Abstract

Today, mass media’s need to attract and maintain their audiences shows a pronounced tendency of the news outlets to a “news softening”, to the disadvantage of what is traditionally defined as “hard news”. Despite this trend identified over the past decades, there is actually no consensus among communication scholars on the definition of “hard” and “soft” news. Moreover, some authors suggest the necessity to introduce a third news category – “general news”, arguing that the hard/soft dichotomy is not sufficient to cover news diversity. In order to include a news item in the hard or soft category, other scholars consider not only the topic of a news item, but also the way that topic is framed. In this article, we review a series of theoretical considerations and empirical findings on hard news, soft news, and their relation with framing. We also discuss, in this respect, two directions identified in the scholarly literature: one that goes from hard and soft news to framing, and another that goes from framing to hard and soft news. This article aims to give some arguments in favor of the latter direction, which relies on the idea that a framing-based approach on this dichotomic news classification could be more relevant to the current media landscape.

Keywords: soft news, hard news, framing, frames typology

1. Introduction

To date, most communication scholars (Scott & Gobetz, 1992; Patterson, 2000; Baum, 2008; Curran, Salovaara-Moring, Cohen & Iyengar, 2008) agree that the raise of “soft news” and journalists’ critical tone – the so-called ”critical journalism” – is a consequence of a market-oriented media that, being subject to economic pressures, try to attract and keep their audiences by the means of softening the news coverage.

However, there is no consensus among scholars either in terms of definition of hard news and soft news, or of clear indicators that help us to include a news item in one of the two categories. Some of them take into account the news topic (Scott & Gobetz, 1992; Curran et al., 2008), whereas others highlight the news timeliness (Shoemaker & Cohen, 2006; Lehman-Wilzig & Seletzky, 2010) or a broad range of news characteristics (Patterson, 2000). We also consider worthwhile to mention that in most studies we reviewed there was no clear differentiation between the concepts of hard and soft news and similar terms such as tabloidization, infotainment or sensationalism.

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Moreover, some authors suggest the necessity to introduce a third news category, “general news”, arguing that the hard/soft dichotomy does not cover news diversity. Anyway, hard news is generally defined as reports about politics, public affairs, economy, science, technology and related topics, while soft news is defined as reports about celebrities, human interest, sports, scandals, and other entertainment-centred stories.

We have to keep in mind, as some authors put it, that it would be deceptive to tag a news report a priori as being hard or soft, because its character depends on the way it is framed. Curran et al. (2009) offer the example of a crime story, saying that if it is reported as linked to the public good, it can be considered a hard news item assimilated to public affairs. If, in turn, the crime story focuses on details related to the perpetrators or the victims, it could be judged as soft.

Other studies (Baum, 2004, 2008; Reinemann et al., 2011) exploring the relation between soft news, hard news, and framing argue that soft news media favor the episodic frames by emphasizing the experiences, usually the most dramatic, of individuals or small groups, while the hard news media tend to rely on thematic frames, by offering a broader, in-depth political, social or economic context.

Scholars interested in hard and soft news also focus on the effects that emerge from the exposure to these two categories of news. We will take a quick look at the most interesting findings in this respect, ranging from the negative effects of soft news outlets on the foundation of democracy itself to the political knowledge of soft news consumers.

In this paper, we review a series of theoretical considerations, empirical findings, and approaches on hard news, soft news, and framing, keeping in mind that some aspects or, in McCombs’ terms, certain “attributes” of an issue or an event can be made more salient by the way they are framed. While reviewing the studies regarding this relation, we identified two different directions among researchers, one that goes from hard and soft news to framing, focused on the frames used in media coverage, and another that goes from framing to hard and soft news. The latter direction relies on the idea that the way a news story is framed can determine its inclusion either in the hard or soft category.

2. How can we define hard and soft news? A quick review

Faced to economic pressures and to a far more challenging media environment, news outlets try to attract and maintain their audiences. In order to do so, they had to reconsider their way of covering stories, trying “to make a portion of the news diet more palatable, more consumable, more human” (Scott & Gobetz, 1992, p. 9). In other words, based on the traditional dichotomy between soft and hard news, the media organizations have begun over the past two decades “softening the news” or to put more emphasis on “what will interest an audience rather than on what the audience needs to know” (Patterson, 2000, p. 3).

Although most communication scholars (Scott & Gobetz, 1992; Patterson, 2000; Baum, 2008; Curran et al., 2008) agree that the rise of soft news and journalists’ critical tone – the so-called “critical journalism” – are a consequence of a market-oriented media, there actually is no consensus among researchers on the definition of hard and soft news. Moreover, authors do not offer clear indicators for hard and soft news in their studies, some of them focusing on the news report topic (Scott & Gobetz, 1992; Curran et al., 2008), others on timeliness
Generally speaking, in terms of topic, hard news is defined as reports about politics, public affairs, economy, science, technology and related topics (Patterson, 2000; Baum, 2004, 2008; Curran et al., 2008, 2009; Lehman-Wilzig & Seletzky, 2010), while soft news is defined as reports about celebrities, human interest, sports, scandals and other entertainment-centred stories.

Of course, the number and the name of topics considered relevant for hard and soft news differ from one author to another, as well as the focus on certain topics. For example, Patterson’s comprehensive definition, one of the most cited among scholars, argues that “hard” news refers to coverage of breaking events involving top leaders, major issues, or significant disruptions in the routines of daily life, such as an earthquake or airline disaster. Information about these events is presumably important to citizens’ ability to understand and respond to the world of public affairs [...]. Soft news has also been identified by certain characteristics. It has been described, for example, as news that is typically more sensational, more personality-centered, less timebound, more practical, and more incident-based than other news. [...] Finally, soft news has been described as a change in the vocabulary of news. The news is said to have become more personal and familiar in its form of presentation and less distant and institutional” (2000, pp. 3-4). As we can see, Patterson (2000) uses an array of characteristics in defining hard and soft news, ranging from topic to timeliness and verbal style.

Shoemaker (2006) offers a different approach on hard and soft news, linking the dichotomous categorization of news to the negative, “bad” nature of news. In her terms, a story is more likely to become news and be published more quickly if it has some negative aspects: that would be a “hard” or a “breaking” news. If, to the contrary, the developments of that story turn to be positive, the news item no longer needs immediate publication: “Hard” news and ‘breaking’ news are generally bad news – crime, political conflict, threats to the health of the public, sex scandals, dire economic forecasts, war, and death – but a hard or breaking news story is analogous to hearing about the car crash. The bad news comes first, and then later news stories tell us about ‘developing’ aspects of the event. If developments are negative, they are more likely to become news. [...] ‘Soft’ news is often differentiated from hard news because it does not have to be published as quickly. But what is there about soft news that makes timeliness a less important news criterion? It’s that such stories contain less bad news. Bad news must be known right away, while good news can sit around for a while” (Shoemaker, 2006, pp. 107-108).

Reinemann, Stanyer, Scherr, and Legnante (2011) identify three dimensions that could help to distinguish hard from soft news: the subject matter covered (“topic dimension”), the specific aspects of events or topics emphasized (“focus dimension”), and the way events or topics are visually and verbally presented (“style dimension”), while stressing that “the topic dimension is the foundation on which the focus and style dimension are grounded” (2011, p. 232). The same authors argue, having in mind the topic dimension, that “a news item reporting a politically relevant event will always be ‘harder’ than a politically irrelevant item – even if the focus and style are ‘softer’ for the first and ‘harder’ for the latter item” (2011, p. 232).

Baum (2004, 2008) highlights the focus of soft news outlets on human drama, especially danger, violence, tragedy or heroism, as well as on reporting styles “that tend to pass moral judgment on the subjects” they cover (2004, p. 316). Other researchers mainly take into account the dimension of topicality or timeliness when they talk about hard and soft news, that...
is, the need for urgent dissemination of a news item, depending on its newsworthiness level. Shoemaker and Cohen’s (2006, p. 8) definition of hard and soft news focuses on this very aspect: “Hard news items are urgent occurrences that have to be reported right away because they become obsolete very quickly. […] Soft news items […] are usually based on nonscheduled events. The reporter or media organization is under no pressure to publish the news at a certain date or time – soft news stories need not be ‘timely’.”

In terms of timeliness, Scott and Gobetz (1992, p. 6) take a more specific approach: “A timely story was defined: Any story that reports new information surrounding the story that has developed within the past 24 hours is considered timely. Conversely, not timely was defined: Any story that reports information or events that occurred more than 24 hours before its presentation is considered not timely”.

3. Hard and soft news: pros and cons. Do we need a third category of news?

When assessing the newsworthiness of an event, some authors mainly consider its relevance for people’s need to know (Patterson, 2000; Zaller, 2003; Baum, 2008). That is the reason why hard news is generally seen as the most appropriate type of information that a citizen can get, “a snapshot of key moments in public life” (Patterson, 2000, p. 9) or as “news that people should know when they want to understand public affairs” (Reinemann et al., 2011, p. 226, italics in original).

Soft news consumers claim that this category’s content is not just amusing or interest-evoking, but it also offers useful information to citizens, relating to safety, health, or similar subject matters. As Zaller (2003) states, “soft news is information that is either personally useful or merely entertaining” (p. 129).

Probably the critics of soft news are many more than its defenders. Even if these critics acknowledge soft news get people to pay attention to some news and this way become more informed about certain political events (Baum, 2008), this news category is still largely considered “repetitive and thus at some point tiresome” or “a weak foundation for a news program or newspaper” (Patterson, 2000, p. 9).

In a study exploring the way soft news report about foreign policies, Baum (2008) finds that the coverage lacks political or strategic context of the event, and it focuses instead on the character and motivations of decision-makers, or on “human drama”, that is individual stories of heroism and tragedy. Baum argues that it is the reason why many “soft news consumers care less about geopolitics than about body bags” (2008, p. 115).

Some authors challenge the very dichotomy hard/soft of the news and propose an intermediate category, that of “general news”. Lehman-Wilzig and Seletzky (2010) investigated the necessity of a middle category of news, through a questionnaire and in-depth interviews with 32 journalists and editors from three main Israeli dailies. They tried to find out if the hard/soft distinction could be applied to any news item or if there was a “twilight zone between what has heretofore been defined as ‘hard’ news and ‘soft’ news. […] For example, a news item regarding a consumer product that has a life-threatening element is clearly ‘hard’ news, but within a theoretically ‘soft’ rubric” (Lehman-Wilzig & Seletzky, 2010, p. 42).

In order to get an answer, they drew up a list of criteria for the traditionally dichotomous hard and soft news, and for a third category they named “general news”. The lists were dis-
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tributed to an Israeli editor and two senior journalists, who were asked to select the criteria considered appropriate for every type of news. The aim of the two researchers’ questionnaire was to see whether there was a consensus regarding an intermediate classification of the news. The findings showed a general agreement on 17 criteria corresponding to the three news categories. For the soft news category, these criteria are: reports on a light or exotic topic (like gossip, fashion, or consumerism) that can be reported at a later time or not at all; routine news without great or immediate public significance, and thus likely to be reported at a later time or not at all; news of interest to a narrow segment of the public; light or routine news that for non-substantive reasons (famous personality, for example) or media competition must be reported immediately.

For the “general news” category, the criteria are the following: up-to-date news that must be reported but not necessarily immediately; important news that influences only certain groups; important news not on the present public agenda, so that if not reported would not be missed; a recent announcement regarding new data or reports that should be published but not necessarily immediately; an event from an important continuing story; relatively “light” news regarding a person who has great influence over society; very important utilitarian news, but which need not be reported; light news relating to important, quality of life topics such as ecology and health, which do not affect the public in the short term.

And finally, for the hard news category there was a general consensus on the following characteristics: political, social, economic or serious environmental news of a highly significant nature that needs to be reported right away due to its immediate influence on the public and surrounding world; a breaking, surprising event of great importance for the public and/or the environment (that is, epidemic, natural disaster, terror attack); new findings, discovery or report regarding a continuing story of great significance for most of the public and/or the environment; significant news on the national plan; significant news on the international plan.

Comparing the criteria Lehman-Wilzig and Seletzky found for each of the three categories of news to some definitions of hard and soft news, we notice that certain indicators generally considered relevant for soft or hard news fall into the intermediate class proposed by the two researchers, that is, “general news”. For example, the utilitarian, practical nature of a news item is regarded as an indicator of soft news by some authors (see Patterson, 2000), while the same characteristic becomes a criterion for identifying “general news” in Lehman-Wilzig and Seletzky’s view.

We also noticed that criteria suggested by Lehman-Wilzig and Seletzky did not cover the way things were reported, the style of news presentation, consisting of a set of verbal or visual indicators. For some authors (Patterson, 2000), a hard news item relies on a factual, text-oriented style, whereas a soft news item is reported in a more personalized, visually-oriented style.

However, the findings of Lehman-Wilzig and Seletzky suggest a clear need for other type or types of news besides what is commonly known as hard and soft news. Actually, the two aforementioned authors conclude that communication scholars should increase the number of news categories and investigate which criteria are more relevant for each medium besides the newspapers.
4. The effects of hard/soft news on audiences

In order to define hard or soft news, researchers focus on different dimensions of these two types of news. Most of them take into account the topic of the reported event, such as politics, health, violence, while others highlight the style of news presentation, or the effects on audiences.

Our aim is to offer a quick review of the most interesting findings related to this latter dimension: possible effects on hard and soft news consumers. For example, Baum (2002) argues that the selective political coverage by soft news media “help” politically inattentive people to get information about important political issues, especially foreign policy crises, “as an incidental by-product of seeking entertainment” (p. 91). Baum’s findings suggest that reports about foreign crises and similar issues, if presented in a soft news context, draw the attention of politically uninvolved Americans, and “the net effect is a reduced disparity in attentiveness to select high-profile political issues across different segments of the public” (2002, p. 91).

In another study, the same author (2004) investigates the different ways in which hard and soft news media cover foreign crises, and the effects of these differences on American public attitudes toward foreign policy. His findings suggest that politically inattentive individuals will be less influenced by consuming hard news than by consuming soft news. Moreover, the results of Baum’s study show that people exposed to soft news media tend to take an enhanced skeptical attitude toward an internationalist American foreign policy. However, the author argues, the exposure to soft news among highly attentive individuals tends to strengthen internationalism. The results also show that inattentive individuals “appear relatively immune to being influenced by hard news, presumably due to their capacity to counter-argue dissonant information” (p. 331).

In a more recent study, Baum (2008) explores the way soft news coverage of politics forces political leaders to change their communication strategies. He offers the example of former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice who used to arrange, during her visits abroad, “photo opportunities” with local celebrities. These actions were aimed at gaining more attention by the local media and were a way to carry out a message that may have been otherwise ignored by the local population. That is the reason why Baum talks about political leaders’ need for “not only repackaging existing political messages into soft news friendly formats, but also emphasizing different aspects of those issues, as well as altogether different types of political issues: those most likely to engage the relatively less-politically engaged members of the public” (2008, p. 137).

While noting that Baum’s (2002) approach is limited to attention paid to politics, Prior (2003) tries to assess the effects of the soft news on people’s political knowledge, arguing that if exposure to soft news does not produce any learning effects, there are no really positive consequences of this type of news. In this respect the results of his study show “there is only very limited evidence that viewers actually learn from soft news. The positive consequences of soft news for the political process remain to be demonstrated” (p. 149). According to Prior, people’s preferences on news formats certainly have some effect on their political knowledge. The results of his study show that people who prefer hard news tend to be more knowledgeable in the first place.

Other authors take a harsh tone when they talk about the soft news’ effects on audiences. For example, Patterson (2000) argues that soft news are weakening the foundation of the
democracy by diminishing people’s information about public affairs and their interest in politics. Even if he admits that soft news outlets can provide useful information to citizens, Patterson notes that “soft news imposes a net cost on democracy. News that highlights incidents and developments that have little to do with public affairs and that are selected for their capacity to shock or entertain can distort people’s perceptions of reality” (2000, p. 3).

Zaller (2003) takes into account the news importance in providing people with the political information they need in order to fulfill their role as citizens, underlining the news contribution to self-government. As he explains, “if citizens can’t easily get political information that is independent of politicians and government, democracy will suffer. […] Hence, when observers worry that the news has become too soft, or that its political information quotient is too low, they are usually worrying that the news is failing to provide citizens the public affairs information they need to perform their role as citizens” (p. 110).

In sum, as Patterson puts it, “it would be grandiose to claim that hard news is the daily unfolding of a people’s history. But it is a snapshot of key moments in public life. The plots and characters are constantly shifting, and the stakes are sometimes high. It is an on-going story affecting all of us and, for more than a century, has been the primary reason that millions of people each day choose to spend some of their time on the news. Soft news lacks that kind of drawing power” (2000, p. 9).

5. Hard news, soft news, and framing: a bi-directional relation

As mentioned in the introductory part of this paper, our aim is to explore the relation between hard news, soft news, and framing, considering the different theoretical approaches and empirical findings in the literature.

While reviewing the studies concerning this relation, we identified two different directions among researchers, one that goes from hard/soft news to framing, focusing on the frames used in media coverages, and another direction, that goes from framing to hard/soft news. The latter one relies on the remark that the way a news story is framed can determine its inclusion either in the hard or soft category.

As some authors explain, it would be misleading to predetermine a news report character as hard or soft, because it depends on the way it is framed. In this respect, Curran et al. (2009) offer the example of a crime story, saying that if it is reported as linked to the public good, it can be considered a hard news item assimilated to public affairs. If, in turn, the crime story focuses on details related to the perpetrators or the victims, it could be judged as soft.

In other words, even if a news story should be included, by its topic, let’s say, in the hard news category, media can focus on some story aspects that are no longer connected to the hard news indicators.

Other studies (see Baum, 2004) explore the relation between soft/hard news and framing by arguing that soft news media favor the episodic frames by emphasizing the experiences of individuals or small groups, usually the most dramatic ones, while hard news media tend to rely on thematic frames, by offering a broader, in-depth political, social or economic context.

In the following pages, we will take a quick look at some theoretical considerations and approaches on framing, frames typology and its relation with hard and soft news, relevant to each of the two directions identified.
6. How can we define frames and framing? A quick review

As in the case of scholarly literature focused on hard and soft news, there is no consensus among communication researchers on what exactly "frame" or "framing" means. The term of frame is commonly referred to as the way media may shape or influence public opinion, by covering different issues or events in particular manners.

In the news, a frame is often described as “a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them. The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, p. 143). However, some authors (Entman, Matthes, & Pellicano, 2009, pp. 175-176) question this frame definition, considering it “an insufficient basis for consistent measurement or theory”.

By stressing and selecting certain aspects of reality and pushing others into the background, news frames may suggest certain attributes, judgments, and solutions. Entman focuses on this very selective dimension of frames, arguing that “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating context, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (1993, p. 52; italics in original). Starting from the example of the “cold war” frame, Entman argues that frames have at least four locations in the communication text, and these are the communicator, the text, the receiver, and the culture. Moreover, he explains that framing in all four locations fulfills similar functions: “selection and highlighting, and use of the highlighted elements to construct an argument about problems and their causation, evaluation, and/or solution” (1993, p. 52).

In a more recent study, Entman, Matthes, and Pellicano (2009) resume the discussion about what a frame is and try to find out which characteristics differentiate a frame from a persuasive message or an assertion. In this respect, they argue that “a frame repeatedly invokes the same objects and traits, using identical or synonymous words and symbols in a series of similar communications that are concentrated in time. These frames function to promote an interpretation of a problematic situation or actor and (implicit or explicit) support of a desirable response, often along with a moral judgment that provides an emotional charge” (p. 177; italics in original).

Based on these definitions, one can argue that frames in the news can be seen as patterns of interpretation that are used to organize information and contribute to a more efficient information processing by the audiences.

Taking into account that frames can be found in several parts of the communication process, for both presenting and comprehending news, Scheufele (1999, p. 106) makes a distinction between “media frames”, which organize everyday reality, and ”individual frames” that are present in a person’s mind as internal structures.

The idea of multi-located frames has led to the understanding of framing as a process that can be found at all levels of the communication. Based on this idea, De Vreese (2005) proposes an integrated process model of framing that refers to production, content, and media use perspectives. At the production level, De Vreese (2005, p. 52). decomposes this process into “frame-building”, which consists of factors “that influence the structural qualities of news frames”, and “frame-setting”, that is “the interaction between media frames and individuals’ prior knowledge and predispositions” The same author notes that the consequences of framing can become manifest either on individual or societal level, consisting of altered
attitudes about an issue (at individual level) or social processes “such as political socialization, decision-making, and collective actions” (De Vreese, 2005, p. 52).

Framing is often seen, next to priming, as an extension of agenda-setting (McCombs, 1992), a theory which refers to the transfer of an issues or a subject salience from mass media to audiences. In other words, if a specific issue is given more coverage by the news outlets, the public is more likely to attribute greater importance to that issue. In this respect, McCombs explains that “agenda-setting is about more than issue or object salience. The news not only tells us what to think about; it also tells us how to think about it. Both the selection of topics for the news agenda and the selection of frames for stories about those topics are powerful agenda-setting roles and awesome ethical responsibilities” (1992, pp. 8-9).

The same author (2004) argues that mass media exert influence on public’s perceptions by either emphasizing the importance of issues – that would be first-level agenda setting, or issues attributes – that would be second-level agenda setting, seen as equivalent to framing. By “attribute”, McCombs means “a variety of characteristics and traits” that describe the object, that is usually a public issue, on the agenda (2005, p. 546). In McCombs’ view, “a frame is an attribute of the object under consideration because it describes the object. However, not all attributes are frames. If a frame is defined as a dominant perspective on the object – a pervasive description and characterization of the object – then a frame is usefully delimited as a very special case of attributes” (McCombs, 2005, p. 546).

Other scholars (Scheufele, 2000; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2006) argue against placing agenda-setting, priming, and framing under the theoretical umbrella of cognitive media effects. They claim framing relies on psychological processes that are different from those of agenda-setting or priming. According to them, whereas agenda-setting increases the accessibility of an issue and therefore shapes the importance individuals assign to an issue, framing functions by organizing, reorganizing and connecting beliefs, which renders these beliefs more likely to be integrated into subsequent judgments.

7. Frames typology

In an experimental study conducted in 1990, Iyengar focused on the issue of poverty and explored the ways in which television news frames covering that issue exert influence on how people assign responsibility for poverty.

In this respect, Iyengar noted that ”televised news reports focus on concrete acts or ‘live events’ at the expense of general contextual material” (Iyengar, 1990, pp. 21-22). He identified 191 television stories considered relevant to the poverty issue and divided them into two categories: in the first one, poverty was described mainly as “a societal or collective outcome”, whereas in the second category, poverty was presented in terms of “particular victims, for example, poor people” (Iyengar, 1990, pp. 21-22). If stories were covered in a way in which the object referred to was “abstract and impersonal” (Iyengar, 1990, p. 22), relating to matters of public policy, for example, Iyengar considered that way a “thematic” frame. If stories relating to poverty were reported with a focus on personal, individual experience, Iyengar considered it an “episodic” frame.

In a later, broader research, Iyengar (1991) resumed and extended the analysis of television’s impact on public opinion to the questions of political responsibility and accountability. He explored ”the direct impact of ‘episodic’ and ‘thematic’ news formats, or ‘frames’, on
viewers’ attributions of responsibility for political issues and the indirect effects of these frames on public opinion in general” (Iyengar, 1991, p. 2), starting from the premise “that news about political issues almost invariably takes either an episodic or thematic frame. The episodic news frame focuses on specific events or particular cases, while the thematic news frame places political issues and events in some general context”.

Iyengar’s findings showed that when viewers were exposed to a thematic news coverage related to poverty, unemployment or crime, they tended to attribute responsibility to societal or political forces. In contrast, when they were exposed to an episodic news frame, they attributed responsibility to particular individual or groups, for example poor people, criminals, and terrorists.

Another typology of news frames is suggested by the Dutch researcher Claes de Vreese (2005), who divides them in two categories: issue-specific frames and generic frames. According to him, frames in the first category are limited only to specific topics or events. Given their limited applicability to specific topics, De Vreese (2005, p. 55) suggests that creation of issue-specific frames is somehow time-consuming, making studies based on this type of frames “difficult to generalize, compare, and use as empirical evidence for theory building”.

Frames in the second category transcend thematic limitations and can be identified, some of them even over time, across different issues and cultural contexts. Thus, generic frames can signal patterns in news coverage.

Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) content analyzed newspapers and television news in order to assess the prevalence of five news frames, namely attribution of responsibility, conflict, human interest, economic consequences, and morality. Their research was based on Iyengar’s (1991) theory of “episodic” and “thematic” frames effects on the way people assign responsibility for social problems, and also on earlier studies exploring framing and framing effects.

As Semetko and Valkenburg explain, relying on studies by Neuman et al. (1992) and Patterson (1993), the conflict frame highlights dissensions between individuals, groups, and institutions, as a way to gain rating points. They also note, as observed in previous research, that presidential elections campaigns news tend to be framed in terms of conflict.

Human interest frame “refers to an effort to personalize the news, dramatize or ‘emotionalize’ the news” (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000, p. 96). Economic consequences frame covers an issue or an event in terms of economical outcome on an individual, group, institution, or country. When journalists use the morality frame, they usually put the issue or the event in the context of religious tenets or moral prescriptions.

The responsibility frame covers an issue or a problem so that to attribute responsibility for its cause or solution to either the government or to an individual or group.

However, there is a disagreement between Iyengar’s (1991) and Semetko and Valkenburg’s findings in terms of responsibility frame. While Iyengar argues that the episodic nature of news coverage encourages viewers to blame the individual for social problems, Semetko and Valkenburg’s study indicate that “television news can be episodic and at the same time frame the government (rather than the individual) as responsible for social problems” (2000, p. 106).
8. From hard and soft news to framing

As previously mentioned, we identified in the reviewed literature two different directions among researchers: one that goes from hard/soft news to framing, focused on the frames used in media coverage, and another that goes from framing to hard/soft news, based on the idea that it would be misleading to predetermine the character of a news report. Our aim is to explore the arguments of both sides, and then discuss them in order to propose new possible research topics.

The first direction (see Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Baum, 2004, 2008) focuses mainly on the way hard and soft news outlets use frames in order to attract audiences, and also on the effects these frames could have on readers or viewers. For example, Baum (2004) investigates the differences in coverage of foreign policy by the hard and soft news media, and the implications of these differences for public attitudes regarding the appropriate U.S. role in the world. In terms of frames, Baum argues that soft news media favor dramatic, human-interest themes and episodic frames, and put less emphasis on knowledgeable information sources or thematic frames, featuring comments by individuals unlikely to possess important information regarding the U.S. foreign policy. Unlike the soft news media, which tend to emphasize comments by celebrities, for example, the hard news media feature comments by people with significant knowledge about the U.S. foreign policy, such as leaders of president’s party, opposition party leaders, or experts.

Moreover, soft news coverage has a “greater propensity to emphasize the potential for bad outcomes” (Baum, 2004, p. 313), highlighting negative aspects of the U.S.military engagements. This aspect was also raised by Shoemaker (2006, pp. 107-108), according to whom “the bad news comes first, and then later news stories tell us about ‘developing’ aspects of the event. If developments are negative, they are more likely to become news”.

Another characteristic of soft news outlets is that they tend to rely “disproportionately” on episodic frames, focusing on the experiences of specific individuals or small groups, bypassing thematic frames, which offer a broader social, economic, and political context (Baum, 2004). Unlike hard news outlets, which cover the broader implications or consequences of policies, soft news frames on foreign policies in terms of “human drama” – violence, heroism, tragedy – which is more likely to capture people’s attention, especially if they are not involved with the object of the frame. Although he admits that many Americans previously not interested in politics attend to some information about major political events through the exposure to soft news media, Baum notices that they tend to be “more suspicious of the motives of political leaders and less supportive of their non-soft-consuming, or more politically engaged counterparts” (2008, p. 117).

In sum, Baum’s findings show that “consuming hard news will influence politically inattentive individuals less than consuming soft news. The effects on attentive individuals will be relatively modest, but may or may not be weaker than the effects of soft news” (2004, p. 320).

While Baum’s studies focus on the content of the hard and soft news, the frames they use, and the effects of these frames on audiences, Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) explore the prevalence of the five news frames indicated in the previous section of this paper. Even if the two authors do not refer directly to hard or soft news, they talk about “sensationalist vs. sober and serious” types of news outlets. In other words, sensationalist is often a characteristic attributed to soft news, whereas sober and serious correspond to the hard type of news. As Reinemann et al. (2011) note, there is no clear differentiation between hard/soft news and
other similar concepts such as tabloidization, infotainment and sensationalism. Actually, their definitions often overlap. For example, Baum (2004, p. 315) defines soft news “as a set of story characteristics, including sensationalized presentation, human-interest themes, emphasis on dramatic subject matter and the absence of a public policy component”.

Semetko and Valkenburg’s (2000) study showed that the attribution of responsibility frame was more commonly used by sober and serious newspapers – we could say newspapers with a “hard” orientation – and television news programs, while sensationalist outlets preferred the human interest frame.

To summarize, the first direction identified in the literature review starts from different types of news outlets (sober vs. sensationalist) or from hard and soft news in order to show what type of news frame is more often used by media. Put it otherwise, according to the authors cited in the first category, framing does not rank first: a news story is either hard or soft, and based on each category characteristics, it chooses a type of frame that reflects its characteristics.

9. From framing to hard and soft news

The second direction regarding the relation between hard news, soft news and framing that we want to discuss goes from framing to hard and soft news. In other words, the way a story is framed sets up its hard or soft character. We should note that this second direction was very little explored, although it raises a legitimate research question: is framing a key element for a news item to fall into the hard or soft category?

Our remarks rely on a study by Curran, Salovaara-Moring, Cohen and Iyengar (2009), in which the authors investigate the way that hard and soft news media contribute to different levels of public knowledge in Finland and in the United Kingdom. For this purpose, they defined topics such as politics, public administration, economy, science and technology as hard, whereas topics like celebrity, human interest, sports and entertainment were placed into the soft category. However, they introduce an important distinction in the particular case of crime stories, that can be related to hard or soft news depending on the way it is contextualized: “If a crime story was reported in a way that was contextualized and related to the public good – for example, if the report referred to penal policy, or related to the general causes or consequences of crime – it was judged to be a hard news story assimilated to public affairs. If, however, the main focus of the report was the crime itself, with details concerning the perpetrators, violence and victims, but with no reference to the larger context or implications for public policies, the news item was judged to be soft” (Curran et al., 2009, p. 2). In other words, it would be deceiving to predetermine the character of a news story as either hard or soft, because the way that story is framed should be taken into account.

This approach seems to be shared by Reinemann, Stanyer, Scherr, and Legnante (2011), who comment on Curran et al.’s article, in their theoretical study related to hard and soft news. While underlining that it is unclear why certain topics are regarded as hard or soft, they argue, in line with the aforementioned authors, that it is not only the topic of a news item that makes it a “hard” or a “soft” one, but also the framing of an event or topic linking it to the public good, to policy issues or to society at large. Put another way, soft topics may be framed, for example, as relevant to the society or, to the contrary, hard topics may be presented as “lighter” or more entertaining, with a focus on their soft dimensions.
Actually, Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) also brought into question the relation between a certain topic and framing, by investigating whether framing of news vary by topic. They focused on two prominent topics during the period of data collection for their research: crime and European integration. They noticed that stories about Europe were predominantly framed in terms of attribution of responsibility, conflict, and economic consequences, whereas stories about crime were mainly framed in terms of human interest. Moreover, they found that crime stories were focused on personal details of victims and perpetrators.

However, as Reinmann et al. (2011, p. 231) argue, most authors take into consideration topics “only as substitute indicators for other characteristics representing the real cause for categorizing an item as hard or soft”. Anyway, the manner in which they define hard and soft news follows the same line proposed by Curran and his colleagues, highlighting the political relevance of a news item as a way to frame that item either thematically or episodically. Only after an in-depth analysis of all these aspects one could say that a news item is more likely to be regarded either as a hard or a soft one: “The more a news item is politically relevant, the more it reports in a thematic way, focuses on the societal consequences of events, is impersonal and unemotional in its style, the more it can be regarded as hard news. The more a news items is not politically relevant, the more it reports in an episodic way, focuses on individual consequences of events, is personal and emotional in style, the more it can be regarded as soft news” (Reinmann et al., 2011, p. 233).

10. Discussion

Without assessing the distinction between hard and soft news by its topic as an inappropriate one, we consider that a framing-based approach on this dichotomic classification could be more relevant to the current media landscape.

Over the past decades, technological advances, new media, and, we must not forget, powerful economical constraints have dramatically changed the way that media outlets cover news. Media moguls have begun to focus on how to gain more rating points and how to boost their profits, so news has become what Kalb (1998) calls the “new news”, a mix of infotainment and critical journalism.

These are the main reasons for the spectacular metamorphosis of the values and standards of journalism, and of the nature of news, “marked, most recognizably, by the rise of ‘soft’ news, the proliferation of pundit television and the power of ratings” (Kalb, 1998, p. 20).

In this light of quick changes of media landscape, traditional distinction between hard and soft news should be redefined, taking into account the way that media organizations frame it, by stressing certain aspects of reality and pushing others into the background. As Nelson, Lecheler, Schuck, and De Vreese (2012) remind us, “every day, in many ways, communicators try to influence public opinion by guiding the impressions that citizens form of the day’s pressing issues, as well as how they understand the menu of policy options from which they might choose. This is framing. Frames can be conceived as patterns of interpretation that are used to classify information sensibly and process it efficiently” (Nelson, Lecheler, Schuck & De Vreese, 2012, p. 2).

This is the reason why, starting from the premise that information must be included in a context in order to get meaning and coherence, we argue that the latter of the two directions
described in the previous section of this paper deserves a more in-depth analysis when we explore the relation between hard news, soft news, and framing.

Actually, as media outlets aim exclusively at gaining profit, the way they frame news is critical. Because news has become “a commodity. It can be bought, sold, and traded. Journalists manufacture the news. Public relations firms manipulate the news. The audience consumes the news. Advertisers pay to place their products next to the news. News travels by word of mouth, across the Internet and other mass media. [...] News is ubiquitous” (Shoemaker, 2006, p. 106).

So, in line with the aforementioned quotation, we could say that a news item must be carefully and attractively “packaged”, that is, framed, in order to be sold. Hence, we consider that news is not hard or soft, by its topic, but by the way it is built. However, we have to keep in mind special cases where a news item cannot be framed so that it appears a hard or a soft one (for example, it is unlikely that a news item reporting on foreign exchange rate is going to become a soft news by framing). We also assess there actually is a higher probability that a news item with a theoretically hard topic falls into the soft category through framing than vice versa. And in this respect, we must take into account Curran et al.’s remarks, according to which news can be seen as hard or soft depending on its focus on certain aspects of the story.

But which methods and theoretical tools would be the most appropriate in order to explore the relation between hard news, soft news, and framing? Here we would like to propose some possible research directions.

First of all, when investigating the role of framing in building a news story as a hard or a soft one, we must rely on an integrative approach, which includes not only verbal framing, but also visual or, if possible, auditive framing elements. Even if visual framing has not been paid the same attention the verbal one has, we consider it of great importance in including a news story in the hard or soft category.

While verbal framing refers to the written or spoken words of a news story, visual framing of media news refers to “the selection of one view, scene, or angle when making the image, cropping, editing or selecting it. When a journalist chooses which photograph or piece of video to use, it is an act of framing” (Coleman, 2010, p. 237).

In short, by selecting which photo to attach to a newspaper article or which video coverage to broadcast on a TV news program, media outlets frame news, and through this process, give a hard or a soft orientation.

To set out a theoretical model on how to operationalize the distinction between hard and soft, we should carefully examine all the elements a news story is built of, that is, verbal (for example, textual indicators of subjectivity or emotionality), visual (the angle from which a photo is taken from, its perspective), and also auditive – if possible (for example, to see if images on TV news programs are accompanied by a soundtrack from a famous movie). In order to do so, qualitative analysis would play a critical role.

We could also investigate, for example, if there are differences between the way that state-owned television channels and privately-owned television channels cover the news. Against the background of a market-oriented media, we estimate that privately-owned TV channels will tend to broadcast news in a more sensational way than state television channels, mainly because of economic pressures and of the challenging media environment they have to deal with.

Another worthwhile element in assessing the role of framing in building hard and soft news is the audience. Researchers should explore audience’s perception of news and which elements of news make them consider it a “serious” or a soft one.
To sum up, the distinction between hard and soft news has been traditionally defined by its topic. But journalism has dramatically changed over the last decades, with a focus on “softening” the news. Media outlets have begun to “repackage” news coverage in more soft or friendly formats, in order to attract and keep their audiences. So in the current media environment, news topics, widely considered the main reason for seeing a news story as hard or soft, have begun to lose their leading position.

The fact that a news story today is covered, “packaged” so that it attracts larger audiences by emphasizing certain aspects of that story (usually the most sensational ones), confirms media patterns already signalled by communication scholars back to late 1990s.

New media have produced changes at two levels: the first, that of news coverage, and the second, at news consumer’s level. Nowadays, most news consumers no longer have to wait to get their information from television channels or newspapers: they are able to get it by themselves and sometimes they even become “reporters”: actually, it is even the television channel that invite them to send information about events they have witnessed or experienced.

Against this background, it goes without saying that these changes require a completely new approach on the way hard and soft news is built: we consider that the most appropriate is framing.

11. Conclusions

Although many scholars in the communication field are interested in exploring the current trend of news softening, they still do not agree on a clear definition or characteristics of hard and soft news. We should also mention that most of the studies we reviewed have not offered a clear differentiation between the concepts of hard and soft news and similar terms such as tabloidization, infotainment or sensationalism. Moreover, the very dichotomous categorization of news is somewhat questioned, some authors suggesting the necessity to introduce a third news category – “general news”. In defining hard and soft news, other scholars take into account not only the topic of a news item, but also the way that topic is framed.

In this paper, we reviewed a series of theoretical approaches and key empirical findings on hard news, soft news, and framing, keeping in mind that some aspects of an issue or an event can be made more salient by the way they are framed. While analyzing the studies on this relation, we identified two different research directions, one that goes from hard/soft news to framing, focused on the frames used in media coverage, and another that goes from framing to hard/soft news. The latter direction relies on the remark that the way a news story is framed can determine its inclusion either in the hard or soft category. However, most authors seem to focus on the first direction, trying to identify types of frames used by hard or soft media outlets.

Besides the need for a conceptual clarification of what exactly hard and soft news means, we consider worthwhile to explore more in depth the role of framing in building the hard or soft character of a story by the mass media. We also consider important to investigate if there are news items which cannot, under any circumstances, be included into the hard or soft category. We argue that news is not, in itself, hard or soft, but its inclusion in the first or second category depends on the way it is presented. Thus, it is relevant to study framing and see to which extent a news item with a theoretically hard topic could fall, by the way it is framed, into the soft category, or vice versa.
Rezumat: În prezent, nevoia mass-mediei de a atrage și a-și menține audiența conduce către o tendință pronunțată a organizațiilor media spre o "softizare" a știrilor, în detrimentul a ceea ce este denumit, în mod tradițional, știri de tip hard. În pofida acestei tendințe identificate în ultimele decenii, nu există, de fapt, un consens în rândul specialiștilor în privința definiției știrilor soft și hard. În plus, unii autori sugerează necesitatea introducerii unei a treia categorii – știri generale, argumentând că dihotomia hard/soft nu este suficientă pentru a acoperi diversitatea știrilor. Pentru a include o știre în categoria hard sau soft, alți specialiști ia în considerare nu doar subiectul unei știri, ci și modul în care este încadrat acesta. În acest articol, prezentăm o serie de aspecte teoretice și rezultate ale unor cercetări empirice referitoare la știrile hard, soft și relația acestora cu framing-ul. În acest sens, vom analiza, de asemenea, două direcții identificate în literatura de specialitate: prima pornește de la știrile hard și soft către framing, iar cea de-a doua de la framing către știrile hard și soft. Scopul acestui articol este de a oferi argumente în favoarea celei de-a doua direcții, care susține că o abordare bazată pe framing a clasificării dihotomice a știrilor ar putea fi mai relevantă pentru actualul peisaj mediatic.

Cuvinte-cheie: știri soft, știri hard, framing, tipologia cadrajelor

References
Is Framing a Key Element for a News Item to Fall into the Soft or Hard Category?