

## **Journalists reframing political PRs. Strategies in the morning talk radio**

Enric Castelló and Marta Montagut, Universitat Rovira i Virgili

© 'This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in

*Journalism Studies* on 14 Dec 2010, available at

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2010.530969>

Castelló, E. & Montagut, M. (2011) Journalists reframing Political PRs. Strategies in the morning talk radio. *Journalism Studies* 12(4) 506-521.

### **Abstract**

Research on agenda setting and framing has been dominated by studies of television and the daily press, developed mainly in the United States of America and in northern European countries and paying special attention to electoral periods. Far from this mainstream approach, our research focuses on agenda and frame building in radio in a non-electoral period in Catalonia (Spain). We carried out in-depth interviews with political party communication consultants and radio editors to analyse how strategies are set and how political issues are framed. We adopt and reconceptualize the concept of 'reframing', referring to the journalistic task of readdressing the direction of messages promoted by frame sponsors. The journalist who plays a weak reframing role is an easy target for political parties public relations with vested interests and, in this model, communication consultants have a great capacity to influence the framing of the news aired. The strong reframer, on the other hand, minimizes political party influence

on setting and framing issues. In this model, the journalists admit that they engage in an ongoing, strategic battle regarding control of media frames with professional spin doctors. The article also highlights the special conditions of the radio as a medium (ubiquity and immediacy) and its impact on the framing process.

**Keywords:** agenda building; Catalonia; political journalism; public relations; radio research; reframing

## **Introduction**

Since the 1970s, when agenda-setting research was first applied to political communication (McCombs and Shaw, 1972), researchers have placed particular emphasis on the correlation between issues featured in the media and the importance attached to them by the public. However, early academic literature already asked a number of preliminary questions: Who or what sets the issues? Where do the political issues come from? And how are they placed in the public sphere? (Cobb and Elder, 1971: p. 905). Agenda-building analysis initially differentiated between two types of public agenda: topics related to the public interest and topics considered important by political elites and decision makers (Cobb et al., 1976: p. 126). A set of studies then focused on the impact of the media agenda on the political agenda and vice versa. As Walgrave and Van Aelst (2006) pointed out, there is a wide range of studies in this field: from those establishing a high media impact on mainstream political decisions to those questioning the correlation between media exposure and the political agenda.

Scholars working on agenda building have focused on the process of shaping the media agenda, distinguishing this from agenda setting as the configuration of the public

agenda (Scheufele, 2000; Sheafer and Weimann, 2005). Most agenda-building research has focused on the correlation between real world facts and events (known as indicators) and their media exposure, while a secondary branch of studies has been concerned with the strategies of political actors or corporations regarding the placing of topics in the media (Sheafer and Weimann, 2005, p. 349). As a consequence of the specificity of the methods and objectives of framing research and the considerable amount of research and theoretical work done in this field, we would agree with the consideration that framing is more than a mere second level of agenda setting, as McCombs (2004) and Weaver (2007) stated. However, we are in agreement with the scholars who recognize that frame analysis objectives complement agenda setting studies (Weaver, 1997-1998, p. 3; Scheufele and Tweeksbury, 2007, p. 18).

This article departs from the conceptualization of a media frame as ‘a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events’ (Gamson and Modigliani, 1994, p. 376). We have assumed that some actors have the power to organize storylines so that the message transmits a certain meaning about the object of the information. These media frames should be differentiated from individual frames (Entman, 1993), which refer to how individuals organize information and give it a certain meaning.

In this article, therefore, we address several questions: What factors influence the way journalists or other societal groups frame certain issues? How do these processes work and, as a result, what are the frames that journalists use? As observed by Zhou and Moy (2007, p. 81), in order to explain how the frame is constructed it is necessary to look into the relationships between the political system, the public, and the media. We consider frame building to be the process through which political actors or corporations shape certain issues when these are addressed as media products (principally news, but

also entertainment or other types of journalism). Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007, p. 12) delimited three fields of interest: news production, news processing and the locus of effect. Public relations (PR) agencies, which already work as framers, act in the first two areas. From a sociological perspective, this framing action is considered as a ‘multilayered process that begins with a negotiation between key political actors or interest groups and the media before reaching citizens’ minds’ (Castells, 2009, p. 161).

Nevertheless, journalistic routines do not always take the form of a negotiated process. Journalists usually work under strong pressures imposed by production routines, economic determinants, cultural contexts, and personal limitations, which can make it difficult for them to adopt a position in negotiating meanings. Consciously or otherwise, the action of framing involves an investment in terms of time and workforce. Unconsciously, professional routines model the frames in a standardized way; that is, the routines configure a kind of minimum common denominator context for journalists. This can make the frames more vulnerable to the influence of political PR agents, whose thorough knowledge of professional routines allows them to hone their communication strategies for maximum effect. As a result, most information is already packed, framed, and smoothly presented by the time journalists deal with it. In his critical deconstruction of journalistic practices, Louw (2005) has observed that journalists, PR managers and spin doctors have a symbiotic relationship in which the traditional watchdog function assigned to liberal political systems simply has no place. Some authors consider this to be the origin of the mutual mistrust between media professionals and politicians—the beginning of a “spiral of cynicism” (Robinson, 1976). This cynicism is not embedded in the content itself, but has its starting point in the relationship between politicians and journalists (Brants et al., 2010, p. 27).

In this discussion about the level of journalistic intervention in the presentation of issues to the audience, we can distinguish between two approaches. Some scholars take a highly critical position and try to show the permeability of the media to precooked information, which reinforces the homogenization of the news and the power of PR. In a recent international study of newsmaking, Preston suggests that this is the current trend, as highlighted by an illustrative but gloomy comment from an interviewed British professional: ‘In the old days you’d go out on the story and get a completely different angle from somebody else’ (Preston 2009, p. 70). Adopting a different argument, some researchers have noted the dual role of the media in which journalists are more than mere frame transporters or reproducers. The second approach is more confident of the journalist’s role. Callaghan and Schell (2001, p. 203) compared the frame scope of press releases on gun control by interest groups and politicians with media coverage; they noted considerable changes, which allowed them to point to the active role of journalists in selecting from “many available frames”.

We take this position further, arguing that journalists do not function as mere selectors of frames, but as reframers. Reframing has been already theorized in the literature on mediation and negotiation (Hale, 1998). Hertog and McLeod (2003, p. 146) previously mentioned the concept of reframing when referring to the protests of radical action groups against the dominant framing. Entman and Herbst (2001), Marchi (2005) and Mythen (2010) used the concept to refer to the action of social movements and citizen journalism transforming the production and perception of news. In our view, reframing is an action which is not only exercised as radical protest against hegemonic approaches to social and political issues, but is, in itself, a defining function of journalism. As Entman (1993, p. 52) suggests, framing is an intentional action by actors who want to “promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral

evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item”. In this regard, political parties are the main frame sponsors (Van Gorp, 2007) and their principal objective is to “naturalize” (Miller and Parnell, 2003, pp. 111-113) their frames in the media in order to gain public support.

Reframing refers to the capacity of journalists to turn on the media frame and to read, understand, contextualize, and transform the meanings of precooked messages coming mainly from the input of PR managers and spin doctors. Thus, our position in this debate is that media power is not restricted to transmitting frames but is actively involved in the configuration and reconfiguration of frames. This function is especially evident in political communication processes, on which the editorial wing of media companies has an important impact, as do journalists exerting their watchdog role in their defence of the public interest.

The medium we focus on is radio, which is often neglected despite its high social penetration (Lewis, 2000; Lacey, 2009). In the study context of Catalonia, radio is the second most popular medium after television. Over half the population (56.1%) regularly listens to radio, for an average of 92.2 minutes per day (1). Despite this social importance, studies of the political impact of the media have paid little attention to radio; Mazzoleni (2003, p. 32) has observed that political communication research has focused much more on television and the daily press. Much of the research into radio has centred on its relationship with democratic development (e.g., Hochheimer, 1992; Kivikuru, 2006), community radio (e.g., Barlow, 1988; Cammaerts, 2009, van Vuuren, 2006), or the impact of political talk shows on audience perceptions and political engagement (e.g., Hall and Capella, 2002; Holbert, 2004; Ross, 2004; Turner, 2009). A less general assumption of radio research scholars is the importance of radio as a medium with considerable impact on political issues such as elections, democratic

processes, the building of the public sphere, political conflicts, or even crisis and emergency communication. Portable devices, Internet access, and diversified radio consumption have all increased radio's impact on audiences, which, in turn, has led to more sophisticated strategies and more complex relationships between PR agents, journalists, and the audience. In this regard, we consider that radio as a medium offers specific conditions - because of its immediacy, ubiquity, and technological accessibility - for fostering the dialogue between frame and reframer roles, especially in political news often fuelled by 'statement-versus-statement' journalism.

In this article, we discuss the results of a study on agenda- and frame-building in the context of Spanish political radio, with a view to understanding how these processes work. In the relationship between political parties and journalists we observe the strategies of the former to act as framers and the latter to act as reframers of political issues. As Vicente and López (2009) point out, frame analysis in Spain has been very much influenced by international mainstream research. Most of the work published in Spanish academic journals focuses on media content ('what frames'), and there are few publications on audience frames (locus of effect) (2009, p. 27). Added to this is the fact that there is still little research on frame building and, with some few exceptions (Aira, 2009; Castelló and Montagut, 2009), little ground has been covered in the field of political communication. The aim of this work is to contribute to frame-building research from a qualitative perspective by identifying the strategies and factors that influence the framing and reframing functions of political parties and journalists in Spain, specifically in the context of Catalan radio.

## **Context and method**

Radio in Spain has developed differently from other European countries, basically because of the lengthy dictatorship of the last century, ownership concentration in the 1990s and the power of what is called the ‘autonomous’ model, especially in Catalonia and the Basque Country. That said, the diversity of radio stations has not resulted in a broad diversity in terms of programmes and content (Franquet, 2002). The 1990s was a decade of intense competition in radio, resulting in a boom of local and regional radio stations (Corominas et al. 2006) and a saturation of the radio electric spectrum (Martí, 2006). Digitalization and the Internet have brought further complexity to the context.

Although the radio audience is fragmented, several radio stations cover the whole Spanish territory. Thus, the public radio corporation (RNE) and several private networks (SER and COPE are the most important) are nationwide broadcasters, with opt-outs or specific channels for regional audiences (some addressing the audience in their regional language). Consequently, listeners in every city or region can choose among a broad range of messages relating to politics (from left to right wing), identities (from centralist to nationalist) or culture (language, cultural viewpoints, etc). This diversity has already been observed in the case of the Barcelona radio spectrum (Morris, 2008).

In our study we focus on morning news-current affairs programmes. Broadcast from around 6.00 am to 1.00 pm, depending on the station, they are usually structured in two main parts: an early fringe dedicated to news, services, current affairs, and radio debates, and a second part containing softer news and topics, magazine sections, etc. This kind of radio programme is known in Catalonia as a *magazin contenidor* (‘container magazine programme’) (Martí, 2000). In Catalonia, information programmes represent almost half the content of generalist radio stations (Gutiérrez, 2009: 81), and it is in the early morning that we find a “concentration of competitive



programming of the same genre” (Bonet and Fernández-Quijada, 2009, p. 15; Martínez Costa et. al, 2007, p. 405).

Table 1. Sample of radio stations

<b>Radio station name</b>	<b>Owner</b>	<b>Language</b>	<b>Programme</b>	<b>2008 audience in Catalonia (thousands) (*)</b>
Catalunya Ràdio	Public / Catalan Government	Catalan	<i>Els matins de Catalunya ràdio</i>	389,000
RAC1	Private / Grupo Godó	Catalan	<i>El món a RAC1</i>	226,000
SER	Private / Grupo Prisa	Spanish	<i>Hoy por hoy</i>	272,000
RNE1	Public / Spanish State	Spanish	<i>Buenos días</i>	59,000
Ràdio 4	Public / Spanish State	Catalan	<i>El matí a 4 bandes</i>	n/d

(\*) Source: Martí (2009), from the Estudio General de Medios.

The sample of radio stations studied was composed of both public (3) and private (2) channels. Table 1 summarizes information on programming and audience ratings for 2008. The leading morning radio programme in 2009 was *El món a RAC1*, with 469,000 listeners; currently, RAC1 is in fierce competition with Catalunya Ràdio for the top ranking position. We carried out in-depth interviews with the editors of each programme in 2009, addressing issues as diverse as the editorial ideological line, the relationship between political parties and journalists, the newsworthiness of political issues, the use of political communication sources, and the relationship with politicians. On the PR side, the sample was composed of all seven political parties with parliamentary representation, two of which - CDC and UDC - act as a coalition (CiU) for election purposes. We interviewed the heads of the party PR departments regarding communication strategies for getting issues on the agenda, their relationships with the media and journalists, the role of political leaders, the use of radio as an effective communication tool, etc. A total of thirteen journalists and PR managers were interviewed. For the sake of anonymity, each interviewee was coded (I1 to I13, with the I standing for interviewee). The interviewees were selected by purposive sampling of all the heads of communication offices and the four main (in audience terms) radio editors. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in two parts: a general first interview on routines and general aspects of the daily work of the informants, and a second more specific interview on the strategies used to negotiate frames in mutual relationships between PR agents and journalists. Six hours of interviews were transcribed and statements and topics were ordered to extract the main ideas from each and to detect coincidences and differences in the discourses.

Table 2. Sample of political parties

<b>Party name</b>	<b>Circumscription</b>	<b>Ideology parameters</b>	<b>Results in the last elections (2007) % / MP seats</b>
Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya (CDC)*	Catalan	Catalan nationalist / moderate right wing / liberal	31.52* / 48
Unió Democràtica de Catalunya (UDC)*	Catalan	Catalan nationalist / Christian democrats / right wing	31.52* / 48
Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya (PSC)	Catalan / Branch of Spanish Socialist Party	Moderate Catalanist / unionists/ moderate left wing	26.82 / 37
Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC)	Catalan	Catalan independentist / moderate left wing	14.03 / 21
Partit Popular de Catalunya (PPC)	Catalan / Branch of Spanish Popular Party	Spanish unionists / right wing / liberals	10.65 / 14
Iniciativa per Catalunya/Verds (ICV)	Catalan	Moderate Catalanists / left wing / greens	9.52 / 12
Ciutadans	Catalan	Spanish unionist / liberals	3.03 / 3

\* Electoral coalition, *Convergència i Unió* (CiU)

The political party spectrum in Catalonia is dominated by Catalan nationalist formations (CDC, UDC, ERC) (2) and parties representing moderate regionalism – *catalanisme* – (PSC, ICV) (3). Nonetheless, the current government (the 2006-2010 legislature) is formed of a coalition between left-wing parties composed of moderate Catalanists (PSC, ICV) and the pro-independence ERC. Spanish unionism is well represented by the right-wing PPC; in the last elections a new party, called *Ciutadans*, launched a discourse against Catalan nationalism (4). The PR infrastructure of these parties varies in complexity in correlation with election results and the number of seats. The larger parties (PSC and CiU) have a bigger communication structure than the smaller parties (ICV and *Ciutadans*). As we will discuss later, the communication culture of each political formation is also determined by whether they are in government or the opposition.

### **Political parties as framers**

In the studied context, radio is frequently used to introduce issues in the media agenda. The PR strategies of political parties focused especially on the morning magazine programmes broadcast on generalist radio stations. These programmes are directed by editors who are part of the radio star system in Spain and who control programme content. Peak ratings are during the early morning fringe (7.00 am to 10.00 am). One of the very first issues to arise from the interviews about radio use was precisely the immediacy of this medium. Referring to ‘the pipeline strategy’ (*estratègia del canutasso*), one of the PR agents (I5, interviewed 16 January 2009) emphasized the instant and no-image nature and ubiquity of radio. Its immediacy allows the PR to raise

a topic on air simply by placing a telephone call to the radio programme. This direct 'pipeline' to the media agenda has important implications for political rivals, as a party leader can thus directly address the audience about a conflict or controversy; this is much more difficult in television and impossible in the printed press, where messages are more elaborated and processed than in radio. The PR managers admitted that radio allows the media agenda to be monitored and, along with the printed press (commented on by the radio editors), is an early setter of media topics. The radio is, in fact, a compass of the current affairs landscape:

The first thing we do in the morning is check the radio to find out what issues are in public debate at that moment. This allows us to enter the political game (I1, interviewed 14 January 2009).

Radio offers the possibility of reaching a large number of people engaged in diverse activities like driving, working, practising sports, etc. This ubiquity is highly appreciated by PR agents, as some of these people will not have any more time during the day to obtain further information on current affairs. Another of the features valued in radio is precisely its iconoclastic nature. In a mediatized world ruled by the impact of image, radio is especially useful for transmitting concepts and abstract ideas. Some of our interviewees considered that radio was especially appropriate for transmitting content independently of the image of the candidate/politician, as image can sometimes hinder more than it helps to transmit a specific topic or idea.

The single most valuable tool for introducing a topic in the media agenda is the interview, because it allows politicians and PR managers to speak directly to the audience. In a way, the interview is an opportunity to elude the reframing filter of

journalists, although the questions brought up by the editor and the tone adopted can obviously affect the PR framing. It should be mentioned that the style of radio interviewing in Spain is not as aggressive as in Anglo-Saxon countries, where journalists traditionally take a hard watchdog role - called “adversarial watchdog-ism” by Louw (2005, p. 64). Thus, the interview is usually an opportunity for politicians to express, more or less comfortably, their own viewpoint on issues.

Communication offices use three types of interviews for different purposes. The breaking-news interview is a short phone interview, usually taking place very early in the programme, about some of the leading stories of the day. It permits the PR agent to place what is called a ‘news pill’ (*píndola informativa*) (I5, interviewed 16 January 2009), which is a brief but strong statement on current affairs. PR managers know that this statement will be reproduced throughout the morning, will require a response from the political adversary, and might have repercussions in other media (press or even television). The second interviewing strategy is a lengthy interview at the end of the prime-time morning fringe. This is a more relaxed conversation covering several topics on the political agenda. The interview is much more prepared by the journalist and usually touches on controversial issues in the internal affairs of political parties; it is, in a way, more demanding on the PR agent. It is in this kind of interview that politicians tend to introduce longer-term and in-depth issues in the media agenda that require more argumentation and a sophisticated elaboration of the frame. For PR strategists, early morning short interviews are used to make an impact with superficial but explosive statements, while late morning longer interviews are used for in-depth attacks to undermine the opposition. In the latter, the PR manager will agree beforehand with the journalist regarding the broadcasting of exclusive information. Thirdly, there is the personality interview, which is especially useful for constructing leadership or changing

audience opinions about a politician. These interviews, which are usually conducted late in the morning or early in the afternoon, are a good means for presenting personal facts about a candidate.

Radio, jointly with television, is the medium that requires most effort from PR managers in preparing a statement. As one of the interviewees stated: “We prepare everything, what we have to say, the message, the idea, the tense (...) a set of concepts that must fit into a sound bite” (I8, interviewed 14 January 2009). But this preparation of the statement depends on the profile of the politician. Callaghan and Schnell (2001, p. 188) pointed out that politicians, as actors, play an important role in framing the news. Their expertise, control of the topics, and ability to successfully communicate are considered key issues when working on a statement. Some politicians tend to rely on PR advice and counselling. We observed how the PR and journalistic culture in Spain seems to offer the possibility of ‘negotiating’ the inclusion of information; as one interviewee admitted: ‘The easiest way to maintain control is to negotiate the information, which is a complex process. This only happens with exclusives. Then, you can put conditions’ (I5, interviewed 16 January 2009). However, journalists do not admit these tactics and, in their view, they never agree what is to be said, or how, in programmes. Despite this, they acknowledge the growing skills of PR managers in ‘scoring a goal’ (I11, interviewed 11 June 2009).

Radio gatherings (radio debates) are also used by politicians and spin doctors to frame political debate in Catalonia. The context here is also interesting. From 1996 to 1998 there was a general tendency to exclude political party members from radio talk shows in Spain because of the excessive partisanship of the radio debate and the difficulty in discerning between opinion and propaganda (Sánchez, 2004, p. 4; Moreno, 2002, p. 282). One consequence was that, as the radio gathering became less framed by

political parties, another actor assumed a central role: the pundit, who could come from any of a wide range of fields, including law or science. Typical guests were writers, business people, university professors, economists, historians, columnists, etc. How the political parties reach out to these pundits in order to set and frame their topics was one of the matters of this research. A common approach is to provide them with political argumentation about issues, the *argumentari*, i.e., a set of ideas and positions regarding a public debate. PR managers try to contact pundits, especially those closer to the ideology of the party, to inform them on how the party views a specific problem; they use a variety of approaches, from electronic communication to what is called the ‘over-coffee strategy’, i.e., an informal personal meeting (I4, interviewed 16 January 2009; I5, interviewed 16 January 2009). Alternatively, PR managers often try to propose pundits to journalists to ensure a more favourable balance in radio gatherings. Not all journalists allow this and it should be said that public radio stations usually try to achieve a balanced representation of party viewpoints in political talk sections.

The communication offices of political parties have other ways of setting and feeding their frame of political issues. For example, they send large pre-edited sound bites with politicians’ statements by mail or upload them to the political party websites. Most PR managers consider this practice to be more a service to journalists than a strategy (I1, interviewed 14 January 2009; I2, interviewed 14 January 2009; I3, interviewed 16 January 2009), but some are aware that radio journalists reject this kind of ‘facilitation’ (I8, interviewed 14 January 2009). This strategy is based on PR knowledge of journalistic routines: given the lack of time and resources, especially in radio, political journalists use this kind of precooked material in order to provide news quickly without having to attend a press conference or meeting (I2, interviewed 14 January 2009; I4, interviewed 16 January 2009). Finally, the most controversial PR



strategy is to negotiate an exclusive, especially when PR managers set up interviews with political leaders. PR managers admit that this approach is useful but not easy to achieve:

You have to do it [negotiate the exclusive] in a restrained way and only if you're sure you'll get more benefits than damages... I always say: you have to share out the scoops. Today it's your turn; tomorrow it's someone else's (I1, interviewed 14 January 2009)

In theory, journalists reject the way PR agents share exclusives among different media in order to secure access to prime-time radio, but in practice they admit that it is 'a question of time and opportunity (...), a problem of political opportunity versus journalistic opportunity' (I14, interviewed 9 June 2009). When the opportunities do not coincide, this kind of game provokes PR mistrust of journalists and vice versa.

### **Journalists as reframers**

When questioned, all the editors asserted their editorial independence but most of them acknowledged that PR strategies for inserting and framing issues in the media agenda were highly sophisticated:

You have to consider what is interesting for your audience and to discern if they [the PRs] are selling you some great news or pure electoral interest. This task is becoming more complicated by the day, because they [the PRs] have a legitimate interest in selling their own tactics (I12, interviewed 18 May 2009)

All the interviewed editors, whether from public or private radio stations, talked about the concept of the public - as opposed to political - interest. Their defence of the public interest was their main argument for controlling the agenda and frame. In this regard, the journalists were highly conscious of their role as reframers, although obviously they did not use this term when referring to this function. Some of them talked about their role as a 'translator' (I9, interviewed 19 May 2009) of information from the political arena to the media arena, or a 'teacher' (I12, interviewed 18 May 2009) with a didactic role, given the sometimes incomprehensible complexity of a political situation; alternatively they referred to their job as a 'shop window' showing 'a selection of issues, well explained, that give the audience balanced news so they could form their own opinion' (I13, interviewed 9 June 2009). Editors are engaged in a symbolic battle with PR managers and their political strategies, revealing 'a relationship of mutual hatred or mutual attraction' (I14, interviewed 9 June 2009). In this relationship, the journalists are aware of the necessity of controlling not only the issues proposed by the PR managers but also, and more importantly, of the way they are presented. In fact, journalists see the PR offices as 'agents of influence' rather than as a service that makes their work easier. Judging from the editors' answers and examples, the journalist-PR agent relationship seems to be based much more on conflict than collaboration. One of the editors illustrated this idea very well:

The role of the PR agent should be that of a service provider, service supplier and mediator. Consequently, they should be interlocutors to reach your interlocutor: this must not be confused. Here lies the

danger. There is a clear tendency for the parties and institutions to be increasingly better armed. (I13, interviewed 9 June 2009).

In this sense, one of the most controversial strategies of the PR managers is the ‘no-question press conference’. As the communications consultant Xavier Roig explains, this is popular with politicians in situations of acute crisis (5); it has been used by almost all the political leaders, including the president José Luís Rodríguez Zapatero (PSOE) and the opposition leader Mariano Rajoy (PP). But the growing use of this strategy in unexceptional situations, but presented as ‘institutional statement’ (*declaració institucional*), has provoked strong protests from the main media in Spain, with some proposing boycotting this kind of PR event:

We don’t have to attend a press conference where questions are not allowed, and we should have stood up to this a long time ago. But surprisingly we keep going to this kind of event. So when somebody says ‘no, I’m not accepting any questions’, you grab your things and go! You leave! Until the day we do this, the PR agents or their substitutes will keep growing and growing and we’ll see what happens... It’s absolutely unacceptable. (I13, interviewed 9 June 2009).

But it remains a fact that journalists accept no-question press conferences, and, as one interviewee complained with resignation, ‘it is possible that we will shortly be accepting pre-edited sound bites’ (I13, interviewed 9 June 2009). Radio editors do not

admit pre-recorded and pre-edited sound bites, yet they are aware this might change due to the strong pressures exerted by production and newsroom routines:

I'm lucky to work in a media where I can find my own resources. So unless it is an extraordinary situation and completely impossible to contact the source of the statement, I would never use a pre-edited sound bite that anybody has access to. I prefer the person to speak directly to the media where I work rather than using this kind of press release (...) I am thinking of our prestige as a medium and the quality of the material we offer to listeners (I11, interviewed 11 June 2009).

Instructions from PR managers about the choice and presentation of topics are therefore rejected. "It's unidirectional, I mean... we (journalists) are the ones who take the initiative and make the plan... We are interested in this, this and that the other" (I13, interviewed 9 June 2009). Some journalists think that political PR managers sometimes "overstep the mark" (I13, interviewed 9 June 2009): they try to impose not only the person to be interviewed but also the questions that journalists ask. The editors openly reject these impositions, but some admit that the strategy of exclusives gives PR managers an advantageous position in negotiations. These strategies are based on the media's need to generate their own news (I12, interviewed 18 May 2009) and the common tendency, especially in radio, towards a political statement-versus-statement' journalism:

It's a game that allows you to dress up political information in the way that sells best, which is controversy. Controversy almost always sells.

The attractive thing about controversy is that, formally, it gives you a way of broadcasting a particular story or news. It's more pleasant for the listener (I11, interviewed 11 June 2009)

Some editors, however, considered that statement-versus-statement journalism places PR managers at an advantage in the negotiation of persons, issues and frames in the media (I9, interviewed 18 May 2009; I13 and I14, interviewed 9 June 2009); they are all conscious, however, of the difficulty of breaking this kind of inertia: 'It's a never-ending discussion' (I14, interviewed 9 June 2009).

Radio debates are also a genre in which political parties are interested in exerting ideological influence. The editors are aware of this interest and design debates that offer an independent point of view. In other words, the editors, as reframers, try to build their own position, and whether or not it is ideologically balanced depends on the editorial line of the company, the political profile of the audience, and, of course, the journalist's approach to the topic. After evaluating the many answers and attitudes regarding the reframing role of the journalist, we distinguished three positions:

- Public radio stations try to find an ideological balance between the pundits participating in the programme and are conscious of the public function of the radio. Editors are also conscious of the strong political and institutional controls over public radio stations: 'in public radio you are conditioned in a way that you're not in private radios; there is a vocational sense of striking a balance (...) and we work with this very strictly' (I11, interviewed 11 June 2009).
- Private commercial radio stations place entertainment above ideological matters and look for a less serious approach, including soft-news topics and taking a more

spectacular perspective: ‘above (political) colour, for me the main concept is entertainment. I’m doing radio, not political research’ (I9, interviewed 18 May 2009).

- Private social responsibility radio stations prioritize ‘expertise’, ‘witnesses’ and ‘knowledge’ of the topics. This is known as the ‘plus one’ strategy (I13, I14, interviewed 9 June 2009): “The debate isn’t radio time for a group of persons, well or badly selected, to say what they want, whatever the issues are. We conceive a space for providing information that approaches reality, information to judge (...) and sometimes we involve our own journalists in this debate where they can put the issues in context” (I14, interviewed 9 June 2009). The function of radio debates is to popularize complex political issues (although the public model - the first one described above - also assumes such responsibility as its main function).

Some PR managers complained about the absence of politicians in these radio debate programmes, questioning the political visibility and honesty of the debates (I4, interviewed 16 January 2009): having the politician on air would be fairer for the listener, who is capable of easily distinguishing the interests behind the statements. This argument would point to pundits adopting a pseudo-independent perspective, although the editors disagreed:

Nobody is totally independent. Some positions are ideologically clearer and others are more obscure... but people identify them perfectly. The audience isn’t stupid (I12, interviewed 18 May 2009).

Independently of the three positions, all the editors agreed with the need for an appropriate selection of pundits to construct the programme's corporate image and build listener loyalty:

What is true in the radio debate is that there is a formal factor and there is identification, empathy, knowledge... empathy or antipathy from the listeners towards the pundits. So there must be a particular group of people, more or less fixed, who listeners can identify with (I13, interviewed 9 June 2009).

The editor has total responsibility for this selection and some are aware that pundits can change their political ideas from time to time (I12, interviewed 18 May 2009) or become influenced by a political party (I11, interviewed 11 June 2009). This situation is not tolerated if detected by editors:

I can't accept that pundits are following instructions from political parties, although I might suspect it and some people might be sure. Because if I have more than a suspicion, that person wouldn't be in my programme (I11, interviewed 11 June 2009).

As we have seen, political PR managers are very concerned with setting and framing issues in morning magazine programmes through interviews and statements. Part of this interest is grounded in the indirect influence (Walgrave et. al., 2010, pp. 92) exerted by radio and press on other media, especially television. Regarding the relationship between radio and the press and the controversy about which media follows which, all

the radio editors considered that the press is a very important element in their work but is not an agenda setter as in the past (I13, interviewed 11 June 2009; I11, interviewed 11 June 2009). The use of the press by radio editors responds to a couple of functions: to obtain a general overview of how the influential dailies are framing an issue, and to discover potential pundits already writing articles on specific topics.

## **Conclusions**

This qualitative interview-based research has helped us to understand the attitudes of PR managers and radio journalists to their roles as framers and reframers. Although neither group of professionals refer to themselves as reframers, we can conclude that they are very aware of the reframing function. Far from the critics who hastily write off journalists as mere reproducers of PR news frames, we have found a clear position of resistance among radio professionals. The framing and reframing process is a matter of unyielding dispute and discussion, most of which is not heard on air. Moreover, interactions between journalists and PR managers are not based on a friendly or condescending relationship, but far more on a spirit of competition: framing the news agenda is a battleground.

Radio as a medium has special features that make it ideal as a battleground. Immediacy, ubiquity, technological accessibility and the large amount of air time, all facilitate a rapid impact in the framing process. Regarding PR managers, as we have seen, their strategies take full advantage of these features and the result is a set of calculated actions, such as intervention in the early morning fringe (through telephone interviewing), press releases to intervene in statement-versus-statement situations, the dispatch of sound bites, influencing participants in the debates etc. We have also noticed



how radio is still considered to be a privileged tool for influencing public opinion in Spain.

Regarding the reframing function of journalists, we could determine weak and strong reframer roles: these positions are detached from the moral values of the journalists' attitudes and do not match with the traditional 'lapdog' and 'watchdog' roles.

We consider that weak reframing is well represented when journalists are more concerned with accurately reproducing political party representations in parliament than with reflecting an individual opinion on political issues. Thus, while minority political party PR strategies aim to break this partisan balance and win more attention from the media, weak reframers act as a kind of deliverer and referee of the space for each partisan frame. In some cases, PR agents argue a party's weight in parliament to claim 'balanced' frame exposure in the media. Here, the debate is based more on negotiating air time for each political option than in shaping content. In this regard, journalists who are easier to negotiate with and who accept the PR agent's conditions play weak reframer roles. In this model PR agents have more influence over the brokerage process. Thus, weak reframers convert radio (and the media, by extension) into a 'shop window' in which the PR managers display their frames on the topics of the day.

The strong reframer role displays a vision that is more their own on the topics of the day and here the negotiation is more on the basis of how the media treat issues than on how much they are exposed. This role should not necessarily be identified with a 'good' journalist attitude, as stronger reframers could tend to bias and to a lack of political pluralism; they also could have other frame sponsors (institutions, pressure groups, companies or lobbies). PR managers have smarter strategies versus this role players depending on the editorial position of the media.

Going back to the initial discussion in this article, the frame for news is ultimately contained in the information and opinion aired, but understanding the reasons for how these frames appear on air involves taking a qualitative approach to professional routines. Determining weak and strong reframer positions is not to say that one type of journalist panders exclusively to one role or another. In the radio context analysed above, we could observe how some journalists switched roles and can even adopt a weak or strong reframing attitude in the same programme. This ambivalent role of the journalist depends on the political and informational opportunities, the radio editor's goals at each moment, and the production context (work conditions, accessibility, technologies, etc).

### **Acknowledgements**

This research has been funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, under Project CSO2010-20047: 'The media construction of political and territorial conflicts in Spain: a study of discourses and narratives'. The authors want to thank the support by the the Chair URV/Repsol of Communication Excellence. The authors want to thank the political parties and radio journalists who participated in the project and to Núria Araña for her support during the processing of the interviews.

### **Notes**

(1) Source: Baròmetre de la comunicació, second wave 2008.

(2) Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya (CDC), Unió Democràtica de Catalunya (UDC), Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC). CDC and UDC are joined in the

coalition *Convergència i Unió* (CiU), which governed Catalonia under the presidency of Jordi Pujol from 1980 to 2003.

(3) *Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya* (PSC) and *Iniciativa per Catalunya-Verds* (ICV). PSC is a federation of the Spanish socialist party (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*, PSOE).

(4) *Partit Popular de Catalunya* (PPC) and *Ciutadans*. PPC is a regional branch of the Spanish *Partido Popular* (PP).

(5) Source: <http://noticias.terra.es/espana/2009/0816/actualidad/periodismo-no-sin-preguntas.aspx>, accessed 16 February 2010.

## References

Aira, Toni (2009) *Els spin doctors. Com mouen els fils els assessors dels líders polítics*, Barcelona: Columna.

Barlow, William (1988) "Community Radio in the US: the struggle for a democratic medium", *Media, Culture and Society*, 10, pp. : 81-105.

Barnett, Clive (2003) *Culture and Democracy. Media, Space and Representation*, The University of Alabama Press: Tuscaloosa.

Bonet, Montse and Fernández-Quijada, David (2009) "Public service radio facing the new competitive environment in Catalonia", *International Journal of Iberian Studies*, 22(1), pp. 3-21.

Brants, Klees, De Vreese, Claes, Möller, Judith and Van Praag, Philip (2010) "The Real Spiral of Cynicism? Symbiosis and Mistrust between Politicians and Journalists", *International Journal of Press/Politics*, 15(1), pp. 25-40.

Callaghan, Karen and Schnell, Frauke. (2001) "Assessing the Democratic Debate: How the News Media Frame Elite Policy Discourse", *Political Communication*, 18 (2), pp. 183-212.

Cammaerts, Bart. (2009) "Community Radio in the West. A Legacy of Struggle for Survival in a State and Capitalist Controlled Media Environment", *International Communication Gazette*, 71(8), pp. 635-54.

Castelló, Enric and Montagut, Marta (2009) "Estratègies de comunicació política a la radio: introduint temes a l'agenda mediàtica", *Trípodos*, extra number, vol. 1, pp. 267-75.

Castells, Manuel (2009) *Communication Power*, Oxford University Press: New York.

Cobb, Roger W. and Elder, Charles D. (1971) "The Politics of Agenda-Building. An Alternative Perspective for Modern Democratic Theory", *The Journal of Politics*, 33(4), pp. 892-915.

Cobb, Roger, Ross, Jenny-Keith and Ross, Mark-Howard (1976) "Agenda building as a Comparative Political Process", *The American Political Science Review*, 70(1), pp. 1276-138.

Corominas, Maria, Bonet, Montse, Guimerà, Josep Àngel and Fernández, Isabel (2006) "Digitalization and the Concept of Local: The Case of Radio in Spain", *Journal of Radio and Audio Media*, 13(1), pp. 116-28.

Entman, Robert (1993) "Framing: Towards classification of a fractured paradigm", *Journal of Communication*, 43(4): 51-8.

Entman, Robert and Herbst, Susan (2001) 'Reframing Public Opinion as We Have Known it' in: Bennet, W. Lance and Entman, Robert M. (eds) *Mediated Politics*.

*Communication in the Future of Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
pp. 203-225.

Franquet, Rosa (2002) “La radio en el umbral digital: concentración versus digitalización”, in: Bustamante, E. (Ed.) *Comunicación y cultura en la era digital. Industrias, mercados y diversidad en España*, Barcelona: Gedisa, pp. 179-212.

Gamson, William. A. and Modigliani, Andre (1987). “The Changing Culture of Affirmative Action”, in: Burstein, P. (Ed) *Equal Employment Opportunity. Labor Market Discrimination and Public Policy*, New York. De Gruyter, pp. 373-93.

Gutiérrez, Maria. (2009) “La programació radiofònica a Catalunya”, in: Martí, Josep. M. (Ed.) *Informe sobre la radio a Catalunya 2008*, Bellaterra. Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, pp. 71-88.

Hall, A. lice and Cappella, Joseph. N. (2002) “The Impact of Political Talk Radio Exposure on Attributions About the Outcome of the 1996 U.S. Presidential Election”, *Journal of Communication*, 52(2), pp. 332-50.

Hochheimer, John L. (1992) “Organizing Democratic Radio: Issues in Practice”, *Media, Culture and Society*, 15, pp. 473-86.

Holbert, R. Lance. (2004) “Political Talk Radio, Perceived Fairness, and the Establishment of President George W. Bush’s Political Legitimacy”, *International Journal of Press/Politics*, 9(3), pp. 12-27.

Kivikuru, Ullamaija (2006) “Top-Down or Bottom-up? Radio in the Service of Democracy. Experiences from South Africa and Namibia”, *International Communication Gazette*, 68(1), pp. 5-31.

Lacey, Kate. (2009) “Ten years of Radio Studies. The very idea”, *The Radio Journal*, 6(1), pp. 21-32.

- Lewis, Peter M. (2000) "Private passion, public neglect: The cultural status of radio", *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 3(2), pp. 160-67.
- Louw, Eric. (2005) *The Media and Political Process*, London: Sage.
- Marchi, Regina M. (2005) "Reframing the Runaway. A case study of the impact of community organizing on news and politics", *Journalism* 6(4), pp. 465-85.
- Martí, Josep M. (2000) *De la idea a la antena. Tècniques de programació radiofònica*, Barcelona. Pòrtic.
- Martí, Josep M. (2006) "Pròleg. De la Maduresa a la Incertesa", III Congrés de la radio a Catalunya. On-line available at: [http://www.l-obsradio.org/files/III%20Congres\\_Actes\\_%20v3\\_cos.pdf](http://www.l-obsradio.org/files/III%20Congres_Actes_%20v3_cos.pdf) (accessed 11 Feb. 10).
- Martínez-Costa, María del Pilar and Herrera, Susana (2007) "Radiografía del *prime time* informativo de la radio española", *Comunicación*, 5, pp. 405-14.
- Mazzolini, Gianpietro (2003) "Political communication and television: between old and new influences", in: Maarek, Philippe K. and Wolfsfeld, Gadi (Eds) *Political Communication in a New Era. A Cross-National Perspective*, London: Routledge, pp. 32-40.
- McCombs, Maxwell (2004) *Setting the Agenda*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- McCombs, Maxwell. and Shaw, Donald. L. (1972) "The agenda-setting function of mass media", *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), pp. 176-82.
- Miller, Mark and Parnell Riecher, Bonnie (2003) "The Spiral of Opportunity and Frame Resonance: Mapping the Issue Cycle in News and Public Discourse". In: Reese, D. Stephen, Gandy, Oscar H Jr., and Grant, August E. (eds) *Framing Public Life. Perspectives on Media and Our Understanding of the Social World*. Mahwah (NJ): Lawrence Erlbaum Ass.

Moreno, Pastora (2002) "La tertulia radiofónica, foro para el siglo XXI", *Estudios sobre el mensaje periodístico*, 8, pp. 275-91.

Morris, Nancy. (2008) "Transmitting identity. Radio in Barcelona", *International Journal of Communication*, 2. On-line available at:  
<http://ijoc.org/ojs/index.php/ijoc/issue/view/2> (accessed 11 Feb. 10).

Mythen, Gabe (2010) "Reframing Risk? Citizen Journalism and the Transformation of News", *Journal of Risk Research*, 13(1), pp. 45-58.

Preston, Paschal (2009) *Making the News. Journalism and News Cultures in Europe*, London: Routledge.

Robinson, Michael (1976) 'Public affairs television and the growth of political malaise: The case of "The Selling of the Pentagon"', *American Political Science Review*, 70(2), pp. 409-32.

Ross, Karen. (2004) "Political talk radio and democratic participation: Caller perspectives on Election Call", *Media, Culture and Society*, 26(6), pp. 785-801.

Sánchez, Chelo (2004) "'Las tertulias políticas de la radio española. Un ejercicio de comunicación política mejorable'", *Comunicación y pluralismo*, 0, pp. 141-152.

Scheufele, Dietram A. and Tewksbury, David (2007) "Framing, Agenda Setting, and Priming: The Evolution of Three Media Effects Models", *Journal of Communication*, 57(1), pp. 9-20.

Scheufele, Dietram. A. (1999) "Framing as a theory of media effects", *Journal of Communication*, 49(1), pp. 103-22.

Scheufele, Dietram. A. (2000) "Agenda-setting, priming, and framing revisited: another look at cognitive effects of political communication", *Mass Communication and Society*, 3, pp. 297-316.

Sheafer, Tamir. and Weimann, Gabriel (2005) "Agenda Building, Agenda Setting, Priming, individual Voting Intentions, and the Aggregate Results: An Analysis of Four Israeli Election", *Journal of Communication*, 55(2), pp. 347-65.

Turner, Graeme (2009) "Politics, radio and journalism in Australia: the influence of 'talkback'", *Journalism*, 10(4), pp. 411-30.

Van Gorp, Baldwin (2007) "The Constructionist Approach to Framing: Bringing Culture Back In". *Journal of Communication*, 57(1), pp. 60-78.

van Vuuren, Kitty (2006) "Community broadcasting and the enclosure of public sphere", *Media, Culture and Society*, 28(3), pp. 379-392.

Vicente Mariño, Miguel and López Rabadán, Pablo (2009) "Resultados actuales de la investigación sobre framing: sólido avance internacional y arranque de la especialidad en España", *ZER. Revista de Comunicación*, 14 (26), pp. 13-34.

Walgrave, Stefaan and Van Aelst, Peter (2006) "The Contingency of the Mass Media's Political Agenda Setting Power: Toward a Preliminary Theory", *Journal of Communication*, 56(1), pp. 88-109.

Weaver, David H. (1997-1998) "Framing should not supplant agenda-setting", *Communication Theory and Methodology Concepts*, 17(2), 3.

Weaver, David H. (2007) "Thoughts on Agenda Setting, Framing and Priming", *Journal of Communication*, 5(1), pp. 142-147.

Zhou, Yuqiong and Moy, Patricia (2007) "Parsing Framing Processes: The Interplay Between Online Public Opinion and Media Coverage", *Journal of Communication*, 57(1), pp. 79-98.