


# Ideology, inequality, and the media. A comparative analysis of the housing crisis in the Irish and Spanish digital media

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## Abstract

This comparative research study shows the influence of the ideological alignment of the media of the digital ecosystem concerning economic inequality and, specifically, the housing crisis. It focuses on two countries in the European Union that represent different models: Ireland, where a higher percentage of the population chooses to live in single-family homes, and Spain, whose population, on the other hand, lives more in apartments. They are also representatives of two different media systems: the liberal and the polarized-democratic one. The article explains how digital media shapes the agenda regarding the housing crisis at a time when this vector is discussed throughout Europe as one of the main manifestations of inequality. A content analysis has been carried out on a representative sample of news directly related to the housing crisis in the main Irish and Spanish digital media over three months. The results show greater diversity in the agenda of the Irish media, where there is an emergence of extreme right positions, not yet present in the institutions of the Republic of Eire, while the Spanish media show a more homogeneous agenda. Considering the housing crisis as an effect, and not one of the causes, of inequality leads to diverse positions. The main differences are found in the proposed legal and policymaking solutions in the case of the most left-leaning media.

**Keywords:** inequality; housing crisis; digital journalism; digital media; polarized-pluralistic media system; liberal media system

**Resum.** *Ideologia, desigualtat i mitjans de comunicació. Una anàlisi comparativa de la crisi de l'habitatge al mitjans digitals d'Irlanda i Espanya*

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Aquesta recerca, comparativa, mostra la influència de l'alineament ideològic dels mitjans de comunicació de l'ecosistema digital respecte de la desigualtat econòmica i, en concret, de la crisi de l'habitatge. Se centra en dos països de la Unió Europea que representen models diferents: Irlanda, on més percentatge de població tria habitar habitatges unifamiliars, i Espanya, la població de la qual, en canvi, viu més en apartaments. Són també representants de dos sistemes mediàtics diferents: el liberal i el democràtic-polaritzat. L'article explica com els mitjans digitals construeixen l'agenda sobre la crisi de l'habitatge en un moment en què a tot Europa es discuteix aquest vector com una de les manifestacions principals de la desigualtat. S'ha dut a terme una anàlisi de contingut sobre una mostra representativa de notícies directament relacionades amb la crisi de l'habitatge als principals mitjans digitals irlandesos i espanyols durant un període de tres mesos. Els resultats mostren més diversitat a l'agenda dels mitjans irlandesos, on es constata una emergència de posicions d'extrema dreta, encara no presents a les institucions de la República d'Irlanda, mentre que els mitjans espanyols mostren una agenda més homogènia. Considerar la crisi de l'habitatge un efecte i no pas una de les causes de la desigualtat porta a posicions diverses. Les diferències principals es troben en les solucions proposades, legals i polítiques en el cas dels mitjans més escorats a l'esquerra.

**Paraules clau:** desigualtat; crisi de l'habitatge; periodisme digital; mitjans digitals; sistema mediàtic polaritzat-pluralista; sistema mediàtic liberal

**Resumen.** *Ideología, desigualdad y medios de comunicación. Un análisis comparativo de la crisis de la vivienda en los medios digitales de Irlanda y España*

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Esta investigación, comparativa, muestra la influencia del alineamiento ideológico de los medios de comunicación del ecosistema digital respecto a la desigualdad económica y, en concreto, a la crisis de la vivienda. Se centra en dos países de la Unión Europea que representan modelos diferentes: Irlanda, donde más porcentaje de población elige habitar viviendas unifamiliares, y España, cuya población, en cambio, vive más en apartamentos. Son también representantes de dos sistemas mediáticos diferentes: el liberal y el democrático-polarizado. El artículo explica cómo los medios digitales construyen la agenda acerca de la crisis de la vivienda en un momento en que en toda Europa se discute ese vector como una de las principales manifestaciones de la desigualdad. Se ha llevado a cabo un análisis de contenido sobre una muestra representativa de noticias directamente relacionadas con la crisis de la vivienda en los principales medios digitales irlandeses y españoles durante un periodo de tres meses. Los resultados muestran una mayor diversidad en la agenda de los medios irlandeses, donde se constata una emergencia de posiciones de extrema derecha, aún no presentes en las instituciones de la República de Irlanda, mientras que los medios españoles muestran una agenda más homogénea. Considerar la crisis de la vivienda un efecto y no una de las causas de la desigualdad lleva a posiciones diversas. Las principales diferencias se encuentran en las soluciones propuestas, legales y políticas en el caso de los medios más escorados a la izquierda.

**Palabras clave:** desigualdad; crisis de la vivienda; periodismo digital; medios digitales; sistema mediático polarizado-pluralista; sistema mediático liberal

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## 1. Introduction

Housing is one of the most sensitive topics in our societies, especially in the European Union (Asensio et al., 2024). There, different models appear across the member states: from the most inclined, or forced, to live in apartments, to countries where the population prefers, or can afford, to live in unifamilial houses and suburbs. The treatment that the media do on this sensitive topic, the housing crisis related to inequality of many types -wealth, income, and opportunities, to mention a few- has an evident influence on the perception of the problem and its solutions by the population and by the institutions, and reflect a position by the media themselves, and the ideology they represent, or the frames related to specific ideological alignment that, through such a sensitive topic, could show.

Many scholars have highlighted the importance of guaranteeing fair access to housing to everyone; for instance, Carmen Trilla (2014) said, "Housing is one of the pillars supporting the welfare state in Europe". It is a significant concern for the European population. In some countries, namely Spain, it is also a constitutional right, while in others, like Ireland, politicians have indicated their intention to submit it to a referendum for the people to decide whether it should be included in the Constitution. The relevance of this topic in Spain is further heightened by the approval and enactment of the *Right to Housing Act* in May 2023, which also justifies the election of the sample period (the last months of that same year). This legislation aims to actualise the social right enshrined in Article 47 of the Spanish Constitution, responding to the escalating inequalities in housing access, particularly evident in Spain's major cities.

The problem of housing access has become increasingly important in recent years. This issue is considered one more consequence of inequality. The increased centrality of this problem has also led to increased media attention. Therefore, in this case, the public agenda influences the media agenda, which is not a typical occurrence (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

It seems about right to focus on two so different countries. Both countries show an acceptable rate of inequality levels, as measured by the Gini coefficient, the Palma ratio, and the Lorenz curve. Spain's Gini coefficient was 34.3 in 2023, ranking 105 in the world. It was 32.9 in 2020, so inequality is growing. Ireland's Gini coefficient was 30.6 in 2023, ranking 135. It was 28.2 in 2020. The highest levels of inequality are near to 50 out of 100. Inequality is growing in both countries. The Palma ratio for Spain was 1.25 and 1.01 for Ireland in 2020, with 0.71 being the lowest level of inequality and 2.8 being the worst. The last measurement of the Lorenz curve done by the World Bank was 29.2 for Ireland, and 34.9 for Spain. While in the Irish case the curve usually decreases, it is growing somewhat in the Spanish case (OECD, 2023).

Specifically, regarding housing, 53 per cent of the European population lives in a flat, and 46 per cent in a house. The most significant percentage of

the population living in houses belongs, precisely, to Ireland, 92 per cent of its inhabitants. Ireland rates high in under-occupation of homes, 62.9 per cent. At the same time, Ireland registered one of the highest European levels of rental increment, +63 per cent, and it is the country in which the prices are highest in general terms, 77 per cent above the European average in 2020, with people spending on average 20 per cent of their income in housing (Eurofound, 2023). An official report, *Ireland's well-being framework*,<sup>1</sup> recognised that 'housing remains the greatest source of inequality'. Back in 2020, more than 300,000 Irish people were pushed into poverty risk because of the rising housing rent, so the country has a remarkable problem with homelessness (Eurofound, 2023: 55).

On the other hand, Spain is one of the European countries where people favour living in an apartment; 62 percent of Spaniards follow this option (Eurostat, 2024). Both countries are at a similar level regarding the percentage of young people still living with their parents, mainly because they cannot afford to rent a house or flat (see, for the Irish case, Gusciute et al., 2022). Both countries also share one of the highest rates of homeownership. In the Spanish case, most of them have mortgages, which could leave them unable to cover the cost of living if inflation rises dramatically (Eurofound, 2023). Spanish landlords are six times less at risk of falling into poverty than tenants. Spain is a country where elderly people own their own homes, while young people find it more difficult to buy or rent.

For this reason, given the extreme diversity of living models and the different media systems, we propose a comparative study. This distinction provides a unique lens for exploring how varying media landscapes might frame and address social issues. These two countries, despite significant differences in scale, population, and media systems, both face critical challenges related to housing accessibility. Notably, Madrid and Dublin are recognised as having some of the most expensive housing rates in Europe.

Our research is informed by scholarly discussions on the ideal of equitable communication access, echoing questions posed by W. Lance Bennett and Marianne Kneuer, who, following Habermas, ask whether "the ideal of equality of communication access is realistic" (Lance Bennett & Kneuer, 2023). Simultaneously, we acknowledge the imperative for rational discourse within democratic frameworks.

## 2. State of the art

The topic of inequality and the media has been treated in the two countries we aim to compare. Henry Silke defended a PhD dissertation in 2015, focusing on the political and ideological implications of informing about the economic crisis (Silke, 2015). Julian Mercille examined how the Irish media

1. <<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/b2e0f-understanding-life-in-ireland-the-well-being-framework-2023/>>

intervened to some extent in the housing problem (Mercille, 2014). The role of the economy in media coverage was discussed, for the Irish case, by Breen et al. (2019), and, for the Spanish case, by Arrese (2021) and Arrese and Vara-Miquel (2018 and 2023). Therefore, inequality is defined as the disparity whereby some people have access to specific standards of living and others do not (Ray, 1998: 170). This inequality is founded on differences between people in terms of income, wealth, and opportunities (Therborn, 2013), linked to gender, education, social class, or place of birth (Pérez-Mayo, 2019). Finally, the issue is studied both from a macro perspective, when analysing differences between nations or countries, and from a micro perspective, when studying variations in quality of life standards among citizens of the same community (McKay, 2002).

There is a lack of studies focused on the news framing of housing as a social problem. An analysis of media coverage of the housing problem and its relationship to inequality and the racial gap in the US during the Great Recession, which began in 2008 (Woodford & Clawson, 2024), has been carried out from the perspectives of episodic and thematic frames. The analysis of this issue associated with the racial gap in the United States has also been explored in other studies (Báez & Castañeda, 2014). From the Irish and Spanish context, research studies on housing-related issues using framing theory have been focused on more particular aspects, such as news sentiment covering the degradation of the Dublin neighbourhood of Fatima Mansions (Conway et al., 2012) or, in Spain, the analysis of the discourse of the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca*<sup>2</sup> – PAH – in the media and in social networks (Barranco & Parcevisa, 2020; Ramon-Pinat, 2022).

While numerous scholars have highlighted the significance of the housing crisis in exacerbating inequality, the specific ways in which the media have addressed this issue remain underexplored. Although recent studies have examined the broader relationship between inequality and media (Trappel, 2019; Grisold & Preston, 2020; Schifferes & Knowles, 2023; Kurtulmus & Kandiyali, 2023, to mention some), relatively few have focused on this particular aspect of social and economic inequity. Only relatively recently has the scholarly community centred their efforts on the specific question of new media, inequalities, and the impact on democracies (Scott Matthews et al., 2023). So, hence our modest contribution.

### 3. Theoretical framework

#### 3.1. *Comparing Irish and Spanish media systems: liberal model vs polarized pluralist model*

According to the classical division by Hallin and Mancini (2004), the media systems in Ireland and Spain differ significantly. One of them, Ireland, rep-

2. Platform of people affected by mortgages.

resents the liberal one; and the other, Spain, is a clear representative of the polarized media system. At the same time, media systems grow within a determined social, economic, and political environment. For instance, Ireland is one of the few European countries in which the far-right parties have no representation in the parliament, but they have in the media, instead.

The Mediterranean or Polarised Pluralist Model (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) is characterised by the existence, on the one hand, of an elite-oriented press with low circulation, where audiovisual and digital media have a greater impact. It is a press that is very focused on political life, with a high proportion of comments. In addition, there is a struggle between a profession that is less well developed than in other European countries and a state that usually plays a vital role as owner, regulator, or funder of the media (p. 73). In the Spanish case, considerable interference has been observed in the national and regional public media, which are the primary sources of news for a large proportion of the population (Fernández-Viso & Fernández-Alonso, 2024). Furthermore, the audience is conscious of the existing polarization of the media system, so that citizens perceive only a few media that are neutral or are not characterized as right-wing or left-wing. This polarization is transposed to audiences as their ideological orientation is a variable with the capacity to influence the credibility of the media (Masip et al., 2020).

In the North Atlantic or Liberal Model (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), commercial newspapers dominate, political parallelism is rare and internal pluralism predominates, with the critical exception of the highly partisan British press. Professionalisation of journalism is relatively strong. Journalistic autonomy is more likely to be constrained by commercial pressures than by political instrumentalization, although the latter is more common in Britain. News-oriented journalism predominates, with a stronger tradition of commentary in Britain. The role of the state is limited, though more so in the United States than in Ireland and Canada, where concern for national culture has given the state an important role, and in Britain, where both public broadcasting and the regulation of commercial broadcasting have been very strong (p. 75).

### *3.2. News diversity in the hybrid media system*

Although the existence of two national media systems, which different models also define, could suggest the existence of a specific and differentiated media agenda; Hallin and Mancini (2004) integrate, into their theory, the concept of de-differentiation, proposed by Habermas and Bourdieu, opposed to the vision of an autonomous public opinion, and based on the domination of political and economic powers (p. 81). The first consequence of this dynamic is a certain homogenization of media system models, towards a liberal model, due to exogenous factors – associated with the global dominance of the United States and the emergence of a global journalistic culture – and endogenous factors – related to processes of technological and business mod-

ernisation of media systems and societies (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Moreover, the technological factor, with the advent of the Internet, has also contributed to the emergence of a hybrid media system worldwide, where the traditional media actors, i.e., media and journalists, have to compete and coexist with new actors (Chadwick, 2013).

However, the multiplicity of dimensions used to study diversity and the lack of normativity in its conceptualization can explain the existence of discrepancies in the findings (Joris et al., 2020). In this way, Hendrickx et al. (2020), through a meta-analysis of the literature related to news diversity, found five types: ownership diversity, associated with the business model in the media market; brand diversity, related to the variety of brands in the media conglomerates involved; production diversity, connected to journalists, production processes and changes in journalistic routines; content diversity, related to the news products, topics and frames; and consumption diversity, linked to the degree of diversity consumed and perceived by the audiences in a specific market.

Regarding production diversity, several studies have observed how, in different media systems, diversity arises in the perspectives and sources used (Humprecht & Buchel, 2013; Masini et al., 2018), as well as other specificities associated with the regional or national geographic context of news stories (Quandt, 2008). However, the findings on content diversity are more ambiguous. Studies have found content homogenization when focusing only on news topics (Boczkowski & De Santos, 2007<sup>3</sup>; Odriozola-Chéné & Llorca-Abad, 2014; Shoemaker et al., 2012). On the other hand, when studies analyse content diversity from the sentiment/tone – negative, neutral, positive – or framing approach, it remains despite the homogenization processes developed in the different media systems (Beckers et al., 2019; Benson & Wood, 2015; De Vries et al., 2022<sup>4</sup>).

### *3.3. Framing housing as a social problem*

“To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman, 1993: 52). Therefore, the media provide a framework for the audience to interpret news by promoting the salience of some values and characteristics of the topics over others (Druckman, 2001). This process is influenced by the persuasive efforts of social actors concerned with the topic (Petrova, 2008). However, their coverage of an issue is also

3. Boczkowski and De Santos (2007) define content homogenization “as the degree to which different media focus on the same stories during certain formative cycles” (p. 169).

4. De Vries et al. (2022) define “external news diversity as the extent to which, in a given period of time, different news outlets (1) report on different topics (2), and when they report on the same topics, to what extent they use a similar tone or sentiment”.



closely influenced by the self-interests of the media corporations; in other words, the framing process depends on each editorial line (Miller & Riechert, 2001), because framing is a strategy for producing influence, or political capital, and also involves choosing the right path for delivering information to policymakers (Gandy, 2015).

Although the concept of framing has a well-established definition, it has been operationalised from different approaches. A first taxonomy distinguishes between episodic and thematic frames. “The episodic frame depicts public issues in terms of concrete instances or specific events (...). The thematic news frame, by contrast, places the public issues in some general or abstract context” (Iyengar, 1990). Furthermore, Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) use Entman’s definition of framing and the frames used in previous research to establish five generic frames applicable to any topic: Conflict, Human interest, Attribution of responsibility, Morality, and Economic consequences. On the other hand, De Vreese (2005) describes issue-specific frames, which are relevant only to specific topics or events (p. 54). Finally, Guo et al. (2012), based on the concept of “domestication of news”,<sup>5</sup> establish the taxonomy of domestic frames based on domestic factors driven by the news media in different countries to use different framing strategies – culture, ideology, political positions, and media systems. As a result, news media in other countries can use distinctive frames to cover similar or identical topics (p. 1926).

## 4. Methods

### 4.1. *Research design*

The research question that leads this paper is how the Irish and Spanish media interpret the housing crisis and, thus, economic inequality. Therefore, the main goal is to know how news related to inequality and the housing problem is covered in the Irish and Spanish online media agendas, and to determine how news stories about inequality and the housing problem are covered in the Irish and Spanish online media agendas. This main goal leads to two specific objectives. The first one is to establish the main differences in the construction of this agenda in Ireland versus Spain. The second specific objective is to deepen the incidence of media ideology when framing this problem. These specific objectives will, in turn, show the degree of diversity in news content on this topic, which transcends national frontiers.

The main method used is content analysis, previously employed in some other articles on the media coverage of economic inequality as well (Knowles et al., 2024; McGovern et al., 2023; Odriozola-Chéné & Pérez-Arozamena, 2024). We are closer to the specific techniques used by Odriozola-Chéné and

5. News domestication is defined as the process of adapting international news to suit national audiences (Clausen, 2004; Lee et al., 2002).



Pérez-Arozamena, who concentrated on the Spanish case, but have incorporated into our model some of the most salient contributions by the first authors, namely focusing on the causes and solutions of inequality as categories of analysis, and on the income inequality framing by media, as the second authors propose. The main concepts related to (in)equality also aligned with those proposed in the aforementioned references.

#### *4.2. Unit of analysis, population and sampling*

The units of analysis are configured using a multistage sampling design (Levy & Lemeshow, 2013), with non-probability sampling in the first stage to define the period of analysis and the selected media, and stratified probability sampling by media once the population has been defined.

The media we selected were a combination of legacy media's digital versions and digital-born media. The media selection, intentional as well, was instead based on several comparable rankings. For both countries, we used figures from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism's Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2023) and the Scimago Media Ranking for Spanish media (n.d.a) and Irish media (s.f.b). For the Spanish media, we used also GfK Dam's rankings (Dircomfidencial, 2023) since it is the official measurer of online news consumption, and also AIMC and OJD's numbers. Some additional considerations were carefully balanced to design the final list of online media. Business models, nature (legacy media vs digital-native media), and ideology were two of those. A more nuanced description of the real ideological mechanisms shown by the different Spanish and Irish media though this topic is one of the ultimate goals of this paper, as in McGovern et al. (2023) ("How the frame is actualised, and ideologically linked"), and how the political alignment of media has an impact on the coverage of sensitive topics like the one we are dealing with in this paper (Bosi et al., 2020). In order to make the initial selection of media operational, we have assumed the self alignment of media themselves, when there is, or of the most relevant literature on the field (for the Spanish media landscape, see Bosi et al., 2020; Humanes & Valera-Ordaz, 2023, and for the Irish case, Phelan, 2014, and Breen et al., 2019). While it is considered that the Spanish media landscape is a much more partisan and polarized one, and as María Luis Humanes and Lidia Valero-Ordaz explain, Spanish readers expose themselves selectively and with continuity to the media according to their political preferences in a "structural inclination" (Humanes & Valero-Ordaz, 2023), in Ireland, traditionally, it has been considered that, as Eurotopics say, "in accordance with the Anglo-Saxon liberal media model, political parties in Ireland have little influence on the press [and] links with commercial interests are traditionally stronger" (<<https://www.eurotopics.net/en/149410/ireland-media-concentrated-in-a-few-hands>>). It is consistent with the classical differentiation established by Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini (2004, concepts revised in 2017). Nevertheless, in both cases, we have followed the reports about the media of Ireland

and Spain, and the corresponding chapters for Ireland (Murrell, 2023) and Spain (Vara et al., 2023) of the *Digital News Report* of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford University.

Some media have developed a paywalled, subscription model, but some others are free.

**Table 1.** Digital media selected and characteristics

Spanish media				Irish media			
Media	Nature	Ideology	Business	Media	Nature	Ideology	Business
20minutos.es	Native	Center-left	Free	irishtimes.com	Legacy	Center-left	Subscription
elpais.com	Legacy	Center-left	Subscription	independent.ie	Legacy	Liberal	Subscription
elespanol.com	Native	Liberal	Subscription	irishexaminer.com	Legacy	Conservative	Subscription
elmundo.es	Legacy	Liberal-conservative	Subscription	thesun.ie	Legacy	Conservative	Subscription
lavanguardia.com	Legacy	Liberal-conservative	Subscription	thejournal.ie	Native	Liberal	Free
elconfidencial.com	Native	Liberal	Subscription	theliberal.ie	Native	Liberal	Free
eldiario.es	Native	Left	Subscription	dublinlive.ie	Native	Center-left	Subscription
okdiario.com	Native	Far-right	Free	gript.ie	Native	Far-right	Free

Source: Prepared by the authors.

The population results from the whole set of news published by the selected media from September to November 2023, just a trimester. It is an evident limitation of this study, and a motive for further research, since it would benefit from a longitudinal study. However, due to the exploratory nature of the research, we do think that this could suffice to provide an initial insight into this topic and the methods used to examine it, as well as some results leading to at least some initial evidence on the issue.

Housing is a central issue on the European public agenda. Between 2015 and 2023, the average increase in housing prices in the European Union stood at 48%, with both Spain and Ireland above the European average, despite their different approaches to housing (European Parliament, 2024, October 17). Thus, unlike Spain, the Irish Constitution does not explicitly enshrine the right to housing. Consequently, various social organizations and advocacy groups, such as Threshold (2022, September 5) and Home for Good (2020, January 22), argue that the constitutional right to housing should be recognized as a fundamental human right. These groups, among others, advocate for a referendum on this issue, a movement that attracted significant media attention in 2023. Further underscoring this push for constitutional change, a public consultation process on the possible enshrinement of the right to housing in the Irish Constitution took place from March to May 2023. However, to date, no such referendum has been held in Ireland, although the initiative sparked some debate in the media.

Thus, once the population is defined through intentional non-probabilistic sampling, a stratified probabilistic sampling is then developed. The sam-

ple was selected according to an advanced search in Google according to the terms “housing/vivienda” + “inequality/desigualdad”. In order to determine the final sample units, each of the newspaper articles is reviewed manually to ensure that there is a relationship between inequality and housing and not simply a coincidence of the two terms without any connection. Subsequently, through a stratified sampling by media according to the total number of news items published, the final sample was configured into two groups, then, one composed of news items published by the Irish media and another one published by the Spanish ones, since one of the goals of this research study was to compare the media agenda of both countries.

**Table 2.** Spanish media sample and Irish media sample

Spanish media sample			Irish media sample		
Medium	Population	Sample	Medium	Population	Sample
<i>20minutos.es</i>	33	21	<i>irishtimes.com</i>	71	39
<i>elpais.com</i>	42	28	<i>independent.ie</i>	50	28
<i>elespanol.com</i>	14	8	<i>irishtexaminer.com</i>	47	23
<i>elmundo.es</i>	14	9	<i>thesun.ie</i>	14	5
<i>lavanguardia.com</i>	28	17	<i>thejournal.ie</i>	34	18
<i>elconfidencial.com</i>	20	13	<i>theliberal.ie</i>	5	3
<i>eldiario.es</i>	31	19	<i>dublinlive.ie</i>	21	12
<i>okdiario.com</i>	10	5	<i>gript.ie</i>	42	21
TOTAL	192	120	TOTAL	284	149

Source: Prepared by the author.

#### 4.3. Variables, data collection and data analysis

The analysis of housing and inequality has been carried out from the perspective of the issue-specific frames (De Vreese, 2005). In this case, four dimensions have been constructed: definition of inequality, related gaps/breaches, general remedies and specific remedies mentioned. The first two dimensions result from the definition of the concept of inequality outlined in the state of the art and in previous research, while the two dimensions focused on the analysis of specific remedies to the housing problem emerge inductively through the process of approaching the case study.

First, the definition of inequality is performed using five variables: relation of inequality with the housing problem – cause, consequence, both, neither – ( $\alpha=0.686$ )<sup>6</sup>; level of inequality – macro, micro, both or neither – ( $\alpha=0.922$ ); identification of income inequality ( $\alpha=0.768$ ); identification of wealth inequality ( $\alpha=0.797$ ); identification of inequality of opportunities in education, health and research ( $\alpha=0.777$ ). Secondly, regarding the gaps, this

6. To ensure the reliability of the content analysis, coder agreement was calculated across all analysis variables using 10% of the total sample. The agreement measure used is Krippendorff's alpha (Krippendorff, 2004).

study examines the presence or absence of mentions of the following gaps in the news: gender ( $\alpha=1$ ); race or immigration ( $\alpha=1$ ); social class ( $\alpha=0.797$ ); and age ( $\alpha=0.633$ ). Thirdly, the presence or absence of a series of general remedies to the housing problem are analysed: predistribution ( $\alpha=0.649$ ); redistribution and tax justice ( $\alpha=0.777$ ); legal remedies ( $\alpha=0.695$ ); and policy making ( $\alpha=0.695$ ). Finally, the research measures the presence or absence of specific remedies: subsidies ( $\alpha=0.649$ ); public sector housing ( $\alpha=0.633$ ); private sector housing ( $\alpha=1$ ); fair lending and limitations of rent prices ( $\alpha=0.777$ ); scattered-site housing ( $\alpha=1$ ), and property tax ( $\alpha=1$ ).

Secondly, to study the degree of content diversity, two variables are developed: the media's country ( $\alpha=1$ ) – Ireland or Spain – and the media's ideology<sup>7</sup> ( $\alpha=1$ ) – left-wing or right-wing.

Then, the results of the news analysis were collected by the two coders in a database for later analysis using statistical programs that allowed to meet the objectives through inferential analysis.

## 5. Results

To understand how the association between inequality and the housing problem is framed in the Spanish and Irish online media, it is first necessary to know how inequality is defined overall. Thus, when inequality is mentioned, it is conceptualised as a cause of the housing access problem, 84.8 per cent. Regarding the level of inequality, the micro perspective dominates (81.4 per cent), which means it is defined by differences between individuals rather than between groups. Furthermore, this inequality refers mainly to income inequality, 84 per cent, and, to a lesser extent, to wealth inequality, 24.9 per cent. The presence of inequality of opportunity is far lower, at 7.4 per cent.

Moreover, there is a series of gaps associated with inequality. For news focused on the housing problem, the most common social class gap is the one between 71.4 per cent. The generational gap, 25.9 per cent, is also important, and it is higher than the racial gap, 14.1 per cent, and the gender gap, 8.2 per cent. It should be highlighted how an average of 1.19 of those gaps are usually presented in the news.

Finally, regarding the solution of housing access, there are general remedies and specific remedies. General remedies include mentions of redistribution and tax justice, 56.5 per cent; legal remedies, 19.3 per cent; policy-making, 17.1 per cent; and predistribution, 8.9 per cent. The average number of general remedies mentioned in the news is 1.02. In the specific measures, the most mentioned are those connected to the public sector housing, 33.5 per cent, and to the private sector housing, 19.3 per cent. Other measures related to tax

7. Media ideology has been simplified into a dual categorization based on the specific ideologies mentioned in Table 1. Thus, media defined as conservative, liberal/conservative, liberal and far-right have been defined as right-wing. Media defined as center-left and left have been categorized as left-wing.

property, 14.1 per cent; subsidies, 13 per cent; scattered-site housing, 10.8 per cent; and fair lending and limitation rents, 9.3 per cent, are less frequently mentioned. In this case, 1.00 specific measure is mentioned on average.

**Table 3.** Global framing of inequality and the housing problem

Definition of Inequality mentioned as... inequality		Cause	Consequence	Neither	
		84.8%	4.1%	11.2%	
	Level of inequality	Macro	Micro	Both	Not applicable
		4.8%	81.4%	8.9%	4.8%
Breaches		Yes		No	
		84%		16%	
	Income Inequality	84%		16%	
	Wealth Inequality	24.9%		75.1%	
	Inequality of opportunities	7.4%		92.6%	
	Gender breach	8.2%		91.8%	
	Race and migration	14.1%		85.9%	
	Social Class	71.4%		28.6%	
	Age breach	25.3%		74.7%	
	Breaches mentioned in each news	M= 1.19		S.D= 0.695	
General remedies	Predistribution	8.9%		91.1%	
	Redistribution and Tax Justice	56.5%		43.5%	
	Legal remedies	19.3%		80.7%	
	Policy Making	17.1%		82.9%	
	General remedies mentioned in each news	M= 1.02		S.D= 0.709	
Specific remedies	Subsidies	13%		87%	
	Public sector housing	33.5%		66.5%	
	Private sector housing	19.3%		80.7%	
	Fair lending and limitation rents	9.3%		90.7%	
	Scattered site housing	10.8%		89.2%	
	Tax property	14.1%		85.9%	
	Specific remedies mentioned in each news	M= 1.00		S.D= 0.930	

Source: Prepared by the author.

### 5.1. Framing differences between the Irish and Spanish online media agendas

The disaggregated analysis by country in Table 4 shows statistically significant differences. Thus, when defining inequality, differences are only observed according to the level of inequality, with a higher coverage from a micro level in the Irish media than in the Spanish media, 87.9 per cent vs. 73.3 per cent. The situation, in the case of the macro level, is the opposite, 0 per cent vs. 10.8 per cent.

Regarding the gaps, the racial and immigration breach grows in the Irish media, 20.1 per cent vs. 6.7 per cent). Meanwhile, the social class gap increases in the Spanish media, 77.5 per cent vs. 66.4 per cent. There are no differ-

ences in the number of gaps mentioned by news between Irish and Spanish media.

General remedies also show differences between countries. Redistribution and tax justice increase their salience in the Irish media, 66.4 per cent vs. 44.2 per cent; meanwhile, legal remedies increase their salience in the Spanish media, 29.2 per cent vs. 11.4 per cent. There is also no difference in the number of general remedies mentioned in the Irish media compared to the Spanish media.

Finally, the specific remedies to address problems related to housing access show the greatest differentiation between countries. Thus, in the Irish media, there is a greater presence of remedies related to: public sector housing, 45.6 per cent vs. 18.3 per cent; Fair lending and limitation rents, 12.8 per cent vs. 5 per cent; and scattered-site housing, 15.4 per cent vs. 5 per cent. Only measures connected to private sector housing have a greater presence in the Spanish media, 25 per cent vs. 14.8 per cent. Consequently, the presence of specific remedies is more common in the Irish media,  $M = 1.15$ ;  $SD = 1.023$ , than in the Spanish media,  $M = 0.82$ ;  $SD = 0.767$  ( $F(1, 267) = 8.652$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ,  $n_2 = 0.031$ ).

**Table 4.** Statistical differences between the Irish and Spanish media agenda

Definition of inequality	Level of inequality	Ireland				Spain			
		Macro	Micro	Both	Not applicable	Macro	Micro	Both	Not applicable
		0%	87.9%	6%	6%	10.8%	73.3%	12.5%	3.3%
		$\chi^2 = 21.995$		$gI = 3$		$p = 0.000$		Cramér's $V = 0.286$	
		Yes		No		Yes		No	
Breaches	Race and migration	20.1%		79.9%		6.7%		93.3%	
		$\chi^2 = 9.938$		$gI = 1$		$p = 0.002$		Cramér's $V = 0.192$	
	Social Class	66.4%		33.6%		77.5%		22.5%	
General remedies		$\chi^2 = 3.977$		$gI = 1$		$p = 0.046$		Cramér's $V = 0.122$	
	Redistribution and Tax Justice	66.4%		33.6%		44.2%		55.8%	
		$\chi^2 = 3.977$		$gI = 1$		$p = 0.000$		Cramér's $V = 0.223$	
	Legal remedies	11.4%		88.6%		29.2%		70.8%	
Specific remedies		$\chi^2 = 13.440$		$gI = 1$		$p = 0.000$		Cramér's $V = 0.224$	
	Public sector housing	45.6%		54.4%		18.3%		81.7%	
		$\chi^2 = 22.258$		$gI = 1$		$p = 0.000$		Cramér's $V = 0.288$	
	Private sector housing	14.8%		85.2%		25%		75%	
		$\chi^2 = 4.465$		$gI = 1$		$p = 0.035$		Cramér's $V = 0.129$	
	Fair lending and limitation rents	12.8%		87.2%		5%		95%	
		$\chi^2 = 4.738$		$gI = 1$		$p = 0.030$		Cramér's $V = 0.133$	
	Scattered-site housing	15.4%		84.6%		5%		95%	
		$\chi^2 = 7.527$		$gI = 1$		$p = 0.006$		Cramér's $V = 0.167$	

Source: Prepared by the author.

### 5.2. Framing differences by media ideology

The comparison between left-wing and right-wing media shows similar coverage of the housing problem. There are only some differences related to the definition of inequality and the general solutions to the housing access problem. First, right-wing media consider inequality as a cause to a higher degree than left-wing media, 90.7 per cent vs. 77.3 per cent. Regarding general remedies, right-wing media promote a higher presence of redistribution and tax justice, 62 per cent vs. 49.6 per cent; whereas left-wing media highlight legal remedies, 25.2 per cent vs. 14.7 per cent, and policy-making, 22.7 per cent vs. 12.7 per cent. However, it is necessary to consider that these differences, related to the general remedies, have a very low relation strength. There are no differences in the number of breaches, or general or specific remedies in the news based on ideology.

**Table 5.** Statistical differences between left-wing and right-wing media

Definition of inequality	Inequality as	Left			Right		
		Cause	Consequence	Neither	Cause	Consequence	Neither
		77.3%	0.8%	21.8%	90.7%	6.7%	2.7%
		$\chi^2 = 28.798$		gl= 2	$p = 0.000$		Cramér's V= 0.327
	Income inequality	Yes	No		Yes	No	
		79%	21%		88%	12%	
		$\chi^2 = 4.010$		gl= 1	$p = 0.045$		Cramér's V= 0.122
General remedies	Redistribution and Tax Justice	49.6%	50.4%		62%	38%	
		$\chi^2 = 4.165$		gl= 1	$p = 0.041$		Cramér's V= 0.124
	Legal remedies	25.2%	74.8%		14.7%	85.3%	
		$\chi^2 = 4.730$		gl= 1	$p = 0.030$		Cramér's V= 0.133
	Policy making	22.7%	77.3%		12.7%	87.3%	
		$\chi^2 = 4.702$		gl= 1	$p = 0.030$		Cramér's V= 0.132

Source: Prepared by the author.

However, differences according to the media's ideology vary in each country. Thus, while the coverage of the housing problem in Spain remains unchanged; in Ireland, this question changes the coverage of this problem.

Spanish media agenda is more homogeneous. Therefore, only statistically significant differences are observed in the definition of inequality as a cause or consequence. Right-wing media report it more frequently than left-wing media, both as a cause, 86.5 per cent vs. 80.9 per cent, and as a consequence, 13.5 per cent vs. 0 per cent.

On the other hand, the Irish media agenda is more diverse. This diversity is centred on the definition of inequality, especially in the approach to general and specific remedies. Firstly, when defining inequality, right-wing media mention it as the cause of the problem more frequently than left-wing media, 92.9 per cent vs. 72.5 per cent. Furthermore, differences are observed in defining inequality from the perspective of income inequality, which is more



commonly emphasized in right-wing media, 91.8 per cent vs. 78.4 per cent. Secondly, regarding general remedies, right-wing media place greater emphasis on redistribution and tax justice, 72.4 per cent versus 54.9 per cent, while left-wing media afford greater significance to legal remedies, 19.6 per cent vs. 7.1 per cent, as well as policy-making, 25.5 per cent vs. 11.2 per cent. Finally, differences, according to media ideology, are also observed in the presence of specific remedies. In this case, left-wing media are more likely to address specific solutions related to subsidies, scattered-site housing and property tax, 23.5 per cent vs. 11.2 per cent, in all three variables. Similarly to the general analysis, there are no differences, based on media ideology, in the number of breaches general and specific remedies mentioned in the news.

**Table 6.** Statistical differences between left-wing and right-wing media in in Spain and Ireland

SPAIN							
Definition of Inequality as inequality		Left			Right		
		Cause	Consequence	Neither	Cause	Consequence	Neither
		80.9%	0%	19.1%	86.5%	13.5%	0%
		x <sup>2</sup> = 19.208		gl= 2	p= 0.000	Cramér's V= 0.400	
IRELAND							
Definition of Inequality as inequality		Left			Right		
		Cause	Consequence	Neither	Cause	Consequence	Neither
		72.5%	2%	25.5%	92.9%	3.1%	4.1%
		x <sup>2</sup> = 15.236		gl= 2	p= 0.000	Cramér's V= 0.320	
General remedies	Income inequality	Yes	No	Yes	No		
		78.4%	21.6%	91.8%	8.2%		
		x <sup>2</sup> = 5.418		gl= 1	p= 0.020	Cramér's V= 0.191	
	Redistribution and Tax Justice	54.9%	45.1%	72.4%	27.6%		
		x <sup>2</sup> = 4.632		gl= 1	p= 0.031	Cramér's V= 0.176	
	Legal remedies	19.6%	80.4%	7.1%	92.9%		
		x <sup>2</sup> = 5.156		gl= 1	p= 0.023	Cramér's V= 0.186	
	Policy making	25.5%	74.5%	11.2%	88.8%		
		x <sup>2</sup> = 5.052		gl= 1	p= 0.025	Cramér's V= 0.184	
	Specific remedies	Subsidies	23.5%	76.5%	11.2%	88.8%	
		x <sup>2</sup> = 3.891		gl= 1	p= 0.049	Cramér's V= 0.162	
Scattered-site housing		23.5%	76.5%	11.2%	88.8%		
		x <sup>2</sup> = 3.891		gl= 1	p= 0.049	Cramér's V= 0.162	
Tax proprierty		23.5%	76.5%	11.2%	88.8%		
		x <sup>2</sup> = 3.891		gl= 1	p= 0.049	Cramér's V= 0.162	

Source: Prepared by the author.

## 6. Discussion

The analysis of the news stories that address the housing problem and its relation to inequality shows a definition of inequality as a cause of the problem. While it is quite obvious that inequality is a multifaceted issue, so it is proba-

bly better to talk about *inequalities*, a general economic unbalance is framed in the news items we examine. This inequality is framed, mainly, from a micro level; that is, from the differences between individuals, and also refers to income inequality and, less frequently, to wealth inequality. Moreover, the most common breaches in the coverage of the problem are the social class gap and the generation gap. In terms of measures to resolve the problem, the most common general remedies are those related to redistribution and tax justice, and, to a lesser extent, legal remedies and policy making. On the other hand, the most common specific measure is the one linked to public sector housing. The rest of the specific remedies – private sector housing, tax property, subsidies, scattered-site housing, and fair lending and limitation rents – have less salience.

Framing a diagnosis of inequality, or inequalities, as a cause of social or political discontent, is neither enough nor effective to tackle such a big problem, as recognized by national and supranational institutions, and by many specialists. Providing a solution to each issue related to economic inequality seems also a function of a healthy media system, most especially when the precisely so-called *solution journalism* (Ibáñez Castejón, 2021), a more positive and proactive approach to elaborating the news in a more comprehensive, less fragmented way, has been proposed. For instance, based on the London School of Economics' Multidimensional Inequality Framework (McKnight et al., 2017), and on Nobel Prize-winning Amartya Sen's *capability approach*, Oxfam proposed in a report to focus on the solutions at least as much as the causes. Those solutions, at least the institutional ones, include the political and administrative, both of which come from the governmental institutions, and the ones that could come from the courts. Amending preexisting laws, including, as it has been proposed for Ireland, the Constitution itself – Spain recognizes in its own a universal right to housing –, or passing new ones (the Spanish Ley de Vivienda, 20023 [Housing Act], or the Irish Housing Act, 1988), is one of those solutions. Media can cover not only the discussions leading to enacting those legal instruments, but can also follow their application and effectiveness (or lack of it). Eventually, the courts might have a word on the application of those legal provisions. Other legal solutions, related to an always sensitive topic such as taxation and tax justice, include redistributive measures, addressing resources to the less favoured people, and predistributive measures, in which equality should be guaranteed from the very beginning, assuring this way equal opportunities. Ultimately, it is to propose “structural solutions for structural inequalities” (Visentini et al., 2021).

The Irish and Spanish media systems produce changes in the coverage of the topic. These countries, in which housing is a major issue, for very different reasons, show a structural contrast. Ireland is one of the EU countries in which a higher percentage of the population live in unifamilial houses and residential suburbs, while Spain, on the other extreme, is one of the countries in which most of the population live in apartments, regardless their social class and income. Spain is a much more populated country, near 10 times the Irish.

On the other hand, despite the fact that it was traditionally and, to some extent, when new economic crisis outburst (for instance, in 2008), it is a highly migrating society, our analysis shows that the racial issues seem to have a deeper importance in Ireland than in Spain. Some reasons might explain this fact. One is that the recent migration to the island is related to refugees, and that the Irish government was unprepared to receive and accommodate such a great number of new people, with different cultures and languages. Plainly speaking, there are not enough housing offers for them. Ireland is one of the few Western countries in which the far-right parties have virtually no presence at the institutional level, but that in no way means that there is not a far-right movement, whose presence is perceivable in some digital-native media. The shape of that discourse is also remarkable. There are some comments by active readers near the conception of immigration of presumed wanted (or “unvetted”) people also present in the American alt-right. That political alignment insists on the supposedly rooted problem, for instance, in *Gript.ie*, October 30, 2023, when the writer insisted that “until we reduce immigration significantly, the housing crisis will continue forever and ever”, and, as a conclusion, thought that “we natives might have a place to live.” It is quite clear how a nativist discourse is also appearing in the only European country where the far-right political parties have a less intense presence in the institutions.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, Irish legacy media propose more reasonable measures, relying much more on redistribution than on legal measures, namely in passing new specific laws whose effectiveness is always to be seen. Tax harmonization, however, is less mentioned. Again, for different reasons. Spain has unequal taxation levels in the different so-called autonomous communities, and it has been even defined as an imperfect, or semi-federal state – also, as a failed federal state. Two such regions, the so-called historical, foral ones, the Basque Country and Navarre, enjoy singular economic and tax regimes, and Catalonia is also claiming for 2024 onwards such a different status. Tax inequality is an internal issue in Spain. In Ireland, it is not, but an international issue, when compared to the different tax pressures applied in the Republic and many of the rest of the EU member states. The relationship between the Irish and the Americans can explain this since Ireland serves as a good place for the US technological giants, such as Google, to settle. During the period of our research, the political parties in office were in the Spanish government left-handed, and in Ireland, a centre-right coalition. While in Spain the solutions proposed by the government were mainly a legal regulation of the private market and, to a lesser extent, a public policy of building new houses, in Ireland we can observe, especially from legacy media such as the hegemonic *Irish Times* newspaper – considered today a quite liberal, even socio-democratic medium – a solution both based in public and, especially, private building, so measures to inspire the private initiative are welcome.

8. <<https://gript.ie/interest-rate-increases-spooking-property-market-along-with-supply-issues-survey-finds/>>

In the definition of inequality, the micro perspective becomes more present in the Spanish media. The gaps present in the news also show some differences. Even though social class is the main breach in both media systems, the racial component increases its relevance in the Irish agenda. The most important differences arise in the measures to face the housing problem. Within the general remedies, redistribution and tax justice increase their salience in the Irish media, whereas legal remedies increase their salience in the Spanish media. On the other hand, the differences in specific remedies are even greater. Firstly, the number of measures is usually higher in the Irish news than in the Spanish news. As a consequence, public sector housing, fair lending, limitation of rents and scattered-site housing solutions are more present in the Irish media agenda. Only the private sector housing solutions increase their importance in the Spanish market.

Finally, media ideology also affects the framing of the housing problem. Nevertheless, the differences are more pronounced at the global level and among Irish media than among the Spanish media. First of all, left-wing and right-wing media have a similar definition of inequality, as they accept the ones that come from institutions and academia. There is no sense in proposing new definitions of a well-quantified problem. Another thing is the approach to it. The differences are reduced to the higher definition of inequality as a cause in the right-wing media and to the higher emphasis on income inequality. Furthermore, differences are only found in general remedies, with redistribution and tax justice growing in the right-wing media and legal remedies and policymaking in the left-wing media. Probably this is because the reality of the market and the limitations of regulating private property, also from a constitutional point of view, are more widely accepted in a liberal media system, such as the Irish, than in a polarized one, such as the Spanish media. These differences persist among Irish media of different ideologies, and in this case, differences are also found in the development of specific remedies. Discussions are more nuanced in the liberal media system than in a polarized one. Hence, specific remedies related to subsidies, scattered-site housing, and tax property are mentioned more frequently, and not surprisingly, in the Irish left-wing media than in the right-wing media. On the other hand, in the Spanish media agenda, differences in framing according to ideology only occur when the media define inequality as a cause. This is more important than it might seem at first glance. If inequality is not a cause, but an effect, the ideological alignment on what is the ultimate origin of it, and attributing the responsibility for it to the opponent, is easier. This is more common in the right-wing media. In all other aspects, the Spanish media agenda shows a more homogeneous approach.

## 7. Conclusion

Taking as a starting point the coverage of this problem in the Irish and Spanish media, two such different societies in terms of housing model and of

media system – while both having a problem with proving house to everyone without exacerbating inequalities –, the framing of the housing access problem from the perspectives of the definition of inequality, related breaches, and the associated remedies – general and specific – reveals several common characteristics. Therefore, the analysis from the perspective of issue-specific frames could show a certain homogeneity of the news content. However, an analysis based on media nationality and ideology refines these general results. Content diversity in this context appears to be shaped by differing national media landscapes. The Irish media system, for example, demonstrates greater diversity of content, which is largely based on the ideological variations across media outlets. In contrast, in the Spanish media system, ideology does not so significantly contribute to differences in topic coverage, resulting instead in a more uniform approach to the issue. There are, however, remarkable nuances in the approach to the topic, maybe not so spectacular, but when examined closer, or relevance: the different approach, according to the ideological alignment of media, to inequality – and of the housing crisis, as one of its main manifestations – as a cause or as an effect, attributed, in the second case, to reputedly wrong political decisions by the opponent. This is typical of a polarized media – and political – system like the Mediterranean one, according to the classical categorization proposed by Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini.

Using content analysis, and categories well-established in precedent literature, our modest research study – true as it is that it is reduced to just two countries during a short period of time – can provide a model for further research on the topic. This goes beyond a simple analysis of how (digital) media deal with the housing problem. First, because this is an issue that is symptomatic of economic inequalities in our societies. Second, and mainly, because it helps reveal some ideological axis, not only in polarized media systems and societies, such as Spain, but also in more liberal, business-oriented media systems, such as Ireland. Ideological treats are present in all of them, and no topic is free from their influence. The roots of inequalities are deep down in every society, affect fundamental rights, can erode democracy since weakening trust in media, and go beyond the economic, usually presented in a numeric, non-faced, non-personal way by media – but which has an undeniable, profound importance in people's everyday life. We have also tried to provide an insight into how legacy and Internet-native media have a word on part of the digital public sphere (Sakariassen, 2020; Vermeulen, 2021; Fuchs, 2021) and on framing a relevant issue, in the vogue previous research studies have done, at least in the Spanish case (Pérez-Altable & Serrano-Tellería, 2021).

It should be noted that this research presents certain limitations that future studies could address. Firstly, it would be beneficial to advance the analysis by not focusing solely on the mentions of measures, but also by examining the sentiment or tone with which these measures are discussed. The mere mention does not reveal the media outlet's stance, particularly if the sentiment is positive or negative. Furthermore, while the media system in

which outlets operate and their ideological orientation are influential in the journalistic production process, other factors also shape the construction of journalistic narratives. As Shoemaker and Reese (2014) highlight, these factors arise from social systems, public institutions connected to the media, the journalistic profession, media organizations, and the individual characteristics of journalists. Last, but not least, longitudinal studies in historical series are needed to explain in much more detail the ultimate reasons for media coverage of issues related to economic inequality.

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