

CHARLES UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism

Master thesis

2023

Marina Vidal Rico

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**“Not in our name”: The Melilla tragedy as a
case study of polarized media coverage of
migration in the Spanish Southern border.**

Master Thesis

Prague 2023

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Academic Year: 2022/2023

Bibliographic note

Vidal Rico, M. (2023). *"Not in our name": The Melilla tragedy as a case study of polarized media coverage of migration in the Spanish Southern border* (Master's thesis). Charles University, Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism. Supervisor prof. Annamária Neag, Ph.D

Abstract

The term "Melilla tragedy" is usually used to refer to the events of the 24th of June 2022, when the attempted crossing to the Spanish side of the Melilla border by a group of around 2.000 Sub-Saharan migrants resulted in at least 25 deaths. Hoping to contribute to the understanding of the coverage of migration in polarized media environments, the present study looks at articles focused on these events published by Spanish national media across the political spectrum. Through a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis approach, 16 opinion pieces published by *El País*, *El Mundo*, *El Confidencial*, and *elDiario.es* were critically examined in search of relevant conclusions on the influence of media partisanship in the media's reporting on the Southern border, and differences between the short and long-term reporting on the events. Results of this analysis point to ideology-based differences in the portrayal of migrants and the border and an overall tendency to talk about migration from a political standpoint, even more so in the long term.

Keywords

Migration, partisanship, media, borders, Spain

Abstrakt

Termínem "Melilská tragédie" se obvykle označují události z 24. června 2022, kdy při pokusu o přechod skupiny asi 2.000 subsaharských migrantů na španělskou stranu hranice v Melille zahynulo nejméně 25 osob. V naději, že přispěje k pochopení zpravodajství o migraci v polarizovaném mediálním prostředí, se tato studie zabývá články zaměřenými na tyto události, které publikovala španělská celostátní média napříč politickým spektrem. Prostřednictvím přístupu multimodální kritické diskurzní analýzy bylo kriticky zkoumáno 16 názorových článků publikovaných v denících *El País*, *El Mundo*, *El Confidencial* a *elDiario.es* s cílem nalézt relevantní závěry o vlivu mediální zaujatosti při informování médií o jižní hranici a rozdílech mezi krátkodobým a dlouhodobým informováním o těchto událostech. Výsledky této analýzy poukazují na ideologicky založené rozdíly v zobrazování migrantů a hranice a na celkovou tendenci hovořit o migraci z politického hlediska, a to ještě více v dlouhodobém horizontu.

Klíčová slova

Migrace, stranicví, média, hranice, Španělsko

Range of thesis: 56 pages and 101.173 characters

Declaration of Authorship

1. The author hereby declares that he compiled this thesis independently, using only the listed resources and literature.
2. The author hereby declares that all the sources and literature used have been properly cited.
3. The author hereby declares that the thesis has not been used to obtain a different or the same degree.

Prague 11/07/2023


Marina Vidal Rico

Acknowledgments

To everyone who has ever crossed a border searching for a better life. To my mother, who overcame the biggest of obstacles while I was writing this thesis. And to my friends, who always push me to go further.

Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism
Approved research proposal

Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism FSV UK
Research proposal for Erasmus Mundus Journalism Diploma Thesis

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Thesis title in English: "Not in our name": The Melilla Tragedy as a case study of partisan media coverage of migration in the Spanish southern border.	
Expected date of submission (semester, academic year – example: SS 2021/2022) (Thesis must be submitted according to the Academic Calendar.) SS 2022/2023	
Main research question (max. 250 characters): RQ1: How does media partisanship influence the reporting on the Spanish southern border? RQ2: Are there differences between the immediate and long-term reporting?	
Current state of research on the topic (max. 1800 characters): <p>Migration is a relevant and up-and-coming topic in media studies Existing research on the topic has traditionally focused on representation of the migrants (Blinder & Allen, 2016), the delimitation of the border by public practices (Grimson, 2003) and in media discourse (Linares, 2009), and the influence the news reporting might have on the attitudes towards migration (Boomgaarden, 2009).</p> <p>When it comes to the particular circumstances surrounding the coverage of the borders between the global north and global south (hereafter referred to as southern borders) existing research highlights the constraints media faces when building the public debate around the migration on these borders (Dell'orto & Birchfield, 2014). It has also been researched how among European countries there is a general lack of contextualization and important deficits in the coverage of migration from the "south" in the last decade (Frutos-García & Vicente-Mariño, 2019).</p> <p>In Spain, the media coverage of the southern border between Melilla and Morocco has been mostly studied in relation to the role of the journalists. In their 2020 paper, Ruiz-Aranguren and Cantalapiedra analyzed what type of information and media professionals are present in the Melilla border area, while other studies have focused on how the work done by these journalists can be improved (Serrano-Martín, 2017). Recent studies have also focused on the evolution of migration reporting over the last few years (Solves-Almela, Arcos-Urrutia,2021).</p> <p>In light of the above, to this researcher's knowledge there is a lack of academic focus on the role media partisanship plays in the media coverage of migration that could be explored in this master's thesis. This is especially important given that findings within the Spanish context point towards the portrayal of migration as a political problem (Rodríguez Pérez et al., 2022).</p>	
Expected theoretical framework (max. 1800 characters): <p>This research is focused on the Melilla Tragedy, a series of events that took place on the night between the 24 and the 25 of June 2022 in which a police operation aimed to stop the crossing of the border of the Spanish enclave of Melilla with Morocco led to the death of at least 37 sub-Saharan migrants. The Spanish national media reported on the tragedy with</p>	

noticeable discrepancies regarding the number of fatalities, the excessive use of force by the police and accountability for the tragedy.

This proposed research therefore rests at the intersection of theories about media representation of social issues and the polarized media model.

Firstly, the master's thesis will contemplate media representations of migration. The object of this study, the Melilla Tragedy, can be ascribed to the media coverage of the Spanish southern border with the characteristics presented in the literature review (Ruiz-Aranguren & Cantalapiedra, 2020; Solves-Almela, Arcos-Urrutia, 2021).

Secondly, this study is framed by theories related to the politicization of society and the media. Namely, the master's thesis departs from the idea of politicization as defined by Esmark (Pfetsch, 2014): "said to occur whenever political values, motives and orientations affect editorial and/or journalistic practice" (p.148). It is therefore located within theories that link the Spanish media landscape to the Mediterranean Polarised Pluralist model (Hallin and Mancini, 2004).

Being a comparative study, this research project is also based on the theoretical distinction between left-wing and right-wing partisan media, as well as the differences between "breaking news" coverage of the issue and the subsequent coverage, a more slow paced journalism. This last comparison can be understood within a theoretical branch that is critical to the effects of speed on the practice of journalism (Le Masurier 2015, 143), as it presumes slow-paced journalism to be more nuanced when covering topics like migration.

Expected methodology, and methods for data gathering and analysis (max. 1800 characters):

The expected methodology for this research is Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MMCDA), a research tool heavily influenced by the better-known Critical Discourse Analysis or CDA (Fairclough, 2010). But while CDA regards mainly the language, MMCDA attaches a well-deserved importance to the text's visual features and considers how images separately contribute to the creation of meaning (Machin, 2016). I believe the role of the images should be adequately addressed in this study given the pivotal role visuals play in the portrayal of migration in the media today, as existing research explores how visual framing of migrants tends to dehumanize asylum seekers (Bleiker, 2013; Chouliaraki et al., 2017).

I would also argue that MMCDA is a suitable method for the study of the journalistic pieces that occupy this study, in which I expect the line between the political and social dimension of the issue to be blurred (Rodríguez-Pérez et al., 2022). In this sense it can be useful to explore connections between language, power and ideology within a political context (Fairclough, 1989; Machin & Mayr, 2012).

In the analysis, I am expecting to pay attention to how common denominators in the national reporting on the Melilla Tragedy, drawn from existing studies and observation, vary from left-wing to right-wing media given the pluralistic partisan landscape that is presumed to exist in Spain. I will also pay attention to how these changes evolve, if they do, over time.

Expected research design (data to be analyzed, for example, the titles of analyzed newspapers and selected time period):

The expected research design for this thesis will be a case study of the coverage of the Melilla Tragedy in left and right-wing Spanish newspapers. The Melilla Tragedy is a politically important case (Patton, 2002) in which I will be purposefully sampling specific news articles that convey the positioning of the medium with regard to the events. While doing so I will pay special attention to the risk of bias that comes with this specific form of sampling.

In order to do so, my initial plan is to select newspapers on both political spectrums of the Spanish media landscape. On the left, I will use *El País*, and *eldiario.es*. On the right, *El Mundo* and *El Confidencial*. The justification for these choices relies on the Hallin and Mancini definition of the Mediterranean Polarised Pluralist model (2004), that predicts relevant differences in ideology between the two main groups. *El País* and *El Mundo*, being more moderate options for both positions, are the generalist papers with the highest readership figures in the country, while *eldiario.es* and *El Confidencial* are strictly digital newspapers for a more specific ideology-based audience. With these choices I'm aiming to cover different positions within the political spectrum without relying on the so-called yellow press.

When it comes to the selected time period for the study, I want to look at two different relevant moments in the coverage of the Melilla Tragedy. Most importantly, I will look at articles published during the 3 days following the tragic events (25th, 26th and 27th of June 2022). Secondly, I will pay attention to further reporting on the issue after the BBC

published an in-depth investigation in which the official version of the events was challenged. This investigation was published on the 1st of November 2022 and was followed by some further coverage by Spanish national media that could be useful for the purpose of this thesis. All articles should be accessible through the media's websites and are accompanied by images susceptible to be analyzed as part of the study.

Expected thesis structure (chapters and subchapters with brief description of their content):

- Abstract
- Introduction
- Literature Review
 - Media and migration
 - Reporting on the southern border
 - Melilla as portrayed by Spanish media
- Theoretical Framework
 - Media representation of social issues
 - Polarized media model
- Terminology
- Research design and Methodology
 - Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis
 - Research design
 - Sample selection
 - Limitations, reflexivity and ethics
 - Results and analysis
- Conclusion
- References

Basic literature list (at least 5 most important works related to the topic and the method(s) of analysis; all works should be briefly characterized on 2-5 lines):

- Rodríguez-Pérez, C., Jivkova-Semova, D., Pérez-Vara, E., Asadi, N., Kreutler, M. (2022). Unraveling migration media coverage: How migrants and immigration were portrayed in Spain during the Refugee Crisis (2015-2018). *Historia y Comunicación Social*, 27(1), 161–173. <https://doi.org/10.5209/hics.77537>

This study focuses on media coverage of the Refugee Crisis (2015-2018) and tries to depict how political frames are more predominant than social or human frames when describing issues related to migration. The study finds that political debate prevails in the sampled Spanish media as the “topic with greater importance” when talking about migration.

- Concepción Sepúlveda LG, Rodrigo Alsina M, Medina Bravo P. Niveles semánticos de las representaciones sociales de la inmigración subsahariana: los sucesos de Ceuta y Melilla según ABC. *Estudios sobre el mensaje periodístico*. 2008;(14):129-48.

This text uses a semantic approach to examine the representations of sub-Saharan immigrants in coverage done by the conservative Spanish newspaper “ABC” during two months of 2005 when incidents over the fences of Ceuta and Melilla were taking place.

- Martínez Lirola, M. (2016). Multimodal representation of sub-Saharan immigrants as illegal: Deconstructing their portrayal as victims, heroes and threats in a sample from the Spanish press. *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 93(4), 343–360. <https://doi.org/10.3828/bhs.2016.21>

A multimodal analysis-based research that looks at the main linguistic and visual characteristics ascribed to sub-Saharan immigrants in the Spanish press. It also covers the ideological consequences of these portrayals.

- Hallin, & Mancini, P. (2004). Comparing media systems : three models of media and politics. *Cambridge University Press*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511790867>

Hallin and Mancini present three different models of media systems, one of which is the Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralist Model characterized by the media's involvement in political conflicts and their nature as a source of ideological expression.

- Machin, D. and Mayr, A. (2012) *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis: A Multimodal Introduction*, London: SAGE.
In this book, the authors explore the integration of CDA and Multimodal Discourse as a way to further analyze both textual and visual media texts. It is a general and practical introduction to CDA and MMCDA for media researchers.

Related theses and dissertations (list of B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. theses defended at Charles University or other academic institutions in the last five years):

- Aguilera Madrid, A. (2017). Los Medios de Comunicación ante los movimientos migratorios. *Trabajo Fin De Máster-Máster Universitario En Diversidad Cultural. Un Enfoque Multidisciplinar y Transfronterizo*. <https://doi.org/10.30827/digibug.50402>
- Hien, L. (2021) 'The Police Have Confirmed All 39 Victims Were Chinese'. *The Mis/Recognition Of Vietnamese Migrants In Their Mediated Encounters Within UK Newspapers* [Master's thesis, London School of Economics]. <https://www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/assets/documents/research/msc-dissertations/2020/251-Hien.pdf>
- LOHYNSKÝ, Jan. *European migration crisis in Czech and Austrian media*. Prague, 2020. 86 pages. Master's thesis (Mgr.). Charles University, Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism. Department of Media Studies. Supervisor PhDr. Vlastimil Nečas, Ph.D.

Date / Signature of the student: 15/11/2022

THIS PART TO BE FILLED BY THE ACADEMIC SUPERVISOR:

I confirm that I have consulted this research proposal with the author and that the proposal is related to my field of expertise at the Faculty of Social Sciences.

I agree to be the Thesis supervisor.

Annamária Neag, PhD.

13.11.2022



Surname and name of the supervisor

Date / Signature of the supervisor

Further recommendations related to the topic, structure and methods for analysis:

Further recommendations of literature related to the topic:

The research proposal has to be printed, signed and submitted to the FSV UK registry office (podatelna) in two copies, by November 15, 2021, addressed to the Program Coordinator. Accepted research proposals have to be picked up at the Program Coordinator's Office, Mgr. Sandra Štefaniková. The accepted research proposal needs to be included in the hard copy version of the submitted thesis.

RESEARCH PROPOSALS NEED TO BE APPROVED BY THE HEAD OF ERASMUS MUNDUS JOURNALISM PROGRAM.

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1. Introduction

*"Walls in places where they shouldn't be,
and places where they should be erected instead,
had they not been elsewhere for a while now." (Canetti, 1982, p.16)*

Spain is the only European country bordering Africa. One of the two access points between the continents is the Melilla enclave. There, at the physical border between Spain and Morocco, a large wired fence stands with the stated purpose of hindering illegal immigration and smuggling.

It is a common practice for migrants wanting to enter Europe to climb the fence in hopes of arriving on Spanish territory. The procedures carried out by Moroccan and Spanish security forces to prevent these crossings, together with the fence's built-in deterrents, have led to multiple altercations over the years. Most recently, on the 24th of June 2022, the attempted crossing to the Spanish side of the border by a group of around 2.000 Sub-Saharan migrants resulted in at least 25 deaths. Later on referred to as the "Melilla tragedy" or the "Nador massacre," the incident is still the subject of debate in national and international media. On the one hand, Spanish authorities insist on justifying the actions taken by the Moroccan government in coordination with the Spanish *Guardia Civil*, one of the two national police forces.

On the other side of the debate are the investigations, carried out a posteriori by human rights groups and media outlets such as the *BBC* (UK) and *El País* (Spain), according to which there is evidence to support "pushbacks" from the Spanish side and at least one death on the country's territory. On 23 December 2022, the Spanish Public Prosecutor's Office closed all ongoing investigations and exonerated all authorities and security officers from any responsibility.

As a consequence of this debate, across all reporting, noticeable discrepancies exist regarding the number of fatalities, the use of force by the police, and accountability for the tragedy. According to academic findings within the Spanish context (Rodríguez Pérez et al., 2022), these discrepancies could be related to the portrayal of migration as a political problem, as political influences might make the information be presented in one way or another.

With the above in mind, the thesis aims to look at the “Melilla tragedy” as a suitable case study for the coverage of migration in polarized media environments in which opposing political values increasingly influence journalistic practice. Looking at the role media partisanship plays in the migration news, the present study rests at the intersection of research about media representation of social issues and the polarized media model to try to answer questions about Spanish reporting on the “Melilla Tragedy” over time.

The general purpose of the study is therefore to compare the coverage of this tragedy carried out by newspapers on both political spectrums of the Spanish media landscape and see if there are significant changes between the immediate reporting and the post-investigations (*BBC, El País*) coverage. By doing that, this research hopes to contribute to the literature on migrant representation by expanding the conversation to include media partisanship and taking into account critical and post-colonial perspectives.

To avoid confusion throughout, this paper provides definitions for some contentious terminology that will be used in the study before moving on to the subsequent sections. Firstly, throughout this thesis, the events that took place on the 24th of June 2022 at the Melilla border are referred to as the “Melilla tragedy.” This terminology was identified as the prevailing way to reference the events in international

and national media and was therefore chosen as a way to make this case study more identifiable. It should be noted, however, that the word "tragedy" carries a set of connotations related to the catastrophic nature of the events. Its use against alternatives like the word "massacre," implying a more significant political intervention, will be further analyzed in the thesis.

Secondly, in accordance with the United Nation's definition of migrant (IOM, 2023), this study uses the word to describe those who cross a border to move away from their usual place of residence. In the context of this thesis, the word is specifically to talk about those crossing the border between Nador and Melilla, mostly African citizens trying to enter European territory. The term was decided upon in lieu of "refugee" or "asylum seeker," as the latter can be contradictory or not always known. From a research perspective, the term "migrant" is usually preferred, as it can be used as an umbrella term that includes all categories and legal definitions.

Throughout the following pages, the thesis will explore existing literature on the topic, present a theoretical framework, introduce the methodology for the study, its limitations, and dive into the results and their possible implications.

2. Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

This chapter presents the rationale for conducting research on the portrayal of migration in a polarized media environment. First, relevant literature will be reviewed in order to identify and analyze existing research¹ related to the topic of the present study. Second, the theoretical framework of the study will be introduced.

¹ In cases where the existing research was published only in Spanish, translation work was carried out by the author of this thesis.

2.1. Media and Migration

Migration is a relevant and up-and-coming topic in media studies. In the field of media and migration research, a focus prevails on issues related to the representation of the migrant person. The SAGE Handbook of Media and Migration (2020) dedicates a chapter to this topic, seeking to understand how the portrayal of migration and migrants is constructed throughout different media texts and platforms. In it, Kaarina Nikunen (2020) focuses on the European refugee crisis of 2015 as an example of how the media tends to portray refugees as either “dangerous others” or “voiceless migrants” (p.411). According to the author, these stereotypes and narratives are built through complex mechanisms that dehumanize migrants and dehistoricize their experiences. Made stronger by online media, these mechanisms are also influenced by political polarization and growing nationalisms. To Nikunen (2020), representation-focused research is a valuable tool when attempting to understand the “definitional power of the media” (p. 419), one that should also be expanded to the study of media featuring the voices of migrants or the asylum seekers themselves.

In their 2014 paper about media representations and building of narratives around the people crossing the Ecuador-Colombia border, Cerbino et al. found that mainstream media reporting on the border situation tends to bend the truth in its representations of migration-related topics by over-focusing on the dead and oftentimes ignoring the particular way in which conflict is experienced on the border by the migrants. According to the authors, it is a common practice for mainstream news outlets to push forward ideological agendas in the coverage of border issues, which, as it will be discussed further on, makes said border coverage “an exemplary tool for deciphering the ideological ways in which the national media constructs information” (p.252).

The research on migrant representation in the media is oftentimes approached through the identification of frames. Particularly when examining how said representation might impact audience attitudes and beliefs (Igartua & Cheng, 2009). Most relevant for this thesis are studies in which frames are regarded as “the outcome of newsgathering routines by which journalists convey information about issues and events from the perspective of values held by political and economic elites” (D’Angelo, 2002, p. 877), as it implies a link between framing and political orientation. Specific to news about migration are the “victim” and “intruder” frames presented by Van Gorp (2005) and portrayals of the migrant as dehumanized groups or a threat to national security or culture (Bleiker et al., 2013; Caviedes, 2018; Kovar, 2020).

In addition to those, framing related to the migrants’ “Otherness” has emerged as a common portrayal in media coverage of migration. To Denitza Kamenova (2014), the media’s portrayal of Otherness is not only a reflection of a political or attitudinal reality but the mechanism through which this Otherness is created and perpetuated. As highlighted by Athanasia Batziou in her study of Spanish and Greek press photographs, “the repeated visual framing of immigrants as ‘others’ that is carried out by the Greek and Spanish press corresponds to cognitive schemata that emanate from [...] these societies” (2017, p.57).

In relation to the Spanish media landscape, an interview-based study focusing on journalists working on migration coverage showed how most professionals agree on three primary challenges concerning media representation of migrants (Oller Alonso et al., 2021). According to the authors of the study, these challenges are the prevalence of stereotypical portrayals, shallow reporting, and the absence of migrant perspectives. In order to overcome this situation and achieve a more diverse journalism that is inclusive of different perspectives, communication, and strategies used by media stakeholders

ought to be reconsidered along with the textual and visual news elements (D'Haenens & Joris, 2020). Particularities of migration framing within Spanish media will be discussed further on.

Beyond representation matters, research on the relationship between media and migration has focused on the impact, negative or otherwise, migration-related information might have on public opinion and political attitudes (Kinder, 1998; Iyengar & Simon, 2000; Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009; Schemer, 2012). Studies like the one carried out by Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart (2009) suggest that any exposure to news about immigration is positively associated with anti-immigration attitudes, even more so in contexts where immigration is considered a politically sensitive issue. In the study, researchers found that these attitudes are mainly influenced by “visibility and tone of immigrant actor coverage” (p. 535) in the news, as well as by the audience’s level of education and political knowledge. The article concludes by highlighting the importance for the media to be mindful of the responsibility this influence entails and to aim for accurate and balanced coverage of migration.

On a similar note, Blinder and Allen (2016) examine how migration, as a salient political issue in countries like the UK, which receive large numbers of migrant and asylum seekers annually, is portrayed in mass media. Here, “a well-documented mapping of media portrayals of immigrants becomes a necessary prerequisite for accurate assessment of whether and how media coverage affects public attitudes toward immigration” (Blinder & Allen, 2016, p.4). According to the authors, the “selective depictions of migrants and asylum seekers” done by the media should be sampled for study, rather than the use of “persuasive arguments,” in order to properly understand how the readers’ attitudes can be affected by the coverage (p.35). In other words, more

attention should be paid to how migrants are depicted in the media rather than to the arguments the media outlets publish against migration.

As it attempts to serve as an updated overview of the media and migration research, the SAGE Handbook of Media and Migration (2020) reclaims the aforementioned area of research by introducing a critical approach to the study of migrant representations in the media and their potential effects on public opinion. In the words of the editors, “We want to reconnect with critical analyzes, social theory, critical and cultural studies, postcolonial studies, feminist and intersectional traditions which have been marginalized in certain studies of media and migration” (Smets et al., 2020, p.47). Thus, the present study aims to contribute to this line of research by carrying out a critical exploration of migration-related news media from a post-colonial perspective that pays due attention to the increasing politicization of the topic (Castelli & Morales, 2016; Pettrachin, 2022).

2.2. Defining and crossing the Southern Borders

The concept of migration is inseparable from the idea of borders. Both public practices (Velasco Ortiz & Contreras, 2013) and media discourse (Horga, 2013) play a role in shaping how borders are constructed and defined and, therefore, in how these borders and migration movements through them are understood and perceived by the public. In this sense, the understanding of these borders from a research perspective is necessary in order to analyze the nature of migration-centered reporting successfully.

A border can be defined as more than a political boundary or a line separating countries. In his research on “Borders and the Contagious Nature of Mediation,” Huub Dijkstelbloem builds on the relationship between infrastructures, representation, and violence to describe borders as mediating entities that link states, people, and politics.

Dijstelbloem's contribution is also relevant to this study in the way it connects so-called infrastructural events, “where territory, state authority, jurisdiction, migrants and technologies intersect” (2020, p.311) with the execution of power by the state. The author concludes, “Media and mediation are intrinsically part of border infrastructures and the emergence of border events” (Dijstelbloem, 2020, p.319).

If, as highlighted by Horga (2013) and Dijstelbloem (2020), the media discourse plays an active role in the definition of borders, it follows that the study of said discourse could be indicative of their nature and extension, as well as of the implications the border-crossing might have on those who trespass its limits. The trespassing of a border is then seen as a public practice that debilitates its physical boundaries (Velasco Ortiz & Contreras, 2013), with the media being a tool used to turn borders into frontiers of difference or to dictate to what extent the border opens or closes (Horga, 2013). To that, the author adds that one “of the many aspects of borders in Europe today is the centrality of the cultural dimension, which can be viewed, like Europeanization itself, as an open process characterized by moments of closure.” (Horga, 2013, p.31).

Europe is considered “the deadliest migration destination in the world” (Smets et al., 2020, p.46), with its southern limits being regarded as a geopolitical frontier between the Global “North” and “South.” The Melilla border, for example, represents the most unequal border in economic terms within the European Union, with Spain's GDP per capita surpassing Morocco's 15 times over. As a result, some specificities need to be regarded when it comes to the particular circumstances surrounding the media coverage of these borders (hereafter referred to as Southern borders).

For one, the power dynamics between Europe and the bordering territories to the south (Global South) should be acknowledged. In their book titled “Reporting at the

Southern Borders: Journalism and public debates on Immigration in the US and the EU,” Dell’Orto & Birchfield present a transatlantic perspective on the relationship between news frames and public discourse in “Northern” countries where migration mainly comes from the “Global South”(2014). Here, public debates and media reporting around migration issues are examined based on their effect on public attitudes and the perceived impact of migration in these countries (Chauzy & Appave, 2014). In the book, Chauzy and Appave also reflect on how “Northern” policy-makers, journalists, or other civil actors play a crucial role in the promotion of more nuanced conversations around migration, ones that include a human portrayal of the migrants beyond their migrant status.

While this literature review has already focused on how migrants are usually represented and framed in the media, it is essential to note some differences when discussing the coverage of immigration from Southern borders. In these cases, frames related to Otherness, intrusion, or victimhood tend to be more noticeable, with the subjects' humanity often being overlooked. According to Chouliaraki and Georgiou (2019), most studies focusing on how the media frames migration fail to acknowledge this shift and the unexpected ways in which power dynamics at the border might influence the language used to portray migrants. To them, this is due to the border’s nature as a site of political and cultural struggle, which the media uses to reinforce existing power relations between nations in the North and groups coming from the South.

Other existing research highlights the constraints media faces when building the public debate around the migration on Southern borders, from finding the right genre of journalism, to dealing with unprecedented socio-political circumstances (Dell’orto & Birchfield, 2014). Indeed, these limitations would also turn the border into a place worth

studying from an ideological standpoint. “The border becomes exemplary for deciphering the ideological ways in which the national media construct information” (Cerbino et al., 2014).

Overall, a general lack of contextualization prevails. When talking about European countries in the last decade, especially after the 2015 migration crisis, Frutos García and Vicente-Mariño identify significant deficits in the coverage of migration from the Southern borders (2019). European countries and their media lack a clear purpose in portraying migration and refuge events, which appear disorganized around different sections and thematic blocks. What is now the most significant migratory flow after the Second World War is approached by media in an unchronological way that hinders the audience’s comprehension and coherent reasoning around the EU’s migration policies (Frutos García & Vicente-Mariño, 2019). To the authors, better coverage of migratory flows on the Southern European border could lead to greater citizen involvement in the management of what they consider to be one of the main challenges faced by the European Union today.

In each country, national media tend to rely on the coverage of migration and other subjects from the institutional point of view (Horga, 2013). By doing so, they contribute “ to the feeding of a would-be ‘European democratic deficit,’ which it repeatedly denounces in front of the consumers of mediatic messages” (Horga, 2013, p.41). According to the author, this means local, regional, and national media play a role in influencing the European Public Sphere and in transforming the perception of its borders.

In Spain, the media coverage of the Southern borders (those between Ceuta and Melilla, and Morocco) has been primarily studied in relation to the role of the journalists. As shown in the following section, there is little research concerning the

power relations that take action in these borders or the way partisanship may influence the reporting. With the above in mind, this thesis will attempt to fill this gap in research and address the coverage of migration at the Melilla border by approaching the media discourse from a critical lens.

2.3. The Melilla border

The portrayal of migration in Spanish media is a topic of academic interest (Concepción Sepúlveda et al., 2008; Martínez Lirola, 2016; Rodríguez-Pérez et al., 2022). Understanding how this portrayal is influenced by different factors, including the professional choices made by media practitioners and the broader context of the national media landscape, can be helpful in order to better understand tendencies in public opinion, policy-making, or even the integration of migrants in Spanish society. In addition to focusing on the broader power dynamics and cultural and economic matters, academia should pay due attention to site-specific actors and contexts when attempting to understand the media portrayal of this specific border and its effects.

2.3.1. The role of the journalists at the Melilla border

Melilla is one of Europe's most debated Southern borders and one of the primary receivers of immigration-curbing investments. Being one of the two Spanish borders with Morocco, Melilla is also the location of many events that Dijstelbloem would define as infrastructural (2020): as territory, authority, jurisdiction, and migrants intersect, a considerable number of journalists focus their professional activity on reporting about it. In their 2020 study, María Ruiz-Aranguren and María José Cantalapedra analyzed how the media present in the Melilla border provide information about the particular conditions in the area and how journalism is practiced in what they call "an area of juridical exceptionality" (p.1). Through fieldwork and interviews with

information professionals and authorities, the researchers reached the following conclusions. First, that despite the numerous media working in the area, there is a lack of diversity when it comes to editorial lines. “Very conservative editorial lines prone to favoring political parties on the right of the political spectrum” (Ruiz-Aranguren & Cantalapiedra, 2020, p.5) are predominant, as local media are economically dependent on traditionally right-leaning city authorities. Secondly, that the journalists’ working conditions are usually precarious and susceptible to “the arbitrariness with which state institutions and security forces are involved in offering greater or lesser access to information.” (p.9). In practice, this finding points to the importance for the present study to pay attention to discrepancies in the reporting done by different media, as they might be influenced by this information shortage, especially prior to the publication of the long-format journalistic investigation on the events.

In 2012, Barrutia Navarrete identified the journalists’ lack of legal knowledge in the field of immigration law as another central problem affecting reporting on the Melilla border. Barrutia Navarrete’s study set off to discover how this lack of knowledge, together with other established journalism practices in the area, might influence how accurate, or not, the media’s portrayal of crossings of the Melilla border is. Through an in-depth content analysis and a series of on-sight interviews, Barrutia Navarrete concluded that journalists reporting on migration in Melilla, whose work is picked up by Spanish national media, are prone to include misinformation, inaccurate wording, and unethical images in their work. Like Ruiz-Aranguren & Cantalapiedra (2020), the researcher references the economic dependency on political power as one of the reasons for the breach in journalistic praxis. “Information is limited, both locally and nationally. The malfunctioning, intentional or not, of the Government Delegation’s communications office provides information that is forced on the local media, which

have no choice but to publish it because they are economically subject to political power” (Barrutia Navarrete, 2020, p.62).

2.3.2. Socio-political context and representation

The final journalistic product, however, does not rely exclusively on the work done by news professionals. Media is also influenced by the current socio-political context and, as a result, is subject to evolve over time.

According to Almela and Arcos Urrutia (2020), journalistic coverage of migrations in Spain has changed over the last few years. After a series of semi-structured interviews with media professionals, researchers found sociological, political, and discursive recent changes within Spain to have impacted the reporting done by media professionals in different ways. The study suggests that changes in the portrayal of migration at the Melilla border are a result of the “big sociological change” (Almela & Arcos Urrutia, 2020, p.261) that involves the coming of age of migrants’ children as well as recent changes in the political field, like the rise of far-right party VOX. Overall, media professionals consider that while politicization and criminalization of migration topics might be on the rise, there is also “a wider media coverage of these issues (more space or time devoted to them); and an explicit willingness to correct bad practices” (Almela & Arcos Urrutia, 2020, p.263).

As mentioned above, a turning point in the coverage of migration was the so-called “refugee crisis” of 2015/2016. In their study of how migrants and immigration were portrayed in Spanish media between 2015 and 2018, Rodríguez-Pérez et al. refer to the consistent portrayal of migration as a political problem during the crisis (2022). This politicization, which falls in line with the general lack of humanity in migration-related information already discussed in this literature review, is most visible in news covering border control and deportation (Rodríguez Pérez et al., 2022). The

authors conclude, in regard to the coverage of the 2016 refugee crisis, that the political framing is linked to the overuse of political actors as sources, which, in turn, is linked to the overall tendency to “cover such migration flow from a political debate frame in contrast to other frames more focused on the situation or the human-interest stories of migrants” (2022, p.168).

In a study of the portrayal of sub-Saharan Immigrants in the Spanish press, Martínez Lirola reached the same conclusion and identified a tendency to portray immigration as a problem instead of focusing on the humanity of the migrants (2016). The researcher found a prevalence of the framing of sub-Saharan migrants crossing the Melilla border as either “criminals” or “victims” across press platforms and on a visual and linguistic level (Marínez Lirola, 2016). This would mean the Spanish coverage of the Melilla border usually has a framing dichotomy similar to the one introduced by Van Gorp (2005). In addition, this representation of migrants presents the migrants’ crossing as a sort of invasion, leaving the audience with the idea that “it’s necessary to rescue or to capture these people in order to protect the main group of the population” (Marínez Lirola, 2016, p.147).

Finally, the country or area of origin of the migrants can also determine the way they are portrayed and perceived by audiences. In this line, Igartua and Cheng (2009) controlled for differences in the country of origin of migrants in their study of how framing influences the way the audience processes news about migration. Results showed a difference between the portrayal and perception of Moroccans as a culturally remote group and Latin Americans as culturally closer to the Spanish participants of the study (Igartua & Cheng, 2009).

Specific to national right-wing media like *ABC*, the second-largest media outlet in Spain, is the “stereotyped representation of the actors, information sources and

circumstances that give order to a preformed script” (Concepción Sepúlveda et al., 2008, p.169). According to the researchers, *ABC*’s coverage of incidents at the Ceuta and Melilla borders in 2005 was marked by the portrayal of migrants as a uniform mass from which all references to the humanity or individuality of border crossers are absent. Some elements from Spain’s history are recovered in order to build the migrants’ Otherness, like the idea of the border as the source of “Muslim invasions” or “the creation of a warlike language associated with anti-Francoist resistance and guerrilla warfare” (Concepción Sepúlveda et al., 2008, p.147).

On the other hand, media like *El País* (ideologically positioned on the center-left and the most-read general news outlet in the country) have been found to publish the highest number of opinion articles related to migration. In the coverage, some references can be found related to the importance of legality and the rights of forcibly displaced individuals (Giró & Jarque, 2006). To this newspaper, the responsibility for the negative associations with migration lies with the government of the moment, which was right-wing during the period under study.

2.4. Theoretical framework

The present study rests at the intersection of literature on media representation of migration and theories on politically polarized media environments. The literature review has focused on identifying common traits in the coverage of migration in the media, focusing on the Spanish national media landscape. It has also been established that the Spanish Southern border can be regarded as an example of how postcolonial and North vs. South dynamics come into play when reporting on migration and that the Melilla border and its specificities make for a worthy object of study.

What follows is to position the literature within theories related to the politicization of society and the media. Namely, the master's thesis departs from the idea of politicization as defined by Esmark (Pfetsch, 2014, p.148): "said to occur whenever political values, motives, and orientations affect editorial and/or journalistic practice".

Hallin and Mancini ascribe the Spanish media landscape to the Mediterranean Polarised Pluralist model (2004), which, according to the authors, is characterized by the role of the media as tools for ideological expression and political mobilization. A central characteristic of the model is, therefore, the ideological differences between general news media outlets in the country – media partisanship. In Spain, the media's wide ideological range can be seen as a result of post-transition press freedom and has remained mostly unaltered since the 1990s (Salaverría & Gómez Baceiredo, 2018). In their overview of the Spanish media landscape (2018), the authors describe the country's media polarization as follows:

This ideological diversity shows, in fact, two clear axes, which could well be represented by a Cartesian plane. On the one hand, the horizontal axis where the most progressive to the most conservative media would be located from left to right. On the other hand, the vertical axis, ideally representing Spain's more specific struggle between constitutionalist media (defenders of national unity) and nationalist media (in favour of greater autonomy or even the complete independence of their respective territories).

But ideological differences between media outlets are not limited to the tensions between national unionists and nationalists. When talking about politically sensitive topics like migration, there also tends to be a contrast between media with different ideological tendencies (Concepción Sepúlveda et al., 2008; Giró & Jarque, 2006).

Deciphering the nature of this contrast and the reach of the ideological differences is the main focus of this study. By combining these ideas about the media's representation of migration and the just-described polarized media model, this research will therefore answer the following question: *How does media partisanship influence the reporting on the Spanish southern border?* (RQ1).

Lastly, the comparative dimension of this study will focus on differences between “breaking news” coverage of the issue and the subsequent coverage, more slow-paced journalism. This last comparison can be understood within a theoretical branch that is critical to the effects of speed on the practice of journalism (Le Masurier 2015, 143), as it presumes slow-paced journalism to be more nuanced when covering topics like migration. This second theory adds value to the study by leading to a second research question: *Are there differences between immediate and long-term reporting on the matter?* (RQ2).

3. Methodology and Research Design

3.1. Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

As it sets off to answer its main research questions, stated in the previous chapter, this study relies on the methodology known as Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MMCDA), a research tool heavily influenced by the better-known Critical Discourse Analysis or CDA (Fairclough, 2010). The political commitment and social approach that, according to Van Dijk, characterizes CDA makes it a suitable tool for the study of power and the ideological foundation of, in this case, news (2001). But while CDA regards mainly the use of language in the construction of world-shaping *discourses* and tries to critically assess how these hiddenly convey meaning, ideologies,

and power relations (Hall, 1997; Fairclough, 2010), MMCDA attaches well-deserved importance to the text's visual features. MMCDA considers how critical discourse studies can be applied to non-linguistic units such as photographs or visual designs (Machin, 2016). To Machin, visual elements in the media can separately contribute to the creation of meaning and therefore be studied in the search for "the dominant ideologies that lie buried in all forms of communication" (2016, p.322). The theoretical chapter of this thesis has already described how both text and images can actively shape the portrayal of migrants and asylum seekers (Van Gorp, 2005; Batzio, 2017) and, specifically, how visual framing can reinforce their dehumanization (Bleiker et al., 2013). As a result, the selection of MMCDA as the main methodology for the present research is justified by the need to adequately address the role played by both text and images in the framing of migrants attempting to cross the Spanish Southern border.

In a media context characterized by the politicization of social or humanitarian issues, depictions of politically salient topics like migration are likely to blur the lines between the political and social (Rodríguez-Pérez et al., 2022). By using a given set of words or images, the media create a "field of meaning" in which they map out "an ideological interpretation of events and social practices, which imply identities and actions even if not overtly stated" (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p.56).

When explaining the motivation for choosing this specific methodology, it is important to note how the analysis of photographs has already positively contributed to the understanding of how migrants' "Otherness" is portrayed in Spanish media (Batziau, 2011). Furthermore, the MMCDA methodology has been successfully employed in the study of media coverage of migration on a number of occasions. Contemplated in this study's literature review, for example, is Martínez Lirola's 2016

paper, in which the author used multimodality and critical discourse analysis to deconstruct the portrayal of Sub-Saharan migrants as “illegal” in the Spanish press.

In conclusion, the use of MMCDA in this study aims to allow the identification of common denominators and differences in the portrayal of the 2022 Melilla tragedy in Spanish left-wing and right-wing media. Drawing from existing studies on the topic and critical analysis of a selected sample, the use of MMCDA makes it possible to explore connections between language, power, and ideology hidden in visual and textual *discourses* about the tragedy and the subsequent investigations. Further details regarding the sampling of articles that are relevant to this study will be provided in the following section.

3.2. Sample selection

This section is focused on the selection of a relevant sample for the study. It will do so by taking into consideration the already introduced Spanish media landscape and justifying the use of certain media outlets and articles through which to carry out the study’s analysis.

3.2.1. Clarifications on the Spanish media landscape

As has been discussed in the theoretical framework, the Spanish media model can be ascribed to the Mediterranean Polarised Pluralist model (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), characterized, according to the authors, by the role of the media as a tool for ideological expression and political mobilization. The literature chapter of this thesis has also established how the nature of the Spanish media landscape has implications for the way migrants crossing the Melilla border might be represented in the national media.

Relevant to this study is also the tendency described by Hallin and Mancini (2004), within the Mediterranean model, of lower circulation of newspapers as a result of the appearance of the internet and the 2008 economic crisis. In the specific case of Spain, this tendency is supported by AIMC's (an organization focused on analyzing the national media landscape) latest report about the situation of Spanish media in the last year (the *Estudio General de Medios* or EGM). According to it, the readership of general news media outlets in the country is in continuous decrease. Nevertheless, traditional print media (and their digital versions) are still the main source of news for around 12% of the population (AIMC, 2023, p.15). Among them, the most popular titles are *El País*, *El Mundo*, *La Vanguardia*, and *ABC*. The *El País*' website is also the fourth most visited website in the country, after *YouTube*, *Facebook*, and *Spotify*. According to the same AIMC report (p.48), digital news media, in general, have experienced a significant audience rise in the last few years - with around 34% of audiences choosing to access news digitally (in 2022). In this context, the native digital media (*El Confidencial*, *eldiario.es*, *El Español*) that emerged mostly between 2015 and 2018 have achieved public recognition and journalistic influence comparable to that of some legacy media (Salaverría & Martínez-Costa, 2021).

This data regarding the circulation and prevalence of different media in the country provides some clarification when trying to map out the Spanish media landscape. With it in mind, the sampling of specific media outlets for the purpose of this thesis can be adequately justified.

3.2.2. Media sampling

The selection of media outlets and articles is overall conditioned by the two research questions. First, in order to answer RQ1 ("*How does media partisanship influence the reporting on the Spanish southern border?*") related to the ideology of

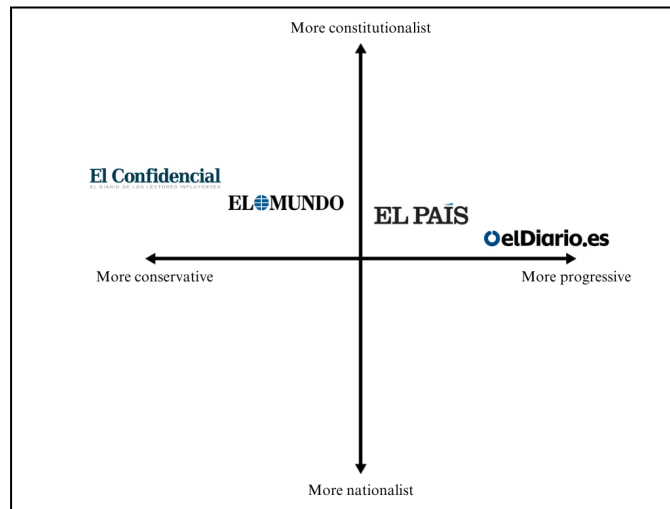
media outlets, a sampling of general news media needs to be done. Based on the previous description of the national media landscape, this research will look at both popular legacy media and strictly digital ones, as the two have been deemed pertinent samples of the Spanish system.

Telling of the political divide within the country are the two most-read print newspapers (*El País*, *El Mundo*), both close to the political center and with a “constitutionalist editorial line” (Salaverría & Martínez-Costa, 2021) but with partisan tendencies to the left in the case of *El País*, and to the right for *El Mundo* (Baumgartner & Chaqués Bonafont, 2015). Among the native digital media outlets, this study will look at the right-wing and economically liberal *El Confidencial* (Sánchez González, 2008) and the leftist *elDiario.es* (López García & Valera Ordaz, 2013). According to Salaverría & Martínez-Costa (2021), these are, respectively, the digital media with the biggest readership and the most subscriptions.

By paying attention to these specific outlets, the sample subject for research will cover the two political spectrums of the Spanish media landscape. Here, *El País* and *El Mundo* work as more moderate options for both positions, while *elDiario.es* and *El Confidencial* are strictly digital newspapers for a more specific ideology-based audience. The selected media are therefore situated at four different positions within the political spectrum and allow for this study’s sample to represent the breadth of the national media landscape without relying on the so-called yellow press or more sensationalistic titles.

Image 1

The study's sampled media outlets situated within Salaverría & Gómez Baceiredo's cartesian plane (2018)



Note: Image 1 shows an approximation based on reviewed literature and aims to aid the understanding of readers who are not familiar with the Spanish media landscape.

When it comes to the selection of articles within the chosen media outlets, this study relies on purposeful sampling methods. Purposeful sampling is a qualitative research technique that relies on “statistical probability theory” for the selection of “information-rich cases” (Patton, 2002, p.230). Within the purposeful sampling method, the use of heterogeneity sampling, as opposed to extreme, homogeneous, or typical case sampling, might be best suited for this research. According to Patton, the heterogeneity sample technique allows for the finding of relevant common characteristics of a phenomenon (2002). In this case, looking at sampled media of heterogeneous partisan orientations and nature might allow for a better understanding of the coverage of migration in Spain and for the identification of important differences and commonalities between opposite sides of the ideological spectrum.

According to Hallin and Mancini (2004), the Mediterranean Polarised Pluralist model is characterized, among other things, by a strong tendency to commentary and

opinion pieces. As this study sets off to understand the coverage of migration in said media model, it will therefore focus on the opinion section of the selected media outlets. The strategic selection of opinion pieces also fits the nature of MMCDAs as a methodology centered on ideology.

In order to find suitable pieces for study, databases like Factiva were considered. However, due to a lack of availability of opinion pieces from the selected media outlets on third-party websites, the final selection of articles was done by manually checking the “opinion” or “editorial” section of each medium’s website. To do so, the following keywords related to the Melilla tragedy were used: “Tragedia+Melilla” and “Masacre+Nador.” These are the most common word combinations used by the media to describe the tragedy subject of study, the “infrastructural event” (Dijstelbloem, 2020) from which we hope to gain a better understanding of the intersection of migrants, territory, jurisdiction, and power. However, for cases where not enough results were achieved through these keywords or on media websites that don’t allow this kind of search, an additional searching technique was needed.

Initially, based on existing research (Hawdon, Oksanen, & Räsänen, 2012), this study presumed a news cycle of at least one month for the “Melilla tragedy”. Departing from this idea, in cases where the aforementioned research technique could not be used or was not effective, the author of this thesis manually scanned the “opinion” or “editorial” section in search of pieces related to the event in question during the month following the events. As a result, it was revealed that the entirety of the coverage done by each media was mostly concentrated on the week after the first report of the events (June 24th-June 30th). In most cases, at least two articles were identified in these sections for the selected time period.

To answer the RQ2 (“*Are there differences between immediate and long-term reporting on the matter?*”), the same manual search was carried out for articles published during the month of November 2022. Here, the time frame of the sample is based on the publication of long-format investigations by international and national media during that month. More specifically, the BBC’s reportage titled “*How Spain looked on as dozens were crushed to death at its border*” (1/11/2022) and the cross-border investigation done by *El País*, *Le Monde*, *Enass*, *Der Spiegel*, and *Lighthouse Reports* (29/11/2022) under the title “*The Melilla tragedy: What role did Spain and Morocco play in the deaths?*”. As revealed by an evidentiary search in Factiva’s database, these investigations caused an all-time high in the number of published articles covering the “Melilla tragedy” during the month of November and early December 2022. Again, after manually searching the “Opinion” and “Editorial” sections of each media outlet, at least two articles that fit the desired criteria were identified on average for each publication.

Once the available opinion pieces for both selected time periods were identified, purposeful sampling techniques were used to identify the most relevant from each of the media outlets. In practice, this means that, when presented with different article options from which to build the sample, the author of this thesis selected those that were “richer” in information, visuals or quantity of text (Patton, 2002). In some of the media, only two articles were found to match the criteria needed to be included in the study, and, therefore, 2 is the chosen number of articles for each of the media and time frames.

As a result of this process, the present study will perform an MMCDA on a total of 16 articles (8 from June and 8 from November/December). The sample obtained from these procedures should, regardless of the results of the study and its limitations, work

as a relevant representation of the Spanish media's coverage of migration issues and contribute to the understanding of partisan differences and similarities.

3.3. Research design

MMCDA-centered literature has not yet reached a consensus on a standardized approach to conducting a multimodal analysis of journalistic pieces (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Machin, 2016; Machin & Ledin, 2018). To Machin, this is likely due to the complexity of multimodality itself, presumed to include multiple aims and concepts (2016). As a result, the use of MMCDA to analyze the "Melilla tragedy" as a case study of media coverage of migration in a polarized media environment does not imply the implementation of a given approach. A suitable research design for the present study can be built, however, from these authors' theories and reflections on the matter.

In their guide to MMCDA, Machin, and Mayr try to establish a system through which to apply the CDA approach to the analysis of multimodal texts (2012). While doing that, they introduce a series of tools and methods for the analysis of both texts and visual forms of communication. To the authors (2012), when attempting to find underlying meaning in a text, special attention should be paid to the lexical connotations that come from a use of language in which the following phenomena are visible: "overlexicalization" (p.37), "lexical absence" (p.38), "structural opposition" (p.39), "lexical choices" (p.42) and "genre of communication" (p.42). In addition to these, Machin and Mayr discuss the relevance of "quotation verbs" (p.59), "representational strategies" (p.77) of people inside the text or images, identifying any signs of persuasion in the text or, among other things, the "modality" (p.186), which refers to the presence of the author and the text and the writer(s)' attitude towards its content.

Machin's posterior work (Machin, 2016; Machin & Ledin, 2018) builds on the above and emphasizes the importance of the *social* when carrying out this kind of research. Applied to photographs, this focus on the social as a point of departure would lead to questions such as the following: "Why is this photograph being deployed? How is it already discursively shaped and governed by practices of representational use? [...] What affordances does it bring to the overall representation which serves the interests of an institution or an ideology, for example?" (Machin, 2016, p.331). Without this social focus, warns the author, the analysis of said images might "fall into pointless description" (p.331).

Machin and Ledin (2018) provide an example of how all these tools and methods can come into play, and their model analysis effectively shows how semiology is at the base of MMCD. Here, semiology (or semiotics) is understood from Barthes' perspective, according to which signs and symbols have both an objective meaning (denotation) and a culturally subjective one (connotation) (1977). Applied to a written text, Barthes' theory can be used in order to identify ideology or power relations from the way said text is constructed. The same principle can be applied to photographs. Even when talking about an image of a real-life event or person, the decision to capture said reality itself (instead of capturing a different moment or angle) and the visual elements within the selected frame could be scanned in search of meaning and connotations (Barthes, 1977).

Inspired by the views described in this section, a general framework was created to fit the present study. While approaching the study of media representation of migration in the Spanish Southern border through a semiotic standpoint (Table 1, Appendix 1), the following aspects ought to be considered:

- Lexical connotations: Conclusions on this matter will be derived from the analysis of the use of language phenomena, quotation verbs, representational strategies, and modality of the text according to the aforementioned definitions by Machin and Mayr (2012). The framework should also contemplate whether these connotations are naturalized in society (Barthes, 1977).
- Visual connotations: Derived from the framed portrayal of a given reality, as well as from the elements that appear in the frame and the relationship between them. The metaphorical meaning of the images and any signs of stereotypical representation should also be considered (as described on Table 1).
- Social meaning: This last step of the framework should provide an answer to Machin's questions (mentioned above) about the social purpose of each photograph or choice of words).

The framework will then be applied to the selected sample of journalistic pieces in order to come to relevant conclusions with which to provide answers to the defined research questions and identify embedded traces of ideology, power relations, and inequality structures within the media's discourse (Fairclough, 2010).

Finally, in addition to considering the semiotic nature of the pieces' lexicon and visuals, the sample will be analyzed on the basis of the following content-related questions. As per this thesis' theoretical chapter, the question-based content analysis should provide further insights into the nature of the pieces (Table 2, Appendix 1):

- What is the general voice and tone of the piece?
- Is the focus of the story put on political figures/actors?
- Does the piece include a reference to the migrants? If so, what frames are used in their portrayal or representation?

- Does the piece include a reference to the fence/border? If so, how is it portrayed?
- Does the piece include a reference to responsibility/accountability for the tragedy? If so, who is portrayed as guilty?

As the last step in the research, results for the semiotic and content-related approach will be compared between the two sampled time-frames (RQ2) in search of differences and commonalities.

3.4. Limitations, Reflexivity & Ethics

MMCDA as methodology allows for what Machin refers to as “a greater sociological imagination” (2016, p.332) which, in turn, makes it easier to better decipher the media’s discourses and the mechanisms behind them. The use of MMCDA, however, comes with a series of limitations that need to be acknowledged.

In their guide to Multi-Modal Critical Discourse Analysis, Machin and Ledin talk about how multi-modality’s main limitations are also an opportunity for improving the way MMCDA is performed (2018). The authors focus particularly on how MMCDA studies have a tendency to be overly descriptive and how, as a result, they might struggle to come up with clear results that are applicable across different case studies. To them, however, keeping in mind how different “semiotic resources,” linguistic or audiovisual, might be “interdependent” on each other could be a way to achieve results that work across a variety of examples (2018, p.64). In order to prevent any limitations related to this, while carrying out this study, special attention will be paid to the identification of general themes applicable across the entire sample and beyond, as opposed to going too much into detail with the particularities of each piece.

Secondly, related to the use of purposeful sampling in this study, some concerns can be raised about the reduced size of the sample. Still, according to Patton, a small sample should be sufficient for a study like the one that occupies this master's thesis as long as the following criteria are met: 1) That the researcher does not overgeneralize the results from the analysis and 2) That the "advantages of in-depth, purposeful sampling" are maximized, meaning that the small sample is analyzed in a detail and in a pertinent manner (2002, p.186).

The use of opinion pieces in this study's sample could also be considered a limitation of its results. Opposite to articles presented as "impartial" or "neutral" news, opinion pieces tend to be explicit in their ideological positioning. And while this makes it easier for the critical analysis to draw relevant and clear conclusions, it should be noted that results might vary if the same methodology was applied to traditional news pieces.

Finally, when it comes to ethical concerns, the nature of the methodology makes it necessary for the researcher to reflect on her own position with regard to the topic. To Graham, criticizing critical discourse approaches for their moralistic approach "misses the methodology's point entirely" (2018, p.186). However, according to the author, it is still important to "make the basis of our [the researcher's] judgments explicit." Keeping this in mind, while applying the semiotic framework to identify connotations related to the use of language or visual elements in this study, it should be noted that the researcher is a Spanish citizen. For someone who has been raised within the Spanish context, the identification of connotations that are naturalized within the culture might be harder than for a non-Spanish researcher. Likewise, the researcher's familiarity with the Spanish political landscape might lead to a higher sensitivity to political references.

When answering the content-related question, “*Is the angle predominantly political?*” special attention should be paid to this particularity.

The present chapter has now introduced a methodological approach to the study of the representation of migration from the Spanish Southern border. A sample has been built through “purposeful sampling” methods to ensure representation from across the Spanish political spectrum is taken into consideration, and a framework for MMCDAs has been presented. Having applied the described framework to the selected sample, paying special attention to potential limitations and ethical concerns, the following chapter will include an in-depth analysis of the sampled journalistic pieces with which to answer the study’s research question. The results of the analysis will then be summarized to be presented as the main findings of the master’s thesis.

4. Analysis & Results

The critical analysis of the sample through the described methodology aims, in this study, to uncover traces of structural power and ideology in the selected media pieces. Overall, while performing the analysis, the study’s two main research questions have been kept in mind at all times.

For the first one (*RQ1: How does media partisanship influence the reporting on the Spanish southern border?*), special attention was paid to whether the traits and tendencies described in the reviewed literature can be applied to the study’s specific sample. As it has been explained in the Research Design section of this thesis, the identification of said characteristics was accomplished by applying the two methodological frameworks (semiotic and content-related). Through the multimodal analysis of the published articles, and taking into consideration the reviewed literature, I identified five main themes that are relevant to this thesis’ research questions and from

which informative conclusions can be drawn. The identified themes of this study are as follows: (1) social meaning, (2) politicization, (3) representation of migrants, (4) border definition, and (5) responsibility. Analysis through these condensed themes, which each correspond to a dominant discourse identified in the sample, was decided upon in order to achieve a more effective comparison between the different media's approaches to the events of June 24th, 2022. Looking at differences in media through this lens also makes it possible to draw conclusions about the two studied time periods (*RQ2: Are there differences between immediate and long-term reporting on the matter?*).

4.1. Opinion Pieces and their social purpose

With MMCDA's focus being set on not only the use of language but also the context of this use, it is important to situate the study's selected sample within its social context. As mentioned in the previous section, this enables the identification of each piece's social meaning through a semiotic lens. To Machin, this also makes it possible to prevent the analysis from being a plain description of the sample (2016).

Bearing this in mind, a brief summary of Spain's social and political context with regard to migration is needed before performing the analysis. As of the 30th of January 2020, a few days after its inauguration, the Spanish Socialist Government instaurated a Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security, and Migration. This, together with a series of other political actions, created a perception of Pedro Sánchez's government as a particularly progressive one in migration matters. Two and a half years later, when the Melilla border events took place, the lack of a clear response from the government was interpreted by some as a break with the inclusion approach and proof of the president's real views on the matter (*Sanchez's associates criticize his words after the death of more*

*than 20 sub-Saharan Africans in Melilla*², El Español June 26th, 2022). On the other side of the discussion are right-wing parties who, going against Sánchez's views, have made anti-migration campaigns a central part of their political program. Parties like PP or Vox show their opposition on their websites, with the former promoting an employment-based migration policy and the latter being known for making statements linking migration to crime and portraying migrants as a threat to the Spanish territorial and cultural integrity. Meanwhile, circulates among civil society, the perception of an increase in the number of migrants arriving from the African continent (*Immigrants lead Spain to break its historical population record*, El Debate November 19th, 2022), together with a debate about how these arrivals should be dealt with by authorities. An attempt to raise awareness around the difficulties of migrants arriving from the South can also be identified in both the media and the work of activists and NGOs in the country (*Collectives call for a state-wide "unified march" to denounce the massacre at the Melilla fence*, Público June 27th, 2022).

Situated within this context, opinion pieces, as a “genre of communication” (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p.42) that allows for semiotic analysis and that openly carries an ideologically aligned narrative (van Dijk, 1996), tend to fall into one of the two sides of the social debate. The analysis of the sampled opinion pieces based on the described context allowed for an informed assessment of the lexicon and images throughout the present study. Taking this context into consideration also proved essential when answering questions such as “Why is this image/sentence being deployed?” or “What affordances does it bring to the overall representation which serves the interests of an institution or an ideology?” (Machin, 2016, p.331) posed as part of semiotic discourse analysis.

² This and the following article titles from the Spanish media have been translated by the author of this thesis. See the original title and access link in the bibliography section.

Applied to the sample, this question-led approach works as an explanation, for example, for the use of Pedro Sánchez's photographs in the June editorial coverage of the Melilla events (Figure 1). Paying attention to the context, the use of the president's image can be understood as a way for the opinion piece to point toward the importance of Sánchez's shift of attitude regarding migration-related events like the Melilla tragedy.



Figure 1: Opening photographs for the sampled El País (30/06/2022) and El Mundo (25/06/2022) opinion pieces about the Melilla tragedy.

To the question: “Why is this image being deployed?” the answer after looking at Figure 1 from a context-based lens would be: to make it clear that the Spanish president is, against his usual human-right standards, failing to admit to any responsibility. Overall, the use of visuals compliments the text in each editorial piece (all Figure 1 articles have criticism towards Sánchez's response to the events as a common trait) and is governed by normalized practices of representation of politicians (at institutional spaces, as individual political actors, in front of microphones, doing hand gestures, or mid-speech, among others³). In *El Confidencial* (28/06/2022), the same message is conveyed through the mid-text inclusion of a screenshot of a 2014

³ The stated common affordances for the representation of political actors in the media were identified based on the researcher's previous media exposure and some additional literature (Haim & Jungblut, 2021).

tweet in which Sánchez criticizes the then president of Spain, Mariano Rajoy, for his lack of acknowledgment of deaths at the Melilla border.

Text-wise, we see references to the Spanish president’s “hypocrisy” in the use of contrasting lexical and grammatical structures across the sample (structural opposition). This analysis has already mentioned how Pedro Sánchez’s representation is partly conditioned by his discourse after the Melilla events, which did not match his previous position in regard to migration. Connotations of this shift are not always stated in an explicit way, but they can be derived from semiotic analysis. For example, in *El País* (30/06/2022), a paragraph focused on a book published by Pedro Sánchez about his role in the rescue of the Aquarius boat, in which he takes credit for saving the lives of hundreds of migrants, ends with the following sentence: “After the death of dozens of people in Melilla, the president declared that the attempted jump was a violent attack on the territorial integrity of our country.” A similar opposition can be found in *El Mundo* (01/12/2022): “The government, once the advocate for the reception of migrants, is now obliged to shed light on the tragedy that occurred in Melilla.” These examples show that most references to the government in the sample have a negative connotation related to its “hypocritical” reaction to the events.

Focusing on the editorial and opinion pieces’ social meaning also made it possible for this study to identify a trend in the coverage of the Melilla tragedy. Mainly in June pieces (RQ2), there is a tendency for the articles to be used as a tool for social mobilization⁴.

We need to live with that reality, with that pain, and from that minimum social conscience of human dignity, reject with all our strength any attempt at political manipulation of that tragedy. (*El*

Confidencial, 29/06/2022)

⁴ All quoted sample segments have been translated by the author of this thesis. Original articles can be accessed through provided links in the Appendix 2 section.

We still have time to say not in our name. (*elDiario.es*, 27/06/2022)

There is a second opportunity to be blunt and to take to the streets this Friday to raise our voices against institutional racism [...], for the complicit murders in Melilla and all the lives that are stolen from us at the Spanish borders. (*elDiario.es*, 1/07/2022)

Differences in the nature of this call for action or social mobilization between the left-wing *elDiario.es* (call for citizens to speak out about the misperformance of authorities) and the right-leaning *El Confidencial* (call for shifting the focus to the migrant's humanity and putting an end to the political debate) are then understood as a sign of ideological positioning, with calls for mobilization being more common in digital native media, independently from the political leaning (RQ1).

4.2. Migration as a political battleground

As expected based on the reviewed literature (Almela & Arcos Urrutia, 2020), the aforementioned calls for mobilization and apparent “willingness to correct bad practices” (p.263) coexist with a media context characterized by rising politicization and criminalization of migration topics. According to Rodríguez Pérez et al., a common way for political framing to manifest itself is in the overuse of quotes from political actors (2022). Out of the 16 sampled opinion and editorial articles, 12 openly put the focus on political actors. From these, 8 articles (half of the sample) include the name of a politician as their first word either in the heading or the subheading. An interesting trend, both because it points to an overt politicization and personification of the Melilla events and because it makes it clear that there was an important shift in the attribution of responsibilities. From the 8 opinion pieces that start with the name of a political figure (mostly concentrated in the fully digital *El Confidencial* and *elDiario.es*), the ones

published in June 2022 all mention Sánchez first, while the ones published after the long format investigations from the *BBC* and *El País* focus the attention on Interior Minister Marlaska (RQ2).

This shift, equally visible in the media of both sides of the political spectrum (RQ1), is also seen in the use of photographs (Figure 1 & Figure 2). Like in the text, the appearance of the political figure is not only the article's main focus but also the chosen way to open the piece – picture lead.

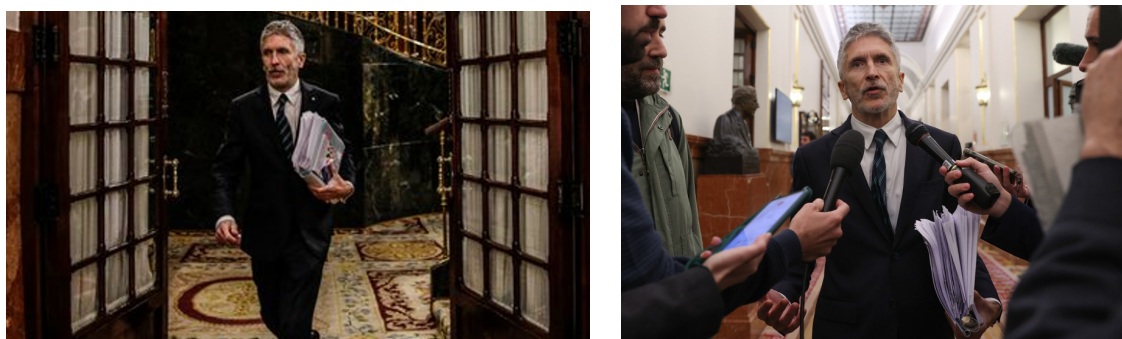


Figure 2: Opening photographs for the sampled El País (01/12/2022) and El Mundo (01/12/2022) opinion pieces about the Melilla tragedy.

Overall, prevail the already mentioned standardized practices of representation of political figures (at institutional spaces, mid-speech, etc.), but negative connotations can be deduced from the semiotic analysis. Facial expressions in the chosen screen capture frames (Figures 1 & 2) negatively portray Sánchez and Marlaska. For example, neither of them is shown smiling, but they are both grimacing in front of journalists/microphones. Additionally, Figure 1 (*El País*, 30/06/2022) shows Pedro Sánchez trying to explain with his index fingers pointed to the sky– a sign of authority and knowledge that are being undermined in the text of the article. In Figure 2 (*El País*, 01/12/2022), Marlaska is portrayed walking out of the Parliament. Here, the decision to include the open doors in the frame can be read as a way to convey the idea that the

Minister is “walking away” or trying to avoid responsibility. Additionally, portrayals of Marlaska in Figure 2 show the Minister “caught” by journalists in a moment of passing, carrying a big pile of paperwork and dressed in all-black formal attire (while in Figure 1, Sánchez is always shown in a space of planned communication with the citizens where all the elements in the frame, except for his grimacing expression, are likely controlled by the media or the President’s communication team).

Also relevant to this study in terms of the politicization of migration issues is the direct reference to the media’s role in portraying the events through a political lens. What follows is an example of this politicization made by *El Confidencial*:

We should reject with all our might any attempt to **manipulate this tragedy politically**. (*El Confidencial*, 28/06/2022)

This self-referential quote situates *El Confidencial* (together with *El Mundo*) as having a tendency to shy away from its own politicization of the topic and talk about “political manipulation” as something alien to them. It is common for *El Confidencial*’s discourse, for example, to paint the Melilla events as an unavoidable tragedy in which the actions of political figures have little to no influence. The opposite happens in left-wing media, where the reference to political perspectives and politicians’ responsibility is made in a more overt way (RQ1):

Politics can and **must defend human rights** and the dignity of all peoples against those who embrace the inevitability of barbarism. (*elDiario.es*, 27/06/2022)

The cited quote from *El Confidencial* (28/06/2022) is also especially interesting if we take into consideration that this is also the media outlet where the politicization is

most visible image-wise (Figure 3). In total, the sample pieces from this media outlet include 5 photographs of politicians (more than any other sampled media). Here again, we see a moody Marlaska, caught in a passing or waiting moment and surrounded by dark tones. The image of Mónica Oltra included in Figure 3 is an exception to the prevalence of Sánchez and Marlaska as the “faces” of the government in the dealing of the tragedy, however, its inclusion in the study helps understand how the portrayal of political figures is subject to practices of representation that shed an overall negative light on the subjects.



Figure 3: Photographs of political figures in El Confidencial, in order of appearance, showing Mónica Oltra (26/06/2022)-a regional politician asking for better handling of migration in the country- and Fernando Grande-Marlaska (07/11/2022; 12/11/2022)

With the politicization of migration coverage being a theoretical pillar of this study, it makes sense that, in the analysis of politicization within the sample, the two chosen approaches in this thesis’s research design (semiotic and content-related) are highly complimentary of each other. Combining a semiotic approach with the previous remarks on the number of references to political actors made by each media allows for identifying patterns in the nature of said politicization.

Put into practice, the results of this combined approach are mostly visible in the lexical choices made by the authors. The prevailing discourse of political

misperformance and dissatisfaction is visible, in addition to the already discussed visual level, in the media's tendency to use a number of subsequent words to describe a political actor or action (overlexicalization). According to *El País* (28/06/2022), the problem with migration is that those with the power to make a change (e.g., politicians) are dominated by "idleness, disdain, and apathy." To *El Mundo* (27/06/2022), Sánchez's response to the tragedy was "disappointing, frustrating, and unacceptable." In *elDiario.es*' description of Marlaska (01/12/2022), the words "incapacity" and "insensibility" are used together to talk about the character of the Minister of Interior. Mentioned examples of overlexicalization are evenly distributed among articles from all sides of the political spectrum and both studied time periods (RQ1 & RQ2).

Finally, it is important to note how, in most cases, the politicization of the coverage comes directly from the piece's author, whose presence in opinion pieces tends to be explicit (modality). Here, modality is understood as "the writer's (or speaker's) attitude toward and/or confidence in the proposition being presented" (Lillian, 2008, p.2) or a tool for uncovering a text's implicit ideology. Therefore, this study's analysis focused on identifying modal verbs, adjectives, names, or adverbs through which the author presents the Melilla tragedy as a politically charged event or positions themselves ideologically concerning the information. In general, authors in exclusively digital media tend to use more extreme descriptions of the social and political actors. There is a contrast, however, in who the recipient of these descriptions is. *El Confidencial*'s reference to the "feminist super-left," "good-intentioned frivolity," or the "*progres*" (Spanish short for progressive people, implying derogatory connotations), clashes with *elDiario.es*' mentions of "extreme right." This same contrast is visible but more toned down in legacy media like *El Mundo* or *El País*. Word combinations like "xenophobic right" (*El País*) or "non-compliant Marlaska" and "stubborn defense" (*El Mundo*) are,

however, still telling of an evident ideological positioning. The same phenomenon was identified in the authors' use of verbs next to political figures' names. Again, there is a more neutral use of language in legacy media ("the government has to," "Marlaska has decided," "Podemos demands") than in digital natives ("Sanchez has showered praise on," "Grande-Marlaska talks and does not stop, excuses himself," or "the president celebrated prematurely") where the ideological breach is more obvious to the analysis.

4.3. Migrants as voiceless victims

When it comes to the portrayal of migrants, in general, all four media outlets editorialize about migration from a common starting point: they all take an anti-racist stance on the immigration issue and agree on the need for improvements in regulation. However, some differences in the specificities of the portrayal of migration were identified during the analysis.

Firstly, drawing from the reviewed literature, this study singled out characteristics of the "victim" (Van Gorp, 2005) and "voiceless" (Nikunen, 2020) frames and found evidence of their prevalence within the sample, even though the extent to which the discourse fit into these categories proved different for each of the media outlets and the two studied time periods. An exception is the article published in *El Mundo* (27/06/2022), in which the events are referred to as an "assault" perpetrated by migrants, an approach more fitting to the "intruder" (Van Gorp, 2005) or "dangerous others" (Nikunen, 2020) frames. The expectations set in the theoretical chapter about the lack of references to how conflict is experienced by migrants on the border were met in all cases (Cerbino et al., 2014).

Content-wise, references to the migrants were more common in the immediate reporting of the events than in editorials published after the long-format journalistic

investigations (RQ2). This is true both for the text and the images, although in some cases, the analyzed November articles made no direct textual reference to the migrants and still included photographs showing the border and migrants before or after the crossing (e.g., *El País*, 14/11/2022; *El Confidencial*, 07/11/2022). The fact that images of migrants are more common than direct textual references themselves is also telling of the nature of the coverage, which falls in some cases into what Barrutia Navarrete would label an “unethical” portrayal of migration (2012).



Figure 4: Migrant portrayals in *El País* (14/11/2022) and *El Confidencial* (07/11/2022)

Both images featured in Figure 4, for example, were published in articles that this analysis marked as “not including a reference to the migrants.” But despite their ancillary character, the presence of the photos can be interpreted semiotically to unveil power relations and political positioning. Visual trends among these images include, for one, representational strategies based on the stereotypical portrayal of migrants as a faceless group of young males standing by the border fence. Figure 4 proves in this regard that there is a lack of individual features in the portrayal of migrants, mostly shown as an unmanageable amount of people. In *El Confidencial*'s photo (07/11/2022), we see a line of young Africans that extends beyond the frame creating a sense of infinite or indeterminate length. In the case of *El País* (14/11/2022), the presence of the security agents in the top part of the frame adds an element of hierarchy to this

portrayal: Not only the physical border stand between the migrants and their desired destination, but also a line of Moroccan police officers pushing behind them and a few Spanish *Guardia civil* officers watching from the heights.

For cases where the articles did include direct textual references to the migrants, the nature of these varied significantly from left-wing to right-wing media from a lexical perspective (RQ1). Words like “individuals,” “people,” “sub-Saharan,” “migrants,” “mortal victims,” and “the dead” were identified as “normalized” across the media based on the frequency of their appearance. Using social context queues and paying attention to surrounding words and information, these words were then assigned to a specific portrayal of the migrants. Based on these parameters, words like “dead migrants” or “dead black people,” for example, were found to carry a connotation of vulnerability and to be more common in right-wing media. For left-wing media, words like “person,” “individuals,” or even “minors,” more focused on the humanity of the represented subjects, proved more frequent. To Igartua and Chen (2009), the inclusion of the country of origin of the migrants plays a role in the way they are portrayed and perceived by readers. And while mentions to the country of origin are common in the initial reporting done by right wing media like *El Mundo* and *El Confidencial*, a slight improvement in this regard was recorded after the publication of the November investigations (RQ2). What follows is an example of this change:

The tragedy that has already left at least 23 **sub-Saharan Africans dead** in Friday's avalanche when **hundreds of migrants** tried to cross into Melilla is one of the most devastating episodes ever experienced at the city's border. (El Mundo, 27/07/2022)

On that day, as Morocco later admitted, **23 people died** trying to cross the Chinatown border post between Nador and the Spanish autonomous city. (El Mundo, 08/11/2022)

Overall, the pieces' lexical portrayal fall in line with the victim, voiceless, and dehumanized frames. In said portrayal, death is usually described as a passive action ("died," "were found dead" vs. "were killed") resulting from natural or unavoidable circumstances "avalanche," or "massive wave"). Only in one article the name of one of the dead migrants is provided ("His name was Abdul Aziz Yacoub"; *elDiario.es*, 01/12/2022), while background information on the circumstances behind their decision to migrate was also limited to this left-wing media outlet (RQ1).

Most of the people who tried to circumvent the Melilla fence that day were Sudanese, a **nationality that usually obtains asylum in Spain.** (*elDiario.es*, 01/12/2022)

As mentioned above, the "victimhood" of the migrants can be seen in the featured images of each piece as well as in their text, a finding that can be applied to the whole sample (RQ1). Figure 5 shows different examples of the migrants portrayed as a homogenous group in which, again, there is no place for individual features or any kind of identification. The second and fourth images (*El Mundo* (25/06/2022), *elDiario.es* (27/96/2022)) present what might be the most clear example of this trend. Both photos portray the migrants as a mass of intertwined bodies in which it is hard to tell who is alive or dead. Recognizable pieces of clothing are ragged and dirty, taking up most of the space, while in the distance a line of observant police officers dressed in clean uniforms take on an observant role, carrying shields and weapons. In the case of the image from *El Confidencial* (28/06/2022), this is taken even step further, and the message of migrants as a group of victims is represented through the graves dug in Morocco for the mortal victims.



Figure 5: From top left to bottom right. Migrant portrayals in *El País* (28/06/2022), *El Mundo* (25/06/2022), *El Confidencial* (28/06/2022), and *elDiario.es* (27/06/2022).

It should be noted, however, that there is a willingness to rectify bad habits in this regard (Almela & Arcos Urrutilla, 2020). Especially in *elDiario.es*, where the described attempt to shift the focus to the importance of social action and achieve a more human-based portrayal of migration is also visible in the use of images. Figure 6 shows a decision-making process at the time of deciding what image to publish with the opinion piece. The photo in Figure 6 shows a parallelism with the ones in Figure 5, but breaks the audience's expectations by showing a homogenous group of bodies (Spanish citizens) performing an active role of protest as opposed to the passive victim role of migrants in the previous figure.



Figure 6: Images from elDiario.es (01/07/2022) showing demonstrators gathered to denounce the deaths in Melilla.

In this regard, it is also worth noting the visual representation done in one of *El Confidencial's* articles from the 26th of June. Figure 7 shows what is probably the most humanized portrayal of migrants in the sample. And while the images show young men in relaxed positions and with smiling attitudes, the victimhood of the subjects is still carried by the inclusion of their tattered clothes and lack of shoes (signs of stereotypical representation). The victorious demeanor shown by the young men in the second photo contrasts with the content of the text in which the photos are included, mostly focused on describing how these “adventurous young men” will soon be disappointed with what Spain has to offer for African migrants.



*Figure 7: Photographs from the El Confidencial article titled “Dead Black people, good Moroccans”
(26/06/2022)*

To conclude, when it comes to the representations of migrants, it has been determined that not one testimony from the migrants’ perspective was included in either left or right-wing media (RQ1). A finding that falls in line with expectations presented by Rodríguez Pérez et al. about the overall tendency to “cover such migration flow from a political debate frame in contrast to other frames more focused on the situation or the human-interest stories of migrants” (2022, p.168).

4.4. The border as a frontier

The analysis of the media’s coverage of the border is, according to Cerbino et al., essential when trying to decipher how the information about border events is constructed from an ideological standpoint (2014). This thesis’ literature review has already focused on how this study can be informative to the nature of the border itself, determined by both the act of crossing and the media discourse around it. Departing from that idea and through MMCDA, this study identified three main ways in which the sample refers to/constructs the border between Spain and Morocco.

First, the border is represented through references to the economic inequality between its two sides. The Spanish borders in Ceuta and Melilla delimit the EU's most unequal economic border, which implies a set level of power imbalance between the two sides. This unequal power relation is referred to in the sample in two different ways. In line with *El Confidencial's* discourse about the inevitability of the tragedy, references to Africa's economic situation are presented as the result of an unavoidable set of circumstances the audience ought to get used to ("We have to live with this reality" 26/06/2022). On the other hand, *elDiario.es* creates a portrayal of this inequality in which Europe and Spain play an active role in Africa's situation.

Europe pays a regime like the Moroccan one precisely so that the deaths occur on its territory and do not disturb here. (*elDiario.es*, 01/12/2022)

Second, at the lexical level, the border is created and represented through an "us vs. them" perspective in which there is an abundance of verbs and possessive determiners of the first person plural to refer to the population as a whole as opposed to the migrants:

The president declared that the attempted jump was a violent attack on the territorial integrity of **our** country. (*El País* 30/06/2022)

Direct lexical references to Spain or Europe were identified as another common way for the different outlets to establish this separation, with things such as the extension of the border being up for debate in some cases:

Grande-Marlaska's is not the first time that a minister excuses himself in the confusion of **where Spain begins** and where it ends. (*El Confidencial*, 12/11/2022)

On the visual aspect, this dichotomy between Spain and that place that is not “ours” is shown through the inclusion of the fence in the frame. Figure 8 shows different examples of the effect the portrayal of Melilla’s wire fence as an internationally recognizable symbol has on the way the photo is read by the audience. In addition to this, a clear difference in the expressions of the migrants is also visible if compared to those images taken in Spanish territory (Figure 7). The lack of expression on the migrants’ faces behind the border, looking straight to the camera, can be read as a lack of humanity and, therefore, as one way for the media to perpetuate its dehumanized portrayal of “the voiceless others.”



Figure 8: Migrant portrayals in El Mundo (27/06/2022) and El Confidencial (28/06/2022).

Finally, in line with Chauzy & Appave’s reviewed literature (2014), this study found that references to the border or separation between Spain and Morocco are made through the description of the public’s attitudes towards the migrants arriving in the country. For the following examples, a tendency to focus on the public’s negativity or indifference toward migration was identified as the main trend in the coverage.

The truth is that these poor people, these young people, who are perhaps the most prodigious of the countries they are leaving, **matter to almost no one.** (*El Confidencial*, 26/06/2022)

About **those who promote racism**, there is little to discuss; they are despicable beings without scruples or principles. (*El Confidencial*, 28/06/2022)

Spanish civil society [...] resembles its progressive government: lukewarm, absent, and increasingly similar to what it is fighting against. (*elDiario.es*, 01/07/2022)

Through the analysis of these three different ways of border representation, the following conclusions were drawn. That when it comes to highlighting the economic nature of the border, there is no significant difference between media of different political leanings (RQ1). That the European nature of the border is exclusively mentioned in articles published before the *BBC* and *El País* investigations, in which at least one death on Spanish ground was confirmed (RQ2). And that, when it comes to public opinion, it is common for left-wing media to put the blame on the normalization of ultra-right frames among the general public (RQ1).

4.5. Responsibility attribution: Tragedy vs. Massacre

The analysis section dedicated to the politicization of the events has already described how, when it comes to the attribution of responsibilities for the Melilla deaths, a shift was found in the discourse from centering the attention on Pedro Sánchez to Minister Marlaska. However, there is more to be said about the attribution of responsibilities from a semiotic standpoint.

Before diving deeper into the analysis, it is important to take into consideration that, in general, Spanish media outlets are aware of the role they play in the building of the narrative around migration and migrants. In this regard, this study found that the sampled media are often self-referential and self-aware, speaking openly about how

some media's "acceptance of extreme right frames" (elDiario.es, 27/06/2022), for example, might influence the way the events are addressed by politicians and the public. For articles following the long-format investigations published in November, some more obvious references were found regarding the role of the media in questioning the political discourse (RQ2).

Fernando Grande-Marlaska, who insisted on rejecting any questioning done by the **media**. (El País, 01/12/2022)

The deadly incident has been reported by the **media**. And, more worryingly, it is already affecting the credibility of our country in the eyes of the European Union. (El Mundo, 01/12/2022)

Derived from this self-perceived responsibility to talk about migration in a certain manner is the use of a specific set of words. When talking about what happened in Melilla on the 24th of June 2022, media tend to refer to the events either as a "Tragedy" or a "Massacre," with each word carrying a different set of connotations. If talking about the events as a "Tragedy," it is more common for the media to focus on the dead as victims of established power relations or a set of unavoidable circumstances. Alternatively, the word "Massacre" is used in a context where responsibility is more clearly put on the quality of migration policies, the passivity of politicians, and the role of security forces, always by left-wing media (RQ1). The two positions are continued or sustained by other linguistic resources that contribute to reinforcing the message or that are used by the media to position itself with respect to what has happened. The nature of the media's "Tragedy" discourse is distinguishable, for example, in the use of passive verbs like "died," "were met with," or "it is discussed," and noun structures like "painful episode." For the "Massacre" angle, different examples of lexical abundance

were identified throughout the text to reference the severity of the events (“institutional racism, the massacres of the mafia-like Immigration Law and for the human rights of people in an irregular administrative situation.”).

It should be noted, however, that even in cases where the “Massacre” angle is used intentionally (“This is not a tragedy, it’s a massacre,” *elDiario.es*, 01/07/2022), some lexical “tragedy traces” remain. The word “tragedy” is still present in the text, together with some other marks that point to the portrayal of migrants as victims (“a friend of the victim,” “passed away,” “their rights were violated”). An example from the *elDiario.es*’ article would as follows:

Interior does not care about [...] the lack of assistance received by refugees during the **tragedy**
(*elDiario.es*, 01/12/2022)

Visually, the blame is partly put on security forces for both framings, with most photos taken at the time of the crossing, including Spanish and Moroccan agents in the image. It is also relevant that this, the only social interaction shown between the migrants and local authorities, is a violent one in which the passivity of the migrants puts the responsibility on the security forces. Figure 9 shows an identified trend for the visual attribution of responsibilities, as independently from the framing or political orientation of the media (RQ1), sampled images tend to show Moroccan agents taking an active role while the Spanish Guardia Civil watches from across the gate. The first image featured in Figure 9 is also representative of a narrative in which after the failed attempt to cross the border it's the Moroccan police's job to deal with the aftermath.



Figure 9: Images from El Mundo (08/11/2022) and El País (14/11/2022) showing Moroccan police forces handling the migrants, while the Spanish Guardia Civil takes a more observant role.

As a result, this study found the “Tragedy” angle, in which there is no responsibility attribution on a national level beyond the references to political misperformance, to be normalized across all media (RQ1), with attempts to fight the dominant representational practices being more common in November and December articles (RQ2).

4.6. Summary of Results

Once the analysis was completed and results were presented for each of the thematic units of analysis, some common traits and differences for the media and time-frames included in the sample were revealed.

Related to the first research question (RQ1: *How does media partisanship influence the reporting on the Spanish southern border?*), this study found no noticeable differences between left and right-wing media when it comes to the normalized practices of migrant representation. It prevailed, among all media, a lack of migrant perspectives and a portrayal of migrants as “victims” of a “tragedy.” This study’s analysis determined in this regard that differences in lexicon and visual portrayal were

not strong enough to alter the prevalence of this dominant discourse. Partisan differences in reporting were identified, however, when discussing the nature of the studied Southern border, with right-wing media making a more overt reference to its security aspect and left-wing media acknowledging the role of public opinion in the definition of said border. Additionally, this study found that, even though the discourse around the “Melilla tragedy” was heavily politicized across the sample, right-wing media tend to be less explicit about this politicization. For all sampled media outlets, independently from political leaning, the MMCDA identified a willingness to separate the media’s discourse from the politician’s actions and declarations and to recognize their own “social purpose” beyond their responsibility to inform.

When it comes to differences between the tragedy’s initial and post-investigation coverage (RQ2: *Are there differences between immediate and long-term reporting on the matter?*), it was revealed that all sampled media took the journalistic long-format investigations into consideration when reporting on the events. In general, this meant articles published from November on were more prone to focusing on how said investigations might impact the political handling of the “tragedy.” As a result, the second time frame of articles was found to be more politicized than the first, with Minister Marlaska as the protagonist of most pieces, instead of Pedro Sánchez (main figure in June articles). And while migrants are more present in articles published during the first time frame, where the social mobilization component is also more visible, articles published from November on –after investigations proved at least one migrant died in Spanish territory– tend to make reference to the migrants in a more human-focused way.

Departing from these results, the next and closing chapter will present the final conclusions of the study and discuss their implications in relation to existing research on the topic.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to examine the “Melilla tragedy” as a case study for the coverage of migration in polarized media environments and, by doing so, to contribute to the study of the Spanish media’s reporting on the country’s Southern border. In order to achieve this goal, it critically analyzed a selection of articles from national media ideologically situated along the political spectrum. A total of 16 opinion pieces from four media outlets were sampled and studied based on their content and semiotic connotations. This double approach, methodologically situated within the framework of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, allowed for the study of both the articles’ text and visual elements. The research questions “*How does media partisanship influence the reporting on the Spanish Southern border? (RQ1)*” and “*Are there differences between immediate and long-term reporting on the matter? (RQ2)*” were then used to guide the analysis toward conclusions that are relevant to the study.

While analyzing the portrayal of migrants and migration events, this thesis followed Chouliaraki and Georgiou's (2019) recommendations about taking into consideration the border’s power dynamics. In line with expectations set by the reviewed literature and theoretical framework, this study found media situated on both sides of the Spanish polarized media landscape to bear similarities in the way they report about migration at the country’s Southern border. Aligned with Nikunen’s findings on the dehumanized portrayal of migrants and refugees (2020), this analysis found a tendency for the sampled articles to overall portray those crossing the Melilla

border as “voiceless migrants” (2020, p.411). No references to migrants’ experiences were found, and instead, the focus was put on their “victimhood” (Van Gorp, 2005) or “otherness” (Kamenova, 2014). Visually, this portrayal translated into the predominance of groups over individuals, the lack of identifying features beyond gender, race, and economic status, and the presence of police forces around the fence.

Despite these common denominators in the overall portrayal of migrants, this study found the political leaning (partisanship) of the media outlets to create discrepancies between left and right-wing media in their coverage of the events. These differences were mostly seen in each media’s use of language to refer to the nature of the border or the migrants themselves. Most poignant, however, were the differences related to the attribution of responsibilities. While sampled media mostly agree on the victimhood of the migrants, the use of the words like “Tragedy” or “Massacre” to refer to the June 24th events was identified as a way for the media to either allude to the catastrophic nature of the conflict or point more directly to the role of politicians and security forces in the events – each of these implying a different ideological stance on the matter.

The explicit politicization of the topic within the sample, with 12 out of the 16 analyzed pieces identified as focusing on political actors and their misperformance, also fell in line with the literature-based expectations for this study (Castelli & Morales, 2016; Pettrachin, 2022). This analysis also found a trend for the opinion pieces to reflect on their own politicization and social mobilization role. This particularity, most visible in *elDiario.es*’ article titled “Not in our name” (27/06/2022), helped confirm a tendency for Spanish media across the political spectrum to over-focus on the political discourse around migration. In addition to criticizing the political discourse and differentiating themselves from it, the analyzed media was found to use political references as a tool

for social mobilization, to call on the public to establish the same difference with the politicians' discourse – to say: “Not in our name.”

The posing of the second research question, related to the impact of long-form investigations on the coverage of the events, allowed for this study to identify the extent to which slow-paced analysis of the “Tragedy” and the media's described self-awareness translated into changes in the long-term reporting. Overall, this analysis identified a slight improvement regarding the humanization of migrants in articles published from November on, a “willingness to correct bad practices” (Almela & Arcos Urrutia, 2020, p.263) that falls in line with the expectations set during the literature review. Finally, even though the politicization of the articles was more noticeable during the second studied time frame, this thesis identified the articles published after the *BBC* and *El Pais* investigations to question the political discourse in a more open manner.

Given that most research around the Melilla border as a location for salient migration events is focused on the role of the journalists, the originality of this paper comes from its focus on the discourse and content of the articles. To confirm and further develop this thesis' results, future research could take on a more quantitative approach to better measure the extent of the articles' politicization or the prevalence of the frames used to talk about migrants. Alternatively, in order to avoid limitations related to the use of opinion pieces, a potential future study could confirm whether these results can be extrapolated to the analysis of traditional news articles and their visual elements.

The findings discussed above are an expansion of existing research in the area of media coverage of migration and polarized media environments. The results from the analysis adhere to previous findings on how the prevalence of stereotypical portrayals, shallow reporting, and the absence of migrant perspectives hinder the reporting focused on migration-related events (Oller Alonso et al., 2021). Implied in these results is that,

in order to achieve a more human-focused portrayal of migrants and achieve their pursued effect on public opinion, media outlets should pay special attention to the depiction of migrants and political figures rather than building persuasive arguments to support their ideology (Blinder & Allen, 2016). Another implication of the study would be the confirmation of the media's role in the politicization of migration in the country, a result that should also inform the reporting done by media hoping to improve their work on this regard.

Finally, by focusing on the events known as the “Melilla tragedy” after the closing of all ongoing investigations, this study hoped to shed light on the national media's implication on the matter previously to the decision. In a context of increasing polarization, in which the issue of migration has become a focal point of political debate, the role of the media is key. As of the 23 of December 2022, the Spanish Public Prosecutor's Office established the exoneration of all national authorities and security officers from any responsibility. The results of this study and their implications, together with previous findings on the matter and potential further research, can contribute to a better understanding of how media might have impacted this decision. A decision in which –just like in the reporting– the resolution of the conflict's political aspect was prioritized over its human dimension.

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List of appendices

Appendix 1: Framework for MMCDA: Content and Semiology

Appendix 2: Link to sampled articles

Appendices

Appendix 1: Framework for MMCD: Content and Semiology

Table 1

Framework for semiotic analysis

Semiotic analysis		
Lexical connotations	Visual connotations	Social meaning
Overlexicalization	Framing (what is/is not in the picture?)	Why is this sentence/photograph being deployed?
Lexical absence	Composition (how are the framed elements arranged?)	How is it already discursively shaped and governed by practices of representational use?
Structural opposition		Metaphorical meaning
Lexical choices	Signs of stereotypical representation?	What affordances does it bring to the overall representation which serves the interests of an institution or an ideology?
Genre of communication	a) Groups vs. individuals	How do the image and the text compliment/contradict each other?
Quotation verbs	b) Fence/border	
Representational strategies	c) Identifying characteristics (age, gender, expression, background, activity)	
Modality		

Note. For every category the question ‘Are these connotations normalized’ was asked as a final step of the analysis.

Table 2

Framework for content-based analysis

- What is the general voice and tone of the piece?
- Is the focus put on political figures/actors?
- Does the piece include a reference to the migrants? If so, what frames are used in their portrayal or representation?
- Does the piece include a reference to the fence/border? If so, how is it portrayed?
- Does the piece include a reference to responsibility/accountability for the tragedy? If so, who is portrayed as guilty?

Appendix 2: Link to sampled articles

[El País \(30/06/2022\)](#)

[El Confidencial \(26/06/2022\)](#)

[El País \(28/06/2022\)](#)

[El Confidencial \(28/06/2022\)](#)

[El País \(14/11/2022\)](#)

[El Confidencial \(07/11/2022\)](#)

[El País \(01/12/2022\)](#)

[El Confidencial \(12/11/2022\)](#)

[El Mundo \(25/06/2022\)](#)

[elDiario.es \(26/06/2022\)](#)

[El Mundo \(27/06/2022\)](#)

[elDiario.es \(30/06/2022\)](#)

[El Mundo \(08/11/2022\)](#)

[elDiario.es \(30/11/2022\)](#)

[El Mundo \(01/12/2022\)](#)

[elDiario.es \(30/11/2022\)](#)