

Framing the Crisis: the Case of the Chicago Press

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Resumo: Neste artigo propomos o deslindar do processo de formação da opinião pública norte-americana no momento inicial da crise do subprime (2007), que posteriormente desencadearia uma crise global. Para o efeito cruzamos sincronicamente a percepção da população acerca do tema, por via de sondagens de opinião, com o discurso mediático que ia sendo produzido. Desta forma tentamos perceber como a opinião pública se deixava permear pela agenda mediática e vice-versa. A questão da crise marcaria inapelavelmente a campanha eleitoral de 2008 e a discussão pública. Como estudo de caso, optamos por analisar a imprensa de Chicago já que o candidato que melhor se posicionava para ser eleito presidente era o senador por Illinois, Barack Obama. Como conclusão substantiva, podemos sublinhar que a opinião pública formulou a sua compreensão do fenómeno da crise atendendo a aspectos de natureza emocional/subjetiva, relativizando para segundo plano argumentos de natureza mediática e institucional.

Palavras-chave: Opinião Pública; Subprime; Imprensa.

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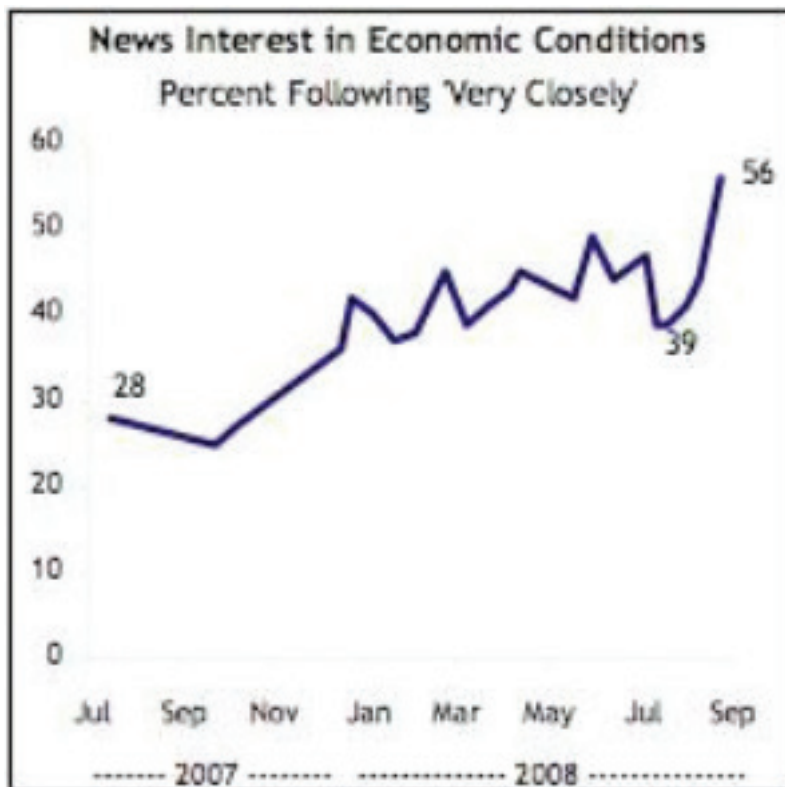
Abstract: In this article, firstly we lay out a simple framework for understanding the process of formation of the American Public Opinion at the beginning of the subprime crisis (2007), which would trigger a global crisis. We crossed, synchronously, population perception of the crisis, using opinion polls, with the media discourse that was produced at the time. By using this methodology we tried to understand the extent to which public opinion was being permeated by the mediatic agenda and vice-versa. The 2007 mortgage crisis had a strong impact on the 2008 election campaign and in the public discussion. To understand the extent of the impact we decided to analyse the Chicago press, considering that Barack Obama, Senator for Illinois, was the best-positioned Presidential candidate. At the end, we will show that public opinion formation permeated emotional aspects/ subjective arguments, rather than mediatic and institutional arguments.

Keywords: Public Opinion; Subprime; Press.

Introduction

The subprime mortgage crisis (2007) represents one of the most important issues of the last several years (Acharya & Richardson, 2009). Even if it started at the end of the 20th century, it became more evident in the last years during the global crisis (Cable, 2010). Actually, the dramatic events of September of 2008 represent only the tip of the iceberg of a deeper crisis started with the new economy and its consequent financial speculations (Claessens & Kose, 2013). For this reason, in order to understand the reaction of the media and public opinion on the most difficult crisis of the U.S. since the 1930s, it's useful to understand the context where these facts arose. According to a study by the Pew Research Center, the interest of the American media in the economic conditions of the U.S. has spiked significantly in 2008 (Fig.1).

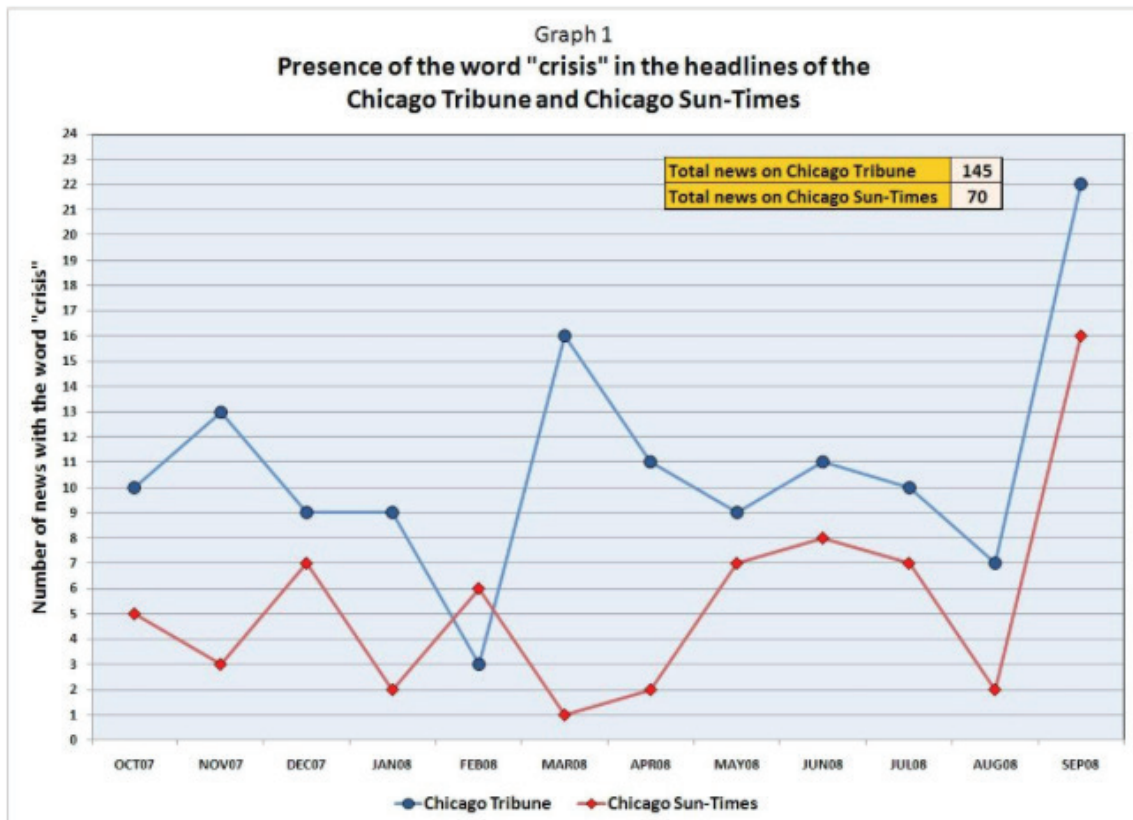
Fig.1. News Interest in Economic Conditions



Pew Research Center, October 2008

As shown on Fig. 1, despite different fluctuations, the growth of the interest in economic news seemed to be constant during the second half of 2007 and the beginning of 2008. The last peak corresponds to the news of Lehman Brothers bankruptcy and the consequent worsening of the financial crisis. The aim of this paper is to understand the impact of these dramatic events on the Chicago press.

In order to understand that, we started to make a superficial analysis of the context where these facts developed trying to measure the climate of the news during the year before the economic failure of the bank. In particular, we searched all the news that contained the word “crisis” in their headline, within the two main newspapers of the Chicago area: The Chicago Tribune and The Chicago Sun Times. The period selected was from October 2007 to September 2008 and we found a total of 145 news in the Chicago Tribune and 70 articles in the Chicago Sun-Times. Even if this data in itself is not sufficient to permit any conclusion, on the other hand it seems very interesting to report them in order to make observations about the emerging climate that the media collaborated to foment.



The Graph 1 shows the first element that is highlighted is the apparent “mirror image strategy” used by the two newspapers from October 2007 until May 2008. It seems that both newspapers tended to use the crises switching from an alarming climate to a

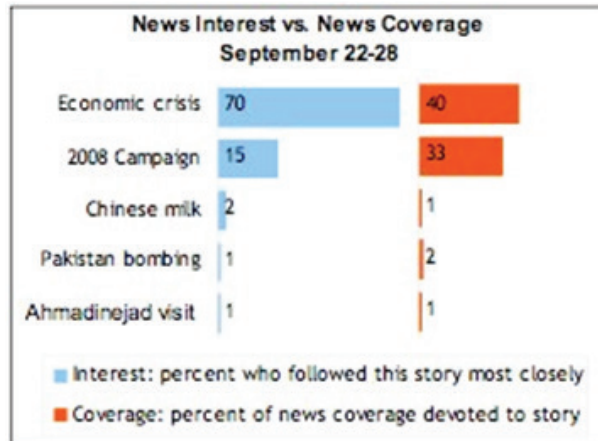
more reassuring atmosphere. In other words, when one newspaper employed fear in order to attract new readers, the other one tried to calm down the public with more reassuring news avoiding the use of the word “crisis” in their headline, and vice-versa.

Using the Altheide’s concept (2002, 2006), we can define that tactic as “strategy of fear.” According to this author, fear is not just an inescapable element of all crises of western societies, but an interpretative frame through which people define their identities and interact with the world. The result is that on one hand government uses this element to reinforce their role of leaders and control public opinion during the crisis. On the other hand, media encourages this feeling in their representation of reality in order to improve the consuming of information. As Altheide (2006:89) says, explaining the “politics of fear” in the media “fear supported consumption as a meaningful way for audiences to sustain an identity of substance and character”.

We can also observe that from May 2008 the communication strategies of the Chicago Tribune and Chicago Sun-Times seem to converge until the peak of the crisis of September 2008. One of the reasons can explain that phenomenon is the beginning of the pre-campaign for the presidential elections. In fact, just at the end of May, Barack Obama was elected as candidate of the Democratic Party against the Republican, John McCain. Thus, the newspapers started to conform their agenda according to the political and electoral news.

This brief introduction can be useful to contextualize our analysis in a very complicated period of the American history and to picture the climate of opinion when the financial crisis reached its climax. With this study, we want to discover if the issue that we selected, the financial crisis, received the coverage that people expected on the press. To determine it, we started from a poll of the Pew Research Center (Fig. 2) that compares the interest of public opinion on specific issues and their respective coverage on the press.

Fig.2. News Interest vs. News Coverage



Pew research Center, September 2008

As we can see on the Fig. 2, even if the interest of public opinion about the economic crisis increased much in the last period, it doesn't seem that the percentage of the media coverage reflected the rise of people's interest in that issue. Instead, media dedicated much of their space to the campaign, offering more than double the coverage that public opinion expected. Starting from that, we analyzed the coverage of the Chicago Tribune and the Chicago Sun-Times during the same week of the poll, from September 22nd until September 28th of 2008.

For this reason, we selected all the news (78 in the Chicago Tribune and 57 in the Chicago Sun-Times) having as the main argument, the economic crisis or the election campaign. We divided the news in different categories. First of all, we separated them by the section of the newspaper: News Section or Business Section. Then, we differentiated the news into: pieces of opinion or information. Next, we analyzed the main arguments of the news, conscious of the fact that in some pieces we could have found the issue of the financial crisis mixed with the issue of the presidential campaign. For this reason, we differentiated between main and secondary themes dividing into: Crisis and Campaign.

Moreover, in establishing the quantity of the coverage of the two issues, we wanted to go deeper and try to understand how the media messages could reach public opinion. Conscious of the fact we cannot have any reliable result about how people react and interpret the news, without starting an analysis of media reception, we tried to focus our attention on a specific issue. In particular, we decided to analyze one of the most debated issues of this financial crisis: the bailout. In fact, this represents the perfect

case of study, focusing the attention of public opinion and influencing the choices of politicians in the middle of the campaign. For this reason, we decided to analyze the valuation that journalists made of this issue. We divided the news on the bailout according to their level of critique in three groups: negative, neutral and positive. The question that we tried to answer is if the interpretation of the media on a particular issue gives priority to the audience opinion or, on the contrary, gives more credit to the position of the political leaders.

At the end of this qualitative analysis, we realized that another way to approach this study could be a frame analysis of the news. In particular, we found a predominant interpretative frame of the bailout, seen as an “unfair solution” that compels the taxpayers, victims of this crisis, to make up for the mistakes of the Wall Street managers, the true perpetrators. On the other side, the government tried to contrast this interpretation with a counter-frame that described the bailout as “bad but necessary solution;” in other words, as an obliged choice to save the American economy from the crisis.

Thus, all the arguments expressed from journalists in favor or against the bailout fluctuated between these two main interpretative frames, giving the news a negative, neutral or positive valuation. To understand which frame received more space in the news, we can try to use the model employed by Robert Entman to describe the dynamics of the news during the crisis of foreign policy. The Entman’s (2003) model of cascade activation explains how officials could easily impose their frames to the media, using their powerful position as privileged sources and interpreters of the facts. Even if Entman used his model to explain the coverage of foreign policy, we think it could be a good model also for this analysis. In fact, as in the cases studied by that scholar, we are analyzing a context of crisis where media is generally more dependent on the official sources. On one hand, they need exhaustive information about the gravity of the crisis; and on the other hand, the subject is so complex that it’s necessary for assistance from field specialists and authoritative sources to interpret the phenomenon/solution.

Results

Even if this represents only a preliminary study and we cannot consider these results as exhaustive, we tried to infer some consideration about the relationship between media, political systems and the audience.

First of all, we can compare the interest of the audience with the coverage of the Chicago Tribune. For this reason, we considered just the two main issues in the poll of the Pew Center Research (Fig. 2) comparing with the same issues of our analysis: the economic crisis and the campaign 2008. Analyzing this Graph, we can see that media gave more attention to the financial crisis (54.8 per cent) than to the campaign (45.2 per cent).

The content analysis of the Chicago Tribune gave similar percentages for the coverage of those two issues: 52.8 per cent for the financial crisis (38 news) and 47.2 per cent for the campaign (34 news). Similarly, the Chicago Sun-Times had a percentage of 50,9 per cent of news regarding directly the financial crisis and a 49.1 per cent concerning the electoral campaign.

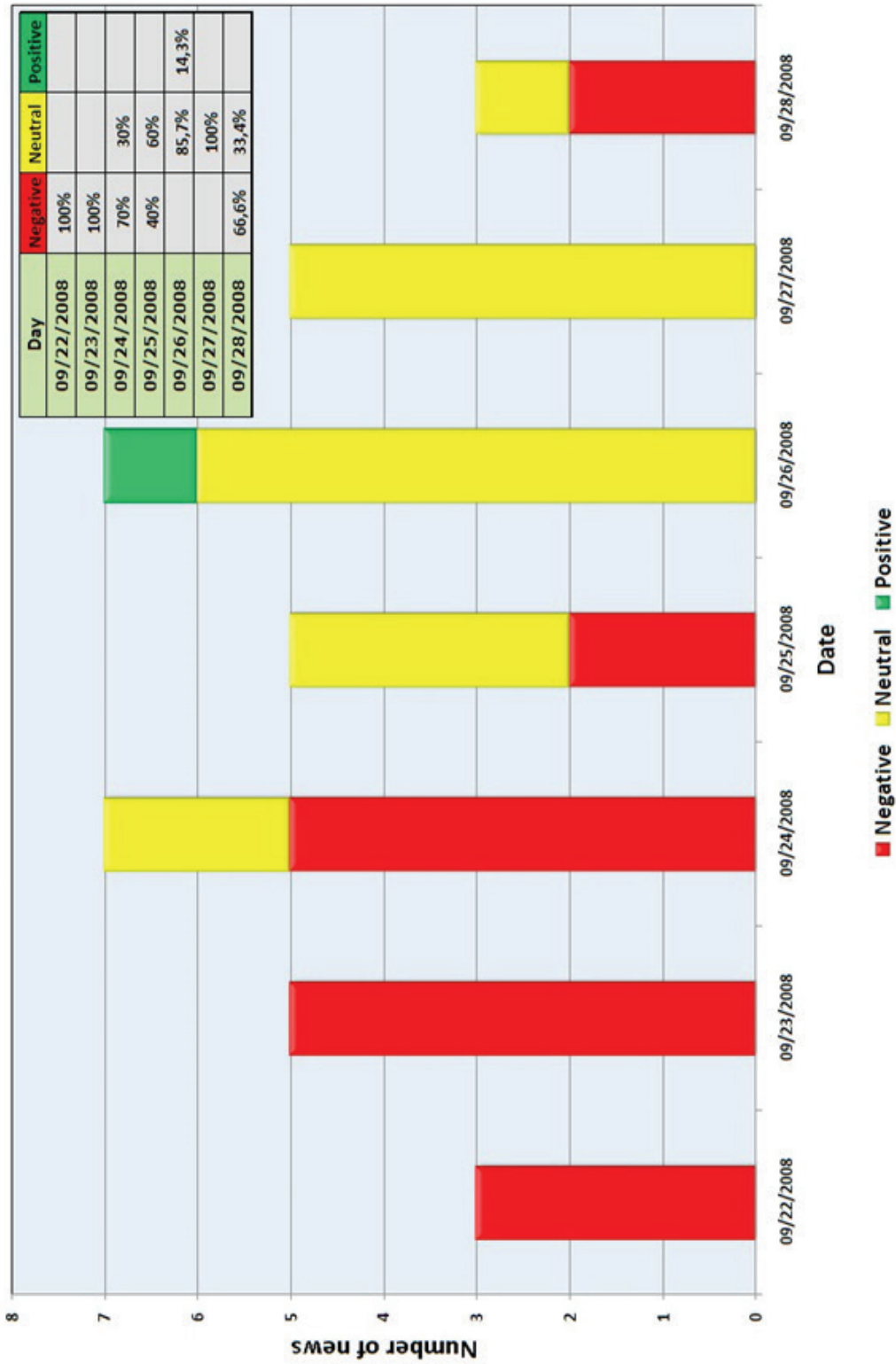
Consequently, we can deduce that the analysis of the two newspapers seems to confirm the study on the news interests realized by the Pew Center (Fig. 2). In fact, even if we did not analyze the whole coverage of the news, we can presume that the two Chicago newspapers, as the rest of the media, did not cover the financial crisis as public opinion expected (70 per cent of interest of news interest). Instead, a considerable space of the information was dedicated to the election campaign.

Moreover, we can observe that in the Chicago Tribune only a 15.8 per cent of the news regarding the financial crisis (as the main theme) made references to the presidential campaign. However, the 32.4 per cent of the news concerning the campaign as a main issue applied to the economic crisis. This element explains how journalists interpreted that crisis as a crucial issue for the results of the next vote and how the election of a new president was considered strictly connected with the solution of the crisis.

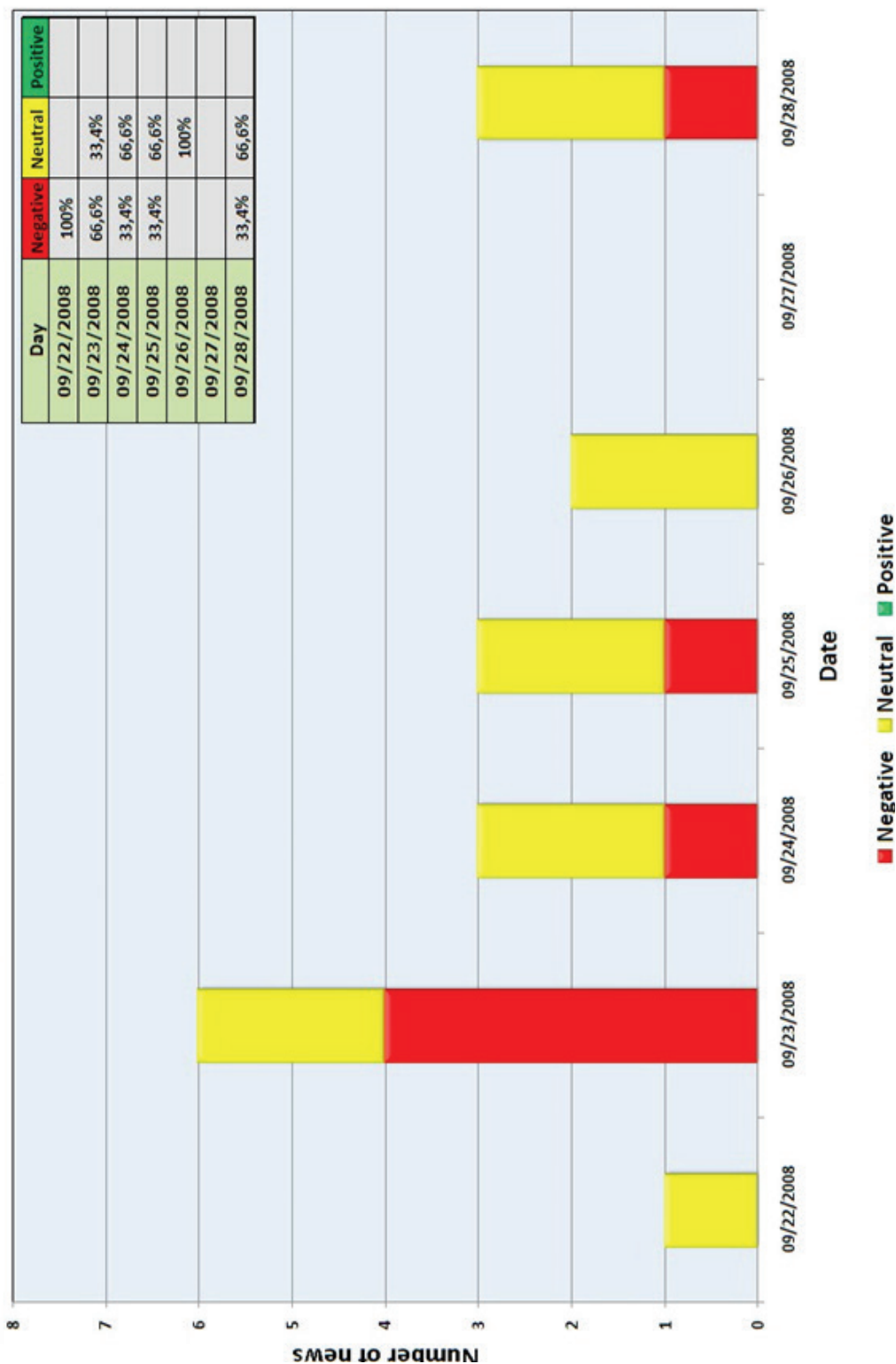
On the other hand, the study of the Chicago Sun Times gave us a more balanced result: 10 per cent of the news, regarding the financial crisis or the electoral campaign as a main issue, made references to the other theme as a second issue. Another consideration about the evaluation that the media gave of the bailout can clarify how strong the interpretation of this economic crisis was connected to the opinion of the officials and the political system. If we look at the distribution of the news during this week and their interpretation of the bailout (negative, neutral or positive), we can observe some interesting elements.

The Graphs 2 and 3 describe the distribution of the negative, neutral and positive news about the bailout and their evaluation as a measure of contrast to the crisis.

Graph 2
Chicago Tribune Coverage of the Bailout



Graph 3
Chicago Sun-Times Coverage of the Bailout



As we can see on the Graphs (2 and 3), the beginning of the week, the negative evaluation about the bailout was predominant and the frame of the bailout as “unfair solution” was prevalent in all the news.

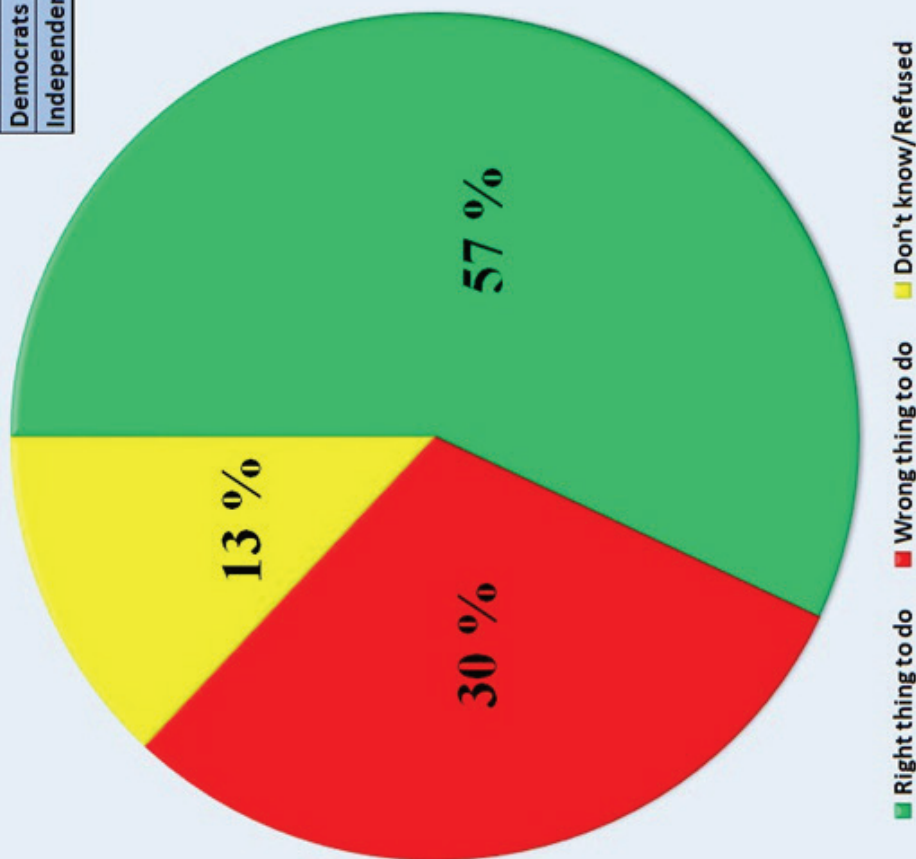
The bailout was presented, according to public opinion, as an unhelpful measure that helps the banks and the big corporations, responsible for the crisis, penalizing the middle and lower class of the population, the true victims of the economic slump. However, in the middle of the week, we can observe that the initial negative interpretation of the federal bailout started to change into a more neutral frame that described this solution as “bad but necessary” for the economy of the US. In some news, we can also find a few positive interpretations that described the bailout as a useful measure for resolving this financial crisis and start the economic growth of the country.

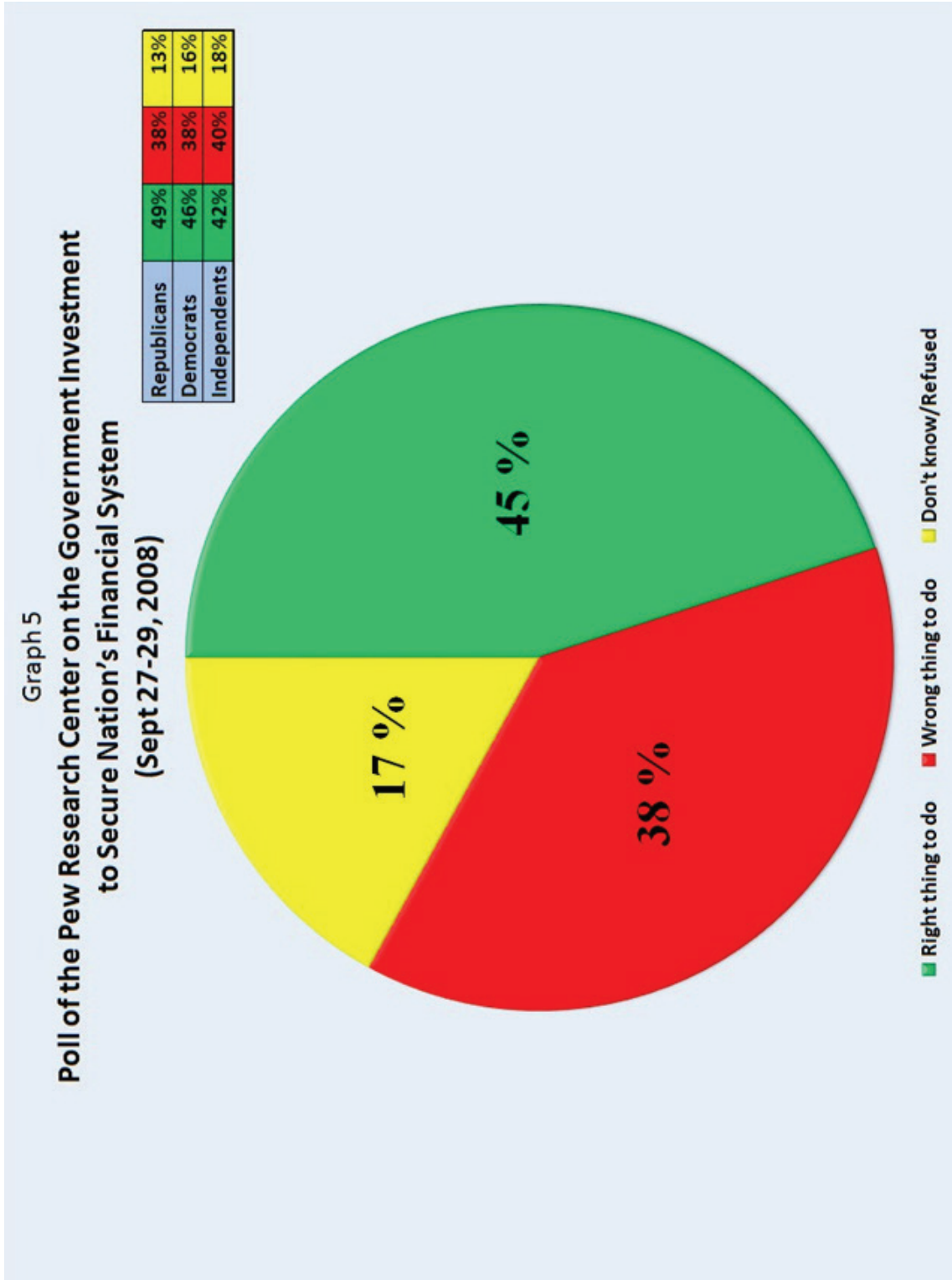
In order to explain this change of evaluation of the newspapers is useful to understand the climate of the debate on the federal bailout and the role of the political leaders and their capability to influence the media. After the announcement of this unpopular measure and in view of its approbation in Congress, the government and the opposition were much divided within their same parties. A few weeks before the elections, this issue could have changed the opinion of a lot of voters and affected the electoral outcomes. For this reason, at first nobody in Congress wanted to assume the responsibility of this unpopular choice. On Wednesday, 24th of September 2008, President George W. Bush made his speech to the nation explaining the reasons for the federal bailout and its urgency, reassuring American citizens about the utility of that measure. The idea of the bailout as a “bad but necessary” solution was clearly exposed to the American audience and at the same time imposed to the media.

Watching the Graphs (2 and 3) and borrowing the metaphor of the cascade model, we can describe this change as a “wave” that goes from the top of the cascade (the officials) down to the lower level (the media) and then, probably, into the audience. In fact, according to the Entman’s model (2003, 2004) we can suppose that a similar effect can also affect the public opinion that will start to interpret the bailout in a different way. The audience could start to look at this measure if not with a positive judgment, at least with less reticence. Two polls, realized by the Pew Research Center -- one during the period of this analysis and the other one the week after -- explain us how the idea of public opinion changed (Graphs 4 and 5).

Graph 4
**Poll of the Pew Research Center on the Government Investment to
 Secure Nation's Financial System
 (Sept 19-22, 2008)**

Republicans	64%	28%	8%
Democrats	56%	29%	15%
Independents	54%	32%	14%





These polls demonstrate the percentage of people agreeing with the bailout decreased from 57 per cent to 45 per cent in a few days, just after the speech of the President. As we can see on the Graphs 4 and 5, if the cascade models seems to work well when explains the relationship between the political and the media system, it doesn't seem to clarify the dynamics of public opinion and the relationship of interdependence between media and audience.

The fact that the percentage of supporters of the economic plan that decreased more were Republicans, explains another element not present in Entman's model. In fact, the dynamics of public opinion not always reflect the exposition to the messages of the media. On the other hand, people, especially in situations of crisis, react emotionally conditioned more by their core values than their opinions or political socialization.

Therefore, if the cascade model seems to work well when explains the relationship between the political and the media system, it doesn't seem to clarify the dynamics of public opinion and the relationship of interdependence between media and audience. In fact, during a period of crisis produced by the political and economic system, the official sources could have lost their power of persuasion on people. In that context, public opinion could have become more suspicious and also the speech of the president (very unpopular in that moment) could have had the opposite effect on the audience.

Conclusions

This financial crisis happened at the end of a long period of alarm in a confused context of public opinion, a few weeks before the elections, without a clear leadership able to carry the country out of this economic catastrophe.

With the lack of guidelines, the interest of people in the development and a possible solution of the crisis increased much. At the same time, media increased the coverage of the crisis, but not so much as the audience expected. The starting of the presidential campaign of 2008 imposed specific issues to the agenda and the media starting to connect the problem of the crisis to the possible electoral outcomes.

The decision to finance a bailout of the banks, destroyed by the crisis, was received with scarce support by the press and public opinion. At first, also the Congress members of both parties did not support the measure, worried by the possible repercussions in the elections. President George W. Bush intervened to convince the media and public opinion on the absolute urgency of the bailout's approbation. Due to the strong dependence

of the media with the official sources, the government succeeded in toning down the resistance of the media to the financial plan. On the contrary, the lack of a clear leadership and a convincing solution for the crisis produced an opposite effect. The percentage of supporters of the bailout decreased quickly, increasing the feeling of anger against a plan considered as unfair for the American population.

That result demonstrates again that public opinion responds to internal dynamics, where the influence of the media is just one of the elements that compose the opinions. The core values and rooted beliefs are predominant when people react to situations of panic such a huge financial crisis like this. Also sentiments, such as the anger against the privileged classes responsible for the crisis, could influence the decision of the people more than political opinions. In addition, some social and political values, such as, the importance of a free market or individualism (typical of the American culture), may have valued more than the national speech by the President of the United States.

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