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Economic crisis as spectacle in Spain: infotainment in quality press coverage of the 2012 financial sector rescue

Abstract

This article reports on a conceptual and empirical analysis conducted to determine the degree to which economic and financial news published by two of Spain's foremost daily newspapers, *El País* and *El Mundo*, may have been spectacularized through the use of infotainment techniques and strategies. Researchers postulated at the outset of this study that spectacularization takes place at every phase of the crafting of a news item and that agenda setting, framing and the selection of information sources, narrative devices, and language constitute strategic points in the process that can be oriented towards transforming news into an appealing and easy-to-consume product. Content analysis was used to examine coverage these papers provided during May and June 2012 of a bailout of Spain's banking sector that entailed a partial government takeover of Bankia, the country's fourth-largest bank in terms of assets, an event that marked one of tensest moments in the country's long economic crisis. Findings indicate that the use of infotainment strategies is now common in economic reporting –the hard news core of the quality press– and that leading newspapers not only employ framing techniques associated with this genre such as dramatization, personalisation, emotionalism, and speculation but also rely heavily on journalistic subjectivity rather than expert sources of information.

Keywords

Spectacularization, infotainment, quality press, economic news, bank bailout, economic crisis, content analysis

1. Introduction

On 7 May 2012, the Spanish government announced that it would rescue Bankia, the country's fourth-largest bank in terms of assets and product of a merger of Caja Madrid, Bancaja, Caja Canarias, Caja Ávila, Caja

Segovia, Caja Rioja and Caixa Laietana. This decision, taken against the backdrop of a deep economic recession, successive declines in the country's GDP and soaring unemployment figures, was one of a chain of events that would eventually lead to a more comprehensive "bailout" of the banking system by EU institutions, an event that sparked some of the highest levels of social tension and media coverage registered during the crisis.

The value of Bankia stock plunged in the wake of the government's intervention, dragging the shares of other companies listed on Ibex 35 with it and triggering media speculation throughout Europe regarding the health of the Spanish financial sector and savings banks in particular. Moody's downgrading of the credit ratings of 16 Spanish banks and two of the country's autonomous regions on 17 May triggered a rise in risk premiums.

Simultaneous negotiations at the EU level regarding the role of the European Central Bank (ECB) in the resolution of the crisis revealed differences of opinion between Germany, the Netherlands and other Northern European countries on the one hand and Spain, Italy and France on the other. Government cuts in social spending provoked social unrest in Spain. Elsewhere, the Socialists swept general elections in France and political instability forced a snap election in Greece surrounded by media speculation about that country's possible exit from the Euro zone.

Under intense pressure, EU member states approved the creation of a community mechanism for recapitalising troubled banks in a bid to reduce the risk of sovereign defaults that would have required far larger interventions at the national level. On 9 June 2012, the International Monetary Fund released a report stating that an injection of 4 million euros would be needed to shore up the ailing Spanish banking sector and the Eurogroup announced its intention to provide up to 100 billion euros for the recapitalisation of the country's troubled banks.

The bank bailout would figure heavily in quality press coverage of the economic crisis. However, this study reveals that leading Spanish newspapers occasionally abandoned the rigorous standards traditionally associated with journalism and engaged in infotainment and the spectacularization of news.

The research reported in this article was conducted to examine the ways in which *El País* and *El Mundo*, Spain's leading generalist newspapers in terms of circulation, altered the tone of their traditional discourses and to identify those processes by which they incorporated stylistic conventions linked to infotainment into their economic reporting. A key objective was to determine whether quality newspapers had adopted television's previously documented propensity for spectacularizing news (Postman, 1985; Bordieu, 1997; Sartori, 1998; Langer, 2000; Anderson, 2004) in a bid to align content more closely with the demands a highly competitive market in which the introduction of new media and formats had supposed a relaxation of traditional deontological standards.

2. The presence of infotainment in the quality press

The spectacularization of news content has been the most notable trend to emerge in journalism since the 1980s (Franklin, 1997; Prado, 2003; Langer, 2000; Thussu, 2011; Ferré Pavia, 2013). This infotainment-based news presentation strategy, which was first taken up by television, favours appealing stories over hard news reporting and analysis and places an emphasis on those facets of a story most likely to capture the attention and entertain readers.

As newspapers have increasingly adopted television's techniques for constructing news stories, the conceptual boundaries between the quality press and popular tabloids have become blurred. These two approaches to journalism have traditionally been regarded as polar opposites. Quality broadsheets have long enjoyed a higher level of prestige, targeted a more selective readership, based their journalism on objectivity and the verification of facts

by means of reliable sources, placed a priority on hard news topics such as politics and economic issues and embraced a style that eschewed "sensationalist tactics, the publication of scandalous photographs and oversized headlines" (Armentia & Caminos, 2003: 153). In contrast, popular tabloids, which are directed to a more heterogeneous audience, have a greater affinity for "extraordinary facts and events and focus more on human interest stories, national news, supernatural phenomena, financial and economic news limited in scope to the successes or problems of individuals, forms of competition ranging from rivalries over economic or political power to team sports, celebrity news, sensationalist topics, catastrophes, scandals and baseless reports" (Armentia & Caminos, 2003: 153). They also place a greater emphasis on storytelling than on the analysis and contextualisation of events, tend to simplify serious news and employ a colloquial, expressive narrative style and flashy layouts.

Various authors have noted that the boundaries between these two very different models of journalism have become increasingly tenuous (Steimberg, 2000; Núñez Ladevéze, 1991). Kurtz (1993) has attributed this phenomenon to the adoption of values traditionally associated with the world of tabloid journalism by the quality press and considers it to be the main consequence of quality newspapers' decision to embrace soft news content. Some such as Sparks (2000) and Humanes *et al.* (2009) have asserted that newspapers are progressively devoting fewer column inches to news of public interest and more to stories with an entertainment slant.

Other experts, however, downplay the theory that choice of subject matter is a key factor in quality newspapers' incorporation of infotainment (Grabe, Zhou & Barnet, 2001), citing the use of this genre by media across the board and in all types of news formats (Thussu, 2007) as a global trend observable as much in superficial reporting of hard news as in coverage of soft news (Berrocal *et al.*, 2014). According to these experts, spectacularization strategies affect the entire process of news production, from the formulation of arguments, themes and frames to the sources newspapers utilise, the manner in which they handle data, the narrative style they employ and their overall approach to covering an event or topic. It therefore follows that the door is wide open to their application in the two sections that have traditionally marked the difference between the quality and tabloid press: political and economic news.

3. The spectacularization of economic news

The economic "democratisation" brought on by globalisation and the privatisations of the 1990s transformed millions of average citizens into shareholders and investors and created the environment for a boom in media coverage of economic and financial news (Arrese, 2006; Vellón, 2014). With the emergence in the 1990s of a press sector focusing specifically on economic matters, generalist dailies also began to enhance their coverage of this topic and add pullout sections devoted specifically to the subject. Given the direct impact of financial and economic issues on average citizens, generalist reporting of this topic has increased significantly since the onset of the current economic crisis in 2008.

However, the expansion of newspapers' coverage of economic and financial issues has exposed a gap between professional expertise – which, by definition, is based a profound understanding of the technicalities and abstractions of economic issues – and the need to make such information accessible to a general public. The struggle to simultaneously maintain high standards, render economic issues understandable to average readers and make economic news attractive to the uninitiated has triggered the parallel development of spectacularization strategies similar to those used to address other topics. Werhane *et al.* have warned that credible reporting has been replaced by "a tribal drumbeat of more emotionally charged, while less factually grounded, news" (2011: 414). Coca and Diezhandino

(1997) have documented the use of euphemisms to tone down or dissimulate given situations and journalists' adoption of terms normally associated with cinematographic, military or catastrophe scenarios. Álvarez-Peralta (2014) has criticised journalists' increasing use of dramatic metaphors rife with medical connotations ("bleeding" stock markets and "injections" of liquidity) and words normally employed to describe natural catastrophes (storms, earthquakes and downward spirals), stressing the impact the use of such terms has on the construction of social narratives and the public's understanding of remedial measures and pointing out that "their objective appears to be not so much to offer clear explanations of the implications of international economics but rather to elicit an emotionally charged public reaction to global disaster: fear" (2014: 340). Chakravartty and Schiller (2010) have gone so far as to blame the crisis on the media's failure to provide the public crucial information regarding the nature of international finance. Starkman (2014) notes that by devoting itself so entirely to topics such as the soaring profits of companies implicated in the burgeoning real estate bubble, the financial press failed to fulfil its inherent public watchdog responsibilities.

Other experts (Doyle, 2006; Mendizábal, 2011) have stressed criticism aimed at the press for its superficial reporting and failure to properly contextualise the crisis. Arrese (2006) in particular has underlined the media's obsession with churning out news updates on long-term processes, excessive reliance on human interest stories and habit of framing companies reported on as mere extensions of their executive officers' personalities. These observations clearly point to the press's adoption of infotainment techniques and strategies previously identified in the media by Berrocal *et al.* (2014), Imbert (2003), Humanes *et al.* (2009), Dader (2007), Gómez Mompert (2009), García Avilés (2007), Paz and Montero (2010), Labio (2008), Ortells (2011) and Baeza (2001).

The spectacularization of news is just as contingent on decisions made at the design and layout stage as it is on journalists' choice of narrative conventions. Regarding the first of these two aspects of journalistic practice, Humanes *et al.* point to a steady decrease in the size of published texts and a concurrent increase in the number of modernising graphic elements incorporated into newspaper layouts: "White space has triumphed over text, large headlines over lead paragraphs and the body of a news item and visual elements (photographs and infographics) over language" (2009). Labio (2008) refers to this shift as the *revistización* (magazining) of the quality press.

As Lozano (2000 and 2004) has noted, in terms of narrative style, the process of spectacularization centres on four strategies identified by Gingrás (1998): dramatization (an emphasis on conflict and alarmism), fragmentation (the piecemeal reporting of isolated aspects of a situation or process), normalisation (simplistic proposals for solving problems) and personalisation (the reduction of the scope of news coverage to individual cases). Delving further into the workings of the last of these four strategies, Imbert (2003) borrows the semiotic term "actantialization" to describe the practice of personalising institutions by transferring their attributions to individuals representing or associated with them or attributing human qualities to such entities or other legal structures. In addition to these factors, one must also consider the emphasis placed on the feelings and emotions of subjects of news stories, which often take precedence over clear-cut narratives of the actual events and facts being reported, (Berrocal *et al.*, 2014; Vellón, 2014) as well as the use of humour (Berrocal *et al.*, 2014). Infotainment relies on a colloquial lexicon, a never-ending stock of stock phrases, hyperbolic narratives that "describe reality as something unusual and exciting" (Redondo, 2011: 156) and euphemisms that downplay the crude reality of situations.

Therefore, the process of spectacularization involves more than a horizontal shift of techniques and values within the media system from the tabloid press and television to the

quality press; it also implies a vertical shift as well, in that it affects the structure of a news story, the way it is produced and even the configuration of social reality.

4. Sample and methodology

The research reported here, which was undertaken to verify the importance that leading Spanish newspapers placed on the bank bailout of 2012, entailed an analysis of the frequency with which they reported on this event and their positioning and prioritisation of news items published on this topic as well as the identification of evidence of spectacularization at every step of the news making process. Dominant themes, the ways in which news in this category was framed, the defining stylistic and lexical characteristics of published content and sources of information consulted were also closely examined. The final objective was to establish a clear picture of the degree to which infotainment had become the norm at the two newspapers analysed and whether this form of journalism had had an impact on the traditional journalistic values they have traditionally espoused.

The starting hypotheses established for this study were as follows:

H.1. The use of infotainment techniques and strategies had extended to the core sections of the dailies studied that distinguished them from the tabloid press (financial and economic news), compromising these organisations' ability to offer optimal coverage of the 2012 bank bailout and its consequences, a topic of great public interest.

H.2 A close examination of these newspapers' coverage of the bank bailout would reveal that as much in their handling of the topics addressed (what aspects were given greater weight) as in their framing of content (the angle from which news was reported), both would demonstrate a tendency to pursue strategies associated with the tabloid press that focused on drama, conflict and emotion rather than practices traditionally followed by the quality press that place more weight on the attribution of responsibility and clear explanations of economic consequences (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000).

H.3 Despite the fact that the use of reliable expert sources is one of the unquestioned tenets of economic and financial reporting, the news organisations studied would prove to have relied on non-qualified, non-expert sources and the personal interpretations and speculations of their journalists – one of the telling hallmarks of news spectacularization – to differentiate their reporting from that offered by competitors.

H.4 The application of infotainment techniques and strategies in the newsroom favours the development of a personalized, emotional, simplistic and fragmented narrative style. It also leads to the adoption of a colourful, colloquial lexicon not traditionally deemed acceptable by the quality press.

Quantitative and qualitative content analyses of relevant news items published by two leading Spanish newspapers were conducted to verify these hypotheses and facilitate the identification of points at which their reporting parted from the classic tenets of serious journalism and began to more closely reflect the practices of infotainment.

The representative sample used for this case study was composed of news content published by *El País* and *El Mundo* between May 8, 2012 (the day both papers reported the resignation of Bankia SA's chairman Rodrigo Rato and government sources spoke openly of the possibility of a sector bailout) and June 10 of that year (the day after the Eurogroup announced its intention to assist in the recapitalisation of certain failed Spanish banks). The corpus, which was determined by means of systematic sampling with a selection interval of 4, contained a total of 258 analysis units, each of which was a relevant news item featured in either of the newspapers chosen for the study. Opinion pieces were excluded from the selection. The final sample contained 125 units from *El País* and 133 units from *El Mundo*.

Once the corpus was defined, an analysis template was devised to facilitate the coding of infotainment strategies into the following categories:

1. Relevance of information. This category was used in a quantitative analysis of variables such as space allotment and hierarchical placement performed to determine the relative importance both newspapers placed on this news event. Size, placement, genre, data contained and inclusion of graphic elements were recorded for each unit during this process.

2. Thematization and framing. Each unit was examined to determine the section in which it appeared, the principal thrust of its content and how it was conceptually framed (Neuman *et al.*, 1992). A methodology designed specifically for this research that drew upon the system of classification developed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) but also took account the inductive approaches employed by Entman (1993) and Igartua, Muñiz, and Cheng (2005) was used to determine the presence of specific frames. Conceptually grouping key terms and expressions identified in analysis units according to their semantic affinities facilitated the development of the following list of possible frames: pressure, conflict, competition, misfortune, uncertainty, problematic situation, cooperation, initiative, fraud and success¹.

3. Sources of information, types of attribution (named, unnamed or anonymous) and affiliations of sources consulted (official/institutional, popular, media, internal in the case of staff journalists, none).

4. Narrative style. Distinctions were based on the stylistic categories for infotainment developed by Berrocal *et al.* (2014), Ortells (2011), Imbert (2003), Humanes *et al.* (2009), Paz and Montero (2010) and Labio Bernal (2008). Units were examined for the presence of the following stylistic conventions associated with this genre: dramatisation, actantialization, speculation and the use of emotion, humour and colloquial language².

Methods were adjusted to facilitate the best possible evaluation of each particular aspect of spectacularization. For example, some were measured in dichotomous terms (presence/absence) whereas others were evaluated on a scale of 1 to 5 in order to determine the intensity of a particular element of characteristic.

5. Results

5.1. *The central importance of news related to the 2012 bank rescue in the Spanish quality press*

An analysis of the variables related to the relevance of news about the bailout revealed that both newspapers followed the criteria one would expect the quality press to uphold. The

¹ Conflict: any type of confrontation, opposition or controversy. Pressure: pressure exerted by means of force or coercion upon an individual or group. Cooperation: join effort towards an objective. Uncertainty: anxiety and risk in the face of future events. Initiative: decision-making in response to a range of situations. Misfortune: a fact or event triggering negative consequences. Problematic situation: a combination of events or circumstances that impede achievement of an objective. Fraud: actions prejudicial to the state or third-parties taken to avoid compliance with legal provisions. Success: the positive outcome of actions. Competition: the competitiveness of or rivalry between opposing parties striving for the same thing.

² Aspects of spectacularization were defined as follows: Dramatization, which refers not only to the use of dramatic and emotive resources but also to the use of dramatic structures that ramp up suspense to the finish rather than articulating information in descending order of importance as per the classic inverted pyramid formula (one example being an article published by *El País* on 5 June 2012 that began with the headline "Merkel and Barroso pave the way for the summit that will reform Europe" but ended with the conclusion that there was no guarantee that such reforms would be carried out). Actantialization is the practice of personalising institutions by transferring their attributions to individuals representing or associated with them or attributing human qualities to such entities or other legal structures. Emotion denotes a strong emphasis on emotional elements or the personal sentiments of the main subjects of a news story. Humour refers to the use of irony and satire. Speculation refers to the publication of baseless news stories or reports representing events that may or may not occur in the future as being definite eventualities. Colloquial language refers informal terminology and expressions such as set phrases and figures of speech not normally deemed acceptable according to the tenets of traditional journalism.

intensity of the coverage offered these dailies during the period examined (12.5 items per day in the case of *El País* and 13.3 in the case of *El Mundo*) and the daily average number featured as front-page stories (2.5 and 1.5 respectively) give a clear indication of the importance both placed on the event and communicated to their readers.

In terms of space devoted to coverage of this issue, 67.2% of the sample units drawn from *El País* filled four or more columns and more than one in four were allotted an entire page (10.4%) or a double spread (11.2%). In the case of *El Mundo*, 55.6% filled four or more columns and 15.7% were run as full-page or double-spread articles. Allotment patterns for both newspapers square with a number of phenomena Barnhurst and Mutz (2002) and Høyer and Nossen (2014) consider to be key facets of the evolution in journalism over the last few decades such as a steady increase in the length of texts, a decline in the array of topics addressed and growing space for analysis on the part of journalists.

Both dailies used a wide variety of resources to stress the importance of the topic in question. For instance, 52% of the news items drawn from *El País* and 45.8% of those drawn from *El Mundo* received prominent placement (full page or "above the fold"). Of these, 46% of the items appearing in *El País* and 45.5% of those appearing in *El Mundo* were placed at the beginning of a section, another indication that the editors of both ranked news about the bank bailout highly within a given thematic category. Six out of every ten related articles they published were featured as the lead story of the pages they appeared.

It is therefore clear that both newspapers placed coverage of the bailout high on their editorial agendas, a decision coherent with quality press criteria for determining the newsworthiness of a given issue and can be assumed to have had an impact on their respective readerships' understanding of the crisis.

5.2. Conflict and pressure as dominant frames

The first level of thematization of a news item is its placement within a section, which positions it within a specific frame of interpretation.

Table 1. Distribution of news items about the bank rescue by section

SECTION	<i>El País</i> %	<i>El Mundo</i> %
National	12	26.7
Economic and financial	57	56.2
International	23	16.9
Other	8	0

The greater portion of analysis units drawn from both dailies (57% from *El País* and 56.2% from *El Mundo*) were published in their respective economic and financial sections – a fundamentally technical section of a newspaper in which expert analysis is paramount and a "highly meticulous handling of terminology, data and, generally speaking, every element of the whole" is essential (Arrese, 2006: 44). Whereas *El País* placed a significant percentage of the news items it published on the bailout (23%) in its international section (thus portraying a significant amount of the background information and explanations it provided on this issue as something estranged from the domestic situation in Spain), *El Mundo* positioned a roughly similar proportion of its coverage of the same issue (26.7%) in the realm of national politics, a move consistent with a growing tendency to portray economic news as the outcome of political decisions that placed a greater emphasis on Spanish authorities' ability to manoeuvre.

The sharp distinctions between these newspapers' thematic treatments of the bailout (see Table 2) signal their differing perceptions of the economic crisis. As could be expected, Bankia's problems and the state of Spain's financial system constituted the main topics of a

sizeable percentage of the articles analysed (13.6% and 11.2% of sample news items drawn from *El País*, and 12% and 12.7% from *El Mundo*). Despite its international scope, *El País* paid notable attention to the ongoing crisis in Greece, the subject of 9.6% of the news items drawn from that paper. However, this level of interest can be explained by the ample grist that situation provided for spectacularization strategies in the form of news angles that ranged from political conflict and leadership rivalries to uncertainty about the future, threats, the fear of what could happen next and the drama of a society finding itself suddenly impoverished. News items falling into the thematic category "effects of the crisis" constituted 11.2% of the analysis units for this daily, the greater part of which were narratives of the plights of average citizens framed in a way that not only personalised the consequences of the economic situation but appealed to readers on an emotional level as well.

Table 2. Themes and frames used in *El País*'s and *El Mundo*'s bailout coverage

THEMATIC CATEGORIES	<i>El País</i> %	<i>El Mundo</i> %
Bankia	13.6	12
Financial system	11.2	12.7
Bank bailout	9.6	5.2
Crisis in Spain	6.4	3.7
Crisis at the autonomous region and local levels	3.2	13.5
Spanish budget deficit	3.2	3.7
Political debate in Spain	4	11.2
Spanish crisis policy	3.2	3.7
Crisis in Germany	3.2	2.2
Crisis in Greece	9.6	6.7
Crisis in other countries	9.6	3
EU crisis policy	10.4	12.7
Effects of the crisis	11.2	3.7
Citizen reactions	0	3
Stock market	1.6	0.7
Other	0	1.5
NEWS FRAMES		
Pressure	14.4	22.5
Conflict	16.8	25.5
Competition	2.4	0.7
Misfortune	6.4	2.2
Uncertainty	19.2	8.2
Problematic situations	5.6	3
Cooperation	15.2	16.5
Initiative	11.2	13.5
Fraud	4	4.5
Success	4.8	3

El Mundo stands out for its meagre coverage of the effects of the crisis elsewhere in the world, which was the subject of a scant 12% of the sample units analysed. A narrow focus on local reporting and lack of interest in international affairs is one of the telling hallmarks of the tabloid press. *El Mundo* also placed a much greater emphasis on breaking news and updates. This is consistent with an editorial line focused on two fundamental issues: the evolution of the economic crisis in Spain's autonomous regions (to which 13.5% of the news items corresponding to this paper were devoted) and the national political debate on the crisis (which was the subject of another 11.2%), which represented a much higher percentage than those focusing on topics such as actions taken by the government in response to the situation (3.7%). These figures indicate that *El Mundo* devoted more ink to opinion, value

judgements and dialectical debate than the implementation of government measures. It also frequently used articles on the effects of the crisis in autonomous communities as an opportunity to report on conflict between individual communities and communities and the central government, a narrative strategy characteristic of spectacularization known as "polemicization" (Imbert, 2003), the framing of news or information in a context that generates controversy and debate.

The news frames noted above (see Table 2) were identified by analysing references that contributed most to the main thrust of the individual texts. They are, as follows, in descending order according to the frequency of their use: conflict, pressure, cooperation, uncertainty, initiative, misfortune, problematic situations, fraud, success and competition.

Analysis revealed that the frames most frequently used were those associated with the spectacularization of news. Almost a third of the items in the sample pertaining to *El País* (31.2%) contained frames that struck an emotional chord: uncertainty (19.2%), misfortune (6.4%) and problematic situations (5.6%). Another third (33.6%) incorporated frames that presented events in a particularly dramatic or controversial light: pressure (14.4%), conflict (16.8%) and competition (2.4%). Of the sample units drawn from *El Mundo*, almost half (48.8%) were constructed using dramatic frames that favoured a personalisation of the issue: pressure (22.5%), conflict (25.5%) and competition (0.7%). Another 13.5% of the items analysed contained frames of an emotional nature: misfortune (2.2%), problematic situations (3%), and uncertainty (8.3%). More than six out of every ten news items related to the bailout drawn from *El Mundo* were framed from perspectives related to strategies of spectacularization.

5.3. Information sources: an excessive emphasis on the subjectivity of journalists

A characteristic of the quality press is its use of ample, varied and frequently expert sources of information. Nonetheless, analysis reveals that *El País* and *El Mundo* strayed from these standards. Although institutional sources were cited in a large percentage of units analysed, authorial subjectivity surprisingly proved to be the second most notable characteristic of articles published by both newspapers.

Table 3. Sources used to support the main ideas of news items

MAIN SOURCES	<i>El País</i> %	<i>El Mundo</i> %
Named/institutional	44	46.6
Named/lay sources	4.8	1.5
Direct/media	0.8	3.7
Unnamed	8.8	10.5
Journalistic interpretation	29.6	24
None	12	13.5

The content and conclusions contained in 29.6% of the news items drawn from *El País* were more heavily informed by journalists' interpretations than sources consulted. *El Mundo* gave its journalists free rein to interpret events reported on in 24% (almost one in four) of the sample units pertaining to that daily. Such a high incidence of authorial subjectivity, which is one of the identifying characteristics of infotainment discourse, drags journalism into a territory in which the border between facts and speculation becomes troublingly tenuous. An analysis of the sources employed revealed evidence of a shift from the journalist's traditional function as mediator between news events and readers to a new role as a protagonist in the news reported.

The notably high percentage of news items in which no source was cited (12% of those drawn from *El País* and 13.5% from *El Mundo*) is an indication of substandard practices that undermine the credibility of news reports (De Fontcuberta, 1993). Reliance on anonymous or

unnamed sources implies depriving readers of basic information they need to form their own opinions about events and furthermore makes the press complicit in veiling the identities of those who wield great power behind the scenes (Gomis, 1991). Results such as those of this study corroborate the assertions of Esser (1999) that infotainment is also a manifestation of the attitudes journalists' bring to their work. It therefore follows that any relaxation of personal standards is a step on the slippery slope towards the banalization of news.

A comparative analysis of news items with a high degree of professional subjectivity and those containing evidence of spectacularization was also conducted. Results revealed that eight out of ten units drawn from *El País* registering high levels of interpretation on the part of their authors also contained characteristics associated with spectacularization strategies. Furthermore, articles in which authorial subjectivity was detected contained higher levels of spectacularization techniques and strategies (3.3 points on a scale of 5) than the overall average registered for units drawn from this daily (3.2 points on the same scale), an indication that subjective reporting is an entry point for the incorporation of infotainment strategies in the quality press.

The same phenomenon was detected in articles published by *El Mundo*: almost nine out of ten (88%) of those that relied heavily on an author's interpretation also contained stylistic elements consistent with infotainment. Nonetheless, the fact that the presence of these characteristics in articles in which the authors' interpretations prevailed was roughly equal to that observed in news items citing sources indicates that the implementation of infotainment practices and strategies is similar throughout the news making process regardless of variations in style and approach.

5.4. A narrative style that accentuated the drama of the bailout

An analysis of the narrative styles and lexicons employed in the reporting examined revealed that both frequently coincided with the conventions of infotainment. The techniques and elements listed below (see Table 4) were detected in 47.2% of the news items drawn from *El País* and a significantly higher proportion (56.3%) of those drawn from *El Mundo*, which in the case of the latter is coherent with the corporate style book it released in 1996 that places a strong emphasis on the journalist's role as storyteller, urges editors to give preferential placement to human interest stories and anecdotal pieces and defends the addition of colourful touches to news stories whenever appropriate.

Table 4. Conventions employed in the spectacularization of the news

CONVENTIONS EMPLOYED	<i>El País</i> %	<i>El Mundo</i> %
Dramatisation	44	30
Personalisation	28.4	13.5
Emotion	10.4	3
Humour	0	0
Colloquial language	28.8	22.5
Hyperbolic language	21.6	9
Speculation	20	24
Other	0	5.2

The portrayal of reality as a spectacle by means of dramatization was detected in 44% of the sample units drawn from *El País* and 30% of those drawn from *El Mundo*. Abandoning the standard inverted pyramid model in favour of exposition-climax-resolution narrative structures similar to those used in fiction writing was one of several tactics employed by journalists writing for these papers to dramatize stories. In a similar vein, *El País* ran an

eloquent strapline over a number of articles related to the bailout that bore the resounding legend "the newspaper of the crisis". Also common were pieces providing minute-by-minute chronological accounts of the previous day's or days' events under such headlines as "Two weeks of anxiety" (*El País*, 20 May 2012) or "Heightened pressure exerted on Spain" (*El Mundo*, 5 June 2012). Portrayals of events as if they were part of an epic conflict and declarations of the singularity of the moment are both consistent with the concept of news as spectacle. *El País*, for example, ran headlines declaring "Greek misgovernance mires Europe in a month of anxiety" and "Athens plunges into the abyss" (*El País*, 16 May 2012).

Actantialization was detected in 28% of analysis units corresponding to *El País*, which framed current events as struggles between political leaders and conveyed the impression that European and national leaders rather than apparatuses of state were making all the decisions. Two prime examples of the use of this tactic were "Merkollande to the rescue of Europe" and "The good, the bad and the ugly", the latter in reference to three German Social Democratic leaders (*El País*, 16 May 2012). By employing constructions in its political reporting that anthropomorphised institutions and substituting conflict between real individuals with conflict between institutions that nonetheless displayed human behaviour, *El País* lowered the tenor of its discourse and heightened the atmosphere of controversy. This technique was used much less frequently by *El Mundo*, appearing in only 13.5% of the sample units corresponding to that paper. Actantialization was occasionally reinforced with metaphors evoking catastrophes; one example being a headline in *El País* that read "Train wreck between Merkel and Hollande" (24 May 2012).

One of the aspects of *El Mundo*'s reporting that set it apart from its competitor was its intensive use of speculation, a tactic considered dubious from the perspective of journalistic rigour. A full 24% of the sample items drawn from this daily either contained unverified information or portrayed events as being driven forward by some mysterious but inevitable force. One example was an article titled "Brussels considers giving Spain more time to meet deficit targets" that included expressions such as "a new climate in Europe opens the door", "everything points to [it]" and "as the commissioner implied". Speculative reporting reflects the competitive logic of infotainment. In a context in which audiovisual media and the Internet offer the public the promise of access to news as it happens and news organisations compete to offer the most complete coverage, only projections of the future can really be considered up-to-date and original (Neiger, 2007).

In terms of the language these dailies used to describe reality, colloquial expressions were detected in 20.8% of the news items corresponding to *El País* and 22.5% of those corresponding to *El Mundo*. These ranged from "out-and-out refuse to bend to the dictates of the Troika" (*El País*, 16 May 2012) to "Greek leaders have come up against the hard reality" (*El Mundo*, 16 May 2012). Spectacularizing discourses abounding in metaphors, plays on words, exaggerations and ambiguities appeared in 21.6% of the news items drawn from *El País* compared to 9% of those drawn from *El Mundo*. Some shining examples are: "The Romans used to say that money doesn't stink, but all crises give off a similar stench that starts with a scandal" (*El País*, 20 May 2012) and "It appears that in the most important country in the Balkans there's only one law: Murphy's law. Whatever can go wrong, will go wrong" (*El País*, 16 May 2012).

Summing the individual figures for *El País*, the overall percentage of news items published by that daily in which one form of spectacularization or another was detected add up to 47.2 % of the total, although in 13.6% it was present to a very low extent (registering 1 on a 5-point scale) and only a slightly higher extent in a further 4% (2 on the same scale). The overall percentage for news items published in *El Mundo* containing elements of spectacularization was 56%, 13.5% of which merited a grade 1 rating and 9.7% of which were rated grade 2.

A comparative analysis of the variables provided the basis for conclusions concerning the circumstances under which spectacularization techniques and strategies had been implemented. Findings indicate that the more space allotted to a news story, the more likely it was to take on the characteristics of infotainment. This tendency was most clearly observed in the part of the sample corresponding to *El País*, in which 61.1% of four-column articles, 48.8% of five-column articles, 60% of six-column articles and 75% of full-page stories contained elements related to infotainment. Figures for all these categories exceeded the mean for that paper's sample. In the case of *El Mundo*, 70.5% of its related four-column articles and 73.8% of its five-column articles contained stylistic elements typical of this genre, which were also detected in the sole seven-column article and two other eight-column articles as well. However, six-column articles drawn from this daily followed a distinct pattern: although one half contained elements of infotainment, the other did not.

Nevertheless, no definitive relationship between the length of an article and the degree to which infotainment elements were present could be established. In the case of *El País*, their presence tended to increase with the number of columns allotted: the degree to which such characteristics were detected in three- and four-column articles was below the mean for the overall sample drawn from that daily but tended to increase with each additional column. Five-column articles registered a 3.3-point presence on a scale of 1 to 5, six-column articles a 4-point presence and eight-column articles a 4.5-point presence. However, this pattern did not hold in the case of ten-column articles, in which the presence of infotainment elements was much lower (2.66 points).

The degree to which infotainment elements were present in news items published by *El Mundo* was more stable and had no direct relation with the size of an article, although the six- and seven-column articles corresponding to this paper did contain higher levels of these characteristics.

Spectacularization was most evident in news items these papers deemed most important, in other words, those that had been given preferential placement on the first page of a section or were considered to be the lead story on a given page. In the case of *El País*, 56.6% of the news items containing infotainment elements appeared on the first page of a section and 57.9% were leading stories. The level of infotainment content in both categories was 10 points above the mean for sample units corresponding to that paper. The pattern was similar for *El Mundo*: 64.7% of the news items in the sample pertaining to that daily that contained a stylistic element typical of infotainment appeared at the beginning of a section and 63.3% were considered to be the lead stories on the pages they appeared.

An analysis of the data leads to the conclusion that correspondents and special correspondents – professionals valued for their personal styles of narration – have a greater tendency to employ infotainment techniques than other journalists. The findings of this study show that 60% of the articles in the *El País* sample and 71.4% of the articles in the *El Mundo* sample bearing correspondent or special correspondent by-lines contained evidence of the imposition of a spectacularization method or strategy.

6. Conclusions

The findings of this study confirm that infotainment has penetrated the nucleus of economic and financial reporting carried out by the quality press in Spain as postulated in hypothesis 1. An analysis of news items about the 2012 bank bailout drawn from the two Spanish newspapers examined not only confirmed these dailies' conformity with general trends in quality journalism (a marked preference for longer news articles, the determination of an event's newsworthiness on the basis of its immediacy, relevance and consequences, and the implementation of criteria that placed a high priority on news of public interest) but also revealed the presence of infotainment characteristics in the content they published.

Hypothesis 2 was confirmed by the presence of elements of such strategies in the form of frames that dramatised or added an emotional charge to content. Although no signs of spectacularization were detected in the thematisation of content they published, the dailies examined demonstrated a notable tendency to incorporate elements of tabloid journalism by means of frames that engaged readers on an emotional (misfortune and uncertainty) or dramatic (pressure, conflict and competition) level, which were detected in six out every ten units analysed. *El Mundo* relied heavily on frames that dramatised content (present in 48.8% of the sample units corresponding to that paper) whereas *El País* made roughly equal use of the two most characteristic conventions of infotainment: dramatisation (present in 33.6% of the sample units drawn from this daily) and appeal to the emotions (present in 31.2%).

As postulated in hypothesis 3, an evolution in values regarding journalists' use of information sources was observed in the sample. Analysis revealed that although these newspapers consulted official and institutional sources, they also tended to trust non-specialist sources and their own journalists' interpretations, relying on the latter to such an extent that subjectivity proved to be a determining factor in the construction of 29.6% of the news items corresponding to *El País* and 24% of those corresponding to *El Mundo*. Such figures point to a shift from the once sacrosanct idea that journalists are mediators between news events and the public to a concept of the journalist as an interventionist who actively constructs and conditions the news. Furthermore, the abundant use of anonymous and unnamed sources (employed in 20.8% of items in the *El País* sample and 24% in the *El Mundo* sample) casts doubt on the credibility of these papers' reporting and reveals a relaxation of deontological standards that results in the production of articles that appear to be informative but are actually rife with ambiguities that prevent the reader from knowing who is really directing and controlling the journalistic discourse.

The detection of stylistic characteristics associated with infotainment and previously identified in television newscasting confirmed hypothesis 4: 44% of the news items in the sample pertaining to *El País* and 30% pertaining to *El Mundo* contained dramatic structures that emulated the exposition-climax-resolution narrative organisation of works of fiction rather than the inverted pyramid formula traditionally employed in journalism. It was also noted that close to 29% of the news stories drawn from *El País* and 13.5% of those drawn from *El Mundo* had been constructed using actantialization and personalisation techniques, both of which lead to a simplification of news being reported and a greater emphasis on personal attitudes than facts and ideas. The presence of colloquial and hyperbolic language also indicated that these newspapers had placed a higher priority on attractive presentation than journalistic rigour and in-depth reporting.

News stories considered by editors to be the most important tended to contain a higher level of infotainment characteristics. Although elements of this genre were detected throughout the sample, articles written by journalists whose professional cachet was an expressive writing style such as correspondents and special correspondents tended to make greater use of them.

It is important to note that although the use of infotainment strategies blurs the boundaries between quality and tabloid journalism, the level to which they had been implemented by the newspapers analysed was not so high as to impede a clear distinction between the two. Such characteristics were detected in less than half of the new items examined (52.8% of the items corresponding to *El País* and 44% to *El Mundo* were free of them) and the full range of spectacularization conventions were only used in one out of five.

This study did not provide any clear and definitive indication as to whether these techniques had been implemented for the sole purpose of expanding readership bases in a highly competitive market, or if their use could possibly have been related to the efforts of political and economic actors seeking to impair the environment for public debate. It does, however, point to the consequences of mixing news and entertainment: the

decontextualization of events, oversimplification of complex social processes, concealment of structural problems and acceptance of subjectivity as a legitimate aspect of journalistic practice.

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