



Discourse Coalitions and Animals for entertainment: the Debate on the “Animal Welfare Act” in the Spanish Press

*Coaliciones discursivas y animales para entretenimiento: el debate de la
“ley de bienestar animal” en la prensa española*

Aranceta-Reboredo, Olatz

Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF)

olatz.aranceta@upf.edu

Moreno, Jose A.

Universidad de Extremadura (UEx)

joseamoreno@unex.es

How to cite:

Aranceta-Reboredo, O., & Moreno, J. A. (2025). Redes discursivas y animales para entretenimiento: El debate de la “ley de bienestar animal” en prensa española. *RAE-IC, Revista de la Asociación Española de Investigación de la Comunicación*, 12(23), raeic122314. <https://doi.org/10.24137/raeic.12.23.14>

Abstract:

This study focuses on the media coverage of the Act 7/2023 and the reform of the Penal Code on animal abuse and neglect. The main goal is to identify the actors and discourses reflected in the media agenda, specifically on animals used for entertainment. Texts from ten Spanish newspapers have been examined from before the presentation of the draft bill (1 October 2021) until the month of its approval (3 March 2023) using a

discursive network analysis methodology. The analysis identifies two discursive coalitions: one in favour and the other against a stricter legislative proposal on animal protection. The results reveal that more actors appear in the opposing coalition. The most introduced arguments in the debate revolve around the inclusion of dogs used for hunting in the law; the use of animals for entertainment in competitions, shows and other contexts; the need for the law to be passed; criticism of the animal lobby; and criticism of the hunting lobby. The identified coalitions compete to institutionalise their discourse and influence political parties and public opinion.

Keywords: critical animal studies, animal welfare, political communication, discourse coalitions, Spanish press, interest groups.

Resumen:

Este estudio se centra en la cobertura mediática de la Ley 7/2023 y la reforma del Código Penal en materia de maltrato y abandono de animales. El objetivo principal es la identificación de actores y discursos que han quedado reflejados en la agenda mediática, en concreto sobre los animales usados con fines de entretenimiento. Se han examinado textos de diez periódicos españoles desde antes de la presentación del anteproyecto (1 de octubre de 2021) hasta el mes de su aprobación (3 de marzo de 2023) mediante una metodología de análisis de redes discursivas. El análisis identifica dos coaliciones discursivas: una a favor y otra en contra de una propuesta legislativa más estricta en materia de protección animal. Los resultados revelan que aparecen más actores en la coalición contraria. Los argumentos más introducidos en el debate giran en torno a la inclusión de perros utilizados para la caza en la ley; el uso de animales para entretenimiento en competiciones, espectáculos y otros formatos; la necesidad de que la ley sea aprobada, la crítica al lobby animalista y la crítica al de la caza. Las coaliciones identificadas compiten por institucionalizar su discurso y ejercer influencia sobre los partidos políticos y la opinión pública.

Palabras clave: estudios críticos animales, bienestar animal, comunicación política, coaliciones discursivas, prensa española, grupos de interés.

1. INTRODUCTION

Awareness of and concern for animal welfare have increased in Spain in recent years. A study by the BBVA Foundation (2022) revealed that the vast majority of the Spanish population believes animals deserve moral consideration (66%), it makes sense to attribute dignity to them (80%), and that humans have a moral obligation to care for other animals (93% for domesticated animals and 86% for wild animals). It is worth noting that, among all uses, the most significant rejection was found for animals used in entertainment (BBVA, 2022; Díaz, 2019), and that this is more pronounced among the younger generations (Otegui, Fraiz-brea & Araújo Vila, 2023). This growing concern has prompted debate on the need for stricter legal frameworks to protect these animals from exploitation and abuse. Within this context, the so-called "Animal Welfare Act" is of particular importance. Representing a change to national regulations, it has sparked debate and received extensive media coverage since the presentation of the Preliminary Draft Law on the Protection and Rights of Animals on 6 October 2021 until its approval on 28 March 2023. The "Animal Welfare Act" encompasses two separate legislative proposals: Act 7/2023 of 28 March on the protection of animal rights and welfare, and the reform of the Penal Code on the mistreatment and abandonment of animals.

Approval of the reform of the Criminal Code on the mistreatment and abandonment of animals and Act 7/2023 marks a key moment in the 14th Spanish Legislature, led by the coalition government of PSOE and Unidas Podemos and presided over by Pedro Sánchez. There was huge media coverage of the law's progress through parliament and the involvement of various interest groups in debating it; however, no studies have focused on the actors and the emergent discursive coalitions regarding this issue. The aim of the present research is to explore how this law has been represented in the

Spanish press in relation to the actors involved in the debate on the use of animals for entertainment purposes.

The article has three main objectives: first, to identify the actors and discursive coalitions (for and against stricter animal protection legislation) that emerged during the media debate; second, to examine the predominant arguments and ideas employed by various interest groups - including animal rights, hunting and political actors - concerning the use of animals for entertainment; and third, to analyse how these coalitions competed with the aim of institutionalising their discourses and influencing public opinion and the legislative debate.

Our hypothesis is as follows: discursive coalitions shape a media and political agenda based on polarising arguments to try and influence the legislative debate and highlight positions that legitimise economic and cultural interests rather than animal protection.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. DISCOURSE COALITIONS AND AGENDA BUILDING

This article focuses on the analysis of discursive coalitions and the genesis of social debates in the press, using the journalistic representation of actors who positioned themselves around the Spanish Animal Welfare Act as a case study. Following Hajer (1993, p. 47), coalitions are understood to comprise the lines of argument, the actors who articulate them and the practices that conform to them, all of which are organised around a discourse. The analysis of these discursive networks focuses on extra-discursive practices; that is, the relationships and networks that emerge around the discourse between different actors who coincide in specific lines of argument (Hajer, 1993). In the realm of interest groups, these coalitions function as social forces that, although not interacting directly, pursue common goals (Plehwe, 2011, p.130). Despite the fact that discursive coalitions do not constitute formal, structured networks of actors, they have been attributed a specific capacity for political and institutional transformation at certain moments of social debate (Plehwe, 2011).

This study also examines the role of agenda building — the process by which the media, government and public influence each other (McCombs & Gilbert, 1986) — to understand how media coverage influences perceptions and expectations regarding legislation, particularly as it relates to the use of animals in entertainment. This construct occurs at two different levels (Coleman et al., 2009): whether the media highlight certain issues will lead the public to believe they are important, and how this information is discussed is useful in trying to understand how the public might perceive it.

In the study of discursive coalitions, it is evident that those actors who align around a common discourse – whether in a coordinated way or not – actively promote specific arguments and position priorities in the media, political and public agendas. This is particularly crucial with issues such as animal welfare, given that, according to agenda-setting theory, discursive coalitions set agendas to form perceptions in areas where the audience has limited experience (Gitlin, 2003; Freeman, 2009). Furthermore, the relationship between agenda-setting and public priorities (Luo et al., 2019) suggests that studying the positions and themes around how the media cover a law provides insight into how the media can influence public perception and expectations, as well as the content of the law itself.

2.2. MEDIA COVERAGE AND ANIMAL WELFARE ACTS

Media coverage also has implications for public attitudes, expectations and perceptions regarding laws related to the use of animals for entertainment (Morton et al., 2022). Indeed, in the face of media scandals regarding animal exploitation, governments may become more sensitive and make policy decisions to protect animals, although these decisions may later be altered by other interests (Munro, 2014), be they economic, strategic or electoral.

In the literature related to media coverage of animal welfare issues, studies on animal-based entertainment framing (Maynard, 2017; Kozina, 2017; Legg et al., 2019; Morton et al, 2022) and agenda-setting reveal that, in addition to affecting its own coverage

(Denham et al., 2014), the media debate also has an impact on the public (Kim, Scheufele & Shanahan, 2002) and the representation of animal activists in the legislative process (Williams et al., 2021). This potential public impact and the ethical issues involved have already been studied for the case of the representation of farmed animals from a critical animal studies approach in Spain. Such an approach values the perspectives and realities of other animals (García Rodríguez, 2020; Khazaal & Almiron, 2016).

2.3. THE 2023 "ANIMAL WELFARE ACT"

Since enforcement of the animal welfare law in Spain, analyses have been conducted into its coverage by the Spanish press (Rivera-Martín, 2023), how animals have been instrumentalised to achieve political goals in parliamentary debates (Bernuz Benéitez, 2020) and polarised public opinion regarding the law on Twitter - X from 2023 onwards (Carrasco Polaino, Lafuente Pérez & Benguría Aguirreche, 2024). Rivera-Martín (2023) examined the dominant discourse in the coverage from February to October 2022 and identified some key actors at that point in the debate. Bernut Benéitez (2020) analysed how animals have been instrumentalised to achieve political objectives in parliamentary debates, focusing on speciesist arguments within the public discussion on bullfighting. In her study, she organised the debates around two opposing positions: one in favour of legislation to protect bullfighting and the other in favour of its promotion. In the field of social networks, Carrasco Polaino, Lafuente Pérez and Benguría Aguirreche (2024) investigated the polarisation of public opinion on Twitter (X) after the Act came into force. The results of that study reveal the existence of polarised discursive communities, with individual citizens as the main emitters of content. Moreover, groups with opposing positions did not interconnect with each other, which polarized the debate and created more divided segments in the network of arguments.

The above studies provide a prior identification of key actors and discursive networks, on which this research is based. The main contribution of this article lies in its detailed analysis of the discourse emitted by the different interest groups, the extended time frame of the sample and the specific focus on animals used for entertainment. Here, by

entertainment we are referring to the use of animals in circuses, shows, festivals and events considered as sports, such as horse racing, dog racing, cockfighting and hunting.

3. METHODOLOGY

This article is based on a Discourse Network Analysis (DNA) methodology. DNA combines discourse analysis with network analysis to weave together visualisations and results that group actors, concepts/arguments and positionings. This methodology thus makes it possible to identify discursive coalitions surrounding a topic of social debate (Leifeld, 2017). DNA has proven useful for studying publicly discussed issues and the participation of actors in them, particularly in terms of positioning themselves and forming coalitions (Muller, 2015). The broad political and social discussion generated around Act 7/2023 makes it an ideal case to examine using this methodology.

For the analysis, texts were extracted from the Spanish press to examine the positions of the actors who have expressed their opinions on the animal welfare law. The search period spanned from 1 October 2021 to 3 March 2023, in order to cover the different stages from the debate on the draft bill to its final approval. The selected newspapers were chosen according to the criteria of diversity in relation to business group, editorial line and circulation. The search criteria entered into Factiva are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Content of corpus

Selected newspapers	<i>El País, El Mundo, ABC, La Vanguardia, El Confidencial, El Español, ElDiario.es, El Periódico, Diario de Sevilla and InfoLibre.</i>
Sample period	1 October 2021 - 3 March 2023
Search criteria	Combination of terms related to the Act and terms aimed at focusing the results on the sphere of entertainment: [(ley de bienestar animal <i>or</i> ley animalista <i>or</i> ley de protección animal <i>or</i> ley del bienestar animal <i>or</i> ley de bienestar <i>or</i> ley animal <i>or</i> bienestar animal <i>or</i> ley de animales <i>or</i> ley de belarra) and (caza <i>or</i> cazadores <i>or</i> zoo <i>or</i> zoos <i>or</i> acuario <i>or</i> acuarios <i>or</i> tauromaquia <i>or</i> toro <i>or</i> toros <i>or</i> circo <i>or</i> circos <i>or</i> gallos <i>or</i> caballos <i>or</i> carreras)]. ¹

Source: author's own work

After checking that mentions of the animal welfare law were relevant and that at least one actor was mentioned in each text, the sample consisted of 214 articles, of which: 35 corresponded to *ABC*; 27 to *El Español*; 25 to *Diario de Sevilla*; 24 to *El Mundo*; 21 to *El Periódico*; 20 to *Eldiario.es*; 19 to *InfoLibre*; 16 to *La Vanguardia*; 14 to *El País*; and 13 to *El Confidencial*. The analysis of the texts was conducted manually by the first signatory, assisted by the Discourse Network Analyzer tool (Leifeld, 2015). This coding followed an inductive procedure for the arguments, given that the analysis did not start from a list of predefined arguments but rather was intended to identify which arguments appeared in the discourse network. The coding processed the different arguments made by each actor in each of the texts studied. In addition to the arguments, the actors' positioning towards the law was coded in *Boolean* format or logical data type: *yes* or *no* with regard to making the law stricter. Subsequently, this analysis was reviewed by the second signing author in order to detect possible errors or doubts in relation to the coding. Given that the coding was carried out by a single person, its consistency depended on the thoroughness of the

¹ English: Animal welfare act *or* animal act *or* animal protection act *or* animal welfare act *or* animal act *or* animal welfare *or* animal act *or* animal act *or* belarra act) *and* (hunting *or* hunters *or* zoo *or* zoos *or* aquarium *or* aquariums *or* bullfighting *or* bulls *or* bullfights *or* circus *or* circuses *or* circuses *or* cockerels *or* horses *or* races.

coding applied by this person and in the detection of possible errors by the second signing author. A total of 1,001 mentions were analysed in this coding process.

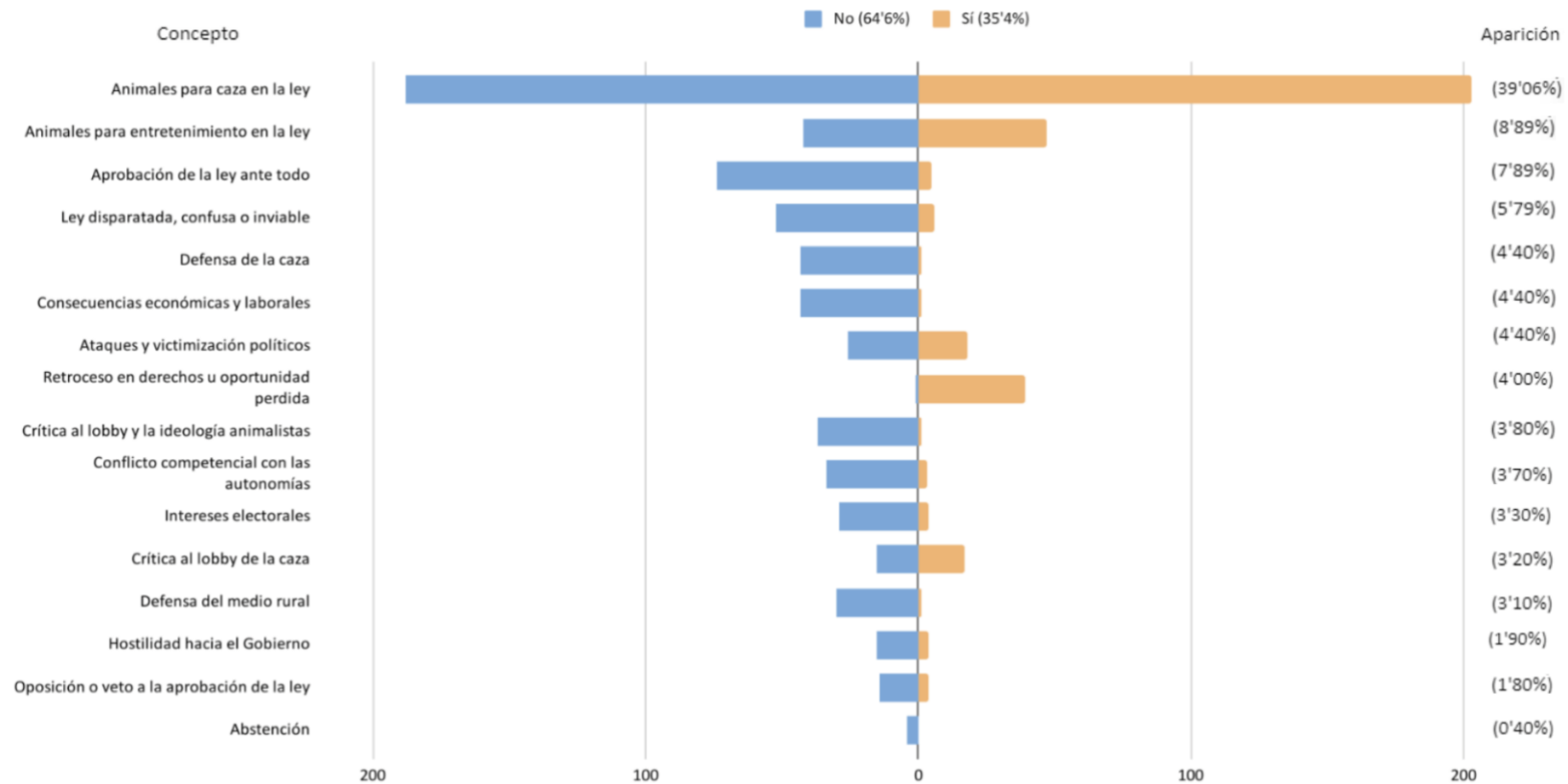
In order to process the data, a network graph was created based on this coding, as well as a count of actors, mentions and arguments that appeared in the network, separated into different graphs. In addition, the actors' interests were classified according to the following categories: industrial (referring to the animal entertainment industry); animal activists (to refer to civil society actors who seek to expand animal rights and welfare); political (referring to political parties and their actors); institutional (public administrations); professional (groups with neither industrial nor pro-animal interests); academic (aiming at generating disinterested knowledge); or individual (related to personal beliefs or motives not identified in the text). This data processing contributed to the interpretation and in-depth analysis of the discursive network presented in this article.

4. RESULTS

4.3.1. ARGUMENTS THAT SHAPED THE DEBATE

A total of 15 arguments were identified, presented in Figure 1, together with a visual representation of the frequency of occurrence for or against a stricter law. A total of 64.6% of the arguments were found to be against a stricter law. The concepts were ordered by frequency of occurrence, and accompanied by the occurrence data in relation to the two positions (*no*: X%/*yes*: Y%): inclusion of animals for hunting in the law (48.1%/51.9%); inclusion of animals for entertainment in the law (47.2%/52.8%); prioritising approval of the law (93.7%/6.3%); the law is nonsensical, confusing or unworkable (89.7%/10.3%); defence of hunting (97.7%/2.3%); economic and labour consequences (97.7%/2.3%); political attacks and victimisation (59.1%/40.9%); setback in rights and missed opportunity (2.5%/97.5%); criticism of the animal lobby and ideology (97.4%/2.6%); conflict with local government powers held by the autonomous regions (91.9%/8.1%); electoral interests (87.9%/12.1%); criticism of the hunting lobby (46.9%/53.1%); defence of the rural environment (96.8%/3.2%); hostility towards the

central government (78.9%/21.1%); opposition to or vetoing approval of the law (77.8%/22.2%); and abstention (100%/0%).

Figure 1. Arguments according to positioning and appearance

Source: Author's own work

Firstly, 39.1% of the arguments pertained to animals used in hunting, primarily focusing on dogs employed for this purpose, as opposed to other animals, such as ferrets, who are also mentioned. Likewise, and regardless of their position, most of these mentions referred to the amendment presented by the PSOE to exclude them from this law.

As for animals used in shows, sports and cultural activities, 8.89% of the mentions addressed this issue, including animals in bullfighting (including horses), horse racing, dog racing, animals used in circuses and festive and popular events, cockfighting and animals in shows in zoos and aquariums. Several organisations and columnists defended activities such as bullfighting or popular festivals, insisting on the need for their protection and arguing against attempts to ban them.

The third most recurrent idea, with 7.9% of mentions, was "that the law should come first", although only three actors indicated that they wanted the law to be stricter: the political parties ERC and UP, and animal protection organisations. Expressions that stood out included "The UP gives in", "forced to accept the modification of its law" or "the purple party ended up succumbing", "the PSOE imposes itself" and the "announced agreement[s] have been broken".

However, the most frequently repeated criticism of a stricter law, with 89.65% of mentions, was that it was nonsensical due to the confusion it would generate or its unworkability. Comprising various hunting lobbies, the Fauna Federation, the PSOE, PP, PNV and VOX, this coalition described the law as "nonsense", causing "legal uncertainty" (Monforte Jaén, 2022) and "pretending to be animal welfare but is not" (*InfoLibre*, 2023b). On the other hand, some actors such as scientists and veterinarians called for the law to be more exhaustive so as to avoid confusion or its unworkable implementation, as certain definitions were not sufficiently clear.

The perception that this law is a step backwards for animal rights or a missed opportunity was a position shared by various animal rights, nature conservation, professional, political and institutional organisations, all in favour of a stricter law.

In the analysis of media coverage, criticism of the animal rights lobby and ideology (3.8%) outweighed criticism of the hunting lobby (3.2%). The coverage in the newspapers analysed included generic mentions of all animal rights actors, including political parties and civil society, to express rejection of the amendments aimed at tightening the law. The following statement was an example of this: “Animal rights activists are on the warpath against the Spanish government over the amendment” (Farrés, 2022).

For its part, the hunting lobby framed its actions as a defensive response to the “harassment” of animal lobbies and a “new social-political correctness” (ABC, 2021). While pro-hunting organisations appealed to an ideological issue and the need to defend their activity, animal rights parties and NGOs criticised the PSOE’s partiality, pointing out that it was responding to electoral interests and that the party had “succumbed” to pressure from the hunting sector.

The argument in defence of the rural world (3.1%) was one of those most frequently employed by the discursive coalition against making the law more restrictive. The discursive coalition also linked defence of the rural world to the PSOE’s amendment, as it was presented as a response to the demands of rural communities². Within this discursive framework, actors such as the Federation of Rural Women and Families (Amfar) expressed their support for hunting. It is interesting to note that among the political parties, hunting was defended as “positive” and “neither left-wing nor right-wing”; that is, as something without an ideology. In contrast, these same actors presented the “attack” on hunting as being driven by “ideological reasons”. Along these lines, a headline in ELDiario.es showed a dichotomous framing that created two opposing positions: the rural, with “soul”, was defended against an animalist position ridiculed as “lettuce-eating”.

² It is important to remember that these are the areas where the PSOE had most concerns regarding the regional elections, while pressure was also exerted by Emiliano García-Page, a PSOE politician and the president of the Junta de Comunidades de Castilla-La Mancha since 2015.

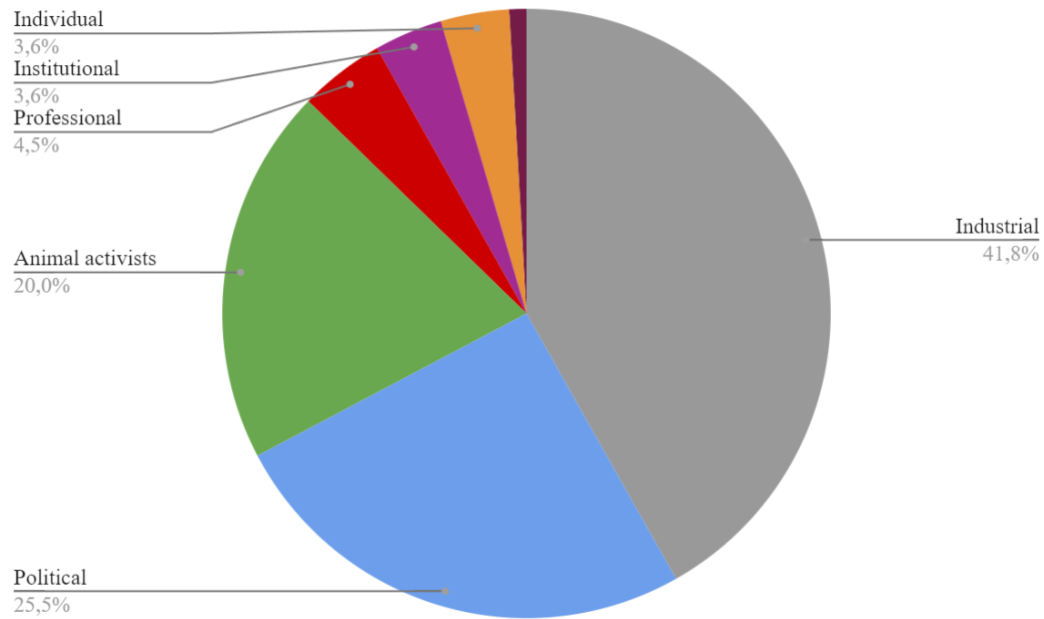
Hostility towards the government (1.9%) was primarily expressed in opposition to a stricter law. In this context, expressions of hostility or even threats were recorded, such as direct warnings by the RFEC calling for mobilisations at the national level or breaking off relations in regional political spaces. Sometimes these actors used ambiguous expressions about “other measures” they would take in case the government went against “the interests of the sector”.

On the other hand, actors seeking a stricter law also exerted direct pressure and even resorted to threats in 21% of all cases where this argument was used. Among them, Más Madrid, Unidas Podemos and various animal protection organisations stood out. The greatest pressure came from the latter, who went so far as to warn that they would stop carrying out certain voluntary tasks for which the public administration should be responsible.

4.2. ACTORS MENTIONED IN THE MEDIA COVERAGE

Up to 109 organisations related to animal-based entertainment were identified as stakeholders in the debate reported in the Spanish press. As Figure 2 shows, these actors have been categorized into seven groups based on the interests they represent.

Figure 2. Actors according to the interest they represent



Source: Author's own work

The interests with the greatest presence in the media coverage were those categorised as pertaining to industry (46%). Among these, the following stood out due to their relevance as interest groups: the United Circus Association; the Spanish Greyhound Federation (connected with hunting); the Royal Spanish Equestrian Federation; the Iberian Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AIZA); the Oceanographic Foundation; the magazine *Jara y Sedal* (hunting and fishing); and the FAUNA Federation (private animal ownership). The hunting block includes numerous organisations with interests linked to the hunting industry, such as the Castilla-La Mancha Hunting Federation, Spanish Hunting Organisations (OEC), the Spanish Regional Hunting Association (ARRECAL), the National Hunting Office, the Royal Spanish Hunting Federation (RFEC), the Castilla y León Hunting Federation and the Artemisan Foundation.³

³ Original names of mentioned associations, in order: Asociación Circos Reunidos, la Fundación ARTEMISAN, la Real Federación Española de Caza (RFEC), la Federación Española Galgos, la Real Federación Hípica Española, la Asociación Ibérica de Zoos y Acuarios (AIZA), la Fundación Oceanográfica, la Revista Jara y Sedal and la Federación Fauna.

The category with the second highest frequency of appearance was that of political interests (25.5%). The presence of the *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE), *Unidas Podemos* (UP), *Partido Popular* (PP) and VOX predominated over that of the *Partido Animalista Con el Medio Ambiente* (PACMA), *Partido Nacionalista Vasco* (PNV), *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (ERC), *Ciudadanos* (Cs), *Más País*, *Coalición Canaria* (CC) and *Euskal Herria Bildu* (EH Bildu)⁴.

The third most frequent category was the animalist interest (20.00%), which comprises civil society actors – excluding members of political parties. This interest includes platforms and NGOs such as No to Hunting (NAC), AnimaNaturalis, the Parliamentary Association for the Defence of Animal Rights (APDDA), the Franz Weber Foundation (FFW), Legal Operators for Animals (INTERcids), the Foundation for Advice and Action in Defence of Animals (FAADA), the International Antibullfighting Committee (CAS International), *Asociación de Profesionales del Derecho Unidos por la Defensa Animal y el Medio Ambiente de Córdoba* (Damac Juristas) and *Abogados Granadinos por el Medio Ambiente y los Derechos de los Animales* (Agmada).

The fourth category in order of appearance was the professional category (4.5%), comprising professional associations, regardless of industry. The results highlight the important presence of veterinarians, with associations such as the Spanish Veterinary Business Confederation (*Confederación Empresarial Veterinaria Española*) or the Veterinary Collegiate Organisation (OCV). In percentage terms, this was followed by institutional interests (3.6%) and individual interests (3.6%). In terms of the former, the Ministry of Social Rights and the 2030 Agenda was the most prominent, followed by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. As for individual interests, the frequency of appearance of civil society exceeded that of columnists, celebrities and letters to the newspaper. And finally, the least present interest was academic (0.9%), with only a few generic mentions.

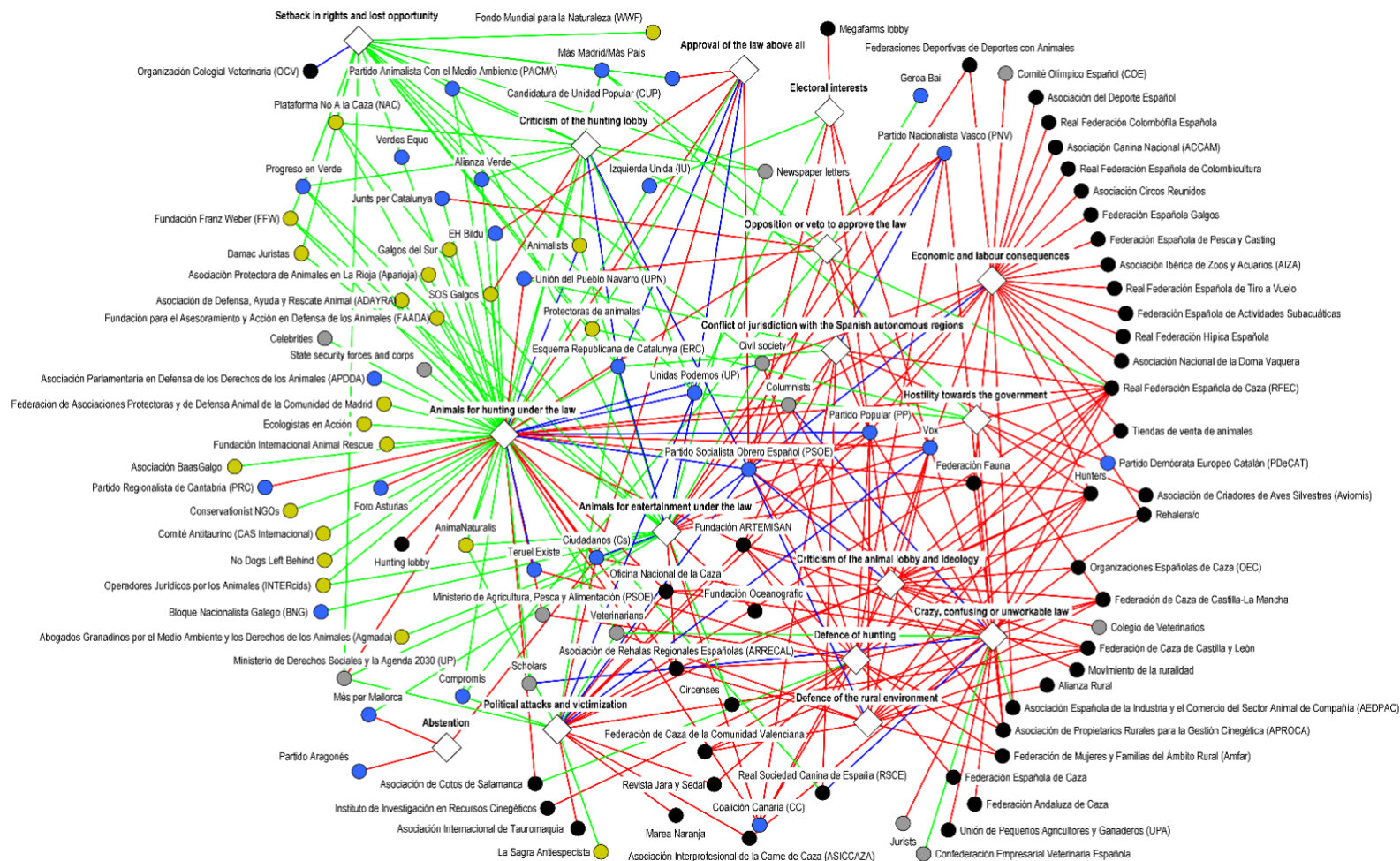
⁴ To provide international readers with some context on the Spanish political spectrum, we understand in this article that the parties UP, EH Bildu, ERC, Más País, PSOE and PACMA are on the progressive side of the political spectrum, while Cs, CC, PP and VOX are on the conservative side (taking into account the variety of ideological nuances and positions that can be found in any political spectrum).

4.3. IDENTIFIED DISCURSIVE COALITIONS

Figure 3 presents the discursive coalitions that emerged from this research, based on the arguments and positions of the various actors. In particular, we observe how discursive networks appeared according to their positions for or against a stricter law, and the ideas they use to defend these positions.⁵ This does not mean that organisations without blue lines have not positioned themselves differently. For example, veterinarians have advocated for stricter laws regarding the inclusion of animals used for hunting, or by pointing out that the current law is confusing, while simultaneously calling for the law to be less strict, arguing in favour of defending the rural world.

⁵ The circles represent the different interests: NGOs appear in green, professionals and industry in black, political parties in blue, and the rest in grey. The white diamonds indicate the arguments that bring them together. Thus, the lines connecting the organisations (circles) with the arguments (diamonds) provide information that reveals the two discursive coalitions in their argumentative diversity. The green lines indicate that the actor and the argument are connected through the law being "stricter". The red lines, on the other hand, indicate that the actor and argument are connected through the law being "less" strict. Finally, the blue lines imply that the same argument and actor are connected by both positions, but they do not give information on the proportion of *no/yes* responses.

Figure 3. Mapa de redes discursivas

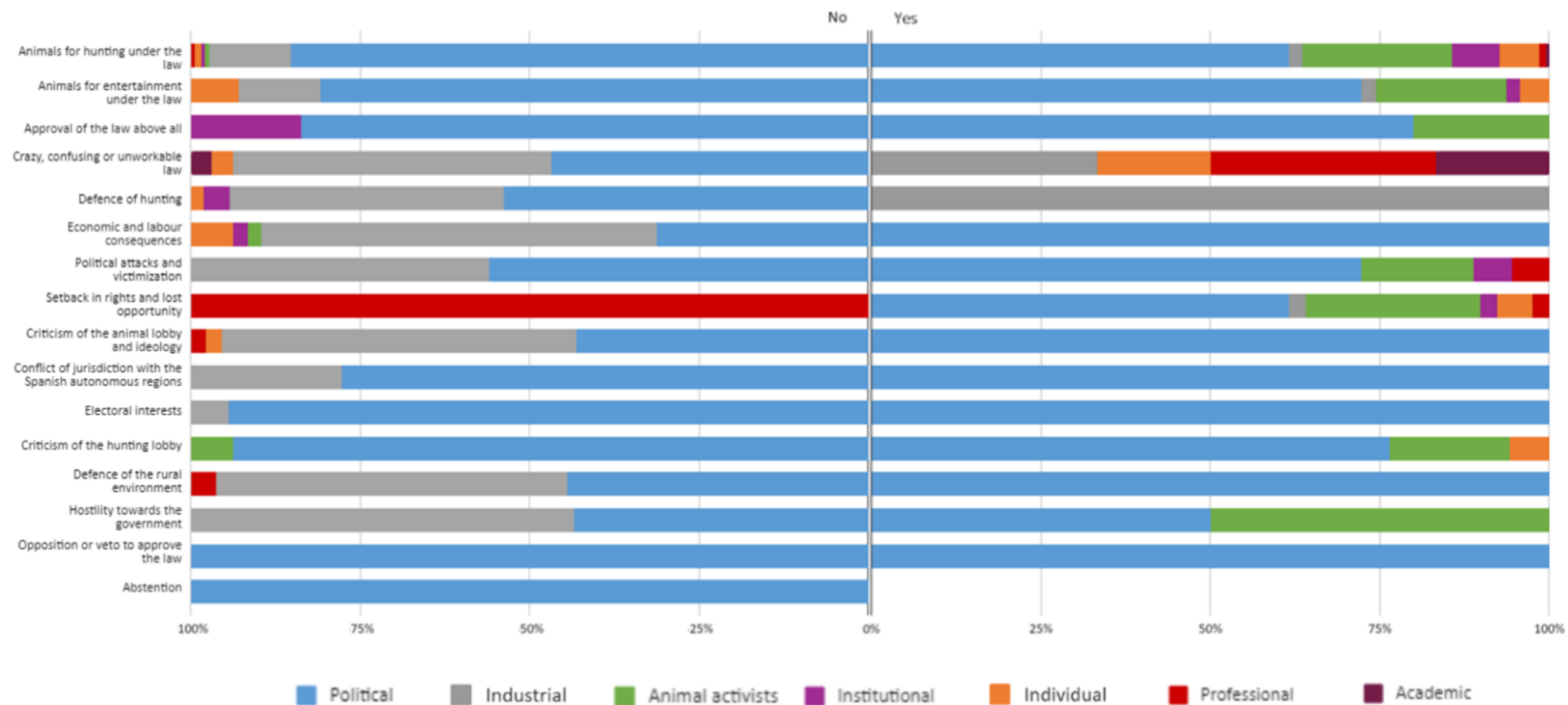


Source: Author's own work

Figure 3 identifies a discursive coalition pushing for enforcement of the law, led by Unidas Podemos and parties that support the law being stricter in terms of including more animals. Industrial interests are minimally represented in this position. The organisations in favour of a stricter law are those working with dogs, namely the Asociación Protectora de Animales en La Rioja (Aparioja) and the Real Sociedad Canina de España (RSCE). On the other hand, a coalition against the legislative proposal has emerged, led by opposition parties and the PSOE, with the animal entertainment industry joining forces to lobby against stricter laws.

4.3. ARGUMENTS BASED ON SECTOR INTERESTS

After outlining the identified arguments and main actors who use them to challenge or defend a stricter law, we can now determine the distinctions between *no* and *yes* to a stricter law according to sector interests. Figure 4 provides information on the most common interests for each argument and position.

Figure 4. Arguments, actors and position according to interest

Source: author's own work

In terms of the interests represented, political actors (in blue) are observed to have dominated the debate in most of the arguments, with *Coalición Canaria* (CC) being a notable case in this regard. Its presence in the coalition against a stricter law and the amendments it presented must be contextualised within the possible interests of this party in defending the Loro Parque Group. The importance of the CC was also significant with regard to cockfighting. On the one hand, the party appeared in the debate with “a compromise amendment to remove cetaceans in captivity from the application of the Act” which “will fully affect dolphins in zoos, aquariums or research centres” (Carvajal, 2022) - at this point it is worth highlighting the importance and power of the Loro Parque Group in the Canary Islands, where the CC governs and where the Loro Parque Group has several theme parks with animals. On the other hand, with regard to poultry the CC declared “that it wants them to be considered an 'autochthonous cultural manifestation' and conservationist of the 'Spanish fighter' avian breed” (R. M., 2023a). Finally, shows in zoos and cockfights were excluded from Act 7/2023; although the training and use of animals for fighting purposes is prohibited, it is only considered a very serious offence when it is carried out outside the scope of regulated activities (Hava García, 2023, p. 33). AIZA, equestrian federations, the Spanish Greyhound Federation and the Fauna Federation also stood out as advocating against a stricter law for animals used for entertainment.

Within industrial interests (shown in grey), hunting federations - and especially the RFEC - put pressure on the PSOE from the outset and threatened potential consequences in the 2023 regional elections. Examples of this stance on the law included statements such as the following from one hunter: “It is meant to finish us all off” (Miranda, 2022). As Figure 4 shows, one of the main arguments posited by these hunting federations (part of the grey area) was a criticism of the animal lobby or ideology.

Another actor with industrial interests, the interest group United Circus Association, appeared in the media coverage as an advocate for the use of animals in circuses. This

stakeholder's arguments focused on ideas such as the law being nonsensical, labour consequences and hostility towards the government. As an illustration, the group stated that the government was aiming to "'destroy employment' [...] and warned that more than 2,500 families in Spain live from the circus alone [...] 'and they haven't even contacted us'" (AAC, *Diario de Sevilla*).

Faced with the prospect of the law being a "step backwards in rights and a lost opportunity", several of the political organisations in favour of a stricter law took a more proactive stance for its modification - while the political organisations against making the law stricter did not mention it as a step backwards. These actors included FFW, NAC, WWF, the Veterinary Collegiate Organisation (OCV), PACMA, Unidas Podemos, Más Madrid/Más País, the Ministry of Social Rights and Agenda 2030 (UP), as well as different sectors of civil society. Their arguments comprised ideas such as "rights should be common to all animals" (Galaup, 2022), criticism of "segregation" based on the use of animals (Medina, 2023), as stated by the FFW, and the reiteration that more protectionist regional laws already exist.

In terms of positions in favour of a more restrictive law, more animal rights and individual actors were identified than those in the opposing position. Arguments exemplifying this position included the fact that the entertainment industry does not need animals, as in the case of the circus and its connection to other industries: "'things evolve' (...). Planas has defended the absence of animals in circuses but also supports their absence in zoos" (R. M., 2022b). The UP and PACMA also expressed an interest in regulating bullfighting and the use of animals in shows (*InfoLibre*, 2023a).

Individuals also expressed anecdotes or opinions when dealing with the issues of animals used for hunting or entertainment, the economic and labour consequences, the unfeasibility of the law, defence of hunting and criticism of the animal lobby or animalist ideology. It is worth highlighting the presence of *ABC* columnists, who took a stance against stricter laws and prohibitions, referring to this as "animal fever" (Miranda, 2022). On occasion, they ridiculed the law by using irony and implausible situations, such as

putting wolves in jail for killing a lamb because their “death penalty would have been abolished” (Capote, 2021).

On the other hand, criticism of the alleged abstract nature and animalistic bias of the Act stood out in the comments made by veterinary professionals. Meanwhile, the institutions positioned themselves in favour of the law being passed, firstly underlining the defence of practices such as hunting, and secondly emphasising the possible economic and employment impacts resulting from its implementation.

Finally, the academic sector appeared to be opposed to a stricter law due to the issue of the confusion it generated, especially in the scientific, and in particular biology, sector. Its presence in the camp of yes to a stricter law was more limited and focused on the need for its improvement to avoid confusion.

5. FINDINGS ON DISCURSIVE COALITIONS AND INTERESTS IN COVERAGE

This study contributes to the line of research on discursive coalitions in the field of research on the press and interest groups. The case studied here identifies, firstly, the leading organisations, actors and interest groups found in coverage of the Spanish animal welfare Act by the selected Spanish press, and, secondly, their corresponding arguments related to the use of animals for entertainment. The texts analysed show the formation of discursive coalitions for and against a stricter Spanish Animal Welfare Act. By employing coding focused on animals used for entertainment purposes in the analysis, the results offer a more specific view of the sector.

The study results reveal that both coalitions are ultimately competing for the institutionalisation of their discourse; that is, to have their arguments and narratives recognised and adopted in official discourse and public policy. An example of this is the criticism of electoral interests that, through amendments, resulted in exceptions for the inclusion of certain animals in Act 7/2023 and reform of the penal code. The recurring narratives in the media agenda revolve around controversies and lobbying influences and the repeated appearance of these issues suggests a competition to set the agenda

and shape public perception of the law at a critical moment in its development. These arguments reflect a polarisation in terms of the dispute for social consensus, something already identified by Carrasco Polaino, Lafuente Pérez and Benguría Aguirreche (2024) in the context of Twitter (X). This polarised and controversy-focused media coverage has succeeded in influencing public perception and expectations, as it has also directly impacted the Act itself.

The affinities between certain lobbies, industrial interests and political parties can be seen throughout the analysis for both positions. Although sectors or actors from the same discursive coalition may not have interacted or coordinated with each other, they do share common objectives and arguments. Moreover, they can be attributed a certain capacity to generate political and institutional change at key moments (Plehwe 2011), despite these coalitions being unstructured. In this case, we observe that interest groups make direct appeals to political parties to adopt positions in line with their interests and the causes they defend, and that they do so within an argumentative harmony visible in the results. As Rivera-Martín (2023) identified in her examination of the dominant discourse in the coverage from February to October 2022, this analysis confirms the majority presence of actors opposed to a stricter law. The results show a clear predominance of political parties and lobbying of them by interest groups. Likewise, in general terms, there is a more significant presence of those actors critical of the animal lobby than those critical of the hunting lobby.

The relevance of this study lies in the clear visibility that the analysed press awarded to certain actors and positions, expanding findings on this law from previous studies (Rivera-Martín, 2023; Polaino, Pérez & Aguirreche, 2024). Specifically, the present study contributes knowledge from a discursive network analysis perspective and identifies the coalitions formed in this debate through an investigation of actual Spanish press coverage. This is of particular interest, because previous studies on the development of this law had not paid attention to actors advocating for the protection of animal rights outside social networks, such as NGOs and activist organisations.

The construction of these discursive coalitions is reflected in - at times implicit - interactions between actors such as parties, interest groups and other organisations, guided by industry, animal rights, political, institutional, professional and academic interests. These relationships and networks that emerge around the discourse through shared lines of argument are illustrated in Figure 3. Thus, this study contributes empirical elements to the theory of agenda construction (McCombs & Gilbert, 1986) by showing how the direction of a debate on a political issue is determined by the media's selection of its sources.

The newspapers studied give voice to a diversity of actors for and against a stricter law. Through this visibility, these actors have the potential to lobby for amendments that benefit their interests. Although attacks and pressures on political parties come from different positions, their degree of hostility varies markedly. Lobbyists opposed to stricter regulation make more direct and frequent attacks on political actors. In addition to referring to such ethical positioning as animal "fever", the reductionism of animal rights implications and the use of extreme examples could be considered misinformation. Thus, through this polarisation of discourse, the interests of hunters are reflected as those of the rural world and its conservation, reinforcing a dichotomy between the rural, traditional and free, versus the urban, self-interested and imposed.

In short, the study demonstrates how discursive networks and coalitions of stakeholders have played a crucial role in shaping the debate and media coverage of the two Spanish legislative proposals known as the "Animal Welfare Law". The initial hypothesis regarding the positioning and influence of interest groups economically motivated to exploit animals has been confirmed and is complemented by the presence of political motivations. Lobbying by political and industrial interest groups has prioritised the exclusion of animals used for hunting from the law, fuelling the idea that it was a nonsensical, confusing or unworkable law. These arguments have been devised to defend hunting, highlight the economic and employment consequences, criticise the animal lobby and its ideology, and express hostility towards the government, among other aims. In contrast, animal rights institutions and NGOs have insisted on the

inclusion of more animals used for entertainment in the law. Actors with animal rights interests have also emphasized the need for the law to be enforced above all else - while maintaining a critical note on the potential setback in rights and highlighting that it represents a missed opportunity for further advancing animal rights.

This article provides a more in-depth understanding of how interest groups and discursive coalitions can shape mediated political debate and ultimately influence legislative decisions. In doing so, it highlights the need for critical scrutiny of the forces at work behind journalistic discourse and their impact on the formation of public policy. The limitations of this study are inherent to the methodology employed. Extending the sample size and origin with additional newspapers or the inclusion of audiovisual media could lead to variations in the results. Therefore, although generalisable, the conclusions presented could be further developed and expanded through further specific research on the topic.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would especially like to thank Anna Mulà and Eze Paez for their contributions and review at different points in the research. We would also like to thank Núria Almiron for her supervision, and Maider García and Tamara Rojo-Castro for their suggestions.

7. FUNDING

This work was supported by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation and State Research Agency (Agencia Estatal de Investigación, AEI) under grant PID2020-118926RB-100/MICIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033, and the associated grant for hiring a predoctoral researcher (PRE2021-099988) that one of the authors benefits from.

8. REFERENCES

A.A.C. (2021). Protestas en contra de la nueva Ley de Bienestar Animal por parte de Circos Reunidos y la Real Sociedad Canina. *Diario de Sevilla*. <https://cutt.ly/Prdjnx4h>

Bernuz Benítez, M. J. (2020). La instrumentalización de los animales para el logro de objetivos políticos: el debate parlamentario sobre los toros en España. *dA.Derecho Animal (Forum of Animal Law Studies)*, 11(3).

<https://revistes.uab.cat/da/article/view/v11-n3-bernuz>

Capote, P. (2021). Los derechos de los animales. *ABC*. <https://cutt.ly/erdjQGSG>

Coleman, R., McCombs, M., Shaw, D., & Weaver, D. (2009). Agenda setting. In *The handbook of journalism studies* (pp. 167-180). Routledge.

Denham, B. E. (2014). Intermedia Attribute Agenda Setting in the *New York Times*: The Case of Animal Abuse in U.S. Horse Racing. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 91(1), 17-37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699013514415>

Díaz, E. M. (2019). "Emerging Attitudes towards Nonhuman Animals among Spanish University Students." *Society & Animals*, 27(2), 197-223.

<https://doi.org/10.1163/15685306-12341490>

Fundación BBVA. (2022). *Estudio Fundación BBVA Visión y Actitudes hacia los Animales en la Sociedad Española*. Departamento de Estudios Sociales y Opinión Pública.

<https://cutt.ly/1rdjWw8O>

Galaup, L. (2022). ¿Mascotas sí y perros de caza no? Una enmienda del PSOE quiere rebajar la ley del bienestar animal. *El Diario*. <https://cutt.ly/PrdjWTUk>

García Rodríguez, R. (2020). El poder del discurso en los medios de comunicación: representación de los animales considerados de granja. Análisis de la prensa española. *dA Derecho Animal: Forum of Animal Law Studies*, 11(3), 0104-124.

<https://revistes.uab.cat/da/article/view/v11-n3-garcia>

Gitlin, T. (2003). *The whole world is watching: Mass media in the making and unmaking of the new left*. University of California Press.

Hajer, M. A. (1993). Discourse Coalitions and the Institutionalization of Practice: The Case of Acid Rain in Great Britain. En F. Fischer & J. Forester (Eds.), *The Argumentative Turn in Policy Analysis and Planning* (pp. 43-76). Duke University Press.

Hava García, E. (2023). ¿Hacia dónde va la política criminal española sobre maltrato animal? Luces y sombras tras 25 años de reformas penales. *Revista Electrónica de Ciencia Penal y Criminología*. RECPC 25-22. <http://criminnet.ugr.es/recpc/25/recpc25-23.pdf>

InfoLibre. (2023a). Una treintena de ciudades salen a la calle contra la Ley de Bienestar Animal: “No es progreso, es retroceso”. *InfoLibre*. <https://cutt.ly/LrdjEF1k>

InfoLibre. (2023b). Los animalistas vuelven a tomar las calles para exigir que los perros de caza se incluyan en la ley. *InfoLibre*. <https://cutt.ly/ErdjE2jw>

Khazaal, N., & Almiron, N. (2016). ‘An Angry Cow is Not a Good Eating Experience’: How US and Spanish media are shifting from crude to camouflaged speciesism in concealing nonhuman perspectives. *Journalism Studies*, 17(3), 374-391. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2014.982966>

Kim, S.-H., Scheufele, D. A., & Shanahan, J. (2002). Think about it This Way: Attribute Agenda-Setting Function of the Press and the public’s Evaluation of a Local Issue. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 79(1), 7-25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107769900207900102>

Kozina, T. (2017). *Horse racing in Melbourne newspapers: themes within content - a critical discourse analysis*. BA Thesis.

Leifeld, P. (2017). Discourse Network Analysis: Policy Debates as Dynamic Network. En J. N. Victor, M. N. Lubell, & A. H. Montgomery (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Networks* (pp. 301-325). Oxford University Press.

Leifeld, P. (2015). Discourse Network Analyzer (DNA) (3.0) [A Java-Based Software for Qualitative Data Analysis with Network Export]. Open Source.

<https://github.com/leifeld/dna>

Luo, Y., Burley, H., Moe, A., & Sui, M. (2019). A meta-analysis of news media's public agenda-setting effects, 1972-2015. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 96(1), 150-172. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699018804500>

Maynard, L. (2017). Media Framing of Zoos and Aquaria: From Conservation to Animal Rights. *Environmental Communication*, 12(2), 177–190.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2017.1310741>

McCombs, M., & Gilbert, S. (1986). News influence on our pictures of the world. In J. Bryant & D. Zillmann (Eds.), *Perspectives on media effects*, (pp. 1-16). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Medina, M. Á. (2023). Podemos aceptar seguir adelante con la ley de bienestar animal sin incluir a los perros de caza, como exigía el PSOE. *El País*. <https://cutt.ly/1rdjTFgT>

Miranda, I. (2022). Podemos impone su Ley de Protección Animal aunque matiza puntos clave para cazadores y ganaderos. *ABC*. <https://cutt.ly/UrdjTC6a>

Monforte Jaén, M. (2022). El PSOE rompe su acuerdo con UP sobre los perros de caza y busca el apoyo del PP para excluirlos de la ley. *infoLibre*. <https://cutt.ly/LrdjT3zR>

Morton R., Hebart M. L, Ankeny R. A, & Whittaker A. L. (2022). Portraying Animal Cruelty: A Thematic Analysis of Australian News Media Reports on Penalties for Animal Cruelty. *Animals*, 12(21), 2918. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani12212918>

Muller, A. (2015). Using Discourse Network Analysis to Measure Discourse Coalitions: Towards a Formal Analysis of Political Discourse. *World Political Science*, 11(2).

<https://doi.org/10.1515/wps-2015-0009>

Munro, L. (2014). The Live Animal Export Controversy in Australia: A Moral Crusade Made for the Mass Media. *Social Movement Studies*, 14(2), 214–229.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2013.874524>

Otegui Carles, A., Fraiz-Brea, J.A. & Araújo Vila, N. (2023). The Ethical Attitudes of Generation Z in Spain Toward Animal-Based Tourism Attractions. *Tourism: An International Interdisciplinary Journal*, 71(2), 285-300.

<https://doi.org/10.37741/t.71.2.4>

Freeman, C. (2009). This little piggy went to press: The American news media's construction of animals in agriculture. *The Communication Review*, 12(1), 78-103.

Plehwe, D. (2011). Transnational discourse coalitions and monetary policy: Argentina and the limited powers of the 'Washington Consensus'. *Critical Policy Studies*, 5(2), 127-148. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2011.576521>

Presidente de la Oficina Nacional de la Caza. (2021). La caza dice basta. *ABC*.

Rivera-Martín, B. (2023). Image and media discourse of animal rights in Spain: The Law on the Protection, Rights and Welfare of Animals in the general and specialised press. VISUAL REVIEW. *International Visual Culture Review Revista Internacional De Cultura Visual*, 13(2), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.37467/revvisual.v10.4566>

R. M. (2022a). Guerra de animales en el Senado por la Ley de Bienestar: de meter perros de caza y toros a sacar ratas o gallos de pelea. *Diario de Sevilla*.

<https://cutt.ly/wrdjY63Q>

R. M. (2022b). Pepa Plana, Premio Nacional de Circo, con la Ley de Bienestar Animal: “No tienen sentido los animales en circos”. *Diario de Sevilla*. <https://cutt.ly/rrdjUsCp>

Williams, D. K., Archer, C. J., & O'Mahony, L. (2022). Calm the farm or incite a riot? Animal activists and the news media: A public relations case study in agenda-setting and framing. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 11(3), 403-425.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/2046147X211055192>