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### 11-M: a lesson on greedy journalism

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### 11-M: a lesson on greedy journalism

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Through the analysis of Spanish media coverage of the terrorist attack in Madrid 11 March 2004, and specifically of the so-called ‘conspiracy theory’ sustained by certain media for political or commercial reasons with large public success, this article examines the consolidation in Spain of a kind of journalism that tries to model with Lewis Coser’s concept of ‘greedy institution’. The political functions of this ‘greedy journalism’ and its relationship with the so-called ‘neo-populist turn’ of present politics in Western democracies are discussed in brief.

**Keywords:** 11-M media coverage; media tabloidization; greedy institutions; neo-populism

A fact is isolated, taken out of context and one tries to give the false impression that any conclusion comes exclusively from it. In this way, one ignores the obligation to analyse the facts in a coherent way, so we can reach a conclusion, by reasoning, following the rules of the logic and experience. The argument is false and comes from false premises; therefore the conclusion is inherently wrong. It takes an isolated fact, ignoring anything else that can explain it, to lucubrate a purely imaginative hypothesis.

(11-M court case, ref. 65/2007 [legal proceeding 20/2004]; part of the judge’s statement)

On 11 March 2004, nine bombs exploded in different parts of the Madrid region railway network, killing 191 people and wounding another 1824 others. It was the most devastating terrorist attack in the history of Europe. A day after the massacre, the police arrested the first suspects within jihadist militant groups linked to the city mosque and to the Lavapiés area. On 4 April, police investigations led to a house in Morata de Tajuña (Madrid), where apparently explosives were made, and to a flat in the neighbourhood of Leganés that was occupied by a group of Islamists who preferred to commit suicide by exploding the dynamite that they were storing than be arrested by the police. Three and a half years later, the Audiencia Nacional (Spain’s highest court) sentenced most of the arrested suspects to more than 120,000 years in prison, confirming the police investigation.

This traumatic episode in the recent history of Spain, in which our country showed by example to the rest of the world the efficiency of its security forces, the emergency health services and the judicial power, has helped, unfortunately, to produce an absurd social breach due to the confrontation between the two main Spanish political parties around the so-called ‘theory of conspiracy’, a mixture of

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lies, false allegations and facts taken out of context aimed at suggesting that the terrorist attack in Madrid was not committed by Islamic fundamentalists but by ETA,<sup>1</sup> and – which is worse – that the socialist government elected on 14 March 2004 for electoral purposes deliberately concealed the evidence that led to ETA terrorists, forcing the police investigation to focus on jihadist groups. This theory suggests that the socialist government did so with the support of the police forces, the judges and even foreign intelligence services. No doubt history will harshly judge the attitude of the conservative Partido Popular's (PP) main leaders between 2004 and 2008, first in government and later in opposition, for unreservedly supporting the conspiracy theories and undermining the legitimacy of democratic institutions, the security forces, the image of Spain abroad and the judicial power. It is likely that history will also be tough on the socialist Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE), which was unexpectedly catapulted into government by a social movement that rejected the way in which José María Aznar's government managed the tragedy. The socialists – and the monarchy – could have done more to defend the public institutions from this untimely attack, but instead they allowed the PP to make mistakes in their search for the big conspiracy, maybe in the belief that their absurd attempt would be punished in the elections.

Nevertheless, it is not this article's intention to judge the attitudes of the political actors who led Spanish life between 2004 and 2008. More capable specialists have already done it<sup>2</sup> and, for a lot of people's misfortune, they will carry on doing it in the future. We will focus here on two specific aspects related to these facts: the attitude of the Spanish mass media in the treatment of information about the terrorist attack and the particular influence that political parties had on society. In order to do that we will be using two notions that we have been developing recently (Ortega *et al.* 2006, García Tojar 2007), *journalism without information* and *greedy journalism*, which from a political sociology approach to journalism can shed some light on the events, as well as collaborating in opening new perspectives of analysis of the mass media political functions and dysfunctions in 'advanced democracies'.

In an important piece of work, Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini (2004, p. 79) analysed and identified the Spanish information system under the definition of 'polarised pluralism'. Its main characteristics are: the importance of the role of the State and the Catholic church as transmitters and regulators of mass communications; a wider and more radical political spectrum than in the liberal traditions of the Anglo-Saxon press; more dependence on the State mass media, the church and private investors; relatively low levels of newspaper reading and insufficient professionalisation of journalists. The authors insist (*ibid.*, p. 225) that all the models of journalism lean towards the 'liberal' system, characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon press, which is, no doubt, the most solid and professionalised. In discrepancy with this optimistic approach, we have suggested in a recent article (Ortega *et al.* 2006, pp. 18–20) the powerful appearance in Spain of a sort of *new tabloidism* that contradicts the very basis of the liberal press, in which the faithful account of events that can be checked upon is substituted by all sorts of inventions, distortions and false allegations for the service of particular stakeholders. Unlike what occurred with the Anglo-Saxon popular press at the beginning of the twentieth century, when tabloids such as those from Hearst and Pulitzer shared the information space with serious newspapers, nowadays the fight for the business and the weight of audiovisual media may have led the so-called 'quality press' to a process of

*tabloidization* (Sparks and Tulloch 2000) that surely moves away from the liberal convergence predicted by Hallin and Mancini. It is logical to think that an information system such as the Spanish one, weakened by the Franco dictatorship and its peculiar transition to democracy, shows this de-professionalisation process more acutely. In order to show that this new pseudo-informative narrative does not aim at the explicative narration of external events by the journalists who have the knowledge that the public is lacking (this is the condition of journalism according to Charaudeau 2003, p. 50), we have called the Spanish version of this new model *journalism without information*, and we have analysed some of its characteristics in the local press, opinion talk-shows, the political information and historical disclosure (Ortega *et al.* 2006).

In search for an explanation of the success of this new sort of journalism in democratic and educated societies such as the Spanish one, we use a sociological concept somehow forgotten, the ‘greedy institution’, proposed by Lewis Coser in the 1960s (García Tojar 2007, in reference to Coser 1978). According to Coser, greedy institutions are ‘those that demand from their members exclusive and unconditional loyalty, reducing the influence of competing roles and status on those who they wish to totally assimilate. Their demands on the people are *omnivorous*’ (Coser 1978, p. 14; italics in the original). Greedy institutions are instrumental associations aimed at the achievement of specific goals, declared or secret, but always *against* a powerful enemy. The most typical examples are the religious sects and monastic communities, but Coser analyses with perceptiveness the possibility that, given certain conditions of anomie and lack of affiliation, ‘normal’ institutions such as marriage or a political party turn greedy and produce dysfunctional social effects. Total submission to the group hierarchy, radical separatism, zero tolerance towards deviation from the internal normative principles and the weakening of social relations are some of the characteristics of a greedy association. In Coser’s work mentioned above, he presents the ideal type and examines some of the historical manifestations to conclude that in modernity, despite most of us belonging to multiple social networks and representing different roles that avoid the totalisation of personality, greedy sociability remains latent as a pathological response to isolation in the family, politics or religion.

The use of the concept of the greedy institution for Spanish journalism without information comes from Coser’s conclusion. From our point of view (García Tojar 2007), in the light of recent events we could talk about *greedy journalism* opposed to the pluralist information model, whose undoubted audience success coupled with the historical weakness of the professional press in our country could lead it to turn into the legitimate model of journalism. Weak professional identity, high external influence (public and private) over the mass media and the rise of ‘conviction ethics’ (Weber 1997) are processes that come together in the configuration of an intentional journalism, with a pastoral mission or a political interest (often both), whose defenders believe they share a collective salvation duty that will free them from the professional norms of information.

Félix Ortega (Ortega *et al.* 2006, p. 27) names five characteristics of Spanish journalism without information that meet the idea of greediness. *Autonomy*: the journalist is not limited by reality, nor are there professional monitoring institutions. It is *crosscutting*; it freely mixes styles that are alien to the informative narrative (i.e. the novel). *Extraterritoriality*: it projects of its own ethics of ‘everything is ok’ onto the rest of the social institutions. *Memory dissolution*: there is an accumulation of

changing and incoherent informative narratives that turn the collective memory into a palimpsest constantly rewritten from ignorance. And *finalism*: it uses information to serve particular stakeholders. In the work mentioned above (Ortega *et al.* 2006, García Tojar 2007) we have given data and facts that support the emergence of this model of false journalism. Now we will examine the famous ‘theory of conspiracy’ from this new perspective, because despite its failure it might have meant the establishment of a new way of doing journalism.

### The ‘lunatic branch’

Political conspiracies are as old as the human being; so is to accumulate more or less crazy narrations – sometimes real – about them. In the old times travellers used to bring news about surprising events, usually terrifying, that happened overseas, where nobody could check the veracity, and they were hosted and fed in exchange for telling their stories. In the modern era, with the expansion of mass media and the increasing democratisation of political institutions, stories about palace conspiracies turned into a literary genre (think of *The three musketeers*, by Dumas) or into political propaganda with devastating effects (the publication in 1905 in Russia of a pamphlet titled *The protocols of the Sion wise men*, which revealed a supposed Jewish conspiracy to dominate the world, instigating prosecutions and state crimes all over Eastern Europe; Hitler apparently believed this story).

Logically, the most advanced country also turned into a paradise for tales about conspiracies. Most of us have heard about Area 51 (a secret refuge in the desert where the US government supposedly kept the remains of alien beings), that the murder of John F. Kennedy was in reality a *coup d'état*, that the landing on the moon was recorded in Hollywood or that Elvis Presley is still alive on a Pacific island. North American journalists know fully well that in any case, no matter how unbelievable or unproven the story is, there is always somebody who believes it. They call this group of hardliners ‘the lunatic branch’ and they believe that nothing can be done to convince them otherwise. The ‘lunatics’ organise their own communication networks, where they circulate their conspiracies, until they get fed up with them. The key to controlling the social effect of these tales is to prevent them from circulating in the mainstream channels of information, other than to be discredited. Thus, in the USA the quality mass media have developed mechanisms to check all the stories that are published, and if those mechanisms fail, the media apologises and makes the people responsible accountable. Since the mid-nineteenth century, nevertheless, together with the serious newspapers others appeared, called popular or *tabloids*, and these were much less careful in checking the information; they also used the information to serve particular interests, either publicly or not. Despite the fact that the popular press soon outdid the serious press in the number of newspapers sold (although not in influence), Anglo-Saxon journalism has been able to maintain – maybe it will not be able to do this any more, as we will see later – the difference between both types of mass media. The distinction between the popular press and the quality press is one of the keys of the Anglo-Saxon model of journalism. If, as some North American specialists believe, the border has been weakening lately due to the pressure of ‘infotainment’ (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2003), this would be a dangerous symptom for the health of liberal journalism and a new reason to doubt the optimistic forecast given by Hallin and Mancini.

In Spain, unfortunately, we are far away from that model. A strong popular press has hardly existed here (except newspapers such as *El Caso*, which disappeared with Francoism, the sports press and lately the free newspapers) and there have been the apparently serious media that have used genres and rhetoric that come from the mass media, such as ‘in-depth journalism’. So, the 11-M terrorist attack has been, from the information point of view, the apotheosis of the journalistic hubris, the end – let us hope it is not for good – of any difference between popular and quality journalism, between checked news and intended false allegations: the success of the ‘lunatic branch’. In our Basque-jihadist-police-socialist-international conspiracy there are plenty of merchants of *serious* information determined to increase the sales, journalists without a profession, unprotected trainees, saviours of the country either by the cross or by the sword, heartless politicians, fanatic politicians, common criminals, mysterious lawyers, dilettante researchers and networks of conspiratorial activists. In order to understand the level of absurdity achieved, as well as the damage that this conspiracy of crusaders has caused between 2004 and 2008 to the journalistic profession and to Spanish society, it is necessary to provide a brief summary of the main lies that have been published. This summary cannot start without remembering that all these news items were presented as research exclusives by the mass media that have – they *had* – the maximum of credibility and prestige in national journalism, such that they totally controlled the political action of the main party in the opposition during one term and eroded the social legitimacy of the government elected on 14 March, three days after the terrorist attack.

The 11-M conspiracy theory was defended by three important media: the newspaper *El Mundo*, the radio station COPE (which belongs to the Synod of Spanish Bishops) and the public television channel Telemadrid. The editor of the newspaper, Pedro J. Ramírez, the COPE leading commentator, Federico Jiménez Losantos, and the president of the Madrid regional government, Esperanza Aguirre (PP), are the people<sup>3</sup> responsible for this Monipodio’s courtyard<sup>4</sup> in which, apparently, the newspaper published lies while the radio and television channels – together with the PP, on the parliamentary front<sup>5</sup> – drummed them up. Let us briefly see some of the *breaking news* offered by these media:<sup>6</sup>

- (1) Anonymous police officers informed *El Mundo* in May 2006 that a visitor’s card from the Mondragón Group, based in the Basque Country, was found in the van used by the terrorists. This served the crusaders’ thesis about the ETA authorship (the PP asked the government in parliament to ‘face’ the scandal). A few days later the police revealed that the card belonged to Gráficas Bilbaínas, a company based in Madrid, and that the ‘Basque track’ was carrying a tape by the rock band *Orquesta Mondragón*, found in the vehicle (which had been stolen). Instead of rectifying the piece, the defenders of the conspiracy theory accused the police of manipulating the evidence.
- (2) In June 2006, *El Mundo* published a whole page stating that the police had found an ST timer, similar to the ones used by ETA, in a house where the terrorists supposedly prepared the explosives. The PP asked the government whether ETA was using these timers and the response was affirmative, so the crusaders re-opened the scandal: the police were hiding evidence that linked the terrorist attack in Madrid with ETA. A while after, a police expert declared that the timer found was used for washing machines, it was not

called ST but STA MEC 24H and it had nothing to do with the components used by ETA. Again, the media that made the accusations not only did not rectify them, but they also directed suspicions at the security forces. In the court hearing the veracity of the police version was demonstrated.

- (3) Police investigations into the provenance of the dynamite used in the terrorist attack led to the Conchita mine, a small working mine in Calabazos (Asturias), and swiftly led to the arrest of José Emilio Suárez Trashorras, a former miner and common criminal who apparently sold the dynamite to the terrorists in exchange for money and drugs. In September 2006, Suárez Trashorras was interviewed by *El Mundo* for two days when he revealed, without backing it up by any evidence, that the police had organised the terrorist attack in order to bring the PP government down. ‘I am the victim of a *coup d’état* that they tried to cover up and put the responsibility on a group of Muslims and informers, when everything was perfectly under control by the security forces’, he declared. He said as well that Jamal Ahmidan, the terrorist who had gone to Asturias in order to collect the explosives (killed in the Leganés flat), told him that he knew the ETA terrorists arrested in Cañaveras (Cuenca) in February 2004 when they were transporting bomb-making material. They knew each other, therefore they were collaborating, the newspaper concluded. Before the judge, the former miner denied all his statements delivered by the media, already dismissed by the leak to the press of a conversation in prison where Suárez Trashorras told his parents: ‘If *El Mundo* pays me, I’ll tell them even about the Civil War’.<sup>7</sup> Following the tracing of the Asturian miner, Rafá Zouhier appeared. He was a drug dealer and the middleman in the dynamite trade, and was arrested as well. In his letters to the general attorney, to the king and specifically to the newspaper *El Mundo*, Zouhier wrote about the numerous versions of the conspiracy and denounced tortures in prison. One of them, especially scandalous, gives us an idea of the type of ‘investigations’ that the conspiracy journalists were doing. Zouhier said in the friendly media that Trashorras’s brother-in-law, Antonio Toro, also arrested, was a friend of some ETA terrorists in the Villabona prison and that once he was given a telephone number to be passed to the former miner. ‘The first link to ETA with the people who gave the 11-M explosives’, *El Mundo* concluded. A face-to-face ordered by the judge of the case Juan del Olmo (who together with the attorney Olga Sánchez had to put up with the insults from the media who supported the conspiracy theory during the court case), in which Zouhier denied his previous statements, revealed that the number belonged to the wife of the drug dealer who was operating in prison (both ETA terrorists mentioned before, Izkur Badillo and Gorka Vidal, testified between laughs in the 11-M court case). In an even more surrealist turn, Rafá Zouhier was interviewed by a PP MP, Jaime Ignacio del Burgo – another character in this intrigue – who managed to send some written questions to the drug dealer and took the answers to *El Mundo* newspaper and to the attorney’s office dealing with the case, who of course refused to use them.
- (4) In autumn 2006 police experts complained to *El Mundo* that their boss had censored a report done by them where they showed the evidence about the links between ETA terrorists and those who were being investigated for the

attack. The document said that in Hassan El Haski's home, one of the people arrested, the police had found boric acid.<sup>8</sup> El Haski said that he used it to kill cockroaches. The experts added that, a while ago, in the search of a flat used by ETA, they had found the same substance. Despite the fact that they admitted that they did not know about the usefulness of boric acid to prepare explosives, they said that the finding 'leads to the possibility that the author or authors of both facts might be related to each other and/or have had the same type of training and/or were the same author/s'. Logically, the suggestion was taken off the report by the head of experts, who was accused by the media of covering up and of making false allegations in a public document together with three of his managers, such as the scientific police superintendent (all of them were absolved in June 2008).

- (5) An police officer angry for not receiving a medal declared in the conspirator media that the terrorist bomb that did not explode due to a failure, and was vital evidence to uncover the terrorist plot, was false evidence. *El Mundo*, COPE and Telemadrid spoke again of scandal and the PP leader questioned the whole court case. The bomb, hidden in a rucksack, got mixed up with the thousands of items collected in the Atocha train station after the explosions and it was found some time after in the police storage area. After an endless media debate, the police showed in the court case that, once found, the evidence was kept following the usual legal procedure and that this was the same device as the other two bomb-rucksacks exploded by the officers that same day in other Madrid railway stations.
- (6) A day after the terrorist attack, the PP government commissioned an urgent report to find out the links between the ETA prisoners and the Islamists. This report was on the desk of the Minister for Security, Ignacio Astarloa, on 14 March and concluded that there was no evidence showing that the contact between the prisoners of both groups could lead, or had led, to the commission of joint attacks. The bugged conversations made reference to the exaltation of violence or slogans against Spain, but nothing else. The report was filed – without being made public – and the police turned towards the jihadist track, although Astarloa sent a copy to the then police superintendent, Agustín Díaz de Mera. The document was published by *El Mundo* three months later, but *then* the news was that the police were looking for links between ETA and the Islamist terrorists and not the very conclusion of the enquiry: that is, that from a criminal investigation point of view there were no such links<sup>9</sup>. In September 2006 Díaz de Mera, now a PP European MP, revealed in a COPE opinion talk-show the 'scoop' that the police information superintendent had concealed a report about the links between ETA and the jihadists. He was careful not to talk about the conclusion of the report, of course. The conspiratorial media criticised the police again and requested the famous report published two years before by them and that obviously was part of the judicial case. Díaz de Mera had the audacity to maintain his version before the judge in order to accuse the government of manipulating the investigation, arguing that he could not reveal his sources in order to protect their identities. The judge on the case penalised him with a fine and charged him with disobedience.



In every case, the media *research* proceeds in the same way: a lie is encouraged, either from an out-of-context document or unchecked statements – we do not know with certainty whether they were paid for or not – from somebody with a stake in the matter. The supposed evidence leads to putting into question the actions of government, the police and the judiciary. When these institutions rebut the lie with evidence, the crusaders accuse them of being part of the conspiracy; in this way they are discredited in the eyes of their most loyal audience. The social unease with political institutions increases; the famous *crispación* (tension) reached paroxysm during the term 2004–2008. When the supposed scandals are analysed in the cold light of day we can see that there is no real basis, that they are sustained on suspicious and absurd guesswork or on unfounded statements that the media refuse to check. In fact, if only one journalist from *El Mundo*, COPE or Telemadrid had asked what the boric acid was used for, what was the content of the terrorist rucksack or which was the conclusion of the report, the supposed scandals would have never been published. But they didn't ask...or maybe they did. Later media reports have found out some of what happened during those days in the three newsrooms involved.

### Conflicts in the newsroom

The newsletter *Capçalera* has analysed in detail the situation of the journalists working in *El Mundo*, COPE and Telemadrid between 2004 and 2008 (see Rovira 2007). According to this source, in Pedro J. Ramirez's newspaper there was hardly any opposition to the editorial line about 11-M, with the exception of *Elmundo.es*, its web page, whose editor and deputy editor left the company in 2006 due to disputes with the editor of the newspaper regarding the information about the terrorist attack. One of the three 'research correspondents' of that daily who signed most of the pieces about 11-M, Antonio Rubio, deputy editor of the newspaper and journalism lecturer at Rey Juan Carlos University in Madrid, who does not agree with the theory of conspiracy, denies any pressure from the newspaper's management to search for news from a particular point of view. He blames the police forces for everything: 'The main mistake has been that the official version has tried to avoid using the word ETA and that has meant that the other side assumed that somebody was concealing information. [It is] The same as in the Annual tragedy, the terrorist killing of Carrero Blanco or the 23-F *coup-d'état*, when the State tried to conceal the information that it had, and when the security forces tried to hide their mistakes causing a wrong analysis of the real situation' (Rubio, in Rovira 2007, p. 4). *Wrong analysis* is a surprising way to explain the mistaking of a company for a music band, boric acid for an explosive and a washing machine for a bomb; to give space to statements from unreliable sources, such as criminals charged with the crime, resentful police officers, shameless politicians or supposed experts without any legitimacy, and not trying to check the truthfulness of statements; to abandon, in summary, the role of professional journalist to turn into a 'hooligan' with the information (ibid., p. 27). Since the police, in general, have quickly shown the falseness of the conspiracy scoops, this means that the police are guilty, but not for their incompetence but – progressively, as the ETA hypothesis was fading – for the terrorist attack itself. The metaphor 'the sewers of the State', which Felipe González used in 1996 to try to justify the GAL crimes, appeared again in *El Mundo* 10 years later. The 11-M attack was planned,

carried out and inspired by the police networks in order to bring the PP government down, and the jihadists who got charged were scapegoats or manipulated stupid fanatics. Wrong analysis.

On the other hand, in COPE and Telemadrid newsrooms there were protests from the very beginning. *Capçalera* (see Rovira 2007) reports that the bishops' radio station got rid of three-quarters of its staff between 2004 and 2007, apparently inspired by its star commentator, Federico Jiménez Losantos, who is also an opinion writer for *El Mundo* and editor of the Internet portal *Libertad digital*. Jiménez Losantos challenged on air his own newsroom – here there are 'PSOE soviets', he said – because they did not always follow the conspiracy line. Soon the purge within correspondents and managers started: Blanca María Pol, head of news, was replaced by Ignacio Villa, and José Apezarena, presenter of the news programme, was replaced by César Vidal. 'I am aware that Villa's order was to follow the information published in *El Mundo* cover', Jose Miguel Azpiroz, former COPE journalist, remembers. He called the changes in the newsroom 'ethnic cleansing'. Since Ignacio Villa's arrival, lots of journalists were replaced by new graduates (and trainees from the radio station Master), with a high degree of ideological affinity and with an unstable professional position which made them very vulnerable.

Something similar happened in the public television channel Telemadrid, where with Esperanza Aguirre's (PP) electoral victory in 2003 staff changes had already started. The president appointed her communications director, Manuel Soriano, as general director of the TV channel. He did not take long to sack the news editor, Alfonso García. As a result of 11-M Telemadrid ostracised veteran journalists and replaced them with young ones coming from the conservative newspaper *La Razón*, the Balearic TV channel IB3 and the Internet portal *Libertad digital*, as well as trainees from the Catholic university CEU-San Pablo. A report produced by the works committee of Telemadrid condemned 'the duplicity of the newsroom'. Javier Bosque, who was appointed as head of home news in 2004 and resigned a year later, has denounced the pressure from the TV channel managers to follow every day the information published by *El Mundo* about the terrorist attack. The presenter of the programme *Diario de la noche*, Germán Yanke, resigned after being reprimanded live by the president of the regional government. 'They told me that I wasn't reflecting correctly the information published by *El Mundo* about the 11-M', Yanke said. Another veteran Spanish journalist who collaborated with him in the programme, Pablo Sebastián (who resigned as well), wrote in his portal *La estrella digital*: 'Manuel Soriano has been putting pressure on for months, and in the last days he has even done it through written messages, encouraging the editors of the programme to get in touch and follow the orders of *El Mundo* deputy editor, Casimiro García-Abadillo, so he can explain to them the only truth about the boric acid experts case and the false documents'. The journalists who kept their jobs responded to this pressure by creating in 2005 an editorial board that has been pointing out the manipulations done by the channel and the political interference. One year after the tragedy, on 14 March 2005, Telemadrid broadcast a documentary titled 'Cuatro días que cambiaron España' (Four days that changed Spain) that follows the conspiracy thesis without giving any evidence and by resorting to clumsy manipulations (such as adding the ETA logo over an image of the demonstration against the fundamentalist attack).<sup>10</sup> The next day, the editorial board published a statement apologising to the audience and to the victims of the massacre. Many news

writers started to refuse to sign their pieces as a way to protest against the manipulation of the news programmes. But the most shameful episode of the disinformation in Telemadrid has to do with the strangest character of the whole lunatic plot. In March 2006 and 2007, the channel broadcast two documentaries about the terrorist attacks titled ‘Las sombras del 11-M’ (The shadows of 11-M) and ‘11-M: Mil días después’ (11-M: one thousand days on), produced by El Mundo TV, the TV production company that belongs to Pedro J. Ramírez’s publishing group, and directed by the *researcher* Luis del Pino. Months after, a special effects company admitted to *Capçalera* that El Mundo TV had hired their services to modify the images that were recreated in order to adjust the information to the conspiracy thesis.

The profile of the author of these documentaries allows us some insight into the way in which certain media delegate the expert authority opinion. Del Pino is a telecommunications engineer and writes computer books. In 2005 he started under his own initiative to study the 11-M case and soon he was willing to collaborate as an expert on this issue in the local media. He moved on to Jiménez Losantos’s portal, the magazine *Época*, *El Mundo*, COPE and Telemadrid. On the *Libertad digital* website he started a blog titled ‘Los enigmas del 11-M’ (The 11-M enigmas), where the craziest lies were published – for instance, that the police and the army had kidnapped, killed and frozen common criminals in order to place them in the Leganés flat and sustain the suicidal terrorists thesis. In Del Pino’s blog was created a ‘citizens’ investigation movement’, the ‘Black Pawns’, that brought together members of the extreme right in regular demonstrations on the eleventh of each month (see Rovira 2007). Between 2006 and 2007, Del Pino wrote three books with *revelations* about the terrorist attack (the latest one in La Esfera de los Libros, *El Mundo*’s publishing house, which also published the work of the MP and *interviewer* Jaime Ignacio del Burgo). During the hearing, this blog was used to form questions for the private prosecutors that sustained the conspiracy thesis.

Could it explain why some media have devoted nearly four years to publishing lies about the most atrocious terrorist attack in the history of Spain, while the profiles of their newsrooms have been transformed by swapping veteran journalists with inexperienced graduates with unstable contracts? Except in the case of Telemadrid, where it is obvious that the defence of the PP was the priority (the audience levels went down as the public channel made its editorial line more radical), COPE and *El Mundo* have notably improved their audiences and sales, both placing themselves second in the radio station and newspaper ranks. ‘Some, through the theory of conspiracy, have more than what they had’, the *ABC* newspaper’s former editor, José Antonio Zarzalejos,<sup>11</sup> said. He refused to follow the conspiracy version. ‘The conspiracy theory is one of the most negative milestones in the recent history of Spanish journalism. It doesn’t come from a reasonable doubt, but from a political and commercial strategy’, said the journalist Fernando Jáuregui. ‘All this breaks down the PP party, the Catholic church, the civilized right and the very notion of journalism, and that worries me. This type of journalism, unimaginable in most countries, is happening in Spain. They’ve said all that they’ve said and nothing has happened! At this pace, who is going to believe us?’ he concludes. The fact that at the moment, rather than collapsing, the ones responsible for the conspiracies have been reinforced brings even more looming questions – deep and old – about the society in which we live.

### Greedy journalism and mass democracy

One of the most surprising pieces of evidence regarding the conspiratorial explanations published in the media is how easily they achieved popular credibility.<sup>12</sup> Still in Autumn 2006, 23 per cent of Spaniards disagreed with the affirmation that the Madrid terrorist attacks were committed exclusively by jihadists and the numbers went up to 53 per cent within the PP voters (see Avilés Farré 2007, p. 30). Although they are not irrefutable evidence, the increase in sales and audiences of *El Mundo* and COPE during the period 2004–2008 (at the cost of the other media that chose to limit their information to proven facts, such as *ABC* or Radio Nacional de España) and the good results of the PP in the 2008 elections, when it achieved more than 400,000 votes (the PSOE only achieved 38,000) by turning the 11-M conspiracy into the centre of the campaign, at least do not rebut the thesis.

How is it possible that democratic societies, where all peaceful political options can be discussed openly and freely checked, can believe these types of invention? The question is relevant, and it has occupied the experts who study the success of extremist and irrational political behaviour. One of the most well-known is Guy Hermet, who, in his work about European populism (2001, p. 379–397), names three possible sources of ‘anti-political’ action – which rejects the established democratic channels – in advanced democracies: rejection of the *welfare* tax system (such as the Scandinavian ‘liberal’ parties), fear of the consequences of immigration (the French National Front) and conflicts related to the national framework, either of opposition to integration processes, separatist movements or those that defend the national essence challenged by worldwide social changes (the Austrian liberals, the Belgium Vlaams Blok, Forza Italia, etc.). If the public issues that affect taxes, immigration or the nation have more possibilities for catching the popular interest for anti-political action, the conspiracy theory about the 11-M has the last two characteristics (and indirectly also the first one, since the agitators kept linking the supposed Spanish police and army criminal collaboration with the citizens’ taxes).

Pierre-André Taguieff (2004, p. 9) has pointed to the following characteristics of the contemporary more successful European ‘national-populists’ movements: personal appeal to the people by the leader, mystic union of the people against internal enemies, encouragement to recover the lost national authenticity by breaking with the present and the need for a political action of ‘national purification’ against internal and external enemies. The conspiracy version of the Madrid terrorist attack fits this scheme: according to it the terrorist attack should mark the point of *regeneración* (regeneration, an old term in Spanish politics) of the people – its characteristic temperance, solidarity and bravery were always highlighted – against immigrants, terrorists (from ETA or Al Qaeda), corrupted politicians and members of the security forces.

A third specialist in this area, Gianpietro Mazzoleni, has put more emphasis than the previous ones on the influence of the media in the expansion of populist politics. In fact, Mazzoleni *et al.* (2003) defend the use of the term *neo-populism* to refer to the media update of the anti-political discourse that is widely used by Western democracies. According to these authors, an information space divided between the sensationalist and the elitist media reacts in a different way to the populist messages: while the quality media criticise them or ignore them, the sensationalist media increases its reach in order to connect with the popular interest. Given that in

mass democracies this is the main objective, these authors' thesis says that in advanced democracies an alliance is made between the sensationalist media and mass political parties, which would mutually benefit from encouraging neo-populist politics; the media would increase their audience, the political parties their capacity to mobilise people. The influence of the media in politics and the influence of politics in the media would therefore be parallel processes. In the 11-M case, the lack of a clear distinction between elite press and sensationalist press weakens the 'pastoral function' (Mazzoleni) of quality journalism. As a consequence, the Spanish media and political parties, from all tendencies, would be especially inclined to use a neo-populist rhetoric and 'image' politics. Even more, the weakness of the quality press in Spain reinforces the sensationalist side, which gets to dominate the action of the main parties. The 11-M case demonstrates this thesis. Despite its absurd content, the conspiracy theory led the political and public agendas during one term, and reduced the PP to being a follower of the *El Mundo* thesis and the PSOE to being the passive defender of the State powers and forces. The electoral results of both main parties in 2008 and the increase in the number of sales achieved by the media that supported the theory of conspiracy show the profitability of greedy politics and journalism in weak public spaces such as the Spanish, where the accountability mechanisms to face the mistakes of both political and media actors do not seem to work well.

At different speeds, the process repeats in every country and ideological tendency. The recent call for 'politics of principles' outlined by influential strategists from the North American left (Lakoff 2004) can be understood as the exploitation of this state of affairs. Neil Postman (1991, 1994) warned in the nineties about the dangers of a technocratic society whose citizens gave up to trying to understand the collective order. In that situation, the public space would not have any other option than to redirect itself towards the entertainment, the scandal and the instigation of collective fears in order to catch the interest of people. US journalists have for a long time been complaining about the increase of *infotainment* as an alternative to the checked informative story about facts that are unknown to the public. Typical elements of this new genre are scandals and secrets (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2003, p. 207), which constitute the architecture of media conspiracies. These would turn into useful ingredients to instigate political mobilisation in mass democracies, from Guy Hermet's point of view, who has resigned himself to seeing the notion of 'governance' as the perhaps definitive end of democratic participation and its transformation into 'a government of the organisations, by the organisations and for the organisations', that, in order to encourage the popular vote, would need neo-populist rhetoric and the constant instigation of fears and national passions (Hermet 2008, p. 53).

But there might be an alternative to resigning oneself. We are facing a political sociology issue and in this area Max Weber is the point of reference. As is well known, Weber did not have much trust in the political future of human groups. He thought that, one way or the other, in time the 'de-spiritualisation' of the world would be inevitable. In every period of history each government system (and each state) has resolved in their own way the fundamental contradiction between both main types of social action, substantive rationality and formal rationality, that at a power level translate into the confrontation between charisma and rationalisation. The typical modern version of this conflict, in the framework of capitalist societies organised in parliamentary systems, is based on the definitive breach with any absolute or 'acosmic' ethics, which abandons the subject to the antinomy between

two ethics of the political action, conviction and responsibility, that are necessary and irreconcilable ways along which the person in power must walk without any guidance other than ‘maturity’. Taking the first option leads to fanatical leadership, blind faith in the leader and the citizen’s loss of substantive rationality (the capacity to decide his/her own values); moving into the second one leads to a technocratic government, where individuals are reduced to being mechanisms of a bureaucratic organisation. Despite the fact that, long-term, the victory of rationality over charisma is guaranteed, the *mature* political action must be oriented towards a necessarily useless resistance, and therefore ‘heroic’. In Weber’s time – when both values and reason were defeated by World War I, heartless capitalism and the failure of the Spartakist uprising – it should have been oriented towards the defence of the defeated German nation within the liberal-capitalist political framework, despite being aware of the final animosity between them. But the politician must lose his soul resisting the eternal tension between values and interests till the fall of the ‘polar night’. In his heroic effort to reconcile the contradictions of the political action, this author replaces Kant’s *as-if* ethics with a *nevertheless* one, which does not resign itself to accepting the inexorable (Weber 1997, p. 163–197).

One hundred years later, Weber’s polar night might have come closer to us, but it has not fallen yet. Politics is still the art of making violent domination legitimate and both charisma and rationalisation carry on with its historical confrontation. In this ‘short century’, as Hobsbawm puts it, we have seen conviction and responsibility disasters that have produced more absurd victims than in any past period. What might be the main novelty in the current political order in democratic regimes is the increasingly influential role of the media in achieving political domination. The German sociologist had already seen it, in 1910, when he considered that ‘the press’ was one of the most important areas of study in order to understand the immediate future of the Western nations: ‘We must focus our research in the following direction, asking: First: What does the press bring to the making of the modern man? Second: What influence is it having on the supra-individual objective cultural elements? What displacements are produced in them? What is destroyed or is created again in the domain of faith and collective hopes, of the sensation of living? What possible attitudes are destroyed forever, what attitudes are created?’ (Weber 1992, p. 258).

Nowadays the media, which according to the German author encourage in society an ‘apparent inhibition of the emotional’, are crucial elements in the achievement of political domination. In controlling the doses of conviction and responsibility in conflicting coordination with the government institutions, they are one of the fundamental pillars where the collective order becomes legitimate. To put it in Weber’s terminology, the role of the mass media is to channel the charisma and rationality in defence of the political system. As happens all over the West, this is linked to the legal-rational type, and following Weber we can defend the thesis that the main political function of the *media* in the current world is to make political passions bureaucratic enough so they cannot stop the State from fulfilling its interests.

Looking at the 11-M case, we could ask ourselves about the effects of this clumsy farce (and about the effects of greedy journalism, if it turns out to be the legitimate model) on our current social ‘sensation of living’. Leaving the *small* interest of its agitators aside (enrichment, defence of ideological or religious projects, creation of a network of political influences in the shadow, etc.), no doubt at a first glance the

conspiracy theories appeal more to faith than to rationality, to the primary (and greedy) loyalties than to the rationally shared interests. It is no coincidence that all this aggressive confabulation had generated sectarian social movements, such as the Black Pawns or the Victims of Terrorism Association, which under the presidency of Francisco José Alcaraz offered its services to the conspirators. Nevertheless, a careful examination of the facts suggest that these stories, with their trashy heroes and villains, could also bureaucratise social unease – a *political asthenia* that is not lacking a fair motivation – towards the political actors, instead of the objective positions that the current organisation of power is forcing them to take. To put it more simply, this grotesque *auto-da-fé* would hardly maintain a feeling of political participation in a liberal-capitalist order, increasingly perceived by the people as an *iron cage*.

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### Notes

1. *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* (Euskadi and freedom), Basque terrorist group founded in 1959.
2. For example see Gil Calvo 2005.
3. We base this on ‘Historia de una conspiración’, the extraordinary report published by the Catalonia Journalists Association in their newsletter *Capçalera*; see Avilés Farré 2007, Rovira 2007. We have also based this on the report published by *El País* with the title ‘La fabricación del bulo sobre el 11-M’; see Romero 2007a, 2007b.
4. See ‘Rinconete y Cortadillo’ in Cervantes’s *Novelas ejemplares*.
5. The PP leader, Mariano Rajoy, declared the same day of the elections that he was ‘morally convinced’ that the terrorist attack had been committed by ETA. After the court sentence, the main party leaders – with the notable exception of former president José María Aznar, who on 11 March itself personally called the editors of the main Spanish media to inform them that he had unequivocal evidence that proved that ETA was responsible for the attacks – have admitted that the Basque terrorist group had nothing to do with the events.
6. Of course the mistakes by *El Mundo*, Telemadrid and COPE were not the only ones connected with the case. The day after the terrorist attack, for example, the radio station SER informed the public that the police had found in the trains the rest of the bodies of suicidal terrorists. The news was immediately rebutted by a police spokesperson and the radio station admitted the mistake and apologised.
7. It is not the first time that *El Mundo* has been involved in supposed payments to people in order to get statements. Another witness of little trustworthiness, the former police officer José Amedo, whose statements revealed the GAL state terrorism scandal during Felipe González’s governments, revealed in his memoirs that he received 30 million pesetas from Pedro J. Ramírez for his revelations (see Mercado 2006). Of course, the editor has always denied such payments.
8. Boric acid ( $H_3BO_3$ ) comes from the borax that is used as a non-irritating antiseptic (for instance for eye diseases) and in the pottery industry, the production of fire-resistant textiles and for steel hardening. Of course, it has no use for terrorist attacks, unless they are against microbes. Nevertheless one of the censored experts, Isabel López, supported the conspiracy thesis in *El Mundo* with the following argument: ‘How is it possible, I wonder, that El Haski had cockroaches and her feet stank, and the ETA ones had cockroaches as well and their feet stank?’ *El País* revealed in 2007 that in 40 years of fighting against ETA a police investigation had never found boric acid related to explosives (Romero 2007b).
9. The report said literally: ‘No objective elements have been found that allow one to link both terrorist organisations’. See Romero 2007a.
10. This documentary was signed by José Antonio Ovies, news deputy editor of Telemadrid.

11. In February 2008 José Antonio Zarzalejos was dismissed as *ABC* editor, due to the fall in sales of the daily. Since then he has denounced the pressure from Esperanza Aguirre to follow the conspiracy theory (Rovira 2008).
12. This has not happened only in the case of Spain. A survey done in 2006 by Pew Research Centre revealed that more than half of the Indonesian, Egyptian, Turkish, Jordanian and British Muslims thought that the 11 September World Trade Center terrorist attacks were not perpetrated by Muslims. Two years before, another survey had shown that nearly half of New Yorkers believed that the US Government had previous information about the criminal plot (see Avilés Farré 2007, p. 30).

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