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Media Coverage of Social Cohesion and Minorities During Riots in the UK and Spain

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Abstract

In Southport (UK) and Torre-Pacheco (Spain), attacks took place, in 2024 and 2025 respectively, against people who are considered part of mainstream society. These crimes were committed by people who are seen as foreigners: a lone murderer whose parents came from Rwanda, although he was born and raised in the UK, and, in Spain, three men from Morocco. A widespread disinformation campaign immediately took place targeting minority groups. The disinformation campaign was followed by violent riots against minority groups, in both countries. Through the media coverage of those events (initial attacks, disinformation campaigns, violent riots, and political responses), what conception of minority groups (their place in society) and social cohesion (who we are, as a society) does the media disseminate to the audience? The aim is to highlight whether or not the media adopt culturally informed communication. *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph*, in the UK, and *El País* and *ABC*, in Spain, were selected for the agenda-setting analysis of 298 news articles. The main hypothesis is that communication in progressive newspapers is more culturally informed than in conservative newspapers. This is mostly confirmed in the UK, while differences between media are not so clear in Spain. Although some indicators show more culturally informed communication in Spanish and progressive media, all newspapers place immigration at the centre of the debates on social cohesion. By reproducing the arguments of the far right and online misinformation, mainstream newspapers contribute to spreading and legitimising anti-migrant and anti-diversity rhetoric.

Keywords

culturally informed communication; migrants; minority groups; Muslims; riots; social cohesion; Spain; UK

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1. Introduction

In the UK, in Southport, on July 29, 2024, three little girls were murdered, and another eight people were injured in a stabbing attack. A disinformation campaign immediately took place on the identity of the murderer. According to some social media accounts, the crime was committed by a Muslim asylum seeker who arrived by boat in the UK, in irregular conditions. An invented name was created and mentioned to make the story real.

The real murderer was arrested just after the attack. His name and his profile were soon made public by the authorities and the media to stop the disinformation campaign. Born and raised in the UK, his family came from Rwanda, where the majority of the population is Christian (92,12%) and only 2% is Muslim, according to the Fifth Rwanda Population and Housing Census (Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning & National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda, 2023). Aged 17 years old at the time of the attack, he suffered from autism. After the stabbing attack, riots took place in several cities, especially against migrants, asylum seekers, and Muslims. The first violent episode occurred in Southport on July 30, targeting the local mosque, just one day after the murders.

In Spain, in Torre-Pacheco, on July 9, 2025, an elderly man was beaten by three Moroccan men. A video of the attack circulated on social media, although it was demonstrated to be "fake," as it referred to another episode. After the nationality of the assailants was confirmed, far-right groups from outside the municipality organised themselves to confront the Maghrebian population in Torre-Pacheco. The organisation of anti-immigrant groups was facilitated by social media and encouraged by far-right movements and political figures. Riots took place over several nights, with the police being reinforced all around the neighbourhood where more migrants live, until calm returned.

Common aspects exist between both cases. Initial attacks took place against people considered part of the mainstream society: little girls in Southport and an elderly man in Torre-Pacheco. These crimes were committed by people who are seen as foreigners: a lone murderer whose parents came from Rwanda, although he was born and raised in the UK, and, in Spain, three men from Morocco. A widespread disinformation campaign took place targeting minority groups, especially: Muslim and migrant population (both countries), unaccompanied foreign minors (Spain), and asylum seekers (UK). The intense disinformation campaign on social media was followed by violent riots against minority groups, in both countries, as reported by the press.

Through the media coverage of those events (initial attacks, disinformation campaigns, violent riots, and political responses), what conception of minority groups (their place in society) and social cohesion (who we are, as a society) does the media disseminate to the audience? This research question follows the idea that, if the media does not follow culturally informed communication (Chaika et al., 2022; Rodrigues & Paradies, 2017; Voorhees et al., 2007), its reporting contributes to the spreading and legitimising of anti-migrant and anti-diversity rhetoric among the audience (Checa-Olmos & Arjona-Garrido, 2011).

As a more neutral term (van der Meer & Tolsma, 2014), the analysis adopts the concept of social cohesion over social integration (Schnapper, 2007). In migration studies, the notion of integration has been criticised (Penninx & Martiniello, 2006) for its normative conception of what migrants and their children should achieve in the mainstream society to be recognised as part of it (Ager & Strang, 2004; Entzinger & Biezeveld, 2003).

Social integration was also criticised for promoting a vision of migrants and their children as a social group isolated from the mainstream society (Brey, 2016).

The classical formulation of social cohesion was offered by Durkheim (1893), who emphasised the importance of social solidarity rooted in shared norms and values. This foundational perspective framed cohesion as the social glue that binds individuals within societies through moral consensus and interdependence. In increasingly diverse societies, the link between social cohesion and migration has attracted attention. A consistent finding across studies is the lack of a rigorous, shared definition of social cohesion (Solé Puig et al., 2011). Van der Meer and Tolsma (2014, p. 460) provide an explicit definition, characterising social cohesion as "the degree of interconnectedness between individuals," encompassing feelings of commitment, trust, as well as norms of reciprocity. Angell and de Beer (2021, p. 65) offer a complementary perspective, conceptualising social cohesion as "the glue" or bonds holding a social system together. Trust emerged as a particularly prominent dimension (Koopmans et al., 2015), alongside belonging, solidarity, and participation (Angell & de Beer, 2021). Angell and de Beer (2021) emphasise that social cohesion involves both structural elements, such as participation, and cognitive elements, such as trust and sense of belonging.

This article analyses media coverage of minority groups and social cohesion. The aim is to highlight whether or not media adopt culturally informed communication, as explained in Section 2, dedicated to the literature review. The analysis was conducted with 298 news articles published after the stabbing attack in Southport (UK) and the assault on an elderly man in Torre-Pacheco (Spain) in 2024 and 2025 respectively. With a mixed approach, through priming and framing analysis, as explained in Section 3, the selected newspapers and country cases will be compared. Section 4 presents the findings, and in the conclusions (Section 5), a discussion is engaged in light of the theoretical perspectives employed.

2. Agenda-Setting, Culturally Informed Communication, and the Cases of Southport and Torre-Pacheco

Section 2 will be dedicated to agenda-setting and media coverage of social cohesion, migrants, and other minority groups (Section 2.1). It will consider which are the determining factors of media coverage on minority groups and social cohesion, and to what extent media contribute to culturally informed communication (Section 2.2). The literature review will include recent findings on the cases of Southport and Torre-Pacheco (Section 2.3). Section 2.4 will introduce the understanding of culturally informed communication and the main hypothesis in this article.

2.1. Agenda-Setting on Social Cohesion and Minority Groups

The agenda-setting theory is a foundational communication theory developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972). The core idea is that the media establishes what people should *think about*. When the theory was proposed, the cognitive paradigm dominated psychological studies. By emphasising certain news topics repeatedly, the media shapes the public agenda and influences the perceived importance of issues in society. Agenda-setting acts through different mechanisms (Monzón, 1996, pp. 304–305, as cited in López García, 2001, pp. 198–199). The media establishes a filter between knowledge and silence, as a topic is considered not to exist if it is not covered by the media. The media also establishes a hierarchy of priorities by determining the degree

of importance given to each issue. Moreover, the media puts emphasis on certain aspects of a topic while overlooking others.

The first two issues (filter between knowledge and silence, hierarchy of priorities) can be analysed through priming, to see how the media selects which topics the audience should think about. The third dimension can be analysed through framing, to understand how the media covers topics by highlighting certain aspects. While priming is treated as a quantitative indicator, framing is considered a qualitative approach (see Section 3).

As far as social cohesion is concerned, the media frame it primarily through assimilationist narratives emphasising minority integration into majority norms and values (Nolan et al., 2011; Rane & Hersi, 2012; Scalvini, 2013), while questioning multiculturalism. While national and transnational media adopt more negative, politicised frames, subnational media employ more positive, substantive frames (Leupold et al., 2018; Mendez et al., 2020). Media coverage emphasises cultural dimensions of cohesion—such as values, identity, and belonging—over economic or political indicators (Leupold et al., 2018; Rane & Hersi, 2012). Temporal dynamics prove critical, as demonstrated by refugee crisis coverage that shifted rapidly from solidarity to securitisation within months (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017). This is one of the main conclusions by Amores et al. (2019) when comparing the visual frames of migrants and refugees in France, Germany, Spain, and the UK, between 2013 and 2017. The authors highlight the existence of dichotomic frames on migrants and refugees, who are mostly portrayed as victims, but also as threats, especially in Germany, after 2015, when large numbers of refugees arrived in the country.

The evidence reveals that framing varies substantially by target group. Refugees and asylum seekers were predominantly framed as victims in visual media during 2013–2014 (Amores et al., 2019), but negative framing increased substantially after 2015, particularly in frontline countries like Greece (Amores et al., 2020) and in German media. Unaccompanied foreign minors in Spain experienced consistently negative framing in media with different editorial lines, during 2017–2022 (Gómez-Quintero et al., 2021). Through a frame analysis of press editorials in Spain, Martín Olea (2023) uncovers seven distinct frames on unaccompanied foreign minors. Although they are mostly portrayed as victims, she finds they are also considered a threat when concerns are raised about the lack of social cohesion and insecurity in the community (Martín Olea, 2023, p. 19). The other frames refer to (potential) criminal elements, supportive frames including representations of unaccompanied minors being part of society, positive evaluation frames, human interest frames, and utilitarian frames. In UK media, Muslims are framed through securitisation and othering narratives, with no evidence of the victim–threat dichotomy observed for migrant populations (Sian et al., 2013). Cross-national differences are substantial, with UK right-wing media being uniquely aggressive. Terminology varied significantly as the press in Germany/Sweden used "refugee," Italy/UK used "migrant," and Spain used "immigrant" (Berry et al., 2016).

Recent contributions on metonymies offer an innovative perspective. Metonymy involves referring to one concept by using a related entity to represent something more complex, helping uncover implicit meanings and ideologies embedded in media texts. Alongside metaphors, metonymies are frequently employed in media to simplify and frame complex migration issues (Catalano & Musolff, 2019). They shape public perceptions by reducing multifaceted realities into more concrete, relatable images or ideas, which may reinforce stereotypes or dominant ideological narratives (Arcimaviciene & Baglama, 2018).

2.2. Determinants of Media Coverage and Effects in Terms of Culturally Informed Communication

Media coverage of migration is shaped by a complex interplay of factors. Within different media systems, media type exerts consistent effects: Public service broadcasters provide more balanced, contextualised coverage than commercial outlets (Jacobs et al., 2016), while elite newspapers demonstrate higher content diversity than popular press (Masini et al., 2018). These differences stem from varying organisational logics, with public and elite outlets prioritising professional norms over commercial imperatives. Genre also matters significantly, with feature formats affording more diverse perspectives than standard news (Horsti, 2016), and longer articles enabling a greater diversity of perspectives (Masini et al., 2018). National context and political orientation often outweigh ownership structure in determining coverage approach (Mancini et al., 2019), while resource constraints, including limited staffing, affect all outlet types (Nachawati Rego & Rodríguez Gómez, 2025). Across contexts, coverage consistently privileges elite political voices over migrant perspectives (Gemi et al., 2013) and follows event-driven patterns that frame migration as a crisis (Mancini et al., 2019).

The comparative study by Berry et al. (2016) on the press coverage of "the refugee and migrant crisis" in five European countries highlights differences between the UK and Spain. The UK system's greater negativity and polarisation reflect both structural characteristics (longer history of immigration politicisation, Brexit dynamics) and partisan effects (aggressive right-wing media campaigns, especially towards refugees), operating in concert. Spain's relatively less negative coverage results from a pro-European orientation and shorter history of politicisation, with more recent engagement of extreme right discourses, through the political party Vox.

Media coverage of minority groups and social cohesion has an effect in terms of culturally informed communication. Culturally informed communication is characterised by: use of genres with diverse perspectives, solution-oriented framing promoting integration (Chaika et al., 2022), acknowledgement of cultural contexts affecting specific communities (Rodrigues & Paradies, 2017), and representation of minority voices in positions of authority (Voorhees et al., 2007). Conversely, lack of cultural competency manifests through: sensationalist language and racialised rhetoric, stereotypical portrayals using problematic tropes (Baugut, 2020), dominant use of threat and conflict frames, consistent positioning of minority groups as outsiders rather than insiders (Hussain, 2000), and over-representation of crime while under-representing positive contributions (Voorhees et al., 2007). These patterns vary systematically by context: Crisis coverage defaults to a threat-oriented frame (Amores et al., 2019; Rodrigues & Paradies, 2017), different minority groups receive differential treatment even within the same country (Meeusen & Jacobs, 2017), and political climates emphasising integration over multiculturalism shape negative framing (Nolan et al., 2011). Culturally informed communication emerges primarily when journalists receive specific cultural competency training (Chaika et al., 2022), newsrooms include diverse staff (Voorhees et al., 2007), and institutional feedback mechanisms connect media organisations with minority communities (Rodrigues & Paradies, 2017), suggesting structural rather than individual solutions are necessary for improvement.

2.3. The Cases of Southport and Torre-Pacheco

2.3.1. Southport

In the UK, academic publications on the riots that followed the attacks in Southport share similar conclusions. In a context of widespread social violence, the authorities gave priority to ending the riots through a securitised strategy (Thomson, 2025). This strategy had negative consequences for minority groups and social cohesion. Participants in the riots were mostly framed as "thugs" and "mindless criminals," with little consideration of the social and political forces underlying the violence. Those underlying drivers include far-right extremism and the existence of groups with specific political agendas (Wroe & Vaughn, 2025), xenophobia and racism, digital radicalisation, social inequalities, and deprivation of "left behind places" (Telford, 2025). According to Thomson (2025, p. 2): "By treating these attacks as mere disorder rather than hate-fuelled extremism, the state bolstered its legitimacy but risked tacitly enabling far-right networks." Godshaw and Singleton (2025) also point out the role of mainstream politicians:

> As the 2024 riots have been framed in public discourse, we argue that they were possible only through the active legitimisation of hostility to migration by successive Labour and Conservative governments, through which racism has become entwined with ideas about belonging in Britain. Furthermore, these framings are used instrumentally to deflect responsibility for the violence away from those in power and to enact a criminal justice crackdown that is both inadequate to prevent future racist violence and potentially counterproductive. (Godshaw & Singleton, 2025, p. 237)

According to Tyerman and van Isacker (2025, p. 410), framing the murderer as the "Southport monster" gave immediate legitimacy to the riots. The framing of "the others" as monsters is not something new, but it is influenced by the colonial British history, with consequences in the social categorisation of minority groups based on (post)colonial borders. According to Swehli et al. (2025, p. 6): "This underscores the reality that laws can create only the illusion of equality when they operate within a broader racial power structure."

2.3.2. Torre-Pacheco

In Spain, as little time has passed since the riots, few contributions have been published. Before the riots, in February 2025, Rodríguez Calles and Iglesias Martínez published a paper on the "factors explaining the peaceful coexistence between immigrants and natives in working-class neighbourhoods in Spain" (Rodríguez Calles & Iglesias Martínez, 2025, p. 1). Through a qualitative, exhaustive fieldwork, Torre-Pacheco was compared with another Spanish local context. The authors detected the following factors as being protective against social conflict:

> Ethnic segmentation, political consensus on immigration, universalist welfare state policies, increasing intergroup contact, native immigrant memory, and the perceived reduced ethnic distance towards Latin American immigration. The weakening of any of these factors, as illustrated by the case of Torre-Pacheco, could increase intergroup conflict in the coming years. (Rodríguez Calles & Iglesias Martínez, 2025, p. 1)

Only a few months later, in July 2025, riots confirmed the fears of the authors. Right after, a *Special Bulletin on Monitoring Hate Speech on Social Media* was dedicated to Torre-Pacheco by the Spanish Observatory on Racism and Xenophobia (OBERAXE, 2025), which depends on the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security, and Migration. In just 17 days, following the initial assault, more than 138,000 racist and xenophobic hate messages were detected on social media. The report identifies an escalation in hostile messages, hoaxes, and calls for violence, mainly directed against people from North Africa (91% of hate content). Most messages incite dehumanisation, criminalisation, and digital "hunts" that end up being transferred to real life.

2.4. Culturally Informed Communication During Riots

Following the literature review (Section 2.2), in this article, communication will be considered culturally informed when:

1. The newspapers give knowledge about the challenges faced by minority groups during riots; these challenges are made visible in comparison to other social groups and other social facts, and the press cites the voices of minority groups. These aspects will be analysed through a priming quantitative analysis (Section 3).
2. During violent riots, the qualitative framing of minority groups and social cohesion highlights national, ethnic, and religious diversity as positive features of the whole society, thereby supporting multiculturalism as a positive value (Section 4).

The communication will not be considered culturally informed when the press does not give information about the challenges faced by minority groups, and they do not cite them. Communication will not be culturally informed if media emphasises the need to promote the social integration of minority groups through an assimilationist perspective. And it will neither be considered culturally informed if minority groups are portrayed as outsiders, even though some members were born and raised in the UK or Spain.

Media coverage will be analysed through agenda-setting. The aim is to identify which topics are mentioned by the press, which topics are salient over others, and which frames are adopted on minority groups and social cohesion. In the UK or Spain, the recognition of minority groups as victims of the riots or the conception of the riots as being legitimate since minority groups are considered a threat will indicate differences between media coverage. In the first situation, diversity is recognised as a positive and constitutive aspect of society, whereas diversity and multiculturalism are conceived as challenging social cohesion in the last case.

Through the media coverage of the events of Southport and Torre-Pacheco, the aim is to understand which conception the media disseminates to the audience on minority groups (what place they have in society) and social cohesion (who we are, as a society). The hypothesis is that communication in progressive media will be more culturally informed than in conservative media.

3. Methodology

For the comparison, four newspapers were selected. This selection was based on: (a) the Media Web Reputation Ranking, by SCImago Media; (b) the digital audience, according to the General Media Framework (Marco General de los Medios) in Spain (Asociación para la Investigación de Medios de Comunicación, 2025),

and to *Press Gazette* ("50 biggest UK news websites," 2025) in the UK; and (c) the editorial line, conservative or progressive. Based on the Media Web Reputation Ranking, only media with general content and more than 70/100 points were considered for the analysis.

In Spain, there are only two general newspapers with more than 70/100 points in the Media Web Reputation Ranking (SCImago Media, 2025): the progressive media *El País* (EPS, 82.25/100) and the conservative media ABC (72.75/100). In 2024, EPS had the largest audience, while ABC was the fifth largest (Asociación para la Investigación de Medios de Comunicación, 2025). As both media are private, for a coherent comparison, two private newspapers were also selected in the UK (Jacobs et al., 2016). In the UK, eight general private media have more than 70/100 points in the Media Web Reputation Ranking (SCImago Media, 2025). By narrowing the selection to newsbrands with more than 35% of the audience ("50 biggest UK news websites," 2025), *Reuters* and *Metro* were discarded. Sky News was discarded for being consistently perceived as generally neutral by the audience, according to a biannual tracker conducted by YouGov (2025). The remaining five newsbrands were classified by their ideology. According to a survey by YouGov, published in *The Times* (Smith, 2017), *The Guardian* (TG) and *The Mirror* were perceived as mostly left-wing media, whereas *The Independent* was perceived as being more centre-left. As TG showed a higher audience (45%) and a higher reputation (85.75/100) than the other two media, it was selected as the progressive case for the UK. Among conservative media, both *The Daily Mail* and *The Telegraph* (TT) were mostly perceived as right-wing media (Smith, 2017). Although *The Daily Mail* has a larger audience (38%) than TT (35%), this latter media has a higher reputation according to the Media Web Reputation Ranking: 78/100 for TT versus 77.5/100 for *The Daily Mail*. Giving priority to reputation over audience, TT was selected as the conservative case for the UK.

The fieldwork was conducted with the digital versions of the newspapers, in August 2025. The news items were identified by searching for the keywords "Southport" and "Torre-Pacheco." For the UK, the news items were identified on each media outlet's website. In contrast, for Spain, the news items were identified through Google's advanced search tools because the Spanish newspaper websites did not have the necessary filters. In ABC, 1,404 news articles were identified, with no time limit. In EPS, when "Torre-Pacheco" was named, more than 10,000 news articles were identified. Through Google's advanced search tools, the specific period of 10 days could be selected. This technique shows validity through two indicators. The number of news articles initially identified in the Spanish media is similar to the number identified in the UK, through the website of the media (Table 1). Different types of news articles were identified in the Spanish media (Table 2). The analysis was conducted for 10 days, with news published from July 29 until August 7, 2024, in the UK, and from July 9 until July 18, 2025, in Spain. The analysis covers the period during which most riots took place

Table 1. Identified and selected news items for the analysis.

Media	Identified news items	Selected news items for the analysis
UK	205	189
Progressive media: TG	120	107
Conservative media: TT	85	82
Spain	238	109
Progressive media: EPS	79	51
Conservative media: ABC	159	58
Total	**443**	**298**

in the UK (Bonnett & Hopkins, 2025, p. 421; Thomson, 2025, p. 5), whereas violent events went on for fewer days in Spain.

As Table 1 indicates, 443 news articles were initially identified, out of which 145 were eliminated for the comparative analysis to be coherent. News articles were discarded if the content did not mention the events of Southport or Torre-Pacheco. Single news articles published on Culture, Sports, and Business were also eliminated. The same decision was adopted for videos, images, podcasts, and cartoons, as this article focuses on written texts. In ABC, 87 news items were discarded as they just reproduced short videos produced by the major Spanish press agencies. Audiovisual and other multimedia formats were not included, as they require a different type of analysis than written texts, such as visual framing (Kędra & Sommier, 2018; Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). Express news and detailed briefings were discarded to avoid repetition.

As a potential indicator of differences between conservative-leaning and progressive-leaning media (Horsti, 2016), the type of selected news items for each media was analysed (Table 2). The type of news is defined by the head of the section in which it was published (Goenaga Ruiz de Zuazu, 2017). In TT, 84.2% of the news items are headed as standard news, while the rest are included in sections dedicated to Opinion & Columnists or Politics. In comparison, TG published fewer standard news items (60.7%). In the UK, the progressive media shows higher variability by publishing news in sections dedicated to World, Media & Technology, Society, and three Editorials. This could lead to more diverse perspectives on the events (Horsti, 2016). In Spain, the opposite is observed, as three out of four news items published by the progressive media are standard news, while they represent less than 40% of the news items published by the conservative media (38.3%). When other types of news are considered, EPS published more news in Opinion & Columnists, while ABC published more news in Society and Television. Both media outlets published an editorial on the events in Torre-Pacheco.

Table 2. Genre of the selected news items, by newspaper.

	TG-UK	TT-UK	EPS-SP	ABC-SP
National News	60.7%	84.2%	75.0%	38.3%
Politics	15.9%	7.3%	—	—
Section "Commentisfree" in TG, Opinion & Columnists in other newspapers	9.3%	8.5%	19.2%	6.7%
World & International News	4.7%	—	1.9%	—
Media & Technology	4.7%	—	1.9%	1.7%
Television	—	—	—	16.7%
Society	2.8%	—	—	35%
Editorial	1.9%	—	1.9%	1.7%
Total	107	82	51	58

As the trends are contradictory when genre is compared in both countries, differences between conservative-leaning and progressive-leaning media cannot clearly be established by the type of news. To analyse if media coverage on social cohesion and minority groups leads to culturally informed communication, priming and framing analyses (Section 2.1) were conducted with the headlines of 298 news articles. Headlines offer methodological justification as analytical units based on their unique cognitive properties and empirical validity. They serve as cognitive shortcuts that attract attention and influence

reader understanding independently of full article text, with particular impact on less engaged readers who may not read beyond headlines (Nisar & Bleich, 2020).

Through the headlines, a priming analysis was conducted with content words, also known as lexical words. They carry primary semantic meaning and refer to objects, actions, qualities, or states. They belong to open-class categories, meaning new words can be added to them over time. They include verbs, nouns, adjectives, and some adverbs (Cuetos Vega et al., 2020). Through priming of the content words, the aim is to identify if newspapers bring knowledge about the challenges faced by minority groups during riots, if these challenges are made visible in comparison to other social groups and other social facts, and if the press cites voices of minority groups (Section 2.4).

The content words used in the headlines were encoded through a mixed coding approach, both deductive and inductive. The inductive method followed grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Overall, 767 content words were identified in the headlines (284 in TG, 187 in TT, 142 in EPS, and 154 in ABC). These words were grouped into 19 to 21 basic categories. This first level of codification resulted from the news item itself. Those basic categories were united based on the similarity of their content, resulting in 10 intermediate categories. The codification was made coherent through media comparison and the literature review on Southport. After the initial murders, public discourses mainly framed people who participated in violent events as rioters, while avoiding considering them as social actors with a political agenda (Telford, 2025; Thomson, 2025; Wroe & Vaughn, 2025). As a consequence, the riots were interpreted in terms of security, with no political responses dealing with their socioeconomic and political background (Section 2.3).

At a second level of the codification process, the following intermediate categories were created:

1. The murderer (in the UK) or the perpetrators of the initial assault (in Spain).
2. The victims, together with their families.
3. Riots, rioters, hooligans, thugs, arrested, and mob, who are recognised as having no political agenda (Telford, 2025; Thomson, 2025; Wroe & Vaughn, 2025). This category is linked to violence and expression of violence through references to being assaulted, attacked, bitten, hit by a brick, and set on fire; as well as angry crowd, brutal awakening, clash, devastation, disorder, fear, safety, threat, warning, and weapons.
4. Terrorists, protesters, fascists, neo-Nazis, or extremists, when participants in violent events are recognised as having a political agenda (Telford, 2025; Thomson, 2025; Wroe & Vaughn, 2025).
5. Misinformation (all media), populism and polarisation (TG), internet, with references to social media, TikTok, Telegram, and artificial intelligence.
6. The far right, their public figures and politicians.
7. Mainstream authorities include politicians (except the far right), the police, and the justice system.
8. Debates on social cohesion.
9. The minority groups, suffering attacks and hate discourses and crimes, formed another category.
10. The members of the local community who showed their support against the initial crimes were considered together with voices against violence, counter activism, and expression of love and solidarity, to support the minority groups targeted by the attacks and hate discourses and crimes.

Those 10 intermediate categories were grouped into three general ones:

1. The actors or the episodes contributing to promote and reproduce social conflicts include: "the murderer"; "the perpetrators of the initial assault"; "the far right"; "misinformation and internet"; "riots, thugs, and violence"; and "extremists, terrorists, protesters, neo-Nazis, or fascists."
2. The mainstream narratives include: "politicians, the police, and the justice system"; and "social cohesion."
3. The victims or the actors whose aim is to resolve or avoid social conflicts include: "the victims and their families"; "minority groups suffering attacks"; and "the community and support networks."

The categorisations of the content words in basic, intermediate, and general categories follow the distinction by Ortí (2003) between the factual, the significant, and the symbolic dimensions of social discourses. The aim is to classify the content words expressed in a conscious and literal way, the meanings of discourses, and the ultimate unconscious motivations, respectively.

The analysis of content words through a quantitative priming approach will be completed with the qualitative framing analysis of the headlines related to social cohesion, minority groups targeted by attacks and hate discourses and crimes, and communities and networks that supported minority groups. The aim is to respond to the central research question about how media coverage of the events of Southport and Torre-Pacheco (initial attacks, disinformation campaign, violent riots, and political responses) disseminates a certain conception of minority groups to the audience (their place in society) and social cohesion (who we are, as a society).

4. Media Coverage of Social Cohesion and Minority Groups During Riots

Section 4 will first compare the media coverage by editorial line and country cases, considering the three overarching categories (promotion of social conflicts, resolution of social conflicts, or mainstream discourses), followed by social cohesion and minority groups. Then, the findings on the UK and Spain will be presented. The quoted headlines are followed by references to the corresponding media and the day of the publication.

4.1. Comparative Notes

The victims or the actors whose aim is to resolve or avoid social conflicts have more visibility in progressive media (21.5% of the content words in TG and 33.8% in EPS) than in conservative media (17.6% in TT and 18.8% in ABC). Overall, all media pay more attention to the actors or the episodes contributing to promoting or reproducing social conflicts, with more visibility in the UK (52.4% of the content words in TG and 54.5% in the TT) than in Spain (41.5% in EPS and 40.9% in ABC). In each country, little difference is observed for this category, regardless of editorial line.

Social cohesion is more visible in Spain than in the UK. EPS addresses the issue in 16 out of 51 headlines (31.4%); ABC, in 20 out of 58 headlines (34.5%). Meanwhile, TG addresses the topic in 20 out of 107 headlines (18.7%); TT, in 12 out of 82 headlines (14.6%). Minority groups, the hatred they face, voices against violence, and the local community are more visible in Spanish media in comparison to the UK, and more visible in progressive media in comparison to conservative media. Those topics are mentioned in 32 out of 107 headlines (29.9%) in TG; 10 out of 82 headlines (12.2%) in TT; in Spain, the topics are mentioned in 31 out of 51 headlines (60.8%) in EPS; 20 out of 58 headlines (34.5%) in ABC.

In all media, several metonymies of minority groups are used. The individual victims of the riots are named: (a) by their nationality (Moroccans); (b) by their ethnic or religious background (Maghrebians/Muslims); (c) by their (im)migrant status; or (d) by their legal category (asylum seekers, illegal migrants, foreign citizens, unaccompanied minors).

4.2. The UK

When the content words in the headlines are compared, differences are observed (Figure 1). TT gives more visibility to the victims and their families, misinformation and the role of the internet, and the murderer. The social actors directly involved in the initial stabbing attacks have more visibility in the headlines of this conservative media. TG gives more visibility to far-right movements and politicians; the community and support networks (8.5% in TG and 2.7% in TT); and minorities suffering attacks and hate discourses and crimes (6% in TG and 3.7% in TT). Social actors involved after the riots started having more visibility in the headlines of the progressive media.

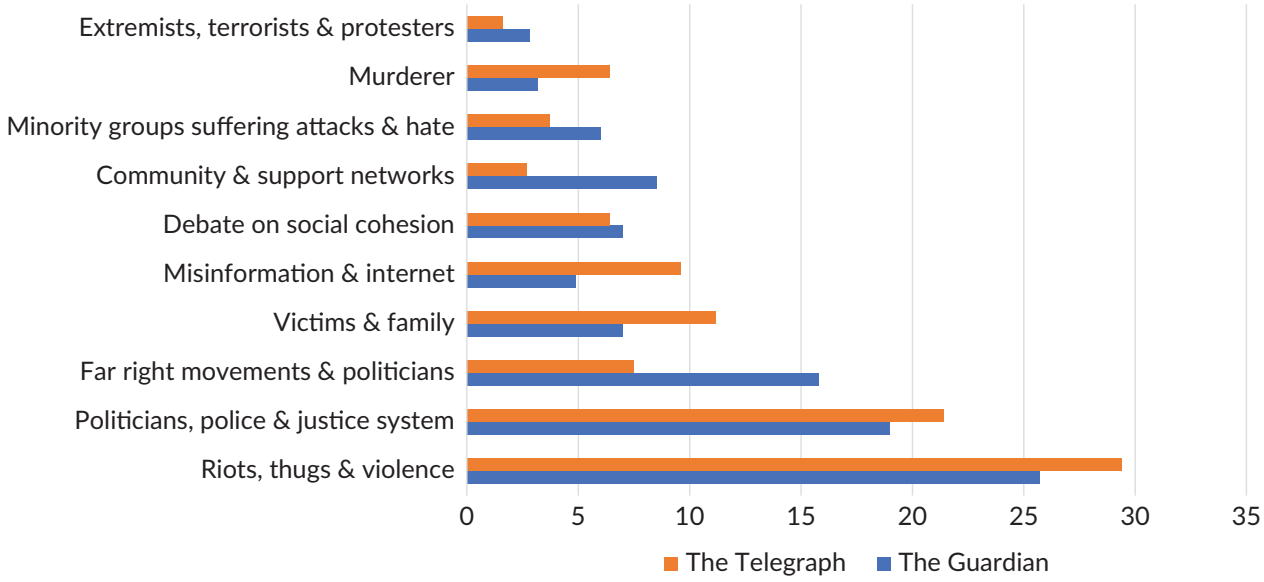


Figure 1. Distribution of the encoded words from the headlines of the selected news articles, in the UK, by percentage.

In both media, the minorities suffering attacks and hate discourses and crimes are among the categories with less attention in the headlines. They are the fourth most invisible category in TG and the third most invisible in TT. However, which groups are specifically identified as minorities?

In TG, minority groups include asylum seekers (four references), Muslims and mosques (three references), Jews, and immigrants. While mosques are protected by the police and targeted by far-right plans, Muslims are "terrorised" by extreme-right activists. TG sometimes gives a direct voice to members of minority groups. Some of them claim: "We don't want to feel unsafe in the place we love" (TG, 02/08/24), while others confess: "Some threatened to kill us" (TG, 06/08/24). Violence went so far that "rioters try to torch Rotherham asylum seeker hotel" (TG, 04/08/24). The far-right is held responsible for the violent events in the street and for online violence. The groups that raise their voices against hate and violence include a

charity, a member of parliament from Southport, and the mother of a victim. Anti-racism protesters, activists, and counter-protesters champion love and solidarity through personal or organised actions, as indicated in the following headlines, both published in the same day: "Love will prevail" and "Friends, family and strangers have banded together" (TG, 03/08/24).

In TT, three references are made to Muslims, after the initial clash against the local mosque of Southport: "Worshippers trapped as mob attacks Southport mosque" (TT, 31/07/24). While riots take place all over the country, Muslims are also seen as a threat, as they are told by the police to "discard any weapons in the mosque" (TT, 05/08/24). Migrants are mentioned in two headlines, as hotels where they stay are attacked by far-right rioters. No reference is made to asylum seekers or attacks against Jews in TT. Like TG, TT reports that hatred is manifested in the streets and online, and voices are raised against the violence, with interventions by the mother of a Southport victim and neighbours of the city. Those people are defined as "a community" in several news reports, and they claim to defy the riots, considered "a disgraceful hijacking of our tragedy" (TT, 31/07/24).

In TG, social cohesion is related to the need to "prevent[ing] further unrest" (TG, 07/08/24) and to "protect communities" from "race riots" (TG, 06/08/24). During what is qualified as a "dangerous new time" (TG, 03/08/24), explanations for the current riots are investigated. Through the headlines, factors close at hand include populism, polarisation through social media, British politics, "Tory race-baiting" (TG, 06/08/24) and their promise to "cut immigration" (TG, 02/08/24). The role of the far right in offering legitimacy to the riots is highlighted. References to far-right politicians and figures include Tommy Robinson (previous leader of the English Defence League); Nigel Farage (head of the Reform Party, member of parliament); and Elon Musk (CEO of X), who published the famous post: "Civil war is inevitable" (TG, 05/08/24), when riots were taking place in the UK. While Keir Starmer, the prime minister, declared that rioters would feel the "full force of the law" (TG, 30/07/24), to put a stop to violence, TG raises a debate about the ideology and the moral and electoral ruin of British politics. Journalists express their concern about what defines us in the present and what will do so in the future. In TG, the profile of the rioters is analysed in an opinion piece, in which the author claims their anger is not legitimate: "Some are calling these far-right riots an outpouring of legitimate anger. They are not" (TG, 05/08/24).

In TT, social cohesion is considered to be threatened by wider problems of modern British society, including weakened law and order, religious diversity, and migration. The riots are partly recognised as legitimate. They are qualified as "civil unrest" (TT, 06/08/24) and "militant politics" (TT, 07/08/24), with a headline claiming: "Freedom of speech must be protected" (TT, 04/08/24). In this context, modern Britain "needs to be recivilised" and "a new approach to integration" must be adopted (TT, 02/08/24). As a columnist wrote: "I deplore those who whip up hatred, but there are undeniable problems with migration" (TT, 06/08/24). TT also makes reference to the far right, but the mentions are mostly related to the political dispute. The far right is not presented as a key factor to explain the riots.

4.3. Spain

In Spain, the newspapers assign varying levels of visibility depending on the topic. In EPS, minority groups is the most relevant category (28.2% in EPS and 11% in ABC). The progressive media also gives more visibility to far-right movements and politicians, and misinformation and the role of the Internet, when compared to ABC.

Both the far right and misinformation are considered key factors to explain the riots that took place after the initial assault on an elderly man in Torre-Pacheco. In ABC, the most visible category refers to politicians, the police, and the justice system, followed by references to riots and violence, perpetrators of the initial assault, together with community and support networks, in comparison to EPS (Figure 2).

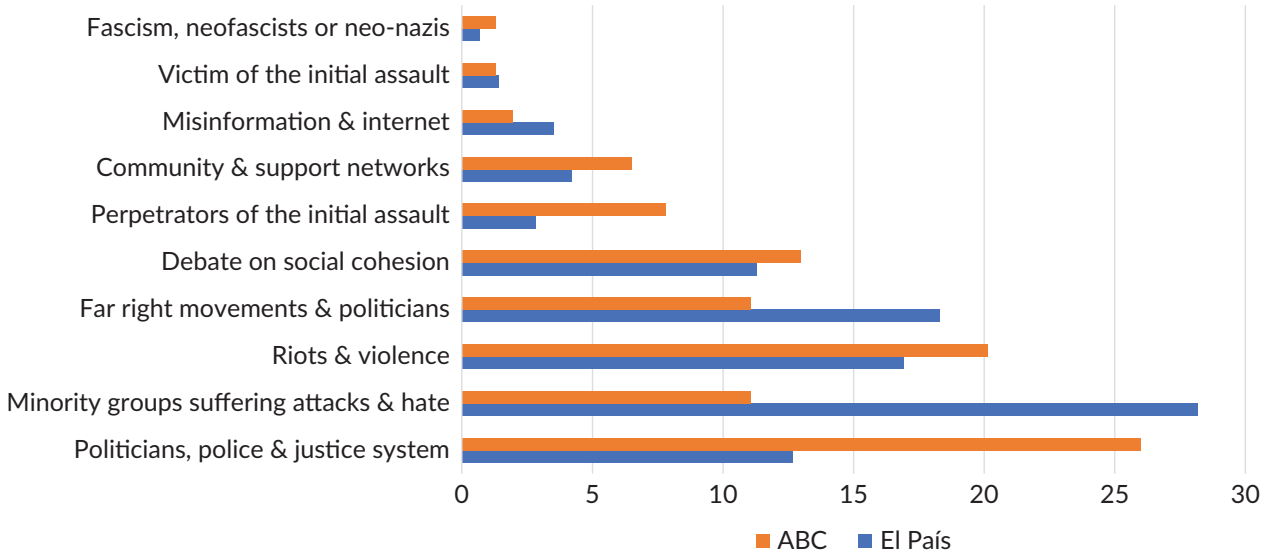


Figure 2. Distribution of the encoded words from the headlines of the selected news articles, in Spain, by percentage.

Both media give similar visibility to social cohesion (11.3% in EPS and 13% in ABC; Figure 2), although the topic is tackled in a different way by the conservative and progressive newspapers.

In EPS, the initial assault on an elderly man is considered "an excuse" (EPS, 15/07/25). What happened next (the riots against the local migrant population) is qualified as an "involuntary revolution" (EPS, 14/07/25) and a "warning" (EPS, 15/07/25) about the division of Spain. Central symbols of Spanish history, such as language, homeland, and people, are mentioned in several headlines. They also refer to current affairs, among which are xenophobia and other "monsters" (EPS, 15/07/25) that have recently gained visibility in Europe. In the progressive media, the debate on social cohesion focuses on the fundamental elements that both define or divide Spain, and the place of otherness in Spanish society.

Immigration is mentioned several times as a key element to explain the increased division between political blocs in Spain. Among the voices for more restrictive policies towards migrants, EPS quoted words from the leader of the conservative Popular Party (PP): "Feijóo demands 'respect and integration' from immigrants in Spain: 'Those who do not comply are not welcome'" (EPS, 15/07/25); "Feijóo toughens his discourse and calls for the 'immediate' deportation of illegal immigrants who commit crimes" (EPS, 16/07/25). Migrants and their access to rights are defended by the Prosecutor against hate crime; the Minister for Inclusion, Social Security, and Migration; and the Prime Minister of Spain. All of them are quoted in headlines, as they claim, respectively: "Going out to 'hunt' immigrants is a serious violation of human rights" (EPS, 15/07/25); "Spain is not a country that hunts down immigrants" (EPS, 14/07/25); "My country's progress and strong economic situation owe a great deal to immigrants" (EPS, 16/07/25).

In ABC, immigration is related to criminality in several headlines, especially when unaccompanied minors are considered, even though they did not participate in the initial assault or the riots. The situation before the riots is interpreted as "a powder keg" and "a perfect storm" (ABC, 15/07/25), considering the sustained local population increases. The conservative media gives a voice to neighbours who claim that migrants are responsible for the situation, especially those who recently arrived from Morocco. A couple of headlines highlight: "Those who come here from Morocco arrive feeling very emboldened" (ABC, 15/07/25); "A farmer from Torre Pacheco is very clear about the real source of the problems in this town: 'The coexistence between immigrants…'" (ABC, 16/07/25). ABC also dedicates several news reports to the negative consequences of the riots for the whole local population, both migrants and non migrants. This trend is visible through the following headlines: "Something has been broken in Torre Pacheco, and it will be difficult to repair" (ABC, 16/07/25); "Peaceful night in Torre Pacheco after the turmoil caused by the call for hunting" (ABC, 16/07/25), although the "hunting of migrants" is not mentioned in the headline. The framing analysis shows a great diversity of perspectives through the headlines dedicated to social cohesion in ABC.

In ABC, social cohesion is interpreted in terms of living together "under the one law" (ABC, 17/07/25) and political perspectives on immigration. Like EPS, ABC gives visibility to political leaders with different positions. The parties with more progressive views on immigration are quoted, including both parties working together in the government: the minority party with a left-wing orientation (Sumar), and the Socialist Party (PSOE), led by the prime minister. While "Sumar condemns 'racist violence by the far right' in Torre Pacheco with a statement in Spanish and Arabic" (ABC, 16/07/25), "Sánchez advocates for 'safe, regular and orderly' immigration" (ABC, 16/07/25). Words from the leader of the conservative and the extreme right parties, PP and Vox, are also quoted. While "Feijóo states that an illegal immigrant who commits a crime in Spain 'must be deported immediately'" (ABC, 16/07/25), Vox claims: "If supporting neighbours who suffer the consequences of illegal immigration is a crime, then arrest us" (ABC, 17/07/25).

In each media outlet, among the news related to social cohesion, a headline is dedicated to the role of Morocco, where the assailants of the elderly man come from. In the progressive media, the headline reads: "Moroccan nationalists raise tensions over Ceuta and Melilla amid unrest in Murcia" (EPS, 15/07/25). In the conservative media, the headline reads: "From the Sahara to Torre Pacheco, Morocco's soft control" (ABC, 14/07/25).

In Torre-Pacheco, who are the minority groups that suffer the attacks? According to the headlines published in EPS, they are mostly (im)migrants (12 references), irregular immigrants, foreign citizens, or children of immigrants (one reference to each). The other five references mention Moroccans or Maghrebians. They are presented as victims of the hunt declared in the far-right online community and by political movements such as the newly created "Deport Them Now." The leader was arrested for hate crimes after he was accused of promoting riots in Torre-Pacheco. The racist and xenophobic underpinnings of the riots are clearly recognised through 13 references to racism and xenophobia, and another seven references to hate and hate crimes and discourses. No legitimacy is given to the rioters after the initial assault took place. The elderly man who was the initial victim, together with journalists and politicians, raise their voices against the violence, as the following headlines indicate: "Domingo Tomás, the neighbour attacked in Torre Pacheco: 'I didn't want any of this to happen. I don't think it's right to go after them'" (EPS, 17/07/25); and "Hatred hurts" (EPS, 18/07/25). In the community, neighbours lament that "There is no peace for anyone" (EPS, 14/07/25) and "We're not going to open a business until this calms down" (EPS, 15/07/25).

In comparison, ABC publishes fewer references to minorities. Only three times were the victims identified as the migrant population, Moroccans, or Muslims, while just three references to racism and a single reference to xenophobia appear among the headlines. Instead, other social groups are identified as victims, such as: (a) journalists threatened by the rioters, and (b) a young victim injured after the riots, together with his family, although no reference is made to their national, ethnic, or religious background. The violence demonstrated against the migrant local population is more invisible in ABC, in comparison to EPS. ABC gives more visibility to "the people" of Torre-Pacheco and their feelings after the violent episodes took place. Those feelings include fear, pain, panic, or distress. As for the voices against violence, they are expressed by politicians from Sumar, PSOE, and regional leaders of the conservative PP, both in the region of Murcia, where Torre-Pacheco is, and the neighbouring region of Castile-La Mancha.

5. Conclusion

The central research question aims to understand, through the media coverage of the events of Southport and Torre-Pacheco, which conception the media disseminates to the audience on minority groups (their place in society) and social cohesion (who we are, as a society). The main hypothesis was that communication in progressive newspapers (EPS and TG) would be more culturally informed than in conservative newspapers (ABC and TT). The comparison between media coverage in the UK and Spain (2024–2025) leads to more nuanced conclusions.

In the UK, both newspapers give more visibility to conflictive forces, especially violent riots. They insist on the need for politicians, the police, and the justice system to provide solutions. In both media, minority groups are among the categories that receive less attention. Beyond this general picture, differences are observed in social cohesion and minority groups. While immigration is recognised as a key social problem to explain riots in TT, the opinions expressed in TG give no legitimacy to violence (Berry et al., 2016). In a few headlines of TG, members of minority groups express their fear regarding violent episodes. Both indicators support culturally informed communication (Voorhees et al., 2007), but the fieldwork also confirms that migrants and asylum seekers are framed as victims (Amores et al., 2019). In TT, fewer headlines refer to diversity, whereas immigration is related to criminality, and mosques are framed through securitisation (Sian et al., 2013). In the conservative media, in times of social conflict, migrants and asylum seekers are mostly framed as a threat (Amores et al., 2020). In TT, the tone is more aggressive (Berry et al., 2016), and multiculturalism is explicitly questioned.

Our hypothesis is mostly confirmed in the UK (TG gives no legitimacy to riots and minority groups express their voices in the headlines), while the difference between media is not so clear in Spain (Gómez-Quintero et al., 2021), when culturally informed communication is concerned. In terms of social cohesion, both Spanish media quote political voices with diverse opinions on diversity and migration control, except for Vox, the extreme right party, whose leaders are not quoted in EPS. In the progressive media, minority groups are presented as victims of the hunts promoted by the far-right online community and reinforced by extremist political movements. In EPS, the racist and xenophobic underpinnings of the riots are recognised, with no legitimacy given to rioters. But references are also made to cohesive elements from the past, before diversity was part of social reality. In ABC, there are fewer references to minority groups, while some neighbours hold Moroccan migrants responsible for the riots, as a threat.

Minority groups, the hatred they face, together with the voices against violence and the community are more visible in Spanish media in comparison to the UK, and more visible in progressive media in comparison to conservative media. Although this trend indicates more culturally informed communication in Spanish and progressive media, all newspapers, in their headlines, place immigration at the centre of the debate on social cohesion. By reproducing the political conversation on international migration and minority groups, the arguments of the far right, and online misinformation, mainstream newspapers contribute to spreading anti-migrant and anti-diversity rhetoric among the audience (Checa-Olmos & Arjona-Garrido, 2011). In the legitimisation of those rhetorics, mainstream newspapers reinforce the discourses of mainstream politicians, some of which support anti-migrant discourses (Godshaw & Singleton, 2025; Thomson, 2025).

All media depict minority groups through metonymies referring to their nationality, their migrant condition, or their legal status (Catalano & Musolff, 2019). This gives a vision of minorities as homogeneous groups, without regard for their internal diversity: They seem to lose their individuality, their agency, and their internal heterogeneity. This trend is a result of the "social identification" (Tajfel, 1978) of the media with the endogenous group of non-migrant people from the UK or Spain. In Spain, social identification is especially visible when both media refer to the influence of Morocco. This echoes Islamophobia and fear of Moroccans and Muslims (Douhaibi & Amazian, 2019; Poli & Álvarez-Miranda, 2024), whether "the others" live outside or inside the country. The social position of migrants results from past and current dynamics, such as the colonial history, narratives on migration and diversity from mainstream parties, and the existence of extreme-right political parties with clear anti-migrant discourses (Favell, 2001).

For future research, visual framing and the analysis of the news narrative through inductive or generic categories (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000) could complete the current findings. Comparison can include newspapers, television, radio, and social media, including at least two progressive and two conservative media per country, to go beyond case studies. Media may be defined not only by reputation, audience, and editorial line, but also by the national context and political orientation. Future research might connect media coverage with the characteristics of specific integration policies for migrants and minorities in the UK and Spain. To select relevant media for the comparison, other factors could be adopted, such as the ownership structure (Mancini et al., 2019) and the resource constraints (Nachawati Rego & Rodríguez Gómez, 2025).

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Conflict of Interests

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Data Availability

All news items are available to the general public through the media's websites or Google's advanced search tools. Sometimes a subscription is required to have access to the full version of the news articles.

LLMs Disclosure

Perplexity AI was used to format references according to the APA style or to identify relevant contributions, for instance, when searching for coherent criteria to select the newspapers in both countries. References were always double-checked by consulting the original source.

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