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THE COVID-19 ON THE FRONT PAGES OF NATIONAL NEWSPAPERS IN SPAIN

La COVID-19 en las portadas de los diarios de difusión nacional en España

María Monjas Eleta¹

University of Valladolid. Spain.
mariamon@hmca.uva.es

Alejandro Rodríguez Holguín

University of Valladolid. Spain
arodriguezholquin97@gmail.com

Alicia Gil-Torres

University of Valladolid. Spain.
alicia.gil@uva.es

Abstract

This research analyses the treatment of the COVID-19 pandemic on the front pages of the newspapers *ABC*, *El País*, *El Mundo*, *La Razón* and *La Vanguardia* during the months of February, March and April 2020. The analysis allows us to compare similarities and differences while observing the evolution in this period. Content analysis is used to determine the space and importance of the topic within the covers, as well as the issues being addressed, who the protagonists are in the headlines or photographs and the lexicon they use. The analysis focuses on how events are communicated while uncovering differences in approach and style between national headlines. The results and conclusions show that the information about COVID-19 gains prominence and takes up more space on the front pages as the weeks go by, and graphics and infographics are included as the incidence of COVID-19 increases. It can also be seen from the analysis of the covers that the issues addressed by the newspapers vary over time, as does the vocabulary used, which is characteristic of each medium

Keywords: Pandemic; COVID-19; Coronavirus; Spain; Newspapers; Front page; Headlines.

¹ Corresponding author: María Monjas Eleta. mariamon@hmca.uva.es Professor of Journalism Degree Universidad de Valladolid

Resumen

Esta investigación analiza el tratamiento de la pandemia de COVID-19 en las portadas de los diarios *ABC*, *El País*, *El Mundo*, *La Razón* y *La Vanguardia* durante los meses de febrero, marzo y abril de 2020. El análisis permite comparar similitudes y diferencias a la vez que se observa la evolución en este período. Se recurre al análisis de contenido para determinar el espacio y la importancia del tema dentro de las portadas, así como los asuntos que se abordan, quiénes son los protagonistas en los titulares o fotografías y el léxico que emplean. El análisis se centra en la forma en que se comunican los acontecimientos acaecidos a la vez que se descubren las diferencias de criterio y estilo entre cabeceras de difusión nacional. Los resultados y conclusiones muestran que la información acerca de la COVID-19 gana protagonismo y ocupa más espacio en las portadas con el paso de las semanas y se incluyen gráficos e infografías a medida que la incidencia de la COVID-19 es mayor. También se puede apreciar tras el análisis de las portadas que los asuntos abordados por parte de los diarios varían con el tiempo, al igual que el vocabulario empleado es característico de cada medio.

Palabras clave: Pandemia; COVID-19; Coronavirus; España; Diarios; Portadas; Titulares.

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1. INTRODUCTION

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), COVID-19 originated on December 31, 2019 in Wuhan, China. On March 11, WHO declared the COVID-19 epidemic a global pandemic due to its global incidence. More than 118,000 cases in 114 countries and 4291 people died due to COVID-19. In Spain, on March 14, the President of the Government, Pedro Sanchez, decrees the State of Alarm provided for in Article 116 of the Constitution, which contemplates the intervention of the Executive to take severe restriction measures on the daily activity of citizens. By this date, the virus had already affected 5,753 people, 136 died and 293 were admitted to the ICU (Department of Homeland Security, 2020). In the following weeks, there were six extensions of the State of Alarm, proposed by the government and approved by the Congress of Deputies. At 00:00 hours on June 21, this exceptional situation came to an end with much more lax measures, the so-called "new normality".

This article deals with the treatment of this health crisis through the front pages of the five main national newspapers between February and April. The front page is the space in which the newspaper shows most clearly the task of inclusion, exclusion and hierarchization of protagonists and current affairs (Borrat, 2003, López Rabadán and

Casero Ripollés, 2012). The front page of the newspaper competes and complements other media, since audiovisual news also echoes the front pages of newspapers and the front page news is read twice as often as the inside pages.

In this way, the definition of the contents of the front page contributes to the establishment of the agenda setting, the process by which the media present more frequently and relevantly certain issues that the public perceives as more important than others (McCombs, 2006). In a situation of global health crisis, with hitherto unknown social and economic repercussions, such as the one addressed in this study, the analysis of the front pages allows us to observe which issues or agents are included in the media agenda.

1.1. Health crises in the media

The treatment of health crises by the media has been addressed on different occasions together with the communication policy of the health authorities. In the case of the Spanish media, the media coverage of various crises such as the so-called "mad cow" crisis in 2000 (Francescutti, 2003) or the swine flu of 2009 and the E. Coli bacterium (Villafranca, 2012) have been analyzed. In the study of health information and crises, the so-called Quiral Report (2008), which for almost two decades has studied the news coverage of various diseases and crises, stands out.

The most recent of these health emergencies in Spain was the Ebola crisis in 2014, which was the subject of several analyses somewhat similar to the one undertaken in this paper, although with differences. For example, González and Cambra (2015) analyze the treatment of this crisis in the main national newspapers while Monjas-Eleta and Gil-Torres (2019) address the study of both national and regional press front pages and institutional communication by the Ministry of Health.

The appearance and spread of a serious infectious disease is a paradigm of a news crisis, understood as a situation that "occurs by surprise, abruptly alters daily professional habits and requires an extra effort of human and technical resources to effectively cover the news emergency" (Quesada, 2007: 7).

There are two basic patterns of journalistic coverage of health crises that were defined as early as 2008: chronic and acute patterns. The acute pattern "consists of a type of rapid coverage, not very specialized, but of great media impact. The chronic pattern describes a type of journalistic treatment, with less impact, but more specialized and elaborated" (Revuelta and de Semir, 2008: p. 110).

Along the same lines, Martínez Solana (2004) distinguishes between information on chronic and acute pathologies. Chronic pattern pathologies are: "those with important repercussions on the quality of life and which have been under investigation for several years". They are also characterized by "a continuous and constant informative follow-up, a higher level of specialization than usual, the subject of the news is usually more

elaborate and there is less tendency to sensationalism, as well as a better use of information sources" (Gómez Martín, 2012: 42).

On the other hand, information on acute pathologies is characterized by: "disrupting normality for a short period of time; in spite of which they have a very high media attraction. Most cases tend to disappear from the media abruptly, although, on certain occasions, there is a tendency towards chronification. Another characteristic of this subgroup is that its mimetic effect is high (the information is usually practically identical), with a greater tendency to sensationalism and less rigor in the use of sources" (Gómez Martín, 2012: 43).

The information on COVID-19 analyzed in this paper, due to its special characteristics, the number of people affected, the duration over time and the economic, political and social consequences, shares the characteristics of the two patterns. At first, the information could be considered an acute pattern and, in fact, it meets the parameters defined in the *10-year Quiral Report* (Revuelta and De Semir, 2008) due to the large number of people affected; it is news at the moment its existence is known; it has negative consequences for health and the economy; unpredictability; proximity, despite the fact that the pandemic started in a country far from our environment; notoriety due to the involvement of numerous well-known personalities or infection of international leaders.

However, the extension in time of the coronavirus pandemic and its consequences, due to its duration, makes it assume the characteristics of a chronic pattern. The media, and specifically the press in the case of this study, include in the informative treatment of this subject not only breaking news or current information, but also elaborate contents with greater specialization and greater rigor in the use of sources.

The special characteristics of the informative treatment of this crisis due to the use of social networks (Pérez-Dasilva et al., 2020), the viralization of hoaxes and the infodemic and overinformation (Masip et al, 2020), has been reflected in a new term, infodemic, which has already been the subject of some articles (Cinelli et al, 2020). The excess and low quality of information has an impact on the distorted vision of a critical situation caused by an infectious disease that often leads to an exaggerated alert in the population that produces fear and uncertainty and reaches all areas from the social to the economic, including the political.

Another related element in the informative treatment of health crises is sensationalism, both in the treatment of images and in the text itself (Andreu-Sánchez and Martín-Pascual, 2020). The discourse of fear through an alarmist vocabulary is another characteristic of crisis information, also the result of the generalized tendency of the media to 'infotainment'. The appeal to a basic emotion such as fear becomes a resource for the search for a larger audience since the presentation of a news item as dangerous causes uncertainty and increases the public's desire for revelations (Monjas-Eleta and Gil-Torres, 2019).

The health crisis that has hit Spain since last March has posed a challenge in all areas in which human life develops. Journalism has not been unaffected by these changes and the crisis has shown, as Álex Grijelmo (2020) pointed out, the importance of journalism in these situations since "it plays an essential role, because it serves as a vehicle for transmitting vital information: what should be done, how to take care of oneself, what domestic precautions should be taken, what is allowed and what is forbidden, what progress is being made in scientific research on the case".

2. OBJECTIVES

Knowing what the news topics have been for the media, as well as analyzing the evolution of their front pages to see the importance of the pandemic over time, makes it possible to obtain a reflection of what happened during this period of time and to draw conclusions about the current situation of the journalistic profession and how it has reacted to this situation. With perspective, we should ask ourselves whether COVID-19 was already attracting the attention of newspapers at the end of February, whether it occupied a prominent place or who were the protagonists of the news included on these front pages. We also perceived whether the use of numerical data and figures to show the progress of the virus was common and whether they focused the repercussion of the impact of the pandemic on the health and social aspect or, on the contrary, on the political and economic sphere. In addition, due to the variety of media, to check whether there were notable differences in the headlines with respect to the selected news topics and protagonists.

Therefore, the main objective of this article is to analyze, understand and examine how the media treatment of the COVID-19 pandemic has evolved in Spain through the front pages of the five main national newspapers: *El País*, *El Mundo*, *ABC*, *La Razón* and *La Vanguardia*.

In addition to the main objective of this research to analyze, know and examine how the media treatment of the pandemic caused by COVID-19 in Spain has evolved through the front pages of the five main national newspapers (*El País*, *El Mundo*, *ABC*, *La Razón* and *La Vanguardia*), other specific objectives are established that will help to understand the use of different methods on the front pages of the newspapers to portray the same reality: (1) To know what type of information each of the media provide depending on their ideological line; (2) To examine whether, in their front pages, they coincide when highlighting a specific event or differ in establishing the most novel fact of the day; (3) To establish how they portray the evolution of the pandemic and observe in which direction each of them point when showing the same reality; (4) To observe how much space and what format they give to the information related to COVID-19 within the usual organization of their front pages; and (5) To find out if there are changes throughout the period analyzed when reflecting the development of the disease in Spanish society on the front pages of these newspapers.

3. METHODOLOGY

The COVID-19 on the front pages of national newspapers in Spain

In accordance with the objectives, the hypotheses put forward in this research on the evolution of COVID-19 on the front pages of the main Spanish national newspapers are as follows:

H1. The contents about COVID-19 gain prominence and occupy more space on the front pages as the weeks go by, with the need to include graphics and infographics on the number of infected, fatalities and other statistical data on the impact of the pandemic.

H2. The issues addressed on the front pages of the newspapers vary over time. It is predicted that in the first week analyzed in February the front pages focus mainly on international information about the virus, in March the main focus is on health issues, and in April information about the impact of the pandemic on Spanish politics and economy gain weight.

H3. The newspapers accompany their front pages with photographs in which the protagonism falls in most of the occasions on political figures.

Despite the decline in the traditional impact of the press as a method of informing the general public after the arrival of the Internet, the audience share remains at 20% of the total analyzed by the General Media Study in its first quarter of 2020 (AIMC, 2020). Even with this audience figure, the data from the Office of Justification of Diffusion (OJD) speak of a generalized decline in all newspapers, a trend repeated almost since the arrival of digital information (Dircomfidencial, 2020). The content analysis is carried out on a selected sample consisting of the front pages or front pages of the five main national newspapers in Spain with print edition: (1) *El País*, as the newspaper with the highest national circulation in print with 110.000 copies per day; (2) *La Vanguardia*, the second newspaper with 88,255 copies per day; (3) *El Mundo*, with an average circulation of 80,600 copies per day; (4) *ABC*, with a circulation of 68,700 copies per day; and (5) *La Razón*, which closed the year with 51,537 copies per day.

The choice of front pages as the unit of analysis is due to the fact that it is a space where the selection and order of importance that the newspaper gives to the journalistic information of the day can be clearly observed. Therefore, the study of the front pages constitutes a basic element to know the approach that each newspaper adopts in the process of construction of social reality (Palau Sampio, 2013).

In the case of COVID-19, there are already studies on newspaper front pages that address compliance with the ethical principles of journalism in the coverage of this crisis, such as the one by Maciá Barber (2020), which differs from the one presented here in that it mainly studies photographic coverage, while this work addresses the lexicon and headlines. Another article, by Fusté-Forné (2020), studies the front pages of three newspapers in the period prior to the State of Alarm, while this paper deals with a broader period, up to April, in five newspapers.

For all these reasons, an analysis of the front pages has been considered an interesting study to analyze the reaction of the press in this health crisis and thus observe the evolution of the information on COVID-19 before the declaration of the State

of Alarm and during the development of part of it. We selected the months of February (when it was already a recurrent topic in the media), March (state of alarm) and April (month of total confinement of the population with the highest number of infections and deaths). The dates selected correspond to the last weeks of these months: February 22 to 29, March 24 to 31 and April 23 to 30. Thus, the total sample selected comprises 120 covers analyzed.

The analysis sheet contains three blocks that allow us to analyze the main elements of the front page with which the newspaper determines the greater or lesser relevance of a piece of information. The first block contains general data (newspaper, date of publication). The second block analyzes the formal aspects: measurement of the space it occupies on the front page of the newspaper, parameters such as location, the number of columns it occupies or the extension it reaches on the front page and accompanying graphic complements such as an infographic or some other complement. All these parameters reveal the valuation that the newspaper makes of a piece of information, for example, the most relevant news are placed at the top, following the Haas triangle, and, being the first page, in the left zone, contrary to the odd pages of the interior of the newspaper. Exceptional news is headlined on the front page in full width, five columns according to the tabloid format and horizontal reading in Spain, and as its importance is reduced, its width is also reduced. The third block of the analysis sheet refers to the content of the front page: three subgroups are specified for each of the elements to be analyzed: 3.1. Photography, indicating the prominence of the photograph related to the information about COVID-19; 3.2. Headline, including both the informative subject of the main headline and its protagonist; and 3.3. the lexicon used to express the news related to the coronavirus. Observing the prominence given by the newspaper in its headlines and photographs, as well as the issues it selects, is key to understanding the most socially salient issues and actors on the media agenda (McCombs, 2006).

4. DISCUSSION

This section presents the results obtained after applying the analysis sheet to the 120 front pages of the newspapers on the days analyzed.

4.1. Results for the week of February 22 to 29

In February, 62.5% of the analyzed newspapers included information related to COVID-19 between 1/4 and 2/4 of the front page. In addition, only 10% of the times did not include any information on the evolution of the spread of the virus. The location of the information varied greatly, with no single area standing out above the rest, the most frequently used being the information located in the upper left-hand corner (22.5%). In most of the occasions (80%) there is information about the coronavirus with a width between three and five columns. However, in the last week of February there was less awareness of the importance of the spread of COVID-19 in Spain, so the information did

not reach excessive relevance and we only found information about the virus on the full front page 5% of the time (2 front pages out of 40 in the month analyzed).

Regarding the analysis of the front pages, it is also worth noting the differences in design between the different newspapers. Thus, for example, the configuration of the front pages of the newspaper *La Vanguardia* is different from those of the other newspapers analyzed. The main news on the front page is highlighted with a box that distinguishes it from the rest of the information included on the front page, but, despite being the main news, sometimes it does not include a photograph. *La Vanguardia* proposes a conglomerate format of headlines with a generic or broader headline, and several headlines that support the main information next to the lead-ins. However, in this analyzed period of the first week of February, there are three days in which the coronavirus reaches three quarters of the front page. In addition, there is an abundance of four to five columns, which indicates that they are usually presented occupying all or almost all the width of the front page.

The front page of the *ABC* newspaper is also different, due to its format: often, a single image occupies practically the entire front page and there is recurrent use not only of photographs, but also of illustrations or image montages. In the first week of analysis, *ABC* included information on the coronavirus on four days, and on three of the front pages, the coronavirus occupied all the space. On two occasions the main subject was the economic repercussions of the disease: on February 25 the front page is a montage of banknotes with the characters covered with masks and on February 29 a photograph of the workers of an Asian stock exchange fills the front page. The third full cover on COVID-19 (23/02/20), focused on the situation in northern Italy with a picture of an ambulance with paramedics with protective equipment and a patient. The Italian scenario also appears on February 24 with the image on a top skirt of a man wearing a Venetian mask and a mask symbolizing the closure of the Carnival of the city of canals due to the coronavirus.

As for the visual section, it is balanced between the covers with a current photograph (half of the February covers) and those without any associated photograph (40%). For the most part, this month neither infographics nor other complements were included to complement the COVID-19 information. The protagonism of the photograph, as shown in Graph 1, in February is centered on the citizens, who appear in them 27.5% of the times.

The COVID-19 on the front pages of national newspapers in Spain

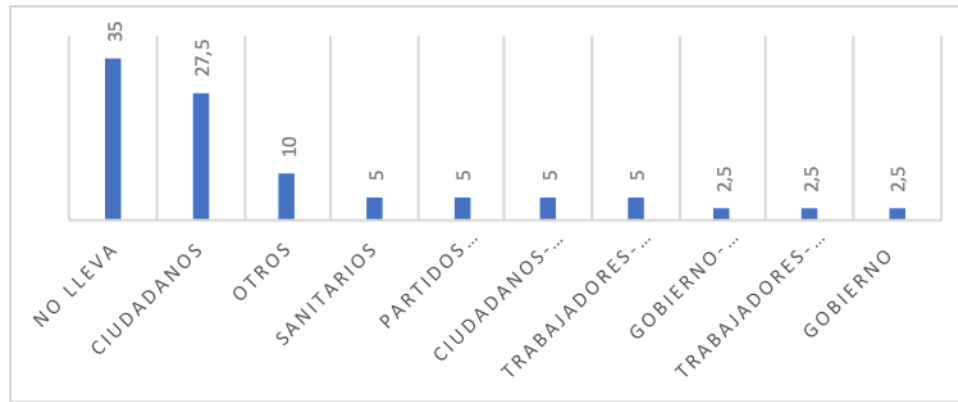


Figure 1. COVID-19 photo protagonists on front pages February 2020
Source: Own elaboration

The main headline news subject, shown in detail in Figure 2, on coronavirus is mostly focused on economic issues (15%), especially the international stock market falls, as well as on politics and autonomous communities (12'5%), such as the data on coronavirus infections in new areas of Barcelona (*La Vanguardia*, 26 and 27/02/20) or the evolution of infections in Spain and the economic impact of the measures taken by the Spanish government (*El Mundo*, 27/02/20). The spread of the virus in other countries and the problems caused in them account for 10% of the front page articles, which mainly deal with the situation in Italy but also with Asian countries such as South Korea (*El Mundo*, 02/26/20).

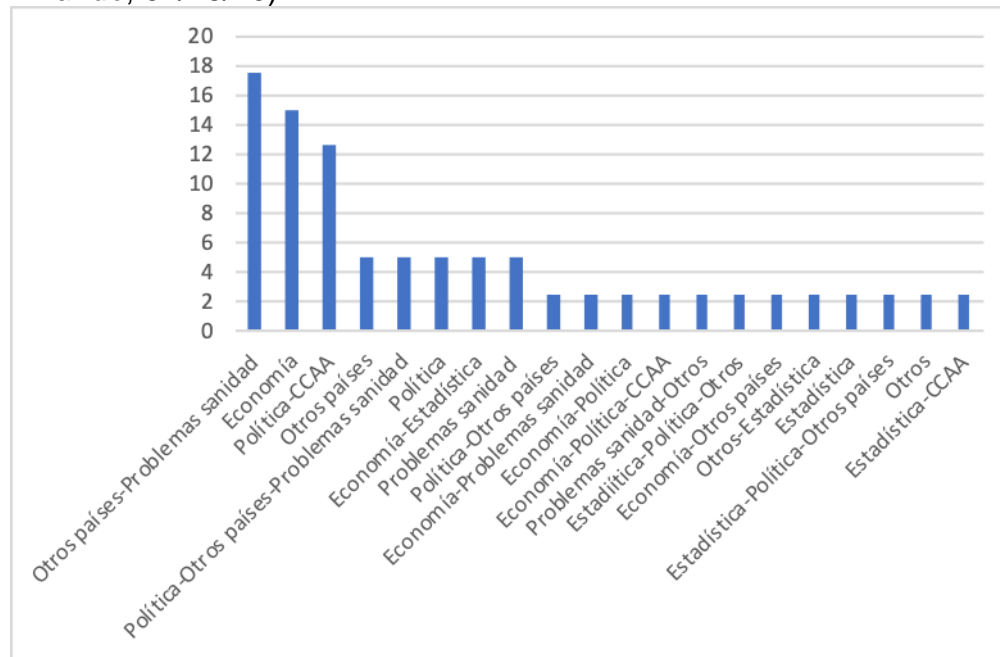


Figure 2. Main COVID-19 related headline subject on front page February 2020
Source: Own elaboration

On the other hand, the protagonist of the headline focuses on various personalities, authorities and other protagonists such as the Italian government or the kings of Spain (40%), while 27.5% focus on the Spanish government.

Another aspect analyzed, the lexicon, refers mostly to a vocabulary of pandemic and crisis, both health and economic, when talking about stock market crashes. The vocabulary reflects the seriousness of the situation. For example, expressions such as "Maximum alert in Italy after 76 coronavirus infections and two deaths" (*El País*, 23/02/20), or referring to fear such as "El pánico al coronavirus contagia a la bolsa" (*ABC*, 25/02/20) or "La OMS teme turbulencias sociales por el coronavirus" (*La Vanguardia*, 23/02/20) are used. Superlative adjectives such as "maximum" abound in many of the headlines as in *La Razón* (23 and 29 / 02/20).

4.2. Results for the week of March 24 to 31

In March, the way in which all the newspapers analyzed reported on COVID-19 changed significantly, in line with its impact in Spain. So much so that, during this period, 100% of the front pages were entirely occupied by information related to COVID-19, placing more than half of the main headlines of these news items in the upper left zone (52.5% of the times). In addition, in more than 75% of the cases (6 out of 8), the main coronavirus-related news items were spread over 4 or 5 columns. In the analyzed newspapers, the main news on COVID-19 occupied a quarter of the front page 75% of the time, due to the large amount of information related to this issue, which made the newspapers choose to include many news items on the front page, to the detriment of the main one. Only in *ABC*, due to its particular configuration of the front page in which normally only one information is highlighted, this tendency is not fulfilled.

In the analysis of the visual part of the front pages, it is observed that, during the month of March, the newspapers use current affairs photographs on almost all their front pages (90%) as opposed to archive photographs or a combination of both, among which the *ABC* front page of March 26 stands out with an image of the Women's Day demonstration on 8-M, due to its relation with the spread of the virus contagion. 100% of the front page images in the period analyzed refer to COVID-19.

The protagonism of the main images accompanying the information on coronavirus, which can be seen in Figure 3, is mostly focused on citizens (22.5%), in different ways and measures of portraying them, even to highlight the absence of life in the streets, the front page image of *El País* on March 29 portrays a deserted Gran Vía with only an old woman crossing the street. Toilets account for 17.5% of the front pages, sometimes to denounce the lack of means of protection, such as the montage of four photographs on the front page of *ABC* on March 25.

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Front pages of *El País* (29/03/20) *La Razón* (28/03/20) and *El Mundo* (27/03/20).
Source: lasportadas.es

Other personalities, institutions and authorities have occupied the protagonist of the snapshots by 20%, such as Pope Francis, who pronounced the blessing *Urbi et Orbe* in an unusual empty St. Peter's Square, which was the cover image on March 28 in *El País*, *La Razón* and *La Vanguardia*. Or the visit of King Felipe to the Ifema field hospital, which was on the front page on March 27 in all the analyzed newspapers, except *La Vanguardia*. National political leaders are also on the front page. On March 26th, *El Mundo* featured the President of the Government in Congress, and the leader of the PP, Pablo Casado, was on the front page of *ABC* on March 31st.

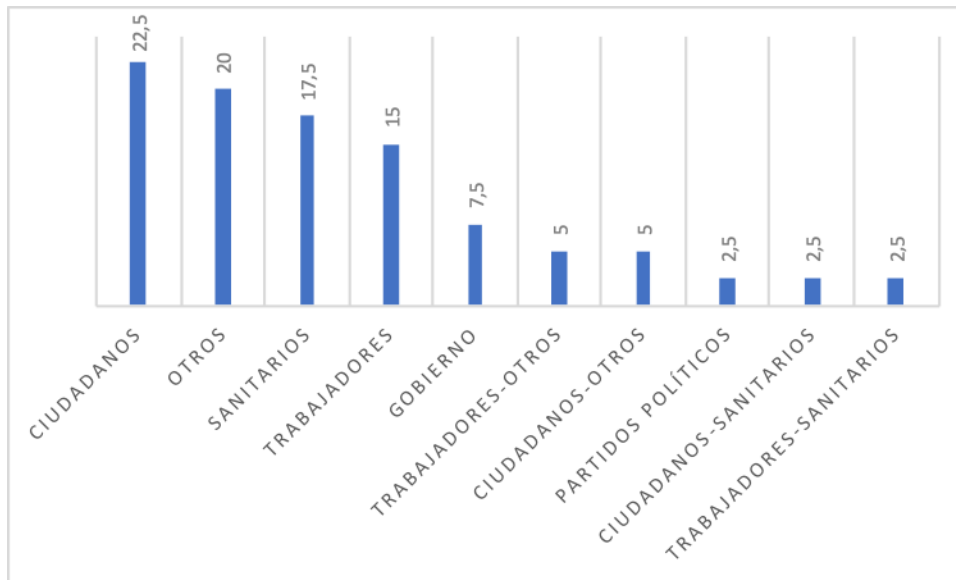


Figure 3. Cover photo protagonist Covid-19 -March 2020
Source: Own elaboration

The COVID-19 on the front pages of national newspapers in Spain

Also this month, the newspapers *El Mundo* and *La Razón* included different infographics highlighting statistical sections and providing information on symptoms and protective measures, as a sign of support to stop the fight against the coronavirus. This information is included 65% of the time in addition to the headlines, and 35% of the front pages do not include any infographics. Other complements are not generally found (87.5%), however, on certain occasions, sections of analysis and opinion on the pandemic are included (12.5% of the times).

The informative subject of the main headlines of the front pages analyzed in the month of March indicates that political issues in economic matters have occupied 30% of the main news items in relation to the crisis and measures as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although this topic is the most prominent, politics in itself, with measures, differences in positions and criticisms, was present in 20% of the occasions, so it could be said that politics occupied half or more of the main information on COVID-19. As a result, the analysis shows that in more than half of the main headlines related to coronavirus, the government is the protagonist, be it its president, vice-president or vice-president or minister of health (57.5%). It is also noteworthy that other authorities, personalities and institutions (10%) are equally or more prominent in the main information about the pandemic than health professionals (5%) or citizens (10%).

The lexicon appreciated in the main headlines of this month analyzed is centered on the crisis, since vocabulary related to this concept is found in 11 of the 40 front pages in March. In addition, other times it is associated with the word alarm (17.5%) or pandemic (12.5%). But also, and in line with the predominance of politics among the issues addressed, terms or expressions are used that imply a greater assessment and criticism of the actions, mainly of the Government. For example, in headlines such as in *La Razón* ("La dejación de Moncloa ante el Covid-19" (24/03/20) or in *El Mundo*, the word "desoyó" (25/03/2020) or "caos" (24/03/20) or "improvisa"(30/03/20) referred to the president of the government, as well as "bandazos" in the headline to define the measures of the executive in the coronavirus crisis. In *ABC*, the language used denotes dispute or belligerence in the political front pages, such as the one about the disagreement between vice-presidents on the 28th when using the expression "impone" between Iglesias and Calviño or the "lealtad sí, pleitesía, no" in the headline of the front page on the 31st. Likewise, there is a certain tone of reproach in the front pages of the 26th ("El gobierno ya lo sabía"), 29th ("Sánchez elige parar la economía") and 30th ("Sánchez hiberna la economía y desoye a los empresarios") to the measures or actions of the government.

4.3. Results for the week of April 23rd to 30th

The last period analyzed in this research, the month of April, leaves practically the same trend as the previous month. 97.5 percent of the front pages carry information on COVID-19 on the full page, leaving the rest of the information on a quarter of the front page (only one front page of the newspaper *La Vanguardia* does not follow the full-page trend). In addition, 60% of the occasions, the main headline on this issue is placed in the upper left area of the front page, 11% of them in the lower part of the same side. This leaves a total of more than 70% of main headlines about COVID-19 on the left side of

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the front page. More than half of these occupy four columns (55%) with the second most observed trend being three columns (17'5%). As in March, the main news items, despite their wide extension, occupy in most occasions (90%) a quarter of the front page due to the great variety of contents on the pandemic included in the front pages of this period.

The graphic section highlights that 90% of the front pages accompany their written information with photographs related to COVID-19. Of these, 87.5 percent are of current events, whether they are photographic montages (ABC's own, which can be seen in Figure 2), illustrations or snapshots, leaving 2.5 percent to archive photographs. In 62.5 percent of the occasions, almost as in March, newspapers use infographics to show data about the pandemic evolution or information about symptoms and protection measures against the virus. *El Mundo* and *La Razón* continue to include this type of graphics, and *ABC* joins them with a black ribbon attached to the masthead as a sign of mourning for the deaths caused by the coronavirus. There are also other complements, mainly of analysis (10%), although the most common tendency is not to include any other section.

The protagonism of the photographs that illustrate these front pages falls on the citizens in a majority way (35%) being the government the second one with more images (17'5%) and the workers in third place with 12'5% of the occasions.



Figure 2. ABC newspaper front pages (25,26 and 29/04/2020).

Source: lasportadas.es

As for the informative issue dealt with in the main headline, as detailed in Graph 4, 37.5% of the occasions are focused on politics, either in decisions or in measures to be approved, such as the de-escalation phases. The second most frequently discussed topic is economic policy, especially the purchase of health material and the creation of the European fund for the reconstruction of the economy after the crisis caused by the

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pandemic in Europe (12.5%). On the other hand, four of the forty front pages in April dealt with other topics centered on authorities and institutions (10%).

The protagonism of the main headlines on COVID-19 in April, which is detailed in Graph 4, has been mostly for the government, being present in twenty of the forty front pages analyzed (50%). In addition, during this month, the Autonomous Regions and their confrontations with the central government have been the protagonists of 12.5 percent of the front pages (5 out of 40) and citizens have also been present (10%) as well as other personalities and authorities (15%).

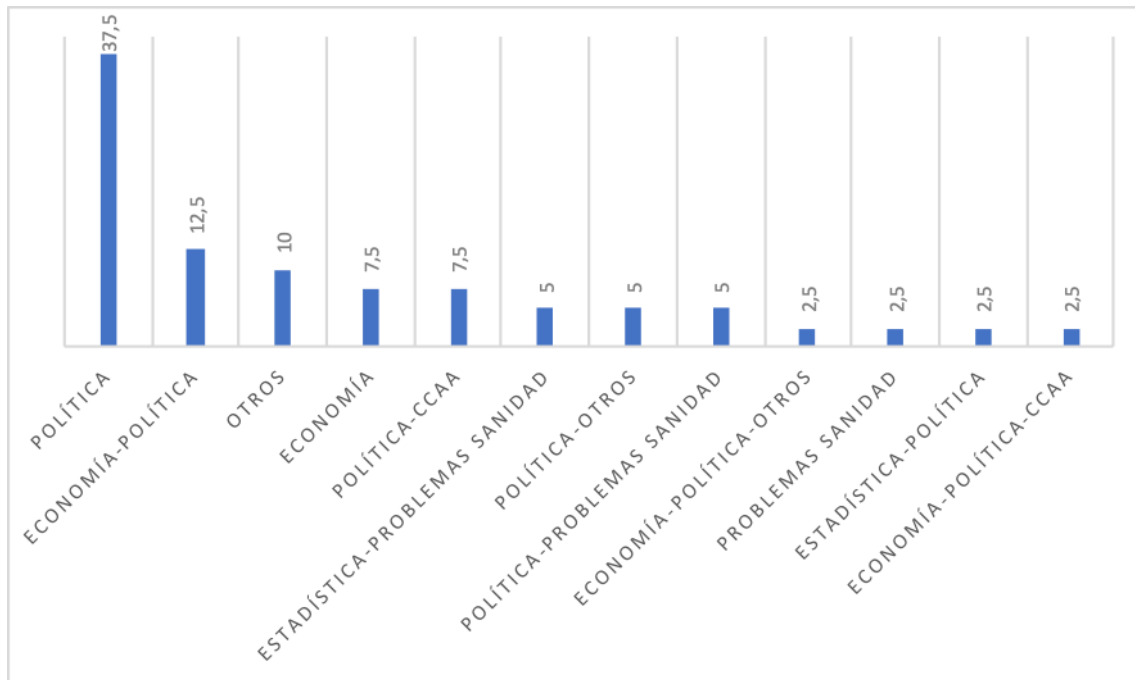


Figure 4. COVID-19- April 2020

Source: Own elaboration

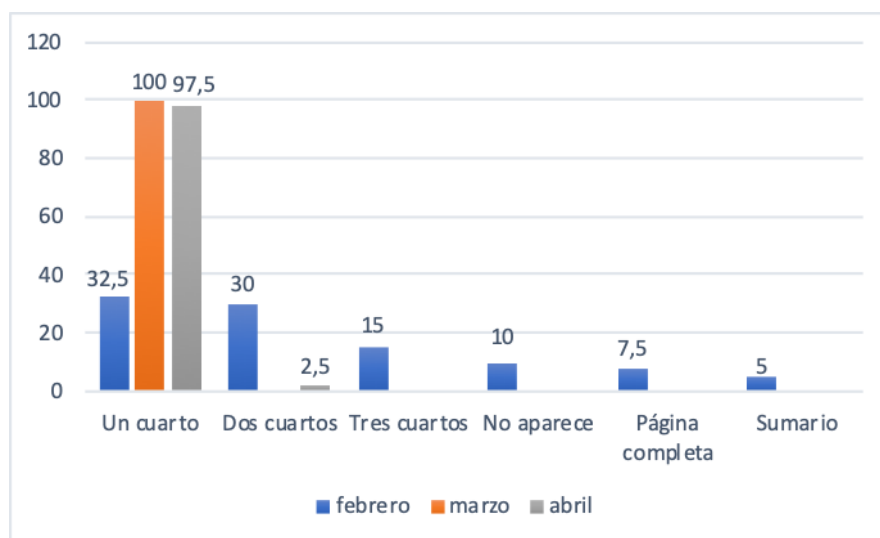
The lexicon used for this month in the main news of the analyzed front pages has focused on a vocabulary related to other concepts not included in the analysis table, such as reproach, criticism and even accusation in certain media (20%). The crisis (12.5%) or the pandemic (12.5%) have also been present in the vocabulary of the main headlines analyzed in April, either related to other concepts or separately.

4.4. Evolution of COVID-19 information on the cover pages

The information on the pandemic on the front pages analyzed between February and April allows highlighting the growth of space dedicated to information on the virus and the change of format as the days have passed and the incidence of the virus has been greater, as is reflected in Graph 5. The growth is outstanding between February and March, when from 10% of front pages without information on COVID-19 in February to 100% of the front pages in March completely dedicated to the coronavirus. The

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difference is even greater if we take into account the space taken up by information on the coronavirus in February, which mostly occupies between one and two quarters of the front page. Following the tendency to dominate the front pages, in April 97.5% of the front pages carry information on the pandemic on the full front page.



Space occupied by information on COVID-19 on the homepage

Source: Own elaboration

The use of infographics on the front page to inform about telephone numbers or statistical data related to COVID-19 also went from a first period of analysis in February, in which these resources were not used, to a greater presence on the front pages in March, although with differences among the newspapers analyzed. In April, the use of this visual information resource is drastically reduced. *El Mundo* uses a band on the front page to show the numbers and percentages of infected, deaths and discharges in both March and April, and *La Razón* also uses graphics on its front page with symptoms, prevention measures, data and emergency telephone numbers in the period analyzed in March (except on the 24th) and in April. However, *El País* does not use any infographics on its front pages in March and in April only on one occasion does it present on the front page graphs on mortality in the national territory (26/04/20). *La Vanguardia* includes in the period analyzed in March a table or skirt with the figures of positives, deaths and discharges in national territory on a yellow color, except on March 31, when it changes color to blue. In April, this data disappears from the Catalan front page and only on April 24 there is a graph on the influence on mortality in Catalonia between influenza and COVID-19. Due to its peculiar characteristics of the front page, *ABC* does not usually include graphics on the front page, although in April it incorporates a black ribbon to its masthead with the name of the newspaper.

The issues addressed in the headlines of the main information of the COVID-19 move along three fundamental axes with different combinations: politics, economy and health, to which we can add one more issue, the one related to information on the impact of the

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pandemic in other countries, which is detailed in Figure 6. While in February, the most discussed issue was the spread of the virus in other countries (17.5%), in March the economy together with politics monopolized 30% of the issues addressed in the headlines. This tendency towards these two topics increases in April, where the economy together with politics captures the highest percentage of headlines, 37.5% referring to political issues, mainly on the management of the pandemic by the government, and the combination of economy and politics accounts for 12.5%, while purely economic issues account for 7.5%.

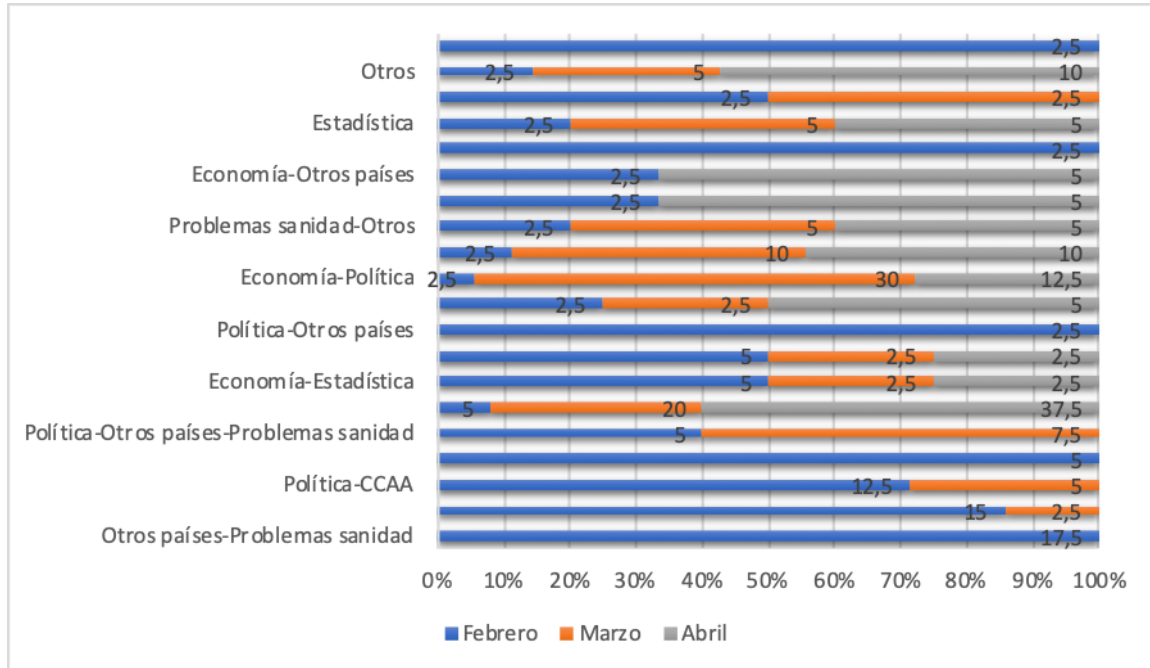


Figure 6. Main headline subject about COVID-19 on front page

Source: Own elaboration

With regard to photographs, it is also worth noting that in February 40% of the covers analyzed did not carry an image related to the virus, while in March 95% of the covers carried a photograph, of which 90% was a topical image, and in April 92.5% of the covers carried a photograph related to COVID-19, of which 8.7.5% was a topical image.

Regarding the protagonists of the photographs related to COVID-19, citizens are clearly the protagonists of the snapshots. Citizens are the protagonists in February with 27.5% of the covers, also in March with 22.5% and in April with 35% of the covers. Figure 7 shows the data broken down, since some snapshots combine protagonists such as citizens, workers and health workers. Healthcare workers occupy an unequal place in the front page photographs. In March they are in second position behind citizens with 17.5%, while in February and April they only reach 5%. To this should be added the photographs that are shared, as we have pointed out, and these data only reaffirm how civil society stands out as the protagonist of graphic information.

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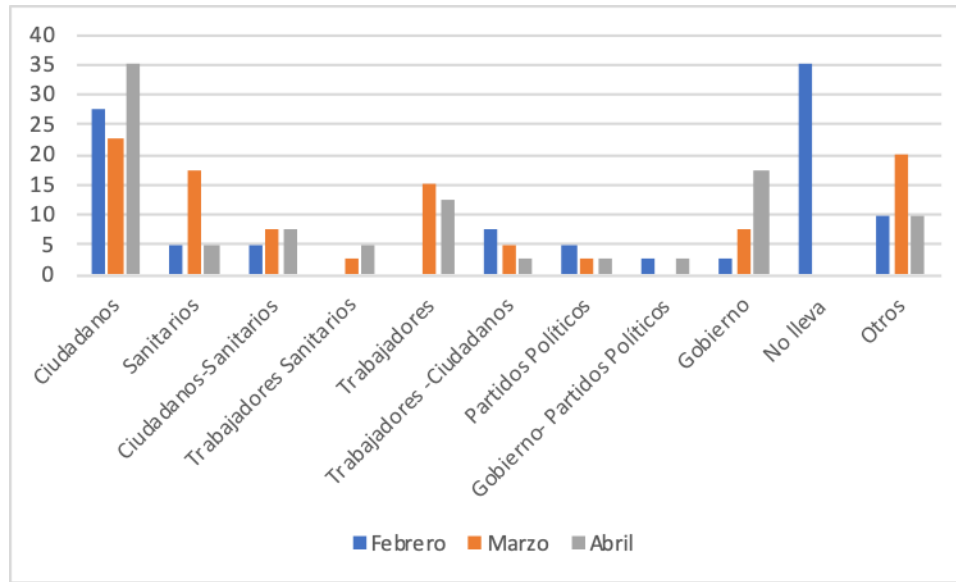


Figure 7. Protagonists of the photograph on COVID-19 on the front cover
Source: Own elaboration

With regard to the representation of the Government in the front page photographs, this has been increasing as the pandemic progressed and the issues to be dealt with came closer to the debate on the political management of the crisis. In February only 2.5% of the photographs corresponded to members of the Government, in March the percentage increased to 7.5% and in April the increase is greater, 17.5% of the images correspond to the government headed by Pedro Sánchez. The representatives of political parties occupy the cover photographs in percentages of 2.5% in all the analyzed periods, although it would be possible to add some snapshots in which they share space with the government, which would raise the percentage by 2.5% more, a fact which is understandable given the prominence acquired by the government in the successive extensions of the State of Alarm.

5. CONCLUSIONS

With regard to the hypotheses set forth at the beginning of this project and on which this work is based, it can be concluded that :

Hypothesis number 1, which stated that information about COVID-19 gains prominence and occupies more space on the front pages as the weeks go by, with the need to include graphs and infographics on the number of infected, fatalities and other statistical data on the impact of the pandemic, is partially verified. In the analysis, a significant growth has been observed, which is irrefutable in the passage from February to March, when the number of front pages with nothing on them went from 105 to 100% of the total front page space occupied by headlines on the coronavirus in March and April.

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However, although the newspapers include graphs and infographics on the number of infected, fatalities and other statistical data on the impact of the pandemic from March onwards, this does not occur equally in all newspapers since it is *El Mundo and La Razón* which include these infographics both in March and April. In February, as the information focused on Italy, Europe, the stock market and the first infected in Spain, this type of information is not provided in any newspaper.

The second hypothesis on the issues addressed is partially verified, since it was suggested that in February international information would be the main focus, in March health information and in April politics and the economy. While in February the front pages focus mainly on international information about the virus, in March the main focus is not on health issues, but also on politics and economics. And in April, as predicted, economic and political issues are in the majority. Therefore, the hypothesis is verified with the data collected in February and April, but not in March, where politics and economics also occupy a large part of the front page.

The third hypothesis, which suggested that politicians played the leading role in the front page photographs, has been refuted after the analysis. In the three months that comprise the analyzed period, the protagonism of the main photograph, montage or illustration of the front page in the analyzed newspapers has fallen on citizens in a higher percentage than on politicians (an average of 30% and 15% respectively). This prominence of citizens has been repeated in the three periods of analysis from February to April.

The aim of this research was to show how Spanish newspapers have chosen to show information about the pandemic crisis on their front page, a key element to attract the reader's attention and reveal which are the most relevant issues for them.

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AUTHORS

María Monjas Eleta

Professor of the Degree in Journalism and the Master in Communication Research as a historical and social agent at the University of Valladolid, PhD from the University of Valladolid (2012), Master in Radio from the Complutense University of Madrid and Radio Nacional de España (1998) and Degree in Information Sciences from the Pontifical University of Salamanca (1996). Her research focuses on the study of the journalistic message, specifically journalism specializing in science and culture, new media and journalism education. Member of the Research Group on New Trends in Communication (NUTECO).

Orcid ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0626-7761>

Google Scholar: <https://scholar.google.es/citations?user=0EtLY3EAAAAJ&hl=es>

Alejandro Rodríguez Holguín

Degree in Journalism from the University of Valladolid. Efe Agency Scholarship.

Orcid ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0991-6336>

Alicia Gil-Torres

PhD in Journalism (Extraordinary Award), Master in Political Consulting, Degree in Advertising and Public Relations and Graduate in Journalism. Assistant Professor at the University of Valladolid in the Degree of Journalism. Member of the research project "*Politainment* in the post-truth environment: new narratives, *clickbait* and gamification" and of the GIR Nuteco. The lines of research are political communication, electoral campaigns and communication.

Orcid ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8042-2208>

Google Scholar: <https://scholar.google.es/citations?user=sYmJrS4AAAAJ&hl=es>

ResearchGate: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Alicia_Gil-Torres

Scopus ID: <https://www.scopus.com/authid/detail.uri?authorId=57195761187>

Academia.edu: <https://uva-es.academia.edu/AGilTorres>