

How to cite this article in bibliographies / References

D Rivera Rogel, MI Punín Larrea, D Calva Cabrera (2013): “Agenda setting in Ecuadorian media. Daily: *El Universo*, *El Mercurio*, *El Comercio* and *El Telégrafo*”, at *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 68. La Laguna (Tenerife): Universidad de La Laguna, pages 529 to 543 retrieved on ___ de ___th of ____ of 2_____, from
DOI: [10.4185/RLCS-2013-988](https://doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-2013-988)

Agenda setting in the Ecuadorian press: *El Universo*, *El Mercurio*, *El Comercio* and *El Telégrafo*

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Abstract

[EN] **Introduction:** This study examines the ideology informing the agenda setting of Ecuador’s four major newspapers: *El Universo*, *El Telégrafo*, *El Comercio* and *El Mercurio*. **Methods:** This study is based on the analysis of nine aspects of the content published from 16 April to 18 May, 2012, by Ecuador’s five major newspapers. **Results:** In the sample of newspapers, public institutions are the main sources of information; the daily routines do not favour investigative journalism; and short news stories are the most predominant form of journalism. **Discussion:** The lack of investigative journalism is remarkable in the sample of newspapers. Journalists often prefer to follow daily routines with the help of public organisations, which make it easier for them to find newsworthy events. **Conclusions:** Ecuador’s print media are constantly being monitored to determine their contribution to journalism. The work of news media outlets is usually restricted by particular interests.

Keywords

[EN] *Agenda setting*; print media; investigative journalism; origin of information; news structure.

Contents

[EN] 1. Introduction 2. The agenda setting. 3. Print media in Ecuador. 3.1. Case studies. 4. Methods. 4.1. Objective. 4.2. Hypothesis. 4.3. Research technique. 4.4. Areas of analysis. 4.5. Sample design.

5. Results. 5.1. The origin of information. 5.2. Investigative journalism. 5.3. News structure and format. 6. Conclusions. 7. List of references. 8. Notes.

Translation by **PM Cahen** (Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja) and CA Martínez Arcos (Universidad Autónoma de Tamaulipas)

1. Introduction

“The need for news is similar to that of food, shelter and clothing. This interest has led to a concern about what others say, or think” (Benítez, 2000: 33) (*non-official translation*). Here, lies the importance of knowing the factors that influence journalistic themes.

The agenda setting theory states that the mass media have a strong influence on society since they determine which news items are of greater informative interest, how much space these news items should occupy, and for how long they will remain to be important.

“Studies about mass communication confirm that the media has significant effects on society, even though there has recently been a consensus on the nature and the scope of such effects” (Rubio, 2009) (*non-official translation*).

The relevance of this theory lies in its ability to measure the capacity of the media to determine the category of importance of each piece of information that is going to be disseminated, in order to reach larger audiences and achieve greater impact and advertising revenue. In the same way that the media select what will be published, they also decide which types of news stories will *not* be published, depending on their economic, moral, political, ideological interests, or their journalistic importance.

The theory of the agenda setting states that the *media agenda*, which is comprised of the news items disseminated by the media, will have an influence on a specific society. Furthermore, the media agenda establishes the impact of the press —both printed and online—, monitors the information disseminated by the different media and examines the reception of this information. This theory also studies how the news media influence society and public opinion. Through the agenda setting the press becomes more than a mere provider of information or opinion articles. The press reaches audiences with different types of ideologies and interests, all of which are influenced by journalists, columnists and press editors. “La teoría de la agenda-setting se ha convertido en un mapa que da cuenta, con todo lujo de detalles, de la agenda mediática y de sus efectos” (McCombs, 2006:13). (*non-official translation*).

The agenda setting is defined as “the capacity of the mass media to select and highlight certain themes over others, and in doing so to make the public to perceive the highlighted themes as being important” (McCombs; Maxwell and Shaw, 1972: 36). “Within the dominant tradition of the media effects studies there exists an approach known as ‘agenda setting’ or the creation of the agenda. This field of research began in the early seventies with the work of McCombs and Shaw (1972)” (McCombs, Maxwell and Shaw, 1972: 176-187), which constitutes the theoretical framework of this study.

Public opinion is the symbolic key to govern in a democracy. It is comprised of opinions such as expressed judgments, which may be verbal or behavioral, or which may be either against or in favor

of various opinions. They are based on rational and/or emotional predispositions, which, in the main, remain implicit. (Sampedro, 2000: 20) (*non-official translation*).

This theory highlights the importance of the media and remarks that the information they provide is not always obtained from the main sources and that there is information that sometimes they hide. The news media decide what information to disseminate or hide, and this power determines, greatly, the information that the mainstream media disseminate.

Recent agenda setting studies are based on the use of content analysis, surveys and comparative analyses. These methods allow the identification of the parameters used by the media to select and organise their agenda. Recent studies have focused on studying “the effects of the messages on the public and have used surveys and content analysis as powerful resources; as they tend to contrast the relation between the media agenda and the issues that the public consider important” (non-official translation of Cervantes, 2001: 52). So, in general terms, the media have the task of providing objective contents that include the issues that matter and engage the majority of the audience.

In addition, our study aims to identify the daily *routines* of the print media in order to understand the guidelines followed by journalists to establish the agenda setting. Based on the agenda setting theory, this study focuses on evaluating the degree of investigative journalism carried out by the sample of newspapers under study. We argue that the main public institutions become the main sources of information for the news media and provide the main news format used by the media.

This article is part of the national research project titled “Analysis of the agenda setting in Ecuador”, which had the participation of 15 professors/researchers and 66 students of the Social Communication (Open and Distance Education System) of the *Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja*. This research was carried out throughout 2012. The data was collected between April and May, while the analysis and presentation of results were carried out in the following months.

2. The agenda setting

Antonia González comments on the origin of the agenda setting and affirms that: “...it all forms part of a theory that commenced at the end of the 60s within the positivist framework of North American “Communications Research”, which has become the main theory for explaining the influence of communications media on forming public opinion” (González, 2000: 1) (*non-official translation*).

The concept of agenda setting refers to the list of topics that are published in the media based on their ideas of what is of general interest. This study of the agenda setting is based on the importance that media gives to the public agenda and its impact on the setting of the media agenda. The public opinion thus constitutes one of the core aims of the agenda setting because of its influence on the public agenda. As Miralles points out:

“... no longer politicians or journalists represent the public opinion: this is now configured as an autonomous sector, which separate itself from journalism and politics through the use of surveys, which not always reflected it. This is precisely one of the great challenges faced by contemporary journalism: to recognise the autonomy of the sphere of the public opinion...” (Miralles, 2007: 47) (*non-official translation*).

Thanks to public opinion, however, media companies can determine the themes that will be given priority in a given society. "...the media do not define the opinion of the public; neither can they control the public according to their wishes. However, they can determine the subjects that are socially important" (Romero, 2006: 52) (*non-official translation*). Although the media should strive to provide objective information to the audience, it can betray its original responsibility and intentionally distort the truth. That is why the media's informative performance becomes even more important.

"... the media will have the power of precisely defining the agenda of the reader or the spectator; every time we read a newspaper or watch newscasts, it is as if the media were saying: «Today, we are going to talk about X», thereby pointing out the topics which we need to know about, and those which we need to form an opinion about" (Boni, 2008:115) (*non-official translation*).

Raquel Rodríguez (2004: 29-32) states that the agenda is comprised of the following elements:

- **Topic:** social problem, act or event of public interest.
- **Relevance:** importance of the topic.
- **Familiar or closely related topics—and topics that are unknown or not closely related:** aspects related to the direct relevance of the topic to the public—not only in the geographical field, but also in relation to how it (the theme) relates to the event.
-

Another important thing to remark is that the news items that are produced are not always published. Many news stories are simply dismissed. In this regard, López (1995: 46-48) has described the several steps that should be followed to select a news item:

- **Selection:** As mentioned, many events can become news stories but in order to select which ones are newsworthy and should be published it is essential to determine which events clearly fulfil the requirements to be considered 'news', like having clear information sources, being current and being relevant, among others.
- **Inclusion:** This part of the process will only consider news that are relevant and the media considers suitable to be published, to be included as part of the news content of a TV news programme or a newspaper.
- **Exclusion:** refers to the news items that were not included because of their lack of relevance or because the media company decided so.
- **Hierarchy:** this refers to the order in which news items are published based on their public relevance. However, a news item may be important simply because it is a 'news bulletin'. The determining factors in this part of the process are the investigative journalism involved in the production of the news item and the production quality.

Despite the process followed by the media to formulate journalistic topics, there are other factors that influence this process, too. "The press has many different guises—among them are: media as industry, media as business, media as a form of providing information and entertainment, media as a service, and media as a mechanism of political influence" (Sohr, 1998: 12) (*non-official translation*). Bearing in mind these characteristics, it could be inferred that the media are often coerced to satisfy the interests of various interest groups.

3. Print media in Ecuador

The origins of journalism in Ecuador date back to the launch of some prestigious national newspapers. The first newspaper in Ecuador, and the third in Latin America, was *Primicias de la Cultura de Quito*, “... it was a newspaper that was exclusively literary. It was edited at Raimundo Salazar Publishers—with express permission from the Head of Government” (Ceriola, 1909: 6) (*non-official translation*), launched in 5 January 1792, which became the Ecuadorian Journalists’ Day. This newspaper is known for its emphasis on justice and liberty and for being the first newspaper to be printed in the first printing press brought to Ecuador, to Ambato in 1755 to be precise [1].

Beginning with *Primicias*, there are many newspapers that have been in circulation until the present date. It is estimated that up until the XX century, there existed approximately 1,000 types of media (Rolando, 1920), afterwards many newspapers were launched but faced constant difficulties because the government tried to silence them. Ever since, the debate on free speech has become more and more important. “...the Ecuadorian man always trembled when it came to fighting for his trampled dignity” (Garcia, 1979) (*non-official translation*).

Table 1: Classification of Ecuadorian daily newspapers (2012)

Nº	NAME	HEADQUARTERS	COVERAGE	CONTENT TYPE
1	<i>El Heraldo</i>	Ambato	Provincial	General information
2	<i>Portada</i>	Azogues	Provincial	General information
3	<i>El Tiempo</i>	Cuenca	Regional	General information
4	<i>El Mercurio</i>	Cuenca	National	General information
5	<i>La Tarde</i>	Cuenca	Local	General information
6	<i>El Telégrafo</i>	Guayaquil	National	General information
7	<i>El Universo</i>	Guayaquil	National	General information
8	<i>Extra</i>	Guayaquil	National	Tabloid
9	<i>Súper</i>	Guayaquil	National	Tabloid
10	<i>Expreso</i>	Guayaquil	National	General information
11	<i>PP El Verdadero</i>	Guayaquil	National	General information
12	<i>Metro</i>	Guayaquil, Quito	Local	General information
13	<i>Diario El Norte</i>	Ibarra	Regional	General information
14	<i>La Verdad</i>	Ibarra	Provincial	General information
15	<i>La Gaceta</i>	Latacunga	Provincial	General information
16	<i>Crónica de la Tarde</i>	Loja	Provincial	General information
17	<i>Diario Centinela</i>	Loja	Provincial	General information
18	<i>Diario Correo</i>	Machala	Regional	General information
19	<i>Opinión</i>	Machala	Provincial	General information
20	<i>La Marea</i>	Manta	Local	Tabloid
21	<i>El Mercurio</i>	Manta	Provincial	General information
22	<i>La Verdad</i>	Milagro	Local	Tabloid
23	<i>El Diario</i>	Portoviejo	Provincial	General information
24	<i>La Hora</i>	Quito	National with regional editions in 12 provincial districts.	General information
25	<i>Hoy</i>	Quito	National	General information
26	<i>Últimas Noticias</i>	Quito	Local	General information
27	<i>El Comercio</i>	Quito	National	General information
28	<i>La Prensa</i>	Riobamba	Provincial	General information
29	<i>Los Andes</i>	Riobamba	Regional	General information
30	<i>Centro</i>	Santo Domingo	Provincial	Tabloid

Source: Authors' own creation based on data taken from the Ecuadorian Association of Newspaper Editors, Media Guide 2009-2010 and websites of newspapers.

3.1. Case studies

According to Efrén Avíles, *El Telégrafo* newspaper [2] is considered “the voice of the national press”. *El Telégrafo*, which was founded by Don Juan Morrillo Miró, was first published in February 1884, when it became the first newspaper in the country to use telegraph technology -hence its name [3].

El Comercio newspaper was launched in Quito, the capital of Ecuador on 1 January, 1906, by Carlos Mantilla Jacomé. This newspaper company later published some magazines, like *Familia*, *Carburando*, *As Deportivo*, *Educación*, *La Pandilla*, *Líderes*, *Últimas Noticias*, and launched several radio stations like *Radio Platinum* and *Radio Quito* [4].

El Universo newspaper was founded on 16 September, 1921, by Ismael Pérez Pazmiño [5]. Although it has the highest number of readers, it has often faced the rejection of Rafael Correa, the President of Ecuador, who took legal action against it for an editorial piece written on 30 September 2010[6].

The fourth newspaper that we studied was *El Mercurio*, which was launched on 22 October, 1924[7].

4. Methods

4.1. Objectives

The study examines the ideology that informs the agenda setting of four different Ecuadorian newspapers and in particular their positions towards the practice of investigative journalism, their main sources or producers of information, and the format and characteristics of their published news.

4.2. Hypothesis

In addition to the previous objectives, this study was guided by the following hypotheses:

1. Investigative journalism is part of the daily routines involved in the agenda setting.
2. The main producers of news in Ecuador are public organisations, which greatly influence the daily media agenda.
3. News with traditional journalistic formats, i.e. those focused on explaining the news events, are the most widely used in the Ecuadorian press.

4.3. Research technique

Content analysis was used to identify and classify the news items. This technique is frequently used to analyse journalism texts. According to Krippendorff (1997: 28), “content analysis is a research technique that aims to formulate, based on certain data, valid and reproducible inferences that can be applied to their context”. This will allow us to make deductions about the sample of newspapers. We will use this technique to examine newspaper articles, which are treated as units of analysis [8], and thus obtain quantitative results about certain variables [9].

The sample of analysis corresponds to the all the contents published by the four newspapers during five non-consecutive days: Monday 16 April, Tuesday 24 April, Wednesday 2 May, Thursday 10

May, and Friday 18 May. We believed that this sample selection method provided validity and credibility to our work, and ensured that the data could be verified and used for future research.

4.4. Areas of analysis

The analysis was guided by a list created by the aforementioned research group. The list of analysis consists of nine sections:

1. Identification
2. Origin of information
3. Nature of information sources and news protagonists
4. Identification of information protagonists
5. Structure of information and format of news
6. News content treatment
7. Focus
8. Information inequality
9. Values

This list of elements enabled us to determine the basis of the Ecuadorian mass media to organise news content. This article presents the results regarding only the following two sections: 1) origin of information and 2) structure of information and format of news, which suffice to meet the aforementioned objectives.

Table 2: Protocol of content analysis

VARIABLES	VALUES
Origin of Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public organisations • Private organisations • NGOs • Social corporations • Political parties • Unions • Others <p>News items is a result of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investigative journalism • Production routines • Production routines and some investigative journalism • News agencies • Unknown origin
Structure of information and news format	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditional or standard news article • Exclusive-coverage news • Special-coverage news • News story with interview • Multiple foci news • Brief news • Topic of the day • Chronological news • Data-based news • Spontaneous news • Smoke screen news • Fake news • Survey news • Short-relevance news story • Long-relevance news story • Intermittent-relevance news • Eclipsing news

Source: Authors' own creation. Note: The above terms reflect the media types used in Ecuador.

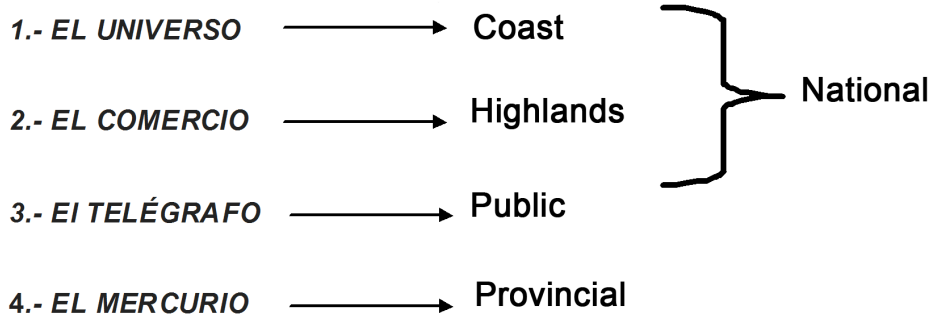
The previous classification of 'structure of information and news format, typical of the Ecuadorian press, is briefly described as by Soengas (2003: 146-166):

- **Traditional or standard news:** this type of news has an introduction, body and conclusion, and answers the following questions: Who? What? When? and Why?
- **Exclusive-coverage news:** news with remarkable journalistic value; they are the first news that appear before the full media coverage of the event.
- **Special-coverage news:** refer to news stories that require important media coverage.
- **News with interviews:** this includes interviews with individuals, who can be the information source or the news protagonist.
- **Multiple foci news:** this genre differs from the rest in that the events take place in different places.

- **Brief news:** these are short news items.
- **Topic of the day:** this is the most important theme of the newspaper edition; it has more coverage than other events; it appears on the front page and is elaborated in more details.
- **Chronological news:** when the events are narrated in chronological order.
- **Data-based news:** news stories where numerical figures are the protagonist; they are generally related to financial topics.
- **Spontaneous news:** Spontaneous news motivated by natural phenomena.
- **Smoke screen news:** news created to modify or manipulate the public opinion; they are used to hide reality or create a specific type of public reaction.
- **Fake news:** news that transmits uncorroborated facts, or manipulated data to distort the truth.
- **Survey news:** These are used to create a specific type of reaction in people, which is later evaluated; a news item with a specific goal.
- **Short-relevance news:** they have a short or specific duration and are not continuous.
- **Long-relevance news:** they are characterised by continuity and relevance.
- **Intermittent-relevance news:** these types of news items are current and maintain their relevance although they may not always be spoken about.
- **Eclipsing news:** these are extraordinary events that modify the established agenda—and eclipse the rest of the news stories.

4.5. Sample design

The whole universe of print media in Ecuador is comprised by 30 newspapers. Our sample selection focused on including the 4 newspapers with the wider dissemination in the most populated areas in Ecuador (such as in the highlands and the coast). The selected newspapers are presented below. The first three are national newspapers and the last one is regional. The inclusion of the provincial newspaper was motivated by its trajectory and importance.



This sample selection aims to provide comparable results due to the characteristics of each newspaper.

5. Results

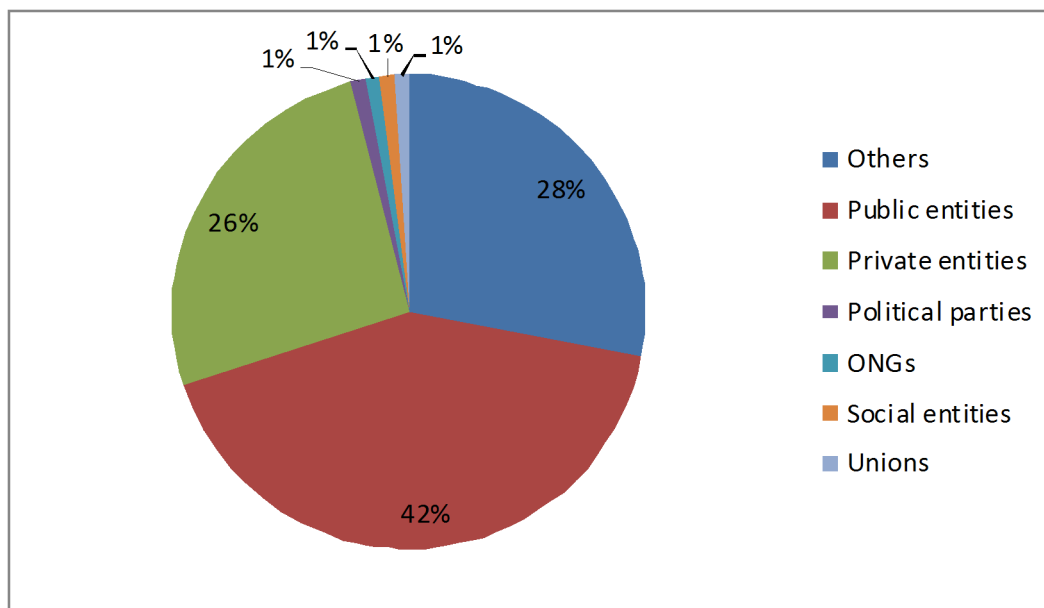
From this sample of newspapers a total of 1,332 news items or units of analysis were selected. Of these news items, 341 (25.6%) were obtained from *El Universo*; 235 (17.6%) from *El Mercurio*; 228 (17.1%) from *El Telegrafo*; and 528 (39.7%) from *El Comercio*.

5.1. The origin of information

This section aims to identify the main producers of information, i.e. the institutions that generate news or manage to turn their events into relevant news for certain groups.

The following figure shows that the public organisations or entities are the main news providers for the sample of newspapers (with 42%). The second most important news provider is the category ‘others’ (28%), which comprises the individuals and institutions that are not included in the categories “public” or “private” institutions; “political parties”, “NGOs” or “unions”. The third most important news provider, with 26%, is the private entities. Political parties, unions, NGOs and social organisations play a minimal role as news makers and provide little input to the media agenda.

Figure 1. Sources of information



5.2. Investigative Journalism

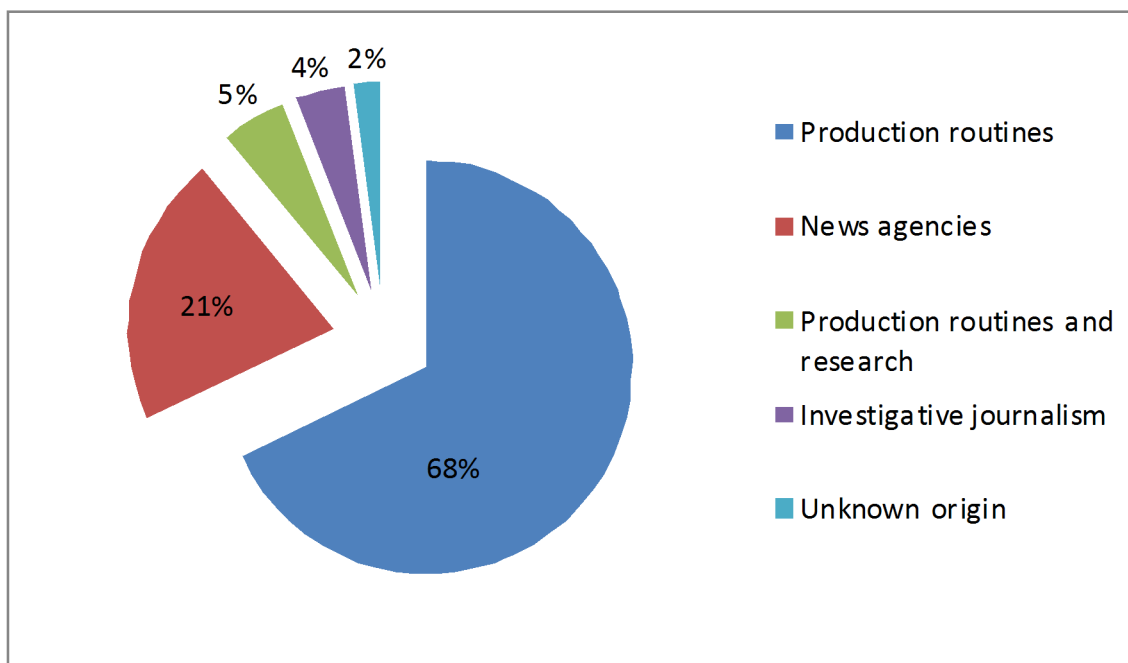
Research should be the fundamental basis of journalism. In this study we aimed to identify the news sources and to determine whether they are the result of the daily routines or investigative journalism (see Figure 2).

Productive routines motivate 68% of the news, i.e. the events covered by the media. Meanwhile, investigative journalism was the source of just 4% of all the sample of news. In this sense, it is clear that only a minimal percentage of the news published by the newspapers is actually created by their journalists.

Our research shows that there is a severe lack of practice of in-depth investigative journalism in Ecuador. In *El Telégrafo*, investigative journalism on a particular theme is only carried out once a month, while in *El Mercurio* the lack of time is the determining factor for not doing investigative journalism.

News agencies also constitute an important provider of news, as they provide 21% of all the published news. Within this classification, we include the news agencies EFE and AFP.

Figure 2: Investigative journalism in the Ecuadorian press



Source: Authors' own creation.

5.3. News structure and format

This study is based on the identification of journalism formats and the characteristics of the published news content. It is important to highlight that the same news item may possess several characteristics and thus belong to several categories. Of the 1,332 news items, we obtained 1,594 multiple answer categories.

As figure 3 shows, “brief news” is the most common format in sample of newspapers, with a total of 563 news items, (35.3% of the total). The short-relevance news items (264) constituted 16.6% of the sample of news. The traditional or standard news items were the third most common news format, constituting 230 (or 14.4%) of the total sample. The rest of the sample is divided into 14 additional categories. The lack of fake news items contributes to the credibility of the newspapers under study.

Figure 3: Structure of information and format of news

Type of news	Number
Brief news	563
Short-relevance news stories	264
Traditional or standard news article	230
Long-relevance news stories	116
Data-based news	81
Special-coverage news	70
Multiple foci news	53
Intermittent-relevance news stories	47
Topic of the day	44
Exclusive-coverage news	37
News story with interview	31
Spontaneous news	26
Chronological news article	13
Smoke screen news	9
Surveys	6
Eclipsing news	4
Fake news	0

Source: Authors’ own creation.

6. Conclusions

The print media in Ecuador are not focused on investigative journalism. They prefer to focus on the daily production routines, i.e. on finding news in places most frequently used by the media

companies. This fact demonstrates the success of the public relations teams of the public and private entities, which are capable of getting the media to disseminate their work and press releases.

Irene Agudelo explains that “news making is a process of negotiation between the journalistic institution, its workers and the institutions of power. This negotiation is often assimilated and institutionalised, through insistence, as part of the production routines” (non-official translation of Agudelo, 1996). It is here where the groups of power that are focused on private interests and not on providing fair and objective information come into play. Unfortunately, in order to serve their own interests, the media companies manipulate the truth by transmitting news stories that only benefit certain groups in society.

Given that the public organisations or entities are the main producers of news, they are the places that are daily visited by journalists to obtain information.

Brief and short-relevance news stories are the types of news used the most by the Ecuadorian press because they are the journalistic format focused on events of common interest.

The identification of the parameters used by the press allows us to get a clear idea of the main factors involved in the agenda setting by the Ecuadorian press.

- This article is part of the [funded project](#) entitled *Análisis de la agenda setting de los medios de comunicación televisivos, impresos y digitales del Ecuador* (“Analysis of the agenda setting of the broadcasting, print and digital media in Ecuador”), financed by the *Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja* with a grant for \$11,932.65 (code PROY_0021).

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[1] Efrén Avilés, undated, available at

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[2] Efrén Avilés was a writer, professor and historian born in Guayaquil on 26 February, 1947. He was the son of Efrén Avilés Tabares and Eugenia Pino Yerovi. He dedicated his entire professional life to documental and archival historical, geographical, and biographical research. His works include: *Himno del Club Sport Emelec* (“The Emelec Sporting Club Anthem”) (1991); *Diccionario del Ecuador Histórico, Geográfico y Biográfico* (“Historical, Geographical and Biographical Dictionary of Ecuador”) (1994); *500 años de historia* (“500 years of history”) (1995); *Gobernantes del Ecuador* (“Political Leaders of Ecuador”) (1996); *Calendario histórico del Ecuador* (“Historical Calendar of Ecuador”) (1997).

[3] www.telegrafo.com.ec/quienes-somos.html, consulted on 08-01-2013.

[4] www.grupoelcomercio.com, consulted on 08-01-2013.

[5] www.eluniverso.com/quienessomos/directores.htm#1, consulted on 08-01-2013.

[6] On this date, known as 30-S, Ecuador experienced a major political crisis as a result of the public demonstrations of the National Police Force against the Public Service Organic Law, which led President Rafael Correa to declare a *State of Exception* for the country. Freedom of information was prohibited. Government-run national broadcasts put a stranglehold on the rest of independent TV channels during an-eight hour period. Moreover, 8 people died and 274 were injured during the altercations with the police and the military. On 30 February, 2011, Emilio Palacio published an article in “*El Universo*” titled “NO to the lies”, which blamed Rafael Correa for what happened on 30-S. This article led to the temporary closure of the media company. This was followed by a legal battle in which the newspaper in question was fined 40 million dollars. Emilio Palacios and three other newspaper directors from *El Universo* were later charged, and subsequently pardoned in February 2012.

[7] www.elmercurio.com.ec/quienes-somos, consulted on 08-01-2013.

[8] Neuendorf, Kimberly A., *The content analysis guidebook*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, 2002, pp. 52-54.

[9] Wimmer, Roger D. and Dominick, Joseph R., *La investigación científica de los medios de comunicación. Una introducción a sus métodos* (“the scientific research of the media. An introduction to their methods”), Bosch, Barcelona, 1996, pp. 168-171.

HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE IN BIBLIOGRAHIES / REFERENCES:

D Rivera Rogel, MI Punín Larrea, D Calva Cabrera (2013): “Agenda setting in Ecuadorian media. Daily: *El Universo*, *El Mercurio*, *El Comercio* and *El Telégrafo*”, at *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 68. La Laguna (Tenerife): Universidad de La Laguna, pages 529 to 544 retrieved on ___ de ___th of ___ of 2_____, from

DOI: [10.4185/RLCS-2013-988](https://doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-2013-988)

Article received on 20 July 2013. Submitted to pre-review on 22 July. Sent to reviewers on 23 July. Accepted on 26 August 2013. Galley proofs made available to the authoress on 30 August 2013. Approved by authoress on: 1 September 2013. Published on 2 September 2013.