

Manufacturing Politicians: Angela Merkel's Image in the Spanish Press during the German Federal Elections

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Abstract

Spanish public opinion shows, according to sociological surveys, a disaffection towards the Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel. From the influence of the media on current prevailing opinion in society, this article analyzes the opinion pieces published in the Spanish reference press: *El País*, *El Mundo* and *La Vanguardia*. The period surrounding the last three federal elections in the German country is taken as temporal reference point. Through the methodological technique of content analysis applied to these texts, the investigation studies what kind of valuations are transmitted about a woman erected as leader of Europe, who does not have the sympathy of the citizens of so-called peripheral countries. Aspects like the media ideological influence in the image creating process are also analyzed in order to establish whether a distorted image based on a negative-aspects approach has been created or not.

Keywords: Angela Merkel, public opinion, Spanish press, economic crisis

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1. Introduction

Media select and interpret current affairs for citizens, shaping opinions according to certain interests. A persuasion that directs our way of looking at events and restores valuations, attending to a complex studding of interests beyond the informative purposes.

In this process, the influence of opinions expressed in the diaries can be understood as the result of an activity that exceeds the limits of information and approaches own propaganda labours. To this fact, critical studies are required to know why we think in a certain way and how media channel society's views.

This is the main purpose of the present investigation. The subject of enquiry is the image that the Spanish press has offered about Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany during the last three federal elections.

The choice of this politician is motivated by the lack of studies on her media treatment, taking as a starting point the citizenship's opinions about Merkel shown in some surveys conducted by sociological centres. 'Transatlantic Trends', an annual poll of European and American public opinion developed by the 'US German Marshall Fund' and the 'Compagnia di San Paolo', can be quoted as an example. The results report of the twelfth study, carried out in 2013, shows that a large majority in the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden and France approves the European management of the Chancellor (73%, 64%, 59% and 58% respectively), while Spain, Portugal and Italy, the three most affected countries by the economic crisis, express strong rejection (82%, 65% and 58% disapprove it respectively).

On the basis of these premises, the objective of the article is to determine the Spanish press positioning with regard to the German Chancellor, evaluating the possible changes that could exist during the last three federal elections and analyzing aspects like the media ideological influence in the image creating process. The final purpose is to establish whether a distorted image based on a negative-aspects approach has been created or not. From this purpose, we formulate the hypothesis of the research:

H1. The Spanish press has taken a stand against Angela Merkel in their opinion pieces, contributing to forge a negative image of the Chancellor in the society.

H2. From 2008, year of the beginning of the crisis, there has been a quantitative and qualitative progression in opinion pieces devoted to the Chancellor, increasing the total amount and the tendency to highlight negative aspects.

H3. The editorial policy of the studied journals influences and determines the conveyed image of Angela Merkel in the texts.

2. Media influence on public opinion: Angela Merkel and the economic crisis in Spain

The press is a social control instrument, directing its efforts to produce consensus, as it was called by Lippmann (2003) and retaken by Chomsky and Ramonet (2010). It is necessary to keep the citizens in their mere observer's status through a permanent fear and a continuous entertainment. But then comes a time when this is no longer

effective as distraction and it is required to switch to a higher level and disseminate fear of ‘enemies’, creating ‘first-line monsters’. Ours is called Angela Merkel.

Morelli (2001) –basing on Arthur Ponsonby- updated the propagandistic technique involving the identification of the enemy with the devil (2001:53): “The reader and the citizenship need ‘good’ and ‘bad’, clearly identified, and today the simplest is to treat it as *the new Hitler*”.²

In October 2011 Angela Merkel visited Athens. She was received by a demonstration of Greek citizens carrying banners and placards equating her with Hitler, hugging him or wearing the uniform of the *Schutzstaffel* (popularly known under the acronym *SS*). The critics focused on the fact that the austerity measures promoted by Merkel emerged as a reinforcement of German power in Europe, as had happened in the events that had led to World War II. A common association in the country's newspapers, as Kundnani (2013) indicates.

And not only Greece has *hitlerized* her: in early 2013, Cypriot citizens attended to a protest march with Hitler moustaches and Merkel masks, an image that was also seen in November 2012 in Portugal. The Spanish press has also make use of this strategy: the newspaper *El País* published -and later retired- a journalistic opinion column written by the Professor of Applied Economics, Juan López Torres (2013), from the University of Seville. He argued that, like Hitler, Merkel had declared war on the rest of Europe, this time to assure German economic space.

Everyday observations -as the above- are the reason why this article tries to find out the media influence on the creation of Angela Merkel's image. The real Spaniards' knowledge about her does not explain the largely negative position adopted by the population, so media have had to play a crucial role, given that what the average citizen knows about the Chancellor comes mainly from them. Following Ellul (1990), without mass media, there is no modern propaganda.

Domenach (1955) also wrote about the necessity of a *pre-existing substrate* as the basis for the rule of transfusion, connected with mythology and clichés. He also theorized about the importance of simplification. This coincides with the growing personalization of politics marked by Zamora Medina (2009). We all know Angela Merkel and most of the criticism focuses on her, not on the *Christlich Demokratische Union* (CDU) -her party- or Germany.

Spaniards do not know the Chancellor for her political career in Germany, but for being the protagonist of the economic crisis in Spain as *de facto* leader of the European Union. Kuttner (2012) synthesizes the general opinion about this guidance: ‘The German chancellor's remedy of austerity is killing Europe, and the failure to contain financial speculation is spreading the epidemic.’ Nevertheless, the roots of the crisis are far behind.

Since 2007, the Spanish economy presented an inflation that exceeded one point the Euro zone rate. This was complemented by a broad current account deficit and the influence of the global financial crisis originated in the United States of America,

² Translated from Spanish by the authors.

from where the explosion of the property bubble spread worldwide (Flores and Van Duin, 2014). All this triggered the onset of economic recession in 2008. One year later, in 2009 -concurring with the re-election of Merkel in the Chancellery-, the first saving bank underwent an intervention and it was created the Fund for Orderly Bank Restructuring (FOBR) for the financial sector.

The Spanish government formally asked the European Union for banking financial support. 35 measures were adopted to reduce spending and, once signed the Memorandum of Understanding in 2012, the Eurogroup granted an aid of 100,000 million euros for Spanish banks. The country experienced these years the creation of the *Sareb* (Company for the Management of Assets proceeding from Restructuring of the Banking System, or simply 'Bad Bank'), the reorganization of the nationalized banks and numerous cuts to reduce public spending.

In late 2013 -beginning of the third and current term of Merkel- the first positive and significant datum after years of recession is announced. The Economic Bulletin on 13 October 2013 of the Bank of Spain pointed the following (2013:41): 'According to the available information, still incomplete, about the evolution of the Spanish economy in the third quarter of 2013, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) would have grown by 0.1 per cent quarter on quarter in this period [...]. If confirmed, this would be the first step of the product from the first quarter of 2011.'³

This context has a significant influence on the Spaniards' conception of Angela Merkel because of her leadership role in the Eurozone crisis as the head of the largest economy in the group. As Ulrich Beck (2011) points, the telephone of Europe belongs to Angela Merkel. She starred -and continues today- the country media landscape.

3. Methodology

In order to study the texts about the Chancellor in the Spanish press, the selected body of scholarship is composed of the most read general information diaries in Spain, based on data from the General Mass Media Survey of the Spanish Association for Communication Media Research (AIMC). *El País*, *El Mundo* and *La Vanguardia* head the list, in this order.

The selected period comprises the week before and after the last three federal elections to choose the German Chancellor: 2005 (18 September), 2009 (27 September) and 2013 (22 September), coinciding with the production peak of information and opinion on the country and its political representatives. Merkel won all these ballots, so she has been leading the Teutonic country's government for a decade so far.

Addressing the overall objective of the paper, only the opinion pieces have been selected for the investigation. They reflect the ideology of the newspaper business group (Escribano, 2008) and they have an inherent influence and ideological orientation capacity.

³ Translated from Spanish by the authors.

The content analysis is the selected technique to carry out the study. Krippendorff (1990) notes that this method allows to formulate inferences from coding form data, together with a codebook. According to Neuendorf (2002: 132), together they 'should stand alone as a protocol for content analyzing messages.' We agree with the practical function of this technique highlighted by Bardin (2002): become distrustful.

Sociologists Mayntz, Holm and Hübner (1993) define the content analysis as a research technique that identifies the linguistic properties in an objective and systematic way, in order to obtain conclusions of the non-linguistic properties of people and social groups. Drawing on these inputs, the following coding form is applied to the sample:

CODING FORM

1. Name of the coder and date of codification
2. Daily newspaper: *El País* / *El Mundo* / *La Vanguardia*
3. Headline
4. Journalistic genre: editorial article / column / opinion article / tribune / letter from the director / criticism / analysis
5. Date of publication
6. Location (journal section and page number)
7. Extension
8. Author and his/her institutional link with the media
9. Overall thematic
10. Economic concepts. It measures the presence and assessment (positive/ negative/ neutral) of the ensuing concepts: euro, economic crisis, reforms, fiscal policy, budgetary balance, public debt, labour market reform, job creation, unemployment deficit reduction, economic growth, budget cuts, bailout or others.
11. Angela Merkel: in order to know the frequency of occurrence and the connotations shown in the Chancellor representation, the coders mark and reproduce the quotations in which she appears, thereby allowing to determine what positioning has taken the author and the general valuation (positive/negative/neutral) that has been transmitted.

4. Results

The first data after the analysis is provided by the frequency of occurrence: in 45 studied days (fifteen per year), Angela Merkel has been present in 129 opinion pieces, as it has already been said, 40 from *El Mundo*, 46 from *El País* and 43 from *La Vanguardia*. Filtering by years, there are 36 units in 2005, 30 in 2009 and 63 in 2013, what means a remarkable quantitative progression.

The most used genre is the journalistic column (35 per cent), followed by the opinion article (22 per cent) and the editorial article (17 per cent). The preponderance of the column indicates that, when giving opinions on the Chancellor, it has been used a very nearby and personalized format with fixed signatures and spaces.

The most used section is *Opinion*, which comprises 56 pieces. It is closely followed by *International*, with 49. The fact that the largest space is formally dedicated to opinions -so they are clearly marked as such- means that there has not been an intentional reader manipulation: they differentiate between opinion and information. A different situation is seen in the *International* section, which only has seven pieces less than the previous one. As it is not well differentiated, it is possible to talk here about a potential reader mix-up. For example, when publishing a notice about Angela

Merkel with a column on the same theme aside in the page, the supposedly objective and aseptic nature of the information is lost because of the obvious influence that the opinion fragment has on the understanding of the news.

With regard to the pieces placement, the analyzed texts predominantly appear on even-numbered pages (74) versus the odd ones. Furthermore, both partial results of the newspaper and the total sum show a predominance (49.61 per cent) of text with an extension of less than half a page, which may indicate a lack of deepening in the treatment of Merkel.

Focusing on the publishing dates -in order to know if it has been done a continuous follow-up or some interrupted publications-, the next figure combines the data from all years and newspapers:

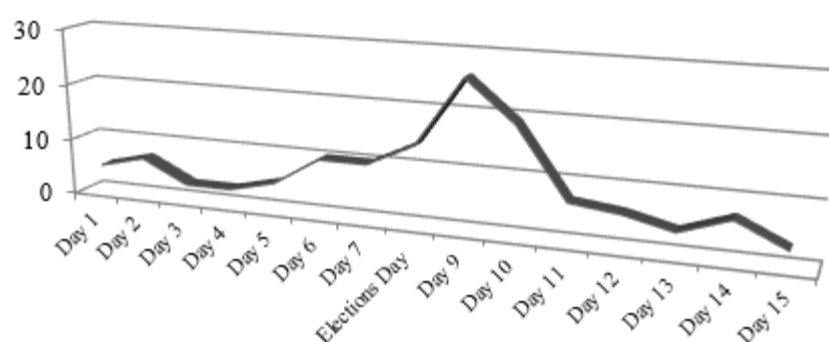


Figure 1: Publication days (all newspapers in 2005, 2009 and 2013).

Source: Prepared by the authors.

It is noteworthy that the highest amount of texts is published during the days surrounding the elections, concretely from the seventh to the tenth, thus corroborating the effectiveness of the temporal selection criteria. These days fit the following periods: from 17 to 20 September 2005; from 26 to 29 September 2009 and from 21 to 24 September 2013. Nevertheless, although there is a peak on the graph, opinion texts about Merkel are published throughout the delimited time (the week before and after the last three federal elections). This can be seen as a truism in 2013, when Merkel is a renowned person in Spain, but it is not so obvious in 2005 and 2009.

All the same, the assiduous appearance is not correlated with an authoring repetition as the average is of one unit per author. But there is an undisputed tendency: the linkage of these authors with their media is majoritarian, either as staff members, journalists or as integrants of the management board (altogether, 91 pieces are signed by linked authors), a tendency also fulfilled in the partial data of individual newspapers. This suggests a respect for the ideological line of their respective media.

Giving up formal aspects and deepening into the content, the study delves into the general topic of the texts about the Chancellor. Those combining economy with international policy are outstanding (46.51 per cent). Considering the inclusion in international politics as logical when studying electoral periods, the most significant finding is the association with the economic issues. We thereupon examine which

specific concepts has Merkel been represented with, on the basis of the following summarizing table:

	Total pieces	Positive	Negative	Neutral
Euro	17	25.53%	58.82%	17.65%
Economic crisis	39	30.77%	69.23%	0%
Economic reforms	42	69.04%	26.19%	4.76%
Fiscal policy	25	44%	52%	4%
Budgetary balance	3	66.67%	33.33%	0%
Public debt	15	6.67%	86.66%	6.67%
Public debt reduction	12	25%	75%	0%
Labour market reform	22	72.73%	22.73%	4.54%
Job creation	15	33.33%	60%	6.67%
Unemployment	33	24.24%	72.73%	3.03%
Deficit reduction	9	33.33%	66.67%	0%
Economic growth	36	22.22%	47.22%	30.56%
Budget cuts	16	43.75%	56.25%	0%
Bailout	13	23.08%	76.92%	0%
Others	1	100%	0%	0%

Table 1: Economic concepts in *El Mundo*, *El País* and *La Vanguardia* during the last three German federal elections. *Source: Prepared by the authors.*

The most commonly used concepts are ‘reforms’, ‘crisis’, ‘economic growth’ and ‘unemployment’, in this order, but only the first one has a positive valuation. They have been carried out by governments of all political hues in every country, so there is no ideological difference between newspapers, opting all for a reform course. The other three main terms have an overall negative assessment. What is more, only three of fourteen catchwords have more positive than negative appreciations: ‘economic reforms’, ‘labour market reform’ and ‘budgetary balance’.

After interpreting the counting results, it is possible to assure that the general appraisal made by *El País*, *El Mundo* and *La Vanguardia* in the selected length of time is superiorly negative: there are 61 negative pieces, against 35 positive –fewer than a half- and 33 neutral.

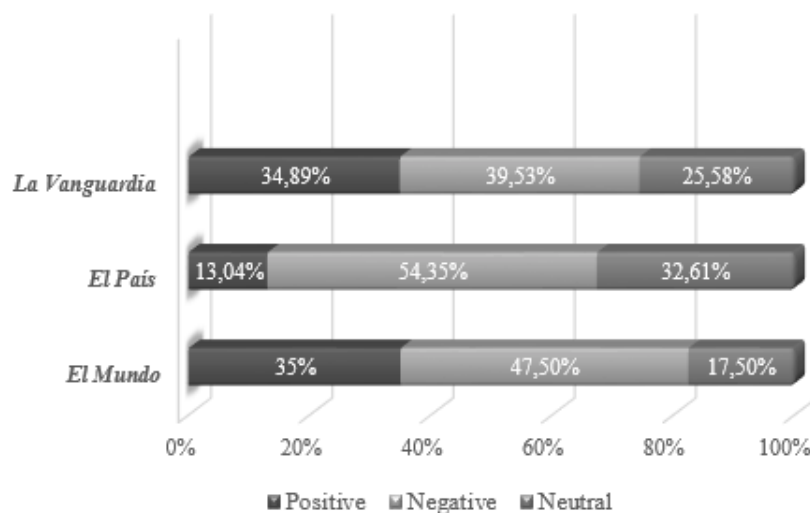


Figure 2: Compared results of the treatment of German Chancellor Angela Merkel in the analyzed newspapers. *Source: Prepared by the authors.*

Starting from Figure 2 above, the periodical *El Mundo* presents a largely negative positioning (47.5 per cent). However, it sometimes supports Merkel in 2005, claiming that if she won, it would be a strong stimulus for all women engaged in politics, and Germany would become the 'locomotive of Europe' again, then favouring Spain and the European Union.⁴ German recovery –the country runs through a crisis at that time– is thus univocally associated with the necessary victory of Angela Merkel. A speech in support that is radically changed the next day, after elections, when *El Mundo* published another editorial article criticizing her lack of leadership and noting that her campaign had been hesitant and full of childish mistakes.⁵

The unexpectedly good results of the political party *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD) are attributed to the same Angela Merkel that, according to the newspaper a few days before, would restore the splendour to the German country. In such a way, the problem is now the confusion of the conservative political agenda, especially in tax matters, added to the serious limitations of Merkel as candidate.

In 2009 this sea change is performed again: before elections, the most repeated thesis is that 'in difficult times, it is better to go for sturdy personalities'. To bet on the strength of the 'Mother of Germany', a woman who loves and cares them like a real mother.⁶ But the day after the elections of 27 September 2009, the mood changes.

In 2013 there is not the quantum leap seen in the elections of 2005 and 2009 because, against all odds of the writers, she continues in the chancellery (and even more reinforced). It is said that most citizens are satisfied with the way the Chancellor has managed the public debt crisis, ensuring that Europe would not be too expensive to taxpayers.⁷

Negative evaluations are the most numerous again in 2013 (45.45 per cent). Criticisms focus on the economic and pro-European line. The negative image of Merkel, it is said, has to do with the disappointment with Europe and the euro, with her main role in the distinction between good and bad and with the management of a crisis that has punished the weakest.⁸ This is an example of the Spanish public opinion orientation regarding the Chancellor, the manufacturing of an image that has been partly shaped by the press, which has also made its own differentiations between victims and guilty.

In respect of the second newspaper, *El País*, there is not any predominantly positive text in 2005, ten of them are negative and one is neutral. Some arguments are clear and note that 'Mrs. Merkel' has not understood her wrong political assessment of a situation that remains full of crises, so choosing her for the Chancellery would be imprudent.⁹ She is still an unknown political figure and journalists doubt about her political qualities. Even so, the CDU wins with a scanty victory that is minimized: the vantage of Merkel consists of three or four seats, what means that her electoral

⁴ Merkel: un impulso para la economía europea. *El Mundo*, 18 September 2005, p.2.

⁵ Alemania, entre la 'Gran Coalición' y el 'Gobierno semáforo'. *El Mundo*, 19 September 2005, p.3.

⁶ Es la quietud, estúpido. *El Mundo*, 26 September 2009, p.44.

⁷ Europa no desata pasión. *El Mundo*, 18 September 2013, p.33.

⁸ Angie, un modelo para Rajoy. *El Mundo*, 22 September 2013, p.46.

⁹ ¿Qué se puede elegir? *El País*, 16 September 2005, pp. 5-16.

success is the closest thing to a defeat.¹⁰ A few days later, there is a step from the criticism of the results to the personal critique.

The year 2009, however, is not as severe with the Chancellor and it is even written that she is one of the most remarkable political figures in Europe, pretending to be normal, speaking clearly and without pretentiousness: 'our neighbour Angie'.¹¹

Nevertheless, there is a step back in 2013 and over half of the texts are negative again. Most opinions are associated with her attitude towards Europe and articles proclaim that she is interested in Europe as a trade bloc with a governed currency.¹²

According to some writings, Merkel has handled the situation her way during the last four years and, although the crisis pressured Germany to lead the economic and political revival of the continent, *Mutti* ('mom' in German, Merkel's nickname) did not attend to the History.¹³

The nickname *Mutti* is steadily used in a sarcastic way. The idea that 'mom' takes care of everything so Germans do not have to worry about anything is combined with the use of stereotypical *femme fatale*. For example, one of the authors of *El País* talks about the coalitions trading period and expresses that Angela Merkel will have to find another partner willing to form with her a couple like those spiders whose male partner is smaller than the female and, when the mission is over, it is eaten.¹⁴

Lastly, we examine *La Vanguardia*. The prevailing assessment is negative again (39.53 per cent), although it should be recognized that the difference with the positive pieces (34.89 per cent) is not as significant as it was in the other two newspapers. Nor is there a high quantitative distance between years.

In 2005, the disagreement with the chancellor is openly shown. She is described as an inexperienced and uncommunicative fledgling.¹⁵ The cuts to the Welfare State are among the protagonists topics of the period and it is made a negative assessment of Merkel, also nicknamed as the 'sad victor'.¹⁶ 2009 is once more the only year with a prevalence of positive judgments.

She is no longer the treacherous girl of her mentor nor the little charismatic candidate of 2005, but the 'the disciple' of Kohl, a person with a personality reinforced by its high scientific, intellectual and social Christian political formation.¹⁷ One notable difference that exemplifies why the positive and negative appreciations of Angela Merkel in the daily show so similar results.

In fact, in 2013 there is exactly the same number of pieces in both evaluative ends. Nevertheless, not all do a positive review, emphasizing in this way the duality of opinions that can be observed in *La Vanguardia*. It is said that Angela Merkel does

¹⁰ Se busca coalición. *El País*, 20 September 2005, p.14.

¹¹ Europa, ¿algo más que una gran Suiza? *El País*, 3 October 2009, pp. 31-32.

¹² La Europa alemana. *El País*, 19 September 2013, p.8.

¹³ Alemania tiene un problema. 23 September 2013, p. 6.

¹⁴ Mamá ganó las elecciones. *El País*, 24 September 2013, p.5.

¹⁵ La incógnita alemana. *La Vanguardia*, 16 September 2005, p. 22.

¹⁶ La edad de oro, en declive. *La Vanguardia*, 25 September 2005, p. 13.

¹⁷ Europa tiene a Merkel. *La Vanguardia*, 3 October 2009, p.24.

not have enough determination and courage to lead the continent, and their European counterparts have the feeling that she disproportionately exploits its economic superiority.¹⁸

5. Conclusions

After analyzing all the data extracted from the study of the opinion texts, it is possible to answer the provisional proposals that have guided the research process:

H1. We can maintain that the analyzed Spanish printed press -which has the largest number of readers in Spain- has positioned against the Chancellor. As seen in the results and discussion paragraphs, the joint assessment extracted from *El País*, *El Mundo* and *La Vanguardia* is mostly negative. In fact, opinion pieces that make a negative value of the Chancellor almost double to those that do so positively.

With the aforementioned reflexion about the orientative role of media on public opinion, we can conclude that the press has exerted a negative influence on society through the content of opinion texts. In the pages of the Spanish diaries, Angela Merkel has been derided as opponent and caricatured because of her style; she has been compared with an amoeba and her sexuality has been matched with a salt shaker; her achievements have been presented as defeats; her merits as worth of somebody else and, at the beginning, her measures has been described as the result of the incompetence. In short, we have been guided to pigeonhole her on the side of 'good' or 'bad'.

H2. Comparing the periods of the last two German elections, which coincide with the economic crisis, a progressive evolution is observed in the results. On the one hand, the number of opinion pieces increases -2013 doubles to 2009-. On the other hand, the negativity of opinions grows -2013 tripled to 2009-. Plus there are more pieces dedicated to Angela Merkel, it may be noted a trend towards the predominance of arguments against her, coinciding with the development of the economic crisis itself, as demonstrated by the inclusion of numerous economic and financial terms in the texts.

If we consider the first stretch of time, from 2005 to 2009, there is a decrease in both quantity (number of pieces) and qualitative (in negative rating) in *El País* and *La Vanguardia*. 2009 is, therefore, an exception to the upward trend of 2005-2013. The crisis in Germany ends in 2009 due to the measures taken by Angela Merkel in her first term, and Spain is in the beginning of the crisis, which may explain the uniqueness of the treatment that has been done.

H3. Considering the ideologies of the newspapers, it would be logical to expect that *El Mundo* and *La Vanguardia* adopt a favourable attitude towards the Chancellor, and *El País* an unfavourable one. As discussed in the first hypothesis testing, it is not true, because all of them make a negative judgement of Angela Merkel as a whole. Nevertheless, according to the editorial lines, there are differences between newspapers. The percentage of positive texts in *El País* is the lowest of all. In contrast, *La Vanguardia* presents a smaller difference between positive and negative

¹⁸ No es Merkiavelo. *La Vanguardia*, 21 September 2013, p.12.

pieces, so percentages hardly vary, as it happens in *El Mundo*. Of course, we must add to these figures neutral appreciations.

Therefore, although the conveyed image of Angela Merkel is generally negative, the editorial line continues to have a demonstrable influence on the difference between the two ideological extremes, which is lower in conservative newspapers than in the progressive one.

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