

## Special article

# Spanish newsreel NO-DO (1943–1975). The diffusion of science as a legitimizing instrument of the Franco regime: polio and other immuno-preventable diseases

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## ABSTRACT

The official NO-DO newsreels were screened in Spain on a weekly basis from 1943 to 1981. These official news and documentary programmes were compulsory in cinemas from the moment they were first produced until the end of the Francoist dictatorship (1975). NO-DO held an information monopoly and was used as the regime's propaganda tool to indoctrinate the population, building stories tailored to the regime's interests and masking social realities. In this study, we examined newsreels on medical subjects relating to diseases preventable by vaccination. A majority of reports centred on poliomyelitis, and two differentiated periods could be defined, coinciding with the development of Franco regime's foreign policy. Further, from the gender perspective, we analyse the female stereotypes in the battle against vaccine preventable diseases. Therefore, the news coverage of polio is of special relevance. In conclusion, this topic offers a good opportunity to reflect on the political role of popular science and science communication in a specific historical context.

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## NO-DO (1943–1975). La difusión de la ciencia como instrumento legitimador del régimen franquista: la poliomiélitis y otras enfermedades inmunoprevenibles

## RESUMEN

Desde 1943 hasta 1981 se proyectó en España el noticiero semanal NO-DO, que tuvo carácter oficial y fue de obligada proyección en las salas cinematográficas desde su creación hasta el final de la dictadura franquista (1975). NO-DO ejerció el monopolio de la información y fue utilizado como instrumento de propaganda del régimen para adoctrinar a la población, construyendo un relato a la medida de sus intereses y ocultando la realidad social. Este trabajo estudia las noticias proyectadas de contenido médico relacionadas con las enfermedades prevenibles por vacunación. La poliomiélitis ocupa la mayoría de los reportajes publicados, en dos periodos bien diferenciados, coincidiendo con la evolución de la política exterior del régimen franquista. Además, desde una perspectiva de género, se analizan los estereotipos femeninos existentes en la lucha contra dichas enfermedades. En conclusión, este tema ofrece una buena oportunidad para reflexionar sobre el papel político de la ciencia popular y la comunicación científica en un contexto histórico determinado.

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## Introduction

From the year 1943, the weekly newsreels *Noticario y Documentales Cinematográficos*, popularly known as NO-DO, were screened in Spain. They had an official character and their screening was required in cinemas from the day of their creation until the end of Franco's dictatorship (1975), although they were shown until May 1981. NO-DO was used as the regime's propaganda tool for indoctrinating the Spanish population, building stories tailored to the regime's interests and masking true social realities.<sup>1,2</sup> As had been the case in other totalitarian countries, and together with other

mass media, such as the written press, the cinema or the radio, the news program was used as an integrating and socializing element for broadening the consensus with the regime, through an appearance of modernity and an eminently indoctrinating purpose.<sup>3</sup>

Because NO-DO held the monopoly and the control of audio-visual information, it is a useful source for understanding and analyzing the relationship between science and society, especially in relation to how science communication became a political tool during the dictatorship. The search on the Webpage of the NO-DO archive (<http://www.rtve.es/alicarta/videos-audios/noticiarios-nodo/>) was made based on the following keywords: vacuna, vacunación, campaña, cólera, difteria, paperas, gripe, polio, poliomiélitis, rubéola, sarampión, tétanos, viruela, enfermedad, laboratorio, parálisis infantil, rehabilitación, salud, salud pública, virus, Seguro Obligatorio de Enfermedad and Dirección General

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de Sanidad; and delimiting a specific chronological period: the Francoist dictatorship (1943–1975). From the analysis of the news obtained, this brief essay reflects on this historiographic possibility, above all, as related to those news items that collected references on immuno-preventable diseases -their treatments and vaccines- with special attention to poliomyelitis.<sup>4</sup>

### Foreign policy, scientific powers and the international image of the dictatorship

The origin of the international news was closely linked to the evolution of the Francoist government's strategic alliances.<sup>5</sup> During the Second World War and until the end of the conflict, when the regime was still supporting the Axis powers, news from Nazi Germany were emitted, praising the country's scientific advances. With the defeat of the Axis powers and after a period of isolation and marginalization, the Spanish government chose to transmit a different image in the international context where it aspired to be accepted.<sup>6</sup>

Subsequently, and as a result of the international political evolution and the external relations, grand speeches of praise were directed towards the USA. This North American power, from mid-century, had become a model of scientific, technological and military progress worthy of admiration, along with other countries with which the Spanish dictatorship had started to establish alliances based on the construction of an Europeanist doctrine, such as France or England.<sup>7</sup> This new image of Spain as the champion in the fight against communism, under American protection and with an Europeanist discourse, was reflected in the news aimed at warning the population that terrible diseases existed in other countries, such as epidemics of flu or cholera in China.

During the 1950s, Spain joined various international organizations, thus enhancing a modern image that the regime wanted to broadcast. Additionally, in order to legitimize the socio-political system and to promote a blatantly positive image of health development, the broadcast of these type of specific health initiatives multiplied in the 1950's, resulting in "the inauguration genre", coined and studied by Medina-Doménech and Menéndez-Navarro.<sup>8,9</sup> These types of representations were part of the biopolitical strategies used in the medico-social sphere,<sup>10,11</sup> self-fashioned as a welfare state, concerned about the health of the population and fully identified with the most advanced countries.

### Gender stereotypes in the fight against vaccine diseases

As in other domains, the dictatorship wished to break from any trace of the preceding Republican era. The regime drew up perfectly defined antagonistic male and female models that would lay the foundations of its new order. An ideal woman possessed her own sphere of activity, the home, based on the principles of docility, chastity and domesticity.<sup>12</sup> The regime had reserved a certain role for Spanish girls and women; the Feminine Section (the female organization of the Spanish Falange party) was in charge of transmitting it as well as ensuring the development of Falangist ideals.<sup>13,14</sup> The NO-DO, faithful to its task of achieving a single line of thought and a total absence of dissidence, contributed by disseminating these stereotypes. A dominant discourse was used that imposed a series of moral demands on women, as well as subordinating them to male models within a hierarchical and patriarchal structure.<sup>15</sup> In this sense, and in line with the approach adopted in this study, two stages are distinguished, both ending with the political turnaround that the government experienced from the 1950s onwards.<sup>16</sup> During the first stage of Francoism, the feminine prominence acquired during the Republican period had to be silenced and annulled, hence the scarce presence of women during



Figure 1. NO-DO 767A, 1957. Female laboratory assistant. © Filmoteca Española.

the 1940s, except for a blurred representation through the figures of nursing nuns, caretakers in some child preventoriums, or street fundraising volunteers. In the 1950s, the NO-DO built up the public's imagination using scientific and medical scenarios fulfilling a twofold purpose: political legitimization and showcasing the Western world, with an emphasis on ideas of progress and modernity. In this new promotional space, women had a place of their own, thus strengthening the rhetoric of patriarchal inequality designed by the regime. The women were shown performing automated tasks, often somewhat gregariously, as in the case of laboratory assistants who tested the vaccines or when preparing that very drug in an assembly line, incorporated into a booming pharmaceutical industry. These images revealed a clear sexual division of tasks: women, dependent and subordinated to the authority of male doctors, as expert specialists (Fig. 1).

In the following decade (1960's), and in parallel to the Spanish society's emerging yearning for change, women who appeared in the news left their background roles and faced new work challenges. Thus, they could be seen treating patients or supplying vaccines, thus playing a more leading role. Thus, in the videos of this moment, the women who appear in them perform different functions from those of the previous decades: they auscultate to a baby or provide the polio vaccine to children in the National Campaign Vaccination.<sup>17</sup>

### Immuno-preventable diseases: poliomyelitis in the NO-DO

Most of the news issued by the NO-DO and related to vaccine-preventable diseases referred to polio. In Spain, polio was an emerging disease that took on a marked epidemic nature from the 1950s onwards.<sup>18</sup> Until then, polio newsreels referred to situations abroad, evoking other struggles that were completely unrelated to Spain, although cases of affected people continued to rise at a growing pace.

Thus, the admiration that the regime was beginning to show towards certain countries, while at the same time re-aligning its foreign policy, was included in the NO-DO discourse. The newsreels showed the efforts by the North American power to combat this sickness. From a social and scientific point of view, the extensive media coverage that the US dedicated to the search for an effective remedy against polio, involving all sectors of society and using personalities from the political or artistic sphere, also reached Spanish screens through NO-DO. The news also provided visibility to research, advances or emergency plans that the U.S. government was implementing to fight the disease and find a vaccine to put an end to it. However, the model of a modern nation that Francoism was striving to construct in order to gain international

acceptance, clashed with the social reality of the country. The government refused to admit that polio was a real epidemic problem for the health of the Spanish population and until 1963 mass vaccination campaigns were not carried out.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, this refusal coincided with the internal struggles between the families of the regime for the control of Preventive Medicine. A struggle that would be revealed that same year, when two simultaneous campaigns of mass immunization against polio took place: one by Compulsory Health Insurance—under the control of the Falangists— using the injectable Salk vaccine, and another by the General Directorate of Health—led by the Catholic military doctors— using the oral vaccine Sabin.<sup>20,21</sup>

When the government decided to join the fight against polio, this was used as another propaganda argument created to build an image of progress and to defend the idea of the existence of a Welfare State. Thus, Spain would be shown as equal to other countries, as successful as them in its fight against the disease. Within the context of the news broadcasted in the NO-DO, regarding the struggle against vaccine-preventable diseases, and also for the case of poliomyelitis, we noticed the use of specific terminology related to the medical advances of the time, which were believed to reach society as a whole, and with which most of the population would feel identified with. In this way, for example, the dictator's inauguration of the clinic "Concepción de Madrid" was used in one of the news analyzed to highlight "the new advances in its specialty, and among them, the iron lung" (NO-DO 648B, 1955).<sup>22</sup> However, the image of the device seemed to be part of some sort of medical stage prop with which to show off and improve that image of modern efficiency the regime was set on displaying. There was no explanation of its purpose or its usefulness, not even with regards to what disease it was supposed to be used for. A similar treatment was given to a news bit that informed on the blessing, by the bishop, of new X-ray equipment in the asylum "San Rafael" in Madrid: "Given the importance of the new facility, other services will be created in the Asylum so that the hospital-sanatorium is, at the same time, a modern and well-endowed functional recovery center" (NO-DO 730A, 1956)<sup>23</sup> (Fig. 2).

The model and the high price of acquisitions, as well as the number of radiographs, were explained, but nothing was said about who the recipients were of such services, nor the disease that afflicted them. Additionally, in many of these news programs, the term "poliomyelitis" was not mentioned, rather it was avoided, referring only to the "sick little children" (NO-DO 522A, 1953)<sup>24</sup> or "hospitalized children" (NO-DO 1099B, 1964)<sup>25</sup> in a portrayal of a paternalistic state that had turned its back on the epidemic.



**Figure 2.** NO-DO 730A, 1956. The bishop bless the new X-ray equipment in "San Rafael". © Filmoteca Española.

The regime manipulated this narration for its own benefit and to associate itself to a set of ideological principles in order to validate its value system.<sup>26</sup>

However, when the newsreel was analyzed, it was found that it was narrated using an imprecise discourse, with no true references to the affected families' situations and completely lacking medical-sanitary explanations. Thus, the interpretation of these silences, what the regime silenced and manipulated, forces us to ask ourselves about the real experiences of thousands of children who became ill with polio and the consequences that this child paralysis had on their lives. At the same time, this consideration invites us to reflect on the social consequences, as the dictatorship's mismanagements of the treatment of the disease were pushed aside and concealed, thus avoiding any type of responsibility.<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

Following a historical-critical analysis of the news programs broadcasted by the NO-DO about vaccine-preventable diseases, we were able to observe how the NO-DO newsreels were utilized, in their early years, as a political instrument to legitimize the regime, serving as a propaganda tool for the newly constituted order.

From a temporal perspective, the information and disinformation that accompanied the images evolved in parallel to Franco's political evolution: a very clear turning point was found in the 1950's, when the regime opted for a political and economic turnaround as well as a different position on the international scene as the country aspired for acceptance.

Turning its back on the country's social reality, NO-DO used those health actions related news and the struggle against potentially vaccine-preventable diseases to sharply dissociate itself from the previous Republican stage, in an attempt to "recover" a glorious common past. In addition, the sobering, patriarchal and paternalistic messages of the NO-DO were used to shape a clear-cut ideological discourse and to build a new image of Spain based on the ideas of modernity, prosperity and progress that reached the entire population through the news, attesting to the intentional use of science communication as a political tool. Coverage of polio exemplifies this use of the news. When the disease was not silenced or hidden, it was used as one more piece of the regime's legitimizing apparatus. The vagueness of polio newsreels reveals how the dictatorship resisted confronting the reality of the epidemic until 1963, when the mass vaccination campaigns began.

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## Authorship contributions

Both authors have performed jointly and equally research and writing of this work.

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