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Quality journalism in times of crisis: An analysis of the evolution of the European reference press (2001-2012)

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Abstract

Introduction. The explosion of new technologies, the progressive implementation of the Internet, the massive use of social networks and the current economic and financial crisis have, along with other factors, provoked a drop in sales of the printed press in the western countries of the planet. This study analyses the evolution of news quality in five European reference newspapers (*Financial Times*, *Corriere della Sera*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Le Monde* and *El País*) over a period between 2001 and 2012. **Methodology.** The research method used in this work has its roots in the concept of media performance developed by Denis McQuail (1992); which allows the use of transversal parameters to evaluate news quality. **Results.** The results indicate (n=1,137) that the European reference press only just passes the test to which it has been subjected (5.39 out of 10). The average index shows a moderate downtrend which is not applicable to all the papers. **Conclusions.** All the analysed newspapers appear to have forgotten about the social function which has historically been attributed to journalism as the guardian of citizens' interests. This is reflected in the poor results which all of them obtain in the section "social contribution of the news".

Keywords: Quality journalism, news quality, news values, reference press, professionalism, press crisis.

Contents: 1. Introduction. 2. Theoretical framework. 3. Earlier studies on the subject. 4. Aims, hypothesis and research questions. 5. Methodology. 6. General results. 6.1. FAZ *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. 6.2. EP *El País*. 6.3. LM *Le Monde*. 6.4. CDS *Corriere della Sera*. 6.5. FT *Financial Times*. 7. Conclusions. 8. Notes. 9. List of references.

Translated by **Angela Jones**

1. Introduction

The explosion of new technologies, the progressive implementation of the Internet, the massive use of social networks and the current economic and financial crisis have, along with other factors, provoked a drop in sales of the printed press in the western countries of the planet. The increase in the number of online readers, far from generating a significant increase in revenue, has provoked a descent in the number of newsagents' customers, and, consequently, the disappearance of many printed daily papers all over the world. At the same time, in the last few years, concern about the effects which this crisis may be having on news quality has grown.

2. Theoretical framework

In spite of the interest which has always been sparked by the quality question, the scientific contribution with regard to informative excellence is geographically dispersed, depending on the language of the publication. Whilst Scandinavian authors have been pioneers with their studies about quality and in the creation of the concept of *informativity*, in the USA research into new business models appears to have been imposed onto that which underlines the need to move forward towards informative excellence. The German scientific community, however, articulated the theoretical framework of the quality debate, together with some methodological proposals. South American universities have recently resumed interest in the quality question, although in the end they have adopted the proposals established by the German authors. Among the most recent contributions is María G. Gorosari's doctoral thesis, presented in the University of the Basque Country (2011).

As O'Donnell and McKnight point out (2012: 40), “[the term *quality journalism*] is hard to define and not universally accepted; for some, it is a code for resistance to change, while others see it as the keyword that will unlock journalism”. Although the question of quality has been largely discussed, it did not achieve research consensus until McQuail (1992) formulated the concept for *media performance*. The present article gathers the main international contributions to news quality research from a methodological perspective.

As a matter of fact, there is a vast terminology referring to the quality of information supply. Along with media product or media offer, three main terms have extended their meaning to this new field, such as: journalistic quality, news quality, and news content quality. To start with, *journalistic quality* (Schirmer, 2001; Pellegrini and Múgica, 2006) is the most extensive concept of excellence of news supply. In fact, it also alludes to quality management. Secondly, the term *news quality* (Vehlow, 2006) confirms news is not only content or information features. From a European perspective, such a term highlights media performance's social responsibility. Finally, *news content quality* (Bucher and Altmppen, 2003) was originally conceived to designate the excellence of news

agencies' information supply. Therefore, news quality designation will be used from now on, since it is the most integrating concept in the literature review (Vehlow, 2006). Accordingly, this study may help to compare the news quality of international media outlets.

3. Earlier studies on the subject

The strategies adopted so far by the major media groups are aimed, fundamentally, at increasing the profitability of their electronic editions, neglecting those aspects related with news quality. There has been little applied research carried out up to now. However, a special mention must go to the work done in July 2012 by Penny O'Donnell and David McKnight of the University of Sydney in which they clearly raise the alarm as to the possible consequences for news quality provoked by the immediacy demanded by new technologies. These authors point out (2012: 42) the necessity of *identifying the criteria that can be used to evaluate what it does best*.

In the last few years, studies about news quality have focussed particularly on the web. The research into online news quality is currently very fragmented and there are considerable differences between one work and another, without it being possible to establish general study guidelines. Therefore, this concept is measured by some authors (Rose *et al.*, 1999: 1-74; Huizingh, 2000: 123-134; McInervey and Bird, 2005) based on three or four factors, whilst other research requires a more extensive study [Olsina *et al.* (2000: 266-278) propose 39 items; Zhang and Von Dran (2001: 9-33) 74 and Aladwani and Palvia (2002: 467-476) establish 102 variables].

Although most of the research recognises the lack of existing consensus in this area, hardly any make a homogenised effort to try and find a solution to this situation. Secondly, it must be taken into account that most research has limited itself to merely providing an index/theoretical model, without empirically contrasting it, which does not guarantee its influence with respect to performance obtained by the website. Lastly, most of the existent literature has been developed in a general context, which does not differentiate the analysed sector and does not take into account that the assessed factors may vary depending on domain type, and may not be applicable in all cases. This lack has been taken into account by some research which has either focussed exclusively on one industry, as in the case of the aeronautic sector (Shchiglik, 2004: 17-25), or has chosen to analyse different sectors simultaneously – finance, entertainment, education, health, government and electronic commerce (Zhang *et al.* 2001).

4. Aims, hypothesis and research questions

The fundamental aim of this research is clear: to analyse the evolution in the quality of the news published by the five main European reference newspapers (*The Financial Times* FT, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* FAZ, *Le Monde* LM, *Corriere della Sera* CDS and *El País* EP) throughout the period from 2001 to 2012. We understand that a news item is of quality when it satisfactorily fulfils a series of minimum requirements related as much to the processes of selection and preparation of the news item, as to the social contribution which the reported events make to society.

The investigative team of this research is aware that, in the field of Social Sciences, it is especially complicated to establish objective and quantifiable parameters which serve as an unquestionable universal reference. This is even more risky to do when referring to subjects which carry a substantially subjective weight, such as the idea of news quality. In spite of all this, the authors

consider that the existing literature on this subject provides a sufficiently solid base on which to design the scientific method used in this current work. The very preparation of that method (in its initial phase and therefore subject to debate) is, in itself, part of the objectives of this work.

In order to fulfil the above aims, the work group used the following hypotheses (H) and Research Questions (RQ), as its starting point:

H1. The technological advances experienced by the printed press of the 21st century, together with the immediacy demanded by electronic editions is provoking an acceleration in news selection and preparation processes, which, in the end, could affect news quality.

Research Questions associated with the hypothesis:

RQ1. How has the quality index of the European reference press news evolved during the period between 2001 and 2012?

RQ2. Are there significant differences between the newspapers?

RQ3. Is the quality index maintained in the same way in all the sections of the paper?

Second work hypothesis of this research:

H2. The news quality index varied depending on the news format. Large format news items have, a priori, more possibilities of obtaining a higher quality index than other smaller news items.

Research Questions associated with hypothesis:

RQ4. Are there significant differences in the quality of the news published on the front page, large format news items inside and those in a secondary hierarchical position?

Third work hypothesis of this research:

H3. The economic and financial crisis affecting a large part of the planet has generated many types of servitude; relationships of dependency which also affect the quality press which seems to have forgotten the social responsibility inherent within the practice of journalism.

Research Questions associated with the hypothesis:

RQ5. How far does the European reference press carry out its function as counterbalance, or watch dog, with regard to the established powers in their respective countries?

RQ6. Does the European reference press encourage citizen participation in the social debate, through, for example, the presence of different viewpoints in the same news item?

RQ7. Does the European reference press respect universal values, human dignity or cultural diversity?

5. Methodology

Before going any further in this section, it should be pointed out that the method used in this current research aims to provide a useful instrument for measuring news quality. However, the research team recognises that, in addition to the variables mentioned below, there are other factors which directly affect the quality of the media and which are difficult to quantify.

The method used in this study examines the news published in the media. We are aware, for example, that the quality of the media is determined by its published and unpublished news. The measuring of the latter would enormously complicate the method and deserves a separate study. The same could be said, for example, about the influence which layout has on news quality. Similarly, we could speculate about how the crisis within investigative journalism is affecting the *watch-dog*

function which this profession should carry out in relation to power and which also forms part of what we understand as information quality. All these variables, along with others, do not form part of our study. Our method covers only informative pieces published by the press and belonging to informative genres, excluding therefore: interpretative texts such as analysis, reports, features, interviews or opinion columns.

The parameters set out below are open to debate. We have tried to objectivise them as much as possible, whilst knowing that this would imply certain risks and be open to criticism. In spite of that, the team believes that it was essential to go to such lengths. Having made all these observations, the research team would point out that methodology used in this work is based on the concept of *media performance* developed by Denis McQuail (1992) which allows the use of transversal parameters capable of accurately evaluating news quality. The method we used provides numerous relative data, both about the format quality of the analysed item (technical, aesthetic and functional aspects, among others), and about its quality index, evaluating in a precise and differentiated way both the selection and preparation processes of the news, together with the social contribution which that news generates in society as a whole.

According to traditional standard theories, evaluating news quality presents an enormous challenge. However, the concept of *media performance* developed by Denis McQuail provided an extremely interesting viewpoint (1992: 17):

“The independent assessment of mass media provision according to alternative ‘public interest’ criteria, by way of objective and systematic methods of research, taking account of other relevant evidence and the normal operating conditions and requirements of the media concerned.”

The concept of *media performance* became especially rooted in western democracies, gradually becoming linked to the idea of “social responsibility”. Gorosarri developed an integrating concept of *News Quality* even formulating a method which makes a *cross-media* analysis possible, similar to the Germanic line of research which surrounds the concept of ‘professionalism’. Germanic literature quickly accepted the new viewpoint outlined by McQuail (Maurer, 2005: 85-88; Vehlow, 2006: 23-24), underlining the need to combine highly demanding quality parameters in strictly professional terms with others related to the social responsibility of the media (McQuail, 1992: 66-68).

The method used in this research to determine news quality combines both qualitative and quantitative aspects. The first area includes matters relating to format quality (technical aspects, aesthetic or functional mistakes such as the presence of *lapsus clavis* [1]), the section in which the profile of the protagonists appears, their gender and scope of influence. These sections are not rated from 0 to 10. Their presence or absence is simply noted and is used to form final conclusions.

The quantitative aspects reflect the quality index of the news, a value which is rated from 0 to 10 points and which is divided into three differentiated segments: selection process (maximum 2.5 points), preparation (5 points) and social contribution of the news item (2.5). The selection process includes five aspects, each one rated with a maximum of 0.5 points: a quote from the source of the information, the nature of the sources, the factual aspect of the matter (event or statements), degree

of topicality and newsworthiness (the degree of interest in the news item). The preparation process is the most important and includes five sections, each with a maximum possible score of one point: accuracy (correspondence between the headline and body of the item), depth (presence of the 5 Ws), presence of different perspectives within the item, contributions made by other informative elements (photographies, graphics, infographies, etc.) and correctness of journalistic language (errors in the text). Lastly, the section relative to social contribution also includes a further five sections, each rated with a maximum of 0.5 points: power watchdog, promotion of social debate, respect for human dignity, presence of cultural references from other countries and the combating of social marginalisation. By adding up the scores from all these variables, a value of 0 to 10 is obtained for each news items. Three types of news item were evaluated: the main front page news of the day, large format news which develops the former inside the paper, and a secondary news item (published in one or two columns at most).

The sample which provided the base for our research was made following the compounded weekly technique (Wimmer and Dominick, 1996; Bardin, 2002; Echegaray, and Ayestaran, 2012 and Zabaleta, 1997). It works as follows: a day of the week is chosen at random, for example Tuesday, and the next consecutive day of the following week, Wednesday and so on until a full week is completed (Zabaleta, 1997: 197). The research consisted of a diachronic analysis of the evolution of news quality in these five newspapers in the period from 1st January 2001 to 31st December 2012. Using this technique, 84 days were chosen, spread over the twelve years (seven days per year). For each day, three different news items were analysed (main front page news, development of the main news inside, and secondary news). The maximum total of possible news items to be analysed for each paper was 252. In some cases this number was not reached for merely technical reasons. In total, the number of news items analysed was 1,137 for the five papers (252 from EP and LM, 224 from FAZ, 219 from CDS and 190 from FT), a sample which is considered to be representative of the universal total analysed.

6. General results

The processed data from the five analysed newspapers appears in the general results in table number 1. The total average score for the five papers analysed between 2001-2012 is 5.39 points, a modest figure considering the prestige and history belonging to these publications, some which, as in the case of CDS and FT have over 100 years of history to their name.

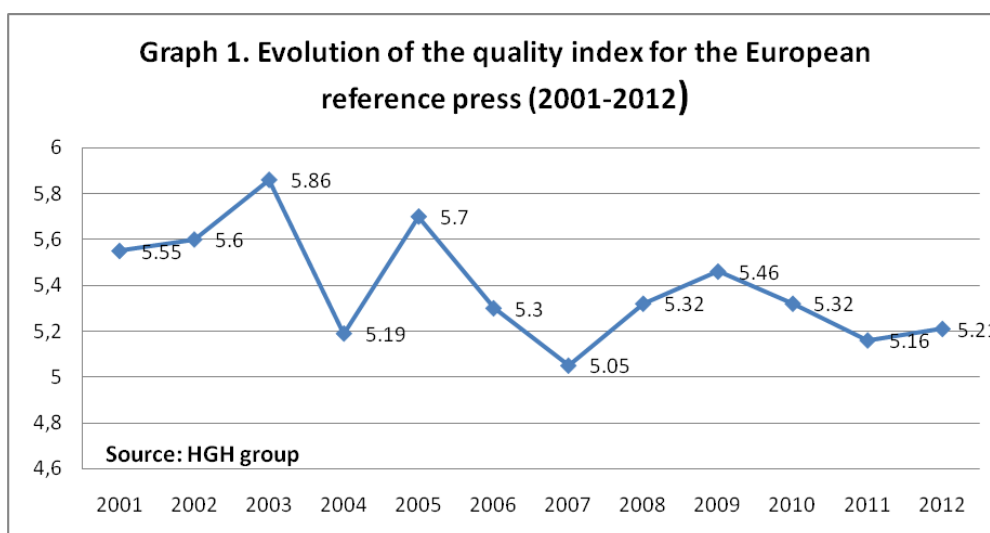
Table 1. Quality index of the European reference press (2001-2012)

Year	FAZ	EP	LM	CDS	FT	AYS (0-10)
2001	5.65	5.60	4.97	5.78	5.76	5.55
2002	5.41	5.44	5.33	6.22	5.64	5.60
2003	6.02	6.05	5.38	5.97	5.86	5.86
2004	5.94	4.92	4.73	5.66	4.71	5.19
2005	5.85	5.42	5.44	6.18	5.61	5.70
2006	6.07	5.43	4.47	5.38	5.14	5.30

2007	6.00	5.41	4.36	4.64	4.82	5.05
2008	5.92	5.83	4.83	4.95	5.05	5.32
2009	6.40	5.15	6.45	4.96	4.35	5.46
2010	6.35	5.70	5.78	3.83	4.92	5.32
2011	6.46	5.28	5.25	4.27	4.53	5.16
2012	6.91	5.40	4.88	3.79	5.08	5.21
ANS (0-10)	6.08	5.47	5.16	5.14	5.12	TAS =5.39

AYS: Average yearly score. ANS: Average newspaper score. TAS: Total average score
 N=1,137 news items. S [2]=0.409 (standard deviation)

Source: HGH Group.



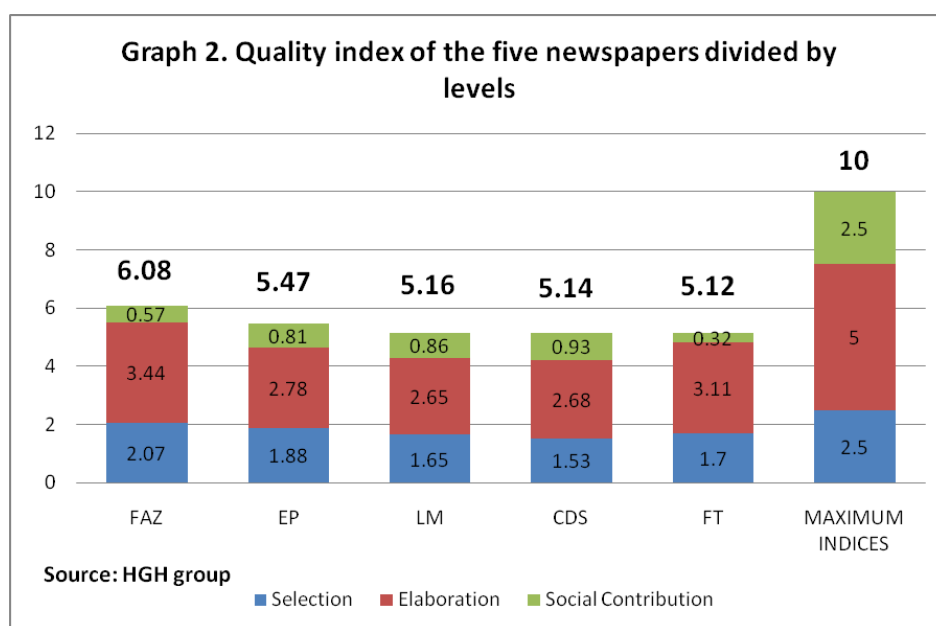
Expressed in graphic form, the evolution of the average score of the five newspapers over the twelve year period is shown in graph 1.

Analysing the general trend of the five newspapers as a whole, it can be said that the quality index shows a notorious downtrend, given that the *five major European papers* began the century with an average score of 5.55 points and finished 2012 with 5.21, which means a loss of 34 hundredths (6.12%), a far from negligible figure considering the margins of these parameters. Comparing the evolution over a six year period, this same tendency can be seen for the period 2001-2006 (total average score 5.53) and 2007-2012 (score obtained: 5.25).

Analysing the results of table 1 in more detail, and comparing them over a six year period, three trends can clearly be seen among the newspapers. Two papers show an improvement in their quality. These are FAZ, whose index improves by 52 hundredths during the second six years and LM which goes up 21 hundredths. Another paper remains almost stable in its six-yearly behaviour. This is EP which showed a loss of 2 hundredths in the second six years. Lastly, two other newspapers, the centennials CDS and FT, show a clear downtrend. The average of the first drops by 1.45 during the

second six years in relation to the first [3], while the FT rating is reduced by 65 hundredths. In general terms, the average loss of the five papers during the second six years was of 28 hundredths. The five major European newspapers have experienced a significant decrease in their sales during this period. According to the different certifying bodies for newspaper circulation in each country, the total sales of these newspapers went from 2,349,454 copies in 2001 to 1,705,327 in 2012, which represents a drop of 27.42%.

If we compare the quality index of the five publications segmented by levels, the following result is obtained (Graph 2):

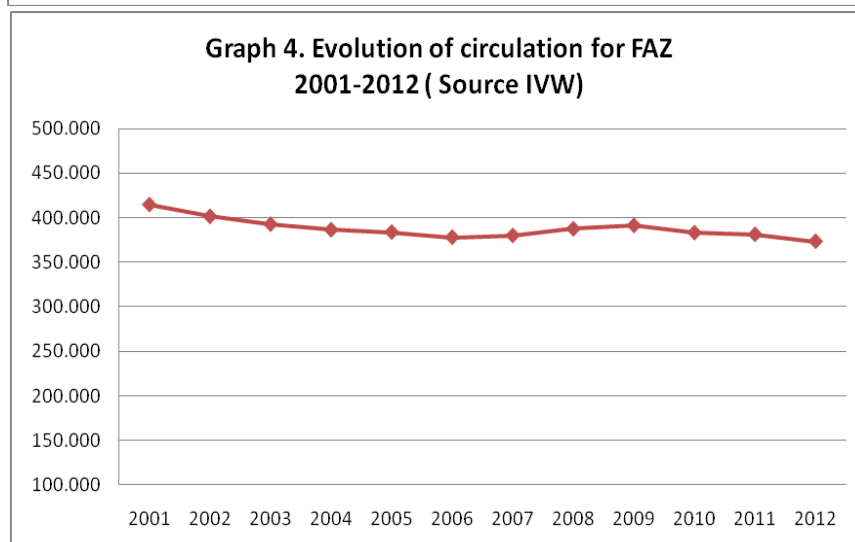
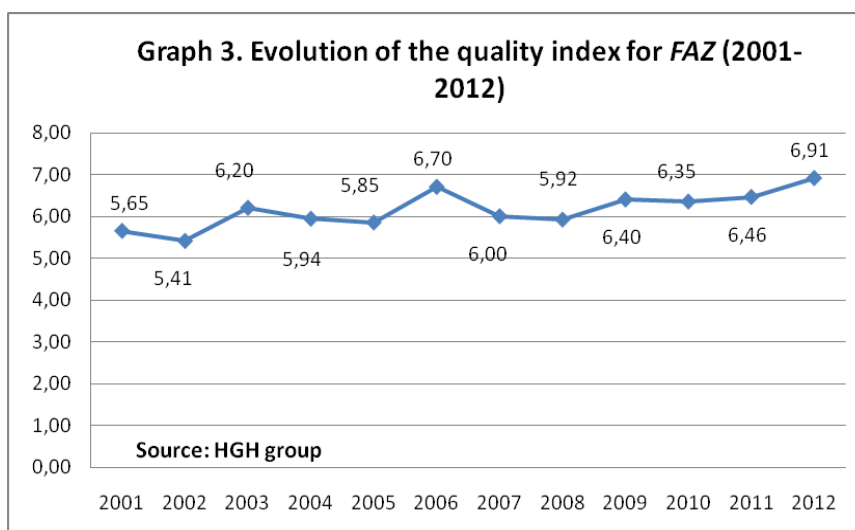


All the papers show a significant deficit: the low social contribution index of their news items. Below we analyse in more detail the behaviour of these papers.

6.1. FAZ - *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*

Born in 1949, following the Second World War, it was originally called *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung für Deutschland*. The base of the newspaper's foundation is the defence of the idea of the market economy, so that FAZ is considered to be of a liberal-conservative ideology. Of a distinctly national character, it ranks as the second most read German newspaper, after *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, which in 2012 surpassed FAZ by 60,000 copies. The society IVW (Informationsgemeinschaft zur Feststellung der Verbreitung von Werbeträgern) calculated FAZ's circulation in 372,854 copies at the end of 2012. That is, this German newspaper has suffered a drop of 13.25% in its circulation with respect to 2001.

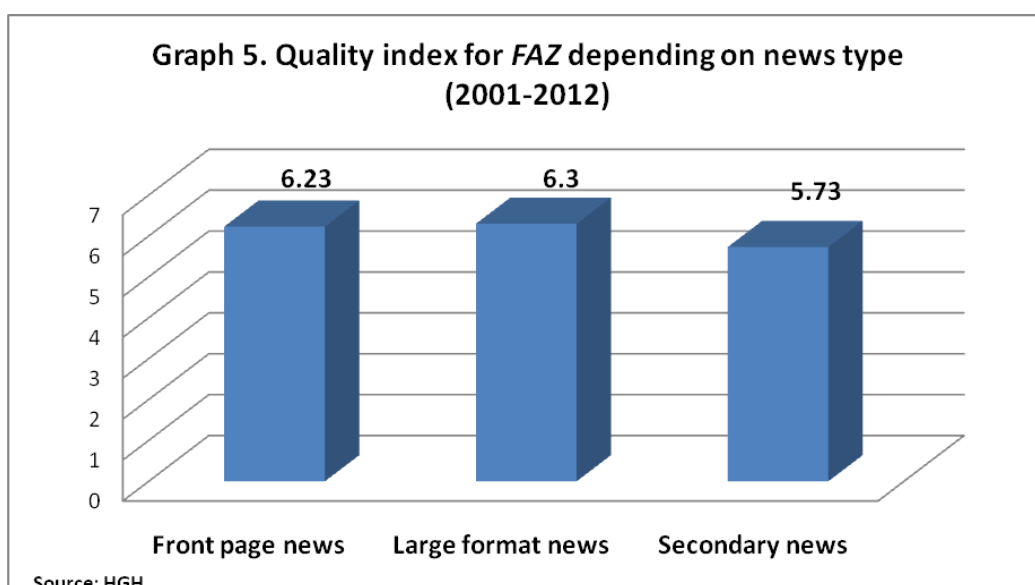
However, the quality index results awarded to the newspaper FAZ differ from its circulation. This German paper improves the quality of its news towards the end of the period studied. In fact, it obtains its best results from 2007 onwards, the year in which FAZ includes a picture on its front page for the first time.



The average score for the quality of the news published by FAZ is 6.08 points. Firstly, it stands out in its selection of news items (it gets 2.07 out of 2.5). One of the characteristics of the German paper is precisely its wide network of journalists, something which gives it a great deal of independence in comparison to the news provided by agencies. Furthermore, FAZ fulfils the requirements of the principle of information transparency: not only does it clearly indicate the origin of the news, but also names the source, even if that implies recognising the validity of news published in its competitors' publications.

Secondly, preparation of the news scores 3.44 points out of 5 for the German paper. This paper takes great pains to get to the bottom of its news stories. The news does not only include the five W questions of traditional journalism, but also the seventh W question derived from German journalism (*Woher*: where from) [4]. It is worth mentioning that both main and secondary news stories include all the answers to the W questions, even *Woher*.

However, 10.1% of the news items contain some kind of spelling or grammatical mistake. Furthermore, during the first six years of the analysis, there are frequent examples in the same text of forms prior to and subsequent to the current Spelling Reform (“daß” and “dass”; “muß” and “muss”). Finally, the social contribution of the news published by FAZ differs from the high level of professionalism shown in the previous two aspects. In this last process, FAZ only gained 0.57 points out of 2.5. Whilst FAZ might ensure the dignity of the protagonists of its news as a whole, the other indicators of the social contribution of its informative work are not so professional. In fact, 9.13% of FAZ's news curbs public debate. In those news items, the two opposing positions are presented, but they are not attributed to two different sources. For example, it is the management of the Berlin metro which explains both positions in relation to a strike: its own, and that of its workers. In the same way, other politicians are the sources used by the newspaper to inform about the perspective of the Social Democrat Party, (SPD) on different subjects.

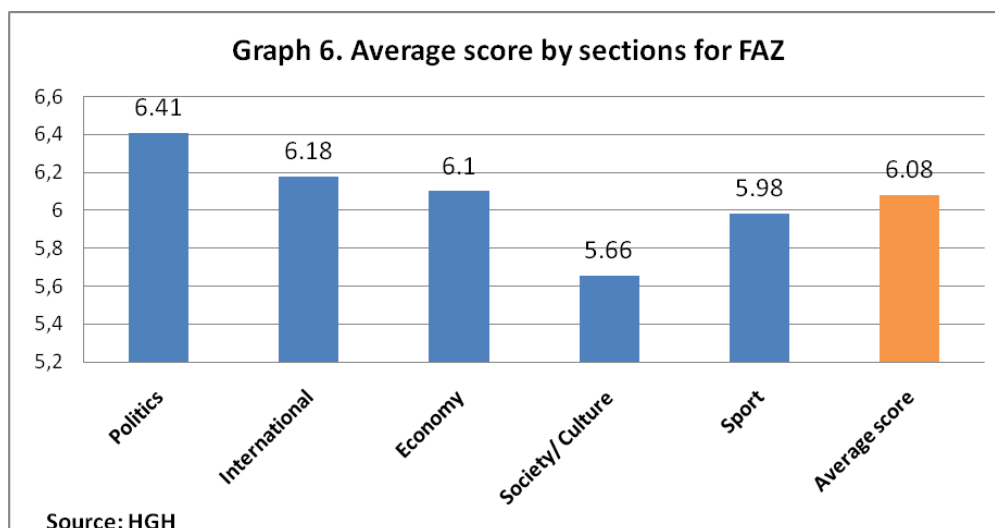


Given the design characteristics of this German newspaper the news which appears on the front page is practically as professional as that of large format. Furthermore, it is worth pointing out that lower category news items obtain a degree of news quality comparable with that of the big reports, as there is only 0.5-0.6 points difference between them.

It is also worth mentioning that all sections of the paper exceed the five point barrier. Political news, which usually appears on the front page of FAZ, scores higher than other sections, such as Society/Culture or Sport, where the headline tends to highlight one aspect of the news item, and where the conjunction of the two opposing positions does not arise so frequently.

With regard to design rules, in nearly half of the headlines analysed in FAZ (47%), a third of the space devoted to them was left blank; 67.71% of them appeared on the front page. Also, a similar number of news items registered lines of just one word or even syllable (41.7%). In this case, over half of them (50.89%) were in large format news items. Lastly, 16.18% of the news items contain

lapsus clavis (such as “Spreocherin” instead of “Sprecherin”). Again, approximately half of the *lapsus clavis* (45.45%) are found in front page news items in FAZ.



It seems to be characteristic of this German newspaper that the main news from the front page appears on page 2, under the heading of Politics. For that reason, over half of the analysed news items appear in the Politics section (54.42%) and only 11.16% in International. The other sections are of a similar size, which differentiates them from the ample cover afforded to politics. Thus, economics takes up 14.88% of the news; the Society/Culture section 11.63%; and lastly, sport 7.91%.

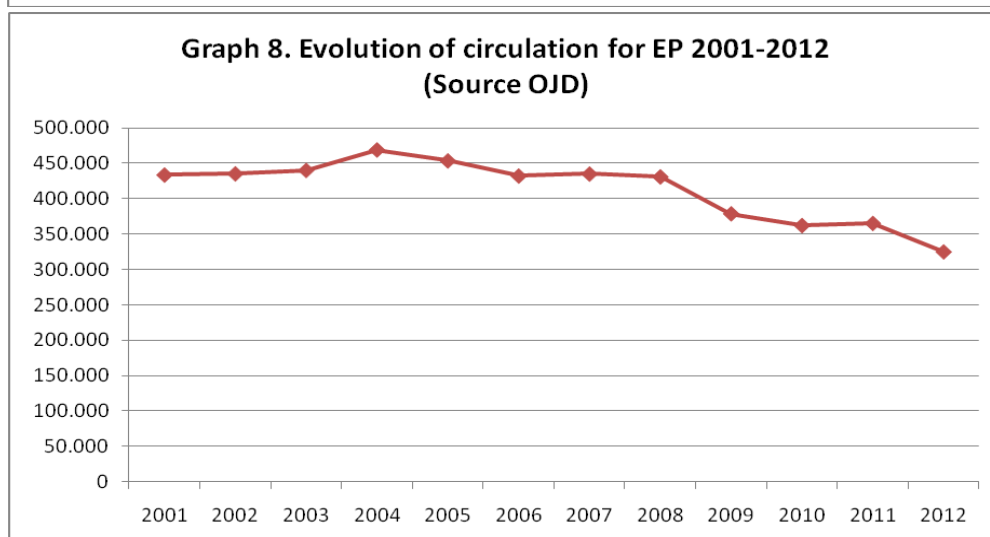
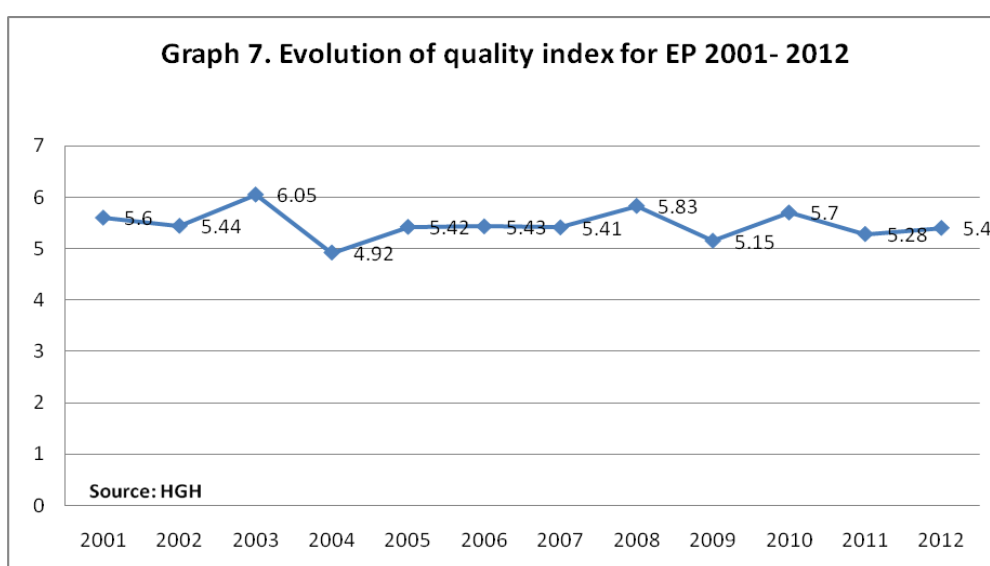
Consequently, the majority of the protagonists of the news in FAZ belong to the political sphere: the Government takes prominence in 37.20% of the news; the Opposition 7.73%; and political parties 10.63%. In second place, cultural and economic bodies are similarly weighted (10.14% and 9.18%, respectively). Furthermore, women only figure as the main characters in 3.85% of the news. Considering that Angela Merkel has been the German Chancellor since 2005, gender equal news only accounts for 4.81% of news items. In this sense, sexist language makes women invisible, in spite of them occupying high-ranking posts.

Finally, the scope of influence of the news published in FAZ is eminently national. 41.35% of the news makes reference to the German State and 14.9%, to other countries of the European Union. However, FAZ reports more often about news referring to Asia (11.07%) and the USA (10.09%) than to those nearby countries from which Germany receives most of its immigrants, such as Turkey and Eastern Europe (4.80%).

6.2. EP - *El País*

The Madrid newspaper *El País* belongs to the communication group Prisa. It was founded by José Ortega Spottorno on the 4th May 1976, six months after the death of the dictator Francisco Franco. It is considered to be a centre-left paper and is the main Spanish reference newspaper at European level. It was the first Spanish newspaper to create the figure of the Press Ombudsman. EP also has collaboration agreements with other European social-democrat newspapers like *La Repubblica*

(Italy) and *Le Monde* (France). During the whole period analysed (2001-2012) EP maintained its leadership in general newspaper sales. At the end of 2012, EP had a circulation of 324,814 copies, *El Mundo* coming second with 206,007 (figures certified by the OJD). Just as with all the newspapers covered in this research, the circulation of EP decreased significantly in these twelve years; to be precise, 25.09% (in 2001 it sold 433,617 printed copies). In 2011, the Prisa group, editor of EP, registered the biggest losses in its history: 451 million Euros (six times those of 2010). The incredibly high job losses being produced in the communications sector in the Spanish State (over 8000 journalists lost their jobs between 2008 and 2012, according to figures from the FAPE) have also affected EP, which in the last year alone made 129 workers redundant, a number which represents 30% of its workforce.

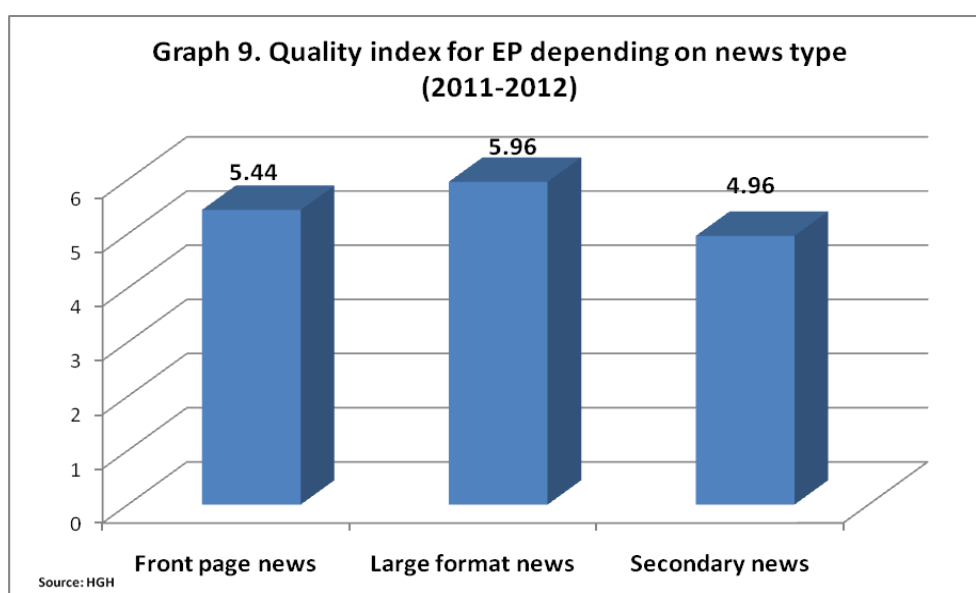


If we compare the paper's quality index in these twelve years with its sales figures, the graphs do not lead us to deduce that there is a cause-effect correlation between the two phenomena. Therefore, whilst the quality index remained quite stable during this period, with slight oscillations (the average

for the first six years was 5.48 whilst for the second six it was 5.46), the drop in sales was practically unstoppable from 2005 onwards, with the exception of a slight upturn in 2007. The removal of prestigious journalists from the paper is too recent to draw conclusions in this analysis which ended in 2012.

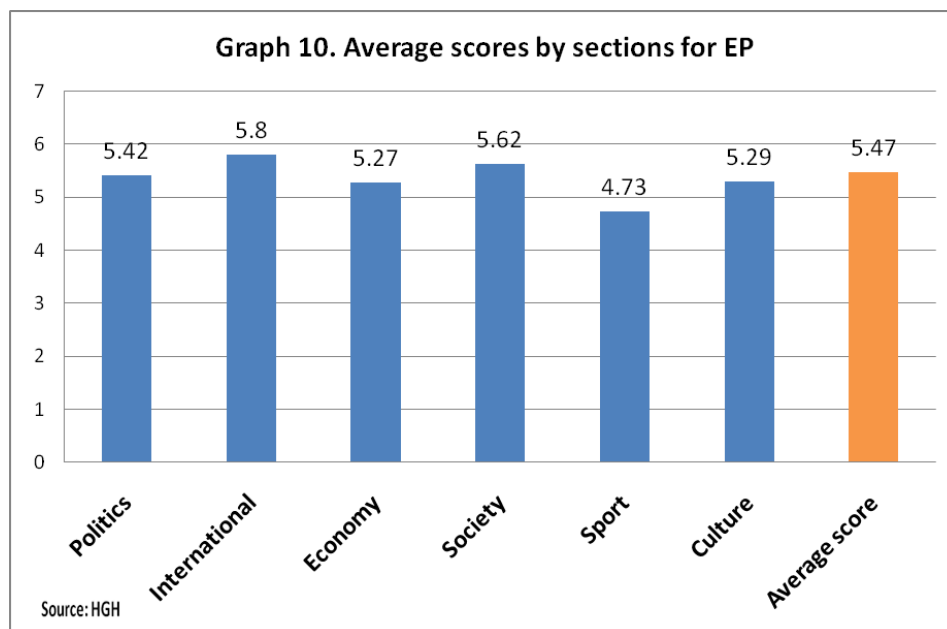
The final average score of this newspaper is 5.47, putting it in second place in the European ranking, although with quite modest figures. The news selection process gains the highest score (1.88 out of a maximum of 2.5) followed by the preparation process (2.78 out of 5) and coming last in the section of social contribution (0.81 out of 2.5). On a global level, amongst the strengths which this paper shows in the news selection process, it is worth mentioning its top marks in matters of factuality (0.48 out of 0.5), topicality (0.30 out of 0.5) and newsworthiness (0.5 out of 0.5). In the preparation section, what stands out is the top mark correlation between the headline and the body of the article (0.92 out of 1) and the correctness of its journalistic style (0.91 out of 1). The weaknesses of EP appear both in the preparation process and in the social value of the news. This newspaper does not make an excessive effort either to include different viewpoints within the same news item (0.36 out of 1), or to provide significantly informative complementary elements (photographies, graphics, infographies, etc.) (0.14 out of 1). The most deficient section is that relating to the social contribution of the news, where, with the exception of the score for the variable "respect of dignity" (0.48 out of 0.5) the rest of the ratings are decidedly negative: counterbalance to power (0.14 out of 0.5), promotion of social debate (0.18 out of 0.5), presence of cultural references other than its own (0.02 out of 0.5) or the fight against marginalisation (0.04 out of 0.5).

The analysis of quality indices on the basis of position and length of news item confirms that it is the larger format items which score the highest, followed by main news items. Small format news items fail in this analysis.



By sections, the best scores are obtained by international and society news which are above the paper's average score. This is not so for politics (5.42) and much less so for culture (5.29) and sport

(4.73). The special characteristics which the news items of these last two sections often have, explain their lower than average results.



If we analyse the format quality, it is worth pointing out firstly that EP clocks up a total of 7 *lapsus clavis* in its news, which represents 2.77% of the total of news items analysed, a not insignificant percentage. Of these seven mistakes, two were made on the front page, another two in large format articles and the other three in secondary news stories. The most noticeable *lapsus clavis* belongs to the international news item which appeared on the 28th June 2005. It concerns an agency news story whose headline proclaimed that *An 'Apache' helicopter crashes near Bagdad*. In the body of the story, the text claims *...at least five dead people died yesterday...* Also related to formatting errors, although less serious, it should be noted that 86 news items (34.12% of the total) contain one or more lines of just one word or of merely one or various syllables.

Political news receives the biggest part of this newspaper's attention (42.23%), followed by international news (24.70%), economy (14.74%) and society with 9.56%. The main protagonists of the news are governments (21.91%) followed by state institutions (18.33) and economic bodies (11.95%). By gender, men figure in 80.8% of the EP news and women 5.20%. A further 7.20% of the news shows an equal presence between genders while the rest (6.80%) are difficult to classify from a gender viewpoint. It is in the politics section where women mostly appear (2.77% of the total news) and society (1.19% of the total news).

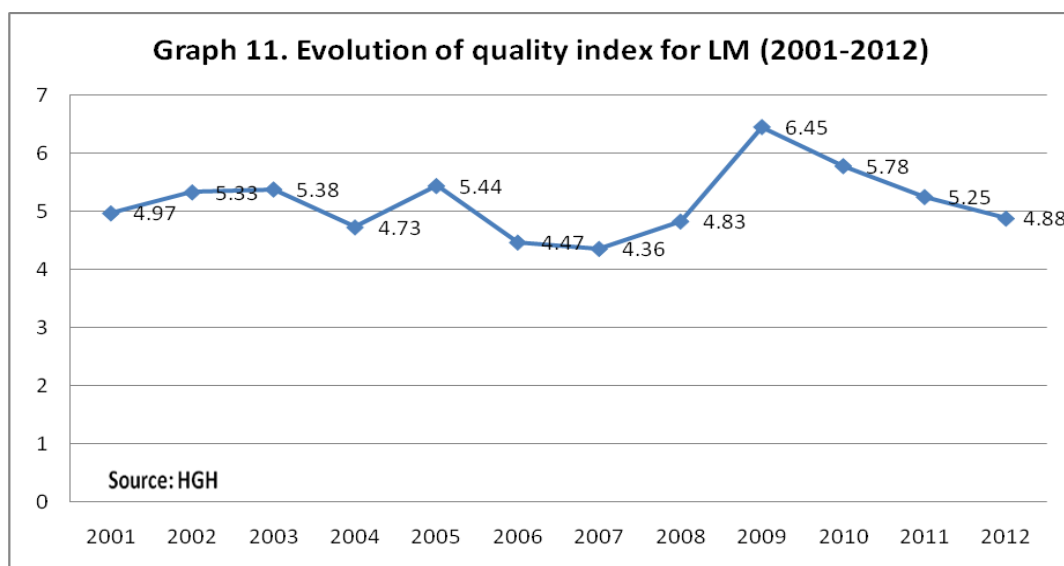
Finally, the scope of influence of the news shows a preponderance of items which have the Spanish State as their reference (60.56%) be they in a local, autonomic or state context. Asia is the second focus of attention in terms of scope of influence, with 10.76% of the news, followed by Europe with 9.57%, the USA with 6.77%, international institutions with 5.98%, other American countries (outside the USA) with 4.38% and Africa with 1.99%.

6.3. LM - *Le Monde*

LM was founded on the 19th November 1944 in Paris by Hubert Beuve-Méry on the request of General Charles de Gaulle. It is an evening paper of the centre-left which has made graphic humour one of its trademarks. LM introduced photography to its front page in January 2002. Natalie Nougayrède has been its director since the 27th February 2013. She is the first woman to occupy the post on this newspaper and one of only a few female directors which exist in the written press throughout the world.

Although at the beginning of the analysis period, LM was the top current affairs national newspaper, surpassing its competitor, the conservative *Le Figaro*, by 34,849 copies at the end of 2000, by the end of 2012 the situation had been reversed. On that date, the circulation of the conservative paper was leading LM by 35,190 copies (figures from the French OJD). During this period, both publications experienced significant drops in sales which fell 12.04% in the case of *Le Figaro* and 29.77% in the case of LM.

LM is in third place in the quality ranking of the European reference newspapers analysed, with an average score of 5.16 points. It even obtains scores lower than 5 in a number of years: 2001, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2012. Comparing them by six year periods, we can see a slight tendency towards improvement, going from 5.05 in the first period to 5.26 in the second.



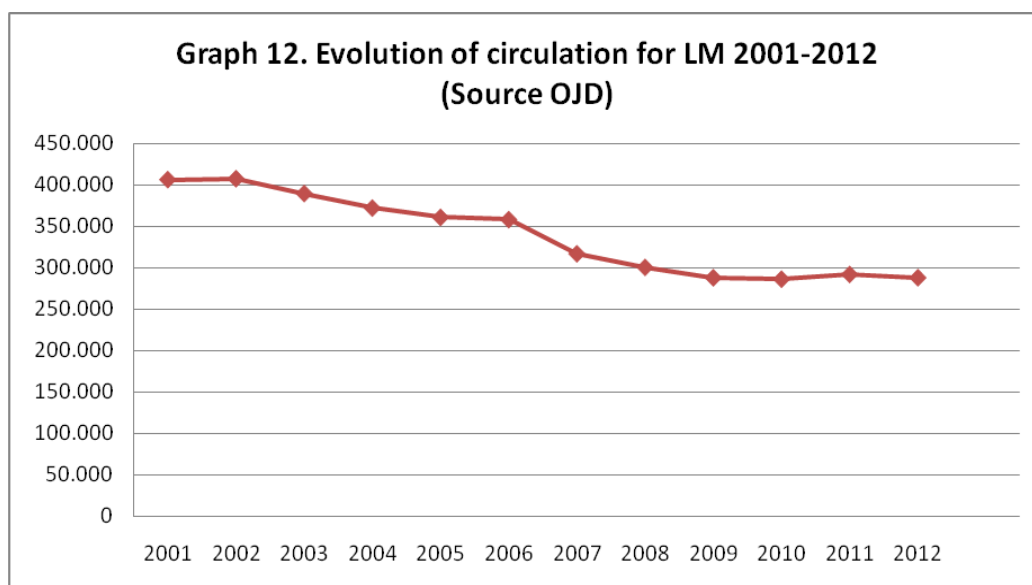
Analysing the final score, on the basis of selection, preparation and social contribution of the news, we can deduce that LM news satisfactorily passes the selection process (1.65 points from a total of 2.5), more narrowly passes the preparation process (2.65 from a possible total of 5) and is deficient as far as its social contribution is concerned (0.86 points out of 2.5).

In its strengths section, and within the selection process, we should draw attention to LM's dedication to events as opposed to statements (0.42 out of 0.5), its high level of topicality (0.36 out of 0.5) and instinct for subjects of general interest (0.43 out of 0.5). With regard to the preparation process, three

aspects are particularly noteworthy: the noticeable connection between the headline and the text (0.83 out of 1), the moderately satisfactory way in which it responds to the 5 Ws (0.56 out of 1), and the tightness of its journalistic style (0.81 out of 1).

The weaknesses area is especially important. In the selection process, this newspaper scores a poor result when it comes to adequately quoting its sources (0.20 out of 0.5). Within the preparation section, the LM should make a bigger effort to provide a larger number of different viewpoints in each article (0.36 out of 1) and attempt to make the complementary elements, such as photographs, graphics, infographies, etc., add more relevant information to the news event. We must not forget that the inclusion of photographs is something relatively new for this newspaper. As with the rest of the analysed newspapers, LM's weakest point is that relating to the social function which its news fulfils. It could be said that this paper neglects its duty to exercise a vigilant attitude towards power (0.17 out of 0.5), it does not worry too much about promoting social debate (0.20 out of 0.5), it ignores the fight against marginalisation (0.03 out of 0.5) and refuses to offer different cultural references other than its own (0.02 out of 0.5).

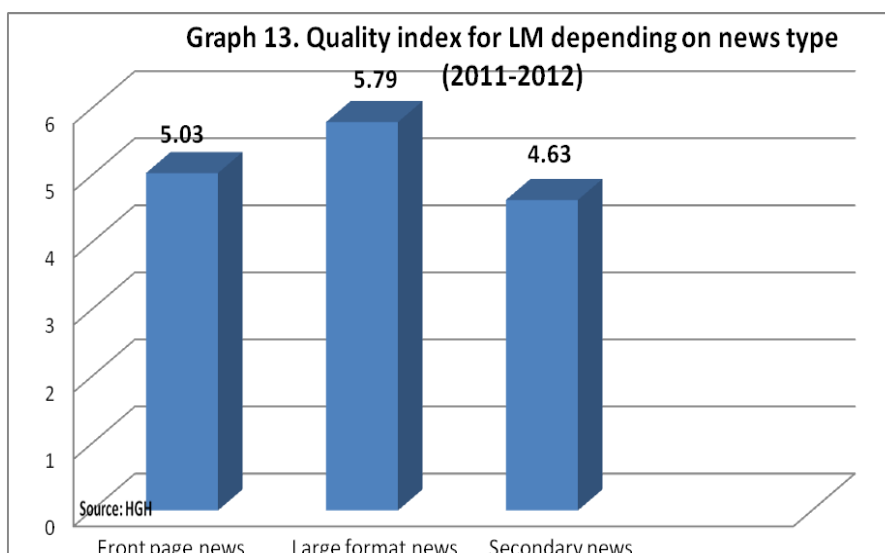
Sales fell considerably, practically throughout the whole twelve years analysed, except for 2002 and 2011. In this period LM lost almost one in every three printed edition readers. This is not true of the digital format, in which, as we know, all the newspapers in the world have registered a very significant exponential growth.



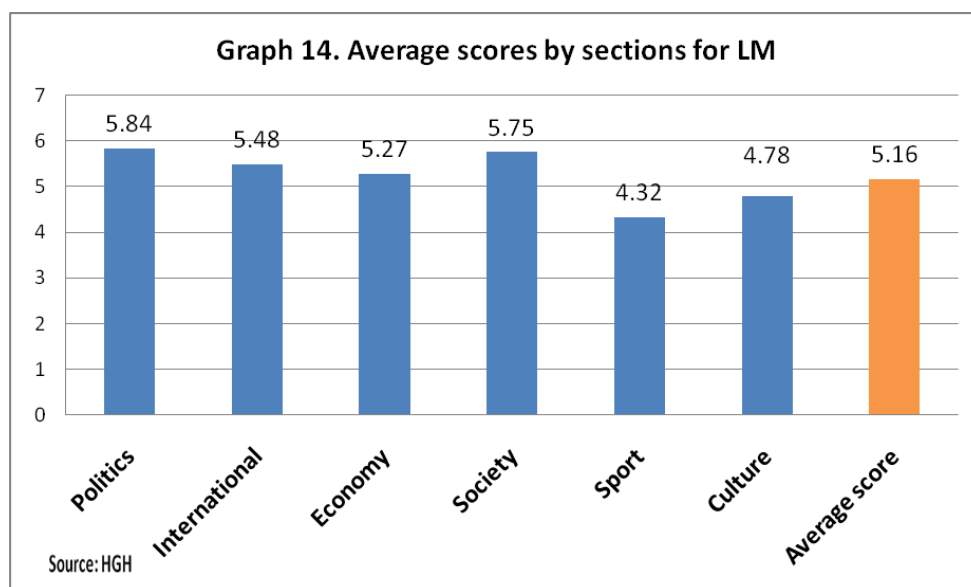
The comparison between quality index and circulation of the paper does not permit us to establish a direct relationship between the two variables. In fact, the downward trend in the circulation of the French press is a phenomenon prior to the digital explosion. Sales of the French press fell by 40% between 1972 and 2001, a period which is before the digital boom.

On the other hand, a detailed analysis of the quality indices depending on position and length of the news item, offers illuminating data. The larger format news items obtain, naturally, the best results. What is noticeable is the narrow index of the main news items and the low score of the secondary

ones. It is essential to point out that the most prominent front page news item is usually a summary of various articles and that since 2012 main news texts have been considerably reduced. This is, logically, reflected in the low score awarded to this item.



An analysis by sections reveals that the best scoring news items (and therefore the best prepared) correspond to the politics section, followed by society, international and economy. They are lower than the average LM score, with the cultural and sports news failing. As with other newspapers, this figure does not necessarily mean that the journalists on these sections do their job badly, but that the professional *licences* which these professional use when writing the news (and which are not usual in sections like politics, economy or international) exceed the parameters provided by the strict, standardised control methods used in this research. In addition to this, various cultural news items in this paper seemed to more closely resemble an advertising feature (designed at promoting records or shows) rather than the report of an event itself.



With regard to formatting errors, one piece of data is worth pointing out: 121 news items (52.83% of the possible total for this variable) contain, in the text, one or more lines of just one word, or simply of one or various syllables.

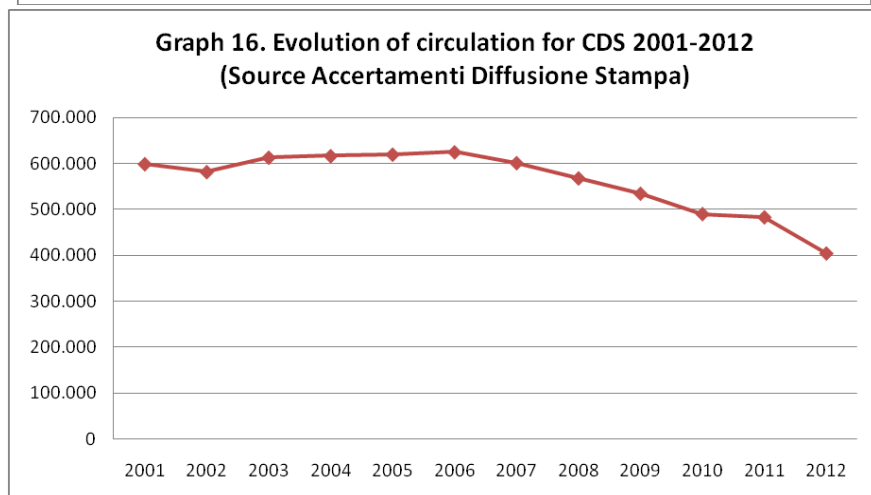
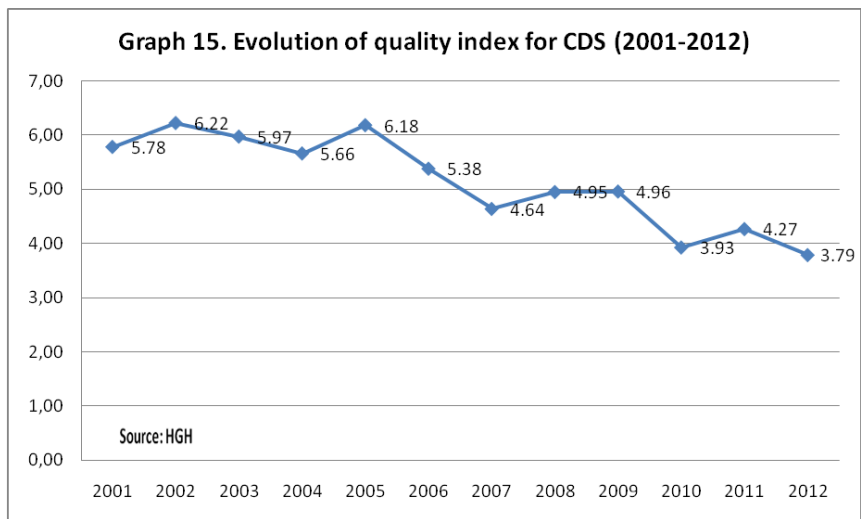
With reference to the diversity of news in LM, it should be mentioned that most of the news published in this newspaper belongs to the political sphere (34.20%) followed by international (28.14%), economy (12.99%), society (10.82%), sport (5.63%), other sections (4.33%) and culture (3.90%).

The main protagonists are people linked to governments (21.49%), state organisations (19.30%) or economic bodies (10.96%). Men are the main players in the great majority of news items (70.43%). Women only appear as protagonists in 5.22% of them. The timid presence of women as protagonists is mainly in the sections of: society (1.30%), politics (0.87%) and sport (0.87%). News referring to French issues were, logically in first place (57.81%), followed by European (15.21%), Asia [5] (9.14%). international organisations (7.84%), the USA (5.66%), Africa (2.6%) and other American countries (1.73%).

6.4. CDS - *Corriere della Sera*

The CDS was founded in 1876 in Milan. It owes its name to the evening edition characteristic of the 19th century. In the leader column of the first issue, it defines itself as "moderate-conservative" and underlines its national character. For this reason, it has been considered the newspaper of the Italian commercial and industrial bourgeoisie. The CDS stands out for its wide circulation at the beginning of the 21st century. Furthermore, in 2005 it modernised its format to make reading it easier (for example, it went from having nine columns to seven). As a consequence, circulation increased. However, coinciding with the serious political crisis in Italy, in the last six year period analysed, the CDS saw its circulation drop (it fell 32.57% with respect to 2001 and lost almost 80,000 copies from 2011 to 2012, according to Accertamenti Diffusione Stampa). It is not only its circulation which is affected, but also its news quality (from 2007 onwards it does not pass the quality index). In effect,

since 2006, the CDS front page news items have become considerably smaller, and, consequently, the quality of these news items has been reduced.

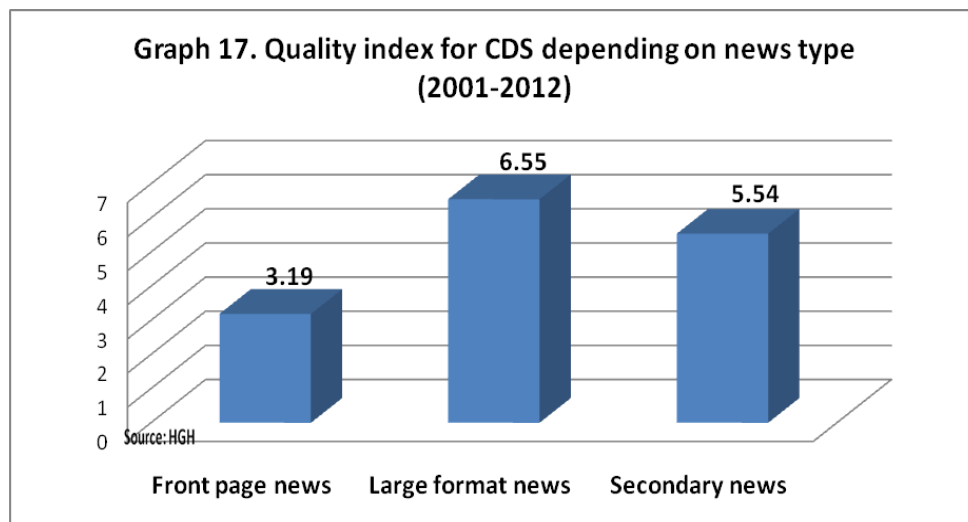


As a result of all this, the average score obtained by CDS news between 2011 and 2012 is 5.14 points, divided up as follows: 1.53 points (out of 2.5) in the selection process, 2.68 (out of five) in the preparation and 0.9 (out of 2.5) in terms of social contribution. Firstly, it must be said that, although the selection process is characterised by the use of qualified sources, however, the origin of the information is not always mentioned with the same clarity.

Secondly, CDS shows an interest in the very preparation of its news. In this sense, it takes care with the exactitude of the headline in relation to the text, and also with the journalistic language used. However, it does not appear to pay the same attention to the artistic side of its illustrations, which whilst adequately adding extra information to the news item, do not stand out from an artistic point of view.

Lastly, the social contribution of the news does not pass the quality index either, but *Corriere* is the newspaper which gets the highest score of the five we analysed (0.93 out of 2.5). CDS is especially characterised by the fact that its news contains elements which promote social debate. However,

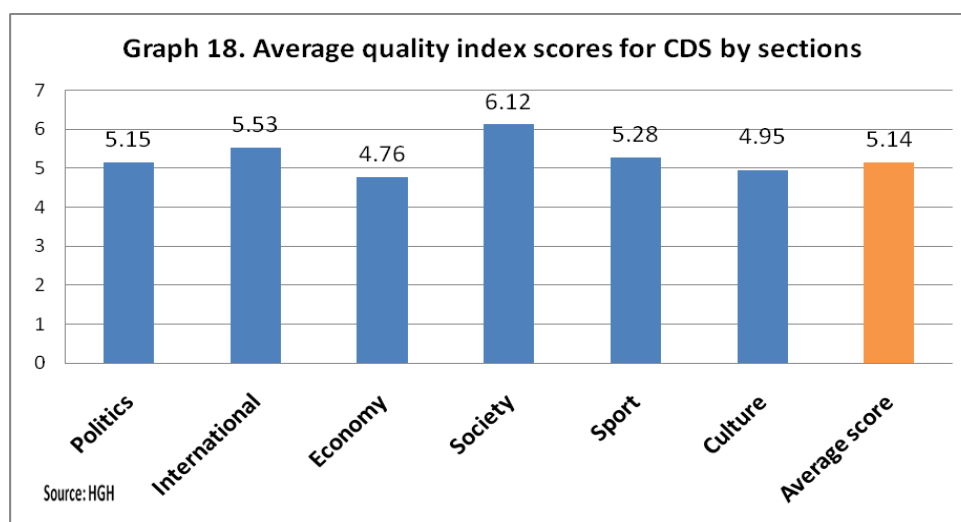
despite the marked national character of the paper, references to Italian traditions and other cultures are decidedly scarce.



Furthermore, the news quality of *Corriere della Sera* corresponds to the prominent position of its main news items (6.55 points). In this sense, the news in this paper differs by almost a point depending on whether they are large format news items or secondary ones. However, the reduction in the size of the front page articles from 2006 has undermined their quality.

The section concerning format quality shows that CDS fulfils certain design rules, especially those referring to the space occupied by the headline, where practically no space is left blank. Similarly, the paper hardly ever commits *lapsus clavis* (around 1% of the news), which once again shows the care taken with formatting by this publication. Despite this carefulness, almost half of the news items contain paragraphs with a line or other of one word or, even one syllable.

The politics section is the trademark of *Corriere*, given that it forms 35.16% of the news. However, it does not get the highest score in quality (it is below the paper's average), as neither does the economic news. Effectively, this is due mainly to the reduction in front page space for the most important news, which is frequently included in the politics, international and economy sections. In this sense, it is worth noting that the society section surpasses the quality average of the paper by nearly one point.



Given the considerable space which CDS dedicates to political news, the government and political parties are the protagonists of most of the news published (32.43% and 9.19%), being found especially on the front page. Thus, economic bodies only figure prominently in half of the economic news items. Conversely, cultural bodies are the protagonists of their section, as they are articles which do not appear on the front page of the paper. Furthermore, what stands out is that CDS triples the number of news items in which gender does not appear (16.76%), with respect to those where women are the protagonists (5.41%) or those with equal presence of men and women (4.32%). Finally, the scope of influence of the news published in the CDS is the Italian State in 53.88% of cases. It is worth mentioning that the quantity of news about the European Union and its member states (11.41%) is somewhat greater than that about Asia (9.60%). However, news with an influence in Asia appears mostly on the front page, whilst European news appears mainly in a secondary context.

6.5. FT - *Financial Times*

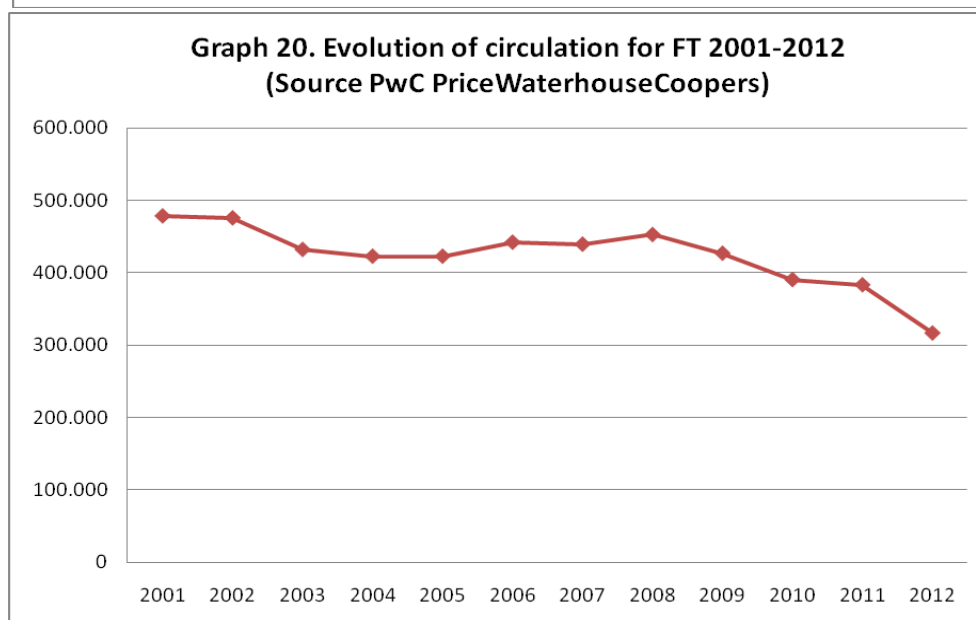
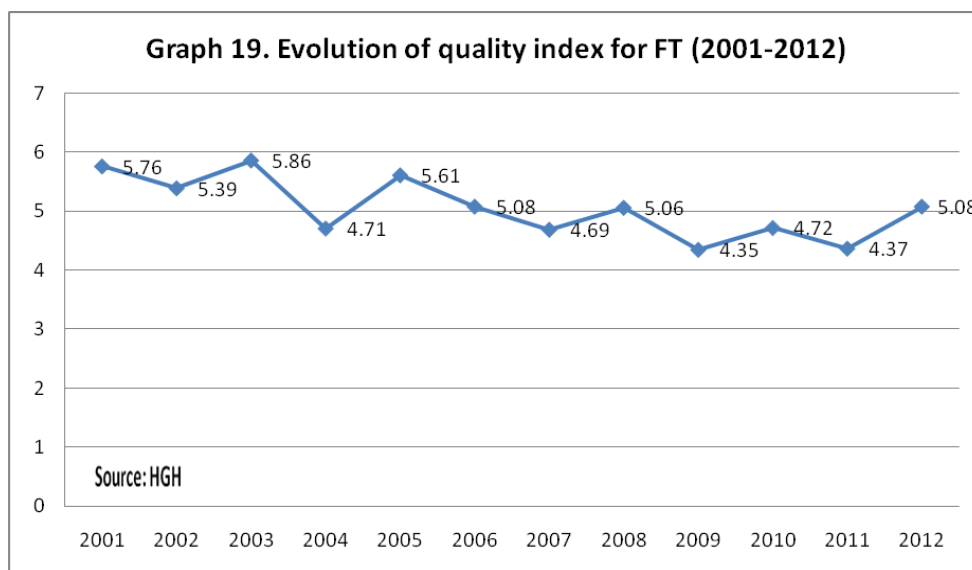
FT was born in London in February of 1888. Consequently, in 2013 it has celebrated its 125th anniversary. Since 1957 it has been owned by the publishing house Pearson PLC, and is considered to be one of the most important financial newspapers in the world. Since its creation, the newspaper has defined itself as a supplier of financial information with the aim of becoming a reference for a very specific sector: the financial community based in the City in London.

From the 1970s the FT experienced an international expansion in the form of five further editions to add to the original British one. First came the German edition, to serve the people of continental Europe, and later those aimed at the USA, Asia and the Near East. The acceptance of English as the international language of business, and the development of the world economy according to parameters limited less and less by state borders, contribute to the newspaper's take-off in a symbiotic relationship. Its broadsheet format, bigger than the continental standard, progressively abandoned by the rest of British newspapers, and its salmon coloured pages, constitute the formal paradigm of a contrasted, thorough and reference financial press.

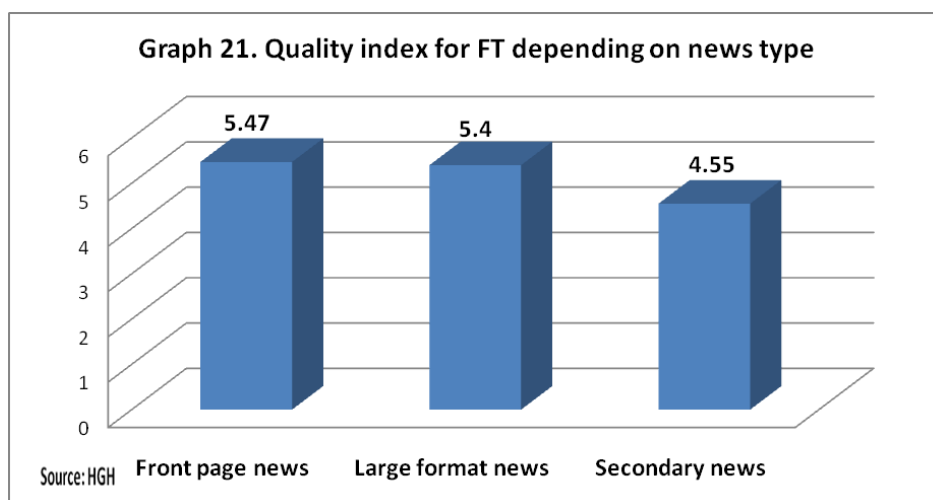
FT has the international recognition of the financial sector, and its news, opinion and analysis columns are a motor for the economic and political elite in the whole of the western world [6]. However, this fact does not bear a clear relationship with the evolution of the quality index monitored (graph 19). In this respect, it has to be said that whilst the formal quality standards of the headlines could be considered excellent, other elements taken into account, such as the promotion of public debate, the inclusion of women as protagonists in current affairs or the questioning of established power, do not appear in the sample of analysed news. In fact, the social contribution index calculated in the sample is 0.31, the lowest of the analysed papers by a considerable margin (see graph 2). Similarly, in many cases, it does not specify the nature of its sources as they are leaks or, given the global nature of the reported events, it does not indicate the place of origin of the news, or this is taken for granted without explicitly stating it. All these practices are penalised in the calculation of the quality index, which explains the divergence between the perceived prestige and the results of this research.

As regards circulation, the FT currently has an estimated 2.2 million readers worldwide [7]. The average circulation of all the editions it publishes as a whole, reached 316,493 copies in December 2012, 88,000 of which correspond to the British edition¹. However, and even though the extension of the publication is growing, this is thanks to access to the digital edition: in July 2012, the newspaper announced that there were as many subscriptions to ft.com as there were sales of printed copies, totalling around 600,000. Graph 20 illustrates how the number of printed copies has gradually decreased over a decade.

Ft.com first appeared in May 1995, and since then has undergone several modifications until becoming one of the few successful examples today of a paywall in the daily press. Although ft.com began by financing itself through advertising, its subscription service started in 2002, and works today on the premise that it allows the free consultation of a set number of articles before payment is required. Similarly, FT has adapted its format for reading on *smartphones* and tablets, which constitute an important route for the consumption of its articles. Within a context of general decrease, the total circulation of the newspaper (printed copies plus digital subscriptions) was, in 2012, 28% higher than five years previously. This increase does not necessarily go hand in hand with a rise in business profits but it means, in any case, an attempt to adapt to a different financing pattern based much more on income from subscriptions rather than from advertising investment [8].



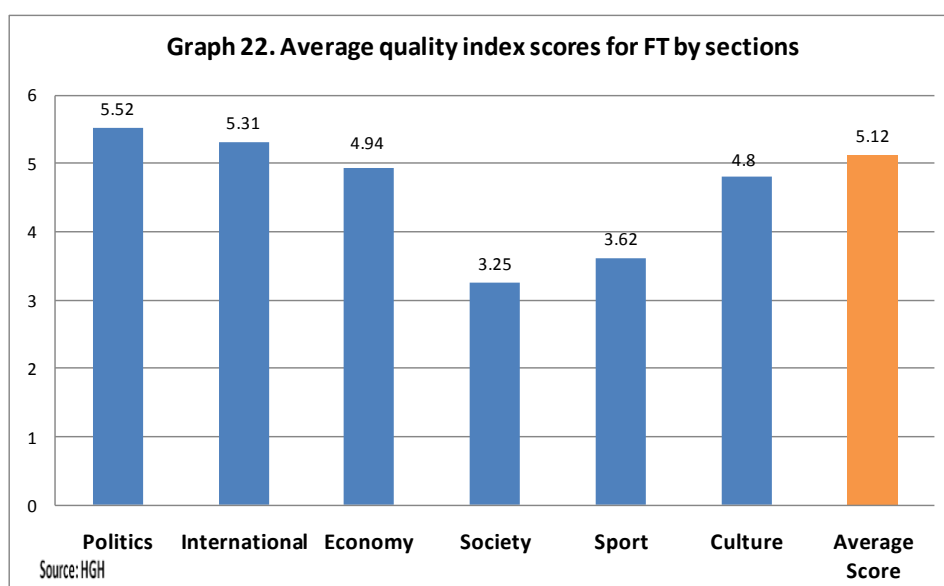
Given the special physical layout of the FT news, not all the main stories which appear on the front page are later developed inside the paper. The size of the pages permits a relatively in-depth presentation of the news, so it is not further developed on the inside pages. Similarly, there is a certain irregularity in the distribution of content by sections. Therefore, there is not a sports section every day, and the cultural section reflects a pattern in which, rather than informative or promotional pieces there are ‘what’s on’, snippets or theatre reviews. In any case, as can be seen in graph 21, the result in the calculation of the quality index is quite similar for front page news stories, large format and secondary ones.



As we would expect, news of a financial nature is the main protagonist. 46.10% of the analysed pieces belong to this sphere. Furthermore, the content analysis of political (25.32%) and international news (18.18%) reveals that, although they are assigned to other sections, these items also focus ostensibly on the economic consequences or derivations of the reported events.

By sections, the highest scores correspond to the international and politics sections which surpass this newspaper's average. This is not so with the economy section (4.94) and much less so for society (3.25), sport (3.62) and culture (4.8), in the last three cases, probably due to the fact that these pieces are usually briefer and do not have accompanying graphics.

Among the front page news stories, there is only one corresponding to the sphere of society; and none from the sport or culture sections. In 48.32% of the news items, the protagonists are economic bodies. Social organisations or citizens do not figure as the protagonists of the news. Men appear as protagonists in 70.47% of the news and women 3.36%; neutral bodies in this respect, such as the IMF, the UN or the EU, the remaining 21.48%.



If we analyse format quality, there are no errors worthy of mention. However, one of the most significant elements which does appear is that related to the attribution and character of the sources. Thus, leaked information usually comes from *people familiar with*, an expression used on numerous occasions. Paradoxically, the news items which are *punished* in the calculation of the quality index for not naming the source, are, probably those most valued by the specialised reader, interested in exclusive and strategically valuable news stories which are backed up by the credibility attributed at length to the paper. What in other circumstances could be considered rumours, are for the FT, prime examples of added value. Premised on the accumulated authority of this newspaper, normally interpretative headlines are justified, as is the relatively scant presence of a literal reproduction of the protagonists' statements.

With regard to the scope of influence, the existent difficulties of geographically assigning many of the news stories, need to be pointed out. Due to the openly international vocation of the FT, many items are written in more than one place and the supposed implications of the reported events go beyond the boundaries of one specific area, and, in fact, could be considered as relocated. However, if we had to attribute one scope of influence, it is worth noting that in 76% of cases this is national. FT is a newspaper which publishes and writes for the world, but above all for the United Kingdom, and not for society as a whole, but for that part especially interested in economic and financial current affairs understood as a global reality.

7. Conclusions

The five major European reference newspapers pass the quality test which they have been subjected to in this research; particularly as far as format quality is concerned. However, the quality index of their content only just passes the required minimum (5.39 points). The average index shows a moderate downtrend which is not applicable to all the papers. Therefore, whilst FAZ and LM show a trend towards improvement, EP remains stable and FT and CDS noticeably lower their scores. In the case of CDS, this score is largely attributable to the reduced size of its front page news stories during the second six year period analysed.

Whilst the average quality index of these five publications dropped by 6.12% in 2012 with respect to 2001, the sales of these papers fell by 27.42%. It is not possible, therefore, to extract one single cause-effect relationship between the two figures. The co-existence of another series of phenomena such as the growth of electronic editions, the economic and financial crisis following the crash of 2008, the fall in advertising investment and the incapability of the press to adapt to new times are, among other factors, elements which help to explain this drop in sales.

All the analysed newspapers appear to have forgotten about the social function which has historically been attributed to journalism as the guardian of citizens' interests. This is reflected in the poor results which all of them obtain in the section "social contribution of the news". This behaviour is especially noteworthy within a context marked by the systemic crisis which western societies are living and which is reflected in the paradigmatic changes which the press on a world scale is facing.

This research shows that it is the large format news stories which obtain the best quality scores. This contrasts with the current tendency to *slim down* the content of news items, largely induced by the premises of immediacy and speed established in all newspaper offices.

The scores registered by news related to sport, culture and, in some cases society (FAZ and FT), are the lowest for these papers. This is doubtlessly due to the greater margin of freedom which the journalists in these sections have when preparing their stories and which contrasts with the strict criteria used in this research.

All the newspapers we analysed practically ignore women in their news items. Only 4.61% of the items analysed (1,137) show women as the main protagonists of events. This data is especially striking considering that during the analysis period, the incorporation of women into the public sphere increased considerably.

Considering the increasing importance which electronic editions of all newspapers are acquiring, looking to the future, a rigorous analysis of *online* news quality is needed. This need is now more necessary than ever in a context in which the major communication groups appear to be more concerned about the profitability of their electronic editions, than about the their news quality.

* This work forms part of a research project ([CSO 2011-23237](#)) financed by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (MICINN) titled *Evolution of the assessed News Quality in European reference media (2000-2014)*. The work has been carried out by the research group HGH (The Media, Society and Education in the Basque language) officially recognised (GIU 11/04) by the UPV/ EHU University of the Basque Country, which also collaborates financially in the project.

* In addition to the authors of this work, the HGH research group would like to underline the special collaboration in this study of Estefanía Jiménez, lecturer of Audiovisual creative forms. Department of Audiovisual Communication and Advertising. Member of the Research Group HGH. 48940. Leioa. Bizkaia; Ludivine Thuverez, lecturer at the University of Poitiers (Faculty of Humanities and Languages), and the pre-doctoral researcher, Ilaria di Bonito, of the Department of Communication of the University Pompeu Fabra of Barcelona (UPF).

8. Notes

¹ *Lapsus clavis* is taken to be those errors made inadvertently by the journalist which, although not grammatical, make understanding difficult.

² The standard deviation was calculated based on the formula developed by Roger D. Wimmer and Joseph R. Dominick (1983:174).

³ The loss experienced by CDS during the second six years is due to the low scored obtained by its main news items from 2007. Its front page layout change led to shorter texts which, consequently, obtained lower results. A more detailed explanation appears in the corresponding section for this paper.

⁴ The sixth W is HoW.

⁵ To be exact, LM shows an interest in, fundamentally, news from Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel and Palestine and to a lesser extent China, Japan, etc.

⁶ <http://www.infobae.com/notas/nota.php?Idx=196573&idxSeccion=0>

⁷ According to the audit carried out by PriceWaterhouseCoopers in November 2011.

⁸ <http://www.abc.org.uk/Certificates/18234567.pdf>. Data from October 2012.

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