

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON JOURNALISM: A SET OF TRANSFORMATIONS IN FIVE DOMAINS

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ABSTRACT

The covid-19 outbreak is a highly disruptive event in our society. Its consequences have affected different social domains. Our objective is to analyse its impact on journalism in a panoramic and comprehensive way. We intend to identify the main alterations and changes that the outbreak of the coronavirus has caused. The methodology is based on the qualitative analysis of secondary data, taking the case of Spain during the first period of the pandemic as a reference. The results allow the identification of positive and negative effects in five areas: news consumption, business models, working conditions, disinformation, and relations with political actors. These findings reveal that covid-19 has had a considerable impact on journalism. This incidence is ambivalent as it has positive and negative effects that affect different aspects of this domain. The main positive consequences are increased news consumption and the promotion of new formats and information products, such as infographics or newsletters. On the other hand, the weakening of business models due to the reduction of advertising revenues, the deterioration of journalists' working conditions, the reinforcement of political control mechanisms over the media, and the increase of disinformation are the main negative effects.

KEYWORDS

covid-19, coronavirus, journalism, media, business models

O IMPACTO DA COVID-19 NO JORNALISMO: UM CONJUNTO DE TRANSFORMAÇÕES EM CINCO DOMÍNIOS

RESUMO

O surto da covid-19 é um acontecimento altamente perturbador na nossa sociedade e as suas consequências têm afetado diferentes domínios sociais. O nosso objetivo é analisar o seu impacto no jornalismo de uma forma multidisciplinar e abrangente. Pretendemos identificar as principais alterações e mudanças que o surto do coronavírus provocou. A metodologia baseia-se na técnica da análise qualitativa de dados secundários, tendo como referência o caso da Espanha durante o primeiro período da pandemia. Os resultados permitem a identificação de efeitos positivos e negativos em cinco áreas: consumo de notícias, modelos de negócio, condições de trabalho, desinformação e relações com os atores políticos. Estas descobertas revelam que o covid-19 tem tido um impacto considerável no jornalismo. Esta incidência é ambivalente, pois tem efeitos tanto positivos como negativos que afectam diferentes aspectos deste domínio. O aumento do consumo de notícias e a promoção de novos formatos e produtos informativos, tais como infografias ou boletins informativos, são as principais consequências positivas. Por outro lado, o enfraquecimento dos modelos de negócio devido à redução das receitas publicitárias, a deterioração das condições de trabalho dos jornalistas, o reforço dos mecanismos de controlo político sobre os meios de comunicação, e o aumento da desinformação são os principais efeitos negativos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVEcovid-19, coronavírus, jornalismo, *media*, modelos de negócio**1. INTRODUCTION**

Initially appearing in China at the end of 2019 and becoming widespread in Europe and the rest of the world by March 2020, covid-19 is a highly disruptive occurrence. Not only because of its high mortality, causing 2.400.000 deaths and 108.600.000 contagions worldwide by February 2021, but because of its ability to upset all realms of our society. In fact, coronavirus has become a mega-event with the potential to produce consequences in different social domains, such as journalism. It has generated a broad consensus on the idea that it could end the world we have lived in until now and bring about radical social changes, increasing uncertainty, and fragility (Zizek, 2020).

This article aims to offer a panoramic and comprehensive approach to the impact of covid-19 on one of the main domains of our society: journalism. As such, we aim to identify the main alterations and changes the outbreak of this pandemic has provoked in this sector's processes and dynamics. In this way, an initial diagnosis of its possible effects will be presented, which can be contrasted in the future with new medium and long-term analyses.

The methodology used is the qualitative analysis of secondary data from surveys, audience studies, and economic data on journalistic companies. As an interpretative theoretical framework, we draw upon the social role of journalism, political communication, and the political economy of communication. The case of Spain is taken as a geographical framework. The analysis is based on five areas within which the initial impact of covid-19 is examined: news consumption, business model, working conditions, misinformation, and relations with the political sphere.

2. IMPACT ON NEWS CONSUMPTION

The health emergency caused by the covid-19 outbreak led to a sharp increase in news consumption. The need to inform oneself and gain knowledge about the pandemic to reduce anxiety and orient oneself in the face of this complex situation has set off a worldwide increase in news demand in both the conventional and digital media and on web pages. In this way, news media became a product endowed with a high social value, reversing the trend that, in recent times, had evidenced its loss in relevance (Casero-Ripollés, 2014).

Thus, in the United States, according to data from the Pew Research Center (2020), 92% of citizens actively consumed news about the coronavirus, registering a 32% increase at the onset of this health crisis. Only 2% stated they did not seek information about the virus. By platform, 96% of Americans were informed about covid-19 through national free-to-air television and cable television. A percentage of 93% opted for printed newspapers, 94% turned to web pages or applications, and finally, 87% turned to social

media. In Spain, news consumption presented similar figures at the start of the pandemic. Hence, according to data from Havas Media (Ruiz de Gauna, 2020), 85% of citizens used television to learn about the coronavirus. Some 54% turned to the digital press, while 13% opted for printed media. Finally, 41% were informed via the internet and 38% through social media. Only 1% of Spaniards declared not actively searching for information about the virus.

This data shows two interesting trends. On the one hand, the full establishment of a hybrid media system in which traditional and digital media coexist (Chadwick, 2017). Second, the institution of a complementarity dynamic in consuming different media simultaneously (Dutta-Bergman, 2004). Rather than generating a replacement of the old media with the new, covid-19 has encouraged citizens to use various media and media channels to obtain data on the pandemic. Consequently, in a complementary fashion, they have sought to enrich their subject knowledge by trying to combine various media to obtain greater satisfaction.

Another of the main trends detected in the coronavirus outbreak was the resurgence of traditional media compared to digital media (Casero-Ripollés, 2020). The most significant increases and percentages of news consumption were focused on these media, particularly on television. In a context marked by risk and complexity, the public opted for well-established, reliable news sources with a consolidated track record (Nelson, 2020). In this way, traditional media were at the centre of the communication system, clearly surpassing social media, mobile applications, or web pages as the preferred space from where to be informed (Ferreira & Borges, 2020). With this, they regained part of the journalistic authority they had lost due to the identity and relevance crisis these media experienced over the last decade (Carlson, 2017; Liu et al., 2020).

On television, there was an audience increase of 60% in the United States, according to data from Nielsen (Perez, 2020). Nightly network television newscasts grew by 42% compared to the same period the previous year, and cable news experienced a 92% audience increase compared to early 2020 (Perez, 2020). For its part, in Spain, television consumption increased by 37.8% between the first and second fortnights of March 2020, coinciding with the worsening health situation (Barlovento Comunicación, 2020). That was an increase of 88 minutes per person per day of television consumption. As a result, the month of March 2020 recorded 284 minutes per person of daily television consumption, even reaching 344 minutes per person on Sunday, March 15, 2020. These were the highest figures since 1992 when television audiences began to be measured in Spain.

In addition, the situation of confinement generated another relevant phenomenon in the news and media consumption: the shift of the maximum audience slot from prime time to day time. In other words, the data indicates that the preferred television viewing time went from being located at night, from 10 p.m. to being located in the mornings, between 9 a.m. and 2 p.m (Barlovento Comunicación, 2020). The audience increase in this last slot in Spain during the coronavirus outbreak was 64.5% (Barlovento Comunicación, 2020). Conversely, prime time, more closely linked to entertainment, rose by 21.1%. This trend was not unique to Spain but was also detected in other countries. Thus,

in the United States, daytime grew by 39% during the health crisis, while prime time fell by 5% (Weissbrot, 2020). Two reasons explain this change. In the first place, due to confinement, the availability of time for citizens to consume news outside the time slots when people were usually away from home carrying out their work grew. The flexibility of teleworking and the need to be informed led to an advance in morning-time television news consumption. Secondly, the link between prime time with entertainment and daytime with information, as a key ingredient to start the day, favoured the latter in the context of a high news demand.

For its part, the increase in digital press consumption time in Spain during the initial weeks of the coronavirus crisis was 35% (Gfk, 2020). Time spent on social media increased by 45%. By media, Facebook time went up 46%, Instagram by 34%, and Twitter by 23%. The latter network also increased user numbers by 21%, while Instagram grew by 3%, and Facebook experienced no increase in users during the second half of March 2020 (Gfk, 2020).

Finally, the widespread increase in news consumption during the coronavirus outbreak also led to the reconnection of some of the more distanced public with a lesser interest in the information (Barlovento Comunicación, 2020; Casero-Ripollés, 2020). The most significant increases in consumption were recorded in the United States and Spain, in people previously connected to the news less, such as young people, people with lower education levels, and sporadic information users. The need for guidance and awareness of developments in the health situation led to a significant increase in the percentages of news consumption among these groups. This reconnection, fostered by covid-19, of information-distanced citizens has positive consequences in democratic terms. Inequalities among citizens in accessing the news were reduced, favouring greater equality with its consequent social and democratic benefits (Casero-Ripollés, 2020).

3. IMPACT ON THE BUSINESS MODEL

The increase in news consumption recorded since the beginning of the pandemic in Spain was not accompanied by increased media advertising revenues. On the contrary, these were notably reduced. The falls were industry-wide. According to Infoadex data (Rivas, 2020), the overall reduction in the Spanish advertising market between January and September 2020 was 22.2%. In total, the losses amounted to €942,300,000. In the case of newspapers, the drop in advertising revenue during this period was 32%, equivalent to a loss of €175,800,000. Radio lost 28.8% of its advertising revenue, equivalent to €100,400,000. Television, on the other hand, fell by 24.4%, losing €344,600,000 in advertising revenue. Between them, these three media accumulated 65.88% of the total advertising losses deriving from covid-19.

This data shows that, despite the explosion in news consumption, advertising revenues have contracted sharply. There can be several explanations for this paradox. First, the reduction in investment by brands is due, in part, to the general fall in sales resulting from the economic paralysis imposed by the confinement. In the face of the closure

of establishments considered non-essential, decreed by the state of alarm, advertising came to a halt. Travel, automotive, and sports sectors, which allocated the most economical resources to traditional advertising, experienced the most significant reduction in advertising investments. On the other hand, the displacement of a significant percentage of the population towards online shopping, estimated in Spain at 25% (Fernández, 2020), can generate new consumer habits that impact advertising investments. If this crisis consolidates this online consumption transition, traditional media may see its advertising revenues further reduced in the future as, in this scenario, it is likely advertisers will target digital media and platforms more.

Secondly, a dynamic similar to that generated after the 2008 global financial crisis has been reproduced. This recession eliminated some \$60,500,000,000 from the advertising market worldwide (Fernández, 2020). Given the economic difficulties associated with covid-19 for companies, advertising investment has been one of the first items to be reduced or frozen. In the United States, 56% of brands expected declines in their sales for the remainder of 2020 (McDonald & Clapp, 2020). As a result, 81% of advertisers in the US decided to reduce their advertising budget. In the case of mainstream television, this percentage stood at 65%. In Spain, 44% of marketing and communication directors expect advertising spending to be reduced by 30% throughout 2020 (Good Rebels, 2020). In particular, the government of Spain forecasts a decrease in the gross domestic product (GDP) of 9.2% due to the crisis arising from the coronavirus. This data allows us to predict that the contraction in advertising investment will not disappear with the return to the new normal. In fact, advertising investment contracts by 5% for each decrease in a point in GDP (Picard, 2009). Because of the impact of the covid-19 crisis on the economy, the media is likely to suffer, in short to medium term, the negative impact on its finances of declining advertising investment, significantly weakening its economic position.

Along with the reduced advertising revenue, the coronavirus outbreak has also affected another key component of the business model: the sale of the newspaper product. The health emergency has significantly harmed the sale of paper newspapers at newsstands. In Spain, it is estimated that printed daily sales dropped between 80% and 90% in the early days of confinement (Cano, 2020).

Before the emergence of this crisis, the Spanish media was in a transformation process based on implementing payment formulas for online access to their content. Several relevant newspapers such as *The Mundo*, *ABC*, *La Vanguardia*, and *El País* have implemented paywalls in their digital versions between 2019 and 2020. The high news consumption during coronavirus has increased paid subscriptions to news media. In Europe, they have increased by 267%, while in the United States, the rise has been 63% (Cerezo, 2020). This data seems to open the way to break the ceiling of reader willingness to pay to access digital news that struggled to exceed 10%-20% in total over the past decade. In fact, a global survey recently quantified that percentage to be 16% (World Economic Forum, 2020). In addition, digital media that are committed to offering free access to their contents have also benefitted from this context of a greater predisposition

towards paying. Thus, eldiario.es, a pure Spanish player, managed to attract 9,000 new subscribers at the start of covid-19, reaching 47,000 (Cerezo, 2020).

This data suggests an increase in the number of media establishing a paywall in the digital environment in the short term. In fact, in 2021, one of the strategic priorities of publishers is to increase the number of digital subscribers (Newman, 2021). Covid-19 will thus contribute to accelerating the change in the journalism business model by promoting digital versus print versions (Newman, 2021).

The challenge for journalism will be to maintain readers' willingness to pay or keep up the financial support that the need for information on covid-19 has generated when this crisis is over. The health emergency has restored the exchange value that the news had lost in recent years (Casero-Ripollés, 2014). The coronavirus outbreak has demonstrated how the media can recover the value of the news: to bet on quality information relevant to citizens' lives. The media must take advantage of the start of this exceptional moment to implement their payment formulas, taking advantage of the public's perception of the need for news in today's complex world.

4. IMPACT ON JOURNALISTIC COMPANIES AND JOURNALISTS' WORKING CONDITIONS

The reduction in advertising revenues due to coronavirus, coupled with problems in the business model, has had a strong impact on the media economy in Spain. Four associations of newspaper publishing companies, representing 260 Spanish publishing groups, estimated that the covid-19 crisis would result in losses of €250,000,000 (Asociación de la Prensa de Madrid, 2020). At the moment, the first financial results demonstrate the negative impact of this health emergency. Thus, Vocento's revenue, one of the leading newspaper publishers, fell by 17.2% in the third quarter of 2020. For its part, Prisa, the editor of *El País* among others newspapers, lost €219,000,000 in 2020, and its newspapers reduced their revenues by 25% (Asociación de la Prensa de Madrid, 2020).

These findings illustrate the tricky balance between monetisation and the provision of an essential public service offering information about the pandemic. The increased information demand has not resulted in a positive impact on the business dimension of journalism. The media has failed to take advantage of increased news consumption to achieve economic benefits. That leads to inefficient monetisation and an unprecedented weakening in the business. That has led the press to request aid from the Spanish government to correct such market-generated imbalances and protect its vital role in providing news for society on relevant events, such as covid-19.

The loss of economic revenue due to coronavirus by the media enterprises has affected journalists' working conditions. Thus, one of the first consequences has been generalising temporary employment regulation plans (*expediente de regulación temporal de empleo*; ERTE). According to data from the Spanish labour ministry (Ministerio de Trabajo y Economía Social, 2020), in the information services sector, which encompasses journalism, 2,435 people were affected by some type of ERTE until April 2020. The large newspaper publishing groups in Spain (Prisa, Vocento, Prensa Ibérica, Unedisa, Godó, Henneo,

and Joly) made use of this formula, reducing the working hours and salaries of their staff reporters between a minimum of 11% and a maximum of 50% over a 3 to 6 month period. That has directly affected the production of journalistic content that experienced a 14.2% sector-wide decline during the initial phase of the health emergency in Spain.

In addition, the reduction in corporate profits has also led to an increase in the layoffs of journalists, adversely affecting the working conditions of the sector. Before the advent of covid-19, data from the working population survey (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2020) indicated the lowest levels of unemployment in the last decade among journalists in Spain. By contrast, the pandemic's effects have put these figures at 24,600 people during the first quarter of 2020, placing them at a similar level to the data from the first quarter of 2008, which marked the beginning of the financial crisis that has severely affected journalism over the last decade. Moreover, in the United States, the coronavirus led to the drop in media jobs estimated to increase by 35% compared to 2019. With data from April 2020, the number of people laid off, suspended from employment, or affected by pay cuts was 37,000 in total (Tracy, 2020), a scenario that shows the pandemic can lead to a process of global job destruction.

On the other hand, the confinement imposed in the face of the covid-19 outbreak has increased teleworking in the media sector. Before the coronavirus crisis, only 19.6% of journalists claimed to work from home (LeanFactor, 2020). However, the health emergency has emptied newsrooms and set off forms of news production and online editorial coordination in a generalised fashion. In this sense, net-based organisational models and greater digital weight in business structures have been reinforced.

Many technology companies, such as Facebook or Google, notified their employees that they would work from home until early 2021. In particular, Twitter stated that it would permanently allow teleworking for some of its professional profiles even after the pandemic. For his part, the editor of *The New York Times*, A. G. Sulzberger, announced that until September 2020, physical writing would not return and advanced that he had begun to design a long-term vision for remote work based on what was being learned from the covid-19 experience. All this indicates that this health emergency has hastened the digital transformation processes of media organisations and the decentralisation of journalistic work, which is likely to be less and less dependent on physical newsrooms (Newman, 2021). Along these lines, labour flexibility within the sector is likely to increase, and new models of a contractual relationship between journalists and media companies are likely to emerge. An even more significant increase in the prominence of digital technologies in news production processes and an increase in decentralisation and off-shoring can also be expected. According to a survey, 40% of Spanish journalists said these would be the most likely consequences of covid-19 for the sector (LeanFactor, 2020). Both will foster the advance of deep mediatisation in a framework where the digital is inextricably intertwined with journalism, becoming the main, and almost the only, infrastructure that allows the sector to function (Hepp, 2020).

The increase in flexibility and teleworking can also pose threats to the working conditions of journalists. In the first place, it will mean the need for more significant

technological investment for media companies in a context where their economic resources are scarce. In the coronavirus crisis, only 44.6% of Spanish journalists confirmed that their company had provided the necessary technological equipment to telework with guarantees (LeanFactor, 2020). In addition, taking the scenario of widespread business weakness and layoffs caused by covid-19 into account, it cannot be ruled out that these new dynamics involve slimming down the media workforce or increased precariousness in the sector. Prensa Ibérica, a prominent Spanish local newspaper publishing company, predicted that by the end of 2020, the pandemic could lead to a reduction in its workforce of 400 people. On the other hand, the emergence of new forms of contractual relations may lead to deteriorating working conditions for journalists, with a consequent increase in insecurity and instability.

Telework and the high information demand have meant that the media have proposed the implementation of new journalistic formats in their covid-19 coverage (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2020). The media has strived to produce news and generate new news products, such as digital newsletters, podcasts or infographics (Costa-Sánchez & López-García, 2020). Similarly, faced with the proliferation of fake news, they have also reinforced data verification and the fight against misinformation. In this way, they have brought added value to journalistic information about coronavirus. This crisis has shown that these new products can also enhance information quality and the connection with the public.

Finally, covid-19 has affected journalists' working conditions from a health point of view. Professional journalists have put their personal safety at risk by reporting on the virus on the front line. Their work has placed them, in many cases, in direct contact with coronavirus. This situation has entailed physical danger due to the possibility of infection when reporting on the health emergency and psychological danger since they face the consequences of the pandemic daily. The pressure to report on a severe health crisis has managed to cause anxiety and trauma for journalists (Perreault & Perreault, 2021). In this context, the network Red de Colegios Profesionales de Periodistas (Professional Colleges of Journalists) in Spain as well as the Asociación Española de Comunicación Científica (Spanish Association of Scientific Communication), the Committee to Protect Journalists or the International Federation of Journalists have published recommendations on how to safely report, trying to mitigate the effects of this health crisis on the sector's professionals (Costa-Sánchez & López-García, 2020).

This severe health risk in reporting on covid-19 has underlined the high social commitment of journalists. Faced with a potentially dangerous and complex situation, they have prioritised the values of public service and professional ethics to let citizens have access to information understood as the basis of social knowledge. In addition, they have prioritised the right to citizenship information, redoubling their professional dedication to producing information about the pandemic. A percentage of 69% of Spanish journalists claimed to have worked longer hours than in the situation prior to the health emergency (PRGarage, 2020).

5. THE IMPACT ON DISINFORMATION AND THE CIRCULATION OF FAKE NEWS

The circulation of fake news experienced substantial growth as a result of covid-19. According to data from CoronaVirusFactsAlliance (Poynter Institute, n.d.), an initiative that brings together various data verification organisations around the world under the impetus of the Poynter Institute sponsored International Fact-Checking Network, 11,022 fake news items related to this pandemic had been detected around the world by the end of January 2021. In Spain, according to Maldita.es (2021), 1,196 misleading information has been recorded from the beginning of the coronavirus until November 2021. This data has led the World Health Organization (WHO) to classify this situation as an “infodemic”. This neologism refers to an excess of information, much of it false or misleading that prevents citizens from accessing reliable information sources on a subject.

The magnitude of this phenomenon concerning covid-19 has stirred various institutions into reacting. Hence, the United Nations has promoted the Verified initiative to address misinformation by providing accurate and reliable information worldwide. The WHO, for its part, has launched the *EPI-WIN* project to debunk the main hoaxes about the pandemic. The Poynter Institute has also promoted the Corona Virus Facts Alliance initiative to join more than a hundred fact-checking organisations worldwide to address the circulation of falsehoods about the virus by cross-checking information. The infodemic has even stoked the debate over legally curbing the spread of fake news in Spain. On the one hand, some have defended this idea because the right to information is based on the transmission of proven facts and that the spread of lies carries legal responsibilities (Carrillo, 1998). On the other hand, there are warnings that the judicial persecution of hoaxes can be an excuse to restrict our freedoms and justify and legitimise the implementation of means of controlling the public, which is hardly compatible with democracy (Zizek, 2020).

Examples of coronavirus-related fake news have been varied: ranging from its emergence being caused by 5G technologies to this virus actually being a biological weapon deployed by China or the United States to extend their global dominance, to helicopters indiscriminately dropping chemicals over cities to eradicate the plague or a wide variety of treatments and remedies. Generally speaking, covid-19-linked hoaxes can be grouped into four major blocks: the causes of the appearance of the virus, the disease itself (symptoms, transmission and consequences), treatments and ways of curing it and, finally, the intervention and actions of the public authorities in the face of this crisis.

Digital platforms have been the main channels through which fake news about covid-19 have circulated. Social media have been the channels the public has detected most information of this type (Casero-Ripollés, 2020; Scheufele & Krause, 2019). In addition, mobile instant messaging services, amongst which WhatsApp stands out, have played a key role in spreading misleading news about the pandemic (Salaverría et al., 2020). Three causes have made this platform one of the main focuses of the infodemic. Firstly, a notable increase in these applications' use, 76% at the start of the confinement in Spain, according to Kantar Media (Flores, 2020). Secondly, the personal nature of their use, since it is family or friends who send the messages, this circumstance makes

the user believable. Thirdly, the difficulty of identifying the source of such messages due to the application's characteristics. According to the leading data verification portals, requests to check the falseness of information disseminated by this messenger service multiplied by six and reached a thousand daily cases. In fact, 80% of the fake news about the coronavirus circulating in Spain came from WhatsApp (Tardáguila, 2020).

The surfeit of information and the multiplicity of channels they circulate through are at the base of this phenomenon. In the case of covid-19, a social climate of fear, risk, and insecurity must be added. In a context marked by emotionally unstable moods, society is more vulnerable to fake news. The temptation to find out forbidden or hidden information that no one dares to disclose and that power wants to silence, and the scandalous or controversial nature of the messages acts as a lure to capture the public's attention and causes it to fall into falsehoods. With this, the circulation of hoaxes increases in times of crisis, as is the case of this pandemic. In fact, fake news is 70% more likely to be shared by social media users than real news (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

Along with its ability to spread anxiety and confusion amongst the public, misinformation also carries a danger in democratic terms. Fake news has a political dimension since one of its objectives is destabilising society and government institutions, generating confusion and anxiety among its citizens (Waisbord, 2018). The far-right and populism frequently use misinformation in political terms and are the main instigators of this phenomenon (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Covid-19, by its very gravity and social centrality, has become a pivotal moment for the widespread implementation of disinformation and manipulation strategies by the far-right. These political organisations have resorted to meticulously planned digital campaigns and bots, automated accounts posing as humans. The circulation of these hoaxes pursued two objectives.

In the first place, by eroding and discrediting political and media institutions. In this way, they sought to sow mistrust of the government's handling of the crisis and turn this into public discontentment. In Spain, fake news about the privileges of government members in the pandemic spread, such as that of the president's family having one floor on a public hospital reserved for them. The government was also blamed for concealing the actual number of deaths or, directly, accused of deaths with the hashtag *#Gobiernoasesino* (government killer) in social media. For its part, it was also to try to discredit the non-far-right media to generate mistrust around them. In this way, it aspired to undermine journalistic intermediaries so that their fake messages and news could circulate without filters or alterations and directly impact the public.

The second objective was related to the promotion of the far-right's political agenda. Resorting to disinformation, it sought to shock and capture the public's attention to promote the issues and proposals of their political agendas, placing them at the centre of political debate. Thus, both in Spain and in other European countries, the far-right blamed the Chinese community for creating and spreading the coronavirus, which is in keeping with its rejection of immigration. In this way, during covid-19, fake news, in addition to sowing confusion, aspired to have a political and democratic impact, magnifying animosity towards institutions and the media, promoting the polarisation and

radicalisation of citizens and promoting their political agenda. For this reason, the impact of the pandemic may translate, in the short and medium-term, into a weakening of the social influence of journalism and politics, leading to negative consequences for democracy.

6. THE IMPACT ON RELATIONS BETWEEN JOURNALISTS AND POLITICIANS

The relationship between journalists and politicians constitutes a central element for constructing social reality (Micó-Sanz et al., 2016). The outcome of this interaction depends mainly on the information that reaches citizens and how news is shaped. That affects both the public agenda, what issues are at the centre of public attention, and the process of forming the public's opinions.

Covid-19 has had a remarkable impact on the relations between journalism and politics as it is an event endowed with great social centrality. In particular, it has led to a revival of the control dynamics of information control by political actors, principally the government (Castillo-Esparcia et al., 2020; García-Santamaría et al., 2020).

The communication cabinets and spin doctors are the key elements in enhancing the political control of information related to the coronavirus outbreak. In an atypical context, due to the application of the state of alarm regulations, the limitation of movement and confinement, these actors operated as a critical strategic element in imposing political domination over the media's informative activity. These intermediaries actively developed their shield function (Micó-Sanz et al., 2016) to guide both the thematic agenda linked to covid-19 and, in particular, the frame under which the journalistic account of the virus was constructed.

The mechanism used by the communication cabinets in Spain at the coronavirus outbreak to impose their preponderance was press conferences. Given the obligation to hold them telematically to avoid contagion and keep social distance, a format characterised by pre-screening arrangements was implemented in many cases. In order to formulate their questions, the media had to previously refer them to the cabinets in charge of selecting them and announcing them to the political actor appearing. With this, they could not only avoid uncomfortable questions or questioning off from the messages they wished to convey, but politicians would also know the questions in advance and could strategically design their answers. In addition, journalists could not cross-examine or seek further clarifications. As a result, political actors instituted a high degree of control over coronavirus-related information.

Among those who resorted to this practice were political parties, namely the Partido Popular (PP) or Vox, and public institutions, such as the government of Spain. In the latter case, the secretary of state for communication created a WhatsApp group where journalists had to formulate their questions for the president and the different ministers. Questions were then selected from this body, and the group's administrator formulated them, on behalf of the media, to the politicians in the press conferences. The PP did something similar through its deputy secretary of communication.

This format, linked to a high degree of control over the journalists' reporting, was kept up during the first fortnight after the pandemic outbreak. In the face of reduced professional autonomy, a part of the journalists protested. A group of media led by the newspaper *El Mundo* and made up of *ABC*, *La Razón*, *Ok Diario*, *Libertad Digital* and *Vozpópuli* decided not to participate in those press conferences with filtered questions. On the other hand, several journalists launched the manifesto "La Libertad de Preguntar" (Freedom to Ask). This pressure brought about a substantive change in format. Beginning in early April, press conferences went on to be held by videoconference, allowing journalists to ask live questions, previously non-communicated to the communication cabinet.

Despite the success of the journalists' reaction to this form of political control of the press conferences, their perception is that their work was significantly hampered, mainly by political interests during covid-19. Thus, according to a survey conducted by PRGarage (2020), 80% of Spanish journalists felt they had been misinformed during this health crisis. In addition, photojournalists also denounced the obstacles imposed by the government in obtaining images of the effects of the virus, restricting their access to morgues and hospitals (García, 2020). As a result, covid-19 has revived attempts to control journalistic information given the relevance of this event.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of these five areas shows that covid-19 has had a considerable impact on journalism. This incidence is ambivalent as it has positive and negative effects that affect different aspects of this sector.

Among the positive consequences, a notable increase in news consumption stands out. In this way, journalistic information has become an essential product furnished with high value as a fundamental mechanism to know the extent and evolution of the pandemic. Traditional media, especially television, have gained significant prominence in this context, achieving a high social centrality. That means a strengthening of journalism and its role in today's society. Covid-19 has also allowed audiences furthest from the news to reconnect with information. In doing so, it has had a beneficial effect in democratic terms.

Among the positive aspects, it stands out that the coronavirus has also promoted the use of new formats and information products, such as infographics or newsletters. With this, it has contributed to improving journalistic quality and connecting with the public. In addition, covid-19 has accelerated the media's digital transformation, promoting teleworking and network organisation by increasing the flexibility and adaptability of the sector. Finally, in this context, the pandemic has increased digital subscriptions. That is expected to encourage the widespread embrace of the paywall in the digital environment.

Despite these reasons for optimism, covid-19 has also brought adverse effects on the evolution of journalism. Hence, the economic paralysis has led to a sharp reduction in advertising investment. This circumstance has been detrimental to newspaper companies, which have seen their business model weakened by the decrease in economic

revenue. Paradoxically, as journalism has become more socially important and higher news consumption figures have never been seen, the greater is the economic fragility affecting the media.

This situation has resulted in a deterioration of journalists' working conditions. Coronavirus has brought layoffs, workforce restructuring and precariousness to the sector, adversely affecting journalistic employment. That poses a serious threat to guaranteeing news quality at a time when this is more necessary than ever.

Finally, covid-19 has also had adverse effects on the democratic role of journalism. On the one hand, it has revived the political control mechanisms of the news and journalistic work, especially through press conferences with pre-screening. With this, the professional autonomy of journalism has been curtailed. On the other hand, the coronavirus outbreak has led to an extraordinary increase in fake news to the extent that it is described as an infodemic. That has generated alarm, confusion and fear among citizens, causing instability and mistrust. In addition, the health crisis has been used by the far-right to push disinformation in order to erode political and journalistic institutions and promote their political agenda. That is something that, in democratic terms, holds a serious danger.

In any case, the existence of these positive and negative effects demonstrates the disruptive power of covid-19 on journalism. Our objective has been to present a panoramic and comprehensive approach to the incidence of the pandemic, allowing an initial diagnosis to be formed. However, analysing its evolution will be necessary to gauge the long-term influence of the coronavirus on the transformation of journalism.

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