

Analysis of Colombian media coverage on COVID-19: an audience perspective

Análise da cobertura mediática colombiana sobre a covid-19: uma perspectiva das audiências

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Resumo: *Durante abril e maio de 2020, no confinamento por covid-19 na Colômbia, analisaram-se as tendências de consumo de notícias. Através de uma pesquisa online com 2.084 colombianos, identificou-se a percepção de uma saturação de informação sobre a pandemia. Adicionalmente, a orientação editorial dos meios influenciou a cobertura, que muitas vezes foi insuficiente e sensacionalista, provocando uma preocupação social desmesurada.*

Palavras-chave: *Notícias; Audiências; Covid-19; Sensacionalismo; Colômbia.*

Abstract: *During April and May, 2020, during the COVID-19 lockdown in Colombia, news consumption trends were analyzed by means of an online survey with 2,084 Colombians. The perception of information overload about the pandemic was identified. Additionally, the media's editorial direction influenced the coverage, which often turned out to be insufficient and sensationalist, leading to excessive social concern.*

Keywords: *news; audiences; COVID-19; sensationalism; Colombia*

Introduction

At the end of December 2019, global media reported that Chinese health authorities were investigating a strange viral pneumonia in Wuhan, Hubei province, after identifying 27 cases related to the virus that caused SARS. (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), which resulted in the deaths of more than 700 people in 2002 and 2003 (REUTERS, 2019; AP, 2019). A month later, in January 2020, with more than 9,700 confirmed cases and another 106 in 19 different countries, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a public health emergency of international concern due to a new coronavirus initially known as 2019-nCoV identified as the cause of the cases reported in China (PAHO, 2020, p. 1; WHO, 2020a). In February 2020, WHO named the disease caused by this pathogen COVID-19, the coronavirus disease 2019, and the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses named it SARS-CoV-2 (PAHO, 2020, p. 1).

As the weeks passed, the media reported the symptoms and behavior of this disease. The virus has a low lethality rate but is highly contagious (CCDC, 2020) and can congest hospitals. The virus can affect men and women of any age and develop into a severe condition in people with pre-existing illnesses and those over 60, who are more at risk of death (CCDC, 2020). Not everyone who becomes ill shows symptoms, the so-called asymptomatic (KINNEAR, 2020), and they are considered drivers of transmission (CONSALUD, 2020). Some of them may die suddenly. Survivors may have a slow recovery or be left with sequelae indefinitely (BELLUCK, 2020). Initially, specialists considered SARS-CoV-2 was a respiratory virus, as it was its most common manifestation. However, after weeks of observation, they changed the concept to multisystemic, as the virus can also attack the kidneys, intestines, blood vessels, brain, among other organs, producing a variety of symptoms (PUELLES et al., 2020; BBC, 2020).

Initially, the World Health Organization (WHO) resisted declaring the state of pandemic, as it did not consider the virus uncontrollable and wanted to avoid scaring the world even more, affecting travel and

commerce, and stigmatizing those who suffered from it. However, in February 2020, the virus had increased exponentially in other countries, such as Italy, Iran, and South Korea, showing that it had circulated freely and spread quickly to all continents (CARA, 2020). On March 11 of that year, the WHO announced 118,000 cases in 114 countries and 4,291 deaths from the disease. Given the alarming levels of spread, severity, and inaction, WHO declared it a pandemic (WHO, 2020b). This initial management of the situation generated questions about the role of the WHO due to the lack of monitoring, inaction in the face of warnings, cover-up, and preferential treatment for China (COBOS, 2020, p. 37-38). Months later, both WHO and the international scientific community recognized the possibility that COVID-19 would become an endemic disease due to the characteristics of coronaviruses, reinfections, acquired immunity, vaccination programs, and vaccine effectiveness (REUTERS, 2020a; SHAMAN; GALANTI, 2020). By the beginning of 2023, WHO maintained a maximum state of alert due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the situation had improved, the virus had caused 170,000 deaths a few months prior, and the mortality far exceeded the official total number of 6,804,491 deaths (DW, 2023).

The COVID-19 in Colombian territory

In Colombia, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection (2020a) reported the first COVID-19 case on March 6, 2020, in a 19-year-old woman who had arrived in Bogotá from Italy. However, a later study by Universidad del Rosario et al. (2020) suggests that the first case probably arrived in Colombia from France on February 17 of that year. A 58-year-old man was the first to die from COVID-19 on March 16, 2020, in Cartagena de Indias. He had a history of untreated hypertension and diabetes. Two Italian tourists he had transported in his taxi days before infected him (MINISTRY OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL PROTECTION, 2020b).

Following similar measures implemented in other countries, the government of Colombia, through Decree 457 of 2020, ordered

mandatory quarantine throughout the country or “mandatory preventive isolation,” starting on March 25, 2020 (PRESIDENCY OF THE REPUBLIC, 2020a). However, weeks before, mayors of cities such as Cartagena de Indias and Bogotá had already implemented curfews and measures of social isolation and confinement due to cases detected in these cities (ALCALDÍA DISTRITAL DE CARTAGENA DE INDIAS, 2020; LA REPÚBLICA, 2020). On December 31, 2020, Colombia recorded 1,642,775 confirmed cases, of which 86,777 were active, 43,213 resulted in deaths, and 1,508,419 recovered, according to official data (AS, 2020). The government renewed the state of emergency successively throughout 2020, 2021, and early 2022 under the names of “collaborative and intelligent mandatory preventive isolation” and “selective isolation with responsible individual distancing,” making restrictive social isolation and mobility measures more flexible with each extension, in some regions more than in others, to gradually reactivate services, industry and commerce. Decree 655 of 2022 determined the last extension, which extended it until June 30, 2022 (FUNCIÓN PÚBLICA, 2022). But, days before its expiration, the Presidency of the Republic declared that there were no sanitary or epidemiological reasons to renew again, thus ending this period (LA REPÚBLICA, 2022).

Media communication in times of health emergency

López (1986, p. 93) indicates the media collects and distributes

López (1986, p. 93) indicates the media collects and distributes information relating to events in the environment of a particular society and the most prominent at a universal level. This function allows members of a social group to guide their action according to how events occurring in society are presented [...], and this constant flow of information [...] has positive consequences: for example, the fact of alerting the population about imminent threats and dangers (hurricanes, military attacks, epidemics, etc.).

News, therefore, is the journalistic product that allows this monitoring or supervision of the environment. News is information of general interest to a target audience. Therefore, the criteria of timeliness, impact, proximity, controversy, prominence, topicality, and strangeness (POTTER, 2006, p. 2-6), besides novelty, lack of knowledge, and perception of risk (GÓMEZ 2013, p. 41), determine which events the media will publicize as such.

COVID-19, which resulted in a public health crisis, fully met each of these criteria, thus leading the media “to provide exhaustive coverage in the health, political, social, economic and cultural areas, generating a media turmoil with profound repercussions on public opinion due to the uncertainty it represents” (COBOS, 2021, p. 116). As Gómez (2013, p. 40) expresses, “if society feels fear in the face of a hypothetical threat, the media will focus on this news, and the economic, health, social, and political repercussions will be notable.” Agencies AP and Reuters released the first reports on December 31, 2019, mentioning the situation in Wuhan and its connection to SARS. Given the history of this disease, the media, naturally including those in Colombia, replicated the information and began broad coverage when cases of this viral pneumonia began emerging in other countries (REUTERS, 2020b). In the first months of the pandemic, COVID-19 came to the top of the media agenda with a variety of approaches or framings, especially when the virus arrived in the country, the first death occurred in Cartagena de Indias, and the then President of the Republic, Iván Duque, announced the restrictive quarantine measures.

Audience perceptions, news consumption habits and the pandemic

A public health crisis on a global scale, such as a pandemic, is, without a doubt, a topic that captures the audience’s attention and that, therefore, increases the demand for news about the different aspects related to it: symptoms, expansion, statistics, measures, effects, impacts, etc., particularly in the early stages.

The constant coverage of events perceived as negative, such as a pandemic, triggers news consumption – driven by the need to be informed – but also causes anguish, anxiety, panic, and apathy in audiences, which may result in a reduction or even suspension of this consumption for mental health reasons. (COBOS, 2021, p. 116)

Before the pandemic, audiences were consuming news (both from traditional and native digital media) mainly through digital social media, instant messaging services, and news applications. They did so mainly through their mobile phones (COMSCORE, 2019, p. 7,8), relegating traditional forms to the background (watching or listening to the news, reading the printed newspaper...). In the case of Colombia, in March 2020, the national government reported the first case of COVID-19, the quarantine and confinement order, statistics on infected and deceased people, and other related acts, which led to a significant increase in news media consumption. According to Comscore (2020):

During March 2020, news and information websites recorded an average increase in page views of 37%, with users seeing approximately six million more pages per day compared to the previous month. On the other hand, in 2019, the percentage of change between February and March 2019 was just 2%.

Furthermore, “85% of page view consumption was via a mobile device.” At the same time, according to Kantar IBOPE Media¹, television consumption in 2020 was higher than in 2019. In April 2020, Colombians watched an hour and three minutes more television than in the same month in 2019, with news shows being one of the most watched television genres. Government programs and content about COVID-19 increased during the first months of the pandemic by 300%. Similarly, Cobos (2021, p. 124) states that confinement during the first months of the pandemic – April and May 2020 – meant spending more time at home. The need for information led to higher audience ratings for traditional television (news, opinion shows...), the news vehicle most

1 EJE21 (2020).

consumed by Colombian audiences in that period, along with the digital press.

These consumptions imply a process of evaluation by the audience of the frequency with which they consume news, their impact (emotions, decisions, behaviors...), and the formation of a value judgment or opinion from those who issue them, the media. Masip et al. (2020) addressed this aspect in Spain, where, among others, the perception of Spanish audiences on news coverage was that the media were offering too much information, their ideological lines conditioned their reporting, and they tended towards spectacle, generating social alarm.

In the context of what we have exposed so far, this research proposed to explore the perceptions of Colombian audiences in quarantine during the first months of the pandemic on the media's reporting concerning the volume of production, editorial line, and journalistic treatment.

Methodology

This study is part of the “Media Consumption during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Colombia” project from the Mass Media and Cultural Products Research Center at the Technological University of Bolívar. Our approach was quantitative and had an exploratory and descriptive scope due to the novelty of the topic and the generated contingency, besides the urgency of carrying out the first diagnoses of how COVID-19 impacted the Colombian news ecosystem from different perspectives, including the audiences' perceptions of how the media acted.

To this end, I applied a 34-item questionnaire to collect information on sociodemographic data, the need for information, news consumption habits, credibility and trust in the media, subscriptions, misinformation management, and memes. Digilab - Media, Strategy, and Regulation of the Ramon Llull University (Spain) - designed the original questionnaire, which we adapted to the Colombian context, changing Spanish expressions to Colombian carefully to preserve its meaning and ease the understanding, besides modifying some responses according to the Colombian reality.

I hosted the form on Microsoft Forms and opened it for responses from April 4th until May 14th, 2020, between a week after the start of mandatory social isolation or quarantine in the country and a few days after its third extension. Therefore, ours was a convenience sampling. I distributed the questionnaire through Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and e-mail to reach participants from five geographic regions in the country, including those with low connectivity. According to the BBVA Research (2019), Colombia has around 29 million internet users. The most used services are Facebook and WhatsApp, with more than 18 million users, followed by YouTube with 9.9 million, Instagram with 7 million, and Twitter with 4.1 million. Inequality in Internet access according to income level and location area is significant.

The questionnaire considered several response options: single selection, multiple choice, Likert scale, and, in some cases, “others.” At the end, there was an open question where the interviewee could provide additional information if desired. All questions were mandatory except the last one, the open question. I exported the data from the 2,084 valid responses to Microsoft Excel for analysis. As limitations, the sample contained only people who had access to the internet and were contacted by one of the platforms mentioned, therefore leaving out those who did not meet such conditions. Furthermore, although I sought to obtain responses from people residing in states of the country with little connectivity, the number of responses collected was low. However, we are satisfied that we left no Colombian state without representation.

Discoveries

As indicated, we received a total of 2,084 valid responses from people with internet access and residing in one of the five geographic regions of Colombia, distributed as follows:

Table 1. Sample composition

Age (in years)	Number	Percentage	Sex	Number	Porcentagem
17 or less	13	0.6%	Women	1,065	51,1%
18 to 24	206	9.8%	Men	1,019	48,8%
25 to 34	328	15.7%	Total	2,084	100%
35 to 44	500	23.9%			
45 to 54	575	27.5%			
55 to 64	371	17.8%			
65 or more	91	4.3%			
TOTAL	2,084	100%			
Geographic region				Number	Percentage
Andean Region States: Antioquia (217), Boyacá (45), Caldas (53), Cundinamarca (291), Huila (39), Norte de Santander (61), Quindío (38), Risaralda (44), Santander (93), and Tolima (44)				925	44.3%
Atlantic Coast or Caribbean States: Atlántico (229), Bolívar (251), Cesar (28), Córdoba (42), Guajira (14), Magdalena (34), San Andrés e Providencia (3), and Sucre (57)				658	31.5%
Pacific Coast States: Chocó (5), Valle del Cauca (245), Cauca (59), and Nariño (50)				359	17.2%
Orinoquia or Llanos Orientales States: Arauca (14), Casanare (15), Meta (45), and Vichada (6)				80	3.8%
Amazon States: Amazonas (2), Caquetá (17), Guainía (3), Guaviare (10), Putumayo (28), and Vaupés (2)				62	2.9%
TOTAL				2,084	100%

Source: Elaborated by the author

Table 1 shows that 51.1% of participants are women and 48.8% are men, an almost balanced sample, with a predominant age between 45 and 54 years (27.5%) and 35 to 44 years (23.9%). Most participants are in the Andean region (44.3%) and the Atlantic Coast (31.5%). The states with the lowest participation (between 2 and 17 people) are those with

low internet connectivity. Those with the most respondents (particularly in three digits) have high connectivity and include the main cities in the country: Bogotá (Cundinamarca), Medellín (Antioquia), Cali (Valle del Cauca), Barranquilla (Atlántico), and Cartagena de Indias (Bolívar). These data coincide with the DANE census results (2018) on internet access in the country.

As a background, Lozano et al. (2024) found that 60% of those interviewed expressed a constant need to get information about the evolution of the pandemic. Furthermore, 70.1% of participants increased their frequency of news consumption after Colombia declared the state of pandemic and the subsequent quarantine.

We can attribute this increase in demand for information to the novelty and immediacy of the topic, as well as the significant threat or risk it posed to the population's health that, in turn, motivated the constant generation of news related to the same issue (LOZANO et al., 2024, p. 93))

Subsequently, the questionnaire asked participants about their perception or opinion about how the media were carrying out their informative work concerning the amount of information provided or volume of production:

Table 2. Perception on production volume

I consider, in general, that the media are providing too much information about the COVID-19 pandemic:						
Answer	Women	%	Men	%	Total	%
I totally disagree	83	7.7%	112	10.9%	195	9.3%
I disagree	181	16.9%	159	15.6%	340	16.3%
I do not agree or disagree	256	24%	186	18.2%	442	21.2%
I agree	360	33.8%	386	37.8%	746	35.7%
I totally agree	185	17.3%	176	17.2%	361	17.3%
Total	1,065	100%	1,019	100%	2,084	100%

Source: Elaborated by the author

As seen in Table 2, 35.7% of the public interviewed, with more emphasis on men, agreed that the media were providing too much information about the COVID-19 pandemic. In contrast, 21% had a neutral position, and 16.3% disagreed. In additional comments, some interviewees reiterated that there was a lot, too much, excessive, repeated, exaggerated overexposure or oversaturation of information on the topic. However, others suggested the media was withholding or giving out incomplete information. Some even considered that such excess could serve as a smokescreen or diversion of attention since issues such as political corruption (such as vote buying and others) had stopped appearing on the media agenda. Faced with what they perceived as excess, some expressed having experienced tiredness, stress, overload, fear, nervousness, panic, anxiety, anguish, fear, restlessness, and uncertainty. Therefore, they chose not to consume any more news on the topic in any media outlet.

The following question asked interviewees to assess whether they considered that the media were conditioned by their ideology when reporting on the covid-19 pandemic:

Table 3. Perception on ideological conditioning

I consider, in general, that editorial lines (ideology) condition media reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic:						
Answer	Women	%	Men	%	Total	%
I totally disagree	41	1.9%	80	7.8%	121	5.8%
I disagree	98	9.2%	69	6.7%	167	8%
I do not agree or disagree	212	19.9%	125	12.2%	337	16.1%
I agree	449	42.1%	357	35%	806	38.6%
I totally agree	265	24.8%	388	38%	653	31.3%
Total	1,065	100%	1,019	100%	2,084	100%

Source: Elaborated by the author

In Table 3, 38.6% of the interviewed sample agree, and 31.3% totally agree. In an analysis by gender, 42.1% of women expressed their agreement, and 38% of men totally agreed. In additional comments,

some perceived media coverage as very biased, manipulated, distorted, or weaponized according to their interests, with a high recurrence of official sources (of the State) or vehicles serving the government (“they seem like presidential press releases” or “they inform what the government wants”).

Finally, the research asked interviewees about their perception of journalistic treatment, that is, whether they considered that the media were reporting about the COVID-19 pandemic correctly or whether they were treating information in a sensationalist way:

Table 4. Perception about correct coverage

I consider, in general, that the media are reporting about the COVID-19 pandemic correctly:						
Answer	Women	%	Men	%	Total	%
I totally disagree	133	12.4%	202	19.8%	335	16%
I disagree	336	31.5%	309	30.3%	645	30.9%
I do not agree or disagree	365	34.2%	283	27.7%	648	31%
I agree	209	19.6%	196	19.2%	405	19.4%
I totally agree	22	2%	29	2.8%	51	2.4%
Total	1,065	100%	1,019	100%	2,084	100%

Source: Elaborated by the author

Table 5. Perception of sensationalism and alarmism in media coverage

I consider, in general, that media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic is sensationalist and generates unnecessary social alarm:						
Answer	Answer	Wom- en	%	Men	%	Total
I totally disagree	69	6.4%	64	6.2%	133	6.3%
I disagree	252	23.6%	160	15.7%	412	19.7%
I do not agree or disagree	295	27.6%	232	22.7%	527	25.2%
I agree	299	28%	322	31.5%	621	29.7%
I totally agree	150	14%	241	23.6%	391	18.7%
Total	1,065	100%	1,019	100%	2,084	100%

Source: Elaborated by the author

As seen in Table 4, 30.9% of interviewees disagreed the media were reporting about the Covid-19 pandemic correctly. However, a slightly higher number, 31%, chose the neutral option, indicating uncertainty or lack of knowledge about the issue. These positions were the same for both sexes. Subsequently, the questionnaire asked participants whether they considered the media sensationalist in treating the issue and generated unnecessary social alarm (Table 5). 29.7% of respondents, more men than women, agreed with the statement, while 25.2%, more women than men, did not know how to answer or were unsure. In other words, although not dominant, there was a perception that the media was not covering the topic correctly and was sensationalist. In this sense, some of the additional comments, particularly referring to television, mentioned, for example, an emphasis on statistics of infected and deceased people instead of focusing on those who had recovered, a lack of scientific information (for example, advances in vaccine research, interviews with scientists, etc.), little positive and friendly news, increased time on television news programs to talk only about the virus, imprecise or incorrect information, sensationalism, insufficient information about self-care (such as the use of hand sanitizer, gloves, facemasks), repetition of information, and misinformation that caused chaos.

Final considerations

As it was possible to observe in this study, it was evident that Colombian audiences interviewed during the first periods of quarantine – or mandatory preventive isolation – in the country had the perception that there was an overproduction of news about the COVID-19 pandemic. (53.1% agreed and totally agreed), which led to overexposure to the topic, generated effects on mental health, and, consequently, led some to reduce or cancel news consumption, mainly television, as noted in the additional comments. That corroborates what Wright (1960 in DE MORAGAS, 1986, p. 77) proposed about the dysfunctions of mass communication, such as the excess of negative news that can generate panic in the audience.

Furthermore, respondents expressed the perception that media coverage was conditioned by editorial lines (70% agreed and totally agreed) and that, as noted in the additional comments, vehicles seemed to act as spokespeople for the government. Likewise, the perception that the media was not correctly covering the topic prevailed (47%). Finally, the interviewed audiences perceived the media was sensationalist in treating the COVID-19 topic, generating unnecessary social alarm (48.5% agreed and totally agreed). Additional comments give nuance to these last two aspects. Some interviewees differentiated between national and foreign media, mentioning they preferred the latter to obtain information. Others only received information from specific national media and strongly questioned other sources, which shows the degree of trust and credibility placed in them (COBOS, 2021).

In respondents' answers, at times, a given option was more prevalent in one sex than in the other. For example, 42.1% of women agreed that ideological lines conditioned media reporting over 35% of men. 37.8% of men agreed that, in general, the media was providing too much information about the COVID-19 pandemic, while 33.8% of women did so.

To conclude, these findings invite us to reflect on the social responsibility of the media, especially in global public health crises. As we saw in this study, the interviewed Colombian audiences do not consider that the media are fulfilling their social responsibility.

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