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## Exploding Crime? Topic Management in Central American Newspapers

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Sebastian Huhn / Anika Oettler / Peter Peetz

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## **Exploding Crime? Topic Management in Central American Newspapers**

### **Abstract**

It has become common to state that criminal violence has superseded political violence in Central America. This paper presents the first results of a research project which analyses the social construction of violent realities in Costa Rica, El Salvador and Nicaragua. The authors describe the print media landscape in Central America and examine both the quality of leading newspapers and the main clusters of topics constituting the news discourse on violence. The analysis of the macro-structure of topic management in Central American newspapers allows to differentiate the “talk of crime”: it is more heterogeneous than often thought. There are signs that the problem of juvenile delinquency is emerging as the center of a cross-country discourse on “ordinary violence”. On the other hand, the talk of crime is centered around few topic clusters, with sexual violence and border-related discourse on violence being of key importance. Finally, the paper points to a heterogeneous array of discourse events that is connected to political developments and power-relations.

Key words: Central America, violence, discourse analysis, media

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## **Zusammenfassung**

### **Eine Explosion des Verbrechens? Topic Management in zentralamerikanischen Tageszeitungen**

Häufig wird darauf verwiesen, dass auf die politische Gewalt, die Zentralamerika in den 1970er/1980er Jahren erschütterte, eine Welle krimineller Gewalt folgte. Der vorliegende Beitrag präsentiert die ersten Resultate eines Forschungsprojektes, das die soziale Konstruktion violenter Realitäten in Costa Rica, El Salvador und Nicaragua analysiert. Dieser Beitrag konzentriert sich auf die Makro-Struktur des *Topic Managements* in führenden zentralamerikanischen Tageszeitungen. Die zentralamerikanische Presselandschaft wird nach der Qualität der Berichterstattung befragt. Mit der Herausarbeitung von den zentralen thematischen Clustern des Pressediskurses wird die gängige Vorstellung von einer „Explosion der Gewalt“ differenziert. Die Untersuchung zeigt, dass sich das Problem der Jugendkriminalität als das Zentrum eines grenzüberschreitenden Gewaltdiskurses herauszubilden beginnt. Auf der anderen Seite stellen sowohl sexuelle Gewalt als auch nationale Grenzen zentrale Motive des Pressediskurses über Gewalt dar. Der Pressediskurs wird ferner als ein heterogenes Feld von Diskursereignissen charakterisiert, das an politische Entwicklungen und Kräfteverhältnisse gekoppelt ist.

# Exploding Crime? Topic Management in Central American Newspapers

Sebastian Huhn / Anika Oettler / Peter Peetz

## Article Outline

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3. Why and How To Analyse Central American Newspapers?
4. The Central American Print Media Landscape
5. Violence as News: Seven Clusters of Topics
6. Concluding Remarks: Manifestations of Violence in Print Media Discourse

## 1. Introduction

According to policy papers and academic studies, levels of violence in Central America are as high as, or even higher than at the times of state terror, insurgent action and war of the 1970s and 1980s<sup>1</sup>. It has become common to state that criminal violence has superseded political violence. Actually, the high level of Central American criminal violence has become a social fact, which is such, because it is commonly believed. From our viewpoint, it is important to recognise, that (1) the 'real' level of criminal violence is mostly unknown and that (2) the 'secondary waves' of criminal violence did not move to all countries at the same speed. While public life in El Salvador has been shaped by fear and criminal violence for almost a decade, in Costa Rica the level of attention to this issue has only recently begun to rise.

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance, Briceño-León 2001:17, Cruz 2003, Lungo/Martel 2005, Bourgois 2005, Call (2000).

This paper is part of an ongoing research project which analyses the origins, development, and institutionalisation of the 'talk of crime' (Caldeira 2000) in Central America.<sup>2</sup> The project focuses on the interconnectedness of hegemonic discourses and counter-discourses across media, public politics, the judiciary, academic spheres and the lifeworld. Empirically, it will be based on newspapers, laws, academic papers, publications and programs of political parties, qualitative research interviews (35 per country; representing a wide range of professions and social classes) and, finally, short essays written by students of nine public and private schools in Costa Rica, El Salvador and Nicaragua .

The present paper presents both, our approach (Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2006) and the first results of a comprehensive discourse analysis. The aim is to differentiate the 'talk of crime' by analysing the topic management in Central American newspapers. While we focus here on the macro-structure of topic management, we will proceed to an intertextual analysis of academic, daily, legal, political and media discourse through the next stages of research.

The paper is organised as follows: The first part exposes our approach to the social construction of violent reality in Central America. The second part deals with the basic question 'why and how should we analyse newspapers?' The print media landscape in Costa Rica, El Salvador and Nicaragua is examined in part three, with a short section looking at the spectrum of news passing the filters of leading newspapers. The subsequent part exposes the macro-structure of news production, and examines the main clusters of topics constituting the media discourse on 'ordinary violence'. The concluding part reflects on the manifestations of violence in Central American news discourse.

## 2. Approaching Central American Violence

The fact that criminal violence plays a decisive role in the discursive structuring of the social world is reflected by criminal statistics, which indicate that Central America is one of the most violent regions of the world. It is important to note, however, that criminal statistics must be treated with caution, because they reflect *and* construct patterns of violent action (e.g. Huhn/Oettler/Peetz 2006). 'But if the information they give on crime is restricted, they may nevertheless reveal other facts about the society that produces them' (Caldeira 2000: 106). Central America, of course, is no exception. According to police statistics, El Salvador

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<sup>2</sup> We are grateful to our research assistants Diego Menestrey and Rosa Wagner for working long and hard with thought and diligence. We also acknowledge the help we received from our volunteers, Nadja Ehlers, Meike Schmitz, Christian Schramm and Thomas Wagner. More detailed information on the research project is available at [www.giga-hamburg.de/projects/violence-and-discourse](http://www.giga-hamburg.de/projects/violence-and-discourse).

has suffered an explosion in homicides. This is connected to political statements and, especially, to the law-and-order statements of the *Alianza Republicana Nacionalista* (ARENA). In contrast, in Nicaragua the police claim that criminal violence is of marginal importance. This coincides with public and private budget increases for security, and is connected to the elite discourse of Nicaragua being a safe country (Rocha 2005, and for the relationship between police activity and statistical outcome see Rodgers 2004: 6).

In all Central American societies, the talk of crime focuses on the ever-present danger of murder, robberies and rape, a sword of Damocles hanging above daily life. However, this seed of fear is nourished by a diverse pattern of discourse events, differing from country to country. In Costa Rica, youth gangs (*pandillas, maras*) are treated as a problem of marginal importance. But in El Salvador, juvenile delinquency has been perceived as an imminent peril for almost a decade. Politicians and military leaders tend to characterise *maras* as an imminent threat to National Security, and, even more: Central American youth gangs are said to belong to a hierarchical transnational criminal network, generally tied to narcotics trade. These 'supergangs' (Arana 2005) are seen as 'more violent, more organised, and more widespread than ever before. They pose one of the greatest threats to the safety and security of all Americas' (Swecker 2005). Actually, empirical evidence on the growth and 'nature' of youth gangs has been provided for local areas (Rodgers 2006, DIRINPRO 2004) rather than the national or transnational levels. We presume that this threat is, such as others, mainly constituted by discourse practices. It seems a likely supposition that even though there is scant evidence on actual involvement, the majority of crimes is attributed to gang violence. Moreover, we suppose that fear is increasingly focusing on marginalized male adolescents (or, perhaps, on the whole generation of adolescents).

The Central American talk of juvenile delinquency shows how public discourses produce and reproduce collective patterns of interpretation as well as systems of social rules. Discourses of violence and collective reactions to the perception of insecurity both emerge in public spheres. First of all, a wide range of human interactions play a central role in the performance of discourse. When we read an article, talk about it to our family, to our colleagues or to our students, discourse is processed. Thus, the basic 'community of discourse' is constituted within the framework of daily life, within the horizon of lifeworld. Collective patterns of interpretation circulating within these spheres legitimise – and are legitimised by – collective action. Obviously, the perception of insecurity serves as an important argument for social segregation, fortification and privatisation of security. But social encapsulation legitimised by ever-present threat is also located within the strata of evangelical sects. As a means to keep men away from alcohol and kids from youth gangs, they also have a conflict preventing function.



Obviously, normative issues are discussed at the same time across different public spaces. The talk of crime strongly affects national and international politics as well as programs of international development agencies. It can be contended that discourse within certain public spheres is anticipated to promote social segregation and law-and-order politics. Moreover, it is anticipated to detract from certain state politics or forms of crime (like corruption for example). But it is important to note, however, that the public is comprised of different – powerful or less powerful – opinion-making bodies. Thus, we should focus on a wide range of hegemonic spheres and of ‘subaltern counter publics’ (Fraser 1993) related to national as well as daily life.

There is a further issue, that is not usually thoroughly investigated, and that is how mass media are shaping the Central American public discourse on violence and crime. We presume that media and politics tend to dominate the architecture of ‘the public sphere’. Mass media play a decisive role in the decision making about how problems of crime, violence and insecurity should be treated. In the entire region, socioeconomic development is shaped by growing human insecurity and marginalisation. Thus, what is at stake in the debate on crime and insecurity is social classification. Media do not only produce and distribute concepts of violence, they create groups: the groups of victims and perpetrators, the groups which combat crime, and the groups which are targeted. Normative discourse within Central American media tends to defend the status quo and balance of power. According to Scheerer (1978), in periods of crisis and social change crime is used as a meta-symbol for social problems. Within this vein of media theory, it has been argued that media campaigns which promote fear or law-and-order are used as an instrument to distract from crisis and social change (e.g. Hall et al. 1978).

It is important to note that Central America is a ‘bounded system’ (Stake 2000), an interdependent configuration of societies, characterised by porous borders. On the other hand, the region – comprised of five (or six, or even seven) countries – is quite heterogeneous. In attempting to analyse the ‘social construction of [violent] reality’ (Berger/Luckmann 1966) in Central America, we focus on three countries: Costa Rica, El Salvador and Nicaragua. The cases are chosen for (1) a suspected similarity in the talk of (in)security, and (2) for the variety of forms and contexts. Thus, we take into account a variety of causal patterns and social phenomena such as agro-politics (Mahoney 2001), political culture and regime change (Walker/Armony 2000) and social stratification (Booth/Walker 1999). Moreover, each Central American capital city has its own spatial and cultural dynamics. Today, more than ever before, space is privatised. All Central American capitals witness the proliferation of gated communities and shopping malls.

### 3. Why and How To Analyse Central American Newspapers?

According to van Dijk, scholarly interest in news reports 'is justified when we realise how important news is in our daily lives. Most of our social and political knowledge and beliefs about the world derive from the dozens of news reports we read or see every day' (van Dijk 1991: 110). Yet, an issue that deserves further examination is the question, if the press really receives much interest in non-OECD countries such as Costa Rica, El Salvador and Nicaragua.

Obviously, there are various factors affecting the impact of press reports in Central America. Many remote areas still depend on radio and television. Illiteracy and functional illiteracy are widespread. Moreover, many people try avoid the influence of mass media and instead, rely on religious services of protestant sects to make sense of the world.

What, if anything, can a Central American newspaper contribute to the public discourse on violence? Press reports are the primary means of disseminating accounts of discursive and non-discursive events. Politicians, social scientists and the middle classes tend to rely on print media coverage of events. Moreover, anecdotal evidence suggests that the Central American middle classes and the elites take media coverage quite serious. According to Adrián Vergara, 'the social influence [of the Costa Rican newspaper *La Nación*] is derived from the fact that it is the newspaper that is read by the dominant groups (middle upper classes, upper classes). This means that these readers refer to the newspapers that may affect their opinion on social reality'.<sup>3</sup> It is also important to note that journalists employed by TV or radio stations disseminate press coverage as well, though their programs may differ from the editorial stance of the newspapers.

And finally, perhaps the cover is as important as the insides. What makes newspapers work in societies characterised by functional illiteracy is the fact that they are sold in public spaces such as street corners, bus-stops and market places. Throughout Central America, newspapers are a necessary ingredient of bustling public squares, with street vendors calling out the headlines. Thus, the public usage and visibility of newspapers have promoted our interest in analysing press discourse. Under these circumstances, it is important to note that different social groups have different access to the same type of discourse. Visual and linguistic resources can have different communicative functions, depending on how particular social groups will be either more or less privileged in their access to the written word.

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<sup>3</sup> 'Lo más importante y lo que le [*La Nación*] da cierta influencia social ('importancia') es que constituye lejos el medio más leído (no tiene competencia) por los grupos dominantes (clase media alta y clase alta), lo cual signifique que estos lectores hagan referencia a lo que dicen sus páginas y quizás guíe de alguna forma sus opiniones respecto a la realidad social' (e-mail interview with the authors).

Our findings suggest that Central American newspapers tend to reinforce messages by compositional means. The front page of *La Prensa* (Nicaragua) (see figure 1) is taken to illustrate how visual and linguistic means are combined in order to create meaning.

Figure 1: Front-page of *La Prensa*, September 19th, 2004



Source: [www.laprensa.com.ni/archivo/2004/septiembre/19/portada/](http://www.laprensa.com.ni/archivo/2004/septiembre/19/portada/), visited 23 July 2006.

Two lead stories appear on the front page, with both headlines and photographs presenting the central action(s). At the top, the headline abstracts a story of police success: *Atrapan a jefes de banda* (Catching gang bosses). The photograph accompanying the story shows a group of policemen marching off a detainee. Both posture and clothing are signifiers central to the ‘rhetoric of the image’ (Barthes 1977): the upper part of the detainee’s body is bare and bowed down by physical force. At the bottom of the front page there is a second story. Again, it is a story of victory and defeat. *Fue una puñalada* (‘it was a stab with a dagger’, but also: ‘it was a nasty trick’) is the headline accompanying a photograph showing the final of a boxing-match. The photographic text is composed of iconic elements such as the naked upper part of the boxer’s body and the posture of the referee counting out the loser. Actually, the compositional strategy is fairly simple. The front page has two stories. Both contain similar visual elements and interchangeable verbal texts. Thus, the whole composition is directing the reader towards the point of the (first) story: the successful fight against criminality. In sum, it is important to recognise that newspapers do not just publish the stories written by journalists. They link stories to images. Each day, the first page of the newspaper pre-

sents a *collage* of text and pictures. The picturing of facts is of key importance for opinion-making. Enteman (2003: 27) noted ‘that even a million words may not be able to undo the negative impacts of a single bad picture’.

Given the prominent function of the first pages of newspapers in the distribution of news stories in Central American societies, we study them systematically.

#### 4. The Central American Print Media Landscape

From the point of view of ‘news sellers’, the Central American media market is small but attractive (see table 1). According to UNDP, the media market of Costa Rica is worth about \$ 120 million a year, and the Salvadoran media market is generating a net cash-flow of \$ 84 million. The Nicaraguan media market is the smallest, reaching \$ 30 million a year (UNDP 2003: 277). The market structure differs from country to country. The data available should permit the following estimates. In Nicaragua, television has clearly become the primary media market segment (64% TV, 22% press). The subsystems of press and television are more balanced in Costa Rica and El Salvador, with the press being slightly more important in Costa Rica (34,8% TV, 36,7% press) and the television being more important in El Salvador (44,0% TV, 41% press) (UNDP 2003: 277).

**Table 1: Circulation of newspapers in 2002**

Country	Estimated circulation	Newspapers/ thousand inhabitants
Costa Rica	317.000 (La Nación: 118.000; Extra: 90.000; Al Día 80.000)*	79,25
El Salvador	280.000 (La Prensa Gráfica: 110.000; Diario de Hoy: 95.000)	44,44
Nicaragua	84.000 (La Prensa: 42.000; El Nuevo Diario 40.000)	16,15

\* In general, the tabloid Extra is not perceived as an important newspaper. For instance, UNDP is referring to La Nación and Al Día as the leading newspapers. ‘Le siguen Extra (90,000), La República (15,000) [...]’ – ‘it is followed by [...]’ (UNDP 2003: 280).

Source: UNDP 2003: 280. How can we describe the quality of press coverage in Central America?

The Freedom House Index of Press Freedom is widely used as the key indicator in order to create common knowledge about the media landscape. The scores indicate distinct levels of press freedom in Central America as well as, in the case of Nicaragua, significant changes over time (see table 2)

**Table 2: Freedom House Index of press freedom**

Country/region	1993	2002
Costa Rica	16	14
El Salvador	41	38
Nicaragua	56	40
Latin America	37	40
Western Europe	16	15

Source: UNDP 2004 b: 116.

What do these data reveal? Freedom House Index measures legal, political and economic constraints on the freedom of the press. The scale goes from 0 (high degree of freedom) to 100 (low degree of freedom). The data are derived from a questionnaire concerning various types of constraints. Experts are requested to reply to questions such as: 'Do the penal code, security laws, or any other laws restrict reporting and are journalists punished under these laws? (0-6 points)' 'Is there freedom to become a journalist and to practice journalism? (0-4 points)' 'Is media coverage robust and does it reflect a diversity of viewpoints? (0-4 points)' 'To what extent are media owned or controlled by the government and does this influence their diversity of views? (0-6 points)' These examples may be taken as an indicator of a certain degree of subjectivity. Moreover, we should be aware of the political tendencies that may influence the data.

In general, democracy ratings should be treated with caution. Seeking reliable sources, we should note that neither International Organisations nor academic papers deserve an automatic assumption of reliability. For instance, the United Nations Development Program (2003, 2004) relies heavily on Freedom House. From our viewpoint, it is important to consider a second approach measuring the quality of press coverage in Central America. Herman and Chomsky (1988) pointed out that there are five filters that limit what can become news:

1. Concentrated ownership is linked to political ambitions and profit-orientation.
2. The permanent threat of withdrawal of advertising acts as a news filter. The press has to be sympathetic to economic (and government) interests.
3. There is a strong relation of journalists and powerful sources of information such as official sources and business associations<sup>4</sup>.
4. 'Flak' refers to negative responses to media coverage that are organised by actors such as business organisations and public relations companies, and that are based on substantial resources.
5. Finally, according to Herman and Chomsky, anticommunism acts as an important news filter. From our point of view, this should be translated into 'dominant ideologies'.

Although the 'age of extremes' is over, concern about ownership and right-wing political ambitions continue. As in other parts of the world, the Central American press is controlled by private interests with political alliances and political ambitions.

In Costa Rica, the newspaper market structure is characterised by concentrated ownership and, especially, by the existence of the media conglomerate *Grupo Nación*. This conglomerate owns a wide range of newspapers and magazines (*El Financiero*, *Sabores*, *Perfil*, *Su Casa*, *El Comerciante*), with *La Nación* and *Al Día* being the leading products. In Guatemala, *Grupo Nación* owns around 50% of the daily *SigloXXI* (Gutiérrez 2004: 986). High profit margins allowed the company to expand into external markets (the Guatemalan daily *Al Día* and the Panamanian weekly *Capital*) and into other market segments (GLR radio, printing services). *La Nación* was founded in 1946 by a group of agro-exporters and social democrats attempting to avert communism (Vergara Heidke 2006: 9). After the social democrats had sold their holdings in 1950, the entrepreneurial view became dominant. Although *La Nación* presents itself as being committed to international standards of high quality journalism (accuracy, impartiality), scholarly evidence suggests that *La Nación* is promoting conservative ideologies and free-trade principles. 'While proclaiming to be the voice of the people, it is never agreeing with them' (Vergara Heidke 2006: 12, translation SH/PP/AO).

The print media landscape in Nicaragua has attracted a certain degree of scholarly interest, as various factions of one family – the Chamorro family – own the national newspapers. The anti-sandinista *La Prensa* was funded by Pedro Joaquín Chamorro Z. (1891-1951), owned by former president Violeta Barrios de Chamorro and directed by Pedro Joaquín Chamorro C.

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted, however, that the emergence of transnational networks of human rights organisations and other NGOs has weakened the reliance on conservative sources. Thus, the problem of 'sourcing' is transcending national borders, it is linked to the genesis of the transnational network society (Castells).

(1924-1978). Currently, the editorial board is composed of Jaime Chamorro Cardenal, Hugo Holmann Chamorro, Ana Maria Chamorro de Holmann, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, Cristiana Chamorro B., and Felipe Chamorro A.

Xavier Chamorro Cardenal, a brother of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro Z., was owner of FSLN-supporting *El Nuevo Diario*. The official daily of Sandinismo, *Barricada*, was under the editorship of Carlos Fernando Chamorro Barrios (a son of Violeta Camorro Barrios and Pedro Joaquín Chamorro C.) (Jones 2002: 78). How should we understand the fact that a wide range of political beliefs is expressed by members of one traditional Nicaraguan family? Carlos M. Vilas has pointed to the significance of family networks and kinship in Nicaraguan politics. According to him, the revolutionary process in the 1980s was characterised by an alliance of conservatives and Sandinistas, and by 'the existence of a broad and dense matrix of family interconnections' (Vilas 1992: 325). The Chamorro family, being one of the most traditional Granada families, is a fundamental cluster within this matrix structure. In Nicaragua, traditional family networks prevented social changes deriving from political ruptures. The traditional oligarchic system reproduced itself within Sandinismo and within the neo-liberal system of the 1990s. Thus, instead of talking about rupture and change, we should rather speak of continuities and gradual change. The regime change of 1990 also reflected the dominant elite structure. The then-ruling anti-sandinista party coalition – Unión Nacional Opositora UNO – was split into two factions (Bendel 1996: 209 et seq.). The first faction was headed by president Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, descendant of the traditional Chamorro family, and the second faction was centered around Virgilio Godoy and Arnoldo Alemán Lacayo, representing upper class families with no ties to the traditional elite. It is within this context of kinship structures and political change, that we should interpret the fact that it is quite difficult to detect the politicians backed by *La Prensa* and *El Nuevo Diario*. Not surprisingly, Arnoldo Alemán and Daniel Ortega are the favorite enemies of *La Prensa* and *El Nuevo Diario* – being both corrupt politicians outside the traditional kinship matrix.

In El Salvador, the leading newspapers are family-owned.<sup>5</sup> *La Prensa Gráfica* was founded in 1915 by José Dutriz. With a daily circulation of 110.000, it is the major newspaper of the country. Its rival, *El Diario de Hoy*, was founded in 1936 by Napoleón Viera Altamirano. Both have been in fierce competition for decades, though for commercial rather than ideological reasons. Ideologically, their publishing operations are biased, ranging from right (*La*

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<sup>5</sup> A noteworthy exception is *Diario Colatino*, that was founded in 1890 by Miguel Pinto. His grandson, Miguel Angel Pinto, sold the newspaper to Corporación 'H' in the 1980s. After the newspaper was brought to the brink of ruin, journalists and workers managed to survive. *Diario Colatino* is co-operatively owned and supported by churches, NGOs and external donors.

Prensa Gráfica) to ultra-right (El Diario de Hoy).<sup>6</sup> It is important to note, however, that both newspapers have undergone an essential transformation in recent years. In the 1980s, press coverage tended to reflect the political beliefs of the owners. Enrique Altamirano made no secret of his anticommunist views. In 1984, for example, he referred to an 'information conspiracy [...] being the main weapon of the totalitarian forces in their deadly fight against the Occident' (Altamirano 1984: 195, translation by SH/PP/AO). In this article, he criticised US-American newspapers for reporting on state violence in El Salvador. In 1984, former US-ambassador Robert White publicly accused Enrique Altamirano of belonging to a group funding the death squads led by Roberto D'Aubuisson (Sheehan 1998: 278). Apart from the fact that the owner is said to be involved in right-wing terror politics, it is important to recognise that most newspapers exercised a form of self-censorship based on fear of intimidation, bombings, torture and assassination. When the war was over, press freedom increased and publishing strategies changed. In an interview with *Confidencial* (the Nicaraguan weekly edited by Chamorro, the founder of *Barricada*), Altamirano stated that his newspaper never had supported political parties, but rather free market economy. His current editorial strategy was fairly simple: 'newspapers modernise or die' (*Confidencial* N° 116, 1998, *Invitado de la Semana*). What does modernisation mean? According to *La Prensa Gráfica*, the Dutriz family has maintained constant investment activities, ranging from new buildings to up-to-the-minute printing presses ([www.laprensagrafica.com/GrupoDutriz/default.asp](http://www.laprensagrafica.com/GrupoDutriz/default.asp), visited 9 Oct 2006). Actually, investments in new technologies are a fundamental precondition for winning the media-market competition. These efforts increased as the '15th departamento' grew: Salvadorans living in the United States turned into an important target group of 'news sellers', being connected to their homeland through new information and communication technologies. The Salvadoran newspapers followed the general trend: merging print and online forms of journalism. As both newspapers tried to satisfy the informational needs of a great variety of readers, they developed new lifestyle papers and other supplements such as women's magazines or the 'Wall Street Journal Americas'. In the course of time, editing itself got more ambitious. Journalists were trained to produce high quality information, following the international standards of accuracy, integrity and ethical behaviour as, for example, expressed in the Associated Press Standards of News Values and Principles ([www.ap.org/pages/about/whatsnew/wn\\_112905.html](http://www.ap.org/pages/about/whatsnew/wn_112905.html), visited 9 Oct 2006). On the other hand, obviously, investigative journalism was still badly damaged by corruption, intimidation and the right-leaning editorial stance.

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<sup>6</sup> This overall ideological evaluation corresponds with the findings of detailed analysis like that of Guzmán (2004) on the covering of the 2004 presidential elections by the two newspapers.



In general, 'modernisation' also refers to the news style. Journalists have to follow the rules of providing accurate information, that is: the *who*, *what*, *when* and *where* basic facts (Bell 2006: 240). Moreover, journalists should reflect a wide range of opinion, avoiding any under-representation of significant views. Though editing is still not impartial in Central America, opposite views tend to be represented. *El Diario de Hoy*, for example, is frequently publishing editorials written by Joaquín Villalobos, former guerrilla *comandante* and currently at Oxford University. Moreover, Central American newspapers bring together divergent views on controversial issues through *campos pagados*, announcements written and paid by political parties, NGOs, business associations and government agencies.

In sum, we analyse six newspapers proclaiming to be 'modern' and 'professional'. Instead of labelling them right-wing' or 'oligarchic', we should rather have a closer look at the representation of events and views. Which news are passing the filters?

Media are one of the most powerful tools that help maintain or create cultural values and social norms (Bourdieu 1998). In order to compare and contrast the messages represented in the six Central American newspapers, we examine the coverage of two events: the recognition of same-sex marriage in Spain on 30<sup>th</sup> June, 2005; and the protests following the ratification of CAFTA in Guatemala on 10<sup>th</sup> March, 2005. Both events are chosen for their non-national character and their non-intersection with the issue of 'ordinary violence'. From our point of view, both events represent key cultural, social and political controversies.

Our first step to understand the techniques of topic management in Central American newspapers is to 'map' the news coverage of same-sex marriage (see table 3). In recent years, the struggle over legalisation of same-sex marriage turned to be a controversial political issue in Western societies. In Central America, where the mere public mention of sexuality might be understood as offensive, media behaviour is ambivalent. Sex sells – and beauty queens often adorn the front pages of Central American newspapers. On the other hand, sexual taboos continue to be profoundly influential in media coverage. As the 'policing of sex' (Foucault 2006: 517) is a key moment in the development of modern societies, press coverage of the Spanish legalisation of same-sex marriage would be – from our viewpoint – particularly revealing of the ways of media priming and agenda-setting. What is at stake in the Christian societies of Costa Rica, El Salvador and Nicaragua is the regulation of the discourse on sex, and, thus, the rules applied to sexual social behaviour.

Our second step to identify the characteristics of topic management is to 'map' the news coverage of the protests following the ratification of CAFTA in Guatemala on March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2005 (see table 3). We presume that Central American newspapers tend to promote free trade. And we want to find out how external social protests are treated in Costa Rican, Salvadorian and Nicaraguan newspapers.

Both issues were treated in the six newspapers analysed, and the issue of same-sex marriage was not ignored. The data suggests that all newspapers heavily rely on international news agencies (see table 3). This might be interpreted as a sign of professionalism and, therefore, as a kind of precondition for polymorphous discourse in Central American societies. The networked global communication structure seems to be increasingly influential. Following the concept introduced by Manuel Castells (1996), we should note that the global news infrastructure allows tabooed social themes and banned messages to pass national censorship. Moreover, the data suggests that there are national microspheres which operate between transnational and sub-national public spheres. We may see, thus, that there are various ways in which the issues are dealt with.

**Table 3: Press coverage on same-sex marriage and protests against CAFTA in Guatemala**

Press coverage	Same-sex marriage in Spain on 30 <sup>th</sup> June, 2005	Protests following ratification of CAFTA in Guatemala on 10 <sup>th</sup> March, 2005
Total (articles, comments, editorials)	16	21
Commentaries (opinión)	4 <sup>a</sup>	3 <sup>b</sup>
Editorial	2 <sup>c</sup>	1 <sup>d</sup>
Total without comments and editorials	10	17
Total without comments and editorials – without participation of international news agencies or external authors	2	4

a) 'El controversial matrimonio' (by Mario Vargas Llosa, La Prensa, 3.7.2005) PRO; 'without title' (by Julio Rodríguez, La Nación, 4.7.2005) AGAINST; 'No jugar con la familia' (by Lucía de Boehmer, La Prensa, 5.7.2005) AGAINST; 'Matrimonios' (by Javier Solís, La Nación, 11.7.2005) PRO.

b) 'Urge aprobar DR-CAFTA' (Francisco X. Aguirre Sacasa, La Prensa, 15.3.2005) PRO; 'Es peligroso ratificar CAFTA' (by Carlos Salinas M., Nuevo Diario, 1.4.2005); 'TLC avanza (en otros países)' (by Anabel González, Al Día, 17.3.2005) (AGAINST ISOLATIONALISM).

c) 'De cómo enloqueció la idea de matrimonio' (by Carlos Mayora Re, Diario de Hoy, 2.7.2005); 'Distinguir no es dicriminar' (by Kalena de Velado, Prensa Gráfica, 12.6.2005).

d) 'Hay que aprobar CAFTA' (La Prensa, 14.3.2005).

Source: Newspapers La Nación, Al Día, La Prensa, El Nuevo Diario, La Prensa Gráfica, Diario de Hoy for a period of ca. two weeks after the events.

In appendix 1 and appendix 2, we mapped news coverage of Spanish legalisation of same-sex marriage and Guatemalan anti-CAFTA protests. The tables indicate the prominence of the issues in news coverage (the scale goes from black to white, with black indicating the highest relevance). Secondly, the tables in the appendix show the spectrum of messages represented in news coverage, with the scales indicating the pros and cons of same-sex marriage and free-trade and protesting respectively.

We took into consideration formal aspects such as the number and length of the articles, and the ratio of editorials<sup>7</sup>, comments and articles. Moreover, we took into account both the organisation of the texts *and* their content (Fairclough 2006: 184), that is: the voices and messages represented.

In sum, the data highlight the polymorphous character of press discourse in Central America. The six newspapers analysed are 'modern' and 'professional' in the sense that they do not ignore those global or regional issues, that tend to be silenced in national debates. It is important to note, however, that print media attention seems to be driven by the political interests of the newspaper owners. In some cases, the editorials – as an important bastion of opinion-making – clearly reflect the conservative or neo-liberal editorial stance of the newspapers. One case illustrates the ambivalent relationship between international standards and local taboos. The Nicaraguan *La Prensa* regularly publishes comments written by Mario Vargas Llosa, apologist of economic and political liberalism. After Vargas Llosa wrote a comment clearly voting for the Spanish legalisation of same-sex marriage, *La Prensa* published a second comment – this time written by Lucía de Boehmer, president of Anafem, Nicaragua's right-wing women's organisation. Not surprisingly, the second – and last – comment heavily criticized Vargas Llosa for supporting 'perversion'. As this example indicates, we should also take into account the organisation of discourse events. The Costa Rican newspaper *La Nación*, on the other hand, first published a comment opposing same-sex marriage and then a supportive (last) comment.

The CAFTA-example shows that issues can be used by media owners in order to influence political agenda-setting and to promote certain policies. Thus, the vague notion of a dominant free-trade ideology seems to apply quite well to the six newspapers analysed. Obviously, press coverage of the events following the March 10<sup>th</sup> ratification of CAFTA in Guatemala does not fully represent the editorial stance on free trade and related topics. Moreover, we should be aware of the fact that press coverage was linked to the national ratification processes in their different stages. The parliament of El Salvador approved CAFTA on

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<sup>7</sup> 'Editorials count as the opinion of 'the' newspaper'. Moreover, they 'are 'impersonal', focus on public (news) events, and support general (social, economic, cultural or political) opinions, usually shared by other elites' (Van Dijk 1996).

December, 7<sup>th</sup>, 2004. In Guatemala, the ratification process came to an end on March, 10<sup>th</sup>, 2005. While Guatemala was the third country to ratify the treaty (after El Salvador and Honduras), it was the first country where ratification was followed by a violent wave of protests. In March 2005, however, there was an ongoing debate on ratification in Nicaragua and Costa Rica. In Nicaragua, though the Sandinista leadership had made compensatory social programs a condition for ratification, the Congress was to approve CAFTA in October, 2005 – following a visit by United States Trade Representative Robert Zoellick. In Costa Rica, the treaty was an electoral issue. During his electoral campaign, Oscar Arias promised rapid ratification. Ottón Solís, on the other hand, announced that he intended to renegotiate parts of the treaty. In general, editorials and comments clearly support national free-trade politics. The articles on Guatemalan protests following the ratification, on the other hand, do not establish any links to national debates and events. Thus, the Costa Rican, Salvadorian and Nicaraguan newspapers seem to have lacked the insight into their own needs to prevent national uprising and violent protests.

In sum, the data indicate that Central American newspapers operate between the imperatives of ‘modernism’/‘professionalism’ and conservative editorial stances. Moreover, the political bias of news coverage can be flexible. While news coverage of free-trade issues seems to be strictly supportive of commercial interests, other issues seem to be treated in a more liberal way.

## 5. Violence as News: Seven Clusters of Topics

Most studies about news discourse are systematic content analyses, focusing on the coverage of certain events in the news. Little work, however, has been done on the relationship between ‘news’ and ‘silenced news’. As mentioned above, this paper focuses on the macro-organisation of news discourse, that is: the topic management.

On the macro-level, we sought to detect the general structure of news discourse as being produced by the leading newspapers of Costa Rica, El Salvador and Nicaragua. For the same reasons outlined above, we focused on the front pages of the newspapers. Our first step to identify the techniques of topic management, thus, was the examination of all front-pages of *Al Día*, *La Nación*, *El Diario de Hoy*, *La Prensa Gráfica*, *El Nuevo Diario* and *La Prensa* published in 2004 and 2005.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> We took into consideration the online-versions. Note that they sometimes differ from the printed newspapers.

Supported by the scientific software atlas.ti, we assigned all leading front-page articles dealing with 'ordinary' violence to a growing body of primary data (this body included a set of leading editorials as well).

In the beginning, we decided to focus on 'ordinary' crime such as robbery, murder and rape. Less attention was paid on 'white collar crimes', corruption and politically motivated violence (e.g. terror attacks in Madrid and London). Moreover, we prepared a chronological index for each newspaper, listing other main themes of news coverage. While some front-page news may be described as exceptional occurrences (natural disasters, political scandals, strikes, violent political confrontations, elections), others refer to 'daily business' (political decisions, sports, beauty queens).

In the course of time, we detected eight central 'families' of topics in news discourse on 'ordinary violence' (see table 4). Thus, in contrast to the deductive approach of many social scientists (e.g. Briceño-León 2001), our approach was rather inductive. The 'families' were not used as the guidelines of empirical research. Instead, they were the result of a process of summarisation of approximately 1,000 news texts.

Nothing seems easier than the summarisation of a news text, and nothing is as difficult as this. Van Dijk (1985: 76) referred to the subjectivity of topics. 'This means that we should not simply say that a text 'has' a macrostructure, but that such a structure is assigned to a text by a writer or reader'. Thus, we constantly had to discuss what we found relevant and how we understood topics and themes. We had to be aware that we were constructing the macrostructure of press discourse.

Our findings are visualised in appendix III. They can be summarised as follows:

First, 'ordinary violence' is treated constantly in news coverage. However, it is not the most prominent issue. In sum, there are approximately 10 months with more than 15 leading front-page articles on 'ordinary violence'. (total: 6 newspapers x 24 months (2004 and 2005) = 144 'newspaper months'). How can we account for the total quantity of front-page stories on 'ordinary' violence? Given the presumption that crime is exploding in Central America, the newspapers do not seem to treat the issue most prominently. On the other hand, news reporting on 'ordinary' violence is prevalent, with some cases being covered excessively.

Second, media attention is driven by events and the general political context (*coyuntura política*). In April 2005, for instance, none of the newspapers treated the issue of violence prominently. This was the month when John Paul II died. To give another example: In March, 2004, the issue of violence did not attract the interest of the Salvadorian *La Prensa Gráfica*. Front-page coverage, instead, was driven by the electoral process.

Third, there seems to be no media attention cycles linked to the seasons. While all newspapers analysed tend to publish a few statistical overviews on all forms of violence at the turn of the year, the boom at the middle of the year seems to be less regular.

**Table 4: ‘Families’ of topics in news discourse on ‘ordinary’ violence:**

1. *Violence and Society*. This category includes articles dealing with violence and (in)security on a macro-level (articles on: the rise of crime; the level of violence during holidays; police resources; criminal statistics; public security in general; criminal violence and social norms, state responses on violence in general).
2. *Borders and Violence*. This category includes articles relating violence, crime and security to national identities or foreign countries or foreigners (articles on: migration and violence; tourism and violence; violence at national borders; crimes committed in foreign countries, with nationals being the victims or perpetrators – or even without any involvement of nationals; articles comparing national levels of violence or violent behaviour to foreign countries).
3. *Drugs and Crime*. This category includes articles relating violence, crime and security to the trade or consumption of drugs.
4. *Gender, Family and Crime*. This category includes articles on domestic violence, sexual violence and violence against children or adolescents (for instance, violence occurring in families or schools).
5. *Youth Violence*. This category refers to violence exercised by adolescents. Articles on violence against adolescents are included within this category if they describe state (or other types of organised) violence against adolescents. Thus, the category includes articles on youth gangs (maras); adolescents being criminals or violent subjects; state responses to gang violence (mano dura); death squads killing kids or adolescents. Obviously, there are many intersections to Gender, Families and Crime.
6. *Social Structure, Spatiality and Crime*. This category includes articles relating violence, criminality and security to social structures (poverty, distribution of wealth, social or ethnic groups) or spatiality (rural regions, the Caribbean, gated communities, shanty towns).
7. *Judiciary and Violence*. This category includes articles dealing with the judicial system (for instance, articles on laws and legal discourse; the judicial system and its actors: lawyers, judges, witnesses etc; the judicial procedure; police, police reforms, police resources and police violence).
8. *Cases*. This category includes all articles on specific cases. The majority of the articles assigned to this category was, of course, assigned to other families as well.

Fourth, the cycles of media attention differ from country to country – and from newspaper to newspaper. The issue of violence tends to be treated less prominently in Costa Rican *La Nación* and more prominently both in Costa Rican tabloid-like *Al Día* and in Nicaraguan and Salvadoran newspapers. On the other hand, however, it is impossible to assign a general level of the prominence of ‘ordinary violence’ to each newspaper. While some newspapers (*Al Día*, *El Diario de Hoy*) tend to dramatise the issue of violence more than others, the irregular booms of news coverage of certain events seem to be contradictory to this general trend. As indicated above, media attention is driven by events, the economic and political interests of the newspaper owners and the general political context.

Fifth, news reporting in 2004 differs from news reporting in 2005. This is most obvious in the case of Nicaragua. While there were many issues of violence treated in both Nicaraguan newspapers in 2004, the issue of ‘ordinary violence’ was treated less prominently in 2005, when several cases of corruption involving parts of the non-traditional elite gained the interest of the Chamorro-owned newspapers.

Sixth, media attention is clearly driven by cases. Nevertheless, chronic problems or the underlying causes of violence can become news as well. For instance, Central American newspapers regularly report on the findings of international agencies such as UNDP.

Since the newspapers decide which ‘news’ becomes news, they create public urgencies and social groups that have to be protected or targeted. As our data indicate, the creation of public urgencies, social groups and political responses differs from country to country, from newspaper to newspaper and from year to year.

Thus, the six newspapers analysed tend to create six different social orders, with different problems and different solutions.

The Nicaraguan newspaper *La Prensa* establishes a dual order of violence, constituted by the white collar crimes of the non-traditional elite and the ‘ordinary slaughter’ committed by the lower strata of society. In general, Nicaragua seems to run the hazard of disintegration. On the one hand, violent events in the autonomous regions of the Caribbean gain high attention in the news coverage of *La Prensa*. These events tend to be linked to spatial governability, the loss of governmental control, the ‘mentality of indigenous people’ and the growth of transnational criminal networks and drug trade. On the other hand, social segregation in the capital city of Nicaragua is rarely portrayed as structural problem. In general, *La Prensa* represents the elite discourse of Nicaragua being a safe country. And if the newspaper reports on the explosion of gang violence and homicides in Managua (October 4<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup>, 2004), the reader gets the impression that the ‘news event’ dropped out of a clear sky. The majority of the readers belong to the Managua of the wealthy, a city ‘that can be said to have been ripped of the ‘palimpsest’ city, and is neither superimposed on it nor within it, but com-

pletely separate' (Rodgers 1994: 15). Not surprisingly, thus, *La Prensa* hardly ever reports prominently on the growth of *pandillas* on the front-page. In general, violent crime is portrayed as a problem being generated and situated in the exterior. Firstly, *La Prensa* regularly reports on Nicaraguans having become (fatal) victims of violence in other countries (Guatemala, United States). In the case of violence committed against Nicaraguan migrants in Costa Rica, *La Prensa* usually prompts a sense of urgency. Moreover, *La Prensa* highlights the role of drug traffickers, regularly reporting on (and visualizing) clandestine airfields and smuggling boats. Seen from this way, *La Prensa's* talk of crime mainly is about spatiality and segregation.

There is a second overall topic in *La Prensa's* talk of crime, which may be summarised as 'murder, kidnapping and the judiciary', with the victims belonging to the higher middle classes and the perpetrators mostly being criminal gangs. Thus, a few cases of criminal violence garnered the highest print media attention in 2004 and 2005. In February 2004, the assassination of Carlos Guadamuz was the leading front-page news, with 14 papers dealing with this topic. In September 2004, a series of kidnappings attracted extensive attention, with 7 leading front-page stories playing out this case. Again, it is important to note, that 'news' never arise in a social and political vacuum. September, 2004 was an eventless month. Actually, while print media coverage has been focusing on specific cases, attention was given to a wide range of topics. Seen from this view, coverage of one case of criminal violence dealt with topics such as the structural weakness of the judiciary, the spread of organised crimes and gender asymmetry.

The second Nicaraguan newspaper analysed, *El Nuevo Diario*, represents a different social order. In sum, news coverage was less event-based. It focused more on the life horizon of lower strata of society than *La Prensa* did. While the killings of journalists or series of kidnappings attracted the attention of *La Prensa*, *El Nuevo Diario* extensively reported on child abuse, 'exceptional slaughter' or the assassination of *transportistas*. News coverage was generally unemotional in tone, with child murder and violence against Nicaraguan migrant workers in Costa Rica being noteworthy exceptions. As indicated above, the general political context is one of the independent variables expected to affect news coverage on 'ordinary violence'. In 2005, a protracted crisis in the energy sector, the frontier dispute (Costa Rica / Nicaragua), *el pacto* between Alemán and Ortega, and a corruption affair discrediting the non-traditional elite (Argüello scandal) attracted the attention of *El Nuevo Diario*. In 2004, on the contrary, the newspaper reported on a wide range of criminal behavior. In sum, *El Nuevo Diario* highlights the dimensions of insecurity affecting the lower strata of society. Most noteworthy, indeed, is the fact that *El Nuevo Diario* unemotionally publishes stories of human interests, with some attention given to the link between criminal violence and poverty,



and little attention given to transnational criminal networks, drug trade and external dangers.

As mentioned above, news coverage of 'ordinary violence' in the Costa Rican *La Nación* significantly differs from coverage in *Al Día*. In *La Nación*, the issue of violence is not treated prominently, but intensively. Even though articles on ordinary violence frequently appear on the front-page, other topics such as free-trade politics, migration, poverty and the (pre) electoral process are much more important. In 2004 and 2005, *La Nación* highlighted the controversy over CAFTA and the problem of corruption. While the latter attracted extensive attention in both years, a big news boom occurred in October, 2004, when Costa Rican ex-presidents Rodríguez and Calderón were arrested. The topic of corruption has never disappeared since then. What matters, though, is the general social and political context. Rather than an upward spiral of progress and development, Costa Rica is actually on a downward spiral of social and political deterioration. Due to political scandals and unstable parliamentary backing, the Pacheco government (2002-2006) was one of the weakest governments the country has ever had. Actually, public politics (social system, migration, free-trade, health, privatisations etc.) tend to dominate news coverage. The issue of 'ordinary violence', however, is often explicitly linked to these topics. As appendix 3 shows, the topic is treated constantly in *La Nación*, but not excessively. Most violent news, however, refer to incidents of crime, the release of statistics (for instance, *Estado de la Nación*) or international reports, or regular booms of violence (Christmas, *Semana Santa*). Moreover, reporting on 'ordinary violence' is centered around four topics. *La Nación* constantly points at the reciprocal effects between poverty, the decline of the welfare state, the education system, social segregation and youth violence. Secondly and thirdly, the newspaper focuses on the 'topic families' of domestic violence and 'drugs and crime'. And, finally, the newspaper tends to highlight the issue of migration and criminal violence. Most strikingly, *La Nación* is not restricting itself to the basic facts but rather providing comprehensive diagnoses of contemporary society. According to the leading Costa Rican newspaper, the level of violence and brutality has increased substantially in recent years. There is an ongoing concern that Costa Rican society is facing a permanent decline. As the foundations of the social security system are deteriorating, the social fabric of society (values, families) is portrayed as declining as well. In sum, *La Nación* tends to highlight moral concerns and the historical conditions unique to Costa Rica. In contrast to the 'serious' press, news coverage in *Al Día* is more event-based, when reporting on violence and (in)security. Moreover, there is a tendency to select stories involving the 'common (wo)man'. The danger of murder, robberies and violations is portrayed as ever-present, and often associated with psycho-pathology. Not surprisingly, thus, individual tragedies feature prominently and regularly in the Costa Rican tabloid press. A large part of

the talk of crime presented by *Al Día* includes minors and the spaces they occupy. First, there is a reasonably high level of reporting on school violence, drug abuse and illicit drug trafficking. Second, there are many front-page stories devoted to the problems of child abuse and domestic violence. News coverage tends to present 'conflations between the sexual abuse of minors and homosexuality' (Russell/Kelly 2003: 9), regularly reporting on scandals over sexual abuse by priests. Nevertheless, *Al Día* reports on women involved in child prostitution and/or child pornography as well. At the heart of this topic is the vulnerability of minors. Extensive reports on child abuse, domestic violence and school violence constantly fuel a sense of fear and powerlessness.

As indicated above, media attention is driven by events and the general political context. *Al Día*, of course, is no exception. News coverage in 2004 differs from news coverage in 2005: although there was a reasonably high level of reporting on violence in 2004, reporting on specific cases was not as important as in 2005. Murder, robberies, sexual violence, kidnappings and cases of bank robbery fuelled news coverage in the beginning of 2005. But it was not until several months later that *Al Día* focused on soccer, natural disasters, border disputes, free-trade politics, and corruption. Something that deserves further emphasis is the didactical approach of the newspaper that regularly describes precautionary measures.

In Salvadoran press discourse, we may witness the constant transmission of few topic clusters. Not surprisingly, thus, both newspapers extensively report on 'ordinary violence', and, especially, on homicides and juvenile delinquency (González 2004). As Downs pointed out thirty years ago, every problem of crucial importance to society 'leaps into prominence, remains there for a short time, and then - though still largely unresolved - gradually fades from the centre of public attention' (Downs 1998: 100). In public discourse, though, issues come and go as a matter of public attention. According to Downs, the 'issue attention cycle' usually begins with a series of dramatic events resulting in 'alarmed discovery' and 'euphoric enthusiasm' (ibid.) to quickly solve the problem. In El Salvador, this kind of media attention cycle seems to have little relevance. There seems to be no loss of print media interest, and the public does not seem to get bored by the issues of killings and juvenile delinquency. It is important to note, however, that it is not the issue of homicides and youth gangs (*maras*) that is exciting and dramatic enough to maintain constant public interest, but rather topic clusters centered around homicides and *maras*. While news coverage is stereotyping the evil of dangerous youth gangs, both newspapers tend to discover new news. In the case of Salvadorian print media attention, alarmed discovery is linked to dramatic events (for instance, 'extraordinary brutality', violent uprisings and massacres in prisons) or new solutions (for instance, *mano dura, super mano dura, mano amiga*). Actually, there is a plu-

rality of media attention cycles comprised of interconnected spirals of dramatic events, public perceptions and policies.

While both Salvadoran newspapers tend to deal with the same topic clusters, the editorial stances, however, are quite different. Whereas *La Prensa Gráfica* describes *maras* as they relate to juvenile delinquency, extreme brutality and transnational (criminal) networks, *El Diario de Hoy* explicitly associates *maras*, juvenile delinquency, extreme brutality and transnational criminal networks with the left-wing *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (FMLN).

The attention of both newspapers is clearly driven by events and the general political context. As mentioned above, the issue of 'ordinary violence' was not treated prominently in March, 2004. Interestingly, *La Prensa Gráfica*'s coverage of 'ordinary violence' significantly differs from year to year. While it focused more on the problem of *maras* in 2004, the general level of violence was often played out as the leading front-page story in 2005. This was closely linked to the dynamics of national agenda-setting. In 2004, the presidential elections that were held in March, shaped the world of public affairs. Tony Saca (ARENA), who was elected with 58 percent of the vote, had employed an electoral campaign focusing on fear and (in)security. For instance, pro-Arena forces accused the FMLN of recruiting members of *maras* to destabilise the country. The Plan *Super Mano Dura* (Super Iron Fist), that was central to the electoral campaign, was approved in 2004. Hundreds of male adolescents were detained in waves of arrest that continued throughout the year. In August, 2004, a violent prison uprising caused around thirty deaths. Not surprisingly, thus, the issue of *maras* and zero-tolerance strategies did not disappear from the national agenda in 2004. Zero-tolerance, however, had not led to a reduction of crime and insecurity. In the beginning of 2005, public debates were centered around the perception of increasing violence. The president responded to growing criticism with a discursive shift, highlighting the problem of social violence. News coverage in 2005, tended to focus on police success, that is: arrested *mareros*. Secondly, both newspapers extensively reported on the general level of violence and the devastating effects of small arms proliferation. The issue of criminal gangs, instead, delved further into the background.

There is a further issue, that is not usually addressed, and that is the question of borders. In both Salvadorian newspapers, stories about migration, deportation and violence create collective attention. In dealing with the roots of crime, *La Prensa Gráfica* and *El Diario de Hoy* are concentrating on transnational dimensions. News coverage focuses more on the deportation of criminal gang members than on other issues. Nevertheless, lengthy descriptions of Salvadorans becoming victims of robberies in Guatemala or elsewhere tend to be played out as leading front-page stories as well. From the point of view of Salvadoran news sellers, the

root of criminal violence would be deportation politics or the culture of violence, rather than poverty, inequality or other causes.

## 6. Concluding Remarks: Manifestations of Violence in Print Media Discourse

Our intention here is not to portray a violent 'reality'. Rather it is to differentiate the vague notion of an explosion of crime in Central America. The findings presented in this paper suggest that while politicians, military leaders and social scientists highlight the transformation of violence and the increase of homicides and youth delinquency, the news discourse on 'ordinary violence' is quite heterogeneous.

What we are observing in Central America, is the prevalence of a print media-inspired talk of crime. But which are the print media's preferred topics? Is newspaper coverage increasing or decreasing fear? What is the impression one gets from news coverage? Do we observe media hype? Our findings suggest that newspaper coverage differs from country to country, from newspaper to newspaper and from year to year. Moreover, there is a complex relationship between news on 'ordinary violence' that receives newspaper coverage and other issues that are treated prominently in the news. Our results point to an important dynamic relation between the production of stories about 'ordinary violence' and the wider political context. On the one hand, news coverage tends to be event-based, with cruel human interest stories receiving and creating collective attention. On the other hand, news coverage is a means both to uncover news and to neglect other, more critical news.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, media attention undoubtedly continues to focus on violence. Our findings suggest, however, that there are six central 'families' or clusters of crime stories played out on the front-pages of the leading newspapers in Costa Rica, El Salvador and Nicaragua: the macro-level of violence; frontiers and violence; drugs and crime; gender, family and crime; youth violence; social structure, spatiality and crime; and, finally, violence and the judiciary.

As appendix 3 indicates, there are oscillations of the conjuncture of news, swinging up and down. Notwithstanding these variations, we detect a general structure of news discourse. Salvadorian newspapers focus more on the problem of *maras* than Nicaraguan and Costa Rican newspapers do. It is important to note that the emergence of youth gangs and juvenile delinquency tend to be portrayed as an imminent peril to Costa Rican and Nicaraguan societies as well. While Salvadorian newspapers appear quite sensationalist, Costa Rican newspapers seem to be highly sensitive to the emergence of a 'youth problem', and Nicaraguan newspapers tend to cover most news related to the poor barrios of Managua.

In Costa Rica, and to a lesser extent in Nicaragua, violence is portrayed as gendered violence. Newspapers tend to report extensively on domestic violence and child abuse. In El Salvador, instead, news clustered around sexual violence is of marginal importance.

Reporting on 'ordinary violence' requires a certain degree of contextualisation. Most strikingly, the six newspaper analysed tend to establish links between the problem of violence and a pattern of frontiers. The newspapers, thus, regularly published articles on migration and violence, tourism and violence, organised trans(but non-)national crime, violence at national borders, crimes committed in foreign countries, and violence in the remote areas of the Caribbean. Moreover, lengthily comparisons of national levels of insecurity regularly appear on the front-pages with little attention given to the socio-economic roots of violence. We presume that the (frontier-related) discourse of violence is crucial for maintaining or re-inventing national identities.

As indicated above, media create both the groups of victims and perpetrators and the groups combating crime and being targeted. Our findings suggest that social classification varies from country to country, from newspaper to newspaper, and from year to year. In general, it is related to the wider political context.

There are signs that the problem of juvenile delinquency is emerging as the center of a cross-country discourse on 'ordinary violence'. On the other hand, we detect a heterogeneous array of discourse events, political developments and power-relations. Finally, each newspaper focuses on a series of events which are played out across a pattern of both national and sub-national peculiarities and cultural traditions.

Although 'modern' Central American newspapers usually authorise a broad spectrum of news, they tend to produce a certain pattern of interpretation of violence centered around few topic clusters. While some newspapers are uncovering silenced news such as sexual violence or child abuse, others tend to neglect critical news related to the deeper roots of criminal violence. Whether these patterns of interpretation are produced and reproduced in other spheres of public discourse, we cannot decide here. In the next step of our research, we will proceed to the micro-level, analysing the form and content of news discourse related to other types of public discourse.

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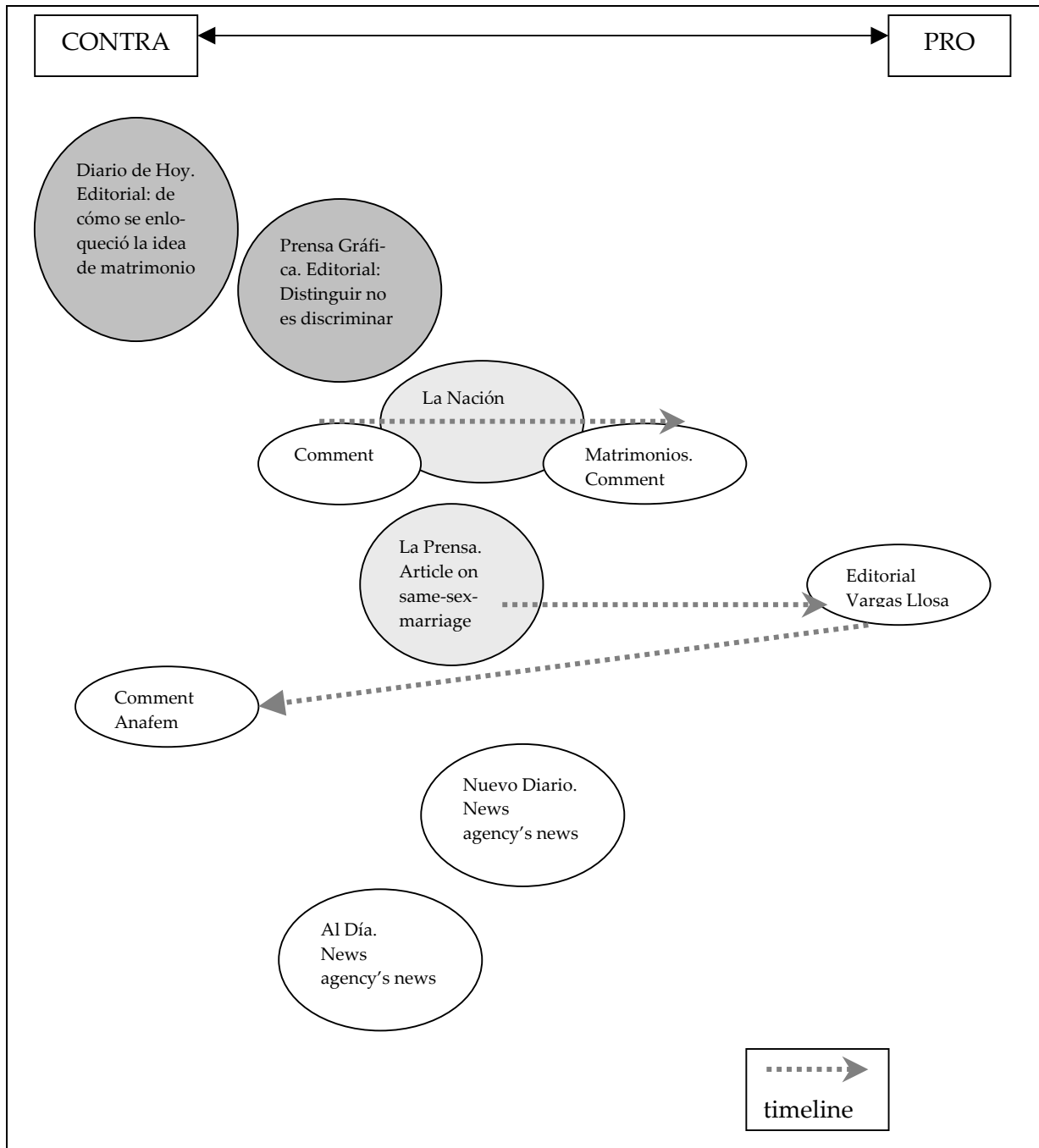
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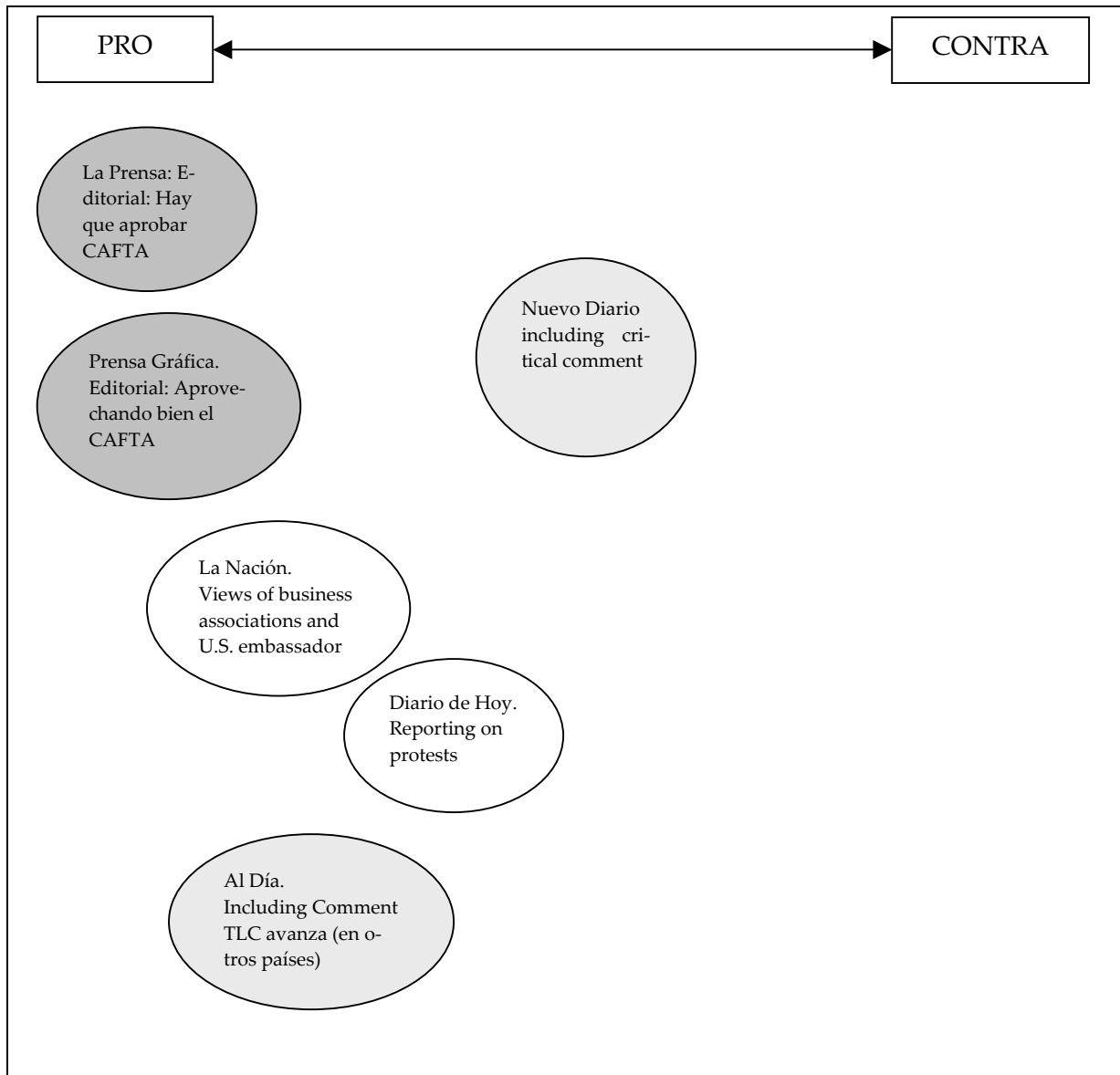


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### Appendix I: Press coverage of recognition of same-sex marriage in Spain



### Appendix II: Press coverage of protests following TLC ratification in Guatemala

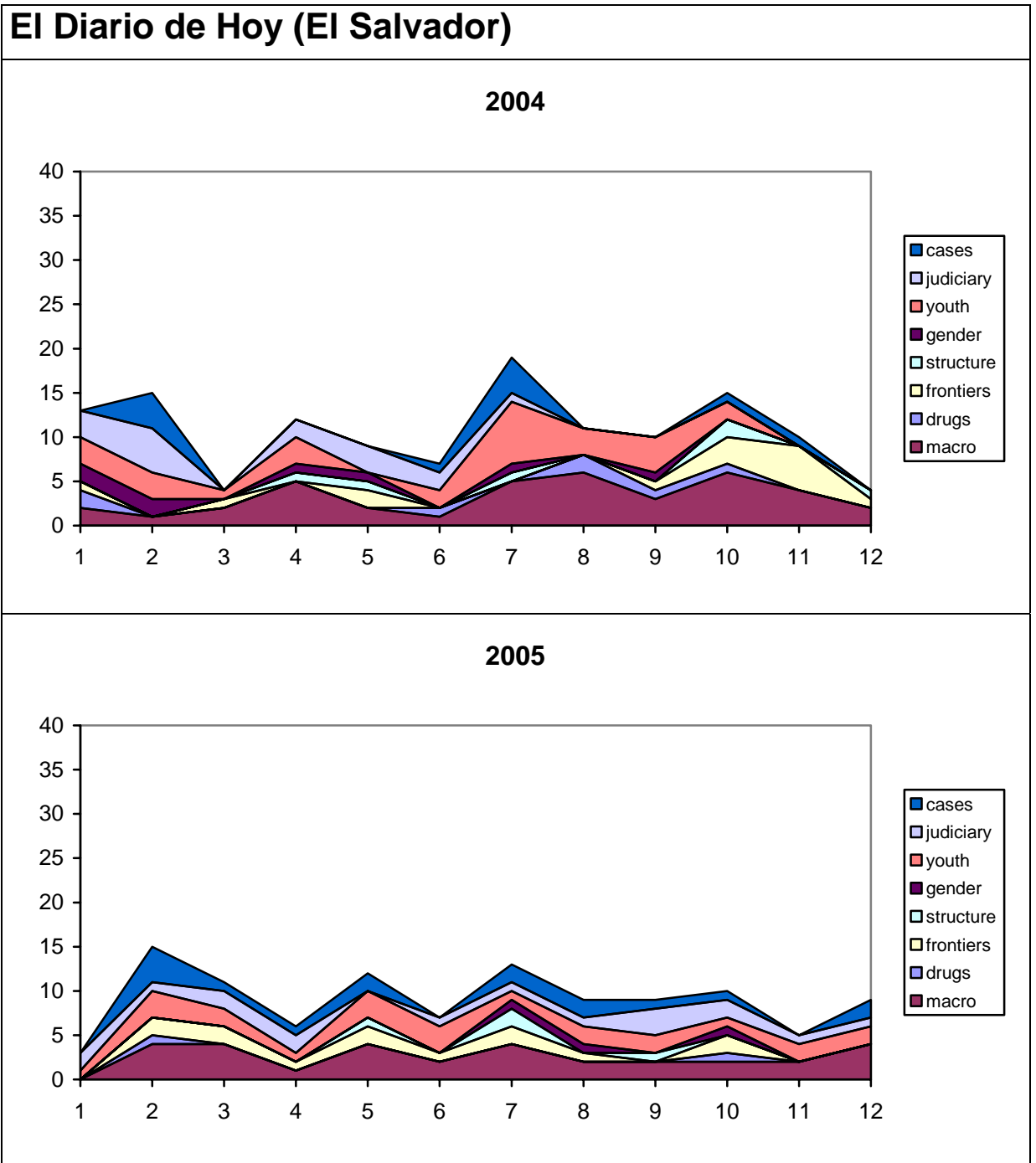


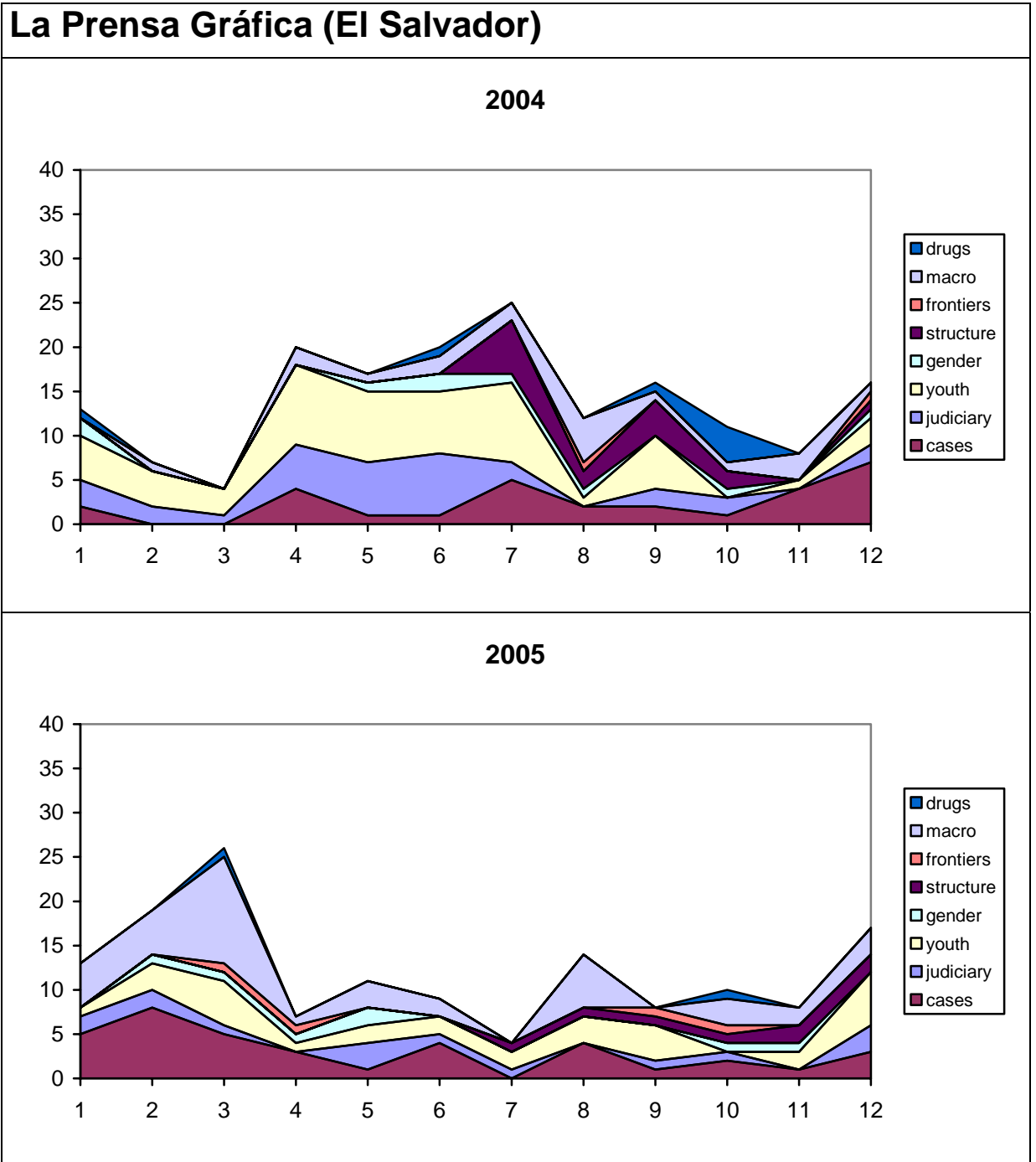
### **Appendix III: Coverage of 'ordinary' violence in Central American newspapers**

We examined the online-versions of all front-pages published in 2004 and 2005. Note that the online-versions sometimes differ from the printed versions. We assigned all front-page stories dealing with 'ordinary violence' to a growing body of data. Finally, we assigned all front-page stories to the 'families' of topics: macro = Violence and Society; frontiers = Frontiers and Violence; drugs = Drugs and Crime; gender = Gender, Family and Crime; youth = Youth Violence; structure = Social Structure, Spatiality and Crime; judiciary = Judiciary and Violence; cases = Cases (see pp. XX-XX). We were aware of the fact that 'there is not just one topic or possible summary of a text, but several' (Van Dijk 1985: 75). As articles could be assigned to more than one 'topic family', the tables do not show the absolute frequency of press reporting, but rather the conjunctures of topic clusters.

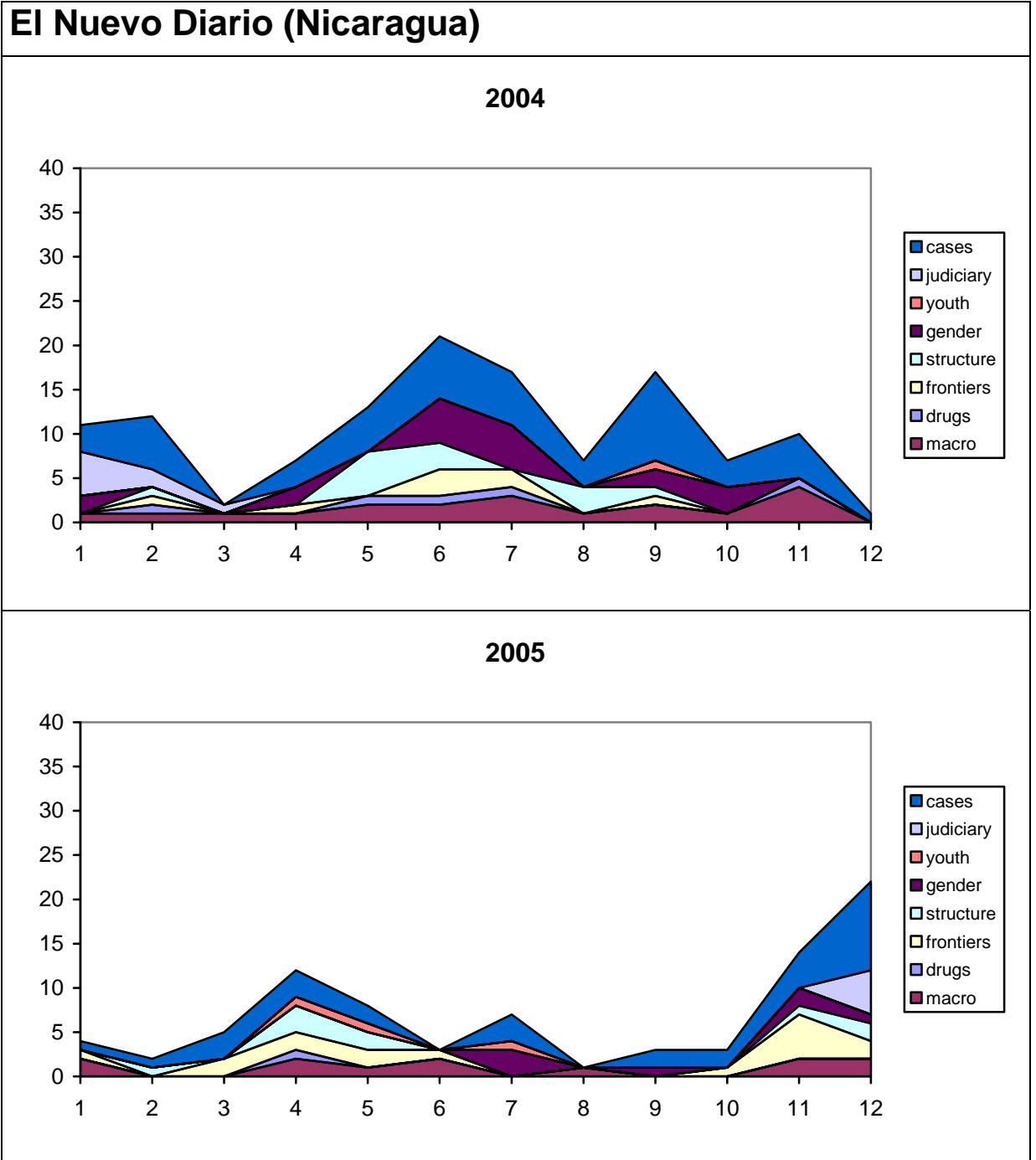


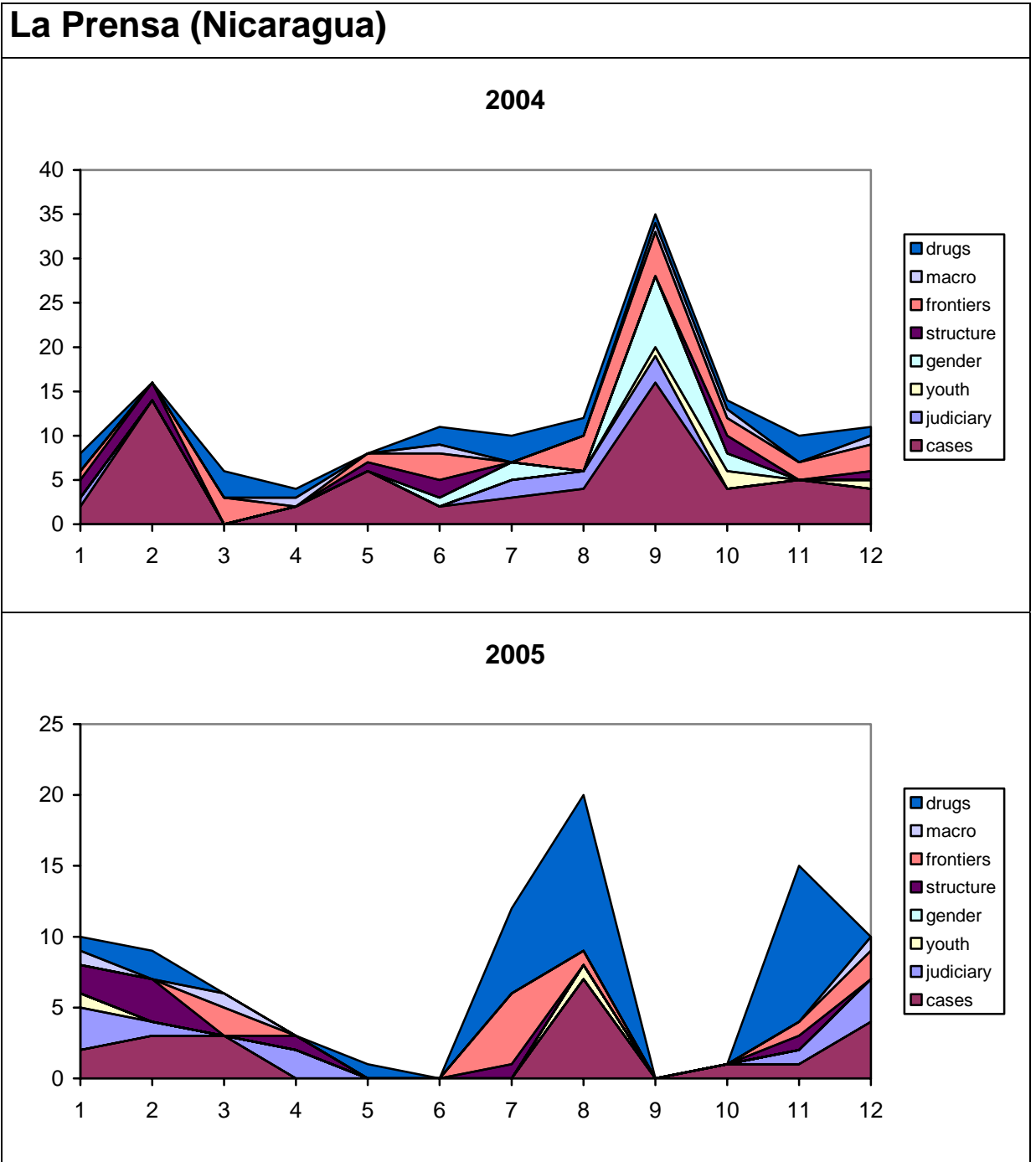












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