

## RESEARCH

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**INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS AND FAKE NEWS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC***Los profesionales de la información y las fake news durante la pandemia del covid-19*

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**ABSTRACT**

Since the new virus causing the disease called COVID-19 made headlines in Spain in December 2019, the population has been demanding more information. Faced with this situation, a great deal of false information spread and journalism had to live with it, even slipping into the media's own agendas. We start from these hypotheses: H1) With the arrival of news about COVID-19, the number of fake news items in the television media increased, H2) Access to information sources changed with the use of video call platforms, not used until now in a professional way for this task. Therefore, this paper studies the role played by communication professionals in this pandemic and the possible causes of the increase in fake news. The methodology has focused on random sampling among professionals working in television in Andalusia during this period. The technique used was a questionnaire via Google Docs, mixing closed and open questions relating to the professionals' access to information sources, the time available to check data, the volume of unchecked publications, or their possible causes, among others. Within the conclusions, it is worth noting the increase in the broadcasting of false or unverified news, the variety of causes that have led to this phenomenon, and the positive influence of video calls on access to information sources.

**KEYWORDS:** COVID-19 - fake news – journalism – disinformation – journalists - video calls - television.

## RESUMEN

Desde que en diciembre de 2019 comenzó a ser noticia en España el nuevo virus que provocaba la enfermedad denominada COVID-19, la población empezó a demandar más información. Ante esta situación, se expandió gran cantidad de informaciones falsas con las que el periodismo ha tenido que convivir, llegando incluso a colarse en las propias agendas mediáticas. Se parte de estas hipótesis: H1) Con la llegada de noticias sobre la COVID-19 aumentó el número de *fake news* en los medios televisivos, H2) El acceso a las fuentes de información cambió con el uso de plataformas de videollamada, no usadas hasta ahora de forma profesional para esta labor. Por tanto, en este trabajo se estudia qué papel han tenido los profesionales de la comunicación en esta pandemia y cuáles son las posibles causas del incremento de *fake news*. Para ello, se recogen los testimonios de periodistas, mediante muestreo aleatorio, que durante este periodo han trabajado en televisión desde Andalucía. La técnica utilizada ha sido el cuestionario a través de Google Docs, mezclando preguntas cerradas y abiertas relativas al acceso de los profesionales a las fuentes de información, los tiempos disponibles para contrastar datos, el volumen de publicaciones sin contrastar o sus posibles causas, entre otras. De las conclusiones destacan la constatación del aumento de la emisión de noticias falsas o sin contrastar, la variedad de causas que han motivado este fenómeno y la influencia positiva de las videollamadas para el acceso a las fuentes de información.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Covid-19 - noticias falsas – periodismo – desinformación – periodistas - videollamadas – televisión.

## OS PROFISSIONAIS DA INFORMAÇÃO E AS FAKE NEWS DURANTE A PANDEMIA DE COVID-19

## RESUMO

Desde que o novo vírus causador da doença denominado COVID-19 começou a ser notícia na Espanha em dezembro de 2019, a população passou a demandar mais informações. Diante dessa situação, espalhou-se grande quantidade de informações falsas com as quais o jornalismo teve que conviver, chegando até a entrar furtivamente nas pautas dos próprios meios de comunicação. Partimos das seguintes hipóteses: H1) Com a chegada das notícias sobre o COVID-19, aumentou o número de notícias falsas na mídia televisiva, H2) O acesso às fontes de informação mudou com o uso de plataformas de videochamada, até então não utilizadas profissionalmente para este trabalho. Portanto, este trabalho estuda qual papel os profissionais de comunicação têm desempenhado nesta pandemia e quais são as possíveis causas do aumento de notícias falsas. Para isso, são recolhidos os testemunhos de jornalistas, por amostragem aleatória, que durante este período trabalharam na televisão andaluza. A técnica utilizada tem sido o questionário por meio do Google Docs, mesclando questões fechadas e abertas sobre o acesso dos

profissionais às fontes de informação, os horários disponíveis para contrastar os dados, o volume de publicações não contratadas ou suas possíveis causas, entre outros. As conclusões incluem a verificação do aumento da difusão de notícias falsas ou não contratadas, a variedade de causas que têm motivado este fenômeno e a influência positiva das videochamadas no acesso às fontes de informação.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Covid-19 - notícias falsas - jornalismo - desinformação - jornalistas - videochamadas - televisão.

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

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In times of health crisis, interest in information and news increases (Westlund and Gheretti, 2015), a circumstance that may have influenced the increase in the volume of news published during the pandemic caused by COVID-19. In fact, of all the news published in Spain since January 9<sup>th</sup>, when there was already talk of the spread of a new virus, until April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020, 63.75% are information about it (Lázaro-Rodríguez and Herrera-Viedma, 2020). Citizens needed information and what the World Health Organization calls an "infodemic" (WHO, 2020), an overabundance of information on a specific issue, but without taking into account whether it is rigorous or not, has occurred. COVID-19 has unleashed the largest known source of rumors and misinformation (Larson, 2020). A situation that has led to an infoxication or information overload that prevents deepening on the issues (Niño-González, Barquero-Cabrero, and García-García, 2017).

For Salaverría (2018, p. 16), "in a few years, we have gone from looking for news to feeling overwhelmed by information". The Internet has changed how news is received and also the amount of news that reaches the public. Despite the existence of platforms to stop fake information through what is known as fact-checking, with platforms such as Maldita or Newtral (Vázquez-Herrero and Vizoso and López-García, 2019), it is really difficult to stop the number of hoaxes that arrive to the receivers. The democratization of disinformation is already a reality, anyone can create false information that, apparently, can be credible and spread it at high speed without assuming responsibilities on the part of those who spread it, having to rectify sometimes but always after the damage is done (Kim and Moravec and Dennis, 2017).

Faced with this increase in information, journalism professionals play a key role in correcting the existing disinformation since fake news has come to sneak into the agendas of traditional media during the pandemic (Román, Sánchez, and Elías, 2020). One of the ways to alleviate these situations is by prioritizing quality information, understanding it also as truthful information, which allows citizens to have a formed and, therefore, critical opinion, which is one of the main objectives of journalism (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2007). Therefore, it is necessary for citizens to have access to information (Habermas, 2006) but not to any type of information. Journalists will be able to alleviate these hoaxes if they can filter the truthful information and make

resources of proven quality available to the population (Aleixandre-Benavent, Castelló-Cogollos, and Valderrama-Zurián, 2020). A difficult task in other areas such as social networks or apps such as WhatsApp, although these same platforms can contribute to the contrast of information through verification systems (Bernal-Triviño and Clares-Gavilán, 2019).

We cannot think of the phenomenon of fake news as something new but, rather, it has been studied for years (Parra and Oliveira, 2018, Blanco-Herrero and Arcila-Calderón, 2019) since it seriously affects information by falsifying reality that citizens receive through different channels, especially social networks (Silverio, 2018, and Shu et al., 2017). In this context, television plays a fundamental role. Television was the medium most used by Spaniards to find out about the coronavirus, according to the data published by the website statista.com (2020). This medium was used by 85% of the population; the press, for its part, was only chosen by 54% of the people who wanted to know about the situation and 53% of the public turned to official sources. Interestingly, only 38% of those who got informed about the virus did so through social media. And it is that, when complex situations occur or that the population considers relevant, television is the favorite of the Spaniards, as was also reflected by the CIS data at the 25<sup>th</sup> UN conference on climate change (CIS, 2020).

Recent studies on the pandemic reach the same conclusion. Thus, Masip, Aran-Ramspott, Ruiz-Caballero, Suau, Almenar, and Puertas Graell (2020), although affirm that the digital media were the ones mostly chosen as the first option by the population for information and, after them, television news (38.9% and 33.9% respectively), consider that, if the percentages of people who chose each of the media as the first, second, and third option are added, Spaniards preferred television. Conclusions similar to those obtained in a study on communication management during the COVID-19 pandemic in Spain carried out by Moreno, Fuentes-Lara, and Navarro (2020).

### **1.1. The role of information professionals.**

Social networks have come to revolutionize how information professionals work. If the Internet came to break with the monopoly that the media had in the dissemination of information (Casero-Ripollés and López-Meri, 2015), social networks, their incidence, and proliferation have caused journalistic malpractice in many cases, using news directly invented, headlines that lead to confusion, news that make no sense, and other techniques to achieve the long-awaited virality and increase the number of visits and traffic in digital media. Therefore, there has been an increase in fake news and practices such as clickbait, which consists of publishing hook headlines that are untrue and violate the values of journalism, eliminating the informational priority and raising the economic one; all this to achieve an audience in digital media (López-Borrull, Vives-Gràcia, and Badell, 2018; Bazaco, Redondo, and Sánchez-García, 2019; Molyneux and Coddington, 2019; Zannettou et al. 2019).

If, as López-Borrull, Vives-Gràcia, and Badell affirm, "fake news has come to stay" (2018, p. 1,354), information professionals will have to work on user training and

validation of the sources, and at times like the one the world is experiencing today, journalists will have to make an even greater effort to curb this trend.

The importance of journalism in times of crisis, and the pandemic is a crisis, is fundamental. In fact, organizations that have so much to say on matters of this magnitude, such as the World Health Organization (WHO), have shown their concern about disinformation regarding COVID-19. In this sense, the WHO published a policy brief called 'Disinfodemic'. Deciphering the disinformation about COVID-19 'written by the Global Research Director of the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ), Julie Posetti, and Professor Kalina Bontcheva, member of the Center for Media Freedom, hereinafter ICFJ, (2020). In this report, the authors differentiate between what is called disinformation or 'disinfodemic', for example, "the production of content promising false treatments to achieve private profits" (p.2), and erroneous information or misinformation, which occurs when false information is unconsciously shared, thinking it is true, with the real intention of helping.

The importance of stopping misinformation has reached such a point that the ICFJ launched the World Reporting Forum on the Global Health Crisis which includes "an interactive and multilingual center for thousands of journalists around the world to support ethical and informed reporting through direct access to reliable sources of scientific and medical expertise; facilitate knowledge sharing and collaborative verification/demystification regarding COVID-19" (Posetti and Bontcheva, 2020, p. 13). Furthermore, efforts have been made by various organizations for the media literacy of different groups, including journalists: translations by UNESCO into different languages of its manual 'Journalism, Fake news, and disinformation' through crowdsourcing; FistDraft created a page with a 'verified database' where you can find a list of reliable sources on the pandemic; educational webinars with reports on this topic and guides to help verify and disprove information about COVID-19; a "curated list of COVID-19 reporting resources, tools, tips, and sources, including a fact-checking collection" created by the African Center for Media Excellence (ACME); among others (Posetti and Bontcheva, 2020, p. 13).

The dangers of disinformation during the pandemic have been taken so seriously by different international organizations that an open online course (MOOC) was organized on May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020 entitled: "Journalism in the pandemic: Covering COVID-19 now and in the future". The course was organized by UNESCO, the World Health Organization (WHO), and the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas at the University of Texas. In it, different information professionals debated and reflected on the importance of verifying all the information that was being produced about the pandemic and how to cover this event of global repercussion in a more professional way.

## 2. OBJECTIVES

This research is based on the main hypothesis that, with the arrival of news about COVID-19, the number of fake news disseminated by communication professionals

working on television in Andalusia increased, and aims to study its possible causes. A second hypothesis that is also raised maintains that access to information sources changed due to health circumstances, forcing the media to make use of video calling platforms, until now not routinely used professionally for informational work.

Thus, the main objective of this work lies in knowing the opinion of television media professionals working in Andalusia about their working conditions in 2020 marked by the pandemic, before, during, and after confinement, and how they believe that the situation affected the proliferation of fake news during this period.

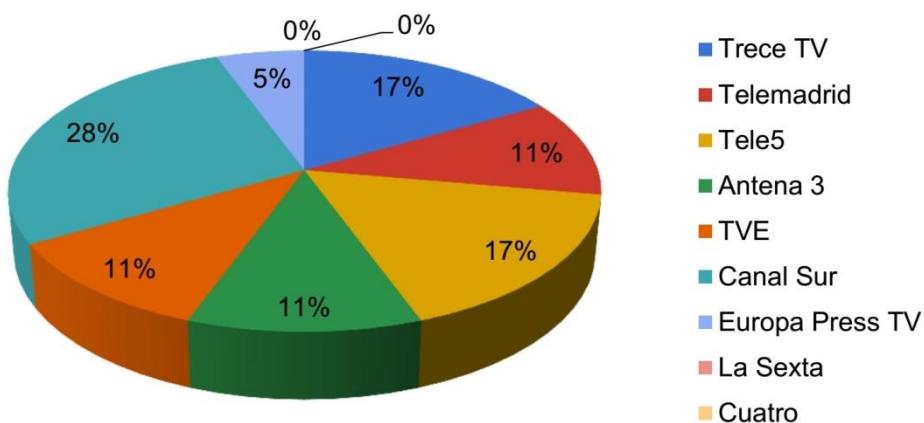
### 3. METHODOLOGY

To achieve this objective, a questionnaire with random sampling has been used through a Google Docs form, in which closed questions have been mixed with other open ones, sent to television journalists who work in different media outlets in Andalusia: Canal Sur Televisión, Televisión Española, Telecinco, Antena 3, Cuatro, La Sexta, Europa Press Televisión, and EFE Televisión. These professionals have been asked to disseminate it among their contacts within the union and journalists from Telemadrid or Trece TV, from the communication group Veo Tv, have also joined.

### 4. RESULTS

18 professionals who work in television in Andalusia have participated in this research. 72.2% of those surveyed are women compared to 27.8% who are men.

The television channel most represented in this study, through the testimony of its workers, is the Andalusian public regional television, Canal Sur Televisión, with 28%. Of the rest of the channels, the representation is more or less equal, except for Europa Press Tv with a very low representation, and La Sexta and Cuatro, from which no responses were obtained.



**Figure 1.** Media in which respondents work.

**Source:** Own elaboration.

The requirements that were requested to participate in this research are that the respondents were journalists who worked for a television channel in Andalusia and who had been active during the pandemic caused by the coronavirus. A relevant fact is that in a country where a State of Alarm was decreed, which caused only workers in services considered essential to continue exercising, 94.4% of those questioned said that they did not stop working even during mandatory confinement.

Indeed, the executive determined from the outset that the media "are an essential service, without distinction," (García, 2020). And what consequences has it had for these professionals to continue working under the conditions imposed by the pandemic? According to those surveyed, the first modifications had to do with the workplace. Many of them began to carry out the functions that they did before the pandemic in writing through teleworking: "We stopped going to the office, we had to telework and adapt our own home to the needs of work. Working with young children at home is not easy", they explain. These changes can be considered more general and not specific to journalistic work, however, others are.

Working during confinement also meant more exposure to be infected during the workday. "The problem was constant exposure, having to continue working, sometimes with little security," they explain. However, they assure that there was a time when face-to-face interviews were eliminated to avoid closeness with other people, and the use of pole microphones was normalized, which allow you not to have to approach the interviewees. And not only that. Some companies took measures to face the exposure of journalists when carrying out their work: "The company I work for, for example, decided to double equipment so that we would be less exposed on the street. My colleagues and I go to work three days a week."

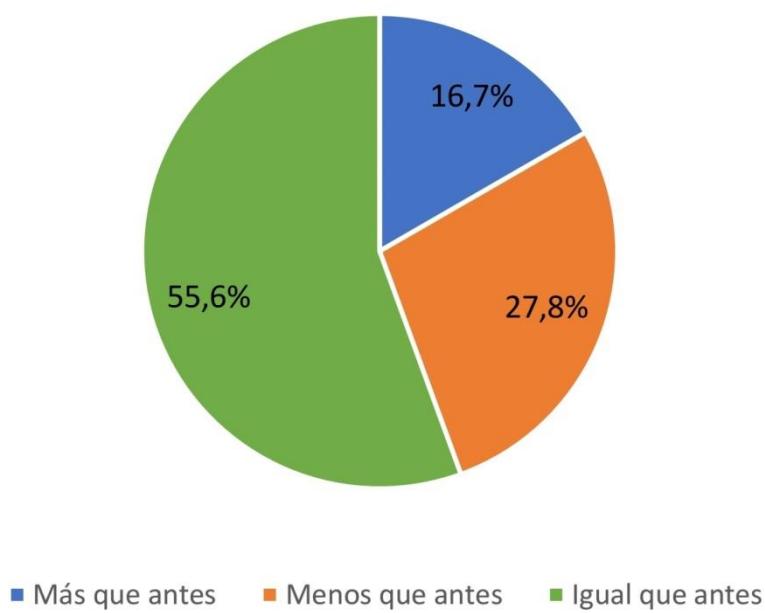
Technical and staff changes were established but they were not the only ones. The journalists state that there were also modifications regarding the content. There was more work, more television hours were filled, but there were fewer acts, fewer scheduled events, the fixed coverage was reduced, so a positive side that stands out is that creativity increased. "As there were fewer agendas and calls, it was necessary to 'look for life' to get through the days." They refer to looking for novel topics and technical means not used before to be able to fill the script rundowns and dayparting. "When it came to reporting, it was necessary to innovate to get the job done. A job, above all, supported by video calls but also by videos that the protagonists themselves recorded".

#### **4.1. Information sources**

For journalists, it is essential in their work to access the appropriate sources of information since this will determine the result of their work and, at the same time, the social function they fulfill (Sánchez-Gey, 2021).

However, in the development of the journalistic function during the pandemic caused by COVID-19, 55.6% of the professionals participating in this research state that they had the same sources as before and only 27.8% say that the number of

sources was diminished. Therefore, 72.3% of those surveyed consider that the sources have either been maintained or have increased.



**Figure 2.** Comparison of the number of sources they could consult compared to before the pandemic.

**Source:** Own elaboration.

Journalists affirm that the use of new technological means -especially the new online video calling platforms- has been essential for this circumstance, that is, the non-reduction of information sources, to occur. Tools such as Skype, Zoom, WhatsApp, or other similar ones have meant that, although contact between journalists and sources was limited on a day-to-day basis, this deficiency was not noticed in the performance of their work. This is confirmed by the fact that 94.4% of those surveyed said that video calls helped to make more sources of information available.

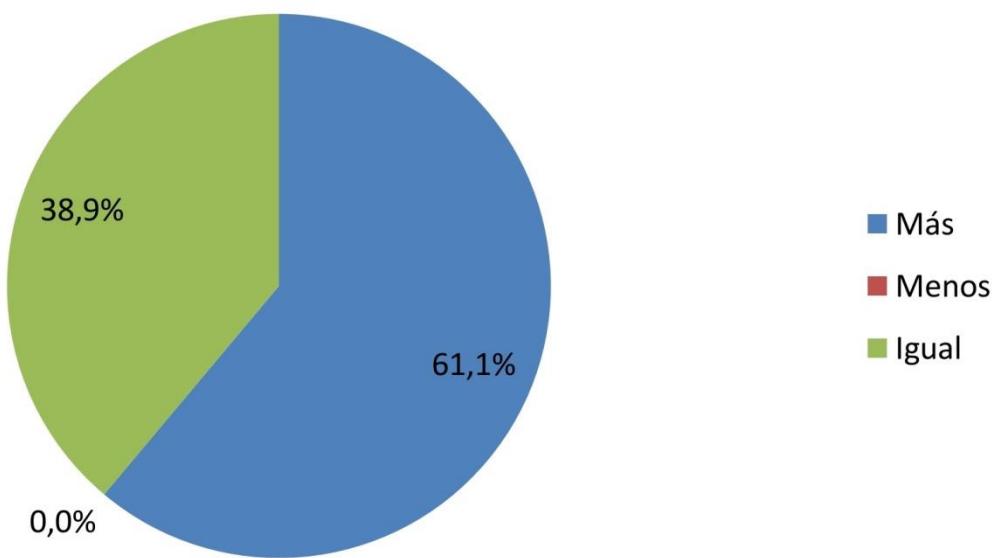
However, among those who consider that there have been fewer sources than before the pandemic, we find this testimony: "From the point of view of the communicator, it is being more difficult to contrast, many sources excuse themselves in the pandemic for not offering the required information. An example, information on the health situation only comes from official sources and can hardly be contrasted. Therefore, you have to trust that there are no interests behind this data", they conclude. They also assure that they received contradictory information from the administrations, which may have also facilitated the spread of some hoaxes. "From my point of view, the pandemic has been able to change the way of working, but never the purpose; report rigorously and objectively".

#### **4.2. The development of fake news during the pandemic**

It is a reality that COVID-19 has unleashed the largest known source of rumors and disinformation (Larson, 2020). But professionals who practice journalism have a very

specific vision of this fact. When asked if they published data that later turned out to be fake or was denied, 83.3% of those surveyed said that they did not, however, it is important to refer to the 11.1% who do not want to answer this question.

However, when asked if they consider that more fake or poorly verified information has aroused during the pandemic than at other times, up to 61.1% state that more has aroused, something that would contrast with the previous answer.



**Figure 3.** Answers on whether more fake or poorly verified news was published.  
Source: Own elaboration.

Regarding the reasons that they consider as causes of this increase in hoaxes or fake news, they state that it is a trend typical of moments of uncertainty. They claim that one of the problems is the increase in information, the 'infodemic', which occurs in this type of crisis: "There was too much information and little time to process it," they say. Speed is another of the arguments that journalists usually use as one of the worst problems in journalism today for achieving the necessary journalistic quality (Sánchez-Gey, 2019). "One of the reasons is in the lack of information, especially at the beginning. The speed at which everything happened also influences, there was almost no time for what you always have to do, contrast."

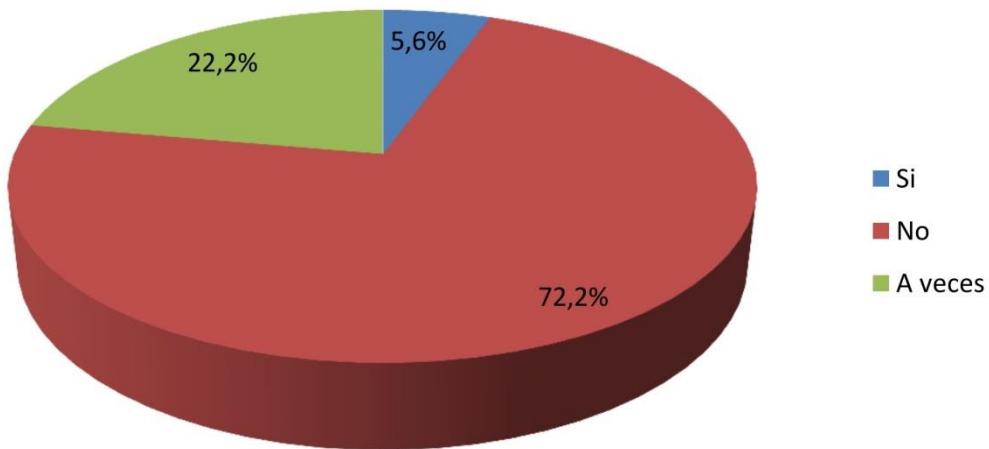
Respondents also link social networks with this increase in fake information: "Social networks have played a decisive role. There was more information on social networks, and this coupled with fear and, at the same time, ignorance of a totally new situation caused the increase in these hoaxes". The lack of knowledge about everything that was happening and, specifically, about the new virus is also mentioned here.

Professionals point to another factor concerning fake news during the pandemic, political motivation. "Lobbyists are taking advantage of this exceptional situation to

sow their seeds and make a profit. The population has needed more than ever to be informed and that is why they use the media", they explain.

However, some defend that, despite this increase, professionals had tools to avoid falling into fake news: "I believe and I want to think that we all try to give verified information before and during confinement. I think the information has been the same, it still depends on the quality of the professional who gives it and the autonomy and rigor of the environment where they work".

This most idyllic response of journalism as a support for the social function that defends the right contained in article 20 of the Spanish Constitution (1978) to give and receive truthful information through the media, is confirmed by the fact that 72.2% assure that mass media outlets do not consciously include fake news. But, taking into account professional ethics, the fact that one person has answered that they do introduce hoaxes knowing that they are hoaxes, is totally reprehensible.



**Figure 4.** Answers on whether media outlets knowingly publish fake news.

**Source:** Own elaboration.

Fortunately, a large majority consider that hoaxes are not included knowingly, but 22.2% say that sometimes fake news is told, with professionals being aware of it. The reasons that they use for this practice are varied, on the one hand, they allude to the editorial line, another motivation is found in political ideals, using the media as a loudspeaker for false information to gather supporters for a specific party: "They want to tell your audience what they want to hear, even if it is false. " But they go further. They maintain that it is a more sophisticated process than the simple fact of introducing a hoax that circulates on the Internet in the media's agenda: "it is not entirely false news, but rather the information is offered in a biased way, omitting the data that is not of interest or exaggerating others. Mainly because there is direct political pressure on the media, also the group's shareholder companies, advertisers..." Several of those questioned maintain that political control and politicization of the media have been blatant during the pandemic. Something that

several authors point out from the point of view of the political economy of information:

If the media hide negative issues about their own tasks from us, that means that they have assumed the fact of putting themselves at the service of non-professional criteria, that they will do the same with negative news or information referring to the governments or politicians they trust, and that they will magnify the scandals of their enemies. (Serrano, 2010, p.20 and 21)

Reig and Labio (2017, p.43) reach the same conclusion by stating that "the communication companies themselves are directly or indirectly related to others that have multiple interests based on what we call 'connecting doors', a term that we coined in a newspaper article to explain a step higher than what are known as revolving doors".

However, the respondents defend themselves: "Despite the manipulation of certain information by large groups, I can assure you that the integrity, values, and responsibility of the majority of the street informants remain intact. To this day, I can continue to sleep peacefully because I have never felt obliged to tell something that is not true and I have managed to "throw" issues from the script rundowns that did not fit reality", they explain proudly.

Finally, we find the idealistic position of "I want to believe that they do not" or "I have faith that they do not", together with the position that states that if a media outlet consciously includes fake information, it should be sanctioned for it.

Furthermore, when asked about the specific media outlet in which they work as journalists, the answers are more corporatist or more evasive. From the one who denies that they occur in their media outlet, those who say that they prefer not to answer that question (having answered the others) but also those who give concrete examples because they are aware that it is a trend that currently occurs in the media outlets, even the most traditional (Román-San Miguel, Sánchez-Gey, and Elías, 2020). "When the Government approved the last anti-eviction law, in the media outlet in which I work, it was ignored, or hardly mentioned, that evictions are prohibited unless the owner had more than ten properties. A fundamental piece of information to understand that behind this eviction there is not an ordinary citizen embittered by an *okupa*, but a vulture fund or a bank without housing problems". It is not the only example given by those surveyed: "Much emphasis was also placed on the gap between the data on deaths from coronavirus provided by the Government and other sources, it seems to me that it is good to tell it but not to show it constantly as if the executive was hiding reality from us. The political and economic interests of communication groups are no secret".

#### **4.3. The role of journalists in the face of COVID-19**

77.8% of the information professionals who have participated in this research work consider that journalism has been and is fundamental, crucial, indispensable, at

present. After being asked about the role of the media during this pandemic, respondents say they have informed, accompanied, and entertained. They consider that the role of the media is "the same as always. Report current events. Bad news is always news and during lockdown and pandemic more than ever, unfortunately", they explain. Becoming essential: "for most people, this was the only window to reality and the exceptional situation that was being experienced."

They also include the role of the media as opinion generators. "Journalism, information, helps to create opinion, that is why it is necessary to contrast, read various media with or without the pandemic, it is essential to be informed. And at this moment, society demanded information about what was happening and if it had not been informed, the disinformation would be alarming."

Furthermore, they do not forget to point out the public service function that the Spanish Constitution (1978) entrusts to the media: "They have had an important educational role for the population. All possible forms of transmission, prevention, types of tests, economic effects, health situation, type of vaccines... This photograph provided by the media has made it easier for the population to better fit all restrictive measures. Without this daily information on the infected or the deceased, for example, the seriousness would not have been understood and there would have been many more irresponsible attitudes". A task as well as a lot of responsibility. "The classic functions have been fulfilled and that of guiding people to know how to deal with the day to day, informing the population almost minute by minute."

In the same way, professionals highlight the pedagogical role played by the media in this period: "they have not only served to shed light on what was happening while everybody was locked up within four walls, but they have also had a very important didactic role." Thanks to this, citizens were able to know the restrictive measures, when they came into force, the number of cases, the situation of the hospitals..." People usually do not read the BOE or consult the PDFs posted by the Ministries on their websites or know the reality of what is happening beyond their neighborhood. It has been the media that have 'translated' the data, they have crushed the measures of responsibility, they have shown them the seriousness of the situation around the world, they have shown the reality of many families, the difficulties of so many sectors".

However, they recognize that there has also been a saturation of information until people's boredom.

Likewise, some are more critical considering that the role of the media has been reduced since they assure that it has been totally politicized "as a mere transmitter." "The audience, the population, have lived through this health crisis locked up at home, glued to the television to find out about any news. I believe that journalism, and specifically television, has played a fundamental role in transferring in real-time the decisions of our leaders and the situation that has occurred in hospitals and has

also been a driving force in raising awareness so that society was aware of the reality that was lived in Spain and the world".

For this reason, they assure that the role of the media and the professionals who work in them has been very important, although perhaps it could be improved, qualifying that, despite the importance they consider their work to have, society does not value it. "Our journalistic work has had little value. I am not saying that we have been superheroes like the health professionals, but we were where the news was despite the risk of getting infected", they say. "Mistakes have been made, yes, but in part, I want to think that it is due to the speed at which everything has happened."

On the other hand, the questioned professionals have analyzed their individual, concrete role as journalists. "My role has not changed. No matter how much an environment changes, the role of the journalist continues to be to report rigorously and truthfully, and I have tried to do so. I have always tried to contrast a lot what the official data said because on many occasions they were out of date and when they were given to us, they no longer corresponded to reality at that time".

They have also highlighted the change they have had to face in the way of telling what was happening due to the special characteristics of this pandemic. "I have tried to look for testimonies of the new reality that we were living. Stories that have marked these months: overwhelmed healthcare professionals, separated families, lonely grandparents... The new protagonists of a situation, until now, new for everyone". That is to say, putting a face to the data: "Finding examples of people who have had to close their businesses, people who have lost a family member, families who have to turn to charity to live... In that sense, I have felt satisfied because I believe that it is essential to give a voice to those who need it, without falling into sensationalism". However, they conclude that: "I would have liked to be able to better tell the saturation of health and deaths, but access was impossible due to the circumstances."

Within this function, they do confess that at some moments (especially at the beginning) it was considered that the approach should be positive and reassuring, "giving guidelines especially to elderly people on how they should act in each scenario that was being presented to them during the pandemic". However, without incurring in distorting the information about what was happening: "I have tried to report honestly, trying not to fall into the alarmism that is sometimes observed. I have told the bad because there it is, but also the good and the positive data when we have had it. So, entertainment and the search for happy topics has been another of the great challenges during these months of the health crisis."

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This research was based on the main hypothesis that, with the arrival of news about COVID-19, the number of fake news broadcasted on television media outlets

increased. In light of the presented results, we can affirm that this statement is contrasted based on the opinion of the consulted professionals who carry out their work in Andalusia. Regarding the causes of this phenomenon, the results highlight a set of varied reasons whose influence is distributed in similar proportions, where the lack of information provided by public institutions (especially at the beginning of the State of alarm), the uncertainty and ignorance in the face of an unknown situation, the excess of information that circulated through social networks, the lack of time given to journalists to contrast the information received, or political interests are highlighted.

The second hypothesis that was also raised argued that, due to the exceptional health circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, there was a change in access to information sources since the traditional physical contact of the interviews carried out on-site, on numerous occasions gave way to the use of video calling platforms, used only very exceptionally for information purposes up to now. Regarding this aspect, the results of the research also confirm this hypothesis since the surveyed professionals affirmed that they suffered this change in their media outlets. Furthermore, we can highlight that a large majority of the professionals who responded to the questionnaire (72.3%) considered that their access to sources was not negatively affected in this period but that it remained the same or even increased their chances of collecting information from the protagonists about the current situation of the pandemic. Almost unanimously (all but one), the results show that the use of such video calls provided greater ease of accessing interviews in exchange for sacrificing physical presence at the news site.

We can also point out the recognition by the majority of respondents (61.1%) that fake or poorly contrasted information was published in the media during the analyzed period, although they overwhelmingly deny (83, 33%) that this happened in their own news and media outlets. These statements, which can be interpreted as contradictory, may be due to a possible lack of self-criticism or to a certain reluctance to criticize their own media outlets.

Where there is consensus among journalists working in Andalusia is on the fundamental importance of the journalistic media at a time of a pandemic such as the current one, highlighting their public service work from both the informational and training/educational point of view. Among the informative work carried out, they highlight aspects of enormous interest such as the data disseminated about the number of infected people, the situation of hospitals, restrictive measures, or the transmission of information from official publications such as the BOE, which the public hardly consults and that the media facilitates in a more accessible way. Within its training work, according to the obtained results, the educational use of television stands out to instruct regarding forms of transmission of the virus, measures to avoid contagion, types of tests and vaccines, or the social awareness of the population in general.

Faced with a novel phenomenon of enormous social and informative importance, such as the pandemic caused by COVID-19 in Spain, this article has tried to analyze an aspect of great importance such as the increase in fake or poorly contrasted news in television media outlets during 2020 through professionals who work in the Andalusian community. The variety in the collection of data, provided by professionals belonging to 7 different types of media, public and private, national and regional, and even news agencies, provides an important plurality of points of view on the situation, thus enriching the sample value. The influence of the demonstrated increase in fake news issued during the analyzed period can be interpreted as a danger to citizens' information and the normal democratic development of our country, which is an interesting line of research to continue in the future.

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