

Framing discourse during the Lampedusa crisis Victims and intruders in the Spanish press coverage*

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines media discourse regarding the humanitarian crisis that took place in Lampedusa and by extension in the European Union during the first semester of 2011 as a result of the Arab Spring. Instability in North Africa became the source of outflows towards neighbouring countries. Reforming Schengen agreements was, beyond their temporary suspension, a major response to the Lampedusa crisis. The empirical analysis encompasses both frame and critical discourse analysis. The questions are a) whether the most read newspapers in Spain (*Abc*, *El Mundo*, *El País*, *El Periódico*, and *La Vanguardia*) framed people coming to Europe as asylum-seekers/refugees (victim-frame) or as immigrants (intruder-frame, i.e. conflict-frame), b) whether the five of them did it in the same way, and c) whether frame-shifts took place over the four-periods time.

Introduction

Demonstrations against Tunisian President Ben Ali prompted him to resign on 14 January 2011. The unrest and uprising in Tunisia was followed by social mobilizations in other Arab countries. Egyptian head of state Mubarak stepped down in February 2011. The confrontations between the rebels and the security forces defending Gaddafi's regime rapidly escalated into a major civil conflict in Libya.¹ Power vacuum, instability and uncertainty in North Africa and the Middle East in 2011, plus the civil war in the Libyan case, had a tremendous impact on population mobility patterns in the region.

Certainly, the Arab Spring became the source of large outflows towards neighbouring countries. By the end of June 2011, according to the International Organization for Migration,² more than 600,000 Libyans and third-country nationals had left the country as a result of the outbreak of hostilities. Major cross-border movements were recorded at the frontier with Tunisia and Egypt, with 256,000 and

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¹ The Arab Spring has also encompassed, whatever the extent of the political changes, from Morocco to Jordan and from Bahrain or Yemen to Siria (see e.g. Abdelali 2013, Hanafi 2012, and Pinfari 2012).

² *World Migration Report 2011* (International Organization for Migration, Ginebra, 2011), pp.49-50.

184,000 arrivals, respectively. With the exception of Malta and the Italian island of Lampedusa, those movements had a limited impact on EU Member States. And less than 56,000 boat-people reached those coasts in the first semester of 2011. 1,535 of them landed in Malta, the rest in Lampedusa, and whilst less than 20,000 departed from Libya, less than 25,000 did it from Tunisia. No significant inflows were reported from other countries in the region, including Egypt, from the beginning of the crisis. Reforming Schengen agreements to legalise “temporary control at internal borders in the event of exceptional difficulties in the management of common borders,” as the Italian prime minister and the French president agreed on a joint letter to the European Commission President and the EU Council President, was a major response to what became the Lampedusa crisis.

In covering the news, the media used to refer to those crossing African land-frontiers either as (economic) migrants trying to return home from Tunisia and mostly Libya, or as displaced people – namely, as people in need of international assistance and protection, no matter whether applying for asylum or not. The aim of this paper is to know how the media represented people crossing the Mediterranean to Europe; in other words, to know whether the same people were framed in the same way when looking for safety or a better life in Europe than when looking for it in Africa. Firstly, it will be addressed whether the media framed people coming to the North also as refugees (victim-frame)³ or as immigrants (intruder-frame). Secondly, this essay aims to know whether major media did it, all of them, in the same way. Thirdly, it will be examined whether frame-shifts took place over time.

The research focuses upon the five most daily read general-interest newspapers in Spain during the first semester of 2011: *El País* (for short, EP), *El Mundo* (EM), *La Vanguardia* (LV), *El Periódico* (EPer) and *Abc*. The two first press releases linking political convulsions in the Maghreb to Lampedusa were published by EP and LV on 13 February. They conform the earliest limit of our data set,⁴ which chronologically

³ The press used to refer to those who would have fled from Tunisia and mostly from Libya for protection-related reasons (to save their lives or preserve their freedom) as ‘refugees’. The term ‘displaced’ is mostly used in this paper because the press did not report on those people no longer being under the official protection of their own government after crossing an international border. Anyway both words, along with ‘asylum-seekers’, are to be understood as synonyms in this essay. Whatever the official status, they retained all of their rights and protection under both human rights and international humanitarian law.

⁴ The number of crossings from post-revolutionary Tunisia to Italy was already on the increase in January, but not publicised in the press, either in the Spanish one or in the Italian one (Monzini 2011).

continues until June included. There are not news addressing our topic after that. Accordingly, we have collected 159 units of analysis (articles, columns, editorials, interviews, and reports) published by five Spanish broadsheet newspapers throughout a five months period. Such published texts are those explicitly mentioning the terms “Lampedusa”, “Malta”, “asylum”, “refugee”, “(im)migrant”, and/or “Schengen”, but only if linked to the Arab Spring and/or to the proposal of reforming the Treaty because of the arrivals of Africans in such a context. The digital archive MyNews has been used to select and collect full press texts. Systematic analysis has been carried out with the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti.

Methods and design

Previous studies have emphasized the role of politicians and the news media in leading public opinion both in general and particularly on migration issues. According to critical discourse analysis (CDA), institutional and media discourses are both of them elite discourses and construct “social cognition” (Van Dijk 1993), that is socially shared perceptions and understanding of the world (see also Van Dijk 2007). Such beliefs (about what is assumed to be true) are used to justify and grant support for policy decisions, regarding for example migration policies⁵ and the restriction of the right to asylum. The crisis of Lampedusa was not related to either restrictive or expansive policies regarding the rights of people coming from the South. Beyond that, it had to do with how those foreigners were defined, represented or framed, either as victims or as intruders, i.e. either as displaced persons (persons in need of help) or as immigrants (people to be protected from).

The Lampedusa crisis was about the suffering subject of the crisis – either *us* (Italians, French, Europeans...) or *them*, the immigrants and/or displaced of/to/from Lampedusa (for short, IDL). The crisis of Lampedusa is the IDL question. Insofar as the way the Other is framed in media discourse affects the way the public perceive and think of the Other, *our* opinion about the IDL is shaped by the media coverage of those events. Scholars have separately analysed how the media frame either immigrants (Muñiz et al., 2008; Ter Wal, 2002; Mendelberg, 2001) or asylum seekers (Horsti 2007,

⁵ For studies concluding that the way that information on immigration is focused, directly and indirectly influences attitudes toward immigrants, see Igartua et al. (2011: 175-76). The authors demonstrate as well that “[t]he type of frame stressed in a news story has a significant effect on cognitive channeling, on the perception of the importance of immigration as a problem, on attitudes toward immigration, on beliefs about the consequences of immigration for the country, and on emotional responses” (2011: 182).

Nickels 2007, Van Gorp 2006 and 2005, and Lavenex 2001), but they have not addressed whether foreigners are framed as the former or as the latter at a given context. It is the aim of this essay to research on that field.

Figure 1 illustrates our theoretical framework and methodology. The approach is deductive (see Semetko and Valkenburg 2000: 94-95) insofar as we firstly define our frames: intruder-frame vs. victim-frame, and then verify 1) the extent to which they occur in the news, 2) whether the pattern repeats similarly in the five newspapers under research, and finally 3) whether it is the same throughout the five months at stake or there are changes along the four-time-periods that arise from the study of the media material. Drawing from the CDA and from the framing theory – mostly from Nickels' approach (2007; see also Entman 1993) – four dimensions would frame the media coverage of the IDL: 1) the term by which the subject is named in the news; 2) the voices and sources that are used by journalists as part of their texts, i.e. the actors whose opinions are directly or indirectly known by the readers; 3) the definition of the problem, i.e. what is the question reported upon, and 4) the solution for the problem defined in such a way.

As can be seen in tables 2 to 5, we have collected each of the terms that appear in each of the units of analysis for each of the four dimensions. Every occurrence of those terms have been codified as framing the IDL either i) as immigrants (a risk factor) or ii) as displaced people (a factor at risk). The occurrences of the terms of the third and fourth dimensions have been codified in addition as framing a) the problem and b) its solution i) for ourselves (Western readers suffering a problem that the IDL cause) or ii) for themselves (the IDL suffering a problem that host societies can help to solve). Thus four analytic dimensions allow testing two pairs of complementary frames, each of which pair finally shapes one of two major frames: intruder-frame vs. victim-frame. Drawing from the literature, the hypothesis would be that the dominant frame is the intruder-frame, and that the frame is dominant no matter either the newspaper or the time period.

It has been pointed out above that four analytic time-periods followed one another from February to June 2011. The main news of the first two articles in our data set were about the Italian government declaring a humanitarian emergency in Lampedusa (EP) and claiming an urgent intervention by the EU (LV). Up until 26 March, the main theme the media informed about was the constant flow of arrivals from Tunisia on the Italian island. During this first time-period of media coverage (*t1*)

reciprocal accusations were frequent between the Italian government and the EU and some EU Member States (concretely the Commission, Spain, France, and Northern State Members) on the one hand, and the Tunisian government on the other regarding both Italian needs and proposals, and the answer the Italian government received from his partners.

On 26 March began *t2*: news were no more about the risk of Lampedusa to collapse, but about the fact that the island was actually overwhelmed by its inability to attend a foreign population that outnumbered the native one. It was also the time of the first protests among residents on Lampedusa against the presence of foreigners. Boats from Libya began to arrive for the first time. It was taken for granted that the Italian prime minister managed the humanitarian crisis as deficiently as intentionally. Critics accused Berlusconi of using diversionary tactics and turning an issue into a problem. As a second step in his strategy – so it was reported – he visited the island on 30 March, and claimed he would “empty” and “free” or “liberate” Lampedusa of foreigners. Transfers of IDL to other Italian territories were intensified, and tensions arose between some of them and the government.

t3 began on 1 April with informations related, on the one hand, to the Italian police complicity with the escape of foreigners from first-aid and identification centres. On the other, with the Italian plan to provide non-asylum applicants with temporary residence permits that would allow them to travel to other EU Member States, especially – Tunisians are largely Francophone – to France. France government closed temporarily its frontier to trains coming from Italy, refused Italian permits, and continued sending back those who tried to enter French territory with no other documents. Both governments accused each other of violating Schengen. *t4* began on 23 April with both countries calling for the Schengen rules on internal border controls to be modified.

Discussion

Table 1 shows media coverage by number of units of analysis, by occurrences of the words used to report on the Lampedusa crisis, and by average of such occurrences per article. EP appears as the newspaper covering the events to a larger extent than any other in those three items, followed in descending order by the regional newspapers LV and EPer and then by the national ones ABC and EM. By time period, firstly *t4* and then *t3* concentrated most of the informations. They two are the time periods when the IDL

question clearly became an EU question, so it was not only something the Italian and the French governments had to confront. It was also up to *we the Europeans*.

Table 6 resumes all the data offered in tables 2 to 5. The hypothesis is confirmed: whichever the analytic dimension we take into account, whichever the newspaper (no matter whether national or regional, and left-wing or right-wing), and whichever the time period of the analysis, the dominant frame is the intruder-frame. 69 per cent of the occurrences of the words analysed for each of the four dimensions framed the IDL as a risk factor, and 71 per cent of them as a problem for us. On the other hand, only 14 per cent of the occurrences framed the IDL as victims to be protected. Our data provide a detailed evidence that the IDL were framed in the press in a very different way than when reporting on the same people but looking for a better life in Africa. To be sure, Tunisians were not reported in the same way than Libyans, and Lampedusa was not reported in the same way than Malta, but the dominant media discourse did not frame IDL as fleeing violence, unrest, and/or confusion. They were reported mostly in this vein only if crossing African land-borders. So media discourse largely reproduced institutional discourse. According to the CDA, it is the usual racist and xenophobic discourse among elites.

Nonetheless, neither major media framed the IDL all in the same way nor reporting took place without frame-shifts over time. The public had a more complex knowledge of reality the more they exposed to EP and secondly to EPer (both of them left-wing newspapers), and the less they exposed to Abc and overall to EM (right-wing newspapers). In other words, competing frames and thus critical discourses with states and EU politics were more present in EP and EPer than in Abc and EM. As to the time periods, *t1* and *t4* were less monolithic (i.e. gave more room to victim-frame) than *t2* and *t3*. While first arrivals (*t1*) were covered to a large extent as a humanitarian phenomenon, the final stage of the crisis (*t4*) had a lot to do with opposing views regarding the reform of the Schengen agreements. News during *t4* were also more related to people coming from Libya (mostly framed as displaced people) than from Tunisia (immigrants). *t4* was also a time of critical media rethinking of the responses to the crisis from its beginning, especially in EP and EPer, but also in center-right LV. Thus there was a media dominant frame throughout the Lampedusa crisis, but not always all the citizens that exposed to the press were framed that way to the same extent.

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Figure 1. Media frames

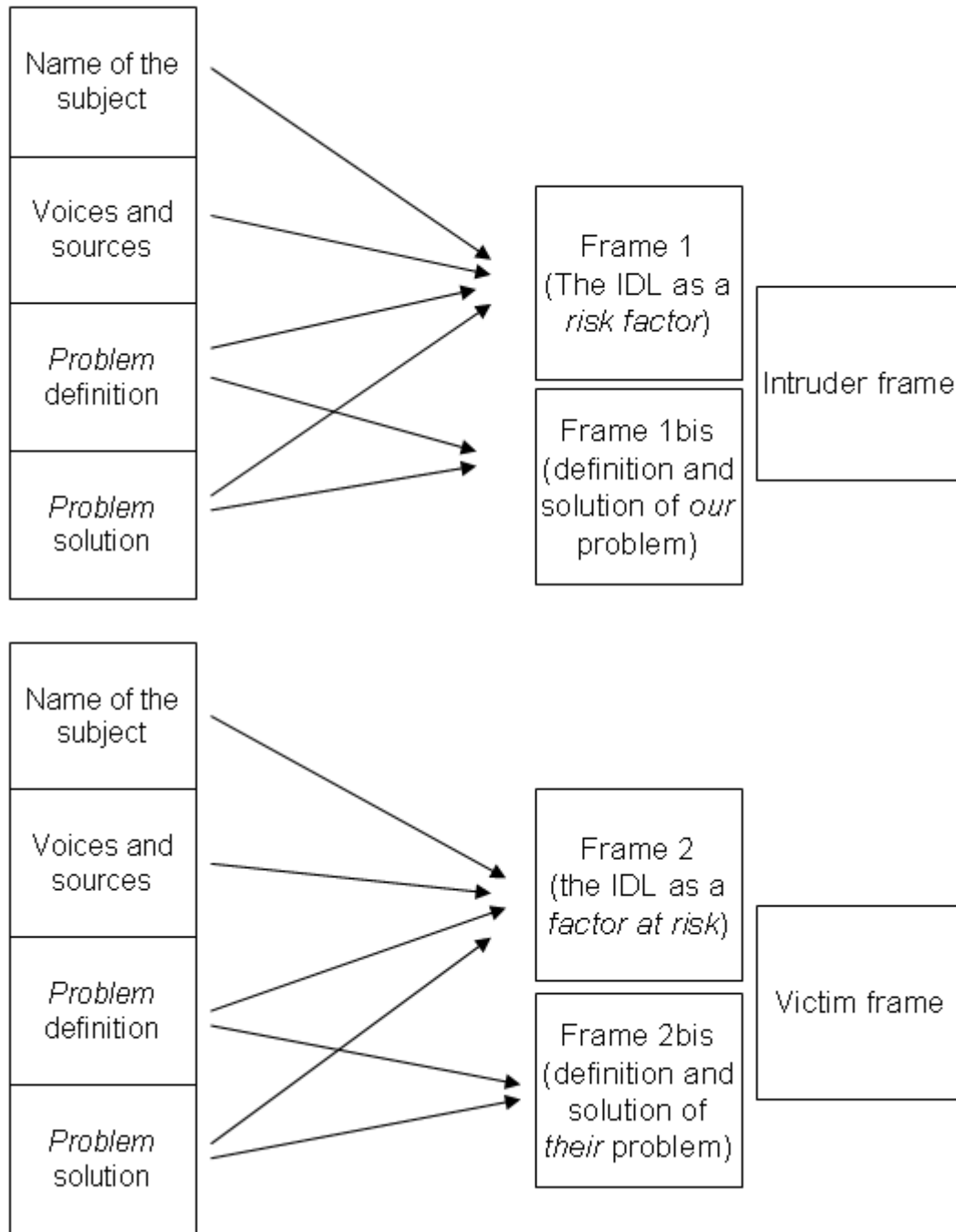


Table 1. Media coverage (5 newspapers) by documents and words (February through June 2011)

	Total		ABC		EM		EP		EPer		LV	
	Articles	Words	Arts.	Words	Arts.	Words	Arts.	Words	Arts.	Words	Arts.	Words
t1	24	11.506	6	3.230	3	1.024	6	3.512	3	1.122	6	2.618
t2	15	6.925	3	948	3	1.151	3	1.585	2	1.135	4	2.106
t3	47	22.947	5	1.275	4	2.432	13	7.959	8	2.908	17	8.373
t4	73	37.461	11	5.783	7	3.578	24	15.790	22	7.166	9	5.144
Total	159	78.839	25	11.236	17	8.185	46	28.846	35	12.331	36	18.241
(%)*	100%	100%	16%	14%	11%	10%	29%	37%	22%	16%	23%	23%
Average words per media article	496		449		481		627		352		507	

* Percentage of total media-texts or words, as appropriate.

Table 2. Framing of the IDL (February through June 2011)*

Frames	Terms**	Total	Time periods				Newspapers				
			<i>t1</i>	<i>t2</i>	<i>t3</i>	<i>t4</i>	<i>Abc</i>	<i>EM</i>	<i>EP</i>	<i>EPer</i>	<i>LV</i>
Risk factor	Africans, Arabs, arrived (people)***, cadavers/corpses, citizens, clandestine, criminal, dead, economic, expatriates, foreigners, fugitives, human beings, illegal, immigrants, irregular, Libyans, Maghrebians, men, North Africans, occupants, passengers, people, persons, <i>sans papiers</i> (without papers), shipwrecked (people), Sub-Saharanans, survivors, suspects, terrorists, Tunisians, undocumented, women	1.050 (64%)	156 (64%)	115 (79%)	401 (74%)	378 (54%)	175 (70%)	126 (79%)	305 (55%)	181 (61%)	263 (70%)
Neutral	African, Arabs, arrived (people), ashore, cadavers/corpses, cannon fodder, citizens, dead women, desperate, disappeared, drowned (people), expatriates, foreigners, fugitives, human beings, human bombs, Libyans, Maghrebians, men, North Africans, occupants, passengers, people, persons, refugees, shipwrecked, Sub-Saharanans, survivors, Tunisians, victims	246 (15%)	54 (22%)	16 (11%)	64 (12%)	112 (16%)	40 (16%)	24 (15%)	70 (13%)	55 (19%)	57 (15%)
Factor at risk	Africans, Arabs, arrived, asylum seekers, cadavers/corpses, citizens, dead, desperate, disappeared, displaced, foreigners, fugitives, human beings, in need of protection, Libyans, men, occupants, passengers, people, persons, refugees, shipwrecked, survivors, Tunisians, victims, women	345 (21%)	35 (14%)	14 (10%)	80 (15%)	216 (31%)	35 (14%)	9 (6%)	184 (33%)	61 (21%)	56 (15%)
Total	44	1.641	245	145	545	706	250	159	559	297	376

* Column percentages.

** In grey, variable frame terms. In black, the terms that determine the frame.

*** "Arrived" (like "shipwrecked", "disappeared", "ashore", and "dead") has been accounted for only when the term refers to people and functions as a noun in the units of analysis (in Spanish).

Table 3. Sources framing the IDL and their presence in Europe (February through June 2011)*

Frames	Voices		Total	Time periods				Newspapers				
				<i>t1</i>	<i>t2</i>	<i>t3</i>	<i>t4</i>	<i>Abc</i>	<i>EM</i>	<i>EP</i>	<i>EPer</i>	<i>LV</i>
Risk factor	EU authorities	98	549 (60%)	92 (61%)	40 (55%)	174 (73%)	243 (53%)	89 (61%)	87 (84%)	172 (52%)	89 (54%)	112 (64%)
	Non-Italian European authorities	159										
	Italian authorities	198										
	Tunisian authorities	4										
	IDL	41										
	Human rights international institutions	11										
	Other sources	27										
	Civil society	11										
Neutral	EU authorities	63	261 (28%)	46 (31%)	31 (42%)	51 (21%)	133 (29%)	44 (30%)	15 (15%)	91 (27%)	57 (35%)	54 (31%)
	Non-Italian European authorities	32										
	Italian authorities	62										
	Tunisian authorities	5										
	IDL	23										
	Human rights international institutions	19										
	Other sources	33										
	Civil society	24										
Factor at risk	EU authorities	8	110 (12%)	12 (8%)	2 (3%)	14 (6%)	82 (18%)	13 (9%)	1 (1%)	68 (21%)	19 (12%)	9 (5%)
	Non-Italian European authorities	13										
	Italian authorities	19										
	Tunisian authorities	3										
	IDL	3										
	Human rights international institutions	43										
	Other sources	9										
	Civil society	12										
Total			920	150	73	239	458	146	103	331	165	175

* Column percentages.

Table 4. The IDL and the media problem definition (February through June 2011)*

Frames	Terms	Total	Time periods				Newspapers				
			<i>t1</i>	<i>t2</i>	<i>t3</i>	<i>t4</i>	<i>Abc</i>	<i>EM</i>	<i>EP</i>	<i>EPer</i>	<i>LV</i>
Risk factor	Alarm**, anxiety, arrival, avalanche (<i>alud</i> and <i>avalancha</i>), burden, case, catastrophe, challenge, chaos, circumstance, collapse, crisis, danger, defiance, degeneration, despair, drama, emergency, escape, event, exasperation, exodus, fatalism, fear (<i>temor</i> and <i>miedo</i>), flood, flow, frustration, heartache, hell, invasion, moment, nightmare, onrush, panic, paradise, phenomenon, pressure, problem, rage, reality, risk, river, ruin, scenario, shake, siphon, situation, tension, theme, things, threat, tide, tragedy, tsunami, uncertainty, wave (<i>ola</i> and <i>oleada</i>), worry	697 (74%)	107 (61%)	83 (87%)	206 (81%)	301 (72%)	133 (81%)	76 (96%)	184 (64%)	124 (73%)	180 (74%)
Neutral		135 (14%)	46 (26%)	10 (11%)	26 (10%)	53 (13%)	25 (15%)	2 (3%)	33 (12%)	26 (15%)	49 (20%)
Factor at risk		109 (12%)	23 (13%)	2 (2%)	21 (8%)	65 (16%)	7 (4%)	1 (1%)	69 (24%)	19 (11%)	15 (6%)
Total		941 (100%)	176 (100%)	95 (100%)	253 (100%)	419 (100%)	165 (100%)	79 (100%)	286 (100%)	169 (100%)	244 (100%)
Problem for <i>us</i>		638 (68%)	121 (69%)	71 (75%)	185 (73%)	261 (62%)	129 (78%)	72 (91%)	166 (58%)	104 (62%)	167 (68%)
Neutral problem		182 (19%)	21 (12%)	15 (16%)	40 (16%)	106 (25%)	19 (12%)	1 (1%)	79 (28%)	44 (26%)	39 (16%)
Problem for <i>them</i>		121 (13%)	34 (19%)	9 (9%)	28 (11%)	52 (12%)	17 (10%)	6 (8%)	41 (14%)	21 (12%)	38 (16%)
Total		941 (100%)	176 (100%)	95 (100%)	253 (100%)	419 (100%)	165 (100%)	79 (100%)	286 (100%)	169 (100%)	244 (100%)

* Column percentages by framing criteria.

** The terms “alarm”, “chaos”, “drama”, “hell”, “moment”, “panic”, “problem”, “scenario”, “situation” and “tragedy” have not been accounted for when used in the media-texts with regard to concrete shipwrecks.

Table 5. The IDL and media solution of the problem (February through June 2011)*

Frames	Terms	Total	Time periods				Newspapers				
			<i>t1</i>	<i>t2</i>	<i>t3</i>	<i>t4</i>	<i>Abc</i>	<i>EM</i>	<i>EP</i>	<i>EPer</i>	<i>LV</i>
Risk factor	Abandon, accommodate, adapt, adjust, adopt, arrange, attend, avoid, benefit, bestow, billing, care, carry, clean, collect, compensate, confront, contain, control, cooperate, coordinate, create, cut, decongest, deliver, deport, detain, detect, dislodge, distribute, empty, Europeanize, evacuate, expel, export, facilitate, fight, force, forward, free, get rid of, give, go back, grant, guard, harden, help, host, ignore, implement, improve, integrate, intensify, intern, interrupt, issue, leave (<i>dejar</i> and <i>salir</i>), lift, lock, manage, modify, offer, open, organise, outsource, patrol, prevent, promote, protect, receive, recognize, (re)distribute, re-export, reform, refuse, reinforce, reinstate, reintroduce, reject, relieve, remove (<i>quitar</i> and <i>sacar</i>), re-open, repatriate, request, reset, restore, restrict, retouch, return, reverse, review, send, shake, shield, shut, solve, stop, strengthen, support, suspend, sweep, tackle, take, take in, take over, tolerate, transfer, treat, update, verify	797 (76%)	91 (65%)	72 (92%)	289 (81%)	345 (72%)	115 (82%)	105 (91%)	244 (65%)	131 (80%)	202 (77%)
Neutral		145 (14%)	30 (21%)	4 (5%)	35 (10%)	76 (16%)	16 (11%)	7 (6%)	65 (17%)	16 (10%)	41 (16%)
Factor at risk		113 (11%)	20 (14%)	2 (3%)	32 (9%)	59 (12%)	10 (7%)	3 (3%)	64 (17%)	16 (10%)	20 (8%)
Total		1.055 (100%)	141 (100%)	78 (100%)	356 (100%)	480 (100%)	141 (100%)	115 (100%)	373 (100%)	163 (100%)	263 (100%)
Solution of <i>our</i> problem		766 (73%)	79 (56%)	60 (77%)	298 (84%)	329 (69%)	101 (72%)	95 (83%)	241 (65%)	131 (80%)	198 (75%)
Neutral solution		128 (12%)	39 (28%)	6 (8%)	22 (6%)	61 (13%)	19 (13%)	10 (9%)	54 (14%)	17 (10%)	28 (11%)
Solution of <i>their</i> problem		161 (15%)	23 (16%)	12 (15%)	36 (10%)	90 (19%)	21 (15%)	10 (9%)	78 (21%)	15 (9%)	37 (14%)
Total		1.055 (100%)	141 (100%)	78 (100%)	356 (100%)	480 (100%)	141 (100%)	115 (100%)	373 (100%)	163 (100%)	263 (100%)

* Column percentages by framing criteria.

Table 6. Media framing of the IDL (February through June 2011)*

Frames	Total	Time periods				Newspapers				
		<i>t1</i>	<i>t2</i>	<i>t3</i>	<i>t4</i>	<i>Abc</i>	<i>EM</i>	<i>EP</i>	<i>EPer</i>	<i>LV</i>
Risk factor	69%	63%	78%	77%	63%	74%	88%	59%	67%	71%
Neutral	18%	25%	17%	13%	19%	18%	10%	17%	20%	21%
Factor at risk	14%	12%	5%	10%	19%	9%	3%	24%	14%	9%
Definition and solution of <i>our</i> problem	71%	63%	76%	79%	66%	75%	87%	62%	71%	72%
Neutral definition and solution	16%	20%	12%	11%	19%	13%	5%	21%	18%	14%
Definition and solution of <i>their</i> problem	14%	18%	12%	11%	16%	13%	9%	18%	11%	15%

* Column percentages by framing criteria. The averages of the four dimensions analyzed (tables 2 through 5) are presented.