



MEDIA DISSEMINATION OF AUTISM IN THE INFORMATIVE CONTEXT OF SPANISH PUBLIC TELEVISION

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Abstract

Research has shown the impact of news coverage on audiences. However, the accessibility bias also has an impact on the behaviour of the population. For this reason, this research aims to find out what information practices are being carried out by the media that can enhance knowledge about the autism spectrum disorder, facilitating the inclusion of this group. Given the quantitative nature of this research, it is determined to carry out a case study of the Spanish public television news through the analysis of the coverage on autism in La 1. The database has been elaborated with the information provided by the Fundación Ciudadana Civio. It was found that there is a positive evolution in the attention paid to autism, resulting in an increase in the number of mentions. On the other hand, the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the difficulties to return to pre-pandemic results have been found. In view of the above, the research on the informative coverage of autism is key for the inclusion of this collective in society: that the cabinets of the ASD associations know in detail the aspects that make it more probable that TVE echoes their data, as

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well as to show the media a diagnosis of the situation, will allow deepening the knowledge and will facilitate the inclusion of people belonging to the autistic spectrum.

Keywords:

public television, autism, information, public opinion, audiences.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that globally, one out of every hundred children is part of the autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) population (WHO, 2023). Over the past decade, a significant increase in the number of diagnosed individuals has been observed, with a prevalence of around 1%-1.5% (Barthélémy *et al.*, 2019). The diagnosis of ASD is a complex process due to its heterogeneity. There are multiple patterns, which is why it is referred to as the autistic spectrum (Baña, 2015). This is further compounded by changes in diagnostic criteria and the absence of official censuses in many territories until very recent times. Spain, for example, lacked official data on autism prevalence until 2015 (Confederación Autismo España, 2019).

Public knowledge about a topic is influenced by the information included in the media agenda (Cuesta-Cambra *et al.*, 2008), known as the Agenda Setting Theory (Rodríguez-Virgili y Serrano-Puche, 2019). This theory forms the conceptual framework for this study. In the case at hand, Gómez-Marí *et al.* (2023) noted in a study conducted in Spain about the sources of knowledge regarding ASD among future educators that 64% stated that television was the primary source of information about autism, with television series being the main cultural product. This highlights the importance of how autism is portrayed in these media. In fact, the content disseminated about ASD influences the social perception that the population holds about this community (Pesonen *et al.*, 2021). The media not only inform but also shape public opinion among their audiences, transitioning from mere informers to creators of public opinion (Lacruz-Pérez *et al.*, 2020).

Increased media coverage of autism can, in turn, lead to greater public awareness of the topic and influence the social representation held by the audience regarding how autistic individuals are and how they behave, thereby facilitating full inclusion (Rodríguez *et al.*, 2021). Raising awareness about the needs and demands of this community in contrast to neurotypical population promotes their inclusion in society (Fundación A La Par, 2018; Tárraga-Mínguez *et al.*, 2020). This is the known accessibility bias that results in people's behaviors being influenced by the information they tend to remember more easily, with mass media information being the most accessible to the population (Iyengar, 1990).

Due to this influence, various studies have focused on analyzing the attention that the media give to autism, with some specifically focusing on interest from television (Kang, 2013; Morgan, 2019). These investigations are usually approached from three perspectives: firstly, there are studies conducted from the framing perspective (Baroutsis *et al.*, 2021; Miller, 2019). As the name suggests, they focus on analyzing media representation through framing. These studies address aspects such as the tone of the coverage (Pesonen *et al.*, 2021; Yén-Khanh, 2023). Secondly, in a similar analytical vein, there are studies that examine the impact of these frames on the autistic population (Jones, 2022). Finally, the third perspective is the analysis of the agenda setting, which studies the appearance and extent of media coverage (Mo-Jang *et al.*, 2019). Among these three, this third perspective is probably the least explored in the case of autism but has been approached from the field of disability (Haller, 2019) or in terms of the coverage given to the neurodiversity approach (Yücel, 2023).

The Spanish Association of Autism Professionals (in Spanish, Asociación Española de Profesionales del Autismo, (AETAPI) (2011), in response to the demands of families of individuals with autism and professionals, has developed a series of recommendations to convey an objective and positive view of autism through the media. This protocol aims to inform journalists and communication professionals about the myths surrounding autism, as well as the main mistakes made in media coverage. These errors can distance the audience from the possibility of approaching the topic with empathy. The protocol also includes proposals to enhance understanding, focusing on professional training, specialization in the subject matter, and avoiding sensationalism, among other suggestions.

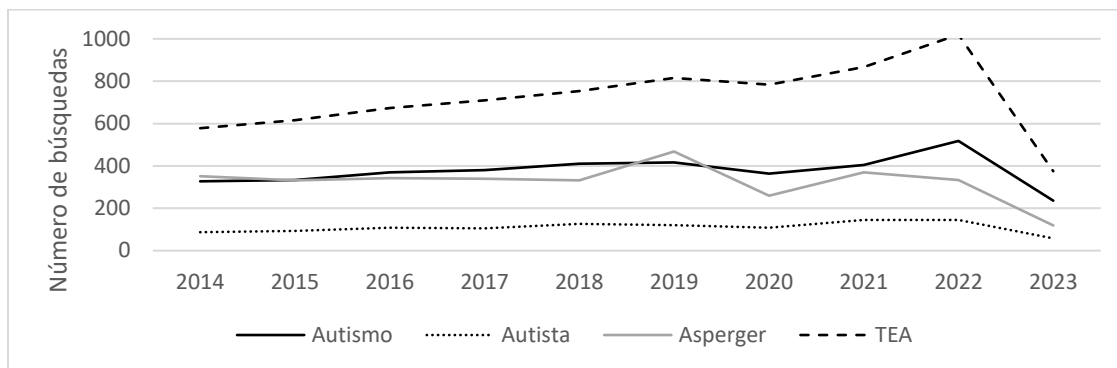
As mentioned earlier, research indicates that in Spain, significant sources of information about autism include television series such as "The Good Doctor" and "Atypical," which are associated with a social and inclusive perspective, showcasing the first-hand experiences of autistic individuals and the injustices they face (Gómez-Marí *et al.*, 2023). Similarly, research conducted in the United States suggests that television tends to frame autism as a problem, with healthcare professionals being one of the most frequently used sources of information by American television journalists, followed by family members of autistic individuals and the individuals themselves (Kang, 2013). Studies in Saudi Arabia also emphasize this aspect, highlighting that in a traditional society, how the media portrays autism influences the audience (Sulaimani and Daghustani, 2022). Therefore, if autism is presented as a disorder, it contributes to the stigma surrounding this community (Sulaimani and Daghustani, 2022).

In this context, researchers Bie and Tang (2015) argue that the media are one of the primary channels through which the population learns about autism. They note that a lack of understanding and knowledge about autism negatively affects diagnosis, treatment, and the associated stigmas, particularly in the case of China. Similarly, analyses of the presence and evolution of autism in the Spanish press show an increase in media coverage, indicating a growing interest in raising awareness about autism spectrum disorder and the importance of informative treatment, as well as the narrative style used in content creation (Lacruz-Pérez *et al.*, 2022). Studies on how people with disabilities perceive their representation in the media suggest that they feel more visible, but the information conveyed by the media about disability is characterized as "biased, stereotyped, depersonalized, and presents people with disabilities as a homogeneous group" (Vázquez-Barrio *et al.*, 2021, p. 1).

Analyzing the media can reveal the interest of mass media in autism among the population, the attention they pay through their coverage, and the framing from which they provide information. However, interest in a topic can also be understood through the choices made by the audience regarding information consumption. Additionally, other studies related to the interest generated by autism among the population focus on analyzing internet searches related to this topic. In the specific case of Google usage, data shows that public attention to autism is seasonal and predictable (Tárraga-Mínguez *et al.*, 2020).

In this context, as the starting point for the research, an investigation was conducted into the level of interest that autism arouses in the public. A Google Trends search confirmed that there was an increase in internet users' interest in autism until the end of 2019, leading to searches for information on this topic through Google (Figure 1). However, during the first year of the pandemic, public interest declined.

Figure 1. Search for information about autism on the Google website.



Source: Own elaboration based on Google Trends data. <https://acortar.link/MjL7BZ>

The detailed information provided above highlights the significance of analyzing the informational inclusion of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) by Spanish public television and its connection to the interest exhibited by Spanish society in this subject. This study questions whether there is a relationship between the decline in interest and the news coverage provided by *La 1* of RTVE during the pandemic. It also seeks to determine if the news coverage is occurring consistently within the television medium. Therefore, the following research questions have been posed in this investigation: What level of attention does Spanish public television devote to autism in its news broadcasts? Has this attention increased or decreased over time, particularly in the last decade? What has been the evolution of this coverage in the past decade? When does autism receive the most attention? Are there specific months when autism tends to receive less visibility?

2. OBJETIVES

The purpose of this study is to address and delve into the aforementioned questions, providing answers to the evolution of news coverage offered by the Spanish state public television over time. The analysis will focus on *La 1* of TVE's news broadcasts from January 2014 to well into the year 2023.

The research aims to understand the evolution of news coverage about autism in Spanish public television and assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve this, the following specific objectives have been formulated:

- O1: Quantify the prominence of information related to Autism Spectrum Disorder in *La 1* of RTVE's news broadcasts from January 2014 to April 23, 2023.
- O2: Determine the months in which autism receives greater attention in television news throughout this period.
- O3: Identify any periods of time when autism is not covered or receives minimal attention.

The hypotheses proposed in this research are as follows:

- H1: The coverage of autism in *La 1* of TVE's news broadcasts shows an upward trend over time.
- H2: Attention to autism in TVE's news broadcasts is seasonal, with periods when autism virtually disappears from the news agenda.
- H3: The significance of the pandemic resulted in reduced attention to autism in news media.

3. METHODOLOGY

This is a case study of the information broadcast by Spanish Television (TVE) about autism in the Newscast of *La 1*. Television has been selected as the medium for analysis due to its high viewership, with 78.5% of the audience (second only to internet usage) (EGM, 2022). *La 1* of TVE is the public channel with the highest consumption of minutes per viewer, averaging 10.6 minutes per day (AIMC, 2022).

For this research, information aired on TVE1's Newscast has been collected over nearly 10 years, from January 2014 (the first available information through the *Fundación Ciudadana Civio* website) to April 23, 2023. This time frame has been chosen to provide a conclusive understanding of how the coverage of autism has evolved (Bie and Tang, 2014), with the study concluding shortly after World Autism Awareness Day (April 2). By using this temporal criterion, potential bias in the selection of information due to seasonality and a lower number of news items during the summer months is avoided.

This study employs a quantitative content analysis through terminological and temporal axes (Arévalo-Salinas *et al.*, 2021). The analysis corpus includes information aired during the 3 PM and 9 PM Newscasts. Information has been obtained using the Verba Volant database provided by the *Fundación Ciudadana Civio*, which contains transcripts of TVE1's Newscasts (Matarín, 2020; Arévalo Salinas *et al.*, 2021). Information retrieval was filtered using the following descriptors: autism (referring to the disorder itself), autistic (focusing on the individual), ASD (common abbreviation for Autism Spectrum Disorder), and Asperger (adding another variable commonly associated with autism). Asperger's syndrome is a neurodevelopmental disorder that used to be distinguished from autism but is now considered part of the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) (Confederación Autismo España, 2018). This resulted in an analysis corpus consisting of 335 mentions related to autism spectrum disorder.

4. RESULTS

The results of this research are presented in two main axes: the evolution of the media's focus on autism and a description of how attention is given to this topic.

Initially, the study explores how the attention to autism in the news broadcasts of *La 1* of TVE has evolved over nearly ten years. Within this analysis, the research examines whether the COVID-19 pandemic has had any impact on this news coverage and, if so, how that impact has manifested. It investigates whether the pandemic has shifted the focus of attention more towards this community or, conversely, led to its invisibility.

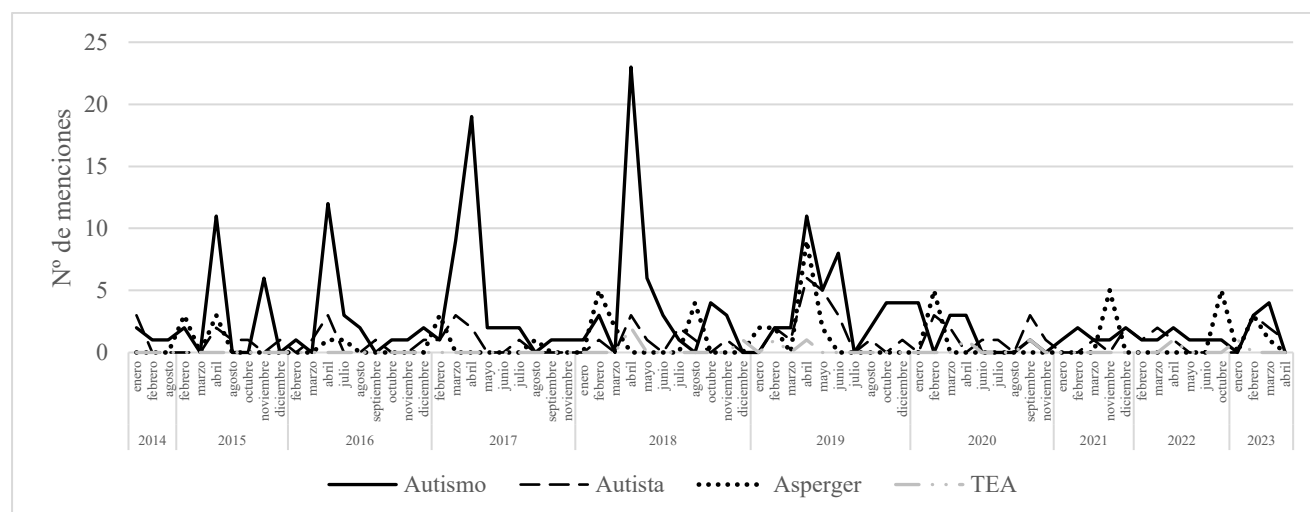
Subsequently, the research delves into whether attention to autism is seasonal and identifies periods of the year when this topic receives more attention. It also investigates the time periods when autism disappears from the news agenda and whether there are established patterns or if these are isolated cases.

4.1. Evolution of News Coverage of Autism and the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Media Agenda

Figure 2 provides a detailed overview of the evolution of the appearance of each of the analyzed terms and the overall media attention, illustrating the influence of specific events (Figure 2). It is evident that there has been media attention on this topic over the years analyzed. The highest peaks

of interest are consistently in the month of April each year, coinciding with the main events related to World Autism Awareness Day. April 2018 stands out with 23 mentions of the term "autism."

Figure 2. Evolution of mentions of the term "autism" in the media agenda of La 1 of TVE.



Source: Own elaboration based on data from Fundación Ciudadana Civio.

<https://verba.civio.es/?q=autismo#search-box>

The term most commonly used to refer to this disorder is "autism," with a total of 196 mentions. This initial orientation suggests a lack of personalization in the information focusing on the presentation of the disorder (which should be addressed in future research through a content analysis of the news broadcasts). The remaining terms are used less frequently, with similar frequencies among them (73 mentions for "autistic," 57 for "asperger," and 9 for "ASD").

Furthermore, Table 1 complements the information provided in Figure 2, showing how Autism Spectrum Disorder has gradually gained more mentions in the news agenda over time. Starting in 2015, there is a significant increase of over 20 points in mentions on TVE compared to the previous year regarding Autism Spectrum Disorder. However, the years 2018 (with 67 mentions) and 2019 (with 74 mentions) represent the peak of news coverage. Out of the entire series analyzed, 2019 stands out as the year with the highest number of mentions on TVE1 (Table 1).

From 2020 onwards, mentions in general significantly decreased. This trend continued in the following two years, likely due to the impact of COVID-19 dominating the agenda setting.

Table 1. *Number of mentions per year.*

Year	Autism	Autistic	Asperger	ASD	Total
2014	4	3	0	0	7
2015	19	5	6	0	30
2016	22	6	2	0	30
2017	37	7	4	0	48
2018	44	9	11	3	67
2019	38	19	15	2	74
2020	11	11	5	2	29
2021	7	3	5	0	15
2022	7	4	5	1	17
Until 23rd of April 2023	7	6	4	1	18
Total	196	73	57	9	335

Source: *Own elaboration based on data from Fundación Ciudadana Civio.*

The peak in news coverage of the term "autism" occurred in 2018 with 44 mentions (Table 1). Although to a lesser extent, the term "autistic," which refers in the first person to the individual, providing personalized visibility, also increased until the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, reaching 19 mentions during 2019 (Table 1).

The COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on autism coverage in TVE1's news broadcasts. During the year 2020, the number of mentions for all the analyzed terms referring to Autism Spectrum Disorder dropped below the levels of the earlier years on record. Specifically, mentions of the term "autism" decreased by 27 points, "autistic" by 8, "asperger" by 10, while the descriptor "ASD" remained with 2 mentions. Since then, within what can be considered the pandemic period, mentions have continued to decline, dropping from 74 mentions at the end of 2019 to 17 mentions by the end of 2022. In the early months of 2023, there have already been more mentions than throughout the entire previous year, suggesting a potential upward trend once again.

Despite 2018 having the highest number of mentions, it's also the year with more months in which there were no mentions. This indicates that autism coverage does not follow a consistent pattern throughout the year, showing a tendency for mentions to concentrate in only a few months while being virtually nonexistent or very low in others.

4.2. Seasonal Attention to Autism in the Media Agenda

Analyzing the frequency of appearance for each month in the total publication timeline reveals that autism receives more attention on TVE1 during the early months of the year. The highest number of mentions occurs in April, with a total of 117 mentions of some term related to Autism Spectrum Disorder (autism 81, autistic 18, asperger 13, and ASD 5), followed by February with 49 mentions and March with 35. It's worth noting that this coincides with the date of World Autism Awareness Day (April 2nd).

Table 2. *Timeline of mentions of each term by months and years.*

Timeline of mentions of the term autism												
Months	N.º Mentions	N.º years	Years									
January	8	4 years	2014				2018		2020	2021		
February	16	9 years	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019		2021	2022	2023
March	20	8 years		2015	2016	2017		2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
April	81	7 years		2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020		2022	
May	14	4 years				2017	2018	2019			2022	
June	14	4 years				2017	2018	2019			2022	
July	6	4 years			2016	2017	2018	2019				
August	5	3 years	2014		2016			2019				
September	2	2 years				2017			2020			
October	10	4 years			2016		2018	2019			2022	
November	12	5 years		2015	2016	2017	2018			2021		
December	8	3 years			2016			2019		2021		
Total	196	10 years										
Timeline of mentions of the term autistic												
Months	N.º Mentions	N.º years	Years									
January	3	1 year	2014									
February	11	6 years				2017	2018	2019	2020		2022	2023
March	12	7 years			2016	2017		2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
April	18	7 years		2015	2016	2017	2018	2019			2022	2023
May	6	2 years					2018	2019				
June	4	2 years						2019	2020			
July	4	3 years				2017	2018		2020			
August	3	3 years		2015			2018	2019				
September	4	2 years			2016				2020			
October	1	1 year		2015								
November	2	2 years					2018		2020			
December	5	4 years		2015	2016			2019		2021		
Total	73	10 years										
Timeline of mentions of the term asperger												
Months	N.º Mentions	N.º years	Years									
January	2	1 year						2019				
February	21	5 years		2015		2017		2019	2020			2023
March	3	2 years					2018					2023
April	13	3 years		2015	2016			2019				
May	2	1 year						2019				
June	0	0 years										
July	1	1 year			2016							
August	5	2 years				2017	2018					
September	0	0 years									2022	
October	5	1 year										
November	5	1 year								2021		
December	0	0 years										
Total	57	10 years										
Timeline of mentions of the term ASD												
Months	N.º Mentions	N.º years	Years									
January	0	0 years										
February	1	1 year						2019				
March	0	0 years										

April	5	4 years					2018	2019	2020		2022	
May	0	0 years										
June	0	0 years										
July	0	0 years										
August	0	0 years										
September	1	1 year							2020			
October	0	0 years										
November	0	0 years										
December	1	1 year					2018					
Total	8	10 years										

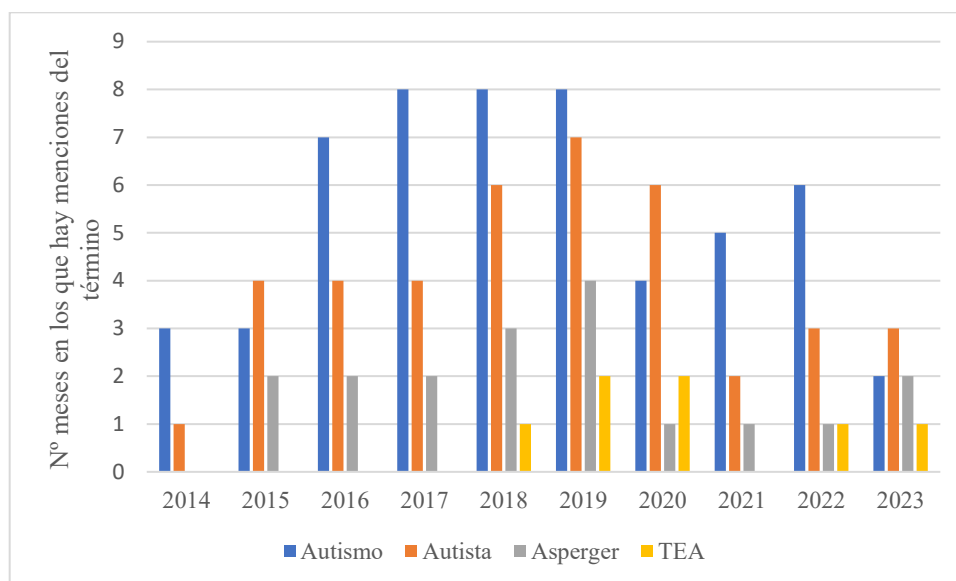
Source: *Own elaboration based on data from Fundación Ciudadana Civio.*

By descriptors, out of the 196 mentions of the term "autism" from 2014 to April 2023, 59.7% occurred during the months of February, March, and April. A similar pattern is observed for the term "autistic," with 56.16% of the 73 mentions falling in these same months. Regarding the descriptor "asperger," the majority of mentions were made during February and April (59.64%). In the case of the term "ASD," which has the fewest mentions, its highest coverage is also in April (62.5%). September is the month with the least attention given to this topic, with only 7 mentions over these nearly ten years, accounting for 2.10% of the total mentions on this topic. The year with the most coverage of Autism Spectrum Disorder in September was 2020. Additionally, the summer months, July (3.3%) and August (3.9%), as well as the end (4.2%) and beginning of the year, December (3.9%), have the fewest mentions.

It's also worth noting that February and April are represented in the majority (52.5%) of the years studied. Thus, the term "autism" appears in February in eight out of the nearly ten years studied.

Figure 3 displays the years in which the terms "autism," "autistic," "asperger," and "ASD" were mentioned in a greater number of months. It's evident that from 2017 to 2019, the months with the highest coverage for the term "autism" remained constant at 8 months. In the case of the terms "autistic" and "asperger," they also started appearing in a greater number of months in 2018 and 2019. The term "ASD" followed a similar pattern in 2019 and 2020.

Figure 3. Number of months per year in which the terms "autism" "autistic," "asperger," and "ASD" are mentioned on TVE1.



Source: Own elaboration based on data from Fundación Ciudadana Civio.

The year 2019 stands out as the year with the highest news coverage of Autism Spectrum Disorder on TVE1, with an average of 5.25 months in which coverage was provided through any of the analyzed terms.

It's also noticeable that during the years of the greatest impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, Autism Spectrum Disorder is represented only through the term "autism," which is the most commonly used term in the news, and it is only mentioned in four of the twelve months, mainly during the early months of the year. A similar pattern is observed for the term "asperger," which in 2020 is mentioned only during February. However, in that year, the term "autistic" received significant coverage.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this research, the objectives set at the beginning have been met. Thus, we have been able to delve into the media agenda of Spanish public television, understanding the attention it pays to autism in its news broadcasts. In line with the analyses by Tárraga-Mínguez *et al.* (2020), it is evident that the interest shown by internet users in this topic, where spikes of attention can be considered stable, predictable, and linked to certain periods or months within the year. Thus, it is observed that on the path towards greater visibility of the autistic community and the audience's knowledge of autism, social events, campaigns related to World Autism Awareness Day, and specific dates play a significant role. As detailed earlier, most mentions occur during the month of April (35%). According to Tárraga-Mínguez *et al.* (2020), this event can be used as a strategic axis in spreading messages in favor of visibility and inclusion of the community. In fact, in this case, it has been observed that media attention to autism is practically limited to dates related to World Autism Awareness Day (April 2), with mentions typically increasing during the last week of March due to its proximity. This shows that, despite having a presence throughout the year, interest is linked only to the aspect that makes the topic extraordinary, such as its day of celebration, during which individuals are presented as special. However, it is regrettable that the media does not remember to include a perspective oriented towards autism in common topics that arise throughout the year.

The main results obtained in this research indicate that news coverage of autism occurs unevenly, with a higher level of interest during the early months of the year, gradually diminishing in the middle of the year, and seeming to rebound at the end. Analyzing the evolution of attention to this topic, it is striking to observe the existence of months in which, over the years, there is virtually no reference to autism. The case of September is paradigmatic because over the years analyzed, there have only been mentions during one period (2017), traditionally a time when no coverage has been given to autism. This shows that during the back-to-school period in Spain, autism has never garnered attention on TVE, with virtually no coverage throughout these years.

Regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the media agenda, it is noteworthy that the pandemic had a negative impact on media attention to autism in the news broadcasts of *La 1* on TVE. From 2016 until the onset of the pandemic, autism was consistently covered in the news almost throughout the year, appearing in eight out of twelve months. However, with the arrival of COVID-19, this trend changed, reducing its appearance by half. In recent years, it seems that the trend is reversing, but it is necessary to wait for more time to confirm this.

In contrast of the hypotheses presented in this research, it can be noted that they have been fulfilled to a greater or lesser extent. Thus, concerning H1: the dissemination of autism in the news broadcasts of *La 1* on TVE shows an upward trend, it can be indicated that until the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, this evolution was positive. Likewise, in the post-pandemic period, there is evidence of a resurgence.

Similarly, it has been confirmed that H2 is met: the attention paid to autism in TVE's news broadcasts is seasonal, with periods in which autism practically disappears from the news agenda. Data analysis has shown that during the middle months of the year, this topic disappears from the media agenda, as is the case in September. Regarding the third hypothesis, it has been found that the pandemic had a negative impact on the attention given to autism, reducing its appearance in the news agenda.

Among the limitations of this study, it should be noted that this research is limited to the media agenda through the analysis of agenda setting. A more in-depth analysis of news coverage will require content analysis of these news broadcasts, as well as the frames used. In this regard, it has not been possible to determine whether the coverage of autism has been carried out from the perspective of the autism spectrum disorder or from a more personalized approach focused on the individual. Regarding news coverage, research focused on the press generally indicates limited inclusion of autistic individuals as information sources in news stories (Huws and Jones, 2011; Bie and Tang 2015). As a future line of research, it is considered relevant to analyze the inclusion of these individuals as information sources in Spanish television news broadcasts, as well as the tone of news coverage and the main thematic issues related to autism. It would also be of interest to investigate the motivations that lead viewers to seek information about autism, as well as to determine the role played by variables such as awareness of stereotypical behaviors, recognition of associated conditions, or seeking a diagnosis.

Furthermore, taking into account the research by Caldevilla *et al.* (2019), it is known that digital social media facilitate the establishment of nodes among people who interact and share information, contributing to the dissemination of relevant information for the community. Therefore, it is pertinent to analyze the strategies for disseminating content related to autism by TVE's news broadcasts on digital social media and to study the interactions of priority nodes, establishing a virtual community of shared information and knowledge about autism.

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