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Ceasefire as bad news: the coverage of the end of ETA in the Basque and Spanish press

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Abstract

The Basque separatist organization ETA announced the cessation of its armed campaign on October 20, 2011. It was the main cover story in all Basque and Spanish newspapers. It was the long awaited definitive end of a 40-year-long violent campaign, but it was not framed as good news in all the media. This article studies how the Basque and Spanish press reported the process leading to the end of ETA’s campaign. For that purpose, we have selected seven newspapers, four edited in the Basque Country (*El Correo*, *Deia*, *Gara* and *Berría*) and three edited in Madrid (*El País*, *El Mundo* and *Abc*), and analyzed how they reported ten significant events that occurred from 2009 to 2011, chosen for their significance in the process. In a qualitative study carried out through discourse analysis and framing theory, we have examined and compared the headlines and news stories of the sample. The study reflects that the editorial line of each media organization regarding the Basque conflict entirely conditioned the perspective from which each one reported the events leading to the end of ETA’s campaign. There is a significant difference in the media coverage provided by the Basque and Spanish newspapers. Most Basque newspapers framed the events related to the end of ETA in the context of a desirable peace process. Some influential Spanish media, in contrast, framed these events as if the cessation of violence was an undesirable outcome.

Keywords

Journalism, framing, news coverage, conflict, ETA, Basque.

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1. Introduction

The Basque media cheered the good news when ETA announced on October 20, 2011, the definitive cessation of its 40-year-long armed campaign. They framed it as a historic event. The giant headlines were more than justified: ‘At last!’ (*El Correo*), ‘Peace’ (*Deia*), ‘A new era for the Basque Country’ (*Gara*). The news about ETA overshadowed the news about Gaddafi’s killing, which occurred the very same day, but it was not the cover story of Basque and Spanish newspapers, unlike most of the papers all over the world. The cover story of the newspapers edited in Madrid was also about ETA. However, not all of them framed it as good news. In fact, three of the four main papers reported ETA’s announcement as if it was bad news. Their main headlines were telling: ‘ETA neither dissolves nor disarms’ (*Abc*), ‘ETA ceases their armed activity without disarming’ (*La Razón*), ‘ETA boasts of their murders and calls upon government to negotiate’ (*El Mundo*).

The divergences in the news coverage of ETA had been a constant in the whole history of the conflict. Although belligerence toward ETA had been unanimous in the Spanish media and absolutely mainstream in the Basque media, there were significant differences between the Spanish and Basque media regarding the degree of this belligerence and, especially, the consequences of that perspective on the rigorousness of the news coverage (Idoiaga and Ramirez, 2002; Batista, 1999). It was a time for, as Ramirez and Idoiaga put it, ‘media counterterrorism’ (2002: 143). Things started changing after 2007. Soon after ETA broke the 2006-2007 ceasefire and resumed its armed campaign, some prominent members of the leadership of the Nationalist Left, the broad pro-independence movement to which ETA belonged, questioned internally the resumption of the armed struggle and launched a debate that eventually led ETA to lay down arms in 2011. It began as an internal and opaque process but it gradually became a multilateral and partially public process, reported to the public by the media. It was a gradual process toward peace. From the beginning of 2010, some Basque media organizations framed the events within a process heading the abandonment of violence; many others did not give credibility to the moves supposedly preceding the end of ETA’s violence until much later; and most of the Spanish media outlets did not give any credibility to the end of ETA’s violence even after the announcement of October 2011.

1.1. Media discourse on ETA

1980 was the deadliest year regarding ETA’s attacks. The Basque group killed almost a hundred people that year. Not all killings were big news in the newspapers of the time. Depending on the circumstances and the profile of the victims, some of the attacks were a small piece of news on the front pages. All attacks were reported with surgical descriptive style: what happened, where, when, and how. Three decades later, when ETA committed its last killings on July 30, 2009, the attack was the only news on the front pages of most of the Basque and Spanish newspapers, and all publications devoted several full pages to the event. The contents and style of most of the pieces were very far from the descriptive nature of the pieces in the 1980s. The evil of the killers and the complicity of their political supporters were remarked upon not only in the opinion pages (Ramírez de la Piscina *et al.*, 2016; Armentia and Caminos, 2012).

The news coverage of ETA and the Basque conflict has evolved over time in connection to the evolution of the political context. The news coverage of attacks committed by armed groups has universally provoked doubts given that the perpetrators usually carry out such attacks with

propagandistic purposes. Armed groups purposely provoke events in order to produce news. In the case of ETA, the idea that the media should silence information about its attacks emerged from the political sphere in the 1970s, but it was widely rejected in the name of the protection of the right to information (Armentia and Caminos, 2012).

Since silence was not feasible, political authorities encouraged the media to agree and maintain a common information policy in accordance with the fight against terrorism. When the anti-terrorism Ajuria Enea Agreement was signed in 1988, the ‘information professionals’ were mentioned among the actors with responsibility in the process of pacification. The divisive line promoted by the agreement between *demócratas* and *violentos* had a direct reflection in the coverage of events related to ETA. Most of the media adopted an active role in harmony with that counterterrorist philosophy. A study on the reflection of the Ajuria Enea Agreement in the media concluded that most of the media reinforced the discourse dividing the Basque society between ‘a democratic majority and a violent minority’ (Armentia et al., 1997: 149-155). The Ajuria Enea Agreement was the beginning of a gradual unification of criteria in news coverage of ETA. Batista (1999) examined ‘the journalistic construction of ETA’ during the Ajuria Enea Agreement period, and concluded that basic principles of journalism were sacrificed in order to construct a specific discourse and frame the conflict as an issue of criminality.

Media belligerence toward ETA would significantly increase in a later period, especially after the killing of the PP councilor Blanco in July 1997. That change was reflected in a considerable increase in the space devoted to ETA’s attacks. Moreover, interpretative titling replaced the more descriptive style of the past, and graphic material showing the havoc caused by the attacks was increasingly used. From 1997 onward the mainstream media developed the awareness that they could play an essential role against ETA (Caminos et al., 2013). This dominant reporting model, more engaged with counterterrorism policies than with the principles of journalism, was also called ‘media anti-terrorism’ (Idoigaga and Ramírez de la Piscina, 2002).

The evolution of the news coverage of ETA during the four decades after the end of Franco’s dictatorship can be summarized in four different periods:

- 1) From 1975 to the signing of the Ajuria Enea Agreement in 1988 the media lacked a unified criterion.
- 2) After 1988 there was a gradual unification of informative criteria to deal with ETA issues in harmony with the increasing polarizations of the conflict.
- 3) The killing of the city councilor Miguel Angel Blanco in 1997 and the collapse of the 1998-1999 peace process gave way to a period of what can be called ‘trench journalism’, dominant in the whole 2000 decade.
- 4) The definitive cessation of ETA’s violence in 2011 was the beginning of new era in both the Basque conflict and its news coverage (Ramírez de la Piscina *et al.*, 2016). Crettenand’s findings about the press role in the Basque conflict in the 2000 decade are compatible with the idea that it was a time of ‘trench journalism’, as he concluded that the extreme polarization of the political debate led journalists to practice their profession according to the dictates of political parties engaged in the conflict (2014).

One of the crucial factors for that polarization, ETA, started to abandon the stage at the end of the decade. After 2009, ETA did not commit any violent attacks, and after 2011 ETA gradually disappeared from the Basque and Spanish political scenario. However, the Spanish Government and many other political actors continued acting as if the Basque group was still active, as if they still needed an enemy to combat (Zulaika and Murua, 2017). That could be one of the keys to understanding why the ETA issue might have endured much longer in the pages of some mainstream media organizations than in reality.

2. Methodology

The contents analyzed in this investigation consist of headlines and news stories about ten events that occurred from 2009 to 2011 published by seven print-edition newspapers. The selected newspapers reflect the plurality of the views from which the news related to the Basque conflict was—and is—reported. *El Correo* is the best-selling daily newspaper in the Basque Country. It belongs to Vocento, which has a total of thirteen Spanish newspapers, most of them of regional scope. *El Correo* is conservative, an advocate of the Spanish constitutional system and critical of Basque nationalism. *Deia* is a publication close to the moderate Basque Nationalist Party (PNV). It is edited and distributed mainly in Bizkaia and belongs to Grupo Noticias, which publishes three other newspapers for Araba, Gipuzkoa, and Navarre. *Gara* was founded in 1999 financed by popular subscription triggered by the judicial shut down of the newspaper *Egin* for its alleged affinity with ETA. It is distributed all over the Basque Country. *Berria* is the only daily newspaper published entirely in Basque. It was founded in June 2003 after the judicial closure of *Egunkaria* in February 2003. *Berria* was founded by the staff and workers of *Egunkaria*, and occupies the same sociological space. It is distributed throughout the Basque Country. *El País*, *El Mundo*, and *Abc* are the best-selling general information newspapers in Spain. All three are published in Madrid and distributed in the whole of Spain. Their overall sales figures in the Basque Country are below those for the Basque papers. *El País* is the best-selling general information newspaper in Spain, is considered a center-left oriented newspaper and belongs to Prisa. *El Mundo* was also center-left oriented in its origins, but has evolved toward center-right positions since the mid-1990s. *Abc*, one of the oldest newspapers in Spain, is a conservative, monarchist newspaper that, since 2001, belongs to Vocento, the group of *El Correo*.

The ten events selected for their relevance in the process leading to the end of ETA are the following:

- 1- The killing of two Spanish civil guards by ETA in Majorca on July 30, 2009. It was the last premeditated deadly attack by ETA.
- 2- The arrest of the main political leader of the Nationalist Left, Arnaldo Otegi, on October 13, 2009.
- 3- The release of the document with the conclusions of the debate within the Nationalist Left on February 16, 2010.
- 4- The killing of a French gendarme in a clash with ETA members near Paris on March 16, 2010. It was ETA's last killing.
- 5- The announcement by ETA on September 5, 2010 of the decision to cease all 'offensive attacks'. It was a temporary and ambiguous halt, not a real ceasefire.
- 6- The announcement of a 'permanent, verifiable and general ceasefire' by ETA on January 10, 2011. It was not the definitive end yet.

- 7- The presentation of the charter of a new political party, Sortu, on February 7, 2011 in which the Nationalist Left publicly rejected the use of violent means.
- 8- The decision by the Spanish Constitutional Court on May 5, 2011 to allow the new leftist pro-independence coalition Bildu to participate in elections.
- 9- The international conference in Donostia with the participation of Kofi Annan and other prominent political figures, on October 17, 2011, where they demanded that ETA end its armed activity and the Spanish and French government engage in a peace process.
- 10- The announcement by ETA on October 20, 2011 of the definitive cessation of its armed activity.

The method used to examine the headlines and news stories about the selected events is qualitative. The news pieces have been studied and compared through qualitative content analysis (Gunter, 2000: 82-92). Wimmer and Dominick (2010: 155-183) distinguish five main purposes of content analysis: 1) to describe trends in media portrayals; 2) to test hypotheses about the policies of media organizations; 3) to compare media content with the real world; 4) to assess the representation of certain groups in society; 5) to draw inferences about the effects of the media. In this investigation the main purpose of using content analysis was to describe trends in media representation of reality and compare media content with the real events of the time. The comparative analysis of the news was done both synchronically and diachronically. On the one hand, we have examined the similarities and differences on the coverage of the same event at the same day by the seven different newspapers. On the other hand, we have analyzed the evolution of each newspaper's approach in the coverage of the events related to the end of ETA. For this comparative analysis we have also ventured into the field of framing theory. According to this theory, the media frames disconnected issues and facts in such a way as to provide the audience with a particular way of understanding complex realities which could have been understood in other ways if presented in other frames. Therefore, framing theory analyzes how the media frames specific events in specific ways that focus readers' attention in certain directions (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Entman, 1993; De Vreese, 2005). Sourcing is related to framing, as sources of information are used to support the framing of such stories, being able to either reinforce or undermine a certain vision of the event (Greenberg and Hier, 2009). Therefore, sources of the analyzed news stories have been carefully examined in this investigation, especially the way they influenced media coverage.

3. Investigation results

Event 1°. Last premeditated killings

ETA killed two Spanish civil guards by exploding a bomb placed under their car on the island of Majorca, a holiday resort of the Spanish royal family, on July 30, 2009. Two days earlier, ETA exploded a powerful bomb and provoked important damage in the headquarters of the Civil Guard in Burgos. Now we know that it was the last premeditated killing by ETA, but at the time there was no indication that the campaign of the Basque group was ending. According to later accounts by the actors involved (Munarriz, 2012; Whitfield, 2014; Murua, 2017), the internal debate about the continuation of the armed struggle within the Nationalist Left was already taking place. The failure of the 2005-2007 process and the return to violence was a turning point in the relationship between the leadership of ETA the armed group, and the leadership of Batasuna, the political party. Their once manageable disagreements turned into two incompatible positions. Otegi and other leading members of Batasuna

believed that the armed struggle should end for the sake of the pro-independence movement; negotiation with the Spanish state was not a possibility anymore, and therefore ETA should start a unilateral process to lay down arms. This faction wanted to open a debate within the movement to question the whole strategy. In contrast, the leadership of ETA and other factions within the Nationalist Left contended that armed struggle could be compatible with political action and they regarded ETA's campaign as an instrumental tool with which to force the Spanish state to negotiate. This faction sustained that all the matters related to armed struggle should be decided by ETA and ETA alone. The first moves toward the opening of a strategic debate were secretly made at the end of 2008, a few months after Otegi's release from prison in August 2008. When ETA killed two civil guards in July 2009, the debate was already taking place, although secretly. Otegi and others later suggested that ETA was trying to condition the outcome of the internal debate within the Nationalist Left (Munarriz, 2012; Whitfield, 2014; Murua, 2017).

Probably unaware of that context, some newspapers framed the attack in Majorca as another step in a big ETA offensive. *ABC* remarked that ETA intensified its action to force another negotiation. *El País* stressed that ETA was in full offensive. *Deia* pointed out that ETA confirmed "it's insane offensive" with the attack in Majorca. *El Correo* headline was that ETA was challenging the State. *El Mundo* and *Gara* remarked on the military capacity showed by ETA. *Berria*, in contrast, chose a descriptive headline: ETA killed two civil guards in Majorca, bombing their car.

Reading the news of the time, nothing was indicative that the killings were ETA's final deadly attack. On the contrary, the media seemed to have reasons to interpret that it was part of a sustained offensive. The publicly known political context gave no hint that the questioning of the armed struggle within the Nationalist Left had advanced as much as it had behind the scenes. The Basque and the Spanish media, like Society in general, were expecting a continuation of ETA's actions.

Event 2º. Otegi arrested

On October 13, 2009, two and half months after ETA's last killings, when the promoters of the debate within the Nationalist Left were about to distribute the report advocating the end of the armed struggle, a Spanish judge ordered the arrest of those promoters, i.e. Otegi and nine other members of Batasuna. They were accused of trying to reconstruct Batasuna under ETA's instructions. Five of them were jailed, and eventually tried and condemned. Now we know it was a tipping point. At their public trial in June 2011, Otegi and the rest of the defendants explained that those arrested in October 2009 formed the group that was organizing the debate questioning the continuation of ETA's struggle, and that the arrests put the entire operation at risk. At the time of the events, it was not so clear.

The newspapers edited in Madrid reproduced the judge's narrative about the re-organization of the leadership of Batasuna under ETA's orders. The *Abc* headline was that the police avoided the re-organization of Batasuna, and that the detainees were serving ETA strategy. *El Mundo* and *El País* stressed that the 'new' leadership of the outlawed Batasuna was arrested. *El País* explained that the judge Garzón prevented 'the last attempt' to unite 'the scattered remains' of the Nationalist Left, and that they were following ETA's instructions. *El Correo* also assumed the narrative provided by judicial sources, asserting that the Police prevented the re-foundation of Batasuna. *Deia* went further and disclosed information about Otegi's 'discrete activity' in order to return to legal politics through 'an explicit disassociation from violence', but adding that the police operation was a consequence of

Otegi's failure to drive the Nationalist Left to abandon the armed struggle. *Gara* reacted to the police operation by disclosing some information about the internal debate within the Nationalist Left. In the front-page headline, it asserted that the Spanish government provoked the detentions in order to abort 'the political initiative of the Nationalist Left'. Inside, the political correspondent Iñaki Iriondo explained that a deep internal debate, 'without taboos', was taking place. *Berria* did not take the judicial version that the detainees were re-organizing the leadership of Batasuna as true, and shaped the arrests as 'an attack' against the Nationalist Left.

To sum up, the arrest of the promoters of the internal debate triggered the release of information hidden until then. Some of the media, most notably *Deia* among the newspapers studied here, disclosed information about a supposedly failed attempt by Otegi to force the abandonment of a political-military strategy. Now we know that the first part of that information was true (they wanted to lead a strategic shift), but the second part was untrue (they lost the internal struggle). In contrast, *Gara* began a gradual disclosure of information about the internal debate, including the online publication of the full strategic report developed by the detainees. *Berria* also gave credibility to the narrative of a deep internal debate promoted by the detainees, although it did not provide as much information as *Gara*.

Event 3°. The debate ends

On February 15, 2010, four months after Otegi's arrest, a press release in the name of the Nationalist Left announced the end of their internal debate, and provided the media with a summary of the conclusions. *Gara* and *Berria* had access to the entire document and both published it in full. Both newspapers gave great importance to the event, making it the main headline. It seems that they understood that the conclusions of that debate were a game changer, because the social base of the Nationalist Left decided to abandon the political-military strategy, which should eventually mean the end of ETA's armed struggle. Nevertheless, none of the two newspapers specifically asserted it in the headlines, or in the narrative of the main pieces of the news. Using the same terminology of the document, *Gara* highlighted that the Nationalist Left assemblies ratified that 'the only instruments and guarantee to advance' were 'the political struggle and popular support'. This meant that armed struggle was not an instrument or guarantee anymore, but the newspaper did not dare to assert it expressly. Similarly, the *Berria* headline was that the Nationalist Left would dedicate 'all means of struggle' to serve 'the accumulation of forces'; the two subtitles of the front page clarified that they had decided that 'the only instruments' in 'the democratic process' would be 'mass struggle, institutional struggle, and ideological struggle', and that the Nationalist Left was committed to 'exclusively political and democratic means'. The only express mention of the abandonment of the armed struggle came in the fourth paragraph of an additional analytical piece.

The rest of the newspapers reported on the conclusion of the debate from a critical and skeptical perspective, framing it in a context of insufficiency. *Deia* highlighted that the Nationalist Left concluded their debate 'without an express disassociation from ETA'. *El Correo* noted that they ratified their commitment for political means, 'but without mentioning ETA'. The *El País* headline was that the Nationalist Left 'concluded where it started', meaning that the conclusions were already announced at the beginning of the debate, and they had still not made any demands on ETA. *El Mundo* suggested that the supposed commitment to political means came late, emphasizing that the Nationalist Left appealed 'now' to non-violence. *Ab* did not even devote one headline to the event, but included a

few lines in a piece about some arrests of suspected collaborators of the Basque armed group, which proved ‘ETA’s plans to continue killing’.

None of the analyzed newspapers provided their readers with a real sense of the event. The two newspapers which gave credibility to the conclusions of the Nationalist Left failed to translate the euphemistic terminology of the document, as they did not specifically frame it as a step forward toward the abandonment of the armed struggle. It might have been too soon for the Nationalist Left to write it down in their documents, but it should not have been for the newspapers. The rest of the newspapers failed to understand, or to acknowledge, the importance of the move of the Nationalist Left, and they emphasized the absence of any express requirement to ETA, when what was instrumental was the obvious implicit decision.

Event 4°. Killing of a gendarme

On March 16, 2010, members of ETA killed a gendarme, Jean-Serge Nerin, near Paris. It was not a premeditated attack, but a clash triggered when French agents faced some ETA members who were trying to commit a car robbery. It was a month after the Nationalist Left had announced that their social base supported the end of the armed struggle, and more than seven months after ETA committed its last killings in Spain.

All newspapers noted that it was the first time in history that the Basque group had killed a French public agent, but only those published in Madrid framed it as a turning point, suggesting that it could mean a change in ETA’s criterion of not committing attacks in France. *El País*, *El Mundo* and *Abc* agreed on the mention of ‘a qualitative leap’ in ETA’s praxis. *El Mundo* even pointed out that it meant ‘an explicit challenge to the French state’, and *Abc* stressed that it was a turning point. Basque newspapers reacted with prudence. *Gara* and *Berria* framed the event in the context of a fortuitous shootout, suggesting that it was unintended and, therefore, ETA was not challenging the conclusions of the Nationalist Left debate. Neither *Deia* nor *El Correo* suggested that it could mean the armed group had decided to continue its armed campaign.

Event 5°. Halt of offensive attacks

On September 5, 2010 ETA announced that it had decided to cease ‘offensive armed attacks’ several months previously. Five months earlier, international personalities had demanded from ETA a ‘permanent, verifiable and unilateral ceasefire’ through what was known as the Brussels declaration. Soon after, the political leadership of the Nationalist Left had endorsed the Brussels declaration, meaning that they too were requesting a ceasefire from ETA. However, the videotaped declaration sent by ETA to the BBC and *Gara* did not expressly mention the word ‘ceasefire’. It was just a halt of ‘offensive armed attacks’, which sounded like a temporary decision, far from the demanded permanency. In fact, later findings suggest that it was a technical halt, a temporary cessation to buy time in order to rethink the strategy and decide how to respond to the new situation (Whitfield, 2014; Murua 2017).

Gara and *Berria* framed the event as if it was the expected ceasefire. They emphasized the fact that ETA had decided to cease its actions, and did not note that it did not entirely comply yet with what the Nationalist Left and many others had demanded. The rest of the newspapers framed the event within a context of insufficiency, to varying degrees. *Deia* highlighted that ETA had decided not to commit

more attacks ‘but maintained the uncertainty about the end of violence’. *El Correo* noted that ETA had announced a cessation but had ignored the petition of a verifiable ceasefire. *El País* highlighted that the government and political parties regarded ETA’s announcement as ‘insufficient’. *El Mundo* stressed that ETA had ‘refused’ to declare the ceasefire ‘required by Batasuna’. *Abc* went further and qualified the cessation as ‘false’.

To summarize, there were three different frames. *Gara* and *Berria* only highlighted the positive side of ETA’s announcement without referring to any shortcomings in relation to the demands from the Brussels declaration and the Nationalist Left. *El Correo*, *Deia*, and *El País* remarked on the insufficiency of a step forward. *El Mundo* and *Abc* presented the information from an exclusively negative perspective.

Event 6°. A permanent ceasefire

Four months later, on January 10, 2011, ETA made the announcement required both by international bodies through the Brussels declaration and later by Basque political actors through the Gernika declaration at the end of September: a permanent and verifiable ceasefire. It was not the definitive end yet, but it was a clear sign that the big news might be close. Actually, some of the media had reproached ETA four months earlier for not fulfilling the demands of the Brussels declaration. Now that ETA had declared a ceasefire, the same media did not give ETA any credibility. *Abc*’s front page was devoted to the pictures of the twelve people killed by ETA from 2006, with the following headline: ‘Twelve reasons not to believe ETA’. The inside headline regarded the truce as a ‘trap’ and a ‘trick’. *El Mundo*’s main headline stressed that ETA had ‘dramatized another truce’ in order ‘to sneak into elections’.

El País, *El Correo* and *Deia* gave credibility to the announcement, whilst still framing it as insufficient. *El País* suggested that ETA’s move was in the right direction: ‘ETA has taken another step toward its end’. *El Correo*, instead of devoting the main headline to reporting the ceasefire, used it to reply to ETA: ‘The Basque Country demands the end of ETA’. Inside, the headline was more informative – it said that ETA had amplified its truce ‘but failed to declare it definitive’. *Deia* acknowledged it was ‘a step’, but specified it was not ‘the step’. *Berria* and *Gara*, in consistence with the credibility given to ETA until then, gave full credibility to the permanent ceasefire declared in January 2011, and framed it as fully positive news, with no ‘buts’.

By January 2011, there were many hints that ETA’s move was credible. Unlike the halt announced in September 2010, the ceasefire declared in January 2011 fulfilled all the conditions demanded by the Brussels and Gernika declarations. Most of the media understood that. However, a few newspapers preferred to ignore all the evidence, and continued to frame ETA’s ceasefire as bad news.

Event 7°. Rejection of violence by Sortu

It was less than a month after ETA’s announcement of the ceasefire that leaders of the outlawed Batasuna presented the charter of a new political party, Sortu, on February 7, 2011. The founding statutes expressly rejected not only the use of violence for political purposes, but specifically the violence of ETA, if the Basque group used it again. They did not condemn ETA’s past actions, but they showed a willingness to denounce them in the future, if need be. It was the first time that the Nationalist Left had rejected the use of violence for political purposes so unambiguously.

Some newspapers noticed the novelty of the moment. *El País* and all the Basque newspapers analyzed here acknowledged and remarked on the importance of the move. Unlike with previous events, *El País*, *El Correo* and *Deia* showed no reluctance when reporting on the presentation of the Sortu charter. *El País* stressed that Batasuna had re-invented itself by rejecting ETA's violence. *El Correo* remarked that the Nationalist Left, 'for the first time in history', rejected 'all violence of ETA'. Similarly, *Deia* reported that the Nationalist Left had taken 'the step', and had broken with their past. *Berria* stressed the novelty of the event, and its headline highlighted the rejection of violence. In contrast, *Gara* chose to suggest *why* the promoters of Sortu had gone so far in their rejection of ETA, in a headline directed at the social base of the Nationalist Left which might have been surprised or uncomfortable with such a radical rejection of the use of political violence. Front-page headline: 'The Nationalist Left leaves no room for a possible ban'. Inside headline: 'The Nationalist Left leaves the prohibitionists without juridical arguments'. *El Mundo* and *Abc* returned to the frame of insufficiency. *Abc* asserted in the front-page headline that 'Batasuna' did not condemn ETA. Reading *Abc*'s headline, it seemed that nothing had changed. *El Mundo* remarked that 'the *proetarras*', meaning 'people in favor of ETA', said that 'now' it will denounce ETA's attacks in the future, but did not take responsibility for past violence.

All in all, the coverage of the presentation of Sortu showed a change in some of the media. Gradually, the process was gaining credibility. For the first time, *El País*, *El Correo*, and *Deia* reported on an announcement by the Nationalist Left without adding a 'but' in the headlines. The perspective chosen by *Gara* was also telling, as it framed the event as if it was a tactical move. They preferred to remark on the tactical motivations of the Nationalist Left in a pedagogic headline to comfort the readers who might be disappointed with the public rejection of ETA's violence.

Event 8°. The legalization of Bildu

On May 5, 2011 the Spanish Constitutional Court reversed a previous ruling by the Supreme Court banning the newly created pro-independence coalition Bildu from taking part in local and regional elections and, thus, enabled the participation of the new coalition. Bildu unofficially included candidates from the still outlawed Nationalist Left, as Sortu was initially banned. The legalization or banning of Bildu seemed of vital importance for the consolidation of the process of ending ETA. Six Justices of the Court voted for legalization, and five in favour of a ban. There was no possibility of appeal.

The Spanish conservative media reacted very aggressively. The *Abc* headline was that the Constitutional Court had endorsed the *proetarras*, i.e. those in favor of ETA. It published the pictures of all the Justices of the Court specifying who voted what. *El Mundo* stressed that 'six Justices proposed by the PSOE' had legalized 'Bildu-Batasuna'. *El País*, *El Correo*, and *Deia* offered much more descriptive information on the issue. *Berria* remarked on the positive nature of the news with a big 'yes' on the front page, followed by a mainly descriptive narrative. *Gara* editorialized on the event from the front page headline: '[With] Bildu legal, everybody wins'.

The contrast between the different frames of the legalization of Bildu was in line with the aggressive controversy surrounding the matter. The right-wing opposition party, the PP, and the most conservative media edited in Madrid shaped a discourse equating Bildu with ETA, and making Zapatero's government responsible for the Constitutional Court's decision. *Abc* and *El Mundo* are examples of

the perspective adopted by the right-wing media. *El Correo*, which belongs to the same editorial group as *Abc*, did not take such an aggressive approach, given that its Basque audience was largely in favor of the legalization of Bildu.

Event 9°. The conference of Aiete

The conference held in San Sebastian on October 17, 2011 was a clear signal that the definitive end of ETA's campaign was about to be announced. The prestige of the agents presents in the palace of Aiete, led by Kofi Annan, suggested that things were well-advanced. The participants urged ETA to announce a unilateral end and asked the Spanish and French governments to talk with the Basque group in the event of a definitive cessation.

Unsurprisingly, *El Mundo* and *Abc* did not welcome the conference. The big front-page headline of *El Mundo* was an ironic reference to the well-known International Film Festival: 'The festival of San Sebastián'. *Abc* did not use such an irony in its headline under the picture of the five international personalities: 'In the service of ETA'. In the subtitle, *Abc* explained that the participants had accepted the road-map proposed by the 'terrorist gang'. *El Correo* and *El País* reported on the conference without criticism. *Gara* chose a long headline to explain that ETA was not the only recipient of the Conference demands. *Deia* and *Berria* gave the news a positive sense of hope, and a suggestion of the imminence of the end of ETA's campaign.

By the time the Aiete conference took place, there were two main approaches among the analyzed media. Unlike the news coverage of the beginning of the process, now most of the newspapers gave credibility to the imminence of the end of ETA's violence, and had abandoned the reluctance shown in an earlier period. *El País*, *Deia* and *El Correo* reported on the conference, to some extent, similarly to *Berria* and *Gara*, in a sense that they gave credibility to the signs of the end of ETA's campaign. In contrast, *El Mundo* and *ABC* were the exponents of the sectors who still regarded the efforts to facilitate the end of ETA as a concession to the armed group.

Event 10°. The definitive end

On October 20, 2011, ETA made a historic announcement. After 40 years of armed struggle, they decided, unilaterally and unconditionally, to stop their campaign for good. It was the culmination of a process initiated in 2009. It seemed good news for everybody. However, it was not. *El Mundo* devoted the front-page main headline to ETA's decision, but reading the content it did not seem that such a big title was justified, as nothing new was highlighted: 'ETA flaunts its murders and calls upon the Government to negotiate'. There were four subtitles on the matter in the front page, but none of them gave news of the definitive end. *Abc* gave the news of the cessation in one of the subtitles on the front page, but it emphasized what ETA did not do in the main headline: 'ETA does not dissolve nor surrender weapons'. A frame of insufficiency yet again. The rest of the newspapers captured the historical sense of the moment. They remarked on it in their headlines and devoted a large number of pages to covering the event, framing it as historic and positive.

As with the coverage of the Aiete conference, there was unanimity in the Basque newspapers in treating ETA's announcement as a historic positive event which would open a new political era in the Basque Country, but such unanimity did not exist among the Spanish newspapers edited in Madrid. The conservative media was so critical with the model of the end of ETA that they framed the definitive

cessation of its violence as bad news. Now that ETA's decision was public and, thus, it was more difficult to deny credibility to their will to put an end to violence, the media outlets critical about the process focused on the fact that ETA did not surrender its weapons and did not dissolve as an organization. The *enemy* was still there, and there was no need to change the discourse.

4. Conclusions

The analysis of the news on the events chosen for their significance shows some features of the information given at the time of the process. The line followed by some newspapers did not significantly evolve over time, whilst other newspapers shifted their approach as the events showed that the end of ETA's violence was actually coming. Within the first group are, on one side, *Gara* and *Berria*, and on the other, *Abc* and *El Mundo*; within the second group are *El Correo*, *Deia*, and *El País*.

Gara and *Berria* gave credibility to the moves of the Nationalist Left and the gradual announcements of the cessation by ETA from the beginning. Because they had reliable information or because they made the right interpretation of the context, they provided their readers with content suggesting that the Nationalist Left, including ETA, was moving toward the end of the use of political violence. Yet, information about the internal struggle within the Nationalist Left was very scarce in *Gara*, and almost inexistent in *Berria*. *Gara* showed that it had privileged information about the internal goings-on, but did not disclose anything until October 2009. Only after Otegi and his associates were arrested did *Gara* and, to a lesser extent, *Berria* begin to disclose explicit information on the important move that the detainees were preparing. Those arrests were a tipping point for *Gara* and *Berria*. From then on, both newspapers started to release information on the Nationalist Left's imminent change of course. However, they did not disclose information on the internal disagreements within the Nationalist Left until all discussion was over. In addition, they showed significant restraint regarding the explicitness of the real game changer that was on the horizon. Instead of explicitly explaining what Otegi and his allies were proposing, i.e. the end of the armed struggle, they only suggested it, as if the explicit mention of the abandonment of armed struggle was taboo for these newspapers too.

Abc and *El Mundo* denied any credibility to the Nationalist Left and ETA from the beginning. When the social base of the Nationalist Left supported a document that proposed the abandonment of the political-military strategy, these newspapers remarked that it did not demand anything from ETA. When Sortu rejected the use of political violence by ETA, they suggested that it was a trick to sneak into the elections. When ETA announced a cessation of offensive attacks, they highlighted that it did not fulfill what the Brussels declaration had demanded. When ETA announced a permanent ceasefire, they remarked that it did not announce its definitive end. When ETA declared the definitive end of its activity, they remarked that it did not dismantle nor disarm. In the end, they reached the point of framing the long-awaited unilateral and unconditional end of ETA's violence as bad news. All events were interpreted in a way that fitted an anti-terrorist discourse which refused to acknowledge that the abandonment of violence by ETA was game changing.

El País, *El Correo*, and *Deia* did experience an evolution in their news coverage. When ETA committed its last killings in Majorca, they framed the news in the context of a terrorist offensive. They did not report on the conclusions of the debate in the Nationalist Left as if it was an instrumental decision for the end of ETA's violence. They framed as insufficient ETA's halting of 'offensive attacks' in September 2010 and the ceasefire in January 2011. Things changed when the promoters of

Sortu presented the charter of the new party, where they expressly rejected the use of violence by ETA. That seems to be a tipping point for these three newspapers. From then on, they gave credibility to the statements and moves of the Nationalist Left and the armed group.

All in all, the readers of the information published at the time of the events were not aware of the real happenings. The actors involved in the process did not disclose much of the information instrumental in understanding the real evolution of the situation. In addition, all newspapers were conditioned by their editorial approach and their variable degree of access to the diverse sources. The newspapers with direct access or, at least, proximity to the sources of the Nationalist Left, did not usually dare go further than their sources in the interpretation of the reality, and did not disclose information that their sources did not want them to disclose.

Unsurprisingly, the study of the contents of this sample confirms that the real significance of the events reported by the media rarely arises at the time of occurrence in the case of political processes with the involvement of clandestine and outlawed actors. The comparison of the published news with later accounts by the actors shows that the narratives provided by the media at the time did not reflect the genuine facts as they were. Overall, they released only partial news related to the process, and they very often provided interpretations that were not in accordance with the real developments.

The actors involved in the conflict or in the peace effort were not the only restraint for the release of reliable information. The media organizations are also actors in the Basque conflict, and have their own partisan views regarding the nature of the conflict and its resolution. This study ratifies what other researchers found in relation to the media coverage of the Basque conflict (Batista, 1999; Idoiaga and Ramírez de la Piscina, 2002; Crettenand, 2014), namely that the media outlets behave more like political actors in the conflict than information sources of the real occurrences.

The proximity to, and ideological harmony with actors involved in the conflict and in the peace effort can enable access to more accurate information about the reality, but this proximity can condition and limit the disclosure of information concerning the ongoing process. The scarce information about the goings-on in the debate within the Nationalist Left and the behind-the-scenes peace-building efforts suggests that, beyond the understandable difficulties of accessing information from behind the scenes, journalists and media organizations sometimes choose not to release content if they consider their disclosure a disturbing factor for the development of the peace effort. In addition, the journalistic use of an opaque political terminology shared with the political actors, without translating it to a more informative and understandable language shows that proximity to or harmony with political sources often becomes an obstacle to the release of unambiguous narratives of the events in question.

All in all, it can be concluded that the media has not been a facilitating factor in the success of the process leading to ETA's end, but a polarizing one. However, the examination of the media's narrative evidences that a generalization of the role played by the media in the Basque conflict and its resolution effort would not be accurate, as each media outlet has acted following its own editorial line. There is a significant difference in the media coverage provided by the Basque and Spanish newspapers. Most Basque newspapers provided more accurate information overall about the events and they framed those events in the context of a desirable peace approximation. Some very influential Spanish media, in contrast, provided their readers with a distorted vision of the events framed as if the cessation of violence was an undesirable outcome. It is confirmation that framing is instrumental in giving certain

meaning to certain realities; in this case, to the point that peace as good news became peace as bad news.

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