

# MASS MEDIA BROADCASTING SOCIAL RISKS

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## Abstract

The main goal of this article is to analyse Spanish media coverage of risks and threats, particularly on television news programmes. This analysis focuses on a series of issues that, according to public opinion surveys, are deemed to be the main problems facing Spain: public safety, economic problems, terrorism and immigration. Based on the assumption that such issues are perceived with a clear component of individual and collective risk, this study analyses the way they are handled by news programmes. For this purpose, three national television channels and one regional channel were chosen, encompassing a total of 105 news programmes and 683 news stories, applying qualitative analysis techniques to their contents.

## Keywords

Media; Television; Safety; Security; Terrorism; Migration.

## 1. Introduction

Historically, cultural products have influenced processes of change and permanence of values, lifestyles, beliefs or stereotypes. They have also spread threats, fears and possible punishments. The modern mass media, firstly press and radio and later television, have played their own role in this spreading of fears. A historical review of these threats is provided by Robert E. Bartholomew and Hilary Evans (2004) in *Panic Attacks*<sup>1</sup>.

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1. A review focusing on contemporary US society can be found in: Barry Glassner, *The culture of Fear. Why Americans are afraid of the wrong things*. New York: Basic Books, 1999.

In fact, the media often use violent, gruesome and sensationalist contents<sup>2</sup>, which engage the public and can affect their perception of social reality and threats (as pointed out by George Gerbner)<sup>3</sup>. In particular, news programmes are filled with bad news or the dreadful aspects of any social phenomenon. Bad news is good news, as the saying goes. Hence, news bulletins seem to provide a running tally of murders, tragedies and individual and collective misfortune. They have, therefore, become a special focus of interest when it comes to analyse the risks or threats which the media help to spread among members of the public.

This paper presents the preliminary findings of a research project that aims to study the way in which Spanish media, specifically news programmes, present certain risks or fears. How much emphasis is placed on them in broadcasts? Which characteristics, consequences and explanations are highlighted? These are some of the questions this article will attempt to answer<sup>4</sup>.

## 2. Research approach

For the purpose of this analysis, specific issues (risks) were selected previously with a view to analysing their media treatment. In this respect, a distinction was made between risks that appear to be perceived as such by the population and others that apparently are not considered relevant by the public.

In order to differentiate between risks that are and are not perceived as such by the public, the results obtained from surveys compiled by the Spanish Centre for Sociological Research (CIS) were used. Every month, through these surveys, a representative sample of the Spanish population is asked to indicate, in their opinion, the main problems affecting Spain. The results reveal no significant differences over time

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2. An interesting study taking a historical perspective on the use of violence in cultural products can be found in: Jean Seaton, *Carnage and the Media. The making and breaking of news about violence*. London, Penguin Books, 2005.

3. For a review of different theories developed around the influence of the media on the perception of risks, see: Anders af Wahlberg and Lennart Sjöberg, "Risk perception and the media", in *Journal of Risk Research*, vol. 3, n° 1, pp. 31-50, 2000.

4. In this paper we present the results of a research project subsidised by the Regional Government of Valencia (Reference: GV/2007/146), directed by Dr Eva Espinar and developed from the University of Alicante (Spain).

in terms of the constant presence of a small number of issues in the top positions, although the specific order of these problems does vary (see Table 1)<sup>5</sup>.

TABLE 1. MAIN PROBLEMS IN SPAIN (MULTIPLE CHOICE)

PROBLEMS	% 2005	% 2006	% 2007	% 2008
Terrorism, ETA	53.3	24.8	44.9	35.1
Unemployment	58.2	49.8	37.5	43.8
Immigration	20.2	32.4	34.5	23.7
Housing	19.6	18.1	29.7	29.1
Public safety/security	16.7	23.2	18.9	16.4
Economic problems	11.3	17.2	18.3	39.2
Political class, political parties	8.3*	10.1	12.4	8.9
Quality of employment	4.9*	8.4	9.7	12.3

Source: January polls from the Spanish Centre for Sociological Research. <http://www.cis.es>

\* In 2005, in both cases, a different categorisation of open-ended responses was used. We have taken the percentage corresponding to “political problems” and “problems related with employment”, respectively.

On the basis of the results of these surveys, the risks we have classified as being perceived by the population are those related to the main problems that Spaniards consider affect Spain. Certainly, problems are not the same as social risks, although we assume that the former contains a clear element of perceived threat to individual or collective well-being.

According to the surveys consulted, month after month, the following issues are perceived as the main problems affecting Spain: terrorism, immigration, economic problems (as well as responses directly related to “economic problems”, we could also include those relating to unemployment, housing and the quality of employment) and public security<sup>6</sup>. These issues, over time, represent the highest response percentages, with a considerable difference in relation to other problems that mostly present minimal percentages.

5. The main results of these surveys, compiled monthly, are available on the webpage of the Centre for Sociological Centre: <http://www.cis.es>

6. Considering the studies that examine the media broadcasting of risk, two of the risks considered here as perceived risks have received considerable attention: terrorism and public safety. Specifically, there are numerous studies about the media and public safety, normally focusing on crimes (Williams and Dickinson, 1993; Chiricos, Eschholz and Gertz, 1997; Heath and Gilbert, 1996; Moira, 2006).

We have also dealt with the media treatment of other issues that could be classified as threats, but which do not appear to be considered important according to the CIS surveys. Hence, issues such as gender violence, traffic accidents and work-related accidents feature heavily in media agendas but do not appear to have passed into public opinion agendas to the same extent.

According to agenda-setting theory, the amount of attention paid to an issue by the general public is the consequence of the emphasis given to that issue by the media, establishing a direct causal relation between the media agenda and subsequent public perception of the key issues of the day (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). However, it seems evident that it takes more than just the presence of an issue in the media for that issue to become part of the catalogue of relevant problems in the eyes of the public. The media treatment or the characteristics (real or perceived) of the issue can be decisive in this respect.

Similarly, news items related with the fields of science, technology, the environment and health have been included in the analysis for two fundamental reasons. On the one hand, these are issues that frequently appear in texts by the leading authors of what could be termed the risk society, following the terminology used by Ulrich Beck (1998). And on the other hand, these are central topics for different social movements and groups, which condemn the growing risks associated with these matters.

However, these issues are relegated to the lowest positions in the classification of problems according to those surveyed by the Centre for Sociological Research. The issues appear fairly frequently in the media but are not always treated as threats or from a negative perspective. Clearly, differences in the media treatment given to these issues will not be the only variable when it comes to explain their perception as social problems or lack thereof. Their inherent nature could be crucial for explaining this perception. However, it should not be forgotten that the media collaborate, in one way or another, by defining the characteristics and main dimensions of problems (who is affected, who is responsible, which alternatives exist if any, etc.).

### 3. Methodology

The methodological approach followed is essentially qualitative, both in terms of sample selection and analysis. Hence, three national television channels were chosen (two private, *Antena 3* and *Tele 5*, and one public, *TVE 1*) along with one regional

channel (public: Canal 9), owing to our particular interest in the Valencian region. Considering these four channels, a total of 105 news programmes were analysed. In order to achieve the greatest possible diversity in the composition of the sample, prime time news bulletins broadcast on the weekends and during the week (lunchtime and evening news) were selected. The news bulletins were broadcast on television between November 10, 2007 and February 3, 2008.

For each news bulletin, a complete transcription was made of news items related with the pre-selected issues, in accordance with the following selection criteria, which were used more as a guide than an exhaustive list of sub-issues (see Table 2).

TABLE 2. CLASSIFICATION OF ISSUES

PERCEIVED RISKS		NOT PERCEIVED RISKS	
Matter	News about...	Matter	News about...
The economy	Unemployment, job market, housing, inflation, interest rates, economic crisis, labour conflicts.	Traffic	Accidents, legal reforms, preventive measures, accidents on public transport.
Public safety and security	Burglary, theft, murder, paedophilia, drug and people trafficking, mafia, youth violence, bullying, riots.	Gender violence	Direct, structural or cultural violence.
Terrorism / ETA	Including news about the political context and victims.	Environment and fauna	Climate change, pollution, urban development, public works, water, environmental disasters, news about the weather.
Migratory movements	Migration to Spain, migratory policy.	Science and technology	Medicine, genetic research, technological innovation.
		Work-related accidents	News about work-related accidents.
		Health	Pandemics, food risks, diseases and illnesses, consumption of alcohol or drugs, threats to public health.

Given our focus on the spreading of risks that might be perceived as affecting the Spanish population in one way or another, this paper only considers news items that are contextualised directly in Spain or which involve Spanish citizens. It also includes news stories that deal with the aforementioned problems from a global perspective, which is particularly pertinent in the case of the economy, health and the environment.

For each of the news items selected, as well as the full transcription of the text (including headlines and the main body of the news story), a series of basic variables were indicated in order to provide a descriptive quantitative analysis of the sample: TV station, time and date of broadcast, presence of journalists at the scene of the events, duration of the news item, presence in headlines or news roundups.

Finally, on the basis of the texts compiled, a qualitative sociological analysis of the news was performed, looking for common and diverging discourses (between issues and between channels), based on a classification of the extracts in accordance with the dimensions of interest.

Below are the main results obtained from the analysis of news items relating to the four issues classified as problems perceived by the population: immigration, terrorism, economic problems and public safety. In other words, the analysis focuses on the media treatment of the four issues that seem to be of greatest concern to Spaniards in reference to their own country. The aim is to characterise the way in which news programmes portray such problems, by focusing on five elements: importance given, description of the effects and consequences for the population, possible explanations, sources of information consulted and solutions which are being developed or could be applied.

#### 4. Perceived threats: terrorism, public security, economic problems and migration

##### 4.1. Issues in the media agenda

In contemporary societies, the media can influence the social perception of risks and threats based on the characteristics highlighted or the level of attention given to them (Singer & Endreny, 1993: 10). Consequently, one of the basic ways in which the media can indicate the relevance of a problem is through the relative presence of that problem in their broadcasts.

The four issues analysed as threats perceived by the general public (terrorism,

public security, economic problems and migration) have a considerable presence in the news programmes analysed (see Table 3). Of particular note is the high number of news stories related with the category “public security”, with a total of 240 items in the 105 news bulletins analysed.

News items related to migratory processes have a lower presence, with significant differences between the different television stations. However, if in addition to the new stories that deal explicitly with the arrival of immigrants, the life of immigrants in the host society or the measures and decisions adopted, we include all news items that, in one way or another, refer to the foreign population, the result is very different. There are 72 news items referring to this population, even though it does not constitute the central theme of the story. Specifically, 42 of these news stories are linked with public security and 18 to cases of gender violence.

TABLE 3. NUMBER OF NEWS ITEMS BY MATTER AND TELEVISION STATION

	TERRORISM	PUBLIC SECURITY	ECONOMIC PROBLEMS	IMMIGRATION	NUMBER OF PROGRAMMES
TVE1	60	57	39	21	26
Antena3	50	49	34	9	28
Tele5	36	66	30	20	26
C9	31	68	26	15	25
Total	177	240	129	65	105

In all four cases, they are issues that are a part of the everyday agenda of news programmes. They are matters, with their own sub-issues, to which the media refer relatively frequently. Phrases such as “once again”, “another case”, clearly show the institutionalisation of these themes. In other words, they have become issues that repeatedly attract the attention of news programmes.

In the case of “terrorism”, expressions are frequently used that relate each new event with previous cases or the issue as a whole. Furthermore, news bulletins frequently keep a running tally of actions or arrests and make reference to ongoing processes. Furthermore, there are clear sub-issues within this section; specifically: news about ETA attacks or arrests of terrorists, street violence, the political context of ETA and public demonstrations against ETA. In this respect, a single news bulletin often contains several news stories recounting events relating to several of these sub-issues. In general, the same terms are used to introduce these news stories, popular

terms that seem to provide the audience with the elements required for their interpretation: terrorists, *kale borroka* or *abertzale* (the Basque terms for street fighting and patriotic, respectively), which become terms frequently used by members of the public themselves.

The constant presence of public statements, especially made by political leaders, which at times make up the main body of the news story itself, reflects the relevance of the subject (showing it as a constant source of concern to the Prime Minister and opposition leaders and even the royal family) as well as its importance on political agenda. There is, therefore, mutual interaction between the media and politics, with influences in both directions when it comes to establishing agendas and issues of interest (Ortega, 2003).

The group of news items classified in the category of public security constitutes another heading on the media agenda and the block of accident and crime reports in each news bulletin. On occasions, the news programmes keep a running score of numbers of thefts or murders, and even follow up on certain cases. However, there is a widespread tendency to focus on the detailed description of each new event, on the search to provide as exhaustive a description as possible of the facts and the culprits.

On the other hand, news items related to economic problems constitute, in themselves, a priority issue on the media agenda. Even though the news stories analysed came before the current economic crisis (NB, the news bulletins were recorded between the months of November 2007 and February 2008), their numerical presence is significant. News items take the shape of updated information about subjects reported recurrently. Specifically, housing, unemployment, price rises and the situation of different economic sectors are the key issues, in which any changes in relation to previous data provided are usually highlighted. Undoubtedly, an analysis of the economic news broadcast over the last few months would yield different results, especially in terms of a greater quantitative presence and greater protagonism of experts and politicians in the media.

Finally, news about the arrival of immigrants in Spain constitutes another issue with a stable presence on the media agenda. The running total, the use of expressions that indicate the reiterated and constant presence of this phenomenon or the widespread use of the same terms (“illegal immigrants” is one of the most commonly used terms) demonstrate this fact. As in the case of terrorism, frequent references are made to the political figures responsible for this matter, signalling the importance of this issue on the political agenda.



This paper does not aim to study the reasons behind the prominent presence of the four issues tackled. Does their presence derive from the interest shown in these issues by members of the public? From their presence on political agendas? From their value as news for media agencies?

Regardless of the causes that might explain their prominence, important questions remain: what are the effects of this presence? Does the protagonism conferred by the media bias public perception of the main threats that might affect them and, in this case, what are the possible effects of this bias? Numerous authors have tried to analyse these questions, from diverse perspectives and assumptions. For example, David L. Altheide points out, in the case of the US, how the media have played a part in supporting the “war on terrorism – especially after the 9/11 attacks – by stressing fear and an uncertain future” (2007: 292). Moreover, using the term “moral panics”, other authors have analyzed how the spread of certain fears justifies the design and implementation of specific policies (Cricher, 2006).

#### 4.2. Description of effects and consequences

According to the magnitude of the effects derived from an event, the audience can also determine its level of importance. Specifically, the questions to be asked would be: Does it have important consequences? For whom are these consequences important?

In terms of the four issues analysed here, there are common elements between terrorism and public security on the one hand, and migration and economic problems on the other. For the first two issues, a direct threat to the physical security of people can be ascertained from the news stories. They focus on the description of specific episodes in which there have been or could have been physical consequences. They deal with, therefore, a fundamental theme: direct threats to personal safety.

News stories about both terrorism and public security contain a series of features that facilitate empathy with the victims. They offer details about the victims’ lives, especially in relation to their family and social ties. Frequently, in the case of deaths, the news stories appear to be more concerned about their friends and relations than the direct victims, thereby highlighting the genuinely emotional dimension of the facts. Testimonies from neighbours, relatives or acquaintances are frequently used, contributing their concern and pain to the emotional dimension of the news story. At the same time, these testimonies highlight the apparent normality of the victims, turning

the members of the audience into potential ones. Collective displays of sorrow are also often shown, which present the whole community as an indirect victim.

On the other hand, news items relating to economic problems and migratory processes do not make reference to direct threats to the physical integrity of people. However, in both cases, the news stories are delivered in a negative tone, although, mostly, specific details are not provided regarding the negative consequences for the Spanish population or these consequences are reported anecdotally. However, these stories are related to a collective threatened space, if immigrants arrive at “our coast” or if the price rises affect “our pockets”.

Specifically, news items related to economic problems, although they might make reference to macroeconomic data, tend to personalise economic difficulties. Hence, the testimonies of individuals or their answers to questions are used, referring to price rises or the difficulties buying a home, for example. By establishing this connection with people’s everyday lives, as well as highlighting the emotional element of the news stories, it seems that the aim is to make the audience understand complex macroeconomic processes in simple terms. Even though the news stories analysed were broadcast before the current economic crisis broke out, there is a significant widespread presence of alarmist news items, which sow seeds of doubts about the future evolution of different economic indicators and announce an imminent process of recession on a grand scale. TVE1 (public national station) is the only channel that seems to move away from this generalised alarmist tone, using a more neutral language and providing comparatively greater information about the causes and possible alternatives to the problems described.

Finally, although news stories that focus on migratory processes as the central theme rarely consider the specific consequences of population movements, a very different conclusion could be inferred by examining all the news stories that, although they might focus on other themes, refer to the foreign population. References to this population are particularly relevant in news stories relating to public security or gender violence, some of which explicitly attempt to develop an explanation linking violence and immigration.

#### 4.3. Causes and explanations

Looking at all the news stories analysed, there is a general lack of relevant explanations about the issues reflected in news bulletins. As discussed previously, some

news stories establish links between new and previous events, and on occasion even monitor ongoing processes, but usually do not provide further explanation.

Hence, there are minimal attempts to explain the roots of economic problems or migratory processes. It is taken for granted that the audience is fully aware of the main variables related with ETA's terrorism and its political context, and news items about public security tend to focus on the description of specific events, searching to point out the direct culprits and their victims.

In other words, news programmes prioritise the 'what' over the 'why'. In doing so, the probable intention is to achieve greater dynamism and even drama in the exposition of the different news stories, in contrast to the effect that could be achieved if these events were contextualised or explained. If television, and therefore news programmes, aims to appeal to the audience's emotions over their rationality, the strategy observed would be the most coherent with this endeavour.

In general, the use of terms that become clichés provides the only explanation: terrorist, illegal immigrants, or allusions to the specific nationalities of immigrants (for example, Maghrebins, Moroccans, Albanian Kosovars, Romanians...), etc. Terms that require no further explanation to understand what is being talked about, and which instantly seem to transmit to the audience the key elements required to decode the information received.

On other occasions, the explanations provided are minimal or anecdotal. So, for example, if price rises are only explained by stating that "as always, fuel and food are responsible", the audience will find it difficult to understand the complex relationship of variables involved in a process of inflation.

Ultimately, this general absence of explanations turns news bulletins into a string of events that are difficult to understand, with indeterminate causes, and yet entail a threat to the population to a greater or lesser degree.

#### 4.4. Sources of information

In the news bulletins analysed, there is a high presence of institutional sources. Central Government, the political parties and judicial or police authorities become protagonists and the main sources of the information offered.

However, in general terms, when news stories are related, little attempt is usually made to provide an explicit clarification of the sources of information. On occasions it is inferred, since the protagonists are largely police forces or institutional bodies, that they must have been the sources. In other cases, only vague unspecific references

are used. This way of proceeding is probably due to the search for greater dynamism and even realism in the narration.

The presence of journalists at the scene of the news story seems to be sufficient proof to demonstrate the truthfulness of what is being broadcast. In other words, the mere presence at the scene of the events seems to accredit the journalist as a reliable source of information with no need to explain how he or she has accessed the information being provided. Undoubtedly, this physical presence also reflects the importance each programme confers to the different matters, although on occasions journalists are sent to cover clearly anecdotal news stories.

Finally, to support the information given by journalists or allow them to draw conclusions, testimonies of specific individuals are frequently used – neighbours, relatives or those affected by the events – which seem to give credibility to the news item. For example, neighbours are used to provide relevant information about an event or as an example of the views held by the general population. These testimonies are also used to transmit a certain point of view when the journalists' comments or conclusions are endorsed by this never random selection of supposed spokespersons for public opinion.

#### 4.5. Solutions and alternatives

News programmes, depending on the dimensions and protagonists highlighted for each news story, select information about the measures that are being taken or could be taken. In other words, it is not necessary for the journalist to recommend specific actions explicitly (although on occasions they do just that, especially when referring to the individual behaviour of citizens and especially in the case of economic news items); all they have to do is report the words of certain sources (from all those available) or give protagonism to specific actors.

Hence, the alternatives offered to the different problems broadcast are limited. As for terrorism or public security, police and judicial actions are the clear protagonists of news stories. In the case of the immigrant population, although some news items consider integration processes, the vast majority focus on the illegal nature of these population movements and, therefore, on their necessary control. Finally, in the case of the economy, the contributions provided in terms of alternatives or solutions are minimal. At most, possible individual strategies are put forward for members of the audience, normally commented by anonymous people who are asked questions when they are shopping or walking down the street.

Considering the first three issues (terrorism, public security and immigration), by presenting them as repetitive events that, in spite of any police or judicial measures taken, never cease, news broadcasters could create a climate of vulnerability. In other words, the measures do not appear to be really effective (although there are a significant number of news items focusing on successes by the police and judges) and the threats persist and, apparently, will continue to persist.

## 5. Conclusions

Terrorism, economic problems, immigration and public safety are constant concerns for the Spanish population, according to the surveys drawn up by the Spanish Centre for Sociological Research, as well as issues that make up the everyday agenda of news bulletins. Hence, they frequently appear in news programmes, becoming sections that shape their structure, especially in the case of economic problems, public security and terrorism. Immigration is treated as the main issue of news stories to a lesser extent but crossing into other clearly negative issues, there are frequent news stories referring to the foreign population.

For these four main issues, the reiterated use of terms that become clichés is common and citizens themselves even end up using them in everyday conversation. These terms become codes that immediately transmit the essence and meaning of the news item broadcast. Furthermore, these expressions are often the only explanation given for the events described.

In general terms, there is a marked lack of elements that might facilitate understanding of the news stories broadcast but which would probably limit their emotional impact and entertainment value. This is true of contextualisation, an adequate explanation of causes and consequences, or the explicit determination of sources. News programmes tend to stress the – sometimes morbid – details of specific events, the opinions and feelings of friends or neighbours or the sorrow shared by the community. These characteristics seem to indicate that the main goal of news programmes is not to inform and educate but rather to entertain and move, not to mention the other political or economic interests that the media might have in the construction of news stories.

Notes

1. A review focusing on contemporary US society can be found in: Barry Glassner, *The culture of Fear. Why Americans are afraid of the wrong things*. New York: Basic Books, 1999.
2. An interesting study taking a historical perspective on the use of violence in cultural products can be found in: Jean Seaton, *Carnage and the Media. The making and breaking of news about violence*. London, Penguin Books, 2005.
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