

EDITORIAL POLICY IN THE OPINION AGENDA-SETTING OF A GENERAL INTEREST NEWSPAPER

Yulia Vladimirovna Kurysheva, Maria Olegovna Potolokova,
Anna Sergeevna Smoliarova, Sergey Borisovich Nikonov and
Svetlana Il'inichna Korenyushkina

The study analyzes the newspapers of general interest editorial stance. On the example of national daily "El Pais" the authors define the role of the editorial column as the main tool of the newspaper editorial policy expression. The analysis has taken into account themes, topics, diversity, geographic wideness, values highlighted in editorials. Sixty editorials were analyzed to determine the homogeneity or heterogeneity of the topics. El Pais editorial policy is reviewed in the framework of the Prisa media group professional policy and social mission as well as the El Pais Editorial code professional values. The results reveal the unbalanced proportions in political, social, cultural and economic themes, inconsistency of the list of countries in the opinion agenda to the positioning of the newspaper as a global issue, the predominance of national events in the editorial agenda.

Key words: editorials, editorial policy, El Pais, global newspaper, opinion agenda-setting

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century the news agenda has moved toward an entertainment side. Infotainment trend in media sphere was caused by the desire to simplify the great amount of the information, available for the audience with the help of traditional and new media. According to the democratic views on the media functions there is a contradiction between the objectivity and the newspaper own stance on the events. But the editorial policy has always existed. This is the essential and vital peculiarity of the mass media as an actor of communication. Furthermore, among the unlimited and the boundless information flow the audience needs clear guidelines. Consequently nowadays in times of the information overabundance the structural role of mass media is as important as never before. The editorial line of media analysis has become necessary, and the most important tool of the newspaper policy expression is the editorial column.

MAIN PART

Theoretical background

Scholars point out that newspapers are very influential social and political force (Franklin, 1999; Jeffs, 1999; Eilders Ch., 2000). It is clearly obvious that there are a lot of factors that may have prevented a newspaper from the implementation of its social task, from making a substantial contribution into the public awareness

* Saint-Petersburg State University, Russia, 199034, Saint Petersburg, Universitetskaya Naberejnaya, 7/9

about the surrounding reality. Many researches are trying to identify the functions of mass media in democracy. Most of the functions are normative and hardly measurable. The most important and stable one is the agenda-setting theory. One of its principal points is that it is independent from the normativity. The western culture of journalism assumes that mass media can take part in public communication in two roles, as a medium and as an actor. Taking into account that the main idea of journalism is to provide “the free exchange of information that is accurate, fair and thorough”, there is no restriction on editorial position in professional standards. Media are not only neutral information agencies, which provide a forum for other actors. They always take active part in political, social, economic and cultural life of society by different forms, such as by selecting and structuring information, placing emphasis, determining relevance, interpreting and evaluating the stream of events continuously taking place” (Eilders, 2000). There information power is significant on the national and international level as well (Nikonov, 2013, Nikonov & ed, 2015).

Journalists should act independently, should accurately work with facts and opinion, should provide objective information. But agenda-setting theory notices that complete objectivity is impossible. There are a lot of factors such as personal, social, political, cultural which influence the newspaper content. First of all it concerns the decision making about the news topics selection, then about the selection of facts, and finally - the opinion agenda. It is impossible to shape the actual and important information picture of the reality avoiding the responsibility of having your own clear opinion. That’s why the question of the newspaper editorial policy is so important. The only way of understanding and evaluation of the editorial policy is through analysis of mass media content. It is logical to assume that the main tool of a newspaper policy expression is the editorial. They are the strict channel of communication with the audience. And the empirical research of the newspaper editorials could help to understand the backgrounds of the mass media news agenda.

Despite the fact that the editorial is one of the most historically stable genres, there is not so much theoretical background. In the scientific field there are mostly empirical researches, based on agenda-setting theory and basic communication theories.

Editorial is usually an opinion text, and the tool of newspaper self-expression. It is usually defined as the unsigned text on the opinion pages. It has been considered as a “focal element in authoritative press”, but now it is still a source of relevant information in the opinion agenda and can be considered as an opinion text of institutional authorship (Sánchez and López Pan, 1998). Among others opinion newspaper genres an editorial shapes the newspaper ideology and builds a hierarchy in the newspaper.

News pages provide the audience with current information while the opinion writing is the result of news agenda rethinking. In contradistinction to features and

other opinion genres, which provide the editorial line indirectly by the means of content, editorial “is the text in which the newspaper openly engages in criticism and evaluation in the first person” (Teruel, 2012).

The aim of the editorial is to reflect and analyze current affairs from a newspaper point of view, facilitate awareness of the audience about the surrounding reality (Blanks, 2008; Ho & Quinn, 2009). Editorial shows “the identity of the big media and about certain trends in the system”.

While news articles report facts and relevant background, editorials reflect the news agenda and expresses and summarizes the editorial common interpretations of the issue under discussion, “editorials not only inform readers of the various elements comprising the issue but more significantly educate—if not persuade—on the merits of their point of view”. They explain the meaning of the news, interpret the facts, give the framework for key events (Filippi González, 1991).

In fact editorials cause the effect of journalistic mediation in public opinion construction.

It plays a determining role in the public opinion construction, in promoting social values and examples, in the interaction among newsmaker, journalists and the audience, “and influence social debate, decision making and other forms of social and political action” (Dijk, 1996; Le 2004; Murphy 2005).

Editorial is also called “leader” in Western journalism, it is a form of opinion discourse, made and initiated by a newspaper staff. An outstanding function of the editorials is in that they play a very important role in influencing policy and elite discourse... Some researches notice that the editorials not only draw boundaries in public opinion but also have a significant influence on political elite opinion (Dijk, 1991, Jeffs, 1999). But we suppose that such a hypothesis is hardly to be measured. Although editorials formulate and express opinions to the general public, they also “attack, defend, or give advice to the authorities” (Dijk, 1991, p. 134). Researchers propose to analyze the degree of credibility afforded to the specific topic, which means whether the submitted arguments have scientific background.

Dijk proposes a functional typology of editorial – three categories. The first functional category is “defining the situation”. It gives the opportunity to the editor to summarize the issue’s most important points, select defining facts and to develop how this issue should be discussed. The second functional category is “explanation and evaluation” – the editor gives the explanation of the event’s causes and gives the evaluation of the event according to the socially adopted rules and opinions. This is exactly the part where the editor reveals own position and identifies ideological opponents. The third category is “conclusion or moral”, where the editor defines what should be done about the issue. Or it may be left for the reader to draw conclusions. For example, the absence of any highly reported news topic in the editorial can show some skewness in the editorial policy, as well as the

quantity and the quality of expert sources cited in each text, the type of editorial, the tone of editorial.

Methods

The research is constructed on the analysis of the editorials published by the “El Pais” in comparison with the positioning of the newspaper’s values, aims and social role. The chronological period is one month. The empirical selection has collected quantitative data, focusing on themes, topics, diversity, geographic wideness, values highlighted. The examination of the selected articles focuses on the identification of the main issues, actors, territories and the degree of the diversity.

The samples have been accessed through the digital subscription of the newspaper. The selection was made in chronological order, all the editorials published since 1st of March till 1st of April 2016 were included. Total number of samples reviewed is 60.

Results

The daily “El Pais” is owned by the global media group Prisa, which defines itself as “the world’s leading Spanish and Portuguese-language media group”.

It promotes and implements its own vision and values. The core basement of all values is the commitment to the society.

El Pais as the leading news edition of Prisa was the first that admitted social values. From the very beginning in 1977 El Pais “has been committed to Spanish society, to defending and expanding democratic liberties, equality and civil rights for all”. These values taken by the El Pais thereafter were adopted by the whole media group. Now Grupo Prisa distributes the content in different fields of people’s life. It is presented in 22 countries, understand itself as market leader in press. Grupo Prisa is positioning itself as a socially responsible group, as a respectable actor of the information space. Here are the visions of the professional self-esteem: independence, responsibility, pluralism, defense of freedom, self-criticism, creativity, and attention to the concerns of the society, responsible efficient and sustainable management.

We have to discern two different editorial policies. The advocated one, that is presented in editorial ethic code. And the real one, that is obvious from the real newspaper position, which can be seen and felt by the audience from the news agenda and the editorials.

At a first glance at the analyzed texts there is an obvious difference between proposed and real editorial line. It can be seen according to three main points.

First of all it is the connection of the topic to political, economic, social or cultural interests. Secondly it is the question of “pluralism, attention to the concerns of the society” and agenda diversity. Thirdly it is the question of national, foreign, international and global themes proportion.

Proportional relationship of political, economic, social or cultural interests

Among other core values El Pais promotes “daily, accurate and complete” information. Daily is connected to the frequency of the publications. El Pais normally publishes two editorials in an issue. During the period under review there were 60 editorials. But the proportion of the articles on policy, social relations, culture and economy does not reflect El Pais core values. According to Grupo Prisa’s mission, which is defined as to contribute to the cultural development of individuals and the progress of society, we can suggest that El Pais policy should include cultural component. But the results of textual analysis show that there is an obvious imbalance in favor of the political and social themes. You can see on the chart that the number of political theme exceeds the others for over 50% (diagram 1).

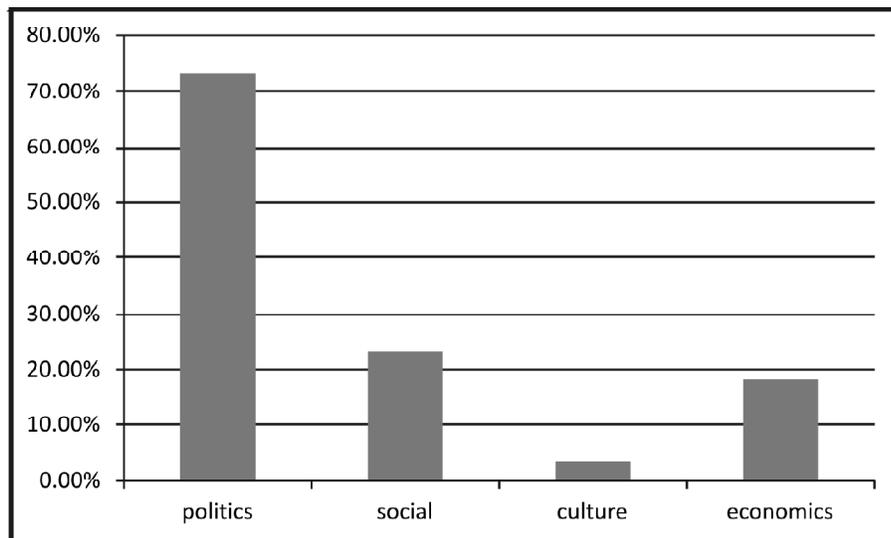


Diagram 1: Total amount of political, social, economic and cultural editorials in El Pais (%).

In the second place there are social editorials. Editorials on economic events are only in the third place by frequency. There were only two articles on cultural theme, less than 4% of total amount. Both were about a language conference in Puerto Rico. So, the editorial line of the newspaper is much politicized and gives little attention to the cultural development of Spain.

Pluralism, attention to the concerns of the society” and agenda diversity

The core elements of professional self-esteem: independence, responsibility, pluralism, defense of freedom, self-criticism, creativity, and attention to the

concerns of the society are closely connected with the diversity of the events under review.

Political theme represents by 44 editorials. They are mostly connected with political crisis in Spain 18 articles), acts of terrorism in Brussels and European strategy crisis (3 articles), European Union crisis (4 articles), Spanish antiterrorism policy (3 articles), political contradictions in Brazil (4 articles), migration policy in EU (3 articles), Donald Trump US presidential campaign (3 articles), US president Obama foreign visits (2 articles).

Other themes are revealed not more than once: Turkey geopolitical status, migrant policy of Germany (Angela Merkel's policy), EU and Turkey migration discussion, political process in Columbia.

Economic theme is 11 editorials. The leading question in this section is connected with Spain: Spain's tax policy (3 articles), Spain's investment policy (3 articles). Besides El Pais is interested in the economic situation in Argentina (2 articles). Other questions are covered only once: economic background of antiterrorism policy, tourism development, economic crisis in the European Union, in Spain and others.

Social theme is revealed in 14 articles. The most attention is given to the EU migration policy crisis and Syrian refugees (6 articles, almost a half of total amount). Other questions are very different and predominantly of national character: the level of juvenile delinquency in Spain, Spanish historical and political heritage, the level of traffic accidents in Spain, violence in Spain, crime in Spain, level of social welfare increase in Spain, etc.

Culture becomes the subject of attention only twice. Both times it is the International language conference in Puerto Rico.

National, foreign, international and global themes proportion

Among the values of Grupo Prisa are people, creativity, value quality and excellence, integrity, pluralism, connectivity, security.

El Pais functions in the framework of these values and personally points out some more. They are independence, social responsibility, plural democracy defense, and solidarity "at least in Western countries". There is a contradiction in connection with the global attribution of the newspaper. While Grupo Prisa's vision is to be the brand of reference worldwide, in culture and education in Spanish and Portuguese, El Pais editorial code pretends it is to be national and European newspaper, "attentive to the changes taking place in Western society". But on its front page El Pais labels itself as a global newspaper.

All editorials under review show that editorials are mostly national, foreign and international themes are translated rarely (diagram 2).

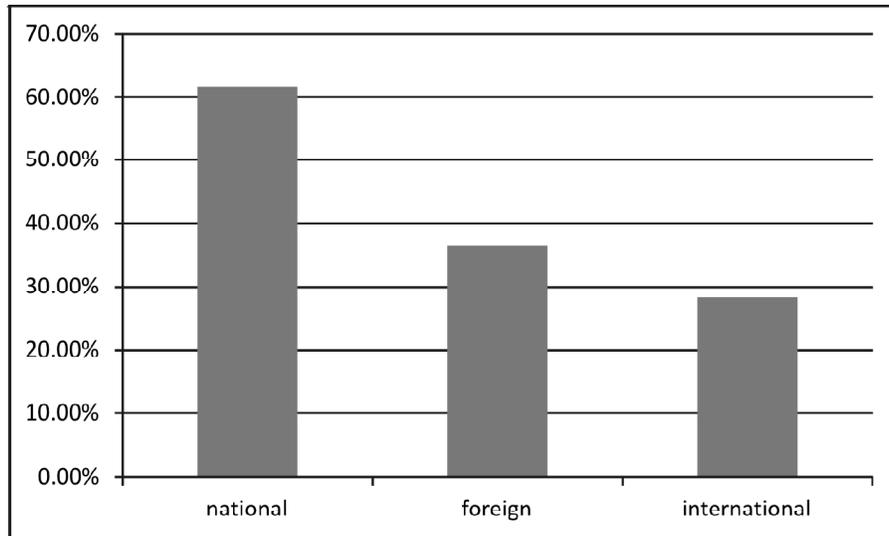


Diagram 2: Total amount of national, foreign and international editorials in El Pais (%).

Quantitative analysis of countries mentioned shows (Diagram 3) that El Pais doesn't cover all countries, announced by Prisa. Only seven of twenty two are in the editorials

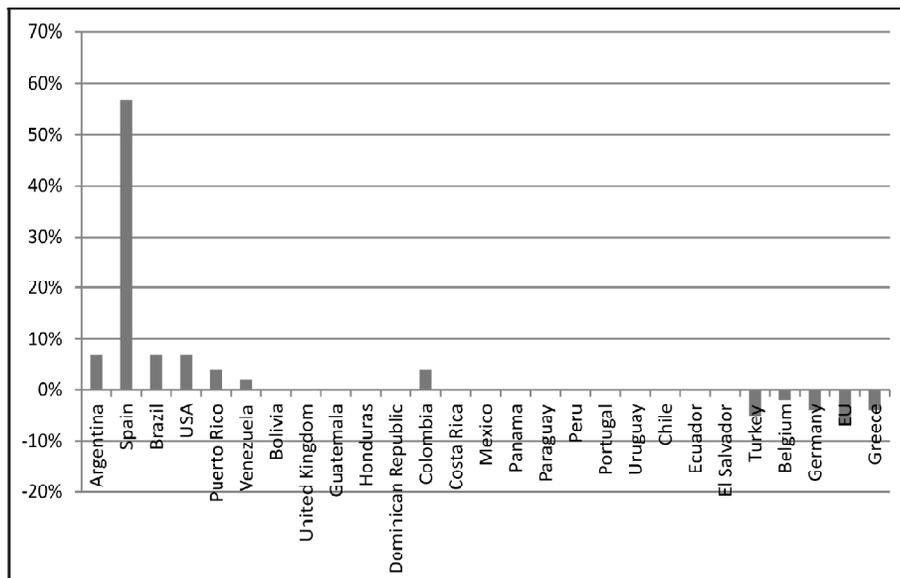


Diagram 3: Total amount of countries, mentioned by the El Pais in editorials (%).

Only seven countries of twenty two from Prisa group list are being covered, less than a half. They are Spain itself, Argentina, Brazil, the USA, Puerto Rico, Venezuela and Colombia. So fifteen countries have not been mentioned at all: Bolivia, the UK, Guatemala, Honduras, Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Chile, Ecuador, Salvador.

Another interesting observation is that, announced as global and promoted as western oriented in El Pais Code of ethics the newspaper is closer to the national events and cover the USA and South American countries with the same frequency as European. But taking in account the content analysis we have to admit that there is much more diversity in the South American countries covering while in relation to the EU and European countries El Pais covers limited number of topics at different angles.

CONCLUSION

The results demonstrate some obvious contradictions and mismatches between declared editorial policy and its realization. Data analysis shows that the declared values – such as complete information, pluralism, attention to the concerns of the society - are not completely implemented. El Pais editorial policy has a political angle, while social, economic and especially cultural themes are not so highlighted. Pluralism and attention to the concerns of the society are operationalized here as a diversity in the editorial agenda in themes and the quantity of points of view on the covered events. The results show that there is a random variety in the international events covered and there are some strict lines, which naturally have special attention and are under newspaper scrutiny. Global trend, declared by Grupo Prisa is in the contradiction with the El Pais Editorial Code, where the European values are on the first place. But the real editorial agenda shows, that newspaper has interests in the USA, Latin America politics and economy as well as the European ones.

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