

## **Information, Interest, and Ideology: Explaining the Divergent Effects of Government–Media Relationships in Argentina**

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During the administration of Argentina’s president Cristina Fernández (2007–2015), the government developed a confrontational stance toward news organizations that it perceived to be against it, usually labeling them “opposition media.” This has also been the case in other countries in the region and in other parts of the world. This article examines the consequences of this confrontation on the news agenda and the preferences of the audience. Findings from a panel survey and content analysis of three news organizations usually labeled opposition media indicate that the agendas of the news outlets and their respective most viewed stories diverged substantively in their thematic preferences. Different opposition media and their audiences behaved in a heterogeneous fashion. Interviews with members of the audience underscore the role of ideology in mediating the impact of government–media relations. Drawing on these findings, we contribute to middle-range theorizing of government–media relationships and reflect on their implications for the dynamics of journalism and political communication.

*Keywords: political communication, content analysis, in-depth interview, Latin America, media audiences, surveys*

During the first decade of the new millennium, a widespread turn to the left brought to an end the neoliberal reforms that marked the 1980s and 1990s in Latin America (Kitzberger, 2016; Levitsky & Roberts, 2013). One outcome of this transformation was the emergence of a direct and explicit confrontational stance between the government and selected media. In Latin America, “although the majority of news organizations do not maintain organic linkages with political parties, they are identified with specific ideologies and political-economic interests” (Waisbord, 2010, p. 318). In recent years, rather

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than confronting the actors whom selected media organizations supposedly represented, the governments in these countries decided to confront the media directly.

In Argentina, this strategy was most noticeable from 2008 to 2015, during the confrontation between former president Cristina Fernández and what her administration and political allies termed the “opposition media” (Becerra & Mastrini, 2014; Kitzberger, 2010). It was enacted in two complementary ways. First, the government and its allies launched public relations, economic, and regulatory attacks toward the media perceived to be against it. This affected most directly Grupo Clarín, the largest media holding in the country, which has historically had a centrist ideology. It also affected *La Nación*, a conservative broadsheet (Sidicaro, 1993). Second, the government utilized public advertisements in an arbitrary fashion to support the operation of progovernment news outlets with small audiences (Waisbord, 2010).

What effects, if any, did this dual strategy have on the agendas of the opposition media and the news preferences of their audiences? The effect on the latter is particularly important, because governments orchestrate their relationships with the media with the ultimate goal of shaping public opinion; the media’s agenda is a means toward that end, not an end in itself. In addition, were these media and their respective publics homogeneous in their behaviors, as purported by the label applied by the Kirchner administration—“hegemonic media”?<sup>2</sup> One way to tackle these questions is to look at the prevalence of public affairs news in the agendas of these media outlets and in the consumption practices of their respective audiences. Governments target media organizations because of public affairs news, rather than sports, weather, or entertainment news that they also carry (Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2008). In this article, we address these questions through an examination of the media agendas and preferences of audiences at three news sites in Argentina for a 12-month period running up to the 2011 presidential election. Two sites are affiliated with Grupo Clarín; the third is the online edition of *La Nación*. We combined these content analyses of the media’s agendas and the most viewed stories with a panel survey with a representative sample of the online news consumer population in Argentina and three waves of in-depth interviews with 46 consumers of online news.

Our findings suggest that the agendas of news outlets and their respective most viewed stories diverged in their thematic preferences. Those affiliated with Grupo Clarín were more volatile in their

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<sup>2</sup> Although the government’s treatment of *Clarín* and *La Nación* diverged, mostly due to the former standing as part of a multimedia conglomerate (Becerra, 2015; Mauersberger, 2012), President Fernández usually grouped them under the same label in her public speeches. For instance, on September 3, 2013, she criticized an editorial article at *La Nación* about the 1955 coup, remarked that her party had won a mayoral election in Bariloche, and stated that if they had lost, it would have been the “main headlines on the front pages of *Clarín* and *La Nación*” (Fernández, 2013, para. 2). The president also made several mentions of “hegemonic media” that did not refer exclusively to *Clarín* in other speeches (Fernández, 2014a, 2014b). In an article on the legacy of the Fernández administration, media analyst Alejandro Alfie proposes that the government “stigmatized and harassed . . . independent media, which the government calls ‘hegemonic media,’ under which Grupo Clarín, Editorial Perfil and *La Nación* newspaper are included” (Alfie, 2015, para. 5). (Alfie covers media and communication topics for *Clarín*.)

interest in public affairs content, and *La Nación* and its audience were more consistently concerned with such content. Thus, supposedly hegemonic media and their audiences behaved in a heterogeneous fashion. We argue that ideology played a dual role in this divergent effect. Even though the government often grouped Grupo Clarín and *La Nación* under the same banner, it directed its actions primarily at the former. The long-standing conservative elite outlook of *La Nación* and its readers seemed to endow its coverage and the interest in it with a steadiness that was absent in the centrist and general-interest perspective that characterized Grupo Clarín and its audience. Drawing on these findings, we contribute to middle-range theorizing about government–media relationships and reflect on their implications for the dynamics of journalism and political communication.

### Government–Media Relationships in Contemporary Argentina

The Argentine media system is polarized pluralist (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) in the sense that the media is controlled by private interests who use them for political ends, and there is a politicization of public broadcasting and broadcast regulation and a relatively low level of development of journalism as an autonomous profession (Hallin & Papathanassopoulos, 2002). Since Argentina regained democracy in 1983, government–media relationships have been neither neutral nor low-key. The connection between political leadership and communication power deepened during the first decade of the 21st century (Becerra, 2010). During the presidency of Néstor Kirchner (2003–2007), *La Nación* remained mostly critical of his administration, but news outlets from Grupo Clarín were often supportive of it (Kitzberger, 2016). The president, in turn, helped the conglomerate strengthen its market position.<sup>3</sup> In 2005, he signed an executive order granting all holders of broadcast licenses a 10-year postponement of the renewal of their license. Grupo Clarín held a broadcast license for Canal 13, and the executive order postponed its expiration from 2015 to 2025 (Califano, 2011). Three days before leaving office, President Kirchner signed a ruling allowing the two main cable operators in Argentina to merge under the ownership of Grupo Clarín, thus controlling 47% of the national cable market (Marino, 2013).

Cristina Fernández, Néstor Kirchner’s wife, succeeded him in December 2007. Three months later, in March 2008, the government raised the export taxes for soybeans, which led to a strike/lockout by agricultural producers. Their protest gained support from middle- and upper-middle-class sectors. The president stood by the decision, but opposition continued to grow. Negotiations between the government and the producers stalled, and in June the president announced that Congress would decide the matter. The bill was approved in the Chamber of Deputies and received a tie vote in the Senate, which was resolved by the vice president on July 16, 2008. He voted against the administration and repealed the reform in export taxes.

During the conflict between the government and the agricultural producers, *Clarín* was critical of the former and sympathetic with the latter. According to Aruguete and Zunino (2013), in *Clarín*’s coverage, “the voices that supported the agricultural organizations prevailed” (p. 29). The critical tone and

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<sup>3</sup> At the time, Grupo Clarín owned “the second largest radio station (Radio Mitre AM) . . . , the second most popular television station (Canal 13), with 28% of the total audience, and several other broadcasting licenses. . . . [It] also held a dominant position in the important cable TV market” (Mauersberger, 2012, p. 590).

coverage of the government continued once the conflict ended (Repoll, 2010). In contrast, *La Nación* remained critical throughout the 12 years of the Kirchner and Fernández presidencies.

Although Néstor Kirchner had chosen *La Nación* “as an ideological opponent right from the beginning” (Kitzberger, 2016, p. 455), this had not been the case with *Clarín*. During the conflict, the Fernández administration and its allies changed their attitude regarding Grupo Clarín, treating it as part of the opposition (Repoll, 2010). On October 12, 2008, the government nationalized the soccer television transmissions that had been previously in control of Grupo Clarín (Kitzberger, 2016). A month later, on November 26, 2008, a union allied with the government blocked the distribution of the print *Clarín* and *La Nación* newspapers (Repoll, 2010). In 2009, the government pushed forward with the reform of the Audiovisual Communication Services Law, which, due to the limits it placed on ownership, would force Grupo Clarín to divest.<sup>4</sup> In September 2010, there was a massive fiscal audit of Grupo Clarín, and the government attempted to control Papel Prensa, which produced newsprint for *Clarín*, *La Nación*, and other newspapers, and in which Grupo Clarín, *La Nación*, and the Argentine State were minority owners (Mochkofsky, 2011). These actions were part of what Waisbord (2013) characterized as a populist perspective on media, based on the friend–enemy dichotomy, according to which media could only “be seen as simple opponents or allies to the government” (p. 29).

By 2011 the conflict between Grupo Clarín and other media outlets and the government was well established. The Fernández administration had abandoned its pragmatic treatment of Grupo Clarín (Kitzberger, 2016), and the leading media saw themselves as civic bulwarks against a potential Kirchner dictatorship (Sivak, 2015). In part due to successful performance of the economy,<sup>5</sup> social policies such as the universal allowance per child (Bertranou & Maurizio, 2012), and a divided opposition, the incumbent Fernández appeared to be poised to win the election. In the Open Simultaneous Compulsory Primaries in August 2011, 10 candidates ran unopposed within their own parties, and the incumbent received 50% of all the votes. This result was interpreted as predicting Fernández’s victory in the presidential election in October of that year, which she won with 54% of the vote.

Governments and the press also had confrontational relationships in other Latin American countries. Bolivia, Ecuador, Uruguay, and Venezuela also enacted or attempted to enact reforms to curtail the power of media (Kitzberger, 2017 Schuliaquer, 2017). In this context, “the scrutiny of government power has often been motivated by political antagonism rather than some post-political professional goal to serve the public interest” (Waisbord, 2010, p. 318). Thus, although the data for this article concern the Argentine case, we are confident that the findings can provide insights applicable to other countries.

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<sup>4</sup> The Audiovisual Communication Services Law (Ley de Servicios de Comunicación Audiovisual) had long been a demand from sectors of the civil society that sought reform to the National Broadcasting Law (Ley Nacional De Radiodifusión), which had been passed during the 1976–1983 military dictatorship (Segura & Waisbord, 2016). The new law limited concentration and market domination to promote media democratization, but the Fernández administration “inexplicably delayed the application of the law. It aimed the policies of the audiovisual sector against Grupo Clarín, instead of promoting the new solutions enabled by the new legislation” (Becerra & Mastrini, 2014, p. 62).

<sup>5</sup> Gross domestic product grew in 2010 and 2011 (World Bank, 2016).

### **The Interplay Between Information, Interest, and Ideology in the News**

The agendas of the media and the public tend to differ (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013). On the one hand, and as a consequence of organizational and professional norms, journalists and editors usually prioritize information about public affairs—national and international politics and economics stories—over non-public affairs topics, such as sports, entertainment, crime, and the weather (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2012). On the other hand, scholarship indicates that audiences are often more interested in the latter set of topics (Hamilton, 2004). This interest can vary according to changes in the sociopolitical context: at times of heightened political activity, such as election campaigns, audiences are more interested in public affairs news (Holbrook, 1996).

In our previous research, we examined whether this news gap between the media and their audiences changed when organizations identified with either a conservative or a centrist/liberal ideology (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013). We looked at cases in six different countries and found no evidence of an ideological effect of this kind. In this article, we probe deeper into the role of ideology as a mediator in government-media relationships. We adopt a broad definition of ideology that includes, but goes beyond, the political/partisan stance of our previous work, conceptualizing it as the set of ideas, expectations, and normative positions that orient an actor's position in the world (Althusser, 1970). With this definition at hand, we examine the role of ideology in shaping the dynamics of government-media relationships before and during the 2011 presidential elections in Argentina.

Ideology has often been characterized as a central component in the production and consumption of news (Williams, 1973). Scholars have suggested that news media tend to represent the ideas held by the elite: a belief in capitalism, social order, and representative democracy (Gans, 1979; Thompson, 1990). However, other authors have argued that media cannot be characterized as a homogeneous institution (Benson & Hallin, 2007). Graber (2013) has noted, "There are vast differences in content, framing, and mode of presentation among various types of news venues and within each venue [which] make it foolhardy to generalize about 'the media'" (p. 140). Indeed, some actors have linked diversity in media outlooks to the fragmentation of audiences, arguing that citizens obtain their information increasingly from like-minded media and journalists (Stroud, 2011).

Research shows that not all media have a clear ideological leaning, because some outlets may express several outlooks (Esser & Umbricht, 2013). American regional newspapers are characterized by internal pluralism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Although *Clarín* started out as a newspaper linked to the Desarrollista party in the 1940s, it severed its ties to that ideology in the 1970s with the aim to become "the great Argentine newspaper" (Sivak, 2015), in part by developing a centrist outlook (Di Tella & Franceschelli, 2011).

Scholarship disagrees on whether there is a genuine centrist position or one that is a product of inconsistent responses due to lack of political sophistication (Converse, 1964), or an irrelevant category due to the multidimensionality of politics (Stokes, 1963). Although *La Nación's* readership has been consistently conservative (Sidicaro, 1993) and self-identifies as part of an elite, *Clarín's* audience is heterogeneous and tends to mirror the newspaper's lack of political definition. Several authors and

political commentators characterize *Clarín* as *clarinista* (Sivak, 2015)—that is, defending whatever policies or parties it deems best for the parent conglomerate, Grupo Clarín, rather than following a set ideology. Survey respondents who self-identify as centrist tend not to hold consistent ideological positions. The same lack of consistency might be observed in centrist media.

The differences in the ideological stances of *Clarín* and TN, part of Grupo Clarín, on the one hand, and *La Nación*, on the other, allow us to explore to what extent the news media at the center of the political spectrum may be more malleable to the larger context, and what effects that influence might have on the agenda of journalists and the audiences of those news outlets.

### Methods

This article uses three complementary data sources: content analyses of the media agenda and the most clicked articles on three of the country's leading online news sites<sup>6</sup>; a two-wave panel survey of online news consumers, conducted in April and October 2011—the month when presidential elections were held; and a three-wave panel of in-depth interviews with citizens conducted one year before, six months before, and the month of the elections. We chose this period because the government–media confrontation had been well established by the time it had started, which also included the primaries and the presidential election. The selection of this period helped make more visible the political and cultural tensions that might have been less readily accessible to the analyst during more routine periods of social life.

For the content analyses, we compared the news displayed most prominently on the home pages and the most clicked articles on three leading news sites: the online editions of two national newspapers (*Clarín* and *La Nación*) and an all-day, cable television news station, TN (*Todo Noticias*).<sup>7</sup> Data collection averaged about 12 days per month and took place during 160 days randomly selected between November 10, 2010, and December 2, 2011. On each data collection day, we gathered the first 10 stories on the home page, counting from left to right and from the top down in a grid-like manner ( $N = 4,761$ ).<sup>8</sup> On each of these days, we also collected data on the 5 or 10 most clicked news stories on each site, based on

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<sup>6</sup> Online versions rather than print versions of the media outlets were selected for analysis because they allowed us to examine readers' thematic preferences directly (from the "most clicked" articles lists) rather than indirectly (through survey responses). Nevertheless, survey respondents were asked whether they had accessed public affairs content on print or online during the last week, and the differences between print and online readers were not statistically significant (84% of print news consumers said they had compared with 81% of online news readers in the first wave. The percentages were 86% and 85% in the second wave). Tables are available on request.

<sup>7</sup> In May 2011, *Clarín* had a daily average daily circulation of 277,000, and *La Nación* had an average daily circulation of 159,000 (Instituto Verificador de Circulaciones, 2011). They were the two newspapers with the highest circulation in Argentina. The online editions of *Clarín* and *La Nación* had 12 and 6 million unique visitors in November 2010, respectively (Internet Advertising Bureau, cited in "Clarín.com sigue siendo," 2011). TN was the most viewed cable news network, and its online edition had 4 million unique visitors in 2011 (TN, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> The total adds up to 39 articles fewer than 4,800 ( $1,600 \times 3$ ) due to missing or repeated pieces.

information made publicly available by each site (the number of articles in the most clicked list varied by day of data collection and news site;  $N = 4,122$ ).<sup>9</sup> According to their topics, articles were coded as “public affairs,” including stories about national and international politics, the economy, and business, or “non-public affairs,” including stories about sports, entertainment, science, health, crime, and the weather.<sup>10</sup>

The panel survey examined responses about online news consumption in four locations in Argentina: Buenos Aires, the capital of the country; José C. Paz, a low-income district located about 30 miles from Buenos Aires; Santa Fe, the capital of the relatively well-to-do province of the same name; and Resistencia, the capital of the province of Chaco, the second poorest province in Argentina at the time of data collection.<sup>11</sup> The first wave was conducted in April 2011 ( $N = 1,600$ ), before the presidential campaign started; the second wave was in October 2011 ( $N = 1,023$ ), a few days before the presidential election.<sup>12</sup> The questionnaire included several items about online news consumption. For this article we report on the responses to two items. One asked whether the respondent had read online news during the previous week. A second questioned whether the respondent had read online news about nine particular topics: politics, the economy, international affairs (these three were later subsumed under the category “public affairs news”), sports, entertainment, science, health, crime, and the weather (these latter six were later subsumed under the category “non-public affairs news”). Respondents were also asked about their age, gender, and education level.

We conducted 132 in-depth interviews with 46 citizens in the four locations. Interviews enabled the analysts to examine the affective factors that drive attention to news as well as respondents’

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<sup>9</sup> *La Nación* and TN changed their designs and offered 5 or 10 news articles on the most read list at different times during the entire data collection period.

<sup>10</sup> A second coder analyzed 4% of the sample. For content, the intercoder agreement level was 92%, and Cohen’s  $\kappa$  was .84.

<sup>11</sup> These locations represent diverse levels of economic development. The first district is the nation’s capital, Buenos Aires. It has the lowest percentage of population below the poverty level, and its population has the highest level of education. The city has a high human development index (UNDP, 2009). The second district is the capital of the province of Santa Fe. It also has comparatively high income and education levels and a large, diversified, economic structure (UNDP, 2002). The third location is José C. Paz, in which more than 25% of the population has unmet basic needs (INDEC, 2001) and more than one-third of the population lives under the poverty line (UNDP, 2002). The fourth district is Resistencia, the capital of the province of Chaco, which has the second lowest human development index in Argentina (UNDP, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> The survey was conducted via the telephone (computer-assisted telephone interviewing) in the cities of Buenos Aires and Santa Fe and face-to-face in José C. Paz and Resistencia. We chose different methods of interviewing because the higher proportion of apartment buildings in Santa Fe and Buenos Aires restricted access for conducting face-to-face interviews. Telephone penetration is relatively low in the Resistencia and José C. Paz districts, which would have introduced high levels of bias into the sample. The AAPOR1 response rate in the first wave was 58%. For the second wave, all participants interviewed for Wave 1 were contacted again; the response rate was 64.2%.

interpretations of the political cycle and its online coverage. Twelve interviewees lived in Buenos Aires and Santa Fe, and 11 in José C. Paz and Resistencia. Most people were interviewed three times. Because of attrition, 45 respondents participated in the second wave and 41 in the third wave. The interviews took place in November and December 2010, April and May 2011, and September and October 2011. The two final waves overlapped with the two waves of the survey. Recruitment of interviewees was undertaken using a mix of strategies: a referral network of contacts; notices in churches, schools, universities, and social network sites; and snowball sampling. This procedure yielded a convenience sample that included 24 women and 22 men.<sup>13</sup> Nineteen interviewees were between 18 and 34 years old, 16 were between ages 35 and 49, and 11 were age 50 or older. Nine of the interviewees had not finished high school, 26 had had some postsecondary education, and 15 were college graduates.<sup>14</sup> The conversations were conducted in a place selected by the respondents and lasted an average of 40 minutes in the first wave, 25 minutes in the second wave, and 34 minutes in the third wave. The data were examined in a grounded theory fashion (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Using a mixed-methods strategy allows the triangulation of two different types of self-representational data sources—the news consumption practices reported by participants in surveys and in-depth interviews—with a behavioral one—the most newsworthy and most clicked articles on online news sites. This triangulation improves the validity of the analysis and enables a deeper and more comprehensive account of what would have been possible by relying on a single source of data and method.

### **Findings**

This section describes how the opposition media diverged in the kind of information they provided and how the interests of their respective publics also diverged. Then we discuss the role of ideology in shaping these divergent trajectories.

### ***Information and Interests***

The survey provides an initial window into the kinds of topics that capture the public's attention. In the first wave, conducted in April 2011, 27% of the respondents said they had accessed online news

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<sup>13</sup> Although more women than men were interviewed, men were more willing and confident to discuss political issues, which explains why two women and six men are quoted in this article. Although not the focus of this research, this difference resonates with previous findings (Eliasoph, 1998). We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

<sup>14</sup> When comparing the sample to the general voting-age population in the four locations (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos, 2010), women were slightly overrepresented (52% vs. 51%), as were those in the 18–34 age group (41% vs. 38%) and in the 35–49 age group (35% vs. 31%), whereas those 50 and older were underrepresented (24% vs. 32%). Those who had not finished high school were underrepresented (18% vs. 33%), and those who had completed college were overrepresented (30% vs. 11%). The sample did not aim to be representative, but rather to include respondents with varying ages and levels of education.



during the previous week. Among the 437 respondents who said that they were online news consumers, almost all of them (97%) reported having read at least one article about non-public affairs matters, whereas four of five (81%) noted having read at least one public affairs piece (Table 1). In the second wave, conducted right before the presidential election, online news consumption had increased by 10% from the first wave: 30% of the respondents reported having accessed online information. In this second wave, 95% had read at least one online news article about non-public affairs during the previous week, whereas 85% had accessed at least one public affairs article.<sup>15</sup> In sum, there is a gap in the interest of the audience about public affairs and non-public affairs news; it decreases, but does not disappear with the rise of political discourse during a presidential election. The prevalence of interest in the different topics is greater in survey responses than in the content analysis due to major differences in measurement instruments—we introduce these results in the next paragraph. But regardless of which measurement instrument is used, news audiences are more interested in non-public affairs stories than in their public affairs counterparts.

**Table 1. Percentage of Public Affairs News and Non-Public Affairs News Reported and Accessed by Respondents in April and October 2011.**

| April 2011                         |                    | October 2011                      |                    |
|------------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------|
| Public affairs                     | Non-public affairs | Public affairs                    | Non-public affairs |
| 81%                                | 97%                | 85%                               | 95%                |
| $N = 437, t = -7.9837, p < .00001$ |                    | $N = 304, t = -3.9584, p = .0001$ |                    |

The content analysis permits us to examine how the divergent thematic interests of the public vary according to different media outlets and how they match the information provided by these media (Table 2). Taking into account the entire period between November 2010 and November 2011, there was a significant, average gap of 14 percentage points between the proportion of news about public affairs displayed most prominently by the news sites and the proportion of public affairs news among their respective most clicked stories. The largest gap, at TN, was 19 percentage points, whereas the smallest, at *Clarín*, was 10 percentage points.

A focus on April, August, and October 2011 allows a better understanding of the dynamics of information and interest at three critical points in time: before the electoral season started, around the primary elections, and around the presidential election.

<sup>15</sup> Logistical regressions with “consumption of online news about public affairs” as the dependent variable show that in Wave 1, being older, male, and middle-class are positively related with engaging in this practice. In Wave 2, these coefficients are positive, though not significant. There are no differences between Buenos Aires, José C. Paz, and Resistencia in either wave. Santa Fe showed higher public affairs news consumption levels in April and lower public affairs news consumption in October. This difference might be because the provincial primaries in Santa Fe were held in May 2011, which might have increased interest in that type of news. Once the gubernatorial election was defined, interest in public affairs news might have declined vis-à-vis the other provinces (local elections were held in July in Buenos Aires, September in Resistencia, and October in José C. Paz).

**Table 2. Percentage of Public Affairs News in the Stories Displayed Most Prominently on the Home Page and the Most Clicked Articles on Clarín, La Nación, and TN.**

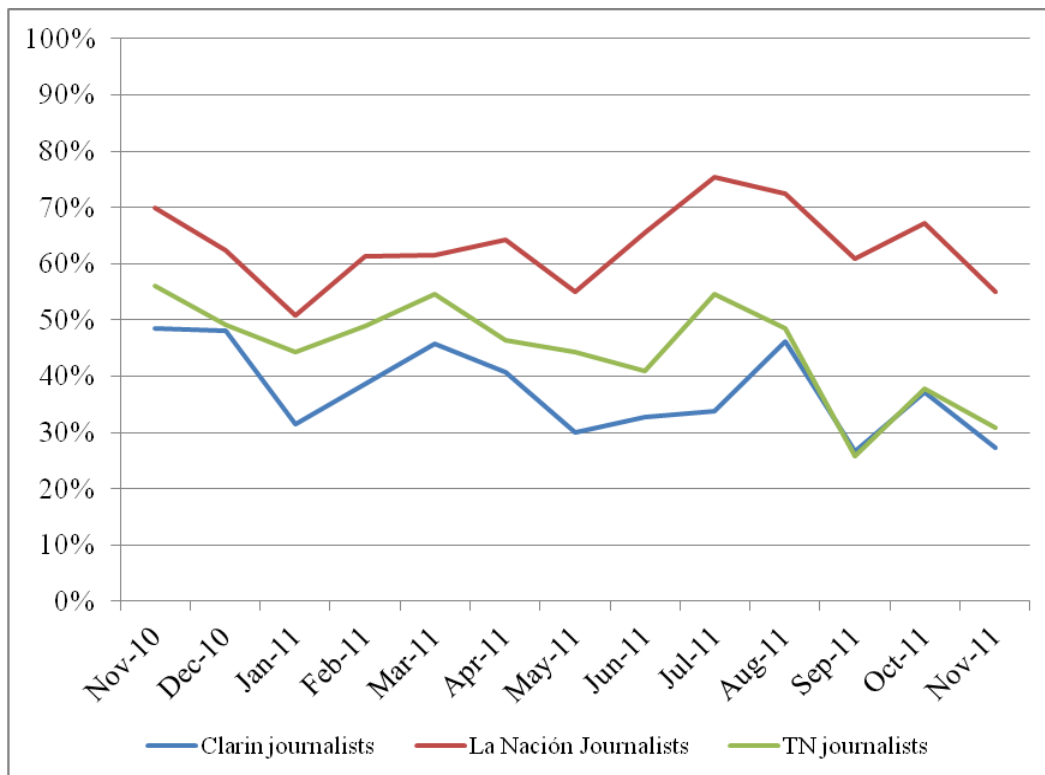
|                                | Clarín                                  |           | La Nación                               |           | TN                                       |           |
|--------------------------------|---|-----------|---|-----------|--|-----------|
|                                | Journalists                             | Consumers | Journalists                             | Consumers | Journalists                              | Consumers |
| November 2010 to November 2011 | 37.59%                                  | 27.20%    | 63.34%                                  | 50.88%    | 44.90%                                   | 25.53%    |
|                                | $N = 3,169, \chi^2 = 39.0920, p < .001$ |           | $N = 2,951, \chi^2 = 46.6726, p < .001$ |           | $N = 2,763, \chi^2 = 109.0840, p < .001$ |           |
| April 2011                     | 40.71%                                  | 27.14%    | 64.29%                                  | 48.89%    | 46.63%                                   | 35.71%    |
|                                | $N = 280, \chi^2 = 5.7514, p = .016$    |           | $N = 275, \chi^2 = 6.6372, p = .010$    |           | $N = 210, \chi^2 = 2.1875, p = .139$     |           |
| August 1–15, 2011              | 55.71%                                  | 44.29%    | 76.47%                                  | 65.71%    | 51.43%                                   | 47.14%    |
|                                | $N = 140, \chi^2 = 1.8286, p = .176$    |           | $N = 138, \chi^2 = 1.9338, p = .164$    |           | $N = 140, \chi^2 = 0.2572, p = .612$     |           |
| August 16–31, 2011             | 35.00%                                  | 16.67%    | 67.80%                                  | 57.50%    | 45.00%                                   | 18.33%    |
|                                | $N = 129, \chi^2 = 5.2628, p = .022$    |           | $N = 99, \chi^2 = 1.0922, p = .296$     |           | $N = 120, \chi^2 = 9.8588, p = .002$     |           |
| October 2011                   | 37.14%                                  | 22.30%    | 67.14%                                  | 68.57%    | 37.86%                                   | 21.43%    |
|                                | $N = 279, \chi^2 = 7.3506, p = .007$    |           | $N = 210, \chi^2 = 0.0435, p = .835$    |           | $N = 280, \chi^2 = 9.0588, p = .003$     |           |

In April, before the campaign started in earnest, less than half of the most read news stories on the three sites were about public affairs: 27% on *Clarín*, 49% on *La Nación*, and 36% on TN. On the two online editions of the print newspapers, *Clarín* and *La Nación*, there was a significant gap between the preferences of the media and the audience for public affairs news. In contrast, on the online outlet of the cable news channel TN, there were no significant differences between both sets of preferences.

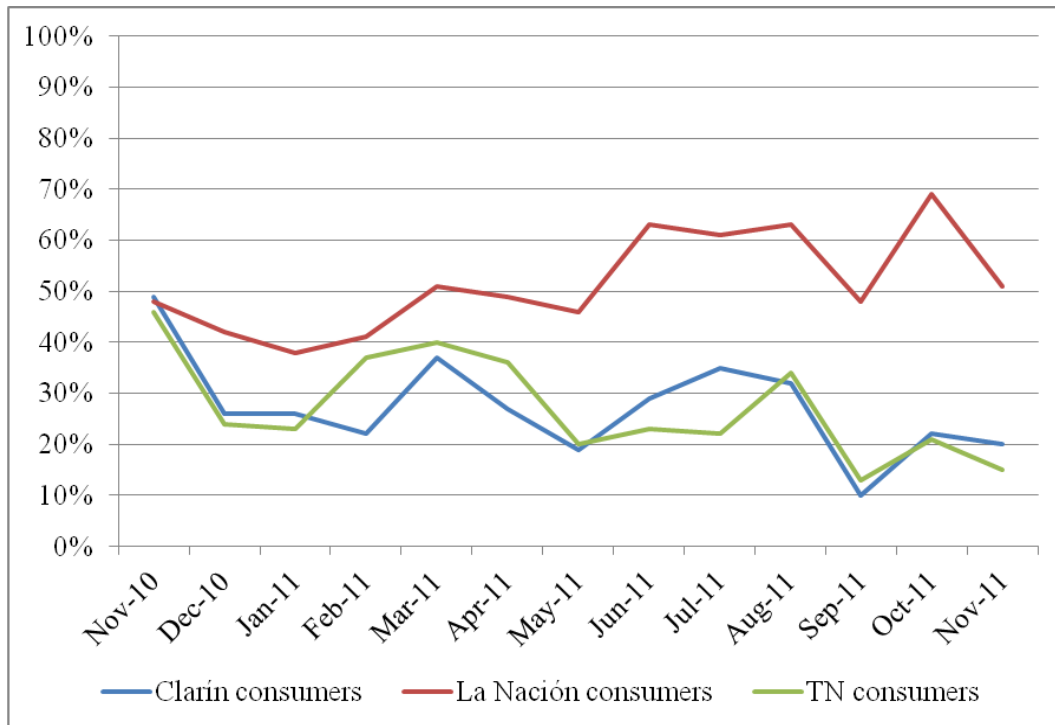
The primaries were widely considered to be a preview of the presidential election, because the 10 candidates ran unopposed within their parties. During the first two weeks of August, the coverage of public affairs topics on the home page increased by 15, 12, and 5 percentage points on *Clarín*, *La Nación*, and TN, respectively. Audiences seemed to follow that trend, because the percentage of public affairs topics among the most clicked stories increased by 17 percentage points on *Clarín* and *La Nación*, and by 11 percentage points on TN. Thus, the gap in interest in public affairs news between the media and their audiences was 12 percentage points on *Clarín*, 10 on *La Nación*, and 4 on TN. However, by the last 16 days of August, immediately after the primaries, coverage of public affairs topics on the home page of the sites returned to the levels of April (on *La Nación* and TN) or decreased even more (on *Clarín*). Among the most clicked stories, the prevalence of public affairs news diminished by 28 percentage points on *Clarín*, 8 on *La Nación*, and 29 on TN. As a consequence of these changes in the media's provision of news and the audience's clicking patterns compared with the first half of August, the news gap rose 6 percentage points on *Clarín* and 23 on TN, but remained constant on *La Nación*.

When compared with the primaries, during the general elections, coverage of public affairs topics in the most prominently displayed stories on *La Nación* remained constant and decreased on *Clarín* and TN. Among the most clicked stories, audiences on *Clarín* and TN selected the same proportion of public affairs topics as during the second half of August. In contrast, on *La Nación*, the percentage of public affairs topics on the most clicked stories increased by 11 points from the second half of August. Thus, on *La Nación*, the news gap between the media and the audience disappeared, but on *Clarín* and TN, the gap continued to be significant (15 and 16 percentage points, respectively).

The evolution of public affairs coverage by these three media organizations and of the interest in this information as revealed by the clicking behavior of their respective audiences shows that the former was less variable (Figure 1) than the latter (Figure 2). A closer look at the data also indicates that this was not a uniform pattern. Online readers on *La Nación* increased their interest in public affairs topics, whereas those on *Clarín* and TN decreased. The lower level of interest in public affairs topics among the *Clarín* and TN audiences might be due to the lower level of unpredictability of the October general election. We explore this possibility further through a qualitative analysis of the interviews.



**Figure 1. Percentage of public affairs news on the home pages of Clarín, La Nación, and TN between November 2010 and November 2011.**



**Figure 2. Percentage of public affairs news on the most clicked articles on Clarín, La Nación, and TN between November 2010 and November 2011.**

### ***Ideology***

In the August primaries, President Cristina Fernández obtained just over 50% of all the votes; none of the other candidates received more than 13% of the votes. Thus, the media, the politicians, and the population at large interpreted the results as a reasonable forecast of the general election outcome. This had different effects among the voters. For instance, five months before the primaries, in March 2011, Carlos, a 38-year-old lawyer from Santa Fe, said that he was very interested in news about politics. “The other day, because of the [gubernatorial] elections in [the province of] Catamarca I went online to read [political news on] *La Nación*, *Clarín*” (personal interview, March 2011). However, one month after the primaries, he said he perceived less attention to political news in himself and others because “the results . . . of the primaries have almost defined the election, only the actual [final] numbers of each candidate have yet to be known, but other than that, the outcome is set” (personal interview, September 2011).

Echoing Carlos’s views, José, an engineering student from the city of Buenos Aires, used a sports metaphor to describe his interest in the election during our conversation in October 2011:

Before the primaries [had taken place], [the electoral contest] was more entertaining, [and] I was more interested because the result was not clear. Up until that moment,

everything was possible, what would happen was not clear. But now it's like playing a soccer game in which you know you are going to win three-zero. It's not a lot of fun. What's fun is playing without knowing the end result! (Personal interview, October 2011)

However, this pattern of a decrease in the audience's interest in political news does not explain the observed differences between *Clarín* and TN, on the one hand, and *La Nación*, on the other hand. As noted above, *Clarín* and TN belong to the same media conglomerate that since 2008 had had an intense high-profile dispute with the president and incumbent candidate, Cristina Fernández. In fact, several of the interviewees maintained that *Clarín* had lost credibility in the previous years due to this dispute. For instance, Federico, a 29-year-old public-sector employee said:

To me, it seems that in the last few years, journalism has become very biased. On one side, you have the Grupo Clarín, and on the other, you have all the progovernment media, and in the middle there are very few [options]. . . . If you turn on 678 [a progovernment current events program on the public broadcaster television network] and it's . . . Néstor [Kirchner, the late president] who is a great man who did everything for us. And if you turn to *Clarín*, everything is a disaster. There is no moderation, no balance in the political coverage. (Personal interview, April 2011)

The hostile confrontation between the government and Grupo Clarín seemed to have taken a toll in terms of the interest of their audiences in its public affairs coverage. Pablo, a 38-year-old small-business owner, explains why he stopped paying attention to *Clarín* and TN.

For as long as I can remember, I don't recall that these news media have ever been so markedly opposed to a government. . . . During many years I read *Clarín* and watched TN with a lot of naiveté. (Personal interview, October 2011)

However, this pattern of credibility loss in its political coverage might not have affected other topics of interest among news audiences. Eduardo, a 58-year-old plumber, said in December 2010 that newspapers tried to sway him "from one side to another." He then added, "On *Clarín*, for instance, I am very interested in this stuff," as he pointed to the last page, where cartoons are published (personal interview, December 2010).

The decline in attention to political coverage in *Clarín* and TN and the overall distrust of their credibility as media organizations, however, contrast with the relatively higher level of loyalty to *La Nación*. This, in turn, relates to the fairly stable levels of interest in its public affairs reportage among its audience. Why was this the case? Three distinct but related manifestations of ideology appear to contribute to this divergence in the public's behavior.

First is the different treatment the government dispensed toward *Clarín* and *La Nación*. On the one hand, it lumped *Clarín* and *La Nación* together as the hegemonic media that were deceiving the population with false information. On the other hand, it often singled out *Clarín* as *the* media enemy and made it the

subject of attacks under the slogan, "*Clarín* lies." This phrase was displayed as graffiti and printed on T-shirts and government buildings. In contrast, there was not a campaign stating, "*La Nación* lies."

Second is the finding that reading *La Nación*, much more than reading *Clarín*, appears to be linked to a deeply rooted everyday ideology of family life. Several interviewees told us that they subscribed to *La Nación* in consonance with this perceived ideological mandate. Maite, a 55-year-old lawyer, explained, "As a matter of tradition we have received *La Nación* at home for ages" (personal interview, November 2010). Ignacio, a public relations consultant, went a step further, "During my entire life *La Nación* was read at home; I love *La Nación*" (personal interview, October 2010).

This stronger loyalty in news consumption habits could be related to a manifestation of ideology that internalizes *La Nación's* historical positioning as a participant in the conversation with either the real or the imagined elite. In his analysis of the evolution of *La Nación's* editorial stance over time, Sidicaro (1993) synthesized the ideology of this newspaper with the phrase "politics as seen from above" [*la política mirada desde arriba*]. This newspaper has historically adopted an elitist stance marked by favoring the interests of the upper classes and enacting the notion that following public affairs is a matter of civic responsibility that distinguishes the elites from the rest of society. This implies a "reading contract" (Verón, 1985) with the audience that stabilizes an interest in public affairs news. It also endows these practices with a more analytical and dispassionate manner than the one associated with other media, including *Clarín*. For instance, Mariana, a 24-year-old psychology student, estimates that "*La Nación* is a little bit in the middle between *Página/12* (a progovernment newspaper) and *Clarín*. . . . I believe that the articles are a little less opinion and a little more of news" (personal interview, November 2010). The typical *La Nación* reader consumes public affairs articles as part of a moral mandate to remain informed. In most cases, this is also a reflection of an imaginary belonging to a certain elite, which, in turn, is linked to a higher level of stability in public affairs news consumption than in other mainstream news media, such as those from Grupo Clarín.

### Discussion

The information that *Clarín*, TN, and *La Nación* provided, and the interest they generated among the centrist and conservative publics, were quite divergent. Even if the three media examined were, in fact, opposed to the government, their agendas and audience preferences were not uniform. Furthermore, this pattern also varied at different periods marked by the preelectoral season, the primary season, and the national election season. Online news consumers tend to privilege non-public affairs topics over public affairs topics. On the three sites examined, the interest in public affairs topics increased in the two weeks before the primary elections in August 2011. Contrary to previous research, this trend did not repeat itself in the same fashion before the general election in October. On two of the sites examined, *Clarín* and TN, audiences did not increase their consumption of public affairs topics during that period, whereas on *La Nación* they did, effectively erasing the gap between the media and the public.

Ideology mediates the impact of government-media relations. The government's greater attack against Grupo Clarín than *La Nación* might have contributed to undermining the basis of support for the former more than the latter. Yet the conservative ideology of *La Nación* and most of its public seemed not

only quite resistant to these attacks, but probably reinforced by them. The stability of the editorial line of the media organization and the loyalty of its audience could have experienced a “circling-of-the-wagons” effect in which preexisting ideologies are reinforced rather than undermined in the presence of outsider criticism. This does not detract from the oppositional role that these media might have had during this period in Argentina. However, it indicates that this role was exercised in different ways, and that audiences of Grupo Clarín’s outlets and *La Nación* responded in diverging manners to this antigovernment stance. This is probably due to differences in the ideological and affective links between these media and their publics (Sidicaro, 1993; Verón, 1985).<sup>16</sup>

This analysis contributes to conceptualizing the role of ideology in government–media relationships. Our previous findings show that, under stable conditions in these relationships, there are no significant differences in the news gap associated with different ideological positions. This article suggests that when these relationships are destabilized—in this case, the emergence of a government–media confrontation—different ideological formations and commercial orientations might help shape divergent trajectories of effects. A conservative ideology coupled with an elite target audience seem to contribute to the maintenance, and perhaps deepening, of preexisting patterns. On the other hand, a centrist ideology, together with a general interest perspective and a broad, middle-class target audience, appear to be more malleable to the presence of external attacks, thus partly severing the trust in the media and the interest in its public affairs coverage.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, in a high-choice media environment (Prior, 2007), variability in audiences’ preferences might jeopardize the authority of news organizations to set the agenda and push forward the issues that should be important to the citizenry (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). The combination of variability with political polarization and the open confrontation of the government toward media companies might further endanger the ability of mainstream media to serve as a virtual public sphere (Habermas, 1996) in which citizens get together to discuss public affairs. Although several authors have suggested that online news outlets might be closer to the traditional partisan press (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008), polarization in news coverage and the associated polarization in the audience (Stroud, 2011) could be highly detrimental to democratic dialogue and consensus building.

Finally, the differences between *La Nación*, on the one hand, and *Clarín* and TN, on the other hand, underscore the importance of reception practices and interpretations when examining the consequences of partisanship on political communication. The audiences of *La Nación*, who are part of or identify with the elite, maintained a steady level of interest in public affairs topics during the period under study. But the mostly middle-class audiences of *Clarín* and TN reduced their interest in these topics when a victory of the incumbent candidate became all but certain. Unless news outlets that cater to the elite can keep their audiences’ interest in public affairs stories regardless of the potential outcome of a given electoral process, this does not bode well for the polity. Mass-oriented news media would lose their *raison d’être* on a market basis—a decline in interest among the public—and a political basis—a dwindling of their

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<sup>16</sup> We thank an anonymous reviewer for this insight.

<sup>17</sup> That the government’s confrontational stance was more intensely directed at Grupo Clarín than at *La Nación* potentially confounds this.

influence on the polity and decision makers. This, in turn, would be coupled with a less effective agenda-setting power on the citizenry, which would drift away from a common ground of public affairs conversations. This would not be a positive scenario for a healthy democratic culture.

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