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Narrating Civil Society: A New Theoretical Perspective on Journalistic Autonomy

Narrando la Sociedad Civil: una nueva perspectiva teórica sobre la autonomía periodística

ABSTRACT: To what extent is journalism autonomous from spheres of power in society? In journalism studies, it is widely accepted that political, economic, and professional interests constrain journalists and frustrate independent reporting. Drawing upon previous research on media independence, this article proposes a set of analytical categories to enrich and strengthen the theoretical argument for journalistic autonomy. The proposed categories are in line with Jeffrey Alexander's cultural sociology. While interests inevitably influence journalists, from a cultural-sociological perspective any journalistic narrative can be interpreted as indicative of cultural values that transcend particular groups, sections, or parties. The categories proposed in this article are applied to media coverage of the 2004 Madrid bombing to illustrate the way in which media narratives that are strongly overshadowed by ideological power spheres may reflect autonomous cultural values that are common to all civil society.

Key words: theory of journalism, journalistic autonomy, partisanship, ideology, civil society, cultural sociology

RESUMEN: ¿Hasta qué punto es el periodismo autónomo de las esferas de poder en la sociedad? En los estudios de periodismo, se acepta ampliamente que los intereses políticos, económicos y profesionales restringen a los periodistas y frustran a la información independiente. Basándose en investigaciones previas sobre la independencia de los medios de comunicación, este artículo se propone un conjunto de categorías de análisis para enriquecer y fortalecer el argumento teórico de la autonomía periodística. Las categorías propuestas están en consonancia con la sociología cultural Jeffrey Alexander. Si bien los intereses influyen inevitablemente periodistas, desde una perspectiva cultural-sociológica cualquier relato periodístico puede interpretarse como indicativo de los valores culturales que trascienden a determinados grupos, sectores o partes. Las categorías propuestas en este artículo se aplican a la cobertura mediática de los atentados del 2004 en Madrid para ilustrar el modo en el que la narración periodística que está totalmente eclipsada por las esferas del poder ideológico puede reflejar los valores culturales independientes comunes a toda sociedad civil.

Palabras clave: teoría del periodismo, autonomía periodística, partidismo, ideología, sociedad civil, sociología cultural.

Author's note:

> To look upon politics from the *perspective of truth* […] means to take one's stand outside the political realm. The *standpoint outside the political realm* – outside the community to which we belong and the company of our peers– is clearly characterized as one of the various modes of being alone. Outstanding among the *existential modes of truth-telling* are the solicitude of the philosopher, the isolation of the scientist and the artist, the impartiality of the historian and the judge, and the independence of the fact-finder, the witness, and *the reporter* [italics supplied].[1]

1. Introduction

Chief among journalism's roles in democratic theory is the imperative to inform citizens, who actually rule society, about public affairs so that they can better rule.[2] However, journalists are likely not to be independent actors. Although studies in contemporary media research have shown practices of journalistic independence in different contexts of news coverage, much of the current literary media research broadly assumes that professional, political, and economic interests are likely to colour the news. Historically, professionalisation seems to have legitimised journalism as an autonomous field. Nevertheless, recent studies on news production and journalistic values have demonstrated that most professional values linked to media independence (such as objectivity, impartiality, or political neutrality) represent professional

[1] ARENDT, Hannah, *Between Past and Future. Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, Penguin Books, New York, 1977, pp. 259-260.
[2] Cfr. SCHUDSON, Michael, *Why Democracies Need an Unlovable Press*, University of California, San Diego, 2008.

ideologies through which journalists have tended to legitimise their role in European and American democracies.[3] For example, Patterson and Donsbach's study[4] of European journalism's partisan role have challenged journalists' self-perception of political autonomy –journalists in European democracies tend to identify themselves as committed to a form of journalism marked by impartiality or political neutrality– and thus the impact of the news based on how it is reported. Deleuze[5] has approached American journalism's autonomy as an aspect of professional ideology rooted in the profession's development around American ideal-typical values, a 'dominant occupational ideology'. Insofar as professional values –non-partisanship, impartiality and neutrality– justify journalistic practice of a high standard, they also assume that autonomy is difficult to achieve. In fact, most studies focus on the external and structural factors that contribute to bias and partisanship rather than attempt to explain autonomy as non-partisanship.[6] Research in the news production tradition, following Tuchman's influential *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality*,[7] evidences newsrooms buttressing objectivity and independence under the banner of reporting news facts as a professional shield against criticism. Therefore, the consensus is that journalists are conditioned by continuous and changing pressures[8] which they try to face by referring to themselves as autonomous.

Apart from such practical aspects in the literature, a dominant argument for media dependency on political and economic power spheres in

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[3] Cfr. PATTERSON, Thomas E. & DONSBACH, Wolfgang, "News Decisions: Journalists as Partisan Actors", *Political Communication*, nº 13, 1996, pp. 455-468; PRESTON, Paschal, *Making the News: Journalism and News Cultures in Europe*, Routledge, New York / London, 2009; STATHAM, Paul, "Making Europe News: How Journalists View their Role and Media Performance", *Journalism*, vol. 9, nº 4, 2008, pp. 398-422; SOFFER, Oren, "The Competing Ideals of Objectivity and Dialogue in American Journalism", *Journalism*, vol. 10, nº 4, pp. 473-491; DELEUZE, Marc, "What is Journalism? Professional identity and ideology of journalists reconsidered", *Journalism*, vol. 6, nº 4, 2005, pp. 442-464.

[4] Cfr. PATTERSON, Thomas E. & DONSBACH, Wolfgang, *op. cit.*

[5] Cfr. DELEUZE, Marc, *op. cit.*

[6] Cfr. STATHAM, Paul, *op. cit.*; POLETTI, Monica & BRANTS, Kees, "Between partisanship and cynicism: Italian journalism in a state of flux", *Journalism*, vol. 11, nº 3, 2010, pp. 329-346; ELMELUND-PRÆSTEKÆR, Christian & WIEN, Charlotte, "What's the Fuss About? The Interplay of Media Hypes and Politics", *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, vol. 1, nº 3, 2008, pp. 247-266.

[7] Cfr. TUCHMAN, Gaye, *Making news: A study in the construction of reality*, Free Press, New York, 1978.

[8] Cfr. HALLIN, Daniel C., & MANCINI, Paolo, *Comparing media systems: Three models of media and politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge / New York, 2004.

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society has also prevailed in theoretical frameworks crafted from classical socio-cultural and critical perspectives. The socio-cultural tradition of mass media theory –according to which news 'largely reproduces' the existing social order[9] in line with Wright's pioneering 'Functional Analysis and Mass Communication' (1960) and the prior classical functionalist analyses of media rooted in Parsons' social theory– has situated journalism within the political institutions of modern liberal societies. While five decades of classical-to-neo-functionalist evolution have revisited, criticised, and refined Wright's model, the various functionalist schools have settled on the assumption that news practices and content are not autonomous and reflect the political structure.

Interestingly, however, this framework of political-ideology also applies to functionalism's counterpart, the critical tradition, whose political interpretation of media derives from its Marxist or neo-Marxist (dialectical materialist) economic focus. Accordingly, the second theoretical framework or classical critical theory –even in its recent disguise as 'political economy of media'– has interpreted this political ideology of journalism in terms of economic dependence. Adorno and Horkheimer were the first to observe news as a radical, mass-cultural rejection of journalism's claims to autonomy. In *The Cultural Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception* (1997 [1947])[10] these pioneering Frankfurt theorists portrayed the news media within the economic domain of mass culture and the marketplace –far from the spheres of 'culture' and 'art'– and showed the media as distorted by the material and ideological forces at work in capitalist societies.

Many media sociologists have since interpreted journalism's relative autonomy from an even broader, more complex perspective, offering alternatives to classical and neo-functionalism and Marxism.[11] These representative currents

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[9] Cfr. CRAIG, Robert T., "Communication Theory as a Field", *Communication Theory*, vol. 9, nº 2, 1999, pp. 119-161.

[10] Cfr. ADORNO, Theodor W. & HORKHEIMER, Max, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Verso, London, 1997.

[11] See, for example, CONLEY, Donovan & DICKINSON, Greg, "Textural Democracy", *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 27, nº 1, 2010, pp. 1-7; HAAS, Tanni & STEINER, Linda "Public journalism as a journalism of publics: Implications of the Habermas–Fraser debate for public journalism", *Journalism*, nº 2, 2001, pp. 123-147; COLLINS, Richard "Walling Germany with brass: Theoretical paradigms in British studies of television news", Media, *Culture and Society*, nº 6, 1984, pp. 27-44; BENSON, Rodney, "What makes news more multiperspectival? A field analysis", *Poetics*, nº 37, 2009, pp. 402-41.

can be over-simplified for the present introductory purposes as: the British School of Cultural Studies, which alternately critiques and affirms mass culture as the bedrock of sorts for the media; Pierre Bourdieu's 'field theory', which dwells on the symbiosis of journalism and audience within the structure of media that, in its turn, is structured by society; and, finally, Habermas's 'public sphere' theory,[12] in the media offers public venues and a marketplace of ideas for the interactive exchange of perspectives – irrespective of their content or importance.

The present study attempts to enrich and strengthen the theoretical argument for journalistic autonomy in the context of these scholarly studies –none of which have managed to address and answer the question with complete success. The following sections present an alternative theoretical framework for analysing journalistic autonomy based on Jeffrey C. Alexander's concept of 'civil sphere'[13] as developed and applied to journalism by Alexander himself and other scholars working within the field of cultural sociology.[14] The article begins with an overview of literature on media independency in order to highlight theoretical and operational concerns. The following section offers a set of analytical categories in line with Alexander's cultural sociology and designed to suggest a new theoretical understanding of journalistic autonomy through the cultural structure of civil society and how this autonomy might operate through media narratives. This section aims to integrate the two fields (studies of journalistic autonomy and Alexander's sociological theory of the civil sphere) into a coherent framework for analysing media independence. The last section illustrates the proposed categories by using them to examine an illustrative media event –the journalistic coverage of the 2004 Madrid bombing.

[12] Cfr. HABERMAS, Jurgen, LENNOX, Sara & LENNOX, Frank, "The public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article", *New German Critique*, nº 3, 1974, pp. 49-55.

[13] Cfr. ALEXANDER, Jeffrey C., *The Civil Sphere*, Oxford University Press, Oxford / New York, 2006.

[14] Cfr. ALEXANDER, Jeffrey C. & JACOBS, Ronald N., "Mass communication, ritual and civil society", in LIEBES, T., *Media, Ritual, and Identity*, Routledge, London, 1998, pp. 23-41; JACOBS, Ronald N., "Culture, the Public Sphere, and Media Sociology: A Search for a Classical Founder in the Work of Robert Park", *American Sociology*, nº 40, 2009, pp. 149-166; JACOBS, Ronald N., *Race, Media and the Crisis of Civil Society. From Watts to Rodney King*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000; BREESE, Elizabeth Butler, "Reports from 'Backstage' in Entertainment News", *Society*, nº 47, 2010, pp. 396-402.

2. What is meant by journalistic autonomy in journalism studies

This section discusses some current attempts to define and analyse jour-
nalistic autonomy especially in contexts where it is difficult, either because
of government control over the construction of news stories, or because of an
ongoing competition between two sides that wish to shape the news to support
partisan interests and political positions.[15] Partly because of these constraining
contexts and the events to which they refer (such as political events, terrorist
attacks, or wars) most of the literature has tended to emphasise the limits and
even the frustrations of independent reporting, rather than provide substantial
arguments to reinforce journalistic autonomy. Althaus[16] has criticised this
shortcoming arguing that this is basically due to the inconsistent methods
used to analyse news content and conflicting ideas about the nature of media
independence derived from Bennett's concept of journalistic indexing[17]
(which addresses most of research on media independence). Althaus criticises
both the theory (indexing) and the method (content analysis) followed in
these studies. His proposal points towards an improved method. I intend to
approach the problem from a more theoretical level because it is generally
understood that sociological theory follows the method. In other words, the
form of analysis is determined by how society is understood (or the specific
object within society that is the subject of the study).

Most of the literature on media independence is based on Bennett's first
formulation of indexing theory[18] where the news is formulated as a depen-
dent variable of governmental discursive structures and high-level political
circles. Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingstone's attempt to provide a model for
a semi-independent press to explain the American mainstream media repor-

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[15] See, for example, ALTHAUS, Scott, "When News Norms Collide, Follow the Lead: New
Evidence for Press Independence", *Political Communication*, nº 20, 2003, pp. 381-414; BEN-
NETT, Lance W., LAWRENCE, Regina. G. & LIVINGSTON, Steven, *When the Press Fails.
Political Power and the News Media From Iraq to Katrina*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago,
2007; HALLIN, Daniel. C., *The 'Uncensored War'. The Media and Vietnam*, University of
California Press, Berkely, 1986; WOLFSFELD, Gadi, *Media and the Path to Peace*, Cambridge
University Press, Cambridge, 2004; WOLFSFELD, Gadi & SHEAFER, Tamir, "Competing
Actors and the Construction of Political News. The Contest Over Waves in Israel", *Political
Communication*, nº 23, 2006, pp. 333-354.

[16] Cfr. ALTHAUS, Scott, *op. cit.*

[17] Cfr. BENNETT, W. Lance, "Toward a Theory of Press-State Relations in the United States",
Journal of Communication, vol. 40, nº 2, 1990, pp. 103-125.

[18] Cfr. BENNETT, W. Lance, *op. cit.*

ting of crucial events during the Bush years (from the Iraq war to Hurricane Katrina)[19] is an example of understanding journalistic autonomy from this theoretical framework. According to these authors, if the range and dynamics of bloc power in government are characterised by plurality, diversity, and opposing views, then the range of voices in news stories will increase. Conversely, news stories tend to be manipulated following a lack of opposition and unified ideological preferences within the government. Dependence by journalists on political power reinforces the general rule, and so journalistic autonomy is understood as an exception to this main presupposition.

Similar assumptions lie behind other theories that are applied to the study of media independence such as the 'building' theory used by Wolsfeld to study media independence in the context of a peace process.[20] For Wolsfeld, the media is of little importance and responds in a causal manner to political forces. The level of political consensus (in support of the peace process in the case studied) is always an independent variable, while the media frames used by journalists reporting on the process are dependent variables (reflecting a greater or lesser level of political consensus). As Wolsfeld argues,

> The greater the level of elite consensus in support of a peace process, the more likely the news media will play a positive role in that process. […] Thus, these changes in the political environment had a direct influence on the news media moving from a supportive role to a more independent and critical role. [...]The most important indicator for the news media in these situations is the positions taken by the major political parties. Journalists depend on party leaders as their dominant sources for assessing the state of the political environment[21].

Wolsfeld acknowledges the important role of journalistic narrative to frame the discourses for or against a peace process. However, these media frames operate within the 'politics-media-politics cycle' where, in Wolsfeld's terms, 'politics almost always comes first'.

The work of Hallin on the media and the Vietnam war provides an example of understanding news media as a dependent variable of political power.[22] Hallin offers a more contrasting version of this subordinate role as his approach conceptualises American news media as structurally both 'highly autonomous'

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[19] Cfr. BENNETT, Lance W., LAWRENCE, Regina. G. and LIVINGSTON, Steven, *op. cit.*
[20] Cfr. WOLFSFELD, Gadi, *Media and the Path to Peace…*, *op. cit.*
[21] *Ibíd.*, pp. 26-27.
[22] Cfr. HALLIN, Daniel. C., *op. cit.*

from political spheres and 'deeply intertwined in the operation of government' through the journalistic routines of news gathering. The professionalisation of journalism has established a new continuum where, according to Hallin, journalists shift from a more cooperative to a more adversarial position towards government. Nevertheless, adversarial media positions are formulated once again within the margins of political consensus vs. political conflict. If there is more critical reporting it is because conflictive voices coming from inside the political structure reach the media.

Literature regarding independent media, paradoxically, provides evidence of autonomous reporting. Media independence seems to be identified with specific media narratives. For example, Altasus speaks of the 'narrative imperative' or, quoting Timothy Cook, the 'storytelling imperative'[23] to prove the way in which mainstream American TV networks (ABC, CBS and NBC) reporting on the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf crisis preserved limited but real autonomy and became sources for expanding the range of oppositional views, contrary to the indexing hypothesis.

Moreover, news media autonomy is liable to be associated with event-centred or event-driven narratives, based on sudden events, accidents, and natural disasters; as opposed to institutionalised news defined by officials and political actors (a hypothesis that the previously mentioned work on American media coverage during the Bush years by Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston has demonstrated).[24] It was an event-centred story, Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, that marked a break down in the pattern of American mainstream media dependence on the Bush administration in the aftermath of 9/11.

> Yet Katrina does tell us something about what it takes to create a moment of truly independent press coverage: White House communication and spin operations were shut down (the entire top tier of the administration had been literally on vacation when the hurricane struck); officials were not even aware of a critical situation; journalists were on the scene to see the devastation by themselves, and had the technical capacity to show that reality directly to viewers […]; and reporters had just enough access to critical officials to keep the news accounts from appearing overly partisan or crusading. In short, journalists had entered the eye of a no-spin zone.[25]

[23] ALTHAUS, Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 382.
[24] Cfr. BENNETT, Lance W., LAWRENCE, Regina. G. and LIVINGSTON, Steven, *op. cit.*
[25] *Ibíd.* p. 168.

The authors state that because of this no-spin zone journalists were able to criticise the bureaucratic incompetence of the Bush administration. However, as indicated before, journalistic independence in American mainstream media is the exception to the rule, and has to take place within a set of exceptional conditions that enable journalists to stand away from the official consensus created by communication professionals operating within the circles of political power.

Shehata[26] has moved focus from the type of conflictive events and key events that gain significant media attention (which are the main interest of the literature on media independence) to routine political press coverage. Shehata has demonstrated the ways in which journalists use 'independent strategies as manifestations of independence' in reports where political actors dominate news coverage in terms of source and story initiation. These strategies include using narrative and dramatic structures such as presenting conflicting actors in stories, including opposition voices, or focusing on politics as a game or a battle, rather than covering policy issues.

In summary, two key points arise from an initial examination of the literature on media independence. Firstly, Bennett's formulation of how journalists 'index' news stories to levels of dissent within political power (as well as other similar theories of press-power relations that feed this literature) explains journalistic practice as a dependent variable of political power spheres. Secondly, although the main theoretical assumptions underestimate journalistic power and autonomy, there still seems to be room for specific evidence of media independence within this literature. Event-driven news narrative is likely to be the most contrasting and complementary concept for explaining institution-driven news, as reflected in indexing theory. Both concepts reflect the poles of a continuum from political control to media independence.

3. Journalistic autonomy through the civil sphere

The accepted theoretical approach to journalistic autonomy suggests that in an alternative effort to understand the news an independent variable is needed to strengthen the claim for journalistic autonomy. In order to build upon previous research, previous theoretical work seems to suggest that specific

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[26] SHEHATA, Adam, "Marking Journalistic Independence: Official Dominance and the Rule of Product Substitution in Swedish Press Coverage", *European Journal of Communication*, vol. 25, nº 2, 2010, pp. 123-137.

narrative aspects in the news express the internal structures of journalistic practices. This section tries to develop this alternative approach through Alexander's cultural-sociological perspective and his concept of the civil sphere. Alexander offers a satisfactory alternative to journalistic autonomy as he has developed a sociological theory of the cultural system in itself, and not in relation to other social and structural variables.[27] In this theory, narrative has a crucial role in the construction of a cultural system.

In his book *The Civil Sphere*, Alexander argues for a sociological theory of civil society[28] based mainly on the concept of a cultural structure to which he attributes a relative autonomy from instrumental interests –and at the very centre of which are journalism and other communicative institutions. The starting point of his theory is that power and self-interests are not the only interests that frame societies and that ideals of community and justice, integration, and feeling for others are also important. This solidarity 'is possible because people are oriented not only to the here and now but to the ideal, to the transcendent, to what they hope will be the everlasting'.[29] He argues that the discourses and institutions of civil society go beyond the social restrictions of daily life, providing more universalistic civil codes for democratic critique, action, and reform. This autonomy from political and economic power is due to the fact that social solidarity grows from a symbolic structure deeply rooted in the core of social life. Although civil society is made up of civil associations and institutions, it also has a relevant subjective dimension of moral codes that are not external but inherent in society itself. The symbolic content operates as a skeletal structure of binary codes for opposed civil and anti-civil human 'motives', social 'relations', and 'institutions' as in the chart below.

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[27] Cfr. ALEXANDER, Jeffrey C. and SMITH, Philip, "The strong program in sociology: Elements of a structural hermeneutics", in ALEXANDER, Jeffrey C. (ed.), *The Meanings of Social Life: A Cultural Sociology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford / New York, 2003.

[28] Alexander aims to develop a theory of social solidarity and justice –building on Gramsci's cultural Marxism, Tocqueville's democracy, Durkheim's civil morals, Weber's fraternisation, and Parson's societal community– vis-à-vis Rawls's vision of democracy and justice as an overlapping consensus and Habermas's theory of a public sphere as an exchange of reasons in argumentation. For critiques and Alexander's response to his critics, see, for example, ANTONIO, Robert J., "Locating the civil Sphere", *The Sociological Quarterly*, nº 48, 2007, pp. 601-613; ALEXANDER, Jeffrey C., "On the Interpretation of *The Civil Sphere*: Understanding and Contention in Contemporary Social Science", *The Sociological Quarterly*, nº 48, 2007, pp. 641-659.

[29] ALEXANDER, Jeffrey C., *The Civil Sphere…*, *op. cit*, p. 3.

Chart 1. Binary structures: motives, relations, and institutions[30]

CIVIL MOTIVES	ANTI-CIVIL MOTIVES
Active	Passive
Autonomous	Dependent
Rational	Irrational
Reasonable	Hysterical
Calm	Excitable
Self-controlled	Wild-passionate
Realistic	Distorted
Sane	Mad
CIVIL RELATIONS	**ANTI-CIVIL RELATIONS**
Open	Secretive
Trusting	Suspicious
Critical	Deferential
Honourable	Self-interested
Altruistic	Greedy
Truthful	Deceitful
Straightforward	Calculating
Deliberative	Conspiratorial
Friendly	Antagonistic
CIVIL INSTITUTIONS	**ANTI-CIVIL INSTITUTIONS**
Ruled regulated	Arbitrary
Law	Power
Equality	Hierarchy
Inclusive	Exclusive
Impersonal	Personal
Contrasts	Bonds of loyalty
Groups	Factions
Office	Personality

The three binary structures categorise social groups as 'pure' or 'impure', the former including 'the discourse of liberty' as opposed to the latter's 'impure', 'polluted', 'discourse of repression'. The positive codes represent the 'sacred' and the 'civic' while their opposites stand for the 'profane' and the 'anti-civic' insofar as they emerge from extra-civil spheres such as markets, states, sections, or parties.

This analytical distinction between civil and anti-civil, a key component of Alexander's theory, counters two traditional ideal-type understandings of

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[30] *Ibíd.*, p. 57-59.

civil society: 'Civil Society I' –formulated by Locke and Harrington, developed by Ferguson, Smith, Rousseau and Hegel, and employed by Tocqueville– is a rather diffuse, umbrella-like concept referring to a plethora of institutions outside the state, such as capitalist markets, voluntary religion, private and public associations, and 'virtually every form of cooperative social relationship that created bonds of trust.' 'Civil Society II' –primarily associated with Marx– significantly narrows and confines attention to capitalist markets and institutions. Alexander's innovates with 'Civil Society III', reinforcing the need to understand civil society as a sphere that is independent of the market, state, and other social spheres –such as family life or religion. He argues that these other spheres are perhaps necessary for creating the civil sphere, but are insufficient to sustain it. Civil society can thus be conceived as an autonomous social order, a universalising community with its own discourses, organisations, and institutions– communicative (public opinion, the media) as well as regulative (law, political parties and offices) –that crystallise common ideals about civil solidarity. For Alexander, because of the symbolic potential for broadcasting collective representations, the media in particular is likely to produce social solidarity –as will become increasingly clear below.

Having established this analytical distinction between civil and anti-civil spheres, Alexander describes their mutually beneficial influence and the repression that originates from extra-civil domains with intermediary 'boundary processes' from both the civil and extra-civil spheres that are framed by 'time', rooted in 'space', and differentiated by 'function'. According to Alexander, there are three ideal types by which these boundaries can be conceived: 'in terms of facilitating inputs, destructive intrusion, and civil repair'.[31] The relations between the civil sphere and the non-civil sphere are fundamentally cultural. This is related to the symbolic construction of the frontiers that indicate the civil sphere. Specific actions and actors from other spheres can be symbolically considered as reinforcements (inputs) or aggressions (destructive intrusion). After receiving attacks, the civil sphere may repair and re-establish the frontier using the media, social movements in favour of justice, and civil associations, etc.

This supports Alexander's other key argument: civil society is a project that needs to be achieved given the incompleteness of civil society. Far from idealism or utopia, his theory explains the ways in which contradictions and anti-civil forces have become lodged inside this sphere of solidarity. By brin-

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[31] *Ibíd*, p. 205.

ging to bear the cultural codes and regulative institutions of the civil sphere, the domination of non-civil spheres can be forcefully blocked in the process of building civil solidarity.

As indicated, the media are one of the communicative institutions of civil society, along with public opinion, polls, and associations (these are institutions with primarily cultural influence rather than power in the instrumental sense). Within the symbolic structure of civil society, the news has the potential to translate common cultural codes into specific descriptions and evaluations of events, actors, goals, and situations. As Alexander suggests and cultural-sociology scholars have recently demonstrated,[32] the role of journalistic narratives to reflect purifying motives, social relations, and institutions (or their opposites) is crucial. For example, Alexander and Jacobs explained that the radical change in the public perception of Watergate, leading to Nixon's resignation, was due to the media's identification of the scandal as a stain on the common codes of American civil society. Accordingly, the initial crime received relatively little attention but came to be referred to as political corruption in media discourses –leading to arrests, and disgrace as Nixon became associated with the profane. On the other hand, Jacobs demonstrates the opposite tendency in the press mobilisation of public opinion in favour of African-Americans and against racism in media depictions, respectively, in the Watts uprisings of 1965 and the Rodney King incident of 1991. Thus, the argument for the autonomy of journalism could be summarised as that news stories, while reflecting partisan interests, are in fact embedded within the cultural values of civil society at a deep level or, in Alexander's terms, within the symbolic structures that 'build social solidarity and the putative obligations immanent to it, for demands about economic equality and political responsibility, for the scandals over the abuse of office power, and for repairing the rent structures of social life'[33].

3.1. Narrative as key category for analysing journalistic autonomy

Media institutions provide empirically observable social practices and material. It therefore makes sense that many sociological approaches to the

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[32] Cfr. ALEXANDER, Jeffrey C. & JACOBS, Ronald N., *op. cit.*; JACOBS, Ronald N., "Culture, the Public Sphere, and Media Sociology…", *op. cit.*; JACOBS, Ronald N., *Race, Media and the Crisis of Civil Society…, op. cit.*
[33] ALEXANDER, Jeffrey C., *The Civil Sphere…, op. cit.*, p. ix.

media emphasize external factors, focusing on the sociological, technical, political, or economic aspects of the news. However, these aspects will not enable us to understand the nature of news because news products are primarily cultural objects. From a cultural-sociological perspective, news stories have their own internal logic. In contrast to an external approach to the news that relates media content to partisan ideologies and interests, analytical tools based on narrative suggest a different approach to media that works within its symbolic content.

Discussion of the narrative dimension of the news points to the pioneering work of Robert Park and his attempt to see news stories as cultural forms that can be equated with fictional forms.[34] Narrative models suggest an analogy between myth, fiction, and news by analysing the symbolic form of human action that they share. Narrative analysis is an *intrinsic* approach with three key aspects. Firstly, it avoids any attempt to assimilate journalism to literature or film from an external point of view, and examines the rhetorical strategy or literary features of the news. Secondly, and more importantly, it focuses analysis on *actions* embedded in any story insofar as myths are 'imitations of an action' in Aristotle's terms, as found in various genres of film or literature. The mythical elements of the news may seem less obvious because its content aims to reflect basic, or factual, social issues or political discourses. Nevertheless, news stories also contain actors, whose actions have goals, as well as changing circumstances, crucial events, and anecdotal plots. These elements are articulated in a space and in a given time in the same way as any other facet of human life. Thus, any piece of news can be construed as a narrative that contains 'action' in its key elements –'what, who, where, when and why'– as they reflect the corresponding basic aspects of human 'action', 'agency', 'time', 'space', and 'end' or purpose of action. Similar to fictional stories, the news establishes a 'plausible pact' between journalists and their audience. This agreement implies the audience's belief in exchanging 'real' facts, and not imagined events[35]. However, the narrative dimension of a 'possible world' outside of 'real' life, into which the audience enters and accepts the rules that govern the narrated world, is common to news stories and is based on the ontological distinction between the real and narrated action, whether the

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[34] Cfr. JACOBS, Ronald N., "Culture, the Public Sphere, and Media Sociology...", *op. cit.*
[35] Cfr. WHITE, Hayden, *The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and the Historical Representation*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore / London, 1987.

latter is factual or fictional.[36] So this contract between journalists and their audience invites the public to support a conventional rhetoric or presentation that distinguishes the situation inside the plot from the situation outside the plot. Journalists and the public assume, respectively, the roles of narrator and implied audience, and share common cultural values, thoughts, and opinions that may or may not coincide with the ideologies or interests of journalists and the target audience.

This self-referential, or intrinsic, world of the news introduces a third reason for using the narrative model and which pivots on the assumption of journalistic autonomy as discussed in this section. The proposal was that journalism can be understood as an autonomous sphere; but not in the sense that journalists are free from external pressures, political and economic interests, or professional ideologies. Instead, the news narratives are related to broad, systemic cultural civic or anti-civic values –a core cultural structure inherent in every society as previously mentioned. Narrative interpretation of news reveals the internal relationship between journalism and the cultural structure of civil society.

In particular, two analytical categories support this theoretical assumption: *myth* and *plot*. In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye defines myth as 'a structural organising principle of literary form' with archetypes –often opposing one another as in good *versus* evil scenario– as principles derived 'not from an external analogy with something else but from the internal analogy of the art itself'[37]. Following Aristotle, Frye explains how 'myth is the imitation of actions near or at the conceivable limits of desire'.[38] This approach provides a framework to analyse, for present purposes, binary civic and anti-civic codes –as well as the corresponding narratives of the sacred and the profane, the pure and the impure. Yet, in order to be plausible, the abstract and purely structural elements of myth are commonly *displaced* or adapted to human experience by an elementary narrative form, or *plot*. The story and plot differ inasmuch as the plot refers to the formal structure of the story, thus distinguishing between the story's events and the organised combination of facts, or a chain of actions, by which a plot is ordered from beginning to end to create a story.

These arguments suggest a literary conception of journalism according to which the news resembles fiction. From a cultural-narrative perspective, news

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[36] Cfr. RONEN, Ruth, *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge / New York, 1994.
[37] FRYE, Northrop, *Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1957, p. 341.
[38] *Ibíd.*, p. 136.

reporting includes in a sense a certain residual human element that, in the symbolic order, transcends professional routines, political ideologies, and the economic interests associated with media discourses and reaches to the core of moral and cultural attitudes. Within the cultural dimension, media narratives adopt a moral texture. News stories are performed by actors whose actions are driven by goals. Accordingly, the analyst's role is to identify the narrative principles by which the public processes news stories and interpret these principles within the context of their production and reception. The role of the analyst consists in describing those narrative elements through which the public mentally processes the story –for example, selecting, and outlining the events or proposing hypotheses on the development of an action– and interpreting these narratives as a type of action susceptible to moral interpretation.

4. Narrating civil society through partisan media coverage on the Madrid bombing: an illustrative case

The intention of the empirical exercise in this section is not to develop a rigorous quantitative and qualitative research of media reporting on this event –a task which, moreover, has already been undertaken by media researchers.[39] This more empirical part of the article continues with the general discussion developed in the paper and aims to visualise the plausibility of the theory. Taking as a starting point, partisan reports on the terrorist attack, the analysis suggests how media narratives that are highly dependent on political powers may provide insights on journalistic autonomy and reveal the relationship between ideology and culture. Specifically, these insights may reveal how the former tends to overshadow the latter as an interpretive lens, consequently reducing our understanding of journalism to merely partisan or ideological terms that are insufficient and inaccurate.

To introduce this case, the politicisation of news events has become a regular theme in criticism of Spain's mainstream media, which is not to suggest that news content is invariably political in the purest sense of the word –but that news events are routinely covered, explained, or spun in line with

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[39] See, for example, VARA, Alfonso, RODRIGUEZ, Jordi, GIMENEZ, Elena, DIAZ, Montserrat (eds.), *Cobertura informativa del 11-M*, Eunsa, Pamplona, 2006; SAMPEDRO, Víctor F. (ed.), *13-M Multitudes on line*, Catarata, Madrid, 2005; CANEL, María José & SANDERS, Karen, *Crisis Communication and Terrorist Attacks: Framing a Response to the 2004 Madrid Bombings and 2005 London Bombings*, in COOMBS, W. Timothy & HOLLADAY, Sherry J. (eds.), *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, 2010, ch 22.

ideological agendas that transcend the content. The Spanish media is often politicised or partisan because of a discourse linked to the two main political parties, the *Partido Popular* (People's Party, or PP) and the *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (Spanish Socialist Workers Party, or PSOE), respectively, on the right and the left of the ideological spectrum. Because ideological differences between these political parties are relatively minor, media partisanship is less a matter of expressing competitive convictions or corresponding political positions, and more a matter of seizing strategic or electoral opportunities favourable to the party-affiliated media in question. From this accepted perspective, media partisanship tends to narrow the space of public conversation as political interests overshadow social and human issues inherent in major media events. To this extent, media partisanship impedes rather than fosters genuine public dialogue on matters of terrorism, nationalism, migration or human relations in civil society. Thus, events are stereotyped according to a partisan perspective and journalistic stories are published as salvos in a political battle over a given issue.

Such partisanship highly influenced Spanish journalism around 11 March 2004 when a large terrorist bomb exploded in Madrid. Three days later, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, the PSOE leader, won the a general election in which Spanish voters severely punished José María Aznar, the reigning PP's neo-conservative prime minister for his involving Spain in the Iraq War and mishandling of the consequences of the terrorist attack. Spain's two largest newspapers, *El País* and *El Mundo*, started a fierce row over each other's reporting of investigations into the Islamic-extremist bombing. This battle was the beginning of a media war in which other mass media groups took sides around the two parties. Simultaneously, an ensuing investigative commission highlighted the rivalry between these two largest national newspapers, *El País* and *El Mundo*. These papers are owned, respectively, by the two largest media groups, *PRISA* and *Unidad Editorial*, and directly reflect the differences and critical perspectives of the *PSOE* and *PP*. The investigative commission and the alignment of the national newspaper owners with these political parties meant that the events and aftermath of 11 March 2004 initiated a period of media dependency. Echoing this conclusion are studies documenting partisan ideologies that influenced reporting of the events and served as a catalyst for the facts reported in the news, hindering public understanding and insight about what happened and who was responsible for the slaughter.[40] Highlight-

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[40] Cfr. *op. cit.*, VARA, Alfonso, RODRIGUEZ, Jordi, GIMENEZ, Elena, DIAZ, Montserrat (eds.).

ing this polarisation of public discourse along partisan lines, new technologies, particularly mobile-phone text messaging, played an important role in mobilising citizens in the pre-election uprisings leading up to 14 March.[41] Online forums, email, and blogs served as alternative sources of real information and debate that paralleled the official and deceptive discourse fostered by the party-aligned media establishments. In just three days, media reporting on the Madrid bombing passed from an event-centred discourse to a statement-centred discourse and from the narrative of the story itself to the narrative 'telling of the story' by politicians. In the beginning, the media told the story of the bombings as a compassionate narrative that reflected the codes of civil society and opposed the bombers. However, this narrative was quickly changed into an account of the facts as given in briefings by politicians and so reflecting the ideological and electoral interests of the political parties. The relevant point here for the argument of journalistic independence is that these reports show that partisanship in Spanish mainstream journalism is in itself an insufficient explanation for the news reporting on the terrorist attack. This point defines the general academic discourse on this case.

The study focuses on news stories, reports, opinion articles, and editorials on the event published in the mainstream newspapers, *El Mundo* and *El País* from 11 to 14 March. Two main goals motivated the selection of news sources: to compare media that reflect both sides of the political battle and accusations, and to analyse in depth the motives, judgments, and moral evaluations reported by the media.

Narrative analysis of this journalistic input is conducted through a formal approach to texts, in contrast to content analysis. Under this formal approach, the media story is constructed from the terrorist attack to the general election three days later. The coding procedure considers each text as narrative action, equating news items –'what', 'who', 'when', 'where' and 'why'– to the corresponding basic aspects of the human action: 'action', 'agent', 'time', 'space' and 'end' (purpose). Each news item was seen as a unit of basic study in order to isolate and summarise it in an expression of elementary action such as: "Attack made. Terrorists leave evidence"; "Otegui (Batasuna leader) says ETA not behind attacks"; "Citizen discovers stolen van and calls police"; "Prime minister Aznar reports that ETA behind attacks", etc. For both newspapers, all the news actions are listed as describing the main news items. The actions that are repeated in the items of information are highlighted to follow a single

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[41]   Cfr. *op. cit.*, SAMPEDRO, Víctor F. (ed.).

narrative of the events. The media story is reconstructed by arranging this list of redundant actions from beginning to end. This preliminary approach consists of identifying the chronology of the story to which the main events in the newspaper refer and describing the temporal sequence of actions and the key transformations.

4.1. Two journalistic narratives of the Madrid bombing

The media story about the Madrid bombing can be iteratively reconstructed, working backwards in time through three major media events that provide the larger picture: the trial of October 2007; the commission of inquiry into the bombing in July 2004; and, in March 2004, the attack itself followed by a general election three days later.

On 30 October 2007, a Spanish court sentenced 28 people for participating in the bombing. The large number of witnesses meant that the trial lasted four months. Of the 28 condemned, three were found guilty of mass murder and sentenced to 40 years in prison, the maximum sentence under Spanish law; other defendants were given lesser sentences for trafficking in explosives or for being members of a terrorist organisation, including the alleged mastermind of the attack, who was acquitted as such. The judge ruled that there was neither proof of ETA nor al-Qaida involvement. Along with two of the guilty, seven others –who blew themselves up on 3 April 2004 in a suburban flat–were named as being responsible for placing the bombs. Relatives of the victims expressed shock at the verdicts and the People's Party leader promised that the verdicts would not end the investigation. Prime Minister Zapatero indicated satisfaction with the judicial outcome. The human and social trauma caused by the terrorist attack – to say nothing of the political crisis expressed in partisan disputes –continued well after the trial. This controversy embroiled the media during the commission of inquiry's hearings in July 2004. In the context of these hearings, the partisan media battle focused public opinion on the tense polarity and accusations and denials in the Spanish mainstream media. Indeed, every Spanish media outlet dealt with the terrorist attack from perspectives aligned with either *El País* or *El Mundo*. Both papers defended their easily recognisable partisan positions. As Redondo has noted,[42] the analysis of the reports of *El Mundo* and *El País* in the congressional commission highlights

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[42] Cfr. REDONDO, Javier, "Identidades mediáticas y adhesiones políticas", en VARA, A. (et. al.), *op. cit.*

two opposing realities: 'This news coverage did not offer different interpretations of the events, but changed the nature of the facts'. The media published politically rival scenarios to explain the bombing. This stance was criticised before the election because of an evident manipulation of the event to win the general election three days later (which was the criticism made against the PSOE and *El País*); or because blame was aimed at the Basque terrorist group ETA despite evidence of Islamic-extremist involvement (criticism made against the PP and *El Mundo*).

While the extended aftermath of the terrorist attack (the October 2007 trial and the July 2004 congressional commission) reveals the media battle lines, this case study focuses on the original event –namely, the attack itself, followed days later by the general election. The study focuses on news stories published in *El Mundo* and *El País* from 11 to 14 March. These initial reports are significantly different from news reports after the general election as they betray two narrative levels: the narrative of the story itself and the 'telling of the story' narrative. These two narrative levels do not reflect the two partisan-interpretive versions of the PP and the PSOE as to the facts of the matter –but reveal how and why the terrorist attack so polarised Spain.

4.2. The mythic representation of the Madrid bombing, a romantic narrative

The media's initial construction of the massacre shows the difficulty of narrating the essentially inexplicable terror perpetrated on innocents. It is revealing that *El Mundo* appealed to poetry, publishing numerous works about the event by renowned Spanish poets, authors, and singer/songwriters on 12 March in the day-after story. The slaughter and the shock compelled media adoption of a mythical form that pivoted on good *versus* evil. Such mythical elements were embedded in the headlines, the stories, even the page designs and published photographs, organised in a narrative of facts about trains and explosives, terrorists, their victims and their relatives, governmental statements, and the police investigation. The journalistic narrative of 11 March began by positioning clearly on the front page the 'evil' terrorist attack on 'good' Spanish civil society. In both newspapers, *El Mundo* and *El País*, the front-page narrative adopted this mythical form in which the bombing and its immediate consequences –almost 200 dead and 1,400 injured– are described literally as 'hellish' and 'infamous'. Opposition to terrorism and the unity of the political parties, general public, royalty, and other national democratic forces was reported as the basis of the need to reconstruct freedom and civil rights. Thus, binary terms were used to classify actions and characters into two poles: 'heaven' and 'hell', 'life' and 'death', 'light' and 'darkness', 'hope' and

'despair', 'serenity', and 'confusion', 'human' and 'inhuman'. For example, a train full of workers, citizens, immigrants, and students was transformed into a 'train of death' (*El País*, 12 March, p. 13). The tranquillity of a normal working day became 'chaos' and 'madness' (*El Mundo*, 12 March, p. 1).

This narrative polarisation was further intensified in editorials and opinion columns. The *El País* editorial on 12 March (p. 10) emphasised 'terrorist hell' to relate the Madrid bombing to other bloody terrorist attacks such as the 29 August 2003, and the terrorist attack in Najaf, on Bali on 12 October 2002, and America on 11 September 2001, or the most brutal acts of the ETA such as the supermarket mass murder on 19 June 1987. *El Mundo*'s editorial (p. 3) described Madrid as the 'city of martyrdom' that cries out for 'justice'. This metaphor of Madrid as a desecrated holocaust victim was revealed in terrible photographs of the scene –injured, mutilated and bloody bodies alongside a jumble of wrecked train in an atmosphere of confusion and pain. The event was linked to a series of terrorist attacks against Madrid with the supporting headline: '30 years of terrorist torture' (*El Mundo (M2)*, 12 March, p. 2).

These examples liken the initial narratives and underlying mythical forms of corresponding significance. According to Frye,[43] the city with its roads and railways brings normal citizens to their daily work. In a symbolisation of an apocalyptic world, the 'heavenly' city –the form imposed on society by human work– represents 'the temple' and the roads are metaphors of 'the way' to reach it. Opposing this archetypal conception of a city blissfully composed of people united by common bonds are the elements of evil –with the train wreckage, bloodshed, and mutilation symbolising the unnatural, inhuman, torture and the unwilling sacrifice of demonic origin.

These mythical meanings suggest a romantic attachment to civil society expressed, for example, in a journalistic narrative about the good in Spanish civil society, and heroic actions by emergency and hospital personnel, and anonymous citizens. Even nearby journalists found that events eclipsed their ordinary roles: 'I dropped the camera and started to help the wounded,' wrote one journalist (*El Mundo*, 12 March, p. 15). Such heroes emerge together from the journalistic telling and help the victims and their families, together restoring the solidarity and justice disrupted by terrorism. The King's speech condemning terrorism, joint statements by the two major parties in favour of democratic unity, the suspension of the electoral campaign, and the announ-

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[43] Cfr. FRYE, Northrop, *op. cit.*

cement of large anti-terrorism demonstrations intensified such civic unity and the spontaneous response to the terrorist hell in the narrative.

4.3. The civic narrative of evil: codifying the Spanish government as the enemy

The mythic significance of the journalistic narrative in *El País* and *El Mundo* bore no resemblance to the second narrative, *the telling of the story* –involving the government and, later, the commission of inquiry. The distinction in narration between *story* and *plot* is essential for a narrative analysis of the telling of the story, which, from 11 to 14 March, was formed by the chronological reconstruction of actions, particularly those that explained and justified blame for those responsible for the attack and those that recounted the police investigation and government statements.

According to this chronology, the story began with the attack, swiftly followed by the outlawed Basque nationalist party's statement that ETA was not involved and the government's claims that ETA was indeed responsible. The police quickly found conclusive evidence of Islamic involvement and made arrests, resulting in the government's simultaneous pursuit of two investigations: Al-Qaida or ETA. In fact, *El País* first initially accused ETA while *El Mundo*, perhaps more cautiously, resisted accusing ETA or al-Qaida. These initial positions that were later reversed as the newspapers took opposing party positions. Meanwhile, large demonstrations against terrorism at the Popular Party headquarters and the subsequent PSOE election victory, structured the story that these newspapers told.

The *plot,* or the organised summary of the actions and events, presented by both newspapers showed the dynamism of the mythic and romantic narrative form, whose main character was the unified population demonstrating in the streets across the nation. Atocha train station in Madrid became known as 'Ground Zero' and from where representatives of Spanish and other European governments, Spanish royalty, and political parties led a massive demonstration. Yet, in this atmosphere of civic unity, *El País* reported that the people railed against the government, and asked who was responsible for the massacre. Prime Minister Aznar and his interior minister Acebes were described as opaque, if not untruthful, in their insistence on ETA responsibility. ETA denials were later confirmed by police findings. Even the pro-government *El Mundo* cast doubt on statements made by the interior minister.

The narratives ended emphasising evidence of Al-Qaida's guilt –the arrest of five people seemingly linked to a Spanish Al-Qaida branch and the claimed responsibility by an Islamic terrorist group– as narrated in parallel with another major event: a general election. 'Spain is voting under the cloud of

the worst attack in its history,' said the *El País* headline (14 March, 2004), in reference to public confusion about the attackers. In addition, *El País* reported on the demonstrations in front of the PP headquarters calling for the government tell the truth before the elections. At the end of the story, on the day of the elections, there were substantial differences in the stories in both newspapers and their editorials. While *El Mundo* celebrated the government's transparent honesty, *El País* complained about its secretive cover-up. When the investigative committee was convened in July, the media confrontation escalated to litigiousness by governmental representatives, political leaders and parties, and the media itself –based on varying reconstructions of the same events and competing yet unproven claims. With a newfound focus on this legal confrontation, the dominant journalistic narratives reflected partisan interests about 11 March, which was morphed from romance to irony for the rhetorical devices of comedy, which as Frye noted, resembles the rhetoric of jurisprudence.

The media's narrative reconstruction of the Madrid terrorist bombing underscored its role in offering a story of universal solidarity, whose romantic narrative dramatised a terrorist attack on Spanish society. In the developing narrative the media organised characters with clear binary sets of cultural codes cast along partisan lines. In the journalistic plot, the Spanish government was stained by anti-civic codes and was symbolically placed outside civil society, which affected public opinion and the general elections insofar as ousting the ruling party was among the final actions of civil repair following the terrorist attack. An analysis of narrative time, which supports this conclusion, is beyond the scope of this article. In Genette's terms, the *narrative time* of the media's construction did not coincide with the *story time,* whose plot highlighted the government's wrongdoings with attributed anti-civic motives and the public's negative perception of the ruling party in strongly mythical terms throughout the telling of the story from 11 to 14 March.

But the distinction between the journalistic narrative with its mythical and romantic plot, and the telling of the story by others as recounted by the media is critical to gaining an understanding of the eclipse of social solidarity by partisan ideology. Yet, although journalists were partisan actors, political leaders and their media platforms, right and left, embraced a stance of solidarity and insisted, as true partisans, on their opponent's disorder. Thus, both newspapers –*El Mundo* and *El País*– as political scions, respectively, of the PP on the right and the PSOE on the left, shared a binary civic-minded code –factual and truthful– and criticised their opponent in civil discourse.

5. Conclusions

The aim of this article has been to provide a new approach to the study of journalistic autonomy which differs from accepted functional views of media independence within journalism studies. These studies are based on theoretical models that reduce journalistic practices and its products –the news– to political power. As a result, the journalistic sphere is conceived within the margins of the political sphere. Alexander's conceptualisation of civil society explains the defining tension and moral structure of binary codes. Further, it provides a useful framework to analyse journalistic practice and outputs with symbolic dimensions that transcend the ideological and partisan interests commonly attributed to journalism. Thus, the framework fosters insight into the dynamics of ideology and culture through the study of media narratives.

To this extent, cultural-sociological theory offers an appropriately expansive basis for a valid approach to analyse and evaluate the role of the media as an autonomous field of activity related to civil society. Such an approach avoids the theoretical limits imposed on journalism by practical, ideological, or critical (political and economic) orientations –and offers a less reductive and functional explanation of journalistic autonomy. A socio-cultural approach to the study of journalism could be understood as being close to Bourdieu's influential concept of the journalistic field as a professional autonomous field within the social structure. Nevertheless, while studies based on Bourdieu's notion of social fields take into account the internal cultural logic of journalism to signify journalistic activities, the 'cultural capital' of the media as a key concept in such studies underlines the material structures of journalism. However, Bourdieuian-oriented theories of journalistic autonomy avoid reductive explanations of journalism to political structures; but still consider journalistic practices and meanings as dependent variables of social and economic structural conditions.

Narrative analysis of news stories can be useful to discuss the *operationalisation* of journalistic autonomy with respect to civil society. Empirical analysis in line with a cultural-sociology approach could refine existing theories and content analysis of media independence as a news narrative form that transcends socio-structural factors and political interests and captures the cultural and autonomous dimension of journalism. In this sense, Althaus's critique of literature on media independence[44] offers a suggestive exploration of news

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[44] Cfr. ALTHAUS, Scott, *op. cit.*

coverage that stretches from methods for analysing news content using proxy analysis to a more complex and revealing type of full text analysis. This analysis distinguishes three types of categories for coding arguments and frames of references represented in the news: 'means' discourse, 'ends' discourse, and 'context' discourse. This approach to exploring the news seems closest to the narrative dimension of news stories with a symbolic reference to the structural elements of *action* –and so enables the autonomous dimension of journalism to be better captured.

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