

# **Humanitarian crisis and public opinion. Treatment of immigration in the Spanish media**

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## **Abstract**

According with several authors (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1986; Gitlin, 1980; Snow et al, 1986; De Vreese & Claes, 2005; Reese, 2007; Scheufele, 1999) framing is a process of generating emphasis about a certain piece of information in news. We are interested in knowing how do Spanish media of reference frame immigration issues in the Mediterranean Sea. Through a mixed method of content analysis in over 774 news, we made a comparison between the last five months of the former President Rajoy's Administration and five months of the actual Sánchez's Administration. The findings suggest that in the most read newspapers in Spain the coverage changes between both Administrations. Also, that the coverage of the issue is focused more in the informative aspect of the irregular immigration, than in the political and economical conditions of the migrants. Besides, the political actors that are present in the news are mostly Governmental Institutions or NGO's, and the presence of the migrant voice is rather low. The problematic news frame about immigration is hegemonic; the benefits of immigration is mostly absent in their news coverage.

**Keywords:** media, framing, immigration, strategies, public opinion, Spain.

## **1. Introduction**

Spain is the country of the European Union that registered the highest number of arrivals of irregular immigrants by sea, in the year 2018. Reports says that 57,498 people arrived on the Spanish coasts by boats; figure that represents an increase of 161.7% with respect to 2017, according to official data of the Ministry of the Interior (2018).

This growth of the migratory flow through the Mediterranean towards the Iberian country occurs in a "context of increasingly harsh stagnation of immigration policy in the European Union" (Tramontana, 2018, para. 1), where the anti-immigration discourse stands out, headed by the Italian far right leader, Matteo Salvini.

The United Nations (UN) has promoted the understanding of the States in migration matters, since the adoption, in December 2018, of the Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Compact for Secure, Orderly and Regular Migration. Both processes have their genesis in the New York Declaration on Refugees and Migrants (2016), “which reaffirms the importance of the international refugee protection regime and establishes the commitment of the Member States to strengthen and improve the protection mechanisms of persons that move” (ACNUR, 2019, para.2)

Migration - as a complex social phenomenon that involves a large number of people, social organizations, governments and institutions - is a relevant issue in media agendas. Hence, the media, as political actors linked to the highest levels of power, interpret events related to migration processes, and articulate their strategies for the construction of frames towards the public opinion.

This research analyzes the way in which the reference Spanish press has framed the issue of immigration, in the political scenario that has already been described, and to which is added the change in the presidency of the Government of Spain, from Mariano Rajoy, representative of the Popular Party (PP), to Pedro Sánchez, leader of the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) - whose ways of conceiving immigration shows the polarization of positions on this issue.

Immigration, xenophobia and racism has been studied from the linguistics (Alcaraz and Soto, 2016) the critical analysis of discourse (Bañón, 2002, Fajardo and Soriano, 2016, Van Dijk, 2016) and, from framing theory (Bruno, 2016, Gemi, Ulasiuk & Triandafyllidou, 2013, Figenschou, Beyer & Thorbjørnsrud, 2015), a point of particular interest in this study.

### **1. 1. Objectives**

- 1) Describe the strategies of the Spanish press of reference to intervene in the symbolic construction of reality on immigration.
- 2) Identify the actors that participate in the media discourse.
- 3) Establish the frames of *El País*, *El Mundo*, *ABC* and *La Razón* on the immigration of the western route of the Mediterranean in each stage.
- 4) Compare the types of frames present in each stage.

### **2. Methodology**

Based on a methodology of content analysis (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004, Piñuel, 2002), the universe (774) of information published during 2018 by the Spanish press *El*

*País, El Mundo, La Razón* and *ABC*, is analyzed. The study seeks to compare the framings that emerge in the corpus in the first six months of the administration of former president Mariano Rajoy, and the first six months of the administration of the current president of the Government, Pedro Sánchez.

To collect the data, a content file was developed that allowed the codification and operationalization of the category and subcategories of analysis (**table 1**).

<b>Table 1. Analytical category: operationalization</b>					
<b>Media frame on immigration</b>					
<i>El País</i>	<i>El Mundo</i>	<i>ABC</i>	<i>La Razón</i>		
Formal resources		Content resources			
Date	-Stage of Mariano Rajoy -Stage of Pedro Sánchez	Subject	- Immigrants' arrival - legislative or governmental decisions - conflict - Death of immigrants		
Section	-politics -national -international -society -others	News criteria	- current issue - novelty - human interest - Social impact - proximity - hierarchy of those involved		
Source	-own of the media -national news agency -international news agency -collaborators -others	Political actors involved	-institutional field	-government -ministries -Security forces -European organizations -International organizations	
Genres	- News - journalistic chronicle - Editorial unit - Reports - Opinion article - Others		-immigrants		
			-non-governmental organizations		
			-social associations		
	-photography -graphs -video	-policital	-official party -opposition		
<b>FRAME</b>					
-positive	-negative	- cause / effect	-conflictive	others	

Source: authors' own elaboration

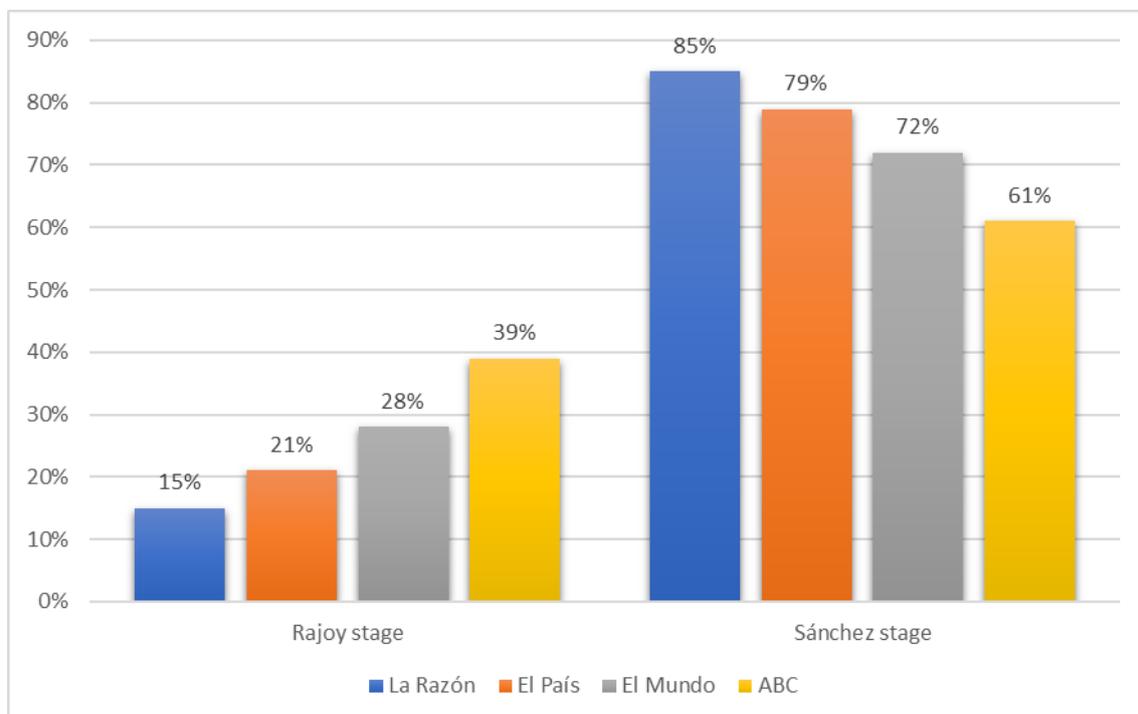
### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Strategies of the Spanish press for the symbolic construction of immigration

The data corresponding to the analysis of the universe of the four media make it possible to observe similar tendencies regarding the frequency of appearance of the topic in the media agenda between the presidency of Mariano Rajoy and that of Pedro Sánchez. The leadership in quantity of publications takes the newspaper *La Razón*, with 375 pieces of information, although the great majority corresponds to the period of Sánchez. The newspaper *El País* follows with frequency of approach to the topic, with 271 information related to immigration. Then the newspaper *El Mundo* with 76 informative pieces and finally, the *ABC* newspaper, with 72 publications

As can be seen in figure 1, the presence of the theme in the four media increased considerably in the Sánchez stage with respect to the Rajoy stage, and a notable rotation can be seen in terms of the media that leads with the coverage of the subject. When in the Rajoy stage *ABC* is the newspaper that most focuses on dealing with the issue, followed by *El Mundo*, then *El País* and finally *La Razón*, in the Sánchez phase this approach changes radically, with *La Razón* the media that most percentage of informative pieces offered in its pages, followed by *El País*, *El Mundo* and, finally, *ABC*.

**Figure 1.** Volume of information on immigration by means and stages



Source: authors' own elaboration.

It is observed that not only has the amount of information on the subject of immigration increased in the Sanchez stage, but there is also a notable impact on the editorial lines of the media that in the Rajoy stage took the issue of immigration as a small part of your media agenda. This irruption also manifests itself in the way newspapers thematized the issue at each stage.

In both periods in the analysis of the four media are communicative products with recurring themes (figure 2), such as the rescue of immigrants in different parts of the Mediterranean, the actions of the bodies and security forces of the State against networks of trafficking of immigrants, especially women, or xenophobic stereotypes and beliefs towards the figure of foreigners as the causative agent of the collapse of social services in Spain.

The case of the newspaper *La Razón*, however, highlights the violent events in which foreigners are involved in Spain during the Rajoy stage. There is a clear intention on the part of the media to identify the manifestations and protests of the immigrants with criminal acts; actions that perhaps in a different context and under the protagonism of other actors, would have had a less negative connotation. Priority is given in these cases to the declarations of the security bodies and owners of affected premises, relegating to a second plane, and even omitting, the interventions of the protesters.

Information of the same type is offered by *El Mundo* and *ABC* at this stage. Frequently highlight the violence linked to the arrival of immigrants, or their negative influence on Spanish society linking them with criminal acts.

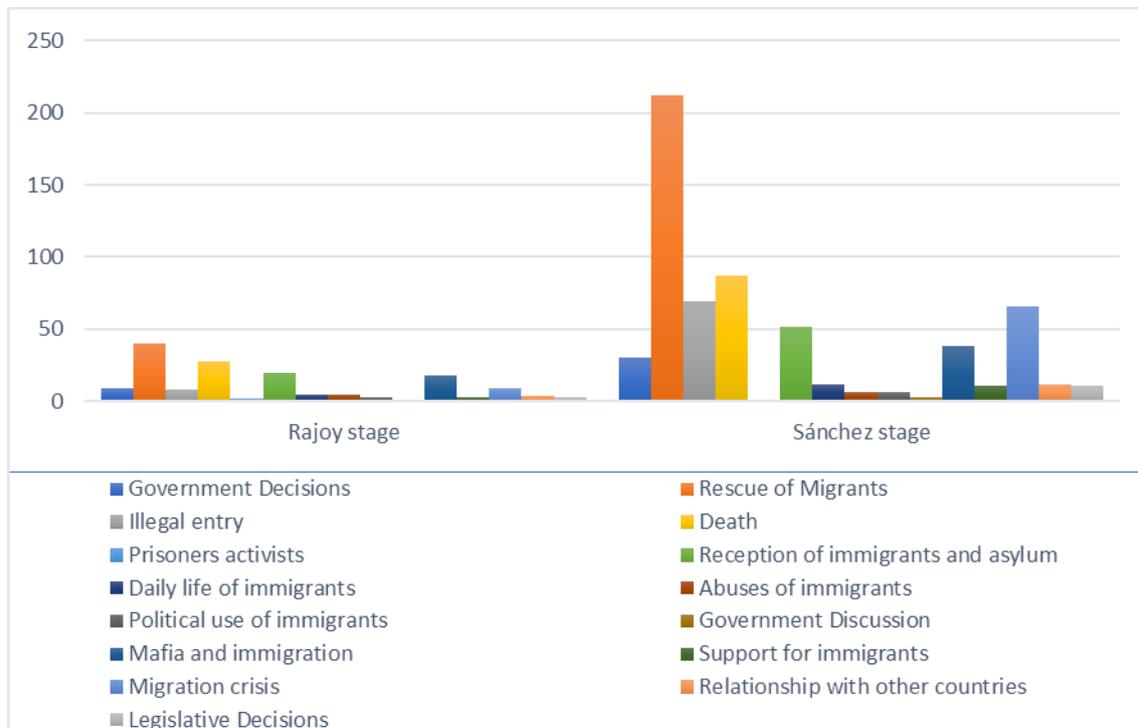
Only in the newspaper *El País* can one see a detachment from this type of interpretation. The media highlights, for example, the protests of immigrants in Lavapiés, after the belief that the death of the man of Senegalese origin, Mame Mbaye Ndiaye, had been caused by police persecution; the arrival in Catalonia of trucks with immigrant stowaways from Italy; the conflict between the Ministries of the Interior and Defense (Popular Party) with the City Council of Motril (PSOE) for the reform of a building destined to be an immigration detention center; the arbitrariness and improvisations that are committed in the assistance to migrants recently arrived at the Spanish coasts, as well as the situation of the immigrants when they leave the centers of minors without “papers” or permission to work.

The treatment of the subject by *El Mundo* corresponding to the Sanchez stage prevails the theme related to the reception and asylum, to the rescue at sea and to government decisions in the face of the “migratory crisis”, so named since this period. In the case of

*ABC*, the subject is mainly focused on the illegal entry of immigrants to Spain, with chronicles on violent income in Ceuta and Melilla (two Spanish cities in the African territory), the actions of the Police and the Civil Guard to contain this income and even statistics that indicate that Although illegal immigrants are down in Europe, the index rises in Spain (*ABC*, June 29, 2018, National Spanish Section). Another frequent topic is the rescue at sea, and the asylum and shelter. These three media have in common the spectacularization of immigration while highlighting aspects linked to criminal acts and the administrative overflow that means the “indiscriminate” arrival of these immigrants to the Spanish coasts.

*El País* offers a different approach to the topic in the Sanchez phase, since it deals with issues such as the arrival of Aquarius and the need for a shared European management of migrations; the importance in the current scenario of the Global Compact for Secure, Ordered and Regular Migration; the causes of contemporary migratory phenomena; or the actions “for tolerance” in the neighborhoods of Madrid, with regard to the emergence of Vox in the Andalusian parliament and its candidacies for the municipal and regional elections of May 26, 2019, with an openly anti-immigration speech.

**Figure 2.** Immigration issues addressed in the four media



Source: authors' own elaboration.

The photographic accompaniment, as an element that complements the media discourse in a visual way, is relevant for the media studied. In general, the images record the

immigrant in situations of rescue, arrival, flight, shelter and, to a lesser extent, in situations of integration. The increase in media treatment in the Sánchez phase is another feature shared by these newspapers.

The approach from the journalistic genres presents discrepancies in the analysis of these media. While *El País* stands out for treating the issue in depth from reports and opinion articles, *La Razón* does it from the story and the news. In the case of *El Mundo* and *ABC*, there is an interest in the treatment of the topic from the chronicle, especially in the Sánchez phase. The journalistic chronicle allows the media to give voice to different political actors and describe contexts of enunciation.

This differentiation responds to the editorial interests of each media to approach the events from the perspective of some or other social actors, according to the communicative circumstance in question. The approach they propose from the communication strategies of the journalistic message allows us to know the degree of social commitment that the media manifests with a situation that has broad foci of interpretation.

### **3.2. Comparative media frames**

The thematization of the issue of immigration from the frequency of publication, the section in which the information appears, through the journalistic genre that sustains it, the political and social actors who take the floor and the graphic accompaniment, are elements that allow us to interpret the predominant setting offered by the four media analyzed.

The frame of *El País* adopts different positions according to the edge that is addressed. On the one hand, it is negative in the information about criminal acts linked to immigrants. This framing, while responding to legitimate ethical principles of not concealing criminal actions, can at the same time confirm ethnic and racial prejudices when the contextual circumstances of the events are not clarified, for example, the role of the immigrant in the event, whether in quality of victim or victimizer.

On the other hand, it emphasizes the number of immigrants arriving on the Spanish coasts and performs statistical comparisons with previous years that could generate a sense of alarm among readers, in terms of “invasion” rather than “reception capacity”. In these cases, the media also highlights the actions of the security forces, to the detriment, for example, of the details of the journey or the health conditions of the migrants.

However, we also note the existence of a positive framework, fundamentally in the Sánchez phase, when the media recognizes the demographic and environmental causes of migratory processes, explains the composition of migrations in order of origin, shows that the majority influx does not come from the poorest countries, and is positioned in front of the discourse that tries to present migration as a new phenomenon that only involves security issues. This positive framework is evident even at a lexical level, with the use of expressions such as “forced migrations” instead of “irregular migration”.

*El País* is the only means that proposes a framework that aims for public opinion to know the causes and consequences of immigration, not only for Spain and its citizens, but also for the migrants themselves.

In the case of *La Razón*, a conflictive setting prevails towards the subject under study, taking into account that the discourse exacerbates aspects of negative social connotation such as violence or the record of arrivals, and circumscribes them as consequences of the “invasion” of which Spain is being subject. This framing appears above all in the Sánchez phase, where the media repeatedly blames the government for the generalized collapse that the reception of illegal migrants entails.

The framing offered by *El Mundo* regarding immigration in the Mediterranean during the Rajoy stage is conflictive and predominantly negative. He points out the problems that mean for Spain the increasing arrival of the “undocumented” and although certain deplorable conditions are mentioned by which the immigrant passes, his story is offered as a show of misfortunes that the country or the citizens have to solve. The conflict constitutes a guiding thread to frame the issue, from which the responsibilities that some African countries should have in controlling their borders, especially Morocco, are pointed out.

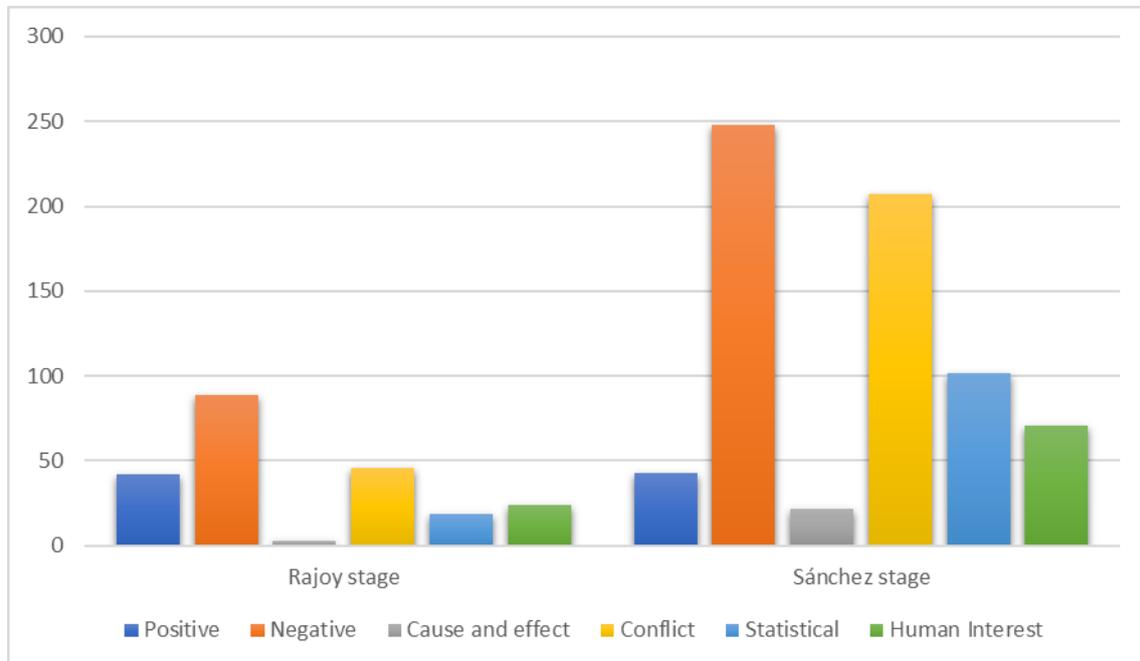
This negative and conflict framework is exacerbated in the Sánchez phase, in which, starting with the taking of the word from NGOs and security forces, priority is given to information that points to the impossibility of welcoming these immigrants and a national responsibility to request help from European entities to find a solution to the “migration crisis”. It is at this stage that the media begins to use this denomination frequently and points out in different communicative products the impact that this type of irregular immigration has for Spain.

The framing that *ABC* offers regarding immigration is also that of the conflict, both in the Rajoy stage and in Sánchez’s. In the first, this framework is constituted with certain features of human interest, which is lost in the second stage in which the controversial

aspects of the management of the situation are highlighted, and the few results to obtain the support of the European Union, added to the decreasing collaboration of Morocco in the protection of the border. In both stages, negative features of the subject are emphasized.

Finally, it was possible to observe (figure 3) that the negative and conflict frames prevail among the analyzed media, with the exception of *El País* coverage, especially in the Sánchez phase. It is striking how there are certain coincidences in the treatment of the issue between both stages by media that have supported disparate political positions. The issue of immigration and the mostly negative approach is shown as transversal in at least three of the four newspapers of reference for Spanish public opinion.

**Figure 3.** Frames used by the Spanish press as reference in both stages



Source: authors' own elaboration.

#### 4. Conclusions

Although it is about four media that belong to companies with different editorial lines, they share the same immigration frame: “the spiral of collapse”.

There is a media interest to highlight that the phenomenon of immigration could affect coexistence in Spain and, consequently, endanger the pillars of the welfare state, as it causes the collapse of citizen security, administrative and financial resources and social services.

This framework is based on prevailing news criteria for dealing with the event, as is the case of the human interest generated by the arrival of immigrants, the actuality of the

progressive increase of these arrivals, and the social impact of the overflow of capabilities host.

The political actors involved in the pieces of information analyzed constitute another element from which the framework is constructed. And it is that the media prioritize the speeches of the Non-Governmental Organizations and of the institutions -represented by the security forces and by the ministries with competences in the subject- as main actors of the events. Immigrants intervene to a lesser degree and their statements, in general, enhance the difficulties that the migratory phenomenon entails, even when social integration has been achieved.

Regarding the frames identified by stages, a significant change is perceived in the *ABC* proposal. When in the Rajoy stage it offers a perspective of conflict, but with elements of human interest regarding the alarming situation of the immigrants, in the Sanchez stage the framing focuses only on the conflict, marking the responsibilities of the government authorities. This process occurs in a similar way in *El Mundo* and *La Razón*, in which the translation of a negative frame with nuances of the conflict is also evident, to an even more negative one in terms of “invasion”. Only a positive frame of human interest can be observed in the case of *El País*, especially in the Sánchez phase.

It is concluded that the issue of immigration is treated in a predominantly negative way by the press of reference in Spain. The media is concerned with marking the conflicting features of the issue, thus generating a framing of the spiral of collapse that places the immigrant as the center of imbalance.

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