

Chapter 19

Cry Wolf!

A Historical Chronicle of COVID-19 Through Spanish Cartoons

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged societies all around the world since the beginning of 2020. A state of alert was declared in Spain from March to June. The country came to a complete standstill, until restrictions gradually began to be eased. This study examines how the first wave of the pandemic was reflected by analysing 1,007 cartoons published in various Spanish newspapers between January and June. The results show that criticism of the political management of the public health crisis was the most extensively featured issue. Protection measures against the coronavirus, such as lockdown, hand hygiene, and social distancing were also important issues. Although the cartoonists at first minimised the risk, as soon as the state of alert was declared, the often contradictory measures and strained relations of the government and the opposition parties were the main focus of attention for cartoonists. The present analysis also shows that despite being the main victims of COVID-19, neither the elderly nor healthcare professionals are the most commonly depicted actors in the sample.

INTRODUCTION

The world has faced a global health threat since early 2020, as a result of the appearance of a novel coronavirus affecting humans, known as SARS-CoV-2 (Zhu et al., 2020). The virus, of zoonotic origin, led to an initial outbreak of pneumonia in Wuhan, China, in late 2019, and within less than a month,

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2,000 cases of person-to-person infection had been confirmed in the region (Lu et al., 2020). Access to and transport links with Wuhan were sealed on 23 January 2020, and initial restrictions were imposed in other Chinese cities. The first case had been reported in the United States shortly beforehand (Holshue et al, 2020) and one day after Wuhan was sealed off on 24 January, other cases were also registered in Europe (WHO, 25 January 2020).

The first case in Spain, a German patient who lived in the Canary Islands, was reported on 31 January. Further infections in mainland Spain were reported a few weeks later, and finally, on 3 March, the first death from the novel coronavirus was confirmed in Valencia, after an autopsy was performed on a patient who had died three weeks earlier after presenting symptoms consistent with the disease (Reuters, 3 March 2020).

Events and infections occurred in quick succession, and the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak to be a *pandemic* on 11 March (WHO, 11 March 2020). By this time, Spain had experienced more than 5,000 infections and 133 confirmed deaths, and on the government decreed a state of alert 14 March, which placed restrictions on citizens' free movement and regulated economic, educational and cultural activities (Royal Decree 463/2020 of 14 March). This situation continued until 21 June 2020, when a gradual phased easing of the lockdown began, and with it, the transition to the 'new normal,' in which some flexible regulations aimed at containing the virus remained in force.

Under these circumstances, the media provided extensive and detailed coverage of the pandemic from multiple perspectives. However, the pandemic has also increased the volume of incorrect or completely false information (Moreno-Castro et al., 2020), creating what the WHO and specialists have described as an *infodemic* (WHO, 23 September, 2020; Zarocostas, 2020). This term, which is a combination of the words *information* and *epidemic*, was coined during the SARS crisis of 2003 (Merriam Webster, n.d.) but has come into widespread use in the wake of the avalanche of misinformation that has circulated during the crisis caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus. As has occurred with the new media, the pandemic has also attracted the attention of writers of opinion columns and cartoonists. Cartoons are therefore an interesting source of data for studying social phenomena, and as a result, they have become increasingly important in the research carried out in various disciplines: communication, linguistics and even the health sciences (Giarelli and Tulman, 2003; Sani et al., 2012; Domínguez, 2020).

This article examines the evolution of the coronavirus pandemic in Spain through the cartoons published in various media. Graphic humour is an essential part of the opinion section in print and online media, which provides an interpretation of the most important aspects of the news (Domínguez, 2014; 2015a; 2015b). Cartoons are also a better reflection of public opinion on particularly complex issues than other interpretive journalistic genres (Domínguez and Mateu, 2014; Domínguez et al., 2014; Forceville and Urios-Aparisi, 2009). Graphic humour is highly accessible to a diverse and heterogeneous readership, since it contains points of view, facts - and even caricatures of politicians and public figures. Studying cartoons may therefore reveal common beliefs and values, as well as the public's expectations concerning a particular subject (Giarelli, 2006).

Our initial hypothesis is that like analysts and administrators, cartoonists tended to underestimate the threat of the pandemic in early 2020 (Spanish Ministry of Health, February 11, 2020; Güell, 19 May 2020). We believe that Western countries' previous experience of managing recent pandemics contributed to this overconfidence. This resembles the children's story of "The boy who cried wolf," which is undoubtedly based on one of Aesop's fables, in which a young shepherd repeatedly calls out to nearby villagers that "the wolf is coming" when it is not true, until one day the wolf appears, and then nobody pays attention to his cries of alarm. Like countries elsewhere in Europe, Spain believed that previous pandemics had

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