

# Risk, responsibility and political action: Media discourse on environmental crises in Spain

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**ABSTRACT.** This paper presents an argumentative case study of the discursive representation of risk, responsibility and political action in the Spanish media. The study uses a critical discourse analytical approach combined with theories on risk, agency and political communication in the media. It is argued that an application of the Toulmin model is useful for eliciting systematic overall representations of responsibility and agency in environmental crises such as the mad cow crisis as well as for revealing relationships between social domains such as moral, politics, economics and science in discourse. Discourse analysis shows that in the Spanish newspaper sample the focus was on the construal of high risk and on the construal of the national Spanish politicians, the EU and the British nation as scapegoats. No responsibility was associated with consumers or other individual players. Political action was transformed into a moral responsibility on the part of the national and European politicians, constrained by economic and technical-scientific 'reality' and represented as taking place only in the public sphere.

**KEY WORDS:** CDA, World Risk Society, argumentation, media discourse, argumentation, responsibility, political action, Spanish government, environmental crises.

## **1. Introduction**

In *Das Schweigen der Wörter* (2002) Ulrich Beck connects such different events as the Chernobyl accident, the climate catastrophe, the discussion of human genetics, the financial crisis in South East Asia and the terror attack on the Twin Towers of 11th September 2001. These events, says Beck, illustrate the mismatch between the prevailing rational, industrial, *economic* and *technical-scientific* discourses and the reality he sees in the World Risk Society: We live, think and act with concepts that are historically outdated, but these concepts still determine the way we act and think. Crises like the mad cow crisis are another good illustration of the same point. Every nation is seen to act as if it were able

to control its own importation and exportation of cattle and feed and in this way keep the disease away from its own border. Previous discourse studies on BSE and other environmental crises have focused on the role of science in journalistic discourse (Calsamiglia & Ferrero, 2003), on the socio-cultural conceptualization of the disease in the shaping of social policy (Nerlich, Hamilton & Rowe, 2002) or on consumers' conceptualization of risk (Lupton & Tulloch, 2002). The present study of the mad cow crisis in Spain focuses on the concepts of responsibility and agency. It documents the role of the media in placing moral and legal responsibility for environmental and health crises, and it explains the moral character of this and the way in which it works discursively.

## ***2. Media discourse, agency and moralism***

The media role in portraying collective or individual agency and responsibility has been investigated by scholars of political communication and mediated politics. To this end, some scholars argue that on some issues media discourse promotes political engagement quite well (Gamson, 2001) whereas others observe that the structure and culture of news production combine to limit popular participation (Bennett, 1988, xii).

According to some political scientists, contemporary political discourse is increasingly moralistic and self-righteous (Rose, 1999, Bennett & Shapiro (eds.), 2002, Keenan, 2002). The problem with moralism of both the right and the left of the political spectrum, according to Allan Keenan, is that it "implies a resistance to democratic openness and to the fundamental ambiguity and uncertainty that characterize the democratic 'we'. In denying that uncertainty is constitutive of democratic politics, moralism ultimately makes the condition more, rather than less, dangerous" (Keenan, 2002:42). More studies are needed, however, to cast light on the way media discourse structures and represents knowledge and how it relates to issues like political action and responsibility in different countries. Fairclough (1998) argues that the study of political discourse in the media could approach the following questions (1998:161-162<sup>1</sup>): 1) who are the political agents involved, and what genres, discourses and ethoses are drawn upon, 2) how are they articulated together? 3) How is this articulation realized in the forms and meanings of the text?, 4) How are the resources of the order of discourse drawn upon in the management of interaction?, 5) What particular direction does this type of discursive event give to the articulation of the political order of discourse? And 6) What wider social and cultural processes shape and are shaped by the way this discursive event articulates genres, discourses and ethoses? The present study deals with most of these aspects. The discursive event that is analysed is the discussion of the handling of the mad cow crises in the Spanish

media and this is closely related to the theories on risk as presented by Ulrich Beck and others.

### ***3. Risk Society and responsibility***

The concept of risk, Beck says, is a modern concept. It presupposes decisions and tries to make the unpredictable consequences of civilian decisions predictable and controllable. In modernity, inventing risk became a way of eliminating uncertainty. Risk, in its purely technical meaning, according to Deborah Lupton, came to rely upon conditions in which the probability estimates of an event are knowable. Uncertainty, in contrast, was used as an alternative term when these probabilities were inestimable or unknown (Lupton, 1999:72). In Beck's view, risks are both real and constructed: Risk thinking is a way of intending to control the world in the old industrial sense, but the 'real risks' in late modernity have bypassed control, and therefore this rationality no longer works. (Beck in Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994:10). Risk Society in this way becomes a stage where risk thinking (that is, the intentions to calculate and control future events) produces more risks, and this will potentially lead to "a multiple voiced self-criticism" (Beck in Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994:10). Risk rationality will break up industrial society – and indeed the Welfare Society – and do away with old forms of security and control.

Responsibility is a key concept tied to the concept of risk and the handling of crises. The prevailing idea in sociology (Giddens, 1991; Beck and Beck Gernsheim, 2001; Dean, 1999) seems to be that the individual is becoming increasingly responsible for managing his own life. For Mitchell Dean, for instance, responsibility is being forced onto the individual as a part of the governing strategies exercised by those in control: "...the 'privatization of risk' or 'individualization of risk' is a key index of retraction of the socialized risk-management techniques associated with the welfare state and the emergence of new forms of governing in contemporary liberal-democratic states" (Dean 1999:133). This kind of risk rationality, says Dean, has been termed 'new prudentialism' (O'Malley 1992) and has to do with an emphasis on individuals, families, households and communities taking responsibility for their own risks (Dean 1999:145).

This position has been contested by among others the British sociologist Barry Barnes. Barnes claims that "differentiated societies are remarkable for how *little* they rely on individual responsibility in the usual sense (...) and how much and how successfully they have come to rely upon *institutional responsibility*" (Barnes, 2000: 94). According to Barnes, institutions – collectives, organisations, offices and hierarchies – are the natural loci of responsibility and accountability in a society that is inhabited by mutually susceptible responsible

agents who use voluntaristic discourse to press each other to do what is necessary to create, continue and change social order (Barnes, 2000: 76).

#### ***4. The Spanish context***

Compared to other European countries Spain is a young democracy and has inherited from the Franco days a strong scepticism toward public institutions and central government. At the same time the population is brought up with a sense that the public administration takes care of everything (Lorenzo and Armangué, 1996: 139). Furthermore, in Spain, as in the European political élite in general, there is a strong consensus about continuous growth being the most important parameter of welfare.

The combination of the idea of the government as being simultaneously responsible for and incapable of handling public safety and welfare issues on the one hand, and of a strong consensus on the blessings of the market economy on the other, is likely to make an environmental crisis like the BSE case a textbook example of Beck's first phase of the Risk Society. In this phase it is not the politicians who are making decisions about technology, but they are the ones forced to assume responsibility, when things go wrong (Beck, 1999:57).

The mad cow crisis had a high price for the Ministers of Health and Agriculture involved in handling it. The reluctant response of the two ministers in charge made reporters and commentators launch a veritable media campaign against them. The crisis also made the Spanish farmers take to the streets and call for the resignation of both ministers. The majority of the population did not believe that the authorities were in control of the BSE situation<sup>3</sup>, and 38% believed that Aznar ought to dismiss Villalobos and Arias Cañete<sup>4</sup>. Four months after the outbreak of BSE half of the Spanish population had cut down on the consumption of beef<sup>5</sup>.

Since the food poisoning scandal was a hot public issue in Spain in 1981 (15.000 citizens were poisoned by colza oil that was sold door to door and more than 1000 people died<sup>6</sup>) several issues of public health and protection of the environment have been top stories in the news media. The media focus on these scandals also fits well in with their fight for democracy in Spain.

In the first 25 years following the death of Franco, Spain went from a media system with a moralistic, educative mission to a free market system with freedom of speech, abolishment of censorship, satellite communication, 100% private ownership and foreign capital entering the Spanish media market (Fernández Alonso and Santana Cruz, 2000: 14). During these years, however, successive central governments sought to regain (some of) the control of the national media, and this striving for control on the part of the central governments (the UCD and the PSOE) on the one hand, and the national media's struggle for

their right to criticize the government on the other hand, has marked the relation between media and government in Spain.

The socialist González government and the PSOE took the newspapers to court several times during the '80s and '90s. But the newspapers continued to make public the results of their investigations of government activities. So when the conservative *Partido Popular* took office in 1996, they inherited from the socialist government written media that were highly critical of the central government, expecting the new government to be more open and transparent than the socialists had been and to do away with any type of corruption and unprofessional behaviour. The media were on the alert, so to speak. This is perhaps one of the reasons why the BSE case could produce more than 2000 newspaper articles in *El Mundo* and *El País* in 2001 alone.

## **5. Method of analysis**

With the aim of uncovering the discourses on risk, responsibility and political action that are drawn upon in the Spanish editorials it was decided to focus primarily on the line of argumentation that is used. The term 'argumentation' alludes to a verbal activity consisting of a constellation of statements aiming to justify or refute a certain opinion and persuade an audience (van Eemeren et al, 1987) Not all discourse has an argumentative structure, in the same way that not all discourse is strategic and goal oriented (Habermas, 1984), but the prototypical editorial is a clear case of real life argumentation. The editorial belongs to the discourse order of media discourse as well as the order of political discourse and it displays explicitly strategic features; the reader of an editorial will expect the sender to put forward arguments and points of views.

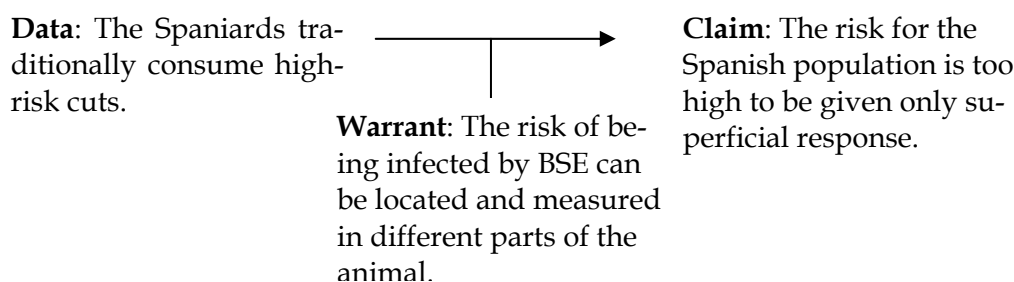
In this paper an argumentative analytical approach is combined with a socio-cultural contextualization of the media event in question in order to enhance the analysis of the arguments. The overall theoretical framework for the study is Critical Discourse Analysis as presented and conceptualised by Fairclough (1992, 2003), adding to his methodological approach a more explicit argumentative orientation (see also Wodak, 1991).

### **5.1. ANALYSING DISCOURSES, ANALYSING ARGUMENTS**

The level of discourse that is concerned with the beliefs, rationalities and worldviews that are exposed in texts (Fairclough, 1992:3) is unfolded at the socio-cultural level that Fairclough calls 'discourse practise' or more specifically, 'interdiscursivity' (1992, 2003). Discourses compete over the representation and framing of processes, relations and structures in the social world and interdiscursivity is thought to exist when different discourses, styles and genres are articulated together in a text (Fairclough, 2003:218). In this paper

the focus is on discourses, not on genres and styles. Fairclough suggests that to identify different discourses in texts the analyst needs to a) identify the main parts of the world that are represented – the main ‘themes’ and b) identify the particular perspective from which they are presented (Fairclough, 2003: 129). I believe Toulmin’s 1958 model of argumentation can be applied to uncover both of these elements in the same analysis. Its simple form, which consists of three axioms: 1) the *data* that is put forward in order to support 2) the *claim* or conclusion and 3) the *warrant* that allows for the conclusion to be drawn on the basis of the data, allows for analysis of both the thematic perspective and the ‘point of view’ perspective of discourse.

**Figure 1. Toulmin Model, simple version.**



The model has been criticized for being difficult to apply to real-life discourse, mainly because of difficulties in separating the data from the warrant. For instance, Ball (1994) suggested that Toulmin’s model is useful in analysing simple arguments, rather than arguments of realistic complexity. There have also been some argumentation critics who have challenged altogether the usefulness of Toulmin’s framework for the description of real-life argumentative texts (e.g. Willard, 1976; Freeman, 1991). According to Maria Simosi (2003) however, these studies have often confined argumentation analysis to the level of the text without being interested in eliciting parts of the arguments which are left unsaid and not stated explicitly (Simosi, 2003:187). Similarly, it has been argued that argumentation analysis needs to be integrated in discourse analysis (Plantin, 2002)

In line with Simosi’s analysis of business conversation my analysis goes beyond surface expression in order to focus on the inferences and assumptions in each argumentative structure. In a political genre such as the editorial genre one will expect to find *explicit* traces of argumentation such as a number of statements that are used as ‘data’ for supporting a number of ‘claims’. The ‘warrant’ that makes the conclusion or claim possible will often be implicit and at

the same time usually in this 'space', fragments of 'systems of knowledge and belief' or discourses will appear (Fairclough, 2003: 82).

Accordingly, the relation between the three axioms of the Toulmin model could be described as follows: The claim is the rhetorical means for getting across the message (for instance to the government that they should be doing a better job). The data that supports this claim is a cognitive device that is supposed to remind the recipient of a truth that is sometimes shared, sometimes backed by argumentative strategies and which the recipient (for instance the government) will find it hard to deny. It is therefore also a rhetorical tool that reinforces the argument and makes it appear more solid. The warrant, however, is an implicit topos, a presupposed general mechanism of human action that the sender is prepared to operate with (Toulmin, 1958: 100).

If one applies Toulmin's argumentative three-point model to both the main claim and the subordinate claims in the text, it will be possible, once the link between the data and the claim (expressed in the warrant) is established, to categorize both the discourse that is adopted in these claims and data, and the discourse orders that are (implicitly) expressed in the warrants. The definition of 'order of discourse' applied in the paper is close to Fairclough's "particular combination or configuration of genres, discourses and styles, which constitutes the discursive aspect of a network of social practices" (Fairclough, 2003), though for the present purpose focus is only on discourses, and the division of categories follows broad social domains such as economy, science and moral.

## ***6. Case study: Discourses on risk, responsibility and political action in El Mundo, El País and Cinco Días***

The following analysis is based on 17 articles from *El Mundo*, 4 articles from *Cinco Días* and 13 articles from *El País*. They have all been found by searching for 'vacas locas' in a newspaper database search engine. The period of search was 22<sup>nd</sup> November to 6<sup>th</sup> of March 2001. Only editorials are analysed, and the analysis is mainly concentrated on three periods of discursive activity: The first week after the discovery of the first Spanish mad cow (22<sup>nd</sup> November to 1<sup>st</sup> December), the whole month of January (the 'black month' in Spain when new cases kept 'popping up' fuelling public alarm) and the beginning of March when the mad-cow news coverage was drawing to an end. *El País* is the largest national newspaper with 1,447,000 readers (in 2000) and *El Mundo* is the fourth largest national newspaper with 996,000 readers (in 2000)<sup>7</sup>. *Cinco Días* is a daily newspaper covering economic issues and belongs to the same media group as *El País*; it had 28,267 readers in 2000<sup>8</sup>.

For reasons of space, I have chosen to display only a few examples from the text sample and offer a model of how discourse and argumentation interact



in the examples at the end of the analysis. This will be followed by a conclusion. The editorials from the different newspapers are not compared to each other, since this is not the aim of the paper, and from the perspective of my investigation there are no significant differences in the kinds of comments that were made in the three newspapers.

#### 6.1. RISK: INDUSTRIAL CONTROL AND THE RETURN OF UNCERTAINTY

From a risk theoretical point of view the discourses on risk in the sample draw on an 'old industrial rationality' as Beck calls it, which uses technical-scientific estimates to back claims on high or low risk. The two positions share the same approach to risk, in which risk is conceptualized as a material phenomenon that can be calculated, estimated and controlled. But only in the high-risk discourses is risk also conceptualized as producing uncertainty. Thus, the prevailing high-risk discourse includes an understanding of uncertainty being produced when for technical reasons the risks cannot be estimated exactly (cf. Lupton, 1999).

Argumentatively, the *high-risk* discourses are also used differently than the *low-risk* discourses: *High-risk* discourses are used to pave the way for the claim that the government is doing a bad job in handling the crisis, whereas *low-risk* discourses are used to support the claim that the government should not spend too much money on fighting the crisis. The low-risk discourses can be found towards the end of the period of crisis (end of January to March 2001) and they all fit in with a 'discourse of limited financial resources', which is part of the prevailing market economic discourse order in contemporary European society.

##### 6.1.1. HIGH RISK – THE GOVERNMENT IS NOT DOING ENOUGH

The following extracts are excerpted from an editorial written a week after the first emergence of BSE in Spain with the headline *Mad cows: The EU is reminding Spain of its responsibility* (El Mundo, November 30, 2000). The text refers to the discussion in the EU over the prohibition of meat and bone meal and the exclusion of animals older than 30 months from the food chain, and at the same time it echoes criticism of Spain voiced by EU health commissioner David Byrne, who is cited as saying that protective measures like closing the borders are not going to work when mad cows are appearing everywhere.

In the first example the conception of risk as something measurable and controllable forms part of the overall argumentative goal, which is aimed at criticizing the performance of the Spanish government and bring forward the main claim that the government is not responding seriously to the BSE crisis.

(1) ... el riesgo para la población española -que además, consume habitualmente los cortes de casquería, de alto riesgo – es

demasiado importante como para seguir con las medidas efectistas o superficiales.

... the risk involved for the Spanish population – who traditionally consume high-risk cuts – is too high for the government to continue responding to it with what are only seemingly effective or superficial measures.

*Claim:* The risk for the Spanish population is too high to be given only superficial response.

*Data:* The Spaniards traditionally consume high-risk cuts.

*Warrant:* The risk of being infected by BSE can be located and measured in different parts of the animal.

A scientifically defined high-risk situation is established in which it is expected that the government will be taking action. The government is construed as responsible and furthermore it is presupposed that governmental action will solve the problem: The statement that the risk “is too high to be given only superficial response”, implies that the response has to be serious and that this ‘serious’ response will have some kind of effect (otherwise it is futile to call for response).

In the next example, *uncertainty* or *lack of knowledge* is used as an argument to support the existence of risk. It is taken from an editorial from 6<sup>th</sup> January titled *Mad cows: they keep popping up and the handling of the crisis lacks efficiency* (*El Mundo*). The prevailing conception of risk in this editorial relies on scientific understandings of risk (testing leads to knowledge about risks and lack of testing produces a feeling of uncertainty).

(2) Los consumidores tienen motivos para la preocupación. Es verdad que no se ha detectado en nuestro país ningún caso de la enfermedad en seres humanos, pero lo que no sabemos es si, aquí y ahora, los que comen carne de vacuno se exponen al riesgo de contraerla. Efectivamente, los análisis están funcionando. Pero es que el número de test puestos a disposición de los ganaderos es irrisorio teniendo en cuenta la cantidad de animales susceptibles de contraer la enfermedad.

The consumers have reason to be worried. It is true that in our country no cases of this disease have been found in human beings, but what we don't know right now is if those who are eating beef are being exposed to the risk of getting it. The analysis is actually working.

But the problem is that the number of tests that the farmers have available is much too small to test the number of animals who could have been infected by the disease.

*Main claim:* The consumers have reason to be worried.  
*Data:* Those who eat beef don't know if they are being exposed to risk.  
*Warrant:* If you are unsure of the existence of a risk, you should be worried.

The logical connection between the claim and the data here seems to be that if you are unsure of the existence of a risk, then you should be worried. The uncertainty is produced by the fact that after having discovered the first BSE case in November, in January Spain still did not possess a sufficient number of prionic tests, so they were unable to determine whether or not all the cattle destined for consumption had been infected.

It is not only the word 'risk' that evokes this representation of the risk situation. By negating the reasons for feeling safe, the author implicitly argues for the existence of risk or danger. This line of argument was taken further in another editorial the day after: "We know so little about this disease that the government's calls for calm are not credible" (*Advice from an expert, El Mundo*, January 7, 2001). The statements also resemble the message in an extract from *Cinco Días*: "Evidence of this problem - whose true reach and extension - there are scientists who speak of the possibility of an epidemic - is not yet known, has been documented many years ago ..." (*The politicians and the mad cows, Cinco Días*, November 23, 2000). This representation implies that the risk is knowable ("it is not yet known") and therefore also controllable.

### 6.1.2. LOW RISK - THE EU IS OVERREACTING

As mentioned above, low-risk discourses were found towards the end of the crisis. The following example from an editorial with the heading *Mad cows: the limits to prevention* (*El Mundo*, January 24, 2001) was written only a week after an editorial that spoke of blood, fear and death under the headline of *Fear of epidemics*:

(3) Parece de sentido común que el coste económico de la defensa de la salud de los consumidores, prioridad que nadie niega, debe guardar una proporcionalidad con el riesgo.

It is common sense that the economic cost of protecting the health of the consumers, a priority nobody denies, must be proportional to the risk.

*Main claim:* The economic costs connected with the protection of the consumers' health must be proportional to the risk involved.

*Data:* It is common sense.

*Warrant:* If it is common sense, it is true.

As can be seen from the example the possibility of calculating risks and the idea that the main goal in society is to reduce economic costs have become truisms. It is presupposed that you can equate a certain amount of 'risk' with a certain amount of money. The data supporting the claim is not an empirical fact, but a general reference to "common sense". In a strictly rhetorical perspective this kind of argumentation is very thin, and the reason why it appears in this form is of course that the sender does not feel obliged to back claims that are thought to be 'common ground'. The connection of the wording "greater calm than before" with the introduction of "the (new) vet controls" in the same text presupposes an automatic relation between the two, reflecting a conception of science and society which is rooted in industrial society. Thus, the postulate of the non-existence of risk (e.g. The wording 'control' and 'calm') is perhaps even more a part of the 'technical-scientific risk discourse' than the postulate of the existence of risk.

## 6.2. ATTRIBUTION OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR SPREADING AND HANDLING RISK

As can be seen from the examples below, overall responsibility for spreading the disease, handling the crisis and avoiding further spreading of the disease is attributed primarily to the Spanish central government, the EU and Great Britain. Sometimes responsibility is attributed on a looser basis to 'the politicians', be they Spanish, British or whatever. Responsibility on the part of individual citizens is either denied (the minister in charge should not try to place responsibility on consumers) or represented as having to do only with obeying the law (the farmers should apply measures agreed upon in the EU). Some of the texts have a distinctly moral tone: Blame is placed on politicians for hiding truths and giving priority to economic interests over human life and on the British for spreading the disease. At the end of the crisis there is a shift in the blaming or responsibility attribution activity: In both *El País* and *El Mundo* the

intensive production method, which is said to be a result of the EU subsidy policy, is blamed for the emergence and spread of the disease.

#### 6.2.1. THE RESPONSIBLE POLITICAL CLASS

The European Union is blamed in all newspapers for instance for “having protected economic interests of the British cattle industry” (*Cinco Días*, November 23, 2000), for “not having listened to scientists and experts in time” (*El País*, January 22), for “not having applied sufficiently severe measures in the combating of the disease” (*El País*, January 30), for “taking the combating measures too far” (*El Mundo*, January 24) etc. All these claims could be said to belong to typical moral discourses about assuming responsibility.

An explicitly moralist discourse accusing the politicians of hiding the truth is found in *Cinco Días* the day after the discovery of the first mad cow was announced (*The politicians and the mad cows*, November 23, 2000). The main claims were that the EU and the member states had been hiding the truth and that they had given in to pressure from the British cattle lobby. This appears from the beginning of the editorial.

**(4)** La confirmación del primer caso en España de encefalopatía espongiforme, el llamado mal de las vacas locas, pone una vez más de manifiesto la grave responsabilidad de los políticos que ocultan la verdad y se pliegan a intereses económicos sectoriales incluso en situaciones de riesgo para la salud humana.

The confirmation of the first case of BSE in Spain, the so-called mad cow disease, illustrates yet again the grave responsibility of the politicians who are hiding the truth and are giving in to pressures from economic sectors even when faced with evidence of hazards to public health.

More than one claim can be read from this piece of text, but the most explicit claim, and the claim that can be seen in the text to be supported by data further down in the text, is that the politicians give priority to economic interests over health.

*Main claim:* The politicians give priority to economic interests over health.

*Data1:* In 1990 the European Commission forced the member states to remove restrictions on the importation of beef from Great Britain.

- Data2:* At that time, there were already signs that this disease had spread from sheep to cows.
- Warrant 1:* Importation of beef caused BSE spreading.
- Warrant 2:* If you know of some risk and don't act on it, you have chosen to ignore it.

Two different pieces of data are given to support the main claim – both belonging to a technical-scientific rationality and involving assumptions about cause and effect, while at the same time conveying also a moralist undertone – a tone that is repeated in the opening paragraph of the text. In the phrase “illustrates yet again” it is presupposed that this *immoral* way of handling crises is usual for politicians (this applies to all politicians because no specific politicians are mentioned). It is also presupposed that it is immoral to ignore risks – risks must be taken seriously, no matter how small they are. Furthermore, it is assumed that politicians have sufficient tools for evaluating scientific estimates and acting on them. Again technical-scientific discourses are used to put forward moral claims about the politicians' lack of concern for the ‘health of the citizens’.

#### 6.2.2. THE RESPONSIBLE ‘OTHER’ NATION

Placing the blame on the British was a strategy used in all three newspapers. But especially in *El Mundo* the tone was very harsh. The call for moral fairness is central in this editorial about the negotiations of the Council of Ministers on the definition of the SRM, in which the newspaper thinks the British cattle is “rewarded” (*Paradoxical award to the British cows*, January 30, 2001):

(5) Podrá tener su sustento científico, pero no deja de ser una sangrante paradoja que Gran Bretaña, el principal responsable de haber extendido a toda Europa el mal de las vacas locas, sea ahora bendecida por las instancias comunitarias.

It may have some scientific justification, but it is still a bloody paradox that Great Britain, the nation that has the main responsibility for having extended the mad cow disease to the whole of Europe, is now rewarded by the European institutions.

- Main claim:* It is unfair that Great Britain is rewarded in the Council of Ministers' negotiations on the definition of SRM.
- Data:* Great Britain is responsible for the mad cow crisis.
- Warrant:* If you are to blame for a crisis, you should not be rewarded.

This discourse was repeated in *El País* and *Cinco Días* and other media in Spain during the crisis and further sharpened by a line of argumentation that goes “if one country is responsible for ‘exporting a problem’, it should be punished for it”. The argumentation is not primarily based on scientific or logical appeals; rather it has recourse to strong images in order to convince the readers that it is the British who are behind it all.

### 6.2.3. THE FAILURE OF INTENSIVE PRODUCTION

At the end of the crisis there is a shift in the blaming or responsibility attribution activity: In both *El País* and *El Mundo* the intensive production method, which is said to be a result of the EU subsidy policy, is blamed for the emergence and spread of the disease. The kind of environmental voice that is reproduced here could be characterized as being primarily a mainstream technocrat environmental modernization discourse, in line with the Limits to Growth-approach launched in the 1970s<sup>9</sup>. That is, there is no sign of any far-reaching social critique, but the issues of size and mode of production are questioned (*Mad subventions, El País*, March 2, 2001):

(6) La cria intensiva de ganado ha acabado por poner en peligro la salud de los consumidores y ha arruinado los mercados carnicos. Reducir la ganadería a mero negocio ha sido un error.

The intensive cattle breeding has ended up endangering the health of the consumers and it has ruined the meat markets. Reducing cattle breeding to nothing but business has been an error.

*Main Claim:* The EU should switch to more extensive agriculture  
*Data:* The intensive cattle breeding has ended up endangering the health of the consumers and it has ruined the meat markets.  
*Warrant:* If it is dangerous and it ruins the markets, it is wrong.

“The abusive industrialization” is now seen as the main cause of “the evils that are tormenting us today”, and this industrialization is allegedly made possible by the subventions policy of the EU. This claim is echoed almost at the same time in *El Mundo*, 5th of March (*Epizootias, common agricultural policies and intensive cattle breeding in Europe*), where it is said that: “the subsidies are the main cause of over-production, which is the main cause of BSE”.

The ‘environmentalist’ line of argument in some of the editorials and the echoing of green European politicians show that in the course of evolution of

the crisis the discourse was taking a more structural turn toward – not only an attribution of blame to a popular scapegoat, but a more profound reflection on the consequences of industrial mass production and the state supporting this: “It gets much more important to spend money on securing a healthy agricultural production that respects the environment than to promote over-production.”

### 6.3. POLITICAL ACTION

Attribution of responsibility was clearly directed at the ‘political class’ of ministers and the members of the Council of the European Union. If we take a closer look at the kinds of political action that are called for and the constraints on political action that are expressed in the sample, the politicians are construed as responsible not only for law making, but also for law enforcement, and they are urged to be on top of every detail in the crisis – every piece of scientific knowledge, every incident occurring in the farms and the slaughterhouses, etc. The minister in charge is also construed as someone who on the one hand is not supposed to discuss in public the problems he is dealing with; on the other hand, he is supposed to reveal all the information he has, so that nothing is hidden from the public. Finally, the demand for continuous economic growth or stability is also used as a constraint on political action. This line of argumentation is based on the topos that if the production is threatened, steps must be taken to counteract this. The central claim is about honesty and trustworthiness, and this is seen as being important for keeping the wheels of the economy going.

#### 6.3.1. CONSTRAINTS ON POLITICAL ACTION: WHEN ECONOMY AND SCIENCE DEFINE MORAL OBLIGATIONS

*El País* argued on 30th of January that “The EU should take all possible precautions” “because of the alarm created” and that “if the politicians had reacted before, we would not be in a situation in which a whole sector of beef production is likely to go down”.

Taking this line of argumentation a bit further, the media reacted with strong rejection when Celia Villalobos, the Spanish Minister of Health and Consumption, as the only person in the government addressed the consumers directly and told them that the best thing would be for them to stay away from beef, and that if they wanted to buy beef they should be sure to buy quality meat and meat that had been controlled by the authorities. In saying so, the minister actually tried to put some of the responsibility in the hands of the consumers, acting on the basis of a Principle of Prudence, and had she been a member of a consumer organization, the advice of not eating beef would not



have caused alarm. The central problem with the minister's statements in this situation seems to be that she was in a position in the Spanish society in which she was expected to take responsibility for the safety and quality of a whole beef production, and she was not willing to do that.

In this piece of text titled *Mad cows: the difference between the Spanish and the German case* (*El Mundo*, January 10, 2001), the minister's attempt to hand over some of the responsibility for the handling of the crisis to the consumers is criticized for creating alarm.

(7) Villalobos creó alarma al hablar de la existencia de 'mataderos clandestinos', luego recomendó consumir carne de elevado precio y, por último, aconsejó anteayer –contra toda evidencia científica– no hacer caldo con huesos de vaca.

Villalobos created alarm when talking of the existence of 'illegal slaughterhouses', later she recommended eating only expensive meat and finally, the day before yesterday – against all scientific evidence – she recommended that soup not be made with bones from a cow.

*Claim:* Villalobos is creating alarm.  
*Data:* She is questioning the safety of eating Spanish beef.  
*Warrant:* If a minister questions the healthiness of the national food, she will create alarm.

This claim is used to feed the main claim that ends this text namely that if the minister is not very careful not to "commit new errors", she will have to go. The line of argumentation belongs to a political discourse aimed at reminding the government or the minister of the social and ideological constraints on political action. The same discourse is found in *El País*: "To close the circle she has said that in Spain there are still illegal slaughterhouses, and therefore she recommends that the consumers eat "meat with guarantees". What is the minister waiting for in order to bring the relevant charges, so that these slaughterhouses can be closed immediately?" (*It has reached Spain, El País*, November 24, 2000).

When mad cow number eight was announced in mid January, the accusations against the government for not coping with the crises grew even more serious (*Cattle borders, El País*, January 22, 2001).

(8) Tan solo hace medio año, Arias Cañete tildo de "irresponsables" y "alarmistas" a los miembros del Comité

Científico Director de la UE por incluir a España entre los países de “alto riesgo”. Tras perder un tiempo precioso, ahora toca improvisar a toda prisa, con los inevitables errores que ello acarrea.

Only half a year ago Arias Cañete said that the members of the scientific committee in the EU were “irresponsible” and “alarmist” when they included Spain in the list of “high risk” countries. After having wasted precious time, now he has to improvise at full speed, with the inevitable errors this is causing.

*Main claim:* The government should professionalize its response to the BSE crisis.

*Data:* The government is not listening to experts.

*Warrant:* If the government listened to experts, the handling of the crisis would improve.

In this extract the newspaper depicts the government as not paying attention to scientific opinions and this representation functions as data supporting the overall claim. The focus is on the obligations of the politicians to listen to and react appropriately to scientific information. This understanding of the role of the politician presupposes a situation in which the minister in charge is capable of evaluating (possibly contradictory) pieces of information.

## ***7. Relations between discourses, social domains and argumentation***

Discourse analysis shows that the moral accusations against the government of “not doing enough” rely on economic or scientific arguments or discourse. As social domains these orders of discourse have their own genres, styles and action types (Fairclough, 1992, 2003). But in this particular ‘public opinion event’ they are interwoven: the moral domain (which as an order of discourse is associated with precisely the commentary genres of written and spoken media discourse among others) is moulded onto these two social domains. Technical-scientific rationalities or discourses are used as ‘cognitive backgrounds’ in the texts to put forward moral claims about the politicians’ lack of concern for “the health of the citizens”. Similarly, market economic truisms are used as data when launching claims of ‘creating alarm’ or ‘not being honest’. In this way, science and economy become part of the moral discourse order in the editorials.

Fairclough (1995) has characterized the media discourse order as being positioned between public orders of discourse and private orders of discourse, and has stated that the way in which the media transform their source public

discourse for consumption in domestic settings “is the key to understanding the media order of discourse and the internal relations between its constituent genres and discourses” (Fairclough, 1995:63). In my discourse sample, the transformation of economic and technical-scientific truths into moral claims is taking place via argumentative structuring.

**Figure 2. Example of how argumentation and discourse interact**

Main claim in text	Claim that makes main claim possible	Discourse that this claim pertains to	Discourse order that this argumentation pertains to
"The <u>government</u> is not <u>responding seriously</u> to the BSE crisis"	"The risk for the Spanish population is <u>too high</u> to be given only superficial response"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>High-risk discourse</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Technical-scientific order of discourse</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>Discourse:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Discourse of responsibility and moral obligation</i></li> </ul> <p><u>Data:</u> "The protective measures taken by Spain are not working"</p> <p><u>Warrant:</u> If the measures are not working, you are not taking the problem seriously</p> <p><b>Discourse order that is foregrounded in the text:</b> <i>Moral</i></p>	<p><i>Link between the two claims:</i></p> <p>The crisis is serious</p>	<p><u>Data:</u> "The Spaniards are traditionally consuming <u>high-risk cuts</u>"</p> <p><u>Warrant:</u> The risk of being infected by BSE <u>can be located and measured in different parts of the animal</u></p>	

It can be observed that in relation to *the way in which the media transform their source public discourse for consumption in domestic settings* this is done by recurring mainly to moral discourse, which gets interwoven with political, economic and technical-scientific discourse. The interaction between argumentation and orders of discourse or social domains in the examples given in this paper can be illustrated as follows:

**Table 1. List of topoi and discourse orders expressed in the warrants**

<b>Topoi</b>	<b>Discourse orders</b>
1. The risk of being infected by BSE can be located and measured in different parts of the animal.	1. Technical-scientific
2. If you are unsure of the existence of a risk, you should be worried.	2. Technical-scientific
3. If it is (market economic) common sense, it is true	3. Economic
4. Importation of beef caused BSE spread.	4. Technical-scientific
5. If you know of some risk and don't act on it, you have chosen to ignore it.	5. Technical-scientific
6. If it is dangerous and it ruins the markets, it is wrong.	6. Economic
7. If you are to blame for a crisis, you should not be rewarded.	7. Moral
8. If a minister questions the healthiness of the national food, she will create alarm.	8. Economic
9. If the government listened to experts, the handling of the crisis would improve.	9. Technical-scientific

As can be seen from this table, in the extracts shown in this paper there are three versions of interdiscursivity, the most common of which are the versions in which economic or technical-scientific truths are being implicitly assumed in the argumentation; in a single case, the argumentation is purely moral.

To sum up, at the explicit, foregrounded level in the media discourse, political discourses and moral discourses are dominating, but economic discourses can also be relied on in the main claims of the texts. Foregrounding of technical discourses is not found in the sample, rather, it operates at the subordinate level for instance to support claims typical of media discourse, namely, that the government is not doing a proper job, or technical 'truths' are used as data or warrant in the argumentation, principally as an implicit element to be inferred by the reader.

## **8. Conclusion**

The argumentative analysis of my discourse sample was able to show that in the newspaper sample that focus was on the construal of high risk and on the construal of the national Spanish politicians, the EU and the British nation as scapegoats. The main claims in the texts were centered more on popular-political criticism and moral judgement than on changing states of affairs in society.

No responsibility was associated with consumers or other individual players. Political action was transformed into a moral responsibility on the part of the national and European politicians. The conception of risk as something

measurable and controllable formed part of this overall argumentative perspective of the editorials. In order to be able to put forward claims that the government is not responding seriously to the crisis it was necessary for the editorials first to establish the seriousness of the problem, and this was where the technical-scientific voice came in. In this way, the moral discourse order was seen to be using the technical-scientific discourse order, thus reflecting a rational understanding of risk in the old industrial sense.

The attribution of blame to the British nation and the British politicians presupposes that it was their sole responsibility – not the responsibility of the other countries or of communities (e.g. the farmers) within the countries. This part of the discourse on risk reflects an understanding of nations that is out of line with the current state of affairs in which the global character of problems is increasingly being acknowledged.

During the crisis, the Minister of Health and Consumption tried to put some of the responsibility in the hands of the consumers. This move was criticized by all sectors of the Spanish public. Thus, the vision of Government that seems to be launched in the media is that of a body being responsible for the safety of the population. The analysis also indicates that at the turn of the millennium Spain had reached the first phase of ‘risk society’ (Beck, 1999), in which risks are being focused upon in newspaper editorials and in which politicians are being blamed for developments in society, which they seem unable to control.

On the other hand, there are some signs that, as the BSE crisis unfolded, a growing awareness of the effects of the industrial society and of the striving for continuous growth began to develop in the written media. There is a shift away from the economic disaster mentioned in the first editorials after the first BSE emergence to an environmental disaster, and phrases “the evils of the intensive production methods” and “the industrial agriculture that puts profitability before everything else” clearly pertain to an environmental discourse.

It is important to note, though, that there is no sign of individualization of blame and responsibility here. It is the government’s and the European Union’s responsibility to think ‘green’, not that of the farmers, the consumers or the citizens. Thus, Barnes’ term ‘institutional responsibility’ seems the most appropriate to describe the pressure being put on the authorities and the political class to solve problems of risk and security.

No room is left in these editorials for the political consumer, and only little room is left for the agency of the farmer. The only kinds of persons who are supposed to act politically are the politicians. They are consistently construed as the ones who both possess the necessary knowledge and the necessary power to control and change states of affairs. The citizen, be he farmer or consumer, on

the other hand, is construed only as someone who needs to be protected, looked after, controlled or manipulated. The consumer must be reassured so that he does not stop buying beef; interestingly though, the consumer also must have all available information about the disease, but not in order to be able to act upon this, only so that he can feel safe. When the consumer or citizen reacts to the events around him by for instance refraining from buying meat, he is depicted as someone who reacts 'hysterically' and who is 'alarmed'.

The politician on the other hand is supposed to be acting all the time. What "is he waiting for?" - he "should have acted before", he should "roll up his sleeves", and he should have "listened to the experts". The politician is even made responsible for the failures of the farmers and the slaughterhouses and other societal agents, because he ought to have prevented these people from doing what they did. This leaves us with only one responsible agent on the arena: the politician - the minister in charge. All other agents are expected to obey the law, but they are not expected to do more than that.

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#### NOTES

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1. Van Dijk (1998) argues that the study of ideology in the press should focus on in and outgroups. However, this is not within the scope of this paper.
2. Following Mary Douglas (1992: 24) Lupton states that the distinction between risk and uncertainty has now become somewhat lost (Lupton 1999: 8), and that the word risk means danger and high risk means a lot of danger. Consequently, issues of calculable probability are not necessarily important to the colloquial use of risk.
3. El País, 1st March 2001.
4. El País; la cadena SER, 1st March 2001.
5. El País, 1st March 2001.
6. El Mundo, 26th November 2000.
7. According to OJD; published on Spanish home page about European media.
8. According to EGM; published on Spanish home page about European media.
9. For a discussion on this, see Hajer 1995: 78-89.

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