

# Delimited Solidarity: Study of the Television Coverage of the Events at the Melilla Fence in October 2005

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- *The main television stations that broadcast in Catalonia covered the so-called "crisis of the fences" in Ceuta and Melilla with a supportive but alarmist speech in whom the representation of the immigrants ranged between the victimization and the threat of danger. These are some conclusions extracted from the study that appears in this article. The investigation analyses and compares a sample of eight days of the evening news bulletins of diverse televisions to know the informative priorities of the media, the production and evolution of the news, as well as the representation of the actors and the conflict.*

## **Key words**

Television coverage, immigration, television, conflict resolution, thematization, media representation

## **Presentation and Summary of Results**

The information offered by the highest-rating stations in Catalonia about the events that took place at the Melilla fence in early October 2005 altogether showed a caring discourse with regards immigration, but at the same time one delimited by various elements. Among the programmes analysed there were noticeable differences to which we will refer later on, but considered globally, the media discourse weaved together common threads.

Initially, the television coverage generally presented immigrants waiting to enter Ceuta or Melilla in an alarmist fashion, i.e., as a threat for Spain and Europe. Later on, they were shown as victims, in particular of a breach of their human rights by the Moroccan authorities when they were transferred to the desert in southern Morocco. Spanish and European responsibility for the situation was either played down or ignored.

However, they were most frequently portrayed in a simplistic image as 'desperate' to escape their homelands, complemented with a distorted generalisation of Africa as a continent where hunger, misery and war are hegemonic.

These are the main conclusions of the analysis of the coverage offered by the regular evening news bulletins [the study object] of TV3, TVE-1, La 2, Tele-5 and Antena 3 TV between 5 and 12 October 2005. The study, funded by the CAC, was a joint effort by the Observatory for the News Coverage of Conflicts (OCC) and the Centre for African Studies (CEA).

Below, in this order, we set out the methodology used, a very short summary of the most relevant events of those days for the reader to get his or her bearings, the research results and a number of conclusive reflections.

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## 1. Methodology

The body of the work – the evening news bulletins of TV3, TVE-1, La 2, Tele-5 and Antena 3 TV – which involved one news show from each station and only over eight days, was in itself only a sample of the coverage that the different stations did. We therefore analysed it all, i.e., we took the whole of the body as a sample.

We started from a perspective typical to critical analysis of the discourse combined with anthropology and the theory about conflict resolution and transformation. In other words, we began with the concern about the media's contribution to the construction of the social representation of conflicts – of actors, problems and processes – to the extent that we know it affects the very development of a conflict and, in particular, can be used to both legitimise and de-legitimise abuses of power and the suffering involved.

The general object, which consisted of analysing how the different stations covered the events at the Melilla fence, therefore focused on:

1. Studying the news priorities of the media.
2. Studying the representation of the actors.
3. Studying the presence of clichés and stereotypes.
4. Studying the complexity of the description of the conflict.
5. Studying the ideological position of the media.
6. Comparing the results on a per-station basis while meeting the previous goals.

The analysis was carried out as follows: firstly, we prepared a television script with the description of the images and a transcription of the verbal content of all the stories related with the case, including the headlining presence of the issue and presenters' comments.

Secondly, we filled in a sheet for each news story that included the following items:

- a) The macro-positions that summarised the explicit and implicit story content.
- b) About the actors:
  - Which actors were introduced?
  - How were they described?
  - Did the story lack actors? Who?
  - What actions were they awarded?
  - Who made the statements reproduced in the story?
  - What contribution did they make to the conflict? What

verb was used to introduce them?

- c) About the problem:
  - How was the problem in the story identified? Were its roots mentioned?
  - How were the theses of the different actors with regards the problem explained?
- d) About the process:
  - What was the central issue of the piece?
  - Was the genesis of the conflict explained? Who? What about the evolution?
  - Were solutions explored?
  - What sources were used for the monitoring?
  - Was there enough contextual information? What was it?

It involved a series of standard questions made exhaustively to apply them to all the news stories, even if there were no responses for all the items.

## 2. Framework of the Events Reported by the Media<sup>1</sup>

The data contributed is based on the written press and the news programmes analysed.

Below we set out a series of data highlighted by the media from a few days before the period studied to position the reader at the time when the events the stations covered took place.

According to official figures, from January 2005 to the end of August there were 11,000 attempts to scale the fence at Melilla by people from various south-Saharan<sup>2</sup> We will use the term 'south-Saharan' which indicates a geographic location in preference to 'sub-Saharan' (the terms most commonly used) which may mean the same but which can also connote a position of inferiority because of the prefix 'sub'.

countries. In a correlative fashion, the number of people arriving in boats and controlled by the security forces had fallen by 37% over the 2004 figures for the same period.

Three deaths among immigrants were recorded between late August and mid-September. In early September, the Moroccan gendarmerie detained a certain number of people waiting to cross the fence.

On 29 September, five people were killed in an attempt by various hundreds of people to cross the Ceuta fence. On 3 September, 350 immigrants managed to enter Melilla after scaling the fence.

On 4 October, the Spanish government announced it would reinforce the two fences with a new metal barrier.

On 6 October, before sunrise, six immigrants died and 30 were injured in a new episode. That same day the Spanish and Moroccan governments agreed on the return of 73 immigrants. The expulsions were carried out between 6 and 7 October.

On 7 October, Moroccan workers cut trees near the Melilla fence. Mobile phone calls showed that hundreds of south-Saharan immigrants had been abandoned by Moroccan forces close to Morocco's southern border with Algeria. The next day, 8 October, television crews arrived, followed by diplomats from Mali and Senegal, organizing the repatriation of their citizens.

On 9 October, the Moroccan government sent a thousand south-Saharan immigrants (seen handcuffed) on coaches to other destinations, including, as it would later emerge, Mauritania and Western Sahara.

On 10 October, the first planes left for Mali and Senegal with the repatriates and coaches arrived at diverse destinations in the southwest. The UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan called for no drastic attempts to be made to stop the migratory movements. The Spanish and Moroccan governments agreed to hold a Euro-African summit on immigration.

On 11 October, there was considerable concern for the location and fate of the immigrants that had been deported to the desert. On 12 October, the EU published a report saying some 30,000 people were distributed between Morocco and Algeria waiting to enter Ceuta or Melilla. Kofi Annan expressed his concern for the cases of political asylum. The Moroccan Home Secretary said the King of Spain had called his counterpart in Morocco, which is why the return of the 73 people a few days before had been accepted.

### 3. Results

We will show the results following the sequence of the objectives mentioned previously. What we show is not an exhaustive compilation but one that was reduced to the most relevant factors. We will begin with the results concerning the news priorities of the media.

#### 3.1. Subject Matter

The subjects the television stations treated as central were: the diverse attempts to cross the fence and enter Melilla; the measures the Government anticipated to reinforce the border, both increasing forces and reinforcing the fence; the deaths recorded from the different times people scaled or tried to scale the fence and Morocco's responsibility, and the abandonment or transfer of south-Saharan immigrants to the south and south-west and the breach of their human rights by the Moroccan authorities. These subjects were common to all the stations, imposed by the force of the events, although approaches varied in diverse degrees, as we shall see later on.

All the stations also reported the steps taken by the Spanish government, the trip by the Vice-President María Teresa Fernández de la Vega, the Minister Miguel Ángel Moratinos and the statements from both. Another common element was the presence of NGOs and their condemnation by the Moroccan authorities.

In terms of the continual entry of people from south of the Sahara, the general tone of the information was alarmist. As we said before, the attempts to scale the fence were presented in the first few days with the term *assault* by all the stations, which then changed to *scaling*, while the terms *avalanche*, *wave*, *mass scaling* and *mass entry* were also maintained.

There were exceptions, even though low in tone, such as the brief mention on TVE-1 (on 6 October) of a statement from the ACOGE network, which said the issue was being exaggerated because the total number of people who, whether by boat or via Ceuta and Melilla, entered Spain came to around 60,000 per year, while the most important entry of immigrants 'without papers' (a million a year) was via the airports.

Prior to the deaths on 6 October, we also identified a problem based (and which in fact had been identified long before) on the fact that during attempts to scale the fence, barbed wire led many of the people who got over it to be injured, some very seriously.

Among the causes given that compel migrants, the classics were the hunger, misery, epidemics and wars that affect Africa. And, in association, these characteristics would explain their 'desperation'. Firstly, it is a gratuitous generalisation to talk about the whole of Africa in these

terms. But even when talking about a country, the hyperbole is inappropriate. In a news report on Antena 3 TV on 7 October, the presenter said, “The exodus of sub-Saharan immigrants towards Spain begins in the poorest countries of the most wretched continent” and then, a voice off-screen adds that “in countries like Nigeria, the only food is the small amount of grass that grows in the fields”.

Secondly, even if there are one or some of the abovementioned problems in some of the areas that the migrants who hope to enter Melilla come from, it has been shown they are not the most affected people – they are not the desperate people, they are usually educated and have the initiative and ability to get up and go.

So if the adjective *desperate* was acceptable at any time, it would not be because of the environment they come from but rather the existence of a barrier that stops them from realising their goal, i.e., to reach a place where they think they can build a better future, and because of the persecution they are subject to by the authorities on both sides of the fence. However, this was never the dominant representation in the news.

The measures that were presented in the news stories to solve the conflict between the people who want to get in and the people who don't want them to basically consisted of: a) making a more modern fence that would be hard to cross and which would cause less physical damage to the people who try to scale it; and b) increase the monitoring and forces on both sides of the border so they cannot cross. This is not what the journalists or media propose specifically, but rather they are the proposals formulated by diverse political authorities, which are reported by the media and transmitted to the audience. In any case, in both proposals there is an implicit acceptance of the fence and its function. This is what mainly appeared in the media discourse, even though it did not come from the mouths of the journalists. And the media, except for TV3 in one video, did not question it.

In terms of the second problem, i.e., the deportations and maltreatment of immigrants, as we said in previous sections where we highlighted the presentation of the actors, responsibility fell mainly on Morocco and much less on the Spanish government and EU. The Spanish government took responsibility for the 73 people who were returned and the announcement of more, which the Government stopped after the deportations to the desert were made public and

the government even appeared to say the Moroccan government had guaranteed it would treat the returnees appropriately.

As we saw earlier, the (mainly implicit) criticism of the Spanish government and the EU for making the Moroccan authorities responsible for monitoring the fence and stopping new people from scaling it, were few and far between.

Let us now look again at the proposals to solve the problem. There were only three appearances of ideas different to the ones already mentioned. TV3 (on 6 October) aired a piece questioning whether the fences could stop immigration and which provided various examples of other places in the world where they are not effective. As we mentioned before, Antena 3 TV (9 October) broadcast a few seconds of a protest in a Spanish city where there was a proposal to bring down the fence. Thirdly, in a report from Rabat (TVE-1, 10 October), the special correspondent mentioned the points of a memorandum that was to be addressed at the meeting between the ministers Mohamed Benaiissa and Moratinos. The four points were: “to handle immigrants as they are, human beings”, “attack mafias with police and judicial collaboration”, “establish joint humanitarian aid between Spain and Morocco for the sub-Saharan”, and “attack the root problem with a plan for Africa, for which the EU will be needed”. The correspondent listed the points and followed them up with a statement from Moratinos saying: “I am going to make it very clear: Spain cannot tolerate the entry of immigrants by force in its national territory. Immigration has to be legal and organised...” - thus ruining the complexity that had just been built up. .

Also, when Kofi Annan said “there should be no drastic attempts to stop the migrations”, again there was no follow-up or more details about what that involved or what he meant to say.

In other words, in general and in short, the ideas predominating in presence in the news discourse involved an explicit and implicit acceptance of the fence and its function as an impediment to stop people from reaching Melilla. This result is congruent with the fact that: a) when immigrants were given a voice it was to talk about their experience as victims of abuse or, in a second phase, to say that (after having been dumped in the desert) they were happy to be repatriated, but not with proposals for global solutions; b) the condemnations by the NGOs were particularly also to do

with social welfare or the breach of human rights (threat of dying, inhumane treatment, etc.) and c) the debate about the strategic solutions was practically monopolised by the row between the PSOE and the PP opposition leaders (particularly on TVE-1 and Antena 3 TV) and every now and then by leaders of other parties (IU, IC-V, PNV).

### 3.5. The Media as Actors

The previous sections feature multiple considerations about the media discourse in this conflict, so that their character not just as witnesses but also as actors is clear.

The previously mentioned alarmist tone did not stop all the stations showing solidarity with the dead and injured, the deportees in the desert or with the fate awaiting the people hiding the forests or setting off again for a new opportunity. Many of the off-camera texts included statements from members of NGOs and some migrants, both those who had crossed the fence and those who had not managed it.

The shots of immigrants bleeding, being deported in handcuffs onto buses, protesting, asking for help, yelling or crying, were also a show of the empathy of the news discourse. Their experiences were presented as dramatic and in some stories not just because of the conditions in which they were found, but because it signified failure in this stage of their migration.

The distribution of food and clothes by an NGO in the forests around Melilla, which was followed by a team from TVE and another from Antena 3 TV (7 and 11 October), clandestinely to prevent the Moroccan police from finding the hidden would-be immigrants, also gave form to news stories with empathy for the immigrants, mainly sub-Saharan immigrants. We have already discussed the awarding of responsibilities.

In this section we will focus on showing how the media are aware of their role as testimony and actor and show some additional examples of them taking sides, both explicitly and implicitly. However, we should remind the reader again that not all the stations did so in the same way or to the same degree.

In the news discourse about the events at the Melilla fence, the media showed they were aware of having a certain degree of prominence, a certain role of actor, both because

of the effects on the public and on the authorities. Tele-5 showed this with the abovementioned airing of the video where a Civil Guard officer is shown kicking an immigrant, and the subsequent follow-up with parliamentary questions, and also in reporting that the station had received a court request to release the video so the case could be investigated.

Similarly, the TV3 correspondent in Morocco (10 October) explained on air that he might not be able to do his job as he would like because he had received a call from the Moroccan authorities telling him they were not happy with the footage he had aired. Also, the TVE-1 correspondent (8 October) said, the day after the first pictures of migrants dumped in the desert were released, “we think that, fortunately, the images that came out of here have made people aware and rung the alarm for the authorities in the countries responsible for this situation”.

In the case of Antena 3 TV, the awareness of being a witness was explicit: “The Antena 3 TV cameramen have today been witness to the difficulty, the hard times that numerous people displaced at the border are going through to provide aid to the thousand-plus immigrants who need to eat, who need to drink”, the special correspondent said (7 October). Also, that same day: “An Antena 3 crew has been able to prove how the returns also affect the Moroccans...”.

The awareness of the importance of the role of the media included the Moroccan ones. “Moroccan TV is filming in this area but not in the desert, where over a thousand people, including pregnant women, babies and the injured, have been abandoned to their fate...” (Antena 3 TV, 7 October). Similarly, Tele-5 criticised Moroccan TV for showing its own version of the events in which six migrants died.

The ideological position of the media was to condemn the abuse and breach of human rights. It was implicitly made clear that this was in reference to the maltreatment, physical integrity and risk their lives were put at when they were abandoned in the desert. However, they did not discuss the universal right of all people to leave their countries, even if this human right is in reality limited by the rights of some states to close their borders.

The geographic/possessive point of view (also loaded with ideology) that the media implicitly transmit with certain uses of pronouns like *us* and *ours* is also relevant. Not all the stations used these terms. For example, on TVE-1, the jour-

nalists did not use them to refer to the country, but the politicians did, and very frequently, in the fragments in which they appeared.

The La 2 news shows, on the other hand, used expressions like: “Now the new system [in relation to the fence] we will have, will include many more surveillance cameras” and “...and also what surely awaits the people expelled from *our country*” [authors’ italics].

On TV3, *us* and *our* referred to the station or reporters. La 2 also used this idea. This is a resource known in the profession as an instrument for bringing viewers closer to the station. The same thing happened, although more intensely, on Tele-5. But this station’s position flourished when it called Morocco a *neighbouring country*.

In more general terms, there was the almost exclusive use on the part of all the stations of the term *immigrants* – unlike *migrant* or *emigrant* – to refer to the people who emigrate from their countries to immigrate to another, a position which is stated in the country of arrival or rejection.

In short, there was explicit awareness about the importance of the media to the fate of many of the people immersed in this conflict. There was also, particularly on the private stations, an emphasis on the important role of the station and its reporters, a particular insistence on its singularity as a media outlet. And, to different degrees, there was recognition of the stations’ being located in the country or state that the migrants wanted to reach.

#### 4. Conclusions and Reflections

We have reviewed the description of the different elements of the conflicts that were used by the news shows studied and shown the ideological position they took at different times about what became known as “the fence crisis”. To not repeat ourselves unnecessarily, we hereby set forth the conclusions we consider most relevant:

- 1) The news shows shared a caring position with the migrants, particularly with regards deaths and the hardships they were subjected to. However, it was a delimited solidarity, as some of the reflections below show.
- 2) The news discourse accepted as a fact the existence of the fence and the measures taken to stop immigrants from entering. Only one station, TV3, questioned the

fence as a way of controlling immigration.

- 3) Responsibility for the fate of the migrants fell particularly on the Moroccan authorities and only occasionally was the co-responsibility of the Spanish authorities mentioned, on the basis of the return of immigrants and to award Morocco the task of controlling the border. There was no mention of the responsibility of the migration policy of Spain or the European Union.
- 4) The explanation of the causes of the conflict was not looked at in depth.
- 5) There was an alarmist treatment – because of the supposed threat or danger for Spain/Europe – involving the people who wanted to enter Ceuta and Melilla, and occasionally a sensationalist treatment of their hardships.
- 6) People who wanted to be immigrants were only given speaking time to talk about their drama.
- 7) The recommendation to not associate the word *illegal* with immigration or *immigrant* should have been better promoted. Other recommendations for the ethical treatment of information about immigration and journalistic practices in general, e.g., using the political voice of immigrants, not being sensationalistic, etc., were not well respected, either.

The fact that we found different shortcomings in different stations means it is still possible for all the shortcomings to appear on all the stations. But it also means, although it seems paradoxical, that if one station does not suffer from a particular shortcoming there is no reason why another one should.

In terms of the shortcomings that were common, we either have to get over them or try to correct them. And with regards the good things we found on the different stations – particularly of awarding contexts and responsibilities on La 2 and TV3 - we can say something similar: if some stations do it there is no reason why the others can’t.

The necessarily summarised conclusions could lead people to forget some of the tough criticism shown in this study. We do not want it to go unnoticed or for the work to be understood as an operation directed against the media, and even less against the journalists. It is a study that aims to develop reflections that contribute to improving the journalistic work that inevitably affects the reality of society today and tomorrow.

## Notes

- 1 The data contributed is based on the written press and the news programmes analysed.
- 2 We will use the term 'south-Saharan' which indicates a geographic location in preference to 'sub-Saharan' (the terms most commonly used) which may mean the same but which can also connote a position of inferiority because of the prefix 'sub'.