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**ANALYSIS OF THE HEADLINES AND PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE COVERS IN SPAIN  
IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS: PROTAGONISTS, FRAMES  
AND WARLIKE LANGUAGE**

***Análisis de los titulares y las fotografías de portada en España en el contexto de  
la crisis del coronavirus: protagonistas, frames y lenguaje bélico***

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**Abstract**

This research reflects the impact of Covid-19 on the covers of the main generalist newspapers in Spain: *El País*, *El Mundo*, *La Vanguardia*, and *ABC* and *El Correo*. The research, in which 609 headlines and photographs have been coded, focuses on the agenda-setting of these newspapers, the protagonists, the frames and the analysis of the discourse. The methodology followed was content analysis and Nvivo software was used for qualitative analysis. The results show that the media treats the pandemic as a foreign matter. In March, once the crisis floods the front pages, the framework of social and health consequences prevails, but with the passage of time, the frames of solutions and responsibility appear strongly. The usual role of government actors is maintained, but the exposure of civil society grows, especially in photographs. The use of warlike language acts as a militarizing agent for civil society. The aesthetics of the pandemic is visualized on multi-screens, with particular force in those featuring the King of Spain or the Prime Minister. The role of the press as a symbolic reconstructor of events is certified, in convergence and tension with the political system, to homogenize discourses and maintain the social cohesion.

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**Keywords:** Covid-19; press; journalism; framing; agenda-setting; warlike language; Nvivo.

## Resumen

Esta investigación recoge el impacto del Covid-19 en las portadas de los principales diarios generalistas de España: *El País*, *El Mundo*, *La Vanguardia*, y *ABC* y *El Correo* entre enero y abril. La investigación, en la que se han codificado 609 titulares y fotografías, se centra en la *agenda-setting* de estos diarios, los protagonistas, los frames y el análisis del discurso. La metodología seguida ha sido el análisis de contenido y del discurso, y se ha recurrido al software Nvivo para el análisis cualitativo. Los resultados muestran que los medios tratan la pandemia como una cuestión extranjera. En marzo, una vez que la crisis inunda las portadas, el marco de consecuencias sociales y sanitarias prevalece, pero con el paso del tiempo aparecen con fuerza los enfoques de soluciones y de responsabilidad. Se mantiene el protagonismo habitual de los actores gubernamentales, pero crece la exposición de la sociedad civil, especialmente en las fotografías. El recurso al lenguaje bélico actúa de agente militarizador y de domesticación de la sociedad. La estética de la pandemia se visualiza en las multi-pantallas, con especial fuerza en las protagonizadas por el Rey de España o el presidente del Gobierno. Se certifica el rol de la prensa como reconstructor simbólico de los acontecimientos, en convergencia y en tensión con el sistema político, para homogeneizar los discursos y mantener la cohesión social.

**Palabras clave:** Covid-19; prensa; periodismo; *framing*; *agenda-setting*; lenguaje bélico; Nvivo.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The expansion of covid-19 has generated a complex situation at the health, economic and social levels. Due to the interest that crises generate in citizens, their presence in the thematic agenda multiplies. Scientific publications on this issue have known an exponential growth (Torres-Salinas, 2020), also in the field of journalism, from different points of view, such as cybermedia (Lázaro-Rodríguez, Herrera-Viedma, 2020), social networks (Cinelli, 2020) or *fake-news* (Pérez-Dasilva, Meso *et al.* , 2020).

This type of information becomes close to the public because it affects the entire population. The crisis situation entails the need for official information, together with chronicles with the civilian population as the central protagonist. In a health crisis,

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institutions have to "disseminate messages that help the population to know the origins of the crisis, the threats, the level of alert and the measures to be taken to minimize the damage, often based on appeals to fear as a persuasive factor" (Rodríguez-Andrés, 2011: 33). Journalists look for reliable sources among medical specialists (Lubens, 2015).

The press understood as a primary sector, with kiosks open in a state of emergency, emphasizes the role of information. The consumption of information in health crisis situations is multiplied in all social strata (Westlund, Ghersetti, 2015). According to data from the Association for Media Research AIMC (2017), the decline in paper consumption began in 2006-2008, at the time when the percentage of consumption on the web began to increase. This situation in the race for immediacy on the web, has generated a lack of depth in the contents and has multiplied the possibilities of publishing non-contrasted information (Álvarez, Gurrutxaga *et al.* 2019). As stated by (Carr, 2011), the speed of networks and new technological platforms are not always allied to the generation of true knowledge.

Despite this scenario, incipient studies on communication during the pandemic point to the resurgence of the role of traditional media and the reconnection to the news of citizens who are more distant from the information (Casero-Ripollés, 2020). It is worth remembering that Edelman (2020) coined the term media refuge to refer to the need that citizens feel to turn to reliable spokespersons, especially in situations of health crises, which reached its zenith in the first weeks of the pandemic (Xifra, 2020). Edelman identified scientists, health authorities and doctors as the most credible spokespersons, ahead of those affected and in last place *influencers* or celebrities. In addition, based on surveys, he confirmed that the most trusted media are the traditional media: press, television and radio. This perception is repeated in a study by Italian researchers who organized an observatory of *infodemia* - propagation of fake news - and confirmed that as the virus approached a region the individuals who made up their society demanded more information from the most reliable media.

There is also empirical literature (Castromil, 2012) that shows how the topics selected and the frames associated with them by the print press, far from being restricted to the exclusive sphere of its readers, go beyond these limits, reaching the rest of the media integrated in the same media group or other media of different ownership, extending to other consumers of information. There is even evidence (Luengo, 2014) of how these contents, now digitized even before they are printed, influence the debate in social networks. Therefore, the press serves to decipher the general patterns of journalistic activity.

This research focuses on the front pages of the most influential newspapers in Spain. The front page is the showcase where a newspaper displays its informative merchandise and serves to present in a quick and direct way the most important issues of current affairs; it defines its character and gives it personality compared to others, it is a key element to exercise that power of attraction that the newspaper seeks among the public opinion to attract readers and provides clear indications about their ideological

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preference (Davara, López *et al.*, 2004). Media groups contribute effectively to standardize messages" (Marín, Armentia *et al.*, 2014).

When deciding which topics to publish and which attributes to include, journalists are guided by newsworthiness criteria (Armentia, Caminos, 2009). These criteria are only part of the multifactorial process of information construction. It is convenient at this point to refer to the sociology of journalism (Shoemaker, Reese, 2013), according to which journalistic work, the *agenda-building*, is the result of the balance between interconnected forces such as work routines, the business level, the social environment and the prevailing ideology: "It is about conceiving news as a cultural product constructed collectively and in a differentiated manner by different social actors and structural factors" (Cervantes, 1996; 53).

The media construct meanings and symbols in the presentation of the political agenda (Acosta 2013, 74). In relation to the protagonists, Aruguete (2009) refers to the ease with which traditional sources get the grace of the media to be included in all types of information. On the other hand, the rest of society sees their appearance limited to the maximum and when they appear, it is exclusively due to negative moral or social acts.

Obtaining the attention of the media is not trivial since "*mass-media* confer category, status, to public issues, people, organizations and social movements" (Moragas, 1985).

## 2. OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main objective of this research is to analyze the front pages of the press in order to explore the treatment of the news that emerged in the first months since the appearance of Covid-19. The specific objectives are the following: to know the incidence of Covid-19 in the headlines and photos of the press; to examine the treatment of the news about the outbreak of the new coronavirus on the front pages. The content analysis technique was used to analyse the topics dealt with, the framing, the assessment of the Government and its protagonists. The use of war language is also explored.

Research questions:

1. What are the most common themes and frameworks?
2. Who are the main protagonists of the headlines and photographs?
3. Is there a recourse to war language?

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Five generalist newspapers in Spain were chosen for the sample<sup>2</sup>. Among them, the three with the largest circulation (*El País*, *El Mundo*, *La Vanguardia*), together with *ABC*, with national coverage, and *El Correo*, from the Basque Country, one of the communities most affected by the coronavirus. The criterion for the inclusion of each mancheta, apart from its circulation, responds to its belonging to each of the most important media groups: Prisa (*El País*), Recoletos (*El Mundo*), Grupo Godó (*La Vanguardia*) and Grupo Correo (*ABC* and *El Correo*).

The analysis period runs from 22 January to 30 April 2020. On that first date, information on Covid is published for the first time on the front page of one of the selected newspapers. The extension until April is considered appropriate for the objective of analysing the initial impact of the pandemic in the Spanish press.

The study has been approached from a quadrangular methodology in which both content analysis, understood as "a research technique designed to formulate, from certain data, reproducible and valid inferences that can be applied to their context" (Krippendorff, 1990:28) and the contributions of *agenda setting* (McCombs, Evatt, 1995), in order to quantify the presence and relevance of Covid-19 on the front pages of the selected newspapers; then, we resort to *framing* theory (Tuchman, 1983; Reese, 2001; Goffman, 2006), and, finally, to discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 2016) to identify belligerent discourses, including those with a warlike tone.

Regarding the framing, of the two possible ways to delimit it, inductive or deductive (De Vreese, 2005), we have resorted to the first one, which offers concrete results that accurately x-ray the media treatment of a topic by detecting the most prominent approaches to the object of study. And a specific frame is added for the photos, the control frame, induced from the indicators proposed by Entman (1993) and Tankard (2001).

Thus, the frames selected for the headlines are: consequences -subdivided into health, economic and social- (Valkenburg, Semetko and De Vreese, 1999); solutions/recommendations (Entman, 1993); and responsibility. And for photographs it is reduced to consequences -health and social-, and control.

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<sup>2</sup> EGM. First wave of 2020. <https://bit.ly/2YzLd51>

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**Figure 1.** *Types of News Frames for Headlines*

**Source:** own elaboration

The health ones refer to the consequences of Covid-19 for health and the health service; the economic ones include the effect of the pandemic on the economy, and the social ones refer to general effects on society as a whole, such as confinement or the spread of fear. In the framework of solution and/or recommendation, information is coded in which measures are proposed to resolve the coronavirus or useful advice is offered to the public on how to deal with the situation.

The visual frames are transmitted through images and share space with the headlines (Scheufele, 2005; Igartua, Muñiz and Otero, 2007). In the control frame, specific to the photos, images are framed with police or military protagonists in which a situation of control of the situation, surveillance and action against the pandemic is transmitted. The perception of the idea transmitted is achieved through a comparison, without the photos having to be a replica of reality (Messaris, Abraham, 2001).

With "the intuition that knowledge has to be organized in blocks" (Van Dijk, Kintsch, 1983: 47) as a starting point, we have proceeded to differentiate between topics (society, politics and economy) and the evaluative nature (Igartua, Muñiz and Otero, 2007: 100). It is assessed whether the information is favourable, contrary or neutral to the actions of the Spanish government.

The methodology also includes discourse analysis, in this case focusing on belligerent expressions, especially of a warlike nature, used in relation to the advance of the pandemic or to report on measures against its spread. Although the intention is to delve into the argumentative dimension, more typical of journalistic genres such as interpretative or opinion, in this research the news is codified. It is assumed that every journalistic text is an act of interpretation (Armentia and Caminos, 2009). In some cases we will be facing a subtle belligerent discourse and it will be necessary to make "the implicit explicit" (Vega, 2016: 7-10).

The study is completed with content analysis, a technique, or a set of techniques that offers an evaluation and analysis that have the virtue of objectivity. It is a technique of systematic and quantitative investigation of the content of the communication manifesto, in any of its forms (Zabaleta, 1997). It allows the inference of knowledge relative to the

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conditions of production/reception (inferred variables) of these messages. The dominant objective of the study is communicative and also cognitive, through the explanation of basic communication processes (Gaitán & Piñuel, 1998).

The universe, which coincides with the sample, is made up of the front pages of *ABC*, *El País*, *El Mundo*, *La Vanguardia* and *El Correo*, from 22 January (the day on which the first front page photo related to the coronavirus is published in the selected newspapers) until 30 April. In this case, the unit of analysis will be, on the one hand, the main headline of the front page and, on the other hand, the central photograph of that front page, whether the image accompanies the main headline or if it is independent (photo-news) or if it accompanies secondary information.

### 3.1. Codebook

The conceptual definition of all variables and sub-variables are included in this so-called codebook. They have been coded:

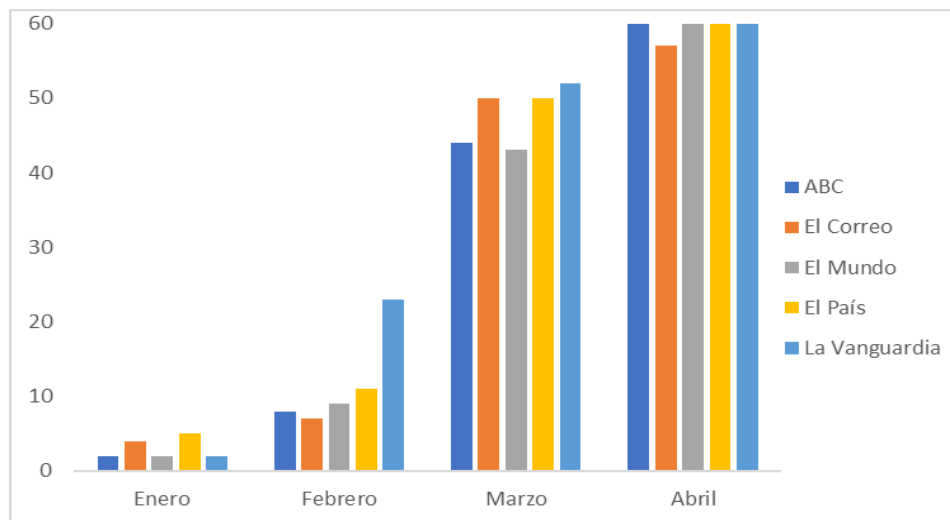
- Headline name, day and month of publication, and format (headline or photograph).
- Thematic (only in headlines): Society, Politics and Economy.
- Geographical scope: Spain (except Madrid, Catalonia and the Basque Country); Madrid, Catalonia and the Basque Country (Spain is selected because of its role in the pandemic and because the newspapers chosen have their headquarters in these three areas); China, Italy, USA, Europe, World (the areas not included in the previous ones).
- *Frame*: economic, health and social consequences; liability; solution/recommendation; and other (for headlines); and health, social and control consequences (for photographs).
- Evaluation of the Spanish Government (only in headlines): good, bad, neutral and none (no mention of the Executive's management), based on key words, critical or flattering expressions, etc.
- Protagonist: autonomous: The following must appear textually: Sánchez, Torra, Urkullu and Casado; Government (of Spain) King of Spain, Pope, WHO and Mobile; China (Government of China), economic (employers' associations, SMEs, Stock Exchange, banking, IMF), Army, European (European governments or institutions and their spokespersons), governmental (ministers of Spain and autonomous governments and their spokespersons), medical-scientific, Police (all the police forces of Spain), civil society (citizens alone or grouped together).
- Warlike or violent terms or expressions. Three categories are distinguished: war term (words or expressions that according to the DRAE have a meaning proper to the military or war semantic field); adapted term (from other fields outside the military -sports, health, economics, etc.-, which contain a violent charge); violent metaphor (metaphorical expressions that contain a violent meaning) (Barrero, 2007).

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The elaboration of the codebook and the coding was carried out by the two authors of the article. Using the SPSS program, the coding was certified with Cohen's kappa coefficient (0.71), and the existence of statistically significant differences between the variables was verified with the chi-square test.

### 4. RESULTS

Regarding the evolution of the headlines throughout the analyzed period, we note that the first reference to Covid-19 on the front pages of the five major Spanish newspapers appears on January 21 in *El País*: "The keys to the lethal virus that spreads through Asia". The headline barely appears in the summaries, at the top, above the masthead. A day later, the same newspaper repeats the action, in the same space. On this occasion, for the first time in the Spanish press analysed, the "coronavirus" is mentioned, but "from Wuham" is added, and it is warned that it "overflows China" and that it "reaches the USA". That same day, *El Correo* carries the main photograph of Wuham on its front page. Chronologically, it is the first unit of analysis of this investigation. The first main headline on the front page did not appear until two days later, on 24 January, in *El País*: "China isolates 21 million people to stop the spread of the virus". From then on, the headlines about the coronavirus have been *in crescendo*, in direct proportion to the presence of the virus in the State. In April, the pandemic made headlines every day in the five major newspapers.



**Figure 2.** Monthly evolution of the number of headlines and front page pictures

**Source:** own elaboration

From February to March 31, 319 headlines and 290 main photographs have been published on the front pages of the five selected newspapers. The most prolific is *La Vanguardia* (137), followed by *El País* (126) and *El Correo* (118). The last position, tied, is for ABC and *El Mundo* (114).



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In January, only 15 cases were reported, rising to 58 in February and 239 in March, when almost every day the subject and the main picture referred to the coronavirus. April (297) marks a journalistic milestone with 297 cases, as the coronavirus occupies all the headlines and main photo of the front pages of the five major Spanish newspapers, except in one case, on April 30. On that day, *El Correo*, without forgetting its local character, published a photo referring to the murder in Bilbao of an old man by an 81-year-old man.

The volume of information published in January is lower and is insufficient to make quantitative assessments of the press's informative attitude towards the coronavirus. On the other hand, it is significant that out of the 15 reports, only two, in *El Correo*, are focused on Spain and, specifically, on the Basque Country. In January, the Spanish press understands that this is a foreign issue, localized in China, and this is expressed in the headlines and photos alluding to "Chinese virus", "Chinese coronavirus".

This dynamic continues in February, but with less force. In this month, the press continues to present the coronavirus as a foreign issue, from China or Italy, and later as a global problem, due to the warning messages issued by the World Health Organization (WHO). The geographical scope of Spain, especially Catalonia, begins to appear.

The February data are sufficient in number to make a first reliable comparative analysis of the strategies of the five newspapers. It is clear that *La Vanguardia* (23 reports) saw the importance of the pandemic before its competitors, well ahead of *El País* (11), *El Mundo* (9) and *ABC* (8). The preeminence of local information printed by *El Correo* (7) puts it in last place.

The first position of *La Vanguardia* is based on international news and, also, localized in Catalonia. In the latter case, the news reports the suspension of Mobile, the world's leading mobile technology trade fair: "Mobile tries to stop more companies leaving due to the coronavirus crisis" (6/2/2020).

Among the rest of the newspapers, only *El País* found the subject worthy of the main headline, albeit to question its suspension: "The Government and the WHO question the closure of Mobile" (14/2/2020). The eminently economic, and even geostrategic, nature of Mobile is confirmed by the headline also in *El País* two days later: "The US demands that Europe joins its technological war against China". The news refers to the potential of the Asian giant, especially in the area of mobile phone technology, whose latest innovations are presented every year at Mobile. At that moment the press remains oblivious to the potential danger of the coronavirus and brings to the front page, in this case to the cover photo caption, a text in which, on the one hand, it is stressed that more than 2,000 deaths have already been counted in China and, on the other hand, that "although the virus is not yet contained, the WHO said yesterday that great progress has been made" (*La Vanguardia*, 20/2/2020). In March the number of pieces of analysis is close to 50 (photos and headlines) for each of the media. This month the vaccine against Covid-19 is mentioned for the first time. *El Mundo* is the first media to mention it,

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in a piece that includes the WHO warning that the vaccine will not be ready at least until the end of 2021. And in April it has already been mentioned that, except for a photo, the rest of the images and main headlines refer to the coronavirus.

### Geographical scope

The geographical scope has been coded in both headlines and photographs. The main scope of the headlines and photos is Spain, followed by Euskadi, Madrid and Mundo. This first position is consolidated by the high percentage in *ABC* (76.3% of its headlines and photos), above *El Mundo* (72.8%). *El País* (62.2%) limits much more the repetition of this area, and *La Vanguardia* (51.8) and, especially, *El Correo* (23.7%) show their character of peripheral newspaper with this variable.

We will point out that in March there is a radical change of trend that makes Spain the main area. That month covers more than half of the codifications, the same as in April. The presence of Catalonia and Euskadi is also important, although it is reduced to the newspapers *La Vanguardia* and *El Correo*, respectively, in the same way that Madrid is limited to *El País*, *El Mundo* and *ABC*. In general, the more distant areas, such as China, World or Italy lose weight in the timeline in favour of Spain and also Europe. Catalonia shows ups and downs, conditioned by the importance of the Mobile fair in February. The Basque Country shows a homogeneous line, as a result of the permanent interest that *El Correo* has devoted to this community throughout the crisis.

### 4.2. Topics and protagonists

The subject matter was only coded in the headlines. More than half of them fall under Society (168), well ahead of Economy (86). Third place goes to Politics (65), for example: "Los presidentes autonómicos cierran filas con el Gobierno" (*El País*, 16/3/2020). But the trend shows that the political focus strengthens in April, while social issues lose weight in the timeline. The headlines that report on economic issues maintain a uniform growing trend.

The cross-referencing of the variables of the geographical and thematic scope allows us to find out that the political focus is multiplied when the news is located in Spain (81.5% of all political news). In Europe and Catalonia, the focus is more economic: "Brussels proposes a fund against the crisis of 1.6 trillion" (*El País*, 23/4/2020), in contrast to Euskadi, which is more social.

Regarding the protagonists of the information, we note that the main actor of the headlines is the civil society (26.33%): "A German tourist in La Gomera, first case of coronavirus confirmed in Spain" (*El Correo*, 1/02/2020); "Maximum alert in Italy after 75 cases of coronavirus and two deaths" (*El País*, 23/02/2020); "A Biscayan, first dead in Euskadi" (*El Correo*, 5/03/2020). The second place is occupied by politicians (20.68%). Among them, the president of the Government (16.61%), in first place. The press in which Sánchez appears the most is *El Mundo*, with 4.39%, followed by *ABC* with 3.45% and *El País* and *La Vanguardia*, both with 3.13%. The first headline which includes

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Sánchez as the main protagonist is from March: "Sánchez announces 'difficult weeks' and aid for families and companies" (*El País*, 11/03/2020); "Sánchez dosifica la respuesta al virus pese a la emergencia económica" (*El Mundo*, 13/03/2020). The next political figure with more expositions is Casado (2.19%). ABC is by far the publication in which he appears the most, with 1.25%, followed by *El Mundo*, with 0.94%. He does not appear in the rest of the media. The third and fourth places are occupied by the presidents of the Basque and Catalan autonomous regions. Urkullu, with 1.25%, only appears in *El Correo*: "Urkullu raises that children can go out and that trade opens from the 26th" (*El Correo*, 18/04/2020); Torra, on the contrary, although with less presence, 0.63%, appears in both *El País* and *La Vanguardia* with 0.31% in both: "Torra seeks to strengthen independentism during the crisis" (*El País*, 18/04/2020); "Torra wields a devastating report to insist on more confinement" (*La Vanguardia*, 26/03/2020).

References to the Government (10.66%) and other governmental issues (7.84%) occupy 18.50% of the information. In information about the Government and governmental issues, *El Mundo* stands out with 5,64%. "Iglesias divides the Government by showing his power before Escrivá" (*El Mundo*, 04/17/2020); "El caos de datos siembra dudas sobre el fin del confinamiento" (*El Mundo*, 04/18/2020). In second place is *El País* with 3.76%: "El gobierno lanza un plan para proteger a los sectores más vulnerables" (*El País*, 1/04/2020); "Sanidad: "La desescalada la dirige el Gobierno" (*El País*, 1/04/2020); "Sanidad: "La desescalada la dirige el Gobierno"" (*El País*, 25/04/2020). (*El País*, 25/04/2020). The rest is below 3%.

The economy is the next informative subject, since in general it occupies 10.97% of the total. The content referring to economic aspects appears with a frequency of 4.08% in both *El País* and *La Vanguardia*: "La expansión del coronavirus aleja la recuperación de la economía" (*El País*, 29/02/2020); "La amenaza de un parón económico por el virus hunde las bolsas" (*La Vanguardia*, 28/02/2020). It should be noted that in the case of *El Correo* this aspect appears linked to what we have called civil society, as it alludes to the economic consequences: "More than 51,000 Basque workers have been affected by employment regulations" (*El Correo*, 24/03/2020); "Euskadi faces the hard phase of the confinement with a total paralysis of the industry" (*El Correo*, 30/03/2020).

Another of the protagonists of the news analysed in the first four months of this year is the medical-scientific sector with 9.69%: The presence of healthcare workers has grown substantially, especially from mid-March onwards: "Thank you!" (*El Correo*, 23/03/2020); "El virus diezma a los sanitarios por el retraso en la protección" (*El Mundo*, 25/03/2020). In this sense, we have to underline that the newspapers that make more allusions to this type of protagonists are ABC with 1.57% and *El Correo* with 1.25%. On the contrary, this information only appears in 0,31% in *La Vanguardia*. Although we can find the protagonists of health in the headlines, their presence is very prominent in the photographs.

### 4.3. Framing

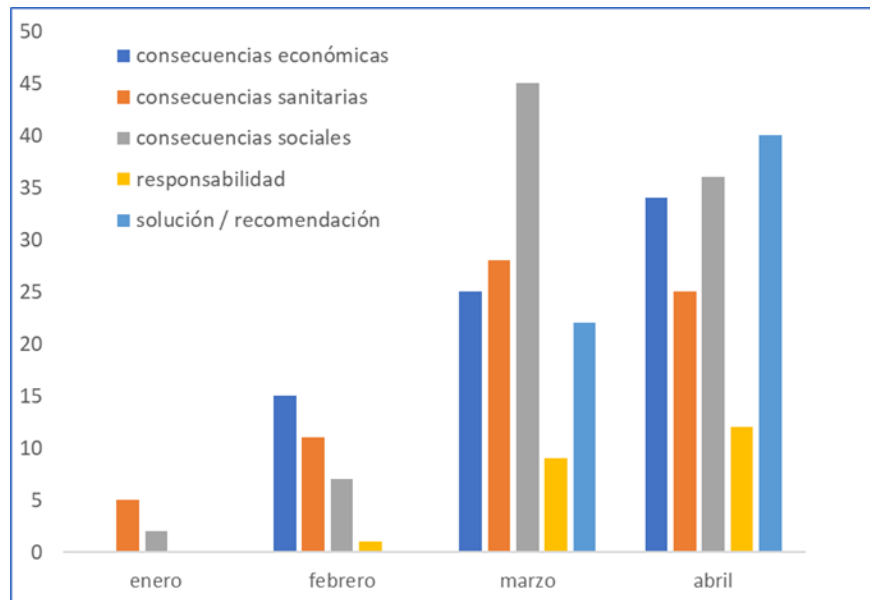
In the context of the *frames* analysed in the headlines, we should point out that the relationship between the protagonists is the majority with respect to civil society, as it presents the highest values in terms of its relationship with the health and social consequences, 10.34% in both cases. Their relationship with the economic consequences is also important (3.13%) and with the solutions-recommendations (2.19%).

Regarding the Government and the governmental it appears related to the social consequences in a 5,64% and with the solutions and recommendations in a 4,44%. The economic consequences are also important as they appear related to 4.39%.

In relation to the *frames*, the most common ones refer to the consequences, with social consequences standing out (28.21%), ahead of economic consequences (23.20%) and health consequences (21.63%). The fourth position is for the framework of solutions/recommendations (19.44%) and in fifth place, approaches to responsibility appear (6.90%). The rest has been coded in Others.

The predominance of the focus on social consequences is due to the media attention devoted to civil society issues, starting with China already in January: "The Spanish evacuated from Wuhan will be quarantined at their destination" (*El País*, 29/01/2020); In February, the focus continues to be on Chinese and Italian society: "Russia bans entry of Chinese due to coronavirus" (*La Vanguardia*, 02/19/2020); "Codogno, ghost town" (*ABC*, 02/23/2020); "Northern Italy closes schools and cancels public events due to virus" (*El País*, 02/24/2020); Information from the WHO also already appears as the main topic: "WHO fears social turbulence due to coronavirus" (*La Vanguardia*, 23/02/2020) and also as a health consequence: "WHO asks the world to prepare for a pandemic" (*El País*, 25/02/2020). Figure 4 shows the evolution of the *frames* in the period analysed.

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**Figure 3.** Evolution of frames in the headlines. In absolute values.  
**Source:** own elaboration

The economic consequences (23.20) are the second most common *frame* and increase over time. Their presence at the beginning of the period studied is due to the international perspective: "La epidemia del coronavirus amenaza la economía mundial" (*La Vanguardia*, 3/02/2020); "El Mobile trata de atajar más bajas de empresas por la crisis del coronavirus" (*La Vanguardia*, 6/02/2020); "El salto a Italia del coronavirus contagia a las bolsas mundiales" (*La Vanguardia*, 25/02/2020); "El coronavirus provoca la peor semana de la bolsa en 10 años" (*El Mundo*, 29/02/2020). And also nationally, especially from March onwards: "The Government and the WHO question the closure of Mobile" (*El País*, 14/02/2020); "The Government facilitates the closure of companies due to the risk of contagion" (*El Mundo*, 5/03/2020); "The coronavirus is already costing the Spanish stock market 110,000 million" (*El País*, 7/03/2020).

The framework of health consequences (21.63%) is found in the Basque Country in the first month of the year: "Alert in the Basque Country when a possible case of Chinese coronavirus is detected in Cruces" (*El Correo*, 25/10/2020); "Osakidetza remains on guard despite the negative result of the coronavirus in Cruces" (*El Correo*, 26/10/2020) and in parallel at a global level: "The WHO declares a global emergency due to the spread of the virus" (*El País*, 31/01/2020). Its presence increases, especially in *El Correo*, in March and is almost maintained in April.

The solution/recommendation approaches (19.44%) are not very significant. Most of them appear in *El País*. *El Correo* and *El Mundo* tie: "Europa promete 25.000 millones contra la "tormenta" del coronavirus" (*El Mundo*, 11/03/2020); "La UE activa un plan inmediato de 7.500 millones" (*La Vanguardia*, 11/03/2020); "La sanidad madrileña cierra filas ante la emergencia" (*ABC*, 13/03/2020); "El Gobierno ahora recomienda el uso de mascarillas en la calle" (*El Mundo*, 4/04/2020).

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With regard to the headlines in which the framework of responsibility stands out (6.90%), most of them are found in the *ABC*. "State of confusion" (*ABC*, 14/03/2020); "The tests are key to the curve but we only need the State to give us the material" (*ABC* 22/03/2020); "The Government already knew" (*ABC*, 26/03/2020); "Sánchez chooses to stop the economy" (*ABC* 29/03/2020).

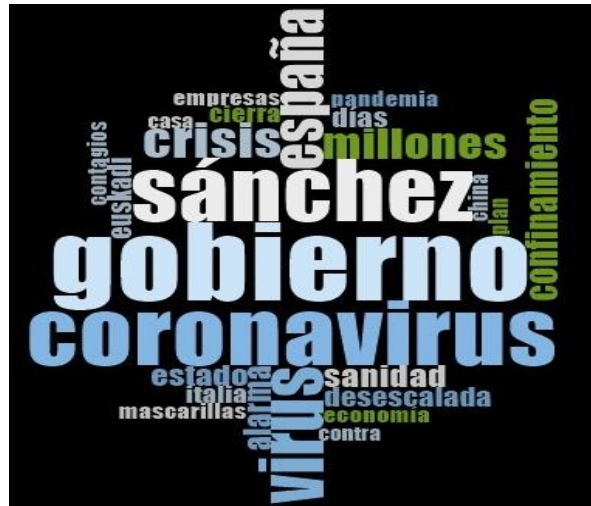
We note that the president of the Government, Sánchez, appears related to economic consequences and solution-recommendation with the same data, 4.39%, but above all with social consequences in 5.33%. We will underline that the relation with health consequences is only 0.94%. With reference to the representative of the opposition, it appears related to the contents on responsibility and with those referring to solutions and recommendations with 0.94% in both of them. It should be emphasised that the relationship with social consequences is 0.31% and that it does not appear related to either economic or health consequences. The president of the Basque Government is related above all with social consequences in 0.63%, but also with health consequences in 0.31% and with solutions and recommendations in the same percentage. The president of Catalonia appears related to solutions and recommendations in 0.31%.

Within the variable of the valuation of the Spanish Government, it has been analysed whether the information - its action - is considered as good, bad or neutral.

In the 319 headlines analysed, we found that in more than half of the news items (53.29%) there was no assessment of the work of the Executive. The analysis of this variable has been carried out with the remaining news items. The neutral (22.57%) and bad (21.32%) evaluation -rises in April and shoots up in May-, present similar data in the rest. The good rating is 2.82%: "The regional presidents close ranks with the Government" (*El País*, 16/03/2020); "Michel: "Do we have an agreement, Pedro? Sánchez: "it's impossible like this"" (*El País*, 23/02/2020). It is worth noting that *El País* has not found any negative reading of the government's work. It is followed by *El Correo* and *La Vanguardia* in uncritical information; only 1.25% are negative: "El reparto de mascarillas en el transporte enfrenta a los gobiernos central y vasco" (*El Correo*, 12/04/2020); "Las indecisiones del Gobierno marcan el parón de la economía" (*La Vanguardia*, 31/03/2020). On the opposite side, *El Mundo* (10.03%) and the daily *ABC* (8.78%) are the ones who value more negatively the Government's action: "Alarma en diferido" (*El Mundo*, 14/03/2020); "Sánchez spreads the alarm among critics of his management" (*El Mundo*, 23/03/2020); "Atrincherados ante la semana más trágica" (*ABC*, 23/03/2020).

### 4.4. Warlike language

The word cloud - made with the Nvivo12 software - visualizes the preeminence of the word Government in the headlines of the five most widely circulated newspapers in Spain. The prominence of official bodies in the *mass media* is intense in the middle of the pandemic, above the term coronavirus or virus. The reiteration of the term 'Sánchez' multiplies the institutional presence in the headlines.



**Figure 4.** Most common words in headlines. The size represents the percentage of appearances.

**Source:** own elaboration

Terms such as millions or companies, more visible than confinement or health, reflect the fact that the headlines about the pandemic transcend health information and extend strongly to the economic sphere. De-escalation appears diminished, but it is evident that the term is conditioned because the study period has the limit of April 30. We note that none of the terms in the graph is impregnated with the tone of the language of war, although confinement refers to situations experienced in wars.

However, war language is explicitly present in 28 news items -headlines plus the accompanying text- of the first pages analysed. It represents a percentage of almost 9% in a sample of 319 units. It is a remarkable number, taking into account the importance of the front pages. War terms (13) are the most used resource, among the three defined in the methodology, above violent metaphors (11). Adapted terms (4) are significantly less used. *El Mundo* and *ABC* are the most active newspapers in the use of all these resources. *El Correo* is, on the contrary, the most reluctant to use them in its headlines.

War terms include words or phrases that contain a martial meaning in any of the meanings of the dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy (RAE). Cases have been found in which the nominal syntagm textually includes the word war: "El Ramón y Cajal es un hospital en guerra" (*El Mundo*, 21/3/2020); "Es la guerra de nuestra generación" (*El País*, 22/3/2020); even with the subject of the sentence: "Una guerra, casa por casa" (*ABC*, 13/4/2020). There are terms that imply a violent action: "Offensive to prevent new contagions among health workers" (*La Vanguardia*, 4/3/2020); "President Xi Jinping said that overcoming the virus is a key test of China's system" (*El País*, 5/2/2020). And, in contrast, other terms do not entail an explicit action, but are more neutral, or of a defensive nature: "Los presidentes autonómicos cierran filas con el Gobierno" (*El País*,

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16/3/2020); "España no se rinde" (*ABC*, 19/3/2020); "Atrincherados ante la semana más trágica" (*ABC*, 23/3/2020).

The metaphors used are not of a military nature, they contain a threatening meaning: "El Ibex 35 loses 20,900 million in a 'black Monday'" (*ABC*, 25/2/2020); "Milán vive presa del pánico" (*El Correo*, 27/2/2020); "45 días de imprevisión y pasividad que permitieron el zarpazo del virus" (*El Mundo*, 22/3/2020). "Han jugado a la roulette rusa" (*El Mundo*, 24/4/2020).

The third figure of speech used is the adapted term. The examples show that there is no direct relation with violence but there is an intrinsic one, with the aim of generating interest from the relation between the term and suspense, that is, fear, which is a form of violence: "Codogno, ciudad fantasma" (*ABC*, 23/2/2020); "Sanidad considera Vitoria 'zona caliente'" (*El Correo*, 3/3/2020); "Objetivo: reflotar la imagen de España en el exterior" (*ABC*, 30/4/2020). This last example assumes that Spain is a sunken country and therefore needs to be 'refloated'. With this metaphor, a calamitous image of the country is conveyed, while hopes are placed on the actors of the information, the King and Queen of Spain, in a multi-screen conversation with sportsmen Rafael Nadal, Fernando Alonso and Pau Gasol.

### 4.5. Photographs

It is significant that almost all the news in which the actor is the civil society, the frame corresponds to the social consequences. This inertia is repeated when it comes to doctors, health professionals or scientists as protagonists and the framework of the health consequences.

The usual images of civil society on the front pages act as a contrast to the *hard news* that has dominated the headlines during the pandemic. They are images of citizens waving to the camera from their balconies and inside their flats assimilating new routines. In other cases they are scenes of almost deserted streets that transmit uneasiness and increase the harshness of the cover.

The visual approach of health consequences refers to the victims of the pandemic, in many including deceased. The tragedy is intensified by the use of black and white in the photograph (*ABC*, 13/4/2020). The positive side appears in the images that show the signs of solidarity towards this collective. Or the doctors and health workers themselves applauding. They are photos that reinforce the feeling of solidarity and the sensation of community, an inherent effect of the media.

The police and the army, both added together, are the third most common type of actor on the front page photographs. The pandemic has given them both a preferential role. In the images, they show a proactive attitude, they provide a sense of security and control, both in surveillance and health work. The military tanks in the airport of Bilbao or in Montjuic, reflected in the front pages of the main Spanish newspapers, reveal the transformation of daily life brought by Covid-19. We can add to this set the image of the king dressed as a military man, with mask and gloves (*ABC*, 4/4/2020). The headline



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accompanying the image reads: "Fortress to remain confined by decree". The fortress and the confinement by decree are displaced to the metaphor of the martial figure of the King as the personification of control. The figure of Sánchez, on the other hand, presents more variations, and although the frame of responsibility is in the majority, there also appear approaches of social consequences and, to a lesser extent, of solution/recommendation.



Figure 5. ABC and La Vanguardia front pages (2020)  
Source: own elaboration

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The outbreak of covid-19 has entailed a recognition of journalism as an essential instance in 21st century societies (Casero-Ripollés, 2020). Likewise, the data allow us to affirm that the front page is the showcase where a newspaper displays its informative merchandise and serves to present in a quick and direct way the most important current affairs (Davara et al., 2004).

If a ranking is established, *La Vanguardia* is ahead of the competition in gauging the importance of the pandemic. The most lagging behind is the conservative press, *ABC* and *El Mundo*. At first, Covid-19 is treated as a foreign topic, but *La Vanguardia* shows a special interest in bringing the global closer to the local by reporting first from China and then from Italy. The timeline shows that in March and April the information is located in Spain, especially in ABC, and it is in this area where the most critical news about the Government are published. At the same time, social issues weaken, and the economic one remains in time.

In line with the theme, the focus on social consequences, linked to confinement or the spread of fear, is the majority. But the economic consequences *frame*, in second place, reveals the importance that the media give to the functioning of the economic system over the health consequences. The solution/recommendation frame, somewhat more

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minority, advocates the adoption of measures against the negative consequences of the pandemic, and thus benefits the image of the governments, while, on the contrary, the responsibility approach, especially common in *ABC*, contains criticism to the work of the central Government, with Sánchez as the central axis of this censorship. The front page provides clear indications of its ideological preference (Davara *et al.*, 2004).

The prominence of politics as an informative subject, usual in the press, is diluted, the preeminence of political figures (Sánchez, central and regional government) is maintained to report information of a social nature, such as the confinement measures or health data concerning the pandemic. It is necessary to add the presence of the police and the army, and also the King, to contemplate as a whole the exposure that the powers of the State have in the press in this Covid-19 crisis. The systematic use of visual frames in the media to complement textual information (Muñiz *et al.*, 2008) has not been fully confirmed in this work, although there is a common correlation between the two formats and their approaches.

The rise of the media presence of new alternative news actors - NGOs, civil society, experts, etc. - has been confirmed in diachronic studies of the front pages of Spanish newspapers (López-Rabadán and Casero-Ripollés, 2012). This paper reaffirms this idea, insofar as civil society is the main protagonist, as well as experts.

The discourse focused on belligerent expressions and the argumentative dimension reveals that the presentation of the covers, their protagonists or the stylistic resources are a key element in capturing the readers' attention (Davara *et al.*, 2004).

It has been demonstrated that war language, typical of sports chronicles (Barrero, 2007), is present in the Covid-19 news. The use of war metaphors by politicians in the media can lead to social confrontation, while understanding the pandemic situation as a path that we must all travel would help to generate feelings of solidarity (Ostolaza, 2020). War language is a resource that adds colour and drama that the news genre does not really require. In the information about the coronavirus, war language is understood as a way of militarizing society so that it acts obediently and uniformly in compliance with the confinement measures, in a form of peaceful domestication. In this war context, the figure of the hero appears, represented in doctors and health workers, and to a lesser degree in the police and the military.

The weight of *soft news* is relative on the front pages, a historical characteristic of the front pages (López-Rabadán and Casero-Ripollés, 2012). The headlines refer to the harsh consequences of the pandemic. The results also tell us that the press resorts to image frames to reinforce the focus of the headlines, although there are examples in the opposite direction, with photos that relax the tension of the hard headlines during the pandemic. The presence of civil society as the main actor in the photographs provides a counterbalance to the *hard news* in the headlines. However, this protagonism is mitigated by the images of police or military action, and even the figure of politicians, who usually occupy this preferential space. The pandemic has allowed the Police and the Army to present themselves as close collaborators of the citizens, establishing the control required by a situation of alert and showing a proactive attitude within a strategy

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against the spread of the coronavirus. The figure of the King is the maximum exponent of this metaphorical representation, especially when he appears in military dress. In the cases in which Philip II appears with gloves and masks, the figure evokes the need for compliance with the rules imposed, from the highest authority to ordinary civilians.

In this *mise-en-scène*, the images of the King of Spain and the President of the Spanish Government wearing a mask are the icons that best represent the aesthetics of this pandemic, together with the multi-screens (Carrión, 2020). Contrary to the perception emitted by the plasma screen, the mosaic conveys a desire for dialogue, interaction as opposed to the distance imposed by confinement, and hierarchy. The mosaic appears in the first episode of the first series about Covid-19 broadcast on television, by Netflix, as a sign of its media impact.

Despite its exploratory and initial character, these findings reveal the existence of an important influence of Covid-19 on the media system, which covers most of the front pages of the newspapers in print. The role of journalism as an actor that exercises the symbolic construction of events, in alliance, but also in tension, with the political system, in order to homogenize the discourses and thus maintain in society a cohesion essential for coexistence, is proven.

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