

# The Spanish press approach throughout the COVID-19 crisis. An analysis of framing through the front pages of the main national newspapers

El enfoque de la prensa española durante la crisis del Covid-19. Un análisis del framing a través de las portadas de los principales diarios de tirada nacional

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** In this work, an analysis of the front pages of the main Spanish newspapers during the Covid-19 crisis is carried out. **Methodology:** This study's main objective is to analyze the approach or framing adopted by the various headers to convey information regarding the pandemic and its impact on society. For this purpose, the methodology applied consisted of analyzing the cover pages' contents in the Spanish press. The sample design has been based on three criteria: temporal, professional, and discursive. **Results/Discussion:** The tone of the main headlines on the front pages was negative. Such negativity focuses on the government's management of this crisis. Similarly, the topics covered in the headline condition the tone. The following have been the main topics, in this order: health, politics, and economy. In terms of visual treatment, it should be noted that the headlines have highlighted civil society in their photographs as an information actor ahead of politicians and official institutions. **Conclusions:** The most present institutional actor in the headlines' discursive analysis has been the Government represented in the figure of its President.

**KEYWORDS:** Covid-19; coronavirus; health crisis; framing; agenda setting; news; newspapers.

## RESUMEN

**Introducción:** En este trabajo se lleva a cabo un análisis de las portadas de los principales diarios españoles durante la crisis del Covid-19. **Metodología:** El objetivo principal de este estudio es analizar el enfoque o *framing* empleado por las diferentes cabeceras para trasladar la información sobre la pandemia y su impacto a la sociedad. La metodología empleada fue el análisis de contenido de las portadas de la prensa española. El diseño de la muestra se ha basado en tres criterios: temporal, profesional y discursivo. **Resultados/Discusión:** El tono empleado por las principales cabeceras en sus titulares de portada fue negativo. Esta negatividad se centra en la gestión que de esta crisis está realizando el Gobierno. Los principales temas han sido sanidad, política y economía. En cuanto al tratamiento visual, las cabeceras han resaltado en sus fotografías a la sociedad civil como actor informativo por delante de políticos o instituciones oficiales. **Conclusiones:** El actor institucional más presente en el análisis discursivo de los titulares ha sido el Gobierno, representado en la figura de su Presidente.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Covid-19; coronavirus; crisis sanitaria; *framing*; *agenda setting*; noticias; periódicos.

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Translation by **Paula González** (Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, Venezuela)

### 1. Introduction

Since 1995, there have been six outbreaks that the World Health Organization (WHO) has classified as international health emergencies, according to the International Health Regulations (IHR) revised in 2005: H1N1 Flu, Polio, Ebola in West Africa and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Zika, and, now, Covid-19. Two other coronaviruses, SARS and MERS, also spread internationally, although they were not considered an international health emergency (Ratzan, Gostin, Meshkti, Rabin, and Parker, 2020).

The year 2020 began with the news that an unknown respiratory virus, dubbed Covid-19, had been detected in the Chinese city of Wuhan. The first news about this health crisis reached Spain the second week of January, although the first contagion in Spain was not documented until January 31<sup>st</sup>, a German tourist who had been in contact with a Chinese citizen and who was isolated on the island of La Gomera. The first peninsular cases were verified on February 24<sup>th</sup> in the Community of Madrid, Catalonia, and the Valencian Community. From this moment on, the number of infected multiplied exponentially and the Government of Spain decreed the State of Alarm on March 14<sup>th</sup>, which was subsequently extended (Costa-Sánchez and López-García, 2020).

This latest global health emergency has resulted in an unprecedented political and social answer and is already having massive consequences on the global economy. The avalanche of the human response has been facilitated by the flow of information, channeled through both traditional mass media and social networks (Singh et al., 2020).

Numerous case studies on crisis risk communication have indicated that messages are often misinterpreted by the public, warnings do not work, false rumors are generated, certain sources provide inconsistent information, populations are not calm, and the media treat the story in a

sensationalist way (Glik, 2007). However, crisis risk communication is essential to saving lives and plays a critical role in disaster mitigation efforts. Indeed, when a health crisis drags on, the media and the public lose patience. In these cases, accusatory fingers begin to point at those in authority, and panic often gives way to collective anger (Garrett, 2001).

Managing a pandemic like Covid-19 requires a balanced approach that conveys to citizens what they and the health system can do without causing panic (Cowper, 2020). However, Cowper points out that China, the country in which the virus originated, used an authoritarian approach to minimize the severity of the outbreak in its early stages, so, paradoxically, its stance on city closures has also taken shape as an effective measure to curb the virus in European countries. As predicted already in 2017 by a report by the World Economic Forum, global risks are interconnected. In particular, the case of the Covid-19 epidemic is showing the fundamental role of the dissemination of information in a news cycle that, in many cases, lacks an intermediary (Cinelli et al., 2020).

The rapid escalation of the virus has been associated with confusing and sometimes contradictory communication about its spread. As such, it is challenging for the media to report on the status of the outbreak as information becomes available at unpredictable times and ways (Ratzan, Gostin, Meshkti, Rabin, & Parker, 2020). The only bastion of defense against growing citizen panic, financial market hysteria, and unintended misunderstandings of the science and epidemiology of Covid-19 is agile, accurate, and globally available counter-information that broadcasts a consistently science-based narrative. This pandemic presents unprecedented scientific information delivery mechanisms, increasing pressure for proper interpretation by the media and citizens (Garrett, 2020).

There is no doubt that the health crisis in the media has become, since its irruption, the central theme of their agendas, taking over the covers and most of the information space, both in the traditional and digital mass media. Therefore, taking as a basis the previous works and the theories on the cognitive effects of the media on public opinion, it is necessary to promote rigorous research on the informational treatment of a subject, in this case, the pandemic derived from the expansion of Covid-19 in the media from the theories of agenda setting and framing.

### **1.1. Theories of *agenda setting* and *framing***

The theories of agenda setting and framing have as a point of convergence the structure and content of the information published by the media. This theory was raised by McCombs and Shaw (1972) and is based on Cohen's (1964) idea of how the media does not indicate so much what to think about, but about what to think. The knowledge that citizens acquire about certain phenomena –Covid-19, in this case– is not due to direct experience or deep knowledge of them, but rather it is the media that act by establishing a list of relevant issues.

This fact influences conditioning the actors to the social reality of their environment. Consequently, the media can direct the gaze of a large part of the citizens towards some issues or others. The information made available to citizens by the media is not their sole responsibility. Rogers and Dearing (1994, p.79) indicated that the information to which public opinion is exposed comes from the confluence of three agendas: that of the media, the public, and the political. These agendas refer to the issues or topics that the media, political agents, and public opinion consider most relevant within a specific spatial-temporal context. Therefore, it is suggested that journalistic coverage and attention influence the priorities and concerns of citizens.

The framing theory in the media arose in the 1960s and consolidated in the 1980s, when the analysis of the effects of the media was linked to cognitive issues, as in the case of work on agenda setting.

The main premise of framing theory is that a phenomenon can be viewed from a variety of perspectives and can be interpreted from multiple values or considerations. Framing refers to the process by which people display a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking on an issue (Chong and Druckman, 2007). Sábada-Garraza already warned (2004, p.2) that framing has a relevant component of particular focus since the facts will be arranged by the journalist from a focus determined by personal and professional influences (Masip et al., 2020), leaving aside phenomena such as misinformation or hoaxes (Salaverría et al., 2020).

The application of framing in communication research already has a solid track record, which makes it possible to consider it as one of the key concepts in this area of knowledge (Vicente-Mariño and López-Rabadán, 2009).

For the media, a frame serves to organize everyday reality (Tuchman, 1978) by providing meaning to a series of events that are taking place (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989) and promoting particular definitions and interpretations about political issues (Shah, Watts, Domke, and Fan, 2002). That is, it involves selecting, emphasizing, and structuring information packages to establish a perspective from which to interpret a topic (Fenoll and Rodríguez-Ballesteros, 2017).

But what is the link between agenda setting and framing theory? There is a majority current among Communication researchers who consider that the two theories (framing and agenda-setting) are complementary but autonomous (Ardèvol-Abreu, 2015). McCombs, Llamas, López-Escobar, and Rey (1997) equate framing with the second level of agenda setting. These authors suggest that in the language of the second level of agenda configuration, the frame, is the selection of a restricted number of thematically related attributes for inclusion in the media agenda when a particular object is discussed. They argue that there are many other attribute agendas and that a good theoretical map is needed to order the types of frames discussed in other works.

Weaver (2007) also recognizes that there are similarities between framing and the second level of agenda setting. Both are more concerned with how problems or other objects (people, groups, organizations, countries, etc.) are represented in the media than with the problems or objects that are reported more or less prominently. Both focus on highlights, topics, or descriptions of objects of interest and are concerned with ways of thinking more than with objects of thought. But the frame seems to concentrate a broader range of cognitive processes, such as moral evaluations, causal reasoning, appeals to principles, and recommendations for the treatment of problems than the establishment of the second level agenda (the importance of the attributes of an object).

Framing theory applied to Communication is part of the theory of informational mediation. The media, therefore, play an intermediary role between citizens and the world around them. In this task, the media give the news a specific focus or frame, understanding by framing the central organizing idea of the news content that provides a context through a process of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration.

## **1.2. The theory of *framing* applied to health crises**

The media are the main focus of attention on controversies and scientific problems, drawing the attention of policymakers, interest groups, and the public. The media not only influence the attention of political actors and citizens, but also intervene in how problems related to science and technology are defined, symbolized, and ultimately solved (Nisbet, Brossard, and Kroepsch, 2003). The media is itself a political organization, they have direct contact with policymakers, they select a variety of

possible news and sources, often leading political actors towards actions that anticipate the agenda and the nature of the news (Cook, 1998).

The issues that receive the most media attention are those that are most easily dramatized or narrated. This dramatic news emphasizes crisis, individual events in the past or future, and conflicts between personalities (Nisbet, Brossard & Kroepsch, 2003). McCombs and Shanahan (1999) showed that coverage of a problem begins with an increase in dramatic complaints that draws attention to the problem, reaches a peak in coverage with efforts to solve it, and then decreases during the outcome and resolution of the problem.

These aspects become more relevant when scientific events and developments pose health risks. In these situations, the media approach is essential to adequately inform the public, avoid panic, and promote the prevention measures indicated by the health authorities.

Singh et al. (2020) researched the focus of epidemics in the print media and identified six types of frames:

- Consequence. It focuses on the consequences of the crisis: human lives, social and economic impact...
- Uncertainty. It highlights unknown aspects of the epidemic: cure, expansion...
- Action. It emphasizes any action against the disease: prevention, possible solutions, strategies...
- Security. Minimize public concern about the effects of the disease. It also emphasizes the preparedness and / or success of the authorities to combat it.
- Conflict. It focuses on disagreements regarding the epidemic: novel sources, decisions to combat it...
- New evidence. Provides unpublished data on the disease.

By comparing the frames used by the New York Times in the coverage of three epidemics (mad cow disease, West Nile virus, and bird flu), these authors concluded that, although journalists emphasized the consequences and action frames consistently across all diseases, they also took into account the specificity of each disease when differentiating levels of importance in other frames regarding the risk of the epidemic in question. Besides showing that the narrative considerations vary according to the diseases, they also found that these narrative topics change according to the stage in which the development of the epidemic is at. This work also shed light on the link between frames and the nature of a problem, so that the more political a problem was, the more prominent the conflict frame was in media coverage. The treatment of mad cow disease, which was tinged with political overtones, contained more conflict frames than that of the other two diseases.

Wallis and Nerlich (2005) researched the metaphorical framework and media coverage of SARS in the United Kingdom, whose treatment reflected some properties of the approach to global problems. SARS highlighted the role of international organizations in promoting novel agendas on some global issues. In the geopolitical situation at the time, few institutions could claim a real leadership role or own significant assets of their own, other than national governments. They functioned as advisory, regulatory, and coordinating bodies and depended on the goodwill of national governments to enforce their purposes. This, in turn, affected the metaphorical framework of international problems and induced the bureaucratic and managerial approach that can be seen in the SARS discourse rather than other war metaphor systems. Understanding this change in framing, away from the well-established metaphorical system of war and plagues, could not only signal a change in perception and surveillance of an emerging disease but also contribute to a change in the theory of the metaphor itself, far from seeing it as a purely rhetorical or cognitive device to see a cultural and political one.

Tian and Stewart (2005) compared the frame used by the BBC and CNN during the SARS crisis, concluding that both focused on the outbreak and its effects on public health and the medical system, and framed the problem from a global perspective. WHO played a key role in both media, and public health around the world was a common concern. However, the economic dimension of this crisis was more prominent on CNN news than on BBC news. This may suggest a cultural difference between the disease as a social, medical, and economic phenomenon.

These frames are directly related to the persuasiveness of information sources based on their credibility and attractiveness (McGuire, 1985). Regarding this second quality, the most attractive sources in the eyes of the audience have greater persuasive power. First, because an attractive source may determine that the message is paid attention, while a less attractive one may not avoid going unnoticed. Second, the attractiveness of the source can influence the acceptance phase, since the receiver, through the identification process, may want to wish, think, or act in the same way as the source does. Third, attractiveness can increase the credibility of the source. Hence, in a sector as competitive as the press, every day we try to create the most striking presentation possible for the reader. This call for attention is determined by the composition of the texts (in the form of headlines, photographs, and graphic elements). Vander-Zanden (1986, p.222), from *Social Psychology*, defines persuasion as “a deliberate attempt by a person or group of people to influence the attitudes or behaviors of others, to achieve some pre-established goal”. For persuasion to exist, the issuer of the information must have a certain credibility, as well as that the message is accurate and appropriate on the pre-existing knowledge that the receiver has Álvarez-Gálvez (2012, p.5). Likewise, citizens are accommodated to this type of information source (León et al., 2018).

Ultimately, both in the agenda setting and in the framing theory, decisions are made, information is collected or omitted, issues are highlighted or ignored, headlines are written to attract attention, and graphic material is incorporated to illustrate the issues. Therefore, thematic priorities are established whose success depends on the credibility and attractiveness of the source. In each of these steps, the frame is outlined.

## 2. Objectives

Based on longitudinal research of the analysis of the covers of the general information newspapers with national circulation in Spain, the general objective of this work is to determine the approach adopted by these media in the face of the pandemic caused by Covid-19.

The specific objectives are:

- Examine the main headlines of the covers to know in-depth what topics and what purpose (tone) they present.
- Study the informative actor and space of the headline to discover which typology is most present in this pandemic.
- Carry out a photographic analysis of the covers to discover their visual focus.
- Determine the degree of homogeneity of the front-page media agenda, quantifying the level of agreement on the main front page topic between the examined newspapers and identifying the similarities and differences between their topic agendas, actors, and spaces.
- Carry out a discursive analysis of the headlines to establish positions.
- Define the reality projected by the generalist press to establish the taxonomy of the thematic framework of each of the media under study.

### 3. Methodology

The method used has been the content analysis of the covers of the most significant generalist newspapers in the Spanish press. The analysis of the front pages of the newspapers has been researched (Erbring, Goldenberg, and Miller, 1980; Danielson and Lasorsa, 1997; Davara-Torrego, López-Raso, Martínez-Fresneda, and Sánchez-Rodríguez, 2004; Alvarado, 2008; Gibson, 2011) and makes it possible to recognize in a single image the strategic character that journalistic companies overturn in that section. This is where the editorial line is glimpsed, more or less explicitly, and they play a crucial role in interpretive frames (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007; Vicente-Mariño and López-Rabadán, 2009; López-Rabadán, 2010), which longitudinal analysis starts from “the social and democratic relevance of the information, the journalistic importance of the front page, and the link with the current development of agenda setting studies” (López-Rabadán and Casero-Ripollés, 2012, p.472 ).

Hence, their analysis is proposed as a way of knowing the approach that each head has given to the Covid-19 pandemic concerning other news that is happening. This research focuses on how the covers show at a textual and graphic level the day-to-day life of this virus in the 30 days of its most critical phase, in which the evolution of deaths from this virus in Spain has reached the figure of 21,717<sup>1</sup> dead.

A series of variables have been identified (Table 1) adapting the model proposed by López-Rabadán and Casero-Ripollés (2010, p.476). In the same way, a categorical analysis within the subject has been necessary, as well as of the framing (Bardin, 1986; Entman, 1993; Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Scheufele, 1999). We also want to know the tone or direction of the headlines. The prominent headline on the front page was coded with a predominance of positive, negative, or neutral phrases about the Covid-19 pandemic (Bardin, 1986; García-Ferrando, Ibáñez, and Alvira, 1986; López-Aranguren, 1989; Piñuel and Gaitán, 1995). On the other hand, the work of Tankard (2001) has served to adapt the content analysis to photographs and illustrative material.

The design of the sample was based on three criteria: temporary, professional, and discursive. Regarding the first, the dates on which Covid-19 was beginning to attract media interest until the maximum death phase have been determined. Regarding the professional criteria, the Spanish generalist newspapers with the greatest circulation in the national territory have been selected. Besides, the political diversity traditionally presented by these media has been sought so that the study offers a greater richness of data and its consolidation. And, finally, regarding the discourse, the analysis has focused exclusively on the most relevant news on the front page, that is, the main topic of each edition of the studied newspapers. The main cover photo of each newspaper has also been analyzed.

**Table 1.** *Values associated with the analysis variables.*

Variables	Associated values
Main topic	1. Politics 2. Economy 3. Employment 4. International 5. Health 6. Education 7. European Union 13. Corruption 14. Elections 15. Agriculture 16. Culture 17. Immigration 18. Terrorism 19. Housing

<sup>1</sup> Number of deaths as of 04/22/2020, according to the Ministry of Health.

	8. Environment 9. Energy 10. Sports 11. Industry 12. Social welfare	20. Monarchy, Royal House 21. Territorial organization of the State 22. Judicial Power 23. Other
Informational actor	1. Institutions/officials 2. Politics 3. Economics 4. Alternatives 5. Civil Society	6. Media system 7. Cultural 8. Other
Informative space	1. Spain (national/regional/local) 2. Global/world reference 3. United States 4. European Union 5. Rest of Europe	6. Russia 7. Asia 8. Latin America 9. Middle East and Maghreb 10. Sub-Saharan Africa 11. Other
Photograph	1. With political character 2. Without political character	
Headline tone	1. Positive 2. Neutral 3. Negative	

**Source:** Adapted from López-Rabadán and Casero-Ripollés (2012).

The analysis sample (Table 2) was made up of the six main national general information newspapers based on the latest broadcast data (March 2020) and accessible audiences (1<sup>st</sup> Wave 2020).

**Table 2.** *Broadcast and number of readers of national newspapers in Spain.*

Newspaper	Broadcast	Readers (000)
El País	92.633	1.004
La Vanguardia	83.870	532
El Mundo	70.230	657
ABC	65.074	444
El Periódico	50.057	362
La Razón	40.353	194

**Source:** OJD and AIMC (2020).

The content analysis was carried out during the first half of April 2020 from the daily paper front pages of the 6 newspapers that make up the sample during an interval of 30 days (n=180) from the beginning of the Covid-19 coronavirus crisis in Spain (March 7<sup>th</sup> to April 5<sup>th</sup>). The qualitative analysis was carried out with the software Atlas.ti v. 8.4.4, while SPSS v.22 was used for the statistical analysis.

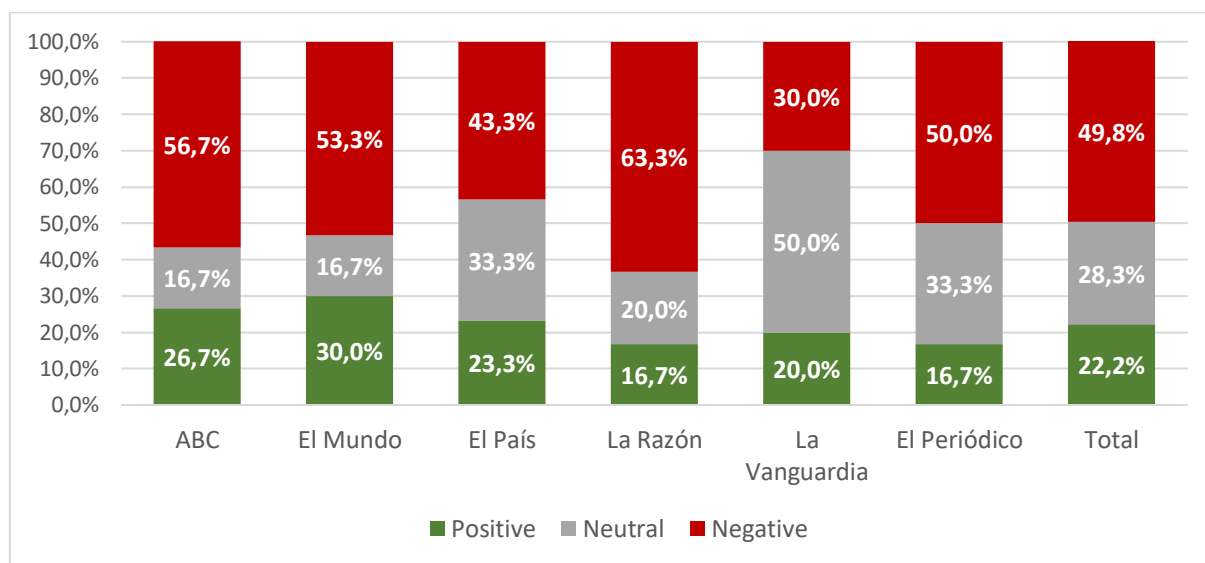
#### 4. Results / Discussion

49.8% of the total covers stood out for a negative headline tone (Figure 1), compared to 28.3% neutral, and 22.2% positive. Considering the feelings of fear, worry (Ahorsu, Lin, Imani, Saffari, Griffiths, and Pakpour, 2020), anxiety, depression (Stein, 2020), insomnia or anger (Torales, O'Higgins, Castaldelli-Maia, and Ventriglio, 2020) that the Covid-19 coronavirus has awakened in people around the world, it seems consistent that the framing of the covers of national newspapers



has been oriented towards a more catastrophic than optimistic vision, in a critical scenario in which uncertainty has prevailed (Brown, 2020). Fear and stigmatization of those infected by the virus have been constant in this health crisis, as has happened previously with SARS and MERS (Li et al., 2020).

The crosstab between the Newspaper and Tone of the headline variables showed a slight relationship between both, with a Contingency Coefficient of 0.279 and a difference that was not statistically significant ( $p=0.124$ ), so there is no dependency relationship between these variables. *La Razón* (63.3%), *ABC* (56.7%), and *El Mundo* (53.3%) were the newspapers with the highest percentage of covers with a negative tone, while, paradoxically, *ABC* (26.7%) and *El Mundo* (30.0%) were also the two newspapers that published the most covers with a positive tone. The two Catalan newspapers with national circulation were the most neutral on their front pages (50.0% *La Vanguardia* and 33.3% *El Periódico*).



**Figure 1:** *Tone of the headline by the newspaper (n=180).*

**Source:** self-made.

Contrary to what happened with the head of the newspaper, the topics collected by the headline do significantly condition the type of tone used ( $p=0.020$ ). When the topic of the headline was Culture, the tone was always positive (100.0%) and when it was Social Welfare, the positive tone was the majority (66.7%). However, the Judicial Power (100.0%) and Employment (90.9%) were issues linked to a negative tone.

In the cross-analysis of the variables Date of the covers and Tone of the headline (Table 3), given the length of the 30 observed days, there were significant differences and, therefore, a dependency relationship ( $p=0.014$ ). In the analysis of certain key dates, it is appreciated how the position of the newspapers has evolved, considering that the indicated dates correspond to those of publication, that is, they refer to events that occurred the day before. When the quarantine was decreed on March 7<sup>th</sup> for a large group from Haro that spread Covid-19 at a funeral, the tone used was mostly neutral (66.7%) and negative (33.3%), and the next day, when the Health Department advised against attending mass events for those who had any respiratory symptoms the day before the 8-M feminist demonstration, the tone was equally distributed between positive, neutral, and negative (33.3% in each case), which already reflects the points of view about a controversy with defenders and detractors that have been used throughout the Covid-19 crisis to warn about the wrong decisions of

the Government and, in other cases, to try to overturn part of the responsibility for the health crisis in feminism.

The following days, when the government's discourse on the seriousness of the health situation changes, the positive tone disappears (0.0%) and the headline about the feminist demonstration published on March 9<sup>th</sup> becomes negative (66.7% negative), the headline on the closure of educational centers decreed by Madrid on March 10<sup>th</sup> (66.7% negative), and the declaration of the pandemic by the World Health Organization and the beginning of the closure of schools on March 12<sup>th</sup> (50% negative).

It seems that it is at this moment, in which restrictive decisions are being made, that the newspapers begin to publish positive headlines again. Thus, on March 15<sup>th</sup> the State of Alarm is decreed (16.7% positive), on March 29<sup>th</sup> is strengthened (33.3% positive), and on April 4<sup>th</sup> a second extension is announced (33.3% positive and 0.0% negative). Therefore, it seems that the awareness of the seriousness of the health crisis leads to the fact that the measures that could be considered negatively by the population become neutral and even positive for the media, which adopts their educational and informative function responsibly. The fact that the actions that were taken against the virus focus the attention of the media underscores the appearance of the Action frame detected by Singh et al. (2020) in their research on the approach to epidemics in print media. Likewise, these data confirm that the coverage of a crisis begins with an increase in dramatic claims that draws attention to the issue, reaches a peak in coverage with efforts to resolve it, and then decreases during the outcome and resolution of it (McCombs and Shanahan, 1999).

This issue is clearer when considering that, during March 15<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup>, the headlines on the State of Alarm present a Topic of the Political headline (83.3% on both dates), while on March 29<sup>th</sup> the Topic is mainly Economic (50.0%) due to the consequences of the strengthening of the State of Alarm. In the announcement of the 2<sup>nd</sup> extension of the State of Alarm, on the other hand, the Subject of the headline becomes mainly Health (66.7%).

These results are also consistent with a narrative in which the Conflict frame is more prominent the more political the issue is (Singh et al., 2020), considering that the difficulties that are dramatized are those that receive the most media attention. (Nisbet, Brossard, and Kroepsch, 2003). As with the SARS coronavirus health crisis, it is addressed as a social, medical, and economic phenomenon (Tian and Stewart, 2005).

The educational function is also reinforced by the analysis of the informative Actor that appears in the photograph, since in the headlines associated with the closure of educational centers (83.3% on 03/10 and 50.0% on 03/12), the decree of the State of alarm (66.7%), the announcement of the first extension (83.3%), and the announcement of the strengthening of it (66.7%) highlights the Civil society, in what seems an attempt to raise awareness among the population to get involved with the restrictive measure.

**Table 3.** Crosstable Date of Cover/Tone of the headline.

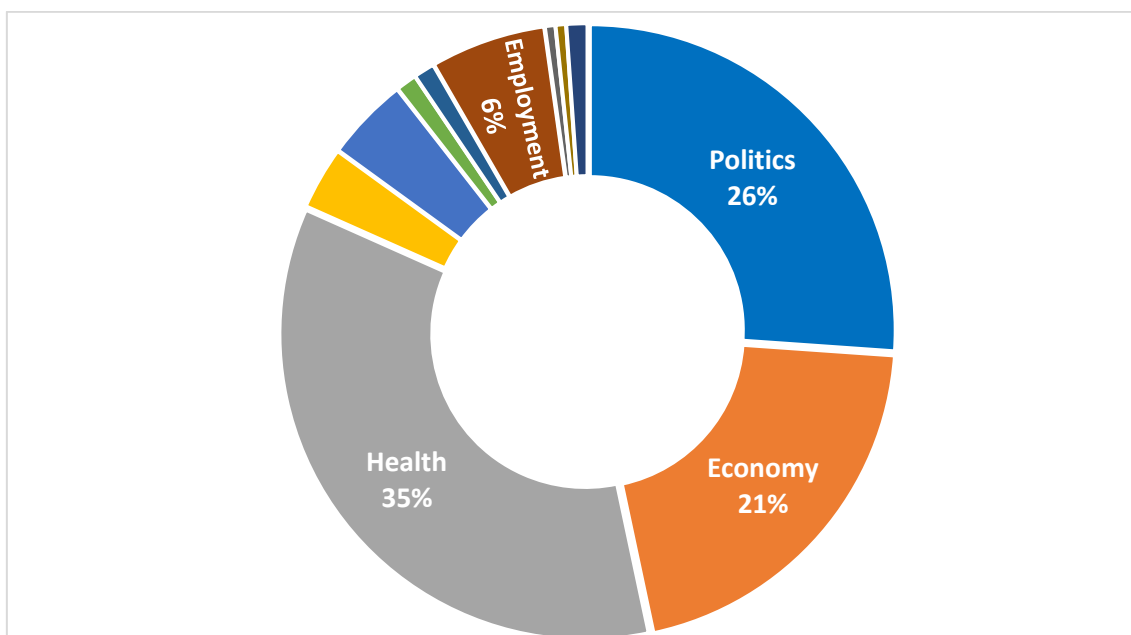
Date	News	Positive	Neutral	Negative
03/07/2020	Quarantine in Haro to a group that was infected at a funeral.	0.0%	66.7%	33.3%
03/08/2020	Health advises against attending mass events to those who have a cough or respiratory symptoms.	33.3%	33.3%	33.3%
03/09/2020	Feminist demonstration 8-M.	0.0%	33.3%	66.7%
03/10/2020	Madrid decrees the closure of educational centers.	0.0%	33.3%	66.7%

03/12/2020	WHO declares pandemic. Beginning of the closure of educational centers.	0.0%	50.0%	50.0%
03/15/2020	The Government decrees the State of Alarm.	16.7%	33.3%	50.0%
03/23/2020	The Government announces the 1 <sup>st</sup> extension of the State of Alarm.	0.0%	50.0%	50.0%
03/29/2020	The Government decrees the hardening of the State of Alarm.	33.3%	33.3%	33.3%
04/04/2020	The 2 <sup>nd</sup> extension of the State of Alarm is announced.	33.3%	66.7%	0.0%

**Source:** Self-made.

In other catastrophes with health effects, the responsibility of the media in published news has also been identified, although it is common for them to differ depending on the headline and the period considered (Thomas, Kannaley, Friedman, Tanner, Brandt, and Spencer, 2016). This orientation is a consequence of the increased perception of risk when there is high proximity of an epidemic and because of the possible identity of invulnerability that can spread among the younger population (Idoiaga, Gil-de-Montes, and Valencia, 2016). However, in other health pandemics, it has also been revealed that numerous European newspapers sensationally amplify risks to emphasize conflict, drama, and emotion in their coverage of the news (Rossmann, Meyer, & Schulz, 2018).

The health nature that gave rise to the coronavirus crisis is also reflected in the topics that featured on the front pages of newspapers (Figure 2). Thus, 35.0% of the covers dealt with Health, with a prominent role of Politics (26.1%) and the Economy (20.6%). With less relevance, issues such as Employment (6.1%), International (4.4%), or Social Welfare (3.3%) emerged. Culture and the Judicial Power, with a presence of 0.6% each, were irrelevant issues during the Covid-19 crisis.



**Figure 2:** Topic of the headline of newspaper covers (n=180).

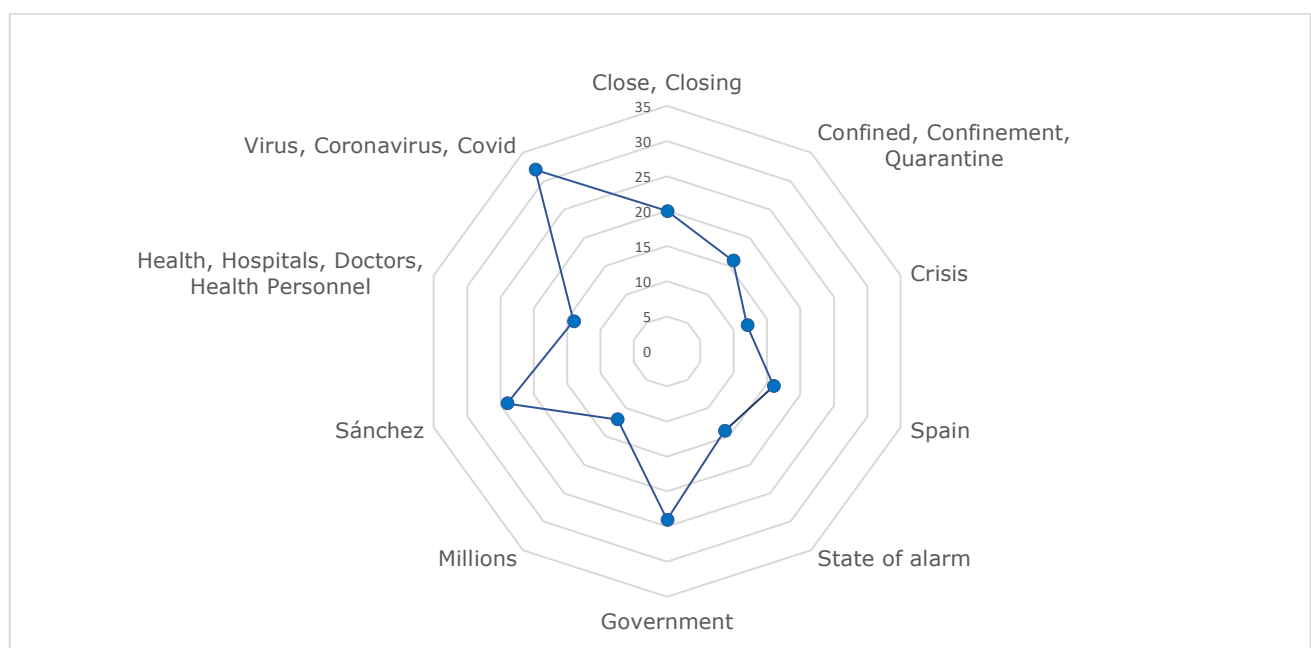
**Source:** self-made.

The crossing of variables between Newspaper and Topic of the headline showed an intermediate level relationship, with a contingency coefficient of 0.465, even though there were no statistically significant differences ( $p=0.490$ ) that allow concluding a dependency relationship between the variables. Despite this, the cross-analysis revealed that the newspaper with a more negative tone, *La Razón*, focused this negativity on the health issue, with 46.7% of its front pages, while the other two that stood out were oriented towards Politics, both *ABC* (43.3%) and *El Mundo* (33.3%). *El País*

registered the lowest percentage of covers on the Political issue (16.7%), with an impact on Health (40%), Economy (16.7%), Employment (10.0%), Social Benefits (6.7%), and International (6.7%). This medium carried out less coverage of the most critical issue for the Government, focusing on the policies that had an impact on the well-being of citizens in terms of health, employment, or financial aid, using the Security frame detected by Singh et al. (2020), whose objective is to minimize public concern about the effects of the disease. Catalan-owned newspapers showed uneven behavior, as *El Periódico* showed a notably higher than average initiative on Health (43.3% of its front pages), while *La Vanguardia* focused its efforts on Economy (33.3%), using in this case the Consequence frame (Singh et al., 2020) when highlighting the devastating effects of the pandemic on the economy. The different approach used by the media is explained by Cook's study (1998), which indicates that the media function as political organizations, selecting a variety of possible news and sources, and often leading political actors towards actions that anticipate the agenda and its nature.

To reduce uncertainty in a health crisis, political leaders need the support of the media to provide a credible explanation of the event, provide guidance, instill hope, show empathy and suggest that they remain in control (You and Ju, 2019). Health framing is common in stages after the overcoming of the health crisis, but not in the previous stages, in which the health risk, the resulting social setbacks, and the political issue are prominent approaches (Pan and Meng, 2016).

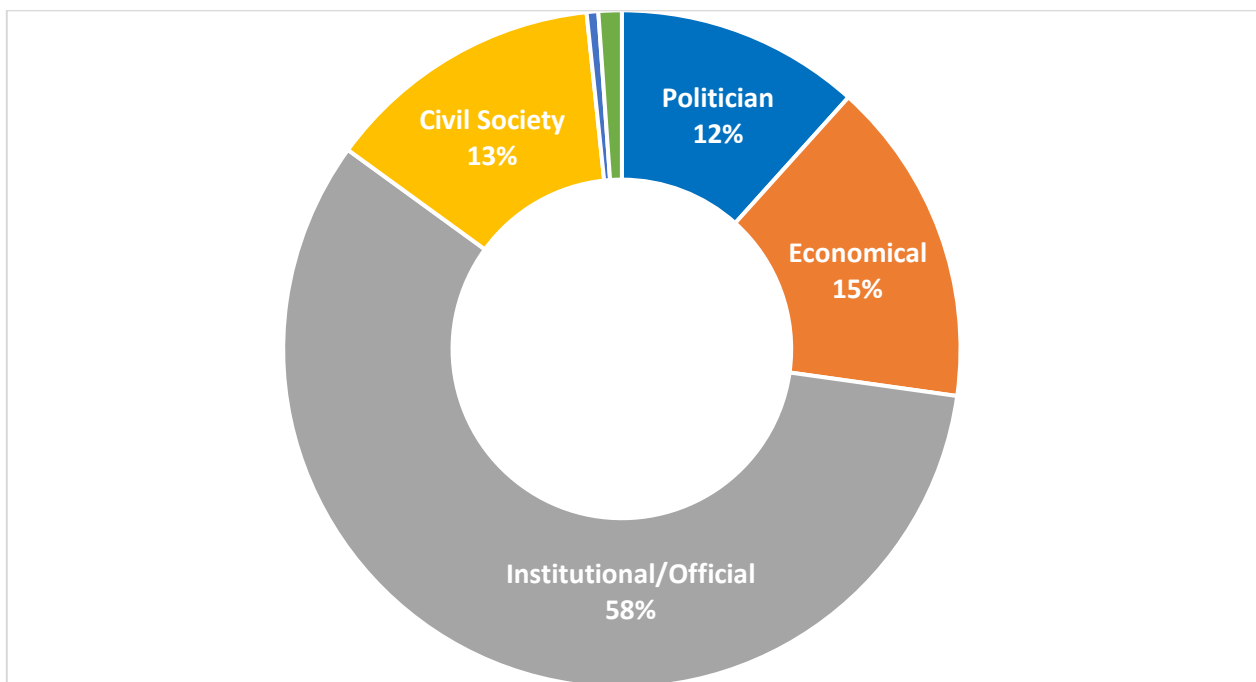
The analysis of the redundant concepts in the discourse of the cover's headlines (Figure 3), made these issues even more specific, while Health was oriented towards the terms "virus", "coronavirus" and "Covid" in a majority way, instead of towards the work of "health, hospitals, doctors, and sanitary workers". Health issues mainly sought to answer questions regarding the disease, highlighting, in this case, the frame of Uncertainty and that of New Evidence that emerges in situations of a health crisis (Singh et al., 2020). Secondly, the institutional actor "Government" and its President, Pedro Sánchez, stood out with the same presence. The rest of the concepts present in the main headlines of the covers were related to the closure of the country and confinement, Spain, the State of Alarm, and the resulting crisis. It must be considered that the term "millions" is shared in various headlines concerning the coronavirus crisis, referring to millions of people affected, necessary masks, losses on the Stock Market, or unemployed.



**Figure 3:** Redundant concepts in the discourse of the headlines of the newspapers.

**Source:** self-made.

The informative actors present in the headlines of the newspaper covers (Figure 4) were related to the main topics, highlighting the Institutional/Official (57.8%), followed by the Economic (15.6%), and the Political (11.7%).



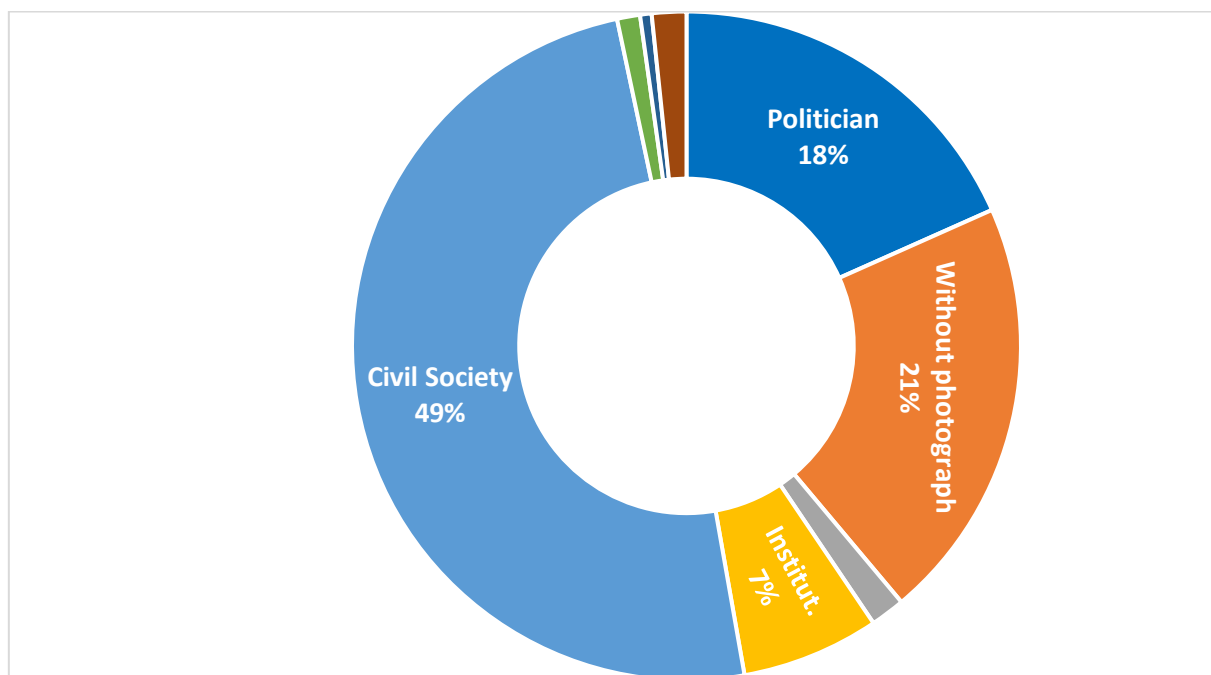
**Figure 4:** *Informative actor of the headline on the front pages of newspapers.*  
**Source:** self-made.

Neither in the cross tables between the variables Newspaper and Informative Actor of the headline was a dependency relationship identified, with a moderate contingency coefficient of 0.385 and a significance of  $p=0.179$ . The three newspapers that offered the highest percentage of covers with a negative tone are also the three that offered the most headlines in which the protagonists are politicians (*ABC*, 26.7%; *La Razón*, 16.7%; *El Mundo*, 16.7%), although most newspapers opt for an Institutional/Official figure rather than the personalization of the Politician. *La Vanguardia*, *El Mundo* (66.7%), and *El País* (60.0%) lead. *La Vanguardia* stands out for the highest record in terms of economic actors (23.3%) and *El Periódico*, for the representation of Civil Society (23.3%). The case of *El Periódico* is in line with previous research, which revealed their intention to differentiate themselves from the rest of the national newspapers by the prominence of certain issues that make it possible to increase the interactions reached with their audiences, such as feminism (Mañas-Viniegra, López-Cepeda, and Sierra-Sánchez, 2019).

The cross table that observes the Topic of the headline and its informative Actor, showed a high dependency relation ( $C=0.815$ ) in a significant way ( $p\leq 0.001$ ). When the topic of the headline was Politics, it determined that the headline actor was also Political (36.2%) or Institutional (59.6%), in the same way, that the Economy determined an Economy (51.4%), or Institutional actor (45.9%); Social Welfare conditioned an Institutional or Civil Society actor (50% in each case); Health, an Institutional (68.3%) or Civil Society actor (27.0%); or European Union or Monarchy, correlated with an Institutional actor in all cases (100.0%), thus existing consistency in the results.

In a contradictory way with the examined headlines, the newspapers chose to give prominence in the photographs (Figure 5) to Civil Society (49.4%) ahead of Politicians (18.3%) or Institutional/Officials (6.7%), being relevant that in 20.6% of the covers there was no photograph

linked to the headline of the main news item, which shows a claim by the newspapers themselves of the prominence of the information on any other visual or narrative element.



**Figure 5:** *Informative actor of the photograph of the headline on the front page of newspapers.*  
**Source:** self-made.

In this issue, the differences were statistically significant ( $p \leq 0.001$ ) between the studied newspapers, with a dependency relationship between the headlines and the type of informative Actor in the photograph linked to the main headline (Table 3). *El País* (43.3%) and *El Mundo* (40.0%) stood out for presenting twice the number of covers without a photograph associated with the main headline compared to the total of newspapers considered. The newspapers that used the negative tone the most, *ABC* and *La Razón*, were the ones that used Politicians (30.0%) the most in the photograph of the headline, and the two Catalan newspapers mainly used the photographs to give prominence to Civil Society (*El Periódico*, 83.3%; *La Vanguardia*, 63.3%).

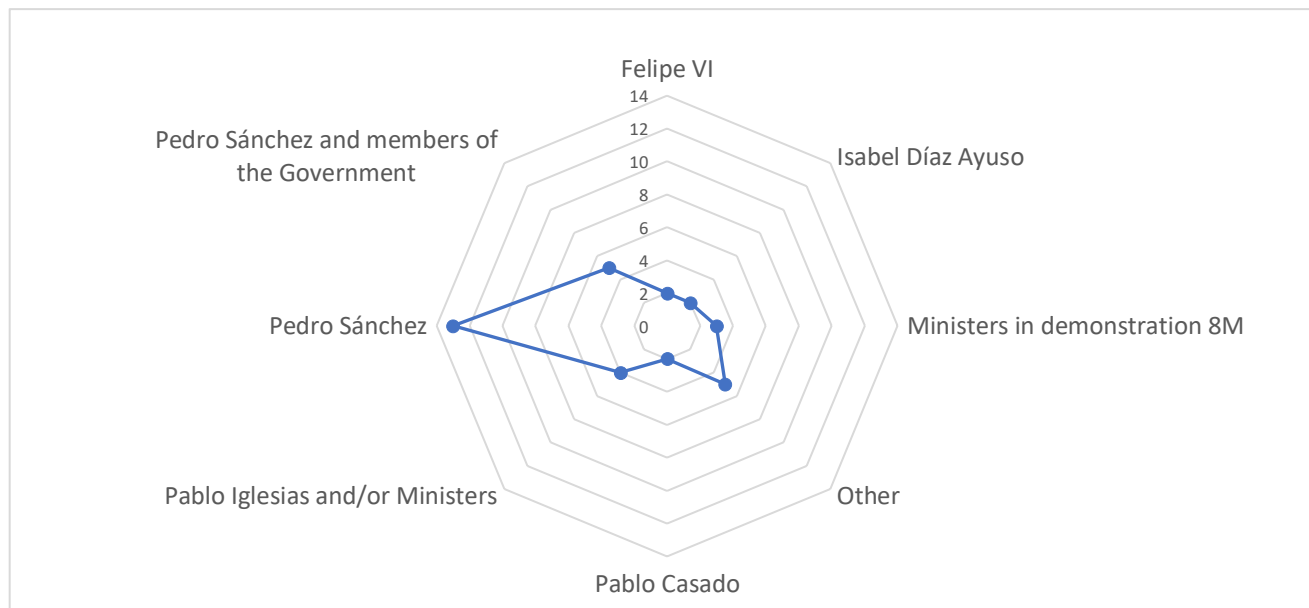
**Table 4.** *Newspaper/ Informative actor of the photograph crosstable.*

Newspaper	Political	No photograph	Religious	Institutional	Civil society	Cultural	Media	Economy
ABC	30.0%	0.0%	0.0%	26.7%	33.3%	3.3%	3.3%	3.3%
El Mundo	13.3%	40.0%	0.0%	0.0%	46.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
El País	23.3%	43.3%	0.0%	0.0%	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
La Razón	30.0%	23.3%	3.3%	6.7%	36.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
La Vanguardia	10.0%	16.7%	3.3%	3.3%	63.3%	3.3%	0.0%	0.0%
El Periódico	3.3%	0.0%	3.3%	3.3%	83.3%	0.0%	0.0%	6.7%
Total	18.3%	20.6%	1.7%	6.7%	49.4%	1.1%	0.6%	1.7%

**Source:** self-made.

The photographs of the political actors that accompanied the headlines (Figure 6) focused on the Government, whether it was its President Pedro Sánchez alone or with the members of his

Government, or his Ministers, being almost irrelevant the appearance of the politicians of the opposition, which reinforces the idea that the negative tone in the headlines is directed towards the Government's management in the Covid-19 coronavirus crisis, reinforcing the leading role of the Conflict frame detected by Singh et al. (2020) in their study on media coverage of pandemics.



**Figure 6:** Political actors in the headline photograph on the front page of newspapers.  
**Source:** self-made.

With a high Contingency Coefficient (0.755) and a significant dependency relationship between the variables Topic of the headline and Informative Actor of the photograph ( $p \leq 0.001$ ), it stands out that the Social Welfare Topic was more associated with an informative Actor of Politics (50.0%) in the photograph, a higher figure than that obtained by the Politics issue itself (31.9%), which in turn was more related to the appearance of Civil Society (53.2%). The topics that suppressed the associated photograph were Monarchy (100.0%), Employment (54.5%), European Union (50.0%), and Economy (37.8%). The topics that were closely related to the Informative Actor of the Civil Society photograph were International (75.0%), Health (54.0%), and Politics (53.2%).

Although all newspapers concentrated the information space of the headline in Spain without significant differences ( $p = 0.113$ ), with a total of 85.0% of the front pages, this concentration was more notable in newspapers whose headline tone was negative: *La Razón* (96.7%), *ABC*, and *El Mundo* (93.3%). *El País*, *La Vanguardia*, and *El Periódico* opted for an International/Global space (10.0%), or, at least, European (16.7% *El País* and *La Vanguardia*; 10.0% *El Periódico*).

The crosstab between the Topic and the Information Space of the headline, with a medium Contingency Coefficient (0.584) and a dependency relationship with significant differences between the variables ( $p \leq 0.001$ ), showed that the topics of Social Welfare, Monarchy, Employment, Culture, Judicial Power, and Industry referred in all cases (100.0%) to Spain, while, in a majority, the European Union focused on that same territory (100.00%) and International was distributed between the European Union (62.5%), International (25.0%), and Asia (12.5%).

In short, the presence of the six frames Consequence, Uncertainty, Action, Security, Conflict, and New Evidence identified in the news coverage of other epidemics in print media can be seen in the analysis (Singh et al., 2020).

## 5. Conclusions

The longitudinal analysis carried out allows us to describe in detail the predominant front-page media agenda in the reference Spanish press regarding the Covid-19 health crisis.

The negative tone has prevailed in the headlines of the national newspapers under analysis. At the content level, this catastrophic tone referred mainly to government management, anxiety, uncertainty, and a state of psychological and economic depression. The newspapers that are ideologically furthest from the current government have made the most negative headlines.

The topics included in the headline determine the tone used in it. And it is there, in the interpretation of the fact, where the political ideology of the newspaper is revealed. It has been found that the more restrictive the measures proposed by the Government were (State of alarm and successive extensions), the more positive were the messages that the newspapers addressed to the population through their front pages.

The Covid-19 pandemic has focused on the front pages of Spanish generalist newspapers on three fundamental topics, namely, in order of importance; health, politics, and economy. The first of them is fundamentally focused on expansion data and containment and prevention measures. The political is focused on the legislative measures agreed by the Government, as well as by the executive part of its management to provide resources to the Spanish public health system. And, lastly, the economic issue refers to measures to support the country's productive area.

Regarding the visual analysis of the covers, the Spanish general press has prevailed in its photos as an informative actor to civil society, represented by doctors, nurses, State Security Forces and Corps, volunteers, and essential activities workers. The topics most closely related to the civil society actor are international, society, and politics.

It is precisely those newspapers that have used a more negative tone in their headlines that have used a greater number of photographs of politicians to reinforce their headlines. Basically, they have used photos of the President of the Government and his Ministers.

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