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Homogeneity and plurality of the media agenda in Chile. A crosslongitudinal study of the national print press between 1990 and 2015

Abstract

Through a cross-longitudinal news content analysis of 6.567 news articles published in two of the main national newspapers in Chile, this article addresses the evolution of the thematic agenda of both the elite and popular press -*La Tercera y Las Últimas Noticias*- between 1990 and 2015, specifically, at the level of the homogeneity and plurality in the news topics included in the coverage by the National Desk of the Chilean print press. Overall, the results reveal high levels of homogeneity between the thematic agenda of the popular and the elite press. Nevertheless, the data also show that such homogeneity has diminished across time, possibly explained by their audience orientation and with that, their editorial line. Likewise, the data indicate that in the analyzed period, the popular press increased significantly more than the elite press in the plurality of its thematic agenda.

Keywords

Journalism, thematic agenda, content analysis, news, Chile, crosslongitudinal study, diversity Index, intermedia agenda setting

1. Introduction

One of the functions of journalism and the mass media is to select and give visibility to issues to which the public turns its attention. This process of selecting and prioritizing certain events or problems is known as *agenda building* (Nisbet, 2008). The result of this process makes up the media agenda, or in other words, “a list of issues and events that are viewed at a point in time as ranked in a hierarchy of importance”, (Rogers & Dearing, 1988: 565). Hence, issues covered frequently and prominently by the media serve to guide the audience to regard certain issues as more or less important (McCombs, 2013: 37).

Although most studies have analyzed the media agenda at a specific moment in time, the study of the thematic agenda from a crosslongitudinal perspective offers several advantages. On the one hand, it allows for discovering structural trends in media coverage

within a specific media system, while also enabling to detect transformations that have occurred in the thematic coverage in a specific national context.

From this perspective, the goals of this study are three fold: to describe the evolution of the thematic agenda of the elite and popular Chilean press in the National Desk's news coverage for the period 1990-2015; to identify the degree of overlapping of the thematic agenda between the popular and elite press for the analyzed period -in other words, to know whether, in the more than two decades under analysis, there was a homogenous or heterogeneous thematic agenda; and, 3) to analyze the extent to which the elite and popular Chilean press have diversified their thematic agendas over time, generating greater plurality in their topics.

The print press was selected as the subject matter of analysis for its ongoing important influence on establishing the political agenda and because of its tendency to assign more funds to the coverage of different news content (Mellado et al, 2016; Skovsgaard & Van Dalen, 2013). Furthermore, because there were no samples available of other media types (television, radio and online media) for the entire period of time analyzed, it was decided to work only with the written press in order to obtain comparable results.

2. Chile as a case study

After 17 years of dictatorship, Chile today is considered to be one of the most prosperous countries, as well as most stable democracies, in Latin America (Mellado et al, 2012).

The dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet began to weaken after it lost the 1988 plebiscite, which voted on whether his government should continue for another eight years. The referendum was won by the Coalition of Parties for Democracy (Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia), which also triumphed in the 1989 presidential elections, with Patricio Aylwin becoming the first president in post-dictatorship Chile. The transition was achieved, however, through commitments reached between the military and their right-wing allies (Navia, 2010). In fact, Pinochet remained as Commander-in-Chief of the Army as well as Senator until 1998 when he was arrested in London for human rights violations and abuses - genocide, torture and other crimes - committed during his regime. The first Coalition government in Chile began then, implementing a sociopolitical model defined as an "incomplete" or "pacted" democracy (Garretón, 2012). The government maintained the neoliberal economic model implemented by the dictatorship with some regulatory measures to mitigate the effects of the reforms of the 1980s, although the economic inequalities remained (Garretón, 2012). In political terms, meanwhile, the institutional reforms of the Coalition were limited.

The two governments that followed that of Aylwin -Frei and Lagos- although unable to change the constitution imposed by Pinochet before the fall of his regime, were able, slowly but surely, to forge the way to a more participative country and to be less fearful of military reprisals. The government of Lagos, the first Socialist president after Salvador Allende, particularly demonstrated a change in the way in which citizens addressed *de facto* powers and started to raise their voice on issues they disagreed with.

In 2006, Michelle Bachelet became the first female president of Chile (fourth Coalition government). One of the first measures adopted by Bachelet was the approval of the Pro Participation Agenda for Citizens for 2006-2010. This aimed to improve the quality of Chilean democracy, placing citizens at the center of public policies (Checa, Lagos & Cabalin, 2011). During her first government (2006-2010), Bachelet launched the Social Protection System, but she had to deal with student demonstrations (Penguin Revolution). The escalating protests led to the articulation of a new range of political initiatives and demands both in the street and the mass media (Navia, 2010).

With regard to economic policies, the Coalition governments were not able (nor did they try) to substantially modify the neoliberal economic system installed by the Pinochet dictatorship, the principal objective of which was economic growth (Undurraga, 2012). Hence, overlapping between the business and political elite was consolidated, which also had consequences on the media system in Chile.

In March 2011, businessman Sebastián Piñera, a right-wing candidate and member of the Coalition for Change (Coalición por el Cambio) was elected president, producing for the first time in post-dictatorship a change in parties, from the center-left to the right (Avendaño, 2011). Piñera began his term with a program that sought to strengthen the democratic system and confidence in institutions by broadening citizen participation. Nevertheless, its impact was limited while Piñera further reinforced the neoliberal economic reforms, favoring productivity over social reforms. In 2011, in addition to the student protests against the neoliberal education system, other groups joined in, demanding better labor conditions, greater environmental protection, and in general, a decrease in social inequalities (Undurraga, 2012).

In January 2014, Bachelet returned to the presidency for the second time. She began her mandate by approving subsidized bonuses for low-income families. During her term a tax and an educational reform were also passed, aimed at shrinking social and economic inequalities. Her popularity, however, has progressively decreased due to corruption and political scandals that involve not only her government but the entire political class as well.

If we analyze the period involved in this study (1990–2015), we can see positive as well as negative elements. On the one hand, restrictions on freedom of expression imposed by Pinochet's regime and strongly upheld during the first decade of the return to democracy, disappeared. However, the citizens' political apathy as well as the spectacularization of politics and news topics in general, increasingly forced the media to adapt its work to a "new audience" (Mellado & Van Dalen, 2016; Mellado, López & Elórtégui, 2017).

In effect, since the return to democracy in Chile, an important change has occurred in the way in which the media relates to the audience – which can be observed at a glance by how different types of media have segmented the audience, creating a deep sociocultural transformation. This translates into audiences who are increasingly open to consumption, with greater expectations on quality of life, and increasingly dedicated to the use of media tools and technological advances (Hunneus, 2014). Likewise, although somewhat timidly, citizens have become more empowered through manifestations and requests for reinstating their rights, which picked up force at the turn of the 21st century during the government of Ricardo Lagos. Parallel to this, important levels of political disaffection has been observed, with a citizenry resentful of the corruption scandals and questioning public and private institutions. Despite this, recent studies have shown that the empowerment of the citizenry is still incipient (Hughes & Mellado, 2016) in a country with a power structure that continues to be oligarchical. Furthermore, the level of parallelism between the media and economic powers is high. Indeed, Chile has proportionally one of the highest concentration levels of media ownership in the region (Becerra & Mastrini, 2009). This concentration is especially evident in the print press, where the El Mercurio SAP and Copesa groups control the four national newspapers and information of general interest and almost 90% of regional newspapers, all of which have a right-leaning political orientation.

Given that this study is interested in learning about the evolution of the thematic agenda of the press in Chile, the results have major implications on understanding how the thematic agenda adapted or did not adapt to democracy, as well as the country's social and cultural changes.

3. Homogeneity versus heterogeneity in the news agenda and their evolution over time

In general, the body of work analyzing the media agenda from a crosslongitudinal point of view has adopted the classification of news or thematic topics to measure the evolution of the agenda (Bae, 2000; Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2008; Tan & Weaver, 2013). The system of news topics in journalism establishes areas to be covered, such as politics, economy, sports, social affairs, etc., in which journalists focus on society's institutions or sectors to inform the public (McCluskey, 2008). These areas, although not always obvious in the eyes of the audience, organize the newsroom's activity, making them a key factor in news production (Marchetti, 2005).

One of the issues relative to the evolution of the thematic agenda is the possible increase in news coverage that is more oriented to infotainment resulting from a greater market orientation, and in search of larger audiences (Uribe & Gunter, 2007). Since the 1970s, numerous studies have corroborated this fact both in the press and in television (Adams, 1978; Davie & Lee, 1995; Dominick, Wurtzel & Lometti, 1975; Slattery & Hakanen, 1994; Wulfemeyer, 1982; Scott & Gobetz, 1992; Hofstetter & Dozier, 1986). Although a lighter or more trivial news coverage can not be directly associated with specific news topics (Uribe & Gunter, 2007), there does seem to be consensus that some topics can be described as less serious compared to topic on national or international politics and economy. McLachlan and Golding (2000) classified 38 topics of their study as sensationalist and non-sensationalist topics. Grabe et al., (2001) also distinguished between non-sensationalist (politics, economy, education, health) and sensationalist news items (crime, accidents/disaster, celebrities, scandals and sex).

In the case of Spain -to some degree similar to Chile for its transitions to democracy- Casero and López-Rabadán (2012) found that the thematic agenda of *El País* and *Abc* remained relatively stable from 1980 to 2010, with prominent coverage of hard news items regarding national politics and little coverage of soft news items. On the other hand, several studies have found that the distinction between the elite and popular press is useful in explaining the differences in news selection (Sparks & Tulloch, 2000; Strömbäck, Karlsson & Hopmann, 2012).

In Chile, journalism is also governed by sectorized news coverage that coincides with the country's political institutional structure (Sunkel & Otano, 1999). Puente and Mújica (2004) analyzed the presence of news items in six media outlets of the capital city and in provinces, finding that national politics was the news topic that received more coverage in every case. Valenzuela and Arraigada (2009) analyzed the thematic agenda in the Chilean print press and television between 2000 and 2005. According to their results, the thematic agenda of newspapers is predominantly covered by news on politics, sports, culture/entertainment and crime, while television news broadcasts are mainly related to crime, sports, natural catastrophes and politics.

However, none of the previous studies in Chile has analyzed the media agenda from the beginning of the post-dictatorship period until the present, evaluating the structural characteristics and transformations that occurred throughout this crucial period in Chilean history when its political system was democratized and market expansion intensified, thereby generating different changes in the audiences (Hughes & Mellado, 2016; Mellado & Van Dalen, 2016).

Likewise, few studies in Chile have focused on comparing the similarities and differences of the thematic agenda in media with different market orientations (elite versus popular audiences). Nevertheless, in the case of Chile, the popular press has a cultural logic that differs from that of the elite press (Mellado & Humanes, 2015), which could generate

different thematic agendas. Therefore, we consider that the distinction between the popular and elite press is useful in understanding the construction of the thematic agenda.

On the basis of this discussion, we pose our first research question:

RQ1: How has the hierarchy of topics evolved in the news agenda of the elite and the popular press in Chile from 1990 to 2015?

One of the factors in setting the thematic agenda of each media outlet is the influence that the agendas of other media outlets can exert, giving rise to similar patterns in news coverage. McCombs (2013) argues that the thematic agenda in both traditional and new media outlets are redundant. Weimann and Brosius (2015) also state that along with the current diversification of the media, the homogenization of agendas has increased.

In Chile, systematic studies on the homogeneity of the media news agenda began in the early 21st Century. Their main goal is not to compare the agenda across time, but rather to compare the differences of the thematic agendas of different media outlets. Puente and Mujica (2003), for example, confirm the thematic similarity of newspapers, TV and radio networks both nationwide and in regions, with correlation coefficients higher than .80 between newspapers. Meanwhile, Valenzuela and Arriagada (2009), found a correlation coefficient in the agendas of newspapers *El Mercurio*, *La Tercera*, *La Segunda* and *Las Últimas Noticias* to be .65 while the coefficient of the TV networks they analyzed was higher than .90.

Gronemeyer and Porath (2014) analyzed the news agenda of the newspaper editorials of *El Mercurio*, *La Tercera*, *La Segunda*, *La Discusión* and *El Sur* in 2005, 2009 and 2011, using 14 topic categories. The study concluded that homogeneity is on average higher in the press in Santiago, with the agendas of *El Mercurio* and *La Tercera* being the most similar (in 2005 $Rho = .88$; in 2009 $Rho = .90$; 2011 $Rho = .82$). These authors concluded that the concentration of ownership is not the only factor that explains homogeneity, given that the two newspapers most similar in terms of editorial topics belong to different business groups and also belong to the elite press.

Considering that there are no systematic data on the study of the intermedia agenda in Chile prior to 2000, we pose the second formal research question of this study:

RQ2: What degree of homogeneity has kept the thematic agenda of the elite and popular presses in Chile between 1990 and 2015?

4. Plurality of the media agenda

The media, through their media agenda, promote plurality by increasing the diversity of news content and points of view offered to the audience. For McQuail (1992), one form of social integration is to offer the largest collection possible of ideas, values and information. One way in which the media fulfills this function is by showing a greater number of issues to which the public should pay attention (Roessler, 1999). The greater the concentration of only a few topics, the lower the diversity. Roessler (2007) has also stated that diversity can be measured at varying levels: macro (media system structure in terms of ownership), meso (programming diversity in audiovisual media) and micro (topics and personalities). This study focuses empirically on the micro level, analyzing the diversity of news topics.

Although there are several strategies and indices to measure diversity (Roessler, 2007; McDonald & Dimmick, 2003), we will use the Simpson index for diversity (1949), which takes into account two dimensions of diversity: the number of thematic categories and the number of news items per category (McDonald & Lin, 2004). The Simpson D index provides a standardized measure in which 0 is the minimum diversity and 1 the maximum possible diversity. Therefore, given that it is a standardized measure, it is interpretable in any case

study and enables to compare differences between groups; in our case, between years and newspapers.

In media studies, the Simpson diversity index has been frequently used to measure the level of plurality of the media agenda. Hence, Lee (2007) used the Simpson index to test the effect of competition on thematic diversity in the Taiwanese print press market. The results showed that the entrance of new newspapers in the period between 1998 and 2003 increased diversity in general, but not prominently, since the index of traditional newspapers remained constant and that of the new newspapers did not make a too substantial increase. Carpenter (2010) used the Simpson diversity index in her comparative study of traditional online newspapers and those based on the citizen journalism model. The author found a slightly higher level of plurality in citizen model publications ($D = .869$) than in traditional ones ($D = .839$). Tan and Weaver (2013) measured the diversity of the thematic agenda of *The New York Times* between 1956 and 2004, finding that this paper maintained, for 58 years, a high level of Simpson diversity ($D = .91$).

In the case of Chile, Valenzuela and Arriagada (2009) used the Hirschmann-Herfindahl index to measure diversity in *El Mercurio*, *La Tercera*, *La Segunda* and *Las Últimas Noticias* between 2000 and 2005. *La Segunda* and *El Mercurio* obtained higher diversity indices, followed by *La Tercera* and *Las Últimas Noticias*. Using the entropy index of Shannon, Gronemeyer and Porath (2014), they concluded that *El Mercurio* was the newspaper with the most variety of topics, followed by *La Tercera* and *La Segunda*, while the regional press (*La Discusión* and *El Sur*) was more diverse than the national press.

Considering that there are no data on the evolution of the diversity level of the agenda for the analyzed period (1990–2015), and that previous studies did not compare the diversity of the agenda between popular and elite media, we pose the following research question:

RQ3: What level of plurality has kept the thematic agenda of the Chilean press have between 1990 and 2015, and to what extent is this plurality similar or different in the elite and popular press during the analyzed period?

5. Method

5.1. Sample

The design of this study based on a crosslongitudinal content analysis of Chilean print press between April 1990¹ and 2015, published in two newspapers with nationwide circulation: *La Tercera* and *Las Últimas Noticias*. Specifically, we used 5-year intervals to analyze changes over time: 1990, 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010 and 2015.

The selection of these two newspapers was based on the argument of some authors who contend that competition for the same kind of audience would lead to homogeneity, whereas when this competition does not exist the media would tend to have diversity in styles and content (Esser, 1999). The two dailies represent different audience orientations; they are among the most widely read and belong to the two conglomerates that dominate print press, therefore, by analyzing them, we can detect whether these similarities and differences exist. *La Tercera* (from the Copesa group) is currently one of the most important elite newspapers in Chile. *Las Últimas Noticias* (from the El Mercurio S.A.P. group) is a popular newspaper with a large readership and a marked commercial model².

¹ Given that Pinochet left power in March 1990, we deliberately omitted all articles published before April 1990, so as to analyze only the post-dictatorial scenario.

² It is worth mentioning that the belonging of this two newspapers to the popular or the elite press varied over the period of time analyzed, and we consider that in our analysis. *La Tercera* was a popular newspaper until 1995, while *Las Últimas Noticias* was an elite newspaper until that same year.

Ideologically, the two dailies under analysis fall in line with right-wing politics, the reason for which no research question has been posed on the effect of ideology on the thematic agenda. Indeed, political ideology is not a variable in the Chilean print press as all print press in general is right wing oriented.

By using the constructed week method, a stratified-systematic sample of each newspaper was selected. The two dailies were analyzed during the same constructed weeks. Because daily and monthly variations are important factors when conducting a news content analysis, we divided each year into two sets of six months each, randomly selecting a starting date for each period.

The unit of analysis was the news item, defined as the group of continuous visual or verbal elements that refer to the same topic within the National Desk section. In total, 6,567 news items were codified. Table 1 shows how the sample was distributed.

Table 1. Distribution of the units of analysis per newspaper and year

	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015
<i>La Tercera</i>	721	569	443	656	714	620
<i>Las Últimas Noticias</i>	561	790	569	208	347	369

5.2. Measures

In order to analyze the thematic agenda of the national news the coders had to evaluate the main topic and classify each news item under one of 15 categories (politics, government and State; police, crime and courts; defense and national security; economy and business; education; energy, environment and climate change; transportation; housing, infrastructure and public works; accidents and natural disasters; health; religion; human rights; demonstrations and riots; social problems; and miscellaneous). Appendix 1 describes the operational definitions of the variables used in the study.

5.3. Data collection and coding

Ten independent coders were trained in the use of a specific codebook. Ten percent of the randomly selected sample was encoded twice in order to determine intercoder reliability, resulting in Krippendorff's alpha of .81.

6. Results

The first research question of this study asks how the hierarchy of the thematic agenda in the elite and popular press had evolved from 1990 to 2015.

Considering the two newspapers under analysis together, certain topics show a clear downward trend in their presence in the analyzed period: politics (from 36.4% in 1990 to 26.2% in 2015); defense and national security (from 2.7% to 1.1%); religion (2.2% to 1.4%); human rights (from 5.1% to 1.2%) and demonstrations and riots (from 3.8% to 1.7%).

Meanwhile, other topics clearly increased their presence: economy and business (from 9.5% to 17.5%); education (from 3% to 5.2%); energy, environment and climate change (from 1.8% to 4.9%); transportation (from 1.1% to 3.5%); housing, infrastructure and public works (from 1.6% to 2.3%), accidents (from 3.6% to 7%), and health (from 1.6 % to 4.4%).

In the popular press, the analysis of adjusted standardized residuals indicates that the most significant variations occurred in three topics. News regarding politics, government and State concentrated the greatest decline by losing more than half of their presence between 1990 and 2015, while news on economy and business, and on accidents and natural disasters, became more important. At the same time, other topics (education; energy,

environment and climate change, and transportation) also increased their presence in the agenda of *Las Últimas Noticias*.

Table 2. Evolution of the thematic agenda in the popular press

NEWS TOPICS ($\chi^2 = 477.348$; $p \leq .000$)	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015
Politics, Government and State	33.7(+)	39.7(+)	29	20.7(-)	22.5(-)	11.9(-)
Police, Crime and courts	17.8	19.9	18.5	23.6	17.6	17.9
Defense and national security	2.8 (+)	1.6	0.9	0	0.6	0.5
Economy and business	9.6 (-)	15.6(+)	13.9	16.3	8.1 (-)	16.3(+)
Education	2.2	2.1	3.2	1	1.7	8.1(+)
Energy, environment and climate change	1.9	1.9	3.2	1.4	2.6	6.8(+)
Transportation	.8 (-)	.9 (-)	4.6(+)	1	.9 (-)	5.7(+)
Housing, infrastructure and public works	1.7	1.1 (-)	4.4(+)	1	2.3	1.9
Accidents and natural disasters	4.3(-)	3.7 (-)	5.4	8.7	8.6	13.0(+)
Health	1.7(-)	3.2	4.6(+)	1.4	3.2	3.8
Religion	1.5	1.4	0.9	1.4	0.6	0.5
Human Rights	5.5(+)	.9 (-)	2.6	1.9	1.2	.5(-)
Demonstrations and riots	4.9(+)	2.1	3.5	2.4	3.2	1.4(-)
Miscellaneous	11.7	6.0 (-)	5.4(-)	19.2(+)	27.1(+)	11.7

* The table reports percentages and, in brackets, the sign of the adjusted standardized residuals for the statistically significant values

In the elite press (Table 3), the hierarchy of news topics remained more constant over the period studied. Only news on the economy increased significantly, followed by health. The topics that lost importance in *La Tercera* are religion, human rights and miscellaneous.

Table 3. Evolution of the thematic agenda in the elite press

NEWS TOPICS ($\chi^2 = 345.425$; $p \leq .000$)	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015
Politics, government and State	37.6(+)	34.2	32.5	31.7	30.5	34.7
Police, crime and courts	19.8	16.3	21.4(+)	22.7(+)	13.3(-)	15.6
Defense and national security	2.7(+)	1.6	2.5	.9	.8	1.5
Economy and business	9.4(-)	10.1(-)	20.5	25.8(+)	23.9(+)	18.2
Education	3.9	2.5	1.4(-)	1.4(-)	4.3(+)	3.4
Energy, environment and climate change	1.6	2.8	1.8	3.0	2.8	3.7
Transportation	1.4	.5	2.9(+)	.8	.7	2.3(+)
Housing, infrastructure and public works	1.4	2.9	2.0	1.5	3.8(+)	2.6
Accidents and natural disasters	2.7	3.7	4.1	4.3	5.7(+)	3.4
Health	1.4(-)	4.9(+)	2.0	2.3	2.2	4.8(+)
Religion	2.5(+)	1.6	.7	1.1	1.1	1.9
Human Rights	4.5(+)	2.3	.5(-)	1.4	2.2	1.6
Demonstrations and riots	2.5	3.0	3.8(+)	1.1(-)	2.0	1.9
Miscellaneous	8.6	13.4(+)	3.8(-)	2.1(-)	6.4	4.4(-)

* *The table reports percentages and, in brackets, the sign of the adjusted standardized residuals for the statistically significant values*

We are also interested in knowing whether these trends were similar in the elite and popular newspapers or, on the contrary, the thematic agenda had evolved differently.

Among the similarities, we can see that news on economy and business grew in both the elite and the popular press, occupying second place in the hierarchy of news topics in 2015. News on energy, environment and climate change; housing, infrastructure and public works; transportation, and health had also increased their presence in both newspapers under analysis. Meanwhile, miscellaneous news stayed in first place throughout the period in both media outlets. News on human rights, however, decreased since 1995 in the two types of newspapers, just as defense and national security, and religion. Lastly, news on demonstrations and riots declined in both newspapers, but to a greater extent in the popular press.

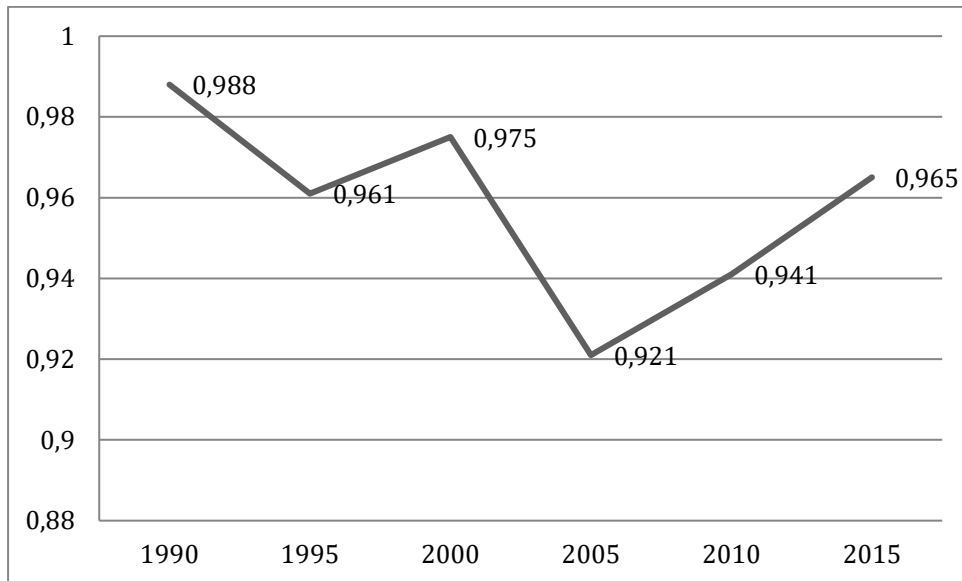
Meanwhile, the greatest difference between the elite and the popular press is found in the information on politics and government, which diminished mainly in the popular press, dropping from first place in 1990 to fourth position in 2015. However, this topic stayed at the same level in the elite press. On the other hand, news topics on police, crime and courts, and accidents and natural disasters became more pervasive in the popular press, while declining in the elite press. In summary, differences are detected in the presence of the called “hard” and “soft” topics in terms of the type of reader being targeted by each newspaper.

The second research question of this study focuses on finding out the degree of homogeneity that has kept the thematic agenda of both types of newspapers during the analyzed period.

To that end, a bivariate correlation analysis was conducted to test the extent to which both newspapers carried out a similar news topic selection in the 25-year period of the study, based on the analysis of news covered by the National Desk, excluding sports, and culture and entertainment.

Figure 1 shows that Spearman’s Rho values are high –always overlapping with over 90%–, which expresses an important level of homogeneity in the intermedia agenda, even though *La Tercera* and *Las Últimas Noticias* are two newspapers with different audience orientations. Nonetheless, the data show a downward trend in the homogeneity level of the thematic agenda if we consider the difference between the point of origin and the year 2015, as shown in Figure 1, a difference that is statistically significant ($F= 5,45174$; $p\leq .000$).

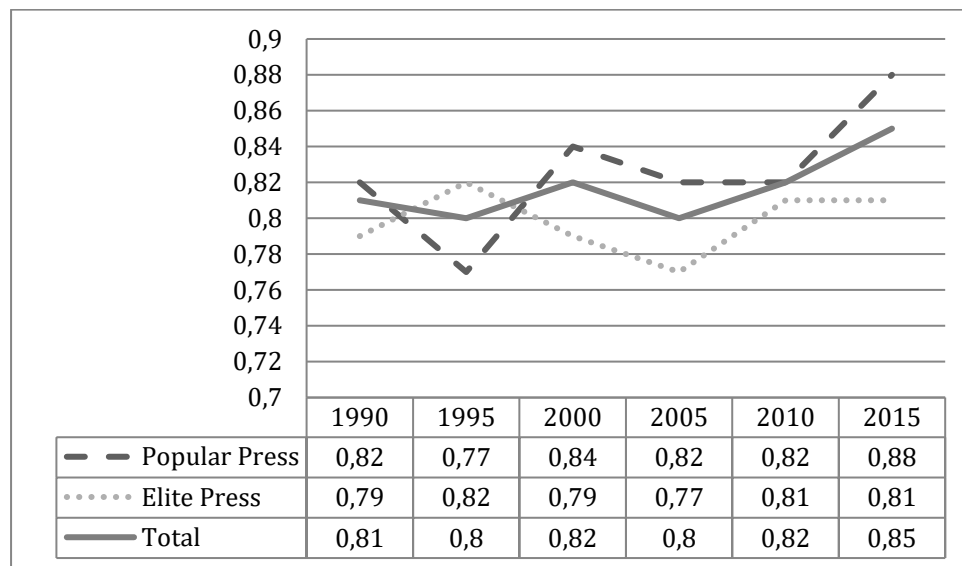
Figure 1. Levels of homogeneity of the thematic agenda in the Chilean press between 1990 and 2015



Lastly, the third research question addresses the level of diversity of the thematic agenda in the Chilean press between 1990 and 2015, and to what extent the level of plurality is similar or different in the elite and the popular press during the analyzed period. In other words, after measuring the similarity of the intermedia agenda, we analyze whether the thematic agenda of the Chilean press – both elite and popular – can be characterized as allowing for a plurality of topics or, on the contrary, as concentrating on just a few news topics, and how this evolved over time.

Figure 2 shows that Chilean newspapers has diversified significantly their thematic agenda from 1990 to 2015, with a Simpson diversity index of .81 in 1990, to a value of .85 in 2015. Remember that Simpson index values close to 1 would indicate greater plurality in the news topics offered to the public. It is important to point out, however, that this increase in the diversity index has been largely fueled by the popular press, which grew from an index of .82 to an index of .88. The elite press, in turn, experienced ups and downs between values of .77 and .82, without a clear tendency.

Figure 2. Evolution of the Simpson diversity index in the Chilean press



7. Conclusion

This study analyzed the news topics that the elite and popular press in Chile have hierarchized as the most and least important in their news agenda from post-dictatorship until today. Likewise, this study examined to what extent the news agenda of the elite and popular press had coincided over the period analyzed. Lastly, the study was interested in discovering whether each type of press had diversified their news content since the return of Chilean democracy, thus generating greater plurality of the thematic agenda.

Previous studies on the news agenda in the Chilean media had shown that politics ranked first in the National Desk news agenda, and that news on crime, sports or entertainment also enjoyed an important presence. Our analysis of the National Desk news covered by the Chilean national press also points to a similar direction as that of these previous studies, regarding the importance given to news on politics, and crime and courts in the thematic agenda, from post-dictatorship until today.

Likewise, our study has contributed to better understanding both the structural tendencies of the news agenda and its transformation from 1990 to 2015, as well as showing the similarities and differences through a comparative analysis between the elite and popular media across time. In fact, the results of this study show that the evolution of news topics presence in the elite and popular press was dissimilar. In 1990, the elite and popular press shared four of the most relevant topics (politics; police, crime and courts; economy and business, and miscellaneous), while in 2015 they only shared the second topic in importance (economy and business). Moreover, only economic issues showed a similar trend in both types of newspapers, which could stem from the connection between economic powers and media groups, and the importance given to economic growth by all Chilean governments.

Along this line, we can conclude that by the end of the analyzed period the elite and popular press hierarchized their thematic agenda differently. While politics and economic affairs occupied more than 50% of National Desk news coverage in the elite press, this space in the popular press was occupied by police, crime and courts; economy and business, and accidents and natural disasters. It is worth mentioning that the popular press increased considerably their coverage of education in the last year under analysis (2015), possibly resulting from the impact of the debate on educational reform and free university education.

These results confirm the idea that the orientation to different audiences is a crucial criterion that makes a difference in the news content of newspapers today. This fact falls in line with the findings of Strömbäck et al. (2012) in the study on the criteria used to select news. In our study on the Chilean case, the elite press kept a more conservative criterion in the selection of the news agenda, giving priority to politics and the economy throughout the period, in accordance with the parallelism between the political-economic-media system. The popular press, however, introduced more changes in their thematic agenda, perhaps because of the pressure to capture an audience that might be attracted to other news sources, especially in television. An audience that, in addition, would “feel more comfortable as a spectator” (Mellado, López Rabadán & Elórtegui, 2017: 38).

On the other hand, in topics to which the media gives less importance we observe more similarities in the evolution of both thematic agendas. For example, it is common to see a decrease in news on defense and national security; human rights, and religion from 1995 onwards in both types of press. This fact is related to the progress made in the democratization process and the loss of power among the military, and on the pact to silence repression during the dictatorship.

One of the common tendencies that the analysis has revealed in both types of presses, is the increase in topics with a greater direct impact on citizens' everyday life (energy, environment and climate change; housing, infrastructure and public works; transportation, and health), which can be oriented towards an audience as a citizen, as well as an interest towards a public as a client, providing them information can be useful in his day-to-day life. We can also think that the thematic agenda of the Chilean press –both elite and popular– would adjust to the emergence of hybrid models as shown by other studies in the same national context (Hughes & Mellado, 2016; Mellado, López Rabadán & Elórtegui, 2017). Along this line, both the elite and the popular press have tried to adapt to the changing Chilean citizenry who, as mentioned in this study, is more oriented towards the search for a better quality of life (Hunneus, 2014).

In terms of the homogeneity of the agenda, this study concludes that, in general, the degree of overlapping between agendas throughout the analyzed period has not increased. On the contrary, both types of press adopted a strategy to differentiate their agendas in order to cater to the demands of their different readerships and, by doing so, address an increasingly segmented audience.

The last research question addresses the evolution of plurality of the thematic agenda of the Chilean press. Our results show a slight increase throughout the period; in other words, the newspapers did not balance the presence of the topics measured in this analysis. As can be seen in Tables 2 and 3, three topics occupy more than half of the news. However, it must be underlined that the popular press had diversified its content more than the elite press. The popular press, therefore, had not only varied its priorities more in the hierarchization of news topics across the years, but also diversified more its content, mainly at the beginning of this century when *Las Últimas Noticias*, the main representative of the popular press, turned towards sensationalizing the news. This resulted in a greater segmentation of audiences, with *El Mercurio*, belonging to the same consortium, oriented to an elite audience. In parallel, the other journalistic consortium dominating the national print press, Copesa, also developed a similar strategy.

Although this work is pioneering in Chile because of the analysis of such a lengthy period of time, the study is not without its limitations. First of all, it only analyzes the National Desk, leaving out news topics such as sports, or entertainment, which should be included in future studies. Secondly, this work only analyzes print press and no other media platforms. In this sense, future studies should replicate the analysis in comparative studies that involve audiovisual media, as well as Internet and social networks. Likewise, it would be interesting to take this study to a higher comparative level, analyzing Latin American media

agendas at the macro level in order to involve macrosocial variables and understand to what extent political, macroeconomic and cultural elements influence changes in the news agenda.

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Appendix 1. Operational definitions of the variables

MEDIA ORIENTATION

This refers to the type of media in which the news item is published, according to its respective audience orientation:

Popular Press
Elite Press

MAIN TOPIC OF THE NEWS ITEM

This refers to the main topic of the story. The code tors needed read the news item from start to finish, paying special attention to the main topic of the story. The main topic tends to occupy more space, and is frequently mentioned in the headline, title and/or the first paragraph, although not always.

Politics, government and State: This refers to the information related to formal and institutionalized power, including activities of the State powers: governments and their services (activities and/or declarations of the President, ministers, public employees, etc.). It includes international relations, State visits, diplomacy; Parliament, the Senate, and the Judiciary (institutional activities and/or declarations or that of their employees). Likewise, it includes all news that mainly refers to government elections at the local, provincial and national level, stories focusing on the activities of political parties and news on elections.

It is important to bear in mind that all news items referring to specific and sectorial thematic beats such as health, housing, education and others are also considered part of this category when relative to public policies promoted by the State.

Examples:

“The Minister successfully introduces respiratory diseases to declare environmental alert”.

In this case, the main topic of the news item is considered political and not related to health, as it refers to an action by the minister of the area on public policy in connection with that topic.

“Senate abolishes death penalty”.

In this case, the main topic is considered to be political, and not related to human rights, as it refers to a legislative action of one of the houses in Congress.

Police, crime and courts: This involves criminal incidents, corruption and financial crime, criminal trends (statistics and trends in crime), defense measures against crime and judicial processes regarding a specific criminal act. Aspects associated with order and public order and safety, such as jails and delinquency, and in general, news on terrorist acts, their cause and effect, and measures from the police force and other prevention agencies on terrorist acts in the country. This topic also includes news on the legal/judicial system, the Supreme Court and other courts of the judicial system.

Example:

“Supreme Court challenges gay marriage”.

Defense and National Security: This refers to information on policies regarding the military (Armed Forces), defense and national security including protective actions and threats from abroad. Specifically, it refers to military or defense operations inside the country, such as national defense/military, military operations/military activities

Example:

“Defense evaluates Triton drone program for the Navy”.

Economy and business: This refers to all non-legislative activities regarding the economic performance, including business and personal finance. This topic also includes micro and macroeconomic issues.

Example:

“Corporate pressure to regulate taxes is global”.

Education: This refers to all of primary, secondary and tertiary education, whether public or private. It includes extracurricular activities (debate, theater, community activities, etc.) that are specifically connected with the school. It also refers to information on processes and instruments for measuring, results, curricular programs, as well as educational management and teaching practices.

Example:

“Montgomery High School students watch their movies on a giant screen”.

Energy, environment and climate change: This refers to all information relative to ecology and the environment. It includes aspects related to the care and conservation of the environment and its agents (vegetation, minerals, animals), the risks and problems they face (global warming, contamination of any kind, etc.). It further includes issues related to the impact of energy sources and their mechanisms of exploitation and distribution (renewable, non-renewable and clean energies, pollutants), as well as projects with environmental impact and their mechanisms of evaluation and mitigation (for example, from large shopping malls, to energy generation projects).

Example:

“New study shows solar batteries have become 300% more efficient in last five years”.

Transportation: This item considers information regarding mechanisms, devices, driving, operation and impact of every form of transportation (air, sea, land, public and private).

Example:

“Drivers turn ramp into high speed racetrack”.

Housing, infrastructure and public works: This refers to information on the current and future state of society’s material development in its most concrete aspects (where and how to live; where and how to interconnect; what are the connectivity strategies and mechanisms). For instance, this topic considers information on roads, highways, bridges, tunnels, airports, aerodromes, ramps, irrigation reservoirs, levees, storm water catchments, rural drinking water systems, new public buildings, valorization of urban heritage, coastal buildings, and others; their design, construction, operation and problems. This topic also includes news referring to telecommunications, housing, and the territorial integration of neighborhoods.

Example:

“Airports in China obey strict flight path”.

Accidents and natural disasters: This refers to information on man-made accidents (air, sea, land or rail transportation; explosions, fires, and others) as well as natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, river flooding, storms, and others.

Example:

“7.3 earthquake hits Japan in same region devastated by 2011 earthquake and tsunami”.

Health: This refers to information on the health system, public health, and disease/prevention. It refers to news that focuses on components of the health system in general, such as insurance, medical training, general medical care, etc. It also includes news on pandemics, epidemics, etc., that affect the health conditions of collective groups.

Example:

“Corporate clinics notified to determine benefits”.

Religion: This refers to information relative to the spiritual development of individuals and the population in general, including activities of faith-based institutions (for example, churches), as well as debates on beliefs, values and morals in society.

Example:

“Cardinals elect Bergoglio, who will become Pope Francis”.

Human rights: This refers to information on the liberties and demands to the basic elements that every person is entitled to, simply because one is human, and that guarantee a dignified life. These are regardless of gender, status, sexual orientation, race or nationality. It refers to civil rights (for example to life, to safety, to freedom of expression), political rights (to vote and be elected), and social and cultural rights (for example, to a house and to health).

Example:

“Human rights commission takes Chile to court in Judge Atala case”.

Demonstrations and riots: This topic refers to situations, events and actions that show conflict between two or more actors in society, for different reasons. It includes issues associated with marches, protests, strikes, land seizures, and other forms of showing social disputes, regardless of the issue at hand.

Example:

“100,000 people march in Chilean student protest”.

Miscellaneous: Stories that do not clearly fit in with any of the previous categories.