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Autonomous thought and political talk show guests. A study of the television programme *Las Mañanas de Cuatro*

Abstract

Utilising the technique of content analysis, this article explores the discourse of guests invited to participate in the political debate that forms part of the television programme *Las Mañanas de Cuatro*. In general, their participation does not appear to be based on autonomous reflection, does not provide a complex analysis of social and political reality, and does not usually result in the transmission of well-founded opinions. Most panellists simply seem to play the role of spokesperson for certain media sources and political parties, reproducing the discourse of such entities. The discourse of almost all panellists is characterised by partisanship; as such, it is possible to classify the messages transmitted into specific groups according to their ideology. This leads us to the conclusion that these actors become a mere instrument to influence the process of public opinion formation. As a result, the talk show guests analysed do not appear to play a leading role in this process because, strictly speaking, they lack the ability to “fabricate opinion”, as proposed by Giorgio Grossi. However, the frequency with which many of the messages are repeated in the comments of different panellists also suggests that these actors do play a relevant role in generating the climate of opinion, leading to the impression that the views they express are in the majority and form part of a consensus.

Keywords

Talk show guest, public opinion, media discourse, autonomy, climate of opinion

1. Introduction

We maintain that political talk shows are a particularly interesting genre for analysing the process of public opinion formation because, in our belief, far from expressing independent views based on a thorough knowledge of the issues discussed, talk show guests, according to Taibo (2010: 37), often renounce free and autonomous thought.

Ortega (2006a: 11) associates the emergence of talk shows with a type of journalism, widespread among Spanish media, in which mere

opinion is passed off as information, and evaluation is passed off as description. This author describes some of the main disadvantages of these kinds of talk shows, such as the fact that the appropriate information on which a discussion is organized is usually hidden from the audience, or that the opinions expressed in such programmes tend to lack foundation (2006a: 11). Ortega is emphasizing, therefore, the complete replacement of information with opinion. In this sense, some authors (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2012: 187) call for talk show guests to be submitted to the same principles as other professional journalists, starting with the need to comply with certain standards relating to truthfulness, facts, and verification.

Although referring specifically to the radio, Sánchez (2006: 84) considers that the problem of the omnipresence of opinion in the mass media lies in the fact that the message of opinion acts, in many cases, in an informational vacuum (that is, without data, verification, or sources), and is affected by the professional negligence of the panellists (who lack specialist training and are not subjected to guidelines). Faced with this understanding of the issue, Sánchez (2006: 79) advocates a model of professional journalistic opinion characterized by reflection, a foundation on prior knowledge of the facts, support by truthful data, and the ability to prove statements with arguments. Such a model implies the negation of improvised opinion. The present study analyses a corpus of talk show discourse with the specific intention of analysing the presence of views whose position is not defended with arguments, or those which are based on platitudes and preconceived ideas. In this way, the study will attempt to verify if the panellists examined simply reproduce certain messages which are elaborated by political and media elites or, on the contrary, if they construct discourse which is a product of reflection and is supported by truthful data.

Bourdieu considered television not very conducive to the expression of thought due to the negative correlation which exists between thought and urgency (2007: 38-39). Consequently, the French sociologist wondered whether this characteristic forced television to rely solely on what he called 'fast thinkers', and concluded that thinkers use preconceived ideas, that is to say, clichés, on television. The problem is that thought is subversive by nature and must therefore begin by derailing preconceived ideas and then demonstrating one's own; a process which requires time (2007: 39-40). Similarly, Taibo (2010: 35) argues that, in the activity of talk show guests, it is difficult to discern any effort aimed at a complex evaluation of reality. Even though this last point seems very relevant and, in fact, in this paper the presence of superficiality and the mere façade of profound thought in the panellists' discourse will be taken into account, we shall pay greater attention to another of the aspects described by Taibo in reference to this group: as he states, "The panellist who shows genuine independence is a rare figure. On the contrary, it is much more common to observe overt or covert compliance to the dictates of a business or political group" (2010: 36). This type of conduct implies that talk show guests renounce autonomous thought and, as a result, merely put into public debate a set of discourses elaborated by political and media elites. Such discourses contribute to the public opinion-forming process.

On the basis of this vision of panellists, the current paper will analyse two main aspects: on the one hand, the degree of autonomy shown by these actors in their comments on the television programme *Las Mañanas de Cuatro*; and on the other hand, their possible role in the opinion generation process as the mouthpieces of certain media groups or political parties. Accordingly, the discourse of talk show guests could form part of a view that shows important similarities with that of some of the actors to which Confalonieri (2001: 192) refers, such as companies, political parties, interest groups or public bureaucracies. These similarities lead to the belief that panellists in general show no autonomous thought in their televised comments, although the limitations of the current study prevent us from knowing the exact mechanisms of influence and pressure which may be established between the aforementioned actors regarding the generation and transmission of discourse.

2. Theoretical framework

A number of authors (Lazar, 1995; Price, 2001) emphasize the centrality of mass media in the public opinion-forming process, to the point that it is considered that “public opinion is inseparable from mass media” (Lazar, 1995: 4). Thus, mass media communicators, beyond their role as facilitators of the collection and exchange of ideas, play much more of a leading role in trying to configure and shape opinion. Moreover, these media elites are active participants in the aforementioned process, proclaiming their own views through partisan political analysis and editorial support given to politicians and candidates (Price, 2001: 104, 109).

In fact, according to Gladys E. Lang and Kurt Lang’s (1983) process-based model, the mass media goes beyond mediation between individuals and collectives because it plays an active role in the public opinion-forming process (*opinion-building*) (Grossi, 2007: 134). Giorgio Grossi concludes, in line with Lang and Lang’s (1983) research perspective on public opinion, that the mass media has gradually expanded its role within the public sphere: “It has thus become responsible for the scheduling of the issues to be discussed as well as the views on such issues” (2007: 104). In this way, media play a leading role in the public opinion-forming process by acting as not only channels of communication, but also as independent producers of public discourses. Therefore, authors such as Crespi (2000: 137), when analysing the effect of new information technologies on the process of generating public opinion, highlight the fact that, at present, collective opinion is an increasingly manufactured product. This situation contrasts with a time when such opinion arose as a spontaneous product of discussion and public debate.

However, we should also take into account another of the constituent elements of what Grossi (2007: 91) calls the *campo demoscópico* (demoscopic field), which serves to identify the social space of formation and effect concerning public opinion in post-industrial societies. This element deals with politico-institutional elites and leaders, who perform, *inter alia*, the following tasks in the demoscopic field: thematising problems, defining the issues, competing in the opinion market, and attempting to guide and influence the general public (2007: 98).

According to the theoretical perspective outlined above, this paper attempts to verify whether the panellists examined merely exercise the aforementioned functions in the name of certain media groups and elites and, consequently, follow the narrative defined by these groups in their participation during debates, instead of building discourse that is the product of personal reflection and rigorous research into the matter at hand.

The above is related to a lack of independence on behalf of the panellists and to the evolution of the space of opinion over the past two decades, which has been analysed by Jacobs and Townsley. According to these authors, internal distinctions within this space have become more pronounced and, while one part remains anchored in the traditions of journalistic autonomy and independent opinion —the professional columnist—, another part —the political talk show— moves closer to the political field (2011: 107). Political panellists, therefore, are supposedly moving away from journalistic canons and situating themselves closer to political and economic power.

In addition to the role played in controlling the messages which reach the public, we shall examine whether the panellists’ discourse plays another relevant role in the generation of the so-called ‘climate of opinion’ and accordingly in the formation and modification of public opinion. In fact, according to the ‘spiral of silence’ theory, the mass media is one of the two sources from which people may estimate the climate of opinion (Noelle-Neumann, 2010: 258). This theory is based on the assumption that society threatens to isolate and exclude those members who deviate from the consensus. As a result of this fear of isolation,

people attempt to continuously evaluate the climate of opinion. To this end, they test which opinions and behaviours are approved or disapproved of in their setting, and which are gaining or losing strength. This influences an individual's inclination to express themselves and their behaviour in general. In this way, if people believe that their opinion is part of a consensus, they express themselves with confidence in public and private conversations (Noelle-Neumann, 2010: 259-260). On the contrary, those people who feel that they are in the minority become silent and, as Noelle-Neumann points out, those who feel relatively isolated from others are the most likely to modify their electoral behaviour and, for example, participate in a "last-minute swing" (2010: 23).

From our perspective, if the messages disseminated in talk shows are perceived as a relevant sign of the aforementioned climate of opinion, the views expressed in these programmes can be interpreted as the majority opinions present in society. This would lead to a situation in which those individuals who take a different (supposedly minority) view decide not to publicly express their opinions, resulting in a false perception of the spread of the panellists' views. In this sense, the spiral of silence theory assumes that when people feel they are in a minority they become cautious and silent, which thus reinforces the perception of the weakness of their opinion (Noelle-Neumann, 2010: 260). According to this perspective, therefore, the perception of an unfavourable climate of opinion will decisively condition the possibility of an individual publicly defending their views.

3. Objectives

This paper takes as a starting point the hypothesis that most political panellists play the role of mere intermediaries in regards to the dissemination through the Spanish media of certain ideas defended by political and media elites. In this sense, these panellists contribute to modelling and modifying public opinion. Consequently, they speak on behalf of specific social interests and lack autonomy in their participation in the debate.

Based on this assumption, it should be noted that one of the objectives of this study is to find out to what extent the panellists who participate in the programme *Las Mañanas de Cuatro* exhibit independence with regard to the interests of Spanish political parties and media elites. The question is whether these talk show participants generally act as mere spokespeople of certain media or political elites, and are limited to disseminating the discourse developed by those elites, or whether, conversely, a considerable degree of autonomy can be seen in the panellists' discourse.

A further goal of this study is to ascertain if, with regard to the political debates included in the television programme *Las Mañanas de Cuatro*, both the television channel Cuatro Televisión and the media or political groups linked to the panellists are primarily responsible for both setting the agenda concerning the items to be discussed and determining opinions on such items, thus intervening in the public opinion-forming process. To this end, we shall examine whether the panellists' discourse can be grouped into categories according to similarity in form and content, and whether these positions fully coincide with the ideas defended by various Spanish political parties.

4. Methodology

In terms of methodology, this study uses the investigative technique of content analysis. Although initially this technique was eminently quantitative in character, at present the analytical plurality existing under the common heading 'content analysis' is recognized: it is not limited to the quantification of what is expressed in the communication process, but also addresses its interpretation (Cea, 2009: 351-352). In this sense, we share the view that the interest in content analysis "lies not only in the description of contents, but in what these contents, once processed, could teach us concerning 'other things'" (López Noguero,

2002: 175). Therefore, the presence of certain content, such as positive or negative views regarding the actions of different political parties, or some of the sectors established within them, have been considered indexes of the degree of autonomy shown by each panellist. An index, as Krippendorff (1990: 56) points out, is a variable whose significance rests on its degree of correlation with other phenomena. In this correlation there must be a causal link between the index and these phenomena, not a relation of similarity or a relation based on arbitrary convention.

In our case, of the three types of indexes highlighted by Krippendorff (1990: 57) in mass communication research, the one we have decided to employ is the balance between the number of favourable and unfavourable attributes of a symbol, idea or topic. We have done so because this index tends to function as a measure of focus or trend. In the present study, we have analysed the balance between the number of favourable and unfavourable attributes which the panellists associate with the different political parties mentioned during the debates.

At first, the messages transmitted by the panellists were categorised according to their favourable or unfavourable orientation towards each of the political parties or some of their factions. A quantification of the messages was also made in order to classify them ranked in accordance with their frequency of occurrence in the sum of the talk shows examined.

Measuring these favourable or unfavourable attributes will allow us to ascertain the level of partisanship shown by the panellists. To this end, we have used an analysis of asseverations, which, according to Irving Janis' classification, forms part of Semantic Content Analysis, in order to give us the frequency with which certain objects are characterized in a particular way (Krippendorff, 1990: 46). This kind of technique is similar to Thematic Analysis, one example of which would be considering the Partido Popular (the Christian democratic People's Party) party to be a criminal organisation, an idea conveyed by some of the panellists examined.

On the basis of the data collected regarding the panellists' asseverations, an indicator has been developed to measure the degree of independence shown by panellists in their discourse. The purpose of this indicator is to verify if each of the panellists express different types of opinion on the same political party (or concerning the same group within this party), or if, on the contrary, certain panellists always take a stand in favour of or against the decisions taken by a particular party or by one of its factions.

Moreover, the analysis of asseverations has also been used to elaborate a list of the most frequent messages conveyed by the panellists in order to verify if the same idea is disseminated by different panellists. Should this reiteration prove to be significant, we will consider that these messages have been elaborated by media and political elites and that, through their propagation, such elites are influencing the public opinion-forming process.

Utilizing these methods, we attempt to discover if the panellists examined merely use preconceived ideas which, rather than being the product of reflection, constitute a simplification of social and political reality because the view they defend is mainly based on messages elaborated by certain political or media elites. This position is similar to that of Taibo (2010: 36), who believes that panellists usually renounce autonomous thought and merely comply, either manifestly or covertly, with the dictates of a business or political group.

Regarding the corpus analysed in the current study, we have chosen the political debates which form part of the television programme *Las Mañanas de Cuatro*, broadcast on the 10th, 11th, 13th and 14th of October, 2016. This programme is broadcast by the private television channel Cuatro Televisión, which belongs to the business group, Mediaset España Comunicación. These debates were viewed through the digital version of the programme, which is available on the on-demand television platform of Mediaset España (www.mitele.es). The time period was selected specifically due to the fact that, during that

week, media attention was focused on two issues which directly affected the two main parties of the Spanish political landscape: namely, the trial of the so-called “caso Gürtel” (the “Gürtel” corruption case) in the case of the Partido Popular and, in the case of the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (the social democratic Spanish Socialist Workers' Party), the internal crisis which led to the resignation of its Secretary-General Pedro Sánchez. Although we consider that the analysis of a larger sample would have been desirable, we believe that the selected corpus is broadly representative of all the political debates involving talk show guests on the major nationwide television channels. Our opinion on the representativeness of the sample is based on the following two reasons. Firstly, because following a preliminary enquiry into the object of analysis in this study, it was found that the structure and functioning of political debates broadcast on the main private television channels are very similar. Thus, in the morning programmes *Espejo Público* (broadcast by Antena 3), *Al Rojo Vivo* (broadcast by La Sexta), and *Las Mañanas de Cuatro* (broadcast by Cuatro) different panellists who are normally grouped by their proximity to either the positions of the government or the political opposition are invited to participate. In addition, the role of the moderator is almost identical in all debates, the only clear difference being the biased behaviour that moderators exhibit by emphasizing certain aspects of the issue under discussion, which benefit, to a greater or lesser extent, one political party or another. Secondly, because there were only two people who participated on more than one occasion (specifically, twice) during the broadcasts selected, as such the total number of panellists who were examined ($n = 18$) adequately represents the diversity of those invited to these debates. This is reinforced by the fact that many of these panellists participate in several of the aforementioned programmes simultaneously, from which we may conclude that the archetype of the regular contributor to this type of television programme is very similar across them all.

5. Research findings

First of all, it should be noted that, during the discussions, most of the panellists examined make judgements which are exclusively favourable or unfavourable about the behaviour of the leaders of each political party. In fact, of the 18 different panellists who participated in the programme *Las Mañanas de Cuatro* during the time period analysed, 17 of them took clearly partisan positions in their discourse, meaning that this feature characterizes 94.4% of all participants in the debates.

A high level of partisanship can be seen in the participation of most panellists. In particular, we have been able to establish the following positions according to the preferences expressed toward one political party or another:

a) Position 1: A clear defence of the current formation of the Partido Popular (henceforth: PP).

This position is adopted by the following panellists:

- Cristina de la Hoz. Journalist from the digital newspaper *El Independiente*.
- Esther Esteban. Journalist and writer. Collaborator in the news agency *EFE*, as well as the newspapers *ABC*, *El Mundo* and *Diario Siglo XXI*, and on the radio station *Onda Cero*, in addition to having been the director of general news for *Telemadrid*.
- Javier Gállego Jané. Journalist and sociologist. Collaborator on the radio programme *Julia en la onda*, from the radio station *Onda Cero*. Collaborator in several *Telemadrid* and *Telecinco* programmes.
- Jaime González. Head of opinion for the newspaper *ABC*.
- Carmen Morodo. Deputy Director for the newspaper *La Razón*.

- José Alejandro Vara. Collaborator in the radio station *EsRadio* and for the digital newspaper *Vozpópuli*. Previously, director of *La Razón* and editorial director of national media for the Vocento Group.
- b) Position 2: Criticisms of the PP and defence of different sectors within the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (henceforth: PSOE) and the recently-formed, left-wing party, Podemos.
- This heterogeneous group of panellists are composed of the following individuals:
- José María Calleja. Professor and journalist. Previously, director of the programme *El debate de CNN+* from the television channel CNN+, and collaborator in the political discussions of numerous television stations including TVE, Cuatro Televisión, Antena 3, La Sexta and Telecinco.
 - José María Crespo. General Director of the digital newspaper Público.
 - Cristina Fallarás. Director of the digital newspaper Diarío16.
 - Javier Gallego. Director of the radio programme *Carne Cruda* (*carnecruda.es*) and contributor to the digital newspaper *Eldiario.es*.
 - Fernando Garea. Parliamentary correspondent of the newspaper *El País*.
 - Alicia Gutiérrez. Head of investigation of the digital newspaper *InfoLibre*.
 - Esther Palomera. Political chronicler of the digital newspaper *El Huffington Post*.
 - Sol Sánchez. Former member of parliament for the political party *Izquierda Unida* (United Left) and ATTAC¹ activist.
 - Beatriz Talegón. Head of opinion of Diarío16.
 - Ana Terradillos. Journalist for the radio station Cadena SER.

- c) Position 3: Criticisms exclusively levelled against the current management of the PP.
- In the debates analysed on the programme *Las Mañanas de Cuatro*, the only panellist who complies with this characteristic is Ketty Garat, a parliamentary chronicler for the Libertad Digital Group and *EsRadio*.

- d) Position 4: Demonstration of independence in some comments.
- The only panellist to show a certain degree of independence in some of their comments is the writer and journalist Ernesto Ekaizer, who has held the position of deputy director of *El País* and executive director of Público. In spite of displaying greater autonomy than the rest of the panellists, in most cases Ekaizer takes a stand against the PP.

That most of the talk show guests take a clear partisan position is clearly evidenced by the polarisation of views expressed on the trial relating to the Gürtel case.

Although this plot particularly affects the PP, the six panellists that we have categorized as belonging to Position 1 either frame these corrupt practices in a context of more widespread corruption which they contend is now 'in the past' or they deny the responsibility of the current management of the PP for such acts. The following are some of the arguments used by these panellists and the reasons for refuting them given by some of their counterparts:

- Corruption in the PP is in the past. This argument is used by Carmen Morodo, for example, when she argues that in the past there was a structural problem concerning the PP and highlights the fact that this problem does not affect the

¹ ATTAC is the acronym for *Association pour la Taxation des Transactions Financières et pour l'Action Citoyenne*, an international organisation involved in the alter-globalization movement, which opposes neoliberal globalization.

current government headed by Mariano Rajoy: “Not at present, but it has existed” (Cuatro Televisión, 11/10/2016); by José Alejandro Vara, who repeats on several occasions that these corruption cases occurred 20 years ago (Cuatro Televisión, 11/10/2016); by Jaime González when he uses the statements of Francisco Correa regarding Antonio Cámara —personal secretary of José María Aznar— in order to establish a clear separation line between the government headed by Rajoy and the government headed by Aznar with regard to their involvement in corruption. González interprets that Cámara constituted the connecting link between Correa and the PP which allowed Correa to carry out criminal acts, and this only finished because Cámara was not trusted by Rajoy (Cuatro Televisión, 14/10/2016); by Esther Esteban, who puts forward a similar argument to that of González when interpreting Correa’s statements: “Correa has drawn a dividing line between the Aznar government and the Mariano Rajoy government” (Cuatro Televisión, 13/10/2016); lastly, Javier Gállego Jané also attributes corruption to the Aznar government, and contends that Rajoy acted as a trigger to put a stop to Correa’s constant presence at the PP headquarters (Cuatro Televisión, 13/10/2016). This reasoning is refuted by Ekaizer (Cuatro Televisión, 11/10/2016) and other panellists from the Position 2 category, who deny that the Gürtel plot is in the past because it affects certain people who hold positions of responsibility within the current formation of the PP. The panellists mentioned are Fallarás (Cuatro Televisión, 10/10/2016), Palomera (Cuatro Televisión, 13/10/2016) and Sánchez (Cuatro Televisión, 14/10/2016).

- Corruption was a problem which affected all political parties equally. Gállego Jané is the panellist who most strongly defends this argument, which serves to camouflage the responsibility of the PP for the corruption cases that were covered in the debates because they are placed in the context of a presumed widespread corruption which would affect any governing party. Gállego utilizes the words of Correa relating to the alleged existence of many others who enriched themselves illegally with public money, saying, “it is true that there were many *Correas* in Spain in many political parties, in many city councils and in many other places. This is a portrait and an analysis of a certain era of Spain” (Cuatro Televisión, 13/10/2016). Although Correa himself does not clarify if these individuals negotiated exclusively with the PP or with other parties, Gállego connects them with all political parties and is very blunt in maintaining his view when he affirms that corruption has affected all parties, contributing to the establishment of a situation of impunity, and when he says “let us not say that some of them are all corrupt and others are not” (Cuatro Televisión, 13/10/2016). González (Cuatro Televisión, 14/10/2016) also generalises when discussing corruption saying that he is not surprised by the information concerning the behaviour of the companies linked to the Gürtel plot because this has been almost invariably how most of the big companies in Spain have conducted themselves for nearly 40 years.
- The application for cancellation of the Gürtel trial on the part of the lawyer representing the PP, Jesús Santos, is justified through one of the following explanations. It is either a defence strategy which has been decided outside the party leadership, or while one sector of the PP’s leadership knew about and was uncritical towards this strategy, another sector opposes it and wants to regenerate the party, which apparently demonstrates that only some PP leaders are attempting to hide corruption. Three panellists justify the application for the cancellation of this court case on the grounds that it is simply a strategy decided by the party’s defence lawyers and is supposedly distant from decisions taken by its leadership. While Jaime González and Cristina de la Hoz (Cuatro Televisión, 10/10/2016) define

it, albeit in a critical manner, as a “defence strategy”, José Alejandro Vara, although defining it in the same way, shows more understanding of this strategy because he believes that “the juridical attitude of the party’s lawyers in a trial is understandable” (Cuatro Televisión, 11/10/2016). Morodo, by contrast, rebuffs this argument, pointing out that the lawyer representing the PP would not proceed in any way without endorsement from the party leadership (Cuatro Televisión, 11/10/2016). Nevertheless, this journalist takes the opportunity to attribute complicity with the lawyer’s strategy to a minority of the PP’s leaders—in fact, she only mentions the party’s Secretary-General, María Dolores de Cospedal—, since Morodo emphasizes that some deputy secretaries and the majority of the PP electorate “want the party to show a combative stance regarding this structural problem” (Cuatro Televisión, 11/10/2016). The picture of the PP which emerges from Morodo’s comments is, therefore, that of a political party involved in the fight against corruption. Faced with this view, several of the panellists categorized as belonging to Position 2 convey the following message: the PP pursues a strategy that consists of giving importance exclusively to the legal responsibility in the Gürtel case while ignoring the political responsibility. However, the PP leaders do not respect even this, already self-interested, discourse because they also sabotage the judicial process. Fallarás (Cuatro Televisión, 10/10/2016) claims that it is very convenient for the PP to separate ethics from politics and to focus exclusively on the judicial sphere. Gutiérrez also highlights one of the strategic actions of this party by claiming that the PP brought a private prosecution lasting nearly four years “which it used to torpedo the process from within” (Cuatro Televisión, 11/10/2016). For their part, Terradillos (Cuatro Televisión, 13/10/2016), Calleja (Cuatro Televisión, 13/10/2016) and Sánchez (Cuatro Televisión, 14/10/2016) coincide in expressing their indignation at the fact that after announcing the assumption of responsibility, the PP have tried to annul or torpedo the judicial proceedings. Crespo (Cuatro Televisión, 11/10/2016) indirectly holds the PP leadership responsible for trying to annul the Gürtel trial, because he claims that the lawyer must have consulted his decision in this matter with the party.

In addition to the conflicting views described above concerning specific aspects of the Gürtel trial, another sign of partisanship on behalf of the panellists can be seen in the great difference between their positions regarding who is ultimately responsible in the corruption cases discussed.

During the debates, we see how the group of panellists classified in the Position 1 category never holds the PP responsible as an organisation but merely criticises the particular behaviour of a specific party leader. In contrast, the group of panellists critical of the PP blames the party as an entity for the actions which are being tried. In this respect, there is a recurring message in the comments of several of the panellists analysed: they consider that the PP has acted as a criminal organisation in the Gürtel plot as well as in many others.

The panellist who expresses this message in the strongest possible terms is Sol Sánchez, who defines the PP as “a web of corruption standing for elections” (Cuatro Televisión, 14/10/2016), in addition to saying that the facts coming to light in the Gürtel trial constitute a *modus operandi*, and that “we are governed by a mafia” (Cuatro Televisión, 14/10/2016). Fallarás expresses a similar sentiment, stating that the alleged PP illegal

financing manual² “reinforces the idea that the PP was a criminal organisation” (Cuatro Televisión, 10/10/2016). José María Calleja conveys a comparable message when interpreting Francisco Correa’s statements in the *Gürtel* trial as a description of a consolidated way of acting within the PP: “stealing in order to conduct their electoral campaigns” (Cuatro Televisión, 13/10/2016). Beatriz Talegón also considers that the aforementioned web of corruption is a further example of the *modus operandi* of a political party—the PP—that acts outside the law (Cuatro Televisión, 10/10/2016).

The journalist Esther Palomera (Cuatro Televisión, 13/10/2016) takes a slightly more moderate position by pointing out that the PP has been the protagonist in political corruption over the last twenty years, and, in this way, responds to Javier Gállego’s assertion that corruption in Spain has affected all political parties. Palomera notes, by contrast, that the corruption has occurred particularly in those institutions governed by the PP.

Finally, Ekaizer, Gallego and Garea also hold the PP as an organisation responsible for corruption, but limit themselves to talking solely about the criminal acts related to the *Gürtel* case. Ekaizer argues that Correa’s statement shows that Aznar, Rajoy, Cascos and that whole generation are behind the corruption cases being tried (Cuatro Televisión, 14/10/2016). Gallego, from a similar perspective, directly indicates the last two presidents of the PP as possibly those ultimately responsible for the awarding of contracts connected with the *Gürtel* case, and raises the following question: “In order for these contracts to have been awarded, there has to have been a politician who awarded them. Who are Mister Y and Mister Z? Perhaps Rajoy and Aznar” (Cuatro Televisión, 14/10/2016). Garea, furthermore, only makes reference to the responsibility of the PP and notes that this party benefited from what occurred in the *Gürtel* plot.

Furthermore, the panellists classified in the Position 1 category also remain radically opposed to the panellists classified in positions 2 and 4 with regard to the discussion on whether Mariano Rajoy should be tried with reference to the *Gürtel* case.

In this case, the panellists that adopt positions close to PSOE or Podemos—Position 2—repeatedly seek to exploit the *Gürtel* trial in order to hold responsible, to a greater or lesser degree, the leader of the PP, whose party they aim to replace in the central government. In this respect, Fallarás (Cuatro Televisión, 10/10/2016) considers that Rajoy should be brought to trial while Sánchez (Cuatro Televisión, 14/10/2016) maintains that the conservative leader’s involvement in this plot is clear. In addition, the former Member of Parliament for Izquierda Unida makes use of the latter argument to deny that the *Gürtel* case is a thing of the past. Terradillos, for her part, searches for any element that links the Spanish Prime Minister with the *Gürtel* plot and maintains that “Correa indicates the involvement of Xosé Cuiña, who was very close to Mr. Rajoy” (Cuatro Televisión, 13/10/2016). Finally, Javier Gallego (Cuatro Televisión, 14/10/2016) claims that the accusation against Rajoy is implicit in Correa’s statement. González (Cuatro Televisión, 14/10/2016), adopting a partisan position opposite to the panellists mentioned above, strongly refutes Gallego’s assertion and adds that the situation alleged by this panellist is what some of the panellists present would wish. Esteban (Cuatro Televisión, 13/10/2016) also shares the view of González and claims that Correa has established a dividing line between the governments of Aznar and Rajoy. De la Hoz (Cuatro Televisión, 10/10/2016), for her part, underlines that judges have already rejected several times the request that Mariano Rajoy testifies.

² Fallarás refers to the explanatory PowerPoint presentation which, according to the newspaper *El Mundo* (Urreiztieta, *Elmundo.es*, 10/10/2016), made it possible for dozens of mayors belonging to the PP to learn how to finance their electoral campaigns irregularly during the years in which the *Gürtel* plot was in operation.

The widely differing interpretations regarding the same issue, as described above, seem to form part of some of the argumentative stratagems used by the *todólogos*³, to whom Taibo (2010: 74) refers. The following examples illustrate some of these stratagems: constant repetition of the same arguments, which are imposed by driving a panellist's rival to exhaustion; the use of abusive generalizations; the use of synecdoche; and the use of formulas of double standards, which allow laws or rulings to be defended or contested as the panellists see fit.

The other main issue under discussion during the programmes examined was the resignation of Pedro Sánchez as Secretary-General of the PSOE. A consequence of the ploys orchestrated by a group of members of the PSOE Federal Executive Committee aimed at forcing the dissolution of this body. This resignation brought about the formation of a managing committee to lead the party until a new federal congress can be held.

In this matter, all the panellists classified as belonging to Position 1 agree with those members of the Position 2 group who, although usually disapproving of the actions of the PP, are close to the sector of the PSOE that is critical of Pedro Sánchez.

During the discussion on the above subject, the holders of these two opposing positions broadly defend the following two contrary messages regarding the resignation of Sánchez and its consequences on the pact between the PP and the PSOE:

- a) Faced with the lack of any other reasonable alternative, a pact between the PP and the PSOE is necessary in order for the former to govern.

Morodo (Cuatro Televisión, 11/10/2016) finds the abstention of the PSOE logical in order to allow the PP to govern, not least because negotiation between the socialists and the pro-independence supporters (which is allegedly the only alternative to the pact between the two main political parties) would not be understood in certain territories. González is pragmatic when arguing that the abstention of the PSOE is logical because the party is acting exclusively in its own interests, he contends that if the general elections were repeated “the PSOE would be crushed” (Cuatro Televisión, 14/10/2016). Vara also adopts a pragmatic position when he claims that although the PSOE is sure to lose many of its supporters for allowing the PP to govern, “they have no other choice”. In addition to the supposed lack of alternatives for the socialists, Vara interprets the defenestration of Pedro Sánchez as a necessary evil in order to avoid a pact with Podemos. Esteban, for her part, praises the existing good relations between the PP and the PSOE, since she interprets the moderation shown by the socialist managing committee when their members talk about the Gürtel case as “an appeal to prudence and political respect between adversaries” (Cuatro Televisión, 13/10/2016).

- b) There has been a *coup d'état* within the PSOE in order to remove Pedro Sánchez and thus facilitate the governance of the PP.

This message is transmitted by Talegón (Cuatro Televisión, 10/10/2016), Gutiérrez (Cuatro Televisión, 11/10/2016) and Ekaizer (Cuatro Televisión, 11/10/2016); Javier Gallego is categorical on this matter, stating, “the PSOE has ‘beheaded’ its Secretary-General in a tortuous manner” (Cuatro Televisión, 14/10/2016). Sol Sánchez (Cuatro Televisión, 14/10/2016), although not making explicit reference to a *coup d'état*, talks about the common objective between the PP and the PSOE to silence each other's corruption during the period of abstention negotiations. Crespo (Cuatro Televisión, 11/10/2016), from

³ Carlos Taibo considers that, above all, the panellist is a *todólogo*, a term which he defines as such: “someone who, by definition, is supposed to know, that knows, about everything” (2010: 33).

a much more moderate position, merely criticises the problems which the PSOE would face should it facilitate the investiture of Rajoy.

It should be noted that, as regards the issue of the abstention of the PSOE, all panellists who maintain or have maintained a close link with any media from the PRISA Group remained silent on this matter during the debates, or merely denied the existence of a pact of silence aimed at hiding the corruption of the PP while the abstention of the PSOE was being negotiated. The reason behind the panellists' silence is presumably continuity with the clearly defensive position regarding the PP-PSOE pact maintained by the media of the PRISA Group since the general elections of the 26th of June, 2016. For these panellists, whose position in the debates is a blunt criticism of corruption cases affecting the PP, it would be incongruous to simultaneously defend the socialists facilitating a PP government. Consequently, they opt for discretion, as such the following panellists linked to the PRISA Group have maintained a total silence on this issue: Fernando Garea, from *El País*; Ana Terradillos, from Cadena SER, and José María Calleja, who directed the television programme *El debate de CNN+* between 1999 and 2010. Furthermore, Esther Palomera, from *El Huffington Post*, merely denies the existence of a pact of silence on corruption agreed between the PP and the PSOE.

In the case of all other panellists, coherence between their individual participation and the discourse of the media for which they work has also been almost absolute. In the group of panellists which clearly defends the current formation of the PP —Position 1—, there is an obvious concurrence between the discourses of Jaime González and *ABC*; between the discourses of Carmen Morodo and *La Razón*; between the discourses of Cristina de la Hoz and *El Independiente*; between the discourses of José Alejandro Vara and *ABC* or *La Razón*, and between the discourse of Esther Esteban and *ABC* or *Diario Siglo XXI*.

Among the panellists classified as belonging to Position 2, in addition to those who are linked to companies within the PRISA Group (mentioned above), we find concurrence between their messages and the discourse of the media for which they work. This can be seen in the following cases:

- José María Crespo and *Público*.
- Cristina Fallarás and *Diario 16*.
- Javier Gallego and *Eldiario.es*.
- Alicia Gutiérrez and *InfoLibre*.

Furthermore, Sol Sánchez's discourse is in line with that of the political party Izquierda Unida, which Sánchez represented in the Spanish Parliament.

The comments made by the five panellists mentioned show that all of them, in addition to being critical of the PP, advocate the establishment of a left-wing government, when faced with a possible PP-PSOE pact. They and the mass media or political parties to which they are linked, are usually critical of both the PP and of the faction heading the PSOE after the resignation of Pedro Sánchez.

With regard to the panellist classified in the Position 3 category, Ketty Garat, we must highlight that her critical discourse of the current leadership of the PP coincides with that of the media for which she works: Libertad Digital and EsRadio. Garat constantly talks about the alleged pact of silence between the political parties PP, PSOE and Ciudadanos (the centrist, liberal party Citizens) concerning the Gürtel trial, and about a possible deal between Francisco Correa and the public prosecutor's office in order to clean up the image of the current leadership of the PP (Cuatro Televisión, 14/10/2016).

Finally, it should be noted that Ernesto Ekaizer is the only one of the panellists examined who demonstrates a certain degree of independence in some of his comments. Although the main focus of his criticisms is the PP, and to a lesser extent the PSOE, Ekaizer's discourse exhibits some of the features which, according to Sánchez (2006: 79), should

characterise the professional journalistic opinion. In this regard, his comments are based on prior knowledge of the facts and his assertions are usually proved using objective arguments. An example of the latter is the information that Ekaizer provides, in the debate on the 14th of October, concerning the posts which Mariano Rajoy held within the PP between 1996 and 2004. This information is provided in order to demonstrate a possible link between Rajoy and the Gürtel case based on temporal congruence. Likewise, Ekaizer acts with rigour when he comments on the criminal practices carried out within the Spanish banking sector over the last few years. Thus, unlike the rest of the panellists, instead of holding any specific political party responsible or making generalizations about the perpetrators of these actions, this journalist points out the failure of the system of banking activity inspection. Ekaizer (Cuatro Televisión, 14/10/2016) mentions that the board of the Bank of Spain ignored the warning made by inspectors regarding the infeasibility of the flotation of Bankia, a major Spanish retail bank. Furthermore, this panellist refers to an additional failure of this system, as Pedro Solbes, former Minister of Economy, was warned during Rodríguez Zapatero's government (2004–2008) about the risks of the excessive expansion of bank credit that was taking place.

It should be noted, in addition, that Ekaizer is the only panellist who apart from strongly criticising the PP with respect to the Gürtel case, also refers to the corruption case which directly affects the PSOE: the so-called “caso de los ERE” (Cuatro Televisión, 14/10/2016).

These characteristic features of Ekaizer's comments as a panellist contrast with those of the rest of the panellists critical of the PP, who only denounce one decision taken by the PSOE: that is, the pact established with the PP which allowed them to govern. This attitude is presumably due to the fact that most panellists simply spread the message that a pact between the left-wing parties is better than one between the PP and the PSOE.

Likewise, Ekaizer does not always improvise when giving his opinion, rather some of his comments are characterised by reflection. In fact, he is the only panellist who goes beyond connecting the PP-PSOE pact of silence on corruption with the abstention of the socialists. Ekaizer (Cuatro Televisión, 14/10/2016) reflects on who holds real power in the PSOE (Javier Fernández and Susana Díaz) and he attributes the leniency of these leaders towards the corruption of the PP to the fact that in their own party there is also a very serious case of corruption: namely, the issue of the so-called “ERE” in Andalusia.

A complex analysis of the social and political reality is virtually non-existent in the participation of the rest of the panellists. Most of them fail to provide almost any rigorous information about the topics discussed, and usually their arguments are based on mere personal opinion. On the contrary, we find one of the characteristics which Bourdieu (2007: 39–40) attributed to thinkers who appear on television: that is, the use of preconceived ideas.

Regarding the role played by mass media in the agenda-setting process relating to which issues are to be discussed and the opinions on those issues, we have included in Table 1 the most repeated messages during the debates examined.

In nearly all cases, each of the messages corresponds to the same group of panellists, based on our established classification of political tendencies. The congruence between those messages and the discourse of certain media appear to demonstrate that it is these media which act as autonomous makers of public discourse through the political debates of the programme *Las Mañanas de Cuatro*, and therefore play an active role in the public opinion-forming process.

Table 1. Messages repeated most frequently by panellists

Message	Number of repetitions	panellists' position
The PP as an organisation is directly involved in the Gürtel case	7	2 and 4
Mariano Rajoy must be tried for the Gürtel case	6	2 and 4
The Gürtel case is a matter of the past	5	1
The PP sabotaged the judicial proceedings in the Gürtel case	5	2
The resignation of Pedro Sánchez was the result of a <i>coup d'état</i>	4	2 and 4
Part, or all, of the leadership of the PP are not in accordance with or did not know about the application for cancellation of the Gürtel trial	4	1

Source: prepared by the author

Considering that the moderator of the debates severely restricts the number of comments from each panellist, the frequency with which the messages are repeated is very relevant. It is noteworthy that the reiteration of criticism of the PP is more common in the study because a greater number of panellists who are close to left-wing or social democratic positions have been invited to participate in the debates, in comparison to those who are close to liberal or Christian democratic positions. In fact, 11 panellists have been classified under the former category (positions 2 and 4, although Ekaizer expresses greater impartiality than the rest), in comparison to 7 who can be classified under the latter category (positions 1 and 3).

It is apparent that the panellists who are close to left-wing or social democratic positions and critics of the PP (positions 2 and 4) show great interest in disseminating messages which may influence a loss of votes for this party. In this sense, the reiteration of the following ideas is noteworthy: the PP as an organisation is directly involved in the Gürtel case (present in the comments of 7 different panellists); and, Mariano Rajoy should be tried for this case (and idea repeated by 6 panellists). By contrast, 5 of the panellists who defend the current leadership of the PP (position 1) convey the message that the Gürtel case is a matter of the past. Equally, 4 of them attempt to uncouple the current leadership of the party from the strategic decisions taken by its lawyers during the trial for this case. In both cases, these panellists wish to convey both the idea that the current leaders of the PP have nothing to do with the mistakes of the past and that this case is a sort of external problem which these leaders have been forced to face.

6. Conclusions

The case of the debates on the programme *Las Mañanas de Cuatro* seems to confirm the role assigned by Grossi (2007: 104) to the media as being responsible for scheduling both the issues and the opinions on these issues. It appears that mass media play a central role in the public opinion-forming process since a large number of repeated messages have been disseminated through the broadcasts of the aforementioned programme. These messages are repeated in the discourse of almost all panellists and match the ideas propagated by the media they are linked to. Thus, during the period analysed, the television channel Cuatro Televisión has set the agenda by focusing the discussion on the Gürtel trial and the crisis of the PSOE. The panellists, in turn, have contributed to establishing a view on these issues through reiteration of the aforementioned messages.

Furthermore, most positions taken by the different panellists can be grouped into blocks according to similarity in the form and content of discourse. In fact, we have been able to situate the different talk show guests in very homogeneous groups, given that most of them always evaluate the actions of a particular political party in an exclusively negative or exclusively positive manner. Likewise, these positions often coincide with the ideas defended by specific political parties. We conclude from this that, in general, the panellists

merely play the role of a spokesperson for certain media and political groups by means of reproduction of the discourse elaborated by these groups. Except in the case of one of the panellists who participated in the debates examined, the comments appear not to be the result of critical reflection but rather of certain preconceived ideas which, moreover, often coincide with the discourse advocated by certain media groups or political parties. Therefore, it appears to be confirmed, in respect to this television programme, that most panellists renounce autonomous thought in their participation.

Likewise, the fact that there is a significant number of messages which are repeated and that, in many cases, the number of repetitions is so great, suggests that panellists are playing an important role as key elements in the transmission of a number of opinions on the issues discussed, which are elaborated by political and media elites in order to influence the public opinion-forming process.

It should be noted, lastly, that the political debates included in the programme *Las Mañanas de Cuatro* are apparently characterised by the presence of what Ortega (2006b: 46) calls “internal pluralism”, which relates to the diversity of consistent interpretations and approaches that journalists can provide to the audience. Nevertheless, the fact that most panellists do not elaborate autonomous discourse, but merely reproduce the discourse drawn up by certain political and media elites, implies that the specific media which acts as the platform of public debate –Cuatro Televisión– maintains control on the views that are to be disseminated.

Even though the presence of significant coincidences between the discourse of panellists and the discourse of certain media corporations or political groups has been observed, a more exhaustive study would be required in order to identify the reasons behind such congruency. Indeed, we must mention some of the limitations of this investigation, particularly those which affect the explanation of the process of mutual influences between political or media elites and panellists. Through the methodology used in the present study it is impossible to know with certainty what the cause-effect relationships are between the characteristics of the discourse of media and political elites and those of the discourse of panellists, even though we have noted that there are important similarities between the two. In the case of the panellists linked to media groups, it would have been necessary to expand research by exploring the factors which influence and put pressure on journalists when carrying out their work. In this regard, in order to improve our understanding of the power relations between the research subjects and political and media powers, some surveys should be drawn up to ascertain the perception of panellists in relation to the influences in their work as journalists. This could be accomplished by taking as a reference the model of perception of influences developed by Hanitzsch *et al.* (2010), or the model developed by Preston and Metykova (2009) concerning spheres of influence, which includes, among others, organisational factors and the political and economic system.

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