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Towards European securitization press processes? A comparison of Sahel news coverage in Southern European countries

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the role of the media in the processes of securitisation of international policies in Mediterranean countries. To do so, it studies the presence of the 'security' and 'human drama' frames in seven newspapers in Spain, France, Italy, and Portugal, with the primary objective of measuring these frames to answer questions about the differences found in the newspapers of these countries and the issues discussed in them. Our hypothesis is European Mediterranean press suffers from media securitisation when reporting on the Sahel conflicts. The reason is mainly due to the singularisation of migration issues. Machine learning, specifically unsupervised (LDA) and supervised (SVM) algorithms, were used to locate the frames to analyse the large volume of extracted data. This type of Natural Language Processing (NLP) technique gives excellent results for political communication research. The results show that the security frame is in most of the media analysed. In short, security as a discursive element is the central narrative when dealing with the socio-political reality of the Sahel countries.

KEYWORDS

Framing; security; Sahel; securitization; Southern European media

Introduction

Violent dynamics in the Sahel significantly impact the security of European countries, especially in the Mediterranean States. Several problems, such as increased migration flows, the proliferation of armed groups, and the incidence of jihadism, have concerned multiple academics from various areas of research (Badewa 2022; McGriffin 2022; Collado 2021). First, however, there needs to be a broad consensus on the role the European Union should play in developing these countries and the public security and defence policies in a wide area encompassing more than 11 countries. An example of the current debate is in the research of Bøås (2021), which points to the possibility that the EU migration policy in Niger may destabilise in the long term. In recent years, the Sahel has experienced several political crises that have concerned European political circles: the increase in political violence by Boko Haram, the conflict in the Tigray region, and successive attacks on MINUSMA troops.

A crucial aspect of the study of conflict and violence is the difficulty of extracting contrasting empirical data. As Nievas points out (Nievas 2009), war academics strongly depend on data produced by third parties, such as NGOs or the media. Furthermore, it should be noted that social scientists could not carry out fieldwork under optimal and safe working conditions (Alan Sluka 2020). For this reason, political communication studies, especially in media and conflicts, are valuable to security and international relations studies. Especially in Western democracies, where public opinion is an

essential player in public policy design. From the field of political communication and media studies, research paradigms have emerged which are specifically dedicated to this type of analysis. The best suited to answer these questions is framing theory (see, for example, Entman 2010). In essence, framing theory suggests that how something is presented to the audience ('the frame') influences the choices made in processing that information. *Frames* are abstractions which work to organise or structure message meaning.

Among the political and academic debate on European policies in the sub-Saharan region lies media coverage of these countries. In that regard, some scholars point out that the Western media, especially tabloids, foster a decontextualised and violent image of African reality (Hellmann 2019), in other words, an expansion of Afro-Pessimism. From a media perspective, part of the explanation might lie in using negative frames that emphasise terrorism (Ojebuyi 2017), which has also been encouraged by political institutions, such as in France, since the 2015 attacks (Fragnon 2019). However, the progressive introduction of security-related frames is not an issue which has affected the research into conflicts in Africa but has been a present phenomenon since the 9/11 attacks.

In this paper, we want to answer the question about the frames used by Southern European countries in the Sahel region. The objective is to analyse the securitisation press process in Europe (specifically Southern Europe). Thus, we are measuring the presence of 'human drama' and 'security' frames in seven Mediterranean newspapers during the 2013–2020 period: precisely, *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro* (France), *El Mundo*, *El País* (Spain), *La Stampa*, *Corriere della Sera* (Italy) and *Correio da Manhã* (Portugal). The study period has been selected based on two criteria. 1) The existence of a temporary space would allow us to have a large sample 2) The beginning of the French intervention in the Mali conflict. These countries not only stand on the border between Africa and Europe but share common elements in their media systems (Polarised Pluralism and Democratic Corporatism models (Hallin and Mancini 2004). Our research hypothesis is that the European press has undergone a process of media securitisation in addressing conflicts in the Sahel. In other words, we try to see if the influence of securitarian discourses is consistent with the media routines of Western European countries. Although it has been studied in specific cases, such as the coverage of conflicts in the Arab world in Spain (Moreno-Mercado, García-Marín, and Luengo 2021), this influence requires more comparative research.

We use SVM (Support Vector Machines) to locate frames, models, and automated text analysis. The sample size ($n = 3.331$) makes applying this supervised learning algorithm ideal for analysing them. Therefore, this work intends to strengthen the use of computer science techniques in media and conflicts. In addition, as the methodological literature indicates, SVM algorithms may be more reliable than human encoders if they are well-trained (García-Marín and Calatrava 2018).

The article is structured as follows: First, we address the literature on the dynamics of media securitisation in the coverage of armed conflicts. Second, we present the research design, followed by the main results. Finally, the latter are discussed and interpreted in the conclusions.

Theoretical framework

Securitization theory

Throughout the 20th century, Security Studies have been consolidated in the social sciences and international relations. In this discipline, security has been an axis around which different topics are articulated and unified (Orozco 2006; Karyotis and Patrikios 2010), especially in recent decades. *Security* is a political phenomenon closely related to the concept of power. It is thus a concept which can be adapted according to the interests of different political agendas. Security has evolved as a concept. In recent decades, this evolution has overturned two of the principles of traditional visions: (a) the military one-dimensionality of security and (b) the centrality of the state in the

analyses (De-Cueto-Nogueras 2012, 4). Thus, Security Studies expanded with new concepts and theories. Also, new actors were involved in academic research.

One of the concepts incorporated has been securitisation, developed by the Copenhagen School. This concept was elaborated mainly by Ole Waever (1995) and later refined by the other members (Buzan, Waever, and De Wilde 1998). This School conceives security as the result of an intersubjective social construction. So, it is opposed to the more traditional views that consider security as something objective. Securitisation is a process. It describes when specific issues move from the political to the security level. It is as follows: key actors, usually political elites, use speech acts to transform political issues into security issues. In this way, security issues are constructed (Waever 1995, 55). We have to stress that this construction must be accepted by the target audience (Balzacq 2005), be it public opinion or specific communities of experts. Two reference articles are the contributions of Stivas (2021a, 2021b) on the securitisation of migratory discourses in Hungary and Greece. Within that acceptance by the audience, legitimacy is an essential factor that must be present throughout the securitisation process so that the actors, framings, or proposed actions are not seen as illegitimate by the audience (Olesker 2018, 315). A somewhat illustrative example is how different media in Israel (*Ynet* and *Mako*) supported the use of video surveillance through mobile tracking (based on the social support of a considerable part of society) to prevent the COVID-19 crisis (Marciano and Yadlin 2021).

Early studies on securitisation already indicated the need for political actors to be seen as legitimate (Buzan, Waever, and De Wilde 1998, 24). In contrast, later studies refer to the need for a subjective exchange between the securitising actor and the audience (Gad and Lund Petersen 2011; Balzacq 2015; Olesker 2018). Here is where the media acquires fundamental importance as an intermediary actor between the government and society. For a securitisation process to be successful, a critical mass must be reached, i.e. enough suitable people (O'Reilly 2008, 67), which in democratic systems tends to become the general public opinion. In the same way, we should understand the securitisation process as recurrent and continuous. It does not occur at a given moment but in when an audience (public opinion and experts) are socially constructing it (Olesker 2018). As Ulrich Beck indicated in *The Risk Society*: 'The definition of threat is always a cognitive and social construction' (Beck 1992, 18). However, there is a theoretical weakness regarding the audience since this concept is one of the least developed in securitisation theory (Balzacq, Léonard, and Ruzicka 2016). This fact shows that currently, we do not have specific criteria to measure the degrees of acceptance by the audience (understanding this as public opinion), which is difficult to establish causalities. In this sense, we can say that the challenge of measuring audience acceptance of securitising speeches is the same as establishing media effects in political communication. This need to better define the audience's meaning is evident in the recent historical commentary. An illustrative example is the different conflicting positions in Spain and the United Kingdom regarding the intervention in Iraq in 2003 (political elites vs public opinion).

As inferred, the audience is a fundamental actor in the securitisation process. This statement has even more weight if we consider that public opinion progressively equates with the rest of public policies. In our opinion, this makes it possible to explain that although the concept of the Copenhagen School was born to explain the constituent elements of 'new' security problems (such as epidemics), it also serves to study traditional security problems (armed conflicts). Can this be contradictory? We propose that the answer is negative. For traditional securitisation research, the securitisation of problems is a mainly communicative process. Hence, some authors have used the concept to empirically study the evolution of security and defence policies (Hayes 2013; Lupovici 2019) and others to analyse how various issues have entered security agendas (Hoffman 2020). Although scholars such as Vuori (2008) point out that the concept should be balanced, the theory is valid for studying the media's behaviour in the face of armed conflicts. Sjöstedt (2019) argues that the term's flexibility makes it valid for explaining multiple social and political realities. Therefore, communication is a vital component behind securitisation processes. Further comprehension of

communication within securitisation provides a more precise and profound description of the phenomenon (Lukacovic 2020, 11).

Considering a given problem as a security problem makes it possible to limit the political or ideological debate since it is based on considerations that affect national interests (Abad-Quintana 2015, 49). This 'national' feature of threat perception underwent a revolution from the September 11 attacks. If we briefly review the birth of modern terrorism in Europe in the 70s (Bossong 2013) to the attack on the World Trade Center, the concept of collective security has never been articulated before. As Kaunert and Léonard (2019) point out, the 9/11 attacks extraordinarily precipitated security cooperation between EU Member States. The securitisation process finds its foundations in a subjective definition of a threat to survival. It is based on the need to take urgent measures and be accepted by the public, concerned with the message that sustains this threat definition. As an issue can be securitised, it can also undergo a process of desecuritization. It refers to the opposite process: changing an emergency issue to a process that enters the political sphere's normality. A relevant empirical contribution is a study by Andžāns and Sprūds (2021) on the securitisation and desecuritization of Russia in the concepts of national security and defence of Latvia.

Within the theoretical contributions on desecuritization, we find the most significant criticisms of the theory. For Claudia Aradau (2004), the securitisation theory corresponds to exclusionary and scarcely democratic logic. She argues that the securitisation approach should be analysed at the political level rather than as an analytical framework. These considerations, framed within decolonised, critical security studies, carry out a debate on the postulates of the Copenhagen School through a normative commitment. In other words, securitisation/desecuritization research must be studied with ethical responsibility. Hence, we find a broad literature which addresses different problems which have yielded exciting debates. Howell and Richter-Montpetit (2020) point out that the postulates of the Copenhagen School start from clearly racist euro-centrist premises. For them, securitisation is a concept that contrasts the defence of 'civilised politics' vs 'primary anarchy'. First are white and colonial politics, and second are racialised and, in many cases, antiblack politics. Naturally, it is not the objective of this research to discuss these questions but to demonstrate that we can empirically demonstrate behaviour patterns from theory. However, we consider it scientifically honest to point out the corresponding criticisms of the analytical framework from which we start. Within the replicas to the work of Howell and Richter-Montpetit (2020) we must make an illusion to two counter-arguments which seem fundamental to us. Waeber and Buzan (2020), in a harsh counter-reply, argue that these criticisms are based on high ideological loads, in addition to a defamatory threat to the entire methodology of classification differentiation of the social sciences. Nevertheless, Hansen (2020) considers that these debates (without agreeing on the racist component) have helped to rethink the theoretical postulates of international relations and critical security studies.

Media securitization

Securitization is also related to communication theories since this concept understands that security, or the lack of it, results from communication processes occurring in society. Despite this, it is not possible to find extensive literature on incorporating the media into the securitization theory of security studies and international relations. However, some examples are from case studies (Williams 2003; Frensley and Michaud 2004; O'Reilly 2008; Lusk 2019; Marinescu and Balica 2021). In other words, it is common to find works that point out that securitizing discourses are likely to be conveyed through the media rather than research that explicitly analyses the media. Among these few contributions, we can highlight the research by Vultee (2010), Schäfer, Scheffran, and Penniket (2016) and Gray and Franck (2019). In them, we can notice how the field of international communications touches on an important issue for the studies mentioned above: how media coverage establishes and limits the terrain of political discourse on international crises. Lazaridis and Skleparis

(2016) define the concept as ‘the process of integrating an issue into a security framework that emphasizes policing and defence’.

It is essential to question the role of the media in these international conflicts, especially to separate information (even if it is biased) from propaganda. That is to say, to study the role of the media as independent and strategic actors within the securitization processes and not only as actors transmitting the information. Through the study of frame theory in political communication, the role of the media in conflicts can be established (Moreno-Mercado and García-Marín 2020). Moreover, frame theory offers methodological tools that can overcome the limitations of securitization theory beyond emphasizing political elites, the speech act, and discourse analysis inherent to these theories. This claim is scientifically proven in the study Baele and Sterck (2015). The authors make a significant methodological contribution when measuring securitization through quantitative analysis of automated linguistic analysis. Therefore, framing theories makes it possible to: (i) Quantify and operationalize securitization discourses. (ii) Incorporate the audience, measure the moderating effects of concurrent frames, and explain how they produce effects. (iii) Audience preferences can be measured through surveys and public opinion data (Watson 2012). In other words, the literature on framing allows us to identify multiple securitizing elements (photos, images, metaphors, pictures, among others) from a solid theoretical basis. For this reason, we believe that a framing analysis can contribute, especially to the current debate on the theory.

Of course, methodological advances have yet to resolve the questions raised by securitization theories in communication entirely. Nevertheless, some of the central questions of the scientific debate stand out. Can the media play the role of securitizing actors? Or are the media and the frames they produce simply enabling conditions for securitization? Both answers can be considered affirmative. If we review the scientific literature, we find research supporting both viewpoints.

On the one hand, Bourbeau (2011) starts from the premise that the media are a unitary actor in which some editorial lines choose to securitize specific political issues (such as immigration) and others decide not to do so. Furthermore, on other hand, various authors place the media as an essential speaker for the propagation of discourses which focus their attention on security (Cardinale 2021). In this last section, we can include the Indexing model of Lance Bennett (2015), widely used to explain the relationships between political elites and the media in situations of consensus and political dissent (Relevant research is that of García-Marín and Luengo 2009). However, we can say that there is some unanimity on two specific points. Firstly, political elites and the media are hegemonic actors in securitization processes (Eissa 2018). Furthermore, secondly, that securitization is an essentially discursive process. For this reason, this research follows the line of other works framed within political communication (Rosie-Jahng and Doshi 2021).

In line with Thompson’s (2021) thesis, securitization theory has dispersed into several disparate theoretical models but has helped integrate security studies within the social sciences. For this reason, applying theory to the media treatment of wars is an excellent opportunity to advance scientific knowledge on the subject. In other words, use the sizeable theoretical corpus of security studies with research techniques typical of political communication. In this regard, armed conflicts have traditionally been an essential subject of study for framing analysts (García-Marín 2007). In the case of armed conflicts, research by Semetko and Valkenbur (2000) provided five generic and standard frames for covering political issues: conflict, human interest, economic consequences, morality, and responsibility. The first of these is the most common in Western media, as it is often used to capture audience interest. This claim has now been demonstrated by the use of explanatory frames about genocide and ethnic cleansing in post-Cold War conflicts (Hammond 2018, 434), even to the extent that there is duality in the framing itself between the deaths of women and children (victims) and male soldiers (casualties).

Based on these considerations, securitization can be studied as a framing process present in the media, especially in the Western media, in the conflicts of recent years (Vultee 2010; Qadri 2020), which has displaced other frames. The use of this frame has apparent effects on audiences. The

ability to invoke security implies the need for extraordinary measures and a shared sense of national security danger (Vultee 2010, 34).

The importance of Sahel region

Since the mid-2000s, the Sahel region has acquired unique geopolitical importance due to different international, regional, and local dynamics. The 9/11 attacks impacted global security policies, and state fragility became an increasingly important challenge for Western allies. In this geopolitical context, a relationship has been established between internal actors of the region and external actors. All of them have sought a regional order that suits their different objectives. These actors' interaction occurs at the material, normative and discursive levels. Consequently, we can identify three actors operating in the region: external security providers, insurgent and jihadist groups, and, thirdly, local ruling elites (Baldaro 2020).

From a security point of view, the situation has deteriorated in the last decades, increasing these states' institutional weakness and spreading jihadist armed groups (De-León-Cobo 2021). From the perspective of development, it is an impoverished region with massive levels of inequality and social and political exclusion (Eizenga 2019) and access to essential resources such as water or environmental problems resulting from climate change droughts. Finally, it must be added that it is the transit region for irregular migratory flows, some of which end up in European countries through the Central Mediterranean (Italy), Western Mediterranean routes, and the Canary Islands (Spain).

Securitization of EU actions in the Sahel region

The deterioration of security in the region has led several states and international organizations to engage in peacekeeping and security sector reform (SSR) missions. As a result, we can find purely African, non-African, and mixed initiatives between African and non-African actors if we consider African initiatives. However, they were not the first chronologically. Primarily there were purely African initiatives, such as those launched by the African Union in 2013 (Nouakchott Process) and 2014 (The African Union Strategy for the Sahel Region). Secondly, an attempt to launch by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) a mission to support the Malian government in December 2012 failed due to logistical problems. Thirdly, the fundamental one, the constitution of the G5 Sahel, is a framework for cooperation, especially in security matters between five countries in the region, Chad, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Mauritania. France drove this forum to strengthen the responsibility of the countries in the area with security issues. In 2017, a Joint Force of some 5,000 military personnel was deployed to combat violent extremist groups operating mainly in border areas.

Regarding non-African initiatives, the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) has been active since April 2013. It currently involves more than 18 thousand people, of which 15 thousand are uniformed, including police and military, the vast majority from African countries (UN 2021). Similarly, the European Union is an essential actor in the region, especially since 2011 when the Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel was adopted, a comprehensive and integrated approach to address the region's interrelated challenges. This strategy (UN 2021) was based on the nexus between development and security and considered that economic development and state capacity-building could not be separated. Furthermore, since the launch of the EU Global Strategy in 2016, the EU has improved coordination between its different missions and instruments. There are also individual initiatives in the region from the US and France.

European initiatives in the region are based on developing and establishing good governance practices as an element of stabilization. The EU's actions in the Sahel are rooted in adopting the EU Strategy for the Sahel in 2011. However, the EU has many shared interests: irregular migration flows, drug trafficking, and terrorism. These elements are included in the EU's Sahel Strategy, which focuses on the idea that security, development, and governance are intrinsically intertwined. These linkages

encourage the securitization of issues such as irregular migration. Thus, the security apparatus that the EU has helped to consolidate in the region keeps the issue high on the agenda, hindering the free movement of labour in the region and incentivizing countries to act harshly against migrants without fear of repercussions (Lebovich 2018). Even though, since 2011, the EU has securitized the actions in the region, directly derived from the geopolitical interests of European countries (Zoubir 2012) and the change of conception in the external action of the organization itself (Keukeleire and Raube 2013). For the EU, the Sahel has meant a scenario of change in its foreign policy: from the establishment of a normative power towards much more pragmatic, and realistic approaches focused on conflict management, containment, and stabilization (Belloni, Della Sala, and Viotti 2019). All these changes have been brought about by developments in the EU strategic environments and the development of peacebuilding actions (Zupančič and Pejić 2018).

European governments and European Union securitize the jihadism threats and, more importantly, the migration issue (Lebovich 2018). The Europeanization of migration policies has contributed to the securitization of migration issues by treating migration and asylum issues in the Justice and Home Affairs Council (JHA). As a result, migration has come to be perceived more and more as a threat and, therefore, as a special issue which escapes the ordinary political game and requires exceptional measures, i.e. it has become securitized in the Copenhagen School (Buzan, Waever, and De Wilde 1998). This securitization is evident in reinforcing the security dimension in the Sahel Regional Action Plan 2015–2020 adopted by the Council. The media's position may let us single out the migration issues as a security element by (some) European Governments and the EU. In any case, considering jihadist terrorism in the Sahel or irregular migratory flows as purely security issues for European countries may distort the image of what is happening in the region and limit EU action. In any case, jihadism in the Sahel is currently a fundamental challenge to its security in France. This sentiment is similar in other European countries, such as Spain and Italy. Therefore, it is also essential for these countries to act in the countries of origin and transit to curb irregular migratory flows leading to the Central and Western Mediterranean and the Canary Islands.

Methodology

The aim of the research is, as mentioned above, to demonstrate that media coverage of armed conflicts in Sahel follows the patterns of securitization (H1). For this purpose, we have selected seven newspapers from the predominantly Mediterranean area in the time period between 2013 and 2020: *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro* (France), *El Mundo*, *El País* (Spain), *La Stampa*, *Corriere della Sera* (Italy) and *Correio da Manhã* (Portugal). The formulation of the hypothesis in this region does not imply that it cannot be fulfilled in the media of Central and Northern Europe. However, we have decided to limit the countries which are inserted within the same or very similar media models. The sample selection has been made as follows: Firstly, two press newspapers of large national circulation in their respective countries with different ideological lines were selected. Secondly, select media that are theoretically inserted within similar media systems (Polarized Pluralism and Democratic Corporatism). And, thirdly, the Nexis-Uni database was used to be able to work with a considerable and diverse database ($n = 3.331$). In this sense, it should be noted that it has not been possible to include a second Portuguese medium. However, due to the number of media selected and the size of the sample, we do not think it is a considerable methodological weakness. The search terms for database construction have been **Sahel* and **conflict* (in their respective languages). Since our interest lies in exploring how the media cover those conflicts, we had to introduce the word 'conflict' in the search term, even if there is a slight risk of altering the sample.

We then analyzed the data by answering the following research questions:

RQ1: What frames are used when referring to the conflict?

RQ2: Are there differences between countries?

RQ3: What topics are discussed?

To answer these questions on such a large data set we have designed primarily quantitative research. For the application of these techniques, the texts have been processed according to current standards (see, for example, Feinerer, Hornik, and Meyer 2008; Talib et al. 2016). First, we have judged necessary the application of an automatic technique of extraction and information reduction of the sample for its description. In this way we can reduce the thematic complexity contained in the more than 3000 news items, to a few topics or ideas present in most of them (divided by country). In this regard, there are a multitude of existing techniques, from supervised algorithms to unsupervised ones (such as LDA and LSI). In this case we have applied an LDA ('Latent Dirichlet Allocation') algorithm. This algorithm is a technique encompassed within Natural Language Processing (NLP) that is based on analyzing the relationships between a set of documents and the terms they contain (so it is frequency-based) by producing concepts related to those documents and terms. The algorithm assumes that words which have similar meanings will co-occur in similar texts. The result is a set of topics present in each of the documents (a good explanation of its operation and usefulness can be found in Letsche and Berry (1997) which shows that it is a fairly well-established technique).

However, to answer the hypothesis of this research it has been necessary to apply more advanced techniques. Specifically, to see which frames are present in the media coverage, we have applied a supervised algorithm. These are quite popular in text research, including for framing localization (Burscher et al. 2014; Barbera et al. 2021). The selected algorithm has been SVM (Support Vector Machines) implemented under Orange Data Mining, under Python3 (Dem Š Ar et al. 2013). We decided to use SVM because it is one of the most widely used supervised text classification algorithms in industry and academia (Joachims 1998). SVM is based on the idea that any linear model is valid to classification if the classes are linearly separable, suffice to find a hyperplane that discriminates both sets. In other words, any regression technique can be used for classification if we separate a sample in two groups: one group for trading and another where the value of the regression is calculated and assigned to the corresponding class (García-Marín and Calatrava 2018). Manual coding for training has been done in binary form, presence/absence of the frames security/human drama (definition of problem) on 300 items (100 per country) and the final result was reliability 93% and AUC 98% (Spanish media), 85%/89% (Italian media) and 87%/90% (French media) (kernel linear, $C = 1,30$ and $\epsilon = 0,10$).

Reading news stories from our sample, it was clear that the conflicts in Sahel were not covered under a unique frame. Instead of this, we realized that most of the news stories could be classified into two mutually exclusive groups. The fundamental question is: are these two frames really in contradiction? Why is one frame more linked to a security discourse than the other? The proposal suggested here makes a redefinition of the classic frames proposed by Semetko and Valkenbur (2000). (Conflict vs human interest and security vs human drama). This redefinition allows us not only to simplify the classification of data but also to differentiate the mechanisms for capturing the interest of the public. Of course, we understand that our operationalization may possess certain analytical limitations. However, we support the dichotomy of framing in the words of Pia and Diez (2011): 'the inclusive articulations of human rights tend to have a desecuritizing effect, if they have any effect at all' (pp. 217). In our opinion, it is a quick and clear way to differentiate news which focuses on the emotional angle and those which articulate a realistic perspective of international conflicts. Therefore, the encoding has been done as follows.

- The news stories referring to the humanitarian and dramatic aspects of the situation of the Sahelian populations and immigrants have been included within the human drama frame.
- The news stories referring to military interventions in the Sahel, the security problems of migratory flows, jihadist groups and geopolitics are inserted within the security frame.

Analysis and findings

As the specialized literature points out, France occupies a distinctive place in the Sahel region even when the French government has moved away from unilateral interventions (Chafer, Cumming, and Velde 2020). The French presence in sub-Saharan countries is the subject of extensive academic and political debate. On the one hand, authors such as Tardy (2020) allege that France has entered a process of institutional agnosticism by opting for multilateralism in the Sahel (in an opportunistic way) but without renouncing its privileged individual role. In addition to proposed frameworks of action excessively influenced by military security (Medessoukou 2018). And, on the other hand, there has been a continuing narrative in French governments (especially during the Sarkozy administration) to emphasize that insecurity in the Sahel has direct consequences for European security. Beyond the positioning on this issue, it should be noted that more than half of our sample (Table 1) corresponds to French newspapers (specifically 66%). The sample distribution coincides with what was stated by Ardèvol-Abreu (2015): there is a clear relationship between the visibility of international events and the country's national interests in them. These figures are expected as sub-Saharan Africa is an essential pillar in French foreign policy. Although, there are already authors who point out that France may have to readapt its strategic needs to other flanks in the near future (Pannier and Schmitt 2019).

The first step in exploring which topics have a high degree of newsworthiness in each country has been built from the LDA model. The logic of the algorithm starts from a very simple premise: when a person writes a document, he has certain key topics in mind. Being an unsupervised algorithm, the number of topics to choose is decided by the researchers based on the explanatory potential of these (from one to twelve). In this case, due to the considerable sample size, we have chosen to reduce the topics to 2. Table 2 shows the latent sets of grouped words. In our opinion, this exploratory technique is very useful because it confirms the pre-existence of the security and human drama frames in the news set. Of course, the texts in each language have been tokenized to eliminate empty terms (such as stop words or the letter 'ñ' in Spanish) that could alter the analysis.

The results of the LDA are overwhelming. There is a clear predominance of terms associated with security, especially with jihadist terrorism and structural violence in the region. The media during international crises often use conflictive frames to define the problems of these, although human interest is always a common discursive element. The preliminary results of the LDA analysis are overwhelming. The humanitarian drama suffered by Sahelian societies is not a predominant theme in any country. Although, in the case of the Portuguese media it seems to be more present. However, this could be due to the small sample studied. The data fully coincides with the theories of Buzan, Waeber, and De Wilde (1998) which reflect that the construction of security is not limited only to the Nation-State, and the thesis which maintains that there is an Afro-Pessimistic media construction of African socio-political reality, especially when they talk about conflicts (Bleich et al. 2020).

Table 2 shows in a more structured way the above. As can be seen, the security frame has some really significant percentages. In all cases this frame exceeds 80% of the news related to the Sahel. Likewise, the framing of human drama is very minor, becoming in some cases merely testimonial (see the two French media and the Italian newspaper *La Stampa*). These results validate the formulation of the hypothesis that we raised earlier. Therefore, in this case we can apply the words of Vultee (2010): 'The war on terrorism is a familiar and important example of an issue open for securitization, but the same mechanism can be used to study similar issues' (p. 44).

Table 1. News stories per newspaper and country (sample).

N	Country	Media	
Sample	France	<i>Le Monde</i> (n = 999)	<i>Le Figaro</i> (n = 1231)
	Italy	<i>La Stampa</i> (n = 224)	<i>Corriere della Sera</i> (n = 227)
	Spain	<i>El Mundo</i> (n = 280)	<i>El País</i> (n = 315)
	Portugal	<i>Correio da Manhã</i> (n = 55)	

Table 2. LDA analysis per country.

Priority	France		Italy		Spain		Portugal	
	Topic 1	Topic 2	Topic 1	Topic 2	Topic 1	Topic 2	Topic 1	Topic 2
1	'Ki-moon'	'AQMI'	'Totalitarian'	'Security'	'Terror'	'Hollande'	'France'	'Official'
2	'Mining'	'Law'	'Hospital'	'Death'	'France'	'CNI'	'For'	'Friend'
3	'Djotodia'	'Total'	'Border'	'General'	'Jihad'	'Africa'	'Mali'	'Until'
4	'Farm'	'Mujao'	'Dark'	'Fighters'	'Spain'	'Libya'	'North'	'Food'
5	'Ministry'	'Belmokhtar'	'Only'	'Guerrilla'	'For'	'Alliance'	'Death'	'Refugee'
6	'Respect'	'Mokhtar'	'Emir'	'Zeid'	'Islam'	'War'	'Operation'	'Coming'
7	'Fighters'	'Offensive'	'Centre'	'Global'	'Sahel'	'Mali'	'Jihad'	'Final'
8	'Seleka'	'Zeid'	'Death'	'Kill'	'Country'	'NSA'	'Terror'	'Against'
9	'Bozizé'	'Laden'	'Traveler'	'Just'	'Cooperation'	'Engagement'	'Kidnapped'	'Transport'

Table 3. Use of frames by newspaper.

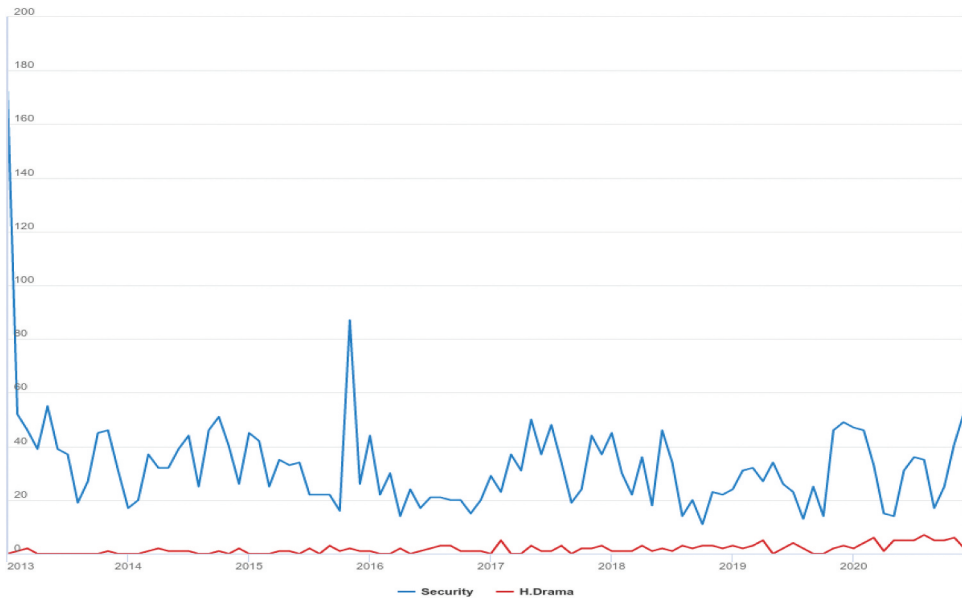
Media	Security Frame		Human Drama Frame	
	n	%	n	%
<i>Le Monde</i>	986	98,70	13	1,30
<i>Le Figaro</i>	1207	98,05	24	1,95
<i>El Mundo</i>	241	86,97	39	13,93
<i>El País</i>	267	84,76	48	15,24
<i>La Stampa</i>	218	97,32	6	2,68
<i>Corriere della Sera</i>	203	89,43	24	10,57
<i>Correio da Manhã</i>	45	81,82	10	18,18
Total	3167	95,07	164	4,92

The application of the LDA and SVM models allows solid conclusions to be reached. The problem of jihadism in the region is an element that homogenizes the information which reaches public opinion. Of course, the number of news and topics have small differences. Differences that are related to the military resources and national interests of each individual country. An example is how the Spanish media make more allusion to the effects of the conflicts in the Sahel for Libya, or the small amount of Portuguese news, since Portugal only participates with 3 soldiers in the EUTM in Mali: 'Defense Minister ends path for Africa with Portuguese military in Mali, *Correio da Manhã*, 12/20/2020'; 'Portugal's commitment to EU mission in Mali "remains total", *Correio da Manhã*, 06/19/2017'; 'ISIS loses its "capital" in Libya, *El Mundo*, 12/06/2016'; 'Libya is the origin of many evils that have spread to the Sahel, *El País*, 07/08/2016'. But, beyond the exceptions, the media construction of the Sahel as a dangerous region strongly marked by radical Islamism is consolidated as a shared journalistic pattern in the 4 countries analyzed. Therefore, the security frame can be understood as a macro-frame that can be subdivided into specific frames (such as European security, ethnic conflicts, insecurity by guerrillas, among others) but that pivots on the same journalistic logics.

As anticipated by the LDA analysis, the use of frames by the analyzed media has been, for the most part, quite uniform (Table 3). As can be seen in Table 4, the security frame has been the absolute protagonist in the sample. The implications are clear: the analyzed media have treated the

Table 4. Means per country and media (security frame).

Media	Means	Country	Means
<i>Le Monde</i>	0.98	France	0.98
<i>Le Figaro</i>	0.98		
<i>La Stampa</i>	0.97	Italy	0.93
<i>Corriere della Sera</i>	0.89		
<i>El Mundo</i>	0.86	Spain	0.85
<i>El País</i>	0.84		
<i>Correio da Manhã</i>	0.81	Portugal	0.81



Graph 1. Use of frames per month and year.

information coming from the region from a security perspective. But, is it the same in every case? Evidently, [Table 4](#) gives us more detailed information in this regard. The French media give the greatest emphasis to this frame, followed by the Italian media, the Spanish media and, lastly, the Portuguese media. In other words, although not all the media behave in the same way, national differences can be observed. Thus, the mean of the presence of the security frame in the French media is 0.98, while that of the Italian media is 0.93 and, in the Spanish media, 0.85 (as there is only one Portuguese-language media, the mean is not significant). In all cases the presence of the security frame is overwhelming. For the French and Spanish cases no major differences are observed between each media; this is not the case, however, for the Italian media where there is a large difference between *La Stampa* (0.97) and *Corriere della Sera* (0.89). This is the only case where the editorial differences seem to be greater than the national ones.

However, with a sample so long in time, it is necessary to see the temporal evolution of the frames analyzed. [Graph 1](#) shows this evolution. This evolution in the use of frames has obviously varied over time, showing significant peaks on certain dates. The fluctuation of the security frame presents significant ascents and descents. On the contrary, the human drama frame can be classified as stable, experiencing its greatest growth in the year 2020, coinciding precisely with the pandemic caused by SARS-Cov2. In our opinion, the strong rises in the security framework are within the expected framework since they coincide with very specific events.

The highest concentration of news using the security frame is located at the beginning of 2013. In our view, this overrepresentation is due to a statistical effect caused by French coverage. This period coincides with the start of Operation Serval (initiated by France at the request of the Malian government), later replaced by Operation Barkhane, with the aim of combating jihadist groups operating in northern Mali: 'The inexorable decomposition of a showcase of African democracy, *Le Monde*, 01/13/2013'; 'Mali: Vast military operation against the jihadists, *Le Monde*, 10/26/2013'; 'The blitzkrieg of the France in the Sahel, *Le Figaro*, 01/23/2013'; 'Mali: France slows down the withdrawal of its soldiers. The Malian state and Tuareg rebels are negotiating an agreement on Kidal in the run-up to the presidential election next July, *Le Figaro*, 06/13/2013'. In addition, during the same period there was the coup d'état of the Seleka coalition led by Michel Djotodia against François Bozizé in the

Central African Republic. Although it is true that this country is geographically not part of the Sahel region its relevant coverage (as can be seen in the LDA analysis in Table 2) is another of the strategic areas where France had a considerable military presence until 2016: 'In Africa, the Al-Qaeda brand resists competition from Iraq', *Le Figaro*, 01/21/2016"; 'Sahel: Merger of three jihadist groups', *Le Monde*, 03/04/2017". The second increase in information (end of 2015) could be due to the same effect, given the importance of the French media in the sample. During this time, shocking terrorist attacks took place, such as the attack on the Radisson Blu Hotel in Bamako (19 dead), various attacks on French troops, the end of Operation Lukcham and bloody attacks in Burkina Faso: 'Jihadist attack on presidential ballot seats', *La Stampa*, 08/13/2018'; 'Ambush against the French with a hidden bomb Dead three soldiers in Mali', *Corriere della Sera*, 12/29/2020'. The other increases in the security frame also coincide with significant episodes of structural violence and jihadist activities by various groups, including MUJAO, AQIM, Al-Mourabitoun or Ansar Dine: 'France announces death of military chief of al-Qaeda-linked group in Mali', *Correio da Manhã*, 11/13/2020'; 'UN supports force in Sahel to fight jihadism', *El País*, 06/23/2017'.

Conclusions

The lack of work on the media dimension of conflicts in Africa has motivated the development of this research. In this article, we have described the news coverage of the conflicts in the Sahel area by several Mediterranean-European media. It is characterized by an overwhelmingly security-based approach, our central hypothesis. Therefore, we can establish that our starting hypothesis has been confirmed. Naturally, the implications of this finding are manifold.

On the one hand, it confirms (Ardévol-Abreu 2016; Qadri 2020) that conflicts are increasingly reported from the point of view of security rather than human drama. In other words, citizens receive information characterized by focusing on the political and geopolitical aspects and not so much on the possible victims or the consequences for the population. We cannot affirm, however, that we are in the presence of a forced change in the media. Furthermore, on the other hand, it theoretically reinforces those analyses that indicate that the international media preferentially focus on violent episodes when they report on African issues. (Abdulateef-Elega, Oloyede, and Özad 2021; Niklas 2018; Gagniarre 2016).

As observed in the different results presented in graphs and tables, the security frame has been consolidated as a generic professional routine within Mediterranean newspapers. However, of course, one is aware that all those explanations of an exceptional nature that fall within the security explanations have to be analyzed in a much more specific way. For example, Moffette and Vadasaria (2016) argue that an excellent way to measure securitization processes is to analyze discourses (political and media) based on racial elements. This work has exposed, in a much more general way, from the postulates of the Copenhagen School how this frame is not only present but has significant relevance.

However, there is a shift in journalistic routines from the 80s and 90s, where 'human drama' seemed to have a strong media presence, to the 2000s, where 'security' approaches seem to be hegemonic. The reasons for these changes are unclear, although they could be related to the generalization of jihadism as a driving force in conflicts and Western intervention in some of them. An example would be how jihadist groups have been inserted into the media and political agenda of African conflicts. For example, see the case of Boko Haram in agrarian conflicts in Northern Nigeria (Chiluwa and Chiluwa 2020). It is a phenomenon that, in our view, continues to propagate excessively simplistic explanations of the problems of direct, cultural and structural violence experienced by African societies. In addition, we cannot highlight the economic variable. That is, is the security frame predominant because it increases economic benefits? Another possible conclusion could be that security issues are more attractive to potential readers in a broader context of the economic crisis of traditional media.

In our opinion, the results presented in this research should serve to rethink journalistic routines and gatekeeping processes in searching, selecting and filtering information mainly because they can produce dehumanizing effects in the face of human rights violations and episodes of violence. For example, we can find in the coverage carried out by various Canadian media on the war on terror (Steuter and Wills, 2009) promoting a dehumanizing construction of the other (mainly Arabs and Muslims). Likewise, the justification of security measures is based on *realpolitik* by Greek political parties during the refugee crisis. In addition to encouraging excessively simplistic explanations for the war reality, it is also worth noting the delicate role in which the traditional media find themselves in an environment of low economic benefits and multi-competitiveness, and, consequently, less capacity to establish journalists in the field.

Nonetheless, more research is needed to establish transparent causal processes on conflicts and specific countries. For the time being, we know that framing is sometimes not neutral, as research on state-owned media in non-democratic countries, such as Russia and Iran, shows (Moreno-Mercado and García-Marín 2020). In other words, there is an attempt to promote a specific political agenda through media coverage. However, it is not the case in the countries analyzed in this research, as they are not subject to censorship or government controls.

In conclusion, the analysis presented in this article should be considered as a first step. The main objective was to discover patterns of behaviour in the Euro-Mediterranean press from the facilities that allow us the tools of computer science. Through the press studies presented in this article, which open the door to discovering patterns of behaviour in the press, we can take a step towards establishing links between political communication theory and the security theories of the Copenhagen School, with the media becoming actors to be analyzed in security studies. In order to delve further into this issue, it would be necessary to make detailed analyses of each country and to expand the number of means to be studied. However, we believe the scientific need to carry out a study like the one proposed, especially since African studies have a minimal presence in some academic fields of the chosen countries (Kabunda 2019). Therefore, the present work, by its methodology and scope, can significantly contribute to the fields of political communication and international relations.

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