ISSNe: 2386-8864
DOI: 10.6018/pantarei/648361

National historical narratives in online newspapers: collective memories of troubled colonial past in Spain

Narrativas históricas nacionales en periódicos digitales: memorias colectivas sobre el pasado conflictivo colonial en España

César López Rodríguez
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid
cesar.lopez@uam.es
0000-0003-4616-8602

Germán Dorado Cazorla
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid
gdoradocazorla@gmail.com
0000-0002-3906-391X

Received: 05/02/2025
Accepted: 12/05/2025

Resumen

Las narrativas nacionales juegan un papel central en el conocimiento histórico, planteando normalmente una visión moral favorable de la nación. Este estudio analiza narrativas producidas sobre el denominado Descubrimiento y Conquista de América en los cuatro periódicos digitales más leídos en España. Usando un análisis de contenido, se examinaron 200 artículos. El estudio examina el rol de la nación como sujeto histórico, los juicios morales, y las estrategias de exoneración empleadas para justificar sus acciones. La nación aparece como el principal sujeto histórico, reforzando una visión esencialista. Los resultados revelan diferencias morales en función de la orientación política del medio. Los periódicos vinculados a una ideología conservadora mostraron una narrativa nacional tradicional, con un predominio de visiones positivas y una presencia de estrategias de exoneración que favorecen la imagen de la nación. Finalmente, se discute el papel que estas representaciones pueden jugar en el aprendizaje y enseñanza de la historia.

Palabras clave

Memoria colectiva, Identidad nacional, ideología, Enseñanza de la historia, Análisis cualitativo.

Abstract

National narratives play a central role in historical knowledge. These narratives usually convey a favourable moral view of the nation's actions in the past. This study analyses the narratives produced about the so-called Discovery and Conquest of America, through Spain's four most-read online newspapers. Using content analysis, a sample of 200 articles was examined. This study investigated the nation's role as a historical subject, the moral judgments involving the nation, and the exoneration strategies used to justify misdeeds. The nation appeared as the main historical subject, reinforcing an essentialist conception. Results revealed differences in judging the nation depending on the political orientation of the media. Conservative newspapers associated with a conservative political ideology displayed a traditional national narrative, with a predominance of positive views and frequent exoneration strategies to bolster the nation's image. Finally, the role of these representations in teaching history and developing historical thinking is discussed.

Keywords

Collective memory, national identity, ideologies, history education, qualitative analysis.

To cite this paper: López Rodríguez, César; Dorado Cazorla, Germán (2025). National historical narratives in online newspapers: collective memories of troubled colonial past in Spain. *Panta Rei. Revista Digital de Historia y Didáctica de la Historia, 19*, online-first. DOI: 10.6018/pantarei.648361

CC BY

ISSNe: 2386-8864
DOI: 10.6018/pantarei/648361

1. Introduction

How we remember the past has a substantial impact on the present and future of our societies. Frequently, the past is the centre of controversies beyond the academic sphere, including social, political, and media agents (Macintyre and Clarck, 2013). A good example is the protests arising from the Black Lives Matter movement on statues of historical figures linked to the colonisation of America. On both sides of the Atlantic, numerous statues of Christopher Columbus and other protagonists of the so-called Discovery of America have been painted, beheaded or removed due to their links with the oppression of Afro-American and indigenous groups.

These debates are especially relevant when they involve historical events central to national identity, as is the case of Spain and the so-called Discovery and Conquest of America. In this regard, an article in one of the most widely read online newspapers in Spain noted, "The conquistadors brutally subjected the indigenous people to violence. They forced them to convert to Christianity, took away their lands and natural resources, and even traded them as slaves" (Fernández, 2018, para. 8). In contrast, a very different view of the Spanish conquerors was displayed in another leading newspaper of the country:

> At the bottom of all the stereotypes of the Black Legend, we find nothing but theological hatred toward the religion that we Spaniards brought to the New World, the religion that freed them from Moctezuma and his boys, those "kind savages" who ripped out beating hearts and drank blood from the carotids of their victims (de Prada, 2019, para. 4).

These two fragments convey very different moral narratives of the same historical event. Representations of the national past produced in the media play an essential role in the construction of collective memory, but their influence also impacts the processes of teaching and learning history within the classroom (Berger et al., 2008; Billig, 1995; Yadgar, 2002). In this article, representations linked to the national narrative of the Discovery and Conquest of America transmitted from the four most-read Spanish online newspapers will be analysed. Specifically, the study will focus on analysing the different moral judgments regarding this historical period. Likewise, it will examine possible differences as a function of the political orientation of the medium. For this, we will draw from sociocultural psychology and history education studies on national narratives' role in understanding the past and constructing collective memory.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Collective memory and national narratives

Collective memory has been defined as "a representation of the past shared by the members of a group, such as a generation or a nation-state" (Wertsch, 2008. p. 120). This shared representation does not seek to achieve a historiographical understanding of the past but rather to strengthen an identity project of the group. Social groups do not possess memory in the same way individuals do. Instead, collective memory is socially constructed and distributed across various artifacts of memory, such as rituals, monuments, or texts (Wertsch, 2008). As renowned scholars in the field of collective memory – such as Paul Ricoeur (1991), Maurice Halbwachs (2020), and Jens Brockmeier (2002)- have pointed out, narratives constitute a key cultural mediator for developing collective identities.

CC BY

ISSNe: 2386-8864
DOI: 10.6018/pantarei/648361

Collective identities, such as national identity, are far from being natural or innate entities and therefore need to be learnt -and taught- in a specific socio-cultural context. It is in this sense that narratives are central to imagine the nation (Anderson, 2006).

From the beginning of history as a modern discipline at the end of the 18th century, historians from around the world developed, in a strong nationalist context, a specific national narrative to collect the past of each nation-state (Balibar, 1991; Berger and Lorenz, 2010; Lowenthal, 1998). These narratives, with a strong ideological character and based more on myths and legends than on historiographic analysis, have played a vital role in the development of national identities, both in the formal educational sphere and outside of schools (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Van Alphen & Wagoner, 2021; Van Sledright, 2008; Wertsch, 2021).

Although these national narratives depend on the sociocultural context in which they were developed, it is possible to find some common characteristic features (Carretero and Bermúdez, 2012). The nation and national identity concepts constitute the backbone of these narratives, projecting themselves into the past as natural and timeless entities. Thus, the nation and its inhabitants constitute the main historical subject of the narrative, establishing clear differences between a national "us" and a foreign "them". Finally, the actions carried out by the national group are usually judged positively, in contrast to the actions of other groups.

Key authors on nationalism have stressed the modern and imagined character of nations demystifying primordialist and nationalistic approaches that see nations as natural and timeless units in which societies are organized (Anderson, 2006; Connor, 2004; Hobsbawm, 2012). Modernist historians argue that nations and national identities did not emerge before the French Revolution and the nationalist context of the nineteenth century, when nation-states were consolidated. Thus, applying these concepts to historical events prior to this period—such as those related to the so-called "Discovery and Conquest of America"—would be anachronistic. Nevertheless, nationalist interpretations of the past, like those found in the national narratives constructed by modern states as Spain, project these concepts backward in time to forge an identity-based connection between present-day citizens and historical actors.

Modern historiographical approaches challenge the very core of nationalistic national narratives. Along these same lines, the vigorous globalisation movements seemed to relegate nationalism to oblivion. However, nationalism remained strong at the end of the 20th century and in the present century it seems that its presence, far from diminishing, is increasing. In recent decades, there has been a strong interest within the educational field in deconstructing these narratives and developing critical historical thinking. However, various studies have shown that young adults' narratives about the past still rely heavily on the official national narrative (Bilali, 2013; López et al., 2015).

The influential work of Michael Billig (1995), titled "Banal Nationalism", has constituted a reference that, from the perspective of social psychology, can help us to understand the survival of national narratives. Billig's work focuses on social practices and discourses transmitted daily and consumed thoughtlessly by citizens. Thus, the banal nature of the processes of transmission of nationalism is emphasised:

> Banal nationalism has a discreet and sober tone. In routine practices and daily discourses, especially in the mass media, the idea of nationality is regularly

ISSNe: 2386-8864
DOI: 10.6018/pantarei/648361

> raised. (…) Through this rise, established nations are reinforced as nations, and their citizens are unconsciously reminded of their national identity. (p. 154)

The media, especially the press, constitute one of the main tools through which nations are imagined (Anderson, 2006). In this sense, it becomes necessary to analyse how the media transmit narratives about the nation's past that citizens subsequently consume.

2.2. Glorifying and exonerating the nation, fostering national identity

One of the main objectives of national narratives is to promote national identity (Berger and Lorenz, 2010; Carretero, 2011). These narratives show the great deeds of the past from a national perspective, contributing to creating a positive image of the group. Often, less complacent views are ignored. As Renan pointed out, oblivion and even historical error are essential factors in the creation of a nation (2013). Several studies indicate how moral judgments about our nation are strongly influenced by our social belonging (László, 2013). For example, Bilali (2013), in a study with Turkish students, found how participants tended to minimise the responsibility of their nation in the Armenian genocide.

When we confront immoral actions committed by our group, the moral image of the group is threatened. These threats need to be mitigated (Castano, 2008). In his Theory of Moral Disconnection, Bandura pointed out the main cognitive strategies used to justify our group behaviour when it conflicts with our moral principles (2017). For example, misdeeds are accepted as a necessary means to achieve a greater goal through moral justification. Dehumanising the victims or holding them responsible for causing the misdeed are other mechanisms that reduce feelings of discomfort. Many acts of war are justified by these mechanisms (Castano, 2008). Other strategies focus on minimising the consequences of misbehaviour, considering the consequences as exaggerated or making advantageous comparisons, by which the severity of the actions is minimised when comparing them with others of greater severity committed by others.

National narratives usually show the nation's actions as morally virtuous to serve as a moral guide to present citizens. However, historical contents sometimes become problematic, and alternative narratives arise that confront a pleasant vision of the national past (López & Márquez, 2021).

2.3. The so-called Discovery and Conquest of America as a troubled narrative

Historian John Elliott (2002) notes that at the end of the fifteenth century, the territory now known as Spain was divided among various Christian kingdoms, with the Kingdom of Castile taking the lead in the early colonization of America—even barring participation from inhabitants of other kingdoms, such as the Crown of Aragon. Consequently, neither Spain as a state nor as a nation existed at that time. However, the so-called Discovery and Conquest of America have become one of the central events in the Spanish national narrative. This narrative is deeply embedded in collective memory and can be observed in museums, memorials, media, and also in schools.

The traditional narrative created by the Spanish state and transmitted through school textbooks has been characterized by an emphasis on its civilizing role. This narrative emphashised the historical achievements of Spain in transmitting culture, language and

ISSNe: 2386-8864
DOI: 10.6018/pantarei/648361

religion to the American continent, carried out heroically and, on many occasions, reflecting a pejorative vision of indigenous peoples (Osorio, 2020; Sánchez et al., 2016). However, since the 1980s, history textbooks research shows a progressive questioning of this "narrative of civilisation", incorporating other perspectives that challenge a complacent view of these events (Valls, 2013). As Bermúdez and Argumero (2018) point out in a recent analysis of textbooks in Spain and Colombia, currently, this narrative of civilisation is increasingly absent. These authors found new approaches that incorporate different degrees of recognition of the violence exercised by Spaniards and position indigenous peoples as victims. These new narratives open room to question the role of the Spanish nation in a shifting past from glorious to controversial and problematic.

A good example is the voices raised to confront the official narrative of the so-called Discovery and Conquest of America. The demand for apologies for the actions committed during the conquest requested by the former president of Mexico, López Obrador, both to King Felipe VI of Spain and Pope Francis, led to a heated political debate in Spain. Thus, while right-wing political parties praised the nation's actions in the past, appealing to feelings of national pride, some left-wing leaders asked forgiveness for the abuses committed (Minder and Malkin, 2019). These confrontations reveal the political uses of the past and their influence on moral valuations.

From an educational perspective, these historical events align with what Santiesteban and González-Monfort (2019) identify as relevant social issues. Its analysis and discussion in the classroom can foster dialogue that challenges the traditional national narrative while promoting skills such as multiperspectivity, historical empathy, and the ethical dimension of historical thinking (Seixas & Morton, 2013).

Previous studies conducted with Spanish university students showed that their narratives often follow highly simplified structures of confrontation between a national 'us' and a foreign 'them.' Consequently, an essentialist and timeless view of the concepts of nation and national identity remains prevalent in their representations (López et. al., 2015). However, research also reveals an emotional ambivalence regarding how students evaluate these events, with emotions such as pride and admiration intertwined with shame and guilt (López & Márquez, 2021).

In this regard, it is worth questioning what kinds of discourses about these events are being conveyed in digital newspapers, what impact they may have on the students' representations, and how these debates can be incorporated into the classroom.

3. Method

3.1. Objetives

The main objective of the present work was to analyse the narratives about the so-called Discovery and Conquest of America present in the most read online newspapers in Spain. In doing so, the study aims to gain knowledge about the dominant discourses surrounding the collective memory of these historical events, which play a key role in shaping citizens' representation. The following specific objectives were proposed:

CC BY

ISSNe: 2386-8864
DOI: 10.6018/pantarei/648361

1. Examine the presence or absence of the Spanish nation as a historical subject in these events that took place before the emergence of the Spanish nation itself[1];

2. Analyse the judgments on the actions attributed to the Spanish nation;

3. Identify the type of strategies used to exonerate the misdeeds of the nation; and

4. Analyse the judgments toward the actions of other historical subjects opposed to the Spanish nation, specifically the indigenous people.

When studying these elements, the analyses focused on identifying possible differences based on the newspapers' political orientation.

3.2. Sample

The four most-read online newspapers in Spain according to the General Media Study of 2020 were selected: *El País*, *El Mundo*, *La Vanguardia* and *Abc*. Regarding political orientation, *El País* is usually described as a centre-left newspaper, while *El Mundo* has a conservative political orientation but reflects a liberal approach in its editorial line and is commonly described as centre-right. *Abc* is considered a conservative and monarchic newspaper. Finally, *La Vanguardia* is difficult to classify, as pointed out by Romero-Frías and Vaughan (2012) due to its Catalan regional approach. These authors classify *La Vanguardia* as left-wing, but it is also commonly described as Liberal-conservative.

From each newspaper, the last 50 articles related to the Discovery and Conquest of America were selected. The articles were published between November 8, 2017, and June 17, 2020. This period was chosen due to the heated socio-political debates that arose both in Spain and Latin America after the demands for forgiveness by the former president of Mexico Lopez Obrador in 2019 which still resonate today. *Abc*, *El País* and *El Mundo* have a section of their newspaper library dedicated to the Discovery of America, from which the 50 most recent articles were selected. For *La Vanguardia*, the newspaper's web search engine was used to search for the Discovery of America articles. Key word search terms were “Discovery of America” and “Conquest of America” in *La Vanguardia* search engine. Due to their content, articles unrelated to these historical events were not included in this study.

3.1. Data analysis

Content analysis was used to perform an in-depth analysis of the narratives presented in the articles and determine the presence of categories regarding our four specific objectives: Examining the *historical subject*, identifying *judgments about the nation*, *strategies for the nation's misdeeds exoneration*, and *judgements about the other*. Content analysis is fundamental to communication research and specifically appropriate for identifying the intentions and revealing patterns in communication content. Furthermore, it allows for both quantitative and qualitative analysis, which are necessary for statistically comparing articles from different political orientations (Berelson, 1952). Inductive and deductive coding of the narratives was conducted to develop our categories (see appendix A for a detailed description of the categories for each analysed dimension). To

[1] Given that the terms ‘Spanish nation’ and ‘Spain’ are frequently used in the historical narrative under analysis, these terms will be employed throughout the text without reiterating their anachronistic nature each time, in order to avoid disrupting the readability of the text.

ISSNe: 2386-8864
DOI: 10.6018/pantarei/648361

conduct the analysis and quantify the presence of categories, sentence was used as the level of analysis. Both authors performed a rigorous and in-depth reading of the articles. For the inductive coding, emerging categories were identified until saturation was reached, and no new categories emerged from the texts.

To validate the categories, an interrater analysis was performed for all dimensions. Two judges independently categorised 25 per cent of the total articles. The kappa agreement index surpassed 0.85 in all cases. The discrepancies found were used to improve the definition of the categories.

Regarding the *historical subject,* a deductive coding analysis was carried out to identify to what extent the nation constituted the historical subject of the narrative or if, on the contrary, other types of political organisations existing at the time were acknowledged (Table A1).

Concerning the *judgments about the nation*, judgments that expressed a positive (great feat, good treatment of the natives, positive personal traits, civilizing zeal, promote miscegenation) or negative view (abuse of indigenous peoples, greed, religious imposition) of the actions carried out by the national group were identified. These judgments were inductively coded to identify recurring themes until saturation was reached for both positive judgments (Table A2) and negative judgments (Table A3).

An inductive coding analysis was performed to identify the *strategies for the nation's misdeeds exoneration* (Black legend, denial of crimes, advantageous comparations, displacements of responsibility, moral justification). This analysis allowed us to identify the most common arguments and themes used in the articles to exonerate the nation (Table A4).

Finally, concerning the *judgements about the other* dimension, inductive coding was used to identify emerging categories concerning the judgments presented in the online newspapers regarding the indigenous people (cultural inferiority, violence and tyranny). It was relevant to examined not only how the nation's actions were displayed in the articles but also how the other is portrayed. This analysis allowed us to identify the content of judgments made about a key historical subject opposed to the national group (Table A5).

4. Results

4.1. Historical subject

A key aspect of narratives about the past is who constitutes the subject of the narrative. In the articles analysed, despite being a historical period long before the emergence of the Spanish nation, Spain and the Spaniards appeared as the predominant protagonists of the narrative.

> In addition, in exchange for tyrannical, theocratic and devastating pre-Hispanic cultures for the native, Spain populated the American continent with hospitals, schools, universities, temples, roads and cities. (*Abc*)

> The thirst for gold moved the Spaniards in America. Such is the most widespread Black Legend thesis. However, not all Spaniards were looking for gold - the reader should note the significant presence of clergymen - nor were the Spaniards the only ones dazzled by the metal. (*El Mundo*)

ISSNe: 2386-8864
DOI: 10.6018/pantarei/648361

The national label is the most frequently applied to the protagonists, appearing on 584 occasions. Less frequent (80) are allusions to non-national political entities existing at the time, such as the Christian kingdoms of Castile or Aragon.

> Castile (in its comprehensive concept that it was at that time after bringing together or being heir to so many kingdoms, such as Asturias, Galicia, León, Seville, Jaén, Murcia, Granada..., or the lordships such as that of Vizcaya) led at first the protagonism, supported later by the Crown of Aragon, where there was also that of Valencia, Mallorca, and the Catalan counties. (*El Mundo*)

Only 17 allusions explicitly addressed the problem of projecting the concept of nation to this period and questioned a timeless view of this concept.

> To think that institutions and nations do not vary, that they are eternal and identical over time, is so elementary, so rudimentary, that it is scary to see a large part of the world's population believing these fallacies. Neither "Spain" nor "France" nor "Mexico" nor "Russia" are immutable abstractions. (*El País*)

Table 1 shows the frequencies found for the "Historical subject" dimension in each newspaper.

Table 1

Frequencies for Historical Subject

	Abc	El Mundo	El País	La Vanguardia	Total
	n	*n*	*n*	*n*	
National historical subject	236	139	87	122	584
Non-national historical subject	52	6	11	11	80

Source: self-elaboration.

This study found that the national historical subject was statistically significantly more frequent compared to other non-national political entities (t (199) = 10.919, $p < 0.01$).

4.2. Judging the nation

a. Positive judgments

From an inductive analysis, five categories were derived: great feat, good treatment of natives, positive personal traits, civilising zeal and promoting miscegenation.

Posing the actions of the Spaniards as a "great feat" is the most frequent category.

> Instead of being puffed up by our audacity and courage and instilling in our children the pride of belonging to this heroic homeland, we ask for forgiveness. (…) Humanity has had three great epics: the discovery of America, the first voyage around the world and landing on the Moon. Two of them carried our flag, damn it. (*Abc*)

> Nao Santa María is one of the most famous ships of humanity. On October 12, 1492, under the command of Christopher Columbus, "she starred in one of the most important milestones in history, the discovery of America." (*La Vanguardia*)

ISSNe: 2386-8864
DOI: 10.6018/pantarei/648361

In the same way, some judgments defended the "Good treatment of natives" by the Spaniards and their rulers.

> Isabel "La Católica" also ordered "to treat these Indians very well and with affection and to refrain from doing them any harm, providing that both peoples should converse and be intimate and serve each other in everything they can." (*Abc*)

> "The survival of the Indian races in North America, without prejudice to the fact that there were individual abuses, is due to the missions, the parishes and the laws to protect the Indians that Spain started", says the president of the Hispanic Civilisation Foundation. (*Abc*)

Other favourable judgments frequently found in the articles extol the "positive personal traits of Spaniards", such as courage, defend the "civilising zeal" of the endeavour or highlight the "promotion of miscegenation" with native peoples.

> They would be heroes who put an end, facing infinitely superior forces with courage, worthy of all kinds of praise, to those savages. (*Abc*)

> What we Spaniards brought to the "original peoples" of America was an idea that represents the greatest advancement in civilisation in the history of humanity. (*Abc*)

> However, Spain Romanized America and did something else because Rome did not have a surplus of people to mix, and Spain did, creating with the natives a new mestizo race, the Hispanic, and a whole civilisation, (...), forming one of the great cultures of the Western world. (*Abc*)

Table 2 shows the frequencies found for each category of positive judgments about the nation in each newspaper.

Table 2

Frequencies for positive judgments about the nation

	Abc	El Mundo	El País	La Vanguardia	Total
	n	*n*	*n*	*n*	
Great feat	43	41	11	21	116
Good treatment of the natives	73	27	3	5	108
Positive personal traits	12	17	5	16	50
Civilising zeal	21	18	6	2	47
Promote miscegenation	12	12	4	8	36
Total	161	115	29	52	357

Source: self-elaboration.

Overall, there was a statistically significant difference between groups as determined by one-way ANOVA (F (3,196) = 11.079, $p < .001$). *A Tukey's post hoc* test revealed that *Abc* presented statistically significantly more positive judgments than *El País* ($p < .001$) and *La Vanguardia* ($p < .001$) but not compared to *El Mundo* ($p = .275$).

ISSNe: 2386-8864
DOI: 10.6018/pantarei/648361

El Mundo displayed statistically significantly more positive judgments than *El País* (p = .005) but not compared to *La Vanguardia* (p = .068). There was no statistically significant difference between *El País* and *La Vanguardia* (p = .804).

b. Negative judgments

Three categories were derived that reflect negative judgments about the actions of the Spaniards: abuse of indigenous peoples, greed and imposition of religion.

The most frequent negative judgments pertain to the "abuse of indigenous peoples" by the conquerors:

> The conquerors subjected the indigenous people to brutal violence. They forced them to convert to Christianity, took away their lands and natural resources, and even traded them as slaves. (*La Vanguardia*)

> Christopher Columbus arrived in America seeking the riches of the East Indies and ended up causing one of the greatest massacres in history. (*La Vanguardia*)

To a lesser extent, there are negative judgments that emphasise the "Greed" of the Spaniards for gold and economic resources and the "religious imposition" on the native inhabitants:

> When the conqueror Andrés Barrientos entered the thick jungles of Central America in search of the desired gold—the obsession of the Spaniards for this metal went beyond what was imaginable—his small expedition was surrounded by hundreds of indigenous people. (*El País*)

> The children were given to the friars for their education, while 60 girls fed the nunneries of Mexico City, and they never saw their families again. (*Abc*)

Table 3 shows the frequency for each category of negative judgments about the nation's actions in each newspaper.

Table 3

Frequencies for negative judgments about the nation

	Abc	El Mundo	El País	La Vanguardia	Total
	n	*n*	*n*	*n*	
Abuse of indigenous peoples	24	60	50	42	176
Greed	3	6	10	5	24
Total	31	73	68	54	226

Source: self-elaboration.

There was no statistically significant difference in the frequency of negative judgments between newspapers as determined by one-way ANOVA (F (3,196) = 2.071, p = .105).

It was relevant to compare the differences between negative and positive judgments about the nation made by each newspaper. *Abc* displayed statistically significantly more positive than negative judgments (t (49) = 5.458, p < .01). In contrast, the articles published by *El País* contained statistically significantly more negative than positive judgments (t (49) = -2.356, p = .023). For *El Mundo*, there was no statistically significant

ISSNe: 2386-8864
DOI: 10.6018/pantarei/648361

difference between the number of positive and negative judgments (t (49) = *1.615*, p = .113), nor for *La Vanguardia* (t (49) = -.114, p = .910).

c. Exonerating the nation

An important aspect in the analysis of the articles was to examine the existence of exoneration strategies and moral justifications for the harmful actions carried out by the nation.

From an in-depth reading of the articles, five categories emerged that reflected these strategies: Black Legend, denial of crimes, advantageous comparisons, displacement of responsibility and moral justification.

The most frequent defence of the nation's actions revolves around the construction of the so-called "Black Legend". The idea of the Black Legend is based on the idea that it was the rival European powers of Spain who invented and constructed a negative view of Spanish colonisation. Throughout the articles, frequent references to this idea appeared:

> Hiding or falsifying the past of a nation, as is the case with the Hispanic world, is to steal its identity, its soul (...). It is time for the Spaniards and Hispanic states to shed the poisonous ballast of the Black Legend, which has the dubious quality of disunity, and dedicate resources to disseminate the truth of the honourable and great Hispanic Memory, which has the virtue of unity. (*Abc*)

It is also common to find a "Denial of crimes" strategy, stating that there was no genocide or that the death toll is exaggerated.

> Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas uses in his texts numbers of dead Indians that are implausible with the chronicles and the information that he or any of his contemporaries could access. (*Abc*)

> "Columbus never caused a genocide. Neither would his ethics have allowed it... nor is there historical evidence to support it. (…) It has no historical basis. He did not dedicate himself to killing Indians. He was a discoverer, an explorer... (*El Mundo*)

A commonly used strategy to defend the actions of Spaniards is the use of "advantageous comparisons" with those committed by other groups.

> Of course, abuses were committed. However, if we compare our ancestors with others such as the English or the Belgians, we shine in humanitarian matters far above... (*El Mundo*)

> And the Indians? What happened to the Indians under English rule? (…) The numbers cannot be argued: when Spain and England landed in the United States, there was a million Indians. When they left, there were 500,000 remaining, almost all of them in the Spanish areas of the West and almost none in the English areas of the East. (*Abc*)

Finally, other strategies of exoneration that emerged from the inductive analysis of the texts were the "displacement of responsibility", focused primarily on blaming the spread of diseases for the deaths of natives, and "moral justification" of actions for the sake of achieving a greater good.

CC BY

ISSNe: 2386-8864
DOI: 10.6018/pantarei/648361

> It was not the weapons of the Spaniards but the diseases they brought there, such as smallpox or the flu, that decimated the local population (…). America was being devastated not by the conquerors but by something that even they did not know they had brought: smallpox. (*El Mundo*)

> It is undeniable that the conquest had gruesome and bloody episodes. However, what happened next? The answer is three centuries of political stability, peaceful coexistence and economic prosperity in which there was great demographic growth thanks, among other things, to the globalisation of trade. However, that last part does not seem to interest anyone. (*El Mundo*)

Table 4 shows the frequencies of each category regarding the nation's exoneration strategies in each newspaper.

Table 4

Frequencies for exonerating the nation

	Abc	El Mundo	El País	La Vanguardia	Total
	n	*n*	*n*	*n*	
Black Legend	52	36	13	2	103
Denial of crimes	31	20	2	9	62
Advantageous comparisons	20	19	4	0	43
Displacement of responsibility	17	6	0	2	25
Moral justification	0	12	1	0	13
Total	120	93	20	13	246

Source: self-elaboration.

There was a statistically significant difference between newspapers concerning the dimension "exoneration of the nation", as determined by one-way ANOVA (F (3,196) = 5.660, p = .002). A Tukey *post hoc* test revealed that *Abc* published statistically significantly more exoneration strategies than did *El País* (p = .014) and *La Vanguardia* (p = .007) but not compared to *El Mundo* (p = .869). No other statistically significant differences were found between the other newspapers.

d. Judging the other

National narratives focus primarily on constructing a positively biased narrative of the group. However, on many occasions, the image and identity of the group are constructed in contrast to the other. For this reason, the type of judgments that the articles transmitted about the other, specifically about the native inhabitants of the American continent, become relevant.

Through an inductive analysis, two main categories emerged that reflected negative judgments toward Native Americans. The first was "cultural inferiority", which often emphasised aspects that dehumanise the group.

> It is assumed that "Amazonas" and "city" do not belong in the same sentence. We all know that the inhabitants of that region lived in the Stone Age until the

ISSNe: 2386-8864
DOI: 10.6018/pantarei/648361

> whites arrived (…), the same human beings that Fawcett called "savage villains, horrible ape-men with pig's eyes" and whom we can only imagine as cannibals or living in perfect harmony with Mother Nature, but not building cities. (*El Mundo*)

> Let us say, before continuing, that cannibalism was practised to a lesser or greater extent by many American peoples: from the Redskins of Canada to the Patagonians of Argentina, through the Chichimecas of northern Mexico, the Aztecs at the centre, the Mayans of Yucatan, the Tupinambas of Brazil and the Guarani of Paraguay. It could be explained, although it has no excuse, that the colonists and explorers who discovered such horrors were not inclined to be pious toward cannibals but considered them vermin in human form. (*El Mundo*)

Another category that emerged from the analysis of the articles was emphasising "violence and tyranny" as characteristics of native societies.

> The Amerindians were found under totalitarian, tyrannical and theocratic regimes. If no European country had colonised them, the indigenous people of America, of submissive condition, would have suffocated for millennia by successive tyrannical dynasties, of which the terrible Aztecs and Incas were simply the last. (*Abc*)

> As soon as he had landed in Mesoamerica, Cortés understood the political reality of the region: the Aztecs had tyrannised other peoples by demanding high taxes and subjecting them to bloody sacrifices. (*El Mundo*)

Table 5 shows the frequency of these categories in each newspaper.

Table 5

Frequencies for judgments toward indigenous peoples

	Abc	El Mundo	El País	La Vanguardia	Total
	n	*n*	*n*	*n*	
Cultural inferiority	17	37	4	2	60
Violence and tyranny	11	12	1	0	24
Total	28	49	5	2	84

Source: self-elaboration.

There was a statistically significant difference between the newspapers regarding the number of negative judgments about indigenous people as determined by one-way ANOVA (F (3,196) = 6.489, p <.001). *A Tukey post* hoc test indicated that *El Mundo* published a significantly higher number of negative judgments than *El País* (p = .002) and *La Vanguardia* (p = .001). There was no statistically significant difference between the other newspapers.

5. Discussion

An important result of this study is establishing the nation's role as a historical subject of the narrative. National narratives seek to establish a link between the past and the

ISSNe: 2386-8864
DOI: 10.6018/pantarei/648361

present in national terms, and for this, they tend to "nationalise" groups and historical figures before the emergence of the nation (Berger and Lorenz, 2010; Wertsch, 1997). In the four online newspapers analysed, Spain is the omnipresent subject of the narrative, and the label of Spaniards is applied to the main protagonists. Thus, an essentialist and timeless conception of the nation and national identity is transmitted. These conceptions are fundamental to establishing an identity link with the past and significantly impact moral evaluations (Bilali, 2013; López & Márquez, 2021). Modern historiographic approaches that pose the recent and constructed character of national identities and criticise their use to allude to groups from a past before the emergence of nations have an anecdotal presence in the articles (Anderson, 2006; Hobsbawm, 2012; Smith, 1991). This atemporal and static conception of the Spanish nation as a historical subject aligns with other cultural tools that shape collective memory in Spain, such as the 12 October celebrations. 12 October celebrations commemorate the arrival of Christopher Columbus to America and currently is the Spanish National Day, explicitly emphasizing an atemporal link between the current Spanish nation and the so-called Discovery of America.

The results reveal how moral elements play a central role in the transmission of historical narratives. *Abc* and *El Mundo* published significantly more positive views, such as presenting the nation's actions as incredible feats or emphasising the good treatment of indigenous peoples, something that is practically absent in *El País* or *La Vanguardia*. Interestingly, a newspaper associated with the centre-left, such as *El País*, globally displayed a morally negative view of the Discovery and Conquest of America, as negative judgments were dominant in its articles. The opposite was observed for *Abc*, for which positive views predominated. These differences highlight the political uses of the past and the existence of conflicting visions based on political orientation.

The present study showed some interesting connections with the current Spanish political scenario where political parties are reacting in different ways regarding social debates linked to the colonial past of the Spanish Empire. Far-right political party *Vox* and center-right *Popular Party* have supported the role of the Spanish nation during the Conquest of America against demands of forgiveness by former Mexican president Lopez Obrador and Claudia Sheinbaum, current president. In contrast, left-wing political leaders tend to transmit a less complacent view of the Spanish role in the conquest (Minder and Malkin, 2019). *Abc*, a conservative and monarchic newspaper, portrays a glorifying narrative of the Spanish past, often defending the role of the Catholic Monarchs as morally virtuous. The results found in *El País* and *La Vanguardia* are in line with a less complacent view. However, it is worth noting that *La Vanguardia*, although read nationwide, is a newspaper based in Barcelona and focused on Catalonia. Thus, it is important to consider that in the Spanish state, there is not only Spanish nationalism but also other nationalisms, such as Basque and Catalan nationalism. Therefore, it seems reasonable that *La Vanguardia* does not support the traditional Spanish national narrative due to the political conflicts between the Catalan and Spanish governments.

The results from the present study also reveal essential differences regarding exonerating the nation and morally valuing the other. *Abc* and *El Mundo* used arguments more frequently to justify the nation's misdeeds. The strategies were in line with the "Theory of moral disconnection" postulated by the social psychologist Bandura, who proposed that individuals and groups tend to justify acts committed even when they go against their own moral system (2017). These strategies of moral disconnection have been frequently used

to justify actions of war (Aquino et al., 2007). In-group glorification and a negative valuation of the outgroup play a determining role in using these strategies (Castano 2008).

The results show that both *Abc* and *El Mundo* still produce a national narrative with a sturdy moral vision favouring the Spanish nation. These types of approaches that seek to glorify the past of the nation support what Billig (1995) called "banal nationalism" and play an essential role in understanding the past and constructing collective memory (Wertsch, 2008). These two newspapers' moral position supports a nationalistic narrative that traditionally played an important role in formal education (Foster, 2011).

However, *El País* and *La Vanguardia* transmit a different narrative in terms of moral evaluations, even publishing, in the case of *El País*, a greater number of negative than positive judgments about the nation. These newspapers show narratives that are not so complacent with the nation, reflecting a problematic past that should remain open to question and produce diverse moral responses in the citizens who consume it. As mentioned above, a recent study conducted with young Spanish adults also showed that it is common to find conflicting moral emotions such as pride, gratitude, shame and guilt about these events, reflecting the conflictive nature of the existing collective memory in Spain (López & Márquez, 2021).

6. Final Reflection

The present study has important implications for the field of history education and its link to national identity construction. There is an emphasis on studies that analyse the role of national narratives in the formal educational context, both through textbooks analysis and the narratives that the students themselves generate (López, 2020). Still, research on these narratives in informal settings, such as the one carried out in this study, are much scarcer. Students not only consume historical narratives in school but also outside of it. Moreover, the growing use of the internet, social media, and artificial intelligence necessitates taking into account the narratives conveyed by these media, which are subsequently brought into the classroom by students. Recent studies on how Spanish history textbooks display these events have revealed a departure from the Spanish nationalist 'narrative of civilisation' in favour of perspectives that acknowledge the violence exercised by the conquerors (Bermúdez and Argumero, 2018). Other studies indicate that these events are losing space and relevance in textbooks, offering a simplistic view that avoids controversy (Reyes Soto & García Fernández, 2023). However, the present study demonstrates both the persistence of that Spanish nationalist narrative and the emergence of less accommodating moral perspectives depending on the political orientation of the medium.

In line with critical literacy, it is pertinent to introduce classroom activities that encourage reflection on the intentionality of discourses, distinguish facts from opinions, evaluate the reliability of sources, and give voice to silenced perspectives (Santiesteban and González-Monfort, 2019). The inclusion, evaluation, and critical reflection of materials like those analyzed in this study in the classroom can help students think critically about relevant social issues.

The advances promoted from the academic field to develop historical thinking and question national narratives in history education are becoming very influential (Seixas & Morton, 2013; Wineburg, 2001). However, as the present study reveals, national

narratives still have a predominant presence in the informal sphere, transmitting biased moral approaches already discredited in academic environments. More studies focused on the production of national narratives in the informal sphere are needed since people bring these narratives and moral positions to the classroom. This study aims to give visibility to the influence of national narratives produced in informal contexts and better grasp their role in understanding the national past and constructing collective memory.

Acknowledgements and funding

This work has been possible because of the support of the project www.makinghistories.eu from the EU (Marie Curie Staff Exchanges Project 10108606), coordinated by M. Carretero (UAM). The views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

This work has also received the support of the Agencia Estatal de Investigación (Spain), project PID2021-127529OB-I00.

Specific contribution of the authors

César López Rodríguez: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing.

Germán Dorado Cazorla: Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – Review & Editing.

References

Aquino, K., Reed, A. II, Thau, S., & Freeman, D. (2007). A grotesque and dark beauty: How moral identity and mechanisms of moral disengagement influence cognitive and emotional reactions to war. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 43*(3), 385–392. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2006.05.013

Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (2nd ed.). Verso.

Balibar, E. (1991). The nation form: History and ideology. In I. Wallerstein & E. Balibar (Eds.), *Race, nation, class: Ambiguous identities* (pp. 329–361). Verso.

Bandura, A. (2017). Mechanisms of moral disengagement. In G. Cromer (Ed.), *Insurgent terrorism* (pp. 85–115). Routledge.

Barton, K. C., & Levstik, L. S. (2004). *Teaching history for the common good*. Routledge.

Berelson, B. (1952). *Content analysis in communication research*. Free Press.

Berger, S., & Lorenz, C. (2010). *Nationalizing the past*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Berger, S., Eriksonas, L., & Mycock, A. (2008). *Narrating the nation: Representations in history, media and the arts*. Berghahn Books.

Bermúdez, A., & Argumero, D. (2018). The narrative framing of violence in teaching resources about the Spanish conquest of America. *Panta Rei. Revista Digital de*

Historia y Didáctica de la Historia, 12, 93-118. https://doi.org/10.6018/pantarei/2018/5

Bilali, R. (2013). National narrative and social psychological influences in Turks' denial of the mass killings of Armenians as genocide. *Journal of Social Issues, 69*(1), 16–33. https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12001

Billig, M. (1995). *Banal nationalism*. Sage.

Brockmeier, J. (2002). Remembering and forgetting: Narrative as cultural memory. *Culture & Psychology*, *8*(1), 15-43. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X0281002

Carretero, M. (2011). *Constructing patriotism: Teaching of history and memories in global worlds*. Information Age Publishing.

Carretero, M., & Bermúdez, A. (2012). Constructing histories. In J. Valsiner (Ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Culture and Psychology* (pp. 625–648). Oxford University Press.

Castaño, E. (2008). On the perils of glorifying the in-group: Intergroup violence, in-group glorification, and moral disengagement. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 2*(1), 154–170. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2007.00040.x

Connor, W. (2004). The timelessness of nations. *Nations and Nationalism, 10*, 35–47.

de Prada, J. M. (2019, March 30). Odio teleológico [Teleological hatred]. *ABC*. https://www.abc.es/opinion/abci-odio-teologico-201903300006_noticia.html

Elliott, J. H. (2002). *Imperial Spain 1469-1716*. Penguin UK.

Fernández, A. (2018, October 10). Los imperios perdidos de Sudamérica [The lost empires of South America]. *La Vanguardia*. https://www.lavanguardia.com/vida/junior-report/20181010/452270650964/civilizaciones-precolombinas-imperio-azteca-inca-maya.html

Foster, S. J. (2011). Dominant traditions in international textbook research and revision. *Education Inquiry, 2*(1), 5–20. https://doi.org/10.3402/edui.v2i1.21959

Halbwachs, M. (2020). *On collective memory*. University of Chicago Press.

Hobsbawm, E. (2012). *Nations and nationalism since 1780: Programme, myth, reality*. Cambridge University Press.

László, J. (2013). *Historical tales and national identity*. Routledge.

López, C. (2020). Las narrativas nacionales en la enseñanza y el aprendizaje de la historia: Una revisión sobre los libros de texto y las narrativas de los estudiantes. *Panta Rei. Revista digital de Historia y Didáctica de la Historia*, *14*(2), 149–166. https://doi.org/10.6018/pantarei.445731

López, C., Carretero, M., & Rodriguez-Moneo, M. (2015). Conquest or Reconquest? Students' Conceptions of Nation Embedded in a Historical Narrative. *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, *24*(2), 252–285. https://doi.org/10.1080/10508406.2014.919863

López, C., & Márquez, M. G. (2021). Proud but ashamed: narratives and moral emotions about the troubled national past in Spain. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, *27*(2), 200–215. https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2020.1781680

Lowenthal, D. (1998). *The heritage crusade and the spoils of history*. Cambridge University Press.

Macintyre, S., & Clark, A. (2013). *The history wars*. Melbourne University Publishing.

Minder, R., & Malkin, E. (2019, March 27). Mexican call for conquest apology ruffles feathers in Spain. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/27/world/americas/mexico-spain-apology.html

Osorio, L. F. (2020). Los mitos latinoamericanos: Vigencia de la obra del Buen Salvaje al Buen Revolucionario. *Telos, 22*(2), 310–324. https://doi.org/10.36390/telos222.05

Renan, E. (2013). What is a nation? In H. K. Bhabha (Ed.), *Nation and narration* (pp. 8–22). Routledge.

Reyes Soto, R., & García Fernández, G. A. (2023). Enseñanza de la conquista española en América en los libros de texto de historia: dos estudios de caso en Perú y España (2019-2020). *Revista hispanoamericana de Historia de las Ideas*, *57*, 1–16.

Ricoeur, P. (1991). Narrative identity. *Philosophy Today*, *35*(1), 73. https://doi.org/10.5840/philtoday199135136

Roediger III, H. L., & Wertsch, J. V. (2022). *National memories: Constructing identity in populist times*. Oxford University Press.

Romero-Frías, E., & Vaughan, L. (2012). Exploring the relationships between media and political parties through web hyperlink analysis: The case of Spain. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology, 63*(5), 967–976. https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.22625

Sánchez, R., Arias, L., & Egea, A. (2016). The perduration of master narratives: The discovery, conquest and colonization of America in the Spanish history textbooks. *International Journal of Historical Learning, Teaching and Research, 13*(2), 127–137. https://doi.org/10.18546/herj.13.2.13

Santisteban, A., & González-Monfort, N. (2019). Enseñar a interpretar problemas y conflictos contemporáneos: los marcos teóricos para investigar e innovar. *Quin professorat, quina ciutadania, quin futur?*, 91–103.

Seixas, P., & Morton, T. (2013). *The Big Six: Historical Thinking Concepts*. Nelson Education

Smith, A. D. (1991). *National identity*. Penguin.

Valls, R. (2013). Iberoamérica en la enseñanza española de la historia. *Práxis Educativa (Brasil), 8*(2), 351–374. https://doi.org/10.5212/praxeduc.v.8i2.0001

van Alphen, F., & Wagoner, B. (2021). Reconstructing the 'Reconquista': Students' negotiation of a Spanish master narrative. *Memory Studies*, *16*(5), 1156-1172. https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980211033325

VanSledright, B. (2008). Narratives of nation-state, historical knowledge, and school history education. *Review of Research in Education, 32*(1), 109–146. https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732x07311065

Wertsch, J. V. (1997). Consuming nationalism. *Culture and Psychology, 3*, 461–471. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X9734002

Wertsch, J. V. (2008). The narrative organization of collective memory. *Ethos, 36*, 120–135. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1352.2008.00007.x

Wertsch, J. V. (2021). *How nations remember: A narrative approach*. Oxford University Press.

Wineburg, S. (2001). *Historical thinking and other unnatural acts*. Temple University Press.

Yadgar, Y. (2002). From the particularistic to the universalistic: National narratives in Israel's mainstream press, 1967–97. *Nations and Nationalism, 8*(1), 55–72. https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8219.00038

ISSNe: 2386-8864
DOI: 10.6018/pantarei/648361

Appendix

Nominal categorisation performed for the analysed dimensions

Table A1

Categorisation of the historical subject

Category	Description of the category
National historical subject	The terms 'Spain' or 'Spaniards' are used to refer to the protagonists.
Nonnational historical subject	Terms such as Castile, Aragon or other medieval and modern kingdoms are used to refer to the protagonists.

Table A2

Categorisation of positive judgments about the nation

Category	Description of the category
Great feat	The actions or events carried out by the Spanish are described as feats or great achievements.
Good treatment of the natives	The Spanish protagonists or their rulers and laws protect and care for the interests of indigenous peoples.
Positive personal traits	Positive characteristics are applied to Spaniards, such as bravery, determination, intelligence and courage.
Civilising zeal	The actions of the Spanish have made cultural, historical, scientific or religious contributions to the American continent.
Promote miscegenation	The Spaniards promoted cultural union and miscegenation with indigenous peoples.

Table A3

Categorisation of negative judgments about the nation

Category	Description of the category
Abuse of indigenous peoples	Actions by Spaniards such as deception, rape, assassinations, enslavement or looting of indigenous peoples are mentioned.
Greed	The greed of the Spanish for gold, spices or other treasures is noted.
Religious imposition	Spanish actions linked to the evangelisation and forced conversion of indigenous populations are noted.

CC BY

ISSNe: 2386-8864
DOI: 10.6018/pantarei/648361

Table A4

Categorisation of the nation's exoneration strategies

Category	Description of the category
Black Legend	The negative views of Spanish actions were constructed, invented or disseminated by rival foreign powers. The existence of a black legend is mentioned.
Denial of crimes	It is argued that the Spanish were not violent or murderers, that there was no genocide or that the number of victims was exaggerated.
Advantageous comparisons	The actions of the Spaniards are compared with others of greater severity committed by other countries or groups to conclude that the behaviour by Spain was much better.
Displacement of responsibility	The focus of responsibility for the large number of victims among indigenous peoples is on the spread of contagious diseases rather than on intentional deaths.
Moral justification	Spaniards' misdeeds are justified as actions to achieve a greater good, such as ending the inhumane actions committed by the indigenous peoples, civilising them, evangelising them or freeing them from their oppressive leaders.

Table A5

Categorisation of judgments toward indigenous peoples

Category	Description of the category
Cultural inferiority	Practices such as cannibalism, religious sacrifices or technological inferiority are emphasised.
Violence and tyranny	Indigenous peoples are described as violent or their rulers as tyrannical and oppressive.

CC BY