

# Transmedia Context and Twitter As Conditioning the Ecuadorian Government's Action. The Case of the "Guayaquil Emergency" During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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*Communication ecosystems have multiplexed and increased their capacity to act, distort, and fight. COVID-19 pandemic and the response of the Ecuadorian Government to it are clear examples of the power of media to erode, to influence, and also to produce fake news. In this context, Twitter has become more than just a social platform, as it helped spread catastrophic pictures of the country, especially of Guayaquil. This article analyzes the tweets posted by the main domestic and global media and by the Ecuadorian government accounts since the out-*

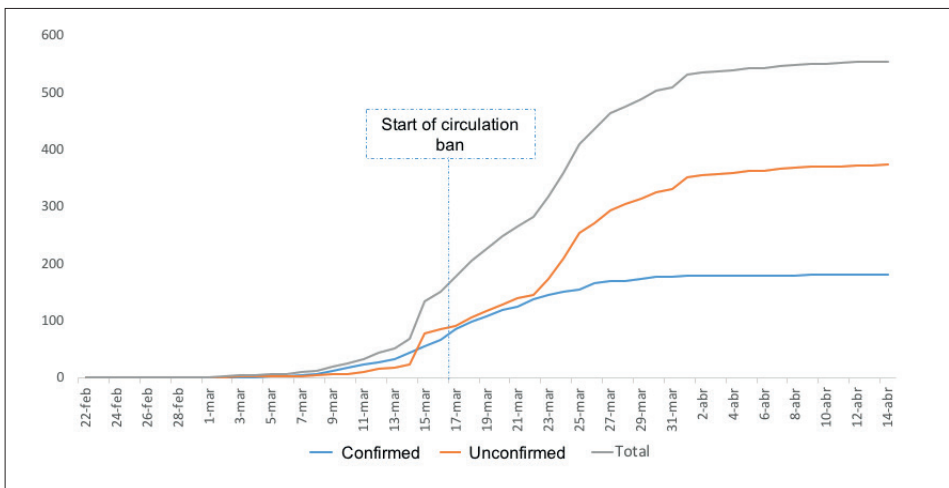
*break of the pandemic in Ecuador, as well as the interrelations among them and their polarity score. The aim is to show how the government changed its action plan by focusing on exogenous elements that had been excluded from its (pre)established strategy, which consisted in neglecting and deliberately minimizing a situation that turned out to be more serious than officially deemed and that was exposed by unofficial global media.*

**Keywords:** Twitter, social network, mass media, impact, COVID-19, Ecuador.

The first COVID-19 case in Ecuador was officially reported on February 29, 2020. Patient zero had arrived from Spain a few days earlier. The controversial response of the government to the crisis can be considered to have started the following day, when former Health Minister Catalina Andramuño held a press conference and disclosed that five more people might have been infected

with COVID-19. Only then did these people, who were patient zero's relatives, find out that they were infected. The Ministry of Health never reached out to them (AFP, 2020). From that moment onward, the disease started to spread all over Ecuador. By April 21, 2020, according to official figures, there were 10,398 people infected, 520 deaths and 1207 recovered cases in the country (Expreso, 2020). Since mid-March, Ecuador has been the South American country with the highest number of COVID-19 infections and deaths per capita. By April 2020, Guayaquil accounted for 68.4% of the cases, thus becoming the epicenter of the pandemic in the country (Millán, 2020). Graphic 1, "Official Deaths," shows the COVID-19 death toll, including both confirmed and unconfirmed cases (the latter developed symptoms compatible with COVID-19) in Guayaquil. In spite of the lockdown measures, the death rate has increased dramatically, which casts doubt on the strategies implemented and the resources earmarked for flattening the COVID-19 curve.

**Chart 1. Official Deaths in Guayaquil**



Source: Personal research.

The COVID-19 pandemic "Guayaquil Emergency" case was triggered by the end of March, when all sorts of Dantean pictures started to spread through Twitter and instant messaging apps like WhatsApp and Telegram: people begging to have the corpses of their relatives removed from their houses, corpses burning in the streets, shroud-covered corpses left on the sidewalk (YouTube, 2020a). These morbid scenes captured by witnesses became viral almost immediately after being picked up and published by both domestic and global media. The purpose of this study is to analyze how the stories in social platforms, especially Twitter, have influenced the main domestic and global media, which picked them up and turned them into actual news during Guayaquil's health crisis. This situation led to the reinforcement and legitimization of the information posted on social plat-

forms, thus expanding their role in shaping public opinion and imposing a new political and media agenda on the government, which was coaxed into adapting its discourse and actions in response to COVID-19.

Firstly, this article offers a heterodox reflection on the effects of the so-called transmedia technologies (Bertetti, 2014; Jansson, 2013) and the construction of transmedia narratives around Guayaquil's health crisis. Secondly, it focuses particularly on the effects of specific forms of "technopolitical action" (Caballero and Gravante, 2017; Milan and Gutiérrez, 2018) and on the setting of the media's agenda and its impact on the public actions carried out by Lenín Moreno's administration. Thirdly, the article includes a topic and semantic analysis of social network multimedia (Ahmed *et al.*, 2019; Kwon *et al.*, 2016; Drieger, 2013) to account for (a) the significant correlation and convergence (Hassler-Forest and Nicklas, 2015) between the "Guayaquil Emergency" denouncing tweets and the setting of domestic and global media agendas b) the influence of the Ecuadorian government on communication and political action through the plotting of a correlation with the main events in the timeline.

## TRANSMEDIA TECHNOLOGIES. BACKGROUND

The global development of the information society in the 90's and the implementation of information and communication technologies (ICT) in contemporary societies have unequivocally reshaped the relationship and boundaries between information and narrative forms. Journalism itself has changed by appropriating news stories and narratives that do not come *strictu sensu* from journalism but from economic or institutional sectors and from social and political activism through new media and communicative forms. It was in this context at the beginning of the century when the first studies on transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2003) emerged to show the shift from the Gramscian concept of consent to the concept of "cultural convergence" (Jenkins, 2014), which states that different elements of a narrative get dispersed across multiple delivery channels and create a unified and coordinated story. The theory of "transmedia storytelling" has gained enormous ground in the academic field leading to numerous studies, like cross-media or multi-platform journalism (Erdal, 2009), or multi-modality in discourse analysis (Baecchi *et al.*, 2016; Mayr, 2016; Casado, 2015; Philips, 2013).

Neira (2014), for instance, resorts to the multi-modal approach to analyze the transmedia mobilization of Chilean students, considered to be "useless" and "subversive", on social networks, and show how "students subvert and turn dominant representations in their favor through consecutive intertextual and re-contextualization practices". The contextualized transmedia mobilization framework is also used in studies on media practices during the Umbrella Movement; it rejects "a social media-centralist framework, and, rather, calls for an integrated approach to media, which facilitates a resurrection of the concept of media ecology" (Lin, 2017: 66). Other studies focus on hybrid media and tackle the issue of technological innovation (Kimmel, Kleiman, and Miller, 2015), the metamorphosis of political power (Chadwick, 2017) and the fac-

tors affecting hybrid communication practices (Louho, Kallioja, and Oittinen, 2006), like the strategies used for Trump's media campaign (Wells *et al.*, 2016). Currently, in social sciences, the transmedia approach is becoming increasingly relevant due to its role in sociopolitical activism as "transmedia testimonio", "in which activists give accounts of their immigration experiences, reveal their legal status, and document their participation in civil disobedience" (Zimmerman, 2016), or in racial and ethnic studies focused, among other things, "on how racial minorities are actively adapting, resisting, and challenging the practices of mainstream media in a convergence era" (Ramasubramanian, 2016). This approach, thus, is used as a "subversive tool" that crosses and connects multiple media narrative threads, genres, and forms, and undermines and overwrites corporate uses of the same term (Chen and Olivares, 2014: 246). The Guayaquil crisis is studied from the overarching approach of transmedia technology (Jansson, 2013) in order to highlight the diversity of transmedia narratives, the fact that stories may be told, and participants may be engaged in many different ways. Furthermore, we want to stress that the potential of the narrative itself (in terms of aesthetics, cognition, affection, and appreciation) strongly conditions the domestic and global media agendas. Actually, several studies have shown how transmedia storytelling has influenced journalism (Larrondo-Ureta, 2016) by introducing new ways of communicating information (Scolari, 2014) and exploring genres and interface designs (Serrano-Tellería, 2016), which leads to new ways of political communication (Moya, 2020), as can be seen in the construction of President Puigdemont's political discourse during the Catalan independence process (López-López, Romero-Ortega, and Ramos-Gil, 2018).

## TECHNOPOLITICS, SOCIAL NETWORKS AND MEDIA AGENDA SETTING

Continuity of meaning does not necessarily imply absence of conflict or neutrality in terms of communication. In order to avoid oversimplification, the transmedia technologies context must be narrowed down with the aid of technopolitics (Kahn and Kellner, 2007) to highlight that convergent processes of meaning are not linear but complex, and are composed of disputes and tensions, not only regarding meaning but also, and most importantly, regarding politics. The media's agendas are marked by processes of dispute, correlation and convergence among media groups, financial oligopolies, governments and international governance organizations (Weiss and Wilkinson, 2014). These are the processes that take place when the governments spread messages and counteracts exogenous attacks by the opposition, foreign governments, local opposing administrations or simply rival corporate media. In these technopolitical processes, the new technologies that feed themselves from big data exploitation have changed the dynamics of public attention. The relationship between the news approach of traditional media and social networks is not mechanical (Russell-Neuman *et al.*, 2014), but one rather specific to social net-

works, based on concepts like affection, that substantially influence and condition the public opinion.

## CONDITIONING INFLUENCES ON TWITTER

At present, there are new flexible communication tools with hardly any costs for participation and access. These tools contribute to the massive spread of messages and allow users to stay ahead of breaking news, refute them or spread them. They also allow for opinions to change within a short time span and for the implementation of specific strategies far from what is considered to be “correct”. The social impact generated by social networks is increasingly apparent (Murthy, 2018). Messages spread all over multiplexed networks, which amplify their dissemination and show their systemic coexistence (Boccaletti *et al.*, 2014). By using these networks intentionally, citizens, politicians, companies, communication agencies and perfectly designed algorithms amplify and disseminate messages with the purpose of having specific effects on public opinion (Boulianne, 2009; Kenski and Stroud, 2006). On Twitter, people (and bots) who post specific information have the capacity of convincing a great number of users before receiving confirmation from the original source or communication media (Hu *et al.*, 2012). Uncertainty and lies can be accepted as truths. That is the reason why Twitter has become such an essential and widely used tool (Parmelee and Bichard, 2011), which has been characterized as an informational medium rather than a social network (Kwak *et al.*, 2010).

Twitter has three features that facilitate communication: 1) mentions 2) retweets 3) hashtags, which allow for answers and online interaction at different levels to the point of holding a conversation (Lovejoy, Waters, and Saxton, 2012; Small, 2011). Mentions have a direct impact on the count of retweets and user retweeting behavior (Pramanik *et al.*, 2017). Also, retweet cascades influence tweet popularity and, consequently, the amplification of impact (Cheng *et al.*, 2014). Politicians can communicate with much of the population without the intervention of journalists, which explains why Twitter has become such a widely used platform both in political debates and daily communication (Gaumont, Panahi, and Chavalarias, 2018; Kruikemeier, 2014). Information, opinions and all kinds of actions (related to commerce, impact, and so on) are posted and, from that moment onward, become conditioning for other agents. For example, viral pictures showing corpses piling up in the streets during the “Guayaquil Emergency” had a strong influence capacity and played a key role in the media’s narrative. However, social network conglomerates should not be seen as representatives of a more egalitarian and democratic way of sharing information. On the contrary, in the field of algorithmic economics, an emphasis has been made on the marketing of data generated by users themselves at no cost (Pasquinelli, 2014). Data have become social platforms most valued asset, since they can be sold to the highest bidder, not always in an ethical manner or with peaceful purposes (Morozov, 2015). That is the reason why algorithms are not public and are subject to censorship (direct or indirect) enforced by Twitter itself; besides, there is no regulation forcing social platforms to show data transactions and

outsourcing, which on some occasions is carried out without consent, as the Cambridge Analytica<sup>1</sup> scandal has shown. The distortion of reality is introduced as a new weapon in political war. Everything can go viral on Twitter (Esser and Strömbäck, 2014; Hepp, 2012; Lundby, 2009). Journalists lead the spread of information and hashtags, organizing the political agenda and bypassing politicians, who find themselves forced to follow their example in order to boost their Twitter presence (Enli and Simonsen, 2018).

These processes influenced the political and economic crisis that Ecuador is facing during COVID-19 pandemic. According to Chomsky (2020), “the pattern of simply making one statement today, contradicting it tomorrow, coming out with something else the next day is really brilliant [...] you tell constant lies, what happens is the concept of truth just disappears”. Twitter is a clear example of impact through the number of followers, likes, and retweets, as well as other deeper features like the polarity score applied to words and chunks of text (Pandarachalil, Sendhilkumar, and Mahalakshmi, 2015; Esuli and Sebastiani, 2006). The sentiment involved in both what is said and what is omitted are also analyzed (Hriday *et al.*, 2015; Khan, Bashir, and Qamar, 2014).

## SEMANTIC NETWORK ANALYSIS AND AGENDA SETTING. THE CASE OF THE “GUAYAQUIL EMERGENCY”

A study on the Katrina catastrophe brought to the fore the importance of the network paradigm in disaster contexts as it sheds light on how crises cause change in social networks, and how those changes may or may not facilitate recovery, as a function of the kinds of changes that occur (Varda *et al.*, 2009). Murthy and Longwell (2013) analyzed the use of twitter during the 2010 Pakistan floods and examined whether users moved from traditional or social media sources to tweet/retweet links, thus highlighting the legitimization power of the latter. In disaster contexts, semantic analysis, under this network paradigm, shows high convergence rates between social media and traditional sources. The relationship between social media legitimization power and influence can be identified on two agenda setting levels for Twitter (Ceron, Curini, and Lacus, 2016). These levels may converge considerably in emergency contexts, when images become particularly harsh, sordid and spectacular, as was the case during the “Guayaquil Emergency”. Liu, Lai, and Xu (2018), for instance, used a semantic network analysis to explain tweeting patterns during the Hurricane Harvey and government strategy changes as a response to crisis, by comparing recurring topics over the disaster timeline. In the similar way, in the case of the “Guayaquil Emergency,” the aim is to identify, analyze and visualize the most influential social media

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1 5 keys to understanding the Cambridge Analytica scandal that caused Facebook to lose US \$ 37,000 million in one day. Source: BBC.com, 2020/03/21. <<https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-43472797>>.

topics and predicates, their adoption by media agendas, and their influence on the Government's communicative action.

## CONTEXTUALIZATION OF EVENTS

When the health emergency was officially declared on March 11, 2020, the first circulation restrictions were announced and massive events were banned (YouTube, 2020b). On March 15 borders were closed to foreigners and, on the next day, to Ecuadorians, and international flights were cancelled (*El Comercio*, 2020). The banning of inbound flights, coupled with only a small fleet of planes available for the repatriation of Ecuadorian citizens stranded abroad, has left a great number of people in a defenceless and vulnerable situation. At the same time, the few flights allowed by the government could not be considered to be humanitarian since tickets had to be paid, unlike what happened in many other countries. People who were repatriated and forced to spend 14 days in hotel quarantine had to pay the fees, which sometimes were above market value (*El Universo*, 2020b).

On March 17 the government announced night-time curfews from 9 p.m. to 5 a.m. with the purpose of completely restricting unjustified movement. Since the number of infected people and deaths kept increasing, the curfew was extended from 2 p.m. to 5 a.m. on March 24 (*El Comercio*, 2020). The inexperienced action of Ecuadorian authorities during the health emergency, as well as the lack of resources and the neglect of sick people with symptoms compatible with COVID-19 and people who were still living with their deceased relatives, became high impact international news. On March 19, during the first days of emergency, when inbound flights had already been restricted, Mayor of Guayaquil Cynthia Viteri decided to stop the landing of two repatriation flights from Europe by blocking the runway with cars and trucks. Both planes, from KLM and Iberia, carried only crew members. When faced with criticism, the mayor claimed that she would do it again "a thousand times" (EFE, 2020).

The Ecuadorian Public Prosecutor's Office started an investigation that has shown no results so far, which proves that the Prosecutor's Office is just an appendix of the Ecuadorian Government. In the midst of the crisis, Health Minister Catalina Andramuño resigned alleging lack of resources and budget (Rosero, 2020). This decision created a big scandal among Ecuadorian ministers. Minister of Economy Richard Martínez contradicted Andramuño's claims and stated that there were enough resources (Primicias, 2020). However, Andramuño's resignation sowed seeds of distrust in Ecuador's public opinion. It was also Martínez who informed on March 24, as the health emergency worsened, that Ecuador would cancel 2020 debt bonds for US\$ 325 millions (Tapia, 2020). The payment of the foreign debt was heavily criticized, since the lack of sanitary resources for the population and the health staff in the face of COVID-19 had become apparent by that time (Valencia, 2020).

By the end of March, Dantean images depicting Ecuador's reality started to spread all over social media: people begging to have corpses removed from their houses, corpses burning in the streets, shroud-covered corpses left on the



sidewalk, giant fridges used as mobile morgues (YouTube, 2020a). These morbid scenes captured by witnesses became viral almost immediately after being picked up and published by both domestic and global media outlets. On April 2, the Spanish newspaper *La Vanguardia*, voicing Ecuadorian newspaper *El Universo* stated that only in Guayaquil there were “almost 450 corpses on the waiting list to be collected from their houses” (Mur, 2020). These deaths were not included in the official COVID-19 deaths figure, and there were disparities in the way the data were published. Actually, *The New York Times* (2020) suggests that Ecuador’s death toll is 15 times higher than its official tally of coronavirus deaths and points out that “the true scale of the crisis has largely been obscured”. The extent to which the Ecuadorian authorities have been overwhelmed by Ecuador health emergency is directly proportional to their dismantling of the health system and their application of regressive public policies. In an exclusive interview, former Ombudsman Ramiro Rivadeneira expressed that the Ecuadorian 2008 Constitution states that “National state health expenditure be increased by not less than 0.5% of the GDP per year, until reaching at least 4.0% of the GDP”. By 2016, the last year of former Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa, 4.29% of the GDP was spent in the Health System (*Expansión*, 2017), compared to 2.78% in 2019 (*El Comercio*, 2019). These regressive policies, indeed, involved the lay-off of about 3,000 health workers in March 2019, one year before the pandemic (*El Universo*, 2019a), and the termination of the health agreement with Cuba, so that about 400 Cuban doctors were made to return to their country in November 2019 (*El Universo*, 2019b).

Not only were the authorities unable to assist the victims of the health emergency, but also they failed to correctly enforce social distance measures, despite the existence of a curfew for almost two thirds of the day (*El Universo*, 2020c). Such impotence resulted in abuses of various kinds by the military and police against people who violated the curfew (*El Universo*, 2020a). Remarkably, lockdown violations, especially in the most impoverished areas, are related to the lack of public policies for people in a precarious economic situation, based on daily subsistence. The high degrees of informality in the country bear witness to this. In Ecuador, only 38.8% of the economically active population has a formal employment, with figures worsening every year—in 2019 alone, over 115 thousand formal jobs were lost (Silva and Tapia, 2020)—. On top of it all, the current government led by President Lénin Moreno is leading a persecution towards anyone contrary to their wills, who are labelled as *Correaist* (in a clear allusion to the previous president of the Ecuadorian government) and repeatedly blamed, as a mantra, for all the evils in the country. Thus, in the midst of the pandemic, a campaign against the so-called “Correaist group” has been unleashed. In the first place, they are blamed for the disastrous economic situation, as President Lenin Moreno himself pointed out in his criticisms of his predecessor in his presidential broadcast on March 10 and April 20 (YouTube, 2020c, 2020d). In the second place, they are accused of leading a fake news campaign to destabilize the government (*El Telégrafo*, 2020).

Furthermore, the only courts proceeding that was not interrupted during the health emergency was the one that involved President Rafael Correa and other



government officials in the so-called “bribery case”, for which he was sentenced to eight years of prison. While the whole court system was closed (by presidential decree), one was surprisingly opened in Quito to sentence the former president. For days on, this mediatically distorting piece of news flooded the front pages and newscasts, inexplicably silencing the sanitary collapse of Ecuador, as well as the government’s disparagement of the COVID-19 WHO recommendations issued months before (Ayala, 2020).

### *Timeline Events*

The most relevant events in Ecuador during the COVID-19 pandemic are chronologically listed in Table 1, Timeline. Hallmarks include the dismissal of Cuban foreign aid, despite the fact that Ecuador health investment or number of doctors per thousand inhabitants is far below the ratio recommended by the WHO; the performance of a sexist, nurse-denigrating slurring COVID-19 cumbia at the Ambato Hospital; and a series of government decisions and contradictory informations which evince a social and mediatic mismanagement of the crisis.

**Table 1. Timeline**

Date	Event
March 6, 2019	Mass layoffs of health staff are reported in Ecuador.
November 12, 2019	The Medical and Scientific Health Cooperation agreement with Cuba, which involved the presence of a large number of Cuban doctors, is terminated, alleging substitution by local staff.
March 2, 2020	Ambato Public Hospital teaches precautions against coronavirus by means of a cumbia song. <sup>2</sup>
February 29, 2020	The “patient zero” is diagnosed with COVID-19.
March 10, 2020	Lenin Moreno’s nationwide broadcast, in which he accuses Correism of the economic situation in Ecuador.
March 11, 2020	Official declaration of sanitary emergency in Ecuador.
March 15, 2020	Ban on the entry of foreigners to Ecuador.
March 16, 2020	The entry of Ecuadorians by air into Ecuador is banned.
March 17, 2020	The nightly curfew begins, from 9 pm to 5 am.
March 19, 2020	The mayor of Guayaquil, Cynthia Viteri, blocks the city airport and prevents two planes from European companies from landing despite being empty and coming on a repatriation mission.
March 21, 2020	The Minister of Health, Catalina Andramuño, resigns.

<sup>2</sup> Cumbia at Ambato Hospital available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xlvID2tk8N8>>.

Date	Event
March 24, 2020	The curfew is extended from 2 pm to 5 am.
March 24, 2020	Payment of the principal on Ecuadorian bonds 2020 for 325 million dollars.
March 25, 2020	<i>Correaism</i> is accused of running a fake news campaign to destabilize the government.
March 30, 2020	Images of deceased people go viral, though neither authorities nor official media take heed.
April 2, 2020	Both domestic and global media assert that 450 corpses would be on waiting list to be retrieved from homes.
April 8, 2020	Former President Rafael Correa is sentenced to eight years in prison for the crime of aggravated bribery.
April 20, 2020	Lenin Moreno's nationwide broadcast in which he accuses Correaism of the economic situation in Ecuador.
April 23, 2020	The New York Times <sup>3</sup> suggests that the death toll in Ecuador is 15 times higher than the official record of COVID-19 victims.

Source: The authors.

## SOFTWARE TOOLS AND RESEARCH PHASES

### *Data Selection Criteria*

Sampling data were divided into three main groups: *a*) Government Accounts, *b*) Domestic Media Accounts, *c*) Global Media Accounts. The selection criteria for the first group included number of followers (greater than 100 thousand), hierarchical, decision-making position, and role in political communication. Domestic media accounts were chosen based on the number of followers (greater than 1.5 million), the territorial scope (nationwide) and the historical-symbolic importance of the media. Global media accounts were selected based on the number of followers (over 3 million), historical and symbolic importance, and constant coverage of the “Emergency in Guayaquil” case (at least 4 tweets in the indicated period).

### *Sampling Data*

Twitter accounts analysed for a month are listed in Table 2 Sampling data, Twitter accounts. The Twitter user is displayed along with the number of followers. Accounts are categorized as 1) Ecuador government agencies, 2) Domestic media, and 3) Global media (Luque and Herrero-García, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> The death toll in Ecuador during the outbreak is among the worst in the world. Information prepared by J. M. León Cabrera and A. Kurmanaev and published through *The New York Times* on 04/23/2020 <<https://www.nytimes.com/es/2020/04/23/espanol/america-latina/virus-ecuador-deaths.html>>.

**Table 2. Sampling data, Twitter accounts**

Government accounts	Followers	Domestic Media Accounts	Followers	Global Media Accounts	Followers
@lenin	964K	@ecuavisa	2.4M	@ActualidadRT	3.4M
@caanmichelena	42K	@elcomercio.com	1.6M	@bbcmundo	3.7M
@CataAndramuno	- <sup>4</sup>	@eluniverso.com	2.1M	@clarin.com	3M
@JorgeWated	23K	@teleamazonas.ec	2.1M	@CNNEE	18.5M
@DrJuanCZevallos	21K	@Expreso.ec	0.73K	@el_pais	7.5M
@mariapaularomo	262K	@lahoraecuador	0.55K	@elespectador	5.2M
@comunicacion.ec	406K			@elmundoes	3.6M
@ottosonnenh	348K			@EINacionalWeb	4.9M
@RichardM_A	71K			@ELTIEMPO	6.9M
@Risgos_Ec	564K			@globovision	4.9M
@Salud_Ec	416K			@LANACION	3.4M
@Vice_Ec	298K			@nbcnews	7.5M
				@NoticiasCaracol	8.6M
				@RevistaSemana	4.4M

Source: The authors.

***Extracting Data and Semantic Network Analysis***

By selecting the time span (03/14/2020 to 04/14/2020) and using the tool Vicinitas ([www.vicinitas.io](http://www.vicinitas.io)), an average of 3,200 tweets are extracted from each of the users in Table 2, together with the number of likes, retweets and mentions. Data are later downloaded and broken out into the three analysis groups, and collected in an Excel database.

Parsing and extraction of relevant information for the study was made with MAXQDA software, version 2020. The software was set up to collect tweets (word clusters) with new, condensed, or specific meanings related to the study topic. For this purpose, the following processes were performed:

- 1) Tweets containing the word Guayaquil were retrieved from the general sample through direct word and code-based search tools (1,975 tweets);
- 2) Retrieved tweets were reviewed and manually tagged, to select only those tweets with references to deceased, deaths, bodies, corpses, coffins, morgues or funeral services (411 tweets in this final selection);

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4 @CataAndramuno twitter account was suspended.

3) These selected tweets were extracted for quantification, date and source tagging, and determination of number of retweets. The resulting values were transposed into Excel to obtain Graphs 3 and 4;

4) In addition, cross-category concepts were identified and context-linked n-gram keywords were chosen (listed in the second section) (Schmidt, 2010),

5) An interactive word tree is checked for possible contextual distortions, in order to eliminate unclassified synonyms. This process evinced the complexity of finding univocal n-grams about “deaths in Guayaquil”, due to the syntax used, as well as the framing of each source. Most frequent 3-grams (based on the Spanish wording) included “COVID-19” (31 times), “cardboard coffin” (19 times), “deceased because of COVID” (21 times), “corpse in Guayaquil” (15 times), “the funeral system” or “collapsing funeral system” (13 tweets each).

These difficulties to obtain suitable n-grams warranted the manual tagging of the automatically extracted tweets. To minimize biases from the selection criteria, a single person was in charge of the tagging process. Tagging was then subject to a first round of review by the entire team of researchers, which shed more than 5% disparity, so that tagging parameters had to be readjusted. A second (virtual) round of review shed a less than 5% disparity, and the final result was the 411 selected tweets.

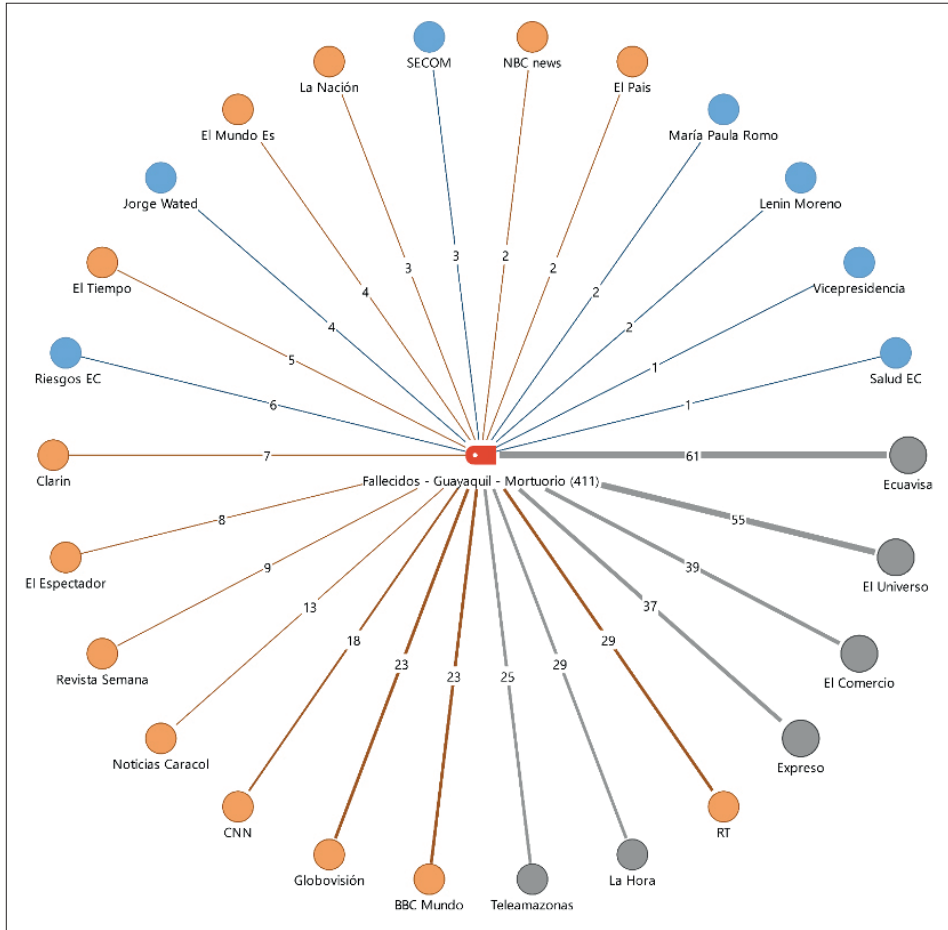
## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results highlight how global and domestic media paid the most attention to the “Guayaquil Emergency”, whereas political officials were the ones that least talked about it (see Chart 2, Triad).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Manual coding based on the presence of the word Guayaquil in association with references to death, corpse management, funeral services, and collection of bodies within one same tweet by city or country authorities in the analysed corpus.

Chart 2. Triad

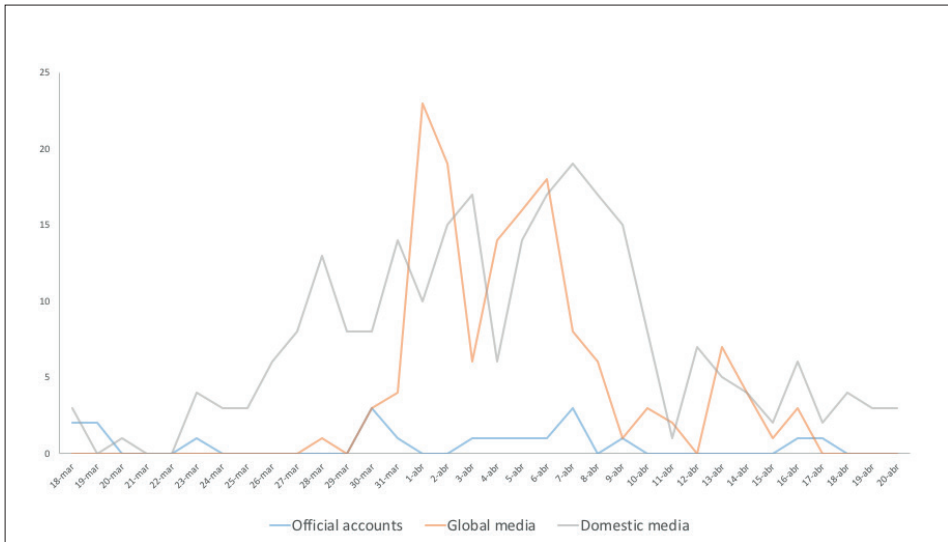


Source: The authors.

This analysis of the posted tweets shows that: *a)* the media converged with the trending Twitter stories to make the “Guayaquil Emergency” part of their agenda; *b)* the agenda stands on the harsh images in Twitter stories, so we can say that it was built through endogenously developed, highly distorting emotional processes; *c)* Ecuadorian politicians appeal to the phrase “Guayaquil Emergency” far less than other agents. This is because this disputed and conflicting subject exposes the government’s mismanagement and risks being spread well beyond Guayaquil, as much of the population in other provinces understands that their situation is not much better, whether or not it is shown in images as in Guayaquil. This is one of the hypotheses why officials tend to conceal the “Guayaquil Emergency” phrase. The number of tweets posted daily with the mentions

‘Guayaquil AND deceased’ during the period analysed is shown in Chart 3, Posting times. Until March 30, virtually only the domestic media reported the emergency. Between March 23 and March 29 tweets reporting corpses uncollected from homes by the authorities or reports of deceased not recorded in the official figures grow. The subject becomes so topicalised that by March 30 it becomes part of the domestic media agenda.

Chart 3. Posting times



Source: The authors.

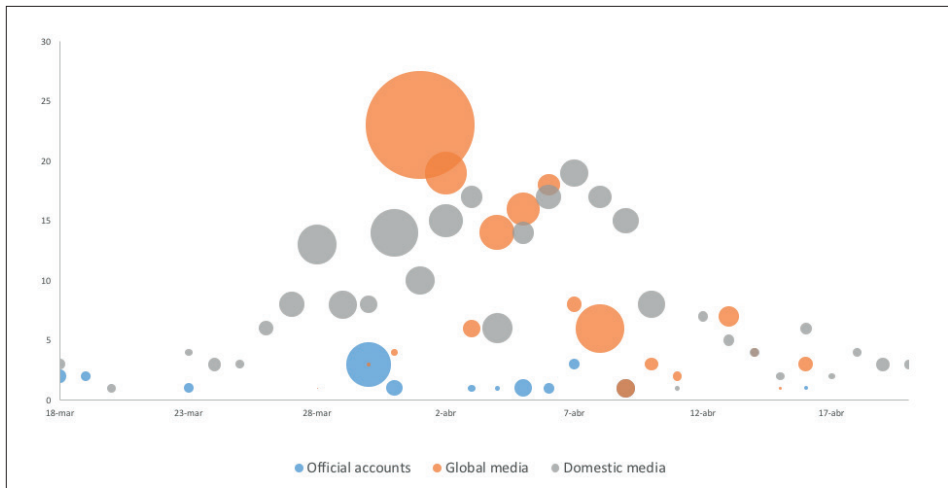
The uncertainty about the number of deaths, the overflow in the crematoriums and the digging of a mass grave in Guayaquil are topics that appear repeatedly in the domestic media. In response, on March 30th, the only two mentions by President Lenin Moreno related to the “Guayaquil Emergency” take place, in which he affirms that a decent burial will be given to the deceased. This is a tacit acknowledgement of the indignity of the events. The media proves to coax the government into acknowledging the need to provide an answer, which some actors will be doing, timidly though it may be, in the following days. However, the denounces continue to pile up in the domestic media. On March 31 and April 1, the “Guayaquil Emergency” erupts with great force in the global media due to the worldwide viralisation of the sordid images that have been on the domestic media agenda for a week and will remain in the global media unremittingly until April 6. April 7 is a turning point, as the intensity of the tweets by the media decreases, while the greatest government response since the start of the “Guayaquil Emergency” case appears.

One same tweet with the hashtag #BastaDeNoticiasFalsas (#StopFakeNews) accusing Correism for an alleged fake news campaign in the middle of the pan-



demics was posted from three different government-related accounts. Since the Twitter accounts denouncing Moreno’s misgovernment proved to be widely diversified, the government’s reaction was shown to be a sham. Faced with the impossibility of providing a solution to the “Guayaquil Emergency”, the government decided to look for a scapegoat to divert the public opinion. From April 8 to the end of April 20, “Guayaquil Emergency” continues to be part of the agenda of the media in Twitter, as they go on posting different stories around deaths in that city.

**Chart 4. Retweets**



Source: The authors.

Chart 4, Retweets, shows how tweets and retweets by the media, especially the global media as of April 1, had much greater an impact and dissemination than those by the Ecuadorian government. The Government’s response in the media, either responding to the “Guayaquil Emergency” case or trying to divert attention, was belittled and of limited scope.

## CONCLUSIONS

Through the “Guayaquil Emergency” case we have been able to witness the significant correlation between transmedia stories and images and Twitter transmedia posts. In domestic media, Twitter stories had a direct impact and were reproduced on the visual agenda verbatim, or rewritten as reports or new posts. The global media in some cases also reproduced the twitter stories, although they built their own reports in a somehow more autonomous manner. In both cases, we verified that the feedback between Twitter and transmedia stories converged

into a mutual legitimation and reinforcement of both discourses, creating common meanings around the “Guayaquil Emergency”. Similarly, hybridisation and convergence were found between news stories and transmedia storytelling. The impact of these practices has rapidly resulted in the degradation of the government’s communicative action. Neither trying to divert public opinion attention nor remaining silent have sufficed for the government to counteract elements that were exogenous to its logics, i.e., global media, and anonymous people who have witnessed the true reality of the tragic events in Guayaquil.

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