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Global news, local coverage: how the Basque press framed the horsemeat crisis

Abstract

During the period January–April 2013, the Basque press covered what at first seemed to be only a local scandal sparked by the detection of horsemeat in processed food labelled in Great Britain and Ireland as containing only beef but quickly became an issue that implicated companies throughout Europe. The findings of this study show that Basque newspapers used interpretative reporting, opinion pieces and in-house journalism drawing heavily on “close” sources to frame this situation in terms of its potential economic and political impact in the Basque Country. The research reported in this article was carried out as part of a more extensive university–civil society research project focusing on media coverage of food safety issues.

Keywords

Framing, journalism, food safety, horsemeat, local, crisis

1. Introduction

The link between food and subsistence in Western societies has long been overshadowed by other cultural, social, and even aesthetic considerations. The never-ending series of pullout sections and special issues devoted to health, diet and responsible consumption churned out by the press provides a steady barometer of the public’s changing gastronomic whims and nutritional preoccupations. Celebrity chefs have acquired the status of gurus in the eyes mass twenty-first century audiences eager for culinary experiences and nutritional promises far beyond the reach of most family budgets. Authors such as Beck warn that we live in a risk society in which a long run of techno-economic progress is being eclipsed by mounting manufactured uncertainties. The global implications of risks of this nature, which can no longer regarded as merely collateral effects, have made them the subject of social and political debate. “A universalisation of hazards accompanies industrial production, independent of the place where they are produced: food chains connect practically everyone on earth to everyone else. They dip under borders” (Beck, 1992: 36).

The present concern of governments and consumers alike for food safety is a reflection of a general perception that certain risks must be

avoided. The action plan developed at the 1996 World Food Summit held in Rome established that “Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life”. Although access and availability (food security) is not a major first-world problem, the European Commission released a White Paper on food security on 12 January 2000 that laid out key principles for addressing other food-related issues from a European perspective. This document promoted a “farm to fork” approach to EU legislation intended to cover every link of the food chain from the cultivation and processing of food to its transportation and distribution to consumers and establish a system of regulatory control.

As the declared objective of new regulation is to protect and promote consumers’ health, a strong emphasis has been placed on risk analysis, which the Commission paper states “must be the foundation on which food safety policy is based. The EU must base its food policy on the application of the three components of risk analysis: risk assessment (scientific advice and information analysis) risk management (regulation and control) and risk communication” (White Paper on Food Safety 2000).

Over the past few decades, Spanish authorities have had to deal with a number of food crises, the most memorable being the toxic oil syndrome crisis of 1981, the outbreak of Bovine spongiform encephalopathy in 2000, the detection of benzopyrene in olive pomace oil in 2001, the diagnosis of a number of cases of salmonella gastroenteritis traceable to vacuum-packed cooked chicken in 2005; the bird flu crisis of 2005–2006 and, more recently, an outbreak of *E. coli* infections in Germany related to the consumption of cucumbers in 2011.

Given the need to deal with public perception of risk, one of the most important tools for managing these crises has been communication. “Risk communication is the means by which scientists and other professionals attempt to provide information that people, whether individuals specifically directly affected or entire communities, need to make the best possible decisions regarding their personal well being or a risk to their health” (March Cerdá, 2011: 64)

This branch of communications has been studied in depth by authors such as Fita (1999); Gonzalo Iglesia and Farré Coma (2011); Saura (2005) and Pérez-Castellanos (2004). Nevertheless, as private businesses and public authorities call upon the media to disseminate their messages and recommendations in times of crisis, the role of the media in risk communication must also be taken into account. According to some authors such as Bland (1994), media response to a crisis often determines how it plays out. The construction of a public perception that a risk does or does not exist depends greatly on the coverage the media provide and the aspects of a given situation they choose to focus on. The food safety crises that the Spanish public has needed to periodically come to grips with have been the subject of numerous studies.

The purpose of this article is to contribute to this line of research by analysing Basque press coverage of the so-called “horsemeat crisis”.

2. The horsemeat crisis: a chronological history

Pilar Saura defines a crisis as “a serious situation that affects some of a business/institution’s operations and/or has the potential to intensify and/or cause harm to its target audiences or interest groups and/or result in negative media impact and/or tarnish its image in the eyes of the public and/or affect an entity’s results or viability” (2005:13).

The chain of events that took place between January and April 2013 as a consequence of the detection of horsemeat in products labelled as containing only beef fits this definition

perfectly. On January 13, 2013, regional and national newspapers in Spain ran stories about the discovery of horsemeat and pork in supposedly 100% beef pre-prepared burgers produced in Great Britain and Ireland. This anomaly came to light as a result of tests on pre-prepared hamburger patties produced at three meatpacking plants – two located in Ireland and third in Great Britain – initiated by the Irish health authorities. What began as a local case of labelling fraud involving two countries gradually evolved into a full-blown crisis that spread throughout Europe and implicated numerous local and multinational businesses in the food sector. Raymond Ellard, Director of Consumer Protection for Ireland's Food Safety Authority, reported that the meat used to adulterate the burgers came from the Netherlands, Spain and, to a lesser extent, from Ireland. According to him, the contamination had probably been accidental rather than intentional.

On January 30, 2013, the Spanish Organización de Consumidores y Usuarios (OCU) announced the results of an analysis that confirmed the presence of equine DNA in pre-prepared burgers marketed in Spain by Eroski and Alipende. Eroski downplayed these findings, stressing that their burgers did not pose a health threat and suggesting that the presence of equine DNA in this product may have been caused by its inadvertent exposure to traces of horsemeat during the manufacturing process.

Agriculture and food ministers from the seven countries affected by the problem met informally at the request of the Irish presidency of the EU on February 13. No representative of Spain was invited to attend this meeting. EU Health Commissioner Tonio Borg subsequently recommended that EU member states test meat products for foreign DNA.

The crisis reached a peak on February 14 with British Minister of State for Agriculture and Food David Heath's announcement that horsemeat from Great Britain contaminated with phenylbutazone (an anti-inflammatory drug administered to animals considered to be potentially harmful for humans) might have entered France's food chain. Three individuals employed by two processing plants in England and Wales were subsequently arrested on charges of fraud related to improper labelling.

The following day the European Commission's Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health met to assess the extent of the problem and determine whether it constituted a public health risk. This committee resolved to implement two kinds of testing as of March 1 of that year: one to verify the DNA of beef used in processed foods and another to test for the presence of phenylbutazone in horsemeat at slaughterhouses. Shortly afterwards, various companies including Nestlé, Ikea-Ibérica and the Brazilian multinational corporation JBS announced product recalls and others such as Spanghero were the objects of legal actions launched by the governments of the countries in which they were based.

On April 15, the Spanish Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Environment released the findings of tests mandated by the European Commission: 4% of the 189 samples analysed contained horsemeat not noted on the product label but none contained traces of phenylbutazone. It was revealed that 4.6% of products tested in Europe contained unlabelled horsemeat. France and Greece registered the highest incidences of fraudulently marketed meat. The EU did not rule out the possibility of introducing new measures such as stricter controls and dissuasive financial penalties in the wake of these findings.

3. Objectives and hypothesis

The general objective of this study has been to analyse Basque press coverage of the horsemeat crisis from January through April 2013. The research design called for a detailed analysis of the formal and stylistic resources these newspapers used to report on this subject. Quantifiable aspects of press coverage such space allotment and the inclusion of graphic elements were examined in order to determine the importance that each paper

placed on this issue. Journalistic formats, sources and acknowledgements of authorship were analysed to gain a clear picture of the approach each newspaper took in its coverage of the crisis.

Research was based on the following hypotheses:

- The complexity and scope of the situation, which was played out at multiple levels on a European scale, made it impossible for the newspapers analysed to frame events in a common, coherent manner.

- The diverse ways in which they identified and defined the situation fostered uncertainty and confusion.

- The responsibility frame was rarely used and given little importance. The attribution of responsibility was diluted and fractured, a factor that heightened public confusion about the issue.

- Initial coverage of the subject, which was devoted to problem definition, was conditioned by local context, and social and cultural values, which naturally differed from one country to another.

- The Basque press framed its reporting so as to mitigate the political or economic consequences the crisis might have for local livestock breeders, distributors, small businesses and the Basque government.

- The newspapers studied used different frames to convey their points of view regarding the situation.

4. Methodology and background

To meet stated objectives and test the aforementioned hypotheses, we employed content analysis, defined by Krippendorff as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (1990: 28).

Content analysed was drawn from seven different newspapers: *Deia*, *Diario de Noticias de Álava* and *Noticias de Gipuzkoa* (owned by Grupo Editorial Noticias), *El Correo* and *El Diario Vasco* (owned by Grupo Vocento), *Gara* and *Berria*, the latter of which is published exclusively in Basque. All these dailies are edited in the Basque Country. The editorial line of newspapers published by Grupo Noticias closely reflects the views of the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV). In contrast, Grupo Vocento reflects centre-right opinion, which in the Basque Country implies opposition to proposals for Basque independence as well as defence of the Statute of Autonomy of the Basque Country (the Statute of Gernika) and the community’s historic “foral” rights. *Gara* and *Berria* are both editorially aligned with the izquierda *abertzale* (Basque independence movement), the former to a greater extent than the latter.

The news corpus employed for this study was compiled using iPressreview, a tool marketed by Kantarmedia, a company specialising in newspaper archive and press clipping services. A search of the iPressreview data bank, which supports key word search, yielded a total of 72 relevant news items published between January 17 and April 23, 2013 in various formats.

Framing theory was adapted to address the specific object and theme of this study. The concept of framing was first posited by cognitive psychologist Gregory Bateson (1972) to describe the way in which people are drawn to some aspects of a new situation they are exposed more than others. Goffman (2006: 11) subsequently asserted: “definitions of a situation are built up in accordance with the organisational principles that govern events – at least social ones – and our subjective involvement in them”. Tuchman was one of the first scholars to apply the concept of framing to media studies. She regarded news as a metaphorical window through which we view reality, our perspective contingent upon

“whether the window is large or small, has many panes or few, whether the glass is opaque or clear, whether the window faces a street or a backyard” (1983: 13).

There are two possible methods for identifying media frames (De Vreese, 2005). The first involves an inductive process during which the various types of frames used are identified as material is being analysed and the second a deductive process that involves searching for specific, pre-specified types of frames in a news sample. Both approaches have been applied in this research in order to gain a fuller and more detailed understanding of how the newspapers analysed framed their coverage.

The first step addressed a specific, formal aspect of framing: the amount of space each newspaper devoted to the subject under study and the visual elements they employed in their coverage. In addition to dealing with the complexities of assessing the scope of the crisis with any degree of precision, it was also necessary to track the shifts in concepts employed during the prolonged period that the newspapers in question covered this topic. We therefore decided to examine “problem definition”, one of the four basic functions of framing enumerated by Entman (1993).

During this phase we focused on the key words, themes and arguments present in headlines, decks, subheads, crossheads, quotes, and, occasionally, the text of the new items, framing devices identified by Entman (1993) and Tankard (2001). Of the five most prevalent types of news frames identified by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), the attribution of responsibility was most useful to this study, as analysing the sample material from this perspective made it easier to understand the reactions of implicated parties, businesses and regional and supranational governing bodies and their strategies.

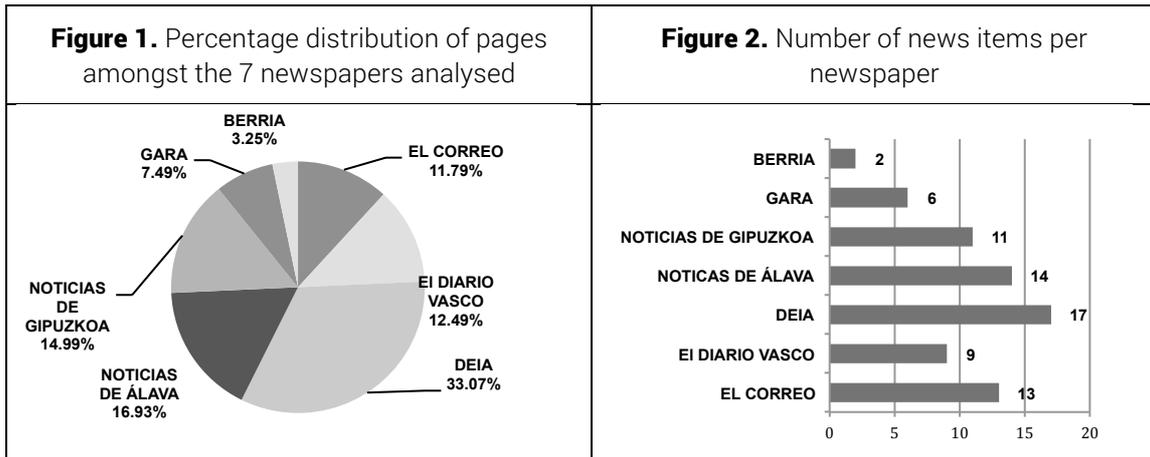
An inductive methodology was applied during the second phase of research, which was devoted to determining the formal resources employed by the newspapers to frame their coverage in line with the economic and political interests they were aligned with and appeal to local readers. The frames that each paper constructed were identified inductively by means of the same devices used previously, but more emphasis was placed on detecting local rather than supranational perspectives and contextualising them within a wider and complex process.

A wide variety of other studies on this topic conducted in Spain and other countries have used this methodology. Some of the most outstanding, which have served as precedents and points of reference for this research, include a study carried out by Sherrie R. Whaley and Mark Tuck (2004) on the perception of food safety risks and a comparative analysis of local news related to food safety conducted by Blake J Gruber (2011).

Some of the most important studies undertaken in Spain have been Pablo Francescutti's (2003) research on the role of the Spanish press in risk communication related to mad cow disease, Quintana's (2004) work on consumers and social media, and more recent studies by Paloma López (2012) on the Spanish press's framing of health news (specifically its handling of the 2009 H1N1 (swine) flu epidemic and the E. coli virus), Vázquez Gestal and Fernández Souto (2014) on Spanish and German media treatment of the 2011 outbreak of E. coli linked to the consumption of cucumbers and Jordi Prades, et al. (2014) on the virtues and drawbacks of web 2.0 environments as vehicles for communicating risks and benefits related to food. These and other studies mentioned further on in this article have provided guidance for our research.

5. Textual and visual content

During the period January–April 2013, the Basque press published 72 news items related to the horsemeat crisis. These accounted for a total of slightly more than 40 pages, which was unevenly distributed amongst the 7 newspapers analysed.

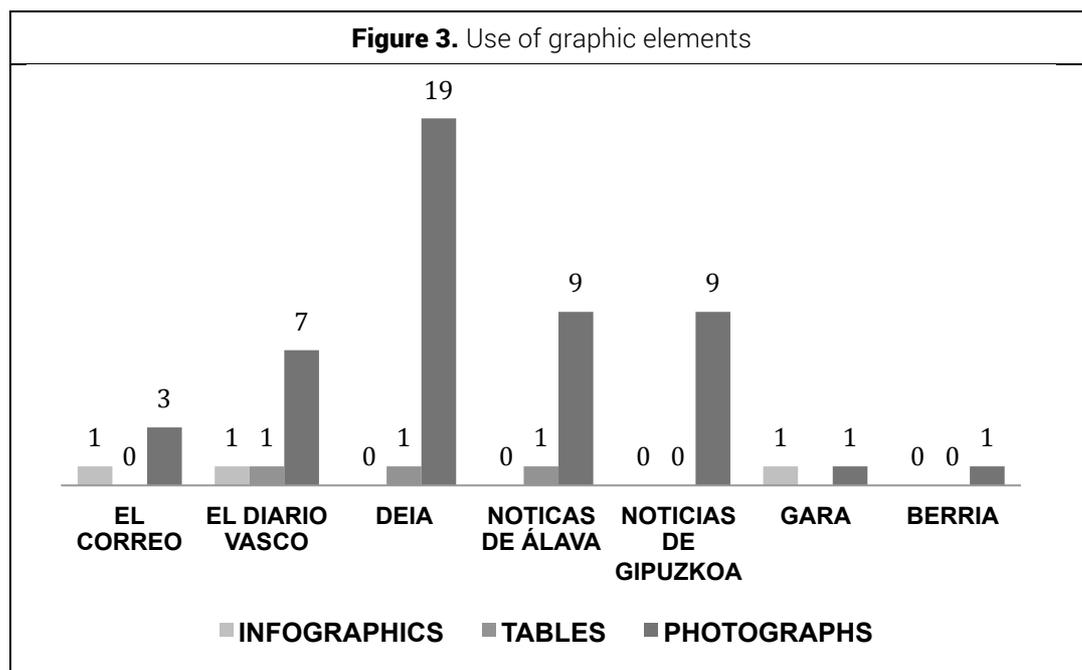


The number of pages devoted to the topic in question ranged from a high of 14 in *Deia* to a low of 2 in *Berría*. As can be observed in Fig. 1, newspapers published by Grupo Noticias (*Deia*, *Diario de Noticias de Álava* y *Noticias de Gipuzkoa*) allocated more space to the crisis than their regional competitors.

Although *El Correo* devoted much less space to this topic than the three dailies published by Grupo Noticias (barely 5 pages), it ranked third (above *Noticias de Gipuzkoa*) in terms of the number of related news items published (13) – 2 more than its Gipuzkoa-based competitor. *Deia* and *Diario de Noticias de Álava* ran the most articles (17 and 14 respectively) and *Gara* and *Berría* the fewest (6 and 2 respectively).

Another issue that needed to be taken into consideration was the weight of graphic material within the overall coverage provided.

Deia ranked first in terms of graphic materials published on this topic, featuring 19 photographs and 1 table, followed by *Diario de Noticias de Álava* and *Noticias de Gipuzkoa*, each of which ran 9 photographs. Although the other dailies used visual resources to a much lesser extent, *Gara*, like *El Correo* and *El Diario Vasco*, used infographics at least once to illustrate or shed further light on news being reported.



6. The role of “definitions” in framing

As in the majority of health alerts or crises, the scope of the case under study had to be defined in order to be adequately assessed. Professional journalists are just as susceptible to the effects of framing as the general public. It is easy to forget that the cultural context in which readers are immersed contributes to the construction of an a priori framework within which we all frame reality. “In the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us” (Lippmann, 2003: 82). De Vreese (2005: 52) uses the term “frame-setting” to describe “the interaction between media frames and individuals’ prior knowledge and predispositions”.

The event that triggered the crisis was the public announcement that horsemeat had been fraudulently added to hamburgers labelled as 100% beef. On day later it was revealed that pork had also been detected in supposedly pure beef burgers. According to *El País* (17/01/2013), the percentage of porcine DNA detected in products tested was double that of equine DNA. The same paper stated that although the products in question did not constitute a risk to public health, “the discovery nevertheless comes as a shock in two countries in which horses are considered to have nothing to do with cuisine and everything to do with sport”. Although the newspaper did consider Muslims’ fears of inadvertently eating pork they believed in good faith to be beef, these consumers constituted a small minority within the European marketplace.

The fraudulent addition of horsemeat became the big issue and pork was rarely mentioned in either subsequent news stories or measures introduced by the European Commission to prevent future cases of fraud. Levi Strauss (1965: 131) asserted that “natural species are chosen not because they are ‘good to eat’ but because they are ‘good to think’”. López García (2005: 60) has similarly noted that “in our society, at least two conditioning factors determine that an animal is fit to eat: we must perceive it as being neither too distant nor too close”. As distance can be emotional as well as physical, culture has a strong impact on our culinary practices and preferences. Although horsemeat is consumed in certain European countries, the emotional closeness between most Europeans and horses provides a cultural barrier that keeps these animals off most continental menus. The existing cultural schema of a large portion of the European (and particularly Anglo Saxon) public won the upper hand in this case, giving the horse a protagonism denied to the less culturally exalted pig.

A content analysis revealed that the newspapers studied had employed a wide range of frames during their coverage of the horsemeat crisis.

Figure 4. The role of “definition” in framing

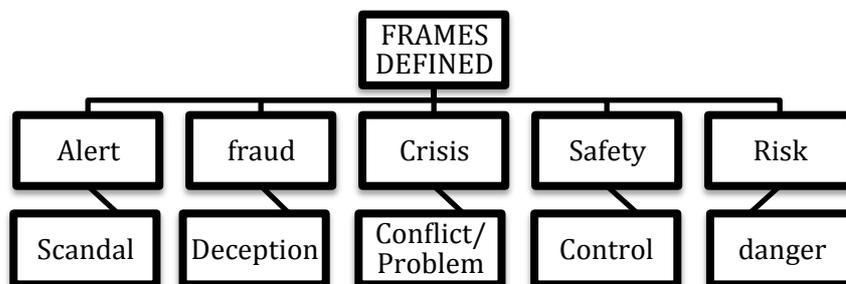


Fig. 4 lists the key words defining the frames employed by the newspapers analysed. As the crisis continuously evolved, these definitions changed from one day to the next.

In its initial article on the subject published on January 17, 2013, *Deia* defined the situation as a case of labelling fraud, basing its opinion that no risk to public health existed on two prior statements from EU sources that asserted the problem was not a food safety issue. Sustaining that the situation did not constitute a food safety issue was incoherent given that “traceability is one of the key concepts of food safety in the twenty-first century. It is defined in Regulation (CE) 178/2002 as ‘the ability to trace and follow a food, feed, food-producing animal or substance intended to be, or expected to be incorporated into a food or feed, through all stages of production, processing and distribution’” (De Marcos, 2012: 35).

The same day the paper quoted a statement released by the European Commission’s spokesperson for consumer affairs and stressed that the presence of equine DNA in the hamburgers tested appeared to be merely “an accident”.

Although there was a notable absence of references to health risks in earlier news reports, the terms “risk” and “danger” appear in subtitles such as “Eroski, one of the supermarket chains involved, denies [the problem] and stresses there is no danger” (30/01/13) as well as crossheads, one of which repeated EU Health Commissioner Tonio Borg’s assertion that nothing indicated the presence horsemeat in the food chain constituted a health risk (14/02/13). Notwithstanding, the terms “scandal” and “problem” were used frequently during this period.

However, on February 15 *Deia* offered broader coverage under the strapline “Food Security in Question”. The next day it pushed the envelope further with the distinctly more alarmist headline “Fraud or a Health Problem in Europe?” Up until this point, the newspaper had framed the situation as either a case of fraud or a matter of food safety but had never overtly suggested that it implied a health risk. What fuelled editorial doubt at this daily from this point on was the detection of phenylbutazone in a number of meat samples.

On March 6 *Deia* ran a headline declaring “This Takes the Cake” accompanied by a photograph of a cake recalled by Ikea. The deck pointed out the presence of faecal matter in desserts sold by that multinational firm: “In the wake of its recall of meatballs found to have contained traces of horsemeat, Ikea has now stopped serving two types of cake in its store cafeterias in 23 countries for supposedly containing traces of faecal matter.”

On April 13, *Deia* and the other newspapers published by Grupo Noticias devoted two full pages to food safety. A strapline styled “food alerts” appeared above an article sporting the rhetorical title “Non-identified Edible Objects”. The use of the words “faecal” and “horse” together in a single subtitle that read “The recent controversies over horsemeat and faecal bacteria have intensified consumers’ preoccupations about foods” once again generated confusion.

Diario de Noticias de Álava runs reedited versions of most of the news stories published by *Deia*. On February 28 this paper published a story under the title “Is It Safe to Say It’s Safe?” that defined the problem as a case of fraud nevertheless attributable to the ineffectuality of European governance: “The fraudulent labelling of beef has revealed the absence of adequate oversight within the EU”.

An even greater shift can be observed in coverage offered by *Noticias de Gipuzkoa*, which in addition to reproducing stories published by the other newspapers in the group, ran opinion pieces and news items that defined the horsemeat situation as “a question of culture”. Other articles sustained the same point of view. This was precisely the frame adopted by the nationally distributed *El País* at the outbreak of the crisis.

Although the Basque press made few direct allusions to health risks, on February 15 *Noticias de Gipuzkoa* ran a headline that went straight to the point: “The EU will study health risks related to the horsemeat scandal.” Although the EU study was conceived as a

precautionary measure, the fact that horsemeat would be the object of EU research sparked a perception of danger and social alarm.

On March 16 and 17 headlines once again made allusions to risk only to deny that any existed, defining the problem once again as a question of fraud and deception.

All three newspapers owned by Grupo Noticias changed their definition of the crisis over time, first referring to it as a case of fraud but later describing it as a food safety problem with connotations of risk. The dominating frame was conflict: news items tended to stoke the controversy by offering contradictory opinions and making occasional use of fairly arbitrary concepts, a strategy that generated uncertainty and doubt. These three newspapers paid very little attention to the root causes of the fraud committed. Very little analysis, the key to an in-depth understanding of any problem, was conducted.

El Correo ran a story on January 17 that without being explicit tended to describe the horsemeat crisis as a case of consumer fraud. From this moment on, fraud is the definition most often reiterated by this newspaper, along with food security, which it frequently alluded to in headlines and decks referring to oversight measures adopted by the EU such as “The EU introduces a plan to avoid the fraudulent sale of horsemeat” (16/02/2013). On two occasions *El Correo* qualified the crisis as a “scandal”: once in a deck that read “Specialist butcher shops warn about the ‘confusion’ generated by the food scandal and praise the ‘healthy’ qualities of horsemeat” (10/03/13) and another time in a crosshead stating “A proposal to require that the country of origin be listed on labels of processed food products divides the twenty-seven [EU member states] whose representatives have met to analyse the horsemeat scandal” (14/02/2013).

In reference to the withdrawal of several desserts from Ikea cafeterias, *El Correo* used the term “bacterial” whereas *Deia* resorted to the more inflammatory adjective “faecal”. Nevertheless, like the newspapers published by Grupo Noticias, it had no qualms about drawing parallels between the two recalls the company had recently made as if they were of equal importance: “The Swedish company, which found itself in a similar situation last week with its burgers, ensures that the desserts affected are not sold in Spain” (06/03/2013). This marks the only point at which this newspaper suggested there was a possible risk to health, although neither the word “risk” nor any of its synonyms stands out in the news items analysed.

El Diario Vasco defined the horsemeat crisis as either a scandal or instance of fraud in at least 4 articles. However, its vague allusions to related measures and health controls introduced suggested that the matter was a food security issue. The only news item that overtly suggested the possibility of health risk was related to the contaminated desserts recalled by Ikea. Even in this case, the headline simply mentioned the fact that the products had been contaminated without providing any detailed information as to the nature of the contamination.

Newspapers published by Grupo Vocento tended to frame the problem from the angle of contention, and although like the newspapers owned by Grupo Noticias *El Diario Vasco* made use of the conflict frame, it generally presented the situation as a food safety issue and refrained from publishing content with alarmist connotations.

Although *Gara* initially defined the situation as a case of fraud, after the detection of phenylbutazone on February 15 it began to refer to it as a health risk, in one case asserting “The horsemeat fraud now points toward a health risk”. One of the crossheads it ran that day had a clearly alarmist tone: “The European scandal provoked by the fraudulent labelling of prepared foods containing horsemeat as 100% beef is spreading across Europe and has now become a health issue in the wake of an analysis conducted in Great Britain that indicates a possible case of contamination involving anti-inflammatory drugs. A report issued by the British Parliament has warned that the scope of the horsemeat contamination could prove to be ‘breathhtaking’ and had most likely been perpetrated on ‘an industrial

scale”. From this point on, “fraud” and “scandal” became the two most frequently used qualifications used by this newspaper. Somewhat curiously, *Gara* downplayed the gravity of the results of the first round of tests imposed by the EU in an April 17 article that reported “out of the thousands of products tested by the EU, less than 5% contained horsemeat”.

El Correo, like the dailies published by Grupo Noticias, emphasised that only 4% of the meat analysed in Spain contained traces of equine DNA. In the two news items it published, *Berria* defined the crisis as a case of fraud and mentioned the issue of traceability in one and described it as a scandal in the other with an overt reference to the “long shadow of the horsemeat scandal” (17/02/2013).

7. Attribution of responsibility: a secondary frame

Many food crises perceived as local are actually global in nature. The free circulation of goods within the European common market and the complexity of cross-border food chains make oversight and, by extension, the attribution of responsibility for problems especially difficult.

Given that the press made little use of diagnostic framing, it follows that it also did little in the way of attributing responsibility. The horsemeat crisis revealed the failures and flaws of existing systems at every level, and the disparate approaches to crisis management adopted by national and supra-governmental agencies made it difficult to identify a sole responsible party.

According to Fita (1999: 162-163), implicated organisations utilised three of the four possible strategies open to them during this particular situation: denying the existence of the problem and refusing to address or devote energy to the subject, attempting to shift responsibility onto the shoulders of a third party in order to save its own reputation and confessing its guilt, assuming responsibility, collaborating with the media and providing explanations.

At the outset of the crisis, Ireland attempted to shift responsibility to a third party (Spain). With the devastating consequences of the recent “cucumber crisis” for the Spanish economy still fresh in everyone’s minds, the majority of the newspapers analysed chose not to place an emphasis on declarations made by Raymond Ellard, Director of Consumer Protection at the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI). The exception was *El Correo*, whose headline “Ireland suspects that hamburgers containing horsemeat came from Spain” gave voice to Irish accusations.

Gara indirectly suggested that the CEO of Spanghero was guilty of fraud in its February 20 headline “[The Basque-French nationalist political coalition] EH Bai points the finger at Aguerre regarding the fraudulent sale of horsemeat”.

The two clearest examples of responsibility framing detected during this study were stories run by *El Correo* on 17/01/2013 and *Gara* on 20/02/2013.

The arrest of three individuals in Great Britain supposedly responsible for one of the multiple cases of fraud was mentioned in sidebars and decks that appeared in *Gara*, *Diario de Noticias de Álava* and *Noticias de Gipuzkoa* (15/02/2013).

Although most of the companies implicated in the fraud adopted denial and responsibility-shifting strategies, only Eroski was singled out for this practice in headlines and decks; the finger pointing and claims of the rest were buried in the body copy of news articles.

El Diario Vasco ran a headline stating “Eroski insists that its pre-prepared hamburgers do not contain horsemeat”. *Diario de Noticias de Álava* and *Deia* ran identical decks in the same vein that read “Eroski, one of the firms under suspicion has denied [any culpability] and reiterates that no danger exists” (30/01/2013).

The complexity of sorting through the many ramifications of a case of fraud that eventually escalated into a situation that had connotations of a public health risk not only made shifting responsibility easier but also made the identification of the party ultimately responsible for what had occurred impossible.

Supermarket chains such as Eroski and Ahorramás withdrew products under fire from their shelves but blamed suppliers for any fraud committed. Providers such as Carnes Selectas, a subsidiary of Campofrío, were quick to state that the products they had supplied were 100% beef. The Swiss multinational food company Nestlé pointed the finger at H.J. Schypke, a German firm that shipped meat to one of its providers. As could be expected, that company refused to assume any responsibility.

When meat imported from Rumania containing traces of equine DNA were detected in France, Rumanian Minister of Agriculture Daniel Constantin defended his country's meatpacking sector against accusations that the problem originated there, claiming, "We have complied with all regulations in place and Rumania has does everything possible to help its European partners" (*El Diario Vasco*, 14/02/13). Although horsemeat used to adulterate beef burgers had been traced to Rumania, after leaving that country it had passed through the hands of middlemen in the Netherlands and Cyprus before arriving in France and later being used in the manufacture of pre-prepared foods in Luxembourg.

The only company to employ a confession strategy was Ikea, which was handling two practically simultaneous scandals: one related to the presence of horsemeat in its beef products and the other involving the bacterial contamination of chocolate and almond cakes. The newspapers analysed indirectly placed the blame on Ikea by reporting the firm's intention to withdraw these products from its stores. However, this company assumed its responsibility and attempted to minimise the fallout by issuing assurances that contaminated products were not being sold in Spain and demonstrating a willingness to investigate both incidents.

As the findings of this study show, Basque newspapers made little use of the responsibility frame in their coverage of this crisis. Only two news items published in *El Correo* and *Gara* conformed to this type of framing. Neither public institutions and governments, thoroughly engaged in the formulation of new oversight measures, nor the private companies affected, busy devoting their energies and resources to denying their responsibility and shifting the blame to other parties, helped clarify who might have been ultimately responsible.

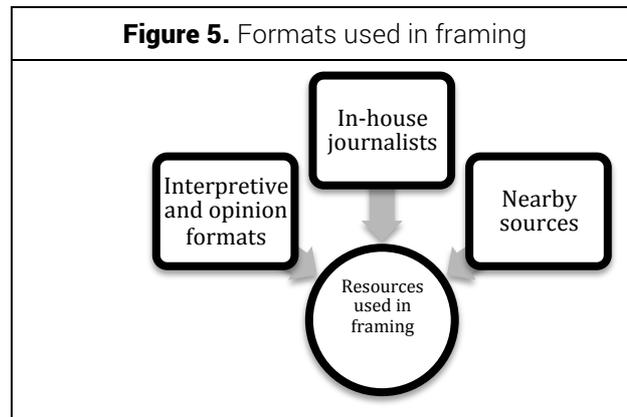
The errors committed were never truly addressed at either a local or global level; nor was the difficulty of monitoring a cross-border food chain closely examined. For Sarpong (2014: 278), the horsemeat scandal "has brought into the fore two particular areas – traceability and supply chain complexity – within the EU. Although there seem to be an ability to trace a number of products that have fallen short of expectation, the complexity of the supply chain sometimes makes such exercises quite problematic. The vulnerabilities in the supply chain are considerable, in part, because there is a huge flow of information that can be difficult to analyse, predict, or even measure".

8. Issue-specific news frames

8.1. Framing strategy: resources

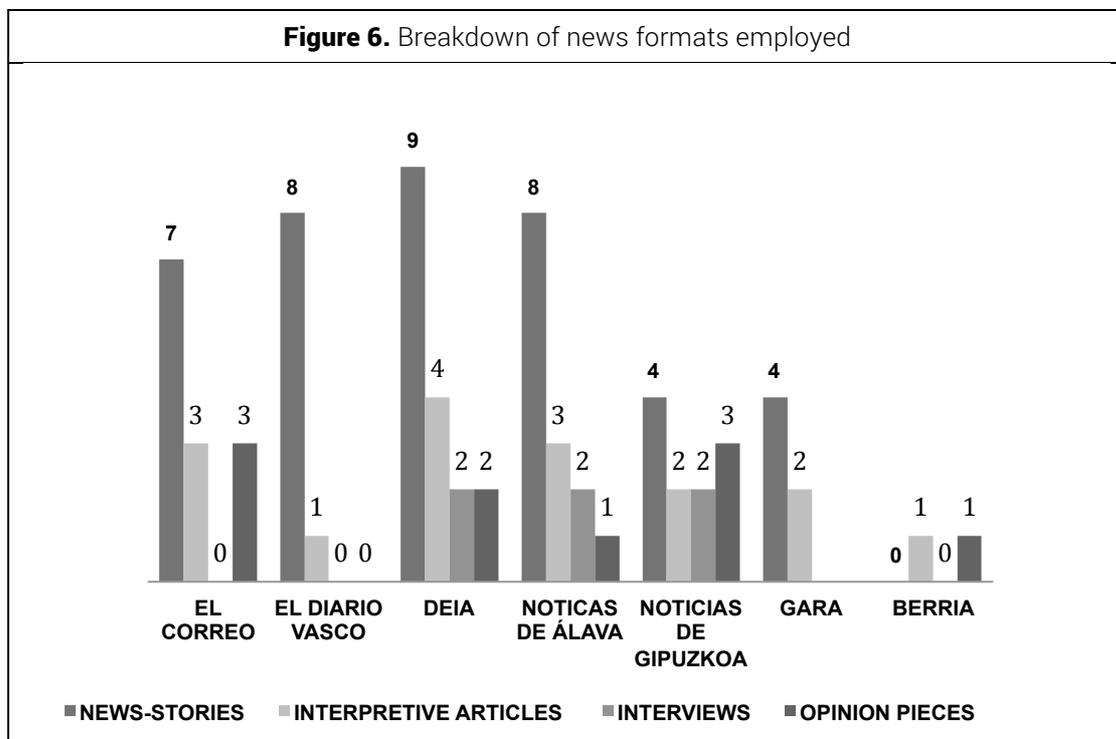
Faced with the complexity of providing coverage of a fraud that, in addition to its political, economic and business ramifications, eventually took on the dimensions of a health risk, the Basque press consciously or unconsciously constructed a parallel frame to mitigate the economic and political fallout of the crisis at the regional level. The strategies they

employed to a greater or lesser extent and with varying degrees of success involved the use of interpretive and opinion formats, “close” sources¹ and in-house journalists.



8.1.1. Journalistic formats

Interpretive articles and opinion pieces offer journalists more possibilities for conveying points of view, interpreting situations or providing in-depth coverage than straight news stories. Although employed in varying degrees by the newspapers analysed, these formats constituted an essential element of their framing strategies and were used not only to convey the possible implications of the crisis for Basque consumers and the regional economy but also to stress the correctness of actions taken by the Basque government.



¹ By “close”, we are referring to the geographic, political or cultural proximity of sources to the news organisations analysed.

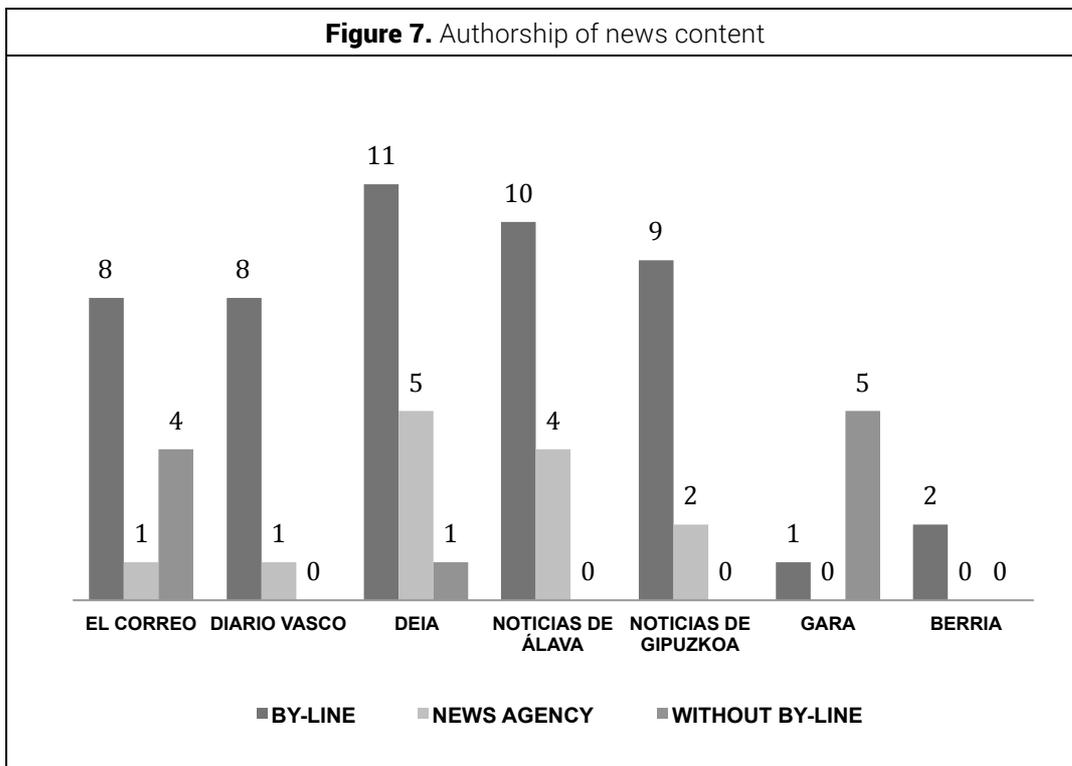
Deia took the lead in terms of the number of interpretive articles and opinion pieces published (8), whereas *Berrria* and *Gara*, with two each, made the least use of these formats. Nevertheless, if we look at their relative weight within a newspaper's total coverage, the picture changes significantly. *Berrria* published only two items related to the crisis, both of which fell into this category. As for the other dailies, interpretive articles and opinion pieces accounted for the following percentages of their total related coverage: *Deia*, 47%; *El Correo*, 46%; *Diario de Noticias de Álava*, 43%; *Noticias de Gipuzkoa*, 36%; *Gara*, 33% and *El Diario Vasco*, 11%.

Generally speaking, news articles accounted for 58% of the total related content published by the newspapers analysed. Feature stories and interpretive articles made up another 20%, opinion pieces 14% and interviews the final 8%. It is clear that interpretive articles and opinion pieces as important a role as news articles in the press's framing of this crisis. A closer examination of the entire sample reveals that news articles and descriptive and narrative pieces were used to cover international aspects of the crisis and interpretive reporting techniques were used to convey its local ramifications.

8.1.2. Recognition of authorship or source

Out of the total news items analysed, 68% carried a by-line. The authors of all the interpretive and opinion pieces in the sample were identified by name. Given the difficulty of covering events in other EU countries and European Commission communications without the benefit of a Brussels-based correspondent, it is not surprising that 18% of the items in the sample were sourced from news agencies.

Gara was the newspaper that least frequently acknowledged the authorship of articles. It ran an author's by-line for only one of the interpretive articles it published. As a matter of editorial policy, by-lines usually carry the name of paper. Content attributable to this daily accounts for much of the 14% of the articles in the sample analysed for which no author was credited. Fig. 7 provides a numeric breakdown of news items each newspaper published with a by-line crediting the author, without a by-line and sourced from a news agency.



The scarcity of journalists specialising in food safety issues is evident in the figures: only two journalists managed to achieve 3 by-lines: Silvia Martínez, the Brussels-based correspondent for Grupo Noticias, and Concha Lago, whose name appeared in the by-lines of one news article and two interviews. José Manuel Etzaniz, a professional veterinarian and member of the Sociedad Española de Seguridad Alimentaria was given credit for two opinion articles published by *Noticias de Gipuzkoa* and A. Lerate was credited as the author of two news articles appearing in newspapers published Grupo Vocento.

In spite of experts' repeated recommendations regarding the "need to improve the training communicators receive in the area of food and health" (Saura, 2005: 79), no significant progress on this issue has been made over the past few years. According to the *Informe sobre la Seguridad Alimentaria en el País Vasco en 2013* (Report on Food Safety in the Basque Country for 2013, Elika, 2014), only 8.8% of practicing journalists wrote more than 6 articles related to food safety that year.

8.1.3. News sources

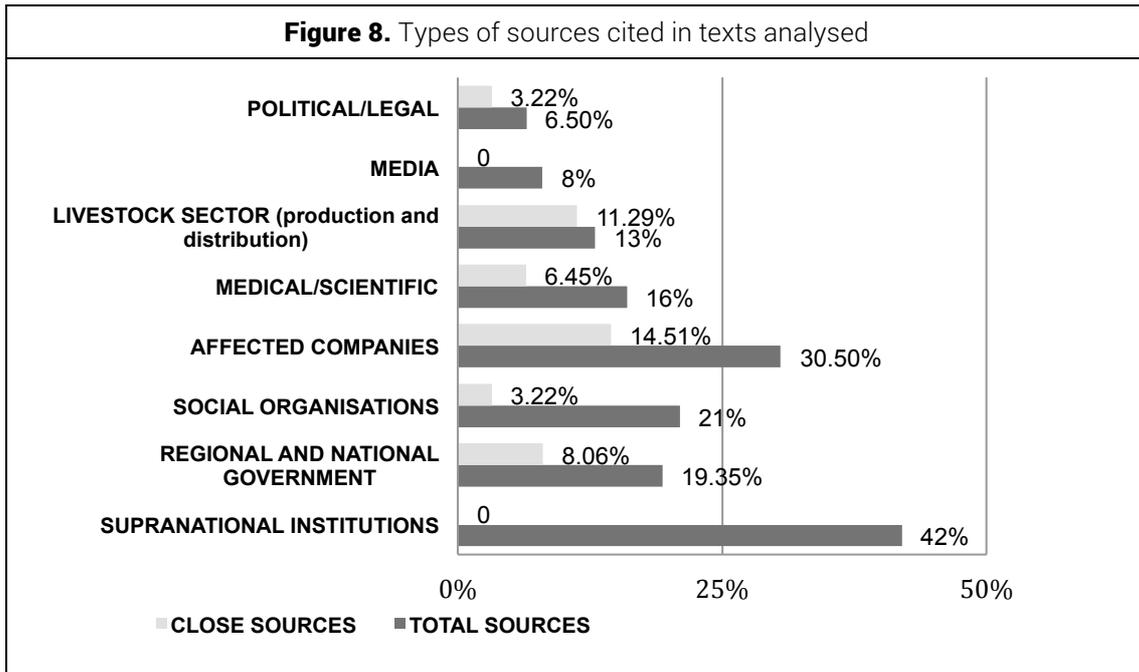
Among other factors, adequate news coverage depends on journalists' access to a range of reliable sources. Consultation with such sources is an indispensable aspect of media coverage of situations that could constitute risks to public welfare. Without the right sources of information, a journalist may find it impossible to write a valid news story.

Governmental and regulatory entities (the European Commission, ministries of foreign countries and food safety agencies) – particularly those at the supranational level – accounted for the highest percentage of sources used by Basque journalists covering the horsemeat crisis. They were cited as sources in 42% of the 62² news items analysed. Organisational spokespeople and heads of entities such as European Commissioner for Health and Consumers Frédéric Vincent, EU Health Commissioner Tonio Borg, and UK Minister of State for Agriculture and Food David Heath were also consulted.

However, the sheer number of sources providing information and the close association of some to the national interests of their respective countries prevented readers from fully understanding the problem. Although the media took advantage of reports and communiqués issued by EU institutions, no single individual or entity enjoyed the authority and prestige necessary to be considered a definitive source of information. Various reports issued by the European Commission during this period were used as source material.

Government institutions were cited as sources in 19.35% of the news items analysed, the most frequently tapped being the Spanish Ministry of Agriculture, Food and the Environment and the head of that ministry, Arias Cañete. Regional governmental entities and authorities were cited as sources in 8.6% of the sample units. Close sources consulted to provide a more local perspective on the crisis included Javier García, head of the Basque government's food inspection agency (Servicio de Inspecciones Alimentarias) and Juan Carlos Zuloaga Eizaguirre, Managing Director of Elika, (The Basque Foundation for Agro-Food Safety), both of whom sought to assure the public that horsemeat sold in the Basque Country was safe for human consumption and reinforce the image of regional government entities and their oversight of the Basque food chain.

² Of the total of news items in the sample (72), 10 opinion pieces that contained almost no cited material were not taken into account in the computation of the statistics displayed in Fig. 8.



Information gathered from affected companies, which were cited as sources in 30.50% of the news items in the sample, focused on either refutations of the charges against them or attempts to mitigate the negative impact of information released by other sources implicating them in the fraud. The corporate sources cited during this period were Ikea, its spokesperson Ylva Magnusson, Nestlé, JBS (a multinational meat processing company based in Brazil), LIDL, Campofrío, Spanghero and Spanghero’s CEO Barthelemy Aguerre.

The Basque County-based cooperative supermarket chain Eroski was one of the implicated companies most frequently mentioned by the Basque press. All of the newspapers analysed with the exception of *Gara* and *Berría* published stories concerning Eroski’s refutations of claims made by the consumer organisation OCU that horsemeat had been detected in its supposedly 100% beef burgers. Nevertheless, they devoted more space to Spanghero, a meat processing firm belonging to the Basque cooperative Lur Berri that had been accused of labelling fraud by the French government. *Gara* defended the integrity of the Basque cooperative by reporting accusations launched by the nationalist Basque-French political coalition Euskal Herria Bai against Spanghero’s CEO Barthelemy Aguerre with lines such as “EH Bai implicates Aguerre in the fraudulent sale of horsemeat” (*Gara*, 28/02/2013). Affected companies based in or with close ties to the Basque Country were mentioned in 15% of the news items included in the study sample.

The consumer organisation OCU was the most frequently cited source of information, in large part due to its January 29 release of the results of an in-house evaluation of pre-prepared hamburgers sold in Spain that indicated some brand name products labelled as 100% beef actually contained horsemeat. Given the impact of this report, it was not surprising that the organisation was cited in 20.96% of related news items published. Representatives of two other consumer organisations were also cited in 3.22% of this coverage: Belén Greaves, then Director of Kontsumobide, and Blanca Ibáñez, legal counsel to the Álava branch of the Unión de Consumidores de Euskadi (Basque Consumers’ Union).

The primary sector was also consulted: 11.29% of the news items analysed contained comments by livestock breeders and butchers who praised the quality of horsemeat and described the impact of the crisis on their businesses. Apart from the Asociación Nacional de Industrias de la Carne de España, sources cited were local. A large proportion of close sources consulted were related to this sector.

The most-cited newspaper source was the *Shanghai Daily*, the paper responsible for breaking the story about the detection of intestinal bacteria in cakes imported to that country from Sweden. *Gara* also used information provided by Titias Keetelaar, a journalist working for *NRC Handelsblad* (Amsterdam) and the Euronews television network. These sources were cited in approximately 8% of the news items published. No local media outlets were cited as sources.

Political and legal sources were cited in 6.45% on the related news content published, the EH Bai political coalition and the ELB labour union accounting for almost half of sources consulted in this category. Medical and scientific sources were also analysed. Although portrayed as the most authoritative sources consulted, it remains unclear whether they represented the only pool of experts qualified to weigh in on the topic and what profile, profession, level of responsibility and functions such sources should have. As Julia Navas has reflected, “It might be wiser in the future to look beyond veterinarians, doctors and biologists and consult experts in any discipline with solid knowledge of the health sciences and professional experience in communications and food crisis management” (Navas, 2010: 28).

Spokespeople for public entities such as food safety agencies tended to present themselves as consumer protection experts. In the opinion of Navas (2010: 62), “This gives rise to another category of people presenting themselves as crisis managers and spokespeople who, in the view of experts critical of their performance, abandon scientific viewpoints in order to appeal to public opinion in exchange for compensation, which in the majority of cases, turns out to be monetary”.

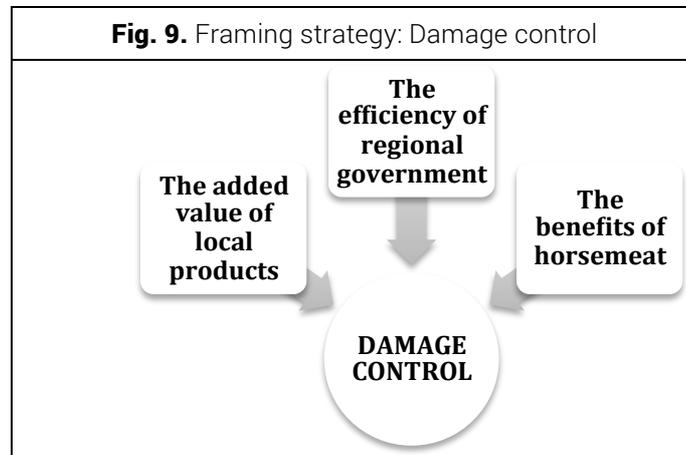
Arguments regarding their relative expertise aside, medical and scientific sources were not frequently consulted or cited by the newspapers in question during this crisis. They appeared in only 16.12% of the news items in the sample, a much lower percentage than those that cited governmental and regulatory sources at the national or supranational level, affected companies and civil society organisations. Grupo Noticias did consult Juan José Badiola, President of the Spanish Association of Veterinarians and member of the European Food Safety Network, who had gained the status of expert during the mad cow crisis, as well as Mats Lindblad, a microbiologist working for the Swedish National Food Agency and the Instituto Zooprofilattico Sperimentale del Piemonte, Liguria e Valle d’Aosta (IZSTO) in Turin, Italy.

Local medical and scientific experts consulted (José Manuel Etxaniz, a veterinarian who had previously collaborated with Grupo Noticias and Ana Isabel Vitas, an expert in microbiology from the University of Navarra) were only cited in 6.45% of the news items analysed. No local experts in this area were cited by *Gara*, *El Diario Vasco* or *Berría*.

As can be observed, newspapers placed a high priority on information gathered from governmental and regulatory sources (a natural choice given the importance of the measures these entities were introducing) and corporate sources implicated in the scandal (not surprising given these firms’ interest in responding quickly to the accusations made against them). Although experts were seldom cited, consulting knowledgeable sources in the livestock sector opened up the possibility of reporting the crisis from a different angle. Newspapers cited close sources of almost every type, the media and supranational entities being the only exceptions. However, the majority of close sources were concentrated in the area of medicine and science. Although only cited in a limited percentage of the total news items published, they helped add a very specific slant to the way the crisis was framed.

8.2. Framing strategy: Damage control

Basque newspapers made use of all the previously mentioned resources to frame the horsemeat crisis from a perspective closely aligned with local interests.



The general objective of this strategy was to minimise the effect of information released in other countries (including news regarding the implication of Basque companies in fraudulent practices exposed) that could have a negative impact on the Basque government and economy. To this end, three main messages underpinned the Basque press's overall coverage of the crisis: horsemeat is healthy, the Basque Country's system for monitoring food safety is effective and products produced in the region are of undoubtedly high quality.

8.2.1. Efficiency of the Basque government

In response to news about the accusations being made regarding the origin of the fraud and the controls and measures being implemented by the European Commission and pertinent ministries of European countries to rectify the situation, the Basque press published statements issued by government entities and government-related organisations such as the Elika foundation (funded by the Basque government) and the Emerging Risks Exchange Network (linked to the EU food safety authority EFSA) assuring the public that the agro-food monitoring system in the Basque Country was functioning properly.

It should be kept in mind that governments were in one way or the other also victims of the crisis in that they lost credibility in the eyes of consumers who deemed them to be at least partially responsible for what had happened. A survey conducted by Crane and Brown in 2003 for the British Food Standards Agency (FSA) revealed that only 1 in 5 consumers had "complete confidence" in food safety procedures and regulations. A report published in 2003 by the market research company Mintel concluded that while 38% of British consumers understood the government to be responsible for food safety, another 39% believed that food companies bore final responsibility. Newspapers analysed for this study used a range of arguments to clarify this issue in the Basque Country.

The following statements underpinned this particular frame:

- *Deia* (15/02/2013) feature article: "During 2012, the Department of Health conducted more than 9,000 on-site inspections" (deck); "Last year, we carried out more than 9,000 on-site inspections and analysed almost a thousand samples." quote from head of Food Inspection Services (crosshead).
- *Deia* (25/04/13) news article: "All the meat in our food chains is correctly labelled." (headline).

- *Noticias de Gipuzkoa* (11/03/2013) feature article: “82% of Basque consumers feel fairly confident about the food they purchase.” (crosshead).
- *Diario de Noticias de Álava* (15.02.2013) news article: “It would be very difficult for a problem like this to occur in Euskadi” (deck).
- *Diario de Noticias de Álava* (28/02/2013) feature article: “The Basque government states that there is absolutely no health risk . . .” (crosshead).

A careful examination shows that newspapers belonging to Grupo Noticias, which at the time of the crisis strongly reflected the views of the Basque National Party (PNV), considered this to be a priority message.

8.2.2. *The benefits of horsemeat*

Despite, or perhaps in reaction to, cultural taboos in Spain regarding human consumption of horsemeat, the Basque press took pains to enumerate its health benefits and culinary virtues:

- *El Diario Vasco* (28/01/2013) feature article: “The detection of equine DNA does not tarnish the reputation of a meat known for being healthier and cheaper than beef” (deck).
- *Noticias de Gipuzkoa* (03/02/2013) feature article: “Sweeter and redder” (subhead) “Its low fat content and high levels of iron, protein and glycogen make it a very healthy and digestible meat” (crosshead).
- *El Correo* (24/02/2013) feature article: “Butchers praise the qualities of horsemeat and assert that the labelling scandal has not hurt sales” (deck); “A mildly flavoured and juicy product” (subhead).
- *El Correo* (24/02/2013) feature article: “Specialist butcher shops warn about the confusion provoked by the food scandal and praise the ‘healthy’ qualities of horsemeat” (deck); “Tender and low fat” (subhead).
- *Noticias de Gipuzkoa* (03/02/2013) Veterinarian José Manuel Etxaniz, author of a column featured in newspapers published by Grupo Noticias, stressed the virtues of horsemeat, describing it as flavourful, healthy and “an excellent option for people with arterial and cardiovascular problems”.

8.2.3. *The added value of local products*

The promotion of the idea that locally produced products have added value was based in arguments linking quality to tradition and place of origin. Grupo Noticias made the greatest use of this frame.

- *Deia* (15/02/2013) feature article: “91% of the over 14,000 businesses in Euskadi offer high or very high quality products” (crosshead).
- *Deia* (15/02/2013) opinion article: “You need to buy local to be sure of what you’re eating” (text of article)
- *Deia* (07/03/2013) opinion article: “The safest food is food produced locally by our own farmers and fishermen” (sidebar).
- *Noticias de Gipuzkoa* and *Deia* (07/03/2013) opinion article: “We have safe food with nothing dodgy about it right at hand. Beef is beef and horsemeat is horsemeat” (text of article).
- *Noticias de Gipuzkoa* (11/03/2013) opinion article: “And what about the poor hoodwinked consumers who for the lack of a trustworthy butcher buy meat from local farmers and make their own pre-prepared meals . . .” (text of article).
- *El Correo* (10/03/2013) opinion article: “All of the horsemeat sold in Victoria comes from Álava [both located in the Basque Country]” (headline).

- *El Diario Vasco* (03/02/2013) feature article: “These are horses we’ve purchased and raised ourselves on our farms” (text of article).

Although local horse breeding and horsemeat distribution barely contributes to the total volume of meat sold in the Basque Country, all of the newspapers analysed with the exception of *Gara* and *Berria* went to great lengths to give local livestock raisers and butchers an opportunity to defend their products and mitigate the effects of the crisis. Local production and marketing was presented as an automatic seal of quality: “We sell local milk-fed colt raised specifically for human consumption,” commented one butcher in Álava” (*El Correo*, 10/03/2013).

The newspapers analysed emphasised the quality of the horsemeat sold in Basque butcher shops and its continued popularity in spite of the recent case of fraud. Butchers and livestock producers were portrayed as optimistic and even unaffected by the crisis:

- *El Correo* (24/02/2013) feature article: “Butchers sing the praises of horsemeat and assert that the controversy surrounding fraudulent labelling has not hurt their sales” (deck); “Now people ask about the qualities of horsemeat and end up giving it a try” (crosshead).
- *Noticias de Gipuzkoa* (03/02/2013) feature article: “After news stories like the one published yesterday, more people drop in saying they want to try it”, stated a butcher in Tolosa (text of article).
- *El Diario Vasco* (09.03.2013) news article: “The horsemeat scandal is boosting the sale of local, quality products” (headline).

Counter to all predictions, Alazne Uribarri, Marketing and Certification Director for Hazi³, assured that “in some cases the surge in sales has been spectacular” (*El Diario Vasco*, 09/03/2013). *Deia* also made a special effort to promote small livestock producers in the Basque Country specialising in horses for human consumption, painting a bucolic picture of horse breeding and reiterating producers’ concerns that the scandal would harm their livelihood (*Deia*, 03/03/2013).

The value of locally produced food was promoted as a means of offsetting the affects of a scandal in which several Basque-based companies (Eroski directly and Lur Berri indirectly) had been implicated but many wished to portray as a faraway phenomena that had nothing to do with the Basque Country.

9. Conclusions

1. Whenever a food chain crosses borders, problems and crises related to it do as well. As can be expected, the media respond to growing public interest in food. The coverage of the horsemeat crisis provided by the seven Basque dailies analysed for this research varied from one paper to another. *Deia* devoted the highest number of pages (12) and news items (17) to the topic, closely followed by *Diario de Noticias de Álava*, another newspaper pertaining to the same group, which ran 14 news items, and *El Correo*, which published 13. By all appearances, *Gara* and *Berria* published the least related content: 7 and 2 items respectively. The inclusion of visual content followed the same pattern: *Deia* ran 19 photographs, more than any other paper. Despite the informative and educational value of tables and infographics in the coverage of complex situations, such elements were seldom employed.

³ Hazi is a public-private enterprise linked to the Basque government that works to stimulate competitiveness and sustainability in rural and coastal Basque communities and promotes Basque products through a quality certification scheme “Euskolabel”.

2. The complexity of food chain processes and the diversity of sources of information consulted made it difficult for these newspapers to provide a precise definition and assessment of the problem. The news coverage provided reflected the lack of an operative international communications framework for the dissemination of simple and coherent messages in crisis situations. Confusion generated by the media was a direct result of the scarcity of expert sources and the lack of a single, central spokesperson.

The definitions offered by the newspapers analysed changed continually and differed from one paper to another. Grupo Noticias changed its perspective midstream, at first defining the situation in alarmist terms as a case of fraud and a scandal but later changing tack and describing it as a health risk once news about the detection of phenylbutazone contamination was released.

Deia generated the greatest level of uncertainty, given that it never clearly defined the situation, a problem aggravated by the perception of risk and danger conveyed by various sources. Dailies published by Grupo Noticias used dramatic, rhetorical headlines that generated uncertainty and suspicion. Although *El Correo* referred to the situation as a scandal on a number of occasions, it tended to treat it as a case of labelling fraud. This paper employed the term “bacterial” rather than the more alarmist word “faecal” used by *Deia*.

Perhaps due to their minimal coverage of the crisis, *Gara* and *Berria* offered the weakest and least analytical definitions of the problem. *Gara* referred to the situation as a case of fraud until contamination was detected, after which it ran more alarmist headlines that portrayed it as a health risk.

3. The responsibility frame was seldom used. The newspapers analysed were more interested in mitigating the potential economic impact of the situation and reporting about measures being taken at the EU level than identifying guilty parties. Instead of engaging in investigative journalism, the Basque press passively accommodated the various crisis communications strategies employed by implicated companies, repeating their statements, denials and attempts to assign responsibility to other parties rather than trying to unravel the maze of accusations. Of the companies reported on, only Ikea assumed responsibility for its actions.

4. Local newspapers, perhaps relying on lessons learned from other food crises, followed framing strategies closely linked to regional interests and geared towards mitigating any negative political and economic impact the situation might have. Framing from this perspective was articulated through three major themes: horsemeat is healthy, locally produced food was of undoubtedly high quality and food chain monitoring carried out in the Basque Country was effective.

The newspapers that made the greatest use of this frame were those published by Grupo Noticias, which was known for reflecting the positions of the political party in power at the time. These dailies stressed the efficiency with which the Basque government monitored the regional food chain and took pains to dispel any doubts the public might have had about food safety in the Basque Country. Both journalists and sources interviewed – most of whom were local livestock breeders and butchers – emphasised the culinary virtues and health benefits of horsemeat.

All of the newspapers published by the region’s two largest media groups stressed the added value of traditional Basque products, particularly in their opinion articles. The Basque press went out of its way to defend small-scale horse breeders and butchers specialising in horsemeat. The only dailies that did not follow these strategies were *Berria* and *Gara*, which both devoted much of their coverage to exonerating the Basque cooperative Lur Berri of any implication in the fraud that one of its subsidiaries Spanhero had been accused of. The frames and strategies employed by all the newspapers analysed reflected the influence of political interests, editorial bias, ideological affinities and a concern for protecting their sources of advertising revenue.

5. Frames used were underpinned by the use of close sources, a preference for content produced in-house and a heavy reliance on interpretive writing and opinion articles, all of which allowed journalists to bring the story home to their readers and craft framing strategies geared towards minimising any negative political and economic impact the situation could have at the regional level.

Interpretative and opinion pieces accounted for 42% of the content published. Related feature stories, interviews and opinion articles were written from a local perspective that took factors such as the impact of the crisis on small livestock breeders and local enterprises into account.

Apart from other media organisations and supranational institutions, most of the sources these newspapers consulted were geographically and ideologically “close” to them. This was definitely true of sources consulted in the livestock sector. Due to a heavy reliance on statements issued by Eroski, and to a lesser degree by Spanghero, more than 50% of the sources cited were affected companies. Only a low percentage fell into the category of medical and scientific experts (16.2%) and 6% of these were close sources.

The newspapers studied sourced 18% of the articles they published from news agencies. Of these, no author was credited for 14% and 68% were accompanied by a by-line identifying the writer. The across-the-board decision to use primarily in-house content favoured the production of feature stories and interviews written from a perspective geared to engage local readers.

6. In sum, the Basque press played an important role in mitigating the potential impact of global problem at the local level.

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