

Environmental inequality and communicational inequality: The covers of *El Mercurio de Valparaíso* on the oil spill in Quintero Bay¹

Desigualdad ambiental y desigualdad comunicacional. Las portadas de *El Mercurio de Valparaíso* sobre el derrame de petróleo en la bahía de Quintero

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ABSTRACT

The oil spill in September 2014 in Quintero Bay (Valparaíso, Chile) attracted the national and local media attention by the large amount of dispersed oil. This disaster occurred in a highly polluted city, scenery of several catastrophic environmental events. The covers or front pages of the local newspaper *El Mercurio de Valparaíso* were analyzed, confirming Chilean media trend to cover environmental issues as conflicts where the environmental aspects are ousted by judicial contents. By this omission of the environmental perspectives when informing about the oil spill –an approach related to Quintero-Puchuncaví environmental social inequity– the newspaper leaves it out of the local public sphere, thus furthering communicational inequality.

Keywords: Verbal visual analysis, covers, oil spill, *El Mercurio de Valparaíso*, local press, environmental conflict, environmental inequality, communicational inequality.

RESUMEN

El derrame de petróleo en septiembre de 2014 en la bahía de Quintero (Valparaíso, Chile) atrajo la atención de los medios nacionales y locales por la gran cantidad de crudo disperso y porque se produjo en una localidad altamente contaminada, escenario de varios episodios medioambientales catastróficos. Se analizó las portadas del periódico local *El Mercurio de Valparaíso* y se confirmó la tendencia de los medios chilenos por atender la cuestión ambiental en la perspectiva del conflicto, desplazando los contenidos ambientales por los judiciales. Al omitir el marco del conflicto ambiental en relación con el derrame, enfoque que corresponde a la condición de desigualdad socioambiental de Quintero-Puchuncaví, el medio impreso lo deja fuera de la esfera pública local, constituyéndose así en un factor de desigualdad comunicacional.

Palabras clave: Análisis visual verbal, portadas, derrame de petróleo, *El Mercurio de Valparaíso*, prensa local, conflicto ambiental, desigualdad ambiental, desigualdad comunicacional.

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INTRODUCTION

This article examines how the covers of a regional newspaper account for a local environmental crisis in a context of marked environmental inequality. For analytical purposes, we considered that the notion of environment is socially constructed from the speeches of the various actors involved in the knowledge, diffusion, or regulations of such a concept. Such a notion comes from the perception and reflection made at any given time, and not directly from the physical or tangible dimension of the problem (Lezama, 2008). In this perspective, the environmental inequality is defined as the exposure of certain social groups to situations of risk or environmental vulnerability, or with differentiated access to environmental goods or environmental welfare, as clean air, clean water, green areas (Torres, 2000; Alves, 2007). Considered this way, it involves the unequal distribution of income and of access to public goods, suggesting that social inequality is at the origin of environmental inequality (Torres, 2000; Taschner, 2000; Bauman, 2012) and both are social facts that can be perceived or not, which determines that they become social problems (Jann & Wegrich, 2006) and burst into the political arena.

In this sense, throughout this article we attempt to establish the construction of the concept “environmental inequality” from the verbal visual discourse of the front pages of the local newspaper *El Mercurio de Valparaíso* regarding the oil spill in the Quintero Bay (located at the North of the Region of Valparaíso) in September 2014. This environmental accident was news of local interest, but even gained national attention because of the scale of the scattered fluid and, above all, because it occurred in a town of vast environmental degradation by industrial pollution, scene of repeated catastrophic environmental episodes.

Media and environment research is meager in Chile and even more in the Ibero-American panorama of studies in communication and environmental journalism, which –according to the literature review of Fernández Reyes (2011)–, is headed by Spain, with 446 studies, followed by Brazilian researchers, with 258 articles, and after them the rest of Latin America, with 77 investigations. Environmental communication studies are scarce and privilege media coverage of major environmental events, such as summits on climate change (interest of Spanish and Brazilian spe-

cialists, with four articles each). Also, environmental communication has dealt mostly with ecological disasters, particularly regarding the crisis communication management, media agendas and their predominant approaches, scientific interest often motivated by circumstances and cases that impact the public sphere (Behr & Iyengar, 1985). The representations of the environment in mass media absolutely dominate research in environmental journalism, along with the approach to the agenda and the setting of interest topics or frames (Fernández, 2011). This feature matches the trend in Spain (Barranquero & Marín García, 2014, p. 32) and of the international context of the last years (Hansen, 2011, p. 15). Similarly, in Latin America, Brazil and Spain studies are concentrated more than 50% in the analysis of the environmental representation in the press, followed by television (Fernández, 2011, p. 95).

In the few studies on the Chilean press, environmental issues follow the trends identified for Latin America and Spain, i.e., they appear concentrated on the agenda, the news treatment and social representations of the environment (Arenas, 1986; Torres, Rodríguez, Goñi & Villarroel, 1997; Firmani, 2001; González, 2008; Oyarzo, 2014). For the Chilean case, two fundamental traits have been identified. Firstly, environmental issues appear in the printed media focused from the conflict and the complaint about a catastrophe. So, in the absence of conflict, environmental news disappears from the press (Aldunate, 2001, p. 233). The exception is in the coverage of Santiago (Luque & González, 2006) atmospheric pollution and forest fires, covered by the press outside the logic of the conflict (Torres et al., 1997)². This inclination could result from the enactment in 1994 of the Law 19300 of General Bases of the Environment, which began a organizing process of the environmental regulations of the country, especially with regard to public and private investment projects with impact on the environment.

Considering the increase of existing environmental conflicts in the country (Villarroel, 2014), the scant research on the approach to them by mass media is paradoxical, which suggests a scientific community distanced from other disciplines that already warn the emergence of new social phenomena regarding environmental conflicts, as the constitution of “new territorialities” (Stamm & Aliste, 2014, p. 72).

This paper explores the construction of the concept of environmental inequality in the local press of Valparaíso on the Quintero-Puchuncaví zone, from social representations made on the 2014 oil spill at the Quintero Bay. The objective is to show the representation in the local press of the environmental inequality in an area facing a catastrophic event that will expose the underlying environmental conflict. To this end, we examined the representation of social stakeholders provided by the press and the themes privileged by the local press on its front pages about the oil spill event.

The interest in addressing the local edition of the national newspaper *El Mercurio* is that, unlike the provinces of other countries, in the port city of Valparaíso there are only two large circulation newspapers: *La Estrella* and *El Mercurio de Valparaíso*. The latter is the oldest newspaper in the country, linked to right-wing business class settled in the capital, and is directed to the most influential sectors of society.

In general, the local newspaper builds in a symbolic way the immediate environment of citizens of the area and sets the local/regional news agenda. If the press at national level contributes to unite the national public sphere, local press would invigorate and strengthen the communities around it as a reference institution for its audience (Pardo, 2013, p. 107). In this case, *El Mercurio de Valparaíso* would contribute in a significant way in the construction of the environmental reality and, in a manner similar to the national edition, would assume a critical role in controversies, fuelling or weakening them.

In general terms, it is considered that, regarding environmental issues, the press tends to consolidate the vision of certain actors in their pages and lower or stigmatize the rest of the opposing actors (Meyer, 2004); by extension, it is assumed that local media act the same way in the absence of studies. In addition, content analysis studies indicate that political and administrative centralism would coincide with a communicational centralism or of symbolic issues, as information; this feature can be seen in the predominant issues for the capital, as politics and economy, and the omitted, which tend to be more local, such as education, health and environment (Andrade, 2013, p. 41). For example, in Mexico it has been observed that in the construction of the local press agenda there is influence of cultural aspects and of aspects of the

political culture of the place that surrounds the journalist (Andrade, 1998).

In this line, this study contributes to the discussion in Chile on the role of local press in contexts of environmental conflict from a case study. In addition, this work could establish a counterpoint with research on the informative treatment of two similar and recent catastrophes: the oil spill in the Galician coast (French and Portuguese) caused by the sinking of the oil tanker *Prestige* in 2002, and the spilling of oil for four months due to the sinking of the British Petroleum platform in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. The *Prestige* episode stands as point of reference for the impact on the national and local political context, and the multiple research points of view that it motivated. The analysis of environmental journalism focused on the media agenda and predominant approach to the event. Studies focused on environmental communication (communication management of the crisis, institutional impact, propaganda effects, environmental education), allowed to set the contrast between the local and national press treatment, the role of the Trade Union Association of Galician Journalists on the coverage, the information link between the local press and of the rest of the countries affected by the disaster (France and Portugal), the role of ICTs as a source of information and catalyst in the establishment of a local environmentalist social movement, *Colectivo Nunca Mais* (Agraso, Eirexas & Jiménez, 2003; Pérez, 2006; Odriozola, 2010; Fernández Souto, 2012). The case of British Petroleum also motivated studies on agenda and print and electronic media (Boydston, Moody & Thomas, 2010; García, 2011; Schultz, Klein-nijenhuis, Oegema, Utz & Van Atteveldt, 2012), but the emphasis was on the discussion and understanding of the communicational model of treatment of crisis and relations between the press and the corporate and governmental public relations apparatus (Harlow, Brantley & Harlow, 2011; Paule, 2010; Muralidharan, Dillstone & Shin, 2011; Liu, Austin & Jin, 2011; Klein-nijenhuis, Schultz, Utz & Oegema, 2013; and Valvi & Fragkos, 2013).

Finally, it is necessary to indicate that we chose to study the front pages of the newspaper due to the lack of research on this aspect of environmental journalism. As a reference, we can mention the comparison study between the front pages of Spanish newspapers on the earthquakes in Haiti (2010) and Japan (2011),

which established that although there was similarity in the construction of the front pages reporting on the event, the pre-existing social perception on both countries conditioned the visual representation of the human tragedy and destruction, strengthening the pre-conceived notions about Haiti and Japan (Fernández, 2013). On the cover image, the reader would expect to meet the expectation based on its prior knowledge about the topic addressed by the newspaper, so it finally observes the claim of its own imagination in the visual motif (Visa & Soto, 2012, p. 148).

The interest in examining the covers is based on its conception as a product of the modern cultural matrix still reflected by the press in the 21st century. The cover belongs to the task of standardization of discourses and social languages in accordance with formats and styles that became a canon of the press and acquired the character of neutral (Abril, 2003, p. 27). The cover domesticated the stylistic, rhetoric and expressive diversity, as well as moral and ideological, towards a communicability that transcends local symbolic borders and dominates the informative cultural matrix (Abril, 2003). The cover of the journal became the decade of the eighties, under the impact of multimedia informational text, a showcase of information with a form of textuality that linked various codes (linguistic and visual) and took various semiotic registers (iconic, plastic, typographic, etc). While the press provides a sensory experience in the context of the discursive textual activity of modern society (Nitrihual, Del Valle, Mayorga, Bascur & Castro, 2012), the informative cultural matrix that emanates from the cover of the journal determines the mass reader subject's cognitive perceptual apparatus. Such matrix shapes, leads, or stimulates the adequacy of perceptual cognitive abilities of the consumer of covers, on a reading operation that links and isolates during the reading the spaces fragmented in modules of the first page of a newspaper. The cover is a space limited and preferential, which varies daily, establishes a significant relationship with the issues set forth by the newspaper in its interior, and reveals its identity (Canga, Coca, Peña & Pérez, 2010). Is like the "shop window of a bookshop, in which are mixed in a more or less specific order best sellers and profound literature (...) the complex news story and the one of human interest, sports and culture (...) the proportion of each allows us to know exactly what kind of newspaper it

is" (Canga et al., 2010, p. 61). Thus, the front page of the newspaper is an operation of selection based on criteria of hierarchy, authority and balance on what is made visible and what can be omitted.

Regarding our attention to the photographs, it is important to consider that every image embodies a way of seeing. The journalistic photography expresses a view among an infinite number of possibilities. The visual sign of the photograph on the cover is inextricably tied to the linguistic code, it simultaneously dialogues and opposes to the modules that make up the page and bind to other codes that characterize a culture in particular at a given historic time and space (Carmona, 2013).

THE "BLACK TIDE" AND ENVIRONMENTAL INEQUALITY IN QUINTERO

The morning of September 24, 2014, the Philippine oil tanker *Mimosa* spilled 38.700 liters of oil in the Quintero Bay when the mooring ropes of the ship were released during the unloading of crude oil to the ponds of the maritime terminal of the *Empresa Nacional de Petróleos de Chile* (ENAP). This accident added to the recurring chain of contaminants events in Quintero and Puchuncaví, two towns nearby, located in the northern area of Valparaíso, which since 1960 became highly industrialized areas and ceased to be agricultural and fishing areas. In Quintero and Puchuncaví there is a long process of deterioration of the population health, with the increase of family histories of cancer and genetic mutations, corrosion and death of ecosystems, including plants, fish, and livestock.

Quintero and Puchuncaví host more than one dozen of industrial complexes, including a State oil refinery and the largest smelting of copper of the country. Two industrial ports and four large thermoelectric plants are found in the area. A journalist described the feeling among the inhabitants of Quintero of living in "the Chernobyl of Chile" (Silva, 2014). Another author referred to the area as an area of "toxic lives" (Tironi, 2014), by the high atmospheric emissions of dioxide and trioxide of sulfur, arsenic, particulate material rich in copper and other contaminating minerals that move with the wind, fall to the ground in acid rain and mingle in the sea, such as sulfur dioxide, carbon, mercury, and zinc (Badal, 2014).

In 1993, the Ministry of Agriculture of Chile had already stated as a “zone saturated by sulfur dioxide and particulate material” the surface around one of the industrial complexes of Quintero, and started a decontamination plan for reducing emissions and adjusting the industries to the Chilean rule, which has emission limits much higher than that recommended by international organizations (Cámara de Diputados, 2011). However, the industrial park in Quintero-Puchuncaví continued growing and the 1993 decontamination plan remained unfinished.

In 2010, the media covered the complaint in Court of the Regional Association of Former Public Servants of the *Empresa Nacional de Minería de Chile* (ENAMI) due to cancer cases and deaths by myocardial infarction suffered by numerous of its affiliates. The Chamber of Deputies requested a report that confirmed the thesis that held the State mining *Corporación del Cobre de Chile* (CODELCO) –former ENAMI– responsible by “the effects that in their health caused the chronic exposure to the refinery vapors” (Cámara de Diputados, 2011, p. 94). In 2011, the press returned to the area due to the intoxication of 30 people from the school of La Greda, caused by a toxic cloud, episode that repeated on 2012 and 2013, along with the complaints of fishermen for the carbon accumulation on the beach. Ultimately, it would seem that the media effervescence about Quintero-Puchuncaví has been based in the catastrophe, promptly in the episodes of environmental crisis, and not on the permanent status of environmental and social inequality in the area.

The population residing in Quintero-Puchuncaví experiences economic and labor dependence (direct and indirect) of the polluting companies, which adds to the status of pre-existing vulnerability. The inhabitants of the area not only live exposed to environmental risks (explosions, leakage of polluting material, accumulation of toxic waste) and with limited access to key environmental goods (clean air, soil and water). The availability of public services and urban infrastructure (hospital, sewerage for all housing sectors, fluid and affordable public transport) is also uneven. This increases their environmental vulnerability.

For the environmental community, the extreme socio-environmental inequality in Quintero-Puchuncaví acquired the traits of an inescapable fate. They called it a Sacrifice Zone, underlining how these places are forced to sacrifice for the development and well-being

of the rest of the country (Terram, 2014). The Sacrifice Zone name refers to the extensive impact of industrial pollution, which exceeds the environmental and comprehensively covers the rest of the fields of the life of the territory, because it generates the erosion of domestic or local economy (food production, quality of soil, access and health) and finally prevents any capacity for human development. “Sacrifice zones reveal, in addition, that the problem of environmental pollution responds to patterns of social inequality; lower income communities must withstand the negative effects of the economic growth of the society as a whole” (Terram, 2014, p. 3).

The fact that Quintero Bay is between exclusive recreational resorts (including, for example, Reñaca and Zapallar), areas of high valuation on the real estate market, highlights the situation of environmental inequality of the area. It reveals, in other words, the (political) role of the State and the richer and more powerful economic groups in mapping environmental inequality, installing activities that generate risk and environmental degradation in areas inhabited by communities of low-income and low-capacity of resistance to the arrival of the industries (Alves, 2007).

TOWARDS AN ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICT JOURNALISM

Theorizing of environmental conflicts predominantly assumes the press as a “second order actor”, because it limits the environmental issue to the opposition of interests between “primary” actors around the physical dimension of a condition or environmental event, and excludes the perceptual and reflective component socially built on the environmental (Lezama, 2008), in which the press participates. This theory assumes that media intervene once the dispute is constituted and are involved in the controversy in a natural way, as part of their regular duties (Villaruel, 2014). “First order actors” are those who constitute the conflict; without them, there would be no confrontation. It is (1) government agencies that administer environmental institutionalism, (2) the companies allegedly responsible for ecological damage, (3) non-governmental environmental organizations, and (4) the community (Torres et al., 1996). On this aspect, it is worth insisting on the overlap of roles presented by the case of Quintero-Puchuncaví, given that polluting compa-

nies are private and of the State. Thus, the government eventually contaminates and, at the same time, settles the controversies regarding this issue.

As mentioned above, “first order actors” also are considered all civil society organizations mobilized to the perception of risk, including NGOs (Sabatini & Sepúlveda, 1997) dedicated to environmental issues in local actions. Sometimes, scientists that define or identify problems or environmental hazards are added as extra actors (Villaruel, 2014), even if nowadays they tend to be attached to environmental groups of civil society organizations or have been hired by privates to create specialized reports.

From this approach, it is considered that from 2005, the struggle around the industrial pollution in the area of Quintero-Puchuncaví acquired the structure of socio-environmental conflict (Correa, 2012). This happens not only because the community manages to organize in terms of civil society (Fuenzalida & Quiroz, 2012) and is recognized as a “first order” social actor, but also because it leads the discussion about the care of the environment to the issue of territory sustainability and quality of life, i.e., to the scope of rights (Aristegui, 2011).

In this sense, the Quintero-Puchuncaví gives base to the statement that social conflicts in Latin America that underlies chronic inequality are no longer episodic, but have given rise to a controversial order, a constitution of the social permanently unsettled due to the nature of the State, put in question by multiculturalism. I.e., social and political conflicts of the society would not only be reflected by the State, they would also act in the formation of systems of economic interests and political actors that define the dynamics of the conflict (Calderon, 2012, p. 8). This is why a new field of conflict appears –triggered by the State and its structural reforms–, related to multiculturalism and new forms of quality of life, citizenship and dignity (Calderón, Fontana, Salinas & Ortega, 2011). In this line of argument, environmental conflicts have demands that exceed the environmental, fully immersed in the social and aim for the notion of real and cultural freedom, seeking for access to a desirable lifestyle and recognition of identities as rights.

In the review of the traditional scheme on the environmental conflict, the location of the press as a “second order actor” also deserves to be reviewed in the existing scenario of extreme political mediatization (Negrine, 1996), where media are capable not only of

distancing an environmental problem of a community, but can also cancel it symbolically until its eradication of the local imaginary. The press has even been pointed out, since it exposes a speech conditioned by economic and political interests, as inherent part of the global environmental crisis (Gavitarí, 2012).

The proposition that the conception of the current environmental conflict surpasses the institutional framework to address the environmental issue as a right, and this goes beyond the formal environmental regulation system (Sabatini & Sepúlveda, 1997), points to a discursive notion of environmental conflict. Its focus is not on empirical data, but essentially in its representation (Hajer, 1995, pp. 13-14). The environmental conflict is discussed in social representations mediated by political, social, economic and cognitive structures that place consumers and producers of the journalistic narrative and journalistic business in a dynamic political culture. Seen in this way, the questions about the characteristics of the social role of the press multiply.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the local press could also oppose centralism, amplifying the role of citizenship and local governance by presenting environmental issues in its confrontational character, but privileging the productive, creative dimension, instead of its violent and destructive connotation. What is in question then is the conception of “newsworthy” (Martini, 2000) and the role of the media in social conflicts, which according to Tarrow (1997) reinforce the transit from the disturbance of order towards the violence often found in protests. “A single student throwing stones at the police is a better new than any number of protesters marching peacefully through the streets of the city” (Tarrow, 1994, p. 169). In the conception of Simmel and Ceballos (2010), conflicts are not essentially negative. On the contrary, they are positive moments as forms of socialization, which mobilizes the discussion from how to avoid objections to the revision of its effects, its productivity, since they involve the activation of speeches and local imaginaries in a community. “After the conflict, it is not the same as before” (Stamm & Aliste, 2014).

The expectations of this study consist of identifying that *El Mercurio de Valparaíso* covers environmental issues when there is a controversy, but –in a paradoxical way– it does not represent on its covers the environmental conflict showing “first order actors”.

Rather, it favors a single actor without antagonists, as well as the legal contents of the environmental problem, which responds to the trend already viewed in the Chilean media of the capital. Denial of the conflict on the front pages delegitimizes the chronic condition of socio-environmental inequality in Quintero-Puchuncaví and adds to it communicational inequality, by reproducing a socially established scheme that does not recognize the integral inequality in the area. This representation is information that feeds the decision processes, the dynamism of democracy and citizen participation

METHODOLOGY

The study of the covers of *El Mercurio de Valparaiso* about the oil spill in the Quintero Bay was made through a content analysis, understood as a set of interpretative procedures of communicative products which originate in particular processes of communication, previously registered. The examination of such products through both quantitative (units count statistics) and qualitative (interpretation based on the construction of categories) techniques of measurement, allows making and processing significant data on the conditions of production of the texts or of subsequent use (Piñuel, 2002, p. 7). The process included the following strategies: (1) we analyzed the covers of the journal from the first day it reported about the environmental accident, Thursday, September 25, 2014, until Thursday, January 22, 2015, when for the last time information relating to the oil spill appears in the cover. In this interval, 89 covers

were published in full color, and of that total, 43 were related to the oil spill, forming the corpus of analysis. (2) The covers were analyzed by setting variables in a matrix divided into two sections. In the formal analysis, the hierarchy of the picture was established depending on its size, location and relationship with the headline. In the qualitative analysis, the following categories were identified in the photography: subjects of the event, symbolic elements present in the image and the situation represented by the image (table 1).

RESULTS

THE THREE COVERS OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL CATASTROPHE

The cover of *El Mercurio de Valparaiso* is based on an invariant modular structure on a tabloid format, which heading is the journal name, followed by a front row with three modules of headlines, two of them with small photographs. The next row is always the main headline of the cover. The particularity of the compositional strategy of the cover design is that, in general, there is a rupture between the headline of the day and the great photography that occupies the lower half of the front page, because they correspond to different information (see figure 1).

The great photography of the cover is usually a close-up or American shot (up to the knees) of people currently known in the national scenario, with a caption in bold that provides the context of the image. The close shot of the photo allows observing the gestures of the face, always looking at the lens, smiling

Table 1. Analysis matrix of the covers

Formal analysis	Size of the photo (main, medium or small)
	Location on the cover (center, side modules or up)
	Relationship headline/photography (rupture or link)
	Photo caption
Qualitative analysis	Subject of the event (State, State enterprise, Navy, national government, local government, community)
	Relevant symbolic elements (shovels, nets, posters, etc)
	Context or situation expressed in the image (beach, dock, city street, etc)

Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 1. Comparison of the first (left) and second (right) covers reporting on the Quintero Bay oil spill



Source: El Mercurio de Valparaíso, digital edition (September 25 and 26, 2015).

or serious. Exceptions are the photographs of sporting events (football, marathon or tennis matches), which reflect the action of players and are more open shots; and, occasionally, some police incident, which is also represented in an image of action or movement.

In the lapse of media coverage of the oil spill (September 2014 to January 2015), there were only two major pictures on the case on the cover. The first appeared on the second day of coverage of the event, with a panoramic view of the beach of Quintero in which the remains of oil deposited on the shore by the successive waves can be seen; distant in the background there is a bended person, who allows the reader, by comparison with the subject, to establish the proportions of the size of the contaminated landscape (figure 1). The main headline above the photo is “Valparaíso will apply prohibition in all mass events of the city”, text that does not have a relationship with the main picture and produces confusion in the reader, waiting to satisfy its expectation with what is already known.

The announcement of the environmental accident was the day before the described cover and had as main headline, with no image, “Oil spill will affect beaches of Quintero and Ventanas”. The text again is different than the main picture: a victim of the great fire that affected Valparaíso on April 14 and 15, 2014 smiles at the camera while holding a notebook on a background of green hills of the city. The man got a college scholarship along with his teenage son (figure 1).

The second main cover photograph on the disaster was published one week after the oil spill and is the only one –not only of the examined corpus (43 covers), but of the 89 covers that released in the three months reviewed– in which the main headline coincides with the central photo. Three employees of the *Empresa Nacional de Petróleo* (ENAP), with the white suit used in situations of chemical accidents, work with a shovel and black plastic bags cleaning the beach of Quintero, on which traces of oil are not observed (figure 2).

The rest of the cover photographs related to the oil spill are discreetly located on the small and upper

Figure 2. Cover rectifying the magnitude of the oil spill in the Quintero Bay



Source: *El Mercurio de Valparaíso*, digital edition, (October 4, 2015).

side modules, are of small size, and occasionally medium-sized, accompanied by a headline (table 2).

During September, the rest of the photos corresponds to panoramic views of the beach in a small format, in

which can only be distinguished the foam of the waves or employees of ENAP cleaning the beach, in variations of the main photography already described. Both photographs and the discourse of the headlines and their subhead refer to the “spill”, without indicating causes or responsible. ENAP only appears in photographs as an actor intensively working in the cleaning of the beaches and the national government (Ministry of the Environment, Council of Defense of the State and the President) is presented the actor who will investigate the situation, undertake studies on the “spill” and punish those responsible. The figure of the environmental conflict is diluted in the absence of other antagonists or “first order actors”. The beach is the only victim.

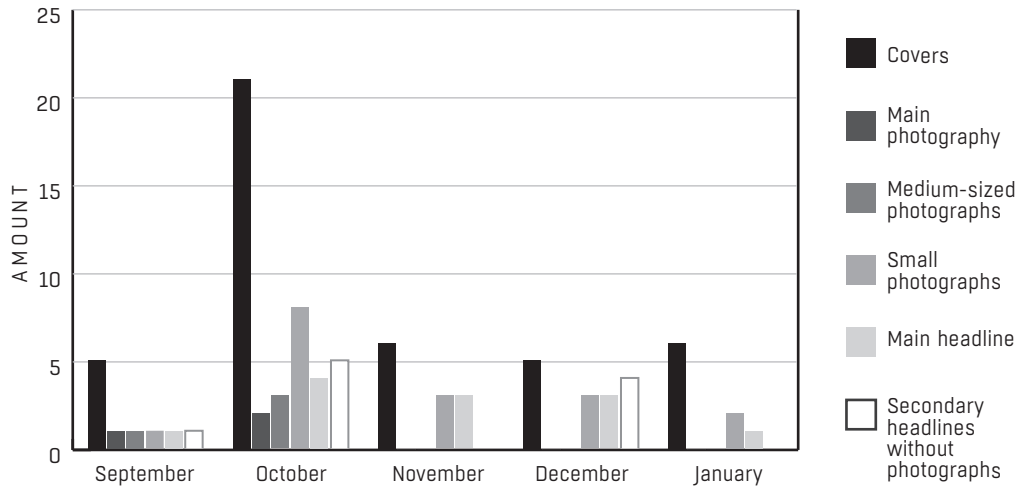
In October, the presence of the environmental problem stays in cover almost all month, with 21 appearances in no main headlines and 13 photographs, all reduced in size, in the side or top modules of the page. The photographs correspond to several aerial views of sunny Quintero Bay, with the boats of fishermen swinging in the background or the pipeline surrounded by serene waves. In the case of the *Prestige* and British Petroleum, aerial views showed traces of oil on the sea bottom, which can only be seen from the sky, and not from the shore. ENAP employees are pictured cleaning residues that are not appreciated because of the small size of the image. There is a picture of a pelican in cleaning treatment surrounded by people with white costumes that one can supposed are vets, but they are similar to the ENAP officials who clean the beach. At the end of the month, the pelican appears again in a photograph when they release it in the edge of the beach, after its rescue of pollution (it is presumed to be the same Pelican).

Table 2. Frequency of covers and detail of photographs and headlines of *El Mercurio de Valparaíso* related to the oil spill in Quintero Bay

Months	Covers	Main photography	Medium-sized photographs	Small photographs	Main headline	Secondary headlines without photographs
September	5	1	1	1	1	1
October	21	2	3	8	4	5
November	6	0	0	3	3	0
December	5	0	0	3	3	4
January	6	0	0	2	1	0
TOTAL	43	3	4	17	12	10

Source: Own elaboration.

Chart 1. Frequency of covers and detail of photographs and headlines of El Mercurio de Valparaíso related to the oil spill in Quintero Bay



Source: Own elaboration.

ABSENCE/PRESENCE OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICT

The covers photographs do not express a climate of environmental conflict surrounding the oil spill, but the headlines of the superior and lateral modules reveal the onset of the dispute. “Concerned about the effects of the spill” fishermen appear (October 2), ENAP recognizes that the spilled oil “ was ten times more severe than estimated” (October 4), “citizens march in protest by the spill” (October 6), “Under-secretary of Health orders the closure of beaches and prohibits fishing “ (October 7), “the Navy investigates the spill and denies responsibility” (October 9) while tug company defends from accusations of that institution (October 11). The journal predicts that “the recovery of beaches would take two years” (October 12). Certainly, in October the conflict broke into the public sphere³; it is even mentioned that the organized community proposes an “environmental plebiscite” (October 27), mentioned by the journalistic pieces in the interior of *El Mercurio de Valparaíso*, but this is disproved by the verb-visual discursive device (photograph and headline) of the covers. The only image of the citizen marches is a small picture with a group of smiling people moving on the sunny beach.

In November are fishermen are depicted as belligerent individuals who “make new demands” to the authority and the enterprise (November 6). ENAP

“rules out more payments to fishermen by serious spill” (November 15) and the newspaper covers the protests. In fact, the two unique photographs of the month on the subject show some people running while the police uses a water cannon against them (November 6) and the repeated panoramic of the lonely beach (in which there are no swimmers or fishermen), with petroleum residues deposited on the sand (November 21).

In December, the social conflict is replaced by legal content. The Navy and ENAP appear confronting each other on the front pages by the dissemination of two reports that point to each other as responsible for the spill. Meanwhile, the regional government warns that the amount of oil spilled is superior to the last correction of November. The need for new measures of decontamination and large investments by ENAP to revive tourism in the area before the imminent arrival of the summer is stressed; the Committee of Environmental Remediation for Puchuncaví is constituted between local authorities, community and companies (December 19), but fishermen dispute it and refuse to participate. Fishing is authorized in the bay (December 21). During the month, only two small pictures are published, a pair of divers dragging a cleaning net on the sand of the beach, collecting oil sediments (December 7), and the customary panoramic of the sunny bay (December 12).

In January, the cover focus drags attention to its main headline “ENAP is questioning the Navy on summary over the spill” (January 18), but days before, on a small headline on one side, it said “Navy reopens summary by spill and asks new background” (January 15), while the regional representative of the Ministry of the Environment “explains measures to mitigate the oil spill” (January 22). The only photograph of the month on the subject is a small one in a module on the side of the cover, with a close-up of an official of the Ministry smiling, sitting on a bench with a garden on the background (January 22).

DISCUSSION

When facing the serious oil spill in Quintero in 2014, *El Mercurio de Valparaíso* follows the trend indicated for the treatment of the centralist Chilean press on the environmental issue: it is governed by newsworthiness criteria based on conflict and shifting towards legal contents of the catastrophic event.

The environmental conflict in Quintero-Puchuncaví is not something new. In the last two decades, Quintero and Puchuncaví communities have led their environmental problem to the courts of Justice to the failure of government agencies to address the conflict, apparently without greater impact in the local public sphere, what requires to be studied. In the 1990s, farmers, the biggest local productive force, weakly began claims to the judiciary by the dispersion of gases (Sabatini & Sepúlveda, 1997). To this complaint were incorporated, after the years, teachers and other social sectors, which increasingly constituted a citizen group with participation of the local authority and varied social, labor and environmental organizations in the area (Correa, 2012, pp. 24-125).

In 2014, the visual representation of this citizen socio-environmental movement on the covers of *El Mercurio de Valparaíso* was restricted to small photographs of marches on the sunny beach and fishermen with handkerchiefs on the fleeing of the police's water cannon. Both images reinforce (negative) preconceived ideas on social movements in Chile and strengthen prior knowledge that holds the imaginary on the social protest of the street associated to violence. This imaginary would be present in the own activists, who long to appear in the media even this way, to make visible their demands (Sapiezyńska, 2014). Such imaginary would condition the social movements in a reflective and

strategic way to obtain media attention (Cottle, 2008).

The covers of *El Mercurio de Valparaíso* have a modular structure that categorizes information according to space and the location of the information, and conditions reading in advance. The modular layout of the cover guides the gaze towards the center, with a great headline and photograph, which in general –as it has been said– are unrelated. The modularity of the cover is underpinned by the hipertextuality of information, suggesting a non-linear reading, multiple routes, and that extends to the printed format the reading habits of audiovisual media (Abril, 2003). The oil spill in Quintero only appeared at the center of three covers of *El Mercurio de Valparaíso* in the first fifteen days of the accident. The first time was with a big headline without photograph announcing the disaster, the second with a large photograph of the deserted and polluted beach, and the last with the officials of ENAP cleaning the beach, which does not look dirty, preceded by a large headline in which the company reveals that the spill was bigger than initially considered. While the modular covers set, rather than a narrative composition, a fragmented verb-visual one in which sense is built from the interaction of heterogeneous components, when examining the whole of the three consecutive covers there is a story sequence in three moments: the announcement of the natural environmental catastrophe that does not have a subject of the action but an object of the accident; the beach signaled as the only victim of the catastrophe, as there is no direct link with the community; the State company discovers the truth about the magnitude of the disaster, but immediately manages to reverse the pollution of the beach (of alleged perpetrator it becomes complainant and environmental advocate). The three covers broadcast a message that reinforces the idea of the spill as equivalent to a natural phenomenon that is not a threat to the population, but to the environment, and the State-owned company is the protector of the environment, not the community. Any link with the directly affected people is omitted, as well as references to the negligence of the company and the Navy, which caused the oil spill in the transfer to the ponds. Finally, the long standing stage of environmental conflict in which the accident occurred is omitted since a single subject of the story is recognized (State-owned company), aside from any conflict and assuming the tasks usually associated with environmental groups in ecological crisis: complaint and cleaning or reversal of the damage. The covers deny

the condition of permanent environmental inequality of Quintero. The behavior of the newspaper on the front pages suggest the study of the communication strategy and management of the State-owned company on the environmental crisis, which apparently opts for the rhetoric of image repair (Harlow et al., 2011) and the influence of corporate public relations in the press (Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2013).

Apart from the central place on the three covers, in the next few days information about the spill was sent, on the front page of *El Mercurio de Valparaíso*, to the sides, in medium and small-sized modules, which indicate the low importance related to that news. But it also reveals the difficulty to eradicate it completely from the showcase of the journal, because the environmental disaster prompted the reaction of the community and intensified the social unrest in the territory, with marches and intermittent protests in public spaces. Medium-sized photographs correspond to representatives of the government shown as protectors of the population before the actions of nature, as they usually appear on environmental issues set forth by the press (Andrade, 2013).

The verb-visual representation of the government also obvious the stage of environmental conflict in which its role is situated, with emphasis on medium-sized photographs with panoramic views of the Quintero Bay, showing by their small size no trace of pollution, reinforcing the notion of overcoming the environmental damage of the Bay. Only two small photographs show the population of Quintero (in an ongoing citizen march and protests by fishermen), accompanied by small headlines that strengthen the representation of the community as conflictive around the oil spill as an isolated fact. Small headlines without photographs allow discerning the presence of a dispute between the State-owned company and the

Navy to establish responsibility for the accident, as well as between the community, the government and the company on measures to repair the environmental and social damage. Seen that way, the environmental conflict around the oil spill persists in covers, increasingly diminished, from September to January. By ignoring the context of environmental conflict that corresponds to the condition of socio-environmental inequality in Quintero-Puchuncaví—caused by the constant pollution of the private-State industrial complex located in the territory—the press emerges as a first order actor of the environmental conflict. The newspaper would prevent that readers feel represented in their everyday life problems of unequal access to environmental goods for the population of Quintero, because it reduces and simplifies the problem to the catastrophic event presented in a fragmented manner. Thus, it difficult that the environmental problem is reflected on, by not providing references (verb-visual) for its social construction and understanding as a social, political and economic matter mediated by antagonistic interests, a speech which, ultimately, interferes with the exercise of fundamental citizens rights. By excluding environmental social inequality from the local public sphere, we can see the juxtaposition of communicational inequality, i.e., unequal access to the symbolic goods that constitute the information.

Finally, understanding the relationship between the media and environmental inequality as the finding of a communicational inequality requires developing further analysis on environmental journalism in Chile generally, and in particular, with the focus on the (dis)balance, centralism and symbolic localism to the interior of the Chilean media system. No doubt the media are far from being secondary actors in environmental conflicts and overcoming environmental inequality.

FOOTNOTES

1. This research is part of the interdisciplinary study "Territory, community and environmental conflict in Quintero-Puchuncaví after the September, 2014 oil spill", funded by the Observatory of Social Participation and Territory of the Faculty of Social Sciences of the Universidad de Playa Ancha (Valparaíso, Chile).
2. This statement may require some reconsideration after the forest fires of the past decade, associated with social conflicts in the area of La Araucanía (South of Chile) and in the city of Valparaíso. The second characteristic of Chilean environmental journalism lies in the shifting towards legal information on situations of environmental crisis, with more legal or economic than environmental content.

3. The discourse analysis of the journalistic pieces published by *El Mercurio de Valparaíso* as well as four special editions published in the period between September 25, 2014 and January 22, 2015 correspond to the second stage of the study that is being developed. The debate that is perceived in the press revolves around causality between environmental and social inequality, i.e., if poverty, lack of employment, low wages and schooling levels are a cause or consequence of limited access to environmental welfare.

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