Digital Media and COVID-19: overinformation, polarization and misinformation

Medios digitales y COVID-19: sobreinformación, polarización y desinformación

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Abstract

This investigation analyses the media treatment of COVID-19 in main Argentinian digital media. The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has reconfigured the economic and social life, jointly with the centrality of the media system and the thematic composition of the media agendas. The demand of information during the outbreak enhanced the role of digital media as reliable sources. In specific terms, this work aims to investigate: 1) the evolution of the media agendas during the social isolation period; 2) the information sources deployment; and 3) the differential standing obtained by different actors in the media treatment. To this goal, a quantitative content analysis was developed of the most relevant news items in Infobae, Clarín, La Nación and Página/12 between March 20 and October 18, 2020 (n=4,240). Results show the existence of similar thematic agendas and a homogeneous presence of state sources in media with different editorial positions. Furthermore, there is partisan and polarized coverage, which is evident in the differential standing attributed to the official and opposition state sources in the analyzed media. The media treatment of the pandemic, over an extensive period, followed a cycle of over-information, polarization and misinformation that was detrimental to public debate quality.

Keywords

Pandemic, journalism, information, electronic media, politics, information sources.

Resumen

El presente trabajo analiza el tratamiento noticioso de la COVID-19 en los principales medios digitales de la Argentina. La pandemia por SARS-CoV-2 reconfiguró, junto con las relaciones económicas y sociales, la centralidad del sistema mediático y la composición temática de sus agendas. La necesidad de información de calidad en tiempo real potenció el rol de los medios digitales como fuentes confiables. En términos específicos se pretende investigar: 1) la composición temática de las agendas informativas durante el período de aislamiento social; 2) el uso de las fuentes de información; y 3) el nivel de crédito diferencial que obtuvieron los actores en el tratamiento informativo. Con ese objetivo, se desarrolló un análisis de las noticias más relevantes de las agendas digitales de *Infobae, Página/12*, *La Nación, y Clarín*, entre marzo y octubre de 2020 (n=4.240). Los resultados evidencian la existencia de agendas temáticas similares y una presencia homogénea de fuentes oficiales en medios con diferentes líneas editoriales. Además, se advierte una cobertura partisana y polarizada que se pone de manifiesto en el crédito diferencial que adquieren en los medios los puntos de vista desplegados por las fuentes estatales oficialistas y opositoras. El tratamiento informativo de la pandemia, a lo largo de un período extenso, siguió un ciclo de sobreinformación, polarización y desinformación, lesivo para la calidad del debate público.

Palabras clave

Pandemia, periodismo, información, medios electrónicos, política, fuentes de información.

Introduction

The pandemic caused by COVID-19 was declared on March 11, 2020. A few days before, the first cases were reported in Latin America. In Argentina, the first patient was notified by the health authority on March 3. The WHO decision and the devastating effects of the new coronavirus on the most prepared health systems in the world forced a large part of the Latin American countries to take relatively early containment measures in an effort to flatten the transmission curve and strengthen health institutions.

The arrival of the virus in Argentina constituted a turning point in the visibility of the issue in the media. With growing social concern, political power had to express itself. President Alberto Fernández, after decreeing the interruption of face-to-face activity in schools on March 16, on March 19 announced the sanction of Decree 297/20, which would enter into force a

day later, through which the initiation of a Preventive and Mandatory Social Isolation (ASPO) to reduce the movement of people was stipulated. Days later, the government announced a series of measures to financially support the most vulnerable sectors and contributions to companies aimed at sustaining private employment.

Pandemics caused by unknown pathogens can be classified as "emerging diseases" (Hallin et al., 2020, p. 2). One of its central characteristics is that "they become an object of public/media knowledge before consolidating as an object of medical/scientific knowledge" (p. 2). In this type of situation, the media acquire an unusual centrality as a result of the greater need of people to receive updated information in real-time, essential for decision-making (Farré-Coma, 2015; Muñiz & Corduneanu, 2020).

In this sense, the COVID-19 pandemic meets all the necessary requirements to unleash a process of moral panic (Thompson, 2014): a threat is established, the media contributes to making it recognizable, political elites must speak out and, finally, social changes occur. The situation is part of a "culture of risk" (Beck, 1998) in which the media occupy a decisive place on the symbolic construction of a state of fear in which the threat to life guides a perception of permanent danger. Said culture can be thought of from the existence of a series of objective threats to integrity that are associated with a subjective perception of risk that finds a dynamizing agent in the media (Hallin et al., 2020). Both dimensions, the objective and the subjective may or may not coincide (Kessler & Focás, 2014).

It is necessary to note, then, that, although in crisis situations information becomes a substantial asset to reduce anxiety and panic, it will depend on its quality to be effective in fulfilling its purpose (Casero-Ripollés, 2020). In a convergent media ecosystem in which news dramatization and speed are the two central newsworthiness criteria (Martini, 2017) to capture the attention of audiences who arrive at information randomly and incidentally (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2017), a spiral of production of high volumes of information (Salaverría et al., 2020) that do not always satisfy the quality standards required for these types of situations, triggering disinformation dynamics, has been developed (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Palpan- Guerra & Munayco, 2015).

News coverage of the pandemic constitutes an active productive process on the part of the media. The media agendas are considered by the agenda setting as an organized list of issues that the media propose for public de-

bate with certain possibilities of incidence (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2014). These are the result of mechanisms of selection, omission, ranking (Roberts, 2005) and theming (Luhmann, 1973) that shape the problems.

Different studies within the framework of this theory explained that issues further from direct experiences, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, stimulate the need for media orientation of audiences (Jablonski & Daniele, 1998; Lee, 2004; McCombs, 2006). Such findings are relevant to explain the centrality that online portals acquired during the process under analysis (Masip et al., 2020; Muñiz & Corduneanu, 2020).

In this sense, the outbreak of a pandemic produced by an unknown pathogen can be considered a key event (Brosius & Eps, 1995) that modifies the selection criteria of journalists. Generally associated with accidents or catastrophes, key events institute coverage prototypes that affect the newsworthiness of events and shape the news treatment. In their presence, productive routines are conditioned by three central factors: 1) the characteristics of a highly newsworthy public problem that dramatically bursts in and impacts the organization of journalistic work; 2) the interest of the audiences, which is manifested in an increase in the demand for information (Casero-Ripollés, 2020; Duc-Huynh, 2020; Muñiz & Corduneanu, 2020); and 3) pressure from sources as a determining element of the physiognomy of media agendas (Bennett et al., 2007).

Information sources are defined as those people who come into contact with reporters and who they include in their stories as they provide them with information about the events, their contexts, and points of view legitimized by the authority that confers their position (Gans, 1979). Transactional and symbiotic relationships of mutual dependence develop between media and sources (Bagdikian, 1985), to the point that Gans (1979) uses the metaphor of dance to account for the way in which both dancers try to gain access to the other.

The most important research on the relationship between media and sources gives the latter supremacy over the media and a broad power to shape agendas with an interested version of reality (Schlesinger, 1992). According to the Indexing hypothesis, coined by Bennett (1990), the media usually index a list of authorized voices, usually state actors with strong institutionalization and power to generate information. This leads Bennett et al. (2007) to conclude that the media tend to delegate to governments the role of controlling themselves.

However, the visibility of the sources in the news does not explain per se their ability to influence the angles (Charron, 1995). Indeed, according to the premise of standing, the sources cited by the media can obtain different levels of credit or media rejection, which affects the credibility of their versions (Ferree et al., 2002; Koziner, 2018). In this sense, previous works show that there are no significant differences between the most visible sources in the Argentine media, although, based on their testimonies, contradictory and polarized coverage related to their editorial positions are constructed (Koziner, 2018; Zunino, 2019). Such a situation, which has a negative impact on the diversity and pluralism of points of view, constitutes a limit to the quality of information.

Materials and methods

The general objective of this work is to analyze the informational treatment of COVID-19 in the most read Argentine digital newspapers. The specific objectives are: 1) to identify the level and variations in the media relevance of the problem from the beginning of social distancing; 2) establish what type of sources were consulted by the media, and 3) determine the level of credit achieved by the versions provided by the different actors.

Based on the objectives, the following hypotheses were established:

- H1: Because it is a key event, COVID-19 acquires a high relevance in digital media that presents variations during the process.
- H2: State sources predominate in the news.
- H3: The level of credit obtained by the sources depends on their political registration in relation to the editorial positions of the different media.

The empirical work consisted of a Quantitative Content Analysis on the front-page news, that is, from the first to the fifth of the homes (first and second scrolls), of the most read online newspapers in Argentina: *Infobae*, *Clarín*, *La Nación*, and *Página/12*.[1] The news gathering was done in a daily

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1   According to the COMSCORE consultancy, the most consumed online newspapers in the period January-June 2020, based on the average number of unique visitors are: Infobae, 23 178 599; Clarín, 23 044 227; La Nación, 18 421 161 and Página / 12, 8 943 953.

cut-off at 9:00 a.m., a time of high influx of readers and in which it is ensured that the topics of the day are updated (Zunino & Grilli Fox, 2020)

The research technique is aimed at analyzing informational texts, identifying their structure, investigating their foundations, their components, and the way in which they interact for their symbolic functioning. The analyst uses statistical tools to infer relationships between variables whose behavior is hypothesized from the theoretical framework and state of the art (Neuendorf, 2002). Through logical deductions, the researcher establishes inferences about the mediatized reality, and about the context in which the information is produced (Krippendorff, 1990).

For this study, a universe of 4,240 journalistic pieces collected over 212 days was constituted, between March 20, the date of the start of quarantine and social distancing, and October 18, 2020, the date on which thirty weeks (seven months) of observation were completed. Then, the pieces related to the pandemic (n = 2184), units of analysis of this work, were identified, which were coded in their entirety.
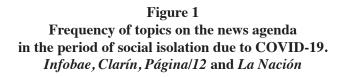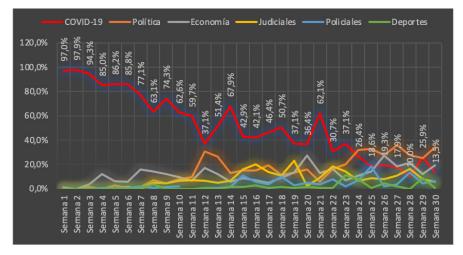
Reliability

Four specialists were involved in the coding process. To establish the reliability of the empirical work, a sample of 10% of the population was randomly extracted, consisting of 220 cases, which were recoded. Next, a statistical agreement test was applied between the original coding and the contrast sample using Cohen's Kappa index (k), which yielded a mean value of agreement of k = 0.897, which expresses a high level of reliability for the analyzed variables.

Analysis and results

In relation to the proposed objectives, firstly, the relevance of COVID-19 in the media agendas between March 20 and October 18, 2020, was analyzed. Figure 1 shows the frequency of the issue in relation to the informative gap (Budd, 1964) of the covers, more visible places of the homes.

In aggregate terms, news about the pandemic occupied 51.5% of the available space. The relationship of two variables is evidenced that allows inferring a high relevance of the matter in the media. At a high frequency of cove-

rage of the subject, which allows establishing that five out of ten news items published during the period were about the pandemic, it is added that these informative pieces were given the top places in the hierarchy, such as the first scrolls. The finding acquires greater relevance if one takes into account that different studies showed that the covers are indicative of the composition of the total information gap (McCombs, 2006; Zunino & Grilli-Fox, 2020).

Figure 1
Frequency of topics on the news agenda
in the period of social isolation due to COVID-19.
Infobae, Clarín, Página/12 and *La Nación*

Source: Own elaboration

Likewise, it is possible to observe from Table 1, a homogeneous thematic structuring between the different analyzed media. Although the highest levels of similarity were registered between *Clarín* and *La Nación*, there are statistically significant correlations between the topics arranged in the agendas of the four media. The finding allows us to affirm that the data in figure 1 express the variations of similar media agendas, even if they are portals with different editorial lines.

Table 1
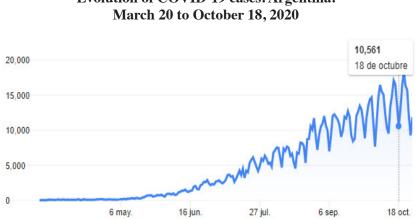**Pearson's correlation of the thematic composition**
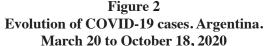**of the media agendas.** *Infobae*, *Clarín*, *Página/12* and *La Nación*

		Clarín	La Nación	Infobae	Página 12
Clarín	Pearson correlation	1	,979[**]	,861[**]	,834[**]
	Sig. (bilateral)		,000	,000	,000
	N	1060	1060	1060	1060
La Nación	Pearson correlation	,979[**]	1	,898[**]	,883[**]
	Significance	,000		,000	,000
	N	1060	1060	1060	1060
Infobae	Pearson correlation	,861[**]	,898[**]	1	,839[**]
	Significance	,000	,000		,000
	N	1060	1060	1060	1060
Página/12	Pearson correlation	,834[**]	,883[**]	,839[**]	1
	Significance	,000	,000	,000	
	N	1060	1060	1060	1060
**. Significant correlation for the 0.01 level (BILATERAL).					

Source: Data constructed by the author.

If the development of the media agenda over the period (figure 1) is analyzed, it is possible to notice that COVID-19 captured significant media attention until the end of April (week 6), a stage in which more than eight out of ten published news were on the subject. The coverage frequency curve from that moment on expresses a downward trend that accounts for a drop in the visibility of the matter over the weeks. Six news out of ten were published on the subject between the end of April and the middle of June (week 11), four out of ten between the first days of June and the middle of August (week 21), and no more than two out of ten from the third week of August to the last days of October (week 30).

The striking fact of the thematic evolution of the agendas is that a peak of overinformation about the pandemic is evident in its beginnings when the COVID-19 became a media monothem, which, however, reached the month of October, peak of infections and deaths in the country, with minimum levels of coverage.

Figure 2
Evolution of COVID-19 cases. Argentina.
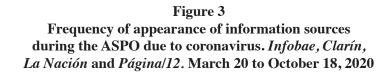**March 20 to October 18, 2020**

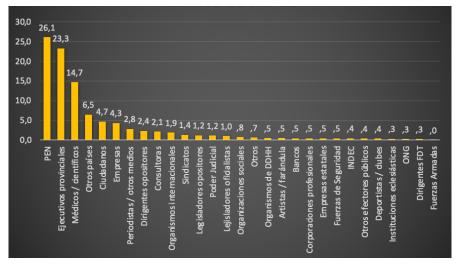Source: Google, based on statistics from the national health authority.

It is possible to analyze several factors that explain the invisibility of the pandemic at the peak of the disease. One of them is the thematic competition with other issues that, at the beginning of the isolation period, had been relegated. For example, the political discussion, which reappeared on the agendas as a result of some decisions made mainly by the national government. On June 8 (week 12), President Alberto Fernández announced a project to expropriate the Vicentín company, one of the most important exporters of agricultural raw materials in the country. The decision, which was rejected days later by the government itself, broke the precarious political consensus on the handling of the pandemic that existed during the first weeks between the ruling party and the opposition. Although polarization had been growing due to situations related to the management of social isolation, the announcement of the expropriation project unleashed a process of political confrontations that reached maximum levels and that reinstated an agenda of issues independent of the COVID-19. This event also rekindled the discussion on the progress of the economy in a context of deep crisis. Meanwhile, the Executive's proposal to Parliament for a justice reform project at the end of July (week 16), widely criticized by the opposition, set up the judicial discussion, related to allegations of corruption against government figures. Fi-

nally, towards the end of the observed period, other common topics on the media agendas reappeared, such as events of insecurity and sports, frequent condiments of the information menu of pre-pandemic times.

In sum, the data allow establishing a cycle of news coverage that is decoupled from the evolution of the pandemic. Indeed, while the greater media visibility of the issue was associated with the emergence of a novel disease in the country, the overinformation of the beginnings is consistent with an average of 150 daily infections and less than a dozen deaths per day. On the other hand, in the week with the highest number of infections, which occurred at the end of the period of this study, the frequency of coverage accounted for only 13.5% of the information gap. In this sense, it is possible to affirm that the evolution of coverage was inversely proportional to the evolution of infections and deaths.

The findings allow us to analyze that the newsworthiness of a pandemic is not necessarily associated with its epidemiological severity —at the national and international level— but rather with its novel and newsworthy components. Proof of this is that, in the moments of greatest uncertainty on the subject, when the demand for information and ignorance were at maximum levels, coverage was total. As time went by, and probably as a result of the saturation of information and crystallization of numbers of sick and dead, added to the fact that the pandemic experience increasingly found intersubjective sources that took it away from its status as a non-experiential topic, the media coverage changed from an initial overrepresentation to an underrepresentation that coincided with the time of greatest objective severity. Both situations institute a cycle of overinformation and misinformation favored by a climate of strong political polarization in which discussions that competed for media attention, at the time of greatest incidence of the disease, were established.

Now, a central variable to analyze the information quality standards is the identification of the presence and credit of the different subjects or institutions referenced in the pieces as information sources. A first finding to take into account is that the average number of cited sources was 2.47 per news item, a figure that, although it does not reach the three sources required as a basic triangulation requirement (Rodrigo-Alsina, 1989), is located above the average for other types of topics in the Argentine digital press (Zunino, 2019).

Figure 3
Frequency of appearance of information sources
during the ASPO due to coronavirus. *Infobae, Clarín,*
***La Nación* and *Página/12*. March 20 to October 18, 2020**

Source: Own Elaboration

Figure 3 expresses the presence of the different sources in the informative agendas. If they are computed in an aggregate manner, the official state sources constitute 69.1%, while the unofficial ones reach 30.9%. The National Executive Power was the central actor in the provision of official data on the pandemic (26.1%), followed by the provincial governments (23.3%), with special visibility from those of the City of Buenos Aires (10, 1%) and the Province of Buenos Aires (7%). Meanwhile, consultation with specialist doctors and scientists was high with respect to other matters (14.7%). Citizens (4.7%) appeared generally as victims of the disease or isolation, while with less relevance other actors with a high level of institutionalization, such as companies (4.3%), journalists (2.8%), opposition leaders (2.4%), and consultants (2.1%).

The findings allow to corroborate the Indexing hypothesis for this case, which stipulates the supremacy of state sources in media coverage. Now, the data merits to be interpreted in the particularity of a pandemic and infodemic context.

The four most widely read portals in Argentina structured their coverage based on data provided mostly by state agents who, in addition to preparing official indicators on the evolution of the pandemic, were the ones who decided and announced public policies on restrictions of movement, economic aid, and crisis management. In addition, the voices of doctors or scientists were recurrent in the informational treatment. Therefore, the Argentine digital media seem to have followed the WHO's indications regarding the use of official and expert sources as a method to counteract infoxication. The statement is consistent with the curatorial role that audiences attributed to traditional and/or digital media with trajectories recognized as privileged channels of reliable information, in a context of information saturation and misinformation that expanded the need for checking (Duc-Huynh, 2020; Muñiz & Corduneanu, 2020; Salaverría et al., 2020).

Additionally, as happened with the thematic composition of the agendas, the behavior of the analyzed media regarding the use of information sources shows highly significant correlations (Table 2), data that indicates that the newspapers, regardless of their editorial lines, consulted to the same sources and in similar proportions.

Table 2
Pearson correlation sources of information cited.
Infobae, Clarín, Página/12 and La Nación

		Sources Página/12	Sources Infobae	Sources La Nación	Sources Clarín
Sources Página/12	Pearson correlation	1	,987[**]	,986[**]	,968[**]
	Significance		,000	,000	,000
	N	1271	1165	1233	1271
Sources Infobae	Pearson correlation	,987[**]	1	,987[**]	,966[**]
	Significance	,000		,000	,000
	N	1165	1165	1165	1165
Sources La Nación	Pearson correlation	,986[**]	,987[**]	1	,987[**]
	Significance	,000	,000		,000
	N	1233	1165	1233	1233
Sources Clarín	Pearson correlation	,968[**]	,966[**]	,987[**]	1
	Significance	,000	,000	,000	
	N	1271	1165	1233	1381
**. Significant correlation for the 0.01 level (BILATERAL).					

Source: Data constructed by the author.

At this point, is it possible to affirm that the mere consultation of official sources in the context of a pandemic ensures minimum standards of information quality?

Table 3
Standing of the main state sources according to media.
Infobae, Clarín, Página/12 and La Nación

	Clarín			La Nación			Infobae			Página/12		
	Main-tained	Not refuted	Is discretited	Main-tained	Not refuted	Is discretited	Main-tained	Not refuted	Is discretited	Main-tained	Not refuted	Is discretited
Oppositions legislators	88,9%	11,1%		57,1%	42,9%		80,0%	20,0%			28,6%	71,4%
Executive CABA	74,0%	19,3%	6,6%	74,8%	23,1%	2,0%	78,9%	13,7%	7,4%	15,5%	64,3%	20,2%
Ministry of Health	73,3%	18,7%	8,0%	73,1%	20,2%	6,7%	84,8%	10,1%	5,1%	64,5%	35,5%	
Excutive PBA	29,3%	40,7%	30,1%	27,8%	38,9%	33,3%	50,0%	26,5%	23,5%	36,2%	58,0%	5,8%
Government legislators	25,0%	31,3%	43,8%	18,8%	18,8%	62,5%	35,0%	15,0%	50,0%	54,5%	45,5%	
Alberto Fernández	20,6%	34,0%	45,4%	28,4%	29,9%	41,8%	52,6%	11,8%	35,5%	62,3%	36,2%	1,5%
Cristina Fernández de Kirchner		20,0%	80,0%		33,3%	66,7%			100,0%	80,0%	20,0%	

Source: Own elaboration

Table 3 shows the level of credit (standing) obtained in each news outlet by the main state sources. As mentioned, although the four portals predominantly included official sources, the level of credit and discredit attributed to them based on their political/editorial orientations is revealing.

Although, in general terms, the official data produced by the Ministry of Health was not discredited, *Infobae*, *La Nación*, and *Clarín* expressed a greater doubt about the statistics and sanitary measures. Instead, *Página/12* never put that data in question. The legislators of the opposition and the Executive of the Federal Capital, led by the opposition political *coalition Juntos por el Cambio*, were the most accredited sources by *Infobae*, *Clarín*, and *La Nación*, and those that obtained the lowest level of standing in the news of *Página/12*. President Alberto Fernández acquired low credibility levels when

he was cited as a source in Clarín and *La Nación* and a high volume of rejection of his claims. In *Infobae* the level of presidential credibility was higher, although so was the refutation of his statements, which shows a more balanced coverage of his figure. On the contrary, the approval in *Página/12* to the president was almost total, with minimal levels of criticism of his positions. Finally, the paradigmatic case of editorial polarization expressed in the credit or discredit to the sources as a mechanism of media positioning occurred with respect to Vice President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. While the former president (2007-2015) monopolized the highest level of standing on *Página/12*, without her opinions being questioned during the analyzed period, the explicit refutation of her points of view was total in *Infobae* and very high in *Clarín* and *La Nación*, without registering, throughout the temporary sample, cases in which these newspapers credited her word.

In support of the descriptive results, and in order to contrast the differences regarding the level of standing between the media, an ANOVA and a Tukey HSD test were carried out, which showed statistically significant differences between two subsets: in the first one, *Infobae* (1,.39, p. <0.05), *Clarín* (1.43 p. <0.05) and *La Nación* (1.47 p. <0.05), and in the second *Página/12* (1.71 p. <0.05). The tests, while confirming the differences between the first three newspapers and the last one, confirm the homogeneity between the components of the first set.

The results presented regarding the sources confirm the standing hypothesis in this research. That is, while a homogeneous presence of actors who provide information to media with different editorial lines was verified, which confirms the notion that the simple count of sources is not enough to account for the influence that these acquire in the construction of the interpretive frameworks that are displayed in the news, the differential levels of credit and discredit, provide clues about the ways in which each news outlet framed the problem. At this point, the finding shows that, although all the newspapers turned to official sources throughout the seven months of the pandemic, *Clarín*, *La Nación*, and *Infobae* —the three most-read portals in the country—systematically confronted the points of view of the ruling party. On the other hand, *Página/12* expressed a position contrary to the first three, generally uncritical of the official versions. In sum, the media treatment of COVID-19 in the most widely read media in Argentina was expressed through a homogeneous composition of agendas at the thematic level and the presence of information sources, although strongly polarized in

relation to the level of credit and discredit with which the official and opposition versions were treated.

Discussion and conclusions

The present work aimed to analyze the media coverage of COVID-19 in the main online newspapers in Argentina. Underlying this objective, the starting point was a central concern aimed at investigating the role played by digital media in an exceptional setting and within the framework of a convergent ecosystem that favors, via content saturation, disinformation, fragmentation, and political polarization (Bennett & Livingston, 2018).

In the first place, it was found that the most important digital media in Argentina maintained a homogeneous thematic agenda that had a particularity: at the beginning of the period of social isolation, the pandemic monopolized all the media attention. Such behavior can be explained from different variables, among which stand out the increase in the need for guidance and the demand for information from audiences (Casero-Ripollés, 2020; Duc-Huynh, 2020; Muñiz, 2020), the pronouncement of political elites, and the change that key events (Brosius & Eps, 1995) introduce in production routines by modifying selection criteria and promoting series on related events.

However, after a first instance of over-representation of the disease at a time when the objective risk of contagion was low, over the months the contradiction was generated that at the peak of the pandemic, media coverage was minimal. Indeed, while the presence of COVID-19 monopolized more than nine out of ten news items on the agenda during March and April, when contagions barely exceeded one hundred per day nationwide, towards the end of the period with more than 18 000 cases and 400 deaths per day, the presence of the issue in the media only accounted for 13.5% of the news gap. The oscillations, therefore, were much more associated with the novelty of the emergency, the government announcements related to the use of public space and the economic management of the crisis than with the evolution of the disease. Consequently, the evolution of media coverage maintained an inversely proportional relationship to the objective dimension of the risk of contagion and could have stimulated processes of moral panic (Thompson, 2014) due to overinformation at times of low virus transmissibility and misinformation at the time higher target risk.

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To delve into this aspect, the study investigated the media use of sources, a substantial factor in information quality. To this end, the Indexing hypothesis was contrasted and the supremacy of state sources in the informative treatment of the pandemic was verified. The finding makes it possible to relativize Bennett's (1990, 2007) statements about how damaging their preponderance can be in news agendas since in certain contexts of crisis and viralization of apocryphal or inaccurate content by connective means, the consultation of official sources during the setting of a global disease is healthy. Even more so if it is taken into account that they were accompanied by the voices of specialists, doctors, and scientists. Probably, as a result of the professional work of filtering or curating the information carried out by media with consolidated trajectories that are recognizable to the population, digital newspapers imposed themselves as reliable sources and increased their audience levels (Casero-Ripollés, 2020; Duc-Huynh, 2020; Muñiz, 2020).

However, the study of the sources was complemented with the investigation of other dimensions of analysis. In this sense, the premise of standing (Ferree et al., 2002) maintains that, in addition to measuring the presence of sources in the news, it is necessary to investigate which points of view are accredited by the media and which are contested or refuted or discarded.

The study of the differential credibility of the sources allowed us to discover that in Argentina there was a polarized, partisan and unequal coverage of the pandemic, even when the thematic agendas and the presence of the sources were homogeneous in media with different editorial positions. While *Clarín*, *La Nación* and *Infobae* were inclined to accept or even highlight the views on the problem of the opposition sectors and discredit the main PEN figures, *Página/12* took the official versions without objecting to them. Said informational behavior tends to construct fragmented, decontextualized, and simplifying representations of a complex and dramatic reality that, while restricting the availability of diverse and plural informational inputs for decision-making, negatively affects the possibility of finding in one outlet a reasonable range of views that will strengthen public debate.

Thus, the mediatization of the pandemic followed a cycle that, in conceptual terms, could be considered in three stages. A first moment marked by an information saturation —which could have generated, due to excess, panic (Thompson, 2014), disinformation, and cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996)— was followed by the second moment of worsening political —and media— polarization; which gave rise to the last phase of high thematic

competition that configured a "post-pandemic" pseudo environment (Lippmann, 1922), of scarcity of information about the disease, just at the peak of its objective evolution. Thus, over-representation, polarization, and invisibility constituted the three phases of the cycle of mediatization of the pandemic in the main digital newspapers in Argentina.

The results of this work are intended to account for a process that is dynamic and remains open. The novelty and seriousness of the situation the world is going through invite us to rethink the productivity of certain hypotheses and to formulate others that allow scientific access to an unprecedented social and communicational scenario. The empirical findings reveal breaks and continuities. Among the former, it is necessary to revisit the postulates on the relationship between official sources and the media, especially in contexts of catastrophe and within the framework of a convergent media ecosystem that favors disinformation. Among the latter, the verification of the existence, even in a pandemic, of polarized coverage that simplifies public debate invites us to think about the processes of overinformation and disinformation beyond the connective media, although in relation to them. The contributions remain open, then, for new comparative and multidimensional studies at the national and international level.

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