The Health Crisis on Instagram: How the Media Are Building Their Agenda on the Visual Social Network During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Over the last decade social networks have become important channels for the media to publish information and communicate with their younger audiences, with Instagram recently becoming the most popular platform for this purpose. This article is an investigation into news production on this social network in the context of the international crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, by means of a content analysis of 552 posts published by the two most widely read Spanish newspapers. The results suggest that despite there being a large quantity of soft content and human-interest stories, as found in previous research, Instagram is also used as a platform to distribute information of public interest about the management of the crisis (such as political decisions and health content).

Keywords: *social networks, Instagram, journalism, COVID-19, agenda.*

The use of social media is currently one of the most popular online activities: with more than 3.8 billion people (42 percent of the global population) engaging with it worldwide (Hootsuite; We Are Social and DataReportal, 2019). Digital platforms have facilitated media communication and interaction with audiences (Al-Rawi, 2017; Duffy and Knight, 2019), becoming a source of information for 52 percent of the global population (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2019). Facebook continues to be the preferred social network for this purpose, but Instagram is emerging as a site to publish informative content (Newman *et al.*, 2019). Created as a visual platform and geared towards private interaction between people (Larsson, 2018), in recent years, Instagram has gained popularity with Generation Z and Generation Y (Newman *et al.*, 2019;

Sumida, Walker, and Mitchell, 2019), attracting many media outlets seeking to improve their visibility and engage young audiences with their brand.

Social networks have become relevant channels for the media to source ideas in order to generate stories, publish information and increase traffic to their websites (Hermida *et al.*, 2012; Lee, 2016; Sacco and Bossio, 2017; Thurman, 2018). On these digital sites, the news is separated from the media context its presence on a printed, or even digital, page entails. On social networks news becomes detached from the hierarchy applied by the media and begins to compete with other information and content that does not always conform to traditional journalistic criteria (Bazaco, Redondo, and Sánchez-García, 2019). Analytical tools working in parallel with this process enable the collection and analysis of the digital traces left by users on the news and provide a series of metrics that push journalists to make decisions that go beyond their intuition: as the interests of users cannot be ignored and end up becoming news in these digital environments (Justel-Vázquez, Micó-Sanz, and Sánchez-Marín, 2016; Tandoc, 2014; Túñez-López, García, and Guevara-Castillo, 2011; Ducan, 2010).

This has occasionally resulted in the creation of pseudo-informative content as the result of implementing strategies to survive in the attention economy, such as striking headlines, direct appeals to the reader and content considered superficial or exaggerated (Bazaco, Redondo, and Sánchez-García, 2019; Katarzyna, 2013). The result of this practice is a new informational paradigm whose main objective is "to produce journalism that transmits with the ease of a virus" (Salaverría, 2015: 19). In this type of journalism, the interest of the public might prevail over public interest (Justel-Vázquez, Micó-Sanz, and Sánchez-Marín, 2016).

Multiple authors maintain that, in many cases, this phenomenon has altered journalism's traditional function of gatekeeping (Bazaco, Redondo, and Sánchez-García, 2019; Paulussen, Harder, and Johnson, 2018; Bell *et al.*, 2017; Salaverría, 2015; Shoemaker, Vos, and Reese, 2009; Tandoc, 2014), understood as "the process of selection, writing, editing, positioning, programming, repetition and, otherwise, massaging information so that it becomes news" (Shoemaker, Vos, and Reese, 2009: 73). The logic of the media is gradually replaced by the logic of social networks (Dijck and Poell, 2013), and the distribution routines of news content adapt to a media environment where the dynamics of social networks become highly relevant (Welbers and Opgenhaffen, 2019).

News organisations maintain daily activity on the social network Instagram, sharing photos and videos on their feeds, demonstrating a clear tendency to follow the criteria of posting attractive, striking and innovative content, instead of that which is informative and current (Vázquez-Herrero, 2019). In recent years, the media have focused their efforts on creating ephemeral content intended to be published on Instagram Stories, but which lacks a defined publication strategy, demonstrating that many news organisations are still in a phase of adaptation to the social network (Vázquez-Herrero, Direito-Rebollal, and López-García, 2019; Rojas-Torrijos and Panal-Prior, 2017). On Instagram, content has been shown to be predominantly apolitical and related to soft categories, normally topics such as fashion, travel, food and beauty (Al Nashmi, 2018). However, research into this matter remains scarce.

The present study, which is framed in the context of an international crisis generated by the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), aims to contribute to the corpus of work analysing the news production and distribution of content by the media on digital social network platforms. The study of the composition of the media agenda on social networks (the channel through which the news content reaches a section of its audience) becomes relevant according to the theory of agenda setting (McCombs, 2006), which states that over time the press agenda becomes the public agenda. It becomes even more relevant when it is taken into consideration that a large proportion of the world's population inform themselves via these platforms (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2019; Sumida, Walker, and Mitchell, 2019).

This article aims to further contribute to studies into the degree to which social networks are used in the production and dissemination of content by the media. It focuses on Instagram because, in recent years, the use of this platform for such purposes has increased (Newman *et al.*, 2019). Before outlining the methodology employed in this research, the research questions and hypotheses developed to guide this investigation are given below:

- RQ1: What presence does information related to the COVID-19 pandemic have on the Instagram profiles of the Spanish press?
- H1: The COVID-19 pandemic has monopolized the agenda of the Spanish press on social networks such as Instagram.
- RQ2: How is content related to the COVID-19 pandemic treated on this platform?
- H2: The majority of the content related to the COVID-19 pandemic corresponds to information that lacks a direct link with the public interest, as the media seek to adapt to the content that habitually circulates on social networks such as Instagram.

METHODOLOGY

This article examines the publication activity of the two most widely read general-interest newspapers in Spain (AIMC, 2020): *El País* and *La Vanguardia*, on their Instagram profiles during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In order to address the research questions posed by this investigation, content analysis was carried out, measuring relevant variables in a systematic, objective and quantitative way to obtain an accurate representation of the set of contents analysed (Wimmer and Dominick, 2010). Data collection was carried out taking into account certain characteristics of content analysis applied to digital news (Karlsson and Sjøvaag, 2016; Widholm, 2016). To avoid complications resulting from the dynamic nature of the object of study; social networks and the ephemeral content circulating on them, screenshots and screen recordings were taken of the content published on the Instagram profiles of *El País* and *La Vanguardia*, and these were stored in order to be able to review and replicate the study after the digital material has disappeared or been modified. In accordance with an

agreed upon plan, data was collected every day at 10 p.m. between March 14th and April 13th. The start date of sample collection corresponds to the day the Spanish Government declared a state of alarm and ordered a national quarantine due to the advance of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country. The screenshots and recordings collected are a record of the content published on Instagram feed, Instagram TV and Instagram Stories. Of the total sample of 552 posts, 320 correspond to the profile of *El País* and 232 to that of *La Vanguardia*.

The content was transferred to analysis grids where, in addition to describing the content published on the Instagram profiles of *El País* and *La Vanguardia*, categories of analysis were proposed that seek to answer the research questions posed. Firstly, content was divided into that related to the COVID-19 pandemic and that to totally unrelated topics. Then, after carrying out a preliminary analysis, a series of categories was proposed in which the content related to the pandemic was classified (Table 1). Thirdly, an analysis was carried out into whether content items corresponded to information that could be considered an issue of public interest, utilising a classification tool employed in previous research (Justel-Vázquez, Micó-Sanz, and Sánchez-Marín, 2016) that is based on the traditional concept of public interest. This classification identifies as news of public interest those international, political, economic, health and science issues that affect people's lives regardless of whether they are interested in them or not.

Table 1. Classification of content related to the COVID-19 pandemic according to thematic areas

Categories	Explanation
Governing authorities' administration and citizen reaction	Content about how the authorities are managing, in general, the COVID-19 pandemic and the complaints from citizens regarding this management.
Economic impact	Content about the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and the quarantine on the domestic, local, national and international economy.
Social impact	Content about the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and the quarantine on the spheres of education, religion, employment and the family. This also includes content related to social inequality and violations of quarantine.
Impact in the streets and on the environment	Content about the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and the quarantine on the environment and the streets of different cities of the world.
Health and science	Content about health, medical investigation, scientific advances, the growth of the pandemic, precautions against the virus and the general state of the health system.
Entertainment	Content aimed at helping people cope better with quarantine.
Human interest and collaborative initiatives	Content whose objective is to produce an affective or emotional response in the audience, and that related to collaborative initiatives to fight the COVID-19 pandemic.
Personalities with COVID-19	Content about personalities or celebrities who have contracted COVID-19.

| Categories	Explanation
Opinion and analysis	Opinion and analysis pieces about the COVID-19 pandemic and the quarantine.
Surveys	Content that refers to public opinion about the COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine.
Humour	Content whose objective is to be humorous about the COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine.
Publicity	Content whose objective is to promote products or services.
Others	Content that does not correspond to any of the previous categories.

Source: Authors.

RESULTS

With regard to the first research question the results have demonstrated that, as expected, the majority of the publications on the visual platform Instagram between March 14th and April 13th, 2020 by the two most widely read general newspapers in Spain; *El País* and *La Vanguardia*, are related to the COVID-19 global pandemic.

Of the 320 publications posted by the newspaper *El País* on the platform's various channels; feed, stories and IGTV, 313 were related to the pandemic, which represents 97.5 percent of the publications during the period analysed. Only 7 non-COVID-19 publications were registered, and these referred to interviews with personalities from the field of culture and information about events. These types of publications represent only 2.2 percent of the total (Figure 1). Although to a lesser extent, this predominance of information about the epidemic is also registered on the Instagram profile of *La Vanguardia*. Of the 232 items published on the platform's various channels, 213 were related to the COVID-19 pandemic, which represents 91.8 percent of the total publications in the period analysed. The percentage of content referring to other topics is, in this case, somewhat higher: at 8.2 percent (Figure 2).

Figure 1. Percentage of content related, or not, to COVID-19 of the total publications on the Instagram profile of *El País*, between March14th and April 13th, 2020.

2.2

- Related to Covid-19 (%)
- Not related to Covid-19 (%)

97.8
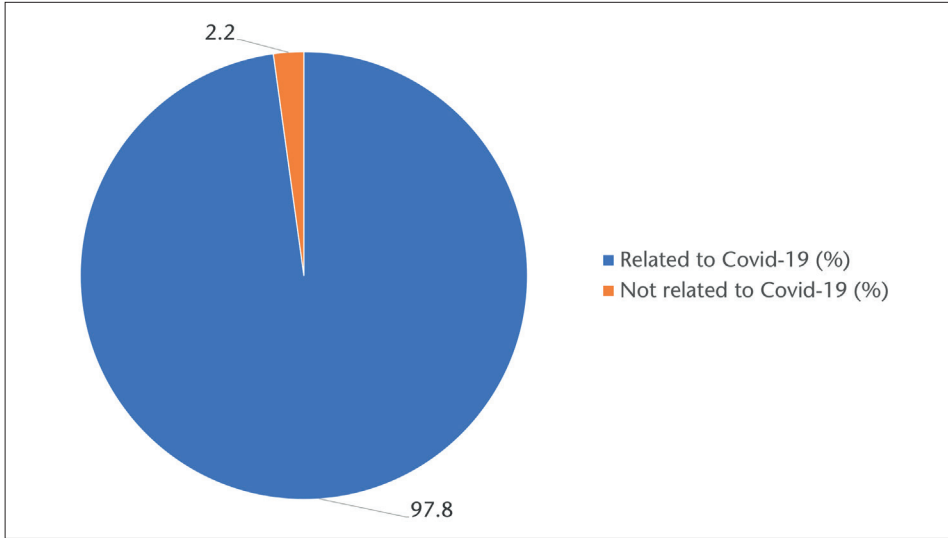
Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 2. Percentage of content related, or not, to COVID-19 of the total publications on the Instagram profile of *La Vanguardia*, between March14th and April 13th, 2020.

8.2

- Related to Covid-19 (%)
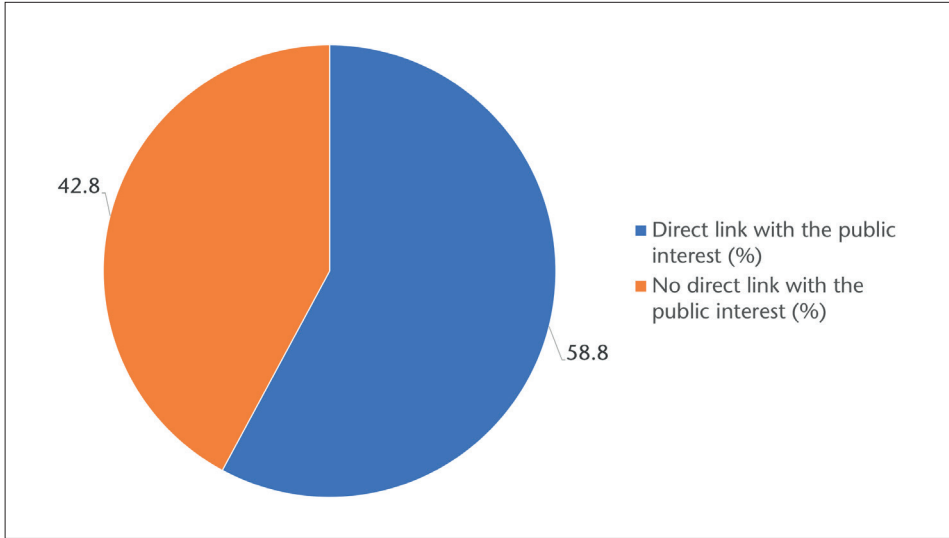- Not related to Covid-19 (%)

91.8
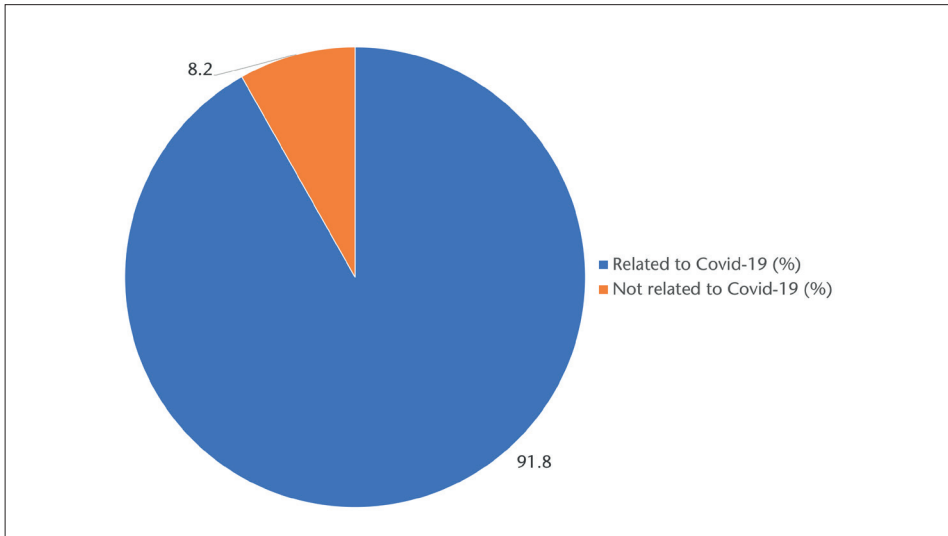
Source: Own elaboration.

Regarding the second research question and the aim to analyse the different approaches taken by the Spanish press to publishing content related to COVID-19 on their Instagram profiles, some broad differences have been detected. As for the thematic categories of the published content, on the profile of the newspaper *El País*, information relating to the way the authorities (The Spanish Government, The European Union, The Vatican, etc.) have reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as information about citizens' complaints about this reaction makes up 29.1 percent of the total. Information about health and science, including publications on scientific advances, the growth of the virus, advice on avoiding getting ill and the state of the health system obtains a similar, if somewhat lower, importance (25.6 percent). In third place of importance is found human interest content, that which appeals to the audience's emotions, and content related to collaborative initiatives to fight against COVID-19 (16.6 percent). The remainder of the themes identified occupies a secondary place. Contrary to expectations, entertainment content aimed at helping people cope better with quarantine occupies only 6.6 percent of the total content published about the pandemic. Information regarding social impact (4.5 percent), economic impact (3.8 percent) and the impact on the streets and the environment (2.8 percent) achieved a lesser presence. The least frequent topics in the *El País* sample analysed are; humour (2.9 percent), opinion and analysis (1.9 percent), personalities who contracted COVID-19 (1.6 percent), surveys (1.6 percent) and advertising (1.6 percent).

The trend is different on the Instagram profile of *La Vanguardia*, with human interest content and that related to collaborative initiatives standing out. Such content represents 43.7 percent of all publications on the virus, that is, almost half. Content relating to the way the authorities have reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as information about citizens' complaints about this reaction occupy second place, representing a significant percentage of the total content published (19.2 percent). The same occurs with health and science related publications (17.8 percent). Information about the impact of quarantine on the streets of different cities of the world and on the environment has considerably less presence (8.5 percent), but the least recurrent themes in the coverage of the pandemic are those related to social impact (4.7 percent), the economic impact (1.4 percent), opinion or analysis (0.9 percent) and personalities who contracted COVID-19 (0.5 percent). Unlike that registered on the profile of *El País*, *La Vanguardia*'s media agenda does not contain any advertising, surveys or humorous items.

Results regarding the degree of public interest in content related to the pandemic vary according to the media analysed. The coverage published by the newspaper *El País* on its Instagram profile contains a greater amount of information with a direct link to the public interest, with 58.8 percent of its content related to this category. However, a similar quantity of softer content (42.8) is present in the newspaper's media agenda, demonstrating a balance between both types of information. In the profile of the newspaper *La Vanguardia* the scenario is different: content directly linked to the public interest represents 35.2 percent of the total published, compared to 67.6 percent of softer information.

Figure 3. Correspondence of content related to COVID-19 with the public interest on the Instagram profile of *El País*, between March14th and April 13th, 2020.

Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 4. Correspondence of content related to COVID-19 with the public interest on the Instagram profile of La Vanguardia, between March14th and April 13th, 2020.
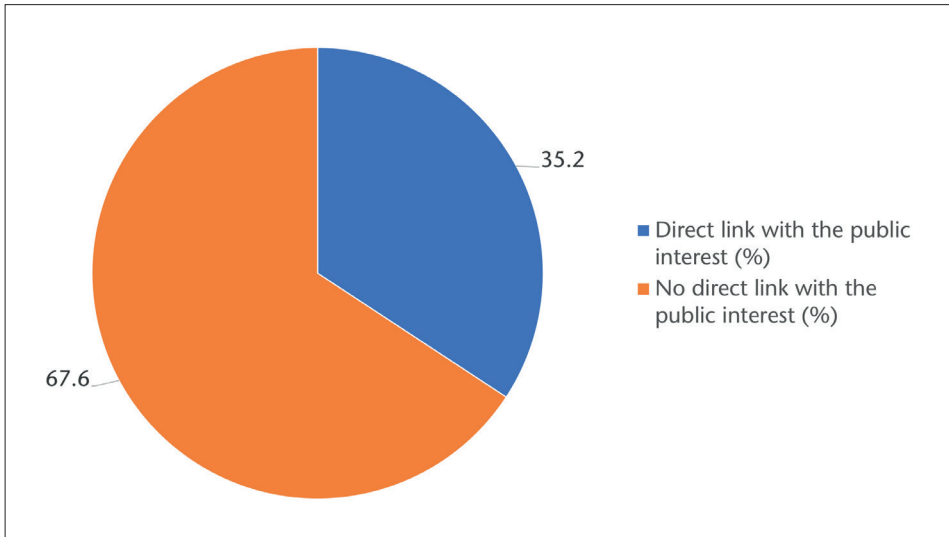
Source: Own elaboration.

CONCLUSIONS

The visual platform Instagram attracts multiple media organisations seeking to increase their visibility and interact with the younger audience. Previous research has shown that the media maintain daily activity on this platform, sharing photos and videos on their feeds (Vázquez-Herrero, 2019) and generating ephemeral content for their stories, tending to follow the criteria of posting attractive, striking and innovative content, instead of that which is informative and current (Vázquez-Herrero, Direito-Rebollal, and López-García, 2019). Previous studies have also concluded that recurring content on the visual platform Instagram is in the main apolitical and related to soft categories, such as fashion, travel and food (Al Nashmi, 2018). However, global health emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic suggest that this dynamic has been altered.

The results of this paper confirm the first hypothesis that pointed to a tendency for content related to the COVID-19 pandemic to monopolise the agenda of the Spanish press on Instagram, evidencing the low importance that content related to other topics acquires in times of a global emergency.

The analysis also leads to a partial validation of the second hypothesis, which predicted a predominance of information about COVID-19 that lacks a direct link to the public interest, based on the assumption that the media seek to adapt to the most common approaches and class of content on the visual platform Instagram.

On the Instagram profile of the newspaper *La Vanguardia*, information of human interest and that related to collaborative initiatives to fight against COVID-19 predominate. However, the results obtained from the analysis of *El País'* profile confirm that information of public interest, such as political decisions, health recommendations or economic measures, are in the majority. This shows that even though the media studied are of a similar nature they have followed different strategies on this visual platform during the crisis generated by COVID-19. It is also noted that on this social network, relevant content has a more significant presence than posts about softer categories or those designed to be attractive.

The differences detected in this research are an indication that further research should be carried out into the activity that news organisations maintain on social networks such as Instagram. Such research should include different types of media (with different business strategies) and media from different countries. Other avenues of research are also open, for example, investigating the format of content according to the channel (stories, feed, IGTV) on which they are broadcast. Although this aspect was beyond the scope of this article, it would be interesting to achieve a more complete understanding of the dynamics with which the media operate on this social network.

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