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# The mediatisation of the political agenda: discussion of the social pact as a conflict of agendas. 2009-2011

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## Abstract

**[EN] Introduction.** In the framework of mediatisation research, this article analyses the way in which the media agendas and politics interacted during the process of social dialogue that took place in Spain during the second legislature of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero (2009-2011). **Method.** The analysis is based on an exhaustive analysis of the front pages and editorials published by eight of the main Spanish newspapers (*El País, El Mundo, La Vanguardia, El Periódico de Cataluña, El Correo, Levante, Abc* and *La Voz de Galicia*) during the whole 2008-2011 legislature. Framing and discourse analyses were performed on those informative units in order to identify the thematic frames of each of the newspapers. **Results.** This analysis allowed us to detect the ways in which the press managed to block the political during the process of social dialogue, which initially stopped Zapatero from getting the budgetary adjustment measures approved. The study also verified that the government used the media to test the acceptance of the adjustment measures and that the press acted as a polarising agent. **Conclusions.** The study provided empirical evidence that supports the premise that the media transcend their information function and mediate the public debate, as they influence the political agenda setting on certain relevant issues. In this way, the media become political actors.

## Keywords

**[EN]** conflict of agenda; frame; thematisation; mediatisation: polarised pluralism.

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## 1. Introduction. Media and politics in a context of polarisation <sup>1</sup>

In a previous study (González, 2008: 349 et seq.) we discussed the thesis of Bernard Manin (1998) on the evolution of the forms of political representation and the transition from a partydemocracy to an audience democracy, which was addressed in relation to the comparative study of the media systems proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004) and with the peculiarities of the polarised pluralistmedia system characteristic of the Mediterranean countries. According to Manin, advanced democracies would be transitioning from a party democracy to an audience democracy. This transition would produce changes in at least two areas:

- Changes in the procedure to select political representatives and in the degree of autonomy achieved by them in their representative function. According to Manin, in the partydemocracy, the political party plays a mediating role between representatives and citizens. In the audience democracy, representatives use their media skills to become a mediator between the party and the voters, which increases the degree of autonomy of the elites in power. The party loses protagonism and becomes an instrument at the service of the political personalisation.
- Changes in the patterns of public opinion: partisan life, including the party press, gives way to the media representation of the political race, which leads to changes in the public sphere in the sense of a greater autonomy of the media with respect to parties (an assumption also promoted in the idea of the ‘media-centred democracy’: Swanson, 1995).

Manin’s thesis raises a question: If political parties are no longer the main mediators in the relation between representatives and citizens or if the mediating function is performed by someone else, who is performing that function now? Manin’s approach suggests that the political leaders are currently those assuming the mediating role through their media skills. However, in practice this response collides with the functioning of a *media-centred democracy*, inasmuch as the media have, in principle, not only the possibility of facilitating the communication between parties and voters, but also the ability to interfere with it and impose their own interests.

In the first case, the media are limited to fulfilling their informative mission, while simultaneously regulating the political conflict (the media *mediate*, within the limits of the aforementioned mediating role). In the second, the media take the place of the parties with the objective of imposing the agenda

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<sup>1</sup> This study and its data are part of the project *Agenda de los medios y agenda ciudadana: Análisis temporal desde un enfoque cualitativo* (“Media agenda and citizens’ agenda: Temporal analysis from a qualitative approach”), which is funded by the Spanish Centre for Sociological Research (CIS). This wider project is directed by Fermín Bouza and Juan Jesús González. An earlier version of this work was presented as a communication paper in the 10<sup>th</sup> Spanish Congress of Political Science and Administration (work group 4.10. The mediatisation of politics), held in Murcia on 7-9 September, 2011.

that best fits their own interests. Put differently, the media no longer mediate, but *mediatise* the political debate with their interferences. As noted by Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999), “the growing intrusion of the media in the political process does not necessarily mean that the media are taking control of the political institutions” (248), but instead that these institutions are losing autonomy with respect to what the liberal paradigm prescribes (Ibid.: 250).

Hallin and Mancini (2004) have provided a classification of the media systems around three ideal types: the liberal model (Anglo-Saxon), the “corporate democratic” model of Central and Northern Europe and the Mediterranean “polarised pluralist model”. Hallin and Mancini depart from the typical assumption of the functionalist sociology, of the increasingly distinctive character of the media system that is configured as an autonomous part of the social system as a whole (Ibid.: 76 *et seq.*). In the functionalist logic, the liberal model would represent the highest degree of differentiation and autonomy, but Hallin and Mancini remark that this does not imply convergence towards the liberal model because, as they say, there are “counter trends” (Ibid.: 282 FF). In fact, the liberal model itself has been questioned from the moment in which one of the observed “counter trends” has been the increasing media polarisation and the consequent political alignment of the media, precisely where the aforementioned model found its paradigmatic representation: the United States of America.

In their characterisation of the Mediterranean media system, Hallin and Mancini highlight the combined effect of the politicisation of the media, the use of journalists and state interventionism in the information sphere, which sometimes leads them to put an excessive emphasis on the “use” of the media as a genuine feature of the model <sup>2</sup>.

This article is based on the idea that the study of the relations between the media and politics in a polarised media system recommend us to abandon the two previous ideas: a) that the media are an instrument of the political parties and b), in contrast, that the media have a purely informational function that is performed within the field of *mediation*. Thus, the dynamics of the recent political and media polarisation have revealed: a) that the manipulation that occurs between the media and the political parties is reciprocal and b) that the media are no longer satisfied with *mediating* and thus try to *mediatise* politics and to define it according to their own interests.

In order to illustrate this idea, we will first study the two main moments of the communication process: the agenda setting and the agenda framing. The agenda consists of the set of issues that the media present to the audience, with the ultimate objective of making citizens to adopt their agenda as their own (McCombs, 2004). Once the agenda has been set, the media frame and present the agenda issues to the audience (Entman, 1993).

We must take into account, however, that this process is not limited to those two moments, and gives rise to a complex interaction between the media agenda and the political agenda in which the various proposals and counter proposals pass the test of the public debate, which allows us to distinguish a third phase: the *political agenda setting*.

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<sup>2</sup> Hallin and Mancini suggest that the instrumentalisation of journalists and the instrumentalisation of the media are the same thing, while this study suggests that it is possible that some media manage to avoid the instrumentalisation attempts of the political parties but at the same time their journalists can be manipulated by the political parties.

According to this approach, the process as a whole, which we will call *thematization*, is more than the agenda setting, because not all the issues that become part of the agenda manage to advance to the phase of the examination and discussion of proposals. Thus, in order to turn an issue into an object of the thematization it is not enough for it to get included in the media agenda. It is also necessary for this issue to be defined and evaluated as a problem worthy of entering the political agenda, which leads to the discussion of proposals and the selection of those which are considered as most suitable. Consequently, the media play a central role in the thematization process, but in order for this process to successfully end up in the media, the latter require the participation of the relevant social and political actors, which in each case convey their demands based on the most suitable media and political alignments (Marletti, 1985: 79 *et seq.*).

One of the reasons that make people to vote for a party is its ability to establish certain priorities, and thus the probability of vote increases as the agenda proposed by the media allied to the party coincides with voters' concerns. Consequently, the items on the agenda have become strategic resources used by parties to get maximum support from the public opinion, so that the role of ideology and pro-party programmes is replaced by the thematization process, which is understood as an eminently media-centred battle intended to fix the focus the audience's attention around a few themes which, after being properly framed and explored, acquire enough capacity to configure the political alignments of the moment (Badía, 1992: 171 *et seq.*).

In this context, *mediatization* refers to a situation, often associated to the dynamics of the media-political polarisation, in which the media are not satisfied with *mediating* between the parties and the public, by making the political agenda available to citizens, and so they try to impose their own agenda and replace the political agenda. In short, *mediatization* would be the general tendency of the media to interfere and alter the political process, while thematization refers to the often conflictive interaction between the media agenda and the political agenda.

## 2. Hypothesis and method

Based on the previous theoretical framework, this article aims to analyse the interaction between the media agenda and the political agenda, which we refer to as the process of thematization. This study is guided by three hypotheses. The first one is a direct consequence of the all the previous ideas and arguments.

H1: The existence of a polarised pluralist media system heightens the conflict between the political agenda and the media agenda and reveals the media's attempt to replace the political agenda. Taken to its ultimate consequences, this hypothesis leads to the media populism or neopopulism (Ortega, 2011<sup>3</sup>).

The second hypothesis proposes that “democratic politics has been ‘kidnapped’ by a communicative logic that decisively influences the decision making process” (Vallés, 2010: 17). In line with the arguments put forward in the previous section about the parties' loss of influence, Vallés argues that “currently, the policymaking circuit has been modified at the expense of the parties and other social organisations. Very often, an initiative of public intervention is the product of the interaction between a

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<sup>3</sup> “Neo-populism” is the political rhetoric in which the public opinion is used both to invoke a genuine social power and to face it to the spurious forms of representation, like the electoral ones” (Ibid. 142).

leader and his immediate team of collaborators, on the one hand, and the media, on the other. The broad lines of an initiative may be advanced or leaked as a trial balloon, waiting to obtain the first reactions of the so-called opinion makers. Such reactions are useful for the leader to decide whether the topic will be given priority over the other possible topics or whether it must be treated as a secondary issue, even if it is relevant, although little rewarding, in terms of popularity” (Ibid.: 20). The second hypothesis is formulated as follows:

H2: The media agenda becomes the lab where the government rehearses its decisions. The risk of this situation is that the political debate is replaced by a rhetorical and empty play whose function is purely self-referential. This is what Meyer calls “pseudo-politics” (Meyer, 2002: 32 *et seq.*).

In another moment of his argument, Vallés comes to the conclusion that the media logic contributes to the “disfigurement of the democratic politics”, through the use of a series of narrative procedures that operate systematically on the public opinion, by emphasising conflict and disagreement over agreement and commitment, and replacing dialogue and collaboration with dispute and confrontation, etc. (Ibid.: 30). The media’s idiosyncratic proclivity towards conflict leads us to formulate the third hypothesis:

H3: In a polarised pluralist media system, the press does not try to reach consensus through rational deliberation as much as through polarisation and conflict, which suffices to qualify the media as polarising agents.

In order to test these hypotheses, we carried out an in-depth analysis of the agenda set by the quality press throughout the entire duration of the legislative term. This analysis is based on the examination of the front pages and editorials of eight major national newspapers: *El País* (Madrid), *El Mundo* (Madrid), *La Vanguardia* (Catalonia), *El Periódico de Cataluña* (Catalonia), *El Correo* (Euskadi), *Levante* (Valencia), *Abc* (Seville edition) and *La Voz de Galicia* (Galicia). In addition to including the most widely disseminated newspapers (seven of them are on the top ten most widespread newspapers in Spain), this sample selection also covers most of the ideological spectrum.

The first step of the analysis was the identification of the issues on which the sample of newspapers focused. The second step was to identify the framing of these issues. In this second step the objective was not only to describe the way in which these issues were presented, but also to point out the media’s attribution of responsibility and, where appropriate, the media’s proposal to solve the problem, according to the parameters established by Entman (2004). The third stage of the analysis focused on the thematisation process, in order to study the interaction between the political agenda and the media agenda throughout the process of social dialogue (April 2009 to February 2011).

Given that there is not a unique canonical procedure to carry out discourse analysis, and that this kind of analysis is adapted to the objectives of the empirical work in question, we will use our own procedure based on the parameters set by Van Dijk (2009). The corpus of study will be analysed with the schema that Van Dijk has termed the “ideological square” (1996: 21). This scheme is particularly suited for a polarised pluralist media context, characterised by a close parallelism between the media and the political parties according to ideological affinity, which is responsible for establishing the political alignments in each moment.

According to this scheme, the critical analysis of the discourse of the press allows us to identify the position of the media based on the combination of four mechanisms: a) by highlighting the properties/actions of the allied party when they are good; b) by highlighting the properties/actions of the opponent when they are bad; c) by mitigating or ignoring the bad properties/actions of the allied party; and d) by mitigating or ignoring the good properties/actions of the adversary.

It should be noted that the relation between the agenda and the political preferences is based on a more or less well-known repertoire of strengths and weaknesses that are associated to the parties in relation to each of the issues. Thus, for example, for a long time right-wing parties have been considered to be more capable of managing the issues related to the economy and the public order, while left-wing parties have been considered to be more competent in matters of social policy. However, the allocation of strengths and weaknesses is a dynamic game that depends on the ability of parties to manage each of the issues in each moment, so that this allocation is not made once and for all, but is subjected to a continuous discussion.

The problem of this scheme is that it assumes that the properties/actions in question have the same news value regardless of their positive or negative character, when the evidence shows an overwhelming tendency to negativism in the media, as a result of their greater emotional impact and penetration in the public. Therefore, we adopted the hypothesis that the media will tend to use informative negativism and that in the aforementioned game of strengths and weaknesses the media will prefer to exploit the weaknesses of the opponent before highlighting the potentialities of the allied party (Casero, 2008: 288). Every time that the topic chosen as the object of study is the social pact, we will pay particular attention to the media's tendency to conflict, i.e. their inclination to present the relations between the social and political actors involved in the news in terms of tension, confrontation and attack, instead of emphasising collaboration, agreement and mutual support.

### 3. Main results

We will start by presenting the evolution of the media agenda during the period of reference, from the beginning of the legislature to the first quarter of 2011, when the long and tortuous process of social dialogue culminated with the signing of the Social and Economic Agreement (*Acuerdo Social y Económico, ASE*). For this purpose we analysed eleven thousand front pages and editorials from the aforementioned sample of quality newspapers.

Given the almost monothematic character of this agenda, dominated by economic issues arising from the crisis, we divided the economic issues in three groups: crisis and unemployment, economy and reforms. This distinction allows us to establish a sequence that started with the explosion of the crisis (last quarter of 2008, dominated by the item “crisis and unemployment”), followed by a second phase dominated by the item “economy” (second and third quarter of 2009), which can be identified as the moment of diagnosis. Finally, the reforms arrived abruptly in the second quarter of 2010, which corresponds to the moment of therapy. The problem is that between the explosion of the crisis and the arrival of the first reforms almost six quarters passed by, which is a very long period for the application of the therapy, especially if we take into account that in the spring of 2010 only some adjustment measures were implemented, since the application of other measures was conditioned to the signing of the social pact (on the right side of the following table we can see that the issue of “reforms” begins to increase in the first quarter of 2011).

**Table 1. Quarterly evolution of the media agenda**

	Sept- Dec. 2008	Jan- Mar 2009	April - June 2009	July- Sept. 2009	Oct- Dec. 2009	Jan- Mar 2010	April - June 2010	July- Sept. 2010	Oct- Dec. 2010	Jan- Mar 2011	Total
<b>Unemployment &amp; Crisis</b>	32.6%	23%	15.2%	13.5%	8.5%	9.3%	7.7%	6.9%	9.2%	10.9%	1520 13.8%
<b>Economy</b>	12%	1.2%	14.2%	20.2%	13.1%	6.4%	3.9%	13%	12.6%	11.9%	1196 10.9%
<b>Reforms</b>	0%	1.9%	6.7%	8.7%	8.9%	21.4%	37.4%	14.2%	14.7%	20.3%	1464 13.3%
<b>Political parties</b>	3%	0.3%	3.3%	1.6%	3.5%	13.6%	7.6%	7.6%	10.6%	7.1%	637 5.8%
<b>Corruption</b>	1.3%	16.6%	10.7%	18.1%	20.2%	5.8%	10.5%	5.2%	2.3%	6.2%	1055 9.6%
<b>Terrorism</b>	15.8%	4.2%	10%	13.5%	6.3%	18.2%	6.9%	9.6%	10.9%	16.6%	1234 11.2%
<b>Elections</b>	2.3%	18.8%	16.4%	1.1%	1.6%	2.6%	2%	11%	18%	11.8%	940 8.5%
<b>Autonomous Communities</b>	8.1%	2.1%	4.8%	7.5%	5.5%	1.7%	7.9%	12.1%	1.3%	4.2%	609 5.5%
<b>Justice</b>	5.7%	8.2%	1.2%	0.6%	0.9%	3.5%	7.5%	1.3%	0.9%	2%	350 3.2%
<b>Social issues</b>	6.5%	6.2%	7.9%	3.9%	6.1%	5.9%	4.6%	11%	5.5%	2.8%	667 6.1%
<b>Other</b>	12.6%	17.5%	9.6%	11.5%	25.4%	11.6%	4.1%	8.1%	14.1%	6.3%	1333 12.1%
<b>Total</b>	1194 100%	1058 100%	1135 100%	1032 100%	1128 100%	1071 100%	1097 100%	1087 100%	1098 100%	1105 100%	11005 100%

Source: author’s own creation with data from the project: *Agenda de los medios y agenda ciudadana* (“Media agenda and citizens’ agenda”).

The second stage of the analysis aims to identify the framing with which these issues were presented to the audience. From this point of view, we can also distinguish three moments in the evolution of the thematic framework associated to the crisis:

A) First moment: the action of the government was dominated by the idea of the “social solution to the crisis”, in which the cost of the solution could not fall on those who did not have any responsibility in it; the quality press seizes this initial moment to urge the government and the opposition to reach a grand pact that would facilitate such a solution. The problem of this first phase was, as it is well known, that the government failed to materialise its declaration of principles, while the political parties and the socio-economic agents were not able to meet the expectations of the grand pact demanded by the media.

B) Second moment: the adjustment measures taken by the government in May 2010 blew through the air the framing of the “social solution to the crisis” without the government having an alternative framing. From this moment the government was torn between the implementation of a reformist agenda and the recovery of the themes of the previous stage (the ‘social agenda’). In this context, the call for a general strike by the labour unions radically called into question the coalition on which the previous framing (the “social solution to the crisis”) was based.

C) Third moment: the relative failure of the general strike helped the government to implement the reforms and to achieve a first agreement with the social agents, which resulted in a moment of reconciliation and agreement.

### 3.1. First stage: the social solution to the crisis

The discussion about the solutions to the crisis during 2009 was characterised by the governmental commitment to seek a “social solution to the crisis” and to avoid any measure that could affect the social security levels previously achieved. This initial commitment served to frame the first economic measures that had a limited scope given the magnitude of the crisis (Plan E). Thus, the loss of one million jobs in the first year of crisis set off the alarms and led the media to demand a grand pact that took as its reference the experience of the transition, when the Moncloa Pacts served to defend the emerging democracy from the devastating impact of the economic crisis of the 1970s.

In this context, concrete demands for reform emerged and affected the financial system, the labour market, the fiscal policy, etc. Initially, these demands did not progress due to the chronic inability of the main parties to achieve operative and specific agreements (with the exception of the new statute of public television, which was passed in 2005). For this reason, for a moment the attention moved towards the social and economic agents (the business groups and the labour unions), which were called to reach the agreement that the political parties were not able to reach.

However, one of those demands (the labour reform) inevitably faced the social and economic agents. The emergence of a manifesto signed by 100 prestigious economists who requested the government to take the initiative on the labour reform was used by the business groups to make the labour reform a *sine qua non* condition in the negotiation process. The problem was that the government left the initiative to the parties, and gave them the ability to veto any proposal, and this facilitated the defensive position of the labour unions, which opposed any negotiations in this field and promoted their own manifesto in defence of the government’s policy.

With these premises, the quality press began to request the political parties a state pact to undertake the necessary economic and social reforms in the spring of 2009. In its editorial of 25 April, *El Mundo* wrote: “the fight against unemployment requires a State pact”. *La Vanguardia* also warned of the need for a profound economic change and requested the government to adopt the initiative and to “take the leading role in the grand pact needed by Spain...” (15-05-2009). The initial impulse became materialised in July, coinciding with the holding of meetings at the highest level. The first newspaper to put the social dialogue on the front page was *La Vanguardia*, which had been calling for the pact since May. In addition to requesting insistently the pact, *La Vanguardia* urged the government and the labour unions to “take into consideration the proposals of the business groups” (LV 20-07-2009).

*Abc* put this issue on the front page on 17 July: “The government forces the machine to reach agreement on social dialogue”, but the agreement was framed as a marketing strategy to the service of the government: “A picture ‘as it is’” (20-07-2009). There are two ways in which the conservative press built the story: in the first case, the government was deaf to whom it should listen to the most (the employers association). In the second, the government was depicted as incompetent and opportunistic.

Meanwhile, *El País* regretted the “inflexible position of the CEOE [the Confederation of Employers and Industries of Spain]” (*EP* 24-07-2009), while *El Periódico* pointed out the political implications of an eventual failure (“The PP will not make any favours to Zapatero...”, *EPC* 11-07-2009). In this way, the pro-government press also offered two stories of the failure: in the first version, the CEOE followed a maximalist and ineffective strategy. In the second, the strategy of the CEOE followed political interests.

There are, therefore, different framings, as well as different stories, because this is not only a question of alignments (for or against the government), but also of narratives, according to the actors’ capacity for initiative, the extent of their responsibility and the kind of motivations attributed to them. There were also different degrees of interest in the coverage of this issue: *La Vanguardia* (which took the lead on this issue) and, to a lesser extent, *El País* echoed this topic, while the other newspapers did not pay attention to this issue until the dialogue broke down. In other words, the social dialogue was only worthy of the front page when it failed, which is consistent with the media’s tendency to conflict and negativism expected by the third hypothesis.

### 3.2. Second stage: the negative coalition blocks the reform

During the second winter of the crisis (January-March 2010) the evolution of the economy did not reach the dramatic quality of the first one (January-March 2009), but the news about unemployment and the public sector deficit remained very negative. At the end of January 2010, the IMF warned that Spain would be the last great economy to get out of the recession and urged President Zapatero to make a labour reform. Zapatero defended himself from these criticisms by highlighting the strength of the Spanish economy and announcing an “austerity plan and reforms to Social security reforms”.

Then the government made two proposals that attracted adverse reactions, and called into question the framing that had presided over the actions of the government up to that time: the *social solution* to the crisis. This is what happens with the dual proposal to raise the retirement age and to increase the period to estimate the pensions, which were rapidly presented as attempts to pass the cost of the crisis on workers. Needless to say, this new situation endangered the previous coalition between the government and the labour unions, and could lead these unions to open a new front of opposition against the government.

The problem of breaking the previous framing and the coalition on which it was based was that it put the government against a sort of ‘negative coalition’, under which sectors with different interests conditionally agreed on a common strategy that had no other purpose than to block the capacity of the government to make decisions. The truly genuine aspect of this situation is that the media, which had been calling for a firm and courageous decision from the government, shifted their focus on tasks of obstruction. Faced with the growing difficulty to find solutions to the crisis, the government resorted to the common formula of the pact as a last resort to break the deadlock.

When the government made public its intention to raise the retirement age to 67, the Popular Party (PP) and United Left Party (IU) rejected the proposal, while the labour unions announced mobilisations against it. As a result, the conservative media highlighted the rejection of the measure and the seclusion of the government: “the pension reform breaks the idyll of the government with the labour unions” (*Abc* 30-01-2010); “Government is left alone” (*LV* 30-01-2010), which led the government to clarify its

position, by initiating a long series of corrections and denials: “Government corrects itself” (*EC* -30-01-2010), “Government sees the age of retirement as negotiable” (*LV* 01-02-2010), which led, in turn, the conservative media to criticise its lack of determination: “Doubtful politics” (*Abc* 03-02-2010), etc. In other words: the government had to choose between ruling by itself or looking weak and improvised, which gave way to a torrent of rectifications (“Government backs down...”, “Zapatero gives in...”, “Government is entangled...”) which clearly illustrate the blocking of the political agenda as predicted by the first hypothesis.

The hesitations of the government were followed by the punishment of the financial markets and the consequent stock-market crash, after which Zapatero asked the social agents in Moncloa to resume dialogue, in an attempt to bring back the social peace and normality. In this way, the government tried to regain the initiative at an extremely critical time, in which all the polls began to detect a growing gap between the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE) and the PP: *El País* published a poll that put the PP almost 6 points ahead (07-02-2010), and clearly framed this situation: “The PSOE accelerates its fall”. This same poll reflected an increase in citizens’ distrust towards Zapatero and in the image of improvisation that citizens have of the Prime Minister.

The government, thus, faced a negative coalition formed by actors with different interests which, nevertheless, agreed at one point to block the adoption of the measures perceived as a threat to their interests. On the one hand, the conservative press, which had been calling for firm actions from the government, seized the opportunity to harass the government as soon as it announced the reforms. On the other hand, the labour unions, which had been criticised by the same conservative press for putting themselves on the side of the government, announced mobilisations against the government. Since they did not have common interests, the coalition members shared at least one common language: for example, when Gaspar Llamazares, representative of the United Left Party in the Commission of the Toledo Pact, called the government’s pension reform proposal the *pensionazo* (the pension gate), he was immediately supported by the conservative press, which echoed the new semantic discovery (“Zapatero is left with no support to take forward the ‘pensionazo’”; *EM* 30-01-2010; “Union and popular pressure forces the government to tone down the ‘pensionazo’”; *Abc* 02-02-2010; “Zapatero tries to dispel the fear of the ‘pensionazo’”; *LV* 22-02-10). The ‘negative coalition’ had come into force.

Faced with this situation, Zapatero offered a series of guidelines so that the social actors could reach a pact and to facilitate the labour reform which, otherwise, would have been stopped by a strong resistance. It was clear that Zapatero did not want to take unilateral measures in part because they were not sufficiently developed and because he did not want to deal with the consequences. Thus, Zapatero’s pact represented, above all, an attempt to break the media-unions blockade that prevented the governmental action.

From this moment there were two alternate media stories. On the one hand, the allied press attributed the initiative to the Prime Minister and urged people to maintain the dialogue: “No more delays” (*EP*, 06-02-2010); “Step forward in social dialogue” (*EPC*, 06-02-2010), while the conservative press criticised the government for its lack of determination: “The government does not dare...” (*EM*, 06-02-2010); “Spain needs a government” (*Abc*, 07-02-2010); “Sensation of sinking” (*EC*, 07-02-2010), etc.

The pact proposal was rejected by Rajoy, whose negativity was criticised by the public opinion, which had insisted in the need to reach a pact of this type. According to a survey, “72% of Spaniards believe a pact is necessary”, which becomes a pressure directed to the PP, since 48.5% of Spaniards considered that it was Rajoy the who did not want to reach an agreement, while 43.9% of respondents believed that Zapatero was willing to negotiate (*Público*, 19-02-2010).

The negotiation of the pact started with these premises (Zurbano). The public opinion supported this pact but knew that it was impossible to achieve its goals. As a consequence, the battle of social dialogue was presented as an initiative, which the press allocated and distributed according to its preferences. In view of the succession of proposals and statements, the climate of obstruction and hostility that predominated at the beginning of the year was gradually diluted, which allowed us to qualify the pro-pact initiative of the government as relatively successful. Finally, on 9 April the government approved a series of “Measures for the promotion of the economic recovery and employment” which were criticised unanimously by the press: “Insufficient pacts”; “The government comes up short”: “A lame political pact”, etc.

As a way to test our second hypothesis, the proposals to reach a pact and the apparent negotiations that took place in early 2010 initially served to disable the ‘negative coalition’, but the agreement was never reached and the content of the negotiation was gradually diluted in a purely self-referential rhetorical exercise, only useful to maintain an illusion of initiative and to avoid the attribution of responsibility. In short, it was a monument to the “pseudo-politics”.

The financial markets attacked once again as a result of the Greek government debt crisis and the resulting contagion effect over the rest of the Mediterranean economies, tormented by the vertiginous imbalance of public accounts. On the first week of May, the date chosen by the Prime Minister and the leader of the opposition to stage their final clash, the markets severely punished the indecision of the government with stock market falls of more than 10%, which led the European Union to the unprecedented rescue of the single currency.

### 3.3. Third stage: time of budgetary adjustment

After Obama demanded “decisive measures” (*EP*, 12-05-2010), Zapatero announced a tough Adjustment Plan that included reducing the salary of civil servants and freezing pensions, which divided the public opinion. While the allied press reconciled with Zapatero (“Zapatero against ZP”, *EP*, 13-05-2010), the conservative press, which had been calling for reforms, framed the new situation in terms of social expenditure cuts: “If the PP government would have dared to support similar initiatives, it is not an exaggeration to say that Spain would have burned completely” (*EM*, 13-05-2010); “An unprecedented social adjustment”, according to *LV* (13-05-2010). Finally, *Abc* seizes the situation to ask for early elections (13-05-2010), in an obvious attempt to alter the political agenda (Hypothesis 1).

Faced with the new scenario, actors realigned and the labour unions broke up definitively with the government when they called for a general strike. Once the social peace was broken and had no official framing, the period of greater political polarisation in the legislature begun: while the pro-government press denounced the lack of responsibility of the opposition, the conservative press criticised the government’s lack of determination. After the labour unions and the Confederation of Employers and Industries of Spain failed once again to establish a dialogue, Zapatero announced his labour reform on

16 June with a major and controversial point: making the redundancy process cheaper and more simplified. In this way, the media's demands triumphed over the government's wishes of securing a deal. Finally, the increased political polarisation reached its peak with the call for a general strike for 29 September.

The labour reform had two types of consequences. On the one hand, it relieved the financial pressure. On the other hand, the government had to deal with the media criticism and the final rupture of the social peace with the call for the general strike. In its media construction, this strike (known as the 29-S strike) illustrated the polarisation that the press can provoke sometimes, as suggested by the third hypothesis. Since the beginning of the social dialogue in 2009, the conservative press accused the labour unions of being closer to the government than to the workers, thereby betraying their natural goal. This criticism increased as the failure of the social dialogue was more evident. In this way, the conservative press pushed the labour unions for a general strike which eventually weakened them ("General failure", that was the way in which *EM* and *Abc* presented the strike the next day).

After the strike, the government resumed the social dialogue and set January (2011) as the deadline for the agreement. To facilitate the agreement, the Minister of Employment was replaced in October so that he would not be able to take part in the government's reconfiguration. This replacement coincided with the renewal of the top leadership of the employers' union and the entrance of the new President of the Confederation of Employers and Industries of Spain: Joan Rosell. Finally, the social pact was reached on 27 January, 2011, with the support of the majority of the economic and political actors. The Agreement included, as its main measures, the gradual raising of the retirement age to 67 and the modification of the pension calculation period (the last 25 years instead of 15).

The interesting part of this process is that the content of the Social and Economic Agreement was basically the reforms that Zapatero tried to implement during the first quarter of 2010. At that time those reforms were blocked by the negative coalition formed by press, the political opposition and the labour unions (as we saw in the previous section) but one year later those reforms did not only receive the blessing of the political, economic and social actors, but also of the media: "good news", "a good agreement", "an inevitable and necessary agreement", etc.

### **3.4. In summary: the tendency to conflict**

The Social and Economic Agreement (*ASE*) closed a chapter in the book of the social dialogue that aimed to visualise the solution to the crisis and guaranteed, at least, the social peace for the rest of the legislature. Looking abroad, this agreement allowed Zapatero to present Spain to the European Union as a solvent country capable of resolving the crisis and of meeting the international demands. Consequently, Zapatero's government was strengthened in the economic sphere. Within the adaptation of the scheme of the ideological square proposed by Van Dijk and, in particular, of the patterns of the media's negativism operating in a polarised pluralist system like the Spanish one, the reaction of the conservative press to the strengthening of the government's responds to the expected parameters: it moved its focus from the economic issues to other issues representing the aspects of weakness. From that moment on, Terrorism (the Faisan case, the legalisation of Bildu, etc.) and corruption (the ERE case) became the new stellar issues in the media's agenda on the eve of the municipal elections of 2011 (see table 1).

As mentioned, our third hypothesis is that in a polarised system the media act as polarising agents, by using the common mechanisms in the media contest: negativism, conflict, etc. Here it is important to remember that the thematisation of the social dialogue began in the spring of 2009 with the media demanding a grand pact or agreement capable of tackling the crisis in all its magnitude. This media demand was in line with the ideas of the citizens who wanted political parties to act in a climate of understanding and mutual support.

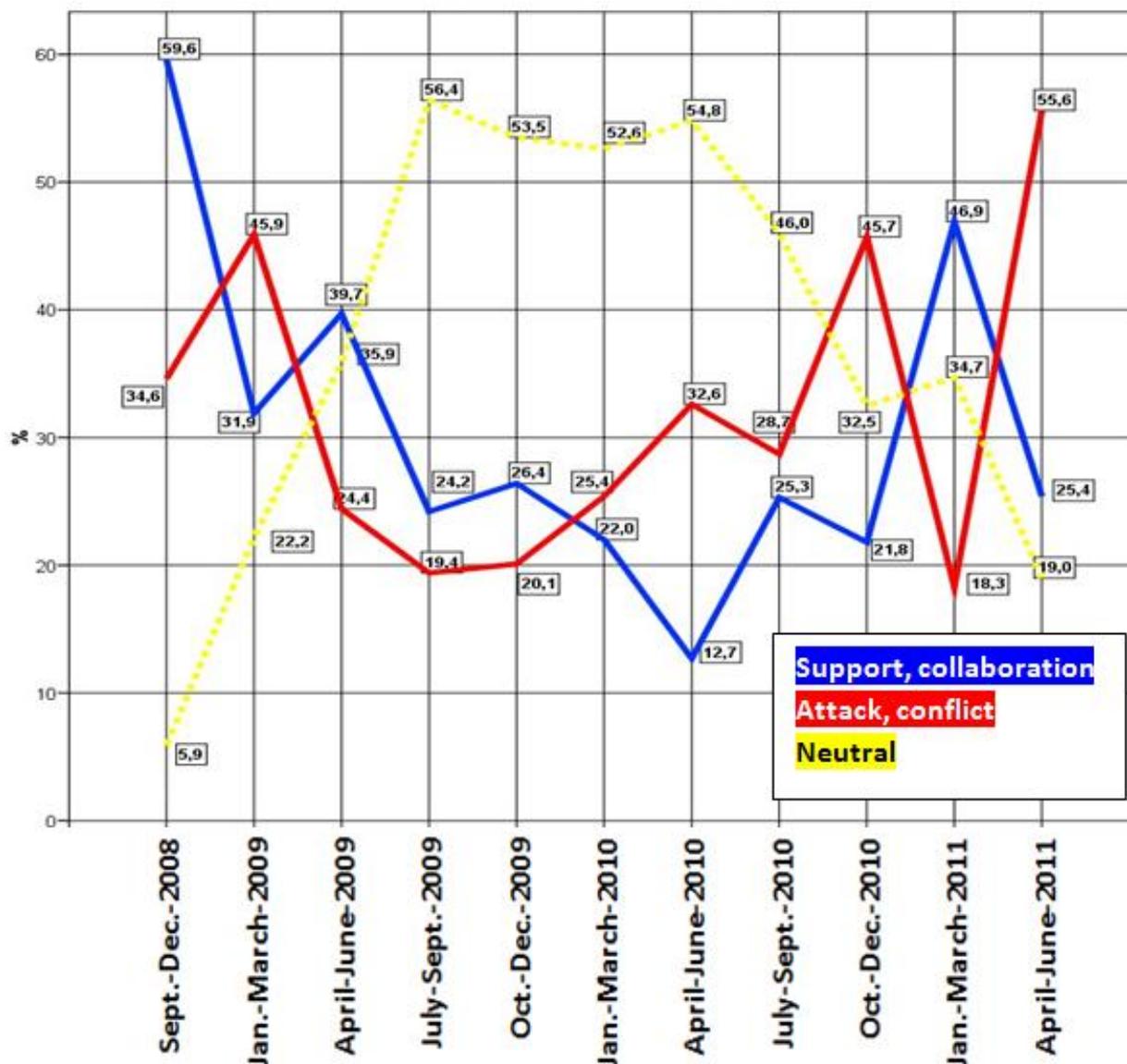
Faced with this situation, it is important to know the extent to what the discussion and subsequent achievement of the social pact affected the way in which the media presented the relation between the economic and social actors involved in the news, depending on whether it was presented as a relation of harmony, understanding, mutual support, collaboration or confrontation, attack, etc. To do this we will take as a reference those front pages and editorials that appeared in the quality press throughout the period under study (2009-2011).

The following figure shows the evolution of the relation pattern between the social and political actors when there is more than one actor involved in the news story, which is one of the most revealing indicators of the political climate and one of the most influential factors in citizens' perception and evaluation of the situation. In order to give homogeneity to the series, the figure is based on 2,091 information units (front pages and editorials) published during the study period, whose protagonists are the government and other social and political actors with which the government has some kind of relation.

Of the sample of news units, 38.6% tended to present the relation between the actors in a neutral manner, while about half of the rest of the news units, 31.4%, presented this relationship in terms of attacks, confrontations and/or conflicts, and the remaining 30% in terms of support, partnership and/or agreement. All of this happened in a period that was marked by a continuous pattern of social dialogue and even included a moment of political agreement, even if it was ephemeral ('the agreement of Zurbano').

In response to its evolution, the pattern of relation between the political actors that play a role throughout our period of study starts at a time of great disposition to dialogue and agreement, as the opposite was not possible at the time when the crisis erupted. However, this disposition soon gives way to a first wave of informative conflict (first quarter of 2009). Afterwards, there is a period dominated by informative neutrality that coincides with the unsuccessful attempts to maintain social dialogue. In the spring of 2010, there was a rise of informative conflict, which coincided with the budgetary adjustment measures. At this moment the pattern of collaboration was minimal. The rise in conflict culminates in the last quarter of 2010, with the general strike called by the labour unions. With the achievement of the social agreement the pattern of collaboration increased for a second time (first quarter of 2011), but the climate of collaboration was ephemeral and conflict returned in the next quarter.

**Figure 1. Types of relations established between actors when the government is protagonist (% per quarters N=2,091)**



Source: author's own creation with data from the project: *Agenda de los medios y agenda ciudadana* ("Media agenda and citizens' agenda").

What is the reason for this tendency to encourage conflict? Obviously, there are several factors involved, but there is one that stands out: the presence of elections in the three stages of the period: in the first quarter of 2009 the Basque and Galician elections; in the last quarter of 2010 the Catalan elections; and in the second quarter of 2011 the municipal and regional elections. It is clear that the proximity of elections strengthened the political alignment of the media and exacerbated their propensity to informative negativism.

## 4. Discussion and conclusions

Based on the premise that the media play a *mediating* role, understood as an attempt to interfere in the political process, this work analysed the way in which the Spanish quality press influenced the development of the political agenda during the process of social dialogue (2009-2011). To this end, we established three working hypotheses in order to determine whether during this period: a) the media tried to impersonate the political agenda; b) the government tested the possible budgetary adjustment measures in the media sphere, and c) the press has acted as a polarising actor.

The content analysis has allowed us, first of all, to identify the themes proposed by the media as the most important, as well as their evolution throughout this period. In this sense, the economic issues were the most important in the media agenda. The economic issues included in the agenda are, in order of appearance: the “crisis and unemployment”, followed by the issue of “economy”, which can be identified as the moment of diagnosis, and finally by the “reforms”, which can be identified as the moment of solution to the crisis.

Just as there was a thematic evolution, the media changed the frames with which they presented these issues. In this sense, we can identify three phases in the media’s framing of the crisis: a) the “social solution to the crisis”; b) the crisis of this framing (*misframing*), as a result of the adjustment imposed by the government in May 2010, and c) the achievement of the agreement and the restoration of social peace after the general strike (Social and Economic Agreement of January 2011).

Given the agenda and framing proposed by the media, the signing of this Agreement meant the culmination of the thematisation process, in which an *issue* (“reforms”) jumped to the public sphere to become an object of discussion among the different actors that had the capacity to define the public affairs and participate in the development of the political agenda, which resulted in the realignment of the actors involved and the re-shaping of the scenario (Badía, 1992).

During 2009, the initial commitment of the government to find a “social solution to the crisis” stumbled with the incapacity of the social and political actors to materialise some kind of agreement, in part as a consequence of the conflict and negativity encouraged by the press, which acts as a polarising agent (H3). One of the most significant episodes of this process occurred in 2010: the formation of what we have called a ‘negative coalition’ with the capacity to block the political agenda (H1). Thus occurs when Zapatero announced measures that were replaced by a series of completely inoperative and empty agreements that have no other purpose than to unblock the situation and to regain the initiative (‘the Zurbano Pacts’: H2). Zapatero’s measures, however, would become the essence of the Social and Economic Agreement, which was signed a year later. This is a moment of *pseudo-politics* in Spain (Meyer, 2002).

In this situation, the financial markets severely punished the Spanish economy and forced the government to take harsh budgetary adjustment measures that destroyed the “social solution to the crisis” (May 2010). The stories published by the press from this moment provoked the realignment of the actors contribute to the increased polarisation until it leads to the general strike of September 2010 (H3). After the expression of the conflict, the government reaches a final moment of reconciliation with the social actors and the consequent restoration of social peace. None of this, however, stopped the

media's tendency towards informative conflict, which was relentlessly resumed over the municipal and regional elections of 2011.

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