



## **Shaping the Online Public Debate: The Relationship Between the News Framing of the Expropriation of YPF and Readers' Comments**

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This article examines how the expropriation of oil company YPF by the Argentine government in April 2012 was framed by Spanish digital newspapers, and whether the treatment of this issue was transferred from the media to the audience. Using the theoretical approach of framing, we analyzed the news coverage of this event to find out whether the event was reported from a strategic game frame or an issue frame. Additionally, the comments posted by the news readers were analyzed to ascertain whether there was a relationship between the frames used by the media and the latent opinion frames in the discourse of these news readers. The results show a higher presence of the issue frame in the coverage of the expropriation of YPF, whereas no significant relationship was found between the media frames and the latent frames in the readers' opinions. Conversely, a significant relationship between these two types of frames (strategic game and issue frames) was found both inside the news content and in the readers' comments.

*Keywords: framing, YPF expropriation, content analysis, digital press, online news comments*

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## Introduction

The political relationship between Argentina and Spain was affected by the events that followed the public statement of Argentine president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner about the imminent expropriation of a large part of oil company YPF in April 2012.<sup>2</sup> Formerly an Argentine company, YPF was acquired in 1999 by Repsol, the largest Spanish investor in the energy sector in Latin America with assets in several countries of Central and South America and the Caribbean. This announcement of expropriation triggered an intense exchange between officials in both countries who held different points of view about the decision. On one side, Spanish officials described it as a hostile action and attack against Spain (Tremlett, 2012), whereas the Argentine officials explained that this move to recover shares in YPF was an act of reparation, given that the oil would be returned to Argentina and its people (Romero & Minder, 2012). From this moment on, the news media became the platform where both types of discourse on the issue converged.

Although the event was supposed to be covered from a business perspective, the information published was treated to a large extent with traditional news frames such as the game frame (Dimitrova & Kostadinova, 2013), thereby leading to a more political view of the issue. For instance, the day after the statement, *Forbes* published a column titled "Shale Gas Wars: Argentina Fracks Repsol, Kirchner Takes YPF" Fontevecchia (2012), which reflects this type of treatment of the issue. According to the framing approach, the media use different news frames to present the details surrounding an issue to their audience. Scholars in the framing tradition posit that political issues tend to be framed in terms of either a strategic game frame or an issue frame (Aalberg, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2012; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Dimitrova & Kostadinova, 2013). Although there is a tendency to use the strategic game frame during electoral campaigns, the issue frame is used more frequently to cover political events outside electoral contexts (Pedersen, 2012).

Based on this assumption, a content analysis was performed on the news about the expropriation of YPF published in the online versions of the main newspapers in Spain as well as in other exclusively digital newspapers during April and May 2012. The study sought to determine which news frame was used more frequently to report this event: the strategic game frame or the issue frame. Solid evidence supports the capacity of these news frames to influence the way audiences think about issues and to form a relatively active public opinion (de Vreese, 2012; Price, Nir, & Capella, 2005). In fact, the news stories represent a key element in explaining—and transferring—political reality to citizens (Matthes, 2012). Consequently, another aim of the investigation was to analyze readers' comments about the news on YPF to determine what kinds of frames were present in their opinions. Finally, the last aim of this study was to check for potential relationships between the frames present in the media and the frames present in these opinions to verify the potential influence of the news on the way the audiences think about an issue—in this case, the YPF expropriation.

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<sup>2</sup> YPF stands for Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales (in English, Treasury Petroleum Fields).

## Literature Review

### *Framing Theory*

Often when journalists communicate issues in the news, they breed a certain point of view or approach toward these issues in the audiences by selecting and emphasizing certain key aspects of the informative material (de Vreese, 2003, 2012; Entman, 1993; Matthes, 2012). Different points of view, thereby, emerge from the relationships between the key elements that constitute news frames; although they remain "latent" in the content of the news, they are crucial for its interpretation. According to Entman (1993), to frame is "to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communication text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (p. 52).

On the other hand, Valkenburg, Semetko, and de Vreese (1999) define the media frame as "a particular way in which journalists compose a news story to optimize audience accessibility" (p. 550). The use of these frames by journalists implies specific decisions about the elements or key words that are to be selected, highlighted, or excluded to build a discourse (Ryan, Carragee, & Meinhofer, 2001; Scheufele, 2006). With regard to this journalistic strategy for building messages, Maher (2001) posits that "framing implies relationships among elements in a message, because those elements have been organized by a communicator" (p. 86).

In the framing process, frames may work as dependent or independent variables interchangeably, depending on the relationship between them (Zhou & Moy, 2007). It is in the relationship between different frames that concepts such as *media frame* and *audience frame* emerge, as both models encompass the framing process (de Vreese, 2003; Scheufele, 2000; Valkenburg et al., 1999). The media frame has been defined in many ways. However, there is certain agreement on the notion of media frame as the routines used by journalists to offer a quick identification and classification of the information and thus advance a faster and more effective reception of the issue in public opinion (Valkenburg et al., 1999). On the other hand, the audience frame has been conceptualized as the group of ideas that are kept in the minds of individuals and that lead them to process new information (Entman, 1993). Additionally, this frame is understood as the group of interpretations that lead people to perceive, organize, and comprehend incoming information (Valkenburg et al., 1999).

One of the most fruitful areas of research in framing theory analyzes news frames about politics in the news media (Schuck, Boomgaarden, & Vreese, 2013). Studies in this line of research identify the constant attempts of elites and politicians to introduce their own frames in the media network with the purpose of influencing the cognitions and behavior of citizens (Druckman & Nelson, 2003; Hanggli & Kriesi, 2012). These works have pointed out that the mass media work in distinct ways to present political events through either a *policy schema* (i.e., portraying a context of policy and issues) or a *game schema*, in which the news provide a context of electoral strategies to get the final victory (Patterson, 1993).

Following this idea, Cappella and Jamieson (1997) noted that the treatment of political information, especially during electoral campaigns, is managed and arranged from either an *issue frame*

or a *strategic frame*. Because of their focus on the different aspects surrounding a political issue, and the array of effects that they provoke on the audiences, both frames have been conceptualized differently by some scholars (Aalberg et al., 2012; de Vreese, 2005; de Vreese & Semetko, 2002). On one hand, the game frame presents more opinion data gathered from surveys and uses the language of war (de Vreese, 2005; de Vreese & Semetko, 2002), which, in fact, may increase interest in politics because it makes politics more understandable and attractive for citizens (Shehata, 2014). Thus, the game frame can be defined as “focusing on politics as a game, personality contest, and as strategies and tactics for winning” (Aalberg et al., 2012, p. 168). In contrast, the strategic frame is used by journalists to focus on politicians’ or candidates’ styles, actions, and motivations. This news frame, compared to the game frame, may increase perceptions of cynicism in audiences (de Vreese, 2005).

Despite their theoretical differences, the concepts of *game strategy* and *strategic frames* often have been seen as interchangeable in the political communication literature. In fact, some scholars proposed their integration into a single *strategic game frame* in contrast to the *issue frame* (Aalberg et al., 2012; Lawrence, 2000). The issue frame is usually used in the news to “present proposals for the problems, information about who is advocating which policy alternative, and consequences of the problems and proposals” (Rhee, 1997, p. 30). On the other hand, Dimitrova and Kostadinova (2013) note that the strategic game frame is used to provide “news coverage focusing on political strategy and tactics, current standing in the polls, who is winning and who is falling behind, and other horse-race aspects of the campaign” (p. 81). Although these two frames are considered prototypical in relation to political campaigns (Rhee, 1997), they are also used by the media to cover political issues in a nonelectoral contexts (Berganza, 2008; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; de Vreese, 2003; Lawrence, 2000).

To date, the studies carried out on this topic have been mostly restricted to electoral contexts where strategic game framing was dominant (Berganza, 2008; Dimitrova & Kostadinova, 2013; Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2012; Rinke, Wessler, Löb, & Weinmann, 2013; Schuck et al., 2013; Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2011). On the contrary, only a few studies have been carried out in nonelectoral environments where the coverage of a specific political event was analyzed. This is the case of the study carried out by Lawrence (2000), who analyzed the U.S. news media during the 1996 welfare reform, finding an important presence of the issue frame compared to the strategic game frame. However, when information on the electoral campaign of 1996 was isolated, the use of the game frame increased dramatically. Recently, Pedersen (2012) observed a high presence of the issue frame compared to the strategic game frame in the Danish press coverage of policy issues in 2010.

### ***The Internet as a New Field for Public Debate***

The Internet has changed many aspects of current societies. It has modified older communication models by providing new channels for the exchange of opinions and ideas, which have transformed social dynamics. In the political arena, the Internet has changed preexisting structures in the public sphere (Brundidge, 2010), leading to what has been called the public sphere 2.0 (Ruiz et al., 2011) or virtual public forum, in which citizens discuss public issues and express their points of view (Zhou & Moy, 2007). Many platforms are available for users to engage actively in this kind of online public debate. The options include an unlimited number of political forums, social network sites, blogs, and sections for comments in

news Web pages or digital newspapers (Brundidge, 2010; Madden, 2006). One of the most popular spaces for participating in virtual debates is the comments sections in digital newspapers, which include the feedback of readers on a specific news item and a public space to discuss other topics related to the issue (Ruiz et al., 2011). The number of digital newspapers that allow readers to post comments in debates generated by their news items is increasing in most countries (Ziegele et al., 2013).

These sites are popular among readers due to various factors such as their accessibility, low or no economic costs, the capacity for maintaining users' anonymity, and the immediacy in exchanging messages (Brundidge, 2010). Thus, in contrast to older asymmetric communication models in which the audiences generally had a passive role, current media channels open up the possibility of a two-way interaction between media and audiences. Moreover, it has been suggested that this relationship between media and audiences is changing: The readers now set the agenda and influence the media (Lee, Lewis, & Powers, 2012). In sum, the Internet provides a new type of forum for political deliberation (Torres da Silva, 2013) as well as new areas for establishing a dialogue or discussing public matters in horizontal exchanges free from coercive communication, thereby increasing the probability of impacting other public spheres. Nevertheless, the question of whether these spaces are really effective in democratizing the public sphere and reinforcing democratic societies remains to be verified (Ruiz, Masip, Micó, Díaz-Noci, & Domingo, 2010).

In any case, the current number of users commenting on published news in digital newspapers is still low, and the number of readers who actively participate in online public debates is even lower. Consequently, the chances of joining small networks of participation are relatively high (Ziegele et al., 2013). In addition, the quality of these networks represents a key factor in developing healthy and active civil societies in current democracies. In contrast to other homogeneous networks in which users hold identical viewpoints, heterogeneous networks seem to contribute, although indirectly, to enhancing political participation among citizens by offering different approaches on public issues (Moy & Gastil, 2006). Ruiz et al. (2011), for example, refer to large communities of debate with different points of view in online discussion forums; however, there are also large, homogeneous communities with widely shared ideological stances and dominant positions in the newspapers. Moreover, these online debates are sometimes loaded by emotional claims that tend to override any rational dialogue (Torres da Silva, 2013). Hence, it is common to see online "flaming," insults, and bad language in the comments posted by readers on many news websites (Ruiz et al., 2011).

The public sphere 2.0 involves more transversality by allowing users to move more easily from the information provided by the media to the online discussion areas in which they can express their public opinion and share their proposals (Brundidge, 2010). Thus, a close relationship exists between the news published in digital newspapers and the rise of online spaces for public discussion or debate. This kind of participation, however, demands equal accessibility to online media and the information provided therein. As reported by different indicators in Western societies, access to these electronic media has increased in the last years and there has been a slight reduction in the digital gap. This accessibility facilitates users' acquisition or improvement of certain personal characteristics such as political knowledge or sense of political efficacy, which represent useful tools in expressing opinions in public spaces, in the form of news websites (Brundidge, 2010). Similarly, it is possible that the online media transfer their

frames to audiences through information content that would be used later by participants in virtual public forums (Zhou & Moy, 2007).

### ***News Framing and the Building of Online Public Opinion***

In political communication research, the relationship between the mass media and the audiences is often analyzed from a framing approach, which posits that people build their ideas about public issues from readily available information in diverse media formats (de Vreese, 2003, 2012; Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992). This type of analysis examines the relationship between the news frames made salient by the media and the frames used by audiences to interpret issues and generate opinions (Slothuus, 2008; Zhou & Moy, 2007). The framing effect postulates that the news topics and issues are packed and presented by journalists within specific frames that influence individuals' cognitive responses and the ways in which they process information while they are exposed to the news media (de Vreese, 2003; Price et al., 2005). Similarly, Rhee (1997) purported that the framing effect is a cognitive process in which: (a) news texts are received, (b) these texts are integrated into existing knowledge, and, finally, (c) a discursive model is built from this knowledge that is used later by audiences to express their opinions about certain public issues.

When audiences face multiple—and sometimes even opposing—considerations about the same topic, the news frames become useful in organizing information by making subjects concentrate on certain aspects while discarding others. These aspects represent a context in which topics can be interpreted, and the people may build their subsequent opinions and judgments (Brewer, Graf, & Willnat, 2003; Druckman & Nelson, 2003; Price et al., 2005; Rhee, 1997; Slothuus, 2008). Furthermore, empirical evidence suggests that the media significantly impact people's responses by channeling the way in which they think and express their points of view on the topics that are presented through the different frames emphasized in the news (de Vreese, 2003; de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2003; Igartua & Cheng, 2009; Price et al., 2005; Scheufele, 2000; Valkenburg et al., 1999). These dominant frames become an important resource for audiences when thinking about the topics disseminated in the news (de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2003), but they are also an important instrument for audiences to generate their own opinions about these topics (Zhou & Moy, 2007).

Empirical studies in framing have used different methodological techniques to analyze the type of effects produced by the news frames, with a special emphasis on the cognitive ones. In this sense, scholars traditionally apply experimental designs to corroborate these effects (de Vreese, 2012). Overall, most findings suggest that there is a tendency among audiences to use the same frames broadcasted by the media when expressing their own opinions on the topic that is reported (Igartua & Cheng, 2009), including the frames present in online environments. Zhou and Moy (2007), for example, analyzed the interplay between online public opinion and media coverage with regard to a potential frame setting in which the media frames match the opinion frames in a subsequent lapse of time. However, they also expected an inverse frame-building effect in which the public opinion affected the media coverage. Their findings from a longitudinal study showed a partial frame-building effect produced by the opinion frames on the media frames as well as an interaction between frames at the same point in time. Nevertheless, no frame-setting effects were found in transfers from digital newspapers to the online public opinion.

## Context of Study

### *The Expropriation of YPF*

Since the mid-1980s, several Spanish companies increased their investments in Latin America to the extent that Spain became the second highest investor in the region, only behind the United States (Toral, 2008). During the second half of the 1990s, this strong flow of investments led different international media to use expressions such as the "Spanish Armada," "El Dorado," and "new conquerors" to describe the financial activities of Spanish companies in Latin America (Valdeón García, 2007; Vandenberghe, 2011). The perception of Spain and most Latin American countries sharing a "common culture" (e.g., a similar language, religion, and cultural values in general) as a result of the "Hispanization" process that began in the colonial period, in addition to their need for expansion, were important factors in Spanish investment in Latin America (Toral, 2008). The process of investment in diverse fields included merging with or acquiring former regional companies in most of Latin America. The acquisition of the Argentine oil company YPF by the Spanish Repsol company is a good example of these practices.

A few years after the privatization of YPF by former president Carlos Menem in 1992, Repsol acquired 97.81% of the shares in YPF, resulting in the new Repsol-YPF oil company in 1999, one of the largest private oil companies in the world. However, 13 years after the foundation of this firm, its future became unclear when the Argentine government announced the possibility of expropriating a major portion of assets from YPF. Eventually, on May 16, 2012, President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner introduced a bill to expropriate 51% of all the shares in the oil company. The bill was submitted to a parliamentary debate for its final approval on May 4, 2012, setting the conditions for the takeover of YPF. As a result, the company once again became dependent on the Argentine government (Aruguete, 2012).

The Argentine president's announcement about the takeover in 2012 was, in fact, a nationalization of YPF. The decision seemed similar to a mergers and acquisitions (M&A) event, because it represents an important episode for international companies affecting a large number of stakeholders; however, it cannot be classified within the traditional concept of M&A in business studies (Vandenberghe, 2011). The social implications of this announcement were important because the issue became a focal point for politicians, the media, and society, and the M&A process was triggered by a political decision with implications for not only business but politicians and society. Fontevecchia (2012) predicted these societal and political repercussions when he wrote, "The Repsol YPF story is but one more Latin America love story that will end in tragedy" (para. 14).

Although the Argentine government's decision to expropriate YPF could have been covered from a business approach, it was presented as a political intervention in two main ways: First, it emphasized the consequences of this action for the Argentine government; and, second, it depicted the way in which Spanish people reacted by swiftly categorizing the event as an act of hostility by the Argentine president (Tremlett, 2012). This is probably why news on the issue moved quickly from the financial or international sections of Spanish newspapers to sections on national politics. Therefore, the way in which this event was framed by the newspapers is an object of interest for the present study. Moreover, the news coverage of

these kinds of events usually has a stronger influence on the way that audiences form their opinions about issues (Brewer et al., 2003). It is for this reason that we consider an analysis of how the media framed this event highly relevant. Based on this background, the following research questions were formulated:

*RQ1: To what extent are the strategic game frame and the issue frame present in the news about the expropriation of YPF and in the comments derived from news of the event?*

*RQ2: Are there significant differences between the presence of the strategic game frame and the issue frame in the news stories and in readers' comments?*

*RQ3: Is there a significant relationship between the media frames and the frames latent in the opinions of readers?*

## **Method**

### ***Data and Coding Procedure***

A content analysis was performed on news stories in the Spanish press about the expropriation of YPF that were published during April and May 2012. This time frame was chosen because it was the most active period in the coverage of the issue. Two of the most important events in this process took place in these months: President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner announced the expropriation in April (April 16, 2012), and the Argentine parliament approved the law of expropriation in May (May 4, 2012). Hence, these two months were analyzed to draw on the context before and after the event. Five research assistants, unfamiliar with the research questions formulated for this study, participated in coding the data.

For the purpose of this study, only the digital versions of the Spanish newspapers were analyzed because of their accessibility and relative immediacy in retrieving news about specific events. Three traditional newspapers, with both printed and digital versions (*El País*, *El Mundo*, and *ABC*), and four online newspapers (*Público*, *El Confidencial*, *El Semanal Digital*, and *Libertad Digital*) were used as primary material for analysis. Although *Público* was categorized as a digital newspaper, it previously had been a printed newspaper, so it can be also considered a traditional newspaper. On the other hand, despite the fact that the issue involved the participation of both Spain and Argentina, we analyzed the information regarding the expropriation of YPF and the audiences' reaction to this issue only in Spanish newspapers.

As a criterion for choosing the news stories to be analyzed, only those that explicitly addressed the expropriation of YPF were selected—that is, news stories about the expropriation as a possibility, the expropriation as it was carried out, and the consequences brought by the expropriation. We excluded news items that did not include the expropriation of YPF as a main issue (e.g., mentioning only Argentina or Repsol). The sample of news stories totaled 374 units. As shown in Table 1, the *ABC* newspaper published more news about the expropriation of YPF than the others ( $n = 125$ ). The rest published a smaller proportion of news on the issue, with *El País* at the top of this group ( $n = 57$ ).



**Table 1. Description of the News and Comments Analyzed in Each Newspaper.**

Newspapers	Total news stories	Total comments	News stories with comments	Total related comments	Stories with related comments
<i>ABC</i>	125	5,219	51	842	42
<i>El Confidencial</i>	48	351	46	62	33
<i>El Mundo</i>	45	2,967	31	809	31
<i>El País</i>	57	12,375	56	2,137	56
<i>El Semanal Digital</i>	23	22	11	10	7
<i>Libertad Digital</i>	34	337	23	72	19
<i>Público</i>	42	2,413	42	938	42
	374	23,684	260	4,870	230

Similarly, only the news stories that contained comments from readers were chosen for analysis, with a total of 23,684 comments gathered from 260 news stories on the expropriation of YPF published in the digital press. The traditional newspapers with both printed and online versions contained more comments than the others. The online version of *El País* published the most news items ( $n = 56$ ), providing the majority of the reader comments included in this analysis ( $n = 12,375$ ). *ABC* published 51 news items with 5,219 comments, whereas *El Mundo* ( $n = 2,967$ ) and *Público* ( $n = 2,413$ ) presented similar numbers of comments by readers.

After the process of discarding all news stories that did not mention the expropriation of YPF explicitly, a resulting sample of 4,870 comments from 230 news stories was retained for analysis. As shown in Table 1, *El País* presented more news stories ( $n = 56$ ) with comments related to the specific issue ( $n = 2,137$ ), which reflected an intense debate among readers. The other traditional newspapers (*ABC*, *El Mundo*, and *Público*) also provoked more comments on this topic than the nontraditional or online newspapers.

With the aim of analyzing the frames present in both the news and comments together, all comments derived from the 230 news stories selected were included in a database along with these news stories. The average presence of both the strategic game frame and the issue frame was calculated in all the comments collected to obtain an indicator of their level of presence. The database with the information derived from the comments was merged with the news stories database to examine the relationship between the two types of frames specified.

### Measures for News Stories

**Framing of the politic event.** The type of news frame used by the newspapers was coded with Dimitrova and Strömbäck's (2012) scale for measuring the framing of politics as either a strategic game frame or an issue frame (see Table 2). The absence (0) or presence (1) of the different items constitutive of both frames was measured in the sample of news stories. Although the levels of internal consistency obtained for both frames were moderate (Neuendorf, 2002), these scores are in line with other studies in

which low reliability values were also obtained for both frames (Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2012; Schuck et al., 2013; Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2011).

**Table 2. Scale for Measuring the Framing of Politics.**

Strategic Game Frame ( $\alpha = .60$ )
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deals extensively with politicians or parties winning or losing elections, legislative debates, governing negotiations, or winning or losing in politics generally.</li> <li>• Deals extensively with politicians' or parties' strategies for winning elections, negotiations, or issue debates (i.e., campaign tactics, legislative maneuvers).</li> <li>• Deals with the implications or consequences of elections, governing negotiations, legislative debates, or other news events for politicians or parties (i.e., how politicians or parties might be affected by elections, governing negotiations, legislative debates, or other events).</li> <li>• Deals extensively with polls and politicians' or parties' standing in the polls.</li> </ul>
Issue Frame ( $\alpha = .62$ )
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deals extensively with substantive public policy issues, problems or solutions.</li> <li>• Provides descriptions of politicians' stance or statements about substantive policy issues.</li> <li>• Deals extensively with general implications or impacts of legislation or proposed legislation for the public.</li> <li>• Deals extensively with real-world problems, situations, or processes that explicitly or implicitly have policy implications.</li> </ul>

### **Measures for Comments**

**Presence of frames in comments.** In addition to the framing of news, the presence of frames in comments was also measured with the same variables for each type of frame. The presence of the strategic game frame in comments, for instance, was assessed in terms of whether the comment mentioned (1) or did not mention (0) losers and/or winners of the political decision as well as strategies used by politicians, consequences for politicians, or whether opinion data were used. The issue framing of politics in comments was measured with similar variables to those applied to news stories. Hence, the coders evaluated whether the comment mentioned (1) or did not mention (0) potential implications of the political decisions, the politicians' stance, statements about substantive policy, or general implications for the people.

### **Intercoder Reliability**

A sample of 100 news stories (26.74% of the total) as well as 200 comments were randomly selected to be tested for intercoder reliability. The size of each sample attended to the suggestions made by Lombard, Snyder-Duch, and Bracken (2002) for a content analysis. They posit that an optimal sample size for reliability tests should not be smaller than 50 units or greater than 300 units (representing at least

10% of the entire sample). The scores obtained from the  $\kappa$  test were .81 for the news stories and .80 for the comments. Thus, the agreement reached by the coders was high (Neuendorf, 2002).

### Results

To check for potential differences in the presence of frames in the news and the comments of readers, an independent samples  $t$  test was performed. The test showed a significant difference in framing between news and comments,  $t(229) = -11.811$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.08$ , with a higher presence of the strategic game frame in the comments ( $M = 0.53$ ,  $SD = 0.33$ ) than in the news ( $M = 0.23$ ,  $SD = 0.21$ ). Likewise, an additional test for differences in the use of the issue frame was found to be significant,  $t(229) = -4.475$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.40$ , with a higher presence of this frame in the readers' comments ( $M = 0.58$ ,  $SD = 0.34$ ) than in the news items ( $M = 0.46$ ,  $SD = 0.24$ ). Based on these results, the most marked difference was detected in the use of the strategic game frame in the news and comments. Hence, a solid online public discourse on the expropriation of YPF was observed, with a more prevalent use of both the strategic game frame and the issue frame in the debate generated among readers than in the news coverage provided by the newspapers (see Table 3).

**Table 3. Means in Presence of Frames and Expressions in the News vs. Comments.**

Expressions and frames used	Content analyzed			
	News stories		Comments	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Strategic game frame	0.23	0.21***	0.53	0.33***
Issue frame	0.46	0.24***	0.58	0.34***

*Note.*  $N = 230$ . Each frame was measured with a theoretical variation scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 1 (yes at all). \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

To check for potential differences in the use of framing within the news stories on the expropriation of YPF, and their subsequent comments, we performed a related samples  $t$  test. The results showed a significant difference between both frames in the news stories,  $t(229) = 12.037$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.45$ , with a greater presence of the issue frame ( $M = 0.46$ ,  $SD = 0.24$ ) than the strategic game frame ( $M = 0.23$ ,  $SD = 0.21$ ) in the coverage of the YPF topic by the Spanish digital press. Furthermore, significant differences were found in the use of both frames in the comments derived from these news items,  $t(229) = 2.074$ ,  $p = .039$ ,  $d = 0.16$ , with a predominant issue frame among these comments ( $M = 0.58$ ,  $SD = 0.34$ ). The use of the strategic game frame was lower ( $M = 0.53$ ,  $SD = 0.33$ ) in the comments, similar to its use in the news stories. However, the difference found between the presence of the issue and the strategic game frame in the comments is not as marked as the difference between these two frames in the news stories.

**Table 4. Correlations Between the Frames Used in the News Stories and Comment.**

Frames used in the news stories	1	2	3	4
Strategic game frame in news	—	.19**	.00	-.03
Issue frame in news		—	-.12	-.05
Strategic game frame in comments			—	.28**
Issue frame in comments				—

*Note.*  $N = 230$ . Each frame was measured with a theoretical variation-scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 1 (yes at all). \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Finally, we analyzed the correlation between the use of both frames by journalists in the news and by the readers in their comments. No correlation was found between the frames present in the news and the frames present in the comments (see Table 4). However, significant—although small—associations were observed between the issue frame and the strategic game frame inside both the news stories,  $r(228) = .19$ ,  $p = .004$ , and the news comments,  $r(228) = .28$ ,  $p = .000$ . However, this latter association in the comments is lower than the correlation found in the news stories,  $Z = -2.86$ ,  $p = .004$ .

### Discussion and Conclusions

The main objective of this study was to analyze the news coverage of the expropriation of YPF by the Argentine government in April 2012, as well as the consequences of this event, in Spanish digital newspapers by determining which frame was used the most: the strategic game frame or the issue frame. Similarly, a further objective was to determine which frame was used the most by the readers of the digital newspapers when expressing their opinions regarding this issue. Finally, we sought to verify whether these frames had an impact on readers' opinions. In short, the first research question asked: *To what extent are the strategic game frame and the issue frame present in the news about the expropriation of YPF and in the comments derived from news of this event?* The results obtained from the analysis uncovered a higher presence of the issue frame in the news that directly addressed the expropriation of YPF, and also in readers' comments. Nevertheless, the strategic game frame was also present in these comments, which confirms the assumption that the issue frame is employed more often in the news coverage about political events that take place in times other than during electoral campaigns (Lawrence, 2000; Pedersen, 2012).

The second research question asked: *Are there any significant differences between the presence of the strategic game frame and the issue frame in the news stories and in readers' comments?* The results showed that the issue frame prevailed more in the discourse constructed by the news and in the opinions expressed by readers in their comments. However, the public debate on this topic tends to be more intense and diverse as the strategic game frame increases the comments posted with different positions, accusations, or calls to losers and winners. Additional support for this argument can be seen in the framing differences found between the news and comments. Despite the fact that the issue frame prevailed more in both the media and public debates, the findings reflected a stronger strategic-oriented public debate than an issue-oriented media debate. In any case, because the study analyzed only the

Spanish press and not the Argentine press, it is likely that a consistent argumentative line was used by the Spanish media to explain the YPF event, leading to the prevalence of the issue approach in the media discourse. More varied points of view might be found in the debate among the readers of the newspapers, assuming that both Argentine and Spanish readers exchanged opinions in the same section. Future studies on political issues with potential international consequences such as the one analyzed in this article must take into account the news coverage in the different countries involved in the event in order to compare the distinct points of view among the media and their audiences.

With regard to the third research question, we asked: *Is there any significant relationship between the media frames and the frames latent in the opinions of readers?* No relationships were detected between the media frames and the opinion frames, implying that the framing effect postulated by previous research (de Vreese, 2003; de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2003; Price et al., 2005; Scheufele, 2000; Valkenburg et al., 1999), even in digital contexts (Zhou & Moy, 2007) did not take place in this study. In fact, the general coverage of the expropriation of YPF in Spanish newspapers apparently did not produce the effect of setting the media frames in the opinions of the newspapers' readers, even if the same frames were used in both the printed and digital versions of the newspapers. An explanation for this could be that this study focused more on generic frames and disregarded other issue-specific frames that could potentially affect these opinions. Another explanation could be that the effect of framing in this study was examined in an uncontrolled context—that is, outside the lab, without any experimental designs or longitudinal panel design. In any case, although no statistical contrast was found for the framing effect, this pattern was noticeable in the similarities between the discourse in newspapers and the comments of readers.

An interesting finding was the significant relationship observed between the strategic game frame and the issue frame in the news stories and comments. Moreover, the correlation is stronger in the opinions expressed by the readers on the expropriation of YPF than in the news content. Again, the public discourse seems more active in discussing the issues, probably boosted by patterns in the news, but with distinct channels for establishing a dialogue. This suggests that, compared to single frames present in the news, readers exchange more diverse opinions as a result of the different approaches that converge in online public debates, leading to richer dialogues about the topic. Conversely, this process seems to be independent from the coverage of the political issue by the news media: The news stories have no capacity to set the ways for a public debate, but are able to boost the debate in the online public forum. However, it is not clear whether the official discourses had some kind of impact on the online public debates. Hence, future studies might incorporate news and comments from Argentine newspapers to determine whether the political discourses disseminated by the Argentine and the Spanish governments respectively were transferred to the discourses used by the audiences.

These findings endorse the important debate that emerged about the influence of the media's coverage of political events on the generation of a public debate among the audiences of the digital press. The data obtained from the content analysis performed in this study do not corroborate this hypothesis: The media frames were not transferred to the online public debate. Although previous studies suggest that it is possible to set frames among audiences of the digital press and online debate forums (i.e., Zhou & Moy, 2007), our findings question the real power of the media to transfer their frames directly to

audiences. The media discourse about the issue converged in these two frames, but these frames differed in the extent to which they were used. This result should be considered with caution, though. Contrary to other longitudinal studies, the present study analyzed the results from a transversal approach, which could reduce the opportunity for detecting midterm and long-term media effects. It is possible that the transfer might take place in the short run, but as days pass, the original debate produced by the news story would take its own path in different directions from the initial purpose of the discussion forum. This important possibility is a potential area for future research.

Similarly, this study provides evidence of how the debate in the media is different from the debate in the audience. In contrast to a relatively low coverage of the issue in the newspapers analyzed (only 374 news items in two months), the number of comments posted by readers discussing these news stories was quite high (around 24,000). However, many of these comments deviated from the original issue and took different argumentative paths, with only one-fifth of all comments focusing on the original issue. The remaining comments discussed collateral or even irrelevant topics with little or no association to the political decision made by the Argentine government. As mentioned by Ruiz et al. (2011) and by Zhou and Moy (2007), the public sphere 2.0 or the virtual public forum is a space where robust discussions take place, but in which the original issue from which the debate started may get lost. An example of this is the evolution of the debate in the weeks after the Argentine government's announcement of the expropriation of YPF.

The findings also show that readers exchange more comments in the traditional newspapers with both printed and online versions compared to newspapers with an exclusively digital version. As in Ruiz et al. (2011), *El País* was the newspaper with the most solid discussion community, providing the largest proportion of comments analyzed in this study. However, *ABC*, *El Mundo*, and *Público* also presented a significant number of comments. Therefore, there are apparently two types of audiences or communities in the digital press: passive readers and active readers who post comments. On one side are the communities of readers who prefer traditional newspapers and actively participate in discussing topics and issues; on the other side are communities in which members read the digital press but do not seek to be engaged in actively discussing the issues. Although this finding was not an objective of this study, it constitutes a promising line of research for future work on the processes involved in setting public opinion in different press formats.

All these results reflect why the study of these virtual communities is important. Likewise, future studies must consider other aspects when analyzing online political discussions such as the plurality of views and opinions, the heterogeneity of participants, and argument exchanges that constitute key elements in understanding the dynamics of online forums as well as their impact on the strengthening of democracy.

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