

## Manuscript Title:

Elections Versus Crimes: Which Topics Are More Effective Burglar Alarms in Online News Sites?

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### Abstract

The notion of “media frenzies” (Zaller, 2003) has been signaled as key to the burglar alarm standard for news. However, there is little empirical research about the factors that shape the public’s uptake of media frenzies. This paper examines the divergent public’s uptake of media frenzies related to two events that took place in Argentina between October 2015 and January 2016: the 2015 presidential elections and the prison escape of three felons convicted for crimes linked to drug trafficking and the political establishment. The analysis reveals that while the presidential election and its immediate aftermath captured the attention of the public to a high degree, the prison escape did not achieve a comparable effect. We draw upon these findings to elaborate on some key factors driving the public’s uptake of media frenzies, and to reflect on broader issues concerning the dynamics of attention in an age of information abundance.

Keywords: online journalism; political communication; content analysis; media frenzies; monitorial citizenship

In his monumental treatise “The Good Citizen,” Schudson (1998) showed that notions of citizenship have evolved in conjunction with broader historic changes in society and argued that an ideal typical “monitorial citizen” can best characterize prevalent practices in contemporary culture. To him, “the obligation of citizens to know enough to participate intelligently in governmental affairs [can] be understood as a monitorial obligation. Citizens can be monitorial rather than informed” (p. 310). By this, Schudson means that citizens need not be fully informed of all public affairs matters all the time, but that they can “scan—rather than read—the informational environment in a way so that they may be alerted on a very wide variety of issues for a very wide variety of ends and may be mobilized around those issues in a large variety of ways” (p. 310).

Building upon Schudson’s work, Zaller (2003) proposed that the news requirements of such model of citizenship are best served by a media system that sounds “burglar alarms” when a major public affairs issue occurs, but does not saturate the citizenry with information about the polity during normal times. According to him:

The idea is to call attention to matters requiring urgent attention, and to do so in excited and noisy tones. News would penetrate every corner of public space so few could miss it. Alarms would go off at irregular intervals rather than continuously—and not too often. This standard would motivate news that would catch the attention of the Monitorial Citizen, providing subsidized information that would facilitate opinion formation and making politics engaging rather than boring (2003, p. 122).

Zaller suggests that news organizations should generate “media frenzies” to maximize the civic potential of burglar alarms because “an intense, dramatic story that keeps up a ‘critical mass’ over one or several news cycles in all information media... breaks through the fog of

disjointed news and engages the attention of the Monitorial Citizen” (2003, p 121). But since not all media frenzies can be equally effective, the question that arises is which ones capture the attention of monitorial citizens better than others. In this paper we move from the normative to the empirical by answering this question through an analysis of the divergent audience reception of the media frenzies related to two major public affairs stories that took place in Argentina between October 2015 and January 2016. The first one centered on the final stages of the 2015 presidential elections. The second revolved around the prison escape of three felons serving a life sentence for crimes linked to drug trafficking and with alleged connections to the highest spheres of the political establishment. A quantitative content analysis of both the news agenda and the most popular stories in seven leading news sites in the country reveals that while the presidential election and its immediate aftermath captured the attention of the public to a high degree, the prison escape did not achieve a comparable effect. We draw upon these findings to offer a theoretical contribution about the factors driving the public’s uptake of burglar alarms on various topics, and to reflect on the larger issues concerning the dynamics of attention in an age of information abundance.

### Context

The four-month period ranging from October 2015 to January 2016 was one of the most politically intense in recent Argentine history. Two events marked this period. The first one was the tail end of a heated presidential campaign that included the closest presidential result in the first round of voting in the nation’s history—less than three percentage points separated the two top contenders (The Data Team, 2015)—which then led to a run-off, also a first in the country’s history, in November 2015. Second, just a month after the run-off, there was a spectacular prison escape of three convicted felons who had been incarcerated for a crime with alleged links to

cross-border drug trafficking and the highest spheres of government. The remainder of this section describes the main elements of each event.

### The 2015 Presidential Election

After twelve years in office, Frente para la Victoria (Front for Victory), a left-wing, Peronist-infused party faced a major electoral test in fall 2015. The three previous terms had seen one member of the same couple in office: Néstor Kirchner was president between 2003 and 2007, when his wife Cristina Fernández succeeded him and was re-elected in 2011 (Jones, 2015a). The first round of voting took place on October 25, 2015. The candidate from the incumbent party, Daniel Scioli—then governor of the province of Buenos Aires, the largest one in the country—had been seen as the front runner. In the weeks prior to the election there was a widespread belief among pollsters that he had a chance to win the contest in the first round (Miroff, 2015; Gallas, 2015). In order to achieve this goal, a candidate needed either to receive at least 45% of the popular vote or have at least a 10-point margin over the closest contender. Among the other five candidates running for office, Mauricio Macri, a center-right politician who had been mayor of the City of Buenos Aires since 2007 and was the leader of the coalition Cambiemos (Let's Change), was seen as the only one capable to defeating Daniel Scioli (Miroff, 2015).

Three weeks before the first round of voting the electorate had the opportunity to watch the first debate among presidential candidates in the nation's history. All candidates with the exception of Daniel Scioli attended. Three weeks later, the first round of voting yielded a surprising result: Daniel Scioli barely edged Mauricio Macri, with 37.08% versus 34.15% of the popular vote. This allowed Mauricio Macri to force a runoff, scheduled for November 22 (Shoichet, 2015; Cantú & Saiegh, 2015).

The existence of a second round of voting led to another presidential debate. This time Daniel Scioli did participate. His performance was far from convincing, raising further questions about his chances of prevailing during the runoff (La Nación, 2015). Given that most pollsters had missed the mark in their predictions for the first round of voting (Watts & Goñi, 2015), and the overall uncertainty since the country had not seen a presidential runoff before, there was a lot of expectation and uncertainty regarding the vote on November 22. Mauricio Macri won the presidency with 51.34% of the votes (Shoichet, 2015). It was the first time since 1946 that someone outside of the two main historical parties, Peronism and Radicalism, had won a presidential election (Lupu, 2016). Also, it was the first time since 1987 that the city of Buenos Aires, the province of Buenos Aires, and the nation were to be governed by the same political party and that party that was not of a Peronist orientation.

Mauricio Macri took office shortly after the runoff, on December 10, 2015. Less than a month in office his administration was shaken by the news of the breakout of three high-profile convicts that had been sentenced to life prison for killing three businessmen in a drug trafficking plot with alleged political connections. This story, which immediately captured the attention of the media, dated back to 2008.

#### The “Triple Flight”

On August 7, 2008, two pharmaceutical businessmen and a publicist from Argentina were declared missing. Six days later their bodies were found dead with their hands and feet tied. They had been shot after being drugged, their bodies had signs of recent tortures, and one of them had an ear cut off (Carabajal, 2008). The investigation revealed that one of the businessmen killed, Sebastián Forza, had ties to Colombian and Mexican drug cartels. He had also provided significant funding to the campaign of Cristina Fernández, who was president at the time of the

murder (Castro, 2008). After months of investigation, which also involved the suicide of another pharmaceutical businessman and the death of a key witness who was run over by train, four men were arrested (La Nación, 2015, Carabajal, 2009). They were the Lanattas and the Schilaccis, two pairs of brothers. They were sentenced to life in prison in December 2012.

In August 2015, one week before the primary elections, Martín Lanatta was interviewed from prison by a very popular investigative journalism television show openly opposed to the Cristina Fernández administration. During the interview he accused a key political player in the government, Aníbal Fernández—no familial relation to the president—back then chief of staff of the president and candidate for governor of the province of Buenos Aires, to have been the mastermind behind the 2008 murders (Gilbert, 2015; Prengaman, 2016; Goñi, 2016). This shocked public opinion. According to different testimonies that appeared in this show, Aníbal Fernández was allegedly involved in drug trafficking. Aníbal Fernandez fired back, accusing the network of airing this show to ruin his candidacy (The Guardian, 2016; Otaola & Lough; 2016; Goñi, 2015). To the surprise of many, he ended up losing the provincial election against a much lesser known politician from the Cambiemos party during the first round of voting on October 25. This also meant that Cambiemos unseated twenty-eight years of Peronist administrations in the largest province in the country. Journalists and commentators speculated that the accusations against Anibal Fernandez might have contributed towards his lost in the election (Jones, 2015b; BBC, 2016).

Right after Christmas, on December 27, Victor Schillaci and brothers Cristian and Martín Lanatta escaped from a high-security prison located in the province of Buenos Aires. They used a fake gun, hijacked the car of one of the prison guards, and took another guard as hostage (BBC News, 2015). The recently elected governor of the Buenos Aires province sacked the main

authorities of the prison system and said that the escape had been possible only by their complicity (Gilbert, 2015; BBC News, 2015). The flight and the hunt for the fugitives became an unfolding event that captured the attention of the news media in Argentina. With elements of the best Hollywood blockbusters, the fugitives took additional hostages, shot two police officers—an event that was captured on a security camera and showed repeatedly on television stations all over the country—rolled over one of the cars they had stolen, broke into houses and, all in all, triggered an operation that involved the participation of hundreds of law enforcement officials (Gilbert, 2015; Grattan, 2016; BBC News, 2016). Live video of this persecution, at the end through swaths of countryside, was sometimes even shown on national television (Fox News, 2016; The Guardian, 2016).

The massive search appeared to have gotten to an end when on January 9, 2016, president Mauricio Macri celebrated on his Twitter account that the fugitives had been captured. Embarrassingly, hours later the administration had to admit that actually two of them remained at large (Otaola & Lough, 2016). Finally, two days later these two fugitives were finally captured.

#### Theoretical Considerations

Schudson's (1998) account of the transformation in the practices of citizenship in America showed that the information-based model that emerged during the Progressive era is not a given but a historical construct bound to change in relation to broader cultural transformations. Taking inspiration from Lippmann's work, Schudson argued that "if democracy requires omniscience and omniscience from its citizens, it is a lost cause. There must be some distribution across people and across issues of the cognitive demands of self-government" (1998, p. 310). To make sense of how this distribution of cognition plays out in contemporary society, he coined the notion of "monitorial citizenship" as a "modification of the information-based

model and [one that] should co-exist with models of citizen engagement based on trust, party, and rights” (Schudson, 2000, p. 16). In essence, the monitorial citizen is not paying attention to matters of the polity all the time, but is alert and does it during major events, therefore he or she “engage[s] in environmental surveillance more than information-gathering... [and] is an absentee citizen but watchful, even while he or she is doing something else” (Schudson, 1998, p. 311).

The notion of monitorial citizenship has been highly influential across the fields of communication studies and political science (Amna & Ekman, 2014; Graber, 2004; Hustinx, Meijs, Handy & Cnaan, 2012; Hooghe, Osen & Marien, 2016; Kobayashi & Inamasu, 2015).

Perhaps one of the most generative uptakes of the monitorial citizenship idea has been in the “burglar alarm” standard of news provision developed by Zaller (2003). This normative standard stems from the view that “the challenge for communication scholars is to... face up to... differences in audience demand for news and to design news standards and styles that, to the extent possible, reconcile them with the informational needs of citizenship” (Zaller, 2003, p. 128). Thus, “what the Burglar Alarm standard does address is how much public affairs information the traditional mass news media... should carry and how they should present this information” (Zaller, 2003, p. 110). Zaller draws inspiration from both Schudson’s notion of monitorial citizenship and also from McCubbins and Schwartz’s (1984) account of congressional dynamics: “instead of sniffing for fires, Congress places fire-alarm boxes on street corners, builds neighborhood fire houses, and sometimes dispatches its own hook-and-ladder in response to an alarm” (p. 166). The basic idea is that, like Congress, the media should not constantly report large amounts of public affairs news—the parallel of “sniffing for fires”—but should massively cover this type of content irregularly, infrequently, and strategically. To this end, “journalists should routinely seek to cover non-emergency but important issues by means of

coverage that is intensely focused, dramatic, and entertaining and that affords the parties and responsible interest groups... ample opportunity for expression of opposing views” (p. 122). Despite criticisms—most notably by Bennett (2003)—the standard has been popular among academics who study media and politics (Baek & Wojcieszak, 2009; Jebril, Albæk & Vreese, 2013; Ladd, 2010; Parkin, 2010; Lyons, Jaeger & Wolak, 2013; Nguyen, 2012).

Zaller specifies several criteria for his standard. Two of them are of particular relevance for present purposes. The first one has to do with the notion of “media frenzies” and was briefly mentioned in the introduction. This is the notion that in order to capture the attention of the public in the most effective way, when the media want to sound a burglar alarm on a particular topic they have to do it in a loud and repetitive way. This could lead to even saturating the public with information about that topic, because “when the level of saturation is high... citizens should have a greater prospect of encountering and absorbing the information than when the dissemination of information remains restricted to a narrow selection of sources” (Elenbaas, de Vreese, Schuck & Boomgaarden, 2014, p. 484). The second criterion is “commercial viability,” which underscores that Zaller intended his normative standard to become consistent with goals of economic sustainability in a competitive industrial context:

Given existing institutional and cultural constraints, news media must be willing to produce and citizens must be willing to consume the indicated kind of news... The Burglar Alarm standard is intended to provide a workable and yet normatively defensible standard for popular news—as opposed to elite news—as it remakes itself to meet this competition (2003, p. 127).

In light of this second criterion, it is imperative not only for epistemic but also for economic reasons to understand which burglar alarms and media frenzies capture the attention of

the public better than others. One attempt in this direction is found in the work of the authors (2013) on the gap between the stories that editors of news sites consider most newsworthy and those that the audience of their respective sites find most appealing. On the basis of over 50,000 observations gathered on news sites in Europe and the Americas, they argue that during periods of routine political activity “whereas journalists exhibit a strong preference for public-affairs news in the articles they consider most newsworthy, consumers lean towards non-public-affairs subjects in the stories they click most often” (2013, pp. 16-17). This conclusion is consistent with findings from a number of recent studies (Jarvis & Stephens, 2015; Jian & Usher, 2013; Lee, Lewis & Powers, 2014; Lee, de Swert & Cohen, 2015; Tenenboim-Weinblatt & Neiger, 2015; Zamith, 2015). Since periods of routine political activity constitute the majority of daily life in any society that is not going through a major crisis, and they are also the periods with much less frequent need for burglar alarms, the existence of this gap allows the analyst to establish the baseline condition from which to assess the efficacy of burglar alarms when they are indeed sounded through media frenzies. Therefore,

Hypothesis 1: During periods of routine political activity there will be a gap between the proportion of public affairs reportage that the media consider to be most newsworthy and that which the audience will click on most often.

The authors (2013) have shown the existence of significant changes between periods of routine political activity and those marked by a great intensification of that kind of activity such as political elections or national crises. These changes result mostly from alterations in audience activity than in media coverage. Consistent with the burglar alarm standard, the media increase the supply of public affairs news during a period of heightened political activity. However, those changes are smaller in proportion than the increase in the nature of audience demand for this

kind of news, which suggests the efficacy of these burglar alarms in capturing the audience attention. The rationale for the change in audience behavior is a combination of a sense of civic duty—the moral imperative of remaining informed about matters of the polity during a pivotal period of social life; cultural currency—the desire to stay abreast of current events that are central to everyday life interactions during a period of this kind; and self-preservation—learning information that is potentially helpful to navigating possible changes in the social landscape. This, in turn, leads to a significant decrease in the gap between the most newsworthy and most popular stories: “at least for online news, audiences behave as ‘monitorial citizens’, increasing the percentage of public-affairs topics in their news diets during periods of heightened political activity” (Authors, 2013, p. 85). For present purposes, this suggests that if news organizations sound burglar alarms on public affairs matters in relation to an electoral campaign such as the one that took place during the 2015 presidential election in Argentina, it is reasonable to think that audiences will pay attention to the resulting media frenzies much more than during ordinary political times. Therefore,

Hypothesis 2. During a period of heightened political activity news organizations will produce media frenzies around public affairs topics and the audience will pay significant attention to them to the extent that the gap between the most newsworthy and the most clicked news will decrease in comparison to that characterizing periods of routine political activity.

But what is to be expected in terms of audience behavior when it comes to the media frenzy surrounding a developing news story like that of the triple flight? A media frenzy around a story of this kind should in theory also capture the attention of the audience because it combines elements of crime news with Hollywood overtones, and sordid elements of political

scandal which were linked to recent electoral outcomes. According to Shoemaker and Cohen (2012), articles high in deviance and public significance, such as the prison break of three convicted murders tend to attract audiences' interest throughout the world. Research on local news in the United States also suggests that crime and law and order stories are attractive to audiences (Lowry, et al., 2003). Therefore,

Hypothesis 3. During a period surrounding a major, developing story that combines highly appealing elements of crime news with sensationalized politics news organizations will produce media frenzies and the audience will pay significant attention to this story to the extent that the gap between the most newsworthy and the most clicked news will decrease in comparison to that characterizing periods of routine political activity.

The unique set of events that took place in Argentina between October 2015 and January 2016—a high-stakes presidential election with an uncertain winner, and a high-profile prison break with ties to the former incumbent party—allows this paper to examine the audience uptake of these two different types of media frenzies.

### Methods

We conducted a quantitative content analysis on news stories published by the following seven sites in Argentina: *Clarín*, *La Nación*, *Perfil*, *Infobae*, *TN*, *La Voz del Interior* and *Diario Uno*.<sup>i</sup> We gathered data during forty-seven days over a seven-month period, from September 2015 until March 2016.<sup>ii</sup> On each data collection day, a research assistant retrieved data from all five sites at 6:00 p.m. local (Argentina) time. Simultaneous data collection was chosen to compare cross-site coverage of similar events at a single point in time. For each data collection day, we identified the top stories selected by journalists and consumers, respectively. The former consist of each homepage's first ten stories (hereafter, "homepage") counting from left to right

and from the top down in a grid-like manner. These stories are usually contained in the first screen of a homepage—akin to the above the fold stories in newspapers’ front pages—and are a proxy for journalists’ selection of the most newsworthy stories of the day. The latter are the top 5 or 10 stories in the “most read list” (hereafter, “most read”) made publicly available by each of these sites. Online stories were defined as text-based packages that included a headline; a story might, but need not, have multi-media features or links to related stories. In total, 5,607 articles were examined (3,251 from the homepage and 2,356 from the most read list).<sup>iii</sup>

The unit of analysis was the story. Four variables were coded: news choice, story content, campaign, and triple flight. Variable and category definitions are as follows:

1. News choice. There are two categories:

(a) Homepage: the top ten stories that appeared on the homepage of each site.

(b) Most read: the top stories included in the “most read” / “most popular” / “most viewed” lists made publicly available on each site.

2. Story content—the main topic addressed in the story. There are two categories:

(a) Public affairs stories, dealing with news about politics, government, economics, business, and international affairs. This category includes stories about the activity of government, elected officials, and political candidates; the economy and business developments; and events, happening in other countries, about the state or international organizations.

(b) Non–public affairs stories, addressing subjects such as sports, crime, entertainment, technology, and weather. This category includes stories about sports; criminal activity; entertainment; cultural, medical, scientific, and technological matters; and weather.

3. Campaign. There are two categories:

(a) Campaign articles (stories, opinion pieces, etc., about the presidential campaign).

(b) Articles that are not about the campaign (all the others).

4) Triple flight. There are two categories

(a) Stories about the prison flight (stories, opinion pieces, etc., about the prison break).

(b) Articles that are not about the prison break (all the others).

A team of seven trained research assistants collected and coded the stories manually.<sup>iv</sup>

Doubts that arose were subsequently resolved consensually through consultation between the research assistants and the authors.

### Findings

The period from September 2015 to March 2016 provides a unique window to observe the uptake of media frenzies. An analysis of the percentage of public affairs news on the homepage and on the most read lists of the seven sites shows that there was a sizable and significant gap between the supply of public affairs news the media and the interest of the audience in this kind of content. It was 14 percentage points on average across these sites during this seven-month period (Table 1). On average, the top-placed news on the homepages featured almost two thirds of public affairs coverage, compared to half of the most popular stories.<sup>v</sup> Despite some differences across the sites, the evolution of the percentage of public affairs stories on the homepages follows similar patterns, with coverage of public affairs news on the top portion of the homepage peaking in November in all sites—which is why data are reported in the aggregate across sites with mentions of some differences in the endnotes. Although audiences' preferences were more variable than the news on the homepages of the respective sites, on all sites except one<sup>vi</sup> there was a peak in the percentage of public affairs stories on the most read list, either in November or December.

--Insert Table 1 here--

During the three months of relatively normal levels of political activity—September 2015, and February and March 2016—there was a combined average news gap of 19 percentage points—with monthly figures of 22, 12 and 23 percentage points, respectively (Table 2). Thus, H1 is largely supported: during times of routine political activity—in this case before the campaign in September 2015, and after the election, the presidential inauguration and the triple flight, in February and March 2016—there was a gap between the proportion of public affairs reportage that the media featured most prominently, and that which the audience clicked on most often. These results also serve as the baseline against which to compare the uptake of the media frenzies surrounding the election and the inauguration on the one hand, and the triple flight on the other hand.

--Insert Table 2 here--

The interest of the audience in public affairs news grew systematically during the last quarter of 2015. Using September as the baseline, it grew 15 percentage points in October—the month of the first round of the presidential election; another 21 percentage points in November—the month of the presidential election run-off; and remained very high by decreasing only 2 percentage points in December—the month of the presidential inauguration, in which the new cabinet was announced and the president made his first speech to Congress. The prevalence of public affairs news in the most read list more than doubled from September, when it was at 32%, to December, when it was at 66%. The provision of this kind of news in the homepage list also increased during this quarter, but in a much lower proportion. This explains an overall decrease in the news gap from 22 percentage points in September, to 10 points in October and 9 points in November, and its disappearance in December.<sup>vii</sup> The critical factor in this turn of events was interest in stories about the presidential election campaign. In October, the percentage of

campaign stories among the top-placed articles on the homepage was 32%, while on the most read list, 25% of the articles were about the election (Table 3). The 7-point difference is statistically significant. While the October round of the election featured several candidates, and had a likely winner, after the upset in election returns, the outcome of election run-off to take place the following month appeared much less certain for any of the two contestants. In November, the news gap in campaign articles was shy of two percentage points, and no longer significant: 60% of stories on the top portion of the homepages were about the election, compared to 58% on the most read lists. The fact that six out of ten stories on both the homepage and the most read lists were about the campaign clearly showed both the presence of a media frenzy and its effectiveness in capturing the public's attention. Thus, H2 is also supported: a media frenzy around a close election for important offices is effective in drawing audiences' attention.<sup>viii</sup>

--Insert Table 3--

But not all media frenzies appear to be equally effective in capturing the public's attention, as we found out through an examination of the news gap during the triple flight. An analysis of the seven sites on five of the seventeen days<sup>ix</sup> that went from the day the convicts escaped—December 27, 2015—to the day after they were captured—January 12, 2016—shows that there was a media frenzy, albeit not as intense as the one surrounding the run-off election: on average, the seven sites examined devoted almost 3 out of 10 of the most prominently displayed stories on the homepage to the developing story of the triple flight. However, on average, articles about this story accounted for only 15% of the most read lists (Table 4).<sup>x</sup> Thus, H3 is not supported. Although the media frenzy about the triple flight story had a combination of elements that a priori was poised to generate significant audience uptake—a violent crime, linkages to

politics, a spectacular prison escape, a country-wide police search that was constantly on television and the web, and a mistaken announcement by the president about the fugitives being captured—most audience members did not make it a major focus of their attention.<sup>xi</sup>

--Insert Table 4 here--

In the discussion section, we will reflect on why a media frenzy about a presidential election might be much more effective in capturing the public's attention than one about a crime and political scandal story.

### Discussion

Research on agenda-setting has shown that a large number of news items on a certain topic or event is more likely to increase awareness and recall than otherwise (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Thus, media frenzies are in principle a suitable vehicle to capture the attention of monitorial citizens, as Zaller (2003) posited. But, as with social phenomena of all kinds, not all media frenzies will be equally effective—and some not effective at all—in becoming the focus of interest among the audience. This paper contributes to begin unpacking the factors that might account for the diverse uptake of media frenzies through an examination of media frenzies surrounding two high profile public affairs events as reported on seven news sites from Argentina.

Our analysis has shown that while the public responded positively to coverage of the run-off election, it failed to make the triple flight a comparably strong focus of its interest. These findings suggest that media frenzies, on their own, are not enough to capture the attention of the citizenry. We propose that the type of uptake of a media frenzy is a function of three intervening variables: the level of political and social significance of the event that is the subject of the media

frenzy; the level of cognitive effort that processing the news coverage poses on the audience; and the dominant affect associated with the event and its coverage.

The first factor is the level of political and social significance of the event or series of events that are subject to the news. Shoemaker and Cohen (2012) define significance in terms of the impact of the content of a news item on the relationship between the people and the government, the exchange of goods and services, the legislation, and institutions and societal well-being. If audiences perceive that an event will not have major consequences for them or their country, they might devote a very high level of attention to them. This is what happens with public affairs news during periods of routine political activity, which in part translates in the existence of the news gap. Of course, a significant event is more likely to begin a media frenzy in the first place. But not all events that are subject of a media frenzy are equally significant from a social and political standpoint. For present purposes, the election of a new president clearly has a high level of political and social significance. However, the case of the triple flight is more mixed by combining political elements that are clearly significant with criminal elements that while sensational and appealing, might not be highly significant to a sizable portion of the public.

The cognitive effort required to process a news item is the second variable that might contribute to explain variance in the uptake of a media frenzy. More than half a century ago Downs (1957) proposed that if the cost of acquiring an item of information outweighs its returns, it is rational to remain ignorant about it. The authors (2013) found that during periods of routine political activity most news consumers are reluctant to engage with content that they perceive as complicated or difficult to understand. For instance, legislative negotiations, economic process, and international matters might have important consequences for the citizenry, but they are

complicated and often require a prior base of knowledge to understand them. In contrast, presidential elections are easy to understand. Although journalists are sometimes criticized for focusing on the horse race (Graber, 2004; Jamieson, 2000) rather than on substantive issues, audiences might find “who is winning, who is losing, and how they are playing the game” (Brewer & Macaffee, 2007, p. 3) less difficult to follow than policy details. Finally, the prison escape featured three convicts implicated in a homicide with complex and obscure ties to politics and campaign financing that were often difficult to understand, and that referred to a complex plot that had started several years before.

The third factor has to do with the dominant affective state associated with the news. Audiences are more likely to pay attention to news content that is linked to a positive emotional pay-off—such as sports, entertainment, or “feel-good” stories—than those tied to negative affect. A sizeable portion of public affairs reportage is centered on problems of the polity or wrongdoing of public officers and elected officials. This generates negative affect among the audience, which contributes to their tuning out of this type of content (Authors, 2013). By contrast, the election of a new president, with the support of more than half of the population, and an inauguration marked by a message of hope, was tied to positive affect for the majority and negative affect for some of the detractors—some citizens who voted against the president might have positively perceived the beginning of a new mandate. Finally, the triple flight was tied to strongly negative feelings due to the combination of a failure in the prison system suspected to be aided by corruption among officers, and links to wrongdoing in the political system.

The combination of these factors contributes to account for the divergent uptake of the two media frenzies examined in this paper (Table 5). Further research should be undertaken to

probe the explanatory power of this combination of factors to account for variance in the uptake of other media frenzies.

--Insert Table 5 here--

These findings have four main implications for the economy of attention in modern polities. First, media frenzies might be necessary to attract the attention of the monitorial citizens as Zaller (2003) proposed, but they are not sufficient. Thus, frenzies might not always work to trigger effective burglar alarms. Second, citizens appear to allocate attention in part according to the significance of events. In the big picture, presidential elections are important, a prison escape is not. Third, this is also influenced by the perceived cognitive effort required to effectively process any news items. Thus, effective burglar alarms should strive to make the issues as easy to understand as possible. Fourth, as rational as ignorance might be, affective states also play a role when the people decide what is news for them. Effective media frenzies about public affairs matters should strive to make the connection between news and positive emotional states as evident as possible.

Audiences living in an age of information abundance, in which they are swamped with news of all kinds, are learning how to navigate their information environment and pay special attention to the content they care the most about. The findings presented in this paper seek to shed light on some factors which are important when making this choice. It will be difficult for a media frenzy to achieve high levels of audience uptake if the subject matter is not important, the cognitive demands required to make sense of the information are too high, or the emotional associations are negative.

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Table 1. Percentage of public affairs articles on the homepage and the most read lists of *Clarín*, *Diario Uno*, *Infobae*, *La Nación*, *La Voz del Interior*, *Perfil*, and *Todo Noticias*, on average by month and in total, from September 2015 to March 2016.

		% Public		
		Total N	Affairs	Sig.
Total	Homepage	3251	64.96%	$\chi^2 = 106.0481$ Pr = 0.000
	Most read	2347	51.26%	Cramer's V = -0.1376
September	Homepage	417	54.20%	$\chi^2 = 36.0522$ Pr = 0.000
	Most Read	311	31.83%	Cramer's V = -0.2225
October	Homepage	557	56.55%	$\chi^2 = 10.9558$ Pr = 0.001
	Most Read	388	46.52%	Cramer's V = -0.1077
November	Homepage	347	77.23%	$\chi^2 = 6.5938$ Pr = 0.010
	Most Read	245	67.76%	Cramer's V = -0.1055
December	Homepage	486	67.08%	$\chi^2 = 0.1468$ Pr = 0.702
	Most Read	351	65.81%	Cramer's V = -0.0132
January	Homepage	484	67.98%	$\chi^2 = 23.1783$ Pr = 0.000
	Most Read	362	51.66%	Cramer's V = -0.1655
February	Homepage	482	58.30%	$\chi^2 = 12.8686$ Pr = 0.000
	Most Read	356	45.79%	Cramer's V = -0.1239
March	Homepage	478	76.68%	$\chi^2 = 46.8423$ Pr = 0.000
	Most Read	334	53.89%	Cramer's V = -0.2402

Table 2. Percentage of public affairs articles on the homepage and the most read lists of *Clarín*, *Diario Uno*, *Infobae*, *La Nación*, *La Voz del Interior*, *Perfil*, and *Todo Noticias*, in September 2015 and February-March 2016

	Total N	% Public Affairs	Sig.
Homepage	1377	63.47%	$\chi^2 = 87.5004$ Pr = 0.000
Most Read	1001	44.16%	Cramer's V = -0.1918

Table 3. Percentage of articles about the presidential election campaign on the homepage and the most read lists of *Clarín*, *Diario Uno*, *Infobae*, *La Nación*, *La Voz del Interior*, *Perfil*, and *Todo Noticias*, on average by month, in October and November 2015

		%			
		Total N	Campaign stories	Sig.	
October	Homepage	557	31.50%	$\chi^2 = 4.8461$ Pr = 0.028 Cramer's V = -0.0716	
	Most Read	388	25.00%		
November	Homepage	347	59.94%	$\chi^2 = 0.1476$ Pr = 0.701 Cramer's V = -0.0158	
	Most Read	245	58.37%		

Table 4. Percentage of articles about the triple flight on the homepage and the most read lists of *Clarín*, *Diario Uno*, *Infobae*, *La Nación*, *La Voz del Interior*, *Perfil*, and *Todo Noticias*, on average, from December 27 2015 to January 12, 2016.

	Total N	% Triple flight	Sig.
Homepage	348	29.02%	$\chi^2 = 16.6170$ Pr = 0.000
Most Read	245	14.69%	Cramer's V = -0.1674

Table 5. Factors that mediate the public's uptake of a media frenzy.

	Level of social and political significance	Level of cognitive demands	Dominant affect associated with the news	Public's uptake of media frenzy
Baseline: news during period of normal political activity	Mixed	High	Negative	N/A
News about the presidential election and its aftermath	High	Low	More positive than negative	Yes
News about the triple flight	Medium	Medium	Negative	No

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> The selection of sites seeks to maximize diversity. Two of them—*Clarín* and *La Nación*—are the online counterparts of two daily newspapers published in the city of Buenos Aires that have the highest circulation nationwide. Their respective average daily circulation is 233,000 and 139,000. *Perfil*, also based in Buenos Aires, is the online version of a print bi-weekly newspaper, with an average circulation of 27,000. *La Voz del Interior* is the online version of the most widely sold newspaper edited outside Buenos Aires, in the city of Córdoba, and has an average daily circulation 30,000. *Diario Uno* is the online version of a newspaper published in the city of Mendoza, in the province of the same name, is part of a large multi-media conglomerate, and has an average daily circulation of 11,000. *Infobae* is the oldest “online only” news site and has long been seen as a top-three online news player nationwide, together with *Clarín* and *La Nación*. *Todo Noticias (TN)* is the online version of the cable news station under the same name, that has the largest cable news audience and is part of the same media conglomerate that also owns *Clarín*. There are no reliable online audience figures. All circulation figures are from January, 2016 (IVC, 2016).

<sup>ii</sup> The sample includes 6 days from September, 8 days from October, 5 from November, 7 from December, 7 from January, 7 from February and 7 from March.

<sup>iii</sup> The difference with the expected number of stories from 7 sites on 47 days (3290) is of 1%. This is due to stories being repeated or human error during data collection. The expected number of stories on the most read lists cannot be calculated because throughout the data collection period sites varied the number of these stories made public.

<sup>iv</sup> Intercoder agreement was assessed on a subset of 19 percent of the data (9 days). It averaged 94% (Cohen Kappa averaged .80)

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<sup>v</sup> The gap was largest on *TN* (28 percentage points), and lowest on *La Nación* (11 percentage points), and it was present in all sites except *Perfil*, where the difference between journalists' and consumers' choices was not statistically significant.

<sup>vi</sup> The exception was *Diario Uno* from Mendoza, where interest in public affairs increased in February due to the possibility of a teachers' strike and in March due to President Barack Obama's visit to Argentina. Detailed figures by site available upon request

<sup>vii</sup> Coverage of public affairs news on the homepages decreased by 10 percentage points in December 2015, which explains the disappearance of the gap to 1 percentage point during that month. In March 2016, coverage of public affairs topics increased again, due to two events: President Macri's delivery of the speech that inaugurates the ordinary sessions of Congress—akin to a State of the Union speech—and the visit of United States president Barack Obama visit to Argentina.

<sup>viii</sup> The gap was largest on *La Nación*, in October: 24 percentage points, and was reversed on *Perfil* both in October and November: 16 and 8 percentage points respectively. Despite these differences, across all sites the same pattern was evident: both coverage of the campaign and audiences' interest in election stories increased from October to November, when there was virtually no difference between the supply and demand of campaign news.

<sup>ix</sup> December 27 and 30, and January 4, 8 and 12

<sup>x</sup> The gap was present on all sites except *Perfil*, and was largest on *Clarín*—31 percentage points.

<sup>xi</sup> A certain degree of fatigue about public affairs news might be related to the relatively low degree of audience interest in stories about the triple flight given the temporal proximity to the presidential election. But this potential fatigue cannot by itself account for the stark drop in interest between the election and the triple flight.