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The limits of information in the negotiated debates

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Abstract: The Television Academy was the scenario considered neutral by the Spanish political parties PSOE and PP to hold negotiated election debates between their competing candidates to the general elections of 9th March 2008, aired on 25th February and the 3rd March. The analysis of the two face to face encounters between the candidates José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero and Mariano Rajoy aims to establish the circumstances implied in those meetings, to assess their utility, and to determine the degree of predictability offered by these previously agreed dialectic confrontations between the leaders of the two major political parties, whose interventions were previously agreed, both in terms of content and mise-en-scene. My interest is to determine the extent to what the freedom of information is compatible with negotiated debates and the imposition of moderators who were left with no authority to intervene. The protagonists knew the moderators' questions in advance and had the security they would not be disturbed with unexpected enquiries because they both had agreed to exclude the subjects that were inconvenient for them to deal with. Together with content, the study considers as a key factor the context in which these meetings between Zapatero and Rajoy took place because there is no tradition to produce such political debate programmes in Spanish television (the last one took place in 1993 between Felipe González and José María Aznar) and thus they had generated great expectations. Based on this situation, the study aims to verify whether the debate rose to the occasion or not.

Keywords: television; political information; electoral debate.

Summary: 1. Introduction. 2. Methodology and hypothesis. 3. The format of election debates. 4. Development and content. 5. The crossfire or tennis-mach effect. 6. Stage and set design. 7. A neutral ground. 8. An unnecessary and non-profitable expense. 9. A negotiated moderator with no intervention capacity. 10. The journalists, out of the debate. 11. The conditions of the PSOE and the PP. 12. The criticism of some media. 13. Ratings and Newsworthiness. 14. The interest of the specialized public. 15. The illicit promotion of bipartisanship. 16. Conclusions. 17. References.

Translated by **Cruz Alberto Martínez Arcos** (University of London).

1. Introduction

The electoral debate between the Spanish Socialist Labour Party (hence PSOE according to its initials in Spanish) and the Popular Party (hence PP) was overshadowed by the negotiations held by the two parties weeks before the meetings, where they agreed on the topics to be addressed and the questions they did not want to answer. There were pacts of silence on controversial matters for both institutions and a biased, self-interested and predictable debate was brought forward, which deprived citizens from the opportunity to hear the presidential candidates' views and possible solutions about transcendental issues. Thus the debate between Zapatero and Rajoy only permitted to know the most formal and saleable and least committed parts of their projects.

But most worrying is the fact that people who are not habitual consumers of media were unaware of the rules of the game and watched the debate convinced the war of words was being held without preconditions, with the only time limitation imposed by the television format (Chomsky and Herman, 1990).

It would be honest and necessary that the moderator gave an introductory explanation exposing in details the pacts reached, and above all highlighting the issues excluded by consensus of both parties.

And this was not done. Political debates are necessary in a democracy, but when political parties hold them under such rigorous conditions and strict limitations they become a farce (Durandin, 1995).

2. Methodology and hypothesis

This research works with a mixed methodology. First we conducted content and formal analysis of the two debates, focusing on four aspects: the topics covered and omitted, time management, set design and production. Then we completed the study with a questionnaire applied to 100 second-year journalism students from the Faculty of Communication Sciences at the University of Santiago de Compostela. The reasons for choosing such a particular target is that we believe this is a qualified audience to reflect on the particularities of the debate and has the expertise needed to value it.

Questionnaire responses permit to know the degree of success of the two debates within a specialized audience and to establish the reasons and motives that made the public watch or dismiss the debates. In addition, students were questioned about a number of key issues, according to the purposes of this research:

- Degree of novelty and predictability detected on the issues raised to the candidates and the responses given.
- Degree of usefulness of the debate for the citizens
- Considerations for the preparation of the debate
- Opinion on the exclusion of the press, particularly in the selection of the stage of the meeting and moderators

This way we verified whether our observations matched those of the students. We focused the analysis on three aspects that we considered the central axes of the two debates: the topics addressed and omitted, the granting and administration of interventions and response times, and the set design. And we started with the following assumptions:

- The previous negotiations between the PSOE and PP prevented an open debate without provisions and did not allow citizens to know the opinions of both parties on many issues.
- The confirmation that the debates were previously negotiated decreased the informative and documentary value of the expositions. It was expected that Zapatero and Rajoy would address the issues eventually raised and would omit other more compromising issues. The contents were predictable.
- The requirement of a neutral stage showed that the PP and the PSOE are aligned with some TV networks and that there is some political control over the worrying information, which was reflected even more when the moderators were censored.

3. The format of election debates

There are two main debate models that can be considered reference formats: open and (prepared or spontaneous) closed debate. The open debate allows all sorts of questions from moderators, and there is even a dialogue with the public in the studio. It is a very common formula in the US (Pérez-Martínez, 2009) and in Spain it has been implemented in the programme "Tengo una pregunta para usted" (I have a question for you) from TVE (Spanish Television). They are live debates, spontaneous, without preconditions beyond the technical standards of the format. In this modality, the journalists, one or more, can ask freely and politicians answer without the assistance of advisors, who in prepared debates are responsible for telling politicians what to do or say.

On the other hand, the closed debate is the formula used by Zapatero and Rajoy. In this case an open debate would not have been feasible given the very rigorous requirements imposed by the PSOE and the PP. But the closed debate can also allow some freedom that was not used here because the moderator's role was reduced to a passive observer who merely indicated the turns to speak of candidates.

It is true that televised debates are governed by a format that obeys rules and behavioural guidelines needed for the development of the meeting within conditions of equilibrium that do not harm any of the participants. But those rules affect the structure of the space and should not influence the treatment of content, to avoid turning the debate into something controlled and predictable, with no room for novelty or unplanned contributions, as in happened in the two debates held between Zapatero and Rajoy.

Both politicians that participated in a face-to-face debate designed it to their specifications (Casero Ripollés, 2009) and did not risk anything because they knew beforehand what they were going to be asked and had rehearsed their presentation and responses. It is clear that it would have been more difficult and incriminating for them to answer unpredictable questions, and that is why they did not want to get involved in risky situations in which they were not in control of the entire process.

4. Development and content

The first evidence is that the expositions of both candidates are virtually identical from the formal point of view because they follow common guidelines agreed in previous negotiations that affected the scenic resources and even their movements. Both the first debate, held on 25th February, and the second one, held on the 3rd March (both 90 minutes long) occurred without surprises and without providing significant news to the audiences. The PSOE and the PP agreed to focus on five main sections: the economy and employment, social policies, foreign and security policies, institutional policy, and future challenges.

Each section lasted 15 minutes and was subsequently divided in various sub-sections, also agreed, so that the chance to get out of the script was almost inexistent. There were 4 turns per candidate in each section, in addition to the initial exposition and closure, assigned by a drawing (22 turns for each in total). All interventions were designed to prevent spontaneous reactions. Even in some cases the times given were clearly insufficient to contextualize the issues and elaborate on the question, which evidences the lack of interest by the PSOE and the PP to make an in-depth debate on current affairs of interest to citizens, who are not always the great classic topics.

The arrangement of content makes it impossible to assess the ability to react to unforeseen events, or the ability to overcome difficult situations and uncomfortable questions. This distorts the argumentative strategies, which are one of the characteristic elements of the debates and so valued by the audience. The spectators attended an exhibition of obvious approaches.

There was also a misleading and ambiguous handling of figures on both sides, using the data in the most convenient manner for the purposes of each participant (Durandin, 1995). It is common for electoral interventions to be characterized by a self-interested focalization (Costa, 2008), where each candidate emphasizes those aspects that benefit them and avoids addressing issues that damage their image. And these tricks must be avoided to ensure a live, serious, and deep debate (Rojano Paniagua, 2004).

But in the meetings between Zapatero and Rajoy the figure of the moderator was left with no authority (the struggle for his election was only a matter of image) and was missing someone with authority to conduct the debate freely, able to raise specific issues out of the script and ask candidates to elaborate or contextualize unclear or dissatisfactory answers for the audience. This is the only way to ensure that candidates take a clear position on certain issues and provide useful information to citizens, without taking refuge in an ambiguous and disengaged speech.

5. The crossfire or tennis-match effect

The scheme of the two debates shows an obsession to give Zapatero and Rajoy an identical treatment, based on a formula of paritarian structure with the same number of interventions, the same shots and the same time for both of them. And such a symmetrical distribution generated a predictable and rhythmic evolution. But monotony was not only motivated by the design of the structure. The treatment of content also helped increasing that feeling of monotony because the percentage of positive and negative questions was virtually identical, depending on whether the issues were addressed by one candidate or the contrary.

The prepared statements had no place for improvisation, which took naturalness away from the speeches. Even the details of the answers were collected in the script. In fact, there were over-documentation on the responses and a lack of spontaneous reactions and own arguments. At various times Zapatero and Rajoy turned to the notes to refute, which further evidence that they knew what was going to be asked and what they had to respond.

6. The stage and set design

The debate organizers designed a sober set, based on cold colours, to focus and maintain the attention on the contents. Scenic resources and the protocol were arranged so that the aesthetics of the program were not harmful or helpful to anyone: the formula and the order of arrival to the studio, the way of sitting, the lighting, the production details, especially the shots during the interventions, etc. The advisers

of Zapatero and Rajoy, aware of the importance of the image (Sampedro et. al, 2000), attributed a decisive responsibility to the stage and that was one of the reasons why they wanted the debate to take place on neutral ground, in the headquarters of the Television Academy.

It is preoccupant that the two major parties did not agree to debate in any of the mainstream television channels broadcasting in Spain and is still more worryingly that they did not reach a consensus to do so on public television, which is accused of being biased by the opposition. They did not want the debate to be linked to any network. This requirement of the PSOE and the PP to face each other in a neutral ground is an explicit admission that each party has an allied network –whose editorial line is used by the party to communicate with the public–, and an evidence that politicians publicly assume they control the media, especially television, which compromises the freedom of information (Soengas, 2007).

Furthermore, this weakened the journalistic authority and the capacity of conviction of the mainstream television networks, especially TVE, to convince Zapatero and Rajoy of accepting to debate in their studios. this is the loss of a unique opportunity and also a setback for journalists, who have been subjected to the whims of politicians, because the debates were designed by the communication leaders of the PSOE and the PP, according to self-interested criteria (Sampedro et al, 2004).

7. A neutral ground

The conditions for the execution of the two election debates were not confined to the topics to be treated, but both parties also negotiated the meeting place and this peculiarity was one of the most difficult issues to resolve. Several formulas were proposed. Initially, the PSOE, through his campaign manager, Jose Blanco, proposed the debate to be held in TVE and that the public television network distributed the signal to the channels interested on the event, but this option was rejected by the PP through García Escudero. The PSOE wanted it to be broadcast through a unique institutional signal and offer this signal for free to all broadcasters, without exception, while the PP, clearly vetoing TVE, was inclined to do so in the two channels that broadcast it in 1993.

The PP's communications secretary, Gabriel Elorriaga, proposed to hold both debates between Zapatero and Rajoy at Tele 5, because it was the most watched channel, and Antena 3, because it was a leader in information services. The PSOE rejected this possibility by arguing that its goal was not to favour or vetoing anyone, but to serve the general interest, and rejected the PP's proposal because it involved discrimination between TV networks. The PP claimed that there was no reason for parties to select some networks and exclude others, since the debates were events of general interest (Cisneros, 2006). For this reason the PSOE stated that all TV networks have the right to broadcast the debate if they wish and all citizens have the right to follow the debates wherever they choose, and discriminating against networks would be discriminating against viewers.

The PSOE and the PP were unable to agree on what network should be the scene of the election debates. After considering many alternatives, the PSOE offered the PP a neutral solution. To end the blockade, Blanco proposed the Television Academy to organize and conduct the encounters between Zapatero and Rajoy. The signal and the production would be neutral and, according to the PSOE, so would be the moderator, who could not work for any of the networks involved in the negotiations. The PSOE was defending its proposal by arguing that society would support the idea of letting all networks broadcast the debates. But the PP insisted again that in 1993, the last time there were election debates on television, Tele 5 and Antena 3 broadcast the debates and thus considered that these two networks also could distribute the signal to the rest.

The PSOE rejected this suggestion because the circumstances were not the same as in 1993: existing now more public broadcasters (the regional networks) and private broadcasters (like Cuatro and La Sexta) plus the Internet. According to the PSOE, the proposal for the Television Academy to organize the debates should satisfy the demand made by the PP that the two debates were held in Antena 3 and Tele 5 because the Television Academy integrated all public and private TV networks in Spain, including Antena 3 and Tele 5. For socialists, this initiative also ensured the impartiality of the organization and production, allowing any media, whether radio, television and Internet, to broadcast the signal and also guaranteed the right of viewers to watch the debates in the medium they chose.

After a long debate and weeks of public disagreements, the PSOE and the PP reached an agreement for hold the debate for the elections on 9th March between Zapatero and Rajoy, on the dates agreed and on a ground considered neutral for both parties: the Television Academy. The two debates were to be broadcast with a signal open for all media wishing to offer them, with a signal and a neutral production.

Previously, the PP had made another proposal to the PSOE: a pre-election debate in Telemadrid

between Solbes and Pizarro, the second bests of both parties, also with open signal. The date set was 14th February, little more than a week before the start of the campaign. The PSOE rejected the offer because it considered it to be inconsistent and contradictory. But more significant was that the PP did not accept a debate in TVE because it did not consider the network to be objective, but it did propose one debate in Telemadrid.

On 11th February, in anticipation that it eventually had to organize the debates and distribute the signal openly for all media wishing to broadcast them, the Television Academy board commissioned the preparation of the event to seven professionals. The team was composed by Manuel Campo Vidal, president of the Academy and moderator of the last debate in 1993 between Felipe González and José María Aznar; Pedro Ricote and Carlos Estévez, the most responsible for that debate in Antena 3 TV; the Academy's vice presidents José Carbajo, retired producer of TVE, and Tacho de la Calle, from Telemadrid, who also participated in another debate in 1993 in Telecinco; Fernando Navarrete, a TV producer, and Concha García Campoy, spokeswoman for the Academy. These seven professionals organized two work committees.

One committee was of technical character and was composed by Ángel Blanco (Lighting), Paco Bello (Set design) and Jesús Glück (Music), and the second was dedicated to communication to coordinate the access of all media interested in offering the debates.

8. An unnecessary and non-profitable expense

The cost of organizing the two debates (infrastructure, sets, production of the signal, etc.) amounted to one million Euros, paid by the media that broadcast them. Most of the budget was devoted to adapting the facilities that were technically unprepared for this kind of events. That cost could have been saved and the debate could have been free if TVE had organized the event and the public broadcaster had distributed the signal to all other stations, since it was an event of extraordinary interest to citizens. TVE, as any other mainstream channels, had the adequate infrastructure without the need for further investment, but, surprisingly, the parties chose a place that needed a new studio that was not used for more events to make it profitable.

Of the total cost, 90% of spending was divided between the national and regional networks, and the remaining 10% was covered by local television stations, radio and the Internet. Of this 10%, local TV networks covered 2%, which is the approximate average share nationwide, and another 8% was covered by radio and the Internet. The payment formula required a 20% fixed charge for coverage from each network, regardless of the audience, and the remaining 80% was paid by the networks depending on the audience ratings obtained on 25 February and 3 March, according to data certified by Sofres (an audience research company).

9. A negotiated moderator with no intervention capacity

Once the meeting place was agreed a new battle started: the struggle was then focused on the selection of the moderator. Initially they wanted a radio or newspaper journalist, something incomprehensible from a professional standpoint, as the stage was television and this medium has its own particular codes that are dominated better by those working in it regularly. Although they lost the opportunity to organize the debate, the TV networks still sought to maintain its presence at the event. So they began the pressure to choose the moderator, because they understood that the network related to the selected journalist would benefit in prestige and credibility.

But this plan conflicted with the theory of neutrality fabricated by the ideologues of the PSOE and the PP (Sampedro et al, 2000). This theory was to choose a moderator unrelated to any mainstream TV network, and somebody who could not be identify with a channel because this way the viewer would make that connection when watching the debate. This position, defended by the Television Academy, was not shared by all people interested in expressing the opposition to the election proposals of Zapatero and Rajoy. But the pressure came not only from the television networks, it also came from radio stations and the media groups owning them, and who sought to position themselves in the public arena. Once again, the purposes of the networks clashed with the preferences of politicians.

For several days, the names of many reporters were shuffled: Manuel Campo Vidal, Àngels Barceló, Carlos Herrera, Fernando Onega, Julia Otero and Luis Marin were those who sounded louder, but consensus was not easy. Every day the negotiations between the PSOE and the PP were repeated. Again the agreement between the two parties became as difficult as the disagreements that existed before confirming the holding of the debates. the new battle was now about the name of the person who would simply give way to the intervention turns.

The selection of the moderator proved to be one of the most difficult aspects to reach consensus, which is something incomprehensible because the previous pacts affecting the form and content left the journalist responsible for presenting and leading the debate without authority. Its function was distorted because he only had to just follow instructions. It was, therefore, a robotic presence. Even so, the majority of political journalists were excluded a priori because they were marked politically. This raises the following question: Is it lawful to marginalize someone on the grounds of his or her ideology?

We all have personal convictions, but a good journalist is able to abstract himself or herself from personal issues and approaches to meet the demands of the professional criteria. What is certain is that the choice of the moderator was a serious humiliation for regular news presenters. None was considered suitable and many were publicly censured and rejected because one of the two parties alleged they did not offer guarantees of objectivity. The final proposal was discussed at a meeting between the two directors of the debates, Campo Vidal and Fernando Navarrete, with José Blanco (PSOE) and Pío García-Escudero and Gabriel Elorriaga (PP).

Finally, the PSOE and the PP agreed on Manuel Campo Vidal to moderate the first debate and Olga Viza the second. Regardless of the value of the elected moderators, the parties were looking for image rather than professionalism, since, thanks to the agreements reached, the figure of the moderator was left without authority. The mission of the moderator was simply to present the candidates, to give the turns to speak, to control the time allocated, all of which could be done by a programmed robot.

Campo Vidal was preferred from the beginning because he had several factors in its favor: he is the president of the Television Academy and one of the negotiators who achieved consensus to hold the debate between Zapatero and Rajoy. He also has journalistic prestige; plenty of experience in television; and in 1993 moderated without criticism, and with the satisfaction of the two political protagonists, one of the debates between Felipe González and José María Aznar.

However, the parties feared the reactions of *Prisa* because its channel, *Cuatro*, had announced it would broadcast the debates, but only if certain conditions were met: depending on the moderator and the production. *Prisa* was supporting Ángels Barceló, director of *Hora 25* (25th Hour), from *Cadena Ser*, one station of its ownership. Moreover, there was another suggestion made by the Polanco group after the revelation of the new agreement to hold another meeting between Pedro Solbes and Manuel Pizarro en *Antena 3* on 21st February: that the second debate between Zapatero and Rajoy should be moderated by a RNE journalist.

Prisa decided to support the public radio to prevent the proposal from Antena 3. If it was about dividing the pie of debates between mainstream television networks, *Prisa* argued that the network *Planeta* should have secured one of the second debates between the PSOE and the PP. But another one of the best placed men to acting as moderator was Carlos Herrera, director of *Herrera en la Onda*, from *Onda Cero*, also from *Planeta*, and promoted by its chairman, Maurizio Carlotti. TVE and *La Sexta* were the only television networks that respected the Television Academy's decision, or at least there were not known intrusions. In addition, TVE committed itself to organize a third debate, between the groups represented in Parliament, which was delivered on 28 February.

10. The journalists, out of the debate

The proceedings of the debate showed the weakness of the press before the power of politicians and demonstrated the ease with which the parties handled the media. In the context of the organization, the journalists were marginalized and played a passive role in the process. First, as mentioned earlier, they allowed Zapatero and Rajoy to design a debate to their specifications to discuss only those issues that suited them both, and the press was abided by every dictate, overlooking a clear case of usurpation of competencies. The PSOE and the PP negotiated every detail so that nothing was left to chance, thus delimiting the margins of freedom offered by the format.

The demands of both parties to produce a harmless debate was translated in directions, orders and impositions which violate all the rights of freedom of information included in the system of law. In this process there was no room for contributions other than the ones made by the politicians, something unacceptable in a democracy. Everything was negotiated, agreed and defined in the speeches of the candidates, cancelling out everything that did not suit them. And then it was accepted that the PSOE and the PP could marginalize the television networks and require to debate on neutral ground with a moderator appointed by political consensus.

the paper attributed to the moderator does not correspond to the roles that it should play and its freedom was nullified by acting under the directions agreed and imposed by the politicians. This way they made

sure they had everything under control, the questions and answers. The room for Campo Vidal and Olga Viza to manoeuvre was nil and their role could be perfectly assumed by a host of game shows because their contributions were limited to the ceremonial introduction and to play a role of timekeeper, indicating the time available and turns to speak to the candidates, which is far from an exercise of free and serious journalism.

This role is the exact opposite of that assumed by journalists in debates in the US, where there exists a culture deeply rooted in this type of programmes and the journalist is free to inquire and to intervene when deemed appropriate. In the US moderators (which may be several in the same debate) are always prestigious reporters who can ask freely without being subject to any prior agreement or to external conditions that may affect their work. There are no restrictions on the issues, or the questions. And beyond asking questions, the moderator has the capacity to intervene at any time and lead the debate, thus preventing politicians from evading questions that do not suit them.

Their role is transcendental and can have decisive consequences, as happened in 1988 in a debate between George H. Bush and Mike Dukakis. Bernard Shaw, a CNN journalist, put Dukakis in serious trouble by asking him: "If Kitty (his wife) was raped and murdered, would you be in favour of irrevocable death penalty for the murderer?" The Democrat coldly responded no. The reaction stunned the audience and certainly influenced his election defeat.

The moderators of the debates between Zapatero and Rajoy were limited to merely be present and be carriers or translators of earlier indications, without having the opportunity to develop their profession in conditions of freedom; they were obliged to restrain themselves.

In fact, they had a built-in invisible gag, and they the submission of journalists to politicians was staged like never before because the parties were the ones who designed all that would happen in the format, without allowing the participation of anyone else, directly and intentionally excluding journalists. But journalists were not aware of their vulnerability and their lack of decision-making capacity in the professional field until the very moment they were displaced from such a transcendental event, and that is why the seriousness of the issue has opened a debate.

Experts attribute this situation to the lack of tradition in Spain to hold televised debates between politicians, something very common in the US where, for example, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama held 20 debates in the political struggle for the Democratic primaries, and there were over 50 debates in the entire election process. In the US it is unthinkable that politicians would give the slightest indication about the development a political debate. That would cause a scandal that would result in the immediate resignation of the persons involved.

But the culture of political debate in Spain is not yet well established. However it should be recognized the success of the programme "59 segundos" (59 seconds) from TVE, which rescued the format and managed to consolidate it on the programming. And this lack of tradition in televised debates is the reason why the figure of the moderator is neither established, and its specific functions are neither recognized nor accepted, beyond the tasks of indicating speech turns and reminding the guests how much time they have left to finish his speech.

11. The conditions of the PSOE and the PP

The televised debate of presidential candidates was held under strict conditions imposed by both parties. The general secretary of the PSOE, José Blanco, and the general director of the PP's campaign, Pío García Escudero, designed the content, assuming the duties that corresponded to journalists.

The meetings between Zapatero and Rajoy were divided into five thematic blocks of 15 minutes each: economy and employment, social policy, foreign and security policy, institutional policy, and challenges for the future. The economics block covered the macro-economy, Spanish competitiveness, employment situation (from the pace of job creation in sensitive sectors to youth and women unemployment), inflation, wage measures, and fiscal policy.

In foreign and security policy the foci of the debate were the defence policy and the fight against domestic and international terrorism, international cooperation, development assistance, and public and roads safety. In social policies the politicians talked about pensions, health, education, immigration, dependency, equality, and family policy. At the turn of the institutional policy the topics discussed were the autonomous states, possible amendments to the Constitution, cooperation between institutions, and the current situation of Spanish justice system. And in the challenges for the future section the politicians addressed the strengthening of research and technological development, climate change and sustainable development policies, infrastructure development, and urban and housing policies.

In addition to agreeing on the content that suited them, the PSOE and the PP imposed conditions that assured them the absolute control of the debate and these demands prevented the citizens from enjoying a free face-to-face debate. Teams from both parties left no loose ends at random. As already mentioned, everything was calculated and agreed upon: the arrival of the candidates, the entry to the studio, the location of each candidate, the timing and implementation. There were even prior testing with photographs the shots, and a rehearsal with extras.

The indications were so accurate that they invaded the professional skills of the TV producers, and the same happened with the usurpation of the work of the moderators. For example, the PP was reluctant to accept close-ups of Rajoy because its strategists believed Zapatero had better image in close up. An exhaustive protocol set all the rules that served as a reference to the entity responsible for producing the signal. The 50 conditions agreed turned the debate into a meeting meticulously measured, with some unprecedented requirements and constraints.

General Conditions. The candidates arrived separately to the studio installed in the Municipal Pavilion Juan Carlos I in Madrid: Rajoy arrived at 21.15 hours and Zapatero at 21.25 hours. The starting time of the debate was set at 22.03 and the end at 23:45 with a six-minute commercial break. In total, each candidate spoke for 41 minutes. The interventions were equally distributed, with an initial exposition (of three minutes per candidate) and an epilogue (of three minutes). Each of the five main themes was addressed in three two-minute alternate interventions and one more of one-minute. By a drawing, Rajoy was selected to open the blocks and Zapatero to close them.

The location was also planned. In the first debate (25th February), the PP candidate was on the left of the moderator, and the PSOE candidate to the right. Then in the second debate (March 3) the order of the turns and chairs was changed. And basketball timers were used to measure and control the timing.

It was arranged for the broadcasting signal to be capable of being linked to television and radios stations and Internet (among the national networks the event was broadcast by *TVE-1*, *Cuatro*, and *La Sexta*). The PP and the PSOE also broadcast it on their websites. And there were indications on the labels, which were limited to the names of the candidates and the moderator. The Television Academy did not allowed the other networks to incorporate their graphics.

Conditions for the set design. The two parties discussed in detail the set design. The presence of a live audience was never envisaged and optimal conditions were sought. The table was 72 cm high, the floor was nonslip, the lighting was of 3,200 kilowatts, and studio's temperature was of 21 degrees. Zapatero and Rajoy were provided with adjustable chairs with no arms or wheels, and with a low back. Furthermore, the candidates had two lavalier microphones whose batteries were not connected until they were on the stage.

By agreement of both parties, at the table there was only the documentation needed by the candidates, water and built-in digital clocks with the countdown of the interventions, although the time could also be seen in separate monitors. In the second debate new timers were installed in the centre of the table, in addition to the timers already used in the previous debate on each candidate's position on the screens next to each one's camera. That would explain Rajoy's constant gaze deviation in the first encounter.

The shots conditions required that the production offered a general shot of the studio followed by close-ups and medium shots. Listening shots and reverse angles of the candidate not speaking were admitted, but could not exceed four seconds. The number of shots of Zapatero and Rajoy had to be similar and the last intervention (of three minutes) should be a fixed close-up. As agreed, in close-ups and medium-shots the cameras were at the height of the candidates' eyes. In the second debate, the position of the cameras was the same as in the first debate and there were ten in the set, although five were reserves in case there were technical problems. Moreover, in this case, the cameramen were able to offer higher overhead shots.

Conditions on the moderator. Campo Vidal and Olga Viza had to stand in the middle of Zapatero and Rajoy, address them as candidates and do not value or clarify their comments. They were only allowed to remind them the time consumption and compensate in case a candidate was still speaking despite having exhausted his turn. If this happened, the moderators could finish the candidates' intervention. They were also mandated to mediate if one candidate was repeatedly interrupted by the other, so that exposition was not jeopardized. The PSOE and the PP agreed that in the last speech, the candidates could not make references to the opponent. Otherwise argument turns would be open until the end of the debate was neutral.

Conditions for teams. Each candidate was provided with a room fitted with television, telephone, fax, and catering, where six advisers could follow the debate. There was also a makeup artist for Zapatero and

one for Rajoy. During the commercial break only one person of the PSOE and one of the PP could access the stage, but the parties could position another collaborator in the production control and have a doctor, located in the same room as the team of advisers.

12. The criticism of some media

The very restrictive conditions imposed by the PSOE and the PP over the content and the explicit veto to the TV networks and the potential moderators made some general channels decide to stay out of something they saw as a scandal for the audience and did not broadcast the debates. So Antena 3 argued that it refused to be a mere repeater station of an informative space where its professionals had not had the chance to make any contribution, directly or indirectly. With this refusal, *Antena 3* became the second station that did not use the open signal of the Television Academy, because *Telecinco* had taken the same decision days earlier.

The *Planeta* network was hoping that the Television Academy would explain the details of the debates to assess whether it would broadcast them live but one of the details were revealed it stated its position through a press release. Antena 3 considered it was a debate model "in which everything has been agreed outside the professional standards of those who then are asked to broadcast it. Us the television networks have been invited to simply broadcast a debate with a format that has imposed upon us, with some moderators we have not chosen, and in which there has been no possibility for our own productions. *Antena 3* aims to inform the Spanish society, but with its own criteria and not as a mere broadcaster.

The network considers that viewers have guaranteed access to the debate through other national stations, and so it reiterates its autonomy as a mass medium independent to produce, with its own journalistic and production standards, the informative programming it offers to its audience and of which, only in this case, it is responsible for".

13. Ratings and newsworthiness

The majority of Spanish citizens are interested in politics in transcendental times, as reflected in the ratings recorded. The first debate between Zapatero and Rajoy reached an average audience of more than thirteen million viewers (13,043,000) and obtained a screen share of 59.1%. TVE was the most watched television network and it reached 8,036,000 viewers, which is 36.4% of all who were watching television (audience share) and 61.7% of those watching the debate. *Cuatro* received 2,360,000 visitors (10.7% share), while *La Sexta* reached 1,335,000 viewers (6% share).

The regional networks that decided to broadcast the event amounted other 882,000 visitors to total level of audience. Furthermore, the debate moderated by Manuel Campo Vidal was also available in many local television stations, in several DTT channels, in radio and the Internet.

But the analysis must take into account the circumstances. The refusal of Antena 3 and Telecinco to broadcast the debate possibly produced a timely re-distribution and concentration of the audience in TVE. According to data provided by *Barlovento Comunicación*, based on measurements of Sofres, over 22,500,000 Spanish people at some point watched the debate, making it one of the most watched shows on Spanish television history. These figures apply to the audience of the networks that re-broadcast the signal produced by the Television Academy, currently subject to the study of T.N. Sofres, taking as a reference the time zone that ranges from 22.07 pm to 23.52 pm.

The most watched minute occurred at 22.38 hours, with 15,081,000 viewers and 65.2% audience share in which the theme was immigration and education.

But the interest decreased when the viewers noticed that the debates were not providing any new information, something that was reflected in the audience level for the second debate, which fell by more than one million people, reaching 11,952,000 (56.3%). This same trend is also seen in the surveys to students in Communication Sciences.

14. The interest of the specialized public

The discovery that the debates between Zapatero and Rajoy were to be held under severely restrictive conditions imposed by both parties decreased the interest among some specialized public sectors, which is reflected in the results of surveys to communication sciences students. The theoretical importance of a debate between leaders of the two major parties in the country does not correspond with the ratings they obtained from students (Sampedro et al, 2000). Of the 100 students surveyed, 59% were initially

interested in the debate held on 25 February, but only 48% saw it completely. And in the second face-to-face encounter the percentage dropped to 47% and only 35% remained attentive throughout the program. Students who did not see the debates formulated four possible justifying reasons:

- A) Because he or she was not interested in politics
- B) Because he or she knew the preconditions and knew there would not be news
- C) Because he or she was not able to see it
- D) Due to other reasons

65% (and 72% in the second debate) said he or she had not seen the debate because they already knew the preconditions and did not expect anything new, 15% was not interested in politics (also 15% in the second debate), 8% (4% in the second) was not able to see it and 12% (9% in the second) sated other motives.

The survey results confirm that the contents were predictable. 82% of students said they expected the debate to deal with the issues raised and 78% believe that the debate had little use for citizens. Students are also critical of politicians and journalists for the roles they both played in the organization of the events. 92% believed that the PSOE and the PP are overstepping the boundaries by imposing the topics and the moderators, and 97% believed that the press did not act properly by allowing politicians to arbitrate such an extraordinary news event.

15. The illicit promotion of bipartisanship

Besides the criticism received for the pacts made on the contents and the moderator, the debate between Zapatero and Rajoy was also very challenged by the minority parties because they considered it a formula that illegally promotes bipartisanship because the PSOE and the PP occupy most of the electoral air spaces and times, leaving the other groups in weaker positions to communicate their proposals. Thus the other political parties, IU (Izquierda Unida-Left United), CiU (Convergència i Unió-Convergence and Union) and PNV (Partido Nacional Vasco- Basque Nationalist Party) appealed to the Supreme Court demanding the suspension of the second televised debate between the leaders of the PSOE and the PP.

The three parties considered the debate between two candidates breached the rules of the central election board about the respect for plurality in the public media because it was a debate only between Zapatero and Rajoy, and closed to other parties. The IU's presidential candidate, Gaspar Llamazares, requested: "[they should return] the voice that we have been stolen. this is not a two-players debate, because there are three national forces represented in parliament and that is why we appeal", he said. CiU felt that there had been a theft to democracy, and for the PNV the formula was a fraud. The three minority parties tried to draw attention to what they considered an illegal promotion of bipartisanship in a parliamentary system.

Faced with these protests, TVE organized an open debate among the seven political parties with their own parliamentary group, which was broadcast on 28th February using the format of the programme "59 seconds" and a duration of 120 minutes, and with conditions and a structure very similar to those involved in the debate between Zapatero and Rajoy, but adapted to the number of participants: 5 thematic blocks, an initial turn of exposition and a final round of conclusions for each party and three interventions for each represent in each block .

Afterwards, TVE agreed to a second debate among seven representatives of the seven political parties, scheduled for 5th March at midnight, a marginal hour when compared with the privileged slot in which the other debates were broadcast. For this reason, IU, CiU and PNV legally requested the event to be broadcast at 10:00 pm, the same time scheduled for the debate between Zapatero and Rajoy. The Supreme Court agreed with the request and ordered RTVE to broadcast the 7-players debate after 22:00 pm and not at midnight, as planned.

16. Conclusions

A) The explicit recognition by the PSOE and the PP of having allied television networks puts in evidence that there is certain political control of the public and private media. This fact seriously affects the professionalism of journalists because it undermines the credibility of their work, and calls into question its independence and weakens its autonomy. The organization of the debates demonstrated that politicians are able to impose the contents of a news programme and also use journalists as they wish to transmit an appearance of objectivity to the audience.

B) The role of the moderator was muzzled by politicians and reduced to some invisible and secondary functions. Campaign managers wrote the script, when it should be television professionals who convene debates with the requirements, they consider appropriate. The role of a journalist is to ask freely and intervene when necessary, and conduct the debate with all that it entails. The press should do an analysis of what happened, demand their rights and make sure a similar situation so degrading to the profession is not repeated.

C) The topics discussed and the positions of each party towards these issues were known in advance. therefore, neither the expositions nor the arguments used to defend and refute the contrary were new or surprising. The discrepancies between Zapatero and Rajoy on central issues were obvious and logical because these issues are precisely those defining the ideology, political thought, and basic action lines of left-wing and right-wing parties.

D) The question to be asked is whether the debate has been useful at all. All the experts who have expressed their opinion in the press after the debates between Zapatero and Rajoy agreed that these events have not provided useful information to citizens, since the official positions of both candidates on the issues addressed were already known and they did not allow the moderators to ask them difficult questions.

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