

Media Discourse and Political Polarization in the Coverage of the Valencia DANA. A Comparative Analysis of *Público* and *Okdiario*

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Abstract. This study examines how ideological bias in digital media contributes to political polarization through comparative analysis of news coverage by comparing the headlines published by *Público* (left-leaning) and *Okdiario* (right-leaning), two major Spanish online newspapers, regarding the Valencia DANA disaster that occurred in October 2024. Using content analysis, we analyzed 177 political mentions in the media outlets, examining both manifest content (frequency of political figures and parties mentioned) and latent content (tone and framing). The findings reveal significant differences in how the outlets framed the same crisis event: *Público* predominantly criticized the Partido Popular and regional government, while *Okdiario* focused criticism on the PSOE and central government. The results show that media outlets do not merely report events neutrally but actively construct polarized narratives reflecting their editorial stances, amplifying political divisions, particularly during crises, through selective framing and emphasis.

Keywords: framing, media polarization, crisis communication

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Introduction

In recent years, political polarization has become one of the most defining characteristics of contemporary societies. This polarization is not only reflected in political institutions and public debates but also in the way media outlets construct and disseminate news. Digital media, in particular, play a crucial role in shaping public opinion due to their immediacy, wide reach, and strong ideological positioning (Happer & Philo, 2013).

The DANA that affected Valencia in late October 2024 represents a particularly relevant case for the study of media discourse and political polarization. Beyond its severe human and material consequences, the event quickly became a central topic of political confrontation, with different actors blaming one another for the management of the crisis. As a result, media coverage of the DANA extended far beyond the reporting of a natural disaster and became a politically charged narrative.

This research focuses on how digital media outlets with different ideological orientations framed and narrated the same event. Specifically, it compares the coverage of the Valencia DANA by *Público*, a left-leaning digital newspaper, and *Okdiario*, a right-leaning online outlet. (Monroy-Trujillo & Padilla-Castillo, 2025) By analyzing news articles published during the two weeks following the natural disaster, this study aims to identify differences in tone, language, framing, and the portrayal of political actors.

The choice of this topic is motivated by the increasing influence of media discourse on social behavior and political attitudes. In highly polarized contexts, media narratives can reinforce ideological divisions, shape perceptions of responsibility, and influence how citizens interpret crises. The DANA in Valencia provides a clear example of how a humanitarian and environmental tragedy can be transformed into a political and media battleground.

Political and media polarization

Political polarization refers to the growing ideological distance between political positions, parties, and social groups, resulting in increasingly divided public opinions and reduced consensus. In polarized contexts, political actors and citizens tend to adopt more extreme positions, often perceiving opposing views as illegitimate or threatening. This phenomenon has intensified in recent decades due to globalization, economic inequality, and the rise of digital communication technologies (Boxell et al., 2017).

Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012) distinguish between ideological polarization and affective polarization. While ideological polarization concerns differences in political beliefs and policy preferences, affective polarization refers to the emotional dimension of politics, in which individuals develop strong negative feelings toward opposing political groups. This affective dimension is especially relevant in media studies, as emotions play a central role in news consumption and interpretation.

Political polarization has significant consequences for democratic societies. It can undermine trust in institutions, weaken social cohesion, and increase political conflict. In moments of crisis, such as natural disasters or emergencies, polarization may intensify debates over responsibility, competence, and legitimacy, shifting the focus from collective problem-solving to political confrontation.

In the context of media communication, political polarization is closely linked to the role of news outlets as mediators between political actors and the public. (Entman, 2010) Media do not merely transmit information neutrally; they select, frame, and interpret events, often reflecting specific ideological orientations. As a result, polarized political environments tend to be accompanied by polarized media systems, in which audiences consume news that aligns with their preexisting beliefs.

Media polarization refers to the tendency of news outlets to present information in a way that reflects particular political or ideological perspectives. In polarized media systems, audiences are often exposed to content that reinforces their preexisting beliefs, while alternative viewpoints may be marginalized or framed negatively. This selective representation can amplify political divisions and shape public opinion in subtle but significant ways.

According to Stroud (2011), ideological bias in the media can be observed through both manifest and latent content. Manifest content includes explicit facts, figures, and events reported in the news, whereas latent content refers to the implicit messages, tone, and framing that communicate approval or disapproval of certain actors or policies. Analyzing both types of content is essential for understanding how media narratives influence perceptions and political attitudes.

In digital media, polarization is particularly pronounced due to algorithmic filtering, social media sharing, and the rapid dissemination of information. Online platforms allow users to select news sources that align with their ideological preferences, creating “echo chambers” in which polarized

messages are amplified. This phenomenon makes the study of media bias in digital news especially relevant in the context of politically charged events, such as the coverage of the Valencia DANA.

The ideological orientation of media outlets can influence several aspects of news reporting, including the selection of events, the language used in headlines, the portrayal of political figures, and the framing of causes and responsibilities. By comparing news coverage from left-leaning (*Público*) and right-leaning (*Okdiario*) outlets, this study aims to examine the mechanisms through which ideological bias shapes public understanding of a single event.

Crisis communication

Crisis communication refers to the strategies and practices used by organizations, institutions, and media outlets to manage information and public perception during emergencies or critical events. Effective communication during a crisis is essential to inform the public, coordinate responses, and maintain trust. In the context of natural disasters, such as floods, storms, or the DANA in Valencia, media coverage plays a central role in shaping public understanding of both the event and the actions taken by authorities.

Coombs (2015) emphasizes that media not only report facts during crises but also frame narratives that can influence public sentiment and political accountability. The way a crisis is communicated – through choice of words, tone, and emphasis – can either foster solidarity and cooperation or generate fear, confusion, and political controversy. For instance, focusing on human stories and rescue efforts tends to build empathy, whereas highlighting political disputes can intensify polarization.

In highly polarized media environments, crisis communication often becomes entangled with political agendas. News outlets may select which aspects of a disaster to emphasize, attribute responsibility to specific actors, or use emotionally charged language to support ideological narratives. This creates an additional layer of complexity, as citizens receive not only information about the crisis itself but also signals about who is “responsible” or “competent” in managing it.

In the case of the Valencia DANA, examining how different news outlets reported the event allows researchers to analyze the intersection of natural disasters, media framing, and political polarization, providing insight into the broader dynamics of media influence in contemporary society.

Framing the crises

Framing theory suggests that the way information is presented—its structure, emphasis, and context—can significantly influence how audiences interpret events. Frames highlight certain aspects of reality while downplaying or ignoring others, shaping perceptions, opinions, and even emotional responses. According to Entman (1993), framing involves selection and salience: selecting some aspects of perceived reality and making them more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable in communication.

In the context of digital media coverage of crises, framing plays a crucial role in how political responsibility, urgency, and the social impact of an event are communicated (Entman, 1993; Cho & Gower, 2009). For example, emphasizing government failures or political conflicts in a natural disaster may generate outrage and blame, while highlighting rescue efforts and solidarity may foster empathy and trust (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Frames are not neutral; they reflect both the ideological orientation of the media and the broader political environment (Entman, 2010). Studies have examined media coverage of specific crises to understand polarization effects. For example, research on hurricane coverage in the United States by Boykoff and Boykoff (2004) found that left-leaning and right-leaning outlets reported the same events with differing emphases on causes, responsibility, and policy implications. Similarly, studies on European floods and wildfires (Schweiger, 2019) indicate that media with divergent ideological perspectives tend to highlight different actors, causes, and solutions, reflecting broader political divides.

Research on crisis communication in digital contexts stresses the relevance of online platforms as arenas for political contestation. Digital media not only report events but actively shape discourse, as users share, comment, and interact with content, potentially reinforcing polarization. Tandoc and Vos (2016) emphasize that social media amplifies ideological framing, making the analysis of online news coverage essential for understanding contemporary media influence.

Specific research on Spanish media confirms that political polarization influences reporting on national and international events. According to a study by Sampedro (2020), newspapers such as *El País* and *ABC* consistently display ideological framing in both editorial and news articles, affecting the

tone, word choice, and presentation of political figures. These patterns are comparable to the case of *Público* and *Okdiario*, in which left-leaning and right-leaning outlets frame the same events differently, emphasizing elements that appeal to their respective audiences. This demonstrates that media polarization is not merely theoretical but has observable effects in practice.

By comparing the coverage of the Valencia DANA in *Público* and *Okdiario*, this research formulates two research questions:

RQ1: How ideological bias shapes news narratives in the context of a natural disaster?

RQ2: How the particular coverage contributes to political polarization in Spain?

Advantages and limitations

This study presents several advantages that contribute to the understanding of media discourse and political polarization. First, by comparing two ideologically opposed digital news outlets, *Público* and *Okdiario*, the research allows for a direct examination of how political bias shapes news narratives. This comparative approach provides insights into differences in framing, language use, and portrayal of political actors, highlighting the mechanisms through which polarization manifests in media coverage.

The use of content analysis as a research method to identify both manifest and latent content of the texts (counting mentions of political figures, parties, and events combined with an assessment of tone, sentiment, and semantic choices enables a comprehensive understanding of media narratives). This dual approach ensures that the study captures not only the frequency of information but also the qualitative nuances that influence audience perception.

Third, the focus on a recent and highly relevant event – the Valencia DANA of October 2024 – enhances the study's practical significance. By analyzing a current crisis that attracted intense political and media attention, the research addresses a real-world phenomenon and provides timely insights into the interaction between media, politics, and society.

Despite these advantages, the study also has several limitations that must be acknowledged. The sample is limited to two digital news outlets, which may not fully represent the broader Spanish media landscape. Including

additional newspapers, television channels, or social media platforms could offer a more complete picture of media polarization. Additionally, the analysis covers a relatively short time frame – the two weeks following the DANA – which may limit the ability to observe longer-term media trends or evolving narratives.

Finally, the focus on Spanish-language media may limit the generalizability of the findings to other countries or linguistic contexts, although the theoretical framework remains applicable across settings.

Research design

For this research analysis, we developed a comparison regarding political polarization and influence in mass media. In this case, the media chosen for the research study are *Público* and *Okdiario*, two recognized online newspapers from Spain. They were both selected because of their typically opposite editorial tone, which makes them ideal for comparison, *Público* being more progressive, while *Okdiario* being more conservative), and also because of their free, complete, and easy access to their past published content through the archives. The accessibility of the content that is presented here makes it reliable and simply replicable. As already stated, the topic of the articles used for the research revolves around politics within the climatic disaster called DANA that occurred in the Spanish province of Valencia in October 2024.

The research method used for this study is content analysis, including both the manifest and the latent layers of the texts. Manifest content includes measurable aspects such as the frequency of mentions of political figures or parties, while latent content captures tone, sentiment, and connotations. Studies using this dual approach (Neuendorf, 2017) have shown that combining quantitative and qualitative measures provides a more complete understanding of media influence and audience interpretation.

The sample selected for the analysis has been the headlines of every article related to the topic published by each newspaper between the day of the incident and two weeks later, ranging from October 29, 2024 to November 12, 2024. The articles for *Público* can be found online on their website under the tag named 'DANA'. On the other hand, for *Okdiario*, the information is found on their page under the tag of 'Floodings'. Not all of the

headlines that fit those requirements were analyzed, but only those referring to politics. The analysis grid focused on two different aspects observed in the selected headlines. First, the manifest content: which political parties and/or personalities were mentioned and their frequency. Second, the latent content: what was the tone in which those mentioned were referred to. In other words, what was the vocabulary used to portray them: positive, negative, or more neutral.

The procedure for the research was conducted completely manually and was as follows: First, we looked for the information regarding this incident in each of the publications and found the most suitable tag that should include the data needed for the study. Afterward, we separated the articles published during the defined time frame and started to pick from the whole the headlines that referred to politics. Then, every time a political personality or party was mentioned, it was highlighted in the text. Different colors were used for this step, symbolically, to differentiate which party each person was part of. Next, the mentions highlighted were counted for each color but also for each newspaper. That is, for example, how many times words were highlighted in blue (referring to Partido Popular) in the *Público* headlines and how many were in *Okdiario* headlines. After that, the data was recounted and divided into positive, negative, or neutral tone used for each party. Finally, the mentions for each political group were transformed into the percentages relative to the total of political mentions made in each newspaper.

Research results

Público (n=156 political mentions) has a very rich variety of news and articles published along the time frame of this study. From opinion genres to up-to-the-minute news, updating constantly with new information that was known. Included in the headlines of the articles selected by the criteria already explained are 156 political mentions of parties, groups, and personalities.

Partido Popular (PP): There are 81 mentions of this group, mostly naming Carlos Mazón, President of the Generalitat Valenciana from July 17, 2023, until December 2, 2025; Alberto Núñez Feijóo, president of the party;

the party itself; and the government of the Generalitat Valenciana. The vast majority of these mentions have a negative undertone, criticizing the management of the issue by the regional government, mostly Carlos Mazón and the emergency counselor. Out of the 81 mentions, 66 are classified as negative (e.g.: “Mazón llegó con dos horas de retraso a la reunión de emergencia por la DANA en València” / Mazón was two hours late to the emergency meeting for the DANA in Valencia), 13 as neutral (e.g.: “La Generalitat desmiente que maneje ninguna cifra concreta de personas desaparecidas por el momento” / The Generalitat denies that they are working with a specific number of disappeared people at this moment), and 2 as positive (e.g.: “Mazón pide que se incorporen 5.000 militares más a las tareas de emergencia” / Mazón asks for the incorporation of 5,000 more soldiers for the emergency work) toward the party. The total mentions of Partido Popular represent 51.92% of the Público political mentions in the sample.

Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE): The total mentions were 54 and they represented 34.62% of the total mentions in Público. Most of them name Pedro Sánchez, President of Spain and General Secretary of the party, the Spanish Government, and Teresa Ribera, third Vice President of the Government. It is also noteworthy to mention the references to Fernando Grande-Marlaska, Minister of Internal Affairs, and Óscar Puente, Minister of Transport and Sustainable Mobility. 34 out of the 54 mentions to this group were positive, defining the Government management as helpful, available, and reliable with the Generalitat (e.g.: “El Gobierno evita la confrontación directa con el PP y prepara un plan de ayudas inminente para los afectados de la DANA” / The Government avoids direct confrontation with PP and prepares an imminent help plan for those affected by the DANA). The other 20 mentions are divided between 13 neutral ones, just providing information (e.g.: “Sánchez hará una declaración institucional sobre la DANA a las 10.30 horas desde Moncloa” / Sánchez will make an institutional declaration regarding the DANA at 10:30 from Moncloa), and 7 negative ones (e.g.: “Ojalá Óscar Puente haciéndose cargo del armario de mis 'tuppers': las redes se llenan de memes con la labor del ministro tras la DANA” / “I wish Óscar Puente was taking care of my tupper drawer”: social media fills up with memes about the minister's work after the DANA).

Far right parties and politicians: There are 8 mentions of this group, all classified as having a negative undertone. This includes the political party Vox, its President Santiago Abascal, and neo-fascist groups (e.g.: “La ultraderecha

vuelve a utilizar los tribunales para sacar rédito político con la DANA” / The far right uses the courts once again to get political yield from the DANA). The total mentions of this group are 5.13% of the mentions in Público.

The King and the Queen of Spain: They are mentioned 7 times, all regarding their visit to the ground zero of the disaster, alongside Pedro Sánchez and Carlos Mazón. Six of these mentions are classified as neutral (e.g.: “Sánchez, evacuado de Paiporta tras una agresión en la visita con los reyes y Mazón” / Sánchez evacuated from Paiporta after an aggression during the visit with the kings and Mazón), and one as negative (e.g.: “Entre Mazón en chaleco y el Borbón en traje de faena, todos salvados”: el papelón de los políticos con la DANA, explicado en tuits” / Between Mazón in a vest and the Bourbon in work clothes, all saved: the spectacle of politicians with the DANA, explained in tweets), and they represent 4.49% of the total.

Podemos and Sumar: Each of these two political parties is mentioned twice in the Público article headlines, all positive. In both cases, the party itself is named once and the other mention is a member of it. For Sumar, that person is Yolanda Díaz, founder of the party and second Vice President of the Government of Spain. Each represents 1.28% of the mentions. (e.g.: “Podemos y Compromís quieren que el Congreso investigue las responsabilidades políticas de la tragedia de la DANA” / Podemos and Compromís want the Congress to investigate the political responsibilities in the DANA tragedy) (e.g.: “Yolanda Díaz protegerá el teletrabajo y ausentarse del empleo a los afectados por la DANA y ofrece permisos retribuidos” / Yolanda Díaz will protect remote working and abstention from work for those affected by the DANA and offers rewarded permits)

Others: The Valencian political party Compromís and Gabriel Rufián, representative of Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya in the National Congress, also receive a mention each. Both have a positive undertone and together represent another 1.28% of the mentions. (e.g.: “Podemos y Compromís quieren que el Congreso investigue las responsabilidades políticas de la tragedia de la DANA” / Podemos and Compromís want the Congress to investigate the political responsibilities in the DANA tragedy) (e.g.: “Rufián responde al PP recordando sus grandes embustes: “Mintieron con Irak, las preferentes, el rescate a la banca, el Prestige, el Yak-42...” “ / Rufián answers PP recalling their big lies: “They lied with Iraq, the preferentials, the bank rescue, the Prestige, the Yak-42...”)

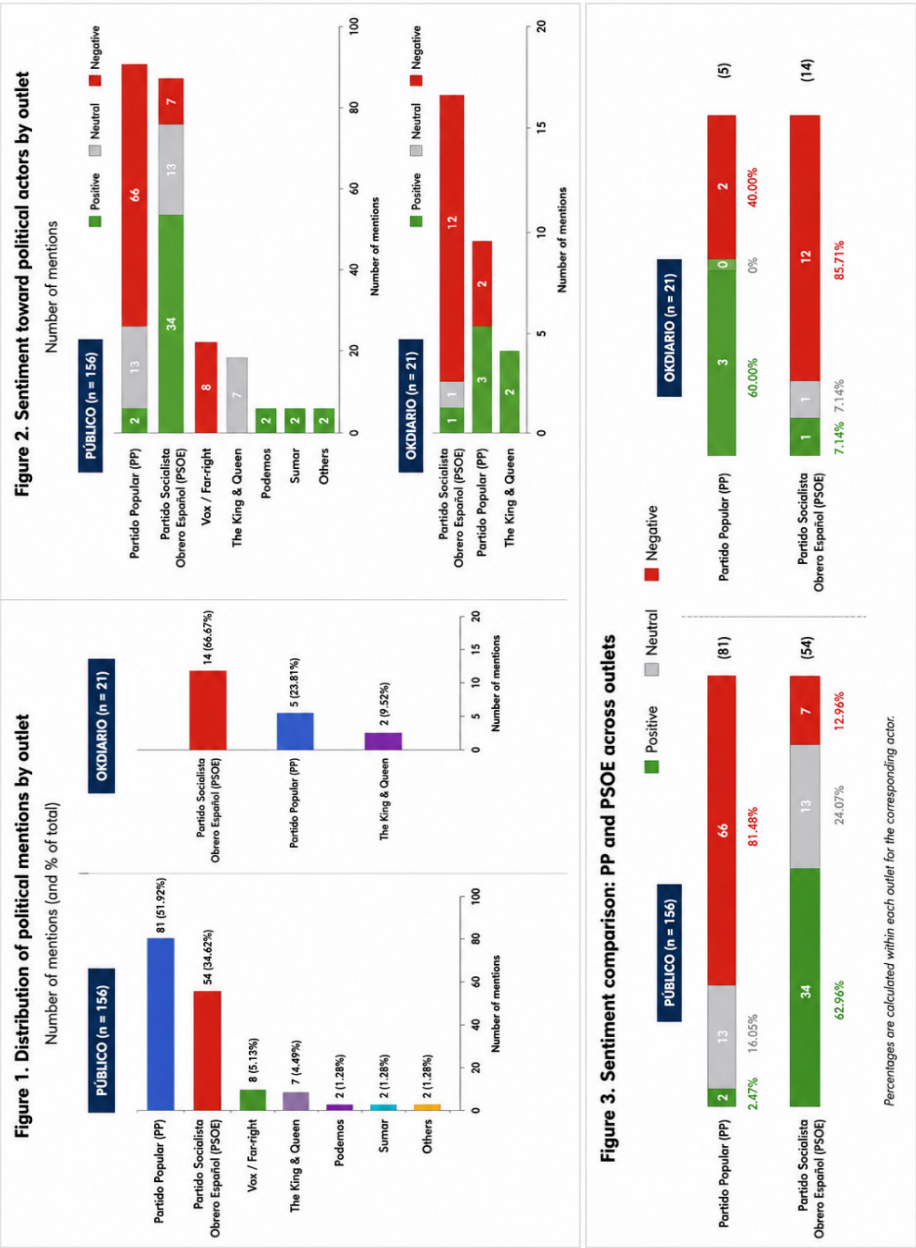


Figure 1. Distribution of political mentions by outlet
Figure 2. Sentiment toward political actors by outlet
Figure 3. Sentiment comparison – PP and PSOE across outlets

Okdiario (n=21 political mentions) had a more limited number of articles about the issue of this study, especially after reducing the headlines selected to those related to politics. Those that meet the criteria explained before sum up to 21 political mentions. The groups included in them are the following:

PSOE: It is mentioned 14 times, reaching 66.67% of the total political mentions that appear in Okdiario's headlines. Again, Pedro Sánchez, the minister Teresa Ribera, and the party itself are the most named. The vast majority of those, exactly 12 mentions, have a negative undertone (e.g.: “El Estado se gasta 2 millones al año en una red para detectar riadas en Valencia que no evitó la tragedia” / The State spends 2 million per year on a system for detecting floodings in Valencia that did not prevent the tragedy). Another mention is more neutral (e.g.: “Feijóo dice que España está ante una “emergencia nacional” que requiere “todos los recursos del Estado”” / Feijóo says Spain is facing a “national emergency” that requires “all of the State resources”), and the remaining one is the only positive one (e.g.: “Sánchez propuso una declaración conjunta “contra los violentos” en Paiporta pero Mazón la rechazó” / Sánchez proposed a joint statement “against the violent” in Paiporta but Mazón turned it down).

PP: The total of mentions they receive from Okdiario is 5, representing 23.81%. Carlos Mazón, Alberto Núñez Feijóo, the Generalitat, the counselor Nuria Montes, and the party itself are the most named elements. Three of the mentions are positive (e.g.: “El PP no es el PSOE: Mazón debe destituir ya a la consejera” / PP is not PSOE: Mazón needs to dismiss the counselor already (this one actually includes both positive and negative tones)), and the remaining two are negative (e.g.: “Sánchez propuso una declaración conjunta “contra los violentos” en Paiporta pero Mazón la rechazó” / Sánchez proposed a joint statement “against the violent” in Paiporta but Mazón turned it down).

The King and the Queen: In the case of Okdiario, they are named in 9.52% of the total with two mentions. Both of those mentions have a positive tone, picturing them as key figures for the stability of the country. (e.g.: “Cuando el Rey era y fue el Estado” / When the King was and is the State).

These results show very clearly the political polarization of mass media and how the words we use to tell the same story can vastly change how it is perceived by the public. In a case like the disaster of the DANA in

Valencia, the controversy regarding who is to blame still surrounds the Generalitat Valenciana and the National Government. If somebody read *Okdiario* to inform themselves about the event, they would have probably thought Pedro Sánchez and his government were responsible for the mismanagement. However, if they read *Público*, they would have been critical of Mazón's way of acting. The results of the study confirm the monarchic and conservative posture of *Okdiario* and the progressive and clearly left-oriented style of *Público*.

Discussion and conclusions

This research set out to examine how media discourse contributes to political polarization through the coverage of the same political event by ideologically opposed digital media outlets. By focusing on the coverage of the DANA climatic disaster that occurred in Valencia in October 2024 and comparing the headlines published by *Público* and *Okdiario*, this study aimed to understand how political ideology shapes media narratives, framing strategies, and the portrayal of political actors during moments of crisis.

The results of the content analysis clearly show that media outlets do not merely inform about political events but actively construct narratives that reflect their editorial positions. The comparison between *Público* and *Okdiario* reveals significant differences in both the quantity and tone of political mentions. *Público* showed a much higher number of political references, with a strong focus on the Partido Popular and the Generalitat Valenciana, predominantly framed in a negative tone. This framing emphasized responsibility, mismanagement, and political accountability, particularly targeting Carlos Mazón and the regional government. In contrast, *Okdiario* presented a considerably smaller sample of political mentions, concentrating mainly on the PSOE and portraying it largely in a negative light, while framing the Partido Popular and the monarchy more positively.

These findings align with existing literature on media polarization and ideological bias, which suggests that news outlets often act as political actors rather than neutral observers. As discussed in the theoretical framework, media framing theory explains how the selection of certain words, tones, and actors can guide audience interpretation. In this case, both newspapers framed the DANA not only as a natural disaster but also as a political conflict, reinforcing narratives that align with their ideological orientations. This

supports previous research indicating that crises are often instrumentalized by media to reinforce preexisting political positions and to allocate blame or legitimacy selectively.

The research questions posed at the beginning of the study can now be addressed. Firstly, political actors and institutions play a central role in shaping media discourse, not only through their actions but also through how media choose to represent them. The prominence of certain figures, such as Pedro Sánchez or Carlos Mazón, and the repeated association of these actors with either competence or failure, illustrates how media discourse contributes to constructing political legitimacy or delegitimization. The results show that political responsibility during the DANA was framed very differently depending on the outlet, reinforcing the idea that media narratives are deeply intertwined with political power dynamics.

Secondly, the polarized framing observed in both outlets may contribute to reinforcing ideological divisions among audiences. Readers consuming only one of these media sources are likely exposed to a one-sided narrative, which may strengthen political attitudes, reduce empathy toward opposing viewpoints, and increase mistrust in political institutions associated with the opposing ideology. This phenomenon is particularly relevant in the context of digital media ecosystems, in which algorithmic personalization often amplifies selective exposure.

The study confirms that the influence of political ideology varies significantly between left-leaning and right-leaning outlets. *Público* adopted a critical stance toward conservative actors while highlighting positive actions by the central government, whereas *Okdiario* emphasized criticism of the PSOE and minimized or positively framed conservative responsibility. This asymmetry illustrates how ideological positioning influences not only what is reported but also how frequently and in what tone political actors appear in media discourse.

Regarding the question of misinformation or strategic omission, while this study did not directly analyze factual inaccuracies, the selective emphasis and framing observed may contribute to distorted perceptions of reality. By prioritizing certain political interpretations over others, media outlets may indirectly contribute to the spread of partial or biased narratives, even without explicitly publishing false information. This reinforces concerns raised in previous studies about the role of media in shaping political reality rather than merely reflecting it.

Finally, concerning whether media discourse anticipates future political developments, the findings suggest that media narratives may indeed foreshadow political conflicts by reinforcing blame, accountability, and legitimacy narratives early on. The strong polarization observed in the immediate aftermath of the DANA indicates that media coverage can contribute to shaping long-term political debates and public memory of events, influencing how responsibility is assigned beyond the immediate crisis.

In conclusion, this research highlights the powerful role of digital media in shaping political discourse and reinforcing polarization, especially during moments of crisis. By comparing two ideologically opposed Spanish online newspapers, the study demonstrates how the same event can be narrated in fundamentally different ways, depending on editorial orientation. These findings are relevant for media studies as they emphasize the need for critical media literacy and awareness of ideological framing in digital news consumption. Understanding how media narratives are constructed is essential for fostering a more informed and reflective public, capable of navigating an increasingly polarized media environment.

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