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Press coverage of same-sex domestic violence cases in Spain

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Abstract

Introduction. Spanish media have covered several cases of violence in same-sex couples in recent years. Reporting on this phenomenon raises questions about how to approach a reality that had remained hidden until recently. **Method.** The aim of this article is to analyse the content of the news stories about same-sex domestic violence published by various Spanish newspapers between 2010 and 2015. **Results.** The results indicate that, while journalists have improved the treatment of gender-based violence, the news coverage of violence in gay couples exhibits similar features to those that characterised the news coverage of violence against women during the early years. **Conclusions.** The episodic and sensationalist coverage, as well as the categorisation of cases of violence in same-sex couples as crimes of passion show that intra-gender violence is not addressed, for the time being, as a social problem but rather as a private matter.

Keywords

News; press; same-sex domestic violence; homosexuality; social problems

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Translation by **CA Martínez Arcos** (PhD in Communication from the University of London)

1. Introduction

Spanish media have reported several cases of violence in same-sex couples over the past years. The phenomenon had not been discussed publicly in the past due to the traditional public invisibility of the LGBT community (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people). The coverage of these cases has faced journalists with a new situation and, therefore, with the need to articulate a narrative that gives meaning to this reality. The challenge involves, among other issues, the definition and categorisation of the events.

At the same time, organisations working for the defence of the rights of homosexual people have also participated in public demonstrations that aim to raise awareness about this type of violence, which is mostly defined as intra-gender violence. However, their messages show some discrepancy about the categorisation of this type of violence and the way the public discourse around it should be articulated. While some groups estimate that violence in same-sex couples must be considered “gender-based violence” (or just “gender violence”), others argue that violence in same-sex couples is different from the violence inflicted against heterosexual women by their male partners. In addition, these voices reveal the differences about the way politicians and society should respond to these situations.

Partially for this reason, public institutions have not offered a clear proposal to address the problem, which puts in evidence the lack of a comprehensive approach in the public administration. Given this complex scenario in which the first discussions about the phenomenon are framed, it is necessary to know how journalists have contributed to the discussion of this phenomenon through the analysis of the coverage offered by the media of this reality.

2. Gender and violence: the journalistic response

2.1. Coverage of gender-based violence

Violence against women has been gaining more and more space in the media since the early 1970s (Berganza, 2003). The journalistic treatment of this phenomenon has evolved throughout this time to reflect the serious considerations that the problem has generated in society and its institutions. The improvement of the media coverage of this phenomenon has resulted from a series of factors that demonstrate society’s growing awareness about violence against women. First, it is necessary to emphasise the collective action of feminist organisations dedicated to fighting inequality against women (Carballido, 2007). Another key factor is the action of the political actors, who at the request of those organised groups, have been gradually responding to the phenomenon through various legislative actions. In addition, we cannot ignore the self-regulation efforts carried out by various media companies and journalist associations, often with the support of the institutional and academic worlds, with the aim of improving the news coverage of these cases of violence.

The press uses different concepts and expressions to identify this type of violence: domestic violence, violence against women, macho violence, sexist violence, domestic violence, gender-based crimes, maltreatment, maltreatment in the domestic sphere, domestic maltreatment, macho terrorism, family terrorism and femicide (Rodríguez, 2008: 174). However, the most common denomination is gender violence, especially since the adoption in 2004 of the “Organic Act 1/2004 of 28 December on Integrated Protection Measures against Gender Violence”, despite the fact that this concept is limited to identifying realities traditionally classified as domestic violence and leaves out other relations of dominance of men over women, such as sexual violence or harassment in the workplace (Marugán 2012).

In accordance with the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in December 1993, “violence against women” must be understood as:

“any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public life or private life.”

It was precisely after the 1990s when the media discourse on violence against women experienced a remarkable turning point, coinciding with the confirmation that the family change that questioned the traditional patriarchal model and the subsequent increased negotiation power of women, which took place in the last decades of the 20th century, had not resulted in the reduction of violence against women (Meil 2004). The murder of Ana Orantes in 1997 is a particular episode that is often identified as the turning point after which the news coverage of this type of violence began to be influenced by other selection processes, a very different news treatment and a willingness to spread social awareness and help the potential victims of these attacks (Berganza 2003; Vives-Cases, 2005; Marín *et al.*, 2011; Gámez, 2012).

However, the process by which gender-based violence has occupied a recognised space of public interest, with the support of the media, cannot be divided only into two periods. As several authors have rightly pointed out, the evolution experienced by a certain topic since it manifests itself until it becomes an object of political and social attention goes through several phases or stages along which various actors and circumstances should occur. Downs (1972) proposes that public issues go through an “attention cycle” of five stages: pre-problem stage (the media show some indifference towards the issue and when they cover it, they privilege sensationalist and moral approaches), alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm (the journalistic coverage of the issue increases, as well as the information rigour, and the issue starts to be perceived as a threat), realising the cost of significant progress (the media privilege the discussion of the resources and measures needed to overcome the problem), gradual decline of intense public interest, and post-problem stage. Berganza (2003) points out that violence against women reached the second stage identified by Downs in 1997-1998.

Bosch and Ferrer, for their part, support the development model of social problems proposed by Kitsuse and Spector (2000: 10-11): agitation (a group of people struggles to reconfigure a private problem into a public one and begins to undertake actions to identify its causes), legitimation and

co-optation (the main social agents and official institutions recognise the pressure group and begin to act to meet their requests), bureaucratisation and reaction (the public administration takes care of the problem and minimises it) and, finally, reemergence of the movement (official policies have generated such discontent that those affected by the problem are reactivated in search of new options). If we look at the phenomenon not from the perspective of collective action but from the point of view of media action, we can resort to the two processes identified by Fagoaga (1994: 68): legitimisation (the media covers certain events because they are newsworthy and sources with sufficient authority can participate in their description) and routinisation (as a result of the previous process, the events have already been incorporated into the media's agenda and have gained a regular and personal space dedicated to their coverage). Both phases would be preceded by a stage known as a process of determination, in which social movements try to create new significant practices around certain realities in order to disambiguate them.

In short, the aforementioned three approaches reflect the complex stages that social phenomena go through, from taking place away from public attention until they manage to occupy a key place in the collective discussion. To make this transformation possible, Hilgartner and Bosk consider it is crucial to rightly define the problem and, thus, to indicate which aspects of the social reality cannot continue being tolerated as they are. This task would involve, on the one hand, to articulate the problem in a space of public discourse and, on the other hand, to include a harmful element: “A social problem is a putative condition or situation that (at least some) actors label a «problem» in the arenas of public discourse and action, defining it as harmful and framing its definition in particular ways” (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988: 70).

The media, therefore, have proved to be an essential tool for the cultural shift that has allowed, since the late 1990s, gender violence to be considered by the community as a real social problem (Carballido, 2007). Through their message, the media have enabled the articulation of a public discourse against violence against women in which it is presented as an attack on human rights that affects the dignity of all citizens. This commitment to address the events related to this type of violence with a new perspective was implemented gradually in the newsrooms, as shown by the diachronic analyses carried out to evaluate the evolution of the coverage of the phenomenon by the Spanish media (Vives-Cases *et al.*, 2005; Rodríguez, 2008; Marín *et al.*, 2011).

As the research studies carried out on this issue have made clear, the press is no longer addressing these crimes as individual events in the accident and crime section and is now giving them a treatment that contributes to their visibility as a social problem whose eradication should be of concern to the community as a whole. News on violence against women were limited, during the first stage, to the identification of the attacks on women as crimes of passion (Rodríguez, 2008; Berganza, 2003), developing a narrative in which it was common to find references to jealousy, mental derangement, drug use, sexual passions, control and sense of belonging. These elements, ultimately, condemned women and, at times, justified violent men (Rodríguez, 2008: 173; Menéndez, 2014). As Vives-Cases *et al.* point out, up to 1998, the majority of news “focused on isolated cases, where women appeared only as victims or were the ones to blame for being abused, and even justified or excused the violent conduct” (2005: 23). This was an episodic approach to the phenomenon

(Berganza, 2003), i.e. the presentation of violence against women as an individual problem which promoted the idea that this type of violence was the result of particular circumstances.

Gradually, violence against women ceased to be framed as specific manifestations described through sensationalist remarks and allusions that could well be interpreted as mitigating circumstances for the crime and began to receive a broader coverage, that involved the development of thematic news that showed greater concern for the contextualisation of the problem, the topics addressed and the sources employed. The fact that the phenomenon was integrated as a constant theme of the media enabled its visibility and understanding as a matter of interest to all citizens (Zurbano, 2010a). In this way the journalistic discourse circumscribed the phenomenon within the framework of social relations based on gender inequalities (Vives-Cases *et al.*, 2005: 23), providing support tools to victims and informing about the sentences given to criminals. Despite this, some aspects can still be improved, such as the excessive use of secondary sources whose statements contribute little to the quality of the information (Rodríguez, 2008: 183), the over-representation of physical violence resulting in death to the detriment of other manifestations of gender-based violence, the excessive focus on the police and judiciary aspects, the disregard for the roots of the problem and the objectification of women (Gámez 2012; Gámez and Núñez, 2013), the lack of greater depth in the conceptualisation of the phenomenon (Zurbano, 2010b: 13), the need for greater effort in pedagogy, prevention and reflection (Menéndez, 2013), as well as the exposition of alternative and counter models for both women and men (Gómez, 2012).

2.2. Violence in same-sex couples: how to conceptualise it and present it

The violence exerted between the members of a same-sex couple is often called intra-gender violence. According to a study on this phenomenon by the Lambda group, belonging to the National Federation of Lesbians, Gays, Transsexuals and Bisexuals (FELGTB), for the National Secretary for Equality, of the Ministry of Health, Social Policy and Equality, this form of violence has similar features, but also different features, with respect to gender-based violence:

“It is a kind of domestic violence that occurs between spouses, couples, lovers, same-sex ex-partners, regardless of the duration of that relationship, where one of the members of the couple abuses (physically, psychologically, sexually, etc.) the other. It does not seem to be legitimised by a social or ideological system as it occurs with gender-based violence and patriarchy, because it does not seem plausible that one lesbian abuses another for being lesbian, however some of its characteristics are similar to those of gender-based violence and others specific types of violence that will be pointed out in the report.” (2011: 7-8).

The fact that this phenomenon exhibits elements that can link it to gender-based violence has prompted the emergence of a debate on whether these attacks should be conceptualised as such, implying that the legislative measures implemented in recent years to protect women from macho violence would also protect the victims of violence in same-sex couples. The controversy occurs at the political-institutional and activist levels. The groups have expressed their differences on this issue

precisely as a result of the past cases that occurred in Spain. While some entities such as the National Federation of Lesbians, Gays, Transsexuals and Bisexuals (FELGTB) and Madrid's Association of Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals and Transgenders (COGAM) consider that legislators should create a specific law for same-sex couples, other organisations, such as the Confederation of groups of lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transsexuals (COLEGAS), propose to regulate the protection of these victims through a modification of the 2004 Organic Act against Gender Violence given that, in their opinion, violence in same-sex couples involves a "gender factor", and thus emphasises the cultural construction and not the biological sex of the individuals involved.

In the opinion of some specialists (Coll-Planas *et al.*, 2008), this diversity of approaches is favoured by the incongruity of the wording of the 2004 Organic Act against Gender Violence. While its title incorporates the concept of gender violence, its body of text exhibits a clear "heterosexist bias" as it focuses on relationships between men and women, "leaving aside the situations of abuse that may exist in lesbian or gay relationships", which suggests that "gender relations do not occur between women or between men" (*Ibid.*: 191). According to these authors, an approach that emphasises the dominant and subordinate roles may be more related to gender mainstreaming, as it is understood as a cultural device that determines power relations and inequality that, despite relying on sex, can go beyond. Thus, Sheila Jeffreys considers that the majority of lesbian and gay relationships follow the same patterns than heterosexual relationships in terms of the distribution of the roles of power and inequality in the couple (*Ibid.*: 192).

Activist voices support this view. Thus, the Basque association *Aldarte* argues that when trying to regulate gender-based violence through the aforementioned Organic Act, legislators forgot about lesbians and gays and left them totally unprotected. For this entity, the reasons why intra-gender violence occurs are not necessarily different from the reasons why the so called macho violence occurs, given that the lack of identification with the socially established roles does not imply that certain attitudes of possession may not be developed in same-sex couples. Along the same line, for Reina (2010), violence between members of a same-sex couple could resemble macho violence against women, even though it would also have its own characteristics, very different from gender-based violence. Thus, in her opinion, power relations are established in same-sex couples, as in heterosexual couples. Therefore, "one of the two members of the couple exercises power over the other" depending on aspects such as "earning more money, being younger or older than the partner, having more authority, belonging to a higher social class, having access to more material or social resources and services" (Reina, 2010: 35).

The debate has moved, as mentioned, to the political sphere. Thus, some regional governments, like those of the Canary Islands and Extremadura, has considered the possibility of recognising the violence that occurs in homosexual relations as gender-based violence in the regulations and laws they create. However, this work does not aim to solve this issue, nor reflect the complexity of positions and theoretical debates around it. The objective of our study is based on the recent public attention paid to diverse cases of violence in same-sex couples, a phenomenon that has in recent years become part of the media's agenda but whose actual incidence is, for the moment, difficult to determine.

In fact, there are hardly any data or statistics on the prevalence of this phenomenon. The only two sources that provide figures in this respect are two initiatives launched by pro-LGBT groups with the collaboration of public institutions. One of these sources is the report of the study on intra-gender violence published by Aldarte in 2010. The campaign, which began two years earlier, consisted of an online survey to 110 gays and lesbians who had been abused by their partners, or knew someone in that situation. The second source is the aforementioned *report on the situation of violence in same-sex couples*. This document recognises that the only data that exist have been obtained in two ways: directly from the victims who attend local care programmes and through surveys applied to specific subgroups of the gay community, such as 18-29 year-old gays and HIV-positive gay men, who do not constitute representative samples given their small size. In the opinion of Reina:

“The degree of violence within the LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender/Transsexual and Queer) community is difficult to determine, since there is a low level of research and, also, the fact that nearly all of the technical personnel and entities working on domestic violence are oriented to heterosexual couples, and thus do not know how or cannot help the victim of aggression in a same-sex couple. However, it is believed that the degree of violence in same-sex couples is similar to that experienced by women in a heterosexual relationship.” (Reina, 2010: 34).

Despite everything, the scarcity of data seems to point out a clear conclusion: intra-gender violence continues in good measure being an invisible phenomenon, and is far from being considered a social problem. Therefore, unlike gender-based violence against women, at the moment intra-gender violence does not have the attention of the social and political spheres. In accordance with the associations, violence in same-sex relations remain anonymous because the victims do not report it and society and social agents find it hard to believe it, influenced by various myths and stereotypes. The recent presence that this type of violence has achieved so far in the media, whose analysis is the objective of this work, begins to open the doors of public discussion and consideration to the phenomenon.

3. (In)visibility of gays and lesbians in the media narrative

According to pro-LGBT groups, the lack of visibility of violence in same-sex couples is consistent with the dynamics of the traditional media exclusion of homosexual community. The underrepresentation of the gay reality in the journalistic narrative reveals that the public sphere composed by the media has encountered difficulties in its efforts to act as a bridge between the private sphere, in which different identities can come into play, and the social sphere, which clearly privileges the heterosexual identity (Sampedro, 2008: 40). For this reason, invisibility, as one of the most frequently used representation strategies when it comes to exclude anything that does not fit into the ideal of a coherently structured society (Gimeno, 2008: 72), has emerged as a common resource of the journalistic discourse that plays against the naturalisation of non-normative sexual orientations. Occasionally, the exclusion is absolute; other times, it plays with the use of euphemisms in order to maintain a seemingly respectful distance with a reality that journalism has been late to

represent in a suitable way, with precision and rigour (Carratalá, 2011a). The result of this, more or less absolute, invisibility can harm the gay and lesbian community, since its lack of representation can have serious effects on their lives, given that when a group of people does not exist in the dominant media, it is not discussed about, nor criticised, nor examined by the rest of society, including by those who have the capacity to make decisions and policies (De Jong, 2006: 39).

Coll-Planas indicates that this media exercise would correspond with the tenets of cultural imperialism according to which the acceptance of homosexual people is only contemplated as a reasonable action provided they keep their sexual orientation in the private sector. Therefore, this practice is implemented through the use of stereotypes, invisibility, undermining, and the imposition of a heterosexist social imaginary and liberal homophobia (2010: 103). In this way, the media narrative configures and reinforces the construction of the hegemonic and minority representations.

The latter include sexual identities that depart from heteronormativity, as well as other many social minorities. Minorities are therefore affected by being cornered in the media narrative or by being incorporated in it based on a series of codes that strengthen stereotypes, prejudices and biased representations. According to Taibi, “minority or disadvantaged groups are associated with problems and negative aspects” (2003: 36). Those associations nourish and strengthen the ideas shared by the majority of individuals about those communities with which they may have not had everyday contact, because all references that surround these identities in the public discourse function as ideological implications (Van Dijk, 2008).

These proposed readings have not been questioned for a long time precisely because they fed on the culturally-assumed ideas and myths around homosexuality. Therefore, as Lippmann has already pointed out, “we imagine most of the things before we experience them [...]” and all those preconceived ideas will govern virtually our entire process of perception” (2003: 88), an action favoured by the so-called selective human perception (Rodrigo, 2000: 57), which pushes us to focus our attention on those aspects of reality whose evidence we had internalised in advance as an unquestionable part of it. This idea is supported by Gomis, who argues that:

“The event is often inserted within a framework already provided and prepared for it and as a result is interpreted with the most accessible codes, which sometimes are prejudiced. Thus, people tend to see in an event what they already expected or feared to see.” (Gomis, 1991: 69).

Indeed, prejudice and stereotyping are two of the tools that have been used for a very long time as sources of social control, as they function as non-neutral devices that “have been considered as those previous attitudes and opinions that determine our interpretation of others” (Israel, 2006: 42). Their inclusion in the media discourse complicates the precise interpretation of the complex social reality inherent to the journalistic exercise. For this reason, some authors assert the need of implementing communicative practices that leave aside those resources that hinder the explanation and understanding of minority identities. According to Israel, the key is the so-called intercultural journalism, the one that is practiced in the coverage of “events in which women and minority groups play an informative protagonist role” and is characterised by its approach to those who are different,

for its ability to recognise those that are different as equal, questioning the division between “us” and “them”, which puts at risk the right to difference (2000: 1).

4. Approach of the study

4.1. Objectives and hypotheses

The main objective of this work is to identify the main features of the coverage of violence in same-sex couples by the Spanish press over the past five years, based on the observation of the features of the journalistic discourse that may be significant based on the results of the examination of the journalistic treatment of gender-based violence, which, as we have seen, has a longer academic tradition, and of the common patterns in the representation of the homosexual community, which have been identified in the theoretical framework of this work. This objective requires us to focus our attention on the way the press has approached this phenomenon, identifying the attributes that have been associated to it. The study of this framework, according to De Vreese, allows us to draw the attention not so much on the notability of the subject but in the way it is presented, thus observing the aspects of the subject that enjoy greater emphasis or importance (2005: 53). The emphasis of those elements and the relations that are established between them allow the media to construct a narrative that incorporates, among other issues, the definition of the problem addressed and the analysis of its causes (Entman, 2007: 164). Therefore, the objective is to identify the sort of reading about intra-gender violence offered by the Spanish media, because it is through this interpretive function that journalism is able to problematise reality; that is, to define and frame all that is at stake in society (Neveu, 2004: 84).

Given the lack of visibility of this phenomenon in Spanish society, as it has been argued by those who carried out the first analytical approximations to it, we consider that the available journalistic information will be far from representing it as a social problem that is worthy of receiving public attention. Therefore, our initial hypothesis is that the coverage of violence in same-sex couples exhibits features that are similar to those that characterised the coverage of gender-based violence during a first stage, until the end of the 1990s, as well as particularities typical of the journalistic discourse on minority sexual orientations, which is traditionally based on prejudices and stereotypes.

4.2. Research body and methods

For the development of this study, we analysed the media coverage offered by the Spanish press of the cases of violence in same-sex couples that took place from 1 January 2010 to 30 December 2014. Thanks to the online tool *MyNews*, we were able to perform an advanced search within a database of all the editions of the leading Spanish newspapers published since 1996, totalling to more than 200 newspapers and 800 online sources. The exploration of the five-year period resulted in the identification of news stories related to four cases of violence in homosexual couples. In all cases, they corresponded to homicides in gay couples.

The criteria to select the units of analysis consisted in selecting the news stories that were related to the aforementioned events and were published, within the three days following the occurrence of the crime, in the four most-read national newspapers edited in Madrid: *El País* (EP), *El Mundo* (EM), *Abc* (Abc) and *La Razón* (LR), ordered from most to least read, according to the General Media Study (EGM). For this research, only the local editions that these four newspapers publish in Madrid were taken into consideration. In addition, it was considered relevant to include the most-read regional newspaper for those cases that took place in other autonomous communities.

The case studies whose news treatment was subjected to analysis are:

The stabbing to death of R.C.C., of 30 years of age, in Xàbia (Alicante), by his boyfriend on 3 July, 2010. The analysis took into account the news published between 4 and 6 of July of the same year. The most-read regional newspaper in Alicante is *Diario Información*, but was impossible to retrieve this publication so we included the news published by the second most-read regional newspaper in the province: *La verdad de Alicante* (LV). A total of 10 units of analysis were collected.

The shooting to death of M.H., of 28 years of age, in Madrid, by his ex-boyfriend, who then committed suicide, on 26 July, 2011. The analysis took into account the news published between 27 and 29 of July of the same year. A total of 10 units of analysis were collected.

The murdering of MAA, of 40 years of age, in Madrid, by his boyfriend, who committed suicide afterwards. The events took place on 20 December 2011, but were discovered the next day. Therefore, we examined the editions published between 22 and 24 of that month. Only three units of analysis were collected.

The murdering of actor K.L., of 54 years of age, in Bilbao, by his husband. The event took place on 19 November, 2014, but the body was not found until the next day. The analysis took into account the news published between 21 and 23 August. In addition to the sample of four national newspapers, in this case we also examined the *El Correo Español-El Pueblo Vasco* (EC). A total of 12 units of analysis were collected.

The final body of analysis consisted of 35 information pieces that were subjected to content analysis. According to the traditional definition provided by Berelson (1971: 18), this technique facilitates the study of the manifest content of messages through an objective, systematic and quantitative description. Bardin also points out that content analysis consists of “a set of techniques to analyse communications in order to obtain indicators (quantitative or not) by means of systematic and objective procedures of description of the content of the messages” (1986: 32). Our approach to the body of study will be mostly quantitative, with the objective to identify and count the presence of specific features and dimensions in the documents to be able to obtain information about the messages, images and representations linked with these pieces and information about their social significance from a broader point of view (Hansen *et al.*, 1998). The advantages of this method have been underlined by many social scientists, who highlight the high degree of rigour, precision and reliability that it provides to the resulting data, as it subjects messages to explicitly identified categories (Deacon *et al.*, 1999: 133).

To this end, the analysis focused on 11 variables related to the different aspects of the framing of the coverage, the visual representation of information, the sources employed and the motives of the reported crime, among others. However, aware of the limitations of this technique given the small number of units of analysis, we will also explore some aspects of the coverage from a more qualitative perspective, related to the more meaningful discursive choices, which allows us to illustrate and interpret some of the data revealed by the quantitative examination. For example, this study critically examines the use of euphemisms (Carratalá, 2011a) and the ideological implications (Van Dijk, 2008) derived from the inclusion of certain stereotypes, the categorisation of the crimes narrated and the motives of the crime reported in the news stories. The selection of the 11 variables of analysis is based on the relevant literature review and therefore includes the categories that so far have proved to be most significant in research on the coverage of gender-based violence and the LGBT community:

1) Presentation and hierarchy of news. The assessment of the space given to the news stories (e.g. is it placed in a privileged space within the medium: front page odd/even pages?) has been shown to be relevant in several previous works on how the press deals with violence against women (Marín *et al.*, 2011; Zurbano, 2012).

2) Use of images. In previous research studies (Marín *et al.*, 2011), the analysis of the presence and content of graphic elements (attacker, corpse, neighbours, location, etc.) has proved to be a significant aspect of the news treatment of gender-based violence. Likewise, some ethical codes and manuals, like the one produced by the Spanish Women's Institute and RTVE in 2002 (Rodríguez, 2008), also make reference to issues related to this, such as the need to respect the dignity of the victim while the attacker is identified.

3) Information and interpretation. The need to go beyond the simple description of the events and to try to contextualise and provide data constitute a key factor in the coverage of this phenomenon, as noted in previous works (Marín *et al.*, 2011). According to Berganza (2003), “the explanation of the context in which such crimes occur acquires great importance at the time of the definition and social recognition of the problem”.

4) Sources employed. The study of which actors are included as sources in the construction of news stories on gender-based violence has been shown useful to assess whether coverage is presented as crime news stories or as a social problem (Berganza, 2003; Vives-Cases *et al.*, 2005; Marín *et al.*, 2011). Likewise, the analysis of this indicator has also been considered of interest in research on how journalism covers news related to the LGBT reality (Carratalá, 2011b).

5) Motives for the crime: motive and responsibility of the murderer. Some of the research studies conducted so far on how journalism addresses gender-based violence have warned of the danger posed by the introduction in the narration of the events of mitigating circumstances that can make the aggressor appear as a sick person (Marín *et al.* 2011). In addition, certain manuals of style, such as the one produced by the Women's Institute of Andalucía, emphasise that the aggression should not be presented as a logical consequence of the passionate love affair between two people. According to Rodríguez (2008), journalist should avoid describing the killer as jealous, drinker or mentally ill to

avoid trivialising, minimising or distorting the news, and avoid diverting the attention from the real causes.

6) Sensationalism. According to Berganza (2003), one of the risks of the contextualisation of this reality is the representation of violence as a spectacle, which is a sensationalist recreation focused on the description of morbid details and elements. Other studies (Marín *et al.*, 2011) also analyse to what extent journalism puts the emphasis on details and becomes sensationalist when it comes to report on gender-based violence. The need to avoid sensationalist treatment is also highlighted in the emergency manual produced by the Women's Institute and RTVE, which warns of the risk of confusing morbidity with social interest and asks journalists to avoid sensationalism (Rodríguez, 2008). Sensationalism is an indicator that has also been examined in the journalistic coverage related to the LGBT community (Carratalá, 2011b).

7) Use of euphemisms and stereotypes. Euphemisms, and stereotypes are two common strategies of identity representation when the LGBT community is the subject of journalistic information, as it has been shown by previous research studies (Carratalá, 2011a; 2011b). Their inclusion of category of analysis is justified by previous studies that have observed their presence and the fact that some of the manuals of style on how to cover gender-based violence specify the importance of preventing their dissemination (Rodríguez, 2008).

8) Categorisation of events. The majority of studies carried out on the news treatment of gender-based violence have revealed the importance of analysing the terminology used to refer to this reality (Rodríguez, 2008). Berganza (2003) points out how, at the end of the 1980s, cases of spousal abuse were not related to the framework in which they tend to occur, disappearing so any reference to gender-based violence in the texts. Other works have also examined this issue, highlighting the unequal presence of concepts such as gender-based violence, macho violence and violence against women (Marín *et al.*, 2011) and reflecting on how the names used to refer, characterise and represent the different aspects of gender-based violence influence the public's conception of what gender-based violence is, how it can be manifested and what are the support resources at their disposal (Zurbano, 2010a).

9) Equalisation to other types of violence. Some others have analysed whether the phenomenon receiving coverage is equated to other attacks. For instance, Rodríguez (2008) identified how some cases of gender-based violence were incorrectly equated to parricide, while Zurbano (2012) examined to what extent the various manifestations of gender-based violence covered by the press may have been framed explicitly under such commonly-used concept.

10) Thematisation. The need to examine the thematic indicators (Zurbano, 2012) used in the coverage of gender-based violence has been emphasised by several previous studies. For instance, Berganza (2003) explains how in the 1990s there was a shift from episodic news to thematic news through the relation of some events with others and their presentation as a social problem, while Vives-Cases *et al.* (2005) stressed how the lack of a more multidimensional approach to gender-based violence provided a simplified version of the problem and its possible solutions.

11) Support resources. Providing useful information about support resources during the coverage of cases of gender-based violence is recommended by some manuals, like the one produced by RTVE (Rodríguez, 2008). Previous studies (Zurbano, 2010b; Marín *et al.*, 2011) have examined the presence of elements of this type in news stories.

5. Results

First, it is necessary to point out that of the 35 news items identified as relevant to our study, two were not taken into account for the quantitative analysis designed to understand the characteristics of the informative discourse about intra-gender violence as they belonged to the so-called opinion genres (a column and an editorial). Thus, the analysis involved 33 news/information units.

As mentioned in the methods section, the case study which received greater coverage was the killing of K.L., with 12 news items. This circumstance could be explained, at least in part, by the public notoriety of the victim, who had worked as an actor. The medium that dedicated more news to the four cases of violence under study was *Abc*, which published eight stories on them, followed closely by *El País*, with seven stories. Regional newspapers, on the other hand, offer a wider coverage of these events, which is logical considering the proximity factor of these news events which results much more relevant to these media. Thus, *La Verdad* published three pieces, for three consecutive days, on the homicide that took place in Xàbia in 2010 (in comparison to, for example, *Abc*, which only covered the event the day after it happened). *El Correo* circulated five pieces -plus the editorial that was not taken into account- on the crime of the actor in Bilbao (*Abc* only dedicated one story to this event).

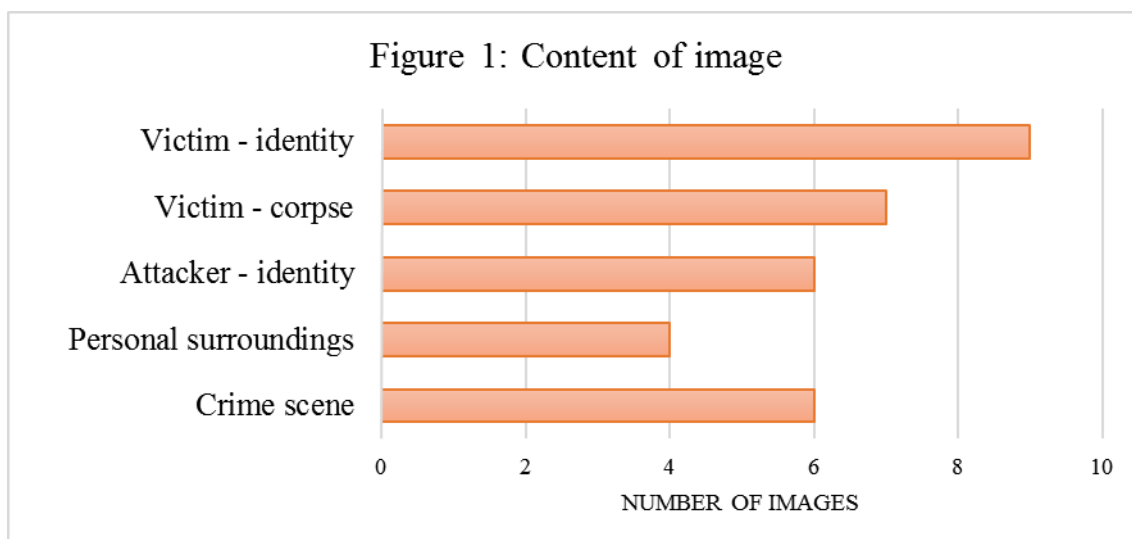
5.1. Presentation and hierarchy of news

Most of the news on intra-gender violence were not featured on the front page (73%). Only nine news items were featured on the front page of the medium or on the inside cover of the regional editions of the national newspapers. In addition, the majority of the news pieces, 61%, were located in even numbered pages, which are traditionally considered less important than the odd pages. In relation to the length, most of the units examined (58%) occupy between a quarter and half of a page. Only one of every three pieces occupied one or more pages.

5.2. Use of images

Most of the analysed units (76%) include graphic elements which, with one exception, are always a photograph. The victim is the main element of these images, which on numerous occasions is identified with a recent photo (28%) or a photo of the corpse (21%). As the following figure shows,

it is less common to use graphic content to identify the perpetrator, the crime scene or the people closely involved in the events.



Source: Author’s own creation

5.3. Information and interpretation

The vast majority of information pieces (82%) belonged to the news genre, since they are limited to present data and hypotheses about the crime or statements collected from the immediate surroundings of the victim and the murderer. Only four pieces could be said to belong to more interpretive genres like the feature article and the news-portrait of those involved. Given the prevalence of the informative discourse, it is not surprising that most headlines (52%) are also informative, and only a minority are interpretive and expressive (33%) (for example: “Gay passion at the gym” -LR, 27/07/2011), or include quotes and statements (15%). The latter type of headlines is reserved to reproduce affirmations about the surroundings of the victim, the acquaintances of the aggressor and even his statements: “the man arrested in Xâbia says that he killed his boyfriend because he fell asleep before sex” (EM, 05/07/2010).

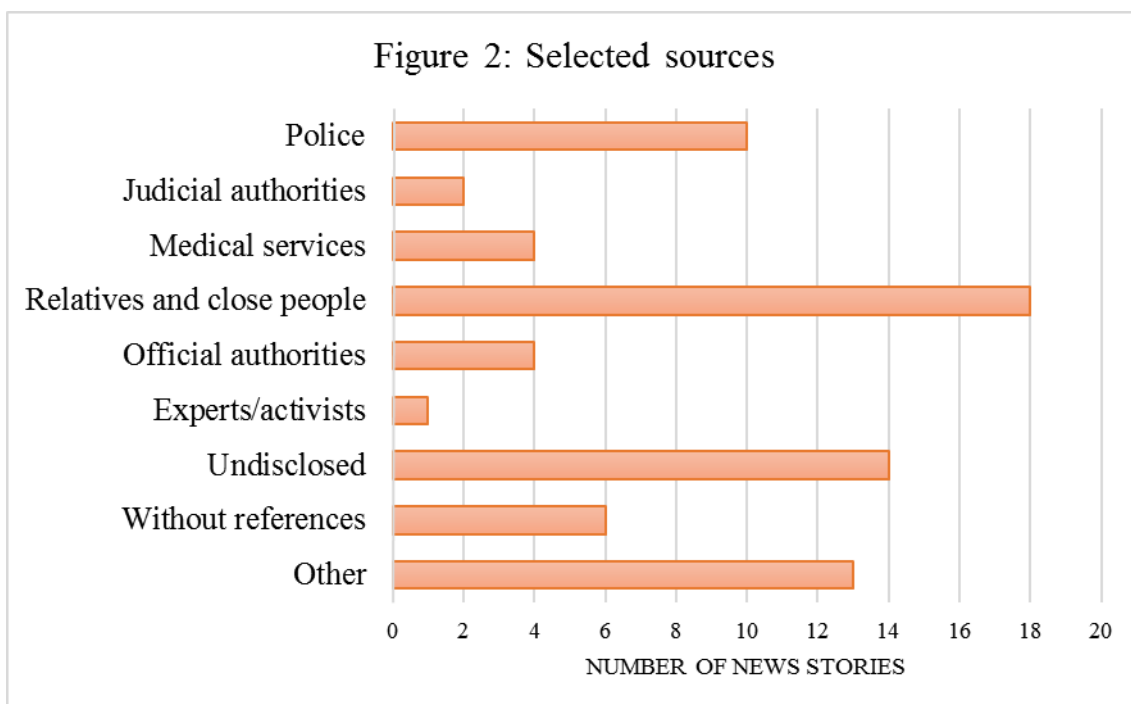
However, many of the informative pieces tried to contextualise the narrated events, in synchronous and diachronic terms (in 55% and 76% of news items, respectively). The diachronic contextualisation was especially used to try to explain the evolution of the protagonist couple. In both cases, we refer to the contextualisation of the event in its specific circumstances, without addressing it as a particular manifestation of a wider phenomenon of violence. These are two examples of how some news pieces tried to interpret the act of violence based on the couple’s sentimental history:

“... there are no police reports of previous cases of domestic violence in this couple” (LV, 06/07/2010)

“Research sources told *Abc* that the public servant constantly harassed Marcos [...] He called him on the phone, visited him at work...” (*Abc*, 28/07/2011)

5.4. Sources employed

A good part of the units of analysis used sources linked with the personal surrounding of the people involved: relatives, friends, neighbours, etc. These sources are used in more than half of the news (55%). It is important to note the high number of cases in which the information is presented without disclosing the sources of data and hypotheses (42%), and this lack of disclosure is justified with phrases such as “sources close to the investigation”. 30% of the examined news stories made explicit that they consulted police sources. Surprisingly, there is a minimal inclusion of official political sources, which appear only in four news stories; of judicial sources, only cited twice; and expert sources, which were only used in one story (which included the opinion of a criminologist about the murder in Bilbao). None of the news pieces cited sources related to pro-LGBT associations.



Source: Author’ own creation

The heavy use of people close to the protagonists of the news story -the attacker and the victim– is not justified by their relevance in the construction of the informative discourse. The following

examples show the scarce journalistic contribution that implies the introduction of these voices in the description of the events, mostly reduced to ambiguous remarks and descriptions of their feelings:

“The couple’s neighbours explained that neither of the two men were conflictive and claimed they did not hear the discussion that took place before the crime” (*Abc*, 04/07/2010)

“«They took him away from us», «I will kill him, even if I have to spend the rest of my life in jail», were the angry statements of the people closest to Rafael, a very discreet man” (*LV*, 04/07/2010).

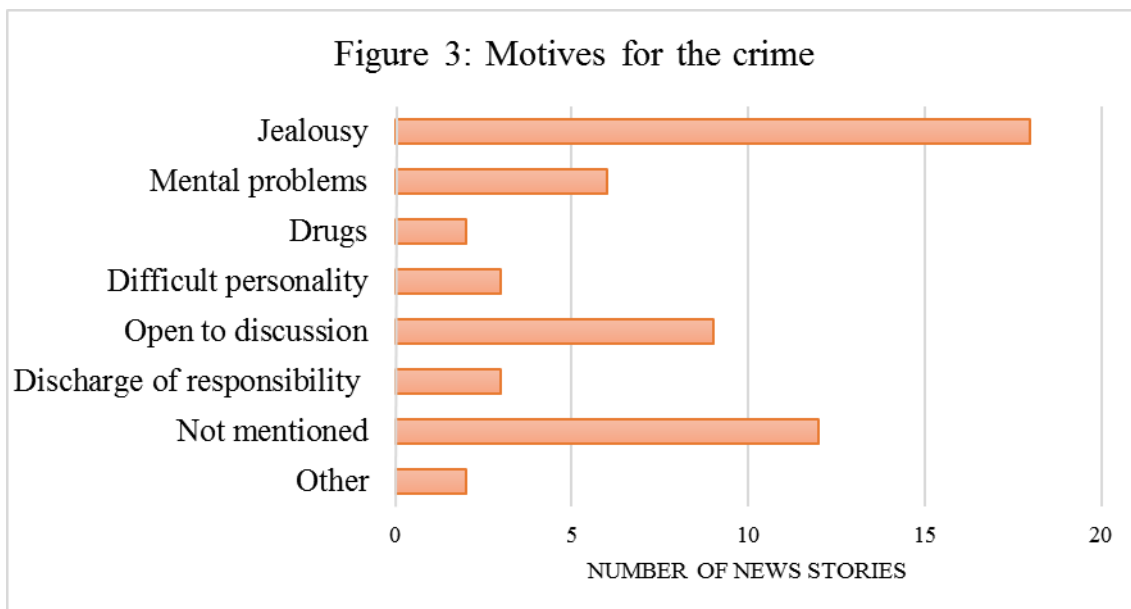
“According to those close to them, both were good people” (*Abc*, 27/07/2011)

“... According to some customers, their relationship seemed «friendly»” (*LR*, 27/07/2011)

“A salesman [...] claimed that Jon was there on Tuesday afternoon and he did not notice anything strange, and Jon even looked «good»” (*EC*, 21/11/2014).”

5.5. Motives for the crime: motive and responsibility of the murderer

The analysis reveals that the vast majority of information pieces refer to jealousy as possible motive for the crime. This occurs in 55% of the sample of news pieces.



Source: Author’s own creation

Many times this motive is included in the headline of the story, setting from the start the frame from which the event is presented: “Young man kills his boyfriend in Xàbia following a jealousy fuelled argument” (*LV*, 04/07/2010), “Flirting at a gay pride party triggered the crime in Xàbia” (*LV*, 05/07/2010), “The jealousy of the methodical sergeant” (*EP*, 28/07/2011), “The alleged murderer of actor Losada Koldo committed the crime out of jealousy” (*EP*, 22/11/2014). The use of this motive in the narration of the crime may lead to an explanation that places the aggressor as harmed by a state of agitation generated by the victim: “... he confessed he became deranged when he saw his partner flirting with other men at a gay event held in Valencia” (*LV*, 05/07/2010), “Angel could not bear that, after just half a year, Marcos was already with another man” (*LR*, 27/07/2011). On other occasions, the attack is presented as the end of a discussion between murderer and victim, which may suggest that both parties were responsible for the commitment of the crime: “In the afternoon people saw them arguing outside the victim’s workplace” (*EP*, 27/07/2011), “After four in the afternoon, and as a result of a violent discussion, presumably fuelled by jealousy, the public servant...” (*Abc*, 27/07/2011).

Also, although less frequently, there are references to the mental health of the offender, in 18% of the news: For example: “... the attacker was received medical treatment for depression” (*LV*, 04/07/2010), “... the Basque police suspected that attacker might suffer from some kind of disorder and was moved by morbid jealousy” (*EC*, 21/11/2014). Motives are not mutually exclusive in some of the units examined, and some news list several reasons to try to explain the event: “... the Sergeant got his wires crossed yesterday and since he was always carrying two weapons...so argument, mixed with jealousy, ended in the worst possible way” (*LR* 27/07/2011).

It is not common to find news reports that suggest a clear discharge of responsibility by the perpetrator of the crime, but in three units there were signs of this circumstance. This happens when the news report proposes a possible exchange in the distribution of victim-attacker roles, as in the headline “«Marcos threatened the sergeant»” (*LR*, 28/07/2011). Something similar occurs in the development of another piece: “...Marcos had threatened Angel Luis that if he didn’t leave him alone, he would reveal he was homosexual to everybody” (*Abc*, 28/07/2011). Another paper makes reference to the love of the murderer for the victim in the headline: “«He lost his mind, Koldo was the love of his life»” (*EC* 22/11/2014). 36% of the news stories did not make any reference to the possible motive for the crime.

5.6. Sensationalism

More than half of the news items included sensational elements (52%). The 17 pieces that exhibited this feature opt for the description of morbid details, as we can see in the following examples, related to the different cases under analysis:

“The rigidity of the corpse reflected the deadly stabbing...” / “The cries of pain woke up the neighbours” (*LV*, 05/07/2010)

“Moments of panic” / “The guard was bleeding through his mouth” (*Abc*, 27/07/2011)

“The transvestite from Chueca cut his boyfriend’s throat with an axe after they broke up” (*Abc*, 12/23/2011)

“... he was found lifeless at night, lying on the house hallway, with a bloodied towel over his head” (*Abc*, 21/11/2014)

Other news reports also reflect their sensationalist treatment by, for example, highlighting the most shocking and morbid aspects of the event which may involve certain misfit from what is socially assumed, as it is the case with the professions performed by homosexual males. Two headlines, for example, highlight the profession of the murderer, a circumstance which probably would have not been highlighted if it did not involve the aforementioned reaction: “A civil guard kills his ex-boyfriend” (*EM*, 27/07/2011) and “a transvestite firefighter kills his boyfriend” (*??*, 22/12/2011). Finally, it is important to note the inclusion of an infographic that depicts how one of the killings was executed (including the drawing of the victim, the offender, and indicating the impacts of the gun shots, among other details (*LR*, 27/07/2011).

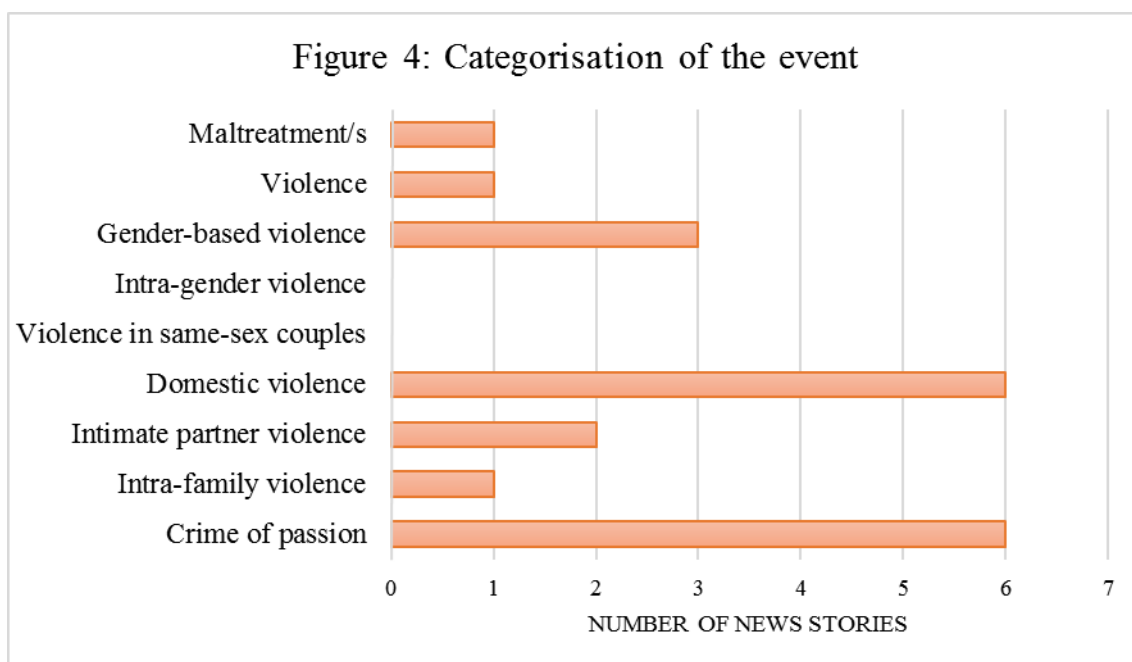
5.7. Use of euphemisms and stereotypes

Eight of the analysed news reports (24%) used euphemisms. The most common euphemism the definition of one of the members of the homosexual couple -usually the victim- as “romantic partner” of the other. In some news reports, as in the one titled “Man arrested in Jávea after killing his romantic partner” (*LR*, 04/07/2010), this is the only discursive formula used to define the relationship between the two men and it is repeated twice more, without introducing possible synonyms. Other times, this expression is combined with others. It is also important to note that it is also common to find terms that are far away from being euphemisms, like boyfriend, husband and partner.

Although less frequently than the euphemisms, we also identified some stereotypical images that accompany the gay world. This occur in seven of the analysed news stories (21%). Sometimes, these representations appear along with the motive of the crime and involve prejudiced speculations such as the promiscuity of male homosexuals - “... According to the man arrested, the problems started because the deceased was flirting with other young men” (*EM*, 05/07/2010) and “Flirting at a gay pride party triggered the crime in Xàbia” (*LV* 05/07/2010)- and the high “sexual appetite” of homosexual men - “the man arrested in Xàbia says that he killed his boyfriend because the deceased fell asleep before sex” (*EM*, 05/07/2010). Other examples consist of widely accepted conceptions, like the perception of gays as men who care excessively for their image -“Marcos Hernández was a man who cared very much about his body, and spent many hours working out in the gym” (*EP*, 27/07/2011)-, or as males who assume a feminine/masculine role when in a relationship -“Those who know him since he was a child argue that [...] «he was the feminine one in the couple»” (*EC*, 22/11/2014)-. The coverage also involved the use of stereotypes not exclusively linked to the LGBT

community and respond, in general, to the world of relationships: “...people affirm that the fact that the sergeant had «several properties» «influenced» the love Marcos felt for the civil guard” (*LR*, 28/07/2011).

5.8. Categorisation of the events



Source: Author’s own creation

As we can see in the following figure, two categories are used the most (18%) to describe the killings taking place in same-sex couples: domestic violence -“... Ezkurdia was arrested and identified as the alleged perpetrator of a crime of domestic violence” (*EM*, 21/11/2014)- and crime of passion. The use of the latter concept -already virtually non-existent in the journalistic treatment of other types of violence- is usually linked to the mentioning of jealousy as a possible motives of the crime and is identified in news related to the coverage of the different cases: “In a few seconds it crossed the threshold of crimes of passion” (*LV*, 05/07/2010), “Apparently, the victim and the agent had maintained a sentimental relationship that ended a few months ago, so everything suggests a crime of passion” (*Abc*, 27/07/2011), and “The violence of the attack could indicate that this is a crime of passion” (*EC*, 22/11/2014).

Sometimes, the news stories introduce other concepts linked to domestic violence, but reflect the difficulty to rigorously conceptualise and categorise the phenomenon under study: gender-based violence (9%), intimate partner violence (6%) and intra-family violence (3%). It is noteworthy that not a single one of the news stories considered these cases as manifestations of “violence in same-sex

couples” or “intra-gender violence”, which are two of the concepts most used by those who study these attacks from the associative and academic worlds.

5.9. Equalisation to other types of violence

Only nine news stories (27%) made references that allow the interpretation of the event as a manifestation of a generalised violence that can occur in any couple, regardless of the sex of their members, beyond the name attributed to the phenomenon. So, the equalisations made in the news stories in terms of categorisation range from imprecise -“...the story of love and heartbreak of this couple has ended, as many other conflictive relations, in the cemetery” (*LR*, 28/07/2011)- to explicit: “Domestic violence does not know sex” (*Abc*, 04/07/2010).

Some of the news stories even included what can be understood as a vindication, because promoted an equal treatment that did not distinguished between violence committed in homosexual relationships and violence exerted on heterosexual women by their sexist partners. In some cases, this occurs as a result of the inclusion of a source: “The spokesmen agreed that this murder «is another manifestation of the lack of respect and of the abuse of power that exists in many relationships, whether homosexual or heterosexual»” (*EC*, 22/11/2014). In others, it is the voice of the journalist who highlights the need to equate the different crimes:

While yesterday thousands of gays were celebrating Pride Day with music and party, in Xàbia a terrible event once again equated, unfortunately, same-sex couples with heterosexual ones. And this is because violence in romantic relationships do not know gender. This time, in Xàbia, two men were the protagonists of the tragedy told so often, but with different protagonists (*EM*, 04/07/2010).

There were subtler examples in which an equal treatment is suggested through references, after the description of the event, to cases of macho violence: “So far this year, three women have died in the region of Valencia as a consequence of gender-based violence...” (*LR*, 04/07/2010).

5.10. Thematisation

It is strange to find news stories that offer perspectives that widen the focus beyond the particular event on which they are reporting to address it as a social problem of greater complexity. 88% of the sample of news stories are limited to reporting the events as an episodic event. Only four news stories showed some effort to thematise the phenomenon, by relating the reported case with previous crimes. One of them opted for a thematisation that would take into account only the violence that takes place in same-sex couples: “It is the second crime between members of a homosexual couple in the province of Alicante. The first happened in...” (*EM*, 04/07/2010). The rest of the news stories, however, deal with the presentation of the case as just another example of gender-based violence:

“This crime of gender-based violence is the tenth in the Community since the beginning of the year...” (*EM*, 22/12/2011), “... violent deaths have multiplied. Ten women have been killed by their husbands...” (*Abc*, 12/22/2011).

5.11. Support resources

Only one of the news stories included information about resources available to help people who in a similar situation. In this case, it is telephone service that is usually recommended in news about on gender-based violence: “016 support line for victims of violence” (*LR*, 04/07/2010).

6. Discussion and conclusions

The analysis of the news coverage of these four cases of intra-gender violence allows us to identify some of the predominant features of the type preferred readings the media offer of this reality. While it is true that the interpretation of the results cannot be generalised beyond the specific events under study, the analysis offers enough evidence to affirm that the news coverage of these events is similar, in some aspects, to the coverage given to cases of gender-based violence before 1997 which, according to previous studies (Berganza, 2003; Vives-Cases *et al.*, 2005; Rodríguez, 2008; Menéndez, 2014), were: presented as crimes of passion or were narrated in a way that excused the aggressor. Thus, it could be argued that the news written about cases of violence in same-sex couples do not regard this problem as worthy of political-social attention.

Following the stages of the attention cycle of public problems (Downs, 1972), the news units under examination place intra-gender violence in the pre-problem stage as they provide limited news coverage and visibility (do not feature it on the front page, but in small spaces and even-numbered pages) and favour the morbid and sensational aspects, without presenting the attacks as manifestations of a problem that should generate general alarm or concern. Therefore, it could be argued that violence in same-sex couples is addressed with informative strategies that were common 20 years ago in the treatment of gender-based violence.

This type of coverage is explained by the fact that, as we have seen, this type of violence is not equated in the media to gender-based violence in the majority of cases. Its presentation seems to indicate that they are similar but not equal phenomena. The fact that only 9% of the units of analysis used the concept of “gender-based violence” to refer to these attacks -a formula more frequently used when media deal with violence against women (Rodríguez, 2008)- would confirm the heterosexist bias that dominates the expression in line with the term adopted in the 2004 Organic Act against Gender Violence, as pointed out by *LGBT* associations and academics (Coll-Planas *et al.*, 2008). Despite the fact that this preference for avoiding the use of the concept of “gender-based violence” to identify attacks that a gay man can receive from his partner would make the journalistic discourse

look more like that of the *LGBT* groups which believe that this phenomenon is not gender-based violence, the lack of contact with these associations could explain the fact that coverage does not favour its framing as a social problem, which would respond to one of the main demands made by associations; that is, the creation of a specific law to protect the members of these couples.

Indeed, the lack of recognition of *LGBT* organisations -which is deducted from their exclusion as sources of information- and the elements that demonstrate an episodic approach to this type of violence (present in 88% of the units) suggest that the phenomenon has not passed the phases of agitation (Bosch and Ferrer, 2000) and legitimation (Fagoaga, 1994). This evaluation of the media coverage indicates that these cases have been framed as crime news and not as a social problem, reproducing elements that have been considered negative in the media treatment of gender-based violence, according to various studies (Berganza, 2003; Vives-Cases *et al.*, 2005; Marín *et al.*, 2011) and ethical codes (Rodríguez, 2008): images of the victim, lack of contextualisation (with an informative approach that is limited to describe the fact, as a singular case and not as an expression of a wider phenomenon of violence), prevalence of police sources and intimate surroundings (without incorporating public authorities or experts), absence of information about support resources or services, and use of expressions that associate the attack with an emotional/passionate manifestation and present the aggressor with certain attributes that may diminish his responsibility for the crime.

The parallelism of this kind of coverage with the one that dominated the treatment of gender-based violence before the death of Ana Orantes in 1997 (Gomez, 2012) requires us to ask ourselves whether the shift from an episodic approach to a thematic approach may have been favoured by the coverage of an emblematic case, and a watershed due to its impact on society. In this sense, the killing of the man from Bilbao seems to have the characteristics to be considered a watershed. The coverage of this murder generated the largest number of units of analysis and the only one that motivated the publication of an editorial piece in one of the newspapers under analysis, which means raising the importance of the issue to the level of collective consideration and reflection. New research studies that expand the analysis to future cases and other media (audiovisual and digital, for example) would allow us to confirm whether this last murder manages to make a change in the news coverage of this reality.

Although the episodic treatment of intra-gender violence and the disconnection between journalists and *LGBT* organisations could favour a representation of gay identities based on prejudices and stereotypes in so far as the homosexual male can be addressed as the “other” (Israel, 2006; Coll-Planas, 2010), the presumption that the coverage would be dominated by euphemisms and stereotypes would only be partially confirmed because they only appear in one of every four news pieces, which reveals that the journalistic discourse has reached a high degree of naturalness when it comes to reporting on the reality of gay relationships. Thus, while previous research (Carratalá, 2011a) had shown that the use of euphemisms was a useful strategy in cases where journalism had deal with drama and death in news about gay men, the cases examined indicate that the normalisation of what is incorporated as natural in the public agenda favours a journalistic representation that is more accurate and free from prejudices and cross-cultural noise. However, the

prevalence of elements of this type indicate that some images commonly accepted about the LGBT community are still, occasionally, being reinforced by the media discourse, as confirmed by some examples which do not reflect the exercise of an intercultural journalism that tears down the barriers between the heterosexual “us” and the homosexual “other”.

In conclusion, the results presented in this study mainly confirm the initial hypothesis, which indicates that the news coverage of violence in same-sex couples would employ similar strategies to those that characterised the coverage of gender-based violence until society accepted as a problem that affected all. In this case, the coverage of the events still adopts an episodic approach that is typical of the accident and crime news genre, which is reflected on the sources employed (immediate surroundings, police...), the images included (the face of the victim, the lifting of the corpse, the crime scene...), the categorisation of events (crime of passion), the focus on the motive of the crime (jealousy, delirium, drugs...), the sensationalist aspects (gory details, shocking circumstances, infographics of the crime...) and the blaming of the victim -who is even referred to as the killer’s “fatal love” (LR, 27/07/2011)- that derives from the use of various narrative strategies (the victim flirted with others, did not satisfy the murderer sexually, carelessly started a new relationship after breaking up with the aggressor, participated in or provoked the previous discussion, threatened the murderer, etc.).

The primarily episodic treatment of the phenomenon of intra-gender violence explains the scares thematisation of these events, as well as confusion around their categorisation and interpretation. The fact that some news pieces equate this reality with gender-based violence (and more news present it as domestic violence), reflects some interest from the journalistic profession to build a more explanatory story of the events, which moves away from the particular to deal with it as a larger problem. The absence of expert sources and experts linked to pro-LGBT organisations in the sample of news contribute to the explanatory gaps and complicates a precise interpretation of this reality, which still does not seem to have passed the first phases that any issue must go through to become legitimised as a problem worthy of consideration for the entire society.

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