

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

COVERAGE BY THE SPANISH DIGITAL PRESS OF A GEOGRAPHIC ISSUE: TOURISTIFICATION

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1. INTRODUCTION

The occurrence of terms and expressions related to the social impact of mass tourism has significantly increased over the past years. Concepts like “touristing”, “touristification”, or “tourismfobia” are gradually turning popular and normally – at least for the Spanish case –, go hand in hand with the typical bits of information about the number of foreign visitor rates moving upwards or downwards, or about the effect of tourism on the national economy. This paper presents the research carried out in order to obtain a closer picture of the degree of interest that the impact of tourism-related activities is raising in the Spanish society, by analyzing the coverage of this issue by the Spanish digital press, as mirror and catalyst of anything that may alter our daily lives.

Del Romero Renau (2018: 2) defines “touristification” as “the process – as well as the state derived–through which mass touristic development which is relatively spontaneous and unplanned takes place in a specific geographic area, causing the transformation of that area into a touristic resource” (our translation). The author regards tourism as one of the four product-consumption strands being affected by the so called “sharing or platform economies”, together with mobility, employment and waste management.

The clearest and most studied effect up to present, because of its widespread nature, is the one exerted on house rental costs by the transformation of regular-living homes into touristic ones. The appearance of collaborative tools, used by big investing funds, has multiplied these processes and, in parallel, fostered others such as the *gentrification* one, in such a way that “we cannot talk about touristification without naming the housing crisis” (Gil and Sequera, 2018: 24).

As a result, only 5% of the homes advertised through *Arbnb* in the capital city of Spain – Madrid – can be linked to a truly collaborative economy, while the rest belong to commercial and specialized actors through “traditional economy forms based on the property rental income” (Gil and Sequera, 2018: 22). As for the city of Palma, a direct link has been clearly found between touristing, revaluation and tenant substitution, so

that touring has become a key factor leading to “the generation of ousting or, rather in this case, evictions” (Vives-Miró and Rullan, 2017: 69). Needless to say, the effects of an inappropriate mass tourism management go beyond the rising of house rental prices.

1.1 The role of media

The presence in the media of touristification as an issue, as well as their coverage of this phenomenon, will probably serve as good indicators of the resonance this has had in Spain and in its biggest cities but, above all, they should also reflect the reactions by the different social actors conforming the social landscape. The media show public policies as well as citizenship mobilization, at the same time that their coverage of social response and its repercussion also inform public policies. As Sosa (2000: p. 14) states “the news story is not what happens, but a semiotic artifact representing in a symbolic way the news events”, hence the importance of analyzing how the press approach issues as the one we are dealing with.

Both Critical Discourse Analysis – or CDA – (van Dijk, 2010) and Genre Analysis (Bhatia, 2004, 2015) constitute a good starting point from which to approach language as a mirror of social behavior. For this specific study research there are certain criteria which should allow to depict the coverage given to the concept –linked to a specific term – by the press, and which have to do long-established discourse conventions.

This way, that a certain topic is considered either opinion or fact –or both –, as well as its occurrence and regularity over time, should provide a hint of its presence in society as an *issue*, as this will be mirrored by the press, thus influencing current events and time drifts. In the same way, the genre where the issue is located will permit to infer about the sender’s intention when conveying this information: The typically informative genres (news and news article) mainly include narration and descriptions as their linguistic functions; on the other hand, genres like the chronicle or the feature article are interpretative, and opinion ones are purely argumentative (Gutiérrez Vidrio, 2010: 174).

2. METHODOLOGY

The present work analyses the presence of the term “touristification” in the written Spanish press during the year 2018, before the lack of studies clarifying the coverage of this issue in Spain. For the sample we drew upon, on one hand, *El País*, *El Mundo* y *ABC*, as the three general Spanish press at national level with the highest circulation in 2018 for both print and digital versions, according to the Spanish mass media research association (AIMC, 2019: 55); on the other hand we also used for our sampling information contained in both the digital paper *eldiario.es* – rated fourth in the same year regarding consultations, according to the Digital News Report del Instituto Reuters (2018: 102) – . This way we could compare the coverage provided by two conservative papers (*El Mundo* and *ABC*) to the one by *El País* and *eldiario.es*, with a more progressive bias as defined by the papers themselves. We used digital versions in all cases for a better access to the contents.

We also need to point to the fact that the term “tourismfobia” was disregarded for the purposes of this research, even though its use was widespread in both *El Mundo* and *ABC* in a first approach, considering that previous research had regarded this specific use as ideologically biased and overtly “criminalizing”.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

- The most frequent expressions –and their related concepts, after grouping semantically related terms and compound forms – in our sample headlines were “*pisos turísticos*” or “*viviendas turísticas*” (65), “*Airbnb*” (31), “*Madrid*” (21), “*Ayuntamiento*” (13) and “*turistificación*” (9).
- Overall, the “local” section is the one clearly containing most of the information regarding “touristification” (61,3%), followed by “Opinion” (15,5%) and “Economy” (10,7%). This coverage is very uneven, though, if we look at each newspaper separately. The same applies to the distribution by genre.
- Even though most of the consequences linked to touristification are present in our sample, the increase of rental prices stands over the rest, cutting across different genres that deal with touristic flat regulation ((38,5%) or housing rights (18,8%), being thus present in more than half of our sample (57,3%).
- There are four main social actors with information source roles, namely the councils of some of the most Spanish touristic cities (Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia and Palma); the companies managing touristic home renting platforms – especially *Airbnb* –; neighborhood associations claiming for home rental regulation and, to a lesser extent, catering industry representatives, also claiming for price regulation that counteracts unfair competence.
- Regarding the geographic focus, specific cities are referred to by a 45% of the sample; 23% present a national approach, 17% on a regional one and just 15% covers the issue from an international perspective. This confirms a mainly local focus as the trend in the sample analysed.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The data points to an evident bias in the coverage of the touristification issue, with a very scarce presence of the term in two of the newspapers analysed – *El Mundo* and *ABC* –, and “tourismfobia” as apparently a preferred option showing a clear slant in those newspapers. This suggests the need to use a variety of information sources at the time of searching for news on this or any other topics.

Apart from this, outside the local sphere a very timid presence of the term can be found, which means that, at least for the time lapse of 2018 that we tracked, the issue did not reach much further or, in other words, does not seem to be part of the main contents either for the regional or the national agenda. The fact that a phenomenon with global causes and consequences is just reduced to a local coverage should lead to a discussion of the way certain issues highly affecting a good part of society may (not) be covered by the media. Whether the reason behind this perceived information gap is the lack of means, or

else the editorial newspaper line, the truth is that a deeper coverage through certain, more interpretative genres is missed, as the only way for the readership to access something more than loose information pieces.

At the same time, in light of the findings we might ask ourselves whether the news on touristification come mainly from places where this phenomenon is self-evident, or just where the media headquarters are located. Thus, cities like Madrid or Barcelona are mostly covered by the media studied, while middle-sized cities where the issue has already had an important effect, altering people's lives – e.g. Alicante, Las Palmas or Córdoba –, are hardly ever mentioned, with the corresponding (lack of) impact in their citizens' perceptions.

A socio-critical, qualitative approach is needed whatsoever, focusing on content analysis and contrasting the different social voices and discourses – e.g., those from neighbors and citizens; governments; tourists; home rental enterprises; catering industry or ecologist groups –, among themselves, but also against the development of related events and facts. This would permit to measure the degree of social tension, as well as the possible future development of a phenomenon for which there do not seem to be clear solutions, but rather the opposite, in the form of varied legal tricks and particular economic interests (Marqués, 2019).