

The Coronavirus on Spanish free-to-air television during the lockdown

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Abstract

This article presents the findings of a quantitative study analysing how the coronavirus pandemic was covered in 24-hour programming on Spain's four main television channels during the lockdown, from 13 March to 11 May 2020. The study examined broadcasts from La 1, Antena 3 TV, Telecinco and La Sexta over a 60-day period to track how coverage of the virus evolved, focusing on the presence of disease-related terms and their progression. The data show that news about the disease, along with political coverage, dominated television programming. In contrast, economic issues received the least attention from both public and private broadcasters, although there were differences in how each channel approached coronavirus-related reporting.

Keywords

COVID-19, coronavirus, pandemic, television, framing, agenda-setting.

Resum

Aquest article és el resultat d'un estudi quantitatiu que analitza l'enfocament donat a la pandèmia del coronavirus en les 24 hores del contingut emès per les quatre televisions espanyoles principals durant el confinament, des del 13 de març fins a l'11 de maig del 2020. Per a l'estudi es van analitzar les emissions de La 1, Antena 3 TV, Telecinco i La Sexta durant 60 dies. L'objectiu és comprovar com va evolucionar el tractament sobre el coronavirus, observant la presència de termes relacionats amb la malaltia, així com el seu progrés. Les dades indiquen que la informació relacionada amb la malaltia, a més de la política, va ser la que es va difondre més a les televisions. L'enfocament econòmic, en canvi, va ser el que va interessar menys a les cadenes, tant públiques com privades, malgrat que hi va haver variacions en el tracte que van donar a la informació sobre el coronavirus.

Paraules clau

COVID-19, coronavirus, pandèmia, televisió, framing, agenda-setting.

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1. Introduction

The onset of the coronavirus pandemic, triggered by the spread of SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19), profoundly disrupted the lives of millions. During months of confinement, people were forced to change their daily habits to reduce the risk of infection, leading to significant social, economic, political and, of course, public health challenges.

With lockdowns and social distancing in place, the media became a crucial tool for delivering accurate, high-quality information to help curb the spread of the virus (Doan, 2019). It also played a vital role in keeping the public entertained. Television, in particular, remained a powerful medium for shaping public opinion (Scheufele, 1999) and ensuring the dissemination of reliable news while countering misinformation and preventing unnecessary fear or scaremongering. In Spain, television audiences soared during lockdown, with March 2020 recording the highest number of viewers since audience measurement began in 1992. The average daily viewing time reached a record 284 minutes per person, a 40% increase from the previous month (Barlovento Comunicación, 2020; González-Neira et al., 2023). The lockdown therefore posed a major challenge for television, not only in covering the pandemic but also in producing and broadcasting original entertainment, educational and documentary content to help people cope with their prolonged isolation.

This paper explores how the coverage of COVID-19 evolved in the programming of the four most-watched national broadcasters during the lockdown period and whether the crisis led them to focus predominantly on healthcare, economic, political or social issues. It examines whether the broadcasters steered their content towards a more informative approach, highlighting the health risks of the pandemic, or whether they used it to shape public opinion and the collective mindset about the social, political and economic consequences of the disease.

2. Theoretical Framework. Objectives and Hypotheses

The main objective of this research is to examine how the coverage of COVID-19 evolved on the four most-watched free-to-air Spanish television channels during the lockdown, from 13 March to 11 May 2020, the latter date marking the beginning of the first phase of the gradual lifting of restrictions.

Furthermore, it is important to understand how the channels in this study approached coronavirus-related content. Specifically, it is essential to determine whether their coverage focused on health issues or whether it was more centred on the political, economic and social consequences of the disease's spread and the lockdown. In addition, the study seeks to explore how this content evolved over the course of the lockdown and as the pandemic progressed, with the death toll fluctuating.

Another key objective of the study was to determine whether significant differences existed in the content aired by the

channels analysed, particularly considering that La 1, as a public broadcaster, is expected to have a social responsibility not necessarily shared by private channels.

Therefore, these initial objectives gave rise to several hypotheses (H) for this study:

H1. Health-related content decreased significantly when the government announced the easing of restrictions.

H2. Economic-related terms were more prominent than those related to social issues.

H3. Social-related terms saw a significant increase when the government announced the easing of restrictions.

H4. Private channels featured more social-related terms than the public channel.

3. Current State of Knowledge

The analysis of the presence of the coronavirus and its coverage in the media is shaped by the significance of COVID-19 in health, social, political and economic contexts worldwide. Although initially the disease did not attract much attention from Spanish television, its spread made it inevitable for media coverage to increase across all domains. In Spain, the media significantly expanded their reporting on the coronavirus during the lockdown period, as expected, given the newsworthiness of the topic. A pandemic has all the ingredients for becoming a major news event: it is negative, its intensity increases – especially if it has a high mortality rate – it generates fear, it is unpredictable and it evolves daily or over very short periods (Vasterman and Ruygrok, 2013; Krawczyk, 2021). It is in this context that the media must act quickly and accurately with the information they share, reaching the widest possible audience while preventing the spread of chaos, fear, moral justification or the stigmatisation of certain population sectors (Li and Liu, 2020; Taylor, 2022). The use of language is crucial to assessing the health risks of a pandemic or epidemic (Gesser-Edelsburg et al., 2015), as is the selection of sources, whether they are health authorities, scientific experts or other relevant information providers (Shih et al., 2011; Rosique-Cedillo and Crisóstomo-Flores, 2020; López-García et al., 2021). These elements shape the framing – how the media present a particular news item –, thus influencing the audience's perception of an event (Tewksbury and Scheufele, 2019). This can be achieved by emphasising certain elements while downplaying others (Goffman, 2006) or by determining the level of attention and the tone given to an issue through content selection and prominence (Entman et al., 2008). Consequently, the repetition and framing of a news item are key in shaping its perceived importance for the audience (Iyengar and Kinder, 2010; Riley et al., 2020). In turn, exposing the audience to multiple messages can help attract their attention, reinforce the message's content and illustrate key health education concepts (Bonales, 2020). The analysis of these elements thus forms the foundation of the study of television content for this article.

Similarly, agenda-setting theory posits that the media are responsible for disseminating the topics or events the public becomes aware of or debates, while also shaping public opinion on those issues (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2020; Lazarsfeld et al., 2021; Deuze and McQuail, 2020). According to these theories, the more a news item is discussed, the more significant it becomes. During the lockdown period in Spain, the media agenda was heavily dominated by the coronavirus pandemic. Therefore, understanding how extensively it was covered helps us assess the extent to which it influenced public opinion (Aleixandre-Benavent et al., 2020; Costa-Sánchez and López-García, 2020).

In this context, television remains a crucial medium for providing reassurance and keeping the public informed. In Spain, television's credibility and audience trust increased during the coronavirus crisis (Casero-Ripollés, 2020), with viewers perceiving TV information as more truthful and reliable and less sensationalist than content found on social media (Havas Media Group [HMG], 2020).

That said, viewers also felt overwhelmed by the sheer volume of coronavirus-related information (HMG, 2020; Villena-Alarcón and Caballero-Galeote, 2020), as the arrival of the epidemic in Spain led to massive media coverage across all channels.

4. Methodology

A quantitative study was conducted, and an analytical technique was developed using subtitles from the full 24-hour broadcasts of Spain's four most-watched free-to-air television channels (La 1, Antena 3 TV, Telecinco and La Sexta) during the period from 13 March to 11 May 2020. These subtitles, intended to assist people with hearing impairments, are either automatically generated or semi-automatically generated, depending on the channel (e.g. speech-to-text detection followed by human review, as is the case with RTVE group channels). Quantitative analysis was deemed the most suitable method for collecting and examining the vast amount of data generated by the 5,760 hours of television content broadcast during Spain's lockdown. The results of this quantitative study offer insight into the evolution of the content aired by the television channels over such an extended period, as well as the use of key terms and vocabulary related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

For this research, a representative sample of the thousand most frequently mentioned words with more than four letters was first analysed from broadcasts on La 1 (Televisión Española) and Antena 3 TV. The selection was based on all television content aired on these two channels every Wednesday during the lockdown, spanning eight broadcast days per channel. La 1 was chosen as the public broadcaster, while Antena 3 TV was selected as an example of a private channel. By combining the words from both channels, the researchers were able to identify terms that were frequently mentioned on one but might not be representative of overall trends across other broadcasters.

From this list of 2,000 words, the research team also excluded those that were not relevant to the study, retaining only those directly related to the pandemic. For example, words such as *hombre* (man), *tiempo* (time), *hoy* (today) or *España* (Spain) were excluded. It is important to note that the semantic field of economics is narrower than that of society-related vocabulary, meaning economic terms tend to be repeated more frequently. This concentration in economic discourse, compared to the broader variety of social vocabulary, could lead to misinterpretations regarding the actual prominence of these topics in television coverage. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, the focus is on how these terms evolved over time rather than their absolute frequency.

The research team classified the selected terms into four main content categories: health-related, economic, political and social. A control group then verified the accuracy of this classification, allowing for a $\pm 1\%$ margin of discrepancy.

Once classified, the ten most frequently mentioned terms in each category were selected. These words, along with all their gender and number variations, were then tracked across the 60-day study period and throughout the 24-hour programming of La 1, Antena 3 TV, Telecinco and La Sexta.

In total, 5,760 hours of television broadcasts were analysed, covering approximately 56 million words and 360,000 pages of text, using the NVivo software. The study examined not only the journalistic content of the main television channels but all their broadcasts, including fiction, educational and entertainment programmes, to understand how this content was affected by the spread of the pandemic.

During the analysis of the lockdown period, 515,822 mentions of words potentially related to COVID-19 were recorded. Alongside the 40 most frequently used terms, their gender and number variations were included, bringing the total to 98 words. The selected terms were classified into the following categories:

1. Health-related terms: *coronavirus*, *sanidad*, *contagio*, *hospital*, *pandemia*, *virus*, *fallecido*, *muerte*, *paciente*, *maskarilla* (coronavirus, healthcare, infect, hospital, pandemic, virus, deceased, dead, patient, face mask).

2. Political terms: *Gobierno*, *ministerio*, *comunidad*, *alarma*, *presidente*, *partido*, *acuerdo*, *congreso*, *prórroga* (government, ministry, community, emergency, president, party, agreement, congress, extension).

3. Economic terms: *trabajo*, *empresa*, *ERTE*, *autónomos*, *economía*, *mercado*, *empleo*, *ingresos*, *paro*, *turismo* (work, company, furlough scheme [known as ERTE in Spain, though ERTes allow for both reduced working hours and temporary contract suspensions, with employers still covering some social security contributions], the self-employed, economy, market, employment, income, unemployment, tourism).

4. Social terms: *familia*, *música*, *residencia*, *policía*, *distancia*, *normalidad*, *miedo*, *aplausos*, *guardia civil*, *aislamiento* (family, music, care home, police, distancing, normality, fear, applause, civil guard, isolation).

Selecting ten words per category was intended to balance the expected surge in health-related vocabulary against terms from other categories, such as the social domain, where the increase was likely to be less pronounced.

Although several cities and autonomous communities (Madrid, Barcelona, Catalonia, etc.) were among the most frequently mentioned terms on the channels, studying the evolution of mentions related to them was excluded, as this could skew the sample by including references to topics unrelated to the coronavirus, such as accidents or weather conditions. The evolution of the term *Gobierno* (government), the most frequently mentioned word in the dataset, serves as a neutral control variable, as its presence on television is generally stable, with only minor fluctuations tied to specific events. For this research, the evolution of the word *Gobierno* also reflects the level of interest in the political impact of the pandemic.

The study also includes an analysis of the evolution of the same 40 words, along with their gender and number variations, in Spain's online media. This made it possible to assess whether their evolution followed a similar pattern or whether the approaches differed, given that the press, being a less immediate medium, tends to be more reflective. Alternatively, it examined whether news coverage of the coronavirus in online media mirrored the way the pandemic was portrayed on television. A total of 396 online news sources were analysed, yielding 5,941,424 mentions of terms potentially related to the coronavirus.

In summary, this quantitative study measures the prominence of coronavirus coverage on free-to-air television in Spain during the lockdown period. It does not aim to assess the tone, sentiment or positive or negative framing of the news and entertainment content analysed, as this would require analysing contextual, audio and visual elements – an impractical task given the vast amount of audiovisual material included in the study. It is also worth noting that this research forms part of a larger study on the presence of coronavirus in Spanish television, which

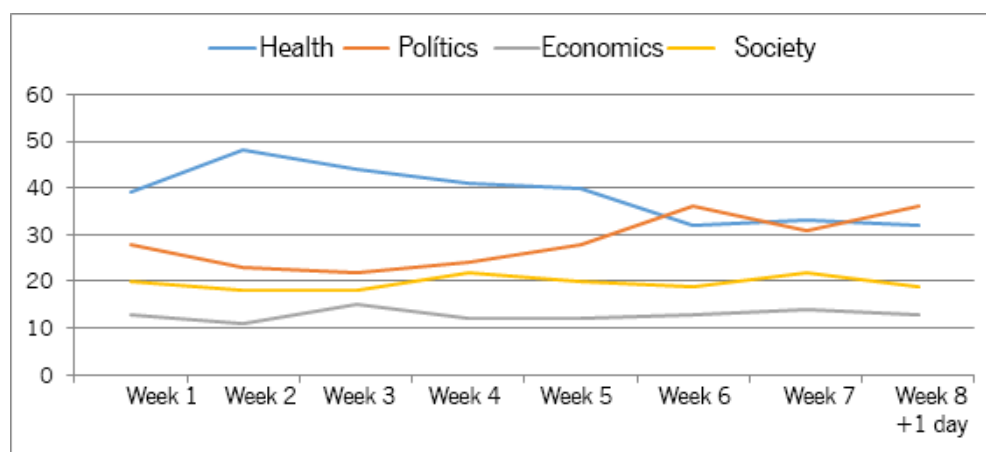
examined the evolution of terms related to the disease in the period leading up to the lockdown. It is also part of broader research into television content in Spain.

5. Results

The analysis of the most frequently mentioned words on the television channels confirms that, as expected, content during the study period largely focused on the coronavirus and its health-related consequences. The 40 terms analysed accounted for 0.9% of all words broadcast across the four channels over the 60-day period. While this may seem like a small proportion, it is important to note that these terms were selected from the thousand most frequently mentioned words, suggesting that coverage of the disease was, unsurprisingly, much broader.

The most frequently cited words in each category and across all four channels were *sanidad* (healthcare) and its linguistic variations (73,256 mentions), *Gobierno* (government) (38,262 mentions over the 60-day period), *trabajo* (work) (18,629 mentions) and *familia* (family) (16,883 mentions), as shown in Table 1. Health-related terms were the most prominent across all four channels, with a total of 205,312 mentions, followed by political terms (143,363 mentions), social terms (100,820 mentions) and economic terms (66,327 mentions). Health-related terms therefore accounted for 39.8% of the mentions analysed, while political terms comprised 27.7%. The 12-percentage-point gap indicates that issues directly related to the disease were more prominent during the lockdown than those concerning its political impact or its social (19.5% of total mentions) and economic consequences (12.8%). These percentage values help contextualise how coronavirus-related terms were represented across the four channels, beyond occasional spikes in specific terms or phrases prompted by particular events.

Graph 1. Weekly evolution of terms in each category, in percentages



Source: Author.

The results in Graph 1 show that television content was heavily focused on health during the first two weeks of the study period, particularly in the second week, before gradually declining after reaching its peak during the lockdown period. This coincides with the week of 21 March, when Spain recorded the highest increase in deaths from the disease.

Economic and social terms remained largely stable throughout the period analysed. In contrast, only political terms saw a slight increase towards the end, coinciding with a more pronounced decline in health-related content. This suggests that television coverage was beginning to return to its “normal” focus, which is typically more centred on political content.

Although the state of emergency was announced on Friday, 13 March, it is important to note that the increase in coronavirus coverage on television did not become clearly apparent until two days later, as shown in Graphs 1 and 2, since the institutional announcement of the lockdown was made on a Friday. Interestingly, mentions of coronavirus-related terms decreased across all channels on weekends, despite expectations that, given the highly exceptional nature of the situation and its widespread impact, coverage of the pandemic would intensify. It could also be expected that, given the usual decline in health and political content on weekends, coverage of social issues would remain stable or even increase. However, rather than an

Table 1. Most frequently mentioned words in each category, by channel, totals from 13 March to 11 May

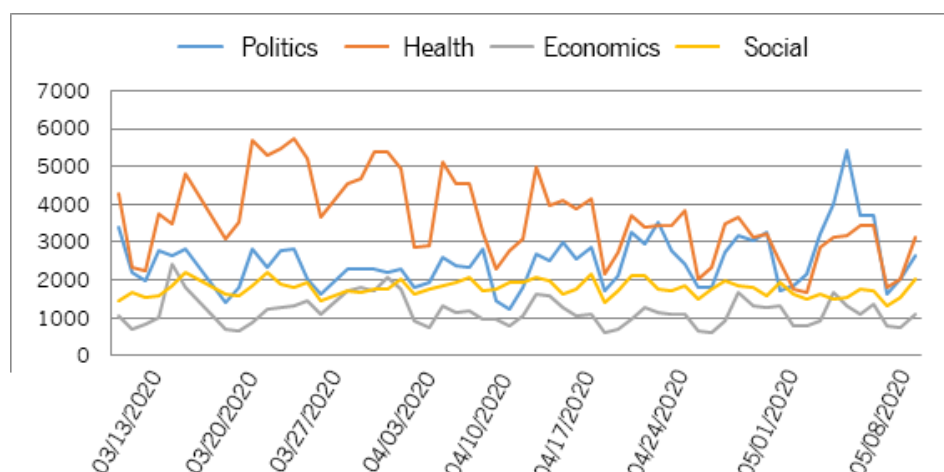
Political Terms	Gobierno* (Government)	Acuerdo* (Agreement)	Presidente* (President)	Alarma (Alarm)	Prórroga (Extension)	Comunidad* (Community)	Congreso (Congress)	Ministro* (Ministry)	Desescalada (Easing of restrictions)	Partido* (Party)
Telecinco	6919	1950	2525	2964	461	4559	639	3227	1245	1427
Antena 3 TV	7227	2628	2422	2562	500	3848	665	3355	1210	1591
La1	13665	4417	5383	5410	1328	8077	1413	7367	2494	2911
La Sexta	19969	4862	6751	7164	1476	12574	1802	10841	3456	5393
Total	47780	13857	17081	18100	3765	29058	4519	24790	8405	11322

Health terms	Coronavirus	Virus	Pandemia (Pandemic)	Sanidad y sanitario* (Healthcare and healthcare worker).	Paciente* (Patient)	Mascarilla* (Face mask)	Hospital*	Muerto* (Dead)	Contagio* (Contagion)	Fallecido* (Deceased)
Telecinco	10759	6027	4933	14765	5957	7724	10516	4891	9489	7711
Antena 3 TV	9746	5955	3863	12847	5063	6092	8758	6550	8750	5557
La1	21558	9786	11405	26872	8685	10282	13491	10969	16351	12132
La Sexta	13438	8539	4953	18772	6092	9640	9745	6216	11331	6578
Total	55501	30307	25154	73256	25797	33738	42510	28626	45921	31978

Economical terms	Ingresos (Income)	Autónomos (The self-employed)	Economía (Economy)	Trabajo (Work)	Turismo (Tourism)	Erte* (Furlough scheme)	Paro y parado* (unemployment, unemployed person)	Mercado* (Market)	Empresa* (Company)	Empleo* (Employment)
La Sexta	630	786	1603	4372	679	1059	1081	932	3699	1410
La1	909	1311	2199	6950	801	1654	1549	2112	5317	2546
Telecinco	479	577	895	3378	411	711	925	530	2806	911
Antena 3 TV	542	532	1013	3929	531	796	1055	627	2909	1171
Total	2560	3206	5710	18629	2422	4220	4610	4201	14731	6038

Social terms	Miedo (Fear)	Música (Music)	Guardia Civil (Civil Guard)	Normalidad (Normality)	Familia* (Family)	Distanciamiento* (Distancing)	Aplauso* (Applause)	Policía (Police)	Residencia* (Care home)	Aislamiento* (Isolation)
Telecinco	1964	2584	1911	1035	5016	2025	3821	2002	3035	1020
La 1	1996	9021	3193	1821	4508	3103	2118	2561	3072	1489
La Sexta	1910	1230	3007	1283	3597	2966	1061	3743	2936	857
Antena 3 TV	1814	1512	1953	919	3762	1753	4093	2429	1940	760
Total	7684	14347	10064	5058	16883	9847	11093	10735	10983	4126

Source: Author.

Graph 2. Trends in word usage by category, total mentions from 13 March to 11 May

Source: Author.

increase, there is actually a general decline in all content on most channels. In contrast, terms related to the financial sector remain notably stable, showing little variation throughout the study period, despite the severe economic consequences of the lockdown (Graph 2).

5.1 Focus of television content on the coronavirus

The study examined not only the evolution of coronavirus-related content but also the progression of four different aspects of COVID-19: health-related, economic, social and political. The term categories helped identify the direction in which pandemic-related television content was moving and, consequently, the focus adopted by the channels.

The evolution of mentions related to business, unemployment, the economy and the self-employed – i.e. the economic category – shows very little variation over the study period, as shown in Graph 2. It is notable how few references there were to employment-related terms, especially given the pandemic's economic impact. Only two words from the economic category make it into the top 20, as shown in Table 2. *Trabajo* (work) was mentioned 18,629 times, averaging 77.6 mentions per channel per day, while *empresa* (company) was mentioned 14,731 times, averaging 61.3 mentions per channel per day. Both figures are far lower than the 305.2 daily mentions per channel for *sanidad* (healthcare) or *sanitarios* (healthcare workers), the 199 daily mentions for *Gobierno* (government) or the 121 for *comunidad* (community).

It can therefore be concluded that the economic focus was the least prominent among the TV channels studied. A similar trend was observed with the social focus, although in this case, private channels, particularly Antena 3 TV and Telecinco, did show some notable differences.

Table 2. Ranking of the most frequently mentioned words, totals from 13 March to 11 May (continue in next page)

1	<i>Sanidad and sanitario*</i> (Healthcare and healthcare worker).	73,256
2	Coronavirus	55,501
3	<i>Gobierno*</i> (government)	47,780
4	<i>Contagio*</i> (contagion)	45,921
5	Hospital*	42,510
6	<i>Mascarilla*</i> (face mask)	33,738
7	<i>Fallecido*</i> (deceased)	31,978
8	Virus	30,307
9	<i>Comunidad*</i> (community)	29,058
10	<i>Muerte*</i> (death)	28,626
11	<i>Paciente*</i> (patient)	25,797
12	<i>Pandemia</i> (pandemic)	25,154
13	<i>Ministerio*</i> (ministry)	24,790
14	<i>Trabajo</i> (work)	18,629
15	<i>Alarma</i> (emergency)	18,100
16	<i>Presidente*</i> (president)	17,081
17	<i>Familia*</i> (family)	16,883
18	<i>Empresa*</i> (company)	14,731
19	<i>Música</i> (music)	14,347
20	<i>Acuerdo*</i> (agreement)	13,857
21	<i>Partido*</i> (party)	11,322
22	<i>Aplauso*</i> (applause)	11,093
23	<i>Residencia*</i> (care home)	10,983
24	<i>Policía</i> (police)	10,735
25	<i>Guardia Civil</i> (Civil Guard)	10,064

*Words with derivations in masculine, feminine and plural forms. For example, face mask-face masks.

Source: Author.

Table 2. Ranking of the most frequently mentioned words, totals from 13 March to 11 May

26	<i>Distanciamiento</i> (distancing)	9,847
27	<i>Desescalada</i> (easing of restrictions)	8,405
28	<i>Miedo</i> (fear)	7,684
29	<i>Empleo</i> (employment)	6,038
30	<i>Economía</i> (economy)	5,710
31	<i>Normalidad</i> (normality)	5,058
32	<i>Paro</i> (unemployment) and <i>parado</i> * (unemployed person)	4,610
33	<i>Congreso</i> (congress)	4,519
34	<i>ERTE</i> * (furlough scheme)	4,220
35	<i>Mercado</i> (market)	4,201
36	<i>Aislamiento</i> * (isolation)	4,126
37	<i>Prórroga</i> (extension)	3,765
38	<i>Autónomos</i> (the self-employed)	3,206
39	<i>Ingresos</i> (income)	2,560
40	<i>Turismo</i> (tourism)	2,422

*Words with derivations in masculine, feminine and plural forms. For example, face mask-face masks.

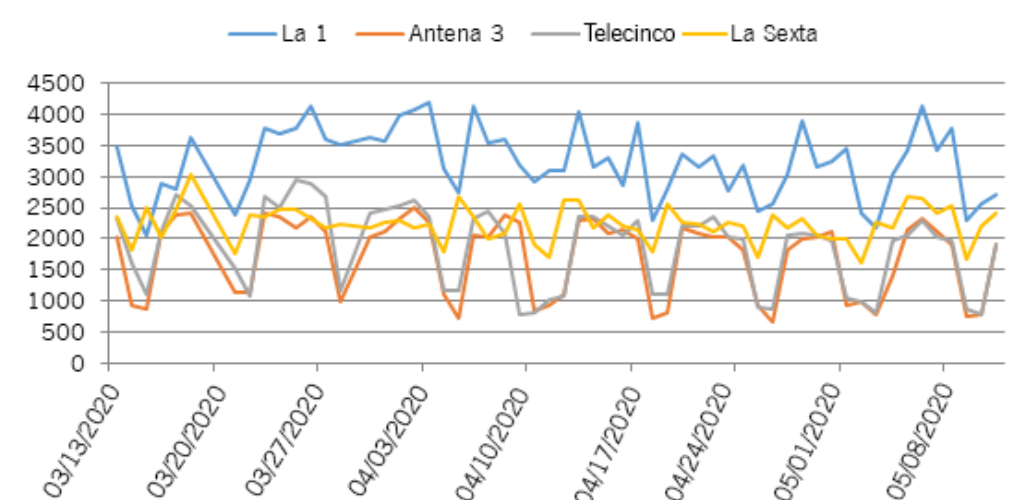
Source: Author.

5.2 Focus of TV channels during the lockdown period

The study's data show that the evolution of coronavirus mentions was very similar across all channels, both public and private. TVE's La 1 dedicated the most time to news coverage, making the highest number of mentions related to the pandemic (183,824 mentions during the 60-day study period), followed by La Sexta with 127,541 mentions, Telecinco with 106,193 and Antena 3 TV with 98,264. Therefore, 35.6% of the mentions of the terms in the study came from La 1 (Televisión Española), 24.7% from La Sexta, 20.5% from Telecinco and the remaining 19% from Antena 3 TV. The differences were not particularly significant, aside from the public channel's stronger focus on news content (see Graph 3).

In terms of progression, the results indicate a very similar pattern across all four channels, with figures closely aligned for Antena 3 TV and Telecinco, and a noticeable drop in mentions over weekends for all channels. However, it is worth noting that this decline was much less pronounced on TVE's La 1 between the second and third weeks of the lockdown, which coincided with the peak of rising infections and deaths in Spain.

Regarding the focus of the channels, there were no significant variations between them, with differences in content type reaching just 5-6 percentage points at most. Telecinco allocated the largest portion of its COVID-19-related programming to the healthcare category, with 41.6% of the mentions (see Table 3), followed by La 1 with 39.7%, while La Sexta and Antena 3 TV showed little variation between them. Telecinco also had the highest percentage of social content mentions (22.9%), but dedicated the least coverage to economic (10.9%) and political (24.4%) issues.

Graph 3. Trends in mentions by channel, totals from 13 March to 11 May

Source: Author.

Table 3. Percentages of mentions by category, by channel, totals from 13 March to 11 May

Cadenes	Health terms	Economic terms	Socials terms	Political terms	Total
La 1	39,7	13,7	17,8	28,5	35,6
La Sexta	38,9	12,7	17,7	30,5	24,7
Antena 3 TV	38,8	13,3	21,3	26,4	19
Telecinco	41,6	10,9	22,9	24,4	20,5
%	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Author.

As for political terms, La Sexta mentioned them most often (30.5%), with a 6% lead over Telecinco – the most notable difference between the channels.

La 1 had the highest number of mentions of the terms studied, as shown in the totals column of Table 3, with its focus predominantly on health-related content (39.7% of the channel's mentions). It also allocated the largest proportion of its mentions to the economic category, surpassing Antena 3 TV by 0.5 percentage points, the next highest in this regard. Of the four channels, La Sexta had the highest political framing (30.5%), although it also dedicated 38.9% of its content to health topics. It was the least socially oriented, with 17.8% compared to Telecinco's 22.9%. Antena 3 TV, on the other hand, ranked second in terms of mentions in the economic category, despite having the lowest overall volume of coronavirus-related terms.

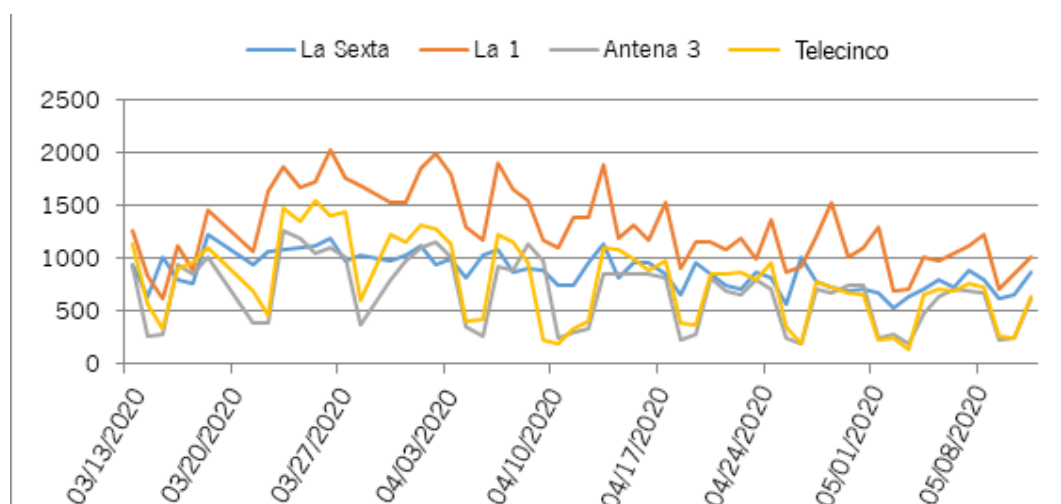
In terms of trends over time, mentions evolved similarly across all four channels, as shown in Graph 4, which focuses

on the health category. This demonstrates that the progression was almost identical across the channels. This trend supports agenda-setting theory, which suggests that the media tend to follow similar informational patterns, shaping a very similar global news agenda across channels (O'Neill and Harcup, 2009).

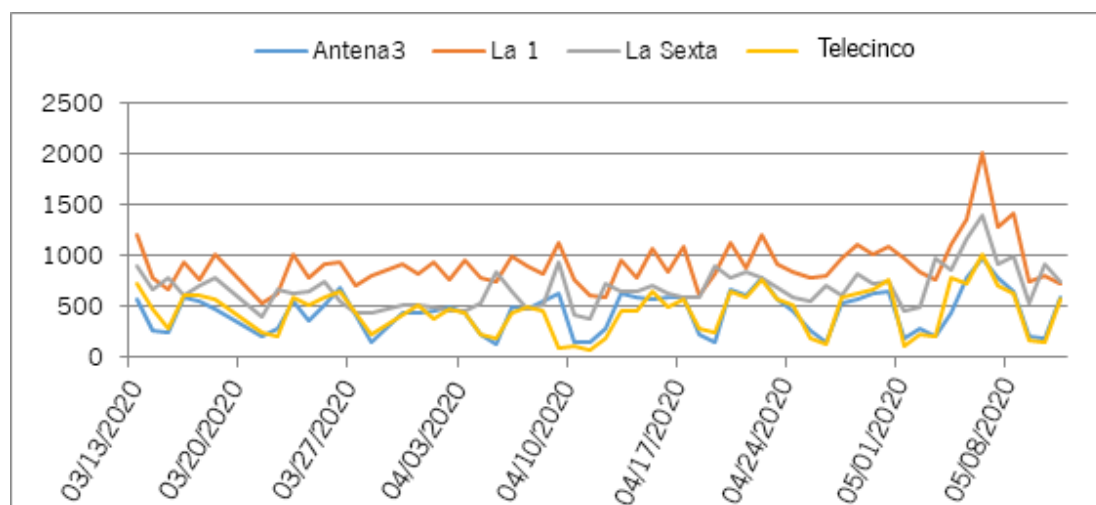
A decline in coronavirus-related content began during the week of 4 April, before the announcement of the start of the easing of restrictions. This drop coincided with the reduction in the number of coronavirus-related deaths in Spain.

A similar pattern is seen in the evolution of political terms, as shown in Graph 5, which illustrates the discourse across the different channels.

A notable spike in political terms can be observed in this graph, which occurred uniformly across all four channels studied. This coincided with the political parties' agreement to approve the fourth extension of the state of emergency in Spain.

Graph 4. Trends in health-related mentions, totals from 13 March to 11 May

Source: Author.

Graph 5. Evolution of mentions in the political category, totals from 13 March to 11 May

Source: Author.

6. Conclusions and discussion

In conclusion, based on the results, the evolution of coronavirus coverage on Spanish television closely mirrored the progression of the pandemic itself and was remarkably similar across the four channels studied. Health-related content was the most prominent, followed by political and social content. Weekly patterns and weekend variations aligned with the channels' typical news cycles, similar to those before the onset of the pandemic in Spain. After the expected surge in coverage at the start of the lockdown, the decline began gradually as the number of deaths started to decrease in March, rather than in April when the government officially announced the easing of restrictions. Studies on coronavirus coverage in countries such as Canada, the United States and the UK show very similar trends (Mach et al., 2021). This finding, therefore, refutes the H1 hypothesis of this research ("health-related content decreased significantly when the government announced the easing of restrictions") and confirms that health remained the primary focus of media coverage, rather than politics.

On the other hand, although the announcement of easing restrictions in Spain could have led to an increase in terms related to social or economic issues, given the expected "return to normality", this was not reflected in any significant shift in television discourse. These two categories remained stable and consistent throughout the entire study period. Therefore, the H3 hypothesis, which suggests that "social-related terms saw a significant increase when the government announced the easing of restrictions", is also refuted. Despite television being primarily an entertainment medium, the return to regular programming began with a decline in health-related content and an increase in political content. However, there was no corresponding rise in content related to leisure and entertainment, which aligns more with social terminology.

What stands out most in the study is the surprisingly low frequency of economic terms, especially those coined during the pandemic, such as ERTE (the Spanish acronym for "expediente de regulación temporal de empleo") [temporary furlough schemes]. Given the economic crisis triggered by COVID-19 and the fact that employment and recession had become major concerns for the Spanish population, an increase in economic terms might have been expected. However, this research reveals that not only did such an increase fail to materialise when the easing of restrictions was announced in Spain, but discussion of the economic consequences of the pandemic was the least engaging across the four television channels studied throughout the entire lockdown period. This, in turn, refutes the H2 hypothesis ("economic-related terms were more prominent than those related to social issues").

The evolution of social and economic content was very similar and relatively insignificant, remaining generally stable throughout the analysis period. Nevertheless, the most noticeable differences appeared in the social content category, particularly between the public channel, La 1 (TVE), and the private channels. Antena 3 TV and Telecinco made the most references to social content, with Telecinco having the highest percentage of mentions of terms like *aplauzo* (applause) and *residencias* (care homes) – words frequently used during the pandemic due to the daily expressions of gratitude for healthcare workers and the severe impact of COVID-19 on care homes for the elderly. This confirms hypothesis H4 of the study ("private channels featured more social-related terms than the public channel"), as Telecinco made the most references to this category, while La 1 was second to last. That being said, it should be noted that both public and private channels had very similar approaches to covering the coronavirus. While La 1 had a higher volume of mentions, this was because its programming focused more on news and current affairs, in line

with its public service mandate (Villena-Alarcón and Caballero-Galeote, 2020).

This research makes several important contributions to our understanding of media coverage of news events (Günther et al., 2020). While an event of this scale is difficult to replicate, given that the COVID-19 pandemic was global and affected many aspects of society, the study of how the media covered the event and focused on reaching and keeping the public informed is valuable. It also provides a solid foundation for analysing crisis communication or health communication. The findings help to assess whether the information fatigue experienced by certain social groups during this period was justified (Liu et al., 2021).

For this reason, the content analysis of information shared with the public is both relevant and necessary, though it does represent a limitation of this study. As a final point, it is important to note that this article is part of a larger project that is studying all television content in Spain from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives. Future academic work will explore additional aspects of framing theory, but from a qualitative standpoint, including the placement of mentions in the news agenda, the types of sources or testimonies used, the duration of these elements and the use of images and sounds in both fictional and current affairs content, among others.

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