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THE SPANISH MEDIA IN TIMES OF PANDEMIC: NEWS GENERATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA DURING COVID-19

Los medios de comunicación españoles en tiempos de pandemia: generación de noticias en redes sociales durante la covid-19

 **Sandro Arrufat Martín**¹. Rey Juan Carlos University. Spain.
sandro.arrufat@urjc.es

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ABSTRACT

This research presents a quantitative study on the information disseminated by the main Spanish media in their social network profiles during the onset stage of the pandemic in Spain until the conclusion of the first State of Alarm decreed by the Spanish Government. In this regard, the results presented show both, the degree of interest by citizens in the information related to COVID-19 during the established time frame and also in which social channels these messages have had greater interaction and acceptance. Likewise, the research has allowed obtaining precise data on which social networks respond best depending on the type of messages and disseminated content. In addition, the research methodological design has led to obtaining results on other social topics of interest and current affairs that are not related to the pandemic and that media also generated in their discourse during the established months for the analysis.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19 - Pandemic - Virus - Social networks - Media - News - Present - Social debate - Information.

RESUMEN

¹ **Sandro Arrufat Martín:** Profesor Asociado en la Universidad Rey Juan Carlos y docente e investigador en EAE Business School. Doctor en Ciencias de la Comunicación por la Universidad Rey Juan Carlos.

La presente investigación presenta un estudio cuantitativo de la información difundida por los principales medios de comunicación españoles en sus perfiles de redes sociales durante la etapa de inicio de la pandemia en España hasta la conclusión del primer Estado de alarma decretado por el Gobierno español, analizando sus principales ratios. En este sentido, los resultados expuestos evidencian el grado de interés por parte de los ciudadanos en la información relativa a la COVID-19 durante el marco temporal establecido y en qué canales sociales han tenido mayor interacción y aceptación estos mensajes, siendo Instagram la red social con mejor aceptación para mensajes de carácter social. Asimismo, la investigación ha posibilitado obtener datos precisos sobre qué redes sociales responden mejor dependiendo el tipo de mensajes y contenidos difundidos. Además, el diseño metodológico de la investigación ha propiciado obtener resultados acerca de otros temas sociales de interés y actualidad que no guardan relación con la pandemia y que los medios de comunicación también generaban en su discurso durante los meses establecidos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: COVID-19 – Pandemia – Virus – Redes sociales – Medios de comunicación – Noticias – Actualidad – Debate social – Información.

OS MEIOS DE COMUNICAÇÃO ESPANHÓIS EM TEMPOS DE PANDEMIA: GERAÇÃO DE NOTÍCIAS EM REDES SOCIAIS DURANTE O COVID-19

RESUMO

A presente pesquisa apresenta um estudo quantitativo da informação difundida pelos principais meios de comunicação espanhóis nos seus perfis das redes sociais durante a etapa do início da pandemia na Espanha até a conclusão do primeiro estado de alarme decretado pelo governo espanhol, analisando seus principais índices. Neste sentido os resultados expostos evidenciam o grau de interesse pelos cidadãos na informação relativa ao COVID-19 durante o marco temporal estabelecido e em que canais sociais tem maior interação e aceitação destas mensagens, sendo Instagram a rede social com melhor aceitação para mensagens de caráter social. Além disso, a pesquisa tem possibilitado obter dados precisos sobre que redes sociais respondem melhor dependendo do tipo de mensagem e os conteúdos difundidos. Por outro lado, a estratégia metodológica da pesquisa propicia obter resultados sobre outros temas sociais de interesse e sobre a atualidade que não possuem relação com a pandemia e que também eram gerados no seu discurso durante os meses estipulados.

PALAVRAS CHAVE: COVID-19 – Pandemia – Vírus – Redes sociais – Meios de comunicação – Notícias – Atualidade – Debate social – Informação.

Translation by **Paula González** (Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, Venezuela)

1. INTRODUCTION

The extraordinary concern generated in society due to COVID-19 is reflected in the consumption of information by the public in the media and their respective dissemination channels. Undoubtedly, in the face of a situation as critical and of such depth as the one that is being experienced globally, information and the media become an essential resource to reduce uncertainty in the face of risk and facilitate the adaptation of our behavior to the new unforeseen scenario.

The World Health Organization declared the public health emergency of international concern due to COVID-19 in January 2020. However, it was not until March 14th, when WHO declared the global pandemic due to the severity and virulence of the virus. Consequently, countries were taking measures to contain the virus, and Spain, among other countries, declared the State of alarm through the publication of Royal Decree 463/2020, of March 14th (Spain, 2020), which required total confinement of the population during an initial period of 15 days, with it being extended several times.

Lubens (2015) already raised a few years ago the determining role that journalists and health professionals develop during times of illness, both professions performing key functions regarding the perception of the population, the flow of information, and decision-making. We can find close antecedents, although not of such magnitude, regarding the Ebola epidemic in 2014. And it is at a time of alarm when the media acquire a greater level of power and importance (Masip et al., 2020). In such circumstances, citizens demand and need more information, and quality information (Seeger et al., 2003).

A phenomenon of such exceptional nature, magnitude, and social relevance as is the coronavirus pandemic has led to numerous scientific productions on this matter, also in the field of communication sciences. As an example, we can mention studies and analysis on the dissemination of information on social networks (Ferrara, 2020), research on false images disseminated about the pandemic (Andreu-Sánchez et al., 2020), and on information consumption and media coverage during confinement, among others (Masip et al., 2020). Analyzes have also been proposed on the communication of institutions (Costa-Sánchez and López-García, 2020), or comparative studies between digital media and the press (Lázaro and Herrera, 2020).

Consequently, and in line with communicative research, most of the proposals attempt to approach the complex process of social influence of the media (Wolf, 2011: 9) as a source of generation of public opinion and creation of the social image of the pandemic. However, and regarding the ideas put forward by Renn (1991) and Slovic (1987), in health crises, citizens tend to trust institutions to a lesser extent, including the media.

The informative ecosystem has varied notably to the point that “usage habits go faster than the producing agents” (Costa-Sánchez, Rodríguez-Vázquez, and López-García,

2015: 288), which has led to a change in the information consumption paradigm no longer only present in traditional media, but also on the web. The use of new technologies and social networks, in particular, has fostered a new space for social interaction where the media, companies, institutions, and people converge. The media have had to adapt their forms and channels for disseminating information (Baraybar, Arrufat, and Rubira, 2020: 4), however, and despite the growth experienced by social networks as a form of access to news in recent years (Newman et al., 2019), "the data show that they are not able to unseat the traditional media during this health crisis as a priority source of information for citizens" (Casero -Ripollés, 2020: 11).

According to a study by Larson (2020) in early April 2020, 113 million unique authors had shared messages about COVID-19 on Twitter. In this sense, the power of information associated with the virus has flooded social networks, the result of the dissemination and rapid exchange of information by the media on their social profiles (Aleixandre-Benavent et al., 2020). At present, the space for debate and the formulation of public opinion has been extended to social networks (Papacharissi, 2010), joining the pre-existing public sphere (Guallar et al. 2016: 359) and building a hybrid system of communication in which traditional media and digital platforms converge (Chadwick, 2013). Although we must indeed bear in mind the sensation of information saturation that may exist in the public and that has already been verified in other crises (Abraham, 2005).

Studies that analyze the behavior and dissemination of information on social networks show indicators and ratios that provide valuable quantitative and qualitative information when it comes to analyzing the so-called "sentiment analysis" in a community (Yu; Duan; Cao, 2013; Ceron et al., 2014). Therefore, this article tries to provide quantitative data that reinforces the theses presented on the consumption of information and generation of interest during the established time frame and with the theme related to COVID-19. Likewise, we delve into other topics that have aroused interest in the space of social interaction and the public sphere during confinement and that are not related to the virus.

2. OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this research is to identify the flow of news related to COVID-19 by the most relevant Spanish media in their respective social profiles. In the first place, the research tries to collect the most outstanding data in the metrics of each social profile to obtain quantitative information that indicates which media and in which channels they have performed better. Furthermore, the research aims to determine those contents with the highest acceptance in each of the social networks by users.

Second, the research will provide the necessary data to interpret what type of informative content not related to the coronavirus issue aroused the interest of the public during the established time frame. This point will provide the research with the

necessary data to understand and interpret the evolution of informational interest on the part of users in social networks about COVID-19.

3. METHODOLOGY

As was well stated above, the research has two well-differentiated points. On the one hand, we find the quantitative data that the research has provided on the metrics and content, concerning the coronavirus, which has generated greater interest in the public and the social channels of the selected media. And on the other, the data related to other types of social issues that, informatively, users demanded in social networks during the established period.

The time frame of the research ranges from March 1st to June 21st, 2020. In this way, the days before the proclamation of the state of alarm in Spain are collected, to be able to observe the growth in demand for information on the object of study, and ends on the day that the Spanish government allowed mobility between provinces and, consequently, the expiration of the emergency decree. For this, the two phases detailed above have been differentiated, the first from March 1st to May 31st, when detecting a key period in the demand for information about COVID-19, and a second one until the end of the analysis where the demand for information about the pandemic began to decrease.

To obtain the results of the research, a technical study of the social and specialized tools for obtaining metrics and quantitative analysis of the behavior of the main social networks was carried out during the exploratory phase. For this study, it was decided to use the Data Analytics and Content Analytics application of the Welovroi company. It is an app that offers quantitative data to analyze the main ratios and behavior of each profile on social networks thanks to its two analysis components. The first component (Data Analytics) allowed the comparison of the different examined profiles according to the metrics (KPIs) chosen within the programmed time range and their graphical representation. The second (Content Analytics) facilitated the possibility of analyzing and filtering the different contents that were related or not to the subject of COVID-19. Once the data from the analysis was extracted by the tool, they were treated together to be able to select the most relevant results for the study and, thus, be able to carry out the different comparisons.

To obtain the information segmented by subject, we proceeded to establish keywords that would screen the information. To differentiate the subject of COVID-19 from others, it was segmented in the app with the following keywords: coronavirus, confinement, virus, pandemic, *cacerolada*, quarantine, infections, epidemic, alarm, masks, disinfectant, and deaths. For its part, the media sample attended to the different media in the Spanish market: press, radio, and television. In turn, the media were selected following the criteria of dissemination and the number of readers, listeners, and viewers according to the General Media Study (EGM, 2020), whose data is a reference among the media themselves. Therefore, it was analyzed the dissemination

of the official accounts in social networks of the newspapers *El País*, *El Mundo*, and *ABC*; of the radio stations Cadena Ser, Cope, and Onda Cero; lastly, of the television stations TVE, Antena 3, Telecinco, and La Sexta. Regarding the segmentation of the chosen social networks, it attends to the use according to the Study in Social Networks 2020 of the International Advertising Bureau Spain (IAB Spain, 2020), with Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube being studied.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Total data and performance of the media on social networks about COVID-19

The total number of posts during the period of the research on COVID-19 by the selected media on social networks was 69,804 posts, observing a downward trend over time and centering the peak of posts in the period covered in the first State of alarm decreed by the Government of Spain and, specifically, on March 12th-13th, 2020. The information tension of the media was centered during the last three weeks of this month.



Figure 1: Total posts on social networks

Source: Self-made based on Welovroi

In the same way, COVID-19 has been the central issue during these three months and this is evidenced in the interaction rate in the analyzed social networks by users. During the established time frame, we analyzed a total of 50,473,226 interactions, these being greatly reduced during May compared to March. The level of user interaction began to decline on April 11th. The research shows that the interaction rate decreases faster than the posting rate during April and May. The media continued to hoard their information on issues related to the virus, but public interest has decreased after the summer period of Easter but remained constant during May. In this sense, we find a general average of interactions of 723.17 throughout the period, concentrating an average of interactions in March of 830.37, in April of 711.77 (-14.72%), and in May of 605.31 (-15.27%).



Figure 2: Total interactions in social networks

Source: Self-made based on Welovroi

The press (36.7M interactions) has been the media sector that has had the best acceptance and interaction rate on social networks, compared to televisions (7.98M.) and radios (5.77M).

Specifically, the newspaper *El País* has been the media outlet with the best interaction rate in the time frame and subject of this study. In fact, the thesis that *El País* is the media outlet that has most attracted the attention of social network users is reinforced since its Facebook and Twitter profiles are in the TOP5 ahead of other media. Between its two accounts, they gather a rate of more than 13 million interactions in the three months of the study. In the same way, it stands out that the highest interaction percentage of all the media is concentrated on Facebook. *Telecinco* is the television media outlet with the greatest interaction in its sector, followed by *Cadena Ser* in the radio sector.

The results of the research show that the social network with the highest posting rate is Twitter followed by Facebook. In this sense, it is evident that a higher posting rate does not lead to a higher interaction rate. In fact, we observe how the social network Instagram is not in the TOP10 table of posts and is in the table of interactions. From these results, we can conclude that media such as *El País*, *ABC*, and *Cadena SER* make more efforts in publishing on social media profiles contrary to what their interaction rate establishes.

Therefore, the social network that has gathered the highest posting rate during the time frame has been Twitter (48.9%), followed by Facebook (45.1%), Instagram (4.7%), and YouTube (1.4%). On the other hand, the social network that has had the highest rate of interactions has been Facebook (70.2%), followed by Twitter (13.9%), Instagram (11.6%), and YouTube (4.3%).

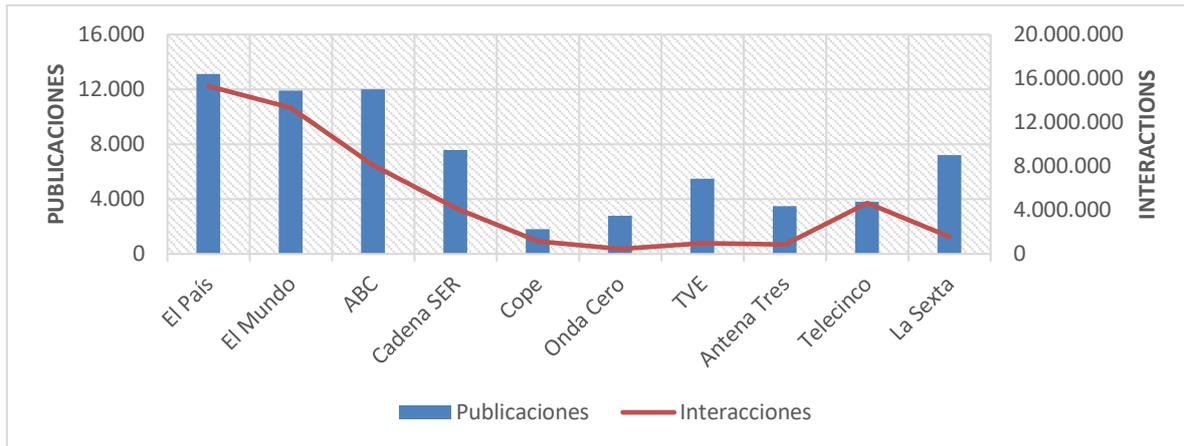


Figure 3: Direct relationship between posts and interactions by the media outlet

Source: Self-made based on Welovroi.

There is not always a balance between posts and interactions. The user of social networks rewards more quality content than the periodicity of the posts. In this specific case, we observe clear differences and inequalities between the posting and interaction rates. Many media outlets have dedicated human and material resources to keeping social media profiles up-to-date with above-average COVID-19 news and increasing their own regular posting patterns without getting any benefit in return from the audience.

The graph shows how the traffic of posts and interactions is concentrated in the accounts of the three national press media analyzed (*El País*, *El Mundo*, and *ABC*), with little balance between their posting and interaction rates. Regarding the first, the percentage between the three media is almost the same, while the results vary if we analyze the interaction rate where we observe that *El País*, even adding the same posting efforts, takes the gold medal and the audience's recognition on their social media profiles.

4.2. Informative content with greater interest related to COVID-19

During the time frame of the study, users have interacted about COVID-19 with a multitude of tags, being the hashtags that are presented in the image the ones that have gathered the most interactions. In this sense, #coronavirus has been the most used hashtag during the three months of the study with more than 3.97 million interactions. The first three places are completed by: #últimahora (2M.) and #COVID19 (1,57M.). They are followed in the ranking by #CoronavirusEspaña (1.56M.), #Urgente (673K.), #YoMeQuedoEnCasa (596K.), and #Covid_19 (476K.). The TOP10 is completed with #Pandemia (465K.) and the hashtag tribute to health workers #AplausoSanitario that gathered more than 432K interactions.



Figure 4: Word cloud according to the most used hashtags
Source: Self-made

Regarding the content that is most in-demand and with the best interaction rate on Facebook by users, we once again endorse, in this case, the thesis that the press media is the one that gathers the most followers in their news. The Facebook post with the highest interaction rate is *El Mundo* (470K), followed by *El País* (139K), and *ABC* (98.9K). As a curious fact, and that undoubtedly invites reflection, is the theme of the three posts that are related to COVID-19 issues of an international nature.



Figure 5: Posts with the most interactions on Facebook
Source: Self-made based on Facebook

As with Facebook, the press media sector has the highest engagement rate on Twitter. ABC's profile on Twitter had the highest interaction rate with Ernesto Sevilla's post (57.3K.), followed by *El Mundo* (56.3K. and 52.3K.). Once again, we observe how content

with an international theme sneaks into the first, coinciding in content and media with Facebook.



Figure 6: Posts with the most interactions on Twitter
Source: Self-made based on Twitter

On Instagram, *El Mundo* manages to position three posts like the ones with the highest interaction rate. In this sense, this media outlet is the leader of all those analyzed in this social network, monopolizing more than 174.1K interactions in these three posts. Stunning social and emotional photos and videos make these three posts a hit with followers.



Figure 7: Posts with the most interactions on Instagram
Source: Self-made based on Instagram

Finally, and in the case of YouTube, *El Mundo* once again leads with its interview with Iker Jiménez, attracting more than 60.8K interactions and with another interview that is in third place (32.1K.). Likewise, the video on the progress of the Spanish vaccine of *El País* brings together more than 41.6K, ranking second.



Figure 8: Posts with the most interactions on YouTube

Source: Self-made based on YouTube

4.3. During confinement, does one talk only about the virus?

The graph of the evolution of posts shows that before March 13th, the posts of the media on social networks had little relationship with COVID-19, with March 13th being the day that attention was triggered concerning this issue, coinciding with the announcement of the declaration of the state of alarm.

In the same way, we observe how during this same month, the central theme continues to be COVID-19, with this trend being slightly altered after Easter and more pronounced during May. If we look at the total number of posts, it can be misleading since it reflects the trend that the media gave space to non-COVID-19 topics more regularly after the mentioned summer period, adding many posts during May and recovering the low figures that this data had regarding March.



Figure 9: Posts with non-COVID-19 subject matter

Source: Self-made based on Welovroi

During the three months of the study, we observed how the non-COVID-19 topics that the media used in their social networks were found in the television sector and, specifically, in *Telecinco* (#Supervivientes2020), *Antena Tres* (#ElHormiguero), and *TVE* (#OT2020).

Regarding specific posts on social networks and with a higher interaction rate, we find on Facebook posts related to the death of Luis Eduardo Aute, Sudan's ban on ablation, King Felipe VI's resignation of his father's inheritance, and the death of Julio Anguita. On Twitter, the most popular topics were the deer resting in Japan, the 75th anniversary of the liberation from fascism in Italy, and other international political topics. On the other hand, in the social network Instagram, the posts with the highest interaction rate were those related to the death of Álex Lequío, Dani Rovira's illness, and social and television issues. On YouTube, we find in the first positions videos of Alberto Chicote and videos of Carlos Herrera.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In recent months, the world has faced a pandemic with no precedent in more than a century that has been devastating at the health, social, and economic levels. The constant adaptation by the media to the new media context dominated by the emergence of social networks has led to the convergence of the media to a hybrid information system dominated by traditional communication and the internet. The media are beginning to have an active presence on social networks and in the Internet context with the firm intention of gaining notoriety and seeking viralization that increases the dissemination of their content.

The research shows how the press sector continues to have greater acceptance by the public when it comes to getting informed. In this sense, the newspaper *El País* is also the undisputed leader in terms of interaction level. Likewise, the study also shows how the media use their social media channels, some to a greater extent than others, to flood their profiles with different news of different magnitude and scope. The tendency to “over-information” is one of the issues to be highlighted in this article since the results conclude that there is no direct relationship between the posting and interaction rates. In the television field, *Telecinco* is the media outlet with the highest level of interaction, followed by *Cadena Ser* in the radio sector.

Regarding social networks, Twitter (48.9%) was the network with the highest posting rate, followed by Facebook (45.1%), Instagram (4.7%), and YouTube (1.4%). On the other hand, the social network that has had the highest interaction rate has been Facebook (70.2%), followed by Twitter (13.9%), Instagram (11.6%), and YouTube (4.3%). These results endorse the thesis that there is no direct relationship between posts and interactions.

Posts with a high emotional component have been more widely accepted than those of a rational nature. In this sense, Patino (2020: 121) states that when talking about something important to the user; group dynamics emphasize much more emotional responses than rational ones. In the social network Facebook, we find the posts with the highest acceptance load in international information matters. Twitter has been the social network with the highest posting rate as a result of its instantaneous nature and with

the most varied themes. For its part, on Instagram, we find posts with a high emotional and social component, followed by YouTube with audiovisual and extensive information with a high component of scientific dissemination and research nature.

Topics of conversation vary at different stages. #coronavirus has been the most used hashtag during the three months. We also observe social topics such as #YoMeQuedoEnCasa and #AplausoSanitario. During the health crisis, the media have also obtained a high diffusion on the networks with other issues; in the case of televisions, the influence and prominence of entertainment shows are revealing. The media, in a generalized way, included in their agenda and reached a prominent following of the news related to the death of the artist Luis Eduardo Aute and the politician Julio Anguita; the resignation of King Felipe VI to his father's inheritance; and at the international level, the legal prohibition of female genital mutilation in Sudan. Influencing the social aspect of Instagram, for illustrative purposes it is worth highlighting the prominence taken by the death of Alex Lequio, being the topic not related to COVID 19 with the greatest dissemination. It is from the Easter holiday period that the media vary their dynamics and information-flows to disseminate news not so focused on the pandemic, but also on other social, cultural, sporting, and economic aspects.

This study also shows changes by citizens in the consumption of information during the State of Alarm, as already reflected in other studies and similar crises (Seeger; Sellnow; Ulmer, 2003). Citizens, in crises, need to know and obtain as much information as possible. However, on occasions, the need to be informed due to the exceptional nature of the situation can create a feeling of overexposure or over-information in the person, creating "certain fatigue due to the overabundance of news on the subject (Masip et al., 2020: 9). This situation, together with the proliferation of social networks as a source of information, produces, in the words of Thompson et al., (2017), greater anguish with greater information exposure, being variables necessary for the analysis so that they can determine new models or theories about behavior in social networks.

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AUTHOR

Sandro Arrufat Martín

Associate Professor at the Rey Juan Carlos University and professor and researcher at EAE Business School. Doctor in Communication Sciences from the Rey Juan Carlos University. Likewise, he has participated in several research projects related to the management and strategies of digital communication, social networks, and corporate reputation. Similarly, he has public relations, branding, and corporate communication among his research lines. Currently, Director of Communication and Institutional Relations at *Santander Financial Institute* (SANFI), a center of the UCEIF Foundation whose patrons are Banco Santander and the University of Cantabria. He graduated in Journalism (2016), Master in Corporate Communication Management from EAE Business School (2017), and Master in Protocol, Communication, and Integral Organization of Events from Rey Juan Carlos University (2018).

sandro.arrufat@urjc.es

Orcid ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3104-4765>