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COVID-19 IN THE SPANISH PRESS. FRAMING ALARM AND REASSURANCE ON THE FRONT PAGES OF EL PAÍS, EL MUNDO AND LA VANGUARDIA

La covid-19 en la prensa española. Encuadres de alarma y tranquilidad en las portadas de *El país*, *El mundo* y *La vanguardia*.

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Abstract

An analysis of the news included on the front page of the three most read media in Spain (*El país*, *El mundo* and *La vanguardia*) during the state of alarm and the COVID-19 confinement situation in the months of March and April 2020 is presented. The main objective of the study is to analyze whether the aforementioned media have conveyed the news events through seemingly unjustified messages of alarm or reassurance. The introduction analyses the role of conventional media, digital media and social networks in periods of pandemic, as well as framing in the coverage of the crisis. A total of 1,154 front page stories have been reviewed and 402 elements (belonging to 162 shared news events and another 35 not shared news events) have been identified for analysis. These constitute the sample for this study. The analysis tool is based on already validated framing measurement tools used in numerous leading articles. The results show that the treatment of information in terms of alarm and reassurance is not so much based on the objectivity of the news events reported or on health reasons, but rather on political interests in favour of or against the government or other interests. It is concluded that, given the importance of the media during pandemics both in the creation of perceived reality and in the assessment of its seriousness, media managers should be aware of the social responsibility and educational function of communication. In order to achieve

truthful and public service information, the economic independence of the media and the training of its professionals in media education are considered necessary.

Keywords: Media, Covid-19, framing theory, information bias, alarm, Spanish press, political purposes, social responsibility, disinformation.

Resumen

Se presenta un análisis de las noticias incluidas en portada por los tres medios más leídos en España (*El país*, *El mundo* y *La vanguardia*) durante el estado de alarma y la situación de confinamiento por la Covid-19 en los meses de marzo y abril de 2020. El principal objetivo del estudio es analizar si los citados medios han trasladado los hechos noticiosos a través de mensajes de alarma o de tranquilidad aparentemente injustificados. En la introducción se analiza el papel de los medios de comunicación convencionales, los medios digitales y las redes sociales en períodos de pandemia, así como los posibles marcos de interpretación (*framing*) en la cobertura de la crisis. Se han revisado 1.154 noticias de portada e identificado para el análisis 419 elementos, pertenecientes a 162 hechos noticiosos comunes, publicados al menos en dos de los tres diarios analizados que conforman la muestra de este estudio. El instrumento de análisis está basado en herramientas de medición de *framing* ya validadas y empleadas en numerosos artículos de referencia. Los resultados muestran que el tratamiento de la información en clave de alarma y tranquilidad no obedece tanto a la objetividad de los hechos noticiosos relatados ni a razones sanitarias, como a intereses políticos a favor o en contra del Gobierno u otros intereses. Se concluye que, dada la importancia de los medios de comunicación durante las pandemias, tanto en la creación de la realidad percibida como en la valoración de su gravedad, sus responsables deben ser conscientes de la responsabilidad social y función educativa de la comunicación. Para conseguir una información veraz y de servicio público se plantean como necesarias la independencia económica de los medios y la formación en educación mediática de sus profesionales.

Palabras clave:

Medios de comunicación, Covid-19, framing, sesgo informativo, alarma, prensa española, fines políticos.

How to create an article

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1. INTRODUCTION

Media distribution has been considered as an essential service contributing to the solution of the current Covid-19 pandemic. Experts in Infectious Diseases and

Epidemiology consider that the most powerful tool for prevention is information, and appeal to the media to share it correctly and responsibly (Hernández-Orozco, Ramiro-Mendoza and Trejo-González, 2020).

Communication with the public and the need for truthful and contrasted information, supported by reliable sources, is more necessary than ever in pandemic situations. This has been highlighted by the WHO in this and previous health crises, such as the influenza crisis in 2009. The *Pan American Health Organization*, in reference to the 2009 influenza pandemic, points out: "The media can condition both the agendas and the decisions of governments and cooperation agencies. [...] Likewise, they constitute an instrument of criticism and denunciation when irregularities are suspected or when there is a lack of transparency and accountability in the management of the emergency (Arroyo-Barrantes et al, 2009: 62).

In the case of Covid-19, the WHO has also considered collaboration between health authorities and the media to be essential (WHO, 2020), but as a differentiating element with respect to previous pandemics, the current media landscape of convergence and continuous transformation must be considered. In addition to the potential of conventional media, there is the singularity of digital media and the influence of social networks, as well as the consequent proliferation of hoaxes and *fake news*.

The international scientific community has reacted quickly and positively, and not only in the field of medicine. Other areas are also trying to generate the necessary knowledge to achieve the best possible way out of the crisis in all its dimensions: personal, social and economic. Rapidity is not free of risks, since haste makes possible the dissemination of health solutions that are not sufficiently contrasted (Larivière et al, 2020).

In the field of communication and journalism, the challenge surrounding the pandemic is threefold: to report truthfully on events and the results of health research; to investigate the role of communication in crisis situations; and to constantly renew and adapt to the new demands arising from the economic situation and physical (but not social) distance.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Role of the Media

The unquestionable function of the media to inform truthfully, parallel to everyone's right to information, could be qualified in cases of pandemics for reasons of health and social stability. Both politicians and health professionals could confuse the social function of the media with the need to reassure the population, resorting to the concealment of certain facts. Crespo and Garrido (2020), however, remind us that, in crisis communication, although it may be a temptation for those in power to minimize the scope or seriousness of the situation in order not to cause alarm or panic among the population, it is usually the wrong strategy. The media, for their part, in line with

politicians, can present the facts with frames that favor alarm or tranquility, and not only for reasons of public health, as we shall see, but also for political reasons and even against public health.

The important role of conventional media in health campaigns and in the Covid-19 crisis has been sufficiently demonstrated (Feo-Acevedo and Feo-Istúriz, 2013; Brown, 2020). Digital media are also considered to be very useful: the European Commission, in its recommendation adopted on April 8, 2020, proposes the convenience of using social networks as complementary communication channels to traditional media such as television and the press, the two media of reference in other health crises (in Costa-Sánchez and López-García, 2020). 66.84% of the total news about Covid-19 appeared in Spain (indexed in the *My news database*) were published in digital media (Lázaro-Rodríguez and Herrera-Viedma, 2020).

There is no doubt about the current importance of digital environments as scenarios for journalistic work and the representation of public health issues (Cano-Orón et al, 2020). The main traditional media have their different pages on the Internet, and in Spain we have prestigious digital native media, but the urgency required on the network and the tendency to respond to the demands of immediacy and traffic generation, can jeopardize the confirmation of veracity of the news and compliance with the quality protocol (Loterio-Echeverri, et al., 2018). Numerous authors warn not only of *misinformation (misinformation)* on Covid-19, due to carelessness or incompetence, but also of *disinformation with intent to mislead (disinformation)* in digital native media and social networks (O'Connor and Murphy, 2020; Pennycook et al., 2020; Tasnim, Hossain and Mazumder, 2020; Montesi, 2020).

Infodemia, or the situation of fear and insecurity generated by overexposure to news (whether false or true), in the coronavirus crisis (Giménez et al., 2020; Cinelli et al. 2020; Hu et al., 2020) constitutes fertile ground for disinformation and political propaganda at the international (Sukhankin, 2020; Gradoñ, 2020; Kosmehl, 2020) and national (Mayor-Ortega, 2020; Branco, 2020; Euronews, 2020) levels.

The role of the Spanish media in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic was discussed at the virtual meeting of Dircom (Association of Communication Managers) convened by Nacho Cardero, director of *El Confidencial* (Dircom, 2020). There it was made clear that information saturation and the proliferation of hoaxes and *fake news* hinder its function of distributing rigorous and truthful information, considered of prime necessity. Cardero admitted, however, that in Spain, although at first there was a kind of cordiality when it came to covering information, in which the media focused on the health crisis, as the days went by, they became somewhat indolent and shifted the focus of attention to the economic crisis, focusing on the thousands of unemployed, to later prioritize coverage of the political crisis.

A similar trend has been verified in our study focused on three national print media: *El País*, *El Mundo* and *La Vanguardia*. It compares the front pages of the three newspapers during March and April 2020 to analyze how each one approaches the

Covid-19 crisis; whether it conveys a sense of alert or of unjustified calm, and to what reasons the possible bias in the framing may be due.

2.2. *Framing* in the coverage of the crisis

Framing theory is, according to McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver, directly related to agenda setting theory, and could be considered as an extension of it (in Scheufele, 1999). *Framing* can be defined as a process in which some aspects of reality are selected and given greater emphasis or importance, so that the problem is defined, its causes are diagnosed, moral judgments are suggested, and appropriate solutions and behaviors are proposed (Entman, 1993). This framing process is accomplished by careful selection of the vocabulary and syntax used in discussions, or by presenting contexts (visual or informational) that will elicit certain interpretations by the audience. (Dobson and Knezevic, 2018). In the case of the press, this careful selection of text and images is even more evident on the front pages, hence our choice for this study.

According to Ardèvol-Abreu (2015) the development of *framing* research in Spain has undergone a rapid evolution from the mid-sixties to the present. *Framing* not only places the analysis on the issuers of information, but the framing is located in four elements of the communication process: the sender, the receiver, the (informative) text and the culture. Along the same lines, Muñiz Muriel states that when we are working with the *Agenda Theory*, it tells us why certain topics are selected or not, when we are working with the *Framing Theory* what it tells us is why we transfer to the citizenship and public opinion one vision and not another of that topic, why we emphasize one point of view and not another, why we propose one approach and not another, why we emphasize one framing and not another. We agree with Muñiz Muriel that *framing* does not stop at the news production process, but allows us to go much deeper into the understanding of the content that is being conveyed to the public and allows us to detect the real impact it is having (Muñiz-Muriel, 2014).

Framing theory, which was born in the context of psychology and interpretative sociology (Sádaba, 2001), is predominantly applied in communication studies to the informative function of the media, and more specifically to political and electoral information. Carter (2013) analyzes the research carried out on *frames and framing* and offers us examples of three areas where the use of *framing* is most common: in politics, in sports and in epidemics. In cases of pandemics, such as the one we are dealing with here, the sensationalist bias of the tabloids and social media is joined by the bias induced by emotion in the audience. According to DeStefano (2020), fear makes us more susceptible to believing false statements and adopting potentially problematic, hostile or fearful attitudes towards those around us, statements and attitudes that in turn reinforce our fear and increase the cycle.

Lerner et al. (2003) already demonstrated how fear and hatred change our beliefs and attitudes about issues of national interest, something that seems to have been taken well into account lately in political campaigns such as Brexit and the election of Trump (Gabbatt, 2016; Norris and Inglehart, 2019).

In public health crises it is not so easy to distinguish the line between informing and frightening, it is not so easy to know when the news helps, harms or alarms (Chechik, 2020). Professionals wonder how to convey relevant information without falling into sensationalism or causing panic, and how to combine frames that convey the seriousness of the situation with those that aim to attract attention (Civeris et al, 2020).

The news treatment of Covid-17 in the sensationalist media has given rise to an epidemic of hoaxes and alarmist rumors that exponentially feed the pandemic of disinformation in the era of post-truth, fake news, deep fakes and "alternative truths", to the point of leading UN Secretary General António Guterres, when recently presenting the *Verified* initiative, to state: "We cannot cede our virtual spaces to those who traffic in lies, fear and hate" (UN News, 2020).

Regarding the coronavirus, Ariel-Giménez et al. (2020) have identified three types of fake news: those related to health and supposed advice to prevent or cure the disease (the majority); political news, referring to supposed government measures or specific actions of a leader; and those related to supposed administrative decisions that affect the daily life of the population. Let us remember that disinformation does not necessarily obey someone's intention to deceive the audience, but can also be involuntary, depending on the values, beliefs and the conceptual framework from which the issuers look at and frame the world (Nogués, 2018).

We live, according to Amorós (2020, p. 20), "immersed in the crossfire of a war of fake news that battles to impose a vision of the world while, from journalism and thought, we try to fight against them". News -according to the author- has ceased to be an instrument for the dissemination of knowledge and the construction of a story according to facts and not opinions. News that contribute to "the construction of emotional narratives that frame reality according to an ideology and prejudices" (ibidem) predominate.

Also other authors, such as Qin (2015), observe important differences between the way an event is framed in traditional media, with more control by professionals, and the way it is framed by social media, while others such as Elias (2018), for example, faced with Trump's victory despite his "bad press", wonder whether traditional media, which mostly spoke out against the candidate, will not have lost power in the face of the networks.

Dobson and Knezevic (2018) maintain that one and the other feed back, reinforce and, therefore, the same discourse is reproduced, including stereotypes. In any case, the interrelation and mutual influence is unquestionable. It is easy to see how any *trending topic* or news that triumphs in social networks is usually also picked up by the media. In this sense, it could be said that the impact of social networks on the population conditions the topics and agenda of the media, but it should also be borne in mind that much of the information gathered and disseminated on social networks is taken from the media.

On few occasions is the social responsibility of both the media and social networks more evident than in the coverage of crises, disasters and emergencies, since in times of confusion and infoxication the public may give the same credibility to hoaxes as to official sources (Mayo-Cubero, 2020). It is up to the most prestigious media not only to maintain their credibility but to counteract the negative influence of fake news with public service information based on contrasted facts and framing as objective as possible. Since the onset of this health crisis, news has become a valuable resource for citizens and the traditional media have regained prominence. According to Casero-Ripollés (2020) government agencies and media news inspire more confidence in the audience than information from social networks, where scientists are not usually found among *influencers*.

Nor can one fall into the error of associating hoaxes with social networks, and assume that the most truthful information is found in official sources and the media. Hao and Basu (2020) caution that, although social media contribute to misinformation, they have also been an important source of verified information about Covid-19. Social media in China, with its anecdotes and reports, has served journalists around the *world to get a* more accurate picture of what is happening in China, while also serving to force the government itself to improve reporting. A similar role is played by the networks in the case of Hungary, where the government, in a new attempt to put an end to freedom of expression, has used the coronavirus as an excuse to suppress the independent media and turn the pro-government media into an instrument of propaganda in its favor (Urbán, 2020). In Venezuela, according to Canelón-Silva (2020), the Government has created a favorable narrative in the pro-government media that influences the perception of facts by appealing to the emotions of the audience.

3. OBJECTIVES

Communication in times of pandemic has become a highly topical issue and it seems pertinent to highlight the consideration of the media not only as a public service but also, and in the same sense, as important agents of education. We point out the socializing and pedagogical function of the media in guiding the public on how to proceed in such an exceptional circumstance as a pandemic.

The study is based on the assumption that the media not only determine the agenda of topics of interest and public debate, but also define a series of frameworks or guidelines that incline audiences to certain interpretations of the content they present, and even invite them to take a personal stance and attitude. The starting point, therefore, is the potential of the media to create states of opinion, ideological positions and even to influence the civic behavior of audiences. The front pages of *El país*, *El mundo* and *La vanguardia* during the months of March and April 2020 are compared in order to detect possible frames that try to generate alertness or tranquility, and whether the motivations could be fundamentally political.

The relevance of this work is justified by the detailed analysis of the journalistic coverage and the selection of the priority (front page) information. The presence of alarm or calm messages not corresponding to the news event is detected, and the different journalistic *frames* used during the first two months of the state of alarm in Spain due to the Covid-19 disease are compared.

The main objective of the study is to analyze whether the aforementioned media have conveyed the news events through unjustified messages of alarm or tranquility and whether this approach favors or harms the responsible political agents.

4. METHODOLOGY

In order to find out whether the news included on the front pages of the three most widely read newspapers in Spain (*El País*, *El Mundo* and *La Vanguardia*) in March and April 2020 conveyed messages of alarm or reassurance for sensationalism or political purposes, the framing adopted by the three newspapers on their front pages was analyzed in order to:

- To detect the predominance of sensationalism over the informative and objective function, identifying the evaluative nature of each of the news items analyzed.
- To check whether the alarm or calm approaches have been applied by all the media to the same news. To know if there is a relationship between the discourse of alarm or calm and the explicit defense or attack on the institutions and politicians responsible for the management of the crisis.

The choice of the sample is determined by the latest 2019 report of the AIMC (2019) corresponding to the 3rd wave and whose results coincide with those of the 1st wave of 2020. In them, the General Media Study (EGM) places *El país* as the most widely read non-sports newspaper, followed by *El mundo* and *La vanguardia* in third place. Taking into account that the digital editions of the newspapers are updated throughout the day, the front page of the newspapers in their printed version has been chosen. As in many other researches (Kim and Chung, 2017; Niemeyer, 2019; Slakoffy Brennan, 2019) newspaper front pages have been considered as sufficiently significant and valid source to achieve the objectives of this research.

In total, 1,154 front page news items were reviewed and 405 elements belonging to 162 common news events were identified for analysis, which make up the sample of this study (125 news items from *El País*, 133 from *El Mundo* and 115 from *La Vanguardia*). Another 42 common news items belonging to issues such as obituaries and ephemeris not linked to current political events or to the Covid-19 crisis were found, which have been discarded due to their lack of relevance.

Cover photographs are considered to be of great relevance in the construction of the news story, and are the object of a specific analysis, so they have not been included in this study as elements of analysis. However, the emotional charge of the images belonging to the news items in the sample has been processed.

To elaborate the analysis instrument, we started from *framing* measurement tools already validated and used in numerous reference articles (Semetko and Valdenburg, 2000; Igartua et al, 2005a and 2005b; Igartua, 2007; Ardèvol-Abreu, 2015 and 2016). Following the qualitative immersion model proposed by Igartua et al, (2005b), for the elaboration of their ENI scale (Encuadres Noticiosos de la Inmigración), the record card was created to allow the collection of key words and expressions from the news of the sample. We also took into account the contributions of Noguera-Vivo (2006) on the analysis of *framing* in disaster information, as well as the considerations of Carter (2013) on the construction of reality.

The resulting analysis instrument or record card consists of 23 variables that are organized into 7 blocks (Table 1).

Table 1: Registration form.

Area of analysis	Corresponding variables
Block 1: Technical elements.	1. Date. 2. Medium. 3. News. 4. Subject area.
Block 2: Positioning and relevance.	5. Font size 6. Third part of the front page where the news item is located 7. Quarter/ space occupied by the news item
Block 3. Subjective elements	8. Qualitative identification of the thematic focus of the news event. 9. Evaluative nature. 10. Does a sensationalist nature emerge from the news story? 11. Highlighted emotional element, what is it? 12. Are any terms linked to literal war language used in the news item?
Block 4. Alarmist approach.	13. The message conveys pain or sadness. 14. The message conveys fear or alarm. 15. The message conveys an imminent danger of great magnitude. 16. The message conveys anger or rage. 17. Does the story suggest that the problem requires urgent action?
Block 5. Reassuring approach.	18. The message conveys calm, positivity or joy. 19. The message is reassuring or optimistic.
Block 6. Attack on the Government.	20. Does the story suggest that some level of government is responsible for the issue or problem? 21. Does the news item suggest a lack of confidence in the ability of institutions to provide effective responses to the issue or problem?
Block 7. Government Defense	22. Does the news story identify a hero who resolves or shows how to resolve the conflict? 23. Does the news story imply confidence in the ability of the institutions to provide effective responses to the issue or problem?

Source: *Own elaboration.*

Blocks 1 and 2 have been processed to extract descriptive information about the sample.

Block 3 accounts for the evaluative nature of the news and indicates the subjective tendency of the story. On the one hand, we analyzed whether the evaluative character was positive, negative or neutral. In addition, the subjective framework was computed in the news items with the presence of some of the resources identified: war terms, prominent emotional elements or the sensationalist character that emerges from the story.

Block 4 reflects the alarmist approach, reflecting the presence of at least two of the four indicators: pain/sadness, fear/alarm, imminent danger, anger/rage or urgent action is required. Block 5 reflects the reassuring approach to the news, it reflects the presence of one of the two indicators, the transmission of calm, positivity or joy and whether the message is reassuring.

Finally, in the last two blocks, 6 and 7, we have reflected the harm caused by the news approach to the government and its defense, with the verification of one of the two indicators recorded in each case.

The analysis contrasts the presence of the four approaches in the discourse by comparing them in the three selected newspapers using the Chi-square statistic. In addition, the simultaneous occurrence of several approaches obtained through the Contingency coefficient is tested. The aim is to find out whether the approaches of alarm and tranquility are associated with those of attack and defense of the institutions and politicians responsible.

To complete the study, and through a qualitative evaluation of the facts identified as alarmist or optimistic in a unanimous or differentiated manner, an attempt was made to ascertain the justification for these approaches.

Prior to the analysis of the results, the news items are classified according to the thematic area to which they belong: *Coronavirus progress in Spain (84 news items)*, *government management (149)*, *economic measures and repercussions of the health crisis (65)*, *educational measures and repercussions of the health crisis (11)*, *conflicts within the Executive or between it and the autonomous regions (30)* and *Catalan conflict (10)*. Other news items classified as *international (34)* have also been identified and selected to assess whether the evaluative nature of the news of the crisis is present when the news event is located outside our borders. The comparison of the news by newspaper shows that the coverage of each topic has been treated with the same frequency in the three newspapers analyzed (Chi-square = 3.415; I.g. =14; sig=0.998), in coherence with the selection procedure based on common news events.

Table 2. *Thematic classification of the news by newspaper*

News subject matter	<i>The country</i>	<i>The world</i>	<i>The vanguard</i>	Total
Virus progress	19,7%	21,4%	19,1%	20,1%
Government Management	35,2%	36,6%	35,1%	35,6%
Economic news	16,2%	13,1%	17,6%	15,6%

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Executive Conflicts	5,6%	7,6%	8,4%	7,2%
International news	9,2%	7,6%	7,6%	8,1%
Educational measures and repercussions	3,5%	2,8%	1,5%	2,6%
Catalan Conflict	2,1%	2,8%	2,3%	2,4%
Others	8,5	8,3%	8,4%	8,4%
Chi-square = 3.415; l.g.=14 sig. =.998				

Source: Own elaboration.

5. RESULTS

5.1. The evaluative nature of the news

The first approach to objectivity in the treatment of information is carried out by analyzing the evaluative nature of the news. As shown in Table 3, neutrality is present in half of the news items analyzed (50.5%), in 36% of the cases the evaluation is negative and the remaining 13.4% positive. When deciphering the thematic areas in which there is more neutrality in their treatment, we find international news, as would be expected, with 70.6% located in impartiality. In this same sense, the news about the government's management stands out, with a greater neutrality than that obtained by the sample as a whole. In the negative section, the economic news items stand out with a higher proportion, and in the positive section, the news items on the progress of the virus.

Table 3. Evaluative nature of the news by topic

News subject matter	Negative	Positive	Neutral	N
Virus progress	36,9%	23,8% ^a	39,3% ^b	84
Government Management	31,5%	10,1%	58,4% ^a	149
Economic news	49,2% ^a	13,8%	36,9%	65
Executive Conflicts	43,3%	10,0%	46,7%	30
International news	26,5%	2,9% ^b	70,6% ^a	34
Educational measures and repercussions	45,5%	0%	54,5%	11
Catalan Conflict	50,0%	0%	50%	10
Others	25,7%	22,9%	51,4%	35
Total	36,1%	13,4%	50,5%	418
Chi-square = 32.504; l.g.=14 sig. =.003				
Coefficient of Contingency = ,269 sig. =.003				

Source: Own elaboration.

Next, we test whether all the newspapers have maintained the same margin of impartiality in their news treatment. For this purpose, we compare the evaluative nature

of the set of news in the three newspapers. As can be seen in Table 4, the position maintained by the three newspapers analyzed differs from each other, and the differences are statistically significant (Chi-square = 52.660; l.g.=4 sig. =.000). The newspaper *El País* maintains a higher proportion of a positive assessment of the events than the other two newspapers, while showing less of the negative side of the news. On the other hand, the newspaper *El mundo* clearly maintains a greater negative view of the contents covered on its front pages, to the detriment of the news with a neutral approach. *La vanguardia* maintains a greater proportion of neutral stance and less presence of negative approaches, as does the newspaper *El país*.

Table 4. *Evaluative nature of the news by newspaper*

Evaluative nature	<i>The country</i>	The world	The vanguard	Total
Positive	23,1% ^a	6,9%	9,9% ^b	13,4%
Negative	25,2% ^b	55,6% ^a	25,2%	36,0%
Neutral	51,7%	36,6% ^b	64,9% ^a	50,6%
N	143	145	131	
Chi-square = 52.660; g.l.=4 sig. =.000				
Coefficient of Contingency =0.334 (sig. =.000)				
^a indicates that the percentage of the box is significantly higher than expected at a confidence level p<.05.				
^b indicates that the percentage of the box is significantly higher than expected at a confidence level of p<.05.				

Source: *Own elaboration.*

5.2. Approaches present in the news

The incidence of the approaches used in the content analysis is described below, the results of which are shown in Table 5. 46.5% of the news items analyzed were subjective in nature. The comparison between media evidences a clear association of sensationalism in the newspaper *El Mundo*, six out of ten news items published in this newspaper contain at least two elements linked to this interpretative framework. Meanwhile, *La Vanguardia* stands out for making a significantly more moderate use of this resource.

Within the alarmist framework, a third of the news items (29.6%) are framed, in which, once again, the newspaper *El mundo* stands out with the highest incidence of emergency calls in the treatment of information (42.1%). Once again, the newspaper *La vanguardia* resorts less frequently to this threatening framing.

The reassuring tone of the messages is found in 15.5% of the news items, with *El País* being the newspaper that most frequently resorts to calls for calm (26.6%), as opposed to *El Mundo*, which less frequently adopts these positive keys in its messages.

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The attribution of responsibility to the government is evident in 21.7% of the news items. In this approach, *El Mundo* stands out significantly with a frequency of 37.9%, while both *El País* and *La Vanguardia* significantly lower this level of attribution.

Finally, the defense of the government is identified in 11.5% of the information analyzed and there are no statistically significant differences between the three newspapers, although there is a tendency in *El País* to address more frequently this defensive stance towards the management of the Executive.

Table 5. News approaches by newspaper

	The country	The world	The vanguard	Total	Chi-square
Subjective approach	41,3% ^b	60,7% ^a	36,6%	46,5%	18,430 (,000)
Alarmist approach	24,5%	42,1% ^a	21,4% ^b	29,6%	16,876 (,000)
Reassuring approach	26,6% ^a	6,2%	13,7%	15,5%	17,969 (,000)
Attack on the Government	11,9% ^b	37,9% ^a	14,5% ^b	21,7%	34,556 (,000)
Government Defense	16,1%	11,0%	6,9%	11,5%	5,761 (,056)
^a indicates that the percentage of the box is significantly higher than expected at a confidence level $p < .05$. ^b indicates that the percentage of the box is significantly higher than expected at a confidence level of $p < .05$.					

Source: Own elaboration.

It was found that the alarmist approach appears more frequently linked to economic news, 56.9% of the economic news evoke messages associated with fear; this relationship is statistically significant (Chi-square = 44.145; $l.g.=7$ sig. =.000). In contrast, the reassuring approach is more associated with news about the advance of the virus; although this relationship does not reach statistical significance, this tendency can be seen in Table 6.

Table 6. Themes of the news under the alarmist and reassuring approaches

News subject matter	Alarmist approach	Reassuring approach
Virus progress	31,0%	23,8% ^a
Government Management	28,9%	16,8%
Economic news	56,9% ^a	16,9%
Executive Conflicts	33,3%	10,0%
International news	2,9%	2,9% ^b
Educational measures and repercussions	0,0%	0%
Catalan Conflict	20,0%	0%
Others	14,3%	11,4%
Total	29,6%	15,5%
Chi-square (sig.) / $gl=7$	44,145 (,000)	13,925 (,053)
Coefficient of Contingency (sig.)	,309 (,000)	,180 (,053)
^a indicates that the percentage of the box is significantly higher than expected at a		

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confidence level $p < .05$.
_b indicates that the percentage of the box is significantly higher than expected at a confidence level of $p < .05$.

Source: *Own elaboration.*

In order to examine whether the messages are constructed in an alarming or reassuring tone with the intention of harming or favoring the government, a contingency analysis was carried out to test the simultaneous concurrence of both approaches. To this end, we identified how many of the news items classified as alarmist coincide in attacking the Government (block 6), and how many of the reassuring ones reflect, in turn, a defense of the Government (block 7). This analysis has been carried out independently in each newspaper.

News with an alarmist approach is significantly associated with attacks on the government in the newspaper *El Mundo*, and in 55.7% of the news items with this approach there is also some reference to the government as being responsible. The Contingency coefficient obtained is 0.298, indicating a moderate and statistically significant association between both interpretative frameworks. In the other two newspapers, the independence of the attribution of responsibility to the executive and the alarm key is observed. On the other hand, when the news adopt the reassuring approach, there is also a defense of governmental decisions; this relationship is significant in the three newspapers. The contingency coefficient is 0.235 for *El País*, 0.392 for *La Vanguardia* and 0.481 for *El Mundo*.

Relationship between news focus and political intentionality by media outlet

	The world	The country	The vanguard	Total
Attack on the Government	Alarmist approach % (n)			
No	44,3% (27)	75,0% (21)	82,9% (29)	78,3% (328)
Yes	55,7% (34)	25,0% (7)	17,1% (6)	21,7% (91)
Contingency Coefficient (sig.)	.298 (.000)	.154 (.075)	.092 (.269)	
Defense to the Government	Reassuring approach %(n)			
No	22,2% (2) _b	77,8% (14) _b	57,9% (22) _b	88,5% (371)
Yes	77,8% (7) _a	22,2% (4) _a	42,1% (16) _a	11,5% (48)
Contingency Coefficient (sig.)	.481 (.000)	.235 (.006)	.392 (.000)	
_a indicates that the percentage of the box is significantly higher than expected at a confidence level $p < .05$. _b indicates that the percentage of the box is significantly higher than expected at a confidence level of $p < .05$.				

Source: Own elaboration.

5.3. The veracity of the alarm and the tranquility in news with the same approach

The study is completed with a qualitative evaluation of the facts narrated in the news items treated with alarm or tranquility in order to assess the need for such framing. It is observed that some of the news items that the three media have treated with alarmism include negative and extraordinary facts that could justify such framing, such as the situation of Spanish hospitals -especially the collapse of ICUs-, the paralysis of all essential activity, the loss of 900,000 jobs in Spain, the over 10,000 deaths and the numerous fatalities in old people's homes.

News about contagions among health workers, the situation of workers and companies, the decline in GDP or the lack of an educational agreement to manage the paralyzation of schools also coincide in the alarmism. Figure 1 shows an example of the alarm story in the three media, highlighting (as mentioned above) the contribution of photographs to its construction.



Figure 1. Covers of March 29, 2020.
Source: El país, El mundo, La vanguardia.

The seriousness may not be justified in news about the conflicts between *Pedro Sánchez* and *Pablo Casado*, in the criticism of the opposition and autonomous regions to the Government or in the pro-independence attitude of *Quim Torra* in the face of the crisis.

The news events recorded in the three newspapers always with a reassuring approach are: the arrival of retired doctors and students to reinforce the health system, the announcement of the Government's subsistence plan in the face of economic collapse, the decrease in hospitalizations, the increase in the number of recovered patients and the successive relief of the ICUs, as well as the announcement and the release of

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children to the streets and the reactivation of professional activity. All of these could be considered good news.

Figure 2 shows how the optimistic recovery figures highlighted by the three media are overshadowed by the cover images chosen:



Figure 2. Covers of April 2, 2020.
Source: *El país*, *El mundo*, *La vanguardia*.

5.4. The veracity of alarm and reassurance in news stories with different focus

The qualitative evaluation ends with a comparison of the news in which at least one media outlet presents an alarmist or reassuring frame, while another presents an approach contrary to the first or of a neutral nature.

As can be seen in Figure 3, the problems of sanitary material are dealt with calmly in *El país*, differing from *El mundo*. This tendency is repeated in *El Mundo*, which opts for a frame of indignation, and in *La Vanguardia*, which advocates neutrality. *El país* includes, in general, few references to the lack of sanitary material. It is noteworthy that on its March 18 front page it blames "La sanidad, incapace de carrying out the necessary tests", alluding to the professional sector and not to the Ministry of Health, as does *La vanguardia*: "Sanidad rectifica y volverá a hacer pruebas a casos leves" and, with greater insistence, *El mundo*.

The country also offers peace of mind when dealing with the circumstances of workers, unlike *La vanguardia* (Figure 3). This polarization does not justify any approach.

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Figure 3. Covers of March 25, 2020.
Source: *El país*, *El mundo*, *La vanguardia*.

El País reflects positively the polemic CIS of April "88% of those polled by the CIS ask for support to the Government" and *El Mundo* denounces the questions of the study, with the headline: "The Government uses the CIS to justify the censorship of the media". None of the frames is objective.

It can be seen that *El País* also unnecessarily reflects alarm in other news items, such as the distribution of patients among autonomous regions: "The autonomous health systems do not help each other to relieve the ICUs" as opposed to the neutrality employed by *La Vanguardia*: "Sanidad se plantea el reparto de pacientes entre autonomías" (Health system considers the distribution of patients among autonomous regions).

El Mundo reveals, as noted above, a sensationalist tendency in its alarm messages that reflects more indignation and anger than fear towards the events, as seen in its communication of the "ALARM IN DEFERRED" status on March 14, focused on the criticism of *Pedro Sánchez* and 8-M, while the other media pick up the measure.

If *El País* focuses on the hospital crisis with few references to the delay of protective material: "Spain exceeds 1000 deaths with ICUs in Madrid overflowing"; *El Mundo* insists on blaming the Government, placing itself in the alert and, again, in indignation: "The ICUs collapse but Health still does not guarantee the material", or "Treasury helps the Autonomous Communities in the face of the logistic chaos of Health". Days later, the same trend will be adopted with the imposition of masks in the so-called "economic unhibernation".

The evolution of the virus is objectively reported in *El País*: "The epidemic spreads", and *La Vanguardia*: "The virus leaves the streets deserted", but is transformed by *El Mundo* into an explicit attack on the Government for the late response to the coronavirus: "45

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days of lack of foresight and passivity that allowed the virus to strike. The Government's management step by step. Doctors alerted on January 30 and there was no reaction". It vindicates (Figure 4) the official mourning and reflects differences with *El País* in its account of the pact between the Government and the *Partido Popular*.



Figure 4. Covers of April 21, 2020.
Source: *El país*, *El mundo*, *La vanguardia*.

The avant-garde reflects, on occasions, more forceful approaches than those chosen by the other media, without any harmful or beneficial reference to third parties, but also without a justified treatment of gravity.

6. DISCUSSION

As in this one, in previous pandemic crises it has already been shown that adequate information can help to solve problems, but information saturation can be counterproductive (Cayón Nieto, 2009; Collinson, Khan and Heffernan, 2015). We have studies on the different role of conventional media and social networks, and their credibility (Austin, Fisher and Jin, 2012), and even, already a decade ago, studies can be found on the potential of Twitter as a tracking and surveillance system to carry out infodemiology studies in the 2009-2010 influenza A pandemic (Chew and Eysenbach, 2010). In pandemics, the media are required to help minimize risks (Brown, 2020) and contribute to their solution with truthful information. It would be a matter of combating disinformation from less reliable sources, never hiding or disguising information to avoid, much less provoke, panic. Even social networks such as Facebook or Twitter, which usually allow political disinformation, have been required to adopt more controlled positions with medical disinformation.

Both in health crises and in relevant political and social events, one of the major concerns of communication research has always been the weighting of the evaluative

tone of the news (Zunino, 2016). From the Agenda Setting and Framing theory, this dimension of analysis has been addressed in multiple works on media coverage in our country. In addition to political campaigns, a recurring theme, aspects such as immigration (Igartua, 2007; Igartua et al., 2014); social exclusion groups (Fernández-Fernández, 2012); the Arab world (Corralgarcía and Fernández-Romero, 2015); vaccines (Cuesta-Cambra and Gaspar-Herrero, 2014; Cuesta-Cambra et al., 2019; Catalán-Matamoros and Peñafiel-Saiz, 2019); refugee displacement (Sánchez Castillo, and Zarauza-Valero, 2020); hunger in Spain (Marín-Murillo et al., 2020, or electoral processes (Pérez-Curiel et al., 2020).

In the information during the COVID-19 pandemic, we found, like Masip et al. (2020), a clear ideological bias in the Spanish media, in obvious alignment and linkage with the economic and political powers. We have also seen how sensationalist information has sometimes generated unnecessary social alarm, and that the pandemic has been exploited for the dissemination of numerous false political and governmental contents. (Salaverría et al., 2020).

Although the potential of traditional media and social networks for the informal education of citizens has been sufficiently demonstrated (Pereira et al, 2019), especially in pandemic situations, those responsible for these media do not consider education as one of their priority functions. This lack of sensitivity would not be attributable to information professionals, since, when analyzing media influence, it is necessary to distinguish between journalistic practice, conditioned by the network of pressures, influences and favors established between economic power, political power and the press (Jiménez-García, 2019), from the ideals and opinions of journalists about their functions, which do not usually coincide (Roses-Campos and Humanes, 2019). Also to have an impact on the recognition of the media as an essential activity during the crisis of this pandemic, a consideration not very consistent with the map of ERTes in the communication sector (CNT, 2020). In any case, the need to train not only in digital competence (Marta-Lazo et al., 2020), but also in media education for information and communication professionals is detected. According to De-Frutos-Torres et al (2020), the priority training areas are not in technical aspects of the media, but in ethical and deontological issues and risk prevention.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The majority of communication studies on framing confirm, as in the research presented here, that the media offer content on social reality that they represent and present, selected according to certain interests, and that, with the way they present and represent, they not only determine the public agenda, but also the trends of opinion on current affairs and the behavior of the citizenry.

From the results obtained, we can conclude that the alarmist treatment has not been due to the objectivity of the news events reported, but to the political ideology assumed by the media, since, faced with the same facts, *El Mundo* includes more alarmist news and in half of them takes the opportunity to criticize the Government, while *La*

Vanguardia does so in one out of every four news items and *El País* in one out of every six.

If under the use of alarmism there is an intention to attack the Government, which is clearly evidenced in the newspaper *El Mundo*, the calm approach, linked to the health news, has not been used in a partisan way by any of the newspapers, although *El País* is the media that has conveyed more calm on its front pages. The ideological and political interest of the media prevails over social responsibility even in situations of health crisis, and more coverage is given to economic management than to the health aspects of the crisis.

Not without a certain nostalgia we recall the functions that the first director of the BBC attributed to this pioneering institution: to inform, educate and entertain. Nor, according to our study, is too much importance given in the press to the educational function of the media or to the repercussions of the health crisis in education, a subject on which only 9 news items are recorded in the two months, with no significant focus. Therefore, we must conclude that, in very few cases, the media assume their educational function.

In the introduction we pointed out the challenges that the COVID-19 crisis has brought to the media for what has been called the "new normality". In addition to investigative work, it is necessary to recover credibility with truthful and objective information, perhaps only possible with economic independence. In this precarious situation, in addition to concrete actions to ensure the right of citizens to a free and public service press, future research will be necessary to try to answer these questions: What will be the "new normality" of the press; will the media survive the crisis brought about by Covid-19 while guaranteeing the independence of information; what social and educational responsibility corresponds to the media?

Allow us to ask one more question as a final reflection: The professionalism, ethics, integrity and social responsibility that many political leaders do not seem to be demonstrating in this COVID-19 crisis, who can and should demand it from communication professionals?

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