

# Newspapers Coverage of Spain and the United States: A Comparative Analysis\*

Antonio V. Menéndez Alarcón

Department of Sociology, Butler University, Indianapolis, USA  
Email: [amenende@butler.edu](mailto:amenende@butler.edu)

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This article assesses the content of foreign news coverage in the United States and Spain. It draws on content analysis of two US and two Spanish newspapers over a 28-month period, during 2005-2007 and in 2009. The results show that the content of these newspapers tends to be more negative when covering politics. However, there was a major change in the type of coverage in the Spanish newspapers from the period 2005-2007 to 2009. Coverage of US politics in 2009 was much more positive than in the previous period studied. These findings suggest that newspapers contribute to an overall unfavorable representation of these countries for their respective populations. Also, when covering international news, newspapers are less independent from their government agendas than they claim; supporting critical research findings that mainstream media is vulnerable to “news management” by the government.

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## Introduction

Social science research over the last 50 years has established that the media are major agents in the codification and transmission of cultural scripts. An array of studies demonstrates the importance of the media in agenda setting and creating images of society, as the works of Gerbner (1969), Altheide and Snow (1979), Cook et al. (1983), Hall (2002) Scheufele, and Tewksbury (2007), and McCombs (2010) reveal. These studies show that the way the media report a story influences the perceptions of the audience as well as the importance of the issue. Furthermore, as Lang and Lang (2002) and Lundby (2009) suggest, the media fashion a symbolic environment through which a new version of social reality is created. This process remains mostly invisible to the audience because it appears to be natural. The seemingly autonomous position of the media projects the illusion that its content is factual and objective. If the public believed that the media represented the interests of business or government they would be less inclined to accept any information at face value (Alexander, 1986; Weaver, 2007). According to Gamson et al. (2002), people try to understand events and issues based on their personal experiences, interpersonal contacts, and media discourses. Although media compete with these other sources (i.e., personal contacts and experiences), their influence may be particularly significant when the issue is nationally or internationally salient, and beyond the personal experience or knowledge of most people.

Research suggests that the representations of the populations of foreign countries result mostly from information and images provided by the media. For instance, the study by Semetko et al. (1992), drawing on content analysis of US network news and wire service coverage of nine European countries, shows the connection between the coverage of foreign countries and pub-

lic opinion about these countries, as does Nadel's (1997) and Alam (2007) research on how the Western media represents the Middle East, and the works of Bang (2007) Torgovnick (1990), Springer (1991), Heung (1997) and Leung and Huang (2007) on portrayals of the cultures of Africa, South and Central America, and East Asia in newspapers and other media. Furthermore, according to these studies, the portrayals of these areas by Western media tend to reproduce stereotypes in which the West appears as a comparatively ideal society, whereas other regions are plagued by shortcomings. Other studies on the impact of US television shows in foreign countries (e.g., Tan & Suarchavarat, 1988; Willnat, He, & Hao, 1996; Saito, 1996), have found that exposure to US shows are associated with stereotypical perceptions of the United States's population as materialistic, individualistic, aggressive, and cruel.

These stereotypical portrayals have important consequences for intergroup or international relations. Indeed, in addition to the affect of media content at the level of the society as a whole, which has been illustrated by sociologists such as Stuart Hall (2002), the media can also influence the face-to-face interactions of members from different societies. As research in the 1980s and 1990s has shown, beliefs about the character of nationals from other societies can produce a cognitive process that influence what is looked at and interpreted in the behavior of members of foreign nations, even in individual interactions (see Darley & Gross, 1983; Devine, 1994; Dovidio, Evans, & Tyler, 1986; Ford, Stangor, & Duan, 1994; Gilbert & Hixon, 1991; Saleem, 2007).

In summary, all these studies reveal the media's role in defining the populations of other countries, as well as the processes through which the media shape audiences' perceptions of the societies represented (which confirms earlier theories, e.g., McQuail, 2010), even though the way people receive these images are not identical or uniform, as Morley (1980), Livingstone (1998), and Liebes and Katz (1994) have demonstrated.

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Other research on media coverage of international issues suggests a connection between the political power agenda and media content. In particular, Herman (1993) points out that the foreign policy agenda and interests of the United States, for example, will be reflected in the mainstream media.

Based on previous findings, the present research follows the theoretical assumption that there is a connection between media content and public opinion, and that media representations affect audiences' perceptions of foreign societies. Thus, this study concentrates on message content. It seeks to describe the representation of Spain and the United States by newspapers of both countries, and explores the processes and factors that shape this content. In short, this research examines how newspapers define the United States for the Spanish population, and how Spain is defined for the US population. Furthermore, given Herman's (1993) theory about politics and international news coverage, it is expected that the newspapers in each country will reproduce news that emulate the views of their government.

The study analyzed visibility (i.e., quantity of stories, and topics addressed in the stories), and tone. Obviously, fewer stories on Spain in US newspapers was expected. Consequently, the most important contribution of this research is how it reveals the topics covered and the tone employed, how the countries are represented, what images are projected in the pages of the newspapers, and to what extent the media contribute to reproduce stereotypes of both countries. This empirical exploratory research is relevant for comprehending the role of the media in the construction of social representations (e.g. De Rosa, 1996; Risse, 2001), and offers elements that could contribute to the theory of news production.

### Methodology

The empirical evidence of this research is provided by content analysis of newspapers. In addition, interviews with journalists working at the foreign desk helped to understand the views and processes of news production. The content analysis of newspapers was conducted on two of the outlets that were considered among the most influential in each country, had a national circulation, and included a substantial proportion of international news. In Spain, I chose *El País* and *El Mundo*; in the United States, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. For the purpose of my research a sample of the two of the leading newspapers in each country was sufficient. Particularly in the US, the two selected newspapers tend to offer the most diverse coverage on international issues. This approach of choosing a limited number of the most relevant newspapers is very common in the field of media research, as several publications cited here and as some research methodology experts suggests (Wimmer & Dominick, 2010).

The study was conducted in two periods: September 1, 2005 to December 30, 2007, and January 1, 2009 to June 30, 2009. I decided to skip the year 2008 in the analysis due to the long electoral campaign in the United States, which would have skewed the Spanish newspapers coverage of politics. A sample of 338 online issues of each newspaper was subjected to the analysis, using a composite sample. Fourteen issues were chosen for each on the same date of publication each month. I constructed two composite weeks for each month (i.e., I chose at random one Monday, one Tuesday, etc.). This approach was inspired by the composite-week sample technique developed by

Riffe, Aust, and Lacy (1993).

The content analysis included: 1) The number and length of articles dealing with Spain and/or the United States (counting how many articles, if any, were written on the subject and how extensive was the coverage related to each country in terms of the number of columns, words, and stories); and 2) the type of coverage (i.e., tone) in terms of negative, neutral, or positive content. Content was defined as any coverage that presented the country or its inhabitants in a negative or positive light, such as concentrating on the negative or positive impact of a particular policy or action, or a negative or positive portrayal of each country's officials or institutions. "Neutral" refers to the coverage that we could not interpret as having specifically positive or negative content. The unit of analysis was any article or news mentioning Spain in the US outlets or the United States in the Spanish outlets. As in my previous research, to reach an acceptable level of reliability, especially regarding the tone, three research assistants and I codified and contrasted findings on the same unit of analysis. The team was made up of people highly familiar with both societies and who complemented each other. There was a native-born Spaniard, a person of Latin American origin who lived in Spain for several years, and two US citizens who had a good knowledge of Spain. All the members of the team spoke both English and Spanish (at native or close to native level). We used Cohen's Kappa (1969) formula to measure intercoder reliability (Reliability [Kappa] = % observed—% expected/(N + M)—% expected). This formula determined the reliability of nominal data by percentage of agreement. Only the articles that produced intercoder reliability above 80% were considered for analysis of the tone. The collected data was interpreted and structured according to the established objectives and categories mentioned above, quantified when possible, and summarized.

Originally, I explored the possibility of comparing content of the evening news on two television networks in each country (in the United States, ABC and CBS; in Spain, TVE-2 and Antena 3). However, after a pretext overview (two weeks in September 2005; two weeks in November of the same year), I found that the sparse coverage of Spain on US networks did not allow for a meaningful content analysis, beyond observing the lack of news on Spain on US television. This difference in television coverage corresponds, obviously, to the traditional role of superpower that the United States plays in the world combined with the US network executives' perceived lack of interest among the US population in international news. Furthermore, at the time, international news in the United States was concentrating on news from the Middle East (i.e., wars in Iraq and Afghanistan). The articles were classified in seven categories: politics, business/economy, sports, art/architecture, travel/recreation (including cinema, theater, etc.), and science/technology.

### Results

As expected, there were many more stories in Spanish newspapers about the United States than in US newspapers about Spain (561 versus 238), reflecting the different status (by any measure) that the countries have in the world. However, the number of articles on Spain in US newspapers was higher than anticipated (based on a previous overview of US newspapers during the preparation of the research project in 2004). The fair amount of news on Spain could have been influenced by con-

frontations, during the period analyzed (particularly 2005-2006), between the Spanish and the US government over the war in Iraq. Nevertheless, the difference in coverage implies a major imbalance of visibility between these countries' representations to their respective populations.

In most articles, there was a correspondence in tone between the headline of the article and the body; however, there were a considerable number of cases where the content of the body of article differed from the tone of the headline. These cases are presented in the tables because, as different studies on reading habits have shown, a considerable proportion of readers (e.g., between 40% and 45% of newspapers readers in the United States, depending on the study) will read headline copy but not the rest. Therefore, in many cases, the headline would constitute the main information. In the following section, the data and tables are presented with brief explanations, followed by some examples of the coverage's content. Even though all the details of the findings are included in the tables, the analysis will only emphasize the most salient aspects. The author made the translations from the Spanish. To avoid unnecessary length, only some key headlines and a few quotes are also shown in Spanish. The quotes from the interviews with journalists were directly translated to English. I present the findings first for each newspaper, starting with US newspapers, and then I contrast the results according to the nationality of the newspapers.

### US Newspapers

#### *The New York Times*

*The New York Times* published a total of 139 articles on Spain during the period studied. Politics was the main theme of the articles, with 36% of the stories on politics (n = 49), whereas 21% covered business/economics (n = 29), 13% were on sports (n = 18), 16% on travel/recreation (n = 21), 9% were on art/architecture (n = 2), and 5% on science/technology (n = 7). The average length of the articles on Spain was 622 words. See **Table 1** for the details on the number of articles.

As **Table 1** shows, 25% (n = 34) of the articles presented Spain or its people in a negative light in the headlines and the body of the article, and a few more were also negative in the headlines, whereas most of the articles (53%, n = 72) were neutral in both body and headline, and 18% (n = 24) were positive in both headline and body. Although most of the coverage from *The New York Times* was neutral, there was a considerable proportion of negative representation, particularly when addressing politics and the Spanish government. For instance, in a report about José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero on the new constitution for Catalonia, he was presented as unresponsive to his

party and the population at large. The article, "Spain's Chief Tries to Keep Risky Pledge to Catalonia", emphasized the many problems with this pledge and gave voice to the main opposition party leaders' criticism, without explaining clearly what Zapatero's pledge was. For instance, *The New York Times* reported that "Eduardo Zaplana of the center-right Popular Party said that the revised proposal still presented a risk to the nation's stability". Later in the same article: "surrendering of money and authority to the regions threatens to drive the Spanish government toward irrelevancy, Mr. Zapatero political opponents contend" (February 6, 2006). Another example of a negative coverage in politics included the use of words such as "irresponsibility" to describe the good relations of Zapatero with Chavez, using a rather negative title: "It's Europe a la carte as Zapatero Aids Chávez" (December 13, 2005).

Another article on migration presented Spain as having a bad policy on immigration, which endangered lives because: "these policies encourage Africans to try to enter Spain illegally" and also asserted that other Europeans were angry at Spain's permissive immigration policies, which allowed migrants to enter Spanish territory, and then travel to other parts of Europe (November 5, 2005). The following article, "Basque Separatists Call Off Cease-Fire in Spain" (June 6, 2007) is an example of several articles on the Basque separatist movement, which gave the impression of imminent danger and chaotic society, and asserted in the body of the article that "Spain was bracing for fresh attacks by the Basque separatist group ETA on Tuesday after the group called off a 15-month-old cease-fire", giving the impression that attacks from the ETA were imminent.

Other articles on politics were not clearly negative in the title, but gave a negative impression of the Spanish government in the body by failing to explain the political circumstances and context. For instance, an article published on February 24, 2009, "Spain's Justice Minister Resigns", and included in the body: "Mariano Fernández Bermejo's resignation came amid an uproar over a trip he took with a judge who is investigating members of the conservative opposition party". Another example of this neutral approach is reflected in an article published on January 6, 2009, about tensions between the government of Spain and the Roman Catholic Church. The title of the article stated: "Spain is a Battleground for Church's Future", and went on to explain that the Catholic Church sees Spain as a key country in its effort to promote Catholicism in Europe.

There were also some negative articles on the Spanish economy. For example, an article published on March 15, 2009, attempted to show the consequences of the economic crisis for the immigrants by emphasizing the problems between locals and immigrants competing for jobs in a small Huelva's town

**Table 1.**  
*The New York Times* (average article length: 622 words).

Topic	Positive (n)			Neutral (n)			Negative (n)			Total
	Headline	Body	Both	Headline	Body	Both	Headline	Body	Both	
Politics		1	7	2		17	1		21	47
Sports			3			14			1	18
Business/Economic	1		2		5	14	4		7	29
Art/Architecture			2			9				11
Travel/Recreation			8			13			2	23
Technology/Science			5			4			1	7
All Topics	1	1	24	2	5	72	5		32	135

(in the south of Spain): “Fruit Picking Causes Strife in Andalusia as Natives’ Job of Last Resort”. And the body of the article presented some examples of Spanish people going back to work in the farms:

A year ago, Mr. Gómez lost his construction job. Now he is harvesting strawberries for \$1100 a month on a farm outside Lepe, in the Andalusian province of Huelva. As jobs disappear across Andalusia, workers like Mr. Gómez are returning to the fields they abandoned for construction sites, hotels and shops during Spain’s decade-long economic boom. They are competing with the migrants who replaced them; fueling resentment that immigrant representatives and farmers’ worry could become explosive.

The article’s content gave the impression that there is strife everywhere in Spain between immigrants and locals, and that it is representative of the rest of the country. The article also reflected on what the writers considered the poor conditions of immigrants in Spain. Data on these issues at the time did not show a widespread confrontation between immigrants and locals, and the situation of immigrants was not uniform. In short, the article failed to put the story in context.

Other articles, although presenting negative data (about the high rates of unemployment, which is a considerable problem in Spain) were mostly neutral in content; for example, in an article published on February 4, 2009: “Spain’s Unemployment Rose Sharply in January”. Spain was also depicted in several articles in a rather positive light, presenting it as a country where freedom is respected and revered. For example, in an article about the cartoons of Mohammed published originally in a Danish newspaper (which created a very negative response, including violence and deaths, from Muslims in many countries) and reprinted by Spanish newspapers, *The New York Times* qualified the fact that Spanish newspapers reprinted these cartoons as a courageous act of asserting freedom of speech.

**The Washington Post**

In the period, our analysis found there were 103 news stories about Spain. Twenty-seven percent of the articles had negative implications in both the body and headline; 6% had negative headlines, but were neutral in the body content; 47% were neutral in both the headline and body; 11% were positive in both body and headlines (see **Table 2**).

As in *The New York Times*, the largest proportion of articles in this newspaper concerned the coverage of politics (37%, n = 38). Most of these addressed issues of Spain-US relations, and the majority of articles on politics (53%, n = 20) carried a negative content in both the headlines and the body. We interpreted

that there were considerable negative inclinations in judging the Spanish government policies and actions. For example, on March 1, 2006, *The Washington Post* ran the article, “A Church-State Schism in Spain: Socialist Leader Back Policies at Odds with Catholic Doctrine”. This title has strong negative implications: The term “schism” is in itself already an exaggeration of the debate that was taking place in Spain during that time; it implies rupture, rift. The term “socialist” in the title also implies a negative slant in the context of the United States; if the author wanted to remain neutral he could have written “The Government Backs Policies” instead of including a word that has a negative connotation among US readers. This negative title is also largely reflected in the body of the article. Indeed, the most negative meaning of the word “schism” is emphasized: “the battle between the Church and Zapatero’s government has spread from parliament to streets, pulpit and confessional, creating some of the deepest political and social schisms in Spain since it returned to democracy 28 years ago”. There were several articles on politics with the same negative tone, as reflected in a piece about immigration policies, *Immigrants Turn Down Incentive to Leave Spain; Plan for Jobless Called “Expulsion in Disguise”* published on February 1, 2009, and the body of the article emphasized the disregard of the Spanish government for the role that the immigrants played in the boom years of the Spanish economy.

Eighteen percent of the articles (n = 18) were on business/economics, with a similar proportion of negative (45%, n = 8) and neutral content (39%, n = 7) in both the headline and the body. Some of the negative articles addressed what they considered the wrong economic choices of the Spanish government. Some of these could be considered neutral; for instance, an article of May 10, 2009, “Good Times Unexpectedly End for Many Workers in Spain: Construction Drove Much of the Economy”, but many other articles faulted the Spanish decision to provide subsidies for the development of windmills, solar energy, and other alternative energy sources. There were two articles about rural Spain and relocation of immigrants in September 2007 that had negative implications. Most of the other articles on this topic basically gave neutral information on business deals of Spanish companies in the international market.

Twenty-two percent of the articles (n = 22) covered sports. These were mostly neutral in the headlines and body content; one article portrayed Spain in a positive manner, as a country with many good athletes and with good chances to play a major role in the 2006 Soccer World Cup. Eleven percent of the articles covered art/architecture in Spain and were either positive

**Table 2.**  
*The Washington Post* (average length per article: 516 words).

Topic	Positive (n)			Neutral (n)			Negative (n)			Total
	Headline	Body	Both	Headline	Body	Both	Headline	Body	Both	
Politics			2	1	3	8	3	1	20	38
Sports			1			21				22
Business/Economics					3	4	3		8	18
Art/Architecture	2		4		2	3				11
Travel/Recreation	4		4			9				13
Technology/Science						1				1
All Topics	2		11	1	8	46	6	1	28	103

or neutral in both the headlines and body; they represented Spain as a country with great sites and beautiful architecture. And finally, 13% (n = 13) of the articles addressed travel/recreation in Spain. These articles were also neutral or positive. Only one article in this newspaper addressed technology/science.

## Spanish Newspapers

### *El País*

The coverage of the United States in *El País* was frequent, and the portrayal of the United States was mostly either neutral or negative. This paper published 277 stories on the United States during that period: the majority (53%, n = 148) of those stories covered politics. Business/economics followed with 14% (n = 39), travel/recreation with 12% (n = 34), 10% (n = 27) addressed art/architecture, and 5% (n = 15) technology/science (see **Table 3**).

Thirty-five percent of the articles presented the United States or its government in a negative light in the headlines and body; 6% were negative in the headlines but neutral in the body; 41% were neutral in the headlines and body; 9% were positive in both headline and body. Most of the negative news was on politics. Some examples of negative content addressing politics follow: “Bush impulsara el gasto de defensa a costa de recortar programas sociales” [Bush will boost defense spending at the expense of cutting social programs] (February 6, 2006); “Un ex-jefe de la CIA acusa a Bush de manipular datos para justificar la Guerra” [A former head of the CIA accuses Bush of manipulating data to justify the war] (February 11, 2006), relating to declarations made by Paul R. Pillar. The article emphasizes that the White House selected, according to their convenience, the reports of the experts to justify the Iraq invasion. In another article, referring to the US Congress’s report on the manage-

ment of the Hurricane Katrina disaster, they report: “El congreso denuncia 90 fallos en la gestión de la catastrofe del Katrina” [The congress denounces 90 failures in the management of the Katrina catastrophe] and “Un informe subraya el fracaso del gobierno de Bush para preveer efectos del huracán” [A report emphasizes the failure of the Bush government to foresee the effects from the hurricane], and in the subtitle of the article, “Respuesta lenta e ineficaz” [Slow and ineffective response] (February 13, 2007).

As one can see in **Table 3**, the news covering the other aspects mentioned, tended to be largely neutral or positive. The other Spanish newspaper included in our study followed a similar pattern.

### *El Mundo*

The coverage of the United States in *El Mundo* was frequent (almost four times per week on average), and a little greater than its Spanish competitor, *El País*. This newspaper published a total of 285 stories during the period studied. As in *El País*, the single topic most covered was political issues. Forty-eight percent (n = 137) of the stories were on politics, 13% (n = 36) on business/economics, 11% (n = 31), on sports, 11% (n = 32) on travel/recreation, 9% (n = 25) on science/technology, and 8% (n = 24) on art/architecture (see **Table 4**).

Thirty-four percent of the articles presented the United States or its government in a negative light in the headlines and body; 5% were negative only in the headlines and neutral in the body; 43% were neutral in the headlines and body; 15% were positive in both the headline and body. The majority of the articles with negative content covered politics. The political articles mentioned the US administration mostly in a critical light. For instance, the headline of an article on the New Orleans disaster stated, “El ex-jefe de emergencias dice que Bush supo al llegar

**Table 3.**  
*El País* (average length per article: 534 words).

Topic	Positive (n)			Neutral (n)			Negative (n)			Total
	Headline	Body	Both	Headline	Body	Both	Headline	Body	Both	
Politics	2	3	14	6	20	34	18	3	74	148
Sports			1			13			2	16
Business/Economic	1		4	2	4	21	1		10	39
Art/Architecture		1	4	2		19		1	2	27
Travel/Recreation	2		5	1	2	21		1	5	34
Technology/Science			6			6			3	15
All Topics	5	4	24	11	26	115	19	5	96	277

**Table 4.**  
*El Mundo* (average length per article: 509 words).

Topic	Positive (n)			Neutral (n)			Negative (n)			Total
	Headline	Body	Both	Headline	Body	Both	Headline	Body	Both	
Politics	1	7	13	1	17	36	15	1	75	137
Sports		2	7		2	18			4	31
Business/Economics	2		6		2	22			6	36
Art/Architecture	1	2	5	2	1	15			1	24
Travel/Recreation		1	7	1		19			5	32
Technology/Science			5		1	13	1		6	25
All Topics	4	12	43	4	23	123	16	1	97	285

Katrina que los diques estaban rotos” [The ex-chief of emergencies (FEMA) said that Bush knew that the dykes were broken, when Katrina arrived] (February 10, 2006). Also: “La casa blanca en la punta de mira por su tardanza en informar del disparo fortuito de Cheney de caza” [The White House is being criticized because they lagged in informing about the Cheney hunting shot] (February 15, 2006). In essence, I found the characterization of the United States to be similar in *El Mundo* and *El País*, with the only noteworthy differences residing in the number of stories written in a slightly more negative bias in *El País*.

The coverage in both Spanish newspapers tended to be more negative when covering the United States than the US newspapers were when covering Spain, especially when addressing politics. Indeed, considering the number of articles with political content that had negative content in both the body and the headline in both Spanish newspapers, 56% of the articles were negative, whereas 48% of the US newspapers presented a negative coverage of Spanish politics. However, if we consider all the stories published on the United States in the two Spanish newspapers, only 34% have a negative content, the rest are either neutral or positive, given an overall portrayal of the United States less negative than if we were only analyzing politics. The same tendency is observed in the US newspapers’ overall coverage. Indeed, only 25% of the articles presented a negative image of Spain.

Furthermore, there was a considerable difference in the topics covered. In the two Spanish newspapers, 50% of the news focused on politics, whereas in the two US newspapers, politics constituted 36% of the topics covered. In short, the depiction of the United States in the Spanish newspapers tended to be more on the heavy information (e.g., politics or business), whereas the US newspapers tend to offer more news, proportionally, on the other aspects (mentioned above), such as traveling in Spain, arts, architecture, etc.

As mentioned earlier, the study covered two periods with different US administrations. When analyzing and comparing the coverage according to the two periods included in our research, there were slight differences in the US newspapers coverage of Spain during the two periods: It was a little less negative through 2009; however, there were also fewer articles, proportionally speaking (therefore, given the limited news during that period we cannot be conclusive one way or another). On the other hand, there was a clear difference in the tone of the coverage in the Spanish newspapers between 2005 and 2007 and in 2009. We found a considerable change of tone in these newspapers’ coverage of US politics during the first six months of the presidency of Barak Obama versus the previous period. Indeed, in 2009 there were very few clearly negative articles. Most articles celebrated the actions of Obama in the world. For example, on June 25, 2009, reporting on an Obama speech, *El Mundo* ran an article titled, “Inteligente gesto de Obama hacia los musulmanes” [Intelligent gesture of Obama towards Muslims], and the rest of the article was also very positive in the tone, celebrating the positive change from the previous administration, and the way the Obama administration was dealing with the Muslim world. Another example, an article of March 18, 2009, referring to a meeting of Obama with Latin American presidents in Port of Spain, was titled: “Obama promete una alianza de iguales a América Latina” [Obama pledges an alliance of equals with Latin America]. This positive title is very much reflected in the body in which the article em-

phasized the enthusiastic response of the Latin American leaders to Obama’s statements and about his intentions of moving the relations with Cuba in a new direction. Perhaps, the most negative coverage we found during this latest period was reflected in the following articles: On April 29, an article was titled “Obama aún genera esperanza, pero también dudas” [Obama still inspires hope, but also doubts], and goes on to explain in the body that Obama has tried to end the uncomfortable legacy of his predecessor George W. Bush, closing the prison in Guantanamo, eradicating torture from the interrogation methods of the CIA, and has made overtures toward Cuba. “However, his economic policy has been criticized from the left and from the right. Conservatives accuse him of squandering public resources with their multimillion injections of funds and, on the other hand, people on the left of the Democratic Party demand a major intervention in the markets”.

Very few articles portrayed the Obama presidency in a negative light. The following (published on June 2, 2009) is an example of those few negative portrayals. It addresses Obama’s policies in the Middle East: “The honeymoon of Obama with the Arab world crumbles”, then the article explains that after rebuilding the credit the United States lost in the Arab world, it seems that his lack of actual pressure on Israel is undermining his credibility in the Arab world. The article cites the statements of Palestina Liberation Organization leader Saeb Erekat: “People do not want to hear more words. They want actions”, and further states that even pro-Western newspapers in the Arab world criticize “Obama dialectic equilibriums”.

In sum, as **Table 5** shows, during 2009 most news about US politics was either neutral or positive. To simplify the presentation of the data and given that the differences do not substantially change the results, we include in this table only those news stories on politics that we classified as having the same tone in the headline and the body (i.e., negative tone in headline and body, neutral in headline and body, etc.).

The process of producing international news implies making a choice of what will make the news of the day. Normally, according to journalists interviewed, this is generally decided following traditional criteria, such as the likelihood of the information will have attracting readers, as well as the perceived importance of the news. Indeed, in international news as well as in national news, novelty, personalities, “things that we think will shock, surprise the readers, something out of the ordinary, are important criteria to determine the content of the newspaper” (journalist *El País*). For Spanish newspapers, the United States “is always covered due to its role of superpower”, but, during the period analyzed, especially because of the controversial figure of the US president. As a journalist from *El Mundo* declared in 2007: “We have always covered very much the USA, but now we cover it much more. Bush is a rupture in international affairs with the Clinton approach, Bush is more conflictive, and he creates controversy in the world. As you know, conflict attract readers, and Bush is perfect in terms of creating conflict”.

**Table 5.**  
Comparative content.

	2006-2007 (n)			2009 (n)			Total
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Positive	Neutral	Negative	
<i>El País</i>	9	21	59	18	9	4	134
<i>El Mundo</i>	6	23	48	14	9	3	103

Given that *El Mundo* had an editorial line of strong support for the Popular Party, whose main leader, José María Aznar, was an ally of Bush in the invasion of Iraq, it is surprising to find such negative coverage of the Bush administration. The head of the international department explains the reasons of this type of coverage:

Travel of the president of the US, elections in the US, interactions with Europe or with Spain directly, are important aspects to cover. Certainly, we have been very much interested in Bush as a personality, due to his radical positions in world affairs and the controversial declarations regarding Europe. Even though our newspaper tends to be closer to the Popular Party, who supported Bush in the Iraq war, at the international level we look at things differently. In fact, our newspaper was opposed to the Iraq war since the beginning...

This approach of covering the news was not openly confirmed by the US journalists, who claimed their independence from political ideologies. However, our results seem to indicate that political views are inherent in the US newspapers coverage of Spain.

### Conclusion

The media-generated images of the world help us to construct meaning about people and their society, and the lens through which the US and the Spanish population receive these images—filtered through the prism of those who have the power to create them—affect how they see and interpret each other's society. As explained earlier, the fact that the Spanish media covers the United States far more than the US media covers Spain is due to a large part to the differential role these countries play in the world, but also to the low interest on international issues existing in the US population, as many surveys have demonstrated over the years.

However, what is more interesting and revealing is the type of content. The single, most covered theme in both countries is politics, but the proportion of politics in the Spanish newspapers is more than double of what it is in the US newspapers. The US newspapers cover stories on issues such as tourism, arts, architecture, or travel. The content in all the newspapers show a tendency to stereotype both societies by presenting issues in a single, unidirectional manner and failing to address complexities. The majority of the news on the United States in the Spanish media is either neutral or positive, with a considerable proportion of negative news when addressing politics. However, there is a significant difference between the period 2005-2007 and the six months analyzed during 2009. Indeed, the majority of the news on politics covered by the Spanish newspapers in 2009 was neutral and the negative and positive coverage were similar. Even though the period analyzed under the Obama administration is shorter, the difference is such that we can safely conclude that the negative coverage during the period 2005-2007 was to a large extent influenced by the negative views of the Bush administration in Spain. Indeed, according to several surveys the Spanish population by disapproved the Bush administration's unilateralist approach to world affairs, and were against the war in Iraq. Furthermore, the Bush administration engaged in direct public confrontations with the Spanish government with rather negative criticism of the party in power and Spanish officials between 2004 and 2006. Journalist reflected these stories in the Spanish newspapers, but espoused mostly the Spanish government point of view.

To be sure, as is well known, the tendency to cover more negative stories than positive is due to the assumption among journalists and newspapers owners that the news needs to have drama, that what attract readers is bad news, and attracting readers in an increasingly commercialized media system is fundamental. Indeed, media content is designed to attract viewers for the benefit of the stockholders and the advertisement industry. Given these assumptions in the media industry, it is not surprising to find an emphasis on conflict and negative content when depicting these countries, but some actors in the political process tend to create more confrontation than others, and George W. Bush and several figures in his administration were perfect for the Spanish journalists, in terms of creating controversy and conflict, in their declarations and their policies. For US newspapers, the same could be said, to a certain extent, of the Socialist leaders of the Spanish government. During the period studied, the Socialist Party was in power in Spain, which is in itself already controversial in the United States, a country of fundamentalist capitalists. Moreover, the Spanish government's decision to withdraw the troops from Iraq, and cut back on most its support for the US-led policies in the Middle East, infuriated the White House and many members of Congress. This was very much reflected in the US newspapers coverage of Spain.

One might conclude that the coverage of news regarding other countries is connected to the perceptions of the government of that country, and to the relations among governments. In sum, this result reveals that newspapers are less independent from their government agendas than they claim, at least regarding international politics. Indeed, in some extreme cases they are given fake news by the government, as it happened during the Bush administration (see *The New York Times's* article by Barstow & Stein, 2005), but usually the newspaper's agenda is set by the government in more indirect and subtle ways, supporting Herman's (1993) claim that mainstream media is vulnerable to "news management" by the government.

Assuming the validity of theories that suggest that newspapers have a strong influence in defining what readers should think about (e.g., Gamson et al., 2002), as well as understanding international issues (e.g., Semetko et al., 1992), and contrasting them with these findings, one could conclude that, given the US newspapers coverage, most of the US population would have an ambiguous view of Spain: mostly negative regarding the Spanish government, but a generally neutral or positive opinion concerning other aspects of that society. Following the same logic, the Spanish population will have an even more negative idea about the US government, but their views of the United States in other aspects would be neutral or positive. The major difference lies in the fact that given a more limited presence of Spain in the US newspapers and the type of coverage, the US population will have less knowledge obtained from newspapers of Spanish society, than Spanish people of US society.

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