

Analysis of information sources and respect for professional ethics in crisis situations: the media treatment of Barcelona's Carmel case

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Abstract

Controlling sources of information in crisis situations leads to great conflict between actors (the media and those in charge of communication for the administration). This phenomenon has been seen in the last few years in recent and familiar episodes, such as the sinking of the *Prestige* off Galicia (2002), the Madrid bombings Madrid (2004) and the case of Carmel accident in Barcelona (2005). This article¹ investigates the conflict between actors based on the coverage provided by five media of the Carmel accident, of which we have studied the sources used by the journalists, the control of information on the part of the political system and the deontological problems created by the media coverage.

Key words

Journalism, journalistic professional ethics, information sources, crisis, case of Carmel accident, risk society.

Resum

El control de les fonts d'informació en situacions de crisi genera un fort conflicte entre actors (mitjans de comunicació i responsables de comunicació de l'Administració). Aquest fenomen s'ha pogut comprovar en els darrers anys en episodis recents i propers, com el del vaixell *Prestige* a Galícia (2002), els atemptats de Madrid (2004) o el cas Carmel de Barcelona (2005). En aquest article¹ aprofundim en el conflicte entre actors a partir de la cobertura de vuit mitjans de comunicació de l'accident del Carmel, del qual hem estudiat les fonts utilitzades pels periodistes, el control informatiu per part del sistema polític i els problemes deontològics que va suscitar la cobertura dels mitjans.

Paraules clau

Periodisme, deontologia periodística, fonts informatives, crisi, cas Carmel, societat del Risc.

1. Introduction

Information from risk and crisis incidents poses a challenge of extraordinary complexity to the work of information actors (the media and public administration communication managers): the conflict for control of the information and respect for professional ethics. A good example of these two aspects can be found in the collapse of the service tunnel for the extension to Line 5 of the Metro in Barcelona's Carmel district, on 27 January 2005. The incident did not have any victims, but there was a considerable amount of damage: 84 buildings (500 homes) and 2 schools. A total of 1,057 people had to be evacuated from their homes and the school because of the risk of further collapses.

The Carmel accident had a huge economic and social impact on all the inhabitants of the area, in addition to the all-familiar political crisis. However, the Carmel case created parallel crises, such as the one affecting the media and the relationship with the public administration. A whole series of controversies concerning news coverage led to a struggle between information actors (the media and public administration communication managers) working in the area. The problem posed, the relationship between information actors in the case

of the collapse of a block of flats in the Carmel district, was analysed in the PhD thesis of the author of this article on the basis of two methodological approaches. The first was more ethnographical in nature, with in-depth interviews and a systematic study of the documentation generated in the case study. The second consisted of an analysis of the information content of the principle media that covered the event.

To carry out the ethnographical study into the relationship between the information actors, four in-depth interviews were conducted with the protagonists involved in the information management of the Carmel case: 1) the General Secretary for Communication of the Regional Government of Catalonia; 2) the Head of Press at the Department of Regional Policy and Public Works of the Regional Government of Catalonia; 3) the Head of Press at Barcelona City Council, and 4) the representative of the Catalan Association of Journalists. However, in this article, and for reasons of space, we will be focusing on the synchronous study into the contents of eight different media: the four most-watched television channels in Catalonia (TV3, Antena 3 TV, Telecinco and TVE)² and the four general newspapers with the highest circulation in Catalonia (*La Vanguardia*, *El Periódico*, *El País* and *Avui*).³ The data extracted for the corpus of analysis comes from the period between

the day of the accident in the Carmel district, 27 January 2005, and a fortnight later, 10 February 2005. The complete study (ethnographical part and content analysis) can be consulted in the PhD thesis.⁴ An analysis of the information units that dealt specifically with the Carmel case has been carried out on the four newspapers in the sample. The parts studied are the front-page headlines, editorials and all the internal units (news) of the different sections of the newspaper that referred to the case.

With regard to the four television operators, a study was conducted into the information units for the midday and evening news bulletins of the four channels selected in this study. The units analysed are those relating to the Carmel case, both to the summary and the news in depth. The specific parts studied are the *Source* field, based on five large categories: official source (Administration), political source (parties), damages source, technical source and media source.

Professional ethics criteria have been created by taking as a reference the four general principles of professional ethics proposed by Alsius (1999: 48-52), in the thesaurus of professional ethics for television news: the principle of responsibility, principle of veracity or truth, principle of justice and principle of freedom. Alsius has collated the contributions of Thomas V. Cooper and Edmund Lambeth to help him delimit a series of "universal" ethics principles.⁵

2. A crisis explained by politicians and those affected

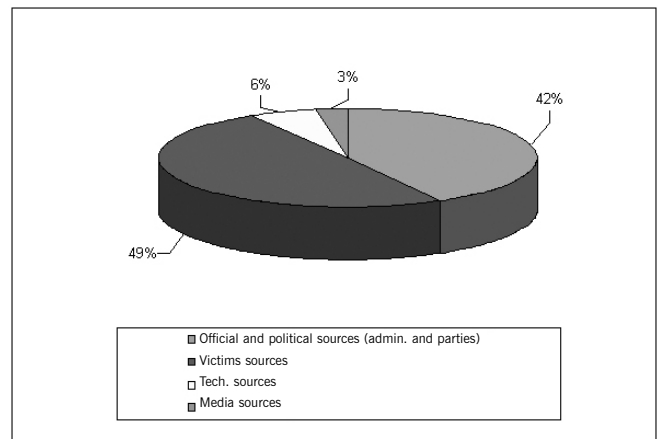
After the contents had been analysed, a total of 1,285 different sources were calculated by adding together the four television operators and four newspapers analysed. Of this, most of the eyewitness accounts referred to people who had been affected by the crisis, those who had suffered damages, with a total of 635 citations, followed by the official and political sources (public administration and political parties), with 538 impacts.

In terms of sources relating to technical actors that had to help resolve the situation, the total was 77 citations. Finally, media-type sources were the least numerous, with a direct citation of 35 impacts.

Source usage percentage reveals that almost half the actors cited by the media (49.4%) were people who had been directly affected by the accident (see Graph No. 1). This section shows people who were evacuated from their homes, residents, traders and shopkeepers, residents' associations and direct eyewitness accounts of the event. The second most important percentage relates to official and political sources, which account for 41.9% of the total citations. This category contains a total of political party and public administration sources.

Lagging a long way behind the first two main groups of actors, in third position, are the technical sources (6%). This grouping includes architects, geologists, geographers and emergency teams, such as fire crews, the police and health professionals.

Graph 1. Types of sources used in %



Source: own.

Finally, the smallest percentage (2.7% of citations) is for media sources.

Official and political sources are one of the principle sources of information cited by journalists from the eight media analysed. Of the 538 impacts in this subdivision, a total of 331 should be labelled public administration managers or spokespersons (Regional Government of Catalonia, Barcelona City Council and the State Administration). The remaining 207 are spokespeople or senior managers, primarily from Catalan parliamentary political parties.

Use of political sources among the different television operators coincides with decision-making moments by the Administration or incidents of political confrontations. It has been noted, therefore, that television channels' decisive moments in terms of the use of official and political sources coincide with three specific decisions. Between 28 and 31 January 2005, the order was given to demolish the block of flats most affected by the collapse; between 2 and 4 February, the Regional Government of Catalonia decided that a number of residents could return to their homes to sleep and the very next day in the morning corrected the decision; and between 8 and 10 February, coinciding with two new incidents: the polemic derived from news coverage with a press release issued by the Government's Communications Office and the appearance before the Catalan Parliament of the Regional Policy and Public Works Councillor. The use of political sources made by the newspapers is significantly different to that by the television channels. In the newspapers, citations of political actors are a permanent feature throughout the analysis and, it is relevant to note, that as the days passed, it was noted that all the newspapers increased this presence noticeably. Citation points are determined by the confrontation between the different political forces. It is of particular relevance that, from day one up until the final day of analysis, the number of actors in this category almost trebled.

Those affected by the Carmel accident were the actors most cited by the media (635 occasions). Of this figure, a total of

517 actors were affected directly by the collapse, i.e. residents evacuated from their homes or businesses for a more or less long period, depending on the neighbourhood in relation to where the subsidence occurred. A much smaller number of people, 37, were cited by the media, but who were affected indirectly by the accident. These were local residents who did not need evacuating, but who did suffer the consequences and were disturbed by the events in the area.

The third largest group of sources used by the media were the spokespersons or those in charge of residents' associations (35 occasions). Traders and shopkeepers' associations were required a total of 21 times by the media. Finally, a group of 25 actors were occasional eyewitnesses to the case. These were people who worked in the area, such as bank employees, estate agents or goods distributors.

Newspaper interest in those affected decreased as the days passed from when the first subsidence appeared. During the initial days, the newspapers reported the residents' discomfort and how they had been affected, but as the hours passed they focused on the political discussion and cited political and Administration actors. On 28 and 29 January, the newspapers used up to 29 of those affected as a source and reached 32 points (4 February). Meanwhile, during the later days analysed, citations dropped to 10 (8 February). According to the data, the days with more political arguments did not see a rise in news coverage, as they took it from one set of actors and gave it to others.

The television operators analysed gave broader treatment to those affected than the newspapers. The channels reported 336 who had suffered damages and the newspapers 308. More importantly than the number, however, a constant interest was noted in their use of those who had suffered damages as a direct source, with a greater number of actors who had been affected as the days passed. On the first day, 27 January, up to 18 people were cited, while the figure grew to 25 impacts on the final day of analysis, 10 February. The period with most actors who had suffered damages used as a source by the television were concentrated between 4 and 5 February, with 31 and 32 impacts, respectively.

3. The absence of experts

The use of technical sources by the media during the Carmel accident was scant. Between the eight media analysed during the 15 days, only 77 technical actors were cited, which represents 6% of the total sources used to cover the case. This category includes specialist technicians in the events, specialists in tunnels, structures and public works (geologists, engineers, architects, etc.) and also the crews in charge of the direct management of personal safety (fire service, police, healthcare, etc.). The most widely cited were geologists (21 impacts), followed by engineers (8), police (7), healthcare workers (5), fire service (2) and architects (1).

It is important to note that 33 of the impacts recorded among the technical sources were in the "others" subsection. Most of the spokespersons used by the media in the "others" subcategory were lawyers, bank managers and insurance agents. Lawyers were required by the media to find out the procedures that those affected had to follow to claim for damages from the event. The bank managers were interviewed to explain the renegotiation of mortgages and bank loans by those affected by the collapse, and finally the insurance agents explained the cover and the rights of those affected to claim from their companies.

The media used technical sources more after quite a few days had passed since the start of the events. As the days went by, the media cited more experts to explain their information. Between 4 and 8 February was when more technical sources were used. In all, 4 February saw 11 impacts, and 8 February saw 12.

Citations by the newspapers of technical sources in the news units were more than four times more than by the television channels. Between the newspapers, 62 technical sources were cited, whereas the four television operators only used 15. In the majority of their news programmes, the television channels did not cite any technical source to inform and based their news solely on the eyewitness accounts of those affected or the political actors or authorities.

This apart, media sources are direct references in which the journalist uses the media themselves as a source. This information in which the medium itself (previously or in another programme) or other types of media are cited have been recorded. It was deemed appropriate to establish this category to detect the news dependency relationship between television and newspapers, the use that could be made of the Internet in conventional media or even the relations that could be established between different media groups or conglomerates. It was noted that the number of impacts in this category was very low, at just 35, representing 2.7% of the total research sources.⁶

The majority of the media sources cited by the media came from the medium itself (26 impacts), while a total of 9 were citations in which the information came from other media. When the sources come from the same medium, the information is published in interpretative genres such as feature articles and some leader columns.

It is relevant to observe that it is the newspapers that most use the resource of other media as sources whereas the use of these citations in television is practically non-existent. The four television operators only used media sources on two occasions, whereas the newspapers account for 33 of the 35 impacts in this category.

4. Respect for criteria of professional ethics

The criteria of professional ethics have been divided according to three principles established by Alsius (1998), which centre

on the principles of truth, justice and responsibility. These three principles have been systematically analysed in terms of both the number of times they were infringed (quantitative part) and the content that was not in line with any of the items established (qualitative part). The principle least respected by the media studies was that of truth (61.2%), followed by that of responsibility (30.3%) and that of justice (8.5%).

The television channels failed to comply more than the newspapers with the criteria of professional ethics established in this research (64% compared with 36%). The private television channels have a very much higher index of incompliance with the criteria of professional ethics than the public channels. The media that most failed to comply with the criteria of professional ethics out of all the media analysed were Antena 3 TV, with 22%, and Telecinco, with 21%. TV3 obtained 11% of the total and TVE 9%. In the case of newspapers, largely insignificant differences were detected between the four titles analysed. *La Vanguardia* (15%) and *Avui* (9%) accumulated more omissions of the criteria of professional ethics than their competitors, *El Periódico de Catalunya* (7%) and *El País* (6%).

The detailed analysis of the different ethical criteria that the media have failed to apply in the Carmel case shows that the most outstanding was sensationalism and the contribution to the news circus (25.6%), followed by the lack of accuracy and exactness of the information (23.2%) and the invasion of personal privacy, especially of those affected (15.2%).

At a greater distance, in 12.3% of the cases, information was not adequately separated from opinion. In 9.5% of cases, the pain and suffering of those affected was shown and in 8.5% it was partial and did not respect the different points of view. Some 3.8% of the information affected the necessary protection of minors, and finally, 1.9% did not consider humanitarian aid and personal safety as a priority.

In terms of the principle of responsibility, aspects referring to personal privacy and the importance of life and public safety in an emergency situation have been analysed. The production of

texts or the reproduction of images, be they photographs (newspapers) or video recordings (television), with a clear intrusion of privacy has occurred up to 32 times in the eight media analysed.

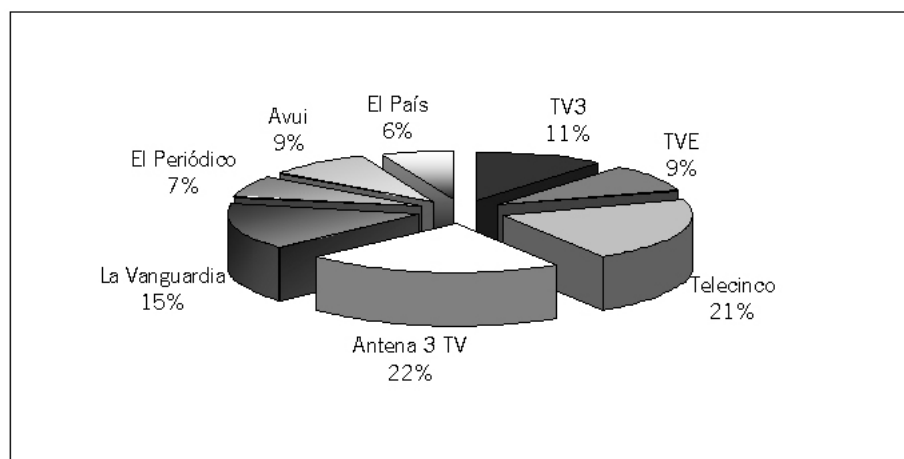
One of the aspects that refer to the respect for privacy is the protection of minors. The media took special care with this group. By contrast, as regards the showing of the pain and suffering of the people affected, a total of 20 cases were recorded that mainly referred to people crying or in a clear state of distress. The private television channels represent 60% of the breach of this rule, Telecinco and Antena 3 TV account for 12 of the 20 times that painful images of those affected in a clear state of pain or suffering were broadcast. They refer primarily to people crying or in a clear state of distress.⁷

Sensationalism and 'spectacularisation' were the most common breaches in the media studied, with a total of 54 times. The private television channels were the media that committed more transgressions of this rule. Some examples illustrate the spectacularisation of the case, and especially the abuse of sensationalism when reporting. In their captions (summary titles), the television channels used some ill-advised headlines: "This suburb is a disaster", "In ruins", "The nightmare goes on", etc. The newspapers also used such headlines as "Tears in the Carmel", "The Carmel sinks" and "The reunion was a sea of tears". The examples that have been seen are a compendium of some of the most outstanding that could be found in the headlines of the media analysed.⁸

The texts also abounded with expressions that contributed to the dramatisation and spectacularisation of the case. The following are some of the phrases and expressions: "The spectre of new collapses hangs over the Carmel", "Complete ruin" and "The truth is that the residents of the Carmel live with *worrying* seismographs in their homes".

As regards the principle of neutrality, we have studied the heading that Alsius (1999: 92) calls *valuing neutrality* and, within this, especially the necessary separation between opin-

Graph 2. Percentage omission of the criteria of professional ethics established in this research (by medium)



Source: own.

ion and information in news genres. In all, 26 cases were recorded where the media mixed news and opinion genres. We will outline some of the cases detected, which refer especially to the political confrontation. One newspaper published news (news genre) with these contents: "The *Convergència i Unió* party always ready to look for someone to blame in the government (...)" and "Yesterday, *Convergència i Unió* was the purest example of the faith in discussion (...). Casually, the then *CiU* Regional Policy Councillor and public works expert (...)."

With reference to the monetary resources that the Administration would devote to the affected zone: "Cheap and cheerful doesn't work" and "Will they be able to get together all these resources? Neither the central administration nor the regional government are exactly going through the best of times from the financial point of view."

A television commentator stated of the appearance in the Catalan parliament of the Regional Policy and Public Works Councillor Joaquim Nadal: "I don't think that the residents of the Carmel are entirely satisfied with this explanation." The period in which the media were less careful with this precept lies in the last days of the analysis, coinciding with the public debate about the case and the appearance in the Catalan parliament of Councillor Nadal to provide explanations about the case.

From the thesaurus created by Alsius (1999: 171), the principle of justice has been chosen to detect, primarily, those units in which different versions or points of view were not included. A total of 18 impacts were recorded, 8.5% of the total of the criteria of professional ethics applied in this research.

The private television channels, Antena 3 TV (33.3%) and Telecinco (22.2%), were the media that have least followed this precept. By contrast, the *El País* (0%), *Avui* and *El Periódico* (5.6%) newspapers are the ones that have sought to include information with different points of view and actors

representing the Carmel crisis. A large part of the media analysed (*La Vanguardia*, TV3 and TVE-1) obtained 11.1% of the total impacts.

Some information about the debates or institutional appearances shows a lack of news plurality. For example, one television operator explained in a news unit the whole monographic plenary devoted to the Carmel held at Barcelona City Council on 4 February 2005 with the sole reaction of the *Partit Popular* (PP). On 8 February, the same channel gave new information solely with an insertion of the PP; the other opposition groups (*CiU*) and the Government of the Regional Government of Catalonia did not appear.

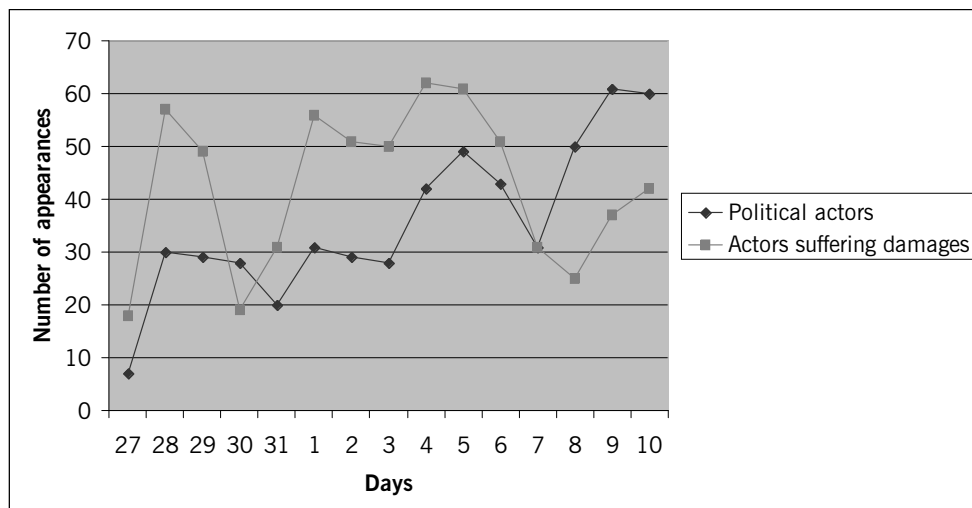
Another television channel broadcast a news video where it said that "the only group that has its hands freer is the PP", referring to the Barcelona City Council plenary. In this news, only the PP appears, and no voice is given to either the Catalan Government or to the mayor. One operator broadcast information about the municipal groups which only spoke of part of the opposition, in this case *CiU* and not the PP.

5. Conclusions

The study carried out enables us to conclude that as the days passed following the accident, 27 January 2005, the media gave priority to the political confrontation: the number of appearances of political actors grew and the number of actors who had suffered damages by the crisis dropped (see Graph No. 3). Similarly, as coverage of the accident became more politicised, less attention was paid to them by television operators and more by the newspapers analysed.

In addition to this, the analysis revealed a clear differentiation in the use of sources (political or those who had suffered damages) depending on ownership (public or private) of the television channels. Consequently, we see that *Televisió de*

Graph 3. Comparison of the total number between political actors and those who have suffered damages



Source: own.

Catalunya (TV3) and Televisión Española (La 1) were more interested in hearing the opinions of the political actors than Telecinco and Antena 3 TV. Between them, the two channels have a total of 89 citations from public actors, for only 24 of the two private operators.

In terms of the use of technical sources (5.9%), we can conclude that they were used the least by the media. Journalists barely required experts (geologists, architects and engineers) and these actors avoided giving their opinion. The media provided technical information through the political actors, without consulting the experts. However, there is also evidence that technical sources refused to talk to the media. Some areas of the media explained: "The few engineers who did come to the phone to talk about the Carmel accident would not say anything for or against the use of one or another method." The construction companies who carried out the Carmel work never gave their opinion and when they did, they asked that the source not be cited. One of the most popular journalistic terms used was "sources in the sector". This lack meant that many units (news) were under compared, which cannot always be attributed to journalists, but to the fact that there were no technicians on hand with a desire to explain the causes and possible solutions that the accident would require.

The most cited political actors included the Regional Policy and Public Works Councillor, Joaquim Nadal, with 144 impacts. A long way behind Councillor Nadal, the second most cited actor was the mayor of Barcelona, Joan Clos (57). The president of the Regional Government of Catalonia, Pasqual Maragall, obtained 36 impacts. It is remarkable that, during the period analysed, the president of the Spanish government, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, was only cited on three occasions, and on very few other occasions, six in total, the different ministers from the Spanish executive. Other spokespersons from the State Administration, including the vice president of the Government, María Teresa Fernández de la Vega, and general secretaries or directors of the Spanish government obtained a total of eight more impacts.

In another order, the political parties of the Catalan political system (204 citations) capitalised on the leading role in this event compared with the political parties of the Spanish political system (three impacts). The most cited parties as sources were those of the opposition in Catalonia, *Convergència i Unió* (CiU) and *Partit Popular de Catalunya* (PPC).

As regards the professional ethics aspects, we can conclude that the television channels breached the principles of professional ethics established in this research more than the newspapers did (see Point 4). Spectacularisation and sensationalism are the established ethical precepts that were least respected by the eight media analysed. However, the reporters took special care with the dissemination of images and texts that affected minors.

Outstanding among the ethical criteria least respected by the media in the Carmel case are the sensationalism and the contribution to the news circus (25.6%), the lack of accuracy and

exactness in the information (23.2%) and, in third position, the invasion of personal privacy, especially that of the victims (15.2%).

The separation between information and opinion accounts for 12.3% of the total in compliance of the criteria set out in this research. It is detected that as the days pass and the case becomes politicised, the information in which no clear distinction is made between facts and opinions is repeated.

The media were rather careless with the respect for personal privacy. The two private television operators analysed account for 60% of the total transgressions of the eight media studied in terms of showing the pain and suffering of the people affected by the accident. The showing of images of personal objects of residents in the block of flats demolished in the area most affected by the subsidence in the Carmel suburb was constant. As the Audiovisual Council of Catalonia recommended,⁹ electronic contrivances, such as camera zooms or others, that magnify misfortune should be avoided, especially in this case, because they intruded into the privacy of the residents of the flats that were being demolished without consent.

Besides this, scenes were also shown of the Nou Barris waste tip set up by Barcelona City Council with the residents trying to find lost personal objects among the debris.¹⁰ The images clearly breached the privacy of people who had lost their belongings and who were trying to recover part of them from amid piles of debris and all kinds of objects. They were shown severely distressed or directly crying in front of the reporters. The television channels were less exact and accurate in disseminating the information than the newspapers were.

Finally, once again, it has been seen how the media attention that is aroused by times of crisis contributes to the creation of new themes and subthemes (*thematization*)¹¹ of aspects relating to the event that are placed at the centre of the media agenda. For example, it has been seen that since the Carmel accident, the theme of the construction of infrastructures in Catalonia has increased in the media.¹² The collapse of the tunnel in the Barcelona suburb of the Carmel has generated new themes and subthemes that contribute to setting the political agenda in Catalonia with reference to the debate on infrastructures, their use and, especially, the perception of the risk as regards their construction.

Notes

- 1 This article is one of the chapters, revised and extended, from the doctoral thesis defended by the author in May 2008 at the Department of Communication of Universitat Pompeu Fabra, tutored by Dr. Josep Gifreu i Pinsach.
- 2 According to data from the General Media Study (EGM). Ranging from October 2004 to May 2005.
- 3 According to data from the Office for Justification of Dissemination (OJD) for printed media in the general information newspapers category.

- 4 See: PONT, Carles. "Protocolos, actores i comunicació institucional en episodis d'emergència. Estudi de la gestió informativa de l'esfondrament d'un túnel del metro al Carmel de Barcelona". PhD Thesis, Barcelona: 2008.
- 5 Alsius' research (1996) was defended as a PhD thesis. The thesis is accompanied by an in-depth study into the new professional ethics codes of television corporations around the world.
- 6 It should be stressed that news from news agencies has not been taken into account, except for cases where the information explicitly quoted that the origin was this type of medium.
- 7 Telecinco, midday (27-1-2005/1-2-2005) / Antena 3 TV, midday (1-2-2005), among other examples.
- 8 All of the examples have been taken from the qualitative study. The television channel or the newspaper, and the day and the place in which each example appears can be consulted in: PONT, Carles. "Protocolos, actores i comunicació institucional en episodis d'emergència. Estudi de la gestió informativa de l'esfondrament d'un túnel del metro al Carmel de Barcelona". PhD thesis, Barcelona: 2008.
- 9 "El tractament informatiu de les tragèdies personals". *Quaderns del CAC*, no. 9. Barcelona: Consell de l'Audiovisual de Catalunya, 2001.
- 10 Antena 3 TV, midday (5-2-2005) / Telecinco, evening (5-2-2005), among other examples.
- 11 The theory of thematisation gives the ability to the media to select a theme, placing it at the centre of public attention. The notion of "theme" (thematization) is a theoretical proposal of Luhmann (1978) and was developed by, among others, such authors as Carlo Marletti (1985). See: MARLETTI, Carlo. *Prima e dopo: tematizzazione e comunicazione politica*. Turin: ERI, 1985.
- 12 During the years following the Carmel case (2005), a debate has arisen on the construction of infrastructures and tunnels that cross the city of Barcelona (e.g. the construction of a high-speed train tunnel connecting the Sants and Sagrera stations and that touches the Sagrada Família).

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