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# School bullying and teen suicide in the Spanish press: from journalistic taboo to boom

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## Abstracts

**Introduction.** This article examines the evolution of the news coverage of school bullying and teen suicide in the Spanish press. **Methods.** The objective is to measure the importance newspapers grant to this phenomenon to determine whether their interest runs parallel to the occurrence of the most serious cases of bullying or whether the media agenda already considers bullying as a major social problem. **Results.** Data were collected from a total of 8,421 news stories published in eight prestigious newspapers between 2004 and 2017, of which 222 directly address the eight cases of teen suicide that took place in Spain during that research period. **Conclusions.** The media’s interest in the problem is increasing, but their reporting of school bullying has strong narrative deficiencies, such as a predominant sensationalist approach focused on suicide cases, which used to be a considered a journalistic taboo due to the fear its reporting could triggering an imitation effect in the audience, and the disregard for the presumption of innocence.

## Keywords

School bullying; cyberbullying; suicide; public opinion; journalism; sensationalism.

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## 1. Introduction

In Spain, one in four students suffers from some form of violence at school. When these attacks become repetitive it is known as bullying, which in recent years became a severe problem with serious consequences for its victims. The Cisneros X report, developed by a team led by researchers Araceli Oñate and Iñaki Piñuel in 2007, concludes that school bullying affects 23.3% of Spanish students and highlights that “it is not the marginal reality that many try to present”.

Since psychologist and researcher Dan Olweus began the study of bullying in Norway in the 1970s, the phenomenon has not stopped growing, and it has evolved in recent years into cyberbullying. Between the two most important studies carried out by Olweus, with 18 years of difference (1983 and 2001), the percentage of victims of bullying has increased by 50% while the percentage of students involved in more serious forms of bullying grew by 65% (Solberg & Olweus, 2003). The magnitude of the problem is more evident every day in Spain. This worrying situation led the Ombudsman to work on a new report on school bullying, since the one carried out in 2000 on school violence and peer abuse in secondary education became obsolete. This first report considered that the situation in Spain, compared to other neighbouring countries, should not be described as alarming. It estimated that the incidence and severity of the episodes of abuse were lower and considered that the legislative framework and the degree of awareness in the educational administrations were appropriate.

Only seven years later, the Cisneros X report, considered as the largest research carried out in Western Europe on the subject, revealed a very different reality. It estimated school bullying rate at 23.3%, which places Spain in the 17<sup>th</sup> position of the world ranking. More recent studies, such as the one published in 2016 by the Aid to Children and Adolescents at Risk Foundation (ANAR), also warn us about the problem. The research covered from 2009, when they recorded 154 cases of bullying contrasted by psychologists and experts of the Foundation, to 2015, when 573 cases were detected.

Awareness of this problem was spread by the first cases of suicide of victims of bullying. In September 2004, 14-year-old Jokin Zeberio took his own life on Fuenterrabía (Guipúzcoa). For over a year he had suffered the aggressions, insults and humiliations of a group of classmates from a secondary school in Hondarribia, according to the sentence that absolved of induction to suicide to the eight classmates but condemned them for bullying Jokin (*El País* 11/02/2011). Since then, the total number of suicide cases among Spanish minors who, according to their families, suffered from bullying, is eight. The most recent case took place in January 2017. Despite the harsh reality, the studies carried reveal important gaps that affect its prevention and treatment in the educational and legislative fields. For example, the only noteworthy measure adopted by the Government has been the launching of the single telephone line (900 018 018), on 1 November 2016, to help families, witnesses and teachers to solve or denounce cases of bullying.

There is, therefore, no law that persecutes or punishes school bullying as such. Only one article (172.ter), incorporated in the last reform of the Penal Code (1 July 2015) punishes the so-called illegitimate harassment, cyberbullying or stalking, but it is not useful for school bullying (Castillo Jiménez, 2017). In other words, the bullying is not considered a crime in Spain, hence it is impossible to quantify lawsuits, since these behaviours are considered as threats, coercions, vexations or offences

against honour, intimacy or moral integrity. In the educational field, where the current action protocols of action seem insufficient and lack the necessary legal protection, it is essential to implement more accurate models for teachers to organise social activities, friends groups and networks, as well as other activities that improve relationships among students (Romera, Cano, García-Fernández & Ortega-Ruiz, 2016)

## 1.2. Bullying and the media

In this scenario, the media can and should enhance their social function. They must help to create a public opinion that demands politics and appropriate measures to curb the problem. In addition, the media also have the responsibility of increasing their informative and educative roles to help the victims and their environment to face the problem of bullying. The Cisneros X report highlights the extraordinary media attention that school bullying has received in recent years. “There is not a day in which news programmes do not present cases of a reality that has been downplayed for too long”. The problem is that, as the report emphasises, media information about bullying has been reduced to only the “most serious forms of physical aggression, or to children with more severe physical injuries”.

This work aims to analyse the media framing of bullying, in its multiple aspects, and determine whether, as mentioned in the aforementioned report, they only cover the problem when there are cases that involve police actions with detainees (i.e., the most serious cases) and, above all, when school bullying adopts its most dramatic face with the victim’s suicide. The initial hypothesis is that the media do not have a coherent policy to cover cases of bullying and that they only show interest in the most serious consequences of the problem, particularly suicides (H1). The second hypothesis proposes that the media make an exception with bullying to the norm that considers suicide reporting a taboo due to the risk of encouraging copycat suicides (H2). Likewise, that interest grows when the event occurs in their area of scope (H3).

Albert Bandura (1977) in his theory of social learning claims that news about suicides increase the risk of imitation, which is why journalists tend to hide them except when the event is essential part of a news story. A study carried out by Madelyn S. Gould (2001) in the Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and the Division of Epidemiology at Columbia University and the State Psychiatric Institute of New York, continues finding alarming correlations between suicide reporting in factual and fiction programming and imitation acts.

The imitation effect theory and suicide reporting have been widely studied in the field of the psychology, where the terms “Werther effect” and “copycat effect” were coined (Herrera Ramírez; Ures Villar and Martínez Jambrina, 2015) to refer to how citizens reproduce the suicidal behaviours that appear in the media. The term “Papageno effect” (also a psychological term) proposes the opposite of the “Werther effect”: The responsible coverage of suicide cases, following established guidelines, may have a preventive effect. In other words, that quality reporting can be helpful. For example, news about the suicide of minors who have suffered bullying put other victims on alert: the ANAR study (2016) indicates that on 20 January 2016 a turning point occurred in the calls made to request information or denounce cases of bullying. On that date, *El Mundo* newspaper published the farewell letter of Diego, an 11-year-old boy who committed suicide in Leganés, and in the following 50 days the calls made by adults and children quadrupled. “News reports do not generate more bullying, but greater social reaction to the problem”, the study stresses.

### 1.3. The media and public opinion

In any case, the media's responsible coverage of school bullying, cyberbullying in particular or suicide, in the most serious cases, is essential for its transcendence. The media have a key role in the formation of public opinion and the construction of social reality. Walter Lippmann (in Rubio Ferreres, 2009) points out in *Public Opinion* (192) that "the news media, our windows to the vast world beyond direct experience, determine our cognitive maps of that world". Public opinion, according to Lippmann (2003), does not respond to the environment, but to the pseudo-environment built by the media.

The media are very powerful when it comes to focusing citizens' attention on certain problems: they can do so through their editorial position, because they constitute a self-portrait open to the public (León and Blanco Castilla, 2009), may suggest topics to think about and even ways of feeling (Lang and Lang, 1981 and McCombs, 2006). That is, by giving more or less importance to certain issues (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), the media can influence what people consider important (Dearing and Rogers, 1996). McCombs (2006, 24) goes further and points directly to editors and directors as those responsible for our perception around the salience of issues. He also warns us that the editorial bias also spreads to the news, given the vulnerability of the due separation between opinion and information, which is a threat recognised by several authors (Druckman and Parkin, 2005; Druckman, 2005; Kahn and Kenney, 2002): the relationship between the media and the *de facto* powers, fundamentally political in this case, and the possibility that it influences the construction of the message (Firmstone, 2008).

Aware of this power, experts call for greater involvement of the media in the problem of bullying. Parents, educators and teens consider that the media should have an active role in prevention. A greater informative effort to restrict the misuse of social networks would help to avoid it (Schneider, Smith & O'Donnell, 2013).

## 2. Methods

Niklas Luhmann's communicational paradigm (1991) is based on his concern about the effects of journalistic mediations on the formation of public opinion. His systemic-constructivist perspective helps us identify problems that hinder the spreading of awareness around an issue, which justifies the focus of the empirical section of this research on the collection of quantitative data around the presence of a serious problem, such as school bullying, in the media.

Content analysis is also the most frequently used technique in media research, and in this case it is also the most relevant approach to achieving the aforementioned objectives: it allows the researcher to carry out an objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication pieces (Krippendorff, 1990), as well as the translation of the symbolic or qualitative material present in texts or manageable scientific data.

The research is based on the content analysis of the news about bullying published in the print and digital press. This analysis has been addressed from two points of view: first, the quantitative analysis of the news stories published between 2004 and June 2017. The study period begins with the suicide of 14-year-old Jokin Zeberio, in Fuenterrabía (Guipúzcoa), and concludes the suicide of Lucia (in

January 2017, in Murcia). The search has yielded a total of 8,356 news items, which were analysed to detect 222 news stories directly addressing the eight cases of teen suicide suspected (judicially verified or not) to be mainly caused by school bullying. The research has focused on the content of the headline due to its fundamental role to identify the approach of the news and for being the only news element read by a large number of consumers (Sánchez, 1990).

The field work consisted in verifying the evolution of the dissemination in the press of news stories related to school bullying. The main objective, beyond measuring the number of news stories published, is to verify whether the peaks in the dissemination of news coincide with each one of the eight suicides that took place during the study period, to be able to draw a clear conclusion on whether bullying has already become part of the media agenda or whether the publication of news stories is coupled with the occurrence of cases of extreme severity.

The selection of the sample of newspapers is not random. It includes the three most widely disseminated mainstream newspapers: *El País* (194,005 copies sold in 2016, according to OJD); *El Mundo* (108,386) and *Abc* (91,159). The second selection criterion is the coincidence between the circulation area of the newspaper and the place of occurrence of the event. *La Vanguardia* (114,960 copies) for the case of Alan (Barcelona); *La Verdad* (15,821), for Lucia (Murcia) and Cristina (Alicante); *El Comercio* (16,358), for Carla (Asturias); and *El Diario Vasco* (50,831) for Jokin (Guipúzcoa). *La Tribuna* of Ciudad Real has not been included due to its lack of digital library. Instead, we included *Diario Sur* as a point of comparison (15,993). Although none of the aforementioned suicides took place in Malaga, the latter newspaper will be used as an element of control of the results to determine whether these cases arouse the same interest outside their geographic scope.

Once the time frame and the sample were established, we searched in the digital search engines of the newspapers for the keyword “school harassment” and the following combinations: *acoso+escuela* (bullying+school) and *acoso+instituto* (bullying+school). One exception has been *El País*, which does not allow for advanced searches in its website. Instead, we used the Pegasus search engine, which documents the printed news that are digitalised. To compare the reporting in the media of the eight cases of suicide, we selected the national editions of *El País*, *El Mundo* and *Abc* and the most important newspaper in the region where the news event took place in order to measure the interest according to geographic area. The keywords used in this search are: school bullying, bullying, suicide, death, dies, minor and teenager.

The purpose-created content analysis coding sheet contains the following questions:

1. Does it use an informative headline?
2. Does it use a sensationalist headline?
3. Does it respect the presumption of innocence? In other words, does it use the words “presumed”, “alleged” or conditional mode when referring to the author(s)? or takes the alleged bullying for granted despite it has not been confirmed?
4. Does it place the focus on the victim?
5. Does it place the focus on the author(s)?
6. Does it place the focus on the observers (classmates, teachers, the principal or the institutions)?
7. Does it mention the word suicide? The use of the term is key to the future conclusions of the research, since suicide has always been a taboo subject for the media.
8. What terminology is used? (the Spanish or the English terms or none of them)

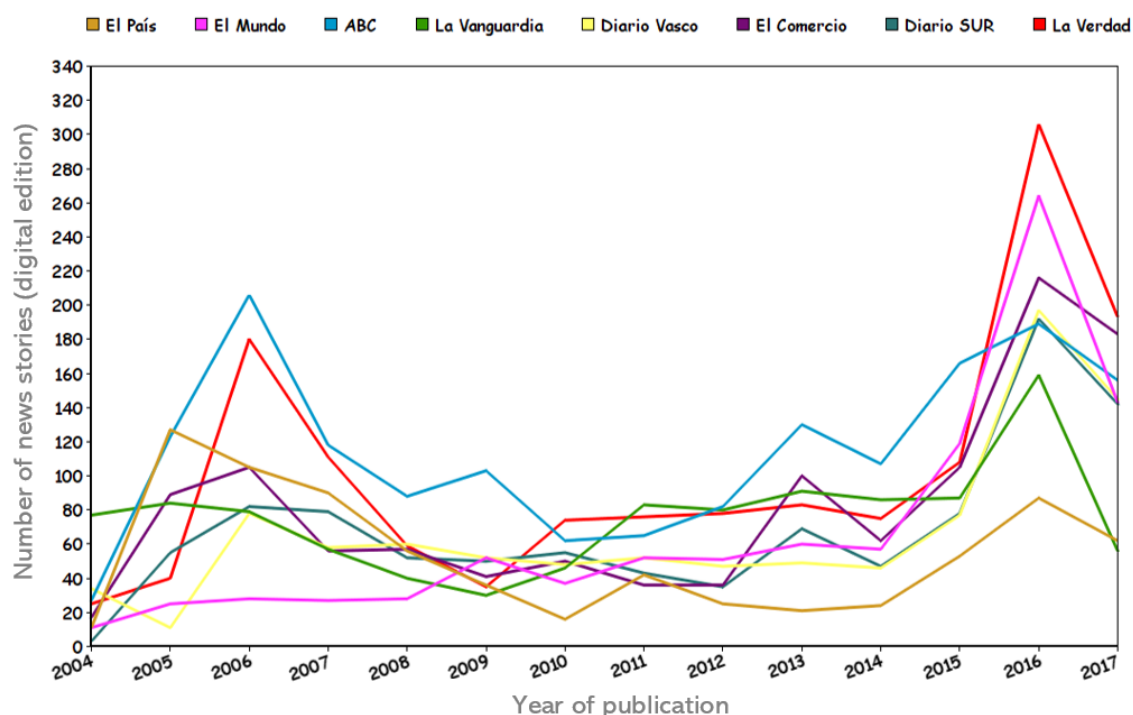


### 3. Results

The quantitative analysis has revealed the media's growing interest in the problem of school bullying. Overall, the distribution of the 8,421 news stories published in the eight newspapers during the 14-year period, between the suicides of Jokin and Lucia. The quantitative analysis did not only take into account the news about the eight suicides, but all the news which contained the word "bullying", which allows to observe the evolution and determine whether the dissemination of news is linked to the cases of teen suicide. The response, in view of the data analysed, is affirmative. After the suicide of Jokin, the number of bullying news went from 190 in 2004 to 797 in 2006. That is, in just two years the number of news about school bullying published in the eight media quadrupled.

Consequently, the curve shows a similar trend of dissemination in all media, with two peaks and a valley. There are no major differences at the quantitative level across the newspapers (all move around a thousand news stories, except for *El País*, whose result is conditioned by the search engine). However, the statistic does reflect a greater interest in the provincial newspapers where the suicides occurred: *La Verdad*, with 1,443, and *El Comercio*, with 1,153, are the ones that publish the largest number of news, in comparison to other local newspapers, like *SUR*, which serves as a control element in the study. This newspaper published 982 news in the same period, which puts it at the bottom in terms of dissemination. Despite this, it can be considered a high number considering that no suicide took place in its area of dissemination.

**Figure 1.** Newspapers' interest in school bullying news



The first one of the peaks in the dissemination obviously corresponds to Jokin's suicide. The second

one occurs in the last two and a half years, in which four teen suicides were recorded, as many as in the previous decade in Spain, which had a great media impact. The large quantitative leap in the publication of news coincides with the months after the suicide of Jokin and the subsequent coverage of the trial and administrative disciplinary proceedings against the bullies and the school. In addition, in 2005 another suspicious case occurred, the suicide of Cristina in Elda (Alicante), in which her parents denounced systematic bullying that was ignored by the Minors' Prosecuting Office and that, therefore, was never cleared up. The media dealt with the latter case with more cautious headlines (they investigate suspected bullying) as bullying had not been confirmed by the authorities, which led to a lower social and media impact.

**Table 1.** Publication news about bullying per year (specifying suicide case) and medium

	<i>El País</i>	<i>El Mundo</i>	<i>ABC</i>	<i>Sur</i>	<i>Diario Vasco</i>	<i>La Vanguardia</i>	<i>El Comercio</i>	<i>La Verdad</i>	<b>Total Year</b>
2004 Jokin	11	11	12	3	34	77	17	25	190
2005 Cristina	127	25	75	55	11	84	89	40	506
2006	105	28	140	82	78	79	105	180	797
2007	90	27	77	79	58	57	56	111	555
2008	56	28	43	52	60	40	57	59	395
2009	36	52	59	50	52	30	41	35	355
2010	16	37	30	55	48	46	50	74	356
2011	42	52	46	43	52	83	36	76	430
2012 Monica	25	51	58	35	47	80	36	78	410
2013 Carla	21	60	91	69	49	91	100	83	564
2014	24	57	71	47	46	86	62	75	468
2015 Arancha and Alan	53	119	143	78	77	87	105	108	770
2016 Diego	87	264	142	192	197	159	216	306	1563
2017 Lucia	62	143	138	142	145	56	183	193	1062
<b>Average total</b>	<b>755</b>	<b>954</b>	<b>1125</b>	<b>982</b>	<b>954</b>	<b>1055</b>	<b>1153</b>	<b>1443</b>	<b>8421</b>

After this event and until the next suspicious suicide in Spain, which occurs in 2012, the publication of news about school bullying decayed substantially, which would demonstrate the main research hypothesis (H1). The valley that occurs between 2007 and 2014 in the publication of news, more or less accentuated according to newspaper, shows that bullying is a secondary issue in the media agenda.

Dissemination data indicate that the media is interested in bullying only when it acquires its most tragic dimension through the victim's suicide, which contradicts the journalistic practice of not publishing these cases (H2). Data from the last years reinforces this argument, given that there has been an exponential increase in the number of news stories coinciding with the death of four teens. *La Verdad*, for example, published 306 news stories in 2016, an average of almost one per day, coinciding with the publication, that same year, of the report titled "I don't play this game", by the NGO Save the Children, which placed Murcia at the head of this problem in Spain. In fact, this is the medium that has published more news stories about bullying in the 14-year period (1,443).

These data support the third hypothesis (H3) that claims that the media interest in school bullying is coupled with the geographical location of the event (Lucia's suicide in Murcia in January 2017). This affirmation is also endorsed with the data of 2013 (Carla's suicide in Asturias), where *El Comercio* (100) and *ABC* (91) were the newspapers that published the largest number of news. Although a similar trend is observed in 2014 and 2015, the statistics are conditioned by the place of occurrence of the suicides of Arantxa and Diego, both in Madrid, which implies a significant increase in the dissemination of news in the national newspapers to the same level of the local newspapers, which also followed with interest these events despite the geographical distance.

The cases of Monica (Ciudad Real), Carla (Asturias) and Alan (Barcelona) did not arouse the same media interest as that of Jokin except in the provinces where each one of them took place. Monica's case was similar to that of Cristina: Justice was not served to their parents, which contributed to a smaller and superficial media coverage. Meanwhile, in Carla's case, the suspected bullies were prosecuted, so the case had a great impact in Asturias and in some national media. Alan's case was also a significant as it linked bullying to transsexuality, although its impact was linked to the medium that interviewed the mother (*El País*), while the interest of the rest of newspapers showed little or no interest in the case. Something similar happened in Diego's case in 2016, in which the exclusive was given to *El Mundo*, which published the handwritten letter he left before taking his life.

After Jokin, the next major quantitative peak in the number of published news occurred between 2015 and 2017, a period that registered four of the cases under study. The suicides of Arancha, Alan, Diego and Lucia became a call for attention to the collective consciousness about bullying and aroused the media and social interest in knowing what was happening at school. The emergence of news in the press increased by 90% in just five years and the media, in addition to reporting the events, adopted an editorial position and produced in-depth reports to try to understand this problem.

### 3.1. Reporting of suicide

This other phase of the research focused on the headlines to determine how the national and regional press addressed these eight cases of suicide. The first clear conclusion is that in the analysed news stories the informative approach predominates. This type of headline is present in 78.3% of the 222 texts analysed from the sample of nine newspapers. Even so, in almost half of the news stories, 49.5%, the headline is sensationalist, which seeks to cause a reaction in readers and orient their point of view.

Regarding the question of whether the news story respects the presumption of innocence, field work reveals that 32.9% of the headlines, summary leads and kickers analysed do not use the terms "suspected", "alleged" or the conditional mode, and instead use the terms stalker or bullies and refer



to bullying as a real event, when in most cases the case is under investigation and has not yet been verified by the police, educational or judicial authorities. In this sense, of the eight suicides that compose the study, in only four of them the perpetrators of bullying have been sanctioned with disciplinary measures by educational authorities (Arancha and Lucia) or convictions (Jokin and Carla).

That is to say, in the other four cases the alleged bullying could not be proven, the authorship was not determined or was ruled out by the investigators as a clear trigger for suicide, because there are other factors in the social and family environments that could have led the victims to take their life. Despite this, the field work indicates that some news stories, especially those published when the event was already known, take for granted that the suicide has been caused by bullying, without questioning whether it was true or not. Other texts, on the other hand, reflect the presumption of innocence (alleged bullying) in the headlines or speak of the case of bullying denounced by the family.

With regards to the use of presumption, we refer at all times to the news articles and not the media, since the analysis clearly shows that there is not a clear guideline in each newspaper on the treatment of these news, located between the chronicle of events and tribunals, social issues and the area of education of the newspapers. Thus, the treatment does not vary according to each medium, but according to each specific case. For example, in the case of Arancha, a 16-year-old girl who committed suicide on 22 May 2015 in Usera (Madrid), the presumption of innocence of the suspect (or the veracity of bullying) was only respected in 38.4% of the news analysed. The media reported from the outset that the victim suffered from a slight mental and motor disability, and did not question the school bullying that, according to her family, she had suffered. Although the police and judicial investigation later determined that the bullying was true, at that first moment it had not yet been verified. The same goes for the death of Lucia, the 13-year-old who committed suicide on 10 January 2017 in Murcia, where the use of the conditional mode and the terms “suspect” and “alleged” is only present in 39.1% of the headlines, when in this case the investigation is completely open.

On the contrary, in the case of Cristina, the 16-year-old who committed suicide in May 2005 in Alicante, the media respected the presumption of innocence in 80.5% of the cases, which is double that in the previous example. The difference could be partly due to the greater use the national newspapers make of news agencies when the event takes place outside of Madrid. Since they do not write the news stories, they tend to question bullying more. The case of Diego, the 11-year-old boy who took his life in Leganés (Madrid) on 14 October 2016, the newspapers showed more prudence than in other cases when dealing with the matter, respecting the presumption of innocence and truthfulness of bullying in 94.4% of the headlines examined, despite the news about the suicide clearly stated that he did not want to go to school.

The research has sought to elucidate the passive subject of the headlines chosen by newspapers to address news about bullying-related suicides. 75.2% of the news stories put the focus on the victim, who is identified with the first name and, in most cases, also with surnames in the body of the news; on his or her life, the forms of bullying he/she allegedly suffered and the circumstances that led to suicide. These are the aspects that capture the interest of the media, way more than the perpetrators of bullying, who are only mentioned in only 19.3% of the headlines, or the observers (colleagues, professors, institutions, etc.), which appear as the main focus in 7.6% of the news.

Finally, the analysis focused on the terminology used in headlines and found that 50.4% of them use

the word suicide, which contrasts with the journalistic practice of ignoring such cases due to fear of the so-called imitation effect (Werther effect).

The data obtained in the study indicate that in the cases of teen suicide the so-called serious press contributes to blurring the line that separates it from sensationalism. This is happening in general with the crime and police news section, which moves away from the standards of quality journalism, as noted by Redondo Garcia's study (2013) on the treatment of the McCann case, and other two studies (Galdón, 2001, and De Pablos and Mateos, 2004).

#### **4. Discussion and conclusions**

The research shows that bullying has been incorporated significantly into the media agenda, although not in a central way or qualitative or quantitative terms. While the news coverage of cases has multiplied by five over the past thirteen years, the detailed study of this growth shows that the media's interest is closely related to the most serious cases, those in which the victims of bullying commit suicide. This problem put in evidence serious weaknesses in the information newspapers offer and in the social responsibility that is expected from them. Thus, the non-existence of a coherent information policy, which involves in-depth monitoring of the problem beyond the specific event, does not allow the media to exercise their social function. There is therefore a need for more journalistic work that helps to victims of bullying make the right decisions, that spreads social awareness and makes it possible to form a public opinion that demands appropriate measures to combat a scourge that, at least, at the news media level, is still circumscribed to the victim's environment, as it happened in the past with gender violence.

The news about bullying that were offered by the newspapers often fall in sensationalism in the use of language and in the headlines, the disregard for the presumption of innocence (also understood as presumption of truth of bullying, i.e., take the accusation for granted when it has not yet been proven). On the one hand, the media have abandoned their traditional cautiousness around the possible Werther or imitation effect that news about teen suicide might cause, with the aggravation that the abandonment of this maxim is not always accompanied by good journalistic practice that allows news to have the needed preventive and deterrent character. On the contrary, the focus is placed on the victim, whose identity is almost always revealed, on the form of bullying he-she has suffered and, in many cases, on the method use to end his life.

Likewise, the analysis of the headlines shows a strong presence of sensationalist elements that seek to influence the reader, with an approach that does not always respect ethical or even legal principles, such as the aforementioned presumption of innocence. This sensationalist language used in many of the headlines analysed is especially aggressive when the news is presented as an exclusive, which suggests that the media treats lightly the emotional impact that the framing of the news can have in the reader, neglecting once again the awareness and prevention work.

As a positive aspect and despite these weaknesses, the media is paying increasing attention in general to the problem of school bullying. Although this interest is greater in the provinces where suicides have occurred, it transcends the geographical boundaries as it is already considered a social problem that is not linked to a specific geographic area, but to all children and the school environment as a whole.

Moreover, this increased reporting of bullying and its consequences has alerted many groups that are already fighting bullying in all its forms. The challenge is to seek a better preventive approach to the media through a more professional and rigorous treatment of bullying. Therefore, the next line of research that we propose is the in-depth content analysis of the news to identify the pre-agenda values and the conditioning factors of the media narrative and the degree of professional specialisation.

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