

# Corruption in building the image of politics in television news broadcasts

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## Abstract

This work analyses the political news of eight Spanish television channels in order to see what image is built of politics, and particularly how the news of corruption affects the image of politics in Spanish news broadcasts. Different cases of corruption such as Gürtel, Palma Arena and those associated with judge Baltasar Garzón in his final stage in office, occupy part of the study. A new methodology is therefore proposed that enables the quality of the political information emitted from inside and outside the political content of the news programmes to be observed. Particular attention is paid to the news broadcasts of Televisión Española and Cuatro as those which offer a more balanced view of politics, and channels such as La Sexta, which give priority to a narrative construction of politics in the news programmes around causes of corruption.

**Keywords:** Corruption, Gürtel, Media Effects, News, Information, Spain, Journalism.

## La corrupción en la construcción de la imagen de la política en los noticieros de televisión

### Resumen

Este trabajo analiza la actualidad política de ocho canales de televisión españoles con el fin de observar qué imagen se construye de la política en ellos, y en particular cómo las noticias de corrupción afectan a la imagen de la política en los noticieros españoles. Los diferentes casos de corrupción como Gürtel, Palma Arena y los relacionados con el juez Baltasar Garzón en su última etapa en el cargo, ocupan buena parte del estudio. Se propone una nueva metodología que permite establecer la calidad de la información política de los noticieros televisivos. Televisión Española y Cuatro son los canales que ofrecen una visión más equilibrada de la política. Y canales como La Sexta dan prioridad a la construcción narrativa de las noticias políticas que tratan la corrupción.

**Palabras clave:** corrupción, Gürtel, efectos de los medios, noticias, información, España, periodismo

### Standard Reference

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**Sumario:** 1. Introduction. 2. Theoretical framework. 3. Methodology and sample. 4. Results. 5. Conclusions. 6. References.

## 1. Introduction

This article asks what image Spanish television news broadcasts give of politics and particularly whether the news of corruption is a key element of this image of politics in the analysed channels<sup>1</sup>. The principal question of this investigation is that a large part of the political information in Spanish news broadcasts revolves around corruption and misappropriation of funds.

Media undoubtedly play a huge role in Western democracies, where a democracy for the media is practiced (Trejo, 2010). Several articles discuss the way in which TV newscasts shape the image of the world (Díaz Arias, 2008; Morales, 2012). Therefore the perception that citizens have of politics is intimately related to the message transmitted by the media. In this sense, television news broadcasts play a fundamental role in building the image of politics and in the image citizens have of politics and politicians. Numerous studies on the agenda of news programmes come to pessimistic conclusions about politics and democracy in general. Some of these studies (Diamond, 1991; Iyengar, 1991; Patterson, 1993) suggest that the increase in entertainment news and “soft news”, to the detriment of the “hard news”, has harmful effects on the quality of the information of the public discourse. However, several authors suggest that sensationalism has a positive influence on citizens’ political motivation (Grabe, Zhou and Barnett, 2001; Uribe and Gunter, 2007).

The image of politics in Europe has also been influenced by the news programmes following the entry of private television channels (Mateos-Pérez, 2009; Demaría, Grosso and Spaziante, 2002; Pfestsch, 1996). An obvious negative impact is seen on political information, and also a fall in substantial and transcendent politics in news programmes. In the United States, where television has not been traditionally characterised by the dual dimension that exists in many European countries, there is an abundance of studies with similar objectives and they bring forth some interesting conclusions. For example, Patterson (2000) concluded that the data obtained were sufficient to be able to establish a correlation between the increase in “soft” news and the fall in values amongst citizens, such as confidence in the government or in the honesty of politicians and the interest in political affairs.

## 2. Theoretical framework

This investigation focuses on analysing the part of the agenda of news broadcasts that has politics as a macro theme, and especially points to the cases of corruption and misappropriation of public funds. These cases are generally treated as public scandals in the sense attributed by Thompson (2000). They are cases that involve transgression of laws, rules, values, moral rules or conducts, and remained secret or hidden until they become public facts through the police or court institutions, or are made

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<sup>1</sup> This article is the result of the competitive Research Project financed by the Spanish Ministry of Education *Televisión y deliberación política. La construcción del espacio público a través de los géneros televisivos de la realidad en España* (Television and political deliberation. The construction of the public through of the reality genres of television in Spain) (Ref. CSO2008-02589).

public by any of those involved in a public revelation that can damage the reputation of certain individuals. In most cases, there is a common denominator between the values and rules that are relevant for the existence of the scandal, and particularly those formed by the triangle of “sex, money and power” (Heidenheimer and Johnston, 2002; Markovits and Silverstein, 1988; Theobald, 1990) and different combinations, and particularly the “political-financial” scandal. Regarding this type of scandal, which coincides with those examined in this article, this will only occur if the breaches in question are made public and only if, in a certain context, they are considered sufficiently serious actions so as to produce a response of public disapproval (Thompson, 2000: 221).

Other research into corruption concludes that the power of the press lies not so much in the action of investigative journalism but more fundamentally in the interpretative framework which the media use to report events (Canel and Sanders, 2006). One of these investigations shows the specific principles of speech arrangement that generates different ways of representing reality and which have been labelled with six frames: “personification”, “comparison”, “widespread corruption”, “popular reaction”, “conquered booty” and “purification of responsibilities” (Zamora and Marín Albadalejo, 2010).

Recent investigations show that citizens generally fail to remember the discourses and intentions of the politicians in their appearances on television news broadcasts; however, when the same citizens are questioned about politics, most discussions revolve around corruption (Jensen, 2005). This might be related to the tendency to pay more attention to negative facts due to their impact on the status quo and to the function of social control of negative events (Wayne and Murray, 2009). There is other research that shows an approach to the impact of media consumption on institutional trust (G. Luengo and Coimbra-Mesquita, 2013) or the relationship between the public perceptions of politicians, political parties and politics and the level of media use (Rodríguez Virgili, López-Escobar and Tolsa, 2011).

A complementary perspective is the “thematisation” proposed by Luhmann (1997) and developed, amongst others, by authors such as Marletti (1985). Thematisation gives the media the capacity to select a certain subject by placing it at the centre of public attention. In this sense, the media focus their attention on some matters and not on others with the clear intention of determining the political agenda in accordance with the political powers themselves (Marletti, *op.cit.*: 25).

### 3. Methodology and sample

The tradition of Agenda-Setting (McCombs and Bell, 1996; Wanta and Ghanem, 2007; Martínez Fernández, Juanatey COSTA, 2012) establishes the relationship between the thematic agenda of the media and the public agenda. McCombs (2006) stresses that the media agenda establishes the public agenda. Several studies have demonstrated the complexity of agenda-setting (Kioussis, McDevitt and Wu, 2005; Tsfati, 2003; McCombs, 2012). This school’s theoretical and methodological evolution has led us to consider the analysis of the operations and of the *priming*, *framing* and “second level” effects of the agenda-setting.

The object under study is what in social and communication sciences is understood by “reality genres”, a broad set of television programmes and formats that are characterised by their claim to treat matters of public interest as the object of preferential attention, and particularly the so-called informative genres. To carry out this analysis, a classification grid was used in which the subjects were divided into two large areas: policy issues and political issues, a classification widely used in studies made by the UNICA research group of the Pompeu Fabra University, in Barcelona (Pallarés, Gifreu and Capdevila, 2007; Pericot and Capdevila, 2009). The authors have long worked with agenda setting methodology, and have had several articles published on the construction of the image of politics in Spain (Guerrero-Solé, Pont-Sorribes and Palencia-Lefler, 2013). This work moves away from the definitions of political information in which the characteristic element is the intervention of political players (Ortells, 2009), and considers political news as that which talks strictly about politics, distinguishing it from the news relative to governance, in which political players also generally appear. In this sense, the definition we propose for political information includes 5 news subcategories: Political system; Political institutions; Institutional reforms; Political culture; and Corruption and misappropriation of funds.

The sample was selected so that it would not coincide with any significant political or social event. Therefore, a period of political “normality” was chosen (a time outside electoral campaigns or precampaigns), which is a habitual feature of Agenda-Setting analyses that allows one to operate with sufficient data so as to draw significant conclusions. Finally, we must stress the definition of *political information* that we considered in this study. The sample includes the prime-time news broadcasts of four state channels: TVE, Antena 3 (A3), Telecinco (T5), Cuatro (C4) and La Sexta (La6). The study also covered the public autonomic channels TV3 (Catalonia), Canal Sur (CS, Andalusia) and Canal 9 (C9, Valencia Community) between 8 and 22 April 2010. In order to target the selection of channels, we chose those with the largest audiences in Spain according to the AIMC and its General Media Study <sup>2</sup> (details of the general summary from February to November 2010). The national channels’ audience figures in terms of percentage share were: TVE (21.1), Telecinco (17.4), Antena 3 (14.4), La Sexta (6.8) and Cuatro (6.2). The analysis also brought in the autonomic channels TV3 (15.9 -Catalonia), Canal Sur (21.6 - Andalusia) and Canal 9 (11.9 - Valencia Community) in order to achieve greater territorial representativeness.

Diversity is an indicator of the quality of the contents, of the programming, of the channels or of the media system as a whole (Pujadas, 2011). News programmes are no exception either in the news production, in the journalistic discourse, or in the diversity of the subjects. Politics and the image built of it through the news programmes, depends on the diversity of the thematisation. We must therefore suppose a balance between the different subjects regarding what we have defined as politics, and a balance between the broad subjects of the news broadcasts. Therefore, Pujadas notes that the balance of points of view in news programmes is considered a factor of quality, an as-

<sup>2</sup> Data taken from the document: General Framework of media in Spain 2011 (data referred to 2010). *Asociación para la Investigación de Medios de Comunicación* (Association for Media Research), Capitán Haya, 61, 28020 Madrid. <http://www.aimc.es>

pect which we expand to that of subjects. The balance in the subjects -as defined by the selection and thematisation of the gatekeeper, who has to do his work equitatively (León Gross, 2006)- will therefore be the indicator proposed by this investigation in defining the quality of the analysed television news programmes.

As in previous works (Guerrero-Solé, Pont-Sorribes and Palencia-Lefler, 2013), we define two different types of equilibrium: the exo-equilibrium, determined by the investigation itself, where the point equilibrium of each subcategory ( $n$ ) is equal to 100 divided by the number of subcategories defined by the research ( $N$ ):  $Px_n = 100/N$ . This is therefore an *a priori* point of equilibrium, without considering the result of the analyses of news programme content, and is an equitative distribution of the news between the defined subcategories, without making a qualitative distinction between them. Moreover, we define the endo-equilibrium, where the point of equilibrium is determined by the average proportion of each of the subcategories in all of the analysed news broadcasts. Therefore, the point of endo-equilibrium of a specific subcategory  $n$  ( $Pd_n$ ) will be the sum of the news items of this subcategory in all channels<sup>3</sup> divided by the total number of news items of the political category:  $Pd_n = \frac{(\sum_i r_{in})}{(\sum_n r_n)}$ . These indexes allow the deviation of each channel to be analysed with respect to the specified point of equilibrium, and how this affects the image built of politics in each channel.

#### 4. Results

The sample analysed in this study includes a total of 2,566 news items distributed over the eight already mentioned channels. It shows the distribution of the three large subjects as a whole (percents). Politics accounts for 16 of all items; Governance, 15; and the remaining Economic, Social, Cultural, Events and Sports news items, 69. It also allows us to observe the distribution of the news items concerning politics, and particularly those dealing with corruption and misappropriation of public funds (36.5), which accounts for an average 5.9 of all news items broadcast.

The image of politics built by the news broadcasts is determined by the distribution of the different related subjects. The average distribution (percents) of the five thematic subcategories of politics (Political system, 8.5; Political institutions, 12.75; Political culture, 18.5; Institutional reforms, 23.75; and Corruption and misappropriation of public funds standing out above the rest at 36.5) already gives as a first idea of what image of politics is drawn from the news broadcasts analysed as a whole. If we observe the thematic distribution by channels, it coincides perfectly with the overall results, except for the cases of C9 and TV3. In particular, the news on this subject accounts for almost 60 percent of the political news on La Sexta, more than 40 on A3, T5 and CS, and 32 in the case of TVE. By contrast, the categories of political system and political institutions fall well below the rest in practically all channels. These results show that generally, politics in Spanish news broadcasts is built around corruption and misappropriation of funds, and to a smaller extent around institutional reforms and political culture. The following table shows the overall data of the sample that

<sup>3</sup> “ $m$ ” is the number of channels and  $T_n^i$  the number of news items of the category  $n$  in channel  $i$ .

back this up and confirm the main question of the investigation.

What's more, we find in La Sexta -percents-(63.8) and T5 (61.3) that 2 out of every 3 political news items

they presented their audiences deal with matters related to corruption. By contrast, the autonomic television stations Canal 9 (18.3) and TV3 (25.4) show quite the opposite, that it is possible to report on political matters without corruption being at the forefront. The following figure presents the spectrum of television news broadcasts in Spain in this context.

The news broadcasts on private channels (T5, A3, La6, C4) move in the area of a high proportion of news dealing with corruption and a low proportion of political news, whereas the autonomic channels (TV3, C9) do quite the opposite, with a low proportion of news on corruption and a large proportion of political news. The TVE public and state channel is the one which appears to be most balanced, although this centrality will be the object of discussion and analysis in the following sections of this investigation. The following figure shows the cases of corruption and misappropriation of public funds in the observed sample.

Table 1. News on corruption and misappropriation of funds in television news broadcasts in Spain

News / Channels	Mean	TVE	T5	A3	La6	C4	TV3	C9	CS
News on the news broadcasts	2,566	383	335	324	267	242	232	374	409
News on politics	405	66	31	38	47	48	55	60	60
	percents in relation to overall news								
	15.8	17.2	9.2	11.7	17.6	19.8	23.7	16.0	14.6
News on corruption and misappropriation of funds	184	30	19	20	30	28	14	11	32
	percents in relation to news on politics								
	45.4	45.5	61.3	52.6	63.8	58.3	25.4	18.34	53.3

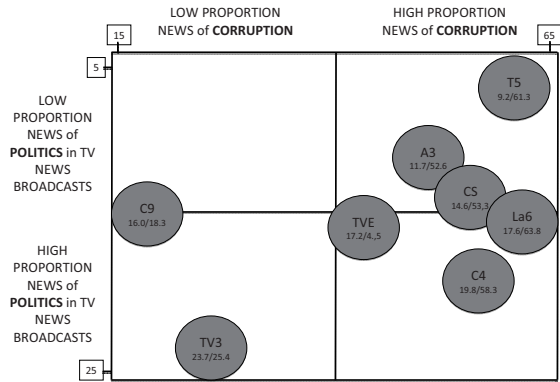


Figure 1. Proportion news of corruption in news of politics in TV news broadcasts

**B. Subject classification**

B.02. Politics	
B.02.5. Corruption and misappropriation of public funds	228
B.02.5.1. Anti fraud office	0
B.02.5.2. Bribery and favourable treatment	110
B.02.5.3. Illegal party funding	84
B.02.5.4. Others	34

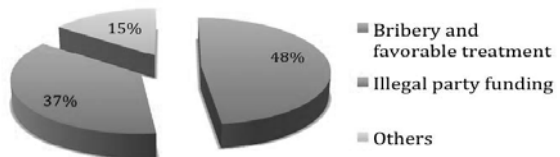


Figure 2. Corruption and misappropriation of public funds in the observed sample

96% of news is related to the 3 large themes (Gürtel, Palma Arena, Baltasar Garzón). Other news (misappropriation of public funds in Almeria, Granada, El Ejido, Marbella, Madrid; Felix Millet and the looting of the Palau de la Música Catalana; the discussions on the personal assets of the President of Spanish Congress, José Bono) were treated briefly (not in the summary, the latest positions, a few seconds) because of the large number of TV news items concerning corruption in the analysed period.

Going a little further, the subjects or items that have obsessively focused the news concerning corruption and misappropriation of funds in the sample were those dealing with the judge Baltasar Garzón, on the one side, and the Gürtel and Palma Arena proceedings on the other. In the first of the two cases, the news broadcasts indistinctly combine the three processes that the judge Baltasar Garzón has pending as a defendant before Spanish justice, stressing that of undue receipt of 1.2 million Euros for organising courses at the King Juan Carlos Centre of the University of New York in 2005 and 2006, sponsored by five Spanish companies (Banco Santander, Endesa, Telefónica, BBVA and Cepsa). The Gürtel proceedings (also led by Judge Garzón until he was relieved of his duties as a magistrate in the National Audience) have their epicentre in the autonomous community of Valencia and evoke a presumed network of political corruption associated with the Partido Popular. What is particularly striking is the way that C9 (the autonomic channel of this community) fails to deal with the subject. Finally, the Palma Arena proceedings involving the misappropriation of public funds by the government of the Balearic Islands. Table 2 presents the list of news on corruption in the programmes of the eight channels under analysis.

Corruption proceedings / Channels	TVE	T5	A3	La6	C4	TV3	C9	CS
BALTASAR GARZÓN N. of news broadcasts	14	10	9	9	12	7	8	15
percents in relation to the news on Politics	21.2	32.3	23.7	19.1	25.0	12.7	13.3	25.0
GÜRTEL N. of news broadcasts	14	7	11	17	16	5	3	15
percents in relation to the news on Politics	21.2	22.6	28.9	36.2	33.3	9.1	5.0	25.0
PALMA ARENA N. of news broadcasts	2	2	0	4	0	2	0	2
percents in relation to the news on Politics	3.0	6.5	0.0	4.3	0.0	3.6	0.0	3.3

The private channels T5 and La Sexta stand out in their constant and persistent treatment of the 3 affairs, whereas the autonomic channels TV3 and C9 deal with them comparatively less. The Palma Arena proceedings are those which proportionally receive more attention in the media agenda across all of the channels analysed.

The scarce treatment of the Gürtel proceedings in the public and regional channel of Valencia, Canal 9, is particularly striking. The channel amplifies all cases affecting the PSV-PSOE, José Bono (PSOE), councillors of the City of Madrid, Case Pretoria' alleged Banco Santander support of Baltasar Garzón. Instead, cases that have to do with the Valencian PP are silenced or minimised. For example, the Gürtel case was ad-

dressed as if it were an unknown subject to the Valencian PP, focusing on Luis Bárcenas, the treasurer of the national PP. When there is such information about the Valencian PP, C9 ignores or minimizes the news or uses a linguistic subterfuge to avoid mentioning the members involved in Valencian institutions.

As already mentioned, one of the contributions of this study is to define two equilibriums that will be of use to us as indicators of the diversity (and therefore the quality) of the political information on television news broadcasts, and which will allow us to view the image of politics that is built in these news programmes from their deviation there from. In fact, this methodology has been successfully applied in a recent research. In the *exo-equilibrium*, the five subcategories have the same weight (20 percent), which are the points of equilibrium calculated from the formula  $Px_n = 100/N$ . But, in the *endo-equilibrium* there are significant variations in the percentages of each one. At the same time, the deviations of each of the categories in the *endo-equilibrium* with respect to the *exo-equilibrium* are: Political system 8.5; Political institutions 12.75; Institutional reforms 23.75; Political culture 18.5; and Corruption and misappropriation of public funds 36.5.

The percentage of news in each of the subcategories varies considerably between the equilibrium defined by the investigation (*exo-*) and the equilibrium defined by the proportions of news items in all of the analysed news programmes (*endo-*). The difference between both points of equilibrium, which is the result of taking the points of *endo-equilibrium* away from the points of *exo-equilibrium*. A first conclusion is that the *endo-equilibrium* of the first two subcategories has a significantly smaller presence than the *exo-equilibrium*, whereas in the category of corruption and misappropriation of public funds, the presence in the *endo-* is much larger than in the *exo-equilibrium*.

The following table show the deviations of the subcategory Corruption and misappropriation of public funds for each channel with respect to the points of *exo-* and *endo-equilibrium*.

Table 3. Deviations from the EXO and ENDO -equilibrium in the subcategory of Corruption and misappropriation of public funds.								
Corruption and misappropriation of public funds / Channels (percents)	TVE	T5	A 3	La6	C4	TV3	C 9	C S
EXO-equilibrium	12.3	23.3	24.7	39.6	17.5	2.6	-3.1	25.0
ENDO-equilibrium	-4.2	6.8	8.2	23.1	1.0	-13.7	-19.6	8.5

The television news programmes are generally seen to devote fewer items to subjects concerning a larger number of news items to corruption and misappropriation of public funds, highlighting La Sexta with the exception of Canal 9. Regarding the *endo-equilibrium*, that defined by the distribution of subjects in the eight news programmes analysed, obviously a more uneven distribution is found between channels. This disparity is particularly clear in the subcategory of corruption and misappropriation of funds, one channel, La Sexta, has a presence far above *endo-equilibrium*, and two, TV3 and Canal 9, far below.



### 5. Conclusions

The emergence of numerous cases of corruption related to the ruling class with the misappropriation of public funds is one of the main elements contributing to the discrediting of politics. In this sense, the media play a key role in building the image that people have of this, and especially influence opinion (Noëlle-Neumann, 1995) as a consequence of agenda setting. Figure 3 shows that in the last four years, there has been a substantial increase in public concern about cases of corruption. This concern rose from 22% in 2010 to 69.7% in 2013, well above the figure for the economic crisis. We can therefore establish a direct relationship between the increase in citizens' perception of corruption as one of the main topics of social concern, and the treatment made of it in the TV news, as demonstrated in this article.

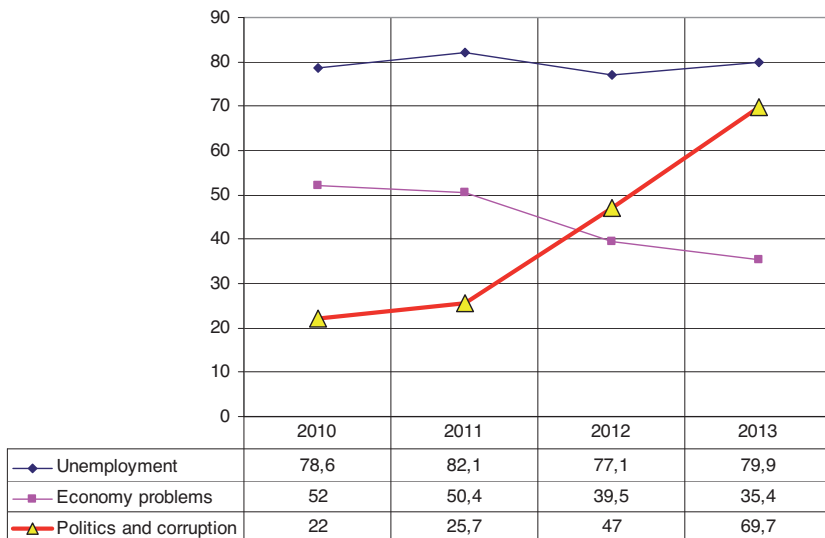


Figure 3. Evolution of Spanish public opinion of politics and corruption, according to the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013)

As we have already shown (Guerrero-Solé, Pont-Sorribes and Palencia-Lefler, 2013), the image of politics is built above all from the subcategory of corruption and misappropriation of public funds. However, the conclusions of this work go further. We have shown that there are significant differences among channels in the treatment of politics; some channels are more likely to include political corruption in their agenda (La Sexta especially), while in other channels the relative weight of news on this issue is significantly smaller (TV3 and C9, for instance). Our work also focuses on what cases of corruption news programmes do talk about and here we also find great differences between the channels. We have shown that C9 (the autonomic channel of the Valencian Community) does not include two of the most important cases of corruption in Spain in its news agenda during the analyzed period: Gürtel and Palma Arena, which directly affected politicians of the Partido Popular (PP), the party that ruled the

community. We have also shown that La Sexta and C4, two channels that are considered to be close to the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE), included a huge amount of news related to the Gürtel case, as did TVE (the Spanish Public Television) and CS (the autonomic channel of Andalusia) when both governments -the Spanish and the Andalusian- were ruled by PSOE. Thus, we can conclude that TV channels talk about corruption, but not always about the same corruption. If we go further, we can argue that talking about corruption can be used as a political weapon. Some media show that politics and politicians are corrupt, but above all the parties and politicians on the other side. Considering the robustness of the agenda-setting effect, we can also argue that Spanish citizens will worry about different cases of corruption depending on the news they are exposed to. Therefore Valencians who only watch C9's news will not consider the Gürtel and Palma Arena cases as serious cases of corruption; on the contrary, those who watch La Sexta and C4 will consider that the Partido Popular is an eminently corrupt political party. This leads us to make a reflection on the role of TV news in Spanish society. In several cases it is very difficult, and somewhat risky, to link TV channels to political ideologies; however, our study clearly and unambiguously shows that TV news has its own preferences when it comes to talking about political corruption and obviously these preferences are not fortuitous.

If we go back to the general results of our work, we can conclude that the private stations are those that most build the image of politics through corruption -La Sexta (59.6), A3 (44.7), T5 (43.3) and C4 (37.5)- except for CS. This investigation presents four different models of television news broadcast agendas depending on the intertwined variables of the political category and the subcategory of political corruption. The state channel TVE appears to be the most balanced, whereas the news programmes of privately owned stations (T5, A3, La Sexta, C4) focus more on a high proportion of news dealing with corruption and a lower proportion of policy news, whereas the autonomic stations (TV3, C9) do the opposite, with a small proportion of news dealing with corruption and a large proportion with policy news.

Therefore, in the three resulting segments (highly balanced, balanced, not very balanced) there are as many public channels as there are private, state and autonomic. In general terms, corruption is the subject which causes most imbalance (both by excess, as in La Sexta (+23.1), and by lack, as is the case of C9 (-19.6). The second thematic subcategory in which most imbalance is seen is that of institutional reforms, also by excess -TV3 (+15.9), C9 (+30.5), and by lack (CS (-20.4), La Sexta (-15.2) -.

Finally, it must be said that the television broadcasts in Spain have become spaces in which the subject of politics has a proportionally small space amongst all of the news, and that corruption has taken on excessive importance in the area of politics, above all in privately owned Spanish channels. In this sense, it is believed that this work should be continued with a comparative study between European television news broadcasts and those in North and Latin America. Such a study could offer useful qualitative data concerning subject and agenda policies in television news broadcasts in different countries and cultures.

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