

Erasing alternatives: grassroots in Spanish media coverage

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Abstract

Grassroots and social movements play an important role in current societies as a way of political expression apart from citizen participation in political elections. Their influence in public policies depends on their visibility. Therefore mass media becomes an essential tool to create a public opinion about them.

To study how these social movements are covered by the media is crucial in order to understand both the importance played by journalism as a political instrument, and the possibilities of social change of these movements, due to the close relationship between media – in search of non-institutional sources of information – and social movements – in search of visibility.

This paper analyses three of the main Spanish newspapers, *El País*, *El Mundo* and *Abc*, coverage of the antiglobalization summits held in Seattle, Prague and Genoa, and one of the main Canary Islands local newspapers, *El Día*, coverage of the ecologist demonstrations against the building of an industrial port in the south of Tenerife. Journalism is shown to be a relevant vehicle to neutralize alternatives and potential challenges, and to turn them into an element that clearly reinforces the system and statu quo.

Keywords: Mass media, grassroots, alternatives, Spain

I. Introduction

Captivated by a technological achievements race, current societies are forced to adapt social relations to the new tools, focusing their attention in building a way of life according to the brand new changes. Somehow, this high velocity development has managed to make us believe that it is also the key to solve the long structural world problems, as if expanding technology would guarantee the equal access to resources and rights.

No matter how many patents we have, globalization has failed spectacularly in supplying the basic needs to the vast majority of the world inhabitants. Furthermore, it even failed in giving the chance to have those needs. At this point, it is easy to understand that technological achievements will increase the gap between and inside societies unless we find a will and an action to use these new tools to benefit the whole world.

Hopefully, things will improve, but that is something that will not depend on globalization, whether we understand it as a new version of capitalism or a political system. Neither will depend on the political and economical players that are selling the globalization benefits, at least the ones who have the capacity to revert this situation just by applying certain measures.

Despite this, we have found a new player that, whether it supports the current institutions by its vote or not, is playing a leading role, as long as it tries to defend its point of view against the dominant players. We are talking about an active citizenship discontent with the current system as a whole or with a particular topic or policy.

Grass-roots movements are playing an important role in challenging entrenched structures of power in formal democratic societies. In the face of increasing globalization, with the further erosion of local community over daily life and the further extension of the power of the market and transnational corporations, people are standing up for their rights as they define them (Thomas, 2001, p. 570).

Even if we understand that discontent has always existed, it was since the uprising of social movements in the sixties when we found several groups involved in the challenging to the dominant structures of formal democratic societies. This is relevant because the common aim of women, minorities, workers, pacifists or ecologists was not only to end discrimination suffered by themselves, other people or the environment. They were targeting democracy itself, seem to be just a sacred cows of western political discourse (Hobsbawm, 2007).

Saving whales, forests, jobs and neighbourhoods or reclaiming the end of wars, pollution and Third World debt, must no longer be as several heterogeneous complaints –almost never satisfy by political authorities– but as many of the concrete social requests which, altogether, aim to change the whole system.

What we found in all of these grassroots and social movements is not exactly a proposal of jumping into the political/economical/social dominant position. The main objective is to implement, or to force implementation, alternative policies. That means that there is a constructive role, people –represented by themselves– deeply interested in improving society. We are talking about positives contributions, although it seems to be only a reaction against a specific dominant policy.

But this clash between establishment and grassroots policies goes further than a representation of their different points of view, where both players use the tools most suitable for them. This clash, as we understand that human reality is socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), achieves historical significance as the new version of the old class struggle.

II. Media

Needless to say that reality, or the “events which take place beyond our immediate social milieu, is a knowledge largely derived from our reception of mass-mediated symbolic forms” (Thompson, 1990, p. 216). In other words, nearly nearly all we see and, therefore, all we know, is because of media.

But media is much more than the scenario where we can see a piece of reality. As soon as we look inside and try to understand how it works, we realize that we are talking about a hypothetical neutral field which no longer needs to disguise its preference for the dominant but also has turn into one of its

privileged members. Nowadays, multinational media corporations, widely involved in industrial cultural activities, have a de facto monopoly on information, pushing journalism into the background in the interest of economical benefits.

Obviously, media relevance depends not only on its economical success, but on the specially strategic product it sells: information. Its natural that this product, now widely recognized as softpower –as important as the military force (Nye and Owens, 1996)–, is sensitive to be an imperialist policies tool (Schiller, 1976) or a product –in the free market in opinions and in the media– supposed to guarantee the consensual views of society (Hall, 1987, p. 55). Therefore, media increase its influence until reaching the status of ideological apparatus, consigning religion and education to a secondary role (Althusser, 1971).

Only by this, we can understand the interest in creating a news agenda according to dominant statements (McCombs, 2004) or avoiding public expressions of discontent (Noëlle-Newman, 1984). Hence, reality, and what we think about it, is no longer something that happens, but mainly what the dominant players want to happen and wants us to think about. So agenda-setting or the spiral of silence are, among many other media theoretical proposals, political essential instruments as important as the legislation to encourage citizenship and its values.

All this leads us to a reality created by consent. This means a democratic assent made by media in order to guaranteed a public opinion support to establishment thesis. Therefore, democracy, justice or freedom turn into ideological pillars which, used by media, reinforce the statu quo, even if that involves, according to Herman and Chomsky (1988), falling into a propaganda activity.

At this point, journalism avoids censorship practices as democracy avoids using the repressive apparatus. So dominant players want to convert journalism into the perfect weapon to hide the dissidences to this social order, trying to disguise reality by using different words to inform about reality. This leads us back to Orwell's *1984* and his newspeak, which became consolidated as the official language of newspapers (Toledano, 2004).

The inversion of words is evidence of the disarming of the forces of the protest that depended on those words. The masters of the world thus seize signs, defuse them, and turn them upside down (International Situationist, 1964).

At the end, playing in this “neutral” field with these rules the score is predictable: the capture of reality given to us by the mass media is a constant cause of conflict because it represents a dominant point of view but, in the meantime, it is still the widest and largest context for displaying the variety of dissident points of view.

III. Discourse

To understand mass media and its role when different groups challenge the establishment, we need to adopt what McQuail called “alternative paradigm”,

which is much more suitable than the dominant one, as long as it has a critical vision of society, with a “wide concern with inequality and sources of opposition in society” (2005, p. 67).

Most broadly, the ‘alternative paradigm’ rests on a different view of society, one which does not accept the prevailing liberal-capitalist order as just or inevitable or the best one can hope for in the fallen state of humankind. Nor does it accept the rational-calculative, utilitarian model of social life as at all adequate or desirable, or the commercial model as the only or best way to run media. There is an alternative, idealist and sometimes utopian ideology, but nowhere a worked-out model of an ideal social system. Nevertheless, there is a sufficient common basis for rejecting the hidden ideology of pluralism and of conservative functionalism (McQuail, 2005, pp. 65-66)

It is clear that there is no neutrality or objectivity at all. Media, goes further than a simple transmission of information, adopting all the necessary mechanisms in order to guarantee its vision of reality. Following that alternative paradigm, we look at critical discourse analysis, as we agree with Van Dijk (2009, p. 82), that media, by its discourse, plays an important role “in the instantiation and reproduction of power and power abuse (dominance)”. This is because...

social representations, including attitudes and ideologies, are often mediated by mental models in order to show up in discourse, and such discourse has social effects and functions only when it in turn contributes to the formation or confirmation of social attitudes and ideologies. (Van Dijk, 2009, p. 82)

This is the reason why we chose to study news reports in the press, as one of the major tasks of discourse-analytical media research, and sharing the Van Dijk’s advice (1991, pp. 110-111) that a complex analysis of discourse must go further than the “textual” analysis and deep into the social, cultural or historical “contexts”.

IV. Alternatives

Among the grassroots variety, antiglobalization and ecological movements can be seen as one of the most representative fights against the political and economical system. Both, as many others, understand that, much more so than the concrete problems, the roots are in a model which prioritize benefits over social needs.

Although grassroots have everyday activities, they only get media’s full attention when they jump into the streets, mainly if is a demonstration against a dominant event. So, summits, conferences or parliamentary debates can show a wealth of information quite difficult to see in other situations. It is, in the end, spectacular moments –part of the media circus– which give the main image of the grassroots and its alternatives, and, consequently, forced them to falling into a “prime time activism” (Ryan, 1991).

Until alternative media can reach a wide and varied audience, mass media will continue to have the main influence channel. And by now, as is widely agreed, press is the biggest quality mass media, being the best way to study the grassroots coverage, not because of its quality, but because of the availability of time and space to give a detailed analysis of these movements, offering a more accurate report.

So we analyse *Abc*, *El Mundo* and *El País* –three of the main Spanish newspapers– coverage to Seattle, Prague and Genoa summits, and *El Día* –Tenerife’s best selling newspaper– coverage to a industrial port construction. With different contexts and ideological points of view, these coverages are good examples of the discontent –and its alternatives– against the dominant.

IV.1. Seattle

The World Trade Organization (WTO) summit in Seattle in November 1999 was called to establish a new order which intended to end the long conflicts between both world core and periphery and amongst them. However, the meeting turned out to be much more a significant event when a heterogeneous coalition marched in the streets against this institution and its rules, questioning globalization and the damages it causes to the whole world.

The three studied newspapers were in a similar situation, with their Washington correspondents assigned to Seattle –*El País* also counted on an economical correspondent from Spain– to cover all the countries points of view, including official and off the record statements, press releases and conferences.

However, apart from these actors, media realized that the news was in the streets, where thousands of protesters campaigned against the WTO. This was nothing new, if we look at the previous articles of *El Mundo* and *El País*, which explain this “alternative summit”¹. It was quite different for the *Abc* correspondent, who did not explain these grassroots meeting and just confined his articles to criticizing the heterogeneous nature. In fact, he mainly decided to call protesters “troublemakers” and “agitators”², emphasizing the “spliff generous consume”³. Overall, this journalist tries to ridicule the demands of the protesters, vulgarizing their arguments (WTO is “the baddie in the film” and trade freedom is a “destructive monster”⁴) and radicalize the whole demonstration: “urban landscape ruled by violent masked groups more interested in destroying and stealing than saving whales o freeing Tibet”⁵.

El País and *El Mundo* correspondents covered the demonstrations in a different way, stressing their pacifist character –“the majority just shouted and danced in a peaceful manner”– and highlighting that violence was an isolated occurrence of “two masked” or “other group”, even suggesting that these people behaved “indignantly” towards police⁶. Both journalists covered the neighbours claims over police brutality –*Abc* correspondent did not. Throughout, they were instilling the notion of “demonstrators” –not “troublemakers”– who had ideological reasons and alternatives proposals for a better world.

Despite pre-summit statements, full of welfare, sustained growth or records, repeated by journalists⁷, the WTO meeting ended as a big failure, attributable both to internal differences and street demonstrations. Overall, these grassroots were covered with some condescension, like youthful rebellion full of utopian ideas, which malaise should be taking into account. However dominant prophets warned there is only one way out: further globalization. The only “possible alternative” to stop it is “Third World War”⁸.

IV.2. Prague

The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank summit in Prague during September 2000 was the target of an antiglobalization movement and, therefore, it became a subject of media and public opinion. Most likely because of this, there was a democratization debate in both institutions, accused of benefiting western economies interests. It came as no surprise, that the aim on streets was to boycott the meeting, and, right in middle of this, the three Spanish correspondents –inside the media circus– tried to cover both what was happening inside and outside the conference site.

From as early as the first few days, a Spanish significant player could be seen: the Basques. Basque grassroots have a bad reputation in Spain because of ETA. This image was transferred to Prague to the antiglobalization movement, with everyday news about the Basques presence in demonstrations⁹, although it was clear from interviewing them that they were only “kind humanitarian groups”¹⁰.

However, radicals –no longer protesters– were playing a leading role, as an *El País* correspondent shows in his (repeated) coverage of a mass meeting in front of the Spanish Embassy, with no element at all which could justify the “radical” word¹¹. Very far from the *El Mundo* correspondent’s neutral description¹², the *El País* correspondent article about the main demonstration reflected his personal hostility toward them:

“Freedom for political prisoners”, the crowd shouted, referring to the fellow protesters arrested the previous day [...] the prisoners whom slogans referred to, were mainly bizzare hair colours troublemakers with gas masks, who choose to be radicals because they feel like it, whose only ideological statement was breaking store windows and luxury cars, and punks with penis piercings, urinating in the streets, generally not very interested in discussing globalization or Third World misery¹³.

In the end, this “anxiety for changing the world, if it not accompanied by information and intelligence, it will only contribute to the problem”¹⁴. This *Abc*’s editorial’s –a subtle way of calling the protesters “misinformed” and “stupid”– shows the predominant image of this movement, really close to what the dominant wants to sell. Therefore, apart from the IMF and WB arguments repetition, media amplifies the dominant dialogue invitation to some protesters¹⁵, remarking that “NGO’s capture all international conclave”, but warning them that dialogue is at risk because of demonstrations¹⁶.

Through this, dominant and media reveal what they really fear: “We have underestimated NGO’s protest capacity”. One may think that with this headline, James Wolfensohn, World Bank president, seemed to give recognition to the protesters, but not exactly: Grassroots “talked about globalization danger, although they did not know exactly what it means”¹⁷. So, what IMF and WB really fear is actually the (newspaper) headline: “the capacity of demonstration”.

IV.3. Genoa

Many international conflicts were pushed into the background of the G-8 summit in Genoa, where antiglobalization pressure forced country leaders to announce an AIDS fund for Africa and other initiatives in order to prove their compromise with the Third World, even saying that they were striving for the same things as the movement¹⁸.

The summit script was already written: international leaders defending their legitimacy in front of protesters, thousands of people were asking for a better world and boycotting the meeting and media in search of spectacular images. Only *El País* decided to assign a journalist to follow the marches, so as to examine this player at a deeper level, while *Abc* and *El Mundo* only had a journalist to covering the whole event.

Obviously, violence was a prominent source of headlines and images. Basques were again a popular subject for journalists¹⁹ and analysts, happy to patent the “kale borroka global” concept²⁰. But this time, surrounded by news of protesters plan to kidnap police agents and counter terrorism measures²¹, Black Block and anarchists attracted the media attention because of their fight against police – apparently also against other protesters²² – but with a clear aim, as they explained to *El País* correspondent: “This is not a place for having fun, but for demolishing walls. In any case, without violence, demonstrations would never appear in the media and all this would be pointless”²³.

Political leaders and media focus their attention on remarking on the differences inside the antiglobalization movement, not only like the *El Mundo* journalist, talking about the “good” and the “bad” protesters²⁴, but demanding “movement moderate leaders” to disassociate themselves from the ones who use violence²⁵. The heterogeneous character is no longer a sign of weakness, but of social commitment. Even the German foreign minister Joschka Fischer said that if he were younger, he would have been in the demonstration²⁶. Somehow, leaders managed to articulate a discourse which combined a rejection of some protesters and an understanding to the vast majority, with certain political statements being an exception, such as the Blair one: “This movement is not democratic at all. These hooligans who form part of this movement are unelected: they just reflect anarchy in the streets”²⁷.

The excessive police violence, the death of a protester and the international critics against the summit organizers ended up as an image of rejection to G-8 leaders, forced to ask for a dialogue with civil society²⁸ and to announce a variety of measures in order to cope with the social malaise, sharing with media editorials the need to move these meetings to remote places²⁹.

IV.4. Tenerife

The building of an industrial port in Granadilla (Tenerife) has sparked prompted controversy. Part of the island’s society rejected the port but the political and business world were completely in favour of it. The Granadilla port is seen by both groups, grassroots and establishment, respectively as a major threat to the environment and an economical development opportunity.

The best selling newspaper of Tenerife, *El Día*, coverage of 2004's events (several demonstrations, social and economical meetings and parliamentary initiatives) gives us the opportunity to analyse how the grassroots proposals are reflected and conveyed to the audience.

The newspaper does not hide his approval of the Granadilla port, but it does systematically hide all denunciation of the port. The people's legislative petition against this infrastructure, with more than 55 thousand signatures (15 thousand is the minimum required) was published at the bottom of the fourth and last page of the economical section³⁰, when, one year later, the parliamentary rejection of this petition was published, it was given a frontpage headline in the paper and an extensive coverage within³¹.

Also significant is the fact that it did not cover the social meeting, citizen initiative against the port which brought together several groups. On the contrary, it did cover the business meeting over the course of several days, with several pages dedicated to all the political and economical local players stressing the need for this port and other infrastructures with a very telling headline: "That is enough!"³².

The massive demonstration against the port was published in the newspaper, but instead of being situated on the front page, *El Día* opens its edition with the government press release's reaction to it: "Granadilla will not be stopped"³³.

Everyday we see publications of employers' organizations press releases about the port, with headlines written as if their opinions were real facts, without any mention of the source: "The future of the trade between Tenerife and Africa depends on the Granadilla port", "To stop the port of Granadilla would lead Tenerife to economical decline" or "The port of Granadilla will create 20 thousand jobs". These no-sources headlines contrast with the few others which criticize this infrastructure: "The future port of Granadilla is the worst environmental black spot, said Greenpeace"³⁴.

It is clear the newspaper does not feel the need to conceal its support of this infrastructure. It is much more than the pictures between the editor and business leaders, but the editorials where the ecologists are called "mistaken", "stubborn" or "stupid" who still reject, as a rule, or who knows why, to all that would lead to Tenerife's progress". In any case, the newspaper editors wanted to clarify that they are not against ecologism: "We respect 'pure' ecologism, not for insignificant things, boisterous and inconsistent, nor the ecologism of surfers and a couple of suspicious godos/as"³⁵, nor false nor subsidized"³⁶.

V. Conclusion

Given the current media landscape, it is not a surprise to see journalism as the perfect tool to guarantee dominant interests. Newspaper discourse -either national or local, conservative or progressive- tends to question all alternatives, resorting to different strategies, which gradually become stronger as the danger to their interests is perceived. Therefore, we find what we call The Five rules to inform of grassroots: to reject (not giving space to certain groups or ideas), to

radicalize (calling them Basques, terrorists, troublemakers, etc.), to ridicule (penis piercing, bizarre hair colours, etc.), to respect (describing in a neutral way their action and ideas) and to reaffirm (positive role of grassroots moderate leaders, NGO's, etc.).

Although we find journalists that really understand the importance of explaining accurately what these grassroots are and their alternatives, media stresses its support for the dominant, choosing words with positive or pejorative connotations or giving preference to certain players and ideas, all of this, amplified by headlines and frontpages according to their interests. Apart from the credibility given to establishment, and in order to hide their ideological apparatus status, media questions only certain dominant manners or policies, but never their legitimacy.

On the other hand, grassroots are seen as important players, but mainly because of being a social malaise indicator. However, the recognition of their role seems to just be part of a script to gain public opinion support, as soon as we realize that the vast majority of alternative policies are pushed into the background.

Civil society is invited to join current institutions and organizations, where democratic legitimacy belongs –as is said constantly. However, it is just a calling to some society organized players, as trade unions or NGO's, but demanding them to contribute and to disassociate themselves from the ones who capture all media frontpages and headlines.

Given that social disagreement will always exist, the strategy is, from one side, to isolate extreme players, denying them any political motivation. On the other side, media absorbs the moderate players, inviting them to take their ideas to other scenarios, obviously dominated by the establishment, where all forms of dissent are covered up by media and dominant players are guaranteed all the headlines.

Through this, there is an attempt to remove grassroots from streets –their natural space–. The intention is to erase any good media coverage and its repercussion on public opinion, taking advantage of the everyday space that they have in media with press releases and conferences.

Given the dominant tricky invitation, grassroots know how important it is to be in the streets, using media as a tool, the most effective way of pressuring the establishment. However, getting into the media means playing in their circus, full of spectacular images and headlines and pushing proposals and alternatives into the background.

Therefore, grassroots media coverage ended up in a statu quo reinforcement and establishment interpretation of democracy, justice or development. Through this, dominant players are presented to the audience as the leading actors, legitimized ahead of grassroots, whose only alternative seems to be marching in the streets.

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