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Framing austerity in Spain: the influence of sources and economic policies over the media discourse

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Abstract

European countries responded to the economic crisis of 2008 by adopting austerity policies that deeply transformed their economic and social model, leading to a general decline in welfare. This study attempts to demonstrate how the media contributed to legitimise this kind of policies by portraying them as the only possible alternative, focusing on the Spanish press. To this end, we carry out a Content Analysis of the frames used by two Spanish newspapers to address the policies applied in response to the crisis between 2008 and 2015. Additionally, this article links through a Z-test the frames reproduced by the media with the type of sources that promoted them, a dimension of the crisis coverage that remains largely unexplored. It also analyses the evolution of the media discourse throughout the crisis. The results show how coverage was dominated by frames that legitimised austerity by presenting it as the only existing option. In a relevant way, both elitist and alternative sources mostly promoted frames that legitimised austerity, although in a different way. On the other hand, the legitimisation of austerity was exercised more intensely in the crisis periods in which these policies were being applied more strongly.

Keywords

Economic journalism, economic crisis, austerity, framing, ideology, Spanish Media, cascading activation model.

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Introduction

The economic crisis that began in 2008 and the events related to it drew a great deal of media attention, and this media coverage was the subject of many academic researches. One of the most studied dimensions was the treatment of economic policies implemented in response to the recession. In this sense, the existing works coincide in concluding that the media contributed to legitimise the fiscal austerity policies implemented in the European Union by presenting them as if they were the only existing alternative of economic policy (e.g. [Arrese, 2018](#); [Barbieri et al., 2019](#); [Doudaki et al., 2016, 2019](#); [Mullen, 2018](#)).

However, this object of study is far from being exhausted and there are still several dimensions to be analysed in depth. Most of the studies were conducted during the crisis or in the immediate aftermath, focusing on the most urgent issues and leaving questions to be answered in the future. In this sense, the media have been criticised for privileging elitist sources in their coverage of the economy in general (Davis, 2005) and of the crisis in particular, and this dominance of elitist sources is pointed out as an explanatory factor for the pre-eminence of pro-austerity discourse (e.g. [Berry, 2013, 2016](#); [Schiffrin and Fagan, 2012](#); [Tracy, 2012](#)). However, we have no record of works connecting the frames reproduced in the coverage and the sources that promote them from a quantitative perspective and applying statistical inference methods; space that we aim to contribute to cover with this study. Moreover, the nature of the crisis itself makes it a unique object of study in the field of economic journalism, since it is relevant for the general public and gets their attention (Arrese, 2018). As a theoretical novelty, we propose to understand the communicative process concerning economic policy in the light of a model typical of political communication, the cascading activation model (Entman, 2003, 2004).

On the other hand, we analyse the long-term evolution of the discourse on the political responses to the crisis, checking if there are significant differences between the sets of frames reproduced in different periods according to the policies applied at each moment, a dimension that has not yet been sufficiently explored. This is understandable due to the insufficient historical perspective that most studies on this topic could have had. Only recently has been published some work that, thanks to this perspective, can apply a longitudinal and long-term approach (Basu, 2019). Finally, it should be noted that we focus on the Spanish case, for which there are no specific studies yet. In a more general sense, the interest in this object of study is reinforced by the new economic crisis derived from the Covid-19 pandemic (IMF, 2020) and by the debate in the European Union about the recovery politics (European Council, 2020).

Theoretical framework

Economic crisis, ideology and media framing

Why is relevant the type of discourse the media reproduced in their coverage of the crisis and the economic policies applied in response? In this section we try to give an answer by combining three elements: the crisis understood as a moment of radical transformation of the economic and social model; the ideology as an area in which the new model must

be legitimised in order to succeed; and the media as agents that produce and reproduce ideology, a role that can be understood through the framing theory.

We start from the premise that the economic crisis of 2008 must be understood as a structural crisis, that is, a crisis that has its origin in the exhaustion of the previous development model (characterised by the predominance of the financial sector, a very high level of global debt and low productivity increases in the real economy) and from which a new model capable of recovering acceptable growth rates must emerge (Basu and Vasudevan, 2013; Harvey, 2010).

In this sense, the general orientation of economic policy in Spain during the crisis evolved in line with the dominant economic policy at the European level at each time. At first, expansionary fiscal policies were implemented with the aim of stimulate demand and protect employment, being approved the great Spanish stimulus plan (E Plan) in November 2008. However, less than two years later, in May 2010, the Socialist Party (PSOE) government, pushed by the European institutions, took a radical turn and austerity became the guideline of economic policy. Restrictive fiscal policies and neoliberal structural reforms on the labour market or the pension system began to be implemented. Containment of the public deficit became the priority of economic policy over the growth and employment. Austerity policies were substantially intensified with the entry into government of the right-wing Partido Popular (PP) after winning the November 2011 elections. Only during 2015, the last year of the mandate, a relaxation in the pace of fiscal consolidation began to take place.

This type of political response to the crisis provides the basis for an economic and social model in which the social majorities suffer a substantial worsening of their living standards compared to the previous situation: lower income, greater inequality, more precarious employment, worse public services, etc. How, then, is it possible for the majority of citizenry to assume the new model?

In order to develop this issue, it is necessary to introduce the concept of ideology. In a brief way, we could define ideology as all that system of ideas and beliefs of fundamental or axiomatic type, related to power conflicts and central interests to social life that, in turn, control and organize other ideas and beliefs (Eagleton, 1991; Van Dijk, 2005). Following Eagleton (1991), we can emphasize that ideologies have a legitimising function, this is, to make acceptable the interests of a certain group (and the practical or material expression of them) for society in general. In democratic societies, any political project needs to be ideologically legitimised before the majority of society and to obtain its consent. An ideology is successful when it stops being perceived as such and its nuclear ideas start being seen, simply, as the natural or as common sense (Gramsci, 1971). Ideology has a dynamic nature, it must be constantly reproduced and redefined to adapt to changes that may occur in the material sphere that it aims to plausibly explain (Althusser, 2003; Williams, 1977).

The media is one of the main agents reproducing ideology, since it fulfils the function of interpreting social, political and economic reality and transmitting these interpretations to the public/citizenry. We can address this role of the media through the framing theory. The concept of framing emerges in the field of psychology (Bateson, 1955), and would be further developed in the field of sociology (Goffman, 1974). Tuchman (1978)

introduced the concept in communication sciences to study the way the journalists interpret and portray the social reality, and since then the framing theory evolved in this area, leading to a fruitful theoretical and empirical corpus¹.

Following the definition of Robert Entman, framing consists in “selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman, 1993: 52). The frames are the packages of information resulting from this process. They are located in the texts, but also in the minds of the journalists, the elites or politicians and the public, who use the frames as a cognitive tool to code, store, and decode information (Lodge and Stroh, 1993; Sábada-Garraza, 2001). Framing is a necessary operation in order to simplify and give meaning to a complex reality, allowing the public understand it and maintaining its interest (Valkenburg et al., 1999).

Given the nature of our object of study, which combines elements of political journalism and economic journalism, we consider that the cascading activation model proposed by Entman (2003, 2004) in the field of political communication and the elite-elite communication model proposed by Davis (2003) and characteristic of economic communication are useful and fit into our theoretical framework. More specifically, we think that the role performed by the news sources in the coverage of the crisis economic policies can be explained according to these models. We expect that our results will provide insights on the suitability of the cascading activation model for different (though related) communicative areas than the one for which it was originally proposed.

The cascading activation model was developed by Entman (2003, 2004) to explain how frames are formed and reproduced in society and what role the media play in this process. Thus, the framing process begins when the political elites (originally the White House) begin to circulate a certain frame on a given issue. This frame takes shape through a process of negotiation between the elites themselves. The process continues with the frames promoted by the elites being reproduced, or confronted, by the media, being finally transferred to the public. The metaphor of the cascade is used to underline the verticality of the process, but the citizens (or the diverse actors that participate in the communicative process that we cannot consider elites) can also promote their own frames and manage to insert them into the media discourse and in the public debate, in the same way that the media themselves can do it.

The success of a frame versus its competitors depends on the power and strategy of its promoters and on its magnitude (prominence and repetition) and cultural resonance, that is, of its “use words and images highly salient in the culture” (Entman, 2003: 417). The cascading activation model suggests that the frame contest usually leads to a situation between frame dominance (complete dominance of a single frame) and a degree of contestation; while frame parity, the situation where two (or more) frames compete on an equal level, would be the exception. To reach frame parity, “the news must offer a *counterframe* that puts together a complete alternative narrative, a tale of problem, cause,

¹ For a further explanation on framing theory development and approaches, see Ardèvol-Abreu (2015).

remedy, and moral judgment possessing as much magnitude and resonance” as the administration’s (Entman, 2003: 418).

Originally, Entman developed his model to explain communications in the context of US foreign policy, in which political elites exert great power over the framing process because they are the primary definers of events, the first to inform. The political power decides and executes foreign policy, and is usually its main actor, which gives it greater access to media organisations than other agents. It also has the capacity to define events for which it is not responsible (e.g. an action by a foreign government), but for which it is expected to provide official information, make an assessment and act accordingly. The elites can also choose strategically when and how they provide information, giving them even more control over the framing.

We have no record of previous studies in which the cascading activation model were applied to areas other than the strictly political, but we consider that the communication process related to the economic policy in the crisis suits this model. Political authorities are the ones who decide and execute economic policy. They are also expected to provide information on the economy (through reports and official data) and to conduct the diagnoses that guide their economic governance. Thus, we believe that this power guarantees political elites, as sources, a privileged access to news organizations and, therefore, allows them to act as the primary definers of economic policy events, leading the framing process. This study aims to explore this question empirically.

On the other hand, economic journalism is characterised by its elitist approach. Davis (2003) proposed a ‘critical elite theory alternative’ to understand the role of media as part of the negotiation processes between elites. In the elite-elite communication, “elites are simultaneously the main sources, main targets and some of the most influenced recipients of news” (Davis, 2003: 673). Other types of sources are marginalized, while topics of general interest occupy a secondary place and the citizenry is not considered as the main public. This model has proven successful in studying the communication process related to financial information (Davis, 2005), but economic journalism in general also follows these trends (Arrese and Vara, 2015; Wren-Lewis, 2018). However, the crisis is different from other economic events, since it is also a major political event relevant to the general public (Arrese, 2018). The press would have reasons to speak to a wider audience and not only to elites or decision-makers, which would imply an alteration of the model. Thus, we consider appropriate to explore whether the economic journalism maintains its usual elitist approach in the use of sources in the specific case of crisis-related reporting.

State of art

In recent years, many studies have been published on the media's coverage of the crisis in general and on austerity policies in particular. In the existing literature we can find a wide consensus on the fact that the media reproduced a discourse that legitimised this type of political response to the crisis by portraying it as the only possible option, which does not imply that it was not also criticised for its negative effects on society or on the economy itself (Arrese, 2018; Basu, 2019; Cawley, 2012; Doudaki et al., 2016, 2019;

Kay and Salter, 2014; Mercille, 2014; Mullen, 2018; Preston and Silke, 2014; Robertson, 2010; Silke, 2015; Tracy, 2012).

The legitimization of austerity would not be exercised exclusively through a lack of plurality in which the frames that treat this political option as the only possible one dominate the coverage and the frames that include alternative proposals occupy a marginal position. For Doudaki, it is also significant that the austerity policies were legitimised by being presented as the natural way to act facing a crisis, being the information and ideas on the subject treated as if they were “real and objective facts that cannot be contested, having a quasi-scientific ontological status” (Doudaki, 2015: 10). On the other hand, it is interesting to highlight the fact that in the mentioned studies were also found texts relatively critical to austerity. However, authors such as Mylonas (2015) warn of the limited scope of these criticisms, given that they are little repeated and tend to be superficial. In other words, the fact that the negative consequences of austerity were highlighted does not imply that it continued to be presented as the only possible option, as long as other policy proposals that could be seen as a practical alternative were not developed. In a relevant way, several studies refer to the fact that the legitimization of austerity was common in mainstream media as a whole, regardless of whether the concrete media outlets had more conservative or more progressive editorial lines (Mazzoni and Barbieri, 2014; Mercille, 2014; Mylonas, 2012, 2014, 2015; Robertson, 2010; Salgado and Nienstedt, 2016).

Most of the referred works focus their empirical analysis on relatively concrete periods or on the treatment of more or less specific events of the crisis, without an analysis of the evolution of the media discourse in the long term. There are exceptions to this general trend. Doudaki et al. (2016, 2019) analyse and compare different time periods in which austerity was being applied, which allows to note how proposals in favour of this type of policy dominated the coverage during all periods. In a relevant way, Basu (2019) analyses the evolution of the austerity frame in the United Kingdom between 2008 and 2015. The author discovers how the pro-austerity frame begins to dominate in 2009, gains strength in 2010 with the implementation of the main cuts and suffers certain fluctuations during the subsequent period, beginning to receive some criticism from the progressive press.

On the other hand, most of the mentioned studies focus on the national press of particular countries, although there are also comparative studies that include media from different countries, highlighting as a result that national differences have a greater influence on the type of treatment of the crisis than differences between editorial lines (Arrese, 2018; Barbieri et al., 2019; Mancini and Mazzoni, 2015; Salgado and Nienstedt, 2016). Besides the comparative studies mentioned, there is a lack of studies on the coverage of the political responses to the crisis that specifically analyse the Spanish press, which we aim to contribute to overcome with this paper.

Several studies focused on the type of news sources used by the media in their crisis coverage, understanding the selection of sources as one of the main factors explaining the type of discourse reproduced by the media. The principal conclusion drawn from these studies is that coverage was dominated by political and economic elite sources (Basu, 2019; Berry, 2013, 2016; Mullen, 2018; Schiffrin and Fagan, 2012; Silke, 2015; Tracy, 2012). These types of agents would also dominate as analysts in other formats such as

debates in the audio-visual media (Rafter, 2014). In the treatment of issues such as public deficit (Berry, 2016) or stimulus packages (Schiffrin and Fagan, 2012) the political elites had more weight; while in the treatment of issues such as the housing crisis (Silke, 2015), the financial crisis and bank bailouts (Berry, 2013) or the debt crisis (Tracy, 2012) the economic elites were more preeminent. In addition, elite sources would also have been treated uncritically by the media, with their interpretations or opinions sometimes portrayed as objective facts (Cawley, 2016).

However, works that empirically and quantitatively analyse the frames and the type of sources used in the coverage are not as numerous. Moreover, these studies either analyse separately the discourse reproduced by the media, on the one hand, and the sources used by them, on the other; or they restrict the analysis of this relationship to a qualitative perspective (Berry, 2012, 2016; Schiffrin and Fagan, 2012; Tracy, 2012). Our work aims to fill this gap and analyse this relationship also from a quantitative perspective.

Hypotheses

The main thesis of this work is that the Spanish media acted as legitimising agents for the austerity policies that the Spanish governments applied in response to the economic crisis from May 2010 onwards. To explore the multiple dimensions of this question, we established the following hypotheses:

H1: Media coverage was dominated by frames that legitimised austerity by presenting it as if it were the only economic policy option.

H2: This legitimisation occurred in the mainstream press as a whole, in both right-wing and left-wing newspapers, and in both national and regional.

H3: Elite sources promoted frames that legitimised austerity in a greater degree than alternative sources.

H4: Trade unions and social movements, and academic sources, promoted frames that legitimised alternative policies to austerity in a greater degree than other elitist sources.

H5: Frames that legitimised austerity were more prominent in periods when this kind of policy was being applied more strongly.

Sample and methods

The sample consists of a total of 2,195 texts about the economic crisis published by the Spanish newspapers *El País* (1,122 texts) and *La Voz de Galicia* (1,073 texts) between 2008 and 2015. These two media outlets are representative of Spain's mainstream press: On the one hand, *El País* traditionally follows a centre-left editorial line and is aligned with the Socialist Party, while *La Voz de Galicia* follows a centre-right one and is aligned with the Popular Party. This perception is largely assumed by the scholars and tested in several researches (e.g. [López-López, 2015](#); [López-López and Puentes-Rivera, 2017](#)). On the other hand, *El País* is the newspaper with the highest readership and circulation in

Spain, while *La Voz de Galicia* is the main newspaper in the historical nationality of Galicia, and the fourth of all Spanish generalist dailies, according to the data of the Oficina de Justificación de la Difusión (2016) and the Estudio General de Medios (AIMC, 2015). The aim in selecting a regional newspaper is to include a kind of press that tends to be underrepresented in studies on the crisis coverage and to obtain some insights on the possible similarities or differences compared to the national media. *La Voz de Galicia* is the best study case: in addition to its large audience, it has a newsroom in Madrid and covers the news events at the Spanish level in much the same way as any national newspaper, so no relevant news on the crisis politics in Spain should be missing.

To collect the sample, we selected 27 dates in which significant crisis events took place. The editions of the newspapers published on each event's day and the day after were taken. Secondly, those texts that included in the headline or in the lead some keyword linked to the semantic field of the crisis were selected². We collected the texts from all sections of the newspapers except local, since *El País* does not have this section and *La Voz de Galicia* has a number of local editions. We included editorials and opinion columns³. Although the latter do not always express the points of view of the newspaper, as a whole they tend to reflect the editorial line since the authors are chosen by the editorial board.

A qualitative and quantitative Content Analysis was performed. In addition to the frames and the newspapers, the variables analysed were the type of promoters of each frame and the publishing period. The periods were established according to the type of economic policy prevailing at each moment of the crisis, in accordance with the theoretical framework (Table 1).

The research was conducted in two steps: first, an exploratory analysis to define the possible categories of variables and; second, a quantitative analysis in which the texts were coded. Thus, in the first step, the specific frames⁴ used to treat the economic policies were defined (see next section). To detect these frames in the texts, we use an inductive method, looking for terms, arguments, metaphors and other devices (Van Gorp, 2007) with “capacity to stimulate support or opposition” (Entman, 2004: 6) to the different positions in the economic policy debate. The categories of the variable ‘promoters’ were also defined, and the following types of agents were established: ‘institutional and political agents’, ‘business agents’ (these two categories correspond to what we understand as elite agents), ‘academic agents’, ‘trade unions, social movements and citizens’ (alternative agents), ‘the journal itself or the text’s author’ and ‘others’. The category that refers to the newspaper itself or the text’s author is due to the fact that, in many cases, the frames cannot be assigned to an agent external to the newspaper, but rather they are the newspapers themselves that use the frames to construct their own discourse.

² For more details on the selection of dates and keywords, see Rios (2019).

³ 27% of the frames identified in *La Voz de Galicia* and 28,6% in *El País* were located in editorials (1% and 7,3%, respectively) and opinion columns (26% and 21,3%).

⁴ The generic frames established by previous researches do not adapt to the objectives of our object of study (e.g. Neuman et al., 1992; Rhee, 1997). We find that the use of specific frames is more suitable, since “it offers specific results to accurately examine the media treatment (...) of a particular topic” (Ardèvol-Abreu, 2015: 432).

In the quantitative section, the analysis unit was the frame, and the possibility of finding more than one frame in a single text was considered. Only the frames related to economic policy were taken into consideration. 633 frames were codified in *La Voz de Galicia* and 760 in *El País* (1,393 in total). The variable ‘promoters’ was managed as a multiple response variable, since on several occasions different types of promoters can be identified promoting a single frame.

Beyond the descriptive statistics, to study if there is a relationship of dependency between the different variables this research was based on the Z-test. Through this test we calculated if the difference between the observed count in the crossing of two categories of two variables and the expected count for that same crossing is statistically significant. Given the relatively large sample size we used an alpha of .01 to measure statistical significance, which is more restrictive than the usual .05.

Overview findings

Frames in the coverage

In the exploratory analysis the following frames were identified:

“Austerity is the only alternative”

This frame legitimises the application of austerity policies and neoliberal structural reforms by presenting them as if they were the only possible economic policy option to address the crisis. This crisis situation is the basic problem definition of the frame.

This frame takes on different forms depending on the text in which it is expressed. First, it can emphasize the positive effects of austerity policies. This can be done either by describing situations in which austerity policies have supposedly positive effects (e.g. a better balance in public accounts), or by directly suggesting them as a solution to the crisis and the economic problems.

On the other hand, this frame also operates in texts that suggest that the austerity policies are simply the only possible alternative. This does not necessarily have to be explicitly stated; austerity can also be presented as the only option in an implicit way by not giving space to other alternative economic policy proposals. This happens in those texts that describe problematic situations (present or foreseen) caused by austerity policies, but do not mention any possible alternatives. In other texts, this frame legitimises austerity policies as a natural response to the crisis, simply defining situations in which these policies are implemented.

Finally, this frame is also expressed in texts which, without openly proposing the implementation of austerity policies, define situations in which the supposedly high expenditure of administrations or its unnecessary nature is problematised. By focusing on the expenditure side and not paying attention to the volume of revenues or to possible formulas for increasing the latter, the solution implicitly suggested is to implement austerity policies.

“Austerity should not be applied”

This frame has great similarities with the previous one, since it implicitly still presents austerity policies and neoliberal structural reforms as if they were the only alternative. However, it defines in a critical way situations in which austerity policies are being or will be implemented and, in view of this, suggests as a solution the non-application of austerity policies. Most commonly, the texts articulated by this frame refer to the non-application of spending cuts or specific reforms, although in certain cases it may refer to the non-application of austerity understood as a general policy orientation.

Although the latter constitutes a relevant difference with respect to the frame “Austerity is the only alternative” (hence we establish a differentiated category); this frame also does not suggest an alternative policy to austerity, but simply proposing its non-application. In this way, and in spite of being apparently critical of austerity, it continues to legitimise this type of economic policy orientation insofar as it implicitly presents it as the only alternative.

“There are alternatives to austerity”

This frame is characterised by legitimising the application of alternative policies to austerity, mainly expansionary fiscal policies. It can also legitimise more specific complementary measures, such as modernisation of the production model, greater spending or investment in certain strategic items or progressive tax reforms.

This legitimisation process can be carried out in different ways. Firstly, this frame may define a situation in which the administration is running alternative policies to austerity. These policies are not explicitly suggested as a solution to the crisis, but they are legitimised as a normal political option insofar as no element included in the text leads to the contrary conclusion.

Secondly, this frame may explicitly suggest the implementation of expansionary policies to tackle the crisis, either by referring to a specific policy or package of measures or to this type of policy orientation in general terms.

Finally, in a relevant way, this frame also operates in texts that define problematic situations caused by austerity policies, suggesting alternative policies as a possible and desirable solution.

This is the only frame of the three identified that entail a threat to the austerity policies, since it clearly legitimises an alternative path of economic policy.

Quantitative results

Analysing the frames used to address economic policies in response to the crisis (see Table 2), the first aspect that stands out is that the frame “Austerity is the only alternative” is by far the most prominent in both *La Voz de Galicia* (71.7% of the frames) and *El País* (66.1%). Furthermore, the frame “Austerity should not be applied”, which also presents austerity as the only alternative, represents 17.7% of the frames in *La Voz de Galicia* and 14.2% in *El País*. In contrast, the frame “There are alternatives to austerity”, the only one that considers the existence of other economic policy options, represents only 10.6% of the frames of *La Voz de Galicia* and 19.8% of *El País*.

Furthermore, as can be seen from the results of the Z-test (see subscripts in Table 2), there are no statistically significant differences between the frequencies at which each newspaper reproduced the two frames that legitimise austerity. The most important difference is the presence of the frame “There are alternatives to austerity”, significantly more frequent in *El País* than in *La Voz de Galicia*.

On the other hand, the analysis of the promoters indicates that a majority of 62.5% of the identified frames were promoted directly by the newspapers themselves or by the texts’ authors (see Table 3). For the frames promoted by identifiable external sources, the main promoters are those of institutional or political type, who promote 29.7% of the frames. Trade unions, social movements and citizens promote only 7% of the frames and none of the other categories represent more than 3% of the total. These figures barely vary for each individual newspaper. Also, it is remarkable the stability observed in the weight of the different promoting agents throughout the different periods of the crisis.

To what extent does greater or lesser access to the media by different types of promoters influence the frames that are finally reproduced in the media discourse? To answer this question, we analyse the set of frames promoted by each type of source (Table 4). The results of the Z-test show that there are several frames whose frequencies according to their promoter differ in a statistically significant way from the expected count, which means that there are several frames that certain types of source are more or less likely to promote.

All types of agents considered promoted frames legitimising austerity as the only alternative, but in two different ways. On the one hand, the journals themselves, the institutional and political agents and ‘others’ promoted the frame “Austerity is the only alternative” to a greater extent than the rest of agents. Also, this is the only frame promoted by business agents⁵. On the other hand, the trade union and social movement agents, and especially the academic agents, tended to reproduce the frame “Austerity should not be applied” more frequently than other agents, especially institutional and political ones. As can be seen in Table 4, these results vary with different intensities when the analysis is carried out individually for each newspaper, and in certain cases the differences are no longer statistically significant, but as can be seen in the percentages, the same tendency is maintained⁶. It must be highlighted the fact that the frame “There are alternatives to austerity” is promoted with a similar frequency by all types of agents considered in the test.

A clear relationship of dependency can be observed between the evolution of the economic policy discourse and the economic policy actually implemented in each period of the crisis (Table 5). The frames legitimising austerity as the only alternative have a significantly greater presence precisely in those periods of the crisis in which this political orientation was hegemonic in practice. Firstly, the use of “Austerity is the only alternative” stands out in the third and fourth periods above the rest. Secondly, the use of the “Austerity should not be applied” frame is significantly greater during the first three years of PP government (fourth period) than in the second and third periods. On the other

⁵ Consequently, this agent cannot be included in the Z-test.

⁶ In the case of *La Voz de Galicia*, the academic agents cannot be included in the test because only promoted the second frame.

hand, the frame “There are alternatives to austerity” is used significantly more in the first and second periods (prior to the implementation of austerity policies) and in the fifth period (relaxation of austerity) than in the third and fourth periods.

Furthermore, some divergences between the overall results and the results of each newspaper deserves to be mentioned: in *La Voz de Galicia* there are no statistically significant differences in the use of the frame “Austerity is the only alternative” and “Austerity should not be applied” between the different periods. On the other hand, despite the presence of the frame “There are alternatives to austerity” evolved in a similar way in both newspapers until the fourth period; in the last period this frame does not reach the same degree of prominence in *La Voz de Galicia* as in *El País*. No statistically significant differences can be observed in the use of this frame by the conservative newspaper between the fifth period and the third and fourth periods. Also, it is remarkable that, in the periods of expansionary policies and in the last period, the alternative frame was the most frequent in *El País*, contesting the two frames legitimising austerity.

Discussion and conclusions

Since 2010, austerity policies have been the predominant response to the economic crisis in Europe in general and in Spain in particular. This neoliberal solution to the crisis meant the configuration of a new model of economic development in which the material conditions of the social majority worsened substantially with respect to the previous model. The media contributed to legitimise this response to the crisis, providing an ideological explanation that would coherently fit the new material reality. In line with the patterns observed in other countries (Arrese, 2018; Basu, 2019; Cawley, 2012; Doudaki et al., 2016, 2019; Kay and Salter, 2014; Mercille, 2014; Mullen, 2018; Preston and Silke, 2014; Robertson, 2010; Silke, 2015; Tracy, 2012), our results show that the discourse of the Spanish media was structured through frames that presented austerity as the only possible alternative to address the crisis, which was not contradictory with the existence of criticism towards the negative or painful effects caused by this policy (confirming H1).

This discourse is dominant in both the conservative and progressive newspapers, and in both regional and national, without statistically significant differences between the frequencies at which each newspaper reproduced the frames that legitimise austerity (confirming H2). This result reinforces the insights provided by previous research (Mazzoni and Barbieri, 2014; Mercille, 2014; Mylonas, 2012, 2014, 2015; Robertson, 2010; Salgado and Nienstedt, 2016). Yet, the alternative frame had a significantly greater presence in *El País*, which could be interpreted as a slightly more pluralistic coverage.

Previous research already concluded that elitist sources dominated the crisis coverage (Basu, 2019; Berry, 2013, 2016; Mullen, 2018; Schiffrin and Fagan, 2012; Silke, 2015; Tracy, 2012). This study concludes that, in addition, the elites are also the main promoters of the frames reproduced by the media in its coverage of the crisis politics. In this sense, and despite the singularity of the crisis as a topic (Arrese, 2018), economic journalism continued following the elite-elite communication model (Davis, 2003, 2005).

Remarkably, the results show that it is not accurate that elitist sources reproduced pro-austerity frames while alternative sources such as trade unions or academics tended to

offer alternative proposals, so H3 and H4 cannot be accepted literally. When analysing the set of frames promoted by each type of agent, we find that the frame “there are alternatives to austerity” is residual in all cases without significant differences. On the other hand, the frames that present austerity as the only alternative were dominant in the discourse of all the sources. Elite agents reproduced to a greater extent the frame “austerity is the only alternative”; while non-elite agents reproduced to a greater extent the frame “austerity should not be applied”. That is, both elitist and alternative agents legitimised austerity by treating it as if it were the only possible choice, although the latter did so more indirectly by focusing their discourse on criticism of austerity but without offering a coherent alternative economic policy.

The Entman’s (2003, 2004) cascading activation model is useful to interpret our results. The political elites, due to their power and their capacity to define strategies, were the main definitors of reality. Their frames were the most repeated in the media. Moreover, they successfully blocked the emergence of alternative frames that could challenge pro-austerity hegemony: the media assumed as their own the frame "austerity is the only alternative"; and the frame most promoted by non-elite agents was "austerity should not be applied", which did not operate as a *counterframe* since it did not provide alternatives.

In addition, the cultural resonance of each frame could also explain this pattern: once the frame "austerity is the only alternative" reaches hegemony, it is possible that the frame "there are alternatives to austerity" will be blocked for going against the general beliefs already installed. This risk would lead non-elite agents to avoid the use of the alternative frame, further reinforcing the dominant one (Gramsci, 1971). Furthermore, economic journalism tends to be particularly dependent on official sources, due to the lack of training of journalists, the routine pressures and the complexity of the topics, among other reasons (Arrese and Vara, 2015; Wren-Lewis, 2018). This dependency contributes to facilitate the assumption of the official frames by the media.

On the other hand, the dominance of pro-austerity frames is even more pronounced in the periods when these policies were most intensively implemented by the political elites (confirming H5), which shows their control over framing. The separate analysis of *La Voz de Galicia* reveals an interesting exception, as the prominence of pro-austerity frames remained at similar levels in all periods. This can be explained by the editorial support of this newspaper to the conservative Galician Popular Party (López-López, 2015), which was already defending the implementation of austerity policies since the pre-campaign of the March 2009 elections, when they won the Galician government and started to apply these policies from that moment on, anticipating the Spanish government by more than a year. Although it may seem obvious, the media outlets have their own editorial lines and these ideological and partisan inclinations should also be considered as explanatory factors of their type of coverage.

The separate analysis of *El País* is also revealing in this regard: before austerity clearly dominated European and Spanish economic policy, when there was still some disagreement between the political elites and the Spanish government (PSOE) was implementing expansionary policies, a frame contestation can be observed in which the frame "there are alternatives to austerity" still had strength in the political debate; although after that it would not recover its presence until 2015. Ultimately, as expected

by the cascading activation model, the framing contest on economic policy in response to the crisis in Spain tended to the domination of the elites' frames, legitimising austerity as the only alternative; emerging some degree of contestation in certain periods but never reaching frame parity.

Europe is currently suffering a recession caused by the Covid-19 crisis, much deeper (we don't know if it will last as long) than that of 2008 (IMF, 2020). Initially, there is a fairly broad -though not total- consensus on the need to implement expansionary policies (European Council, 2020). However, these policies were also implemented in the first stage of the 2008 crisis, which did not impede their replacement by austerity policies once the first major impact of the recession had passed. Austerity is likely to reappear as a possible response in the current crisis. It is necessary for the media to be aware of the dynamics that led them to reproduce the dominant neoliberal discourse in the previous crisis and, this time, to provide a pluralistic coverage that allows the development of a broad public debate about which economic policies should be implemented.

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Tables

Table 1. Crisis periods according to economic policy evolution

No specific politics	Expansionary politics	Start of austerity politics (PSOE)	Austerity politics intensification (PP)	Relaxation of fiscal consolidation pace
2008/01/01 – 2008/11/27	2008/11/28 – 2010/05/11	2010/05/12 – 2011/11/19	2011/11/20 – 2014/12/31	2015/01/01 – 2015/12/31

Table 2. Frames by journal

	<i>La Voz de Galicia</i>		<i>El País</i>		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Austerity is the only alternative	353	71.7%a	378	66.1%a	731	68.7%
Austerity should not be applied	87	17.7%a	81	14.2%a	168	15.8%
There are alternatives to austerity	52	10.6%a	113	19.8%b	165	15.5%
Total	492	100.0%	572	100.0%	1064	100.0%

Values in the same row that do not share the same subscript (in bold) are significantly different in $p < .01$ in the Z-test.

Table 3. Promoters by period and by journal

		1° period	2° period	3° period	4° period	5° period	Total
La Voz de Galicia	The journal itself or the text's author	52.9% ^a	64.4% ^a	67.2% ^a	60.8% ^a	25.0% ^a	62.6%
	Institutional and political agents	32.4% ^a	32.7% ^a	28.6% ^a	22.2% ^a	58.3% ^a	28.5%
	Trade unions, social movements and citizens	5.9% ^a	7.9% ^a	7.8% ^a	11.1% ^a	0.0%	8.5%
	Business agents	8.8% ^a	1.0% ^a	2.1% ^a	2.6% ^a	0.0%	2.4%
	Others	2.9% ^{a,b}	4.0% ^{a,b}	0.0%	1.3%^a	25.0%^b	2.0%
	Academic agents	0.0%	1.0% ^a	0.0%	3.3% ^a	0.0%	1.2%
El País	The journal itself or the text's author	44.1% ^a	63.6% ^a	62.9% ^a	65.4% ^a	57.9% ^a	62.4%
	Institutional and political agents	50.0% ^a	28.0% ^a	32.7% ^a	25.5% ^a	31.6% ^a	30.8%
	Trade unions, social movements and citizens	5.9% ^a	4.2% ^a	5.2% ^a	8.5% ^a	0.0%	5.8%
	Business agents	0.0%	2.5% ^a	3.6% ^a	0.7% ^a	10.5% ^a	2.6%
	Others	2.9% ^a	1.7% ^a	1.2% ^a	1.3% ^a	5.3% ^a	1.6%
	Academic agents	0.0%	3.4% ^a	1.6% ^a	2.0% ^a	0.0%	1.9%
Total	The journal itself or the text's author	48.5% ^a	63.9% ^a	64.8% ^a	63.1% ^a	45.2% ^a	62.5%
	Institutional and political agents	41.2% ^a	30.1% ^a	30.9% ^a	23.9% ^a	41.9% ^a	29.7%
	Trade unions, social movements and citizens	5.9% ^a	5.9% ^a	6.4% ^a	9.8% ^a	0.0%	7.0%
	Business agents	4.4% ^a	1.8% ^a	3.0% ^a	1.6% ^a	6.5% ^a	2.5%
	Others	2.9% ^{a,b}	2.7% ^{a,b}	0.7%^a	1.3%^a	12.9%^b	1.8%
	Academic agents	0.0%	2.3% ^a	0.9% ^a	2.6% ^a	0.0%	1.6%

Values in the same row that do not share the same subscript (in bold) are significantly different in $p < .01$ in the Z-test. Boxes without subscripts are not included in the test.

Table 4. Frames by promoters and by journal

		The journal itself or the text's author	Institutional and political agents	Trade unions, social movements and citizens	Business agents	Others	Academic agents
La Voz de Galicia	Austerity is the only alternative	71.8% ^{a,b}	78.6%^a	52.4%^b	100.0%	80.0% ^{a,b}	0.0%
	Austerity should not be applied	17.5% ^{a,b}	10.0%^a	35.7%^b	0.0%	10.0% ^{a,b}	100.0%
	There are alternatives to austerity	10.7% ^a	11.4% ^a	11.9% ^a	0.0%	10.0% ^a	0.0%
El País	Austerity is the only alternative	64.1% ^{a,b}	73.9%^a	42.4%^b	100.0%	100.0%	36.4% ^{a,b}
	Austerity should not be applied	14.3%^a	9.1%^a	45.5%^b	0.0%	0.0%	36.4% ^{a,b}
	There are alternatives to austerity	21.6% ^a	17.0% ^a	12.1% ^a	0.0%	0.0%	27.3% ^a
Total	Austerity is the only alternative	67.7%^a	75.9%^a	48.0%^{b,c}	100.0%	89.5%^{a,b}	23.5%^c
	Austerity should not be applied	15.8%^a	9.5%^a	40.0%^{b,c}	0.0%	5.3%^{a,b}	58.8%^c
	There are alternatives to austerity	16.5% ^a	14.6% ^a	12.0% ^a	0.0%	5.3% ^a	17.6% ^a

Values in the same row that do not share the same subscript (in bold) are significantly different in $p < .01$ in the Z-test. Boxes without subscripts are not included in the test.

Table 5. Frames by period and by journal

		1° period	2° period	3° period	4° period	5° period
La Voz de Galicia	Austerity is the only alternative	58.8%a	66.3%a	79.2%a	68.6%a	75.0%a
	Austerity should not be applied	17.6%a	10.9%a	15.1%a	25.5%a	16.7%a
	There are alternatives to austerity	23.5%a,c	22.8%a	5.7%b	5.9%b,c	8.3%a,b
El País	Austerity is the only alternative	41.2%a	41.5%a	79.8%b	71.9%b,c	36.8%a,c
	Austerity should not be applied	11.8%a	11.9%a	10.5%a	20.9%a	26.3%a
	There are alternatives to austerity	47.1%a	46.6%a	9.7%b	7.2%b	36.8%a
Total	Austerity is the only alternative	50.0%a,c	53.0%a	79.5%b	70.3%b,c,d	51.6%a,d
	Austerity should not be applied	14.7%a,b	11.4%a	12.5%a	23.2%b	22.6%a,b
	There are alternatives to austerity	35.3%a	35.6%a	8.0%b	6.5%b	25.8%a

Values in the same row that do not share the same subscript (in bold) are significantly different in $p < .01$ in the Z-test. Boxes without subscripts are not included in the test.