Chapter 12
Sensationalism vs. Information During COVID-19 in Ecuador:
A Framing Theory-Based View

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ABSTRACT

The different frames used in the COVID-19 coverage in Ecuador by the national and international press were analyzed through their Twitter accounts. This allowed the examination of which aspects of the pandemic were given greater prominence by each newspaper. The study was based on five generic frames, between 17 March and 16 April 2020. The exploration of these frames was carried out by means of an intersubjective content analysis, using four previously trained encoders. The dominant frames for COVID-19 in Ecuador varied according to the media group studied. 1) The concept of heterogeneity was confirmed within framing theory, according to which a single reality, understood as a textual and visual construct, is addressed in multiple ways by the selection of certain aspects that are given greater emphasis or priority; 2) international newspapers and, to a lesser extent, the national press showed their propensity to "internalize" the dynamic of sensationalism; and 3) there are discrepancies in the interests of the readerships with respect to the dominant frames in the media.

INTRODUCTION

On 29 February, 2020, the first case of COVID-19, also referred to as coronavirus, was confirmed in Ecuador. The disease spread rapidly throughout the country's 24 provinces, initially leading to significant levels of infection in Guayas, Pichincha, Manabí, Los Ríos and Azuay (El Universo, 2020a). A day after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak a pandemic on March 12, 2020, Ecuador announced a national health emergency in order to implement greater prevention and containment measures and avoid mass infection (El Comercio, 2020a). On March 16, the state of emergency decree was signed into law, coming into force the following day to provide for measures such as a curfew, the involvement of police and the armed forces in the implementation of containment, the total suspension of all non-essential face-to-face work, the banning of domestic flights and interprovincial coach and rail transport, as well as the closure of public services in general (Secom, 2020).

The measures were not sufficient to stop the spread of the virus and, as of April 23, 2020, 11,183 cases of infection and 560 deaths were officially reported (El Universo, 2020b), while the total excess deaths—almost certainly attributable to the epidemic—were 15 times higher according to an analysis of data from the official death records by The New York Times (2020), released the same day. Guayaquil, Ecuador's main port and the second most populous city, was the hardest hit, accounting for 68.4% of cases as of April 20 (Millán, 2020). Acosta (2020, p.1) provided a dramatic description of the outbreak in the city, "hundreds of families devastated by the death of a family member, corpses everywhere, including abandoned corpses, hundreds of infected health workers, and thousands of people who are torn between starving to death as they seek daily sustenance on the streets or dying of coronavirus". The scale of the emergency in Guayaquil was such that it became a focus of attention in the media, leading to the need to discuss their key role in this first pandemic of the 21st century (Dircom, 2020).

The objective of this research was to carry out a comparative analysis of the news coverage of the COVID-19 outbreak in Ecuador, in both national and international newspapers, through its framing on the social network, Twitter. To achieve this, approximate answers were sought to the following questions: Which are the predominant news frames of the pandemic in Ecuador? What are the similarities and differences between the news frames of the national and international press? What news events does each respond to? To achieve this, a content analysis was carried out using the keywords "coronavirus", "COVID", "Ecuador", as used in Twitter posts published by the following Ecuadorian newspapers: El Universo, El Comercio, Expreso, La Hora; and the international newspapers, El Espectador (Colombia), El Tiempo (Colombia) El Clarín (Argentina), La Nación (Argentina), El Mundo (Spain) and El País (Spain). The significance of this study arises from its innovative comparative analysis of journalistic publications about COVID-19 in Ecuador, being one of the countries most affected by the pandemic in Latin America. It also contributes to the lines of research into the pandemic in the field of journalism 3.0, thereby enriching knowledge within the social sciences in a context of significant production of literature in the applied sciences.

Framing as a Limitless, Multidirectional Element

Framing theory has evolved considerably and become widely used since its origin in the 1970s, yet the term lacks a unanimous conceptualization (Weaver, 2007; Tuchman, 1978). There is also a lack of agreement on its precise definition and delimitations, with various contradictory positions having emerged (Cacciatore, Scheufele, & Iyengar, 2015; McCombs, 2006).

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