

The Role of the News Media in Fighting Corruption Practices: A Case Study of Spain

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This article first outlines the conditions in which the media could contribute to creating and maintaining an atmosphere that discourages corruption practices. Second, based on the content analysis of 4361 online news articles, it demonstrates that these conditions are not present in the media coverage of corruption in Spain. The Spanish media do not promote a substantive frame, i.e., a meaningful discussion on the causes, consequences and remedies of corruption. There is a very low correspondence between how corruption is debated in the parliament, where substantive frames predominate, and how it is reported in the media. Furthermore, the media do not promote a pluralistic debate. The main players in corruption related articles are the judiciary and political actors, mainly executive elites and political parties involved in corruption scandals. Even though civil society actors, such as non-governmental organizations, are important for generating public pressure against corrupt practices, the results show that these groups go practically unnoticed in public debates. The findings also show that the dynamics that could help to curb corruption are neither present in the news articles of a news agency, nor in those published in newspapers with different political orientations.

Keywords: news framing; media coverage; news scrapping; content analysis; journalism; press accountability; substantive framing

Introduction

Extensive literature, including a number of reports from international organizations, has highlighted the role played by the media in creating an atmosphere that discourages corruption practices. Some of these studies follow a theoretical approach, emphasizing the role of the media in promoting good governance and controlling corruption (e.g., Johnston 1997; Staphenurst 2000). Others focus on determining the empirical relationship between the freedom of the press and corruption. Brunetti and Weder (2003) found evidence of a significant relationship between higher freedom for the press and less corruption in a large cross-section of countries. Freille, Emranul Haque, and Kneller (2007) tested, for all the countries included in the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) of Transparency International, the impact of press freedom on corruption, identifying crucial economic, political and legal restrictions on the media that lead to higher levels of corruption. Kalenborn and Lessman (2013) analysed the joint effect of democracy and press freedom on corruption in 170 countries and demonstrated that they are both complements rather than substitutes in controlling corruption practices (see also Chowdhury 2004). Based on a sample representing nearly all world regions, Camaj (2013) also demonstrated that the association between media freedom and corruption is stronger in countries with parliamentary systems than in those with presidential systems, and that this impact increases as judiciary independence increases.

The present study, unlike these previous analyses, is not oriented towards drawing conclusions on how and to what extent media can actually curb corruption. Rather, it explores how the topic of corruption enters the public debate and outlines the conditions that might help to explain the role played by the media in curbing corruption. It is argued that both a substantive and a pluralistic debate on corruption are necessary. There is a substantive debate when the media spreads knowledge about corruption causes, consequences and possible remedies (Entman 2004). As Kramer (2013, 70) argues, “the media has a responsibility to inform citizens in a way that not only provides oversight but also fosters meaningful debate about issues facing the state”. Media framing of corruption as entertainment poses a risk to the anti-corruption movement¹ by discouraging meaningful action against corruption,

¹ There is no agreed definition of what the anti-corruption movement is in the literature, but generally, it is used to refer to a network of organizations including civil society actors, like Transparency International,

dispiriting people who invest time in a cause that they can see as an unwinnable war (Kramer 2013). There is a pluralistic debate when a number of voices are allowed to speak in the media. As Mungiu-Pippidi (2013, 110) argues, “it is usually taken for granted that the media will serve as watchdogs for ethical universalism. We presume that press freedom works to control corruption by allowing a plurality of interests to manifest themselves openly in a society”. However, the literature has already demonstrated that certain socio-economic conditions undermine the effectiveness of watchdog journalism (Gerli, Mazzoni, and Mincigrucci 2018). In addition, although the existence of a critical mass of civil society organizations that favour a system of governance based on ethical universalism is important for combating corruption (Mungiu-Pippidi 2013), these organizations can hardly be effective if their voices do not reach public debates or they are themselves corrupt agents (Themudo 2013).

As there is little empirical research on this issue, this paper aims to determine whether these conditions are met in the media coverage of corruption in Spain. The analysis of Spain is relevant for two reasons. First, during the period in which the empirical data for this study were collected, Spain received a score of 57 in the CPI 2017, and was ranked 42nd out of 198 countries. This was the worst rating since 2012, when it was ranked 30th with a score of 652. There have been many contributions to explain why there is such a persistent situation of corruption in Spain (e.g., Jiménez 2009; Villoria 2015; Lapuente 2016). It is mainly defined as a problem related to the politicization of institutions, rather than due to regulatory failures and cultural traits. Therefore, curbing corruption would require deep institutional reforms, including, among others, the limitation of discretionary appointments and parliamentary immunity and the reform of public office and public administration. Spanish citizens are especially critical of their government’s efforts to fight corruption. Spain is the most critical of all EU member states (Transparency International 2016, 27) as 80% of Spaniards consider that the government does a bad job. A high percentage also consider that corruption is one of the top problems in the country, 40% on average during 2017, according

and/or international organizations, like the World Bank, that work to combat corruption (e.g. Sampson 2005).

² In the following years, the numbers improved with a ranking of 41st and a score of 58 in 2018, and ranking of 30th and a score of 62 in 2019.

to the Spanish Sociological Research Centre's (SRC) Barometer³. The use of corruption scandals as a political weapon in the Spanish Mediterranean media system, characterized by high levels of political parallelism (see Hallin and Mancini 2004; Chaqués-Bonafont and Baumgartner 2013), contributes to increasing public perceptions of corruption as a political problem (Palau and Davesa 2013). In this context, it is particularly relevant to explore further to what extent a particular media framing of corruption might contribute to discouraging corrupt practices. Second, the analysis of Spain is interesting because it was not included in the Anticorrp project (<http://anticorrp.eu/>), the most ambitious comparative analysis conducted so far on the media coverage of corruption. Since the methodology used to identify corruption related stories and some codebook questions are based on this project, our data could be used in future comparative research on the topic.

In the next section, the theoretical framework and hypotheses are developed based on framing and media-state relationship theories. Section 3 explains the methodology used to conduct the analysis, and lastly, the results are presented. The results of a content analysis of 4361 online news articles show that media coverage of corruption in Spain is neither based on a substantive frame nor promotes a pluralistic debate. The dynamics that might help to curb corruption are not present in either the news articles of a news agency (Europa Press) or in the considered partisan newspapers (El País and ABC). The article finishes with the conclusions and the directions for future research.

Theoretical framework

The fight against corruption should be conceived not merely as a matter of changing individual actions since it is not just the result of individual responsibility and moral ethic. Corrupt practices also depend on the external environment, including cultural factors and communicative frames that might encourage (or discourage) them. However, only a small number of studies have explored how corruption is represented in the media in specific countries (Di Tella and Franceschelli 2011; Fadaïro, Fadaïro, and Aminu 2014; Szántó, Tóth, and Varga 2012), and there are even less studies based on cross-national comparative analysis (Hajdu et al. 2018). Within this literature, there are also very few that specifically apply a

³ This percentage decreased down to 34% in 2018 and to 25% in 2019.

framing perspective and/or are oriented towards improving our understanding of framing effects (Berti 2018; Chen and Zhang 2016; Park 2016; Singer 2011; Zmolnig 2018). The main premise of the framing theory is that “an issue can be viewed from a variety of perspectives and be constructed as having implications for multiple values or considerations” (Chong and Druckman 2007, 104). Based on the typology introduced by Iyengar (1989), Park (2016) demonstrates that, when the media informs about corruption it mainly employs episodic and not thematic frames. The distinction is important because the use of a particular frame influences citizens’ perception of both the attribution of causal responsibility (i.e., who is causing the problem of corruption) and the treatment responsibility (i.e., what has to be done to solve the problem) (Iyengar 1989).

When an episodic frame is used to present an issue through individual stories, individuals are more likely to be blamed for a particular situation. As Park (2016) demonstrates, this might lead to the illusion that corruption is a personal responsibility and will disappear when the perpetrators are convicted. This type of coverage is common in societies with a tendency towards scandalizing the issue with a “politics as entertainment” depiction of corruption that contributes to trivializing a key political issue (Kramer 2013). Singer’s (2011) analysis on scapegoating as a mechanism of issue containment, illustrates that frames of this type suppress substantial public debate and policy reforms. However, when a thematic frame is used, stories depict the general conditions and context of a given issue, and the government and society as a whole are seen as responsible and consequently held accountable (Iyengar 1989). As Zmolnig (2018) argues, this type of frame is more likely to be associated with a more effective implementation of anticorruption measures and meaningful policy reforms. The media can only perform their role as mobilizing agents effectively if they report in thematic frames, contributing to an informed citizenry, motivating thoughtful public discussion, and encouraging public learning and participation in the political process (Norris 2001). An episodic frame could contribute to public ignorance about the basic facts of corruption, especially in societies in need of deep structural and regulatory reforms, reinforcing citizens’ incentives to engage in corrupt practices. As Mungiu-Pippidi (2006) argues, how the problem of corruption is socially constructed, whether citizens perceive their society to be characterized by particularistic or universalistic values, can have an impact on an individual’s decision to support a change in the rules of the game or, on the contrary, to engage in a

struggle to be part of the privileged group. Palomo and Villoria (2020) present the behavioural implications of this moral development and a causal model in the case of private-to-private corruption.

The idea of the media promoting thoughtful debate on the topic of corruption connects with the concept of substantive frames introduced by Entman (2004). Only if the media actively promote a frame oriented towards defining the problem, diagnosing causes, making value judgments, and suggesting remedies, will they contribute effectively to placing limits on corrupt behaviour. However, and despite the importance of the media framing of corruption, there is little literature that explores the circumstances under which different frames are likely to emerge. Some authors have emphasized the need to consider the routines of journalism and the symbiotic relationship that exists between the press and political elites (e.g., Bennett 2004, 2019; Entman 2004). Thoughtful debate might be discouraged because of market driven dynamics, which promote a focus on drama and personalization rather than abstract ideas and in-depth debates because these do not attract audiences (Bennett 2004). Blame for scandals is attributed mainly to individuals and not to institutions because this makes stories more attractive and easier to understand (Just and Crigler 2019). This gives the media the role of conveyors rather than as platforms that critically filter and analyse public problems and governmental actions (Arsenault and Castells 2006).

According to Entman (2004), substantive frames also respond to an exchange between political elites and the media. When substantive frames start at the top political level and reach cultural resonance, they tend to dominate political thinking and communication. Similarly, Bennett (2019) emphasizes that the media look to mainstream political elites as the source of most of the daily news they report. The media “index” the range of voices and debates in mainstream elite debate about a given topic, restricting diversity in the politically volatile “marketplace of ideas”. According to these approaches, a substantive debate on corruption would come to the forefront if it existed among mainstream elites, for example, as a result of a proposal for a new bill or parliamentary debates on the topic.

Alternatively, Mancini et al. (2017) emphasize the importance of considering the characteristics of media systems. In their comparative analysis of Italian, French and British newspapers, they argue that the Italian press, because of its political partisanship, tends to

emphasize and dramatize corruption cases involving domestic politicians and public administrators. Political parallelism and instrumentalization of the media lead to a more extensive coverage of corruption cases. This also results in extensive coverage of the judiciary processes of these cases: long, highly formal, complex trials that make the cases return to the front pages. The traditional weakness of investigative journalism in Italy leads the judiciary to occupy an important position within the media coverage. In addition, there is a strong focus on domestic politics, with Italian political figures and public administrators at the centre, whereas less attention is devoted to corporations and businessmen. The study of the Tangentopoli affair Giglioli (1996) has already illustrated that the political class is portrayed in corruption related stories as a corrupt, arrogant, dishonest cast isolated from and mistrusted by the people. More recently, Berti (2018), based also on case study research, explored media representation of corruption in Italy further, demonstrating that it is characterized by a widespread use of personifications and metaphors, with individuals framed as parts of systemic networks of corruption. Corruption is often externalized leading to a dilution of responsibility and accountability and, consequently, to a focus on anti-corruption strategies characterized by emergency measures, limitation and reparation of the damage, rather than effective prevention policies.

In French and British newspapers, distanced from the pluralistic Mediterranean media system model, media coverage of corruption does not involve the dramatization and instrumentalization that characterizes the Italian case, where there is a risk of increasing citizens' distrust in the government and political institutions in general (Mancini et al. 2017). According to the authors, this is the result of a well-rooted legacy of public administration ethos deriving from specific education and training that prevents the diffusion of corruptive behaviours, as journalists perceive the national administration and politics as more trustworthy and honest than those of other countries. French newspapers focus more on corruption involving business companies and foreign actors; however, they also cover cases involving domestic politicians, although their names appear more rarely than in Italy. In the UK, market segmentation and the fact that most newspapers have an international audience also explain their focus on business corruption and cases abroad. Sensationalist press also focuses on corruption cases in sports.

Finally, British newspapers put much more emphasis on covering anticorruption policies, emphasizing contextual factors and the role of the government and the public sector in fighting corruption. However, in Italy, with a predominant frame on corruption cases, anticorruption policies only come to the fore when a new law is being discussed. While in Italy political leaders are mainly associated with political scandals, in the UK they appear primarily in connection with the debate on domestic anticorruption policies and laws. The literature has connected these differences in the media framing of corruption with the actual levels of corruption in these different countries. A differentiated media coverage in the UK and France is possible because they have a “cleaner environment” (Mancini et al. 2017). This is also corroborated by the research conducted in New Zealand by Berti (2018), a country with very low levels of corruption and where an individual responsibility frame predominates but there is a common narrative of exceptionality of corruption and not a perceived generalization among politicians. Corrupt individuals are framed as posing a risk to the country’s integrity and an emphasis on the need to punish corrupt individuals persists.

Whether the media contribute to placing effective checks on corrupt behaviour depends on how stories are framed but also on the existence of a pluralistic debate, namely, whether the media allows a number of actors, and particularly those from civil society, to be heard in public debates. The impact of civil society actors on corruption has long been a question of interest in the literature. Some studies even demonstrate that they can create an environment that is propitious for corruption, being themselves agents or clients of corruption practices (see Gibelman and Gelman 2004 or Greenlee et al. 2007). Others argue that civil society actors can contribute to creating an atmosphere that discourages corruption practices, so one of the main hallmarks of anticorruption policies is the strength of civil society organizations (e.g., Goetz and Jenkins 2005; Grigorescu 2006). As Mungiu-Pippidi (2006) argues, the effective control of corruption requires credible actors to denounce it, actors that speak on the behalf of those who lose from the corruption practices. Civil society organizations could play a key role in this process. They can contribute to the coordination of anticorruption protests, apply pressure for governments to implement anticorruption policies and ensure that policy reforms are maintained over time. Therefore, it is crucial to know the specific mechanisms through which they contribute to effectively reducing corruption levels. Themudo (2013) demonstrates that what promotes the control of corruption is not the strength

of civil society by itself, but rather it is conditioned by a third variable: the existence of media freedom, i.e., the effectiveness of their strength depends on their capacity to go public. In countries with limited press freedom where civil society actors do not have the possibility to generate public pressure against a corrupt behaviour, this strength has no significant association with the level of corruption.

Although both a strong civil society and press freedom are needed, with a positive and statistically significant relationship (Themudo 2013), in order to know more about the specific mechanisms linking civil society and the media, it is necessary to further research two aspects. First, to what extent the media give effective voice to these actors, namely their media saliency. The empirical association between press freedom and a strong civil society does not necessarily involve these actors having access to the media agenda. Second, how civil society actors and their activities are framed in corruption related stories needs to be determined. Civil society effectively contributes to combatting corruption by raising a substantive debate on the topic, promoting the diffusion of universalistic values, revealing the risks that corruption involves for the wellbeing of societies and contributing to overcoming collective action problems associated with corruption. To the best of our knowledge, no research has yet explored the saliency of civil society compared to other political actors or the extent to which they are portrayed as agents (or clients) of corruption or as agents conducting activities to combat it.

Consequently, if the media can contribute to placing effective checks on corrupt behaviours it is expected that, first, they promote a substantive frame: corruption related stories would identify the causes and the consequences, and propose remedies to control and reduce corruption practices. Second, the media would promote a pluralistic debate on the topic allowing a number of actors, including those from civil society, to have a say in corruption related debates. These hypotheses are tested in the next section through the Spanish case study.

Data and methodology

The analysis is based on 4361 free-access online-news articles published between January 2017 and February 2018. Since the production of traditional newspapers is increasingly dependent on press agencies (Gelado-Marcos 2009; Czarniawska-Joerges 2011) the Spanish private news-agency Europa Press⁴ was selected as the main source (2750 news items). Europa Press is a private news agency founded in 1957 that has gained a reputation of political independence and covers the news stories that Efe (a state-run agency) does not dare to cover because of its political ties (Barrera and Apezarena 2013). A priori, it has a model of independency that should not be subjected to political influences that are present in other press agencies and private newspapers in Spain. To examine whether the media coverage of corruption of this agency differs from traditional newspapers, subjected to patterns of political parallelism, a sample of free-access stories published in two main newspapers with different political orientations, El País (left-oriented) and ABC (right-oriented) with 814 and 797 news items, respectively, were also collected and coded.

To identify corruption related stories we considered eight keywords from the Anticorrp project: corruption (corrupción), bribe (soborno), fraud (estafa), collusion (colusión), clientelism (clientelismo), embezzlement (malversación), favouritism (favoritismo), nepotism (nepotismo)⁵. The free-accessed stories were collected using a scrapping process and natural language processing filtering techniques (De la Orden, Palomo, and Figueroa-Domecq 2017; Montalvo, Palomo, and de la Orden 2018, 2010; Palomo and Montalvo 2011).

A codebook of about 26 variables was designed in order to extract information from the news items⁶. The human coding procedure followed a highly systematic and supervised

⁴ Europa Press is a private news agency founded in 1957 that has gained a reputation of political independence and a recognition of capitalizing on the stories that Efe (a state-run agency) does not dare to cover because of its political ties (Barrera and Apezarena 2013)

⁵ In italics the translated version of Anticorrp's keywords, adapted to the Spanish journalistic style. We used all the Anticorrp keywords with the exception of "kickback" since on its Spanish translation (Comisiones) led too many false positives.

⁶ The codebook can be provided upon request to the authors. The 26 variables were defined according to the research goals, mainly oriented towards identifying whether a substantive debate exists and to test the plurality of the debate, with a number of questions oriented towards collecting information regarding the characteristics of actors involved in corruption related stories. A number of questions oriented towards providing descriptive information were also included, including the type of article, the topic of the article, the type of corruption reported, the sector where corruption occurs and the status of the corruption case.

mechanism. It was performed by three independent coders who were trained to have an appropriate understanding of the codebook. The intercoder reliability scores were high, with observed agreement that ranged from 75% to 98%, and a kappa coefficient in the range (0.595, 0.786) with p-values < 0.016 for all the variables, indicating substantial to almost perfect agreement (Kraemer 1980). Those with lower rates were eliminated or redefined until reaching acceptable levels of reliability. After coding all the news items, 268 stories were false positives, most of them associated with keywords such as fraud, scam, conspiracy and corruption of minors, hence stories not related to public corruption. Finally, since in 1643 news items (40.14%) the associated keywords were accidentally mentioned in the story, the analysis was based on the 2450 news items (63.27% Europa Press, 18.82% El País and 17.92% ABC) in which corruption was found to be the main topic of the story.

We used Entman's approach to empirically analyse whether the media coverage of corruption corresponds to a substantive frame. Each story was coded according to whether it identified: (1) the causes of corruption (and if so the actor that it identifies as the cause); (2) the solutions for controlling or reducing corruption (and the actor associated with each proposed solution); (3) the consequences of the corruption (and the actor that identifies them); and (4) whether the stories used metaphors (corruption as a cancer for democracy, a plague, etc.) It is relevant to explore the use of metaphors, as Bratu and Kažoka (2018) argue since they are mainly used in editorials and when corruption is described as a general phenomenon to introduce concreteness and corporality to the abstract concept of corruption. As far as they imply how, when and with what instruments this phenomenon is prevented, they are an appropriate tool for social mobilizations but also "an unreliable and risky instrument for journalists who try to use corruption related metaphors for accurate and comprehensive news reporting" (Bratu and Kažoka 2018:69).

To determine the presence of a pluralistic debate, we applied a methodological approach in two steps, based on the media saliency of actors. First, for each story, the actor that initiates it was identified, considered the main actor of the story. For example, in the following story "The French police arrests Le Pen bodyguard accused of corruption", the police are the main

These last questions, oriented towards collecting descriptive information, were based on questions used by the Anticorrp project.

actor of the story. A specific coding category was used in order to identify those stories when it was not possible to identify who initiated them, or when they were initiated by two or more actors. The actor's capacity to initiate corruption related stories was used as a proxy of their capacity to influence corruption debates. Second, all the actors that were mentioned somewhere in the entire text of the story were coded; including executive elites (President and members of the Government), political parties, the police and members of the judiciary and organizations from civil society (including actors like non-governmental organizations, labour unions, professional associations, foundations, community or religious groups). It was also coded whether civil society, the judiciary or the police were reported as actors involved in a corruption scandal or, alternatively, as conducting activities oriented towards combating or making corruption visible; whether the stories mention that these actors have connections with particular political parties or political actors; and whether they include positive or negative evaluations about how these actors conduct their activities.

Finally, in order to explore whether the media coverage of corruption is related to how the topic is debated among mainstream political elites, all the parliamentary initiatives on corruption presented in the Spanish Parliament during the same period (January 2017–February 2018) were analysed. This included a total of 99 initiatives: 1 parliamentary bill, 3 interpellations, 21 parliamentary questions (12 oral questions introduced in Plenary meetings and 9 written questions), 3 interpellations, 6 executive parliamentary appearances in the plenary, 13 executive appearances in parliamentary committees, 19 appearances of public officials and authorities, and 28 appearances of other persons in parliamentary committees; 2 report requests, and 3 motions. The data were obtained from Q-Dem databases (www.q-dem.com) (Chaqués-Bonafont, Palau, and Baumgartner 2015) and the website of the Congreso de los Diputados (www.congreso.es).

The following section provides a general description of the type of corruption reported in the Spanish media and analyses whether or not there is a substantive and a pluralistic debate.

Media framing of corruption: is there a substantive debate?

In terms of the type of reported corruption news, most news items (66.34% of the total) refer to grand/political corruption involving decision makers. Only 5.69% refer to petty corruption, involving corruption that takes place at the implementation end of politics, where the public officials meet the public. Business corruption represented 10.50%. In 17.47% of stories, it was not possible to identify the type of corruption according to this three-type category, mainly because they deal with corruption as a general phenomenon or anticorruption policy proposals, and where the main actors are police or legal actors. Considering the differences among sectors, corruption stories mainly concentrate on the public administration and public sector (43.91%), construction and real estate activities (11.33%), political parties' activities (11.33%), water supply/sewerage (3.68%), sports (3.15%), financial activities (2.54%) and arts, entertainment and recreation (2.49%), among others.

The stories are mainly (64.11%) about corruption in Spain (among them, 42.04% concentrated on corruption at a regional level, 16.3% at a local level and 5.77% at a state level); however, contrary to what Mancini et al. (2017) reported for Italy, a large percentage is also devoted to corruption abroad. Furthermore, contrary to what happens in the UK, the focus is on corruption that affects non-European countries (29.90% of the total stories), mainly Latin American countries. Brazil, a country where official corruption has deep roots, with 60% of the members of Congress facing some sort of criminal investigation in 2016 (see Crandall 2018), leads the ranking with 23.58% of the corruption stories, followed by Peru (14.23%) and Colombia (8.40%), and outside Latin America, South Korea (15.99%). Given the economic and commercial ties between Spain and Latin American countries, the media might be oriented, as in the UK when corruption in European countries is reported (see Mancini et al. 2017), towards providing information about levels of corruption abroad for economic actors willing to invest in foreign countries.

Regarding the presence of a substantive frame in the media coverage, it was found that in those stories where corruption is the main topic, only 28 stories (1.14% of the total) identified the causes of corruption; 148 stories (6.04%) proposed solutions, and 150 stories (6.12%) reported consequences (see Figure 1). Among those news items focused on a corruption case, only 14 (0.8%) reported causes of corruption, 105 news items (6.03%)

reported consequences, and 31 (1.78%) reported solutions. Few differences are found among media outlets, only El País reported a slightly higher percentage of stories on solutions to corruption problems compared to ABC and Europa Press, see Figure A1 in the Annex. Surprisingly, stories in which the causes and consequences of corruption are identified, or where solutions are proposed, do not prevail in editorials (1%) or opinion articles (11%) but rather in news articles (88%).

-Figure 1 near here-

The causes of corruption identified the most are deficits in the institutional design and the regulatory framework (43% of stories identifying causes); client relationships between the political and the economic power (29%), human nature (18%) and cultural factors (14%). The debate on the causes of corruption is almost non-existent and, when it arises, 50% refers to stories abroad, mainly in Latin American and Asian countries. Furthermore, in 71% of the cases, the actors that identify the causes are journalists or civil society actors. Members of parliament, political parties and governmental actors do little to promote the debate on the causes (12%).

Regarding the stories proposing solutions to combat corruption (62.5% focused on the national level), the main identified solution is the reform of the regulatory framework and the need to improve transparency (35.14%). Only 97 news items (3.85% of the total corruption stories) were found to refer to issues related to anticorruption regulation, law and policy proposals (see Figure 2). The second most relevant identified alternative to combat corruption refers to increasing the resources and the efficiency of the judiciary or the police (8.78% of the total stories that identify solutions to corruption). A total of 11.03% refer to actions for promoting the visibility of corruption as a political problem. In terms of the actors that identify the solutions, there are 38 news items (24.52%) that identify members of parliament, 35 news items (22.58%) that identify political parties, 30 news items (19.35%) that identify governmental actors, and 15 (9.68%) that identify civil society. Interestingly, as Table 1 shows, neither governmental actors (21.43%) nor political parties (17.35%) take the lead on debates related to the regulatory framework, instead this is mainly driven by members of parliament (35.71%). This could be, as explained above, because during the analysis period the executive did not introduce any executive bills for passing new regulations on the

topic; however, opposition parliamentary groups and more specifically *Ciudadanos* took the lead by introducing a parliamentary bill discussed throughout 2017.

-Figure 2 near here-

-Table 1 near here-

In terms of the news items that contemplate the consequences of corruption, 99 news items (55.00%) refer to the political consequences, 37 news items (20.56%) to economic consequences and 35 (19.44%) to the social consequences of corruption. A variety of actors identify the consequences of corruption, mainly journalists (31.82%), political parties (11.04%), governmental actors (10.39%), members of parliament (9.74%), civil society organizations (7.79%), legal actors (5.84%), economic actors (1.95%), public agencies and organisms (1.95%) and public civil servants (1.30%).

Finally, only 108 stories (2.64%) include references to metaphors or moral judgments, with ABC (3.17%) and El País (2.71%) slightly above the average. Furthermore, eight metaphors were identified in stories that report causes of corruption, 13 that include a metaphor and solutions, and 29 with a metaphor and consequences. Therefore, proportionally it is more probable to find metaphors in stories that identify causes (28.57%) or consequences (19.46%) of corruption than when solutions are presented (8.84%).

Overall, it can be concluded that media coverage of corruption in Spain is not based on a substantive frame. When these results are contrasted with how the topic is discussed among mainstream political elites, following the ideas of media-state relations, important differences can be found. As it could be expected, corruption is mainly discussed in the parliamentary arena regarding policy solutions (47% of the total initiatives, while only 6.04% of media stories included solutions, as mentioned above). However, the percentage of parliamentary initiatives that refer to corruption scandals (without any reference to the causes, consequences or solutions) is also significant (37%). Although it is far from the 69% of stories that focus on corruption cases in the media (see Figure 2) this illustrates the importance of the topic in parties' parliamentarian competition. Most of these initiatives on corruption cases come to the forefront in parliamentary control sessions, mainly through oral questions introduced in plenary meetings, which reach high public and media visibility. On the contrary,

parliamentary hearings and committee work are proportionally more devoted to discussing policy-making related activities. The data illustrate the difference between how the topic of corruption is discussed by the media and how it is discussed by the mainstream political elites, as the media have a clear bias towards scandalization.

In order to further explore these differences, Figure 3 shows, with respect to the total over the analysis period, the monthly percentage of parliamentary initiatives and percentage of media stories mentioning policy-making initiatives (solutions) to combat corruption. The results illustrate that media and parliamentary debates follow a quite different dynamic, and only the positive correlation (0.72) between ABC and Europa Press (p-value 0.0033) was statistically significant. For example, most parliamentary initiatives passed in February 2017, during a peak of parliamentary attention to corruption, are related to parliamentary appearances taking place in the Parliamentary Committee on the Quality of Democracy created in 2016. These appearances and generally the activity of this Committee went totally unnoticed in the media. Similarly, between September and November 2017, a parliamentary bill introduced by *Ciudadanos* in 2016 to combat corruption was discussed and amended in the parliament including a number of hearings that involved several experts and academics on the subject. Although this was an important regulation on which political parties, public authorities and members from civil society set their position on the topic, the discussions did not reach significant media attention in any of the media outlets under analysis. Events outside the parliamentary arena, for example, the so-called “tramabus”⁷, mainly captured the media’s attention, and it was reported as a solution in April 2017.

Figure 3 near here

As Figure 4 shows, there is a slightly higher correspondence between parliamentary initiatives and media stories mentioning corruption cases. Correlations between the parliamentary initiatives and the media were found to be positive: ABC (0.3), El País (0.41) and statistically significant for Europa Press (0.61, p-value = 0.0198). The correlation among these three considered sources was found to be high (between 0.84 and 0.94) and statistically

⁷ The “tramabus” is a commercial bus promoted by the far left (*Podemos*) party showing large images of politicians condemned for corruption on its sides that drove around Spanish cities with the aim of giving visibility to corruption scandals.

significant. Interestingly, in the Parliament, there was a high concentration of particular corruption cases that obtained attention mainly because opposition parties presented parliamentary questions and requested appearances in relation to corruption cases that affected the executive (and their party, mainly the Popular Party during the period under analysis). However, in the media, there was a much more fragmented coverage with a large variety of cases being reported and discussed in news articles. Media coverage of corruption scandals illustrates, as demonstrated by previous research (see, for example, Palau and Davesa 2013), patterns of media political parallelism. The next section explores to what extent this also has an effect on the plurality of the debate, namely on who is allowed to speak in corruption related stories.

Figure 4 near here

The plurality of media coverage: who influences corruption debates?

As expected, by allowing a number of actors, especially those from civil society, to have a say in public debates on corruption, the media could act as an effective check on corrupt behaviour. Our data shows that only 1.11% of corruption related stories give information about anticorruption activities conducted by civil society actors, ranging from public demonstrations against corruption to publishing reports or submitting parliamentary petitions. Considering the total number of stories on corruption, it is observed that the visibility of civil society actors in corruption related stories is very low. As Table 2 shows, only 3.46% of corruption related stories are initiated by civil society actors. When considering whether they are mentioned in the text of the story, the percentage still remains very low (4.02%). As Table 1 illustrates, civil society actors are the main actors of stories that inform about anticorruption activities (71.43%); however, they are not relevant in other cases, such as when corruption is addressed as a general phenomenon (5.36%) or when law and regulation is discussed (4.08%). Data for the different media outlets can be found in Tables A1 and A2 in the Annex. Although there are slight differences, the conclusions are equivalent. These results contrast with the high participation of civil society organizations in parliamentary appearances where policy making measures are discussed. For example, when

the bill introduced by *Ciudadanos* was discussed in the parliament, 58% of the total appearances involved civil society actors.

-Table 2 near here-

As discussed in the theoretical section, one of the main questions regarding civil society actors is whether they contribute to creating an atmosphere that discourages corruption or they are themselves reported as actors involved in corruption scandals. As Table 2 indicates, when all the actors involved in corruption scandals are considered, civil society represents only 3.52%, and they are mainly reported as conducting activities to make corruption visible. Of the total number of stories mentioning a civil society actor, 44.73% of them refer to the publication of reports or conferences conducted by NGOs, labour unions or public demonstrations against corruption. A total of 38.41% report civil society actors involved in corruption scandals. In 16.86% of the cases they are associated with other types of activities. Generally, stories where a civil society actor is mentioned do not include a moral evaluation of how they conduct their tasks (83.90%); however, if an evaluation is present, it is negative in 81.82% of cases.

It is also common that the media reports on civil society actors as having some type of connection with political parties (43.20%), governmental actors (17.16%), economic actors (8.88%), legal actors (4.14%) and, to a lesser extent, with members of parliament (2.37%) or other civil society actors (1.18%). This is important because explicit references to political connections may undermine their credibility as agents against corruption. The low salience of civil society actors is not surprising giving the weakness of the civil society in Spain (e.g., Encarnación 2003) and also because most corruption-related stories refer to corruption cases (69.35% of the total corruption stories). Furthermore, the predominance of corruption cases leads to legal actors, mainly members of the judiciary, being the actors that more frequently initiate corruption stories. As Table 2 shows, legal actors initiate 31.68% of stories on corruption. When a member of the judiciary is mentioned, in 93.07% of the cases they are associated with conducting activities to combat corruption (trials, initiation, court decision, etc.). They are rarely (0.83%) reported as actors involved in corruption cases. In 92.54% of these stories mentioning a legal actor no evaluation of their task is reported, but when present, in 88.64% of cases, it is in a negative way. Legal actors, contrary to civil society actors, are

rarely (2.09%) reported as having connections with other actors (51.22% with governmental actors, 29.27% with political parties, 7.32% with public agencies and organisms, 4.88% with other legal actors, civil society and economic actors, respectively, and 22.44% with members of parliament).

Following legal actors, those that most frequently initiate corruption related stories are governmental actors (18.36%). Table 2 shows that governmental actors are also those more frequently involved in corruption cases (31.27% of the total), followed by economic actors (25.14%), public agencies and organisms (9.80%), political parties (7.50%), public officials (4.15%), civil society organizations (3.52%), members of parliament (3.43%), legal actors (1.25%), police (1.09%), and international actors (0.27%). These results are consistent with citizens' perception of politicians and businessmen as the most corrupt actors (a SRC's poll in 2018 reported that 70% of citizens consider corruption as widely extended among politicians, and 31.2% among businessmen). Members of the parliament (MP) are those most associated with stories on issues related to legislation and changes in the regulatory framework (35.71%). This is consistent with data on the parliamentary arena where, as explained above, opposition MPs take the lead.

Regarding political parties, the party most frequently associated with corruption is the Popular Party (PP), at all levels of government (12.73% at national level, 62.28% at regional level and 46.52% at local level). This is because most corruption cases that came to light during this period were related to the conservatives. The data are also consistent with citizens' perception of the conservatives as the political party least capable of dealing with political corruption (in a SRC poll conducted in May 2016, only 9% considered the PP capable of dealing with corruption). The socialist party (PSOE) and communist party (*Podemos*) were perceived as the parties most competent to deal with the corruption problem (with 17.2 and 13% respectively). In all three media outlets analysed, the PP is the party most associated with corruption (50% of stories on corruption cases mention the PP in *El País*, 48% in *Europa Press* and 49% in *ABC*). This is consistent with previous literature which has already illustrated that while media coverage of corruption strongly illustrates patterns of political parallelism in the Spanish media system, newspapers pay attention to corruption cases that involve their political allies in order to keep their credibility (see Palau and Davesa 2013).

Discussion and Concluding Overview

This paper first outlines the circumstances under which the media can contribute to creating appropriate conditions to effectively face corruption practices. It has been argued that a substantive frame and a pluralistic debate are necessary. Second, it explores to what extent these conditions are met in the media coverage of corruption in Spain. The results show that media stories identifying corruption causes, consequences and solutions are almost inexistent. Furthermore, a pluralistic debate does not exist. In light of these results, the following questions are raised: Is there room for learning? What should the focus be for future research on the topic?

First, although descriptive, the results provide systematic empirical information that raises serious concerns regarding the role of the Spanish media as mobilizing agents and civic forums, functions they need to fulfil to guarantee the quality of democracy (Norris 2001). Corruption is a salient topic: Spanish citizens consider it to be among the most important problems in Spain. However, there is no open public debate including a plurality of actors and contrasting policy proposals on how to combat it. Rather, stories on corruption scandals predominate, and therefore the public debate is monopolized by judiciary and political actors associated with mediatized corruption cases. Even when a voice is given to civil society actors it is mainly to provide information about anticorruption activities and to make corruption visible. Moreover, the visibility of civil society actors in corruption-related stories is very low. There is also a very low correspondence between how the topic of corruption is debated in the parliament and how it is reported in the media, especially regarding policy solutions. The Spanish media give very low saliency to the parliamentary processing of corruption-related bills and parliamentary committee work on the topic, which is precisely where parties set their positions, and substantive frames are likely to emerge. Existing research illustrates that the media report on highly salient parliamentary initiatives, such as passionate plenary control questions or the passing of a new law (see Chaqués-Bonafont, Palau, and Baumgartner 2015 for the Spanish case). Our results show that other types of parliamentary initiatives that have an important role in encouraging public learning and participation are largely ignored.

Second, an obvious limitation of this research is its case study nature. It would be necessary to explore, using the same methodology, whether, in countries with a cleaner environment, namely those with lower levels of corruption, the media coverage is characterized by a more pluralistic debate, with more visibility for civil society actors. How the media frames corruption has already been explored in other media systems; however, little is known about the plurality of debates in other countries. More comparative research on the topic would also help to better explore under what circumstances substantive debates are likely to predominate in the media. Results indicate that motivations for the Spanish media to cover corruption are close to those already identified by the Anticorrp project in other countries, like Italy –also with a Mediterranean media system– where high levels of corruption plus the instrumentalization of the media explain the intense coverage of corruption scandals (Mancini et al. 2017). However, our research demonstrates that a scandal-based coverage is not exclusive to traditional partisan media but also characterizes an independent news agency. Consequently, it is necessary to move beyond explanations related to patterns of political parallelism and the partisanship of audiences, including more structural market driven dynamics of journalism, to account for the results. News agencies' business is focused on writing and distributing news to their clients (among others, newspapers, radios and televisions) and, therefore, they are driven by the selling opportunity, and scandal-based coverage clearly sells better. Market related variables could explain why our conclusions fit also those reached in countries with totally different media systems, like USA or Indonesia, where episodic frames and a “politics-as-entertainment” approach predominate (Park 2016; Kramer 2013). To further explore media coverage in other types of media outlets, for example, local newspapers and/or economic press, which potentially can provide access to other types of actors and use different frames, would also contribute to shedding more light on this question.

Third, an important question for future research is to determine to what extent the lack of a substantive debate in online news articles is compensated by debates on corruption that take place on social media. Do Twitter, Facebook or other social media contribute to a more substantive debate on the topic? Do civil society organizations use social media to bypass the gatekeeping power of online and traditional newspapers? A question recent research aims to explore in relation to this topic is whether social media work by extending political

communication to non-elites. The debate is whether online challenger actors emerge, promoting counteractivities against established elites and institutions or, on the contrary, social media further promote the publication of sensationalist, extreme and personal information encouraged by the predominance of brief messages and the character limitations of some of the platforms (see Tumber and Waisbord 2019).

Finally, more empirical evidence is needed to explore whether there is a causal relationship between how corruption is framed in the media and individual behaviour, namely to what extent a substantive and more plural debate would effectively discourage corruption practices. This question can only be addressed with an experimental research design. How individual citizens attribute responsibility, identify causes and propose solutions is not only affected by the information they gather from the media. The impact of the media has to be contrasted with consideration for alternative explanatory variables, which would require identifying characteristics at an individual level and other contextual variables that might influence citizen's decisions to engage or not in corrupt behaviours.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1. Main actor of the story in different types of corruption related stories (all news)

Main actor of the story	Stories on anticorruption activities conducted by NGO's	Stories on issues relate to law/regulatory framework	Stories with corruption as general phenomenon	Stories on corruption cases
Legal actor	0.00%	4.08%	8.21%	37.68%
Governmental actor	3.57%	21.43%	20.36%	20.77%
Political parties	7.14%	17.35%	26.43%	9.54%
Member of parliament	7.14%	35.71%	17.14%	6.22%
Policemen or police organizations	7.14%	0.00%	1.07%	4.69%
Economic actors	0.00%	2.04%	2.50%	8.72%
Civil society	71.43%	4.08%	5.36%	2.62%
Others	3.58%	15.31%	18.93%	9.76%

Table 2. Visibility of actors in corruption related stories (all news)

	Main actor of the story	Other actors mentioned along the text of the story	Actors involved in corruption cases (as agents or clients of corruption)
Legal actor	31.68%	25.16%	1.25%
Governmental actor	18.36%	14.34%	31.27%
Political parties	10.97%	9.12%	7.50%
Member of parliament	8.41%	5.51%	3.43%
Policemen or police organizations	9.20%	6.49%	1.09%
Economic actors	7.19%	7.13%	25.14%
Civil society	3.46%	4.02%	3.52%
Public agencies and organisms	3.11%	5.60%	9.80%
Others	7.62%	22.63%	17.00%

Figure 1. Percentage of stories mentioning the causes and consequences of corruption and proposing solutions

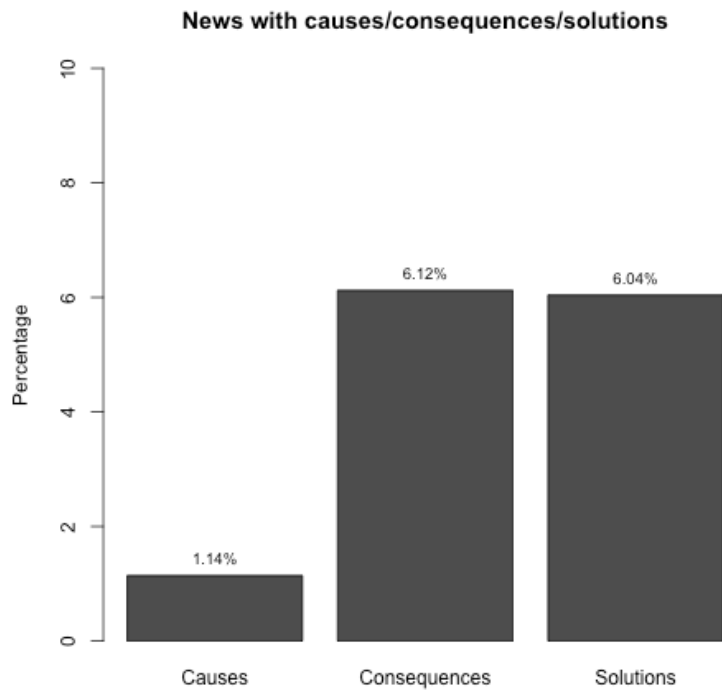


Figure 2. Main topic of corruption related stories

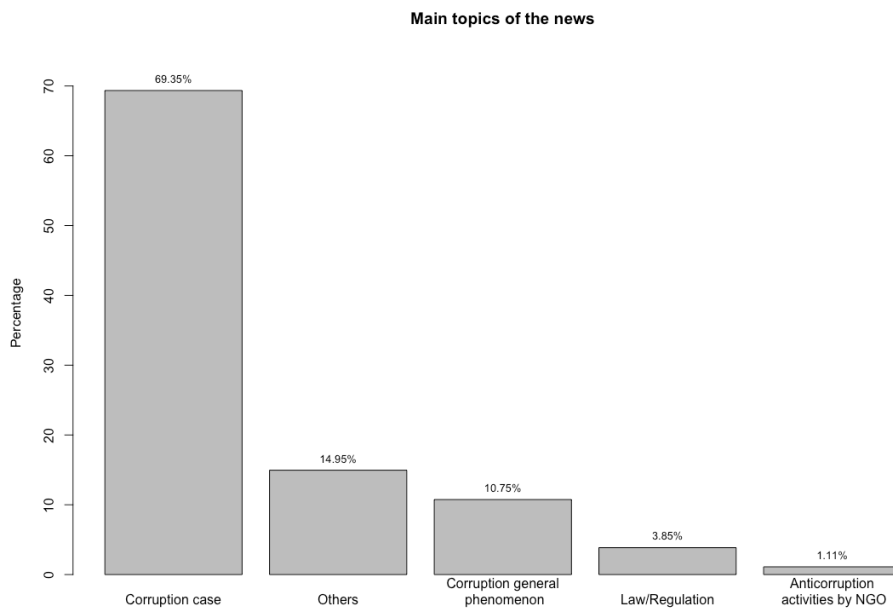


Figure 3. Percentage per month of stories and parliamentary initiatives mentioning solutions to combat corruption

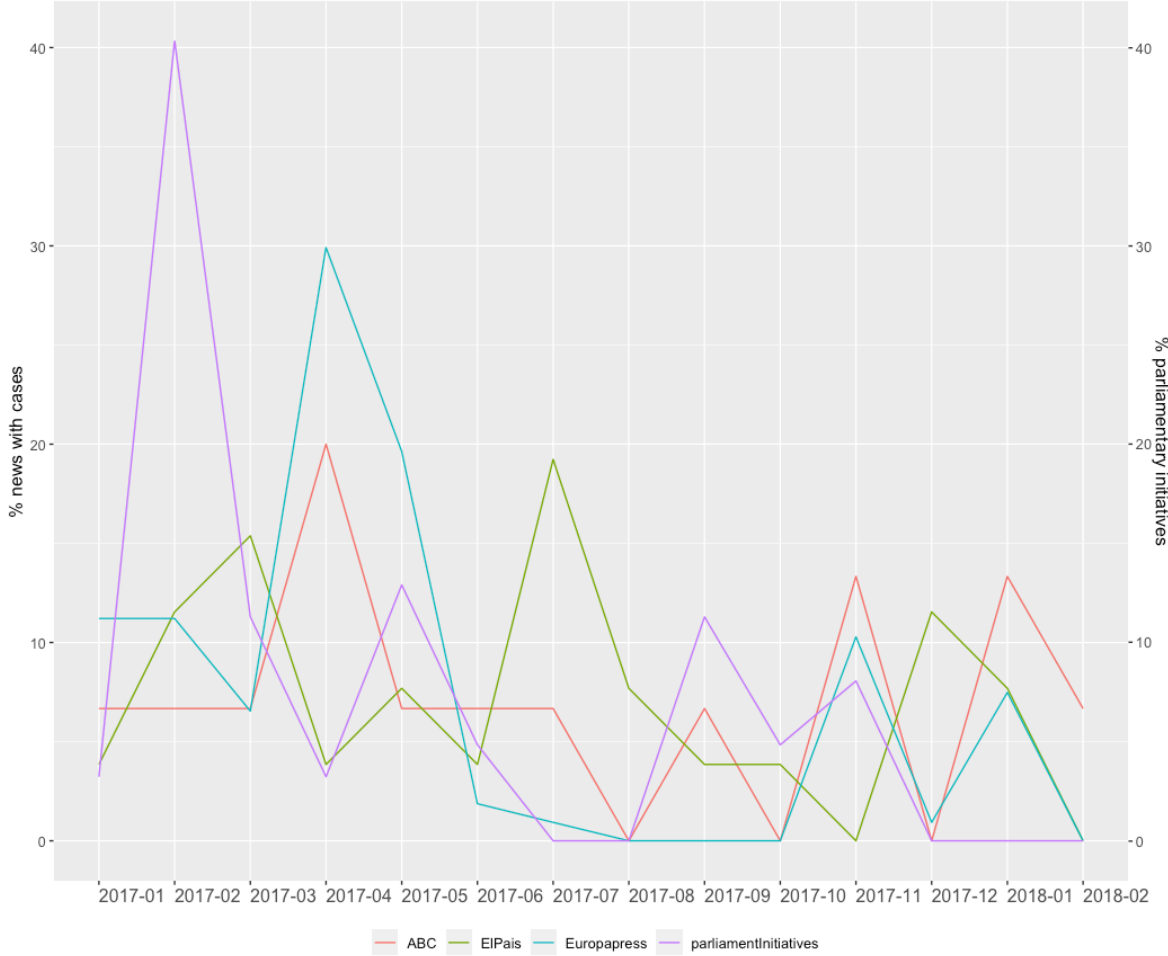


Figure 4. Percentage per month of stories and parliamentary initiatives mentioning corruption cases

