

Armed conflicts and Media Coverage: Supervised Machine Learning Approach

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Abstract: The media coverage of armed conflicts tends to focus on the attribution of responsibilities and the humanitarian or security frames, as the main studies about media and conflicts have asserted. The present research analyzes the frames used in media outlets such as *El Mundo* and *El País* (Spain), *HispanTV* (Iran) and *RT* (Russia), in their coverage of wars in Yemen and Ukraine. Through innovative and machine learning techniques (particularly, SVM), the authors demonstrate that *RT* and *HispanTV* do not follow the traditional routines of mass media, and that the use of frames rely more on the geostrategic position of their countries of origin.

Key words: frames, mass media, conflicts, Ukraine, Yemen, SVM.

Resumen: La cobertura mediática de los conflictos armados suele centrarse en la atribución de responsabilidades, las consecuencias humanitarias o la seguridad, como señalan los principales estudios sobre medios y conflictos. La presente investigación analiza el uso de encuadres en los medios *El Mundo*, *El País* (España), *HispanTV* (Irán) y *RT* (Rusia) cuando cubren las guerras de Yemen y Ucrania. A través de novedosas técnicas de aprendizaje de máquina (en concreto, SVM), se muestra que los medios ruso e iraní no siguen las pautas de las rutinas periodísticas tradicionales, sino que el uso de encuadres depende de la posición geoestratégica de sus países de origen.

Palabras clave: encuadres, medios de comunicación, conflictos, Ucrania, Yemen, SVM.

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Introduction

The terrible and harrowing events in Rwanda (1994), Bosnia (1995) and Kosovo (1999) brought new concepts associated with security such as *human security* or *responsibility to protect*, which have also been adopted in media coverage, as did the famines in some parts of Africa in the 1980s. Thus, the behavior of the press changes depending on the information context; for example, peacetime versus wartime (García-Marín and García-Luengo, 2009: 367). The same occurs when media frame the reality of domestic and foreign policy (Canel, 1999). Frames are probably the best tool to describe these behaviors. Therefore, when addressing armed conflicts, frame building is based on generic explanatory schemes, as noted by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), and, at the same time, they are segmented into other specific ones, aligned with the concrete conflict and its characteristics.

In this sense, today's media coverage of armed conflicts has provided fresh insights into the use of frames. The *ethnic war* and *genocide* frames have been especially significant in news on the Middle East in the Post-Cold War (Hammond, 2018: 434).

The current conflicts in Yemen and Ukraine are of particular interest from the political communication point of view for several reasons. Firstly, for the extensive media coverage they have received from all the world's media. Secondly, for the direct or indirect involvements of major powers, regional powers, non-governmental organizations, and non-state actors that constitute the international community. These two conflicts have raised a large body of literature from multidisciplinary approaches, as international law (Hillier and Cairns, 2018), communication (MacDonald, 2018) or political science (Zabyelina, 2019).

In recent years, new media outlets with formats in multiple languages, such as *RT* or *HispanTV*, have had a singular relevance in covering war episodes. The theories that relate *soft power* to the new strategic dynamics of some countries, for instance the Russian Federation,¹ raise the question of whether these media can be equated to traditional media in democratic settings; especially when these countries are considered enemies of information by major international organizations as *Reporteros Sin Fronteras*.²

1 The so-called Gerasimov Doctrine is particularly well known, although authors do not agree on its purposes and characteristics (Gerasimov, 2013).

2 See the reports in <https://www.rs-f-es.org/>

As specialized literature points out, the use of frames during armed conflicts, regardless of ideological polarization or indexing, is developed under very delimited schemes, as in the case of Syria (Moreno-Mercado, 2018). If we analyze the small number of studies on the phenomenon of these media, this premise leads us to affirm the opposite (Yablokov, 2015; Peña-Ramos and Jorquera-Mery, 2017). Therefore, this work acquires meaning both to address a scarcely discussed phenomenon and provide a theoretical basis on the matter.

The present research aims to carry out an in-depth analysis of the press coverage of the conflicts in Yemen and Ukraine. This work has been conducted based on the analysis of the media *RT* (Russia), *HispanTV* (Iran), *El Mundo* and *El País* (Spain), in their Spanish-language versions.

Frames, media and armed conflicts

Framing theories analyze the schemas of thought in news processing within specific and generic contexts. Similarly to other political issues, the process of framing war conflicts has created its own body of literature, as mentioned previously. Framing theories have been mainly built on the methodological framework based on the characteristics proposed by Entman (1993: 52): define problems, identify causes, provide solutions, and establish moral judgments.

These framing theories aim to explain how some aspects and considerations stand out over others in a political debate (Bartholomé *et al.*, 2017). Naturally, the four categories proposed by Entman do not necessarily have to be present in a discourse, but at least one of them will be, which will ultimately allow us to differentiate between *substantive frames* and *generic frames*. However, from a methodological point of view, framing theory is still fragmented, since there is no *operationalization* of standard measures (Entman, 1993; Al-Nahed and Hammond, 2018: 365).

The main focus of these studies relates to how political events are shown to the audience by media (Druckman *et al.*, 2013). The way issues are presented to the audience may influence the audience's evaluation (priming) and, therefore, may affect media agenda rhythms (Neuman, 1992). Certainly, historical contexts, in addition to framing process, influence the perceptions of public opinion.

Frames and public opinion studies have produced significant data, for example Blauwkamp *et al.* (2018: 464-465), which reveals that American society supports the use of torture for terrorism but rejects it when media

focus on interrogation practices. In this vein, other studies indicate that following the activities of ISIS in Indonesia, the press has added the concepts of *extremist* and *radical* to the terms *Islamic* or *Muslim*, although previously the religion of perpetrators of terrorist attacks was not emphasized (Horvit *et al.*, 2018: 460-461).

Traditionally, armed conflicts have been an important object of study for framing analysts (García-Marín, 2007). This is, firstly, because the relations between the frame origin and its possible effects are visible. These phenomena are highly susceptible to isolation for analysis, since not all the variables of national policy (for example, prior knowledge, personal experience, etc.) are involved. In the case of war conflicts, and consequently security issues, research by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) presented five general and common frames when covering war conflicts, which they called *conflict*, *human interest*, *economic consequences*, *morality*, and *attribution of responsibility*. They have shown extraordinary scientific interest in security issues, such as terrorism, especially since the 11 September terrorist attacks and the beginning of the *War on Terror* (Ette and Joe, 2018: 393).

For example, it is the case of Yemen, one of the conflicts that concerns us, where the media practices lead journalists (Donsbach and Patterson, 2004) to focus their analysis on the clashes between the Yemeni government and internal actors (Houthi rebels, groups supporting Al-Qaeda or Daesh), or between foreign parties (United States, Russia, Iran, or Saudi Arabia).

This analysis may emphasize the human interest stories of people involved in the crisis, the internal or external economic consequences produced by the conflict, the morality or immorality of military actions, or the parties responsible for the conflict and its possible solutions (Cozma and Kozman, 2018: 189); which is usual considering, based on the literature, that frames used by the Spanish, French and British press are similar and oscillate within specific explanatory frameworks (Moreno-Mercado, 2018).

As McDougall (1982) has argued, conflict frame is more prevalent in Western media coverage as a means of capturing audience interest (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000), using shocking events, as human rights violations or humanitarian crises, present in any type of armed conflict. Moreover, this has currently been demonstrated using explanatory frameworks on genocides and ethnic cleansing in Post-Cold War conflicts (Hammond, 2018: 434), with a duality in this frame between deaths of women and children (*victims*) and male soldiers (*casualties*).

Frame building is an essential element for the adversaries' narratives, as framing conflicts based on specific strategic approaches would allow

mobilizing partisan masses of people, demobilizing the opposing ones and obtaining support from abroad (Corstange and York, 2018). Thus, it may be important to have its own narrative, as represented in media such as *RT* and *HispanTV*, and a role in contemporary conflicts.

In the case of the Russian channel, in Moscow, the control of information flows and physical infrastructures for its operation is fundamental both to guarantee domestic stability as opposed to foreign propaganda, and to influence international public opinion (Colom-Piella, 2017); since alternative information channels serve to create disinformation networks that can be exported to other platforms as Twitter or WhatsApp.

The control of information and its insertion in public diplomacy are highlighted as key lessons learned from the fall of the USSR (Colom-Piella, 2018), where no consolidated communicative instrument existed (beyond propaganda), the Chechen war and the Georgian conflict. The foregoing explains the interest use of frames to cover war episodes involving Russia (Moreno-Mercado, 2019), while the Persian media, part of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), aims to counteract Western narratives, particularly in the Middle East, and interconnect information flows, especially in the Latin American and Spain sphere, as recognized by the former president Mahmud Ahmadineyad (Di Ricco, n.d.: 3).

However, what empirical elements can be shown to differentiate the media's role? When is it propaganda and when is it information, even if it is biased? Naturally, the debate cannot be settled from many points of view. In this paper we present a timid proposal based on frames, which originates in the use of journalistic routines. Indeed, in framing theory, the underlying idea is that many of them are shortcuts in exposing information: to report a war there must be victims, there must be weapons, etcetera. Where does the use of journalistic routines come from? Probably from the idea of competition, in other words, we repeat what works, because it is necessary to gain readers, clicks, viewers or any other type of attention that is profitable. It is a market logic that should also work with public media, as it has created cultural patterns, and they work with market criteria such as audiences (Hardy, 2010). But what happens when the objective is not to obtain readers but to promote a certain point of view? Our proposal is meaningful alterations in the use of these routines that we liken to framing.

At this point it is necessary to emphasize that war journalism and peace journalism represent two competing frames. The conflict/war frame process is more strongly presented in media outlets and social media, which may be due to the *commercialization* of war, often using episodic frames.

Media indexing and episodic coverage of conflicts complicates the work of journalists to challenge structural problems and discourse justifications, as DeCillia (2018) when analyzing Canadian media coverage of the military operation conducted in Afghanistan between 2006 and 2011.

These episodic frames focus on victors and vanquished, based on cultural approaches to create specific archetypes such as *David vs Goliath* (Sheafer and Gabay, 2009), and stress civilian casualties and violent events. A clear example is provided by the research of Wolfsfeld (2018: 120), where it is shown how social media, regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, are more likely to disseminate violent content than to promote mechanisms of resolution and peace.

On the contrary, peace journalism is focused on the use of generic frames, based on the responsibilities derived from the war confrontation and marked by the historical roots of the conflict (Galtung, 2007). In this sense, in research programs, the media's active role in constructive communication and crisis management is called peace journalism, positive journalism, and constructive journalism (Lichtenstein *et al.*, 2018: 4). Nevertheless, recent studies indicate that violent events, and mainly the serious consequences of national and international armed conflicts, are still dominating most of the news and editorials in written press, television, and radio (Gouse *et al.*, 2018: 10).

The conflicts in Yemen and Ukraine: a brief introduction

The first case study concerns the conflict that, since 2015, is devastating the Republic of Yemen. The uprisings of 2011, also known as the *Arab Spring* or *Arab Awakening*, affected the whole country; President Ali Abdullah Saleh left power after more than 30 years in office, with Yemen being an example of peaceful transition of power in its initial stage (Medina-Gutiérrez, 2018: 95). The intervention by the Saudi-led coalition against Houthi forces,³ which were backed by the Tehran regime that seized Sana'a in 2014, has caused more than 6,782 fatalities (United Nations and World Bank, 2018). The coup d'état against interim President Abd Mansur al-Hadi by the Houthi insurgency has been a turning point in the Yemeni conflict, leading to a bloody civil war between two governments that some scholars have named *Saudi-Iranian Cold War* (Salisbury, 2015; Tzemprin *et al.*, 2015).

However, the armed conflict between these parties is not the only matter that has attracted international media attention in Yemen. On one hand, the

3 Also known as *Ansar Allah* or Partisans of God.

rise of ISIS in the MENA region has transformed the security paradigm and international relations in the area (Durán and Bados, 2017: 294), including the Arab country. On the other, the participation of major regional powers has caused drastic humanitarian consequences for the country, for instance the naval blockade by Saudi navy,⁴ and diplomatic tensions with other major powers, such as Iran's strained relations with U.S. President Donald Trump.

The second case study is the conflict in Ukraine, also referred to as the war in Donbas (started in 2014), that presents other implications. This Ukrainian axis, of greater importance to Russia than other bordering areas, as Georgia according to some experts (Tsygankov, 2015: 281), has left, as estimated by the United Nations, more than 10,300 deaths (Colás, 2015). The Euromaidan protests that led to the rise of anti-Russian pro-European sectors are seen not only as a regional limitation by Kremlin, but as a NATO project to reconfigure the Russian political system in the medium term (Hove, 2016: 151).

The conflict in Ukraine is considered the most serious European crisis after the end of the Soviet bloc (Burns, 2015: 63), following the Balkan wars. The armed conflict has attracted European media attention due to its implications, related to the use of gas pipelines from Russia, and the emergence of nationalist paramilitary groups in large parts of the country, such as *Pravy Sektor* or militias linked to the extremist party *Svoboda*.⁵

Regarding the European country, authors such as Baqués (2017) or Jordán-Enamorado (2018b: 130) argue that we are not facing a *New Cold War*, but rather “conflicts in the gray zone”, within the perspective of offensive realism of Mearsheimer (2003). A number of defining elements are integrated within this concept: ambiguity in relations that are neither peaceful nor armed conflict, multidimensional strategies, asymmetry of interests and gradualism (Jordán-Enamorado, 2018a: 131-133). In contrast, authors such as Steele (2015) or Legvold (2018) reject the term given the non-existence of two global and ideologically opposed blocs, as occurred between 1947 and 1991.

⁴ We can underscore the controversy in Europe about the sale of arms to the House of Saud, including Germany's decision to cancel the sale of armaments.

⁵ In English, *Right sector* and *Freedom*, respectively.

Methodology

As it is seen, both conflicts are suitable to try to meet the objective of this research: to know if the journalistic routines of new media such as *RT* and *HispanTV* are similar to the routines of traditional mass media in their coverage of international events. Our work has three specific objectives:

- Analyze, on the basis of framing theories, large editorial volumes of selected media when covering the conflicts in Yemen and Ukraine.
- Know if there are notable differences in the use of *human drama* and *security* frames.
- Determine whether *RT* and *HispanTV* may theoretically be considered as following professional routines of media outlets when covering war conflicts.

The starting hypothesis is the following:

H1: The use of frames by *RT* and *HispanTV* will differ significantly in the two analyzed conflicts.

This hypothesis has been demonstrated by exploring the media coverage of the conflicts in Yemen and Ukraine in two traditional media and two alternative media. That is, we will use the coverage of two traditional media to compare it with the analysis of the two-target media in this research.

In particular, the media study is comprised of the digital versions of *El País*, *El Mundo* (Spain), *RT* (Russia) and *HispanTV* (Iran) in their Spanish formats. The editorial pieces have been extracted from the database *Lexis-Nexis Academic*, useful to collect large amounts of journalistic texts and *RT* and *HispanTV*'s search engine. The search strings had the following terms: war*, Yemen*, Ukraine*, Donbas*, conflict*, Houthis*, pro-Russians*; where the asterisk (*) is a parameter that indicates the inclusion of derived words.

The study period covers the last four years of both conflicts (January 2015-February 2019), since it is highly significant for events of great media impact, such as the attack by the Saudi-led coalition on the port of Hodeida (Yemen) or the tensions between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Ukraine for the consequences after the accessions of Crimea and Sevastopol. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the sample has some limitations. In *RT* case, it has not been possible to extract such data as they are not accessible in its search engine, for which reason we were not able to analyze the year 2015.

The result of search and extraction, and subsequent cleaning, was 4,323 editorial pieces, which demonstrates the wide scope of the research. The data were processed with the statistical software *R* to apply the supervised

algorithm SVM (Support Vector Machines). The use of this type of algorithm is ideal for studies similar to the present one (Joachims, 1998); this is mainly because SVM has been shown to be more effective than neural networks (Osowski *et al.*, 2004) for classification (not regression), as well as it is perfect for long texts, such as news, using different kernels. Moreover, as García-Marín *et al.* (2018: 627) note, “from our experience, if they are well training, it is more reliable than human coders”.

Despite the use of Support Vector Machines (SVM) is not an incipient methodological instrument in computing (Cortés and Vapnik, 1995), it is in fields such as communications, with limited presence in few studies (García-Marín and Calatrava-García, 2018; García-Marín *et al.* 2018). The common characteristic of this algorithm is its low complexity. As Gala-García (2013: 6) points out, “it is one of the most powerful machine learning techniques that, despite its simplicity, has proven to be a robust algorithm that generalizes well to real-life problems”.

The origin of SVMs lies in the resolution of binary classifications; however, their use has been successfully extended to other fields and problems, such as regression, text and hypertext categorization, and natural language processing (Carmona-Suárez, 2014). The purpose of the technique is the same, to occupy a hyperplane, or linear classifier in a space of high multidimensionality that separates the used categories. In words of Carmona-Suárez (2014: 2): “the search of separating hyperplane in these transformed spaces, usually of very high dimension, will be done implicitly using the so-called kernel functions”.

In case the used data are not linearly separable, we can employ several kernel methods, for instance polynomial, sigmoid or Gaussian. The solution of the optimal hyperplane is described “as the combination of a few input points which are called support-vectors” (Betancourt, 2005). As literature indicates, the SVM learning method is more oriented to minimizing the *structural risk*, which favors simple structures, than the *empirical risk* produced by learning errors of the model generated from its training. This function is highly positive, considering that the only *empirical risk* minimization can produce an *overfitting*.

In order to be able to work with long texts (text mining or natural language processing), as in the case of news, the weight and frequency of words that constitute them (*tf*) are particularly meaningful. Nevertheless, in these texts there are many words that are not relevant and may disrupt the analysis, for example prepositions. Thus, we needed to utilize the libraries available in *R*, as *tm* to eliminate highly repeated core words, remove punctuation marks,

convert to lower case letters, eliminate whitespaces, and remove stopwords, to achieve tokenized texts.

Likewise, to determine the semantic weight within the analyzed texts, it is optimal to work with the calculation of *tf-idf* factor. The *tf-idf* method generates lists of keywords with the frequency or weight that indicates how important the word is within the selected document and the *corpus* in general (Cabrera, 2011). Despite this method has represented limitations (Ramos, 2003), since it does not detect synonyms and plurals, errors are easily rectified using *stemming processes*. These are the process of automatic elimination “of non-essential parts of the terms (suffixes and prefixes) to reduce them to their essential part (lemma) and help proper indexing and retrieval” (Vuotto *et al.*, 2015: 3).

This research implemented “*libsvm*” (Chang and Ling, 2011), through “*e1071*” (Grün and Hornik, 2011; Meyer, 2001), and the library for transforming data into an inverse matrix was “*tm*” (Feinerer *et al.*, 2008), as mentioned above. Such libraries are open source and are recognized as standard in SVM utilization. It was through “*tm*” that the texts were transformed into *tokens*.

The algorithm was trained by coding 600 editorials randomly. This coding was carried out in a dichotomous way (presence/absence) of the frames to be analyzed coded from the definition of the problem. The main reason is that international events are typically covered based on this characteristic proposed by Entman (1993). A reliability check was not performed, since the creation of a valid model provides ample proof of its viability (García-Marín *et al.*, 2018). Nevertheless, the model predicts of its own viability, and it also helps to clean the database by locating units of analysis that it should not classify (assigning 0.50 probability).

Finally, the algorithm was tested with an additional 121 random units, giving a result of 86% reliability between the classification performed by the coders and the algorithm, which, although it would have been desired to be higher, supports the feasibility of the research.

Results

The descriptive analysis of the data reveals the differences in the coverage of the studied media. As shown in Table 1,⁶ *HispanTV* covers both conflicts the most, differing significantly from the others, with 622 editorials (45.87%) dedicated to the Ukrainian crisis and 2,154 (74.37%) to the case of Yemen.

⁶ The table and graphs can be found in the Appendix at the end of this article (Editor’s note).

Certainly, as mentioned above, it was not possible to extract *RT*'s 2015 editorials, but, since considerable differences from *HispanTV* are observed, that probably would not have significantly affected the presented data. *RT* is the second media outlet with the highest number of editorials covering conflicts, having 300 editorials on the Ukrainian crisis (22.12%) and 292 on Yemen (10.08%). In contrast, the Spanish dailies *El Mundo* and *El País* represent only a modest proportion of the total analyzed sample, in neither case reaching more than 30%. Actually, this was expected, since Spanish newspapers, as opposed to the other media, are in a physical format and their level of interest in conflicts is lower because of their remoteness (see Table 1).

The quantitative differences regarding the number of editorials may also be explained by the international character of *RT* and *HispanTV*, given that both claim to have an important target in Latin America. Despite this, it is significant that the Iranian media provides 23.75% more coverage than the Russian channel, since the average size of *HispanTV* news is smaller, but at the same time more abundant, than that of Russian media. The extracted frequencies reinforce the scarce existing literature on *RT*. In this regard, Moreno-Mercado (2019: 111) notes: "The position of Russia in Eastern Ukraine has been evolving from the direct omission of implications and the use of regular forces of its army to the detention of Ukrainian sailors in the Kerst Strait in November 2018".

During the crisis in the Donbas, the Russian Executive has repeatedly denied having military presence in the European country, even President Vladimir Putin declared "There are no Russian troops in Donbas territory. Although it is true that military units have been created there with militiamen who are self-sufficient" (*La Vanguardia*, 2017). The data, despite the multiple contradictions in information, show the tendency of the Russian media on which topics to ignore and which ones to focus on, since the coverage of the conflict in the Arab country—geographically and strategically much less determinant— is very similar. In this sense, Bernard Cohen's (1991: 9) statement is of great importance: "If government were to lose its power to manage news coverage in a war scenario, its capability to use military force may be lost".

It could be said that the Yemen war has a two-fold media dimension. On one hand, the UN has reported alarming figures on the Arab country situation, indicating that 70% of population face food insecurity (United Nations and Word Bank, 2018). On the other, the conflict has been labeled as another ember of the clash between the great regional powers, Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Graph 1 shows the media fluctuations of the conflict. We can conclude that there is a coincidence of increased coverage on *HispanTV* of the military actions carried out by the Saudi-led coalition. The peak of the Iranian media's coverage coincides with the coup d'état perpetrated by the Houthi militias at the beginning of 2015, which initiated the military intervention of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC).

It is evident that the coverage of the Persian media has been constant during the hostilities, presenting significant peaks in the major offensives by the Arab coalition, results that are in line with that we expected. This is illustrated by the more than 17 civilians killed in the province of Saada, with headlines such as: "*Bombardeos de Arabia Saudí dejan 10 civiles muertos en Yemen*" [Saudi-led airstrikes leave 10 civilians dead in Yemen] (*HispanTV*, 2017), or the attacks on the strategic port of Hodeida despite the cease-fire agreement with the UN, showing headlines such as: "*Ataque saudí contra sede de seguridad deja 60 muertos en Yemen*" [Saudi-led attack on Yemen's security HQ leaves 60 dead] (*HispanTV*, 2018) (see Graph 1).

In contrast, homogeneous coverage has been observed by the other three dailies, presenting variations in relevant moments of the conflict, for example the U.S. sanctions on Iran for arming Houthi militias, with news such as: "*Pompeo aterriza en Arabia Saudita e inmediatamente pide nuevas sanciones contra Irán*" [Pompeo lands in Saudi Arabia, immediately calls for new sanctions against Iran] (*RT*, 2017), or internal political circumstances in the Spanish case. Graph 1 illustrates how coverage in the Spanish media increases amid the debate over arms sales by the Spanish government to Saudi Arabia and Arab monarchy's contracts with the Spanish company Navantia, located in Cadiz, with news such that of *El Mundo*: "*Moncloa vuelve a frenar la venta de armamento a Arabia Saudí*" [Moncloa again halts armaments' sale to Saudi Arabia] (Segovia, 2019) or that of *El País*: "*Barcos sin principios*" (Yárnoz, 2018).

Important nuances are found in the Ukrainian case, since, as in the Yemeni situation, coverage presents fluctuations, but these are smaller and less constant. Graph 2 shows how *RT*'s coverage decreases as the conflict increases in armed dimension. The explanation is found in the Kremlin's repeated denials about the presence of Russian military in the former Soviet Republic and the Russian informational strategic principles on what issues to avoid in order to achieve a greater share of *soft power* (Sánchez-de Rojas Díaz, 2018); especially since *RT*'s potential audience is European citizens looking for an alternative point of view to Western media narratives.

If in the Yemeni civil war the volume of news is linked to military actions or offensives and humanitarian crises, the Ukrainian conflict is characterized by diplomatic crises between Russia, the European Union, and the United States. Examples of this are the news concerning the shooting down of the Malaysian airplane in Ukraine: “*La UE y la OTAN piden cuentas a Rusia por el derribo del avión malasio*” [EU and NATO call on Russia to accept its responsibility for the downing of Malaysian plane] (Abellán, 2018) from *El País*, or geopolitical issues, such as “*Assad, Putin y Khamenei pueden dormir tranquilos*” [Assad, Putin and Khamenei can rest easy] (Sahagún, 2018) from *El Mundo*. In contrast, the coverage of *RT* and *HispanTV* focuses more on the characteristics of the conflict, including the geopolitical dimension: “*Lo último de la escalada del conflicto en el este de Ucrania*” [The latest on the escalation of the conflict in eastern Ukraine] (*RT*, 2016) (see Graph 2).

Regarding the use of frames and their weight, Graph 3 shows that the *security* frame has a greater weight than *humanitarian drama* in the four analyzed media about the Ukrainian case. It can be said that findings are consistent with expectations. The most recent research on media and conflicts point out how the *security* frame has a greater weight than the *humanitarian* one in the European media outlets, the Syrian case proves this point (Moreno-Mercado, 2018). Although there are few differences between the *humanitarian* and *security* components, we can say that the Spanish media provide a Europeanist and pro-NATO view of the crisis, such as this article from *El País*: “*La OTAN se refuerza ante las crecientes amenazas en su flanco sur*” [NATO is reinforced in view of growing threats from the south] (González, 2015).

Likewise, *RT* frames the conflict from the European threat to Russian sovereignty and the persecution of Russian-speaking population in Ukraine: “*La flota rusa del mar Negro inicia ejercicios de operaciones anti sabotaje*” [Russian Black Sea Fleet starts anti-sabotage exercises] (*RT*, 2017); which is natural, since geographic variables largely influence, nor determine, the external behavior of States (Jordán-Enamorado, 2018a). *HispanTV* also focuses its information on the U.S. implications in the destabilization of the region: “*EEUU destina 350 millones de dólares en ayuda militar a Ucrania*” [The U.S. allocates 350 million of dollars in military aid to Ukraine] (*HispanTV*, 2015) (see Graph 3).

The results of the use of frames in the Yemeni crisis are radically opposite. The *humanitarian* frame is the most *significant* in the four media outlets. In the Spanish case, this may be translated into several reasons. On one hand, the war in Yemen is not producing waves of refugees to Europe,

leading to a lack of narratives emphasizing security in the political and media arenas, which is the contrary to other cases, such as Syria and Libya (Rettberg and Gajjala, 2016).

On the other, *HispanTV* mostly uses the *humanitarian* frame focusing on the role of Saudi Arabia; therefore, it would be interesting to observe in future research the weight of attribution of responsibilities, since allusions to Saudi Arabia's culpability in the death of Yemeni civilians are constant. Finally, *RT* also resorts to this frame, although its use could be considered as a circumstantial media line for its role in the Syrian conflict and the alliances developing in the former French colony: “¿Ayuda Trump a Arabia Saudita a destruir Yemen?” [Is Trump helping Saudi Arabia in the destruction of Yemen?] (*RT*, 2018) (see Graph 4).

The use of frames and their distribution provide very clarifying data (see Graph 5). Firstly, the coverage of the Russian and Iranian media outlets surpasses considerably the news space that traditional Spanish media devote to these armed conflicts, which indicate their interest of both frames.

Finally, it should be noted that studies such as Pantti's (2016) claimed that media from democratic countries employed humanitarian captions in their news as opposed to media from non-democratic countries, however, in this case that statement is not true, since the use of humanitarian explanations is clearly related to geostrategic interests of the countries in question: the differences in the use of frames in the Spanish media outlets does not exceed 10%, while in *HispanTV* the difference is 30% (30/70% in Ukraine and 60/40% in Yemen) and in *RT* the most significant data are 90% (90/10% in Ukraine and 40/60% in Yemen). These results confirm the stated hypothesis. As it is seen, the behavior of Russian and Iranian media is not uniform, which leads us to intuit that their professional routines do not equate to those of other traditional media, with the use of frames coinciding with their geostrategic interests.

Conclusions

This paper reveals how the traditional Spanish media and alternative media, *RT* and *HispanTV*, treat the conflicts in Yemen and Ukraine.

Initially we raised the hypothesis that the use of frames in *RT* and *HispanTV* would rely on the geostrategic interests that their countries of origin maintain in the analyzed conflicts. As the present study shows, our hypothesis has been validated, highlighting significant differences with the traditional Spanish media outlets.

These divergences have been found to be particularly relevant in the case of *RT*, where the frames weight is closely related to the external behavior that the Russian Federation has been developing in recent years, which empirically reinforces what other studies carried out (Yablokov, 2015; Keating and Kaczmarska, 2019). Moreover, although the results are less evident in the Iranian media, the differences are still very meaningful.

Our interpretation of the obtained data is related to the media professional routines. In our opinion, the differences do not reside in the fact that these media outlets are state-owned, but rather that their media routines do not follow the guidelines of traditional media, which have been represented, in this case, with *El Mundo* and *El País*.

Therefore, we infer that theoretically we cannot classify these media as traditional or equivalent to what we mainly find in democratic countries. Differences may also be due to different cultural environments or other contextualization. However, the main finding is not the differences in coverage compared to the Spanish media (which have basically been used as a control group), but among themselves. In other words, why are there such significant differences among the analyzed media themselves?

The case of *RT* is paradigmatic: 90% of difference in the use of frames when reporting on conflicts that, in terms of tragedy, are not so different. *HispanTV* follows a similar, although less extreme, pattern. However, the two cases share important presences and, especially, lacks, which may be key to the discussion of the reasons and implications of the conflicts: humanitarian in the case of Yemen, geopolitical in the case of Ukraine.

The data suggest that there is a motivation to occupy the information space, possibly to impose specific political agendas (remember that these are Spanish-language media, not aimed at their international audiences), which is probably due to the fact that foreign policy events provide the ideal conditions for information manipulation (Jacobs, 2001).

Nevertheless, we are aware of the limitations of this study since the results are exploratory in nature. It would be interesting and recommended to examine the behavior of other European media in democratic countries, such as French, British, and German dailies, as well as other publicly owned media, as *Radio Televisión Española* (RTVE). Likewise, increasing the number of case studies; for example, Syria, for its media and geopolitical impact, is an ideal complement to what has been initiated in this research.

An in-depth study of the use and effect of fake news would be of interest in further works. We should underscore the value of this research, as it may be a basis for future studies on conflict, media, peace (especially from

peace journalism), security and defense seeking to approach the informative dimension of wars; mainly because of its exhaustive and complete nature, with a sample of more than 4,323 units of analysis, which we consider to be a novel contribution that covers more than political communication.

The importance and success of the adopted methodology should be highlighted as, although it has been successfully applied in other studies, it is the first time it is employed to examine the relationship between media and armed conflicts. This research, therefore, allows to reinforce the use of supervised algorithms in political communication studies, in addition to confirming and refuting more ambitious hypotheses due to the capabilities of these analysis techniques.

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Appendix

Table 1

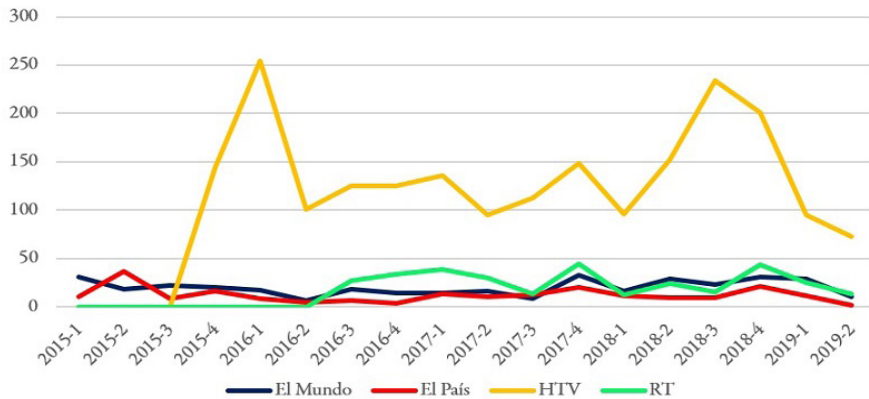
Editorials by media and conflict (2015-2019)

Media	Ukraine		Yemen	
	n	%	n	%
<i>El País</i>	285	21.01	178	6.14
<i>El Mundo</i>	149	10.98	272	9.39
<i>RT</i>	300	22.12	292	10.08
<i>HispanTV</i>	622	45.87	2.154	74.37
Total	1,356	100.00	2,896	100.00

Source: Own elaboration.

Graph 1

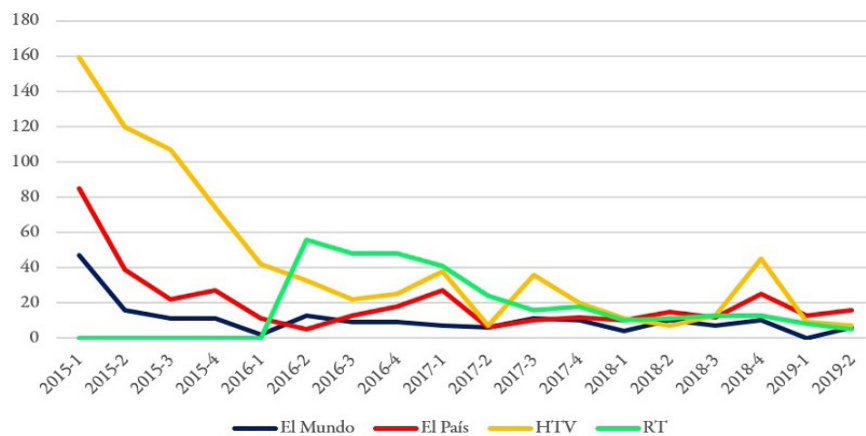
Coverage evolution in the Yemen conflict (2015-2019 *n* of coded editorials)



Source: Own elaboration.

Graph 2

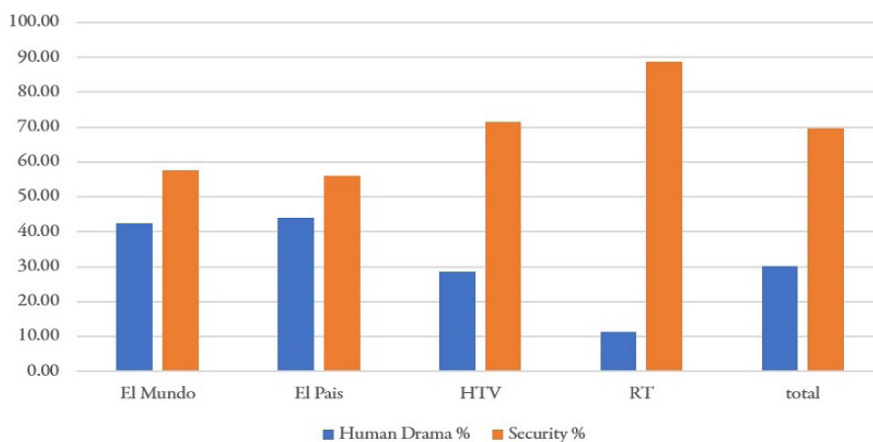
Coverage evolution in the Ukrainian conflict (2015-2019, *n* of coded editorials)



Source: Own elaboration.

Graph 3

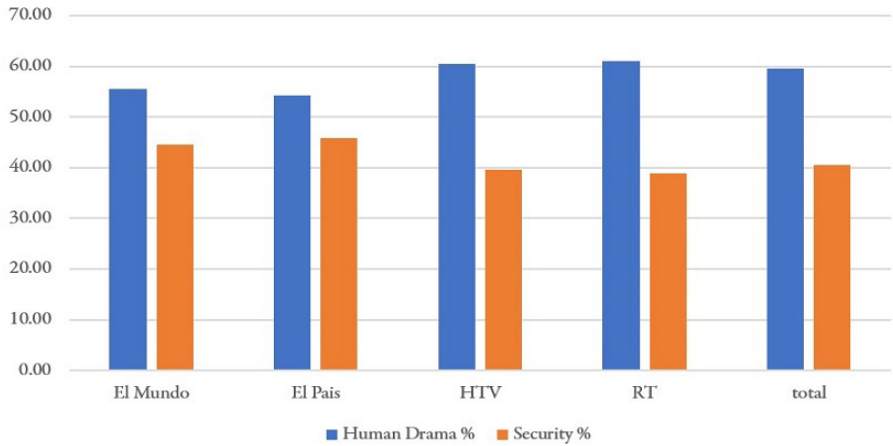
Frames in the Ukrainian conflict (%)



Source: Own elaboration.

Graph 4

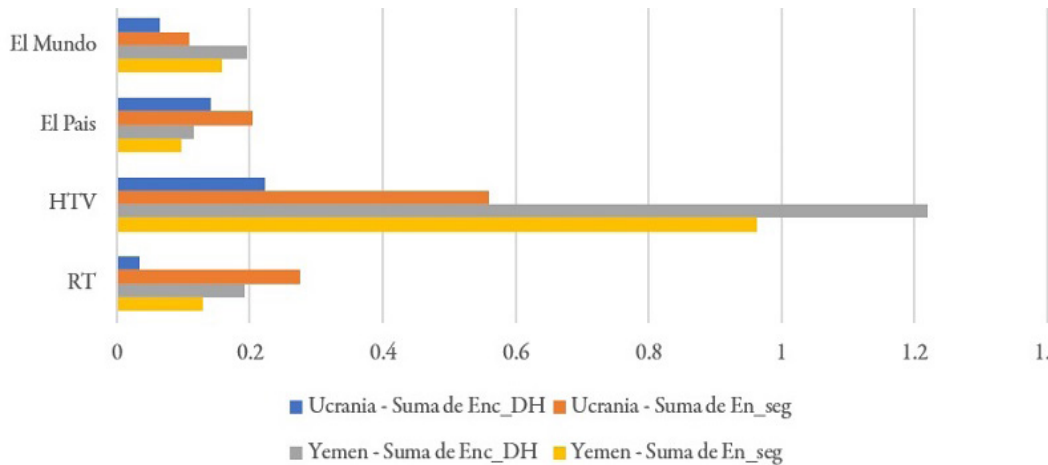
Frames in the Yemen conflict (%)



Source: Own elaboration.

Graph 5

Comparison of frames in the conflicts (%)



Source: Own elaboration.

Note: Yemen_Fram_Sec, Yemen_Fram_HD, Ukraine_Fram_Sec, Ukraine_Fram_HD

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