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Less partisan and less aggressive? The impact of Covid-19 on the media discourse of “El Clásico” on Spanish radio

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Introduction

This article presents an investigation into the way radio, as a particularly popular media across Spain, articulates *El Clásico* (The Classic), the historical rivalry between Real Madrid CF and FC Barcelona. It focuses on radio commentary and studio chats of journalists and pundits with the aim to highlight certain patterns which are becoming increasingly normalised in sports journalism, such as partisanship and nationalism. By comparing the analysis of two games, one played before the Covid-19 pandemic and one during it, the article aims also to show how the absence of fans within the stadium impacted on the narration of the game. In other words, how this specific media discourse was affected by the fact that the games were played in empty venues.

The rivalry between Real Madrid and Barcelona makes a powerful case study in which to observe the evolution of sports media and sports journalism practices. On the one hand, *El Clásico* is the most celebrated and discussed sport event in Spain, whose significance is historically heightened by the political and cultural tensions between Catalonia, the region of which Barcelona is the centre, and the Spanish state, symbolized by its capital, Madrid. On the other hand, this is also one of the most popular football rivalries globally, played by two clubs with large global following and great commercial appeal.

The article will first look at the role of football within the contemporary sports media landscape. It will then unpack the rivalry between Real Madrid and Barcelona, paying attention to the political and cultural dimensions of the struggle of Catalonia against central state power and how the game acquired significance during the Franco dictatorship (1939-1975). The theoretical framework underpinning the analysis will be explored focusing on sensationalism and partisanship in sports journalism, the use of warfare language, and the “gene” trope in discussing the clubs’ identities. The rest of the article will present and discuss

the findings of the study, drawing on evidence from transmissions of public and private broadcasters of one game played in 2017 and one played in 2020. It is important to clarify that each “Clásico” is unique and unpredictable; its media representation draws on specific dynamics happening at the time of the game (such as managers’ rivalries, political developments at national level and so on) which elicit different degrees of dramatization. The comparison never takes place under the same circumstances, nonetheless a systematic analysis of the broadcasts allows us to observe the interactions, commentary and reporting at each moment, and their evolution. The main aim of the study is to highlight the impact of the pandemic on media discourse, and to show that a less confrontational and partisan journalism is possible. However, by presenting a vivid account of the manifestation of partisanship in reporting and commentary, this paper contributes also to the critical discussion of the ethical status of sports journalism.

Sports media and the sporting spectacle

Over the last few decades, the increasing appeal of sport events has brought about changes across all media. The sporting spectacle is the outcome of the mediatisation of the sporting event, magnified by the reliance of the sport industry on the production and dissemination of images (Boyle & Haynes, 2009; Rowe, 2013). At the same time, other media, both traditional media and new media, have been dragged into new territories, where the boundaries between reporting and celebrating have become so blurred to be almost indistinguishable (Mauro, 2022). These changes have exacerbated historical features of sport journalism. In the words of Rowe (2005, p. 126), “in their professional practice sports journalists are expected to both cover sport ‘objectively’ as a news item but also often to celebrate (or, perhaps, denigrate) particular sportspeople and teams as partisan sports supporters”. Miller (2021, p. 369) considers partisanship and nationalism one of the main challenges of sports journalism in the present time. With specific attention to football reporting, he contends that “the majority tendency leans towards chauvinism, regardless of the medium in which it is carried. Such partisanship sees more and more punditry by superannuated players and less and less ‘hard’ news and research”.

The case of Spain is emblematic of this trend. Media researchers in this country have coined terminology to describe a particular phenomenon which characterises popular sports programming and sports journalism. “Forofismo” (from “forofo”, fan, supporter), “periodismo de bandera” (flag journalism) and “periodismo de bufanda” (scarf journalism) have come to define journalists and commentators who not only are not afraid to declare their support for a particular team, but they also make a trademark of their partisanship, seeking popularity rather than credibility (Varona, 2017). They are often hired by media outlets precisely for this reason, to enforce a studio confrontation between different sides made not of players but simply by “observers” of the game.

Understandably, the creation of media channels run by sport organisations and clubs, and their presence across multiple social media platform, has taken to a different level the role of public relations, and its relationship with journalistic practices (Whiteside, 2014). But this development has also pushed traditional media outlets further towards a specific form of entertainment, which downgrades objective information in favour of partisanship and confrontation. According to Bonaut Iriarte (2014: 92, our translation), “The opinion, the

debate and the ‘match beyond the match’, the controversy, have become the common thread of the week-end football shows, which aim to offer a different point of view (...) and fuel the partisanship of their audience”. Over the past decade, a number of researchers have investigated Spanish sporting media with specific attention to this phenomenon, often theorizing it as the “spectacularisation” of sports media (for example, Alcoba, 2005; Mauro & Martínez-Corcuera, 2020). This development closely resonates with what Kellner (2003: 1), with the USA sports media context in mind, defines as “tabloidized infotainment culture”. By and large, football is the dominant focus of the “spectacularisation” of sport in Spain.

As a popular media spectacle followed by millions of people, football programming utilises an emotional language that engenders polarisation, and favours the confrontation between pundits and commentators. Seated in the studio, journalists, pundits and commentators behave and act like supporters. The confrontation of “us vs them”, the logic of conflict, is the perfect formula to establish and maintain the loyalty of the audiences. On the other hand, this consolidates partisan journalism as a popular media practice; the boundaries between information and opinion disappear, affecting the credibility of journalism and reporting, and its commitment to truth (Oates & Pauly, 2007; McEnnis, 2018; Weedon et al., 2018). The Spanish case shows that sport journalism is at risk of losing its remaining professional credibility, and to be essentially turned into a celebratory function of the spectacle (Perelman, 2012: 81-89).

Football and contested identities

The football rivalry between Real Madrid and Barcelona represents one of the most celebrated global media-sport events (Pacheco Barrio, 2012; Lowe, 2013), and according to Lopez-Gonzalez et al. (2014, p. 689), *El Clásico* “has evolved into a cornerstone of the news agenda”. In 2019, it reached an audience of about 650 million viewers in 180 countries, a figure which was higher than the broadcasts of the Super Bowl and the Champions League finals in the same year (Leone, 2019). During the 2010/11 season, the matches between these two teams had in Spain an average audience of 11.5 million viewers, about 60% of the national share (Barlovento Comunicación, 2019). Finally, Real Madrid and Barcelona are the football clubs with the largest following on social media (Murray, 2018).

The importance of this rivalry was evident since the early days of professional football in Spain. It became a central feature of the football calendar during the first decades of the Francisco Franco dictatorship (1939-1975). For much of its history, FC Barcelona has been closely linked to the cause of Catalan independence and active in the promotion of Catalonia as a separate cultural entity, as a nation, from Spain. This commitment was made explicit in its statute in 1908, nine years after the foundation of the club (Pérez-Triviño & Valencia Candalija, 2019). Alongside other clubs in northern regions, such as Athletic Bilbao and Real Sociedad in the Basque Country, during the dictatorship FC Barcelona acquired a particularly important role for the public expression of criticism of the central government, and for the defence of regional identities. Football stadia were the only sites where it was possible to publicly use the Catalan and Basque languages and display their flags without incurring severe sanctions (Payero López, 2009; Vaczi, 2015). In the case of FC Barcelona, this further contributed to the identification between the football club and Catalonia.

During the 1950s, Real Madrid experienced a period of exceptional success, both at national and international level, winning a record of five consecutive European Cups between 1956 and 1960. The success of the club was used by the dictatorial regime as a positive representation of the country, at a time in which the international profile of Spain was at its lowest (Screti, 2016). Francisco Franco saw Real Madrid also has a powerful symbolic tool in his personal fight against the separatist regions of the north, and particularly Catalonia. According to O'Brien (2013, p. 319), the importance of *El Clásico* in Spanish football "is rooted in the historic political and cultural conflict between Catalonia and Castile". This conceptualisation of "nationalism" is one of the main themes of the present paper.

In the eyes of FC Barcelona fans and most Catalan people, the association of Real Madrid with the central state power and with Spanish identity continues to this day. Journalist and commentators based in Madrid are instrumental in reinforcing such a representation, which is an essential feature of the media spectacle of *El Clásico*, by asserting the primacy of the state capital and its main team. On the other hand, over the last decades, the relationship between FC Barcelona and *catalanism* has evolved and become even stronger. In 2012, mass demonstrations in support for Catalan independence took place in Barcelona, and in the wake of these events, the football club became seen by a significant part of Catalan society as the embodiment of the political struggle (Rojo-Labaien, 2020). The Catalan independentist flag (the "estelades") and banners with the message "Catalonia is not Spain" are often displayed by Barcelona fans during international matches, and prominent former players, such as Pep Guardiola, have expressed support for the independentist movement.

It is difficult to deny the persisting political implications of this football rivalry, and the different articulations of "nationalism" (Arnold, 2020) brought to the fore each time the two teams play each other. At the same time, the high mediatisation of the event, and its global profile as the best testimonial for La Liga and Spanish football, has magnified sensationalistic journalistic practices which complicate and confuse the cultural boundaries of the historical rivalry.

Patterns of sensationalistic discourse

In this section we will consider the theoretical framework of the study, focusing on the main articulations of sensationalistic discourse in sports radio broadcasting in Spain such as "war" language, "Us vs Them" narratives, and the articulation of club's "identities".

The use of the metaphor "sport as war" has a long history in sport reporting. Flusberg et al. (2018) refer to metaphor in everyday communication as a tool that helps to understand the world by simplifying complex information and allows to describe the connection between two groups of ideas. The war metaphor is a defining feature of the journalistic discourse of football; it has to some extent become naturalized. They argue that the use and abuse of emotional metaphors in sports journalism to turn information into a media product and capture the interest of the audience; allow the journalistic profession to express value judgments and promote enthusiasm, and even promote certain behaviors and actions (Jenkins, 2013).

At the same time, the use of war metaphors cannot be considered "harmless". While this practice aims to generate drama, emotion, and passion, it can also be an incitement to violence, being entangled in the us vs them confrontation and the view of others as enemies.

Ross and Rivers (2019, p. 6) see a double association, positive and negative, generated by the metaphor “sport as war”. On the one hand, it is presented as something inoffensive; on the other hand, it can trivialise the terrible consequences of war. The sensationalistic narrative around *El Clásico* makes ample use of warfare language and expressions derived from the trivialization of the message (Rojas Torrijos, 2015; Martínez-Corcuera et al., 2021). War metaphors and discourses “provide an idea of the metaphorical structures of the context of culture” (Raffaelli & Katunar, 2016, p. 127) and allow us to “understand how these contexts are conceptualized in our minds and therefore define how one group of people is similar or different, in terms of understanding one concept, to another group of people” (Alzawaydeh & Alghazo, 2018, p. 130). These discourses can be understood as a basis for hate speech; they can lead to more aggressive confrontations and allow for its normalization in society (Martínez-Corcuera et al., 2021). This point is reinforced by Najjari and Mohammad (2018), who stress that the use of warfare language in the context of sport establishes metaphorical markers whose reiteration normalizes discourse and converts it into a natural code.

Stereotypes are quick discursive forms used to interpret realities which are more or less known. According to Ansell and Solomos (2013, p. 152), “Stereotype is a concept that refers to a generalization about a group of people based on imputed traits or attributes. Such generalization may lead to overly rigid, mistaken, and prejudicial beliefs about social groups that can in turn motivate discriminatory behaviour”. Based on stereotypes, people are seen through categories which appear natural and fixed (O’Donnell, 1994). Sensationalistic discourse in Spanish radio broadcasting often relies on stereotypical definitions of a club’s “DNA”. This type of discourse is based on the pioneering work of Johan Cruyff with the youth academy of Barcelona during the 1980s, which established a specific style of football associated to the club. According to the definitions of the dictionary, gene is configured as “DNA sequence that constitutes the functional unit for the transmission of hereditary characters”.¹ Applied to football, the competitive gene would refer to the continuity of the characteristic identity of the teams themselves (Brune, 1999). It implies the transmission and continuity of inherited characters to compete against the others. The youth academies are an ideal setting in which to situate and articulate the “gene” argument. The youth academies are framed as being “ours”, a national or regional asset.

The use of the discursive trope “us vs them” characterizes sports reporting across media, particularly when national teams are involved (Vincent et al. 2010). The confrontation us versus them creates a space in which national identity can be made explicit (Stempel, 2006), amplifying national passions, projecting mythical images and patriotic fanaticism, with players embodying “the virtues of the nation” (Ramonet, 1999:133) or simply the “imagined community of millions” which is called a nation (Hobsbawn, 1991, p. 152). The “spectacularisation” of sport events, and the role they play in the media industry, has led to a polarisation of sports reporting and an increase of partisanship among journalists and communicators. The media discourse of *El Clásico* articulated by Spanish radio broadcasters is centred around the confrontation “us vs them”, and it makes an exemplary case in which to study partisanship in the sports media.

Methodological considerations

This paper articulates a critical discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 2015; Fairclough, 2017) of the journalistic coverage of two games played between FC Barcelona and Real Madrid CF on 23 April 2017 and on 24 October 2020. The game in October 2020 took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, which caused games being played in empty venues. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) enables the observation of the transmission of cultural values through the language used by mass media, and of the ideologies underlying the media content. It focuses on the socio-cognitive interface that binds mental representations of media events and other social occurrences with the basic structure of discourse. It thus emphasizes the role of discourse in the production and reproduction of social reality. Within this framework, power is intended as control over the structure of context, text or conversation, and therefore, indirectly, of people's minds (Van Dijk, 2015).

The study was conducted on the sport programming of six major radio stations. Four stations are based in Madrid: the public broadcaster Radio Nacional de España (RNE), and the private broadcasters Onda Cero (OC), Cadena SER (SER) and Cadena COPE (COPE). Two stations are from Barcelona and are the public broadcaster Catalunya Radio (CR), and the private broadcaster RAC1 (RAC). A leading focus of the analysis was the confrontation between “us” and “them” taking place in the studio, based on the teams facing each other on the pitch, which appears as a confrontation/rivalry between media discourses created by the different broadcasters.

Radio sport programming is broadly structured in two types of programmes: the match broadcast, and the talk show (Owens, 2006). This study focused on the live transmissions of the six channels with the aim of highlighting the polarisation between broadcasters and their partisanship. The analysis of commentary and studio talk was codified along prominent themes, which appear to dominate radio commentary across the different broadcasters, such as: warfare language; identity and nationalistic sentiments; foul language. This pattern is complicated by issues of nationalism seen through the lens of the rivalry between Real Madrid and FC Barcelona (Spain vs. Catalonia). For the analysis, all radio programmes have been listened to in their entirety and the contents of the speeches have been highlighted and transcribed. The categories and units of analysis have been identified through a deductive process, and the use of inference. Inference has been also useful to detect certain aspects that emerge from the evolution of media and social discourse itself. In 2017, the analysis sample consisted of 232 units, classified into five categories (warfare, spectacularisation, partisanship, DNA pride, references to history). In 2020 the analysis sample, along the same categories, was limited to 56 units.

The analysis of the content of radio sport programming shows that the language of sensationalism works through specific axes which reproduce and reinforce certain social patterns: nationalism, racism, and sexism. The “spectacularisation” of sport journalism creates a space in which the use of national stereotypes and different forms of hate speech (Kilvington & Price, 2021) can be expressed, often unchallenged.

Radio sport programming is particularly popular across Spain, and especially the radio talk shows which are broadcast late at night throughout the week. Every night, for about two hours (approximately between 22.30 and 01.45, according to the different radio stations), millions of Spanish football fans tune in on one of the major national radio networks and listen to journalists and commentators discuss all aspects of their favourite teams'

performances. The listening figures for some of these programmes are quite remarkable. For instance, as of December 2020, the sporting show *El Larguero* of Cadena SER (Network SER) gathered on average 766.000 listeners, while *El Partidazo* of Cadena COPE gathers 736.000 listeners (Neeo, 2020). The night-time show *Tu diràs* of the private station RAC1 gathered, only in Catalonia, 102.000 listeners. The numbers are higher for the weekend radio shows that follow live the matches. For example, *Carrusel Deportivo* (SER) has 1.95 million listeners on Saturday (between 12:00 and 01:00am), and 1.83 million on Sunday. *Tiempo de Juego* (COPE) has 1.74 million listeners on Saturday and 1.44 million on Sunday. The Catalan radio stations do not run week-end shows that follow live the matches of FC Barcelona. Nevertheless, the two main Catalan radio stations have specific shows devoted only to Barcelona: *El Barça juga a RAC1*, on RAC1, and *La Transmissió d'en Torquemada* (TDT) on Catalunya Radio.

The first part of the analysis focuses on the 2017 game, while the second part is about the game played in 2020. As noted, each *Clásico*, as a media event, has its own specificities and socio-cultural significance. Any attempt of comparison needs to take this into account. Our analysis aimed at stressing certain patterns made more visible by the Covid-19 pandemic, such as the role of the presence of the public inside the venues, but the same patterns could be observed and analysed also in different circumstances, such as games played in empty venues as a disciplinary measure. The contexts of the two games were different: it is not only the fact that the 2020 game was played in an empty venue, without the noise and the influence of the crowd, but also that this game happened early in the football season, when motivations are different given that a game won or lost will not greatly affect the team's position in the table. The game in 2017 took place toward the end of the season with both RM and FCB fighting for the title, and therefore in a particularly heated moment. Different situations imply different discourses at play, but the comparison can demonstrate that a competent, technical broadcast could be compatible with entertainment and the absence of foul language and hate speech. The next sections will describe the main research findings before the conclusive discussion. Excerpts of radio broadcasts will be discussed in relation to three themes: nationalism ("the best game in the world"), warfare metaphors, and partisanship.

"The best game in the world"

El Clásico involves more than a match: the projection of the football itself, the cities and the country that host it, in a confrontation with the rest of the world: the best game in the world, the best atmosphere, the best stadium, or the largest global audience. The success of the game is interpreted as a success of the whole country. We will first examine the articulation of this trope in the game played in 2017, and then compare it to the game played in 2020. Interestingly, the discursive sensationalisation of *El Clásico* characterises in particular the radio broadcasters based in Madrid. This is a typical feat of Onda Cero, exemplified by one of its more popular broadcasters, Alfredo Martínez.

In this very moment, on a terrace in the Big Apple, there are 3.000 spectators following the great classic of Spanish football and possibly the greatest game of the entire world. It fills us with pride that there are 200 countries watching this game (...) the great show; total game at the Bernabéu (...) Glory to football. The duel between

the titans of the Spanish league, the game that halts the world. We would like it never to end. This is unrepeatabe, only Madrid and Barça can provide such a grandiose spectacle! (OC, 23/04/17).

On Spain's national public radio (RNE), the presenter Ángel Rodríguez talks about "the classic of the classics of the planet", and of "the greatest club match in the world" (RNE, 23/04/17). Journalists and pundits congratulate Spanish football for having "a Madrid" and "a Barça", "the two colossuses of *our* football". Along similar lines, SER present *El Clásico* as the greatest sporting show in the world. They further take the opportunity to disparage other football leagues. In terms of discourse, the superiority of "our" game implies claiming the inferiority of "theirs". For Antonio Romero, SER's match commentator, this is

the classic of the world, the best image of our league to be exported abroad, to end once and for all the fuzz around the Premier League, the Bundesliga, and so on. Tomorrow they will say that the Premier is the bomb... forget about that! This is the best game in the world. (SER, 23/04/17).

The idea that *El Clásico* represents Spain on the global stage is reiterated by other participants in the same broadcast. To be the best in the world brings with it responsibilities...

Dani Garrido (presenter): The great flag of global football. There is nothing like it, Alfredo!

Alfredo Relaño (journalist): There is nothing like it. Truth is, that we are all proud of it, right? That the whole world is watching again the game between Madrid and Barça. But it also brings a certain responsibility (...) when it does not go well, we feel bad. (SER, 23/04/17).

The atmosphere of the Bernabéu stadium is also presented as something unique. The atmosphere includes even moments of sportsmanship and reconciliation with "the other", the supporters of the opponent.

Antonio Romero (match commentator): The sportsmanship that people with the FC Barcelona shirt are spreading in the stands of the Santiago Bernabéu. No problems at the moment (SER, 23/04/17).

Ricardo Gallego (former Real Madrid player): I am not happy with the result, because I support Real Madrid, but I am happy for the people who enjoyed it. I saw something that I don't see in Barcelona. I have seen many Barcelona shirts in the stands celebrating the goals. Something that does not happen in Barcelona. Hence, we should acknowledge that this spectacle can only happen here in Madrid (OC, 23/04/17).

There are arguably examples of fans wearing the Real Madrid jersey and celebrating inside the Barcelona stadium, but it does not matter – it is not relevant to the type of discourse articulated in the studio. The "best game in the world" rhetoric is typical of the radio stations

based in Madrid, while stations based in Barcelona prefer to highlight historical moments in the rivalry between the two teams, with particular attention to underlying political implications. The tone is subtly dramatic. For example, Catalunya Radio presents the game in the following way:

1916. It's 101 years since the withdrawal of Barça against Madrid. The Madrilenians and the Catalans played the semi-final of the King Cup, a tie so tense that needed two games to be disputed. Both games were played in the Spanish capital and officiated by the same referee, who curiously was a former Madrid player. During the final, with the result on 2-2, the referee conceded a goal to Madrid which was off-side, and another one preceded by a foul against the Barça keeper. With the result now on 4-2, and with 12 minutes to go, the Barça captain, Santiago Massana, ordered the team to retreat. They felt conned and they did not want to keep on with that story. (CR, 23/04/17).

And later,

2008. It's nine years since Barça had to give the guard of honour to Madrid at the Bernabéu. In the history of *El Clásico*, there are just three guards of honour to the champions. None was more humiliating than the last: 7 may 2008. The result, a humiliating defeat 4-1. A guard of honor that lasted 90 minutes, during which Barça cried for a change of course. (CR, 23/4/17).

The pandemic allows us to observe the sport-media event unfolding in an almost unique situation: we can analyse media speeches in an environment deprived of audience or fans. It's similar to the case of a stadium closure due to disciplinary measures, but at the same time different, as fans could not even gather to watch the game remotely on TV. The empty stadia lack the atmosphere created by 90.000 fans. The silence dominating the scene arguably dilutes the fervour and the exaggerations which are typical of presenters and commentators following this game. Across the broadcasters, there are sparse mentions of the "spectacle" of *El Clásico* or the "best game in the world". In the game played in 2020 there were just nine references to the football game as a "show", compared to 30 counted in 2017. Below some examples of match commentary from different stations.

Lluís Flaquer (match commentator): The Camp Nou is majestic but empty for this classic, amid the pandemic and without spectators (SER, 24/10/20).

Germán García (match commentator): The classic of classics. The strangest classic in history (RNE, 24/10/20).

Joan Maria Pou (match commentator): The classic of silence (RAC1, 24/10/20).

Alfredo Martínez (match commentator): Attention, please (...) The major spectacle, such a joy. Amid the pandemic, in this empty temple where you can hear screams of silence, the classic of the classics is going to be played. The game par excellence. The world stops! The game starts! (OC, 24/10/20).

During the pandemic, the use of sensationalistic language diminishes. As evidenced by the review of the findings, this appears one of those circumstances where the absence of spectators inside the stadium elicits, among match commentators and pundits, a lower number of hyperbolic expressions, less warfare metaphors, and no expressions that verge on hate speech (for example machismo, racism or LGTBiphobia), which are not infrequent in “normal” conditions. As a consequence, the comments appear more descriptive, more technical, in other words, more “professional”.

Warfare language

In the radio broadcasts, *El Clásico* is turned into a space for the articulation of warfare language as “emotional metaphors” (Flusberg et al., 2018) to entice the audience’s interest. It’s undeniable that the war metaphor is normalized in sport reporting and broadcasting, but this does not mean that it is harmless (Najjari and Mohammadi, 2018). Examples of terminology and language referring to the semantic field of the war are numerous across different broadcasters in the game played 2017. However, as we will see, the game taking place during the Covid-19 pandemic has a different “tone”. Broadcasters and pundit make lesser use of warfare language in 2020 compared to 2017. The analysis of the 2017 game evidenced 111 references to warfare, but only 23 in 2020.

The war has started (...) They have more firepower than us (OC, 23/04/17).

If their troops overtake us, we will all go bust (...) They are coming. How many of them? 300 men. The ball goes toward Luís Suárez, who receives and...goal! We never run away, why should we now? Let’s keep on fighting! Let’s keep on fighting! (OC, 23/04/17).

The narrative around the game transforms the football stadium into a space of confrontation and military strategy. Commentators habitually make use of military ranks in describing the players. At the same time, the narrative alludes to the military capacity of the teams, praising the power of the players, eulogising their play and charging the commentary with strong emotional tones.

What a shot, Valdano! What a shot! Great shot from Kroos, a bomb. What a shell, a missile, a bang. What a ball. Total impact (...) the net exploded. (OC, 23/04/2017).

The resort to violent, emotional speech, in combination with warfare terminology, emerges also in the programming of Catalunya Radio: “Madrid wants to make blood of Barça (...) People here believe that today’s match will be a military walk” (CR, 23/04/17). This type of language can be found also on Onda Cero: “Military walk at the Bernabéu, 3-0” (OC, 23/04/17). There are numerous references to surrender and to the death of the rival, to assassins and killers.

There are teams that never surrender, while others (...) Madrid is not going to surrender (SER, 23/04/17).

We had opportunities to kill the game (CR, 23/04/17).
For the moment, the killers failed. Alcacer is a killer (RNE, 23/04/17).
In the end, the game was killed by Messi (SER, 23/04/17).

As said, the pandemic reduced the intensity of the communication style, lowered the sensationalism, and made the use of warfare concepts less frequent. In 2020 there are sparse, and quite banal, warfare references, such as “Messi shoots” (RNE), “Shoot with the right foot” (COPE), “Two terrible mistakes by Barça. Madrid can now kill them. They can kill” (COPE). The station Onda Cero, and particularly their main game commentator, Alfredo Martínez, are an exception in that they continue to make large use of military metaphors. In a way, he tries to maintain the “spectacularization” of the narration, albeit in a nuanced form, as this is the way he has made his “name”. His approach stands out amid a calmer style of all other broadcasters and commentators, more focused on technical and analytical details.

Chilling afternoon. Marco Valverde is going to take the blaugrana castle.
The gunfire is spectacular.
The Dutch patrolman (...) creates havoc.
It's a crossfire (...) They are wearing the first weapons of the classic.
The ground-to-ground throw was directed at Casemiro. (OC, 24/10/20).

Partisanship: A matter of identity

Pride is a common narrative trope in describing victory or a discursive tool to handle defeat: “Madridism means always being proud of your actions. Sometimes, or generally, more than football itself” (OC, 23/04/17). In the words of Real Madrid legend, Emilio Butragueño: “the team, in fairness, has fought till the end. In that sense, we should be proud of our players. In the end, everything has turned against us, but nonetheless the team has fought on” (CR, 23/04/17). Pride is a discursive tool employed also by journalists and commentators of the other side.

Pride to be of Barça (...) To be of Barça is the best you can be (CR, 23/04/17).
All the footballers, more than ever, display a gesture of Barcelonism pointing their finger to the symbol of the club emblazoned on their shirts (RAC1, 23/04/17).

Journalist and pundits commenting *El Clásico* often refer to “genes”.

Ricardo Gallego (former Real Madrid player): It's a feat of (Real) Madrid to always go looking for victory and triumph (OC, 23/04/17).
Emilio Amavisca (former Real Madrid player): I like it!
Manu Martínez (presenter): You relish in this competitive gene, to always fight for the victory with ten (players), even if the game ends in defeat. (RNE, 23/04/17).

“Genetic” configuration it's a matter of identity.

Jorge Pulido (journalist): It is part of the winning DNA of Real Madrid, and it is something that you cannot take away from this team. I think this is a sign of identity. I also think that this is something that the Bernabéu likes, but they don't only like it, they use it as an excuse. What I mean by this, the Bernabéu will accept a defeat if the team has fought till the end. (SER, 23/04/17).

Reference to “genes” when talking about clubs’ identities is a common trope of sports journalism.

Manolo Lama (match commentator): Madrid has a winning gene that cannot be taken away.

Poli Rincón (former Real Madrid player): Madrid has a gene which is unique in the world, no other team has something like that.

Manolo Lama: Barça does not have it. (COPE, 23/04/17).

The alleged DNA of teams is often used as an argumentative tool to mark the distinction between us and them. For instance, the number of Catalan or Spanish players in the teams is turned into a debate about “identity”. Journalists and commentators are the ones who make these distinctions, deciding which players belong or do not belong. Often, humour is used a strategy to belittle the opponent.

During the broadcast of El Clásico in 2020, there is just one reference to the team’s “DNA”, and it refers to Barcelona. In his celebration of the goal, Ansu Fati repeats what had been done by Messi: he kisses the club’s badge on his shirt. From the point of view of Barcelona, Fati’s gesture represents the young player’s sense of belonging to the club, to the DNA of Barcelona. But from the point of view of Madrid, his gesture is criticised and presented as proof of the youngster’s lack of personality.

Mario Torrejón: Jordi, did you notice that Ansu Fati’s goal celebration is the same that Messi the first time he scored in the classic?

Jordi Martín: They are the values of the academy, instilled since the early childhood.

Tomás Roncero: That is, no individual personality, just a gesture...

Jordi Martín: Tomás, that is since his early childhood.

Tomás Roncero: The great (players) have personality and do their own gestures. That’s it! (SER, 24/10/20).

Despite the pandemic, partisanship and confrontation remain at the heart of football programming, although understandably diluted by the deflated event that is the match in an empty stadium. All Spanish radio stations devoted to sport invite pundits to the programme because of their “relationship” with a team, and pundits are expected to comment from the point of view of the team. On RNE, for example: “Julio Salinas, from Barça’s perspective, what do you make of the game?” (RNE, 24/10/20). On Cadena SER, Real Madrid’s goals during the game played in 2020 are celebrated by the match commentator Tomás Roncero with cheers and shouts of “Let’s go!”, and “Get it!”. This does not happen when Barcelona scores, no cheers or clapping hands for them. During the pre-match studio chat on OC, the

presenter invites commentators to predict the result, eliciting confrontation and the use of irony to belittle other's point of view.

Studio voice: Roberto Gómez predicts a 0-3...

Alexis Martín: Roberto Gómez has based his prediction on "statistical analysis". Yes, in fact the last time Real Madrid beat Barça 0-3 was in 1936... (OC, 24/10/20).

Interestingly, in 2020 social media messages from the listeners read live by the presenter expose the confusing relationship between objective information and commentators' desires.

"We would like to know what is happening in the game, not your desires" (COPE, 24/10/20)

"I am asking you not to grant a penalty when it is not yet clear if it is a penalty" (COPE, 24/10/20).

Discussion - Interpreting media discourse

As all professional sport events, during the pandemic *El Clásico* appears as a simulation of the authentic event: it happens exclusively for and in the media that represents it. It is arguably the case that the identification of sport events as "media events" has been magnified and transformed by the pandemic. In the words of Rowe (2020, p. 706), "Covid-19 exposed the inner workings of sport as a machine that could be disabled by its own global interdependency", as "sport is unusually dependent on commercial media-financed, impossible-to-repeat live events performed before large co-present crowds that form a key part of the spectacle". As a consequence, the sensationalistic discourse, that in Spain is made particularly acute by the divisive rivalry between Real Madrid and FC Barcelona, has also been impacted. The format and the style of radio sport programming cannot be changed, as it is the recipe of its continuous success, but the tone is diluted, the focus has become less clear, and the intensity of the media discourse is arguably weakened. This is the case, for example, of the discursive tropes "we are the best in the world" and "us vs them".

Radio broadcasts of the matches between Real Madrid and Barcelona reiterate the theme "We are the best in the world", making use of epic metaphors and encouraging manifestations of partisanship by pundits and commentators (for example: "the classic of the classics of the planet", "the greatest club match in the world"). In the case of *El Clásico*, such a dynamic takes a particular form, as it involves also the projection of the game itself, the cities and the country that host it, in a confrontation with the rest of the world. The articulation of "us" as the best in the world reproduces and magnifies the confrontation "us vs. them" and, as a consequence, this particular media discourse ends up belittling and denigrating all non-Spanish football teams, leagues or even societies. However, as we have seen, the pandemic has toned down this discursive trope, leaving journalists and commentators like theatre actors performing in front of an empty venue. The same happened to the use of warfare metaphors which are at the heart of the trivialisation of sport coverage and commentary (Ross and Rivers, 2019). This confirms the role of the crowds, the live spectators, the fans, in the articulation of the sporting spectacle even in a media-dominated scenario (Redhead, 2017). At the same time, the extraordinary circumstances in which all games were played during the pandemic, favoured a more direct relationship between broadcasters and listeners, with some

listeners directly questioning the style of reporting and commentary. This is significant as it arguably highlights an interest in competent and authoritative coverage, rather than partisan interpretation. The listeners argue critically against partisan journalism that has defined the development of sporting media in Spain over the last few decades.

As noted, football has a great metaphorical potential to articulate the identity of a group. Definitions of group identity are based on the generalisation of certain traits or attributes, and people are seen through categories or stereotypes which appear natural and fixed. Journalists and pundits covering *El Clásico* often talk about the “DNA” of the two clubs, and of their competitive gene (Brune, 1999). The DNA of the teams is used as an argumentative tool to mark the distinction between “us” and “them”. Journalists and commentators covering *El Clásico* describe the characteristics of a club’s DNA and may consequently decide which players possess it, and which do not. Again, as with other common tropes in the context of this sports-media event, also the metaphor of “DNA” appears to have been diluted during the pandemic. It was used less often and in a less confrontational manner.

Conclusion

Over the last few decades, the football rivalry between Real Madrid and Barcelona has turned each match played by these two teams into a global sport event, followed by millions of people around the world. *El Clásico* represents a central asset of sporting media in Spain, and the event that, more than any other, encourages the “spectacularisation” of communication. The exaltation of confrontation and partisanship is the central feature of highly popular radio programming devoted to football. The broadcasts of the games, alongside the weekly post-match radio shows, have developed a formula which appeals a large audience that is polarised along cultural and political lines. The people in the studio, be they journalists or pundits, all need to declare which side they are on, the team they support and “represent”. The trivialisation of sport reporting and commentary, which in Spain takes the form of “scarf journalism”, not only undermines the credibility of sport journalism, but, even more importantly, may favour the normalisation of hate speech, xenophobia, misogyny, and racism (Mauro & Martínez-Corcuera, 2020).

The exceptional scenario brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic has represented a challenge for the whole sport industry. Games played in empty venues have deprived the sport of much of its social and cultural significance. However, the Covid-19 crisis has not affected the audience figures of the popular radio broadcasters that represent a central feature of the sport-media complex in Spain. Interestingly, though, as evidenced by our study, their style of communication has been altered, becoming generally less aggressive and violent, becoming a more technical and analytical style of broadcast. The broadcast focuses on information, on the development of the game, the critical analysis of the action. That is, it focuses more on football than on what surrounds football.

Finally, the present study highlights potential future research areas. On the one hand, it would be appropriate to further challenge the difficulty of comparing examples of *El Clásico*, exploring continuities and fissures in their media representation. The analysis of this rivalry would allow to highlight the articulation of different discourses and their evolution. On the other hand, it could be interesting to examine the presence of hate speech in match commentary of international sport events. In many countries, games played by national teams

provide the ideal terrain for the exaltation of confrontation, and the us vs them discourse, articulated through national anthems, flags and historical rivalries which have often little to do with the sporting field.

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