

How to cite this article in bibliographies / References

A Miguel-Sáez de Urabain, A Fernández de Arroyabe-Olaortua, I Lazkano-Arrillaga (2017): “Spectacularization of political information. The case of the coverage of the United States presidential election of 2016 by *El País*”. *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 72, pp. 1.131 to 1.147.

<http://www.revistalatinacs.org/072paper/1211/61en.html>

DOI: [10.4185/RLCS-2017-1211en](https://doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-2017-1211en)

Spectacularization of political information. The case of the coverage of the United States presidential election of 2016 by *El País*

Ainara Miguel-Sáez de Urabain [[CV](#)] [ ORCID] [ GGS] Professor at the Department of Audiovisual Communication and Advertising - Universidad del País Vasco (UPV/EHU) / University of the Basque Country (Spain) - ainara.miguel@ehu.eus

Ainhoa Fernández de Arroyabe-Olaortua [[CV](#)] [ ORCID] [ GGS] Professor at the Department of Audiovisual Communication and Advertising - Universidad del País Vasco (UPV/EHU) / University of the Basque Country (Spain) - ainhoa.fernandezdearroyabe@ehu.eus

Iñaki Lazkano-Arrillaga [[CV](#)] [ ORCID] [ GGS] Professor at the Department of Journalism II - Universidad del País Vasco (UPV/EHU) / University of the Basque Country (Spain) - inaki.lazkano@ehu.eus

Abstract

Introduction: The main objective of this research article is to study the tendency towards the spectacularization of political information in the news coverage of Donald Trump, the republican candidate for the presidency of the United States, by *El País*, the most-read daily newspaper in Spain, throughout the electoral campaign: from the announcement of his candidacy on 17 June 2015 to one week after his victory on 15 November 2016. **Methods:** The study is based on the quantitative and qualitative content analysis of 462 news pieces on Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, published in the aforementioned newspaper during the period of study, and the textual analysis of 320 strategy frame news on Trump. **Results and conclusions:** The results reveal the preeminence of the strategy frame, the greater relevance given to Trump, and the construction of two antagonistic characters (Clinton the heroine and Trump the antihero) inserted into a mythical story with no happy ending.

Keywords

Strategy frame; spectacularization; election campaign; Trump; Clinton; *El País*.

Contents

1. Introduction.
2. Methods.
3. Results.
 - 3.1. The character's relevance.
 - 3.2. The character as a person.
 - 3.3. The character as actant.
4. Discussion and conclusions.
6. References.

Translation of abstract by **Ainara Miguel Sáez de Urabain**
University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU)

Translation of article by **Cruz Alberto Martínez Arcos**
University of London

1. Introduction

The objective of this study is to analyse the tendency towards the spectacularization of political information in the coverage carried out by *El País* newspaper of the campaign of Donald Trump, the republican candidate for the presidency of the United States, from the announcement of his candidacy, on 17 June 2015, to one week after his victory, on 15 November 2016.

To achieve this goal, we have analysed the content of 462 news pieces published about the two main candidates, Trump from the Republican Party and Clinton of the Democratic Party, in the traditional print version of the aforementioned newspaper throughout the 17-month long campaign, which has been divided into three phases:

- The primaries of the Republican Party, from 17 June 2015 (when Trump announces his candidacy) to 18 July 2016 (when Trump was confirmed as candidate in the Republican Convention).
- Candidacy: The presidential elections, between 19 July and 8 November 2016.
- The Presidency: the first week of Trump as President-elect, from 9 to 15 November 2016.

The research study is based on the following three hypotheses:

H1: The dominant news frame used by *El País* to cover the U.S. election campaign is the strategy or “game” frame, i.e. news pieces are based on the competition between the candidates to the detriment of the issue frame, which is based on their political proposals.

H2: In the case of *El País*, the strategy news frame is reflected in the tendency towards the personalization of political information, which implies the creation of two opposing characters (Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton), and the adoption of a position in favour of the latter candidate and against the former.

H3: The organisation of the coverage of the electoral process follows the actantial model developed by Greimas (1971) so that the events are inserted into a classic story in which the two characters, Trump the antihero and Clinton the heroine, fight for the Presidency of their country.

These three hypotheses have derived in the formulation of the following four research questions:

Q1: What kind of news frame is used the most by *El País* in its coverage of the U.S. presidential elections?

Q2: How much importance does the newspaper give each candidate in the news with strategy frame?

Q3: How is the character of Donald Trump built? Specifically, what adjectives, actions, quotes and photographs are chosen to portray him?

Q4: What is the actantial role played by both characters (Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton) in the story built by the newspaper?

There are numerous studies devoted to the analysis of electoral communication in the daily press. Their methods tend to be based on the theory of agenda-setting or first-level selection (McCombs, Shaw, 1972; McCombs, Evatt, 1995) and the theory of framing, also known as the second level of the agenda-setting and attribute agenda-setting (Bateson, 1954; Goffman, 1974). Both theories tend to merge with each other or with another method, pragmatist (Hickey, 1987). The contributions of these works have been many and very important, and they have served, above all, to cut to pieces the supposed objectivity of the media (Tuchman, 1972).

This work is based on the theory of framing, which will allow us to identify the interpretation frame used by *El País* in its news coverage of the U.S. electoral campaign of 2016: issue frame, when the subject of the news is the political proposals, and strategy or game frame, when the elections are represented as a game or a horse race (“the horse race frame”), with winners and losers. These two approaches are typical in election campaigns (Cappella, Jamieson, 1997; Rhee, 1997; Lawrence, 2000; De Vreese, 2003; Sádaba, 2004) and there are many authors who have highlighted the growing and expanding dominance, in the West, of the latter over the former (Patterson, 1993; Paniagua, 2004; De Vreese, 2005; Berganza, 2008; Martínez, 2011; Aalberg, Strömbäck, De Vreese, 2012; Lozano *et al.*, 2012; Shuck, Boomgaarden, De Vreese, 2013; Sehata, 2014; Muñiz, 2015).

The most significant effect of the predominance of the strategy frame in the election coverage is the spectacularization of the campaigns, defined as the tendency of the media to personalisation, dramatisation, fragmentation and normalisation (Gingras, 1998; Lozano, 2001). Political news have become entertainment and, in general, government plans, specific political proposals and ideological positions no longer seem to matter; what is noteworthy today is the image of candidates, their personality, charisma, rhetorical skills, the competition between them represented through the use and abuse of the opinion polls in a “permanent analysis of the political activity” (Paniagua, 2004) and their performance in televised debates (personalisation); all this, in addition, appealing more to emotion than to reason (dramatisation); emphasising events over processes (fragmentation); and encouraging the presentation of fast, radical and simplistic solutions that bring back “normality” (normalisation).

These four trends, which are present since more than three decades ago in the political communication of industrialised countries, are evident in television (Trejo, 2000). However, they have also been detected in the written press which, in its obsession to sell more copies, increasingly turns to spectacle and entertainment.

The presence of personalisation, dramatisation, fragmentation and normalisation in elections coverage, regardless of the medium and the country, expand their meaning when speaking of the latest United

States presidential elections. This is because the campaign of Donald Trump, the Republican candidate, has been a spectacle in itself, without the need for mediation; a show that has been wrapped with these four elements for the media. Firstly, Trump himself was in charge of personalising his campaign, exploiting his fame and money as sources of attractiveness and reliability; and from the outset he privileged dramatisation over reason and used fear, distraction and repetition to mask the weakness of his arguments; in terms of normalisation, he overused the old trick of offering simple solutions to complex problems.

The strategy frame and the show were there; therefore, the question is whether *El País*, Spain's most popular general-information daily newspaper (according to the ranking of the print media survey EGM), played this game.

2. Methods

The procedure began with the design of a database divided into four sections: news, text, image, and actantial role of the character.

The first section, the news story, responds to the need for a first quantitative analysis. The number of news amounts to 462, so there was no choice but to count: the number of news pieces with a strategy frame, the number of pages in which the candidates appear, the number in those pages (odd or even), the location of the news in the page (upper, lower, left or right side), the occupied space (full page, number of columns), the amount of images, the section in which it is published (front-page, opinion, international), the author of the texts and the place from which the news pieces are written. This part will define the news frame as issue or strategy (P1), and will reveal the quantity and quality of the space dedicated to the candidates, determining their relevance (Q2).

Second, the study offers a more evaluative content analysis. Semiotics was used to analyse the content of the news. It is as text interpretation method that, when used “at the service of common sense” (Zunzunegui, 2005, p. 7), provides the researcher with good tools to answer the following questions. This analysis, which is concerned with the structural mechanisms that organise the form of the meaning, is obviously a textual analysis. The news pieces are texts; journalistic (or propaganda) texts, but texts in the end. The study will begin and end with them, and “among the inaccessible intention of the author and the questionable intention of the reader is the transparent intention of the text, which disapproves of an unsustainable interpretation” (Eco, 1992, p. 92). This section establishes the assessment of candidates on the basis of what is said about them (the adjectives used, taking into account the value of the chosen words and their combinations), what the newspaper says they do (their actions) and what the newspaper says they say (the quotes) (P3).

The third, the image, completes the previous assessment by studying the images (photographs or political cartoons) of each candidate: the shot, scale, lighting, perspective, pose, setting, the sight of the character and the intertextual relations (P3).

Finally, the fourth section, registers the role played by the character in the election narrative, subject (hero) or opponent (antihero), and identifies the objective pursued and the allies, opponents and obstacles encountered along the way (P4).

Donald Trump will be studied, thus, from two complementary perspectives: the phenomenological perspective, the character as a person, taking into account his personality and behaviour as expressed in *El País*; and the abstract perspective, the character as actant (Propp 1981; Meletinski, 1981),

examining the place occupied in the narrative and his contribution to its development (Casetti, Chio, 2007).

3. Results

3.1. The character's relevance

Table 1. Number of strategy frame news pieces and issue frame news pieces in *El País*

	COVERAGE			STRATEGY FRAME			ISSUE FRAME		
	Total	Trump	Clinton	Total	Trump	Clinton	Total	Trump	Clinton
Electoral process	462	327	135	450	320	130	12	7	5
Primary elections	254	183	71	247	178	69	7	5	2
Presidential elections	159	102	57	155	101	54	4	1	3
Presidency	49	42	7	48	41	7	1	1	0

At first glance, the quantitative analysis yields two clear results. The first has to do with the absolute predominance of the strategy frame over the issue frame, since 97% of all the news pieces about the U.S. electoral process published in *El País* have a strategy frame. This percentage remains the same during the primary elections, the presidential elections and the presidency, which demonstrates the bet of the newspaper on the spectacularization of political information.

The second immediate result is that 71% of the news pieces are devoted to the republican politician and 29% to the democratic politician. As in the strategy frame, this disproportion remains large during the entire electoral process, but this time with ups and downs: it persists in the primaries, when 72% of the news are about Trump and 28% about Clinton; it decreases during the presidential elections, with 65% of news about the Republican candidate and 35% about the democratic candidate and, obviously, it soars during the days after the election of Trump as President, with 85% of the news about him and only 15% about Clinton (see table 1).

A more detailed reading only reaffirms the previous result. According to the 450 news with a strategy frame, the percentages of news written about Trump and Clinton, 70% and 30%, remain valid for virtually all the parameters under studied.

Thus, of all the pages which include the two candidates, slightly more than half (52%) are odd, and while Trump is the protagonist in 73% of the odd pages this percentage is 69% in the even pages. These data reinforce, albeit slightly, the weight of Trump in the newspaper, since the visual impact is greater in the odd than in the even pages, and there are more odd pages dedicated to the republican candidate.

On the other hand, the location of the news on the page is a good indicator of the importance given by *El País* to the U.S. elections as a whole. This is because 68% of these news is placed at the upper section of the newspaper's pages. And, again, the percentages remained the same: 71% are about the Republican politician. If, taking into account the natural direction of reading (from left to right and from top to bottom), we select only the best places, the results remain the same: 31% of all the news on the elections are located in the upper section of the odd pages and 75% of them are about Trump.

The study of the space occupied by the news follows the same line. Only 5.5% occupy the full page, and 72% of them are about the Republican candidate. Of the news that are published in full and odd pages (4.2%), also 68% are about Trump. Despite the small number of full pages devoted to the topic,

the number of columns gives us an idea of the relevance of the topic: 39% of the news are five-column long, 19.5% are four-column long, 16% are three-column long, 6% are two-column long and 12% are one-column long. More than half of the news occupy almost the entire width of the page. And the differences between the candidates persist, since the fact that only 66% of the five-column long news are dedicated to Trump is compensated by the fact that 80% of the four-column long news are also about him.

Table 2. Relevance of Donald Trump against Hillary Clinton in the coverage of the electoral process

<i>EL PAÍS</i>		Total	Trump	Clinton
News pieces		450	320	130
Odd page		235	172	63
Even page		215	148	67
Header		306	217	89
Header and odd page		142	107	35
Full page		25	18	7
Full and odd page		19	13	6
COLUMNS	1	54	38	16
	2	57	43	14
	3	72	51	21
	4	88	70	18
	5	176	116	60
	6 /7/10	3	2	1
Images of the candidate		165	100	65
SECTION	Front-page	68	48	20
	International	343	239	104
	Opinion	39	33	6
AUTHOR	Marc Bassets	146	101	45
	Amanda Mars	50	32	18
PLACE	Washington	177	121	56
	New York	39	24	15

The number of images devoted to the candidates favours once again the Republican candidate, but this time the difference is not so great. 36.6% of the articles on the elections contain photographs of at least one of the candidates, 61% contain photos of Trump and 39% contain photos of Clinton.

However, the sections where texts are published is what emphasise the most the predominance of Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton. Surprisingly, 76% of the news on the U.S. presidential elections are located in the international section. The remaining percentage is divided between the front-page (15%) and the opinion section (9%). The 70-30 distribution in favour of Trump persists in both of these sections. The significant fact is that 85% of the opinion articles are about Trump. There are many and almost half of them are editorials, whose titles say it all: *Trump pulls out*; *Trump is unacceptable*; *Stop Trump*; *Trump alarms the public*; *Trump: collision course*; *Candidate Trump*; *Trump would weaken the United States*; *Surrender to Trump*, *President Trump* (on 20 May 2016, when he was not the president yet), *Trump is crowned* (on 19 July 2016), *Trump breaks the board*, *Trump's*

unpopularity damages his hotels. The only two headlines about Clinton are also crystal clear: *Clinton makes history* and *with Hillary*.

The deployment of authors is impressive: 46 different journalists sign the 450 texts. Correspondent Marc Bassets stands out as his name appears on 146 pieces, mostly written from Washington, but also from the States of New York, Iowa, New Hampshire, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia and Florida. Amanda Mars, the correspondent in New York, signed 50 articles. Pablo Ximénez de Sandoval, on the east coast, sends 32 from Los Angeles (California) and Las Vegas (Nevada). Also writing from the capital are Joan Faus (31), Cristina Fernández Pereda (29), Silvia Ayuso (25) and Yolanda Monge (15).

14 of these 46 authors wrote opinion pieces. They are renowned authors, such as Nobel Prize winner Mario Vargas Llosa, one of the most important contemporary writers; American researcher Ian Bremmer, specialised in U.S. foreign policy and columnist for *Time* magazine; British journalist and historian Timothy Garton Ash, a columnist for *The Guardian* and a regular contributor in the prestigious *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal*; American journalist Anne Applebaum, the 2004 Pulitzer Prize winner; Steve Jarding, professor of electoral strategy at Harvard and IESE Business School; Argentine writer and human rights activist Ariel Dorfman; Mexican writer Enrique Krauze; Mexican politician and intellectual Jorge Castañeda; and Burgos' journalist and traveller Luis Pancorbo.

Correspondents write indiscriminately about one or another candidate, but surprisingly almost none of the opinion writers referred to Hillary Clinton. The only exception is *Hillary's war*, written by the head of the Opinion section of the newspaper, José Ignacio Torreblanca. The rest allude to Trump from the headline: *A millionaire has fun*, written by Vargas Llosa; *Trump's opinions* and *Trump's problems*, by Bremmer; *Trump destroys the United States*, by Timothy Garton Ash; *Trump and the Populist International*, by Applebaum; *Populism has come to the United States*, by Jarding; *Faulkner on Trump's America*, by Dorfman; *The urgency of stopping Trump* and *The division created by Trump*, by Krauze; and *The man who eats the wolf*, by Pancorbo. Therefore, Trump starred in the articles written by prestigious authors, but he is a bad protagonist, portrayed as the great antagonist.

In terms of the places where these authors write from, the city of Washington is, as it has been shown, the base camp of the election information. 39% of the news pieces are written in the capital. Followed, but far behind, by the city of New York, with 39 (8%), Philadelphia (Pennsylvania), the city which hosted the Democratic National Convention, with 17 news; Los Angeles (California), with 16; and Cleveland, Ohio, the city of the Republican Convention, with 14. The only surprising finding in this regard is, perhaps, the fact that the Democratic National Convention, held at the Wells Fargo Center, from 25 to 28 of July 2016, gains greater visibility in the newspaper than the Republican Convention, which was held at the Quicken Loans Arena, from 18 to 21 of July.

A more extraordinary finding is that 20 news pieces on the U.S. elections are signed by authors based abroad Spain, in three of the five continents: six in Mexico, 11 in Europe and three in Asia. All news pieces have their reason for being and, as in the case of the opinion articles, all except for one are about Donald Trump. Mexican correspondents talk about the repulsion of the intellectuals towards the xenophobia of Trump and these disagreements with President Peña Nieto. Europeans write from Brussels (4), to highlight the defensive reactions of the European Union in relation to Trump's rise, from Madrid (3), Paris (1), Berlin (1), where the Deputy Foreign Minister sees Trump as a "danger to peace", Hannover (1), where Chancellor Angela Merkel says nothing about Trump's attacks to her

policy on refugees, and Kallstadt (1), the place of origin of Trump’s ancestors. Asian news come from Moscow (2) and the distant Japanese peninsula Ise-shima (1): the first ones describe President Putin’s praise of Trump’s leadership; while the headline of the second, on the G7 Summit of May 2016, is *Trump’s ghost glides over the G7 Summit*. As shown, the shadow of the Republican candidate is elongated and seems to reach beyond the confines of Earth, but it is dark, a bad shadow. On the other hand, there is only one headline on Clinton signed outside the country, Brussels, but it is exceptionally positive: *Juncker declares his preference for Hillary Clinton*.

Table 3. Relevance of Donald Trump against Hillary Clinton in the coverage of the phases of the electoral process

EL PAÍS	PRIMARY ELECTIONS			PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS			PRESIDENCY			
	Total	Trump	Clinton	Total	Trump	Clinton	Total	Trump	Clinton	
News	247	178	69	155	101	54	48	41	7	
Odd page	110	83	27	93	63	30	29	24	5	
Even page	137	95	42	62	38	24	19	17	2	
Header	175	124	51	99	66	33	32	27	5	
Header and odd page	68	54	14	59	41	18	15	12	3	
Full page	3	2	1	14	9	5	8	7	1	
Full and odd page	3	2	1	10	6	4	6	5	1	
COLUMNS	1	39	28	11	12	8	4	3	2	1
	2	37	28	9	15	11	4	5	4	1
	3	39	26	13	26	19	7	7	6	1
	4	44	35	9	32	23	9	12	12	0
	5	87	60	27	69	40	29	20	16	4
	6/7/10	1/6	1	0	1/7	0	1	1/10	1	0
Images of candidate	92	55	37	64	40	24	9	5	4	
SECTION	Front-page	36	25	11	22	16	6	10	7	3
	International	190	135	55	121	76	45	32	28	4
	Opinion	21	18	3	12	9	3	6	6	0
AUTHOR	Marc Bassets	76	56	20	58	36	22	12	9	3
	Amanda Mars	20	8	12	25	19	6	5	5	0
PLACE	Washington	96	64	32	63	42	21	18	15	3
	New York	16	6	10	15	12	3	8	6	2

The diachronic analysis of the data leads to the same conclusion. Of the 450 strategy frame news published in *El País* about the U.S. election, 55% were published during the 13 months of the primaries, 34% during the three months and a half of the presidential election campaign, and 11% during the first week of Donald Trump as President-elect. The distribution of news between Trump and Clinton follows the previous trend with 72% of news for Trump in the primaries, 65% in the presidential elections and 85% after becoming the elected President.

The analysis of the page number in which both candidates appear (odd or even), the location of the news on the page (header) and the space occupied (full page, number of columns) during the different phases of the presidential election campaign does not provide different results, except perhaps for the logical increase in the prominence of Trump after 8 November. Thus, during the primaries, the 70 and 30 percentage difference remained almost the same, but during the presidential elections campaign it

decreased in favour of Clinton, who reaches 40% of the full and odd pages and 42% of the five-column long news dedicated to the elections. Things change, however, in the last phase, when Trump is the protagonist of 88% of the full pages, 83% of the full and odd pages, 100% of the four-column long news and 80% of the five-column long news.

The distribution of photographic images, as in the synchronous analysis, is more generous with Clinton, with 40% of photographs of her in the first phase, 38% in the second phase and a curious 44% in the last one, despite having lost the elections. But the most striking data are the sections, the opinion section in particular, because, while the opinion pieces on Trump reached 86% in the primaries and 75% in the presidential elections, this percentage rose to 100% once he was elected as President.

3.2. The character as a person

During the year-and-a-half-long campaign, *El País* built a character: Donald Trump. Every day, the newspaper added and related features to shape his personality. These features translate into observable qualities that may be presented directly, i.e. what the newspaper and other characters say about him, or indirectly, i.e. what the newspaper says he does and says, his external appearance and the settings that surround him (Canet, Prósper, 2009).

Table 4. The character as a person

<i>EL PAÍS</i>		Trump		Clinton	
		News	Most repeated quotes	News	Most repeated quotes
		320	Mexicans are criminals, build the wall, block entry to Muslims, deport undocumented immigrants, shoot somebody in Fifth Avenue and not lose voters	130	Attack Trump, defending the use of the private email server
Interpretation	Explicit	111		53	
	Implied	77		57	
	No	32		20	
Actions		320		130	
Statements		60		10	
Political proposals		13		4	
Images		100		65	
Shot	Long	16		10	
	American	26		17	
	Medium	52	33		
			Most commonly used adjectives	33	Most commonly used adjectives
Lighting	Realistic	64	racist, xenophobic, sexist, demagogue and populist	5	favourite image of opacity, image of coldness, low empathy, corrupt (in the mouth of Trump)
	Gimmicky	36		42	
Angle	Normal	91		23	
	High	6		53	
	Low	3		6	
Looking at the spectator		14		6	
Space	Outdoors	13		10	
	Indoors	87		8	
Setting of the act		52		57	
				34	

What *El País* and other characters say about him

Opinion articles are few, but they described the character with many adjectives: Trump is “vain”, “arrogant”, “egotistical”, “narcissistic”, “rude” and “foulmouthed”; his intellectual and political skills leave much to be desired, he is “foolish”, “silly”, “childish”, “uneducated” and “vulgar”, and “poorly prepared”, “populist”, “demagogue”, “simplistic”, “a bright spark” and an “ambushed lefty?”. He is

also “fascist”, “tyrant”, “racist”, “xenophobic”, “sexist” and “homophobic”; “snobbish” and “immoral”. A “ridiculous character”, a “clown”.

Almost all the international adjectives abound in the previous; the most often repeated during the campaign are “racist”, “xenophobic” and “sexist”, followed by “demagogue”, “populist”, “loud-mouthed” and “outsider”. While this section focuses more on the political skills and ideas of the character than on his personality, there are numerous adjectives focused on the latter: “controversial”, “disrespectful”, “foul-spoken”, “foul-mouthed”, “trouble maker”, “charlatan”, “idiot”, “bully”, “intolerant”, “authoritarian” and “unpredictable”. There are also nouns that assume him directly as a construct: “buffoon”, “showman”, “character”, “marionette”, “cartoon” and “actor”. However, there is an outstanding use of terms that identify him as an “ideological hybrid” that used to be democrat and as a problem or a threat to his party: “phenomenon”, “tornado”, “vortex”, “gale”, “nightmare”, “strange body” and a “monster” born out of the uncontrolled rhetoric of republicans.

Other synonyms were used in the campaign, such as “vociferous” and “vulgar” and other even harsher terms like “aggressive”, “vindictive”, “sexist”, “abusive”, “misogynist” and “ignorant”. He continues to be a buffoon, but a “dangerous buffoon”; the whirlpool has become a “hurricane”; in politics, he is a “pro-Russian”, “anti-globalisation” and “conspiracy theorist” and unorthodox, “disconcerting” and “uncontrollable”.

Such descriptions are read during Trump’s first week as President-elect: “arrogant”, “evil”, “nihilist”, “unfair”, “opportunistic” and “erratic”; He is not a politician, but a “televangelist” or a “pyromaniac”, the protagonist of this rhetorical question: “can the arsonist become the fireman?”.

“The only positive epithets are related to his position in the horse race (“favourite”, “leader” and “winner” of polls and debates) or come from the hand of other characters: Putin says that he is a “bright and talented” person and Mike Pence says he is “fighter, builder, Patriot”. The most common, however is the opposite: Michael Bloomberg called him a “scammer”; Colin Powell claims Trump is a “national disgrace and an international outcast”; Michelle Obama says: “We need an adult in the White House”.

El País equates Trump with other politicians, living or dead. The most common are: Berlusconi, Le Pen, Hitler, Putin, Orbán, Wilders, Mussolini, Farage, Boris Johnson and Nixon. Other comparisons are only made once, but they are significant: Jesús Gil (“Donald Trump, and so and so”) and fictional characters like Dr. Frankenstein’s monster, Waldo’s from *Black Mirror* the series, Donald Duck and Flem Snopes from Faulkner.

Hillary Clinton, however, is “the favourite of the democratic ranks”, “the inevitable candidate”; is “famous”, a “successful professional” who has to settle with being the “secondary character” of the campaign. Because the protagonist is another person, opposite to her: a “professional and experienced politician”, “the establishment’s candidate”, “thoughtful”, “restrained” and with “limited rhetorical skills”. This is one of the few negative adjectives that the newspaper dedicated to Clinton; the others are exposed indirectly or in the mouth of other characters: it is not that she is cold, but that she transmits an “image of coldness”; it is not that she is corrupt, but the fact that Trump called her that way.

What the newspaper says he does

The actions reveal the way of being of people and characters, and the newspaper uses Trump’s actions to define him. The most significant finding is that 19% of what Trump makes are not actions but statements and that only 4% of those statements refer to his political proposals: the promises to defend

the isolationism and militarism in foreign policy; in immigration, build a wall between Mexico and United States, expel the undocumented immigrants (also those who entered the U.S. as children), eliminate the right to citizenship of illegal immigrants' children born in the U.S. and prohibit entry to the U.S. to Muslims; in economy, raise taxes to the richest, defend protectionism against the major pacts on free trade, and do not cut down welfare but eliminate Obamacare. The rest speak of the candidate's lies, his denunciation of elites, his "conspiracy" theories, his praise to Putin, his insults to Hispanics and women, his accusations to Obama and Clinton of having created ISIS, accusing George W. Bush of lying about the Iraq war, his attacks on Merkel's refugee policy, on the media for being "corrupt and dishonest", on Hillary Clinton for her "hypocrisy" on weapons, etc. These statements were made by Trump to attract the attention of journalists and gain public visibility and *El País* seems to have played his game.

Actual actions are related to the so-called horse race: receiving insults and boycotts, defying his party, pushing it to the right, dominating the polls, coming out stronger from the debates, attracting thousands of followers, setting the pace of the campaign, becoming its protagonist, overcoming obstacles, suffering some setbacks, winning in several states, becoming consolidated, causing fascination, surviving the primaries, getting "the unconditional surrender of the *establishment*", being "crowned" the candidate, losing positions in the campaign, trying to unite the party, abiding by its rules, losing a debate against Clinton, winning another debate, not surrendering despite the pressures, polarising society, winning the elections. But what he does not do may be as significant as what he does and *El País* highlights on several occasions that Trump does not clarify his political recipe.

The same happens with Clinton. Only 15% of the news articles provide commentary on what she says and only 4% speak of her agenda; the rest focus on defending the private email server she used when she was Secretary of State or in attacking Trump. The actions in themselves continue the previous line: she dominates the polls, wins or loses debates, goes through difficulties, reaches or is reached by her opponents and accepts her defeat. What she does not do, according to the newspaper, is to produce excitement; she "does not generate hope", "she inspires distrust and exudes the aroma of the past."

What the newspaper says he says

Direct quotes from the candidate are always controversial and are repeated over and over again. Trump's statement about Mexicans ("When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. ... They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists") is repeated 25 times; the promise of building a wall, 21; the ban on the entrance to Muslims, 15; the deportation of undocumented immigrants, 11; the assertion that he "could shoot somebody in Fifth Avenue and still not lose votes", four; his allegation that Hillary Clinton and Obama created ISIS, three; and the accusations of falsehood against the media, many others.

Other verbal excesses of Trump were cited two times: "I will defeat ISIS", "Always be around unsuccessful people", "I love the poorly educated", "When you're a star, they let you do it". Another statement that depicts him colourfully was quoted only once: "Here you are, alone with the President of the United States and the Leader of the Free World, and you ask a chicken-shit question like that?".

The most repeated quotes from Clinton are attacks on Trump. Some are ruthless, like Trump "has taken the Republican Party a long way - from morning in America to midnight in America". And some other

are more benevolent: “Instead of building walls we need to be tearing down barriers”. There are also references to the subject of emails, in which Clinton never ceases to apologise.

External appearance and setting

The images dedicated to Trump are quite conventional: medium shot, realistic lighting and normal perspective. His poses stand out as they are loaded with meaning, which reveal the character’s intent of presenting and representing himself as a hero. On numerous occasions he extends his arms showing the palms of his hands, in a messianic attitude; in five photographs, his finger points out to the reader, reminiscent of the poster of Uncle Sam (the personification of the U.S. Government) in which he is recruiting soldiers for the great war in 1914, exclaiming: “I want you for U.S. Army”; in other photographs, he is raising his right arm in what looks like a Nazi salute or simulates he has two pistols in his hands, emulating a cowboy.

The settings are almost always indoors (87%) and many times (52%) they are scenarios in literal sense, i.e. scenario of events, meetings and discussions, with the American flag in the background, next to the character, or projected on him. The flag seems omnipresent (32%). Sometimes, the background is black, like that kind of screen or curtain invented by Venetian artists at the beginning of the 16th century, which gives an artistic look to the image; in other cases, the backstage is in sight, breaking the illusion of truth. Sometimes, we see the candidate on a screen or reflected in the marble of his desk. In other pictures, we see his back, like when, as President-elect, he contemplates the view from Capitol Hill.

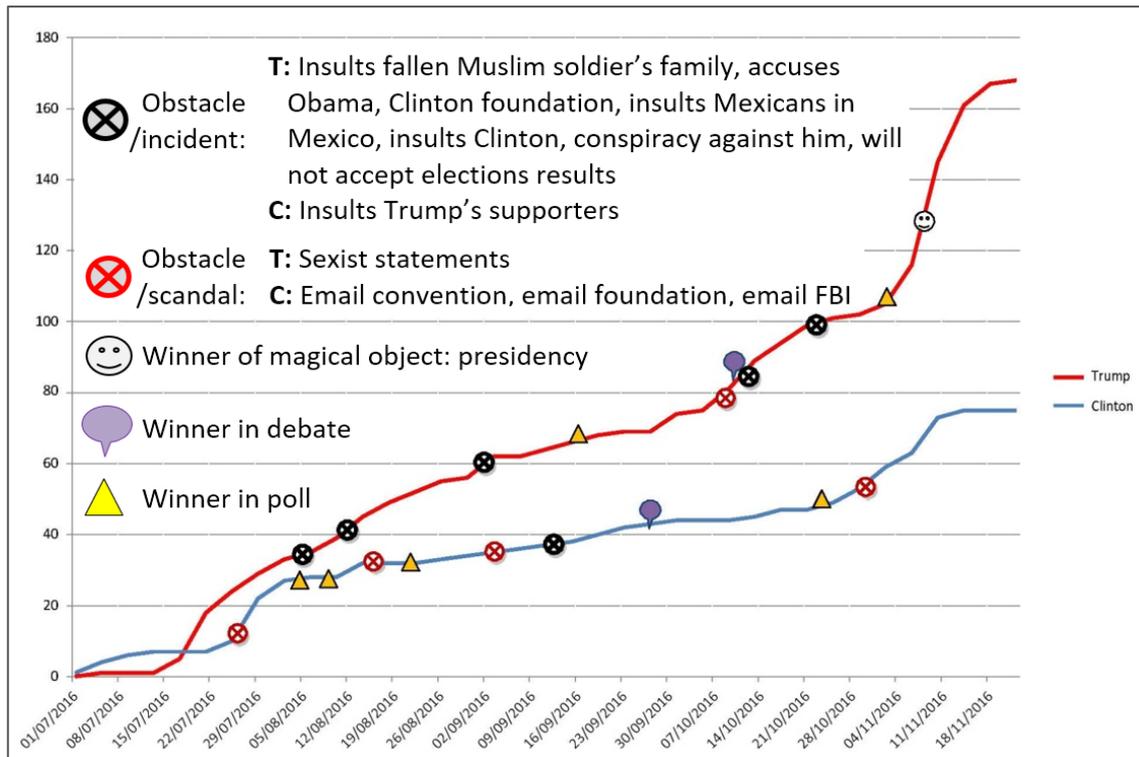
However, during the campaign the newspaper’s discourse becomes harder, in general; there are few changes in the character as an individual. *El País* describes Trump with similar traits during the whole electoral process, offering as a result a coherent and plausible character, although it remains to be complex.

The analysis of the character as person reveals that the Republican politician uses his irreverent statements to attract the attention of the media, but also that the correspondents of *El País*, although get carried away by him, do have room to manoeuvre and try to maintain their professional autonomy, contextualising and interpreting Trump’s words.

Casero, referring to the television information, points out that the political control of information “combines two distinct but complementary aspects: the offensive and the defensive” (2009, p. 356) [4]. The first one has to do with enhancing the media visibility of politicians; the second one consists in reducing it in scandals and corruption cases. Thus, while the offensive of Trump is highly effective (is an expert in offending and attracting the news media), his defensive was not so good not just because he only defends himself by attacking, but also because the newspaper’s journalists react to these attempts of control with professionalism, and the interpretation of his statements.

3.3. The character as actant

The spectacularization of the political competition in the narrative built by *El País* inverts the mechanisms of the actantial model. Donald Trump is the antihero and the outsider whose attributes gain him the presidency: the dominance of reality TV, a vulgar oratory and the ability to connect with people with a discourse of fear that brings together everything politically incorrect. On the opposite side, Hillary Clinton is the heroine who represents the experience and stability of the system but also its dark side, and so she fails to reach voters despite of promoting a message of fear towards Trump.



As we can see in the previous graph, the horse race advances around two diachronic axes:

- Obstacles, specific incidents or scandals that are maintained over time, supporters and opponents that candidates bump into on the track.
- Clashes between the antihero and the heroine with two fixed qualifying tests: the polls and the televised debates.

The engine of the story is a dynamic imported by Trump from the world of reality TV: the spiral of the hate speech used to respond to his obstacles, his poor performance at the polls and the loss in the electoral debates. This media strategy attracts the attention of the reader who follows the electoral race as if it was a soap opera. Clinton presents herself as a victim of the scandals allegedly unleashed by his adversary, who has Putin as his ally. The heroine does not respond with a speech that clarifies the allegations; her only argument is the anti-Trump allegations, which puts her in a secondary position of dependency on the antihero; her supporters, the Obamas and Tim Kane are fundamental counterbalances.

At the beginning of the adventure, Trump beats his opponents, the Republican Party and its leader Paul Ryan, to become a candidate, with Mike Pence as his only supporter. He does not have the full support of his party; Clinton does. The emails scandal that reveals the ploy of the political apparatus to favour her bursts in the convention, but she overcomes this obstacle with the help of her former opponent, Bernie Sanders, and Michelle Obama, who seeks to consolidate the party's union. Finally, Clinton is nominated, but she carries the shadow of corruption and the opposition of the Sanders's supporters.

The spiral of Trump's hate speech is activated as a response to the bad results of the three polls taken in August; he insults and launches his first conspiracy theory: Clinton and Obama created ISIS. Each time he has more opponents in his party, but he hires Bannon, seeks support on foreign leaders such

as Farage and Putin and attracts white supremacists. The polarisation of the antihero favours Clinton, who uses an anti-Trump speech to overcome her second scandal, but not the third one: the new investigation of the FBI on her emails. The President of Mexico acts as involuntary assistant for Trump by inviting him to visit México, an occasion that Trumps uses to insult Mexican people. This spiral of hate gives him the victory in the September polls, but he loses to Clinton in the first televised debate.

The scandal provoked by the video where Trump appears making sexist remarks is the climax of the story and his biggest obstacle, because the members of his party ask him to leave the race and his only supporters are his family and the women Clinton harassed because they denounced her husband. The antihero goes ahead and takes hatred to the extreme: insults and threatens Clinton, denounces a conspiracy against him and announces that he will not accept the election results. He wins the second televised debate, sinks in the polls at the end of October, but the polls prior to the elections announce his victory. The FBI exonerates Clinton and her allies, the Obamas try to attract the vote of young people, minorities and women. But in the realm of political show, the spiral of hate speech is the magical object that gives the Presidency to Trump; the same one that places him at the centre of the coverage of *El País* because he is the one that attracts the reader's attention.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The results confirmed the hypotheses and answered the four research questions: the dominant frame is strategy and political information is personalised through the creation of two opposing characters who fight for the Presidency.

Thus, even Spain's major newspaper, the most widely read and one of the most serious, gives more relevance to the most controversial candidate, and concentrates more on his personality and his insults than in his political proposals. Trump is a different candidate, a headline machine whose strategy is especially suitable to this type of frame, just like *El País*, which has succumbed to the temptation of doing what American television is accused of doing: giving Trump a podium and a microphone. Although this was done to criticise him, with frequent explicit evaluations (which do not even try to appear to be objective), the newspaper has spread his message, in the sense that it has given him publicity.

However, this propaganda has been negative. Nuance is important here because it shows that the newspaper has been controlled by Trump and his advisors in the area of journalistic selection (the Republican candidate is featured in more news pieces and front pages, and receives more visibility than the Democrat candidate), but he has not done so in the treatment of the contents and the framing of the information. This is because, although Trump manages to impose himself as an issue/theme, he does not manage to impose his style. The correspondents of *El País* do their job, and use their professional autonomy to mediate the messages of the politician, preventing him from imposing his reality and avoiding the dissemination of his way of seeing the world.

The discourse of the newspaper is hard and consistent, despite being a polyphonic narrative that stretches over time. It describes Trump as an undisciplined beginner, an irreverent intruder who destroys the limits of social and political correctness. He is the bad guy. Clinton, on the other hand, is depicted as an experienced, thoughtful and risk-allergic politician. She is the good one. And the U.S. elections are, rather than a horse race, a mythical tale. And this is, perhaps, the most important contribution of this work: that this race to the White House has been narrated as a fiction, a classic tale, rather than a race.

***Funded research.** This article is a product of the Basque university system research group, “Mutations of the Contemporary Audiovisual Sector” (MAC), whose main researcher is Santos Zunzunegui. This research group is funded by the Basque Government (Department of Education, Sub-Department of Universities and Research). Reference number: [IT1048-16](#). Note: the resolution date of the group’s concession is 5 December 2016, but has a retroactive effect to 1 January 2016. However, this project has permanently received funding from the MAC research group which, before receiving the concession as a Basque university system group, was a consolidated research group of the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU) (GIU13/21) and received its funding. We are at your disposal to clarify any question relating to this matter.

Dates:

-Start of research: 1 May 2016.

-End of research: 15 May 2017

5. References

T Aalberg, J Strömbäck & CH De Vreese (2012): “The framing of politics as strategy and game: A review of concepts, operationalizations and key findings”. *Journalism* 13, v. 2, pp. 162-178.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884911427799>

G Bateson (1998): *Pasos hacia una ecología de la mente*. Buenos Aires: Lohle-Lumen.

M-R Berganza (2008): “Medios de comunicación, “espiral del cinismo” y desconfianza política. Estudio de caso de la cobertura mediática de los comicios electorales europeos”. *Zer*, 13, n. 25, pp. 121-139. <http://www.ehu.eus/ojs/index.php/Zer/article/view/3580>

F Canet & J Prósper (2009): *Narrativa audiovisual. Estrategias y recursos*. Madrid: Síntesis.

JN Cappella & KH Jamieson (1997): *Spiral of cynicism: The press and the public good*. New York: Oxford University Press.

A Casero (2009): “El control político de la información periodística”. *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 64, pp. 354 - 366.

http://www.revistalatinacs.org/09/art/29_828_47_ULEPICC_08/Andreu_Casero.html DOI: 10.4185/RLCS-64-2009-828-354-366

F Casetti & F Di-Chio (2010): *Cómo analizar un film*. Barcelona: Paidós.

CH De Vreese (2005): “The spiral of cynicism reconsidered”. *European Newspaper of Communication*, 20, n. 3, pp. 283-301. [https://doi: 10.1177/0267323105055259](https://doi:10.1177/0267323105055259)

U Eco (1997): *Interpretación y sobreinterpretación*. Madrid: Cambridge University Press.

E Goffman (1974): *Frame analysis: an essay on the organization of experience*. New York: Harper & Row.

AJ Greimas (1971): *Semántica estructural*. Madrid: Gredos.

AM Gingras (1998): “El impacto de las comunicaciones en las prácticas políticas”, in *Comunicación y política* (Coords, G Gauthier, A Gosselin & J Mouchon). Gedisa: Barcelona.

L Hickey (1987). *Curso de pragmaestilística*. Madrid: Coloquio.

RG Lawrence (2000): “Game-framing the issues: Tracking the strategy frame in public policy news”. *Political Communication*, 17, n. 2, pp. 93-114. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/105846000198422>

JC Lozano (2001): “Espectacularización en la cobertura informativa de las elecciones mexicanas a la Presidencia”. *Comunicación y Sociedad*, 14, n. 1, pp. 29-50. Mexico.
http://www.unav.es/fcom/communication-society/es/resumen.php?art_id=110

JC Lozano, J Cantú, F-J Martínez & C Smith (2012): “Evaluación del desempeño de los medios informativos en las elecciones de 2009 en Monterrey”. *Comunicación y Sociedad*, 18, pp. 173-197. México.
<http://148.202.18.157/sitios/publicacionesite/ppperiod/comsoc/revista18/7.pdf>

FJ Martínez (2011): “La televisión responde: la legislación electoral vs información política”, in *Comunicación, política y ciudadanía: aportaciones actuales al estudio de la comunicación política* (Coord., C Muñiz). Ciudad de México: Fontamara.

ME McCombs & DL Shaw (1972): “The agenda setting function of mass media”. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36, pp. 176-187. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-09923-7_11

ME McCombs & D Evatt (1995): “Los temas y los aspectos: explorando una nueva dimensión de la agenda-setting”. *Comunicación y Sociedad*, 8, pp. 7-32. <http://dadun.unav.edu/handle/10171/8401>

E Meletinski (1981): “El estudio estructural y tipológico del cuento”, in V Propp, *Morfología del cuento*. Madrid: Fundamentos.

C Muñiz (2015): “La política como debate temático o estratégico. Framing de la campaña electoral mexicana de 2012 en la prensa digital”. *Comunicación y sociedad*, 23, pp. 67-95.
http://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0188-52X2015000100004

FJ Paniagua-Rojano (2004): “La nueva comunicación electoral en España”, *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 58. <http://www.ull.es/publicaciones/latina/20045829paniagua.pdf>

TE Patterson (1993): *Out of order*. Nueva York: Vintage.

V Propp (1981): *Morfología del cuento*. Madrid: Fundamentos.

JW Rhee (1997): “Strategy and issue frames in election campaign coverage: A social cognitive account of framing effects”. *Newspaper of Communication*, 47, n. 3, pp. 26-48. doi: 10.1111/j.1460-2466.1997.tb02715.x

T Sádaba (2004): “Enfoques periodísticos y marcos de participación política. Una aproximación conjunta a la teoría del encuadre”, *Política y Sociedad*, 41, n. 1, 2004.
<http://revistas.ucm.es/cps/11308001/articulos/POSO0404130065A.pdf>

A Schuck, HG Boomgaarden & CH De Vreese (2013): “Cynics all around? The impact of election news on political cynicism in comparative perspective”. *Newspaper of Communication*, 63, n. 2, pp. 287-311. <https://doi: 10.1111/jcom.12023>

A Shehata (2014): “Game frames, issue frames, and mobilization: Disentangling the effects of frame exposure and motivated news attention on political cynicism and engagement”. *International Newspaper of Public Opinion Research*, 26, n. 2, pp. 157-177. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edt034>

R Trejo-Delarbre (2000): “El imperio del marketing político. Cuando las imágenes desplazan a las ideas”. *América Latina Hoy*, 25, pp. 15-22. <http://www.redalyc.org/pdf/308/30802503.pdf>

G Tuchman (1972): “Objectivity as strategic ritual: an examination of newsmen's notions of objectivity”. *American Newspaper of Sociology*, 77, pp. 660-679. <https://doi.org/10.1086/225193>

S Zunzunegui (2005): *Las cosas de la vida. Lecciones de semiótica estructural*. Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva.

How to cite this article in bibliographies / References

A Miguel-Sáez de Urabain, A Fernández de Arroyabe-Olaortua, I Lazkano-Arrillaga (2017): “Spectacularization of political information. The case of the coverage of the United States presidential election of 2016 by El País”. *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 72, pp. 1.131 to 1.147. <http://www.revistalatinacs.org/072paper/1211/61en.html>
DOI: [10.4185/RLCS-2017-1211en](https://doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-2017-1211en)

Article received on 20 July 2017. Accepted on 30 September.
Published on 6 October 2017.