The Homogeneity Process in the Online Media Agenda. A Comparative Analysis of Spanish and Foreign Online Media

El proceso de homogeneización en la agenda cibermediática. Análisis comparativo entre cibermedios españoles y extranjeros

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ABSTRACT: The research compares the thematic distribution between Spanish online media agenda and a sample of international mainstream online media on the headlines of their front pages. Through a longitudinal content analysis, carried

out over two years, the study explores the news selection and hierarchization process to verify the thematic homogeneity between both agendas. The analysis of Spanish online media agenda also shows its reliance on wire material. This reliance is not restricted to international news. This also affects the domestic news. The study is part of the research project "Evolution of the online media in the context of convergence: message analysis" (CSO2009-13713-C05-04-subprograma SOCI-).

RESUMEN: El estudio tiene por objetivo trazar una comparación de la distribución temática de las noticias de portada entre la agenda cibermediática española y una muestra de cibermedios extranjeros. Mediante un análisis de contenido longitudinal, desarrollado a lo largo de dos años, se profundiza en el proceso de selección y jerarquización informativa para poder constatar la uniformidad temática que se da entre ambas agendas. El análisis de la agenda cibermediática española muestra, también, la dependencia de la información proveniente de agencias. Esta dependencia no se limita a las cuestiones internacionales, sino que se ha trasladado, también al ámbito doméstico. La investigación se enmarca dentro del proyecto "Evolución de los cibermedios españoles en el marco de la convergencia: análisis del mensaje" (CSO2009-13713-C05-04 –subprograma SOCI–).

Keywords: Online media, agenda-setting, civic osmosis, content analysis, homogeneity, journalistic sources.

Palabras clave: cibermedios, agenda-setting, osmosis cívica, análisis de contenido, homogeneización, fuentes periodísticas.

1. *Introduction*

Due to the impact of online media on the media landscape, the prospects of obtaining information from the audience has been broadened[1]. Thus, the chance to communicate through the Internet may offer a better use of information products when it comes to satisfying the needs of the audience. However, the abundance of digital media is no guarantee, in itself, that the informative *quantum* of the public will grow. In order to achieve that, these media need to bring new information that will increase the cognitive environment of their audience[2].

In view of all this, one may wonder whether online media have allowed a further expansion of the supply of information or, on the contrary, have simply occupied new digital information spaces on the Internet.

1.1. *Objectives*

The study aims to draw a comparison between the thematic map of the Spanish online media agenda and a selection of foreign online media. This main objective is derived

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[1] FIDALGO, António, "Jornalismo online segundo o modelo de Otto Groth", *Pauta Geral*, 11, (6), 2004, pp. 1-13.

[2] YUS, Francisco, "La lengua de los medios en la Red y su interpretación", in DIAZ-NOCI, Javier and SALAVERÍA, Ramón (coords.), *Manual de redacción ciberperiodística*, Ariel, Barcelona, 2003, pp. 261-305.

from the inclusion of this methodological tool in the project *Evolution of Spanish online media in the framework of convergence* (CSO2009-13713-C05-04), where the main objective is to determine to what extent the message of the online media has evolved due to the effect of the convergence process[3].

This comparative framework allows us, in turn, to study the degree of homogeneity between both agendas through both the themes and the main social actors in the information. Therefore, the research helps to determine the role of mainstream online media in the process of civic osmosis[4]. The focal point is not the individual characteristics of each online medium, but rather we aim to ascertain the collective impact of mainstream online media, both in Spain, as well as at an international level.

The methodological tool implemented, on the other hand, allows us to acknowledge the main similarities and differences between both agendas when it comes to constructing their cover stories. Our research approaches this process, with regard to the main themes, from two perspectives: the availability of material and the way it is adapted to the characteristics of the particular medium, in this case, online media.

2. *Theoretical framework*

2.1. *Mainstream online media*

The object of our study is mainstream online media, defined as:

> "the broadcaster of content referred to different areas of media knowledge with a will to mediate between facts and the public, which fundamentally uses journalistic criteria and techniques, uses multimedia language, is interactive and hypertextual, is updated and is published on the Internet"[5].

This definition connects with the essential characteristics of the journalistic function: periodicity, universality, immediacy and dissemination[6]. It is worth noting that these principles had been established before the birth of online media, therefore the question may arise as to whether these can be equally compared to the main traits of the journalistic function. Fidalgo[7] highlights the fulfilment of these principles in online journalism in: (a) getting even closer to ideal periodicity which involves producing new editions as quickly as possible; (b) increasing its universality with regard to traditional media, thanks to the organisation of the contents of data bases; (c) focusing on current issues without affecting their universality, thanks to the qualities of hypertext and the organisation of contents; and (d) increasing dissemination by being accessible to anyone in the world via the Internet.

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[3] DÍAZ-NOCI, Javier, SEIXAS, Lia, LÓPEZ, Guillermo et al., "Content and message analysis of online journalism. Some methodological proposals", *Trípodos (extra 2009), V Congrés Internacional. Comunicació y realitat*, p. 648.
[4] Cfr. McCOMBS, Maxwell, "Civic osmosis. The social impact of media", *Comunicación y Sociedad*, 25 (1), 2012, pp. 7-14.
[5] LÓPEZ, Xosé, LIMIA, Moisés *et al.*, "Tipología de los cibermedios", in SALAVERRÍA, Ramón (ed.), *Cibermedios. El impacto de Internet de los medios de comunicación en España*, Comunicación Social, Sevilla, 2005, p. 62.
[6] Cfr. GROTH, Otto, *Vermittelte Mitteilung. Ein journalistisches Modell der Massenkommunikation*, Reinhard Fischer, München, 1998.
[7] FIDALGO, António, *op. cit.,* p. 12.

2.2. *The selection process of the news*

In the last few decades, sheltered by an inclusive paradigm that takes into account both the active role of the audience and the powerful but limited effects of the media[8] the news selection process has been studied, fundamentally, from two theoretical positions. From approaches that originated around the *agenda setting* theory, the configuration of the media agenda has evolved along with the development of the theory itself. Consequently, the media agenda has gone from being treated as an independent variable, which helps to understand the configuration of the public agenda[9], to becoming "the dependent variable, that needs to be explained"[10]. With the birth of the Internet, the determination of the relationships that exist between the communication media as producers of information and the audiences as consumers may be altered by the interactive character of cyberjournalism[11]. In spite of this, different studies have demonstrated the appropriateness of applying this theory to the new mass media[12]. When studying the media agenda, one may observe how different themes compete to get media attention faced with the limited capacity of the public agenda[13]. Therefore, "even in the case of Internet web sites, with their apparently unlimited capacity to keep adding pages, we find that the reach and time available of public attention impose severe restrictions"[14]. This occurs despite the increase in universality of online media, thanks to the qualities of hypertext and databases[15].

There are two fundamental elements in the production process of their agenda: the selection of themes and their ranking. As a consequence of the selection process, the media focus their attention on certain problems, as some themes stand out more than others in the mind of the public[16]. Hierarchization, on the other hand, determines the relevance of a theme, the degree of importance by which a theme on the agenda is

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[8] Cfr. ROSENGREN, Karl Erik, "From Field to Frog Ponds", *Journal of Communication*, 43 (3), 1993, pp. 6-17.

[9] Cfr. McCOMBS, Maxwell and SHAW, Donald, "The agenda-setting function of mass media", *Public Opinion Quarterly,* 36, 1972, pp. 176-87.

[10] McCOMBS, Maxwell, *Estableciendo la agenda. El impacto de los medios en la opinión pública y en el conocimiento,* Paidós, Barcelona, 2006, p. 189.

[11] Cfr. BOWMAN, Shayne and WILLIS, Chris, *We Media. How audiences are shaping the future of news and information*, The Media Center at American Press Institute, Reston, VA, 2003; BRUNS, Axel, "Produsage. Towards a Broader Framework for User-Led Content Creation", *Proceedings of the 6th ACM SIGCHI conference on Creativity & Cognition*, 2007, http://eprints.qut.edu.au/6623/1/6623.pdf.

[12] Cfr. ALTHAUS, Scott L. and TEWKSBURY, David, "Agenda setting and the 'New' news. Patterns of issue importance among readers of the paper and online versions of the New York Times", *Communication Research*, 29 (2), 2002, pp. 180-207; HERMIDA Alfred and THURMAN, Neil, "A Clash of Culture. The integration of user-generated content within professional journalistic frameworks at British newspaper sites", *Journalism Practice*, vol. 2 (3), 2008, pp. 343-356; ROBERTS, Marilyn, WANTA, Wayne and DZWO, Tzong-Horng, "Agenda-setting and issue salience online", *Communication Research*, 29 (4), 2002, pp. 452-465; WANG, Tai-Li, "Agenda Setting Online. An Experiment Testing The Effects of Hyperlinks in Online Newspapers", *Southwestern Mass Communication Journal,* vol. 15, nº 2, 2000, pp. 59-70.

[13] ZHU, Jina-Hua, "Issue competition and attention distraction. A zerosum theory of agenda setting", *Journalism Quarterly*, 69 (4), 1992, p. 825.

[14] McCOMBS, Maxwell, *Estableciendo la agenda...*, *op.cit.* 85.

[15] FIDALGO, António, *op. cit.,* p. 6.

[16] IGARTUA, Juan José and HUMANES, María Luisa, *Teoría e investigación en comunicación social*, Síntesis, Madrid, 2004, p. 245.

perceived as relatively important[17]. This relevance should be understood as "the creation of a piece of journalism that is more newsworthy, significant and memorable for the public"[18].

Nevertheless, research on the selection process of the news in the media has not been carried out exclusively under the principles of the *Agenda setting* theory. Niklas Luhmann introduces the thematization process in his theory of social systems[19]. The German sociologist defines thematization as the mechanism that allows the formation of public opinion in modern-day society thanks to the themes broadcasted by the media[20]. According to this school of thought, there are certain rules of attention[21] in the selection of events that will become news; bearing in mind that "only the subjects who produce them, or subjects in general, are authorized to define and interpret them, each one subjectively"[22]. As a consequence, all the criteria are reinforced and complemented once the information has been pre-selected under routine patterns and rules of production.

2.2.1. *Influence of external sources in the theme selection process*

External sources make up one of five layers of influence that determine the constitution of the media agenda[23]. Regarding the origin of these contacts, the prevalence of ~~the~~ institutional over individual sources has been proven, thanks to the amount of information they provide to the media for the elaboration of their products[24]. They, therefore, become privileged sources within the context of journalistic practice. Moreover, when determining the media agenda the hypothesis regarding the communicative centrality of the political activity should be kept in mind[25], according to which "this capacity is intrinsically connected to the power to award public relevance to an event, to give it greater importance in the social sphere, to place it, in so far as it is a significant issue, in our daily lives"[26]. This is partly due to the establishment of public administrations and political parties as legitimate institutions in the supply of information in modern-day society[27]. The media, as a result, rely on these organizations when they construct the social reality derived from the institutional facts themselves[28].

[17] DEARING, James and ROGERS, Everett, *Agenda setting*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 1996, p.8.

[18] ENTMAN, Robert, "Framing. Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm", *Journal of Communication*, 43 (4), 1993, p. 53.

[19] Cfr. LUHMANN, Niklas, *Sistemas sociales*, Anthropos, Barcelona, 1984.

[20] LUHMAN, Niklas, *Observaciones e la modernidad*, Paidós, Barcelona, 1997, p. 35.

[21] BÖCKELMANN, Frank, *Formación y funciones sociales de la opinión pública*, Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 1983, pp. 65-67.

[22] ROSITI, Franco, *Historia y teoría de la cultura de masas*, Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 1980, p.292.

[23] Cfr. SHOEMAKER, Pamela J. and REESE, Stephen D., *Mediating the Message. Theories of Influences on Mass Media Content*, Longman, New York, 1996, pp. 63-250.

[24] Cfr. TUCHMAN, Gaye, *La producción de la noticia*, Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 1983.

[25] Cfr. GROSSI, Giorgio, *Rappresentanza e rappresentazione*, Franco Agneli, Milano, 1985.

[26] CASERO, Andreu, "La crisis política como fenómeno comunicativo. La emergencia del 'caso crítico'", *Sphera Publica*, nº 6, 2006, p. 181.

[27] Cfr. GANDY, Oscar, *Beyond the Agenda-Setting. Information Subsidies and Public Policy*, Ablex Publishing, Norwood, NJ, 1982; MANHEIM, Jarol, *Strategic Public Diplomacy and American Foreign Policy. The Evolution of Influence*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1994.

[28] Cfr. SEARLE, John R., *The Construction of Social Reality*, Free Press, New York, 1995.

As a consequence, the visibility in the media of certain individuals and events will be bolstered in comparison with others[29].

2.2.2. *Influence of authorship and adaptation to the characteristics of online journalism*

We must bear in mind that among the factors that will determine the selection of news one must consider the availability of the material and the specific characteristics of the information product[30]. As online media increase their dissemination with respect to traditional media by being accessible to anyone in the world via the Internet[31], one may come to think that the universality inherent to the new media invalidates the applicability of a classification by geographic criteria[32]. Yet, we must take into account that the human resources typical of online media are still limited as is the attention span of the audience. As a result of this, in mainstream online media the "adherence to the need for a specific geographical position of traditional media " may be observed[33].

Regarding the characteristics of the media, in this case online media, there are three distinctive features of online journalism that define the entire discipline: multimediality, interactivity (notably participation) and hypertextuality[34]. Despite the fact that the incorporation of multimedia elements does not necessarily improve the communicative process[35], it can increase the relevance of any particular news item by making it more attractive and interesting to the public[36]. As regards interactivity, setting up spaces for participation is the latest trend in the evolution of online journalism[37]. Finally, when it comes to hypertextuality, it is necessary to confirm the influence of printed media, which have promoted what already existed traditionally: multilinearity and cross-reading[38].

2.3. *Homogeneity of contents in the media agenda*

When research into online journalism began, the increase in universality and dissemination with regard to online media, as well as the low production costs, were perceived as elements that contributed to the consolidation of democratic values, by

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[29] THOMPSON, John B., "The New Visibility", *Theory, Culture & Society*, 22 (6), 2005, pp. 31-51.

[30] Cfr. WOLF, Mauro, *La investigación en comunicación de masas. Críticas y perspectivas*, Paidós, Barcelona, 1991.

[31] Cfr. FIDALGO, António, *op. cit.*

[32] LÓPEZ, Xosé, LIMIA, Moisés *et al.*, *op. cit.,* p. 63.

[33] LÓPEZ, Xosé, LIMIA, Moisés *et al.*, *op. cit.,* p. 69-70.

[34] MASIP, Pere, DÍAZ-NOCI, Javier, DOMINGO, David *et al*., "Investigación internacional sobre ciberperiodismo. Hipertexto, interactividad, multimedia y convergencia", *El profesional de la información*, 19 (6), 2010, p. 569.

[35] Cfr. HOOGEVEEN, Martijn, "Toward a theory of the effectiveness of multimedia systems". *International journal of human-computer interaction*, vol. 2, nº 3, 1997, pp.151-168.

[36] CANAVILHAS, João, *Web journalism. From the inverted pyramid to the tumbled pyramid*, Biblioteca on-line de ciências da comunicação, http://www.bocc.uff.br/pag/canavilhas-joao-inverted-pyramid.pdf, 24/10/12.

[37] Cfr. MASIP, Pere, DÍAZ-NOCI, Javier, DOMINGO, David *et al*., *op. cit.*, p. 570.

[38] PALACIOS, Marcos, "Natura non facit saltum. Promessas, alcances e limites do desenvolvimento do jornalismo on-line e da hiperficçao", *E-Compós*, vol. 2, http://www.compos.org.br/seer/index.php/e-compos/article/view/27/28, 24/10/12.

means of larger and more varied number of news items[39]. However, the practice of online journalism itself has not adhered to this approach.

On the international stage, the arrival of these new media occurs within a homogenizing dynamic regarding their contents[40]. This homogenisation is "understood as the degree to which different media focus on the same stories during certain formative cycles"[41]. There are three elements that have contributed to the homogenisation of contents in mainstream online media. First of all, there is the adaptation of the content that comes from traditional media through convergence processes[42]. Secondly, there is the reliance on wire in the case of international news, due to the material and human limitations of online media[43]. And, lastly, there is the 'cannibalistic' attitude regarding content from other media[44], the continued monitoring of the competition's rivals[45], which increases as a consequence of the constant updating that online media are subject to.

The Spanish media landscape is not immune to this homogenisation of information contents. For mainstream newspapers, the similarity in themes, actors and spaces has been apparent since 1980 as a structural constant and not as an up-and-coming trend in the last decade[46]. The reliance on wire material[47] causes local news to exhibit less thematic uniformity than international news despite the fact that the "political agents are less and the playing field is more reduced"[48]. Moreover, due to the convergence process, the risk of homogenisation has increased in online media causing the information, and even the style of the media, to seem more and more alike[49].

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[39] Cfr. RHEINGOLD, Howard, *Smart Mobs. The Next Social Revolution*, Perseus, Cambridge, MA, 2003.

[40] Cfr. BOURDIEU, Pierre, *On television*, The New Press, New York, 1998; PROJECT FOR EXCELLENCE IN JOURNALISM, *The State of the News Media 2008. Executive summary*, http://www.stateofthemedia.org/files/2011/01/PEJ2008-Overview.pdf, 08/01/13; PROJECT FOR EXCELLENCE IN JOURNALISM2, *The State of the News Media 2006. Executive summary*, http://www.stateofthemedia.org/files/2011/01/2006Executivesummary.pdf, 08/01/2013.

[41] BOCZKOWSKI, Pablo J. & DE SANTOS, Martín, "When more media equals less news. Patterns of content homogenisation in Argentina's leading print and online newspapers", *Political Communication*, vol. 24 (2), 2007, pp. 169.

[42] Cfr. BOCZKOWSKI, Pablo J. & DE SANTOS, Martín, *op. cit.*; REDDEN, Joanna and WITSCHGE, Tamara, "A New News Order? Online News Content Examined", in FENTON, Natalie (ed.), *New Media, Old News. Journalism and Democracy in the Digital Age*, Sage, London, 2010, pp. 171-186; VAN DER WURFF, Richard, LAUF, Edmund, BALCYTIENE, Aukse *et al*., "Online and newspaper in Europe in 2003: Evolving towards complementarity", *Communications. The European journal of communication research*, 33, 2008, pp. 403-430.

[43] Cfr. PATERSON, Chris, "News agency dominance in international news on the Internet", *Centre for International Communications Research. Papers in International and Global Communications*, nº 01/06, 2006, http://ics-www.leeds.ac.uk/papers/cicr/exhibits/42/cicrpaterson.pdf, 13/06/12.

[44] PHILLIPS, Angela, "Old Sources. New Bottles", in FENTON, Natalie (ed.), *New Media, Old News. Journalism and Democracy in the Digital Age*, Sage, London, 2010, pp. 87-101.

[45] Cfr. BOCZKOWSKI, Pablo J. y DE SANTOS, Martín, *op. cit.*

[46] LÓPEZ, Pablo & CASERO, Andreu, "La evolución de la agenda mediática española (1980-2010). Un análisis longitudinal sobre temas, actores y espacios informativos en la portada de la prensa de referencia", *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 67, 2011, p. 20.

[47] Cfr. IZQUIERDO, Luis, "La uniformidad temática en las secciones de internacional de los diarios madrileños de información general", *Index.comunicación*, nº 2, 2012, pp. 37-48; MARTÍN, Nora y MARTÍNEZ, Virginia, "Tratamiento de la información internacional en los periódicos regionales y locales españoles", *Actas III Congreso Internacional Latina de Comunicación Social*, 2011, http://www.revistalatinacs.org/11SLCS/actas_2011_IIICILCS/226_Virginia.pdf, 13/01/2013.

[48] IZQUIERDO, Luis, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

[49] SALAVERRÍA, Ramón y GARCÍA, José A., "La convergencia tecnológica en los medios de comunicación. Retos para el periodismo", *Trípodos*, nº 23, 2008, pp. 41-42.

3. *Hypothesis*

Our main hypothesis aims to confirm the existence of thematic homogeneity between the Spanish and the foreign online media agenda regarding the main front-page news. Despite the fact that the different geographical areas prevent both agendas from focusing on the same stories during certain information cycles, the uniform thematic selection helps create a homogeneous front-page style.
The comparison also helps to detect the main differences between agendas. A second hypothesis will study the way in which the geographical affect the reliance on wire material, as a facilitating element in the homogeneity of contents. It is thus posited that regarding the Spanish online media agenda this reliance is not limited to the international sphere but it also carries over to domestic issues.

4. *Methodology*

4.1. *Characteristics of the content analysis*

For the purpose of this study, the analysis of the contents is being carried out from a descriptive standpoint[50]. In the current typology of content analysis it should be placed within the analysis of thematic content[51], which is suitable "especially for a 'massive' or 'extensive' application, namely, to large samples and statistic procedures or of quantitative content analysis"[52]. Furthermore, taking into account the different aspects related to the design of the object of our study, the selection of the communications and measurement parameters, the study can be defined as: longitudinal, verifying/explanatory and frequential[53]. It is longitudinal because the corpus is analysed at different moments of its trajectory. It is verifying and/or explanatory, because it allows the identification of inferences on the origin and nature of the communicative products. Finally, it is frequential, as it studies the possible relations between the different variables.

4.2. *Influences on the design of content analysis*

The design of the methodological tool is based mainly on three studies carried out in the sphere of online media.
Firstly, the work carried out by Greer and Mensing[54] during a longitudinal content analysis carried out over a period of seven years on the front-pages of 83 digital

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[50] NEUENDORF, Kimberly, *The content analysis guidebook*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2002, p. 55
[51] Cfr. RIFFE, Daniel; LACY, Stephen and FICO, Frederick, *Analyzing media messages. Using quantitative content analysis in research*, Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ, 2005; WEBER, Robert P., *Basic content analysis*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 1990.
[52] ANDRÉU, Jaime, "Las técnicas de Análisis de Contenido. Una revisión actualizada", in *Centro de Estudios Andaluces*, 2001, http://public.centrodeestudiosandaluces.es/pdfs/S200103.pdf, 10/01/10.
[53] PIÑUEL, José Luis, "Epistemología, metodología y técnicas del análisis de contenido", *Estudios de Sociolingüística*, nº 3 (1), 2002, pp. 7-15.
[54] Cfr. GREER, Jennifer and MENSING, Donica, "The Evolution of Online Newspapers. A Longitudinal Content Analysis, 1997-2003", in XIGEN, Li (ed.), *Internet newspapers. The making of a mainstream medium*, Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ, 2006, pp.13-33.

newspapers is worth noting. Secondly, the work of Torsten Quandt[55] also exerts a great influence. In it, content analysis is carried out on the main cover stories of different digital newspapers in Europe and the US over two consecutive months. Lastly, the project conducted by Van der Wuff[56] will also set the tone for this study. It is a comparative content analysis of 51 digital and printed European newspapers which takes place in one day.

Among other aspects, the all deal with design elements, adaptation to the characteristics of the Internet and analysis of front-page information.

4.3. *Units of analysis and type of sampling*

This study handles two different types of online media samples. The first sample is made up of fifteen mainstream Spanish online media[57] and the second, of ten foreign online media[58]. The configuration of the front-page as a portal (Alonso and Martínez 2003: 291-294) has allowed us to delve into its study before arriving the informative news copy on the front-pages of several online: *telecinco.es*[59], *bbc.co.uk*[60] and *canalsur.es*[61].

Regarding the content of the front-page, the study focuses solely either of these on news items. Other aspects are not analysed. These include: advertisements, links or different services. To be more precise, our study focuses on the three main news items on the front-page of the analysed online media. To this end, a multistage sampling method has been developed[62]. Hence, analyses were carried out week by week over a period of one month. Different studies confirm that "a sample size of six days will prove efficient and effective in representing the content of the news sites updated over a period of six months"[63]. For our content analysis there are four periods of analysis: October 2010, June 2011, November 2011 and March 2012.

4.4. *Determination of variables and categorization*

Throughout the project a series of contextual variables common to all the methodological tools have been used: (a) online media; (b) publication date; (c) name of

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[55] Cfr. QUANDT, Torsten, "(NO) News on the World Wide Web? A comparative content analysis of online news in Europe and the United States", *Journalism Studies,* vol. 9, issue 5, 2008, pp. 718-738.

[56] Cfr.; VAN DER WURFF, Richard, LAUF, Edmund, BALCYTIENE, Aukse *et al.*, *op. cit.*

[57] *elpais.com* (National Edition); *elmundo.es* (Spanish Edition); *rtve.es*; *20minutos.es*; *telecinco.es*; *sur.es*; *lavanguardia.es*; *lavozdegalicia.es*; *elcorreo.com* (Bizkaia Edition); *heraldo.es*; *vilaweb.cat*; *cadenaser.com*; *canalsur.es*; *lainformacion.com* and *xornal.com*.

[58] *asahi.com*, *guardian.co.uk*, *bbc.co.uk*, *lemonde.fr*, *rue89.com*, *repubblica.it*, *publico.pt*, *clarin.com*, *globo.com* and *nytimes.com* (U.S. Edition).

[59] http://www.telecinco.es/informativos/.

[60] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/.

[61] http://www.canalsur.es/portal_rtva/web/pagina/seccion/553/noticias.

[62] KRIPPENDORFF, Klaus, *Metodología del análisis de contenido. Teoría y práctica,* Paidós, Barcelona, 1990, pp. 99-100.

[63] WANG, Xiaopeng y RIFFE, Daniel, "An Exploration of Samples Sizes for Content Analysis of the New York Times Web Site", *Web Journal of Mass Communication Research*, vol. 20, 2006, http://www.scripps.ohiou.edu/wjmcr/vol20/20.html, 10/01/2010.

codifier; (d) encoding date; (e) position on the front-page; (f) spatial distribution; (g) title in the development node; and (h) URL.

4.4.1. *Variables related to selection and hierarchization*

Our main hypothesis focuses on the thematic agenda. Thus, the main theme of the information will be the first of the variables to be studied. Due to the extensive nature of our analysis, a configuration of themes was chosen that is closer to *Thematization* rather than *Agenda-setting theory*. "While the theory of *Agenda Setting* focuses on the occurrence of events, the themes [in the thematization theory] are structures of meaning that translate into different communications"[64]. In order to classify the themes, the codes proposed by the *International Press and Telecommunications Council* for international news transfer are used[65].

In addition to the selection, the study also analyses the hierarchization of themes. The front-page relevance of the information is determined by three aspects. Firstly, there is the order in which the news appears. The first news item is considered to be the one in the upper left hand corner, that is, the initial point of the most common browsing patterns among the audience of Spanish online media [66], proceeding with a hierarchization pattern from left to right and downwards on the front-page. Secondly, there is the amount of space occupied by the news item. After dividing the front-page into three basic columns[67], the amount occupied by each news item is calculated and, as well as that, the width of the columns. Lastly, due to the influence of different research studies[68], the audiovisual resources are added to the elements, which determine the relevance of a news item. The presence of one or more of these resources, or of links to them on the front-page are analysed.

4.4.2. *Variables related with social actors*

The study of origin and specific weight of the information sources allows us to deal with another part of the initial main hypothesis. Several variables are therefore established: the identity of the first source of information, the function of the first source, and the identity of the second source and its function.

When categorizing them, depending on the origin and function, we use our own classification based on different studies[69]. Therefore, regarding its identity, a distinction

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[64] IGARTUA, Juan José and HUMANES, María Luisa, *op. cit.*, 157.

[65] DEL VALLE, Félix and GARCÍA, Antonio, "Construcción de un tesauro para el Centro de Documentación de Telecinco", *Scire*, nº 8 (1), 2002, p. 115.

[66] Cfr. ALT64 DIGITAL and AIMC, *Estudio Eyetrack medios España. Análisis del comportamiento visual de los internautas y la efectividad de la publicidad online*, Alt64 Digital, San Cugat del Vallés, BA, 2005.

[67] ARMENTIA, José Ignacio, "Los diarios digitales siguen buscando su propia identidad tras una década de existencia", *Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico*, nº 11, 2005, p. 21.

[68] Cfr. CANAVILHAS, João, *op. cit.*; WILLIS, Darney, "Effects of using enhancing visual elements in web site design", *American Communication Journal*, vol. 3, issue 1, 1999, http://ac-journal.org/journal/vol3/Iss1/articles/Willis.htm, 20/07/12.

[69] Cfr. ARMENTIA, José Ignacio and CAMINOS Jose María, *La información. Redacción y Estructuras*, Universidad del País Vasco, Bilbao, 1998; BORRAT, Héctor, "Los periódicos narradores en interacción", in FONTCUBERTA, Mar & BORRAT, Héctor, *Periódicos. Sistemas complejos, narradores en interacción*, La Crujía, Buenos Aires, 2006, pp. 157-346; RODRIGO-ALSINA, Miquel, *La construcción de la noticia*, Paidós, Barcelona, 2005.

is made between: (a) Political offices in public administration (local, regional, national and international); (b) Other members of public administrations (public servants and other employees); (c) Pressure groups (political parties, trade unions, companies, NGOs...); (d) Experts/scientists; (e) Other sources with social visibility (athletes, artists, celebrities...); (f) Sources without social visibility; (g) Other media; (h) Terrorist/criminal organizations; (i) Anonymous (without ascertainable attribution); (j) Others; and (k) None.

When dealing with its function, a distinction is made between: (a) Unique, when it is the only source of a text; (b) Main, when it is given greater relevance and coverage than the rest of the sources; (c) Secondary, when it compliments the main sources; and (d) No source, when no source is mentioned in the news item.

4.4.3. *Variables related to the availability of material and adaptation to online journalism*

Regarding the availability of the material, the geographical area of the information is studied, as well as the authorship. The country of origin is considered to be a framework of reference of the analysed online medium. A distinction is made between the following spheres: (a) International; (b) Continental; (c) National; and (d) Local/regional. The country where each medium is edited informs the coding of this variable. The authorship of the information is determined by means of the dating itself in the *teaser* or in the body of the story. Regarding authorship, a distinction is made between: (a) Own; (b) Mixed; (c) External; (d) Unsigned; and (e) Other. Finally, when approaching the adaptation to the characteristics of online journalism, we analyse, on the one hand, the use of the different audio-visual resources (photography, video, graphic information and audio) by means of its incorporation on the front page or the main part of the story, as well as hyperlinks to such elements that may be present; and, on the other hand, the interactivity which is measured by the possibility of submitting comments and the average number of comments per news item.

**Figure 1. Form used for the coding of the information**

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

4.5. *Coding and inter-coders agreement*

Due to the interests and possibilities of the project that constitutes the framework for this study, the coding was finally carried out by Javier Odriozola. However, with a view to achieving the inter-coders agreement necessary to guarantee the reproducibility of the content analysis[70], the main researcher of the project, Javier Díaz Noci, and professor Guillermo López, carried out a parallel codification of ten percent of the total of the two samples.

As a consequence, an agreement rate was obtained through the Holsti method[71] of 0.88 for the sample of foreign online media and 0.85 for the sample of Spanish online media. This rate takes into account random agreement. The great number of variables and, in turn, the L number of categories that most of these have, allow for the use of this type of rate. In any case, in order to ensure the reliability of our analysis, Cohen´s Kappa rate[72] is individually applied in the case of variables with categories limited to "yes" or "no". This more conservative rate also implies random agreement[73].

Figure 2. Inter-coders agreement of content analysis
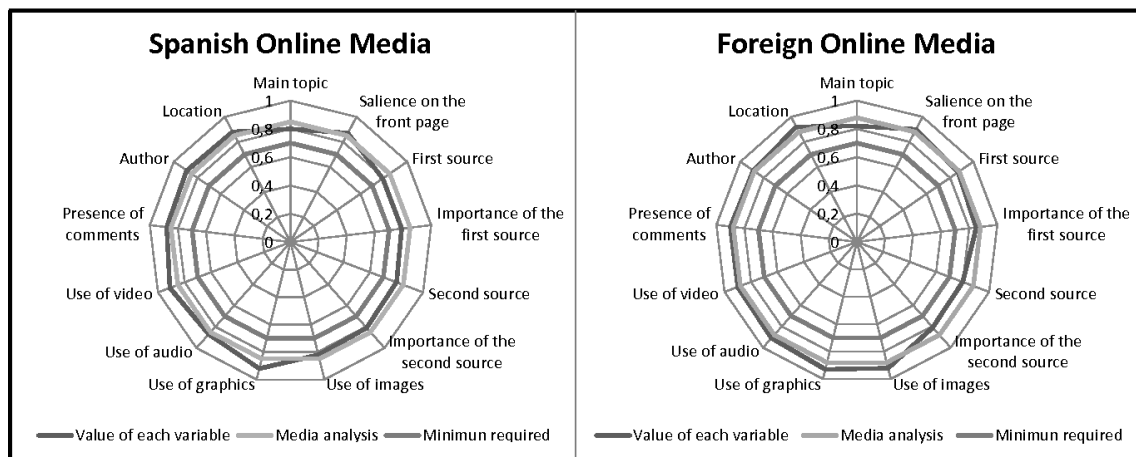
Source: Elaborated by the authors.

5. *Results*

5.1. *Selection and hierarchization process in online media*

The distribution of the main themes is similar in the Spanish and foreign online media. The four most common themes are: *Politics*; *Wars and other conflicts*; *Economy, business and finance*; and *Justice*. Political news becomes the central axis of both

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[70] Cfr. LOMBARD, Matthew; SNYDER-DUCH, Jennifer and CAMPANELLA, Cheryl, "Content Analysis in Mass Communication. Assessment and Reporting of Intercoder Reliability", *Human Communication Research,* vol. 28, nº 4, 2002, pp. 587-604.
[71] NEUENDORF, Kimberly, *op. cit.*, p. 150-151.
[72] Cfr. COHEN, Bernard, "A Coefficient of Agreement for Nominal Scales", *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, vol. XX (1), 1960, pp. 37-46.
[73] LOMBARD, Matthew; SNYDER-DUCH, Jennifer and CAMPANELLA, Cheryl, *op. cit.*, p. 591.

agendas, relying mainly on stories related to *Wars and other conflicts*. Thus, the space allocated to these two themes will cause a greater homogeneity of the online media agenda, while issues relating to *Economy, business and finance* are more frequent in the Spanish online media agenda. Other themes handled more assiduously in Spanish online media are: *Labour* and *Art, culture and entertainment*. Meanwhile, the theme that is more present in foreign online media is: *Disasters*.

The relevance of front-page news[74] confirms that two themes increase their relevance on both agendas: *Wars and other conflicts* and *Disasters*. Consequently, we can observe that the more frequent themes do not necessarily have greater front-page development, except the news related to *Wars and other conflicts*. The political issues show similar relevance to the average of both samples. Other matters that stand out for their relevance in Spanish online media are *Lifestyle and leisure* and *Sports*. Meanwhile, the category *Religion and beliefs* stands out for its relevance in foreign online media, although it seldom appears.

The analysis of the most relevant news in the corpus shows that the dominance of the themes *Politics* and *Wars and other conflicts* is increased in this type of news. The considerable increase in matters related to conflicts in foreign online media is noteworthy. Another theme that increases its frequency in both corpora of online media, is the one related to *Disasters*. As a consequence, the space allocated to a great portion of the thematic agenda (*Economy, business and finance*; *Justice*; *Traffic*; *Health*; *Science and Technology*; *Environment*; and *Religion and beliefs)* is further diminished among the most relevant front-page news. Regarding the differences between agendas, the analysis shows that some themes stand out in Spanish online media (*Lifestyle and leisure* and *Sports*) and others in foreign online media (*Crime* and *Art, culture and entertainment*).

To sum up, as the correlations that we have analyzed show, the homogeneity between the two agendas is reinforced by the greater presence of news about politics war and other conflicts. For this reason, thematic heterogeneity is found in those topics that help to complete the agenda of the cybermedia. At the same time, these are given less relevance on the front pages.

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[74]The study introduces a numeric variable, which compiles all data referred to spatial distribution (less than a column = -1; one column = 0; two columns = 1; three columns = 2), the presence of multimedia resources on the front-page and associated with the news item (absence = 0; one resource present = 1; several resources present = 2), and the position of the information on the front-page of the medium (third item = 0; second item = 1; first item = 2). In addition, a corrective index is introduced for those news items where the only development is a title on the front-page (development greater than a title = 0; title as the only element=-1).

Table 1. Selection and hierarchization of the main front-page information

THEMATIC BLOCKS	SELECTION AND HIERARCHIZATION OF THE INFORMATION*					
	National media (n=1197)			Foreign media (n=810)		
	Presence	Salience	Presence in featured news**	Presence	Salience	Presence in featured news **
Politics	41.2%	2.1	43.5%	40.4%	2	41.1%
Wars and other conflicts	15.1%	2.2	15.6%	16.9%	2.5	24.5%
Economy, business and finance	10.1%	1.8	9.5%	8.6%	1.7	7%
Justice	5.8%	1.8	5.3%	6.3%	1.9	4.3%
Crime	4.8%	1.6	3.4%	4.4%	1.9	4.6%
Art, culture and entertainment	4.1%	2.1	3.4%	2%	2.2	2.1%
Lifestyle and leisure	4%	3	5.5%	1%	1.9	0.6%
Labour	3.9%	1.8	3.6%	2.1%	1.8	2.1%
Sports	3%	2.5	3.3%	5.2%	2	4%
Disasters	2.4%	2.3	2.5%	3.8%	2.2	4.6%
Social issues	1.8%	1.8	1.8%	1.9%	1.6	1.2%
Traffic	1.1%	1.4	0.7%	1.1%	1.7	0.6%
Health	0.8%	1.9	0.5%	1.7%	1.5	0.6%
Science and technology	0.7%	1.3	0.5%	1.5%	1.7	0.9%
Education	0.5%	2	0.5%	1.1%	2	0.6%
Religion and beliefs	0.5%	1.7	0.2%	0.4%	2.2	0.3%
Environment	0.2%	1.5	0%	1.5%	1.7	0.9%
Average		2.1			2.1	

* Correlation between Spanish and foreign media: Presence ($r = 0.989$); Salience ($r = 0.426$) and Presence in featured news ($r = 0.965$).
** News items are analysed with relevance of 2.5 or above. National media (n=550). Foreign media (n=327).
Source: Elaborated by the authors.

5.2. *Distribution of the informative space among the social actors*

The content analysis focuses on the first two sections of the body of information. To this end, the samples go from the *teaser* on the front-page to the main node, where the information begins to develop. In foreign online media, the main source is found in these two sections in 91.7 percent of the news (that include some kind of mention). In Spanish online media, this occurs in ninety six percent of the news. Therefore, the main sources are concentrated situated at the beginning (of the news) following the premises of the inverted pyramid[75].

In both corpora of online media, the featured front-page news uses four main information sources: *Political offices of the public administration*, *Other members of the public administration*, *Pressure groups*, and *Other media*. Political offices dominate both agendas, although their use is higher in Spanish online media. This, together with the increase in sources related to other members of public administration, brings about

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[75] Cfr. CANAVILHAS, João, *op. cit.*

the consolidation of public institutional sources in the Spanish online media agenda. Meanwhile, pressure groups (political parties, trade unions, associations...) maintain their position as the second most used main source. The final main support of online media is the data obtained through other media. This is more common in foreign online media.

The remaining categories don't need attain the status of main source or originator of featured news. Among these sources, in foreign online media it is *Experts/scientists* who stand out, while in Spanish online media *Other sources with social visibility* are favoured such as performers, athletes, celebrities... Moreover, in Spanish online media there is also an increase in sources without correct attribution.

Figure 3. Main sources of information*
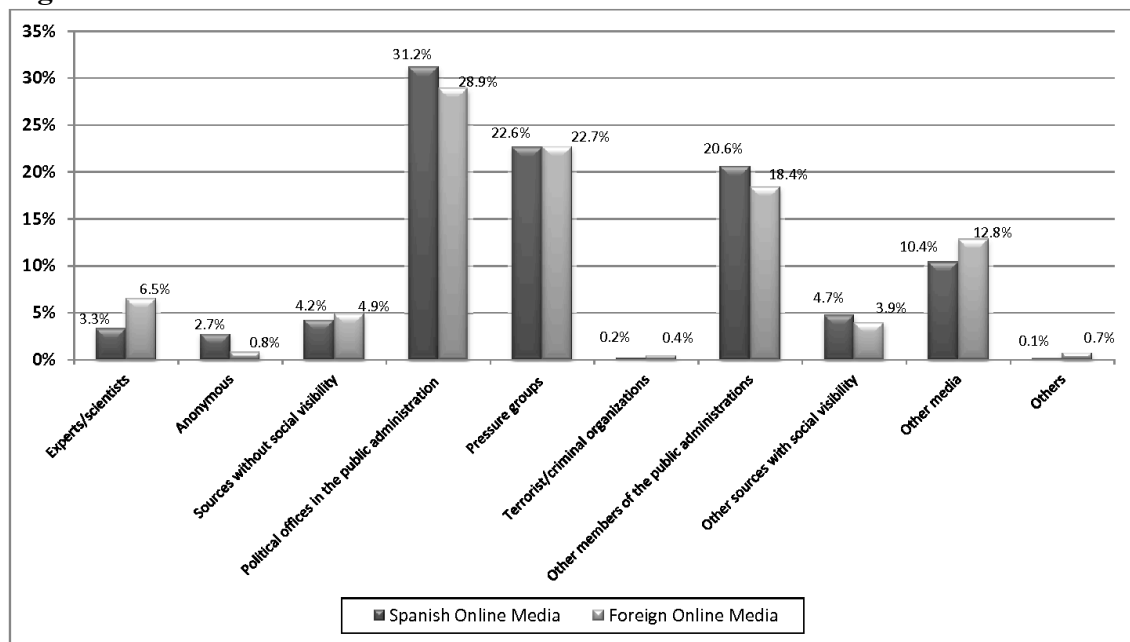
* Correlation between Spanish and foreign media: Main sources (r = 0.986).
Source: Elaborated by the authors.

5.3. *Analysis of the main themes on the online media agenda*

Henceforth, the study focuses on the two themes featured most frequently in the analysed online media: (a) *Politics* and (b) *Wars and other conflicts*. Thus far the configuration of the media agenda of mainstream Spanish online media revolves around the concepts of selection and hierarchization. However, we must bear in mind that, among the factors that will determine the selection of news, the availability of material and the specific characteristics of the information products need to be dealt with[76]. After focusing on the distribution of the informative space among the social actors, the influence of these aspects on the main themes of the analysis is shown.

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[76] Cfr. WOLF, Mauro, *op. cit.*

5.3.1. *Distribution of the informative space among the social actors*

Political news is constructed around three types of main sources: *Political offices of the public administration*, *Pressure groups* and *Other media*. The distribution of the information space is similar in national and foreign media ($r = 0.973$). Political offices increase their dominance with regard to the entire sample, being the main source in one out of two news items. The rest of the actors have very limited space on both agendas. Even so, a greater use of *Experts* is observed as a main source in foreign online media.

On matters related to wars and conflicts, the origin of the main source is similar to that of all the other news. Thus, news stories are constructed around four types of main sources: *Political offices of the public administration*, *Other members of the public administration*, *Pressure groups* and *Other media*. A decrease can be observed in the presence of political offices compared with the public administration as a dominant source. This situation is augmented in Spanish online media, which have pressure groups as the most frequently used main source of information. In foreign online media, the distribution of the informative space is more balanced. Here, political offices maintain their leadership over public administration. Among the other sources, again, a greater use of *Experts/scientists* can be observed in foreign media.

Table 2. Main sources in featured themes

IDENTITY OF THE MAIN SOURCE	MAIN THEMATIC BLOCKS (%)			
	Politics ($r = 0.973$)		Wars and other conflicts ($r = 0.915$)	
	Spanish agenda (n=493)	Foreign agenda (n=327)	Spanish agenda (n=180)	Foreign agenda (n=137)
Political offices from the public administration	50.1	48.2	25	26.2
Pressure groups	21.8	21.6	37.5	23.8
Other members of the public administration	7.5	6.5	15.5	22.1
Other media	13.6	14	13.6	13.9
Experts /scientists	1.6	5.8	1.6	4.1
Sources without social visibility	2.7	1.4	2.7	4.9
Other sources with social visibility	0.9	0.3	2.9	1.7
Anonymous	1.8	1.1	1.8	0.8
Other	-	1.1	-	0.8
Terrorist and/or criminal groups	-	-	1.2	1.7

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

5.3.2. *Availability of news*

First, the geographical area of the news is analysed. When analysing the entire sample, it may be observed that national events are the main focus in foreign online media. There are also news cases from around the world. On the contrary, domestic local events dominate Spanish online media together with those from the national sphere. The study of the main themes shows that *Politics* is markedly national in character in both agendas. Nevertheless, while Spanish online media localize this issue more, due to the presence of regional online media[77], foreign online media are nurtured by a large number of worldwide political news items. Meanwhile, news related to *Wars and other conflicts* has a decidedly global character in foreign online media. Their presence is considerable in Spanish online media as well, although domestic conflict is the dominant type (protests, strikes and other social conflicts), with a prevalence of local events over national ones.

Table 3. Availability of information: geographical area and authorship

	AVAILABILITY OF NEWS*					
	National media			Foreign media		
	Politics (n=493)	*Wars and conflicts (n=180)*	Corpus (n=1197)	*Politics (n=327)*	*Wars and conflicts (n=137)*	Corpus (n=810)
Geographical area:						
International	17%	31.1%	18%	23.2%	63.5%	31.7%
Continental	17%	15%	14.3%	16.8%	11.7%	12.1%
National	36.4%	22.2%	32.7%	56.6%	18.2%	46.5%
Local/Regional	29.6%	31.7%	35%	3.4%	6.6%	9.6%
Authorship:						
Own	54.4%	42.8%	57.9%	70.4%	40.8%	60.8%
Mixed	10.9%	15.6%	10.5%	7.1%	19.7%	9.8%
External	20.9%	33.9%	22.7%	2.2%	3.7%	3.5%
Unsigned	13%	7.8%	8.5%	20.4%	35.8%	25.9%
Other	0.8%	-	0.4%	-	-	-

* Correlation between Spanish and foreign media: *Politics* (*r* = 0.820); *War and other conflicts* (*r* = 0.3385; correlation not verified p-value>0.05); and *Corpus* (*r* = 0.720).
Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Secondly, the authorship of the information is confirmed. It may be observed, studying both samples, that the presence of self-elaborated news is somewhat higher in foreign online media. Spanish online media is characterised by the use of news written up using wire material, either exclusive, *Other*, complementary, or *Mixed*. In the foreign media sample, this space is occupied by news with no signature[78]. With regard to the main themes, two types of behaviour are observed between foreign and Spanish online media

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[77] In the following Spanish online media the local/regional news are dominant: *sur.es*; *lavanguardia.es*; *lavozdegalicia.es*; *elcorreo.com*; *vilaweb.cat*; *canalsur.es*; *xornal.com*; y *heraldo.es*.
[78] News items without a signature are common in three foreign online media: *bbc.co.uk*, 95.2 percent; *clarin.com*, 77.4 percent; and *reppublica.it*, 54.8 percent.

when approaching political news. While the first increase their capacity to produce their own political news, in Spanish online media this capacity is reduced. Consequently, while in foreign online media the space of the other categories is limited, the opposite occurs in Spanish online media. In matters linked to *Wars and other conflicts*, both agendas show a limited capacity to generate their own information. This causes a greater reliance on wire material and, in foreign online media, on news without a signature.

Finally, we have observed a high correlation between the samples from the Spanish and foreign cybermedia depending on the geographical and human availability of information products ($r = 0.7198$). Said correlation is based on the homogeneity of the agendas when dealing with political issues (r = 0.8197). On the other hand, the news linked to *Wars and other conflicts* contributes to the differences between both agendas.

5.3.3. *Adaptation to the defining traits of online journalism: multimediality and interactivity*

In both samples of online media, the analysis of multimediality confirms the greater use of multimedia resources in foreign online media. The clear dominance of photography is observed with video in second place. Additionally, foreign online media use graphic resources, which are not as common in Spanish online media. The use of audio is uncommon in both agendas. When dealing with political news, the difference in the use of photography between the two samples is diminished, while the use of video is reinforced in both agendas. Foreign online media make a more regular use of graphic resources. Audio resources are not frequent in this type of news either, although, they are more common than graphic resources in Spanish online media. In news stories referring to *Wars and other conflicts*, the use of photography is reduced with respect to the average in each sample. However, the use of video increases, especially in foreign online media. Here, the use of graphic resources also increases. The audio does not increase in this type of news either.

On the other hand, the interactivity of the news is studied by evaluating user participation by observing the quantity of comments. In both samples, the possibility to submit comments is somewhat higher in Spanish online media than in foreign ones. These comments appear at the end of the main body of the news[79]. The number of comments per news item, in those that allow for comments, is similar in both agendas. In the two main themes, the possibility to submit comments is reduced with respect to the average for the entire analysis. The clearest decrease involved issues related to *Wars and other conflicts* in foreign online media. The number of comments per political news item is somewhat higher in foreign online media, albeit in both agendas they are above their average. In contrast, user participation soars in Spanish online media when it comes to issues related to *Wars and other conflicts*, doubling the average participation. In foreign online media, participation also increases, but not so strikingly.

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[79] In general, *bbc.co.uk* activates, in some news items, an application that allows users to submit their own input. This text may be considered as informative text, and should the online medium deem it appropriate.

Table 4. Adaptation to online media: multimediality and interactivity

	ADAPTATION TO THE CHARACTERISTICS OF ONLINE JOURNALISM*					
	National media			Foreign media		
	Politics (n=493)	*Wars and conflicts (n=180)*	Corpus (n=1197)	*Politics (n=327)*	*Wars and conflicts (n=137)*	Corpus (n=810)
Multimediality:						
Photography	71.4%	66.7%	70.3%	81.1%	81.2%	84.7%
Video	24.1%	23.3%	21.7%	23%	35.1%	22.2%
Audio	5.1%	3.3%	4.4%	4%	2.9%	4.2%
Graphics	3.8%	5%	5.5%	10.1%	13.9%	12.2%
Interactivity (Comments):						
Possibility of submitting comments	67.9%	65%	69%	62.4%	44.5%	62.8%
Number of comments per news item	147.4	266.4	123.8	154.7	137.5	125.3

* Correlation between Spanish and foreign media: *Politics* ($r = 0.961$); *War and other conflicts* ($r = 0.894$); and *Corpus* ($r = 0.976$).
Source: Elaborated by the authors.

6. *Conclusions*

The results show that the main front-page news on both national and foreign online media agendas are constructed around the same main themes, with national politics as the central focal point. The hierarchization of featured news contributes to this control. Homogeneity is also apparent in the distribution of the informative space among the different social actors and the use of audio-visual resources. The dominance of political news, where political offices increase their control on the online media agenda, contributes to the reinforcement of these social actors as a leading information source. The development of multimediality shows the establishment of photography as the main resource while video is used to a lesser degree. Thus, both the presentation and the thematic content of the main front-page news items are similar in foreign and Spanish online media.

Yet these two online media agendas are by no means identical. Spanish economic and working conditions cause a greater development of these themes in Spanish online media. Regarding the geographical area of the news, the nature and origin of themes, like that of conflict, which range from international military conflict in foreign online media, to the social conflict (protests, strikes and other social conflicts) of a domestic character in Spanish online media, generates greater user participation. Nevertheless, despite the dominance of national and local events in the Spanish agenda, its reliance on wire material increases with respect to foreign online media. This is not exclusively applicable to international news, as this reliance is maintained in political news, the central axis of the Spanish online media agenda, which is characterised by a marked domestic nature.

Therefore, the extensive and longitudinal nature of the methodological tool we have implemented allows us to confirm the thematic and stylistic uniformity between the Spanish and the foreign online media agenda. Having said that, the geographical area that is focused on helps to break the content homogeneity between the different Spanish online media. The reliance on wire material, which is not limited to international issues, acts as a counterpoint in the creation of a more heterogeneous online media agenda. All these aspects cause the collective impact of Spanish online media on the public agenda to focus on a limited and homogeneous quantity of themes.

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