

## Article

# The Crossfire Rhetoric. *Success in Danger vs. Unsustainable Growth*. Analysis of Tourism Stakeholders' Narratives in the Spanish Press (2008–2019)

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**Abstract:** Tourism has always stood out in terms of economic opportunities and personal enjoyment. However, the problem of overtourism has emerged in recent years in urban contexts of cities with diversified economies. Overtourism has become—to a much greater extent than any other variable challenging the sustainability of the tourism model—an object of public debate and the media reflect this debate, which, in the case of Spain, is concentrated in the term “tourismphobia.” This paper aims to analyse the two main opposing narratives reflected in the Spanish media on the emergence of the problem of tourismphobia and that defined what was happening to influence both public opinion and public policymakers themselves. The methodological approach used is the narrative policy framework (NPF), which considers public policies as a social construct, shaped by particular ideologies, values, and worldviews that are structured in narratives. The conclusions point to the fact that even though the “success in danger” narrative was the winner, for the first time the sustainability of the country’s tourism model is being broadly questioned and by very diverse actors. It is also clear that in order to change the trajectory of consolidated tourism policies, it is necessary to build tangible public policy alternatives that can be articulated and implemented by public actors. Based on the findings of the paper, future lines of research could use the “Narrative Policy Framework” for the analysis of sustainable tourism policies or for the study of overtourism in different countries from a comparative perspective.

**Keywords:** tourism policy; narrative policy framework; public policy; tourism stakeholders; overtourism



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## 1. Introduction

Until recently tourism was analysed by highlighting the aspects related to its economic opportunities and personal enjoyment [1]. In fact, according to Tribe [2], work in tourism is traditionally structured around two areas, social science and business. In recent years these have been supplemented by interesting literature on sustainable tourism and by the emergence of a critical studies perspective that proposes a new research agenda [3–6], and although there are a number of studies on sustainable tourism policy [7–13], tourism continues to generate little interest as an object of analysis in political science [14,15].

In this research context, an issue that attracts the attention of many researchers has appeared: The problem of overtourism has emerged in cities with diversified economies and is growing. Reflections on this issue show an interest in better understanding a complex problem and in doing so from different perspectives. Overtourism has been analysed by institutions [16–19]; it intersects with classic urban issues such as gentrification [20] and with the perspectives of tourism research [21–23].

Social problems—unlike those of the exact sciences—are complex realities with multiple interconnected dimensions that are perceived differently by the various actors who observe them [24–26]. As the literature has been pointing out for decades [27], these problems are rarely objectively defined, and this process of definition is in itself a political

exercise in which diverse actors structure narratives in order to frame the problems and influence the decision that is finally made [28] and better fits their intentions [29].

The process of defining the problems that governments must face is the step prior to the design of public action. Reflection on this process has generated rich and diverse proposals that address three interrelated issues: the very nature of social problems, the role of actors and ideas in the articulation of a given definition of the problem within the policymaking process, and the position of the media in this political dynamic.

The first group of studies focuses on the analysis of the nature of the problems that are the object of public policies. For decades there has been talk of “wicked problems” [30], problems that are “difficult to define, have no stopping rule, have no clear solution, each one is essentially unique, may be a symptom of another problem, the solutions to wicked problems are not true or false, but good or bad, there are multiple explanations for the wicked problem” [31].

The second group of studies—the most prolific one—focuses on the role of actors and ideas in the process of defining the problems to be addressed by public policy. The moment of problem definition is a power struggle in which various groups seek to participate [32] and in which the actors try to convince others of the superiority of their own interpretation and minimise attention to alternative proposals. The process of problem definition reflects the competition to impose a point of view on the problem [33].

In this context, the actors have to use their words to construct causal stories easily understood by the general public, arguments that attribute responsibility for the problem that clearly identify the guilty party and the victims and thus construct a coherent rhetorical strategy that, based on objective data and simplifying reality, maximises their position [34–36]. The debate revolves around the construction of hypotheses that identify the contributors to the problem, their intentional or negligent actions, the groups affected, and even the solutions demanded from the public authorities, always compatible with the interests and values of those who propose them [37]. Thus, any story that is constructed in the public sphere contains an empirical–cognitive dimension based on objective data and a moral or normative sphere that will be consistent with the ideas or set of values of the actors who defend it [38].

In this process, the actors are not the only protagonists; ideas are also present or, more precisely, the “symbiotic relationship between power and ideas” [39]. Ideas can consist of shared beliefs or ideologies that provide individuals with a common goal or a reason to believe that they share interests. They are the vehicle for transmitting values as representations of right and wrong, of what is acceptable and what is not [40]. The definition of the problem is a process that involves controversy insofar as it is not carried out neutrally and solely based on objective data but is rather an ideological and social construct [41,42].

If we are dealing with actors and ideas, it is easy to understand the argumentative dimension that presides over the process and its connection with discursive and narrative strategies that seek to impose “certain frames of reference on reality” [42–44]. In line with the above, paying attention to the rhetoric in public policies implies focusing on the actors in charge of the production and argumentation of ideas given that, ultimately, public policy decisions are crossed by moral judgments and social values that are more the consequence of a broad process of argumentation and reciprocal persuasion than of the mere expression of interests [45].

Finally, a third group reflects on the need for this competition between values and ideas to be consolidated, and here the media play a central role [46,47]—first, by generating news indiscriminately aimed at the entire population, and then by recruiting “opinion leaders” who reinforce the transmission of information in media outlets aligned with certain values thanks to the “resource” of the trust from their followers [48]. By focusing on a social problem, the media attempt to directly influence public opinion and indirectly influence public decisions by mobilising information resources and communication structures, and ultimately tries to put a problem on the governmental agenda or to encourage the adoption of certain decisions about the problem. Numerous studies have analysed the influence of

press reports on the problems perceived by the population and the vast majority of them highlight a strong correlation between the two variables [49]. In any case, it is not the degree of influence of the media on public opinion that is relevant, but rather the fact that the political actors believe in it, given that the reaction of the political actors does not have its main cause in the publication of the news, but in the presumed influence of the news on public opinion, which will be higher the more sensationalist it is. It is clear that in this whole process, and for the purposes of this study, the media can play the role of transmitters or mirrors of positions drawing citizens' attention to certain situations, as Downs explains in his issue–attention cycle model [50], or amplifiers of certain political positions [51].

Although all this literature has been used to analyse different policy issues [52–56], the use of narrative analysis for understanding public action in tourism has only rarely been addressed [57].

The aim of this paper is to analyse, based on the theoretical framework described above, the two opposing positions of the debate reflected in the media on the problem of tourismphobia in Spain, a term used in the country when the problem of overtourism arises.

This study builds on previous research [58] that analysed nearly 19,000 headlines in the Spanish press featuring the term “tourismphobia,” which appeared, spread, and virtually disappeared from the Spanish media between 2016 and 2019. The conclusions of that study pointed to the need to deepen the analysis of content in order to understand the reasons behind this process based on the hypothesis that some of the actors had been able to impose a certain narrative that explained how the definition of the problem should be understood and what the solution to be adopted should be. The research question of this work is which arguments are faced in the media to discuss the problem of tourismphobia and to what extent the debate is articulated by two extreme positions or whether there are nuances about the issue.

The methodological approach used is the narrative policy framework, which considers public policies as a social construct shaped by particular ideologies, values, and worldviews that are articulated in narratives in which a structure composed of diverse elements can be distinguished [59–61]. The framework has already been used to analyse several public policies [62–65].

The perspective of analysis employed is meso-level, which means that the research does not focus on the position of individual or institutional actors but rather on the divergent discourses of policy stakeholders operating in the tourism policy subsystem to try to understand the resources and narrative structure they employ in order to win the discursive battle with public opinion, persuade the government, and ultimately, condition tourism policy.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The study is based on the finding and collection of 18,941 press reports (see Table 1) that contained the word “tourismphobia” in their headlines and that appeared in the national and regional printed media between 2008 and 2019, of which 97.8% were published between 2017 and 2019 [66]. The previous study and the present one start from the same dataset: the database of news items including the term “tourismphobia” in their headlines. However, the research strategy and the research question are very different. In the first paper, the database was analysed using a quantitative strategy. Those headlines were analysed by means of “simple word frequency analysis” with NVivo software. This first analysis allowed us to reconstruct the map of actors involved, including also the incumbent authorities, the most relevant problem attributes, their territorial placement, the values promoted by the policies, and the main generic instruments of public policy suggested to address the problem before carrying out a qualitative analysis.

**Table 1.** Number of news stories and number of news stories analysed.

Year	Headlines Referring to Tourismphobia	Number of News Stories Analysed That Year
2008	3	1
2009	6	1
2010	1	
2011	2	
2012	11	
2013	15	
2014	36	1
2015	91	2
2016	246	7
2017	11,831	100
2018	4476	47
2019	2223	18
Total	18,941	174

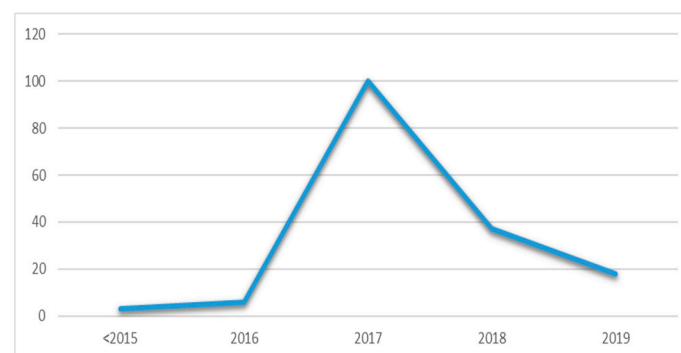
Source: authors, based on Velasco and Carrillo, 2021).

Regarding the strategy, this time it consisted of selecting specific news items that were editorials or opinion articles, coming from media outlets located at different points of the ideological spectrum and in a proportional number to the amount of news published in the year. Thus, 174 pieces of information were selected, based on the criteria of temporality, ideology, and scope of dissemination. On this occasion, the content was coded and analysed with the purpose of capturing the arguments of the main competing narratives and how the opposing arguments are constructed.

Following the time series of the original database, a proportional sample was used to reflect the appearance of press articles. Thus, 57.4% of the texts analysed were from the year 2017, 27% from 2018, 12.2% from 2019, and only 6.8% from the period 2008–2016.

Here most of the news items containing a reference to the term “tourismphobia” were concentrated in 2017. It was in the summer of that year when Arran (a Catalan word that means “root”), which is the youth branch of the Catalan far left and separatist party Candidaturas de Unidad Popular (CUP), carried out a series of actions in Barcelona (assault on a tourist bus, demonstrations, graffiti, etc.) to draw attention to the negative consequences of the current tourist model. These public performances attracted the attention of the Spanish media, both national and regional, as they were perceived as a serious threat to the country’s main industry, and because their authors were pro-independence activists and their actions took place in a political context marked by territorial tensions between the Central and the Catalan governments.

This was the spark that provoked an open debate in the Spanish media about the legitimacy of these actions, their potential link with the secessionist movement in Catalonia, and their negative impact on Spain’s attractiveness as a tourist destination while coining the term “tourismphobia” and spreading its use in the public arena. The debate gradually shifted towards other positions in the following years, as we shall see, until it gradually became less and less heated. The Figure 1 shows the evolution of the number of news items that appeared in the Spanish press and their concentration between the years 2017 and 2019.

**Figure 1.** Evolution of the news flow on overtourism (2015–2019). (Source: authors).

The second selection criterion was the editorial line of the newspapers. The news items analysed corresponded to texts collected from 36 national, regional, and local printed media, owned by 24 business media groups that could be organised on a left–right ideological axis, although not so clearly in the case of local media or press agencies. Therefore, an attempt was made to achieve a scrupulous balance between media according to their ideological position on the right–left cleavage in the sample design.

The final criterion for the creation of the sample aimed to ensure the presence of articles from different regional origins, which is why the selected sample randomly combined national and regional media.

The press articles in the selected sample were the units of analysis used to break down the narrative used by the stakeholders. The study procedure for this sample included a series of stages. First, a general quantitative analysis of the press articles, their presence in the different media organised according to ideological position, and their evolution over time during the 2008–2019 period was carried out to find alterations in the narrative strategies used in the debate on politics. In this regard, it should be borne in mind that the newspapers and press agency reports used were the stage in which the debate between interest groups took place and where they conveyed their ideas, beliefs, and values to the general public and to political decision-makers. Having a panoramic picture of this persuasion effort over the period studied helps to clarify matters.

Once this first analysis was completed, we used the narrative policy framework [61], which proposes working on the following elements:

- **Characters:** These may be individuals or groups who appear as heroes, culprits, victims, allies, or beneficiaries. The villain is the individual or group that is asserted to be the cause of a policy problem and the victim is the person or group harmed either directly or indirectly by the villain and/or the policy that allows the villain to exist. [37] (p. 145). The hero of a policy narrative is the supposed fixer of a problem [37] (p. 145), often the one telling the story or closely allied to the individual or group telling the story.
- **Plot:** understood as elements of the story that connect the characters to each other, or organising devices that link characters to each other via motive and relationships and situate the story and its occupants in time and space [36].
- **Causal mechanism:** understood as the identification of the factors responsible for the problem or that contribute to producing it, and these can be intentional, inadvertent, mechanical, or accidental [37].
- **Solutions:** possible responses to the problems presented by the actors.
- **Distribution of the costs and benefits:** both of doing something about the problem and of not doing something and which social actors benefit in each case.

The research used a meso-level approach since what was of interest were the different policy narratives produced by different policy actors in the public domain. Once the level of analysis was defined, articles in the press were taken as units of analysis. In them, the presence of the narrative components (characters, plots, causes, solutions, and cost–benefit scenarios) was weighted to standardise their presence by means of a binary code of 0 or 1. In the coding process, automated coding was discarded and the whole process was carried out by the researchers to make a better use of the narrative context and provide more valid coding. Table 2 provides a summary of the coded attributes that we tagged. The coded attributes also include data, media, and section.

**Table 2.** Coded guidelines.

Characters	Hero: Those who take action with the purpose of achieving or opposing a policy solution.	Labelled with the character to be coded
	Villain: Those who create harm or inflict damage or pain upon a victim.	
	Victim: Those who are harmed by a particular action or inaction.	
Plot	“Story of Decline”: if the plot describes how in the beginning things were good, but got worse, and are now so bad that something must be done.	1
	“Stymied Progress”: if the plot describes how things were terrible, got better due to a hero, but are getting worse because someone/thing is interfering with the hero’s work.	2

Table 2. Cont.

	“Change Is Only an Illusion”: if the plot describes how everyone always thought things were getting worse (or better) but they were wrong the whole time.	3
	“Story of Helplessness and Control”: if the plot describes a situation as bad, and it must be acceptable because it was unchangeable, but describes how change can occur.	4
	“Conspiracy”: if the plot describes a story moving from fate to control, but also having a twist in the tail ending that a certain small group knew how to control it all along and has been keeping control for its own benefit	5
	“Blame the Victim”: if the plot describes a story moving from fate to control but locates the control in the hands of those suffering from the problem.	6
Causal mechanism	“Causal Mechanism: Mechanical Cause”: Does the excerpt associate intended consequences of unguided actions with a policy problem?	1
	“Causal Mechanism: Intentional Cause”: Does the excerpt associate intended consequences of purposeful actions with a policy problem?	2
	Causal Mechanism: Accidental Cause”: Does the excerpt associate unintended consequences of unguided actions with a policy problem?	3
	“Causal Mechanism: Inadvertent Cause”: Does the excerpt associate unintended consequences with purposeful action with a policy solution?	4
Solutions	The range of policy solutions	Solution X, Solution Y . . .
Cost–benefit distribution	Who benefits from the proposed policy solution?	Labelled with the character to be coded
	Who benefits from the opposed policy solution?	
	Who bears the cost of the proposed policy solution?	
	Who bears the cost of the opposed policy solution?	

(Source: authors based on Shanahan et al., 2018).

### 3. Results: Controversies between “Success in Danger” and “Unsustainable Saturation”

An initial coding of the attributes allowed us to distinguish between the two main competing narratives, disaggregating each of them into the set of elements that made them up, and finally, contrasting the discursive strategies of the actors involved in tourism policy.

#### 3.1. The Narrative of Success in Danger

##### 3.1.1. The Characters

For the promoters of the “success in danger” narrative, the August 2017 assault on a tourist bus in the city of Barcelona, the throwing of confetti at a restaurant in Palma de Mallorca, and the carrying out of other acts of protest by groups linked to the radical pro-independence left to draw media attention marked the moment when a real threat to the Spanish tourism industry was perceived. Words such as “radicals” or “vandalism” are continuously used by this narrative, especially at the beginning.

*“Tourismphobia has become a form of protest used by radical groups to discredit and stain a sector that moves billions of euros in Spain. It has its structural defects, but in no way can the large numbers of jobs it generates be endangered, because of the large number of jobs it generates (...)” Diario de León, 17 August 2017.*

The fact that it was youth groups linked to a pro-independence and extreme left-wing Catalan party who staged these performances in a context of political tension resulting from the Catalan government’s demands for the organisation of a unilateral referendum on independence means that these activists were immediately labelled as villains who attacked a Spanish industry that generates a large part of the country’s wealth and employment.

*“The truth is that the phenomenon of tourism, which has been the goose that lays the golden egg for many Spanish regions, has recently become the object and target of certain campaigns by the radical left.” La Razón, 12 July 2018.*

The CUP villains, however, were not alone in their plight. Their accomplice in this narrative was the government of the city of Barcelona, and particularly its mayor, Ada Colau, who heads a government framed in terms of the “new municipalism.”

*“The delayed condemnation by the City Hall also unleashed a political storm. The opposition sees an intention to hide the attack and blames Colau for what they do not hesitate to label “tourismphobia.” “When you hide acts of vandalism you are basically justifying them.” El País, 31 July 2017.*

The threat to the tourism industry undoubtedly produced some direct victims: employment in the sector, a reduction of GDP, and the intangible deterioration of Spain’s image as a visitor-receiving country.

*“Although the driving forces behind this unique movement have different and multiform nuances, they are all united by a common denominator: their anti-capitalist mentality applied in their analysis to the tourist industry (...) the tourismphobes are hostile, both to the free movement of people and to that of services if we include tourism in this sector (...) they seem ready to finish one of the greatest sources of wealth creation in Spain (...) the tourist sector accounts for around 11% of GDP (...) the tourist industry accounts for around 13% of total employment, the equivalent of some 2.5 million jobs (...) a substantial reduction in tourist flows received from abroad or from Spanish citizens would have a very negative economic and social effect.” El Mundo, 3 September 2017.*

The Spanish tourism sector is presented as the hero that has proved its capacity to transform the productive sector through the generation of wealth and employment, and yet it is attacked for being unjustly considered the cause of a large part of the ills of the cities.

However, this general dispute over the harmful effects of mass tourism temporarily mutes the open struggle for industry dominance between traditional hotels and new sectors such as Airbnb and apartment owners, who took advantage of the potential of digitalisation to expand their business. The initial argument that the protests were organised by a group of radicals was then slightly modified.

*“... more and more venture capital investment companies are buying up entire buildings to obtain very high returns, generating social tension and “tourismphobia”. This is the great fallacy of holiday rentals and the collaborative economy (...) The increase in tourists has not meant that hotel occupancy has increased proportionally, a large part of this increase has been absorbed by holiday home vacancies (...) What this simple image does reflect is the lack of control that exists.” ABC, 6 November 2017.*

### 3.1.2. The Plot

The main idea that this narrative proposes is that the goals of radical action were made visible in the media at the moment of greatest tourist presence in Spain at a time of the year when there is a shortage of serious news. The attack on such an important sector in Spain set off alarm bells and placed the issue at the centre of political debate. The immediate counter-reaction was to highlight the importance of tourism for the Spanish economy:

*“Tourism is a powerful socio-economic engine. It drives employment, construction, agriculture and telecommunications. Its turnover equals or exceeds that of oil exports, the food industry or the automobile industry. Spain is clinging to tourism like a lifebelt in the midst of a shipwreck.” El País, 24 January 2019.*

In this destabilising strategy, the Mayor of Barcelona and her administration are presented as accomplices on various grounds: through inaction, mismanagement, or excessive intervention by implementing a series of measures, especially the approval of a hotel moratorium, which would have managed to curb the traditional tourist offer by indirectly favouring the conversion of residential flats into tourist flats mediated by digital platforms:

*“Complaints about too many visitors, in part fuelled by Ada Colau government’s view of tourism as an uncomfortable reality, may once again put Barcelona’s main industry in trouble.” ABC, 14 August 2018.*

*“It is tourismphobia pure and simple; an attitude based on a poorly concealed aversion to entrepreneurship and economic growth, the result of the utopian approaches (...) of*

*a determined extreme left halfway between post- and pre-Marxism (...). Colau comes to curtail the entrepreneurial spirit and business creativity that have made this city an urban, economic and social benchmark at the European and world level. For the good of the people of Barcelona, this situation must be urgently rectified.” OK Diario, 19 March 2019.*

### 3.1.3. Causal Mechanism

The intentionality of the campaign against the Spanish tourism sector was beyond doubt for the defenders of the “success in danger” narrative. Two components were dangerously mixed: the pro-independence nature of the promoters in terms of its destabilising potential for the Spanish economy and the deterioration of Spain’s image abroad in a competitive global market, and the extension of the simple idea of identifying tourism as the sole, or at least the main, cause of numerous complex urban problems such as gentrification, rising house prices, job insecurity, the disappearance of traditional commerce, noise, and dirtiness.

It was argued, therefore, that the motives of those driving the actions against the tourism industry hid ideological motivations that went beyond concerns for the sustainability of cities.

*“In reality, the so-called tourismphobia is simply an alibi (...). Because for these radical parties that are on the extreme left and behave like fascists, Spain is the enemy to beat.” Lavozdeasturias.es, 13 August 2017.*

*“They are neither childish activities nor a mistake, but rather xenophobic attitudes, and a desperate attempt to regain and achieve a visibility that, it seems, political action does not grant them on other issues,” Ecodiario.es, 17 August 2017.*

However, more nuanced positions, regardless of the ultimate intentionality of the villains, ended up recognising the existence of dysfunctions in the tourism sector that are at the root of the problems affecting citizens and the ills afflicting cities as a whole. This is the legal vacuum that favours the rental of tourist flats (more profitable than residential rentals) and its extension through digital platforms that directly threaten the traditional hotel sub-sector.

*“It is entirely reasonable that some people are protesting against the tourist rental of flats, which is currently illegal and causes so much inconvenience to residents. But this is a long way from making derogatory comments against tourists and it would be a good idea for everyone to behave with restraint and to try to limit the motives for their protests. Tourist rentals are one thing, tourists are quite another.” Diario de Mallorca, 26 May 2017.*

### 3.1.4. Solutions

Faced with the threat to tourism, two different temporary solutions emerged. The most immediate was repressive: It consisted of taking legal and police measures against the villains:

*“The Ministry of the Interior must act firmly to stop this phenomenon, which has been exported from Barcelona to the Balearic Islands and to some cities in the Valencian Community (...). It is necessary to act now at the police and judicial level.” Huelvainformacion.es, 4 August 2017.*

*“We have to demand that the rules are complied with (...) but we cannot encourage the idea that tourism is an enemy because, on the contrary, it is a source of wealth.” Ecodiario.es, 10 August 2017.*

A more late and reflective position, however, recognised the existence of actors (apartment owners and digital platforms) that distorted the traditional tourist market by taking advantage of the legal vacuum and effectively mediating by channelling excess demand towards cheaper options than those the traditional industry could offer. The immediate



intervention of public administrations was therefore called for so that, by means of the approval of institutional declarations and regulation, they could avert the danger that the extension of tourismphobia to the rest of tourist Spain would entail:

*“Institutional declarations must be approved to serve as an antidote to the latent intimidation that can be seen in the demonstrations (...) This is not the time to attack tourists.”* [DiariosigloXXI.com](http://DiariosigloXXI.com), 8 August 2017.

Thus, the threat to the tourism industry came not only from young activists but also from economic actors and economic operators who benefited from a position that gave them an illegitimate competitive advantage:

*“The great paradox of all this is that, if you are not legalised, you do not count for the State, you do not appear on the inspection lists, you do not exist fiscally, you can carry out the activity without paying taxes, without registering your staff or complying with the innumerable tourism regulations.”* ABC, 6 November 2017.

Therefore, in addition to institutional declarations of rejection, there was also a demand for structural measures from the administrations through the regulation of the sector to preserve the city’s equilibrium and avoid the expulsion of its inhabitants.

*“What is clear is that we are not playing by the same rules. I am not in favour of banning, but of regulating.”* ABC, 6 November 2017.

*“Sensible regulation of the tourist sector is not a desecration of the legal use of private property to make it profitable, but a way of defending it and promoting it (...)”.* El Mundo, 8 August 2017.

### 3.2. Unsustainable Saturation Narrative

#### 3.2.1. The Characters

The narrative of unsustainable saturation is based on other elements that were articulated to generate a coherent and solvent definition of the problem.

In this narrative, with nuances that we will see, the role most clearly identified is that of the villain. The villain character does not fall on any specific actor but is identified with the country’s model of tourism development, which is an interesting though diffuse plot twist: There is no specific guilty party, but rather a model of tourism development that has led to regional concentration and high saturation in certain areas.

*What is happening is not phobia of tourism; it is not hatred or fear: it is the consequence of mismanagement of the tourism model (...) What the media, politicians and members of the tourism sector are now calling a phobia is an epidemic that has already spread elsewhere: the so-called Venice syndrome. It is the reaction of residents of tourist destinations to socially and urbanistically unsustainable models, a reaction against the transformation of space into a stage, a theme park where the inhabitants of tourist destinations are no longer able to inhabit their spaces.”* Huffington Post, 21 August 2017.

*“Although sun and beach tourism also brings with it problems related to overcrowding—at least in a specific and localised way—with the unprecedented number of tourists landing in the main cities since 2015, new phenomena have appeared. And tourismphobia has become the word to bring them all together (...) Effectively combating the collateral effects of an activity that is beneficial to the economy in itself is a priority for the sector.”* El Mundo, 25 November 2017.

However, this model clearly benefited some actors, especially the tourism industry.

*“There is a criticism of the tourist industry, which we understand to be anti-social”, states the activist, who considers that the negative impact of the 28 million visitors in the city is reflected in the poor working conditions and the cost in the price of renting flats.”* El País, 11 February 2018.

It was the tourism industry and the businessmen, according to this narrative, who constructed the term “tourismphobia” to delegitimise social protest “using the everlasting strategy of psychopathologising dissatisfied individuals (...)” El diario.es, 3 July, 2017.

*“The crossover of interests between holiday homeowners, tour operators and digital platforms has given rise to words such as turistification or gentrification.”* ABC, 15 October 2018.

Above all, it harmed those who were identified the role of victims, the citizens themselves who were affected by the problem and, in particular, the residents of the most saturated areas.

*“What do we want to do with our cities? (...) the current model is “bread for today and hunger for tomorrow” and, moreover, is “incompatible” with that of a “liveable city.”*” El diario.es, 10 August 2017.

The other character, the hero, is projected onto the citizens, actors, and movements that were trying to raise awareness of the problems of the model and its implications.

The tourismphobia label would be a resource to hide a management problem. Effectively combating the collateral effects of an activity should be the real objective and the priority for the sector.

The fact that the villain is an abstract construct avoids a placing of guilt that is impossible to articulate in any other way, both because of the time that has elapsed and the extent of the positive returns it has generated; but on the other hand, it weakens the possibility of generating a forceful argument about what to do with it.

### 3.2.2. The Plot

The basic argument fits well with the idea of “the story of decline.”

Tourism is good, but its development has gone out of control, leading to a situation of saturation in some places that is unsustainable.

*“Today, the guardians of the macro-economy and the entrepreneurs of the sector still regard tourists as manna from heaven. But for the residents of the most visited neighbourhoods, the spell has been broken.”* El Mundo, 11 July 2016.

*“... the level of spending by visitors is low and barely leaves profit margins. As if that were not enough, the employment generated by this activity is increasingly precarious and less qualified. For all these reasons, some experts fear the bursting of a tourist bubble.”* El Economista, 25 September 2017.

This idea of progressive deterioration of the activity is related to a series of variables. One of them is the idea of monoculture, which implies that in any given region a certain activity is imposed on all others.

*“The problem is not the tourists (...) Nor can tourism in itself be a problem, just as agriculture or industry cannot be; in any case, the problem will be the model of tourism, agriculture or industry. To be more precise, the problem may lie in the monoculture, whether of pine trees, screw factories or tapas bars for tourists. Even more so when this monoculture is favoured by action and/or omission on the part of those in power, who are more concerned with meeting the demands of lobbies than the needs and rights of the population.”* Kaos en la Red, 8 August 2017.

The problems of environmental sustainability related to the intensive use of natural resources and its high seasonality are clearly noted here. The industry must move to take into account the negative externalities it generates.

*“Every million tourists that Spain receives generate some 25 million kilos of carbon dioxide, 1.5 million kilos of waste, 300 million litres of wastewater and consume 11 million litres of fuel, 300 million litres of water and two million kilos of food.”* El Confidencial, 20 August 2017.

Furthermore, the model fails to comply with the basic postulates of social sustainability, generating housing problems for citizens, interfering with other basic services in certain regions, and promoting low-quality employment for workers in the sector.

*“Local residents have been the protagonists of various anti-tourism campaigns. They complain about the increase in housing prices, the disappearance of traditional commerce and the increase in noise and dirt that cause problems of coexistence. They do not clearly see the advantages that tourism brings them.” El País, 11 July 2017.*

*“... difficulty of access to housing due to the uncontrolled rise in rents, the increase in prices and the transformation of local commerce, the saturation of the public transport network, the overcrowding of streets and squares, the excessive use of infrastructures, the precariousness of working conditions, the banalization of urban and natural environments and, once again, pollution.” Diario.es, 19 July 2018.*

The story of decline reaches a point where the citizens have had enough and protest:

*“So, what is called ‘Tourismphobia’ could be more like ‘Enough is enough’. Tourism tends towards saturation (...) Moreover, if you look at the classic holiday destinations, they are not rich places but places for the rich. (...) It is not about stigmatising tourism, but about diversifying and enjoying the best of tourism, but putting an end to the idea that anything goes to make money, under a law of silence. Critical awareness is now called tourismphobia.” El Mundo, 11 July 2017.*

### 3.2.3. Causal Mechanism

The problems are the result of a tourism development model that has had significant positive effects, but also over time has produced some problems that have become more pronounced and that the tourism sector is not able to address. Some of these weaknesses, as reported, impact the sector’s own performance.

*“Tourism contributes around 16% of GDP and although the arrival of foreigners in Spain will set a new record this year, the level of spending by visitors is low and leaves little profit margin. As if that were not enough, the employment generated by this activity is increasingly precarious and less qualified.” El Economista, 25 September 2017.*

Yet this growth in negative impacts has gone unnoticed both by the industry and by national, regional, and local governments, who continue to fail to act.

*“The problem is the “lack of policies” of the administration and the “lack of planning for mature destinations.” Diario del Siglo XXI, 10 August 2017.*

### 3.2.4. Solutions

In the narrative, the solution is to implement a more sustainable model that allows for growth control and a better balance with the rest of the variables. However, there is no clear and convincing proposal as to which specific actions will enable the design of this model. Various lines of action were proposed, but none of them reached a significant consensus in the media.

A process of debate on the development model was advocated, avoiding a “non-decision” as an institutional response. Denying that a problem exists does not contribute to its solution and, what is worse, will aggravate it.

*“... not to mix an issue such as the ‘reprehensible and inadmissible’ acts of violence against tourist infrastructures that have taken place in various Spanish cities, with the debate on issues relating to the sustained and balanced growth, ‘without oversizing’ of tourism.” 20minutos.es, 9 August 2017.*

In this regard, the need for more proactive critical analysis was argued:

*“We lack a critical, structured analysis, focused on a productive proposal. We do not have an alternative discourse that considers tourism for what it is, our oil. This is leading*

*left-wing political actors to take partial solutions, which do nothing to solve the problem as a whole.” El Salto Diario, 5 December 2017.*

It was also proposed that governments consider actions to regulate different types of use of common spaces and reach a collective agreement that covers the tourism sector in a general and comprehensive manner.

*“No country wants to or can give up an activity that brings so many tangible and intangible benefits, but the massification of recent times has pushed many governments to set certain limits, both to preserve their jewels and to guarantee a certain peace and coexistence.” Laprovincia.es, 28 August 2019.*

*“Sensible regulation of the tourist sector is not a desecration of the legal use of private property to make it profitable, but a way of defending and promoting it.” El Mundo, 7 August 2017.*

It was proposed that the use of new technologies be deepened:

*“... promote technologies to avoid saturation points and collapse (...) lines of public assistance for companies or municipalities that guarantee the application of sustainability indicators.” El País, 28 February 2018.*

Promoting new production models to transform the current model from private profits to common profits was also proposed.

*“A community-based model based on the new demand would integrate local producers, from agri-food to those based on construction or furniture (...) Tourist areas that have their own vineyards and wineries. Offering products based on endemic species. Operating with a locally based and specifically rural workforce. Respectful of the environment and culture, being at the same time highly productive and industrially profitable.” El Salto Diario, 5 December 2017.*

However, given the size of the tourism industry and the phenomenon itself, these strategies and public policy decisions could not be made at the local level.

*“To believe that the municipality, as a level of public administration, is capable of curbing an industry that is globally articulated and facilitated by a multitude of regulators from the European Union downwards is science fiction.” El diario.es, 26 February 2019.*

In short, a change in the political and institutional logic was proposed, improving analyses and proposals and generating alternative tourism development models to the existing ones.

*“In the first place, it would be necessary to dismantle institutional logics that support and grant privileges to the tourist industry, privileges that are based on the supposed social benefit of the industry (...) Second, it would be interesting to reinforce spaces for the generation of knowledge derived from activist or militant research, which are responsible for bringing science down to earth, to analyse and make visible the real impacts of the tourist and real estate industry on the daily lives of the city’s inhabitants. Thirdly, it would be transformative to facilitate the construction of alternative and cooperative economy projects in all the sectors that are considered most strategic for the reproduction of life ...” El diario.es, 26 February 2019.*

### 3.2.5. Distribution of Costs and Benefits

In this narrative, it is clear that the benefits of the activity that is causing the problem go to the tourism industry while the costs are borne by society as a whole. Tourism means growth, but it does not mean development; it increases the levels of inequality, implies a very unfair distribution of costs and benefits, and does not generate decent employment.

*“... the investigative journalism platform Investico and the magazine De Groene Amsterdammer, published a study in which they show that the economic benefits of tourism are overestimated and the costs underestimated. The profits end up, according to the*

*study, with a small group of large companies, some of which are members of multinational chains.” El diario.es, 2 August 2018.*

It especially affects residents who live in areas suffering from tourist saturation.

*“The cost is borne by some (residents), and the benefits go to others (tourism entrepreneurs) (...) Let’s be honest. Tourism is a real nuisance. We don’t even notice what good it does for the majority of mortals (except for the usual lobby).” Diariodecadiz.es, 11 September 17.*

It was argued that action is necessary, otherwise tourism itself would suffer.

*“The challenge of matching quantity and sustainability has become a priority for a successful sector that has become the oil of the Spanish economy (...)The paradox is that this strength of the tourism sector, if not achieved in a sustainable way, may have its years numbered, as nobody wants to visit a city where you cannot take a step without literally bumping into herds of tourists wandering from one place to another in search of the emblematic places.” ABC 22 January 2018.*

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Tourism Saturation as a Wicked Problem

It is clear that tourism is not in itself a problem, but rather is a complex phenomenon with positive and negative economic, social, and environmental impacts. Moreover, it is not a homogeneous activity, as there are different types of tourism, each of which poses specific challenges.

The development of tourist activity in recent decades has gone hand in hand with the evolution of our societies. For a long time, the most significant concentration of tourist activity in Spain was in sun and beach destinations that were highly dependent on this activity and very production oriented. The conjunction of various circumstances explains why, from a certain moment onwards, cities have become tourist destinations with an increasingly high number of visitors.

The growth of tourist activity in cities puts a strain on pre-existing urban logic and functionalities that also give meaning to the city itself. The problem of tourist saturation is interrelated with many other urban problems—clearly with the housing problem, but also with the problem of transport and the loss of traditional commerce, among others, which amplifies its impact and complicates its analysis.

This complexity and interrelatedness of factors makes it impossible to define this issue in a definitive and univocal manner. There are multiple dimensions to the tourism–city relationship that are perceived differently by the various actors involved. Moreover, there are no right or wrong solutions to this situation, but rather proposals that are more or less acceptable to the different actors.

All the literature on wicked problems generated in the field of public policy and cited in this paper is profoundly useful and allows us to affirm that the problem of tourist saturation is socially constructed (and re-constructed) and that the way in which this situation is defined is a political fact. The definition will reflect the principles and values of the actor or networks of actors who are able to generate the most convincing arguments for the public in general, and for policymakers in particular.

This study allowed us to observe how the problem-definition phase unfolds and how this process is inevitably linked to the formulation of public policy proposals and their subsequent implementation.

### 4.2. The Media Facilitate the Setting of the Scene

Other theoretical models also allow us to explain how the issue captured the attention of the media and public opinion. The progressive increase of tourists in the centres of some cities generates a series of problems that are being perceived more clearly by citizens, although this problem is not clearly reflected in the media. We know that they are already perceived by citizens because, for example, when in spring 2017 Barcelona residents

were asked about the most significant problems in Spain, Catalonia, and Barcelona, they mentioned tourism when their reference point was the city of Barcelona [67]. This phase would correspond to the first stage of Downs' issue–attention cycle: The problem exists but has not yet captured public attention [50] (p. 39).

That summer of 2017 saw moments of great tension related to various protest actions against the effects of tourism described above. These acts became what Downs labels an “alarming discovery” [50] (p. 39). That is, they attracted the attention of the media and allowed different narratives to begin to be articulated that, as the literature also explains, tried to construct arguments about what the problem is, what its causes are, what its consequences are, and what should be done to solve it. The trigger effect caused the news to multiply, and public opinion began to perceive that there was a new problem that in the Spanish media was labelled “tourismphobia.” The stage for the discursive battle was set and brought together almost 12,000 news items in 2017 alone.

#### 4.3. Two Conflicting Narratives

In this context, two alternative narratives were structured in the media. As explained above, the actors had to be able to construct easy messages that the media could convey in order to gain public support and to achieve a response in line with the interests of the political system itself.

The narrative of success in danger has a very compact central argument: Tourism is a basic sector of the Spanish economy with a huge impact on employment and the existence of small problems cannot jeopardise it. According to this view, the problems have been caused by the irruption of new tourism competitors, mainly unregulated accommodation driven by digital platforms, which take advantage of the legal vacuum to exercise unfair competition against traditional operators in the sector. This circumstance has been exploited by some political groups in certain regions to generate destabilisation and a climate of political confrontation that is alien to the nature of the issue. It is therefore coherent that the narrative criticises the action of these groups as tourismphobia, but at the same time proposes as a solution to the problem that public authorities regulate and control the supply of alternative accommodation in order to avoid saturation.

In the unsustainable development narrative, the central idea is that tourism is good, but the Spanish tourism development model has spatial, labour, and social problems that make it unsustainable. This narrative accuses the tourism industry of enjoying high profits using common goods and of ignoring the costs suffered by residents and regions. However, although the central problem is the tourism development model, the target group of the policy, i.e., the social group targeted by tourism policy actions, is not clearly identified, nor are the tangible solutions that would reverse the problematic situation coherently outlined. Table 3 shows the attributes of the two competing narratives.

**Table 3.** Main elements of the two competing narratives.

	<b>Success in Danger</b>	<b>Unsustainable Saturation</b>
Characters	Hero: the tourism sector (joint effort, contribution to GDP and employment)	Hero 1: citizens themselves
	Villain 1: young left-wing radicals	Hero 2: actors and social movements
	Villain 2 (accomplices): mayor and government of Barcelona for inaction against activist groups, mismanagement, and excessive interventionism in the market.	
	Villain 3: digital tourist accommodation platforms (mainly, Airbnb) and illegal apartment owners	
	Victim: employment, wealth, Spain's image as a tourist destination	Victim: residents in saturated areas
Plot	Development is being hampered and something needs to be done to avoid jeopardising such an important activity for the country.	This is a story of decline. Tourism is good, but its development has gotten out of control, leading to a situation of saturation in some places that is unsustainable.

Table 3. Cont.

	Success in Danger	Unsustainable Saturation
Causal mechanism	Overtourism is an alibi to destabilise the main Spanish industry. If there is dysfunction, it is due to the lack of regulation of digital platforms and tourist apartments, which threaten the industry that contributes so much to the country.	Overtourism is caused by tourism development that has exceeded the limits of social sustainability.
Solutions	1. Repressive: political and judicial 2. Regulatory: aimed at the information sector 3. Declaratory: through the active involvement of public administrations	Introducing a more sustainable model
Cost–benefit distribution if nothing is done	The costs of this situation are being borne by traditional tourism entrepreneurs and society as a whole, while the benefits accrue to the new digital enterprises/collaborative economy.	The cost is borne by some citizens (the affected residents) and the benefits accrue to tourism entrepreneurs (traditional and new).
Cost–benefit scenario if the proposed solution is implemented	The costs will be borne by new, non-traditional tourism entrepreneurs, and the gains by society as a whole.	The cost will be borne by tourism entrepreneurs and the benefits will accrue to society as a whole.

(Source: authors).

An analysis of the media’s approach to the news shows two irreconcilable and extreme positions: one position that rejects any questioning of the traditional Spanish tourism model, and another approach that warns of the erosion of the tourism model and its serious negative environmental and social consequences.

However, not all the news items analysed identify with one of the two main narratives. There is an intermediate position that points out the problems that the growth of the activity is causing in terms of social and environmental sustainability (it partially coincides with the analysis of the narrative of *unsustainable saturation*), but proposes solutions based on the correction of some dysfunctions of the model or the incorporation of some generic principles, such as sustainability (and in this, they are close to the narrative of success in danger).

*“... I was delighted to see the debate on tourist overcrowding in the media this summer; obviously, I do not agree with the way in which some people have raised it in the street, but neither do I agree with those who justify any outrage on the grounds of the economic importance of the sector. Denying that there is a problem does not contribute to its solution and, what is worse, will aggravate it year by year (...). The misnamed tourismphobia is nothing more than a growing concern, which I share, about a process of seasonal overcrowding that is not unrelated to the previous deterioration of the coasts and property speculation in towns and cities. Faced with this, faced with the simplistic view that measures success by the number of visitors, we can only address the issue and consider challenges such as deseasonalisation, differentiation of supply and destinations and, why not, some limitations. In short, common sense.” La Voz de Galicia, 6 September 2017.*

*“There is no denial that tourism is one of the most important industries in the world and one of the fundamental motors of the Andalusian economic sector (...) Despite its advantages, tourism is one of the activities with the most negative consequences for the environment. To begin with, it contributes to climate change, which is mainly due to the environmental impact of travel, but it also leaves a significant—and damaging—impact on the environment, both for natural spaces and for the inhabitants of nearby areas.” El Correo de Andalucía, 27 August 2017.*

It is also common for both perspectives to find their expression in newspapers of different ideological orientations, i.e., centre-right media, which see a threat in the questioning of the tourism model, publishing articles or columns that question it, or, on the other hand, centre-left newspapers, which usually highlight the negative social or environmental impact of mass tourism, defending the tourism model without nuances. However, there are also minority media that act as spearheads of the most opposing positions and only publish texts aligned with the ideological line of the editorial group.

Narrative strategies are well recognised in the models proposed by the literature. The narrative of *success in danger* responds well to the strategy of *containment*. From this perspective there is, “a policy story depicting diffused benefits and concentrated costs that is intended to dissuade new participants and maintain the status quo”; whereas the *unsustainable saturation* narrative uses a strategy of expansion, “A policy story depicting concentrated benefits and diffuse costs that is intended to draw in more participants and expand the scope of conflict” [23].

#### 4.4. The Pressure on Decision-Makers

Although the media behave as a medium of intermediation, they also play an important role in governments making decisions about which particular option will guide their actions.

In our study, each coalition of actors generated a set of solutions to the problem they defined.

In the case of the narrative of endangered success, we found two types of solutions. The first one—also in a temporal sense—is related to the control and punishment of tourism-phobic protests. A second solution is related to the control of new tourist accommodation linked to intermediation platforms, for which regulation and control is expressly called for.

“ . . . we are witnessing a battle between traditional hotel and apartment accommodation and the rise of holiday rentals, which are more economical and attractive for those who are fleeing mass tourism and want to get to know the city they are visiting in depth.”  
ABC, 9 May 2018.

For the narrative of *unsustainable saturation*, the solutions are less specific: rethink the tourism model, dismantle the institutional logics that favour business, opt for a model of de-growth.

Policy analysis conclusively shows that in today’s political systems governments have to choose solutions to problems that are technically feasible and politically acceptable [66]. When a public policy narrative aims for a credible solution to be assumed by decision-makers, it must also be sufficiently clear to public opinion. [68].

Although governments with similar ideologies might consider the solutions proposed by different narratives acceptable, it is undeniable that one position proposed a solution that was technically feasible, tangible, and affected a clearly differentiated target group, whereas the opposite position incorporated solutions that were too abstract and diffuse into the debate.

#### 4.5. Why the Use of the Term “Tourismphobia” Is in Decline

If anything is surprising, it is the fact of the sudden appearance of the term “tourism-phobia” in the Spanish media and its rapid disappearance two years later. Some researchers have used different hypotheses to explain this [69]. We found the hypothesis of Blanco et al. [70] particularly interesting. It proposed that the term, initially created to combat the protests and as a derogatory term for those who supported them, would have ended up affecting the sector itself in the perception of international markets and that for this reason the tourism business sector itself may have withdrawn it from the media, in what is known as the “boomerang effect” [71].

However, the analysis of the two interpretative frameworks used in this paper allows us to propose alternative explanations: First, the progressive lack of media interest in the problem could be related to the gradual adoption of some of the solutions proposed by the “success in danger” coalition (in particular, the regulation of the informal tourist apartment sector); second, because other more ambitious actions could lead to a change of model or, at least, to such a profound alteration that it would have unbearable costs for a large part of the tourism-dependent population and for the small but powerful business group that dominates the sector; and, finally, it should not be ignored that the problem is not dramatic enough to maintain public attention [72].



## 5. Conclusions

The episode under analysis allowed us to reach some slightly more generic conclusions. The first is that although the “success in danger” narrative succeeded in imposing a definition of the problem and an associated solution, it introduced to the public arena for the first time in many decades the open questioning of an activity that had never before been the subject of such a profound debate in the media. In this way, the narrative of “unsustainable saturation” succeeded in expanding the scope of the problem and modifying the vision of the issue, casting doubts on the sustainability of the tourism model that will remain in the collective memory.

We saw how media outlets with antagonistic political positions embraced arguments from both narratives, calling into question basic beliefs across the ideological spectrum about the absolute goodness of the tourism model and the tourism policy that has accompanied it for decades [73].

It was also the first time in decades that a coalition of actors counterposed its own discourse to that of the dominant tourism policy coalition, led by the sector’s big businessmen. This questioning, although unsuccessful, improved the possibility of opening up opportunities for new policies or actions linked to a more complex vision of the phenomenon.

Thus, it is possible to confirm the hypothesis that some of the actors have been able to impose a certain narrative that explains how the definition of the problem should be understood and what the solution to its dysfunctions should be, which in turn explains the disappearance of the term “tourismphobia” in the Spanish press.

Another important lesson learned is that in order to reconstruct the definition of a problem and propose policy alternatives that can be adopted by public actors, it is necessary to understand the logic of the system and work to construct tangible proposals that can be accepted by both governments and public opinion as a whole.

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