. Moreover, the reference to actors connects with a greater use of statements in the

headline. This data of relatively low personalization is contrasted with an abundant appearance of protagonists in the body of the news pieces.

The British media stand out as a singular case, as they are the ones that publish the most personalized news, both in terms of headlines and in the presence of protagonists in the texts. Moreover, they are oriented towards actors outside the European institutions. The national context would work as an explanatory factor for their journalistic practices with the EU.

As a fourth and final contribution, the tone of the news items towards the European project is predominantly neutral. Once again, the national traditions may be key in this behavior, highlighting the greater optimism of the German media compared to the degree of negativity of the British newspapers. The negative news load is a minority in all countries of the sample. However, our research also shows that the topics with the most references (Brexit and the economy) mention critical issues for the EU overlapping with the idea of crisis. This triggers a reflection on how the media set the agenda at European level.

As collected, a statistically significant greater use of the European approach was detected in Germany. The strong German industry and the development of a Europeanist movement in this country since the 1950s could explain these trends. By contrast, the UK has a long background of Euroscepticism. According to our data, the favorite frame for the British media is the national one, orienting many times their contents to Brexit as the research design took place during negotiations. In the case of Spain, the analyzed media denote a mixed use of national and European frames on topics such as social policy and migration, which may be assessed as expected, noting that the country was heavily affected by the previous economic crisis.

In short, the news items about the EU in these newspapers are revealed as scarcely local, making it difficult to differentiate it from what is published by other media, as well as the possibility of understanding the impact of European policies in the area closest to the citizen. The focus on the political class transfers features of national journalism to Europe. This politicization may contribute to the consolidation of the European project as an object of public discussion, but not adapting to the mechanisms of local journalism (Jerónimo, 2015) diminishes its capacity to provide information of interest.

The findings on the hypothetical role of opinionated news are heterogeneous at a local level. On the one hand, the degree of relevance and diversity of information is scarce, with extremely low volumes in the smallest media. This finding is line with prior scholarship on the general work of proximity media (Morais et al., 2020). On the other hand, personalization and negativity are not as high as expected, except in the United Kingdom, whose data is aligned with its declarative tradition (Henkel et al., 2019).

Taken these insights together, some quantitative findings on coverage are largely fueled by national contexts (booming economy in Germany, Euroscepticism in the UK, or previous crises in Spain). The country-of-origin works as a conditioning element for these two variables (personalization and negativity), whilst the economic capacity of the media does so for the previous two (relevance and diversity). In this sense, the importance of diverse news at the local field is affected by the problems of digital native news media, in terms of precariousness and few resources (Salaverría 2020).

As long as we consider that facts are still important for journalistic pieces about European affairs, there are features such as reduced diversity or the neglect of the local perspective that show poor quality. Briefly, the implications of our research include: (1)

elite-driven perception of the EU, and (2) the existence of a gap between the European integration and policies on the ground. This may foster a low turnout in the European Parliament elections, endangering the working of the EU system as a democracy.

Some limitations of our study should be noted. We cover a selection restricted to three European countries, having also unequal sample sizes. The most populated cities are overrepresented in our sample, which means to leave behind the practices of local media in rural areas. Different levels of Euroscepticism could emerge in these regions. Furthermore, we only analyze print and online media, but regional broadcast news providers would also be useful to evaluate the flow of EU information.

Future research faces the challenge of delving deeper into the effects of journalistic reporting on the EU, contrasting the national differences along the time by widening methods and samples. On this matter, the situation in metropolitan and non-metropolitan regions can be tackled. This links to the aforementioned need of expanding the scope beyond newspapers. The relevance of local news for citizens means that scholarship should continue assessing the flow of quality standards, which are traditionally considered external to the European project.

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