Communicating strategically in the face of terrorism: The Spanish government’s response to the 2004 Madrid bombing attacks

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ABSTRACT

With the re-emergence of insurgency tied to terrorism, governments need to strategically manage their communications. This paper analyzes the effect of the Spanish government’s messaging in the face of the Madrid bombing of March 11, 2004: unlike what happened with the 9/11 bombings in the USA and the 7/7 London attacks, the Spanish media did not support the government’s framing of the events. Taking framing as a strategic action in a discursive form (Pan & Kosicki, 2003), and in the context of the attribution theory of responsibilities, this research uses the “cascading activation” model (Entman, 2003, 2004) to explore how a framing contest was generated in the press. Analysis of the coverage shows that the intended government frame triggered a battle among the different major newspapers, leading editorials to shift their frame over the four days prior to the national elections. This research analyzes strategic contests in framing processes and contributes insight into the interactions among the different sides (government, parties, media, and citizens) to help bring about an understanding of the rebuttal effect of the government’s intended frame. It also helps to develop an understanding of the role of the media and the influence of citizens’ frames on media content.

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1. Introduction

The Madrid bombings on March 11, 2004 took place three days before Spain’s general elections. The governing Popular Party (PP) was being led into the election by Mariano Rajoy, the appointed successor of José María Aznar (the outgoing Prime Minister). The PP’s main opponents in the election were the Socialists (PSOE) led by José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero. A week before the elections, polls put the governing party four points ahead of the Socialists; however, the latter won the elections with 5% more votes than the PP.

Unlike what happened in the United States and in the United Kingdom following terror attacks, Spanish media coverage of the Madrid bombings was not characterized by support for the government’s framing of the events. Research into the coverage of the 9/11 attacks in the United States shows that the American press paralleled government frames – “war on terrorism” – demonizing the enemy and stressing patriotism (Hutson, Domke, Billeaudaux, & Garland, 2004; Reese & Seth, 2009; Schubert, Stewart, & Curran, 2002; Zelizer & Stuart, 2002). Research into the coverage of the July 7, 2007 London bombings shows something similar: the response framed by the government (in which patriotic values were used against terrorism and terrorists) resonated well and was readily taken up by the elites and largely echoed by media coverage (Canel & Sanders, 2010).

In Spain, however, the media coverage shifted its frame during the four days prior to the election; the government’s intended frame was not paralleled by the media, and the government’s references to Spanish patriotism produced more of a
rebuttal effect than anything else. How can we explain this contesting of the frame? In the context of the attribution theory of responsibilities as applied to public issues (Iyengar, 1989, 1996) and to crisis communication (Coombs, 2007), and assuming that framing is a strategic action in a discursive form (Pan & Kosicki, 2003), this paper analyzes how the Spanish government strategically managed its communication in relation to the attacks. It particularly explores the interactions between the government’s information policy and those of other political elites, as well as the media’s agenda (through content analysis of the editorials of the main national newspapers), in an attempt to explain who won the framing contest and why.

2. Framing as a strategic action

The introduction of terrorism, terrorists, and terror within the triangle of political communication (Nacos, 2002) has attracted the interest of researchers to the strategic dimension of framing (Entman, 2003, 2004; Norris, Kern, & Just, 2003). Terrorist attacks may trigger processes of political communication that can become extremely complex, particularly in what Norris et al. call “two sided contexts”: when alternative views of the situation compete, different communities dispute the meaning and interpretation of similar events (2003, p. 14).

The strategic dimension of framing, as Pan and Kosicki (2003) understand it, takes Gamson’s definition of framing as a discursive process of strategic actors utilizing symbolic resources to participate in collective sense-making about public policy issues. These authors take the work of different researchers (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Snow & Benford, 1988; Zald, 1996) to point out that to participate in public deliberation is to get involved in discursive practices of framing an issue, “both for one’s own sense making and for contesting the frames of others” (Pan & Kosicki, 2003, p. 39).

Under this approach, framing involves political actors selecting a particular viewpoint, struggling over the right to define and shape issues, and skewing the flow of information and opinions to their advantage. Framing becomes a discursive means to achieve political strength in influencing public deliberation. In short, framing is seen as a strategic action in a discursive form, because it involves strategic decisions on matters such as which frame to sponsor, how to sponsor it, and how to expand its appeal. As a result, public deliberation is a frame contest, in which frames rise and fall, prevail or disappear.

A related approach is that taken by Heath (2001), for whom rhetoric is strategic: rhetoric requires planning in response to a problem. Planning considers which responses are needed, which responses are available, and which responses are likely to resolve the differences. Heath’s rhetorical enactment rationale of public relations, however, does not focus on how to analyze contexts among different positions, but on the capacity of an organization to construct common, coherent, and compatible areas of meaning with its publics (Heath, 2001, p. 49). Involving an organization in strategic framing processes is one of the roles of public relations practitioners. Zoch and Molleda (2006) suggest that along with the media’s framing of events and issues, public relation practitioners who act as sources also contribute to the framing of a story as presented in the media. As will be shown below, assessing strategies in framing contests has to do with the capacity of an organization (in this case, a government) to build areas of shared meaning with different publics; however, success is tied to a complex process of interaction among the attempts of different actors to strategically frame a response.

3. Reacting strategically to terrorist attacks: why responses framed by governments matter

It has been argued elsewhere that a terrorist attack can be regarded as a case of crisis communication: it includes risk and uncertainty, takes on an important communication dimension, and involves the reputation of organizations (Canel & Sanders, 2010). Terrorist attacks put the reputation of governments at stake, thus requiring specific framing strategies to manage the situation.

By making some attributes more salient than others, framing strategies can activate or modify certain schemas; framing effects can be found in how information is processed and made sense of, how people talk about an issue, and how they form political evaluations. Ultimately, as Pan and Kosicki put it, “framing is an ideological contest over not only the scope of an issue, but also over matters such as who is responsible and who is affected, which ideological principles or enduring values are relevant” (2003, p. 40).

To assess the efficacy of strategic government responses it is useful to follow Coombs’ (2007) suggestion of using the attribution theory of responsibilities as a guide for research in crisis communication. Iyengar applies it to public issues: causal responsibility concerns the origin of a problem, while treatment responsibility focuses on who or what has the power either to alleviate or to forestall alleviation of the problem (Iyengar, 1989, p. 879). Both individuals and institutions can be perceived as agents of cause and of treatment, and attributions go along with evaluations and preferences (Iyengar, 1989). The way responsibilities are attributed is important: people tend to punish or reward politicians depending on how responsibility for the state of affairs is assessed; on their part, politicians tend to claim responsibility for outcomes deemed favorable and disclaim responsibility for events or decisions with negative implications (Iyengar, 1996, pp. 60–61).

In Spain, as we will see below, the issue at stake in the four days after the attacks and prior to the election was the attribution of responsibilities. Questions like “who was responsible for what?” and “who really did it?” were put at the centre of the coverage – a coverage that shifted from the “cause responsibility” (who is behind this?) to the “treatment responsibility” (who will be the best in solving this?), consequently modifying the topic about which responsibilities should be exacted.
Table 1
Framework for the analysis.

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4. Methodology

This paper analyzes how the Spanish government reacted strategically to a terrorist attack, focusing on the frame contest that its intended governmental frame induced among the different actors. It uses the “cascading activation” model suggested by Entman for the analysis of frame contests. This author uses the metaphor of a cascade consisting of different levels of networks of associations among ideas, people, and communicating symbols. The administration is located at the top; the second level consists of the “other elites” (members of congress and their staffs, ex-officials, experts, lobbyists, etc.); reporters, columnists, producers, editors, and publishers constitute the third level, that is, the network of journalists; this level is followed by the “news frames” level, which consists of framing words and images; finally, at the end of the cascade, there is the public (Entman, 2003, p. 419).

The model uses the idea of “spreading activation” to explore the evolution of frames. Four variables are provided to explain the activation dynamic and the subsequent emergence and outcomes of frame contests (Entman, 2003, 2004): motivation, power to influence other elites and the media, strategy – planned activation of mental associations – and cultural congruence. The more congruent the frame with the schemas that dominate the political culture, the more success it will enjoy; when matters are ambiguous, however, framing depends more heavily on the other variables: motivation, power, and strategy.

As Entman argues, by highlighting interactions among these four variables the model produces new insights into the relations between the government’s preferred framing and the frames that actually appear in the news (2004, p. 17); it predicts the degree of autonomy exercised by journalists and clarifies the limits of that autonomy (2004, p. 73); the model signals the gaps, showing disruptions in the chain of connections (2004, p. 106); it illuminates the way news feeds information about citizens back to officials (2004, p. 110); it also provides a framework for more complex analyses of the media content that shapes audiences’ political sentiments and officials’ perception of public opinion (2004, p. 147).

For the present research, frames in editorial pieces were analyzed following Entman’s understanding of the functions of a frame (which are also taken by Zoch and Molleda as the four uses of frames by a public relations practitioner to get out an organization’s message, 2006, p. 282): defining problems, identifying causes, making moral judgments about the situation that is the problem, and suggesting remedies (Entman, 1993, p. 52). The analysis was restricted to the three main national newspapers that went out from March 11, 2004 (special edition) to March 14, 2004, Election Day. This involves an analysis of 12 editorial pieces.

Table 1 shows the framework for present analysis.

5. Analyzing the Madrid bombing attacks through the “cascading activation model”

I will first describe different levels of the cascade in the case of the March 11, 2004 Madrid bombings.

5.1. First events

Three days before Election Day, at 7.35 a.m. on Thursday March 11, 2004, ten bombs exploded on four trains causing 192 deaths and approximately 1500 injuries. Immediately, all political parties agreed that all the election campaign activities would cease.

Initially (during the first subsequent hours) there was a “one-sided” frame presented by all the major political (including the Basque nationalistic party) and media actors where ETA was considered responsible for the attacks (only the spokesperson for the illegal political branch of ETA denied ETA’s responsibility). The discovery of an ETA plot to bomb Madrid’s other main railway station the previous Christmas Eve as well as the arrest of two ETA members on February 28 transporting 500 kg of explosives in a city south of Madrid helped to cultivate this one-sided interpretation. Hours later, at 13.15, Spain’s Ministry of the Interior (roughly the equivalent of the U.S. Justice Department) confirmed in a press conference that ETA was behind the massacre. The newspapers’ special editions of March 11 (issued around 13:30 p.m.) ran headlines such as “Massacre in Madrid. ETA murders more than 130 people,” “Murderers. Profound shock in Spain after the savage attacks by ETA in Madrid” and “Murder by ETA in Madrid”.

From this very first step on, a set of events began to raise the suspicion that other terrorist groups different from ETA could be involved in the attack. However, it was clear for all the parties that the result of the elections was tied up with how the Spanish electorate would assess both the responsibility and reasons for the bombings. An ETA attack would be detrimental to the Opposition’s interests, since as a result of the latest regional elections the Socialist Party had agreed on a tripartite Catalan government that included a radical leftist Catalan nationalistic Party, ERC. According to information published
by a newspaper during the pre-campaign period, the leader of ERC was supposed to have met members of ETA, presumably to agree on a truce that would involve excluding Catalonia (a region located in the North East of Spain, which includes Barcelona) from their territory of action. Because of this, an attack against Madrid perpetrated by ETA could be lethal for Zapatero’s electoral chances (he was the Socialist Party candidate for the national election). In contrast, an al-Qaeda attack would harm the outgoing government party (the Popular Party), as it could be taken as a punishment from Islamist groups in response to Aznar’s involving Spain in the Iraq war.

5.2. The government’s response

Faced with devastation and death and the associated public anguish and anxiety, the Spanish government was called upon to respond both with practical deeds and with symbolic responses that would both reassure the Spanish public and yet maintain its support.

Research carried out on both the government and Opposition frames (Sanders & Canel, 2004) has defined one intended government frame as “Constitutionalism to defeat terrorism.” In his first institutional statement (at 14.30 on March 11), Prime Minister Aznar, after saying “we are with the victims,” added: “We are on the side of the Constitution. It is the pact of the great majority of Spaniards, which guarantees the freedoms and rights of all.” This linkage with the Constitution was later reinforced by the call issued by the government to march across Spain with banners bearing the same slogan: “With the victims, with the Constitution and for the defeat of terrorism.”

5.3. Other elites’ response: the Opposition response

The Opposition message (the Socialist Party) adopted what we have called a “Statesmanlike” frame: they used words, gestures and actions which we interpreted as being addressed to the greater good of the country (Sanders & Canel, 2004). Core shared values (“democracy,” “solidarity,” “serenity” and “unity”) were stressed. The Opposition leader mentioned the Spanish identity only once. He made appeals for action as part of an inclusive strategy in which only the terrorists were beyond the pale and he was not overly critical of the government. But, as will be seen below, this statesmanlike frame did not exclude criticism of the government, and it was delegated to the lower ranking party members.

5.4. The news media and news frames

Professional journalism observers agree that an ideological cleavage differentiates Spanish news media’s performance. On the one hand, there was the public media (such as the TV channel TVE, radio station RNE and the news agency EFE) and the right-wing media that were accused of “manipulating by omitting facts.” On the other hand, there was the left-wing media accused of “manipulating by distorting facts” (Chalvidant, 2004, pp. 107, 113) (see also Rodríguez, 2004, entitled 11 March. A State Lie). It has also been written that the pro-Socialist PRISA media conglomerate (owner of the newspaper El País, the cable channel Canal Plus/CNN+) and the SER radio network) worked towards promoting the idea that the Aznar government was hiding information from the public (Chalvidant, 2004; García Abadillo, 2004). Frames of the editorials of two right-wing newspapers (close to the government), El Mundo and Abc, and of El País (close to the Opposition) are analyzed below.

5.5. Public opinion

On the final day before the elections, on March 13 (a “day of reflection” during which Spanish law forbids campaign activity), there were protests outside the PP offices in which the government was accused of lying. The slogans most repeated in these demonstrations were the following: “We want to know the truth before voting,” “Assassins,” “Your wars, our dead people,” “Liars, liars,” etc.) (Sampedro, Alcalde, & Sádaba, 2005). These demonstrations were called for from different websites on the Internet and through SMS on cellular phones. Some authors have argued that it was these concentrations and not the conventional media which really managed to block the government frame (Sampedro, 2005). Whether this was an orchestrated phenomenon of mobilization by a political elite that was capable of strategically coordinating the activity of some traditional mass media – with the information flowing through SMS and other Internet channels and web pages – or more of a spontaneous catalyzing of a latent and long standing protest against the PP government’s involvement in the Iraq war, remains a moot point beyond the scope of this paper.1

What seems to be clear is that these demonstrations managed to get visibility. CNN+/Canal Plus (close to the Opposition) broadcasted reports on these protests live in most of its programming. The private radio channel COPE (close to the government) denounced that these concentrations were the proof of a media and political conspiracy against the government in their afternoon news programs. The SER radio network (a property of PRISA, a media group close to the Socialist Party)

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1 For a detailed description of these mobilizations and with different hypotheses and analysis, see Olmeda (2005, p. 31) and Sampedro (2005).
covered these concentrations for the whole afternoon of the 13th, as announced by the alternative media in the Internet.\textsuperscript{2} As highlighted below, these concentrations became the core topic of the editorials on the day of the election.

6. Frames in editorial pieces: four days for the evolution of a news frame

The following pages will analyze the frames, providing first a brief description of the events of the day prior to the editorial.

6.1. March 11. “Treatment responsibility” frame: who is the best political option to defeat terrorism?

At midday (around 13:30 p.m.) on March 11, 2004, all newspapers issued special editions that portrayed a “one-sided” frame: ETA is behind the attacks.

This “one-sided” frame led editorial pieces to go from “cause responsibility” to “treatment responsibility;” if ETA – a group which has been killing for more than thirty years – is behind the attacks, then the question to be put forward was the following: which political party is the best and the worst in defeating terrorism? The main problem was not ETA, which was assessed as “cruel,” as a perpetrator of a “massacre,” of a “pure genocides” and of an “inhuman and monstrous act.” The problem definition in the editorials of March 11 was the “treatment of terrorism” by different political parties. Causes, evaluations and remedies varied throughout the newspapers.

\textit{Abc} and \textit{El Mundo} drew more heavily on the idea that ETA was behind the attack. If ETA was behind the attack, then the problem was not so much the terrorists as the political disagreements and deceits involved in the debate about how to defeat them. The cause in this case would be those who considered it necessary to establish a dialogue with ETA in order to defeat terrorism: this includes Basque nationalism (or rather “subnationalism”\textsuperscript{3}) and ERC (the radical leftist nationalist Catalanian party, governing in coalition with the Socialist Party in Catalonia, which, as mentioned, was supposed to have met with members of ETA).

\textit{Evaluations} of parties and leaders follow in accordance with the cause frame in these same newspapers. In \textit{Abc}, the Ibarretxe Plan (as the plan proposed by the Basque government for secession of the Basque country was called) was regarded as “opportunist.” ERC’s nationalism (“subnationalism”) was assessed as “a fiction that deceives and confuses” and its members as people “who take terrorists as ploys for both direct and indirect political benefits,” and in general, nationalism was characterized as an “historic lie.” \textit{El Mundo} went further in its evaluations by asserting that the Ibarretxe plan included aims that coincide with those of ETA. In this newspaper, electoral consequences were dealt with more explicitly: the Opposition Socialist party was not suitable for running the government. It could be said that these two newspapers went much further than the government in criticizing nationalism and nationalist parties.

The remedy frame was a declaration to the Socialist Party to break up its coalition with ERC (the tripartite governmental coalition in Catalonia) and to “politically ostracize those who grant terrorists the condition of agents of dialogue.” The head of the Basque government (Ibarretxe) was called on to cancel his plan for secessionism.

Although for \textit{El País} the problem was slightly different (the problem was terrorism and its cause, the terrorists), the remedies referred, as in other newspapers, to the “treatment responsibility” frame. The cause is the terrorists that act against the centralism of Madrid, which is regarded by the editor as a centralist symbol for terrorists. The actions demanded refer to the election outcome: the Antiterrorist Agreement (signed by all parties) should be reactivated to “show that a possible change in the majority vote would not modify the attitude to reject any deal with ETA.” \textit{El País}, like the other newspapers, made its assessments with an eye on the election: what political option would be the best to defeat terrorism?


Several facts should be mentioned (all these events happened after the newspapers’ special editions came out on March 11).

On March 11 at 13.30, Prime Minister José María Aznar called the newspaper editors to tell them of his conviction that ETA was responsible for the attack. At 14.10, the Minister of the Interior gave a press conference confirming that ETA was behind the attack (“ETA has achieved its aim,” – read the statement – “beyond any shadow of a doubt, the responsibility for this massacre lies with ETA”). At 14.30, the Prime Minister gave a first institutional statement already referred to in this paper. The government issued a call to all Spaniards and all political parties to call to march. At 17.25, the Foreign Minister sent a note to the embassies encouraging ambassadors to portray ETA’s responsibility. At 19.55, the Minister of the Interior gave a press conference to announce the discovery of a van with a videotape with verses from the Koran: “although

\textsuperscript{2} This coverage, as research has shown, stressed the question “Who did it?,” shifting to a high increase in the “responsibility” frame, reinforcing the idea that al-Qaeda was behind the attack (see Rodero, Aurora, & Tamarit, 2009).

\textsuperscript{3} In Spain, nationalism does not imply one’s own ethnic or regional cultural identifications merged into a central national identity, but the opposite: what are known as “nationalist” movements and parties in Spain claim greater independence from the central state for their region (including secession). Regions such as Catalonia, the Basque Country and Galicia have strong “sub-national” identities and certain parties within them favor complete independence from Spain.
the main hypothesis continues to be that ETA is responsible,” – said the Minister – “I have given instructions so that other possibilities are not ruled out.” During the whole afternoon, leaks from the security forces, information and briefings from foreign media and agencies were suggesting doubts about ETA’s responsibility and the possibility of the involvement of al-Qaeda, thereby undermining and contradicting the government messages.

On March 12, the day after the attacks, the Prime Minister gave a press conference at 11.00 a.m. after the Cabinet meeting. He insisted that “the government continued to follow all possible lines of inquiry.” Looking rattled by the journalists’ questions, Aznar appeared to be on the defensive, defending himself and the government from accusations that they were not being sufficiently open about the information that they had at their disposal. Early in the morning, following the journalists’ cue, the leader of the Opposition said in an interview with SER radio: “The political response could vary depending on whether we were facing a terrorist attack from al-Qaeda or from ETA (. . .) we need a government that informs adequately.” In the afternoon, 11 million people marched to show their condemnation of terrorism. In these demonstrations, some people carried banners asking “Who is the killer?”

All this confusion, contradiction and ambiguity were reflected in the press. Whereas the special editions of March 11 had been explicit about ETA, headlines on March 12 were less specific: “Terrorist inferno in Madrid,” “The day of infamy,” “200 people murdered in a terrorist massacre in Madrid,” and “All united against terror.”

Analysis of the editorials shows a consolidation of frame contestation in which “treatment responsibility,” was the focus. Responsibility was analyzed both in the treatment of terrorism and in the managing of information.

For Abc, a newspaper more aligned with the Popular Party and less likely to support the Socialist Party, the problem was the treatment of terrorism and information. The editorial headline almost reproduced the slogan that the government had proposed for the march. Mentioning that the investigation was attentive to other different hypotheses, it drew on the ETA hypothesis and quoted Aznar (the Prime Minister, PP): “terrorists have killed them for being Spaniards.” The government’s response to the crisis was assessed as “quick” and “excellent”, and Aznar as somebody who “has not avoided his responsibilities.” Again, actions were claimed in electoral terms: the editorialist challenges the reader to compare the government’s credibility with that of ETA’s. The editorial calls for a vote for the political option that could be regarded as the most firm in defeating terrorism.

El País, a newspaper closer to the Socialist Party than to the party in Government, without discarding the ETA hypothesis and condemning their actions, gave more room than other newspapers to a counter-government frame. It established Islamist terrorism as the main problem, and the Aznar government’s involvement in the Iraq war as the cause, but if this were true, what was also a problem was how the Government was handing out information. The editorialist aroused suspicion: “There is doubt as to whether the government’s resistance to admit other hypotheses, and its being adamant that ETA is the most likely perpetrator, is self-interested or not.” Actions taken by the Ministry of the Interior and by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (a specific reference was made to the note sent to the Spanish embassies) were regarded as suspicious actions. Transparency and prudence on the part of the government were demanded.

El Mundo’s definition of the problem was again the “treatment of terrorism”; there was a slight change in tone that reflected confusion about how the government had managed information. This newspaper offered an analysis with equal arguments for one side and the other, criticized the Government for being hasty in blaming ETA and praised Zapatero for an unselﬁsh attitude. Evaluations were made in electoral terms. Nationalist parties did not deserve the vote for being ambiguous in their attitude towards ETA. Zapatero, although having carried out an excellent campaign, had a serious drawback in his inability to heal the division within his own party about the conceptualization of the Spanish State. The candidate of the Popular Party, Rajoy, however, was assessed as “honest, solvent and efﬁcient,” and as the best option. The remedies called for were an investigation and a legal defeat of terrorism.

6.3. March 14. A government frame with a rebound effect. From “treatment responsibility” to “cause responsibility”: but who really did it? And who is lying? Which party is being more opportunistic as regards the coming election?

On March 13, the day before the elections, when no campaign activity was allowed, thousands of people gathered outside the offices of the Popular Party (PP) at 18.00 to accuse the Aznar government of lying. At 20.00, the Minister of the Interior announced the arrests of three Moroccans and two Spanish nationals in relation to the attacks. At 21.00, the running candidate from the Popular Party (Rajoy) gave a press conference in which he declared: “At this moment, an illegal and illegitimate demonstration surrounding the entire headquarters is taking place in which the PP is being accused of serious crimes. From here I ask and demand that those who called for this illegal demonstration cease in their attitude and end this antidemocratic act of pressure.” At 21.30, the Socialist Spokesman said in a press conference that “The people of this country deserve a government that doesn’t lie to them.”

The event that became the core for the problem definition in the editorial pieces of March 14 was the mobilization against the Popular Party, with associated assessments regarding an opportunistic “vote-catching” approach to the terrorist attacks.

While acknowledging more plausibility for the hypothesis of al-Qaeda as the perpetrator, for Abc the main issue was the vote-catching performance of the Opposition, “who accused the government of concealing information even though the facts have refuted this stratagem” (the newspaper was referring to the statement made by the Socialist Spokesman the day before). If the problem was the treatment of terrorism, evaluations referred to the capability of the political parties to defeat it: the government “has not lied”; Aznar “has behaved efficiently and transparently” and nobody could accuse him of “using terrorism to his own political beneﬁt,” and “there have been successful achievements in the investigation.” It was stated
that the vote-seeking hypocrisy of the Opposition (referred to as “part of the Spanish left-wing”) would not be able to defeat terrorism but is using the attacks on Madrid as a basis for activating “antidemocratic machinery against the Popular Party.” As a way of consolidating the good performance of the government, Spain should “remain in the vanguard in defeating terrorism.”

For *El Mundo*, the problem was an “exceptional electoral situation,” where “democratic customs have been disturbed.” The *cause* was, on the one hand, a Prime Minister and a Minister of the Interior who were *evaluated* as “imprudent” and “hasty”; having shown “improper behavior” for not being serene; however, the government was considered both transparent and honest for “having handed out detailed information.” On the other hand, there were the “lamentable, miserable and antidemocratic” protests organized against PP, which this newspaper attributed in a subtle way (quoting Reuters) to its own adversary, PRISA, a media holding “whose owners are linked to the Socialist Opposition.” The *remedy* is a “coalition government [PP–PSOE] whose priority will be to clarify events and return the country back to normal.”

For *El País*, the problem was defined as the government’s concealment of Islamist terrorists’ responsibility for the attack, and the cause was considered the Spanish government’s (Popular Party) intervention in the Iraq war. *Evaluations* refer to a suspicious government response: “information given by the Ministry of the Interior has brought new and serious doubts as to the way the government has managed information about the attacks.” The editorialist contrasts different government actions that pinpoint blame on ETA with an “international opinion, almost unanimous, based upon assessments made by experts in terrorism, security services and governments.” Aznar, whose government’s action was regarded as more than dubious, was *evaluated* as someone who was “unaware” and “who has flippantly dealt with al-Qaeda’s threats.” *Evaluations* take the form of a summing up for the elections, where the two main parties are assessed. *Remedies* were the clarification of the events. This newspaper ends its editorial of the 14th by saying that the government’s performance justifies placing at the front of the debate the question about “who really did it?”, and that the best homage to the victims would be knowledge and propagation of the truth.

7. Discussion: explaining the framing contest dynamic

In order to explain the framing contest shown in the above frame analysis, I will apply at each level of the cascade the four variables suggested by Entman.

First, at the government level, among motivations the following could be mentioned: monitoring for core values (constitutionalism, unity, solidarity with the victims); fulfilling responsibilities by practical deeds (care for the victims and their families, apprehension of the murderers, preventing new attacks, guaranteeing essential services and guaranteeing the right to vote in the election); diminishing terrorists’ credibility and counteracting the terrorist’s frames; controlling the news message and avoiding, at the same time, being accused of obscurantism; and maintaining public support and winning the elections.

How congruent was the government frame? Analysis shows that the intended initial government frame, “Constitutionalism to defeat terrorism” was not *culturally congruent* with media expectations and with the dominant schemas. Only *ABC* supported and reproduced the government’s references to the Spanish Constitution. In the context of the country’s fractured nationalistic politics, and within the national debate about the need to reform the Constitution to give more power to the regional bodies, references to the “Spanish” did not result in unequivocal unity. Linkage to the Constitution was certainly highly controversial, but what might have made it more controversial could have been the connection of this linkage to the government’s attempt to promote a specific interpretation of the attacks: by putting the stress on constitutionalism to defeat terrorism what was also being stressed was that ETA was the cause of the attacks, since it was ETA’s terrorism (and not Islamist terrorism) that had to be defeated with the Spanish Constitution. As previous research has shown, this “poor culturally congruent” frame along with several strategic actions related to information distribution and withholding transformed the intended frame into an unintended opportunistic vote-catching frame: the government communicated in a way in which their words, gestures and actions could be interpreted as being addressed to winning an election (*Sanders & Canel, 2004*). The analysis of the press in the present study has shown that an opportunistic vote-catching frame (resulting from a failed intended governmental frame) triggered a political battle between the different sides. But this result is not fully explained by a “poor culturally congruent” frame; the frames of the other actors (and their cultural congruence, power and strategy) must also be entered into the analysis.

Secondly, the Opposition was *motivated* by monitoring for core values (such as democracy and solidarity); avoiding being accused of not supporting the government in a delicate and complex situation; controlling the news message and winning the elections. The “statesmanlike” frame was more *culturally congruent* with dominant schemas. Again, this does not fully explain the result of a frame contest; the Opposition’s *strategy* of delegating members from its lower ranks to criticize the government, as well as the mobilizations on March 13, succeeded in putting the government on the defensive. It thus ended up by claiming to have been transparent with information, which led to a shift in the frame of the editorials.

Third, what does the “cascading activation model” tell us about the *media*? Journalists were dominated by ambiguity, distress, lack of information and contradictory messages; they had to combine the need to keep people informed with the risk of being accused of damaging national security if challenging the official version.

The media coverage can be accounted for, partly and only partly, in the professional *motivations* suggested by Entman’s model. The coverage certainly reveals motivations to follow professional norms such as reporting balanced information and normative values (such as holding the government accountable). The media were able to use a certain *strategy* through their
capacity to ask questions, which were relevant in the seven encounters the government had with the media and particularly so in the press conference given by the Prime Minister on March 12.

The three newspapers reacted to the evolution of the frame by going to battle for a specific political option and going against the other one. What is more, the three newspapers went even further than the political parties they supported: *Abc* and *El Mundo* were much more critical of the nationalist parties and of the Opposition than the government was, and *El País* was much more critical of the government than the Socialist Party was. At the shift in the frame (when the “treatment responsibility” of the problem identified as information management became more important than the “treatment responsibility” for the problem of terrorism), the issue became “which party is being more politically opportunistic?” The three newspapers replied differently, getting involved in a media-political battle that paralleled the divisions between the different sides. Once again, and as has been shown through analysis of the coverage of political scandals (Canel & Sanders, 2006) partisanship is a feature of the Spanish press.

### 8. Conclusions

The attacks of March 11, 2004 in Madrid unquestionably constituted an event prone to conflicting and unclear interpretations, where the reputation of the government was put at stake and all sides were motivated to carry out actions of power and strategy in order to influence media content.

Research shows that the efficacy of the strategic framing of a response is related to its capacity to resonate and activate enduring values. Analysis of the interaction of a low culturally congruent government frame with a higher culturally congruent Opposition frame, as well as with the power and the strategies followed by the government, the Opposition, and the media, has shown how an intended government frame can trigger a battle in the press with a rebound effect.

Analysis of the major newspapers shows that the preferred government frame led editorials to shift from the “cause responsibility” to the “treatment responsibility” frame. In doing so, from the very beginning the editorialists’ interpretations of the attack were pervaded by assessments about the best political option for defeating terrorism once in government. With an eye on the election, what really came to the forefront of the debate was “treatment responsibility” of information distribution and withholding, and hence the main question became: “But, who really did it?” And “who is lying?” The answer from the Spanish press was another battle: “Who is behaving in the most vote-catching way?” Constitutionalism was transformed into vote-winning, and the actions that openly demonstrated self-interested use of power and strategy taken on the part of the government could even have helped to diminish the cultural congruence of an already low culturally congruent government communication.

This research also shows that in fragmented audiences like the one analyzed here, the cultural resonance of a governmental frame is more challenged: among nationalists there was less motivation to do their patriotic duty and support the government. The government’s narrative package did not resonate in the minds of certain actors, a resonance that is the basis of frame alignment. In failing to do this, the government also failed to convince other actors in the processing and packaging of information concerning the attacks. Instead of building areas of shared meaning, the government’s framed response enabled various entities to become meaningful to and influential on one another, hence activating division among already divided publics.

This research has also helped develop an understanding of the role of the media in the evolution of a strategic governmentally framed response. It has shown, first, that journalists’ degree of autonomy was dominated by partisan allegiances; but it has also revealed that, as shown elsewhere for election coverage (Entman, 2010), unbalanced news comes not only or necessarily from individual journalists but also from the interaction of different factors, which include real world developments, cultural norms, journalist decision rules, and each side’s skills at frame promotion.

This research also shows how the effect of strategic responses given by governments can be tied to responses given by the public: citizens’ frames can also affect the media, as seen in the fact that citizens’ protests on March 13 turned into the core topic for the editorials on the day of the election. Although public opinion lies at the bottom of the cascade, citizens’ reactions can in some way impinge on media content. Participating in public deliberation with the discursive practice of framing an issue is not the exclusive province of political elites or the media.

Finally, given that this case study shows that framing is a strategic action in a discursive form, our study points to the usefulness of framing theory in examining the potential impact of organizations in strategically setting the public agenda, as well as the capacity of public relations to help democratic states and peoples to respond effectively to terrorism (Richards, 2004).

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