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Communication, health
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Introduction

This year, we at *Quaderns del CAC* are bringing forward our annual publication date to February with a monographic issue dedicated to research on the intersections between **communication, health and well-being**. This is an issue that always bears attention, and not only when global health crises occur such as the one caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. In fact, health, and especially mental health, is an increasingly common subject of public media debates, related to topics such as nutrition, lifestyles, old age, technological addictions and so on. At the same time, the constant transformation of the communication ecosystem, largely as a result of the emergence of new digital social media and technological advances, makes research and reflection on the characteristics and potential effects of digital social relationships around health and well-being more necessary than ever.

The first two articles in the **monographic section** deal, in particular, with the mental health of adolescents. On the one hand, “Adolescence and mental health: from their representation in the media to the prevention of stigma in classrooms” presents the results of an analysis of academic literature on the representation of mental health during adolescence in discourses disseminated through audiovisual fiction, news items and content published on social media. The article highlights the importance of digital media literacy and teacher training in the face of the potential negative effects of these discourses, especially with regard to mental disorders and among women. Containing specialist contributions from different perspectives and areas of expertise, it is authored by: **Clara Virós-Martín** (Universitat Pompeu Fabra), **Mònika Jiménez-Morales** (Universitat Pompeu Fabra), **Mireia Montaña-Blasco** (Universitat Oberta de Catalunya), **Eva Bretones Peregrina** (Universitat Oberta de Catalunya), **Joanna Empain** (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona), **María-José Establés** (Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha), **Ana Freire** (UPF Barcelona School of Management), **Lorena Gómez-Puertas** (Universitat Pompeu Fabra), **Olga Jordana Ovejero** (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona), **Marta Lopera-Mármol** (Universidad Carlos III de Madrid), **Lara Martín-Vicario** (Universitat Internacional de Catalunya), **Leila Mohammadi** (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona), **Segundo Moyano Mangas** (Universitat Oberta de Catalunya), **Ricard Parrilla Guix** (Salzburg University of Applied Sciences), **J. Roberto Sánchez-Reina** (Centro de Investigación Rizoma Redes), **Paloma Sanz-Marcos** (Universidad de Cádiz) and **Jordi Solé-Blanch** (Universitat Oberta de Catalunya).

On the other hand, **Raquel Moraleda-Esteban and Esther Martínez-Pastor**, from the Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, present “Self-harm, adolescents and mental health on social media and in the family environment: from the perspective of health professionals”. Based on interviews with experts in the fields of health and social work and education, the authors shine some light on the harmful effects of social media on the development of non-suicidal self-harm in adolescence. In addition, they provide information about the decisive role of the family in the socialisation process and the emotional well-being of adolescents.

In a monograph on communication and health published only a few years after the coronavirus pandemic, we cannot ignore the contributions related to media communication at that time. This is what the next two articles in this monograph cover. “The Coronavirus on Spanish free-to-air television during the lockdown”, by **Sandra Martínez Costa, Teresa Nozal Cantarero, Antonio Sanjuán Pérez and José Juan Videla Rodríguez** from the Universidade da Coruña, presents the results of a study on the content broadcast by four Spanish television channels (La 1, Antena 3 TV, Telecinco and La Sexta) during the lockdown period from 13 March to 11 May 2020. Alongside it, **María Monjas Eleta and Miguel Lobato Rodríguez** (Universidad de Valladolid) present the article “The health crisis in infotainment shows. Analysis of Pablo Motos’ monologues in *El Hormiguero 3.0: Quédate en casa*”. Their study collects the results of a content analysis of eleven speeches by the presenter of this television programme, assessing their rigour and their news and social relevance in not only health terms but also political terms.

Closing this monograph, the article by **Carolina Sáez-Linero**, from the Universitat Pompeu Fabra, focuses our attention on a question of the utmost relevance and topicality: the use of new digital technologies based on data processing to target advertisements about products harmful to health in a personalised way. The study discusses the effects of this type of advertising segmentation, which are particularly serious for people and social groups with more adverse conditions. Through a review of specialist literature, the article “Health inequalities and personalized advertising: A pathway to equity?” reveals that these new techniques can perpetuate stereotypes and unhealthy behaviours among the most vulnerable people and thus lead to a heightening of social inequalities. However, it also identifies potential benefits from these personalized advertising techniques, if they are used to target messages that can generate a positive intervention, focused on equity in terms of health and well-being.

Finally, in this issue 51 we have a contribution in the **miscellaneous section** written by **Àlex López Alcalde and Aida Martori Muntsant**, from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, entitled “The CCMA's new dynamics of outsourcing productions in the face of digitalisation”. In a context of increasing digitalisation and “*platformisation*” of the media, the article analyses the outsourcing model for the production of video content by the Corporació Catalana de Mitjans Audiovisuals (CCMA) [Catalan Audiovisual Media Corporation], broadcast either on television or through the 3Cat digital platform. The time period encompasses the decade between 2013 and 2023, with special attention to content generated between March 2022 and December 2023. The results reveal, among other things, that investment in outsourced production has increased and that the content most often commissioned to external production companies, mostly from Catalonia, is entertainment and culture, as well as digital media content (a category included in 2023, with 100% outsourced production). Given this new situation, the authors argue that the Regulatory Standard of the procedure for selecting and outsourcing audiovisual content for the CCMA media needs to be updated.

Amparo Huertas Bailén & Sara Suárez Gonzalo

Directors

Adolescence and mental health: from their representation in the media to the prevention of stigma in classrooms

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Abstract

The number of adolescents with mental health disorders and admissions to hospitals for this reason has increased significantly in recent years, placing Spain among the European countries with the highest number of diagnoses. Most of the research carried out so far has focused on the effects of the media discourse regarding the mental health of minors; however, there have been few studies on the representation in the media of the mental health of adolescents. This work examines, through an analysis of the existing literature, the image of adolescent mental health in audiovisual fiction, news media and social media. The analysis also studies the importance of the gender perspective in this representation and reflects on the need to work on media literacy, offering tools to address the prevention of stigma in the classroom.

Keywords

Adolescence, mental health, stigma, representation, media, social media, media literacy.

Resum

El nombre d'adolescents amb trastorns de salut mental i d'ingressos hospitalaris per aquesta causa ha incrementat significativament els darrers anys, i Espanya se situa entre els països europeus amb el nombre més elevat de diagnòstics. Gran part de la investigació realitzada fins ara s'ha centrat en els efectes del discurs dels mitjans de comunicació sobre la salut mental dels menors d'edat; no obstant això, són escassos els estudis sobre la representació del benestar mental dels adolescents en aquests mitjans. Aquest treball aprofundeix, mitjançant una anàlisi de la literatura existent, en la imatge de la salut mental adolescent en la ficció audiovisual, els mitjans informatius i les xarxes socials. L'anàlisi també aprofundeix en la importància de la perspectiva de gènere en aquesta representació, i reflexiona sobre la necessitat de treballar l'educació mediàtica, amb l'aportació d'eines per abordar la prevenció de l'estigma a les aules.

Paraules clau

Adolescència, salut mental, estigma, representació, mitjans de comunicació, xarxes socials, educació mediàtica.

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1. Introduction

One in seven adolescents suffers from a mental health disorder, according to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2024). Depression, anxiety and eating disorders are some of the most common pathologies, tending to affect girls more than boys. Similarly, self-harming behaviour has increased significantly among adolescents, with suicide being the third-highest cause of death. According to Unicef (2022), the situation in Spain is especially worrying: the rate of diagnosed mental health problems among adolescents is 20.8%, a figure that contrasts starkly with 16.3% in the European Union and 13.2% globally, according to this same study.

Adolescence is a key stage of development in which many aspects of identity coalesce and shapes how adolescents deal with their feelings, relationships and social expectations. In the contemporary context, this is also a period in which the use of screens has a strong impact on daily life, altering how reality is perceived, experienced and constructed (Andrade, et al., 2021). Access to diverse media, content platforms and social media exerts a significant influence on young people's perception of themselves, becoming in turn sources of pressure, anxiety or misinformation on all kinds of issues, including those related to mental health.

Scientific research carried out to date has focused mainly on the study of social and environmental factors that negatively impact the mental health of adolescents, as well as the effects of the discourse of different media on their well-being. However, studies on the media representation of psychological disorders among this group are rather scarce, and the few that do exist only tend to focus on investigating specific media. This analysis becomes even more necessary when we consider that the media discourse and the content available on social media can have a stigmatising effect on mental health disorders (Ross et al., 2019).

Teachers in recent years, especially those in secondary education, have also repeatedly pointed out that there are not enough resources available to them to deal with an increase in mental health problems among students. They have also frequently highlighted how the media, and social media in particular, contribute to fuelling these problems and creating a stigma within the adolescent community. Nevertheless, the truth is that there are no preventive educational programmes that address these issues in the classroom.

For this reason, and given that the media discourse exerts an enormous influence on society's perception of certain issues, this work analyses, through a review of the existing literature, the representation of adolescent mental health in traditional media and on social media. The proposal also addresses the importance of media literacy in schools to help combat the stigma in place within this group.

Considering that gender is a factor that affects the risk of suffering from mental health problems, and that the highest percentages in terms of diagnosis and hospital admissions in Spain (Soriano et al., 2024) relate to girls, we believe it is

appropriate to adopt a gender perspective when establishing our approach to the way that the media represents adolescent mental health. The article therefore begins by analysing how the fact of being a woman is, in itself, a significant variable in a potential deficit of mental well-being throughout life. In this regard, as we will see in the successive sections that make up the text, adolescence is a particularly vulnerable time in the socialisation process of a person and certain conditioning factors have a greater impact on adolescent girls.

The work uses this gender perspective to explore how cinema, and latterly television series, have been representing the mental health of minors. Despite the importance of audiovisual fiction as a shaper of the collective imagination and a source of dialogue around the object of study, we have considered it necessary to include a section that analyses how media treat information relating to adolescent mental health. As already stated, the lack of studies on this topic makes it necessary to carry out further research in this area. Finally, given the extensive use of social media by teenagers in the present day, the article analyses the discourse present on social platforms about mental health and its deficits among minors and the influencers that they follow. The analysis also examines the opportunities offered by social media for building communities and combating the stigma associated with mental health disorders, as well as the challenges that remain to be met.

The paper concludes with a section dedicated to reflecting on the need to promote critical thinking in classrooms through media literacy on mental health, as well as on the objectives and tools available for working to prevent stigma in schools.

2. Gender and mental health

As recent scientific literature shows, gender is one of the variables that influences the mental health of adolescents: girls are more likely to develop a mental health disorder than boys and more cases are diagnosed among them than among boys (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2022; Stentiford et al., 2023). This logically leads to a higher rate of adolescent girls being admitted to hospitals for mental health problems, although in Spain the number of suicides is especially worrying: 73.4% of patient admissions due to suicidal behaviour in the last two decades were girls. Nevertheless, hospital mortality is higher among boys (Soriano et al., 2024a, 2024b).

In this regard, several risk and/or protective factors can trigger or reduce the appearance of disorders among minors which can also contribute to exacerbating gender-based differences. For example, Gajos et al. (2022) show in their research that greater exposure to traumatic events during childhood increases the risk of suffering from depressive symptoms in adolescence, particularly among girls. However, the same study indicates that after controlling for certain risk factors (such as having been a victim of bullying, delinquency in one's social circle or a lack of self-control) and protective factors (such as parental

attachment, collective efficacy or connection with the school environment), not only does this increase become less visible, but the risk of experiencing both depressive and anxious symptoms is also lowered.

Among the risk factors mentioned, it is worth noting the importance of bullying and especially cyberbullying, which has increased substantially in recent years. The study by Kim et al. (2018) analyses the impact of this phenomenon, with the authors concluding that cyberbullying can be a predictor of mental health problems among adolescents and that it can also have different effects depending on gender. Girls who are victims of cyberbullying show a greater propensity to develop emotional problems —such as depression or anxiety disorders— while boys are more likely to develop behavioural problems —such as conduct disorders or oppositional defiant disorder. The report by the Observatorio Nacional de Tecnología y Sociedad [National Observatory on Technology and Society] (2022) on digital gender violence in Spain concurs with this conclusion, showing that 42% of girls and young women who have suffered cyberbullying go on to develop emotional stress, low self-esteem or loss of confidence. These figures are also aligned with the hospital admission records in Spain by Soriano et al. (2024a), which show that internalising disorders (such as anxiety, depression, suicidal behaviour or eating disorders) are more common among girls, while externalising disorders (such as ADHD, schizophrenia or autism spectrum disorders) are more common among boys.

Finally, it is worth studying how gender can influence the stigmatisation that adolescents inflict upon other young people who suffer from mental disorders. Recently, Pfeiffer and In-Albon (2023) analysed gender differences in this regard and found that boys display a greater tendency to stigmatise than girls, showing lower levels of compassion towards affected boys and girls alike, and a more acute shaming for and minimisation of the symptoms of mental disorders, against girls in particular. These factors, together with the others presented in this section, form the basis for focusing the analysis of media representation of mental health and proposed classroom interventions in terms of digital literacy proposed by this work. Both will therefore be undertaken by adopting gender-sensitive approaches, paying special attention to the vulnerability of adolescent girls and the predominance of stigmatising behaviour among boys.

3. The media, mental health and stigmatisation

a) Fiction films and series

The representation of mental disorders has been a constant in cinema since its earliest days, manifesting itself in movements such as German expressionism and surrealism, and such landmark films as *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960) or *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* (Forman, 1975). The topic became increasingly common in the late 1980s with works such as *Rain Man* (Levinson, 1988) and in the early 1990s with cult

films such as *Kids* (Clark, 1995) or *Girl, Interrupted* (Mangold, 1999). The representation of mental disorders reached its apex around 2000, with films such as *A Beautiful Mind* (Howard, 2001) or *Spider* (Cronenberg, 2002), which continue to be highly regarded cult films. The subject is still significant today, as we can see in films of different types and genres such as *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Chbosky, 2012), *To The Bone* (Noxon, 2017), *Aftersun* (Wells, 2022), *Inside Out 2* (Mann, 2024), etc.

As regards television, the subject of mental disorders was quickly adopted in Spain in series aimed at young audiences such as *Física o Química* (Baltanás and Mercero, 2008-2011) and in international productions that had a great impact, such as *Skins* (Elsley et al., 2007-2013). There are stigmatising narratives still being produced today that focus on classic stereotypes such as those associated with violent and unpredictable behaviour and the figure of the mentally ill person as someone who is incapacitated, or that include terrifying hospital settings, and medication as the primary, if not the only, form of treatment, showing the effects of pharmacological triangulation (Harper, 2009), that is, stability, crisis and recovery through medication. Fortunately, in the context of the so-called third golden age of television, especially in English-speaking countries, and due to social awareness of the prevalence of mental disorders in both younger and older audiences, the preferred audience for audiovisual platforms - there has been an attempt to try to break with many of these stereotypes in television series that explain the experiences of the mentally ill in all their complexity, even presenting them as role models.

The collective imagination regarding mental disorders in series has been enriched by using the characters in leading roles and specifically focusing on the exploration of their voice through narrative resources in line with the literary genre of confession: diaries or intimate writings and testimonial recordings such as *Ni una más* (Lorenzo and Sáez Carral, 2024), or the narrator's voice in *Atypical* (Rashid et al., 2017-2021), in *Euphoria* (Levinson et al., 2019-present), in *Ginny & Georgia* (Fisher et al., 2021-present) and so on. There are other examples of note that feature both the narrative voice of the main character and the narrative voice of a family member, as is the case in *Everything Now* (Harries et al., 2023).

On the other hand, the representation of these characters' environments and their interpersonal relationships has been expanded, which ends up not only normalising therapies and mental health facilities but also showing the importance of those other roles that make up the character's social environment. This also makes it possible for the narrative to question the role of family or friends, not only in the diagnoses, but also when there is no diagnosis, despite the identification of symptoms and their evolution and treatment, e.g. *Heartstopper* (Walters et al., 2022-present). Similarly, this representation allows us to reconsider stereotypes regarding the character's capacities, depending on whether they are focused on educational or work environments.

Faced with this wave of possibilities, the tension between the televisual rationale and the potential of these narratives to serve as edutainment continues to generate a biased representation of mental disorders that merits study. For example, there is a tendency to make depression and its associated disorders invisible, thereby supporting the neoliberal discourse that blames patients rather than society or makes them responsible for their care. Nor are the possible socio-economic and cultural causes or aggravating factors explored, and there is a need for greater diversity in representation and an intersectional approach (Lopera-Mármol et al., 2023).

Therefore, an adequate critical treatment of transmedia literacy (Scolari et al., 2018) for young people is necessary, paying special attention to an analysis of the ideology, stereotypes and values latent in audiovisual productions for young audiences. The admiration that certain fictional characters arouse among young people and the normalisation of some of their behaviours open avenues for introspective reflection that can facilitate the dialogue about mental health among this group (Gómez-Puertas et al., 2023). Scientific work in this field is therefore relevant because it not only creates a debate about the ramifications of these representations on viewers' perceptions and the associated stigma, but it also has a significant impact on people suffering from mental disorders since these representations can influence their own social acceptance and self-image.

b) News media

The agenda-setting theory postulates that the media agenda—shown by the emphasis on which the media cover each topic—determines which topics citizens and the political class perceive to be important (McCombs, 1977). According to the framing theory, the media coverage of each topic—consisting of its focus on certain aspects and concealment of others—determines how the public perceives it (Entman, 1993; Igartua et al., 2005).

In this sense, several studies have analysed the media coverage focused on specific topics related to mental health; for example, eating disorders (Guzmán-Do-Nascimento and Rodríguez-Díaz, 2017), suicides (Blanco-Castilla and Cano Galindo, 2019) or mental health during the COVID-19 confinement period (Sanjuán Pérez et al., 2022). However, it should be noted that studies that analyse the general coverage of mental disorders are scarce.

Muñoz et al. (2011), for example, studied traditional Spanish media's coverage of mental disorders, revealing that this represented only 5% of the sample, even though the language and terms related to mental health were widespread. More recently, Carrasco et al. (2023) analysed media coverage of mental health disorders among adolescents during the pandemic and noted that the news items studied focused on general mental health problems and, in particular, on suicide (45.5% and 33.6% of the sample, respectively).

Regardless of the cultural context, the media tend to represent mental disorders in the general population in a stigmatising way

(Antebi and Whitley, 2022; Aragonès et al., 2014; Carrasco et al., 2023; Corrigan et al., 2013). This stigmatisation can be explicit, as occurs through the association of mental disorders with the commission of crimes (Corrigan et al., 2013), or implicit, using the images, language or stereotypes associated with complex disorders as metaphors to refer to irrational fear (psychosis) or incoherence (schizophrenia) (Aragonès et al., 2014).

Studies of representations in the news media in Spain (Aragonès et al., 2014) and other Spanish-speaking countries (Grandón et al., 2022) concur that news in Spanish tends to use language rich in metaphors and other linguistic resources that is less stigmatising than that of news items in English. However, the comparison between Spanish-speaking and English-speaking media should be viewed with caution, since according to Wang (2017), the codes and variables of the comparative analyses are normally generated from English.

In this context, Carrasco et al. (2023) observe that the news media in Spain tend to use more positive language and framing in recent mental health news stories compared to the results of previous studies (e.g. Aragonès et al., 2014). Even so, it should be noted that the focus on recovery (from mental illness) is more prominent in English-speaking media than in the coverage in Spain (Carrasco et al., 2023) and that news items that focus on recovery reduce stigmatisation. In this regard, Corrigan et al. (2013) use an experiment to show that readers exposed to a news story with a negative framing tend to favour coercive measures against people with mental health problems, in contrast with the opinions of others exposed to a news story with a recovery-based framing.

The representation and coverage of these disorders are also affected by other variables, such as the type of disorder or gender. On the one hand, Antebi and Whitley (2022) point out that the tone of coverage in British media differs according to the type of disorder. Disorders that are seen as widespread (depression and anxiety) are represented more positively. Disorders that are considered serious (schizophrenia and bipolar disorder) tend to be represented as dangerous, unpredictable and with a lower probability of recovery. In contrast, Whitley et al. (2015) note that Canadian media tends to portray women with mental disorders as victims, while men with the same disorders are shown as aggressors. These variables also influence the positive or negative representation of the adolescent population, both in English-speaking countries and in the Spanish press. In Spain (Carrasco et al., 2023), for example, news stories that associate disorders with violence are usually focused on men with psychotic or behavioural problems.

Despite this, media coverage of mental disorders in adults and adolescents differs on some points. According to Slopen et al. (2007), adults with mental disorders tend to appear in general news stories, while minors are often included in featured articles. Furthermore, the coverage tends to portray adolescents with mental disorders as victims, which fosters a paternalistic view that undermines their autonomy (Carrasco et al., 2023). This can be linked back to the observation made by

Sloven et al. (2007), which found that statements by health professionals are the most prominent feature of news stories about adolescents, an aspect that may contribute to reducing stigmatisation.

Similarly, the results presented by Carrasco et al. (2023) suggest that gender roles also influence the decision about who can speak in the media about adolescent mental health. There are more statements from male patients than female patients, but when the statements are made by family members, they are mostly from women. Regardless of who is speaking, positive and destigmatising statements predominate (negative statements account for less than 4% of the sample). News coverage in Spain, however, does not usually include statements from adolescents, which means that there are hardly any studies on their testimonies in news coverage of mental health. In short, not only are adolescents portrayed as victims when their mental health is discussed, but their coverage in the media does not give them a voice, and this can contribute to stigmatising these disorders among their peers.

c) Social media

The consolidation of technological advances has created a digital scenario characterised by a significant increase in the number of platforms, content and devices with multiple screens, which has led to a real change in habits and how young people relate to each other. This change became particularly accentuated during the COVID-19 pandemic when there was a marked increase in social media use among teenagers. Besides, certain uses of these platforms became associated with higher levels of mental health problems in general and, as regards gender, had a stronger effect on girls, who suffered more negative experiences online (Marciano et al., 2022).

One of the most notable elements when it comes to consuming and accessing online content is the figure of the so-called influencers. Undoubtedly, these creators, who enjoy enormous popularity among young people, discursively exploit communicative boundaries, oscillating between expert and colloquial knowledge to shape their followers' perceptions and behaviours (Lozano-Blasco et al., 2023). Their power to bestow legitimacy means that they have established themselves as one of the priority marketing strategies among major brands in all types of sectors.

As a result, the amount of time during which adolescents are exposed to the power wielded by these influencers is high, even having a significant impact on their mental health (Engel et al., 2024). Through TikTok, for example, one of the most popular platforms among Generation Alpha (Tirendi and Gargiulo, 2024), these influencers idealise their experiences and their daily lives, creating a deep bond of identity that connects with adolescents and influences their interests and opinions. As a result, they have become vital sources of information for an audience that trusts them despite their providing information that is potentially not verified by experts (De Regt et al., 2020).

However, young people do not only use social media to

consume content by influencers, rather they mainly use it to communicate with their peers (Euajarusphan, 2021). Given the different uses they make of these platforms and the central role they have in their daily lives, we can say that the interactions that adolescents carry out with the digital media environment in general can lead them to prioritise and uncritically assume the language, aesthetics, discourses and ways of life that are shown there, especially if one takes into account that adolescence is the stage in which critical thinking skills are largely developed and that Spanish adolescents, in particular, show very low levels of these skills compared to the European average (Feijoo et al., 2023).

The scientific research carried out so far has focused mainly on the effects that social media have on minors. Haidt (2024) has carried out an exhaustive analysis in this area on the increase in anxiety, depression and other mental health issues in younger generations, particularly those born after 1995 (Generation Z). The author argues that the widespread use of social media, particularly since the proliferation of smartphones and constant access to the internet, is one of the main factors behind this deterioration in the mental health of young people. However, the results of this research contrast with other studies that show that there is no causal relationship between the use of social media and mental health disorders in adolescents and that there are other factors that have greater weight as predictors of this type of condition, such as lack of family support (Panayiotou et al., 2023).

In this context, the analysis of mental health discourse on social media has been relegated to the background. Even so, the phenomenon deserves special attention, especially after the confinement due to COVID-19, since it was then that many Spanish influencers began to describe on social media the impact that this situation was having on their mood, which quickly led to direct allusions to certain mental health disorders (Mateus and Núñez-Alberca, 2022). Through imitation, the followers of these influencers, who were mostly teenagers, began, in turn, to act as content creators and share their moods and clinical diagnoses on social media, etc. This was how first-person discourse on mental health first acquired a presence on social media, which was unheard-of until then but was undoubtedly beneficial by normalising dialogue around the mental well-being of minors and ultimately contributing to ending the existing stigma among this population (Monzonís Redondo, 2021).

In this autonomous discourse, mental health disorders are mostly represented as circumstances that young people struggle with in their daily lives. The language used is natural and combined with expressions typical of the protagonists' everyday lives, even using humour sometimes (Lau et al., 2025). The content of these videos ranges from the symptoms of various disorders such as anxiety, depression or eating disorders (Basch et al., 2022; Samuel et al., 2024), to other factors that can be linked to mental health such as interpersonal relationships or social isolation (Lau et al., 2025). It is girls, in particular, who disseminate most of this content (Samuel et al., 2024).

It should also be noted that the image that users affected by a mental health problem present on the networks is not that of incapacitated persons, but the narrative they always use is that of someone who at a given moment and, due to specific circumstances, experiences emotional distress that drives them to share their situation on social media, primarily in search of understanding and support from others (Kysnes et al., 2022). In that sense, a large part of the mental health content present on networks mentions the essential role of psychological treatment and coping strategies (Basch et al., 2022; Lau et al., 2025). It is not surprising, therefore, that this content is also shared afterwards, at a time when users have experienced an improvement, especially with the desire that their experience can help other people who are going through the same thing.

As suggested by Sánchez-Reina et al. (2021) and Theophilou et al. (2023), in general, the structure of the content that is shared on social media not only seeks to attract attention but also to appeal to the emotions and aspirations of other users, creating a direct connection between the sender and the receiver of that message, bearing in mind especially that the topic in question has personal implications for both. Therefore, although some authors highlight the risk entailed in expressing a personal perspective when addressing mental health, especially at certain ages (Zsila and Reyes, 2023), studies such as that of Popat and Tarrant (2023) point out that, despite the risks inherent in social media, they can also play a crucial role in providing support, education and early mental health interventions to adolescents who would otherwise not have access to these resources (Yakobus et al., 2023).

In this regard, social media can act as accessible spaces for disseminating educational content on mental health, as they allow organisations, professionals and experts to share information on topics including anxiety, depression and coping mechanisms. Adolescents can use platforms like Instagram, TikTok and YouTube to gain quick access to reliable information, which is especially beneficial in areas where traditional mental health services are limited (Naslund et al., 2020). Furthermore, these networks can promote awareness campaigns that help normalise discussions about mental health, thereby reducing the stigma that often deters young people from seeking professional help (Latha et al., 2020).

Likewise, social media can provide spaces where adolescents find emotional support and connect with others facing similar problems, which helps to reduce feelings of isolation and builds a sense of community. Platforms like Reddit and Facebook, for example, facilitate the creation of mental health support communities, allowing users to express their emotions and share advice. These communities can also encourage early interventions, as young people receive support and suggestions for seeking professional help (Pretorius et al., 2019).

Finally, social media can also be used to carry out digital interventions that help to identify adolescents at risk through algorithms that detect warning signs, such as posts that express ideas about hopelessness or self-harm, and

to provide them with support resources (Leiva and Freire, 2017; Ramirez-Cifuentes et al., 2018; Ramirez-Cifuentes et al., 2020). Platforms like Facebook and Instagram also offer mechanisms for reporting alarming content related to mental health, triggering automated responses with information about helplines and emergency services. Some applications provide online therapy and psychological support, offering a private and accessible alternative for those who prefer to avoid in-person consultations. Thus, when well-designed, these digital interventions can be as effective as traditional forms of therapy (Aschbrenner et al., 2019).

However, despite the possibilities that these platforms offer, the reality is that the lack of control over the content which minors can access remains a problem. For example, in the case of support communities, various studies have highlighted the importance of being able to moderate these spaces, especially to prevent the spread of misinformation or harmful content related to mental health (Saha et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2024). Along the same lines, Robinson et al. (2019) suggest that discourse on social media can contribute to stigmatising certain mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia, or trivialising others, as occurs with obsessive-compulsive disorder. Ultimately, while it is true that society seems to be more open to talking about mental health thanks to social media, there are still doubts about what the predominant discourse among minors is and what consequences it could have in the future.

4. Digital education in mental health

This social reality underlines the importance of integrating mental health education into digital and audiovisual literacy programmes in school. It is therefore crucial that education should play an active role in shaping adolescents' relationship with the digital environment, providing them with tools that allow them to relate healthily way to the technologies and platforms that they interact with. This means not only encouraging them towards a responsible and balanced use of technology, the internet and social media but also teaching them how to identify harmful content or misinformation about mental health.

As technology advances, it is becoming clear that the challenges young people face in the digital realm are increasingly complex. Constant exposure to idealised images, the pressure to maintain an active online presence, and the possibility of being subjected to criticism or harassment can have significant consequences for their well-being. Offering a complete education that includes mental health as well as digital and audiovisual literacy is one way of enabling adolescents to become critical consumers of information so that they can learn to deal with the polarised feelings that are broadcast on the internet and social media in displays of lifestyles and messages charged with emotions and personal opinions. This combination of digital literacy and mental health education would enable the creation of a more thoughtful digital culture in which adolescents can develop

greater autonomy about the messages they receive, promoting a more balanced interaction with the platforms and reducing the risk of falling into harmful dynamics.

Digital education on mental health in classrooms should focus on three main objectives. Firstly, on raising awareness: it is important for minors to be aware of the influence that digital media can have on their emotions and self-perception. Conditions such as depression, anxiety, eating disorders or self-harm can be amplified by content that idealises harmful behaviour or normalises misinformation. These issues need to be addressed from an educational perspective, providing young people with the tools necessary to recognise, prevent and respond to these problems.

The second objective is digital literacy, a process in which pupils develop a critical view of digital environments by engaging in studies of visual culture. This perspective means teaching adolescents to consume content thoughtfully, and accepting that not everything published on social media is true or beneficial to their mental health. This includes developing skills to recognise authoritative sources on mental health, to identify discourses that encourage trivialisation, discrimination or stigma, and to understand the consequences of engaging with this content without maintaining a suitable distance or taking the appropriate precautions.

The third objective aims to develop a balanced, critical and conscious interaction with the different platforms and social media. This can be done by promoting more appropriate and responsible uses (time management, appropriate selection of accounts and content to follow, civic and constructive participation, critical attitude towards the information and messages received, etc.). Classrooms can also be a space in which to discuss the effects of social media's constant representation of ideals of instant, impulsive happiness, as well as to teach adolescents about helpful strategies to maintain a balance between their time spent online —and the lack of self-control and cognitive overload that this entails— and the search for unconnected spaces, inside and outside of schools, where they can meet others and establish meaningful relationships outside the virtual world (Ubieto, 2023).

Several organisations have already begun to develop programmes to promote mental health in the educational field (Unicef Spain, 2021). The development of digital competence has become a key aspect of these programmes, which each centre promotes through digitalisation plans integrated into its educational projects. Likewise, tutoring and educational guidance spaces play a fundamental role in addressing the impact of the digital environment on the well-being of adolescents. The goal is to promote skills that allow them not only to use technology responsibly but also to understand and manage the psychological effects that can arise from constant exposure to social media and digital content in general.

One of the main focuses of these programmes is to teach adolescents to identify the risks associated with constant connectivity and the excessive use of social platforms (such

as Instagram, TikTok or YouTube), which can lead to a certain dependence on external validation and feedback, or to the phenomenon of over-identification and constant comparison with others. These educational plans also seek to encourage the critical use of platforms to learn to identify reliable information, especially on issues related to mental health. Access to unregulated information about psychological disorders or inappropriate ways of coping with emotional distress can lead to confusion, promote stigma or even aggravate existing mental health problems. For this reason, it is also essential to adopt a gender perspective when implementing these programmes, especially considering the greater vulnerability of adolescent girls when it comes to suffering from mental health disorders or using social media, as well as the higher level of stigma found among boys.

Another key aspect of these programmes is the promotion of digital self-care, which includes students' ability to recognise when they need to disconnect and to set healthy boundaries on the time they spend online. This type of self-care is essential to prevent the emotional exhaustion that can arise from continuous exposure to online life, as well as to promote the construction of an identity that does not depend exclusively on the feedback obtained from networks, their idealised representations or the permanent comparison with others.

Finally, schools must adopt a preventive approach, teaching adolescents to recognise the signs of psychological distress in themselves and their peers. This approach not only promotes self-care but also fosters a mutually supportive environment for those who may be experiencing mental health challenges in the digital context. Some programmes also address cyberbullying, helping students to identify abusive situations and to act responsibly, whether they are victims or witnesses.

5. Conclusions

Most studies on the relationship between adolescents' mental health and the media to date have focused on analysing the effects of the media as a socio-environmental factor that could have an impact on the emergence and consolidation of these types of disorders. Nevertheless, the media and digital discourse has also focused its attention, especially in recent years, on minors and their mental health problems, creating audiovisual fiction narratives, news and content on social media around this topic. For this reason, and given the scant academic research in this area, this work has focused on enhancing the representation of adolescent mental health in this transmedia discourse by analysing of the existing literature. The conclusion is that there are a series of challenges and opportunities concerning the image of young people's mental health in the media and social media, and some recommendations about the need to encourage critical thinking in classrooms to prevent and eradicate the existing stigma.

1. The number of adolescent girls diagnosed with mental health disorders far exceeds that of boys. Since the scientific literature is conclusive regarding the fact that simply being a woman is a risk factor for the development of mental illnesses, it is essential to take the gender perspective into account when studying media representations of the mental health of minors.
2. The image of mental health in audiovisual fiction has been a constant for many years. Although film and television productions are currently trying to move away from many of the stereotypes that present these patients as violent, unpredictable or incapacitated, the truth is that prejudiced views of mental health are still overrepresented and should be studied, taking diversity and the intersectional approach into account, and the socio-economic and cultural factors that are involved in the absence of psychological well-being during adolescence.
3. The media tends to portray mental disorders generically, at most focusing heavily on suicide. Media discourse presents adolescents as victims and very rarely does so in the first person. Instead, it usually features health professionals or family members who speak about the mental health of minors. The protocol developed by the Catalan Audiovisual Council and the Ministry of Health of the Generalitat de Catalunya [Government of Catalonia] (2015) about reporting eating disorders recommended that the testimony of the patients themselves or of people who have recovered from the disease must be included, taking questions of data protection and parental consent into account, in order to avoid the media contributing to paternalism and, therefore, to the stigmatisation of these diseases.
4. In recent years, and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, many influencers popularised the creation of content in which they share their mental health problems with their followers, mostly teenagers. Imitating this, thousands of users of these platforms also started to create content in which they speak openly about their well-being. While this trend represents an opportunity to help reduce the stigma surrounding these disorders among minors, there is a danger of trivialising them and downplaying their importance. In this context, it is essential to see digital education on mental health as a challenge for the coming years, both as a way of encouraging adolescents to adopt a critically rigorous outlook that would allow them to deal with content that is far from credible, but also to generate content and consider the impact that their comments can have.
5. Although digital mental health education in classrooms has enormous potential, it also faces numerous challenges. The speed at which technologies and digital platforms evolve often makes it difficult for the education system to adapt at the same speed. Teenagers are constantly exposed to new trends, influencers and discourses that are more than likely to evade the control of educational institutions. This means that materials and teaching strategies must be constantly revised to ensure that content is up-to-date and relevant.
6. It is also important for education centres to have resources for teacher training. Teachers do not always have specialised training in mental health. However, they must be able to identify and manage situations that affect their students' health in digital environments. Training activities aimed at teachers could include identifying digital warning signs, providing emotional support, and establishing guidelines for action in cases of cyberbullying or other mental health problems.
7. Integrating digital mental health education in classrooms offers an opportunity to support adolescents in their emotional and cognitive development in the digital environment. The aim is to encourage critical thinking, to enable young people to analyse and better understand the content they consume and share, as well as to set limits on their use of technology and access to content that may be harmful.
8. Education centres should establish spaces for collaborating with families to ensure that young people receive coherent mental health education at school and home. This would include providing resources and training on how to manage children's digital habits and encourage healthy social media use. Ultimately, the importance of digital education lies in the fact that it is not limited to the classroom, which is just one of the environments in which adolescents should acquire these skills.

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Self-harm, adolescents and mental health on social media and in the family environment: from the perspective of health professionals

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Abstract

Non-suicidal self-harm (NSSH) in adolescents is increasing as a coping mechanism for negative emotions. In this paper, our objectives are to find out the perspective of health and social intervention professionals on whether social media are a risk factor for the development of self-harm and the role of the family in the emotional well-being of the child. Nineteen interviews were conducted with health and labour/social work/education experts specialised in adolescence, self-harm and families. They were conducted online and in person between March and May 2024. The main findings are that social media promote self-harm and simplify language through memes, abbreviations and codes, affecting the development of basic social skills in adolescents and disrupting their mental health. Hence the importance of good communication with the family to promote the emotional well-being of young people.

Keywords

Social media, digital socialisation, non-suicidal self-harm, mental health, family, adolescents, young people, children.

Resum

Les autolesions no suïcides (ANS) en adolescents estan augmentant com a mecanisme d'afrontament de les emocions negatives. En aquest treball els nostres objectius són conèixer la perspectiva dels professionals de la salut i la intervenció social sobre si les xarxes socials són un factor de risc per al desenvolupament d'autolesions i el rol de la família pel que fa al benestar emocional del menor. S'han fet 19 entrevistes a experts sanitaris i del treball/l'educació social especialitzats en adolescència, autolesions i famílies. Aquestes es van fer per mitjà d'internet i de manera presencial entre els mesos de març i maig de 2024. Les principals conclusions són que les xarxes socials promouen les autolesions i simplifiquen el llenguatge a través de mems, abreviatures i codis, afecten el desenvolupament d'habilitats socials bàsiques en els adolescents i n'alteren la salut mental. D'aquí la importància d'una bona comunicació amb la família per promoure el benestar emocional dels joves.

Paraules clau

Xarxes socials, socialització digital, autolesions no suïcides, salut mental, família, adolescents, joves, menors.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Justification

Non-suicidal self-harm (NSSH) is a set of behaviours through which people inflict physical harm on themselves as a way of reducing intense psychological distress, but without the intention of causing death, with cuts, blows and burns being the main methods (Agüero et al., 2018; Nock, 2014; Rascón, 2024; Xiao et al., 2022). This behaviour is frequent in adolescence, and decreases from the age of majority onwards (Faura-García et al., 2021; Steinhoff, 2021; Xiao et al., 2022).

Numerous studies point to an increase in self-harm (Nock, 2014; Wester et al., 2018). However, prevalence figures in adolescents show a high variability, partly due to the fact that only 0.21% to 6.5% of young people who self-harm seek medical care (Faura-García et al., 2022). This limitation in seeking help contributes to the disparity in published figures: internationally, the figures vary between 1.5% and 54.8%, while in Spain they range from 0.58% to 74.9% (Bousoño Serrano et al., 2021; Faura-García et al., 2021; Calvete et al., 2017). The use of different assessment methodologies (Swannell et al., 2014) or populations analysed in the studies (Faura-García et al., 2021) also affect the variation in this data, and there is no consensus on the incidence of self-harm. However, the literature estimates an overall prevalence of 16-22% (Farkas et al., 2023).

A child's upbringing, care and family dynamics are key elements in their socialisation and the development of their mental health, which are factors that can affect the onset of self-harming behaviours (Albarracín & González, 2020). Parent-child communication and feeling that the home is a safe space are essential for the emotional well-being of the adolescent (De Rivera et al., 2021). However, family interaction time is decreasing, as families have less and less time to spend together (Gladys, 2003). This generates feelings of loneliness and incomprehension in the child that undermine their mental health (Curtis, 2018). Many young people turn to social media for company, making it one of the primary means of communication and interaction among teenagers.

According to data from Spain's National Statistics Office (INE) (2023), seven out of ten children aged 10-15 have a mobile phone and 94.7% use the internet. In addition, 90.8% of young people aged 11-17 go online daily and 98.5% are registered on at least one social network, with Instagram and TikTok being the most used (Andrade et al., 2021). Furthermore, 68.5% of young people use the internet constantly, spending more than five hours a day online (Lopez-Iglesias et al., 2023). However, the literature shows a link between the development of self-harm in adolescents and internet use (Duarte-Tánori et al., 2023).

Virtual socialisation has harmful effects on the mental health of young people (López-Iglesias, 2023). The content they consume alters their emotional balance, making them vulnerable to self-harm as a way of self-regulating distress (Ruiz et al., 2023). The ANAR Foundation (2024) relates the

increase in the use of technologies to the increase in self-harm in young people.

In this context, as there are few studies that reflect the perspective of experts (Martínez-Rodríguez et al., 2024; De Rivera et al., 2021) in relation to our two topics of study, family and social media, we believe it is appropriate to know what professionals who work directly in the area of adolescent mental health, healthcare professionals and social work experts in non-clinical settings, think about the role of the family environment in terms of the emotional well-being of children and the effects of social media on the development of self-harming behaviours.

1.2 State of play

Adolescence defines an essential period of human life in which social and emotional habits necessary for adulthood and emotional balance are acquired (Albarracín & González, 2020). Family bonds generated since childhood, such as attachment and the feeling of protection or safety at home, directly affect the mental health and identity configuration of the adolescent (Duarte-Tánori et al., 2023). Attachment during childhood generates an affective bond between parents and children, serving as a model for their social and emotional relationships throughout their lives (Gladys, 2003).

Previous studies point to the importance of attachment and the correct acquisition of social skills. Gladys (2003) points out that a conflictive family environment generates deficits in social skills, as well as alterations in self-perception and behaviour, causing anxiety. Wang et al. (2019) highlight attachment security as a protective factor for self-harm. Conflicts in the family and negative affectivity are related to self-harming behaviours (Obando et al., 2018). As opposed to healthy parenting with positive affection that acts as a protective factor against distress and self-harm (Duarte-Tánori et al., 2023).

Young people report that the best help a child can receive in dealing with self-harm is to have an environment in which they can talk and be listened to actively without being judged (Berger et al., 2014), and where they have the confidence to talk about this behaviour (Fortune et al., 2008). Young people also report a need for more love, support and care from families, and for them to show more interest in their children's lives (Fortune et al., 2008).

Several studies warn that parents' negative emotional reactions, such as shame, guilt (Ferrey et al., 2015), fear, confusion or prejudice, can increase the child's distress and self-harming behaviour and act as a barrier to asking for help (Hasking et al., 2015). During adolescence, the child continues to need the family as the first support figure in complicated situations (Albarracín & González, 2020). Young people turn to the peer group rather than the family for support, which shows a perceived lack of parental understanding (Hasking et al., 2015). This creates the potential for a copycat effect, increasing the likelihood of self-harm in the peer group (Hasking et al., 2013).

However, some studies indicate that parents do not know how

to deal with self-harm, as they are afraid of encouraging self-harm and feel abandoned in the absence of resources, peer support and information to guide them on how to act (Whitlock et al., 2017), while others are reluctant to seek information because of the taboo of self-harm (Ferrey et al., 2015). Kelada et al. (2016) report that parents do not know how to deal with their children's self-harm, feel insecure and think they do not have the skills to help them. This reveals the importance of efforts to raise awareness so that parents are equipped to help a child with self-harm (Whitlock et al., 2017).

Given the perceived social isolation of young people (Primack et al., 2017) and the uncertainty of a home where there is a lack of communication, the internet becomes a space of refuge and risk related to emotional distress, such as anxiety or depression, which can lead to self-harm (Carbonell et al., 2012); Duarte-Tánori et al., 2023; Ruiz et al., 2023).

Digital communities of children who self-harm have been created on social media (Gustina Sari et al., 2022; Martín Muñoz & Aauri Mezquida, 2024; Martínez-Pastor et al., 2023) where young people show and talk about self-harm, establishing environments that promote this behaviour (Conceição Silva et al., 2021; Hilton, 2016; Khasawneh et al., 2021; Martínez-Pastor et al., 2023).

Some authors believe that digital communities can lead to the normalisation of self-harm (Khasawneh et al., 2021), due to continuous exposure to images and videos of self-harm. Normalisation discourages people from seeking help (Susi et al., 2023), enhances the development of self-harm and increases its frequency due to the imitation effect (Chen et al., 2021; Susi et al., 2023), as the practices shown in the visualised content are reproduced (Memon et al., 2018). Zdanow & Wright (2012) point to the internet as a gateway to self-harm or suicide, given they promote this type of content.

Finally, social media are generating a metalanguage that simplifies words to the minimum expression (Sabando & Rodríguez, 2019), leading young people to configure their own language that only they understand (Martínez-Pastor & Gaete-Salgado, 2023). This affects their ability to relate in the physical world and isolates them increasingly in the digital environment (Nasibova, 2018).

2. Objectives

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- O1: To understand the role of the family environment in terms of emotional well-being and the development of self-harming behaviours in adolescents based on the discourse of experts.
- O2: To research the perspective of professionals regarding the effects of social media on children's mental health and self-harming behaviours.

3. Methodology

This research is based on a qualitative study whereby, through in-depth interviews, we have been able to extensively reflect the discourse of health and social intervention professionals who specialise in children and self-harm. We consider the semi-structured interview to be the most appropriate technique for achieving our research objectives, as through the use of open-ended questions and topics, the experts were able to extensively develop their opinions, knowledge and experiences (Ibarra-Sáiz, 2023), allowing us to obtain a large amount of information with a wide range of nuances. In addition, this technique made it possible to clarify any doubts related to the answers during the process, allowing us to collect comprehensive, accurate and complete information (Díaz-Bravo et al., 2013).

Nineteen interviews were conducted, ten with health professionals (psychologists, child and adolescent psychiatrists, paediatricians and nurses) and nine with social workers and educators. Both specialise in intervention with young people and adolescents, with and without mental disorders (anorexia, bulimia, borderline personality disorder), and their families, both in health centres (primary care, hospitals, day centres, private practices) and in non-profit associations (see Table 1). The selection criteria for this panel of experts, in accordance with the research objectives, were as follows: training and specialisation in adolescents, self-harm and families. Considering that this professional profile has the most knowledge regarding the subject of study.

The experts on this panel belong to two types of institutions: from the field of health and social work/education/psychology. The healthcare professionals are members of institutions such as the Sociedad Internacional de Autolesión, the Spanish Sociedad Española de Médicos de Atención Primaria (SEMERGEN), the Spanish Sociedad Española de Medicina de la Adolescencia (SEMA), the Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Unit of the Department of Psychiatry and Medical Psychology of the Universidad de Navarra Hospital, the Vidal i Barraquer Foundation and the ASISA Centro Médico Caracas. They are also from psychotherapeutic centres: ISNISS Psicología y Formación (ISNISS Psychology and Training), Centro de Psicología Ínsula (Ínsula Psychology Centre), Serendipia Psicólogos (Serendipia Psychologists) and Centro Psicopedagógico Municipal (Municipal Psychopedagogical Centre) (Alcobendas City Council).

The social workers/educators and psychologists work for non-profit associations or foundations focused on caring for children and families in vulnerable situations. The participating associations are: FAD Juventud Foundation, AVIFES, La Rueda Asociación, ACTUA sccl, Asociación Cultural La Kalle, Acción Joven Madrid and Grupo ABD. One person also works at the Centre of Education and Juvenile Detention (CEIMJ) in Zaragoza.

In addition, some interviewees are also academics and lecturers in public and private universities.

Table 1. Panel of experts in health and social intervention

Interviewee name	Profession	Specialisation	Gender	Public/private institution	Location
Health professionals					
Fernando Gallego Mata	Health Psychologist	Adolescence-Families	Male	Serendipia Psicólogos (private)	Madrid (Pozuelo)
Gonzalo García Prado	Social Worker, Doctor of Sociology	Juvenile centres	Male	CEIMJ Zaragoza Univ. Zaragoza (public)	Zaragoza
Miguel Marino Rey	Health Psychologist	Adolescence-Family	Male	Centro de Psicología Ínsula (private)	Madrid
Juan Faura García	Health Psychologist Nurse	Self-harm	Male	President of the Sociedad Internacional de la Autolesión (private)	Madrid
Anna Carrió Llach	Social Worker (in a health centre) Psychologist	Adolescence and community rehabilitation	Female	Sant Andreu Community Rehabilitation Service - Vidal i Barraquer Foundation (public)	Barcelona
Luis Fernando López	Health Psychologist	Self-harm in adolescents	Male	ISNISS Psicología y Formación (private)	Madrid
Azucena Díez Suarez	Psychiatrist	Childhood and Adolescence	Female	Department of Psychiatry and Medical Psychology Clínica Universidad Navarra I (public)	Navarre
Ana Gemma Hernández Osado	Clinical Psychologist	Children and Youth	Female	ASISA Centro Médico Caracas (private)	Madrid
*	Clinical Psychologist	Childhood and Adolescence	Female	Schools (public)	Madrid (Alcobendas)
Luis Rodríguez Molinero	Paediatrician Doctor of Medicine	Adolescent Medicine, accredited by the Spanish Paediatric Association (AEP)	Male	Recoletas-La Marquesina Medical Centre. Sociedad Española Medicina Adolescencia (private)	Valladolid
Xavier Díaz Carrasco	General Practitioner	Family and community medicine	Male	Paediatrics, EAP (psychopedagogical counselling and guidance team) Esparreguera. Catalan Health Service (public). Child and Adolescent Working Group Coordinator SEMERGEN (private)	Barcelona
Verónica Olmo Dorado	General Practitioner	Family and community medicine	Female	Torreblanca Health Centre. Andalusian Health Service (public). Mental Health Working Group Coordinator SEMERGEN (private)	Seville
Social Intervention Professionals					
*	Social Psychologist	Children and families	Female	AVIFES (private)	Bilbao
*	Social and Community Psychologist	Guidance for children and families	Female	FAD Juventud Foundation (private)	Madrid
Judit Cordero Greciano	Social Psychologist	Adolescence-Family	Female	La Rueda Asociación (private)	Madrid
Joan Naharro Via	Social Worker and Educator	Adolescence-Families	Male	ACTUA sccl (private)	Barcelona
Marta Gil Pinel	Social Educator Psychologist	Socio-educational intervention for adolescents at risk of social exclusion	Female	Asociación La Kalle (private)	Madrid
Laura Moreno Rozas	Social Psychologist	Holistic mental health and Drug use	Female	SAE (Specialised Therapeutic Care and Accompaniment Service). Grupo ABD (private)	Madrid
Ildefonso Javier Gómez - Uribarri	Social Psychologist	Adolescent and family social intervention	Male	Acción Joven. Grupo ABD (private)	Madrid

Source: prepared by the authors.

*Note: The names of those professionals who have not consent to publication have been anonymized.

When determining the number of interviews, priority was given to quality rather than quantity, and sufficient variety of discourse was collected in order to reach the saturation level (Pedraz Marcos et al., 2014); Martín-Crespo & Salamanca, 2007).

A database was created with contacts obtained from scientific literature on mental health, adolescence and self-harm,¹ health websites and Spanish medical societies.² Personal contacts of the researchers in terms of child and youth psychologists were also included. A mass email was sent out and respondents were interviewed. All other experts interviewed were found using the "snowballing" technique (identification of informants from networks of contacts of the object of study) (Merriam, 2009). When we conducted an interview, we obtained new contacts.

With the aim of seeking diversity in the discourses, although not a statistical representation of this, we tried to ensure that interviewees were from different areas of Spain (Madrid, Barcelona, Bilbao, Navarre, Zaragoza and Valladolid), and from both public and private institutions, avoiding bias. Additionally, the sample consists of 9 men and 10 women, eliminating gender as a possible source of bias.

Experts were recruited following ethical criteria, informing them of the objectives, process and data processing, with voluntary participation and express consent. The option of public acknowledgement in the final report was offered. The interviews, conducted between March and May 2024, were either face-to-face or online, lasting 90 minutes on average, and in some cases 2 or 2.5 hours.

To create the questionnaire and the response analysis, two thematic areas of interest were established for the study: family and self-harm and social media and children's mental health. The most relevant answers given by the experts for each topic were selected according to the research objectives.

4. Results

4.1 Objective 1: Family environment and self-harming behaviours

Families believe that the more material and financial resources you have, the better you live. However, experts believe this to be a misconception, stating that what creates a comfortable family environment is attention, help and active listening between parents and children.

"There are families that when we ask the parents which school year their child is in, they don't know. I always say: 'you don't know if your child is in year one, two or three?' And they say: 'Er no... I think they're in year two, but I'm not sure' So, of course, when you are dealing with a family where the father doesn't even know what year the child is in at school, you can imagine the level we're at, and the truth is that the parents are more focused on their work than on attending to the needs of the family".

Paediatrician. Sociedad Española de Medicina de la Adolescencia (SEMA)

Young people report that they do not feel accompanied or supported by their families or protected at home.

"When we look at how adolescents are doing at home, there is one very revealing question: Do you feel loved at home? And it's very interesting how almost everyone responds in the same way: 'I don't doubt that my parents love me, but I don't feel loved' So, there is always an emotional background. It's the lack of affection or the lack of expression of that affection that leads us to suffer".

Paediatrician. Sociedad Española de Medicina de la Adolescencia (SEMA)

Families generally seek help when the child has already self-harmed and cuts or blood are found. However, in most cases, parents don't know the reason for the self-harm due to this lack of communication with their children.

In other cases, they haven't even detected the self-harm and simply come because they observe changes in the child's behaviour, but don't know or understand the background to it. There have also been cases where self-harm is detected outside the home, rather than in the family environment, with a friend or one of the friend's parents informing the parents that their child is self-harming.

"Most parents know what it is, but don't know what's behind it. The feeling of loneliness or sadness is often not identified until the self-harm occurs. They also come for cases of bullying that they don't discover until they see the self-harm. But young people don't verbalise that they feel accompanied, they don't feel supported by the family... so the situation of hopelessness leads them to self-harm".

Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychologist. ASISA Centro Médico Caracas.

Family reactions such as a lack of empathy regarding the causes of the child's discomfort are dangerous, as they create a feeling of incomprehension and invalidation in the child, hindering family support and recovery. However, although it is less common, there are also cases where parents provide their children with the right support.

"Self-harm in itself is not the problem, it's the manifestation of the problem. Parents would openly tell you that they are focused on the manifestation of the problem, not the problem itself".

Clinical Psychologist, Specialist in Self-harm. ISNISS Psicología y Formación.

Sometimes, given typical adolescent behaviour, when there is significant suffering, they do not express it, due to shame, guilt, fear of being told off or subjected to control, because there is no habit of communicating with the family, not wanting to scare their parents or simply not knowing how to tell them. Mothers are more empathetic and affectionate than fathers, who tend to be colder and less understanding.

Professionals stress the importance of dedicating quality time to children and providing understanding in order to create a healthy family environment, where it is easy to verbalise negative emotions and provide tools in order to regulate such feelings. This would be a highly preventive formula for self-harm and part of the solution.

"What I have seen that provides the best protection for any adolescent, just like in the case of addictions, is the social network, not social media, but the social network [...] that would boost self-esteem or being more comfortable in your own skin or having someone to share your emotions with".

Health Psychologist. Specialist in Family and Adolescence.
Ínsula Centro Psicología.

Experts point to the importance of developing self-harm awareness programmes for adults that promote a better understanding of the process that children go through.

"Parents don't provide very good support, they do their best to be there, but... they often do more harm than good. They need information and a basic understanding so that they don't slap the child and say "Come on, get studying what you have to and stop hurting yourself"."

Clinical Psychologist, Specialist in Self-harm. ISNISS
Psicología y Formación

4.2 Objective 2: Effects of social media on adolescent mental health

4.2.1 Normalisation of self-harm

Health workers warn of a dangerous normalisation of self-harm by adolescents. Professionals understand that social media have a very important role to play, as we are currently facing an exponential proliferation of online content about self-harm.

Through social media, adolescents have a direct way of connecting with other young people suffering the same discomfort who suggest self-harm as an escape route. Many of them discover it in this way as a tool for emotional regulation, leading to an imitation effect.

"I remember a girl aged 10 or 11 who started self-harming during the pandemic because someone on a social network told her that it could be a good idea, that it might help [...] When we looked at her screen time, we saw that she was spending 14-18 hours a day on the internet, at the age of 10. We told the parents to remove all screens and encouraged them to buy a puppy, and that solved everything. She was cured. It's a full-blown sociological case".

Psychiatrist, Specialist in Children and Adolescents.
Universidad de Navarra Hospital.

The highly personalised algorithm of social media exclusively displays content that may be of interest to the child based on their behaviour on the internet (Macías, 2023), so if the adolescent consumes content about self-harm, the network will forward similar content to them. As a result, people who

consume self-harm content automatically receive more self-harm content, and with increasing frequency (Macías, 2023).

"The content I see on TikTok is not everything on TikTok, but is based on what I have searched for and what the algorithm interprets as being of interest to me [...] TikTok can push over-normalisation through encapsulation. If it only shows a certain type of content, I will easily perceive this as more normal than it really is".

Social Worker and Educator. Asociación ACTUA sccl.

4.2.2 Poorer social skills

According to experts, another harmful effect of social media on adolescents is related to the complex process of developing and learning social skills.

On the net, communication develops through emoticons, stickers, memes, acronyms, abbreviations or codes, lacking the basic structure that gives depth to what we think and express. A language that does not allow us to communicate and express ourselves in complex, articulated language. According to experts, this underdevelopment of language is having serious consequences for adolescents, who are unable to express their emotions through words:

"Self-harm is the only way for them to communicate the pain they feel through the boundaries of their skin, which they are unable to express through words. It is a form of creative communication, the only way they have found to be able to express what is happening to them".

Clinical Psychologist, Specialist in self-harm. ISNISS
Psicología y Formación

However, the current dumbing down of language is affecting the mental health of our adolescents. Therefore, many young people that self-harm have coping problems and no previous pathologies.

"Tomorrow's adults are going to lack the communication and coping skills to deal with the challenges life is going to throw at them. Because the question is not whether life will hit them in the face, but when. And when this does happen, if they don't have the skills to deal with it, we're going to have a population at very, very high risk".

Clinical Psychologist, Specialist in self-harm. ISNISS
Psicología y Formación

The difficulty for the adolescent of expressing themselves through words enhances their sense of isolation, reducing face-to-face social relations and enclosing them in the virtual setting they feel comfortable in. This makes it difficult for them to build strong friendship networks to support them in bad times, which is a risk factor for self-harm.

"There is an involution of the language that is hindering processes that were already established and it's not decreasing, rather it's increasing more and more".

Clinical Psychologist, Specialist in Self-harm. ISNISS
Psicología y Formación

4.2.3 Digital communities and false companionship that foster feelings of loneliness among young people

Many adolescents who self-harm turn to social media to find companionship and peer groups. These groups validate self-harm, as the topic of conversation is not about looking at alternatives, but about seeing how others self-harm.

"TikTok will encourage you to keep posting videos by showing you how many views you have or the impact of your discourse on other people, giving you a false sense of projection and bonding, and this can be very dangerous for self-harm".

Social Worker and Educator. Asociación ACTUA sccl.

Social media are causing a rapid transition in the way young people self-harm. Previously, self-harm occurred alone, in private, and the person hid their suffering and behaviour. Currently, the concealment of self-harm occurs in the real world, but in the virtual space it becomes completely public. Adolescents are turning the behaviour almost into an act of bonding whereby self-harm is romanticised. They are two very different ways of engaging in the same behaviour, and the change is due to digital socialisation, according to experts.

"It gives the sense that the fear of self-harm is removed, or of somebody coming out of the closet, so it has become something that is easier to share than it used to be".

Social worker and educator. Asociación ACTUA sccl.

In these groups, young people create their own language, which identifies them and is known only to them, in order to maintain the exclusivity and intimacy of the group, which acts as a place of refuge for them.

"I have seen WhatsApp messages that remind me of the cryptic language used by the military when they send messages to each other so that no one understands what they are saying. At that level they are [...] the metalanguages or neolanguages of young people on social media are part of their idiosyncrasy. For them it is a way of protecting themselves, so that nobody knows what is happening to them, or only my buddy knows, the one I love, the one I like, the one who understands me and is there for me, but neither my father, nor the professional, nor the journalist, nor anyone else is going to know anything [...] They communicate secretly in search of a place of refuge in that network [...] and the intimacy that the group is completely theirs".

Paediatrician. Sociedad Española de Medicina de la Adolescencia (SEMA)

However, what really protects and supports any adolescent are secure and quality bonds, in family and friendships. Social media and the internet should be used as a complement and for information seeking, not as an end in itself.

"The person will stop self-harming when they no longer need to do so, i.e. when other structures appear that allow the suffering that the self-harm symbolises to be contained".

Social Worker and Educator. Asociación ACTUA sccl.

4.2.4 Social media addiction

Experts warn of the addictive effect of social media and their consequences. Social media fall into the category of so-called non-substance addictions, producing mechanisms in the brain that are very similar to those of drugs by activating the release of dopamine, a hormone that activates the pleasure mechanisms.

"We have had patients admitted for screen detoxification and circadian rhythm recovery because they may not have left their room for 2 years, not going to school, not talking to anyone; they only talked to online therapists".

Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist. Universidad de Navarra Hospital

They warn of the importance of raising social awareness of the danger we are putting young people in when we put them in front of a screen from a very early age:

"It is a very delicate age, and society as a whole, families and schools must take this into account in order to protect young people because they are more sensitive"

Paediatrician. Sociedad Española Medicina de la Adolescencia (SEMA)

5. Discussion

Experts stress the importance of the role of the family in the emotional well-being of young people. Parents have less and less time to talk to their children, a perception also echoed by Gladys (2003), although this author associates the decrease in family interaction time with the increasing distances between work and home, and the time this entails.

This decrease in the time available for parents to dedicate to their children is causing the family to no longer be a space for communication, active listening and attention to the problems and needs of the children, leading young people to feel neither supported nor protected by their families. This is why, according to experts, many parents do not know that their child is unwell until they discover they are self-harming. This fits with young people with this behaviour preferring to talk to friends rather than their parents as they feel misunderstood by them (Hasking et al., 2015), and with young people demanding more love and a demonstration of greater parental interest in their lives (Fortune et al., 2008). This situation produces strong emotional suffering in young people, as detected in the interventions of the professionals we interviewed.

For a child to grow up with good mental health, professionals warn of the essential need for the family to be a warm space where a secure and non-judgmental attachment is fostered from childhood as a protective factor against emotional distress and self-harm (Duarte-Tánori et al., 2023). Invalidation of children's discomfort or parental reactions such as guilt or shame are a major barrier to their recovery, and may even enhance self-harming behaviour, which was also observed by Hasking et al. (2015).

Therefore, in order to facilitate the de-stigmatisation of self-harm and mental health problems, experts are pointing out the urgent need to implement programmes that inform adults of this issue, and the important role that the family can play in such behaviours either developing or being prevented. This claim, based on the experience of professionals, is consistent with studies indicating that parents do not know how to deal with self-harm and lack resources to guide them (Whitlock et al., 2017).

The estrangement that young people feel from their parents increases their feeling of loneliness (Primack et al., 2017), leading them to seek companionship in social media. However, experts warn of a number of harmful effects on young people's mental health resulting from their use. As also indicated by several empirical studies, they alter the emotional balance of the young person, enhancing states of anxiety or depression, and may promote self-harm as a strategy for regulating discomfort (Duarte-Tánori et al., 2023; Moss et al., 2023; Ruiz et al., 2023). However, other work shows social media as positive spaces, as they promote social interaction between young people (Alhassan & Pennington, 2021) and reduce feelings of isolation (Moss et al., 2023).

According to experts, social media are normalising self-harm, making it desirable and even a sign of identity among teenagers, as a result of their algorithmic design. This perspective is consistent with the literature, which indicates that continuous exposure to self-harm content online can normalise this behaviour and be a gateway to it (Khasawneh et al., 2021; Zdanow & Wright, 2012).

Young people who self-harm share their cases with peers, giving rise to digital communities around this behaviour (Martín Muñoz & Atauri Mezquida, 2024). From a professional point of view, this poses a great risk for young people, as it enhances the imitation effect and complicates therapeutic treatment, which begins by understanding self-harm as a risk. The studies by Susi et al. (2023) and Chen et al. (2021) support this perception by pointing to the normalisation of NSSH as a deterrent to psychological help and an enhancer of the imitation effect.

In digital communities, young people seek support and understanding (Martínez-Pastor et al., 2023). However, professionals warn that companionship through social media is not true companionship. Young people have a sense of being accompanied, but when they have a problem in the real world they are alone, that company is not there (Nasibova, 2018). Furthermore, they consider that these communities focus on self-harming behaviour, rather than on ways to stop it, and encourage young people to self-harm more and more seriously and frequently, as a result of the dictatorship of the *like* (Martín Critikián & Medina Núñez, 2021). However, some studies conclude that digital communities benefit young people by providing a place of support (Alhassan & Pennington, 2021). This may be because this study only analyses content uploaded by young people to Twitter, but taking into account that the virtual world is full of untruths, perhaps knowing the effects of

this interaction in the physical space could have changed the conclusions.

Professionals warn of the harmful effects of the high simplification of language in social media (Narciso et al., 2024). Adolescents are being affected in terms of the acquisition of social skills such as communication, conflict resolution or emotional expression, as they lack the necessary language. This means that young people are increasingly rejecting the physical world and becoming more immersed in the virtual world, as they understand it and are better able to deal with it, thus increasing their social isolation. This observation is consistent with findings from other research, which indicate that frequent use of social networking sites generates antisocial behaviour in young people, reduces the time spent on other activities, such as physical social interactions or sporting activities, decreases their public contact and enhances depressive states (Batool et al., 2023; Erreygers et al., 2017).

Therefore, for health and social education professionals, social media are an important risk factor for adolescent mental health and self-harm, given the number of harmful effects they have on young people, which may alter their emotional well-being; a perspective corroborated by the empirical data provided by multiple studies in the literature (Duarte-Tánori et al., 2023; García, 2017; Lira et al., 2017; López-Iglesias et al., 2023; Martín & Chaves, 2022; Martín Critikián & Medina Núñez, 2021).

6. Conclusions

Digital socialisation without a conscious and consistent regulation of the negative effects of online browsing is putting our young people in a serious position of vulnerability and danger to their health. Therefore, it is striking that, despite the scientific evidence, there is still no regulation that effectively reduces the risks of online browsing for young people and avoids content about self-harm.

Experts warn that our young people are already suffering the serious consequences of their addictive exposure to social media. An exposure they say could be avoided by greatly limiting access to mobile phones, implementing educational programmes that provide tools for a more conscious use of the internet, promoting psycho-affective education and creating family environments that teach how healthy and enriching physical social interaction is from childhood, so that the child learns to love and desire this type of interaction, seeing the physical rather than the virtual space as a place of greater protection.

7. Limitations and future lines of research

We came up against certain methodological limitations related to the number of interviews conducted, as a larger number

would have possibly provided more variability in terms of the responses. We also faced the limitations of a qualitative study, namely the lack of representativeness. This expert panel could be implemented at national level, thus providing a more representative view of the perception of health professionals. As future lines of research, we suggest the study of NSSH in other possible targets, such as: the prison population, women who are victims of gender-based violence or the elderly. Another possible line of research would be to work with young people with NSSH and see if their experiences coincide with the professional perception.

Notes

- 1 Some sources consulted: Faura-García et al., 2022; Vázquez López et al., 2023; Vázquez Fernández et al., 2014.
- 2 Links, websites and companies consulted, in Table 1. Other sources: [Sociedad Española Urgencias Pediatría](#) | [LOGPSIC-Centros Psicología y Logopedia](#) | [Sociedad Española Psiquiatría y Salud Mental](#) | [Hospital Sant Joan de Déu](#) | [Hospital Infantil Niño Jesús](#) | [El Neuropediatra](#).

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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*, *aplauzo*, *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

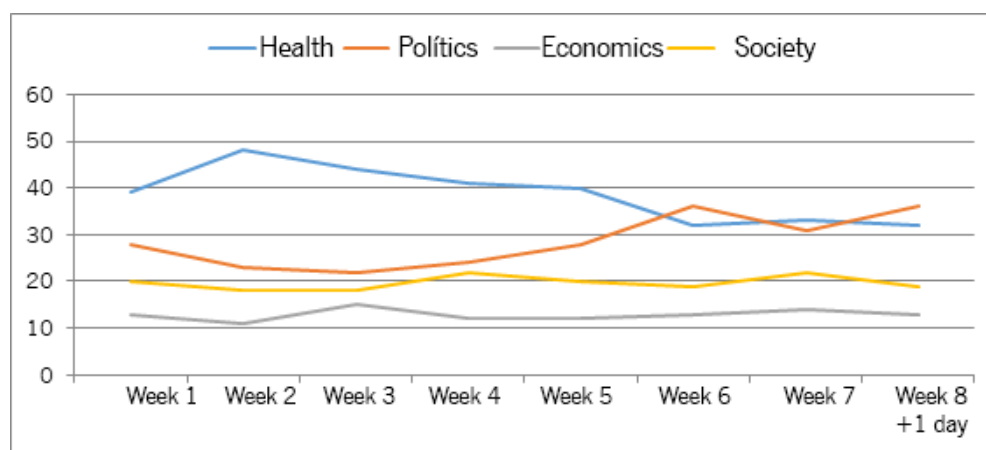
examined the evolution of terms related to the disease in the period leading up to the lockdown. It is also part of broader research into television content in Spain.

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

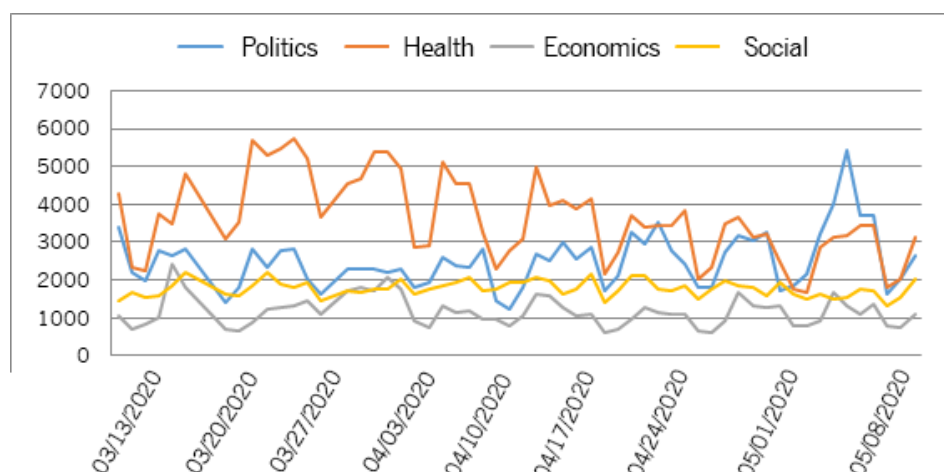
Political Terms	Gobierno* (Government)	Acuerdo* (Agreement)	Presidente* (President)	Alarma (Alarm)	Prórroga (Extension)	Comunidad* (Community)	Congreso (Congress)	Ministro* (Ministry)	Desescalada (Easing of restrictions)	Partido* (Party)
Telecinco	6919	1950	2525	2964	461	4559	639	3227	1245	1427
Antena 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.

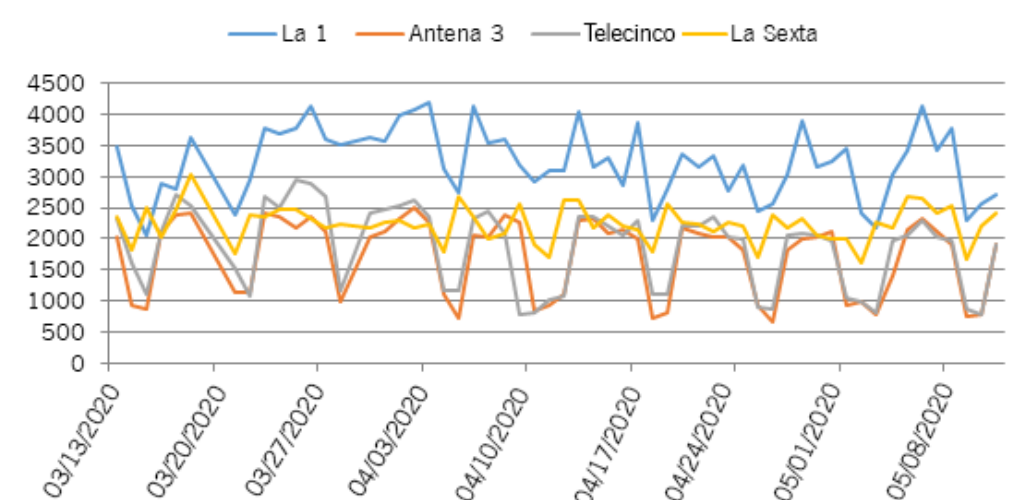
Source: Author.

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.

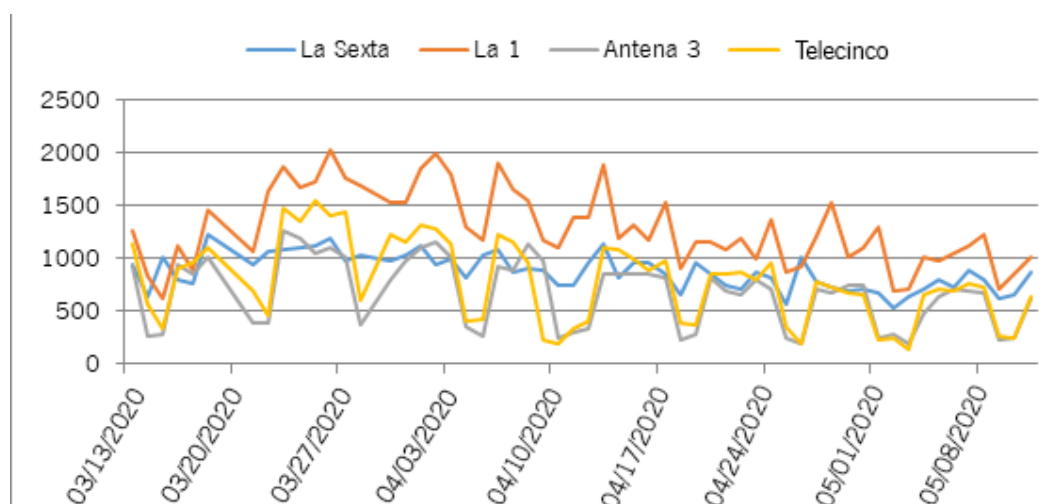
In terms of trends over time, mentions evolved similarly across all four channels, as shown in Graph 4, which focuses

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).

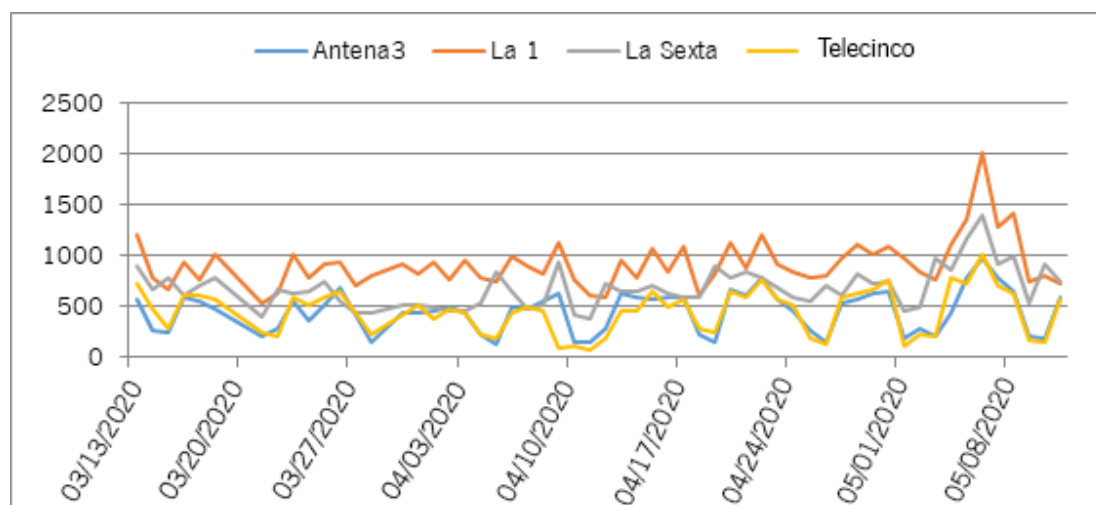
A decline in coronavirus-related content began during the week of 4 April, before the announcement of the start of the easing of restrictions. This drop coincided with the reduction in the number of coronavirus-related deaths in Spain.

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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The health crisis in infotainment shows. Analysis of Pablo Motos' monologues in *El Hormiguero 3.0: Quédate en casa*

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Abstract

This research is based on the analysis of Pablo Motos' monologues on the television show El Hormiguero 3.0: Quédate en casa, aired during the months of lockdown and COVID-19 restrictions (03/23/2020 – 06/22/2020). Through the use of content analysis and by evaluating their informative and social relevance, 11 of the presenter's opening monologues were assessed to observe how an infotainment show tackles the coverage of health information within the context of a global pandemic. All the monologues analysed are centred around the development and consequences of the pandemic. The results of the research reinforce the perceived status of Pablo Motos as an opinion leader and television coach, who assumes the role of expert on social and welfare issues, with his discourse focussed on mental health, yet without relying on authoritative scientific sources.

Keywords

El Hormiguero, COVID-19, infotainment, mental health, late-night, monologue.

Resum

La investigació es basa en l'anàlisi dels monòlegs de Pablo Motos a El Hormiguero 3.0: Quédate en casa, durant els mesos de confinament i les restriccions per la COVID-19 (23/03/2020 - 22/06/2020). A través de l'anàlisi de contingut i valorant-ne la rellevància informativa i social, s'han estudiat 11 discursos inicials del presentador amb l'objectiu d'observar com un espai d'infoentreteniment aborda la presentació de la informació en salut en un context de pandèmia mundial. Totes les peces prenen com a punt de partida el desenvolupament i les conseqüències de la pandèmia. Els resultats reforcen la idea de Pablo Motos com a líder d'opinió i coach televisiu que assumeix un paper d'expert en matèria sociosanitària. En la mateixa línia, centra el discurs en la salut mental, sense basar-se en fonts científiques d'autoritat.

Paraules clau

El Hormiguero, COVID-19, infoentreteniment, salut mental, late night, monòleg.

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1. Introduction

This research is based on the analysis of how health and welfare information is covered by the television show *El Hormiguero*, by focussing on the opening monologues of its host. Based on the programme *No somos nadie* by M-80 Radio, *El Hormiguero* first premiered on the Cuatro channel in 2006, and today continues to be aired on Antena 3. As noted by Gascón and Marta-Lazo (2015), it is the first Spanish programme to have won a Rose d'Or award on several occasions, as well as the Premio Nacional de Televisión [National Television Award] from the Spanish Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport for "its innovative nature as a family entertainment programme", and "its contribution to the Spanish audiovisual industry and international reach" (La Vanguardia, 4 April 2016). This success is also reflected in the programme's ratings, which have seen it ranked among the most-watched shows on Spanish television for many years. This fact also applies to the year 2020, when it achieved a 14.9% audience share (Espinell, Producción Audiovisual, 3 January 2021).

Since it first premiered, *El Hormiguero* ["The Anthill"] has been regarded in all studies on neo-television, infotainment and genre hybridisation as one of the prime examples of the blend between entertainment and information, "understanding the latter in the broadest sense of media current affairs" (Gordillo et al., 2011, p. 101), and a programme in which "sensationalism far exceeds the information". "The common thread of *El Hormiguero* is the childlike amusement on which information on current affairs hangs, be it to a greater or lesser extent serious, formal, grave or cautious" (Gordillo et al., 2011, p. 102). In research, various classifications have been proposed to describe hybrid formats that combine information and entertainment. The taxonomy proposed by Gordillo et al. (2011) distinguishes between three models found in the sub-genre of entertainment: satirical news, metatelevision and the variety show. *El Hormiguero* falls under the latter category, as it is based on the magazine show model while incorporating aspects of current affairs treated superficially and with humour. The show revolves mainly around its star presenter, Pablo Motos, and features fixed segments and collaborators, each with a specific, rotating role (Gascón-Vera and Marta-Lazo, 2019). In their study of politainment television, Martín, Vázquez and Cebrián (2017) build upon these aforementioned classifications by considering the relative weight given to information and entertainment. They distinguish between two types of formats: one that is more focused on politics, and the other where political content takes a backseat to entertainment. *El Hormiguero* forms part of this second group, in being a programme whose primary focus is entertainment. It "features on-set interviews with political leaders and regularly includes political content, albeit presented in a decontextualised manner, interspersed with light-hearted topics and characters" (Martín et al., 2017, p. 67).

Due to the socio-health crisis caused by the COVID pandemic, the programme's access prime-time broadcasting

slot was suspended following the state of emergency declared on 14 March 2020. The slot was replaced by a special news programme hosted by Vicente Vallés, which discussed the ongoing developments of COVID-19 with input from experts. *El Hormiguero* resumed broadcasting on 23 March under the name *El Hormiguero 3.0: Quédate en casa* ["Stay at home"], adapting its format to comply with health restrictions. This included respecting social distancing regulations and reducing the number of on-set crew members (camera operators, producers, floor managers, etc.). The number of collaborators was also cut down, leading to the creation of a new segment called "La tertulia". This section, which has remained a part of the show, featured the presenter along with three rotating co-hosts who discussed current affairs, politics and humorous themes during the pandemic. During the health crisis, guest interviews were conducted by video link with the presenter and the show's regular ant puppets. There was no live audience, a measure that was also adopted by other competing formats.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Infotainment

The term infotainment is a portmanteau of the words *information* and *entertainment*, used to describe a format that blurs the distinction between two traditional media functions — informing and entertaining — in a concept that initially emerged in television (Postman, 2005). Infotainment was integrated into the medium in three main ways: by incorporating soft news into traditional news programmes, addressing serious news topics in entertainment shows, and airing parody programmes that focus on current affairs (Berrocal, Redondo, Martín and Campos, 2014). In the 1990s, academics also coined the term *political infotainment* or *politainment*, to describe the fusion of political news and entertainment. According to Berrocal (2017), this phenomenon involves presenting political information in a superficial, sensationalised, parodic or humorous manner, in an approach which, although particularly prevalent in television, can be found across all media.

The stylistic elements of infotainment can be classified into four key components: thematic preferences, selection and handling of information sources, technical characteristics and narrative style. Therefore, "when discussing infotainment, it is essential to consider both the content of the message and the way in which it is presented" (Aguilera, 2019, p. 32). This is evident in the case of *El Hormiguero*, which incorporates many of these stylistic features, such as the inclusion of post-production effects, editing to accentuate sensational elements, and the use of music — a feature that "plays a very important role from the beginning of the programme with the team's dance" (Gascón-Vera and Marta-Lazo, 2019, p. 10). Additionally, the use of lower thirds and the development of informal interviews which blend questions with humour and games are also prominent.

The presenter becomes “co-protagonist in each of the sections of the programme. His narrative style is characterised by spontaneity, sarcasm, sentimentality and, above all, humour” (Berrocal et al., 2014, p. 99).

2.2 The presentation of health issues on television

Television has become a key platform for transmitting scientific knowledge to the public and for shaping scientific culture in society, acting as an intermediary between the scientific community and the general audience. As one of the most socially influential media, television also becomes a double-edged sword when tackling health issues: this subject, which demands a documented and rigorous approach, stands in contrast with the reality that television often gives voice to “opinion leaders who lack the preparation or sufficient information to discuss topics that could potentially jeopardise quality of life or promote unhealthy habits” (Domínguez Lázaro, 2010, p. 123). This approach is incompatible with the social responsibility inherent in the medium, which should apply to all types of television formats, whether informative or not.

Although health and illness are popular topics on television, health is rarely given its own specific space or independent coverage (Revuelta, 2006). In Spain, in fact, there is no tradition of television programmes specifically dedicated to health (European Commission, 2002). The only exception lies in certain morning shows where issues related to well-being, including medical and health matters, are loosely addressed and —until its cessation in 2014— a single popular science programme, *Redes*, which aired during off-peak hours on La 2 (Grosso Messa, 2014).

Health communication messages exist within a broader context than just the media itself: they transcend the media to become part of our social representations (Nahón, 1994), shaping the way the public perceives and understands health and medical science. As a result, the health of the general population is closely related to their access to and use of health information transmitted through this medium; information that “often relies on sources with little expertise and heavily influenced by political demands” (Revuelta, 2006, p. 208).

2.3 How *El Hormiguero* tackles issues of health and science

Health issues rarely receive a specific space or independent coverage in the media. When it does appear, the information is often presented by professionals with little expertise (Revuelta, 2006). Moreover, although the general public acknowledges that this type of content is a priority for them, they also admit to feeling inadequately or poorly informed on the subject (FECYT, 2020). Additionally, the dissemination of health information often tends to be highly influenced by political demands (Revuelta, 2006). Therefore, the inherent nature of *El Hormiguero* as an infotainment show, which also falls under the broader spectrum of politicised magazines, makes its approach to the health crisis particularly noteworthy.

Television in Spain serves as one of the main channels for accessing information on science and technology (FECYT, 2020), and as San Sebastián Ikutza (2015, p. 11) states, “a television programme can explain concepts that initially seem unappealing in an engaging way”. During the pandemic, television sought to address science and health issues with the aim of offering rigorous, useful information (Pueyo, 2022), in a context where the information provided by public institutions could have been more substantial (Cascón et al., 2021). This is also true of infotainment spaces.

Since *El Hormiguero* first aired, science and technology have occupied an important space in the programme, initially through what was known as the “Espacio de Flipy” (“Flipy’s Space”) —which originally referred to the nickname of the segment’s presenter, but which has subsequently been hosted by various collaborators such as the Hombre de Negro (Man in Black) (Gascón Vera, 2016). This segment has covered topics ranging from chemistry to medicine, as well as showcasing all sorts of scientific and technological advances and curiosities, always with a distinctly entertaining tone and related to current affairs. Its influence has been so significant that previous research has used this segment as a model to explore whether there is a correlation between television programmes with scientific content and attitudes towards subjects like Physics (Moya Guirao and García Molina, 2013). With the arrival of *El Hormiguero 3.0: Quédate en casa*, however, health took centre-stage within this focus on scientific dissemination, through the opening monologues of Pablo Motos.

In the context of a pandemic where medical information and its political connotations were at their utmost relevance, it is crucial to examine the extent to which television shows such as *El Hormiguero* provide accurate coverage of health topics, as even in medical matters “the media agenda influences the issues considered important by the receiving society” (Revuelta, 2006, p. 203). The programme’s capacity for influence became evident from the very first day of its return to the airwaves (23 March), when *El Hormiguero 3.0* became the leader of its time slot and the most-watched episode of the year (eldiario.es, 24 March 2020), with 3.6 million viewers and an 18.1% audience share.

2.4 The television monologue as a prime-time tool for humour

Since the inception of *El Hormiguero*, the monologue has been a segment in which, as the creators themselves describe it, Pablo Motos offers “a unique perspective of the news”. This monologue can be considered a hybrid between two distinct formats: stand-up comedy—a variation of the comic monologue imported from the United States—and the opening monologue of late-night shows (Gordillo et al., 2011, p. 101).

The first type, stand-up comedy, is a form of entertainment that transitioned from the stages of small clubs to the television screen. Its greatest exponent in Spain was *El Club de la Comedia* [“The Comedy Club”], which began on Canal+ (1999–2000) and went on to be aired on various different channels

such as *La 1* (2003), *Telecinco* (2001) and *Antena 3* (2004-2005) (Ríos Carratalá, 2009). The second type, the opening monologue from late-night shows, is, along with interviews, one of the key components of the "late show" format. This format was also solidified in the United States in the mid-20th century with NBC's *The Tonight Show*, and later made its way to Spain in 1994 with the programme *Estamos todos locos* by Pepe Navarro on Antena 3 (Nogués and Rodríguez, 2021).

As Gómez Martínez (2005) highlights in his analysis of the monologues from *El Club de la Comedia*, these monologues follow a common structure based on the principles of classical rhetorical discourse: they begin with an introduction to a theme or subject (exordium), followed by the argument or narration, which includes digressions such as examples, models and commonplaces, and ultimately lead to a conclusion. Meanwhile, in the case of stand-up comedy, American comedian Jerry Seinfeld defines it as "a humorous reflection of reality, viewed from a distance, that creates a sense of identification and with it the laughter of the audience" (Castellón Alcalá, 2008, p. 487). Reflecting these thoughts, Castellón Alcalá (2008, p. 487) also emphasises that between the audience and monologist "a harmony of understanding and camaraderie must be established, creating an informal atmosphere of companionship".

The monologist uses a series of different mechanisms to achieve this connection: continuous engagement with the audience, breaking the fourth wall, and the use of so-called rhetorical *figures of communion*, through which the speaker aims to create or reinforce a bond with the audience. Ultimately, the monologue is a genre of person-to-audience communication with a prewritten script, but performed in a seemingly improvised manner, maintaining an informal tone and addressing topics that are relatable to everyone (Ruiz Gurillo, 2019).

3. Aims

This research aims to analyse how the coverage of COVID-19 was tackled through this politicised magazine show, taking into account the specific features of the programme.

Just as the media can influence the perpetuation of pseudo-treatments linked to COVID-19 or fuel the political conflicts surrounding health measures, the scientific and apolitical coverage of the issue by platforms with extensive reach, such as *El Hormiguero*, could also play a crucial role in shaping the dissemination of ideas about the pandemic on various levels.

This research was guided by the following aims:

- To assess the monologues for characteristics related to infotainment.
- To observe how health policy is presented.
- To identify the types of arguments most commonly used.
- To examine the appeals made during the monologues.
- To analyse references to COVID-19, both direct and indirect.
- To observe the inclusion of health advice.
- To observe the use or absence of expert scientific sources.

The study of Pablo Motos' monologues between March and June 2020 aims to address the following research questions:

- What kind of arguments are most commonly used?
- How does a television programme connect with the audience in the context of lockdown?
- Does the coverage of the pandemic retain the political component typical of a politicised news magazine?
- How is COVID-19 referenced in a comedy/entertainment monologue?
- How important are reflections on health policy in the context of the programme?
- Does the presenter offer medical advice for coping with the situation of lockdown?
- Is this advice based on scientific sources?

Finally, this study proposes two hypotheses: Firstly, that *El Hormiguero*, and more specifically the opening monologues of its host, Pablo Motos, favoured political confrontation related to health measures during the pandemic, at a time of high television consumption and on a prime-time programme with maximum audience reach (H^1). The second hypothesis (H^2) proposes that Pablo Motos' monologues revealed unscientific attitudes and references to pseudo-treatments, including those related to mental health.

4. Methodology

The monologues were assessed using content analysis, considered the method par excellence for evaluating messages (Igartua and Humanes, 2004). Content analysis can be understood as an interpretative procedure applied to a communicative product—in this case, texts—that enables the extraction of both quantitative and statistical data as well as qualitative insights by assessing a combination of categories (Piñuel, 2002). To achieve this, the research draws on works with a similar approach, such as the analysis of Eva Hache's monologues conducted by Ruiz Gurillo (2015).

The categories selected for analysis and quantification can range from more external and formal aspects (both quantitative and qualitative, which are always measurable), to more conceptual elements such as the speakers, the concepts expressed, etc. (Yelo Díaz, 2002). To this effect, an analysis sheet was created featuring variables that provide data on formal aspects, such as the broadcast date and duration of the monologue, as well as the set design and format in which the opening monologue of the programme takes place. Other variables are also included that refer to more conceptually driven aspects, such as:

- The topic of the monologue.
- The type of arguments used (authoritative, factual, statistical or data-related, personal experience, health, emotional/affective, ethical, existential, generalisation or historical facts).

- Direct appeals (to viewers, politicians, emotions or common sense).
- References to COVID-19 (both direct and indirect).
- The inclusion of psychological advice.
- The use of expert scientific sources.

By combining the collected quantitative and qualitative data for subsequent analysis and interpretation to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research objective, the content analysis applied in this study could be considered a hybrid research methodology (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007; Molina-Azorín, 2012). For this study, a two-stage explanatory design method was selected (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). Firstly, content analysis was employed to collect quantitative data through the use of the analysis sheet. The second stage focused on qualitative analysis, with the goal of describing and exploring the defined categories to gain a deeper understanding of the object of study (Guerrero Bejarano, 2016). To this end, an intentional, nonprobability sampling method was chosen, as it allows Pablo Motos' discourse on the programme to be correlated with current affairs during the selected period, thereby facilitating qualitative analysis and the formulation of inferences in the second phase.

The sample selected for the analysis of COVID-19 coverage in *El Hormiguero* consists of Pablo Motos' monologues from 11 of the 53 programmes broadcast during the season, each of which is linked to a significant milestone in the pandemic, as outlined in figure 1.

5. Results and discussion

Pablo Motos' monologues in *El Hormiguero* serve as the opening of the programme and follow a consistent formal structure across the analysed speeches. They usually begin with a greeting followed by a 20-30 second advertisement, and the monologue

lasts an average of 6 minutes. One of the distinguishing features of Pablo Motos' opening speech, compared to other monologues in similar programmes like Buenafuente's *Late Motiv*, is the presenter's interaction with the three collaborators present on set and the ant puppets. Generally, comedy monologues on television rely on the reactions of the live audience, with whom the monologist interacts, thereby shaping the discourse (Gómez Martínez, 2005). In this case, as there is no live audience due to COVID restrictions, it is the collaborators who provide feedback to the presenter and highlight the funny or curious aspects of the speech.

With regard to another of the formal elements analysed, the set design, the most common structure features Pablo Motos standing in front of the desk dressed in formal attire (i.e., a suit jacket), accompanied by the ants and three collaborators. Once the monologue ends, these collaborators are the ones with whom the chat show takes place. This presentation structure occurs in 54% of the monologues analysed. In contrast, in only three of the monologues does the presenter appear in casual attire (i.e., just wearing a shirt). One of these instances is on 22 June, considered the date of return to the "new normal", when the audience returns to the set, thus conveying an image of liberation and comfort.

All the monologues analysed share a common topic: the discussion of the mental health or emotional well-being of the audience during the lockdown period caused by the pandemic. In these speeches, Pablo Motos adopts the attitude of a coach, and assumes the role of an expert on the subject, offering advice intended to alleviate the potential effects of the pandemic on his audience's mental health.

73% of the monologues mention COVID-19 or related topics (pandemic, confinement, virus, etc.). However, these mentions are usually made indirectly, avoiding direct references to the virus itself. In some cases, the pandemic situation is even overlooked, and the monologue shifts focus to a general call for well-being or hope. This approach moves away from the health

Figure 1. Monologues selected for the research sample

DATE	COVID NEWS
Monday 03/23/2020	First programme after the state of emergency is declared.
Thursday 04/09/2020	Second extension of the state of emergency.
Wednesday 04/22/2020	Third extension of the state of emergency.
Tuesday 04/28/2020	Approval of the lockdown de-escalation strategy.
Wednesday 05/06/2020	Fourth extension of the state of emergency.
Thursday 05/14/2020	In Barcelona, Madrid and urban areas of Castile and León, restrictions are eased for phase 0. 14 autonomous communities are in phase 1 and 4 islands in phase 2.
Wednesday 05/20/2020	Fifth extension of the state of emergency.
Monday 06/01/2020	Spanish government hands over the management of phase 3 to the autonomous communities.
Wednesday 06/03/2020	Sixth and final extension of the state of emergency
Monday 06/08/2020	52% of Spaniards enter phase 3.
Monday 06/22/2020	Beginning of the "new normal".

Source: Own work.

and social-political context, using euphemisms or particularly sensitive anecdotes to soften the reality, for example: “We came back because we felt it was important for people not to lose hope” (06/22/2020); “I want to tell you about two life lessons that I know to be true and that I learned on the same day” (06/05/2020); “Our mental hygiene is very bad (...) just as you take a shower on the outside, you can also wash on the inside” (06/08/2020).

With regard to the political management of the pandemic—one of the topics we might expect to be addressed in an infotainment programme—this matter is hardly given any direct mentions. Only on 22 April 2020 does the presenter refer to the incompetence of politicians, in a speech where he points out that the pandemic exposes “all that is false”, using as an example “politicians who pretend to be competent, but are not”. Mentions of health policy are also rare; the only reference of this kind occurs in the monologue on the return to normality (06/22/20), when he refers to the “indecent protective equipment” with which healthcare workers had to contend with COVID-19. On the other hand, there is a constant stream of health advice that may impact on public health and which is not supported by authoritative scientific sources: “No doctor can offer a pill as good as sport” (04/09/2020); “You listen, you breathe and the anguish goes away” (06/08/2020).

In these speeches focused on the emotional well-being of the audience, Pablo Motos assumes the role of coach to such an extent that, in one of the monologues (04/09/2020), he conducts meditation exercises. During this moment, his interaction with the viewing public reaches its peak as he seeks to break the fourth wall. These meditation exercises led by the presenter are conducted without the involvement of any professional in the field or any reference to the sources from which the exercises are derived.

In Motos' words, “the basis of all these techniques is just listening (...) the trick is to breathe” (04/09/2020). These assertions are supported through his own personal reflections and anecdotes, such as: “A friend told me...” (06/01/2020); and

“You will feel better, your clothes will fit better” (04/09/2020). In this same vein, the most frequently used arguments are those of a personal nature, occurring in 91% of the cases. For example, in the monologue of 23 March 2020, the first of the initial lockdown, Motos states: “I have started to write a personal diary (...) you might also be interested in doing so”. It can be observed, therefore, that psychological advice is common, and, in fact, is the focus of 100% of the monologues analysed. Some of this advice is more in-depth and practical in nature, such as offering steps for meditation or explaining certain physical exercises supposedly linked to mental health (e.g., 06/08/2020). Others are more focussed on emotional well-being, such as when, based on his own anecdotes, he advises the audience to avoid nasty arguments or to stay active in order to seize opportunities (e.g., 05/06/2020). However, contrary to what would be expected when addressing a particularly relevant and stigma-prone health issue, this advice is only supported by expert scientific sources in three of the eleven monologues analysed. In the rest of them, Motos serves as the only source, relying exclusively on his personal experience to offer advice such as “right now it is important to create physical fatigue so that there is moral fatigue” (04/09/2020).

Affective arguments, which appeal to the emotions of the audience, also feature in 91% of the monologues. Pablo Motos constantly uses verbs and adjectives related to grief, terror and struggle, introducing lapidary phrases such as “hope is destructive”. After these two types of arguments, the third most frequent, appearing in 72% of the monologues, are those based on generalisations, such as “we have all been very afraid” (06/22/2020).

In contrast, arguments supported by authoritative sources are found in only 27% of the monologues, such as when citing the work of Michael Gazzaniga (06/01/2020). These expert sources often come from self-help books and are frequently misquoted or mispronounced, as seen when referring to psychologist Guy Winch. On other occasions, credentials are overlooked, as in the case of Caroline Adams Miller, who is cited as an expert source



(04/09/2020)

without having any formal scientific training or specific training in psychology.

Regarding appeals to the audience, in all the monologues the host directly addresses the audience at home, while the on-set audience only interacts with him in one of the episodes analysed: the one featuring an entire audience comprised of healthcare workers, which marked the transition to the new normal (06/22/2020). On the other hand, direct appeals to emotions can be observed in 81% of the cases, with phrases such as “you feel like an old rag” or “above all you are going to be sad” (04/09/2020), with fear and hope being the most common emotions alluded to, for example: “Life can change you in a moment, even for the better” (05/06/2020); “At the beginning we were all scared to death, just like you” (06/22/2020); and “Don’t read the news, because now the news are scary” (04/09/2020). These appeals fall in line with the arguments used, and are particularly striking when compared to the percentage of monologues that, in contrast, appeal to common sense, which make up only 18% of the speeches.

6. Conclusions

The first hypothesis proposed in this study (H^1) is disproved: although previous research has observed that coverage of health issues in the media is often influenced by political demands (Revuelta, 2006), this is not the case in the monologues of *El Hormiguero*. In these, health policy takes a secondary role, never encouraging debate or confrontation —a fact that sets the programme apart from the characteristics of a politicised magazine show. The host never uses general politics or the appropriateness of health measures as a narrative, and no political discourse is observed in these monologues aside from the occasional doubts about leaders’ capacity, which were expressed in the monologue of 22 April. Nor are there any direct references to decisions that could spark social controversy, or attempts to sensationalise health policy. In contrast, and in accordance with the second hypothesis (H^2), the focus of entertainment is on mental health, and the emotional and pseudo-scientific approach to it.

In these monologues, the presenter takes on the role of a television coach, using current affairs in a superficial manner to offer psychological advice primarily based on emotional/affective arguments and the narrator’s personal experience, and as seen, this advice is not backed up by authoritative sources. This lack of scientific sources supports the second hypothesis regarding the harmful dissemination of non-scientific treatments related to mental health. Indeed, previous research has already observed that mental health is frequently mentioned in the media without being supported by additional information on symptoms, causes, rehabilitation processes or treatments, and is rarely backed by expert scientific sources (Angermeyer and Schulze, 2001; Gamo, 1992; Nairn et al., 2001). In this context, Pablo Motos’ assumed role serves as confirmation of

this harmful media approach, which also applies to Spanish prime-time infotainment.

The affective arguments and constant appeals to emotions observed also support the findings of other research, which highlight sentimentality as one of the key features of the narrative style of *El Hormiguero* (Berrocal et al., 2014, p. 99). In this regard, Motos serves as the sole source of information, taking on the role of a television coach and employing some of the typical techniques of the monologue (Castellón Alcalá, 2008) to emphasise his message, thereby reinforcing the psychological advice he provides. In addition, hybridisation can also be observed in these monologues, which is one of the defining features of neo-television. A blend can be observed between the features of a stand-up comedy monologue and those of a late-night show. To this effect, as shown in the results, the appeals to the audience that define this format (Gascón-Vera, 2022) are constant and present in all the monologues, breaking the fourth wall and strengthening the connection with a public that, during these pandemic episodes, reached its peak with a 22.7% audience share (eldiario.es, 24 March 2020).

Although *El Hormiguero* is not a news or informative programme but rather an infotainment show, its reach and Motos’ own influence should prompt a reconsideration of how mental health issues are addressed in prime-time programmes. As Manuel Muñoz et al. (2011, p. 172) point out, “an appropriate and rigorous approach to the subject by these same media could play a fundamental role in the fight against stigma”. While the attempt to avoid direct mentions of the virus and present the programme as a place for hope carries seemingly positive connotations that apparently attempt to deliberately position it against the confrontation inherent in politics (H^1), the advice offered and the approach to mental health taken fall short of being desirable. They favour stereotypical attitudes and treatments detached from modern psychology, which are clearly unscientific (H^2), and show a predilection towards pseudo-scientific proposals, such as the idea that hope can overcome illness.

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Health inequalities and personalized advertising: A pathway to equity?

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Abstract

Health inequalities persist despite significant global advancements in health and well-being. While social determinants of health, such as income and education, are well-documented contributors, commercial determinants — especially advertising exposure— play an increasingly influential role. This study examines the relationship between advertising and health inequalities, focusing on how personalized digital advertising may exacerbate these disparities. The literature review reveals that disadvantaged communities have historically been disproportionately exposed to advertisements for health-harming products, a pattern consistent across traditional media and globally. Additionally, the critical analysis undertaken here of digital advertising practices highlights the potential risks of personalized advertising in reinforcing health disparities. These risks include algorithmic biases, issues related to data practices, and content loops that may perpetuate stereotypes and unhealthy behaviours. However, the study also identifies opportunities where personalized advertising could promote health equity by delivering targeted, health-enhancing messages to underserved populations. This research contributes to the broader discourse on health equity by highlighting the dual role of advertising as both a risk factor and a potential tool for positive health intervention. It underscores the urgent need for comprehensive regulatory frameworks that address the evolving landscape of digital advertising, ensuring it serves public health interests rather than perpetuating inequality.

Keywords

Health disparities, personalized advertising, health equity, privacy, algorithmic bias, audience targeting, public health campaigns, data-driven personalization, vulnerable populations, preventive health.

Resum

Les desigualtats en salut persisteixen malgrat els importants avenços mundials en salut i benestar. Encara que està ben documentat el paper que tenen determinants socials de la salut com els ingressos i l'educació, els determinants comercials, especialment l'exposició a la publicitat, tenen un paper cada cop més influent. Aquest estudi examina la relació entre la publicitat i les desigualtats en salut centrant-se en com la publicitat digital personalitzada pot agreujar aquestes disparitats. La revisió de la bibliografia revela que, històricament, les comunitats desafavorides han estat exposades de manera desproporcionada a anuncis de productes perjudicials per a la salut. Aquest patró s'ha detectat en diversos mitjans tradicionals i a escala mundial. A més, l'anàlisi crítica de les pràctiques de publicitat digital que s'ha dut a terme aquí posa de manifest els riscos potencials de la publicitat personalitzada a l'hora d'accentuar les disparitats en salut. Aquests riscos inclouen biaixos algorítmics, problemes relacionats amb les pràctiques de dades i bucles de contingut que poden perpetuar estereotips i comportaments poc saludables. No obstant això, l'estudi també identifica oportunitats en què la publicitat personalitzada podria promoure l'equitat en salut mitjançant l'entrega de missatges dirigits i amb un efecte positiu per a la salut a les poblacions desatenses. Aquesta investigació contribueix al discurs més ampli sobre l'equitat en salut destacant el doble paper de la publicitat com a factor de risc i com a eina potencial per a una intervenció positiva en salut. Subratlla la necessitat urgent de marcs reguladors integrals que abordin el panorama canviant de la publicitat digital per garantir que afavoreixi els interessos de la salut pública en lloc de perpetuar la desigualtat.

Paraules clau

Disparitats en salut, publicitat personalitzada, equitat sanitària, privadesa, biaix algorítmic, segmentació d'audiències, campanyes de salut pública, personalització basada en dades, poblacions vulnerables, salut preventiva.

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Health inequality and advertising exposure

Over recent decades, substantial global human health and well-being advancements have been achieved. Nonetheless, continued progress is hindered by persistent inequalities both between and within populations. The latest report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) on well-being across its member countries underscores that health inequalities among different population groups remain deeply entrenched. While disparate outcomes by age and gender have narrowed over the past decade, this reduction is, at times, attributed to comparatively more significant declines in outcomes among younger individuals and men rather than universal improvements (OECD, 2024). If current trends continue, inequalities in health will persist over the next two decades (Raymond et al., 2024).

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines *health inequality* as systematic, avoidable, and unfair differences in health outcomes between populations or social groups (Carmona & Loza, 2009; McCartney et al., 2021; WHO, 2022). These inequalities are primarily caused by social stratification and economic inequality (Riley, 2020; McCartney et al., 2013), which result from complex social, political, financial, and environmental interactions and often accumulate over lifetimes and generations (Sadana & Blas, 2013).

Understanding health inequalities and their underlying causes remains challenging and essential (Lucyk & McLaren, 2017). Social determinants of health, which encompass income, education, employment, housing and access to health care, are perhaps the most widely recognised factors shaping health disparities (Daniel et al., 2018). These determinants influence daily living conditions and access to resources, leading to significant variations in health across socioeconomic groups. Social determinants outweigh behavioural factors, including lifestyle choices such as diet, physical activity and substance use, or biological and genetic factors (Lipman & Lobo, 2017).

However, the factors that influence health outcomes do not end here. More recently, corporate policies, practices, and products have been identified as powerful influencing factors on health inequalities. The so-called *commercial determinants of health* involve private sector strategies and actions that promote products and behaviours with negative impacts on health, encompassing unhealthy commodities, harmful business practices, and broader market-driven forces (Bhugra & Ventriglio, 2023; Kickbusch et al., 2016; Mialon, 2020). This influence is facilitated by globalization, corporate structures, and neoliberal ideologies (de Lacy-Vawdon & Livingstone, 2020), and they operate through political practices, preference shaping, legal environments, and product promotion (Galea & van Schalkwyk, 2023).

The significant influence of commercial determinants on health disparities is particularly evident in the alarming rise of non-communicable diseases, which now stand as the leading cause of premature mortality worldwide (Collins et al., 2023).

The burden of non-communicable diseases disproportionately affects disadvantaged groups, especially in low- and middle-income countries, contributing to over 86% of premature deaths in these areas (Collin & Hill, 2016; WHO, 2023). This pattern highlights the pressing need for targeted interventions to address the systemic factors fuelling this rise (Lee & Freudenberg, 2020).

A significant barrier to effectively addressing and preventing non-communicable diseases is the role of transnational corporations that profit from products like tobacco, alcohol, and processed foods, each of which significantly increases disease risk. By actively promoting these products, these industries not only heighten the incidence of non-communicable diseases but also drive poor health outcomes and diminish quality of life (Collins et al., 2023).

Regulatory frameworks have sought to mitigate these risks by imposing restrictions on the marketing and advertising of such products, particularly when targeting vulnerable populations. At the international level, the WHO has established guidelines, such as the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO, 2015) which mandates restrictions on tobacco advertising, promotion, and sponsorship. Similarly, the WHO has issued recommendations to limit the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to children, emphasizing the need for stronger regulatory measures to protect public health (WHO, 2023). However, enforcement remains inconsistent across jurisdictions, and digital advertising strategies have led to new challenges for regulatory oversight.

In the context of online media, digital platforms have become primary channels for advertising harmful products, leveraging personalized advertising techniques that raise concerns about consumer privacy and ethical targeting. Regulations such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in Europe and the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) aim to provide users with greater control over their personal data, indirectly affecting how companies can target individuals with marketing (de la Torre, 2018; Hoofnagle et al., 2019). Additionally, specific measures, such as the European Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD), impose restrictions on advertising unhealthy foods and alcohol in children's programming, including online video-sharing platforms (Vlassis, 2022). However, the evolving nature of algorithm-driven advertising necessitates continuous regulatory adaptations to address loopholes and emerging risks.

Beyond formal legislation, self-regulatory frameworks play a significant role in shaping industry practices. Various sectors have established voluntary codes of conduct to guide ethical advertising, such as the International Chamber of Commerce's Advertising and Marketing Communications Code and the Responsible Marketing Codes adopted by major food and beverage corporations. These initiatives outline principles for responsible advertising, including restrictions on marketing unhealthy products to minors (ICC, 2025). Nevertheless, concerns persist regarding their effectiveness, as compliance remains voluntary, and enforcement mechanisms are often weak.

More recently, the regulation of influencer marketing has

emerged as a critical area of policy intervention, given the increasing reliance of brands on social media personalities to promote their products. Several jurisdictions have introduced specific legislation addressing the transparency and accountability of influencer marketing. For instance, the European Commission's Digital Services Act (DSA) mandates clearer disclosure of paid partnerships, while countries like France and Spain have implemented stricter guidelines requiring influencers to explicitly label sponsored content, particularly when promoting products with public health implications (Cauffman & Goanta, 2021). These measures reflect a growing recognition of the need to regulate digital advertising strategies that circumvent traditional restrictions, ensuring that health-harming products are not deceptively marketed to vulnerable consumers.

Despite these regulatory efforts, gaps remain in effectively governing the digital advertising ecosystem, particularly in addressing algorithmic bias and opaque targeting practices. These challenges underscore the need for a deeper understanding of how advertising contributes to health inequalities, especially in the context of emerging digital marketing strategies.

Objective

This study examines the relationship between advertising and health inequalities through a systematic literature review and a critical analysis of the emerging risks associated with digital advertising practices. Specifically, it synthesizes existing research on how algorithmically delivered personalized advertising shapes exposure patterns across sociodemographic groups, potentially exacerbating disparities in health outcomes. Additionally, the study explores the opportunities of personalized advertising in public health contexts, assessing its role in either reinforcing or mitigating health inequalities. By doing so, this research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the mechanisms through which advertising influences health disparities and to contribute to ongoing regulatory and policy discussions aimed at promoting health equity.

Methodology

This study followed a two-step methodological approach. First, a systematic literature review was conducted to synthesize existing research on the relationship between advertising and health inequalities. To this end, searches were performed in two of the most comprehensive and reliable academic databases: Scopus and the Web of Science Core Collection (WoS). The search strategy was designed to identify studies containing the terms health, advertising, and unequal in their title, abstract, or keywords. Boolean operators were applied to ensure a broad yet focused selection of relevant documents, using the following query: 'health AND advertising AND unequal*'. The initial search yielded 138 records in Scopus and 99 in WoS, totaling 237 documents. After removing 67 duplicates, 170 unique records remained. To ensure linguistic accessibility, studies not written in English, Spanish, or Catalan were excluded ($n = 3$; French, Persian, and German). Additionally, non-peer-reviewed documents—including book chapters ($n = 7$), books ($n = 1$), conference reviews ($n = 1$), letters ($n = 1$), opinion articles ($n = 2$), notes ($n = 1$), and editorials ($n = 1$)—were also excluded. This process resulted in a final selection of 153 peer-reviewed articles and conference proceedings.

Studies that did not address the role of advertising in health inequalities were subsequently excluded. Only 18 articles published between 1992 and 2024 explicitly examined disparities in advertising exposure based on sociodemographic factors in relation to health-related topics. Given the high specificity of this research focus, an additional 13 relevant studies were identified through backward and forward citation tracking, ensuring a more comprehensive mapping of the existing literature. This methodological step allowed for the inclusion of studies that, while not captured by the initial database search, provided valuable insights into the relationship between advertising exposure and health inequalities.

Second, the study conducts a critical analysis that examines the potential risks of algorithmically delivered advertising, drawing on insights from the broader literature on personalization. This analysis explores how these risks could manifest in the context of health inequalities, particularly in shaping exposure to unhealthy products and reinforcing existing disparities.

This approach relies on a theoretical extrapolation, using existing evidence on the unintended effects of personalization to anticipate how these dynamics may influence health-related disparities. The argument is grounded in both empirical studies and theoretical frameworks, highlighting key areas of concern for future research and policymaking.

Literature review: the traditional role of advertising in health inequalities

The results of the literature review indicate that, over time and across different regions, disadvantaged communities have consistently been exposed to a higher volume of advertising for products harmful to health. Beginning with tobacco advertising, which has traditionally been promoted in lower-income countries worldwide to a disproportionately high degree—contributing to higher consumption rates and an increased cancer burden in these regions (Tomatis, 1992)—a similar pattern can be observed for other equally harmful products.

In the United States, the prevalence of outdoor advertising for unhealthy products has long been disproportionately higher in low-income neighbourhoods and those with larger Latino and African American populations, compared to wealthier neighbourhoods predominantly inhabited by White and Asian residents (Cassady et al., 2015; Lowery & Sloane, 2014; John

et al., 2009; Kong et al., 2024; Roberts et al., 2015; Venugopal et al., 2022; Wilson & Till, 2012). Recent studies confirm that this pattern persists, with low-income areas facing heightened exposure to advertisements promoting food, alcohol, tobacco, and sugary beverages (Zahid et al., 2022).

These disparities in advertising exposure extend beyond outdoor spaces and disproportionately impact ethnic minority groups across various media platforms, such as magazines and television. African American and Hispanic individuals in the United States, including both women and youth, are disproportionately exposed to advertisements for harmful products, such as tobacco while encountering fewer ads promoting positive health outcomes relative to their Caucasian and non-minority counterparts (Duerksen et al., 2005; Nicksic et al., 2022). Similarly, television networks targeting children and adolescents from low-income or racial minority backgrounds broadcast a higher frequency of advertisements for fast food and sugary drinks (Powell et al., 2014; Rudd Report, 2021).

Similar patterns emerge in other regions. In the United Kingdom, children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more frequently exposed to television and outdoor advertisements for unhealthy foods and beverages compared to their wealthier peers (Adams et al., 2011c; Nairn & Oprea, 2021; Olsen et al., 2021; Scott et al., 2023; Thomas et al., 2019). In Australia, advertising for less healthy products is slightly more frequent in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas (Maganja et al., 2024). In Uganda, a study found that healthier food advertisements were more prevalent in high-income areas, highlighting a similar divide (Dia et al., 2021). In Spain, children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are exposed to nearly double the number of television advertisements for unhealthy foods and beverages compared to children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Royo-Bordonada et al., 2024). Additionally, while alcohol advertising is perceived as omnipresent in high-income neighborhoods, it is more youth-oriented in lower-income areas (Molina de la Fuente et al., 2021).

Although some studies offer nuanced perspectives (Adams et al., 2011a; Adams et al., 2011b; Lee et al., 2015; Macinko et al., 2003; Robertson et al., 2021; Simard et al., 2024), literature reviews consistently highlight a pattern of unequal advertising exposure: worldwide, minority and low-income children and adolescents are disproportionately targeted by advertisements for unhealthy foods and products compared to their wealthier peers (Backholer et al., 2020; Grilo et al., 2021).

This body of research provides strong evidence that disadvantaged communities, particularly minority and low-income groups, are systematically exposed to higher levels of advertising for unhealthy products. However, it is important to note that most studies focus on high-income countries, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom, while research in low- and middle-income countries remains scarce. This geographic bias limits our understanding of how these

disparities manifest in different regulatory, economic, and cultural contexts, potentially causing us to miss important regional variations.

To synthesize these findings, Table 1 presents a summary of key studies, outlining their geographical focus, the type of products advertised, and the main conclusions.

The impact of unequal advertising exposure on health outcomes

Food advertising strongly influences children's and adolescents' intake, choices, preferences, and purchase requests, reinforcing unhealthy patterns over time and heightening the risk of childhood obesity (Radesky et al., 2020; Coleman et al., 2022; Boyland et al., 2022; Arrona-Cardoza et al., 2023). Furthermore, it fosters persistent demands and has been linked to increased materialism, a greater reliance on advertising, and lower self-esteem among children (Carthy et al., 2022; Nairn & Oprea, 2020). Similarly, gambling advertising promotes positive attitudes toward gambling, leading to increased participation and associated risks, again mainly affecting children and other vulnerable groups (McGrane et al., 2023).

However, this disparity in advertising exposure is not limited to products that can harm health, such as gambling, alcohol, junk food or tobacco, but also includes an exclusion from positive health-promoting advertisements (Datta et al., 2020; Tan, 2015). Health-related advertising may contribute to discrimination by excluding certain social groups from health treatment or healthy lifestyle promotion messages.

Thus, the ability to direct advertising toward specific audiences while excluding others inherently generates discrimination. As we have seen, this selective targeting can contribute to health inequities, especially among vulnerable groups.

As the reader may have noted in the literature review, much of the existing research has explored traditional forms of advertising, such as outdoor and television ads, while there remains a significant gap in understanding how these dynamics play out in digital spaces. The digital landscape, where younger generations are increasingly consuming media, presents a unique context that is not adequately addressed by current studies. Given the precision of algorithmically driven advertising, it is essential to examine how data-driven practices might not only perpetuate existing disparities but also introduce new forms of exclusion and inequality in exposure to both harmful and health-related messages. This growing shift toward personalized advertising requires a deeper understanding of its mechanisms and consequences, especially for vulnerable populations.

In the following section, we will explore the potential implications of these digital advertising practices, focusing on how they operate and affect the exposure of vulnerable groups to both harmful and beneficial messages.

Table 1. Overview of literature on unequal exposure to unhealthy product advertising

Study	Region	Product Advertised	Main findings
Adams et al., 2011	UK	Food (HFSS)	Lower-income viewers had higher exposure to food ads
Adams et al., 2011b	UK	Outdoor food ads	More outdoor food ads in low-income areas
Adams et al., 2011c	UK	Food & beverages	Food ads were more common in magazines for wealthier audiences
Cassady et al., 2015	USA	Food & beverages	More unhealthy food ads in low-income & minority areas
Datta et al., 2020	Pakistan	Tobacco control	Tobacco control policies more effective among higher-educated groups
Dia et al., 2021	Uganda	Food & beverages	86% of ads around schools promoted unhealthy products
Duerksen et al., 2005	USA	Health-related ads	Fewer health-positive ads in magazines for Black & Hispanic women
John et al., 2009	USA	Tobacco	Tobacco marketing targeted disadvantaged communities
Kong et al., 2024	USA	Tobacco	Attractive tobacco descriptors more common in Black neighbourhoods
Lee et al., 2015	USA	Tobacco regulations	Tobacco regulation violations varied by neighbourhood
Lowery & Sloane, 2014	USA	Harmful ads	More harmful ads in low-income areas
Macinko et al., 2003	Various	Income inequality & health	Income inequality strongly linked to poor health outcomes
Maganja et al., 2024	Australia	Unhealthy products	Unhealthy products more frequently promoted in disadvantaged areas
Matthay et al., 2023	USA	Alcohol & cannabis	Stricter alcohol & cannabis policies in high-poverty communities
Molina de la Fuente et al., 2021	Spain	Alcohol	Alcohol ads perceived as omnipresent in high-income areas, youth-targeted in low-income ones
Nairn & Oprea, 2021	UK	TV ads	Low-income children were more susceptible to advertising & materialism
Nicksic et al., 2022	USA	Tobacco	Higher tobacco ad exposure among Black & Hispanic youth
Olsen, 2021	Scotland	Unhealthy product ads	More unhealthy product ads in low-income areas
Powell et al., 2014	USA	Food & beverages	Higher fast food & sugary drink ad exposure for minority youth
Roberts et al., 2015	USA	Tobacco	Menthol cigarette ads more common in Black-majority areas
Robertson et al., 2021	UK	Food & drink ads	Most bus stop ads promoted unhealthy products
Royo-Bordonada et al., 2024	Spain	Food & beverages	Children from lower-income backgrounds exposed to twice as many food ads
Rudd Report, 2021	USA	Unhealthy foods	Black & Hispanic youth disproportionately exposed to unhealthy food ads
Scott et al., 2023	UK	Unhealthy products	Unhealthy product ads more prevalent in disadvantaged neighborhoods
Simard et al., 2024	USA	Cannabis	Restrictive cannabis sales policies more common in low-income areas
Tan, 2015	USA	Cancer treatment ads	Cancer treatment advertising exposure varied by income & education
Thomas et al., 2019	UK	Unhealthy foods	Disadvantaged youth consumed more unhealthy food & had higher ad exposure
Tomatis, 1992	Global	Tobacco	Tobacco ads stricter in high-income countries than in developing nations
Venugopal et al., 2022	USA	Vape shops	Vape shops concentrated in socially disadvantaged areas
Wilson, 2012	USA	Alcohol	Alcohol ads more prevalent in lower-income, Black & Hispanic areas
Zahid et al., 2022	USA	Unhealthy products	Low-income neighbourhoods had a higher concentration of unhealthy ads

Source: Author.

The role of personalized advertising in health inequalities

Data-driven advertising leverages consumer information and analytics to deliver highly personalized and targeted marketing messages by collecting, processing, and analyzing digital traces to align with individual preferences (Aiolfi et al., 2021; Lee & Cho, 2019; Strycharz & Segijn, 2022). While traditional advertising formats—such as TV, radio, print media, and billboards—lack the precise targeting capacity of online advertising and often result in expenditures reaching broad audiences that may not engage with the content, online advertising offers much more refined approaches.

Technological advances, particularly in mobile phones and AI, have expanded the capacity for demographic, psychographic, behavioural, and geographic targeting, making personalization more precise (Vold & Whittlestone, 2019; Kim et al., 2019). Advertisers can now align ads with users' immediate activities—such as searching, browsing, or watching videos (Goldfarb, 2014)—and assess real-time ad impact by tracking user interactions, enabling more efficient resource allocation by focusing on engaged audiences (Blake et al., 2015).

This enhanced targeting minimizes scattering losses and increases return on investment. Proponents argue that it also benefits consumers by increasing ad relevance and engagement through messages that resonate with their preferences and needs (Aaker et al., 2000). However, critics point to significant ethical concerns, including manipulative practices and potential inequalities in exposure across demographic groups (Aiolfi et al., 2021; Nadler & McGuigan, 2017; Ali et al., 2019).

Examining the risks associated with this targeted approach is crucial to comprehensively understanding the implications of personalized advertising on health equity. The following section outlines critical risks posed by personalized advertising in health equity, detailing how these practices may disproportionately affect vulnerable populations and exacerbate existing inequalities.

A) Privacy issues

Individuals' privacy is probably the most studied challenge when analysing the unintended effects of personalized advertising, and the number of studies covering the topic has increased exponentially in recent years as advertising has come to rely on "collecting, storing, extracting, inferring, using, selling, and sharing consumer information to personalize and tailor advertising messages" (Boerman & Smit, 2023, p. 60).

The widespread use of digital platforms for health-related services has led to an unprecedented accumulation of sensitive user data concerning both physical and mental health (Surani et al., 2023). Research consistently demonstrates that confidential health data collected by these platforms is frequently repurposed for targeted advertising, often without explicit user consent (Marelli et al., 2021; Downing & Perakslis, 2022). Many fertility and mental health apps, for instance, routinely gather extensive data, including users' locations,

contact information, and even their mental or physical health status, and then share this information with third-party entities. This practice raises significant ethical concerns regarding user autonomy and data security, as users may be unaware of the extent to which their personal information is utilized for commercial purposes (Downing & Perakslis, 2022; Kemps, 2023; Mozilla Foundation, 2023).

Through data gathered on social media and health apps, algorithms have the capability to direct ads at vulnerable populations, including individuals with specific health conditions (Bol et al., 2020; Downing & Perakslis, 2022). Such practices not only threaten user privacy but also create opportunities for potentially manipulative advertising strategies that could influence users' health behaviours in ways that may not align with their best interests (Bol et al., 2020; Grundy et al., 2019; Mozilla Foundation, 2023).

However, this vulnerability extends not only to explicitly sensitive health information but also to data that, on the surface, may appear unrelated to health. For instance, behaviours such as frequently reading posts on topics like fertility or pregnancy can allow algorithms to infer a user's health-related intentions or conditions (Marks, 2020).

This dynamic creates two forms of inequality. First, individuals who already suffer from health issues may become disproportionately targeted by advertising strategies that exploit their vulnerabilities. This heightened targeting exposes them to a greater volume of ads that prey on their health conditions, potentially exacerbating emotional distress and financial strain. In this case, the inequality arises from their pre-existing health vulnerabilities, which make them more susceptible to exploitative advertising tactics.

Second, individuals who have shown interest in specific health-related topics—whether by browsing health content, following social media accounts, or interacting with health-related apps—might be targeted by advertisers who infer their concerns. These algorithms could identify patterns of behaviour, such as searching for symptoms or health information, and use this data to serve personalized ads. This type of inequality would not be created by an overt expression of health concern, but by the inference of such concerns based on digital behaviour, leading to increased exposure to targeted content that exploits these inferred vulnerabilities for profit.

Despite the growing number of privacy regulations, such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in Europe and the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA), which impose strict limits on data collection and usage, personalized advertising remains a pervasive force in the digital ecosystem (de la Torre, 2018; Hoofnagle et al., 2019). These regulations aim to enhance consumer autonomy by granting individuals greater control over their personal data, requiring explicit consent for data processing, and imposing transparency obligations on advertisers and platforms. However, while these legal frameworks have placed constraints on certain invasive practices, they do not entirely eliminate the risks associated

with algorithmic personalization in advertising. The continued reliance on inferred data—rather than explicitly provided health information—demonstrates how advertisers adapt to regulatory landscapes, using behavioural patterns to tailor advertising strategies while remaining within legal boundaries, meaning that even legally compliant advertising can still exploit an individual's vulnerability.

Thus, the lack of transparency and security regarding even seemingly innocuous data contributes to a system where certain populations are more exposed to potentially exploitative advertising. This not only deepens existing inequities in healthcare access and support but also amplifies the risk of individuals being targeted by harmful products or unproven health remedies. As we have seen, these vulnerabilities are compounded by the way data-driven advertising practices personalize and target individuals, often reinforcing existing biases.

B) Algorithmic entrapment and content loops

Another critical risk posed by algorithmic advertising is the phenomenon of algorithmic entrapment and content loops. Intensive personalization algorithms, such as those found on platforms like YouTube or TikTok, have the ability to develop strong and potentially harmful recommendation patterns in a short period of time, locking users into content loops that reinforce biases and misconceptions (Schellingerhout et al., 2023; Hussein et al., 2020).

This is due, in part, to the algorithm's reliance on personalization features to determine what content to recommend next. While this approach may create a more personalized experience, it also increases the risk of exposing users to misleading or harmful information, as the algorithm amplifies content with a high engagement potential, regardless of its accuracy or reliability (Hussein et al., 2020).

This phenomenon has been studied primarily in the field of disinformation, which represents a major public health problem (Laxa, 2022; Hoang et al., 2021). Prolonged exposure to false or biased content can affect public perception and individual decisions about health and safety issues, leading to confusion and distrust in legitimate sources of information (Zucker, 2020). Thus, a person interested in pseudoscientific topics, for example, can quickly find himself surrounded exclusively by content in this vein.

Moreover, escaping algorithmic profiling is particularly difficult. For people who are, for instance, in recovery from eating disorders, algorithmic recommendations can be especially harmful, inadvertently exposing them to triggering content such as diet-related videos or posts based on past viewing behaviours, even if the user actively tries to avoid those topics (Golbeck, 2024). This same phenomenon can occur with other problems such as gambling, self-harm, or suicidal ideation.

These dynamics highlight a fundamental flaw in engagement-driven algorithms: they are not inherently designed to prioritize users' well-being or mental health, focusing instead

on maximizing interaction time and engagement (Golbeck, 2024). Although companies have started to invest in content moderation, these efforts often fall short of aligning with research-based strategies for effectively identifying and mitigating harmful content (Arora et al., 2021; Golbeck, 2024). Consequently, content moderation remains insufficient in both speed and accuracy when compared to the rapid, precise recommendations generated by algorithms, which can readily amplify potentially harmful content.

Personalized advertising is integrated into these algorithmic content loops, leading users exposed to misinformation to receive targeted ads and promotions that align with the biases reinforced by the algorithm. As users engage with misleading or pseudoscientific content, they are more likely to encounter ads for products, services, or even scams that exploit their interests or fears, further entrenching them in these loops. This dual exposure to both content and advertising driven by engagement-based algorithms not only reinforces misinformation but also preys on users' vulnerabilities, deepening the potential for exploitation and harm.

In sum, algorithmic content loops pose significant risks by reinforcing misinformation and exposing users to potentially harmful content, often without the users' explicit intent. The integration of personalized advertising within these loops exacerbates the issue, as engagement-driven algorithms prioritize interaction over accuracy or user well-being. Without stronger safeguards, these systems will continue to amplify biases and vulnerabilities, making it increasingly difficult for individuals to break free from harmful content cycles.

C) Algorithmic bias and exclusion

Lastly, one of the most concerning risks of personalized advertising is its ability to reinforce inequalities through algorithmic biases in ad distribution. A fundamental issue in algorithmic advertising is that bias is often an emergent property of the optimization processes that govern ad distribution, rather than a result of direct human intervention. Modern digital advertising platforms rely on machine learning algorithms that optimize ad placement based on engagement metrics, historical interactions, and predicted relevance. These models are designed to maximize click-through rates and conversions, but in doing so, they can reinforce and perpetuate pre-existing disparities (Imana et al., 2021; Ali et al., 2021). For example, when algorithms detect that a certain demographic group is more likely to engage with a particular type of ad, they will allocate ad impressions accordingly, leading to self-reinforcing cycles of exposure. This means that groups that historically have received more exposure to certain types of ads—whether beneficial or harmful—are likely to continue receiving similar content.

Beyond engagement-based optimization, the bidding structures of online ad platforms also contribute to differential ad exposure. Many digital advertising systems use real-time bidding (RTB), where advertisers compete for ad placements

based on demographic and behavioural data. Since certain user segments are more desirable to advertisers, their ad impressions become more expensive, leading to resource-constrained campaigns disproportionately reaching lower-cost audiences (Cauffman, 2021; Lambrecht & Tucker, 2019). In the health sector, this can mean that preventive health campaigns or public service announcements fail to reach critical at-risk populations because advertisers cannot afford to outbid commercial campaigns targeting more lucrative demographics.

Moreover, the lack of transparency in digital ad distribution systems makes bias difficult to audit or regulate. Unlike traditional advertising, where ad placement was clearly observable, digital advertising operates within proprietary and opaque algorithmic systems. Researchers and policymakers face challenges in tracking who is being exposed to which ads, under what conditions, and with what effects (Ali et al., 2019; Dalenberg, 2018; Rieder & Hofmann, 2020). Without meaningful oversight, the potential for algorithmic bias to deepen health inequalities remains a significant yet largely unregulated risk.

These issues are especially relevant in advertising related to health or products that may undermine health. Studies have shown that ad-serving algorithms disproportionately expose certain demographic groups —mainly women, older adults, and individuals with poorer health status— to health-related content (Bol et al., 2020). These risks are even more concerning when advertisements target younger audiences. Research on children's exposure to advertising reveals that the ads they receive on their mobile devices are significantly shaped by factors such as age, gender, and socioeconomic status (Feijóo & Sádaba, 2022). This segmentation can amplify existing inequalities and contribute to health disparities, as younger users, whose digital behaviours are closely monitored by algorithms, may be exposed to targeted ads that reinforce stereotypes or promote products potentially harmful to their health and well-being (Radesky et al., 2020).

In this context, the combination of algorithmic opacity, inference-based targeting, and RTB structures in digital advertising markets creates an environment where disparities in ad exposure not only persist but intensify over time. Without effective regulation ensuring greater transparency in ad targeting and delivery processes, these systems will continue to favour certain population groups while leaving others at a disadvantage, further reinforcing structural inequalities in access to health information and resources.

Beyond risks: Personalized advertising as an opportunity for health equity

Conversely, the full potential of personalized advertising can be interpreted from a different perspective. While personalized advertising carries notable risks —including privacy concerns, algorithmic loops that reinforce harmful content, and unequal

exposure to potentially detrimental ads for vulnerable groups— these same technologies hold significant promise for public health efforts. In the hands of institutions or organizations focused on promoting health and prevention, personalization can be a powerful tool for delivering tailored, impactful messages to diverse audiences, effectively addressing specific needs and behaviours.

On the one hand, personalization allows health campaigns to align messages with the preferences, cultural contexts, and linguistic needs of different audiences. By tailoring messages to resonate personally, public health initiatives can become more relevant and engaging for individuals, which research has shown can significantly improve audience receptivity. When audiences perceive ads as relevant to their circumstances and values, they respond more positively, showing greater trust, favourable attitudes, and a higher likelihood of sharing the message with others (De Keyzer et al., 2021; Hayes et al., 2021; Loureiro et al., 2023). Additionally, well-executed personalization has been shown to increase engagement and alleviate privacy concerns, striking a balance between effectiveness and consumer trust (Loureiro et al., 2023).

In terms of adaptability, personalized communication can enhance effectiveness by tailoring not only the content but also the style of delivery. For example, using relatable characters, culturally adapted language, or context-specific imagery fosters stronger connections between audiences and health messages, making people feel truly addressed rather than passively targeted (Olsen & Pracejus, 2020). Campaigns that allow for user interaction or content customization —such as choosing relevant topics— can generate even greater engagement and positive attitudes, demonstrating the potential of personalized health messages to resonate deeply with target audiences (Walrave et al., 2018).

Moreover, personalization technologies offer public health campaigns a distinct advantage through data processing capabilities. The ability to analyse vast amounts of data in real time enables the early detection of behavioural patterns that could be redirected toward healthier choices or preventive actions (Ramírez-Cifuentes et al., 2020). By identifying signs of health-related risks or harmful habits as they emerge, campaigns can offer timely interventions, adjusting messages or resources to support informed health decisions.

Finally, personalization technologies, especially those powered by artificial intelligence, enable health campaigns to reach underserved communities by adapting the format, tone, and even language of messages to fit the specific needs and contexts of these groups. As digital platforms develop more advanced personalization tools, health organizations can utilize these innovations to promote equitable access to health information, ensuring that essential health messages reach individuals who might otherwise lack access to such resources (Schmälzle & Wilcox, 2021).

At its core, digital personalization has the potential to make health campaigns more inclusive and effective. By intelligently

leveraging personalized communication, health institutions can address specific needs within diverse communities, promoting a more equitable and impactful approach to health promotion.

Discussion

Historically, advertising has played a complex role in shaping health inequalities, particularly through promoting unhealthy products in vulnerable communities. Traditional advertising has disproportionately targeted lower-income and marginalized groups with messages promoting tobacco, alcohol, and ultra-processed foods, thereby influencing the social determinants of health and contributing to poorer health outcomes within these populations. The advent of digital advertising has not only extended these disparities but has also introduced new mechanisms that amplify selective exposure to harmful content. Through advanced segmentation, digital advertising now facilitates precision targeting that heightens the risk of exposing vulnerable groups to potentially harmful products and messages, reinforcing patterns of inequality in health outcomes.

The digital economy introduces an additional layer of complexity by reshaping consumer vulnerability. In this context, vulnerability transcends traditional definitions of disadvantage and becomes a universal condition, characterized by a susceptibility to exploitation rooted in power imbalances and intensified by digital personalization (European Parliament, 2021; Helberger et al., 2022). As digital platforms collect and analyse vast amounts of user data, their capacity to personalize content in real time enables them to manipulate consumer choices more effectively. This process of behavioural targeting leverages data-driven insights into users' personal and psychological states, creating tailored environments where even rational consumers may find themselves vulnerable to persuasive messaging (Calo, 2014; Hill & Sharma, 2020).

This phenomenon is further complicated by the opaque nature of data collection and usage. Digital platforms can infer users' vulnerabilities—whether related to health conditions, emotional states, or socio-economic factors—through seemingly neutral behavioural data, such as search history or app usage patterns (Grundy et al., 2019; Mozilla Foundation, 2023). By fostering situations that heighten consumer susceptibility, these platforms leverage the architecture of digital interactions and the dynamics of data-fuelled relationships to exploit vulnerable states, thus systematically exposing certain populations to higher risks of manipulation (Helberger et al., 2022).

However, despite these risks, digital personalization also offers substantial potential for positive impact, particularly within public health initiatives. When used ethically, personalization can provide an opportunity for health campaigns to deliver tailored, relevant health messages to diverse audiences, aligning content with cultural, linguistic, and contextual factors that foster engagement and trust (De Keyser et al., 2021; Loureiro et al., 2023). Studies have demonstrated that

personalized messages can enhance receptivity, trust, and even the likelihood of audience members sharing health-promoting content with others (Hayes et al., 2021; Loureiro et al., 2023). This adaptability is especially valuable in reaching underserved populations, where customized messaging—delivered in relatable formats with appropriate visuals, tone, and language—can bridge gaps in health literacy and access (Deng et al., 2019; Walrave et al., 2018).

Furthermore, real-time data analysis enables health campaigns to detect behavioural patterns indicative of health-related risks, allowing for timely interventions that can steer individuals toward healthier choices (Paganelli et al., 2022). This capability, facilitated by advanced AI technologies, strengthens public health efforts by making it possible to address emerging needs dynamically and responsively, thereby promoting preventive behaviours and early interventions. In this way, digital personalization, if implemented transparently and with ethical oversight, can contribute meaningfully to reducing health disparities and supporting equitable health outcomes.

In sum, while traditional advertising has long influenced health inequalities, digital advertising introduces a heightened capacity for selectivity that exacerbates these inequalities, particularly among groups already susceptible to poorer health outcomes. The personalization of digital advertising not only targets individuals based on inferred vulnerabilities but also excludes others from beneficial health-promoting messages, further marginalizing those already at a disadvantage. This form of selective exposure poses significant risks for health equity, particularly as digital marketing practices continue to evolve with minimal regulation. Addressing these disparities requires acknowledging the contextual and often hidden nature of vulnerability within the digital economy, where consumer helplessness is amplified by technological precision and a lack of transparency in data practices.

A more effective regulatory approach should prioritize limiting the amount of data available for ad targeting and increasing transparency in algorithmic decision-making. While large platforms are already subject to certain auditing requirements and maintain ad libraries for transparency, these measures remain insufficient and fail to provide clear insights into targeting mechanisms. Current regulations must go further by restricting the use of inferred sensitive data in advertising, as platforms continue to profile users based on behavioral patterns that reveal vulnerabilities without explicit consent. Additionally, greater algorithmic transparency—not just in ad repositories but in how targeting models operate—would be crucial to assessing biases and ensuring fair ad distribution.

At the same time, stricter regulations on the advertising of harmful products such as ultra-processed foods, sugary beverages, and gambling services are urgently needed. While some jurisdictions have imposed restrictions on these products in traditional media, digital platforms allow advertisers to bypass such regulations through microtargeting and influencer partnerships. Expanding these restrictions to digital environments

—by limiting personalized advertising for high-risk products and enforcing stricter disclosure requirements— would help prevent predatory marketing practices that disproportionately affect vulnerable groups.

Ultimately, ensuring that personalized advertising does not deepen health inequalities requires a shift from reactive transparency measures to proactive regulation. Without meaningful limits on data collection and algorithmic targeting, digital advertising will continue to exploit inferred vulnerabilities, reinforcing disparities in health outcomes. Stronger enforcement, coupled with industry accountability, is necessary to prevent data-driven advertising from becoming yet another mechanism of exclusion in the digital economy.

Limitations and Future Research

This study contributes to ongoing debates on the intersection of digital advertising and health inequalities by critically examining the mechanisms through which algorithmic personalization exacerbates disparities. However, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, while this analysis highlights key challenges related to targeting, data privacy, and algorithmic bias, further empirical research is needed to quantify the extent of these disparities and their direct impact on health outcomes. The lack of transparency in digital advertising ecosystems continues to hinder efforts to systematically track and audit ad distribution patterns, making it difficult to assess the full scope of algorithmic discrimination.

Second, this study primarily draws from research conducted in Western contexts, where technological infrastructures and regulatory frameworks shape digital advertising in specific ways. There remains limited research on how personalized advertising operates in non-Western regions, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, where digital platforms are rapidly expanding but often with fewer consumer protections. Future research should explore how variations in regulation, platform policies, and digital literacy influence the impact of personalized advertising on health inequalities in these regions.

Finally, given the dynamic nature of digital advertising technologies, ongoing research is essential to assess how emerging developments—such as AI-driven predictive analytics, biometric data usage, and cross-platform ad integration— may further influence health disparities. Future studies should not only examine the risks but also identify potential policy interventions and alternative advertising models that could minimize harm while leveraging digital tools for public health promotion.

By addressing these gaps, future research can help develop more comprehensive regulatory strategies and ethical advertising practices that ensure digital personalization does not exacerbate health inequalities but instead contributes to more equitable health communication.

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The CCMA's new dynamics of outsourcing productions in the face of digitalisation

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Abstract

The article analyses the Corporació Catalana de Mitjans Audiovisuals (CCMA) [Catalan Audiovisual Media Corporation] dynamics of content outsourcing to external production companies and its evolution in one decade. The period examined is 2013-2023, with a special focus on 2022 and 2023, when the digital strategy that has generated new production needs was promoted.

Keywords

Outsourcing, public service media, awarding of contracts, television, audiovisual production companies.

Resum

L'article analitza les dinàmiques d'externalització de continguts de la Corporació Catalana de Mitjans Audiovisuals (CCMA) a productores externes i la seva evolució en una dècada. S'examina el període 2013-2023, amb un enfocament especial en els anys 2022 i 2023, en què s'impulsa l'estratègia digital que ha generat noves necessitats de producció.

Paraules clau

Externalització, subcontractació, mitjans de servei públic, adjudicacions, televisió, productores audiovisuals.

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1. Introduction

In Catalonia, the definition of the scope of the public audiovisual communication service in Law 22/2005, of 29 December, on Audiovisual Communication of Catalonia, states that the provision of this service can enlist the support and collaboration of private entities and subjects in cases in which their availability is necessary as long as the decision is well grounded. In this regard, article 26 also states that the mission of the Audiovisual Public Service of the Catalan Government includes contributing to the development of the Catalan cultural industries, especially the audiovisual industry, and promoting audiovisual creation and new forms of expression in this field.

In this context, this research¹ analyses the Corporació Catalana de Mitjans Audiovisuals (CCMA) [Catalan Audiovisual Media Corporation] model of outsourcing the production of television content in the period between 2013 and 2023. Within this period, the focus is on March 2022 to December 2023, as a result of the appointment of the CCMA's new Governing Council by the Parliament of Catalonia, the change in the managerial positions that were previously in acting status and the promotion of a digital strategy in the public corporation. Starting with the launch of the Over The Top (OTT) platform, 3Cat, in October 2023, the analysis includes all video contents broadcast on both linear TV and the platform.

The period analysed falls within the context of an economic crisis that began in 2008, although the audiovisual sector felt it more keenly in 2012–2013, when several regional operators had to adopt austerity measures. They often included cutting public staff and increasing the outsourcing of production, which allows for more flexibility in staff size (Miguel de Bustos & Casado del Río, 2015). In 2010, the CCMA ceased having audiovisual production companies, such as those that produced local news, before making readjustments that affected the corporation's internal staff (Martori, 2017).

The overall objective of this research is to analyse the evolution in the amount of content that the CCMA outsourced in the period 2013–2023 and the dynamics of this outsourcing.

This objective can be divided into the following specific objectives:

1. To identify the process of selecting and awarding productions to external companies.
2. To determine the relationship between the outsourced production volume and the CCMA budget.
3. To study the type of content that is outsourced the most.
4. To analyse which production companies the CCMA has chosen to outsource contents.
5. To study how the promotion of the CCMA's digital strategy affects the dynamics of content outsourcing and whether the Corporation has been working with new audiovisual production companies to meet new challenges in the most recent period (2022–2023).
6. To analyse whether the CCMA's outsourcing of content guarantees the diversity of production companies'

geographical origin in order to equitably strengthen the audiovisual industry.

This study is relevant given that a gap has been detected in the analysis of the CCMA's outsourcing of productions. Previous scholarly work on this topic is not focused on Catalan public television but rather analyses the issue Spain-wide or in other autonomous communities.

2. Theoretical framework: The public media's outsourcing of production

The concept of outsourcing means contracting an audiovisual product of any kind to an audiovisual production company or another company outside the television operator. According to Cañedo (2020:19), 'the outsourced regional television model emerged in 1999 with the birth of Canary TV, the seventh regional operator to start broadcasting', after the three historical ones (Basque Country, Galicia and Catalonia) and the three subsequent ones promoted by socialist governments (Madrid, Andalusia and the Valencian Community).

This model, based on public-private collaboration, stood in opposition to the purely public model of the entities that had existed until then (Albornoz & Cañedo, 2015), which signalled a shift in the history of regional television. Later, other autonomous communities like Murcia, Aragon, Extremadura, the Balearic Islands and Asturias followed this same course, with the exception of Castilla-La Mancha (Cañedo, 2019).

The birth of this model of 'outsourced television' in the autonomous regions increased these operators' volume of contracts with audiovisual companies. This new television structure consisted of outsourcing part of the activity while maintaining a minimum staff (Fernández Alonso, 2002; Sarabia, Sánchez i Fernández Alonso, 2012; Cañedo, 2019).

Outsourcing is a model of public-private collaboration in which the provision of the service is public, as it depends on the administration, which is responsible and the guarantor through direct management, but private entities develop and produce certain services (Sarabia et al., 2012). There are two common practices in contracting by the regional radio and TV broadcaster: public tenders or direct production commissions without advertising.

This model can be analysed from different perspectives, which can afford both positive and negative interpretations. On the one hand, in contexts of economic crisis, sometimes public providers have chosen to limit the outsourcing of contents to external companies, while in others this method has been used because it allows them to lower costs and is more flexible with respect to possible staff dismissals or hires (Miguel de Bustos & Casado del Río, 2015). In this sense, workers do not become permanent civil servants but are hired by the companies (in some cases, with temporary contracts to make specific projects).

The negative side of this model is precarious work for

employees, as well as the tendency to contract the most economical offer, especially in public tender contracts, which causes large communication groups outside the region to become service providers, often the sole providers (Sarabia et al., 2012). A dynamic of growth in content outsourcing to external production companies in a public setting can lead to the assimilation of a neoliberal economic model based on 'a progressive but also violent dismantling of public property and its transfer to private hands' (Sarikakis, 2016:36).

On the other hand, Bustamante (2002:231) highlights concern about the phenomenon of 'sunflower companies', defined by Cañedo (2019:78) as those that 'are born under the aegis of regional television, with which they sign untransparent contracts and establish a situation of dependence that prevents the audiovisual sector in the region from effectively consolidating'. This is often due to the politicisation of public media management, which benefits companies due to political and personal influence and leads to some opacity in the outsourcing process (Bustamante, 2002).

In addition to clientelism, a common practice is outsourcing companies that are created *ex profeso* to produce certain contents (Sarabia et al., 2012). With regard to the outsourcing of strictly news content, this has garnered more criticism and public debate than entertainment, because, according to Fernández Alonso (2017), a private production company is more likely to have economic interests that could influence the objectivity and editorial impartiality of its contents. Furthermore, its workers are considered to be more subject to the fluctuations and precariousness of the market.

According to Cañedo (2019), the Canary Islands, Murcia, Aragon and the Balearic Islands are notable for having awarded complete programming chunks. For example, Murcia is the only regional television that uses an indirect management system in which all the television activities are outsourced to an external company. In contrast, others such as Asturias have chosen to diversify outsourcing through multiple contracts. This diversity of approaches reflects the complexity and variability of the regional television management model in Spain.

Several studies analyse these practices in other autonomous communities such as Asturias (Cañedo, 2019) and the Valencian Community (Carbonell, 2022), and nationally (Fernández Alonso, 2017 and Miguel de Bustos, 2012). According to Bustamante (2009), Miguel de Bustos and Casado (2012), Marzal (2015), Campos-Freire (2016) and Casado and Díaz González (2017), regional television stations in Spain justify their existence by multiple legitimising factors, especially the promotion of regional employment. 'In the territories in which they operate, regional audiovisual companies often orbit around them [the regional public corporations] to secure contracts, generating a situation of economic dependence heavily criticised by those who less support the Keynesian economy' (Cañedo, 2019, 18).

This dynamic began with what are known as the historical operators, such as the Basque regional television, EITB, which 'has created a clientelism that it is finding difficult to break away

from' (Fernández Quijada, 2010:81), even though it is proactive in promoting the audiovisual industry. In the case of Andalusia, 'regional television has generally been the only destination of Andalusian production' (Fernández Quijada, 2009:201).

In order to determine the public media's good practices in content outsourcing, several factors found in these contracting processes can be examined. Source diversity is one of the fundamental components in the sphere of content diversity. According to Napoli (1999), source diversity is also subdivided into the diversity of owners of production companies, the diversity of content distributors and the diversity of the workforce hired by production companies and distributors. This means that diversity is not only related to what is seen or heard but also to who is behind the content creation and distribution.. Albornoz and García Leiva (2017) underscore the importance of assessing to what extent the production, distribution and display/broadcast capacity of audiovisual content is concentrated in a small number of socioeconomic stakeholders. This analysis includes an exploration of the ownership, size and geographical origin of these stakeholders.

Fernández Quijada (2008) points out that the market for independent production largely depends on the evolution of the television stations that are contracted by the services. Today, public media corporations are immersed in the phenomenon of platforms and are striving to become digital media adapted to a context in which platforms have immense influence (Martin, 2021; D'Arma et al., 2021). They have had to create platforms to distribute content on demand and on social media, and these dynamics have affected the production needs (and the characteristics of the contents themselves) and, therefore, the outsourcing dynamics.

3. Methodology

The methodology used in this research is mainly qualitative, based on (1) a document analysis, by checking bibliographic references, laws, contracts and sectoral agreements to analyse the conditions of public outsourcing awards, as well as documents available on the CCMA website and documentation provided by the organisation for this research; and (2) in-depth interviews. Based on the documentation analysis, we have also worked quantitatively with data tables and the amounts of each production company's contracts.

The analysis of production companies' outsourcing poses a difficulty, namely the large volume of CCMA documentation and contracts that are generated every year. In order to adequately meet the research objectives, and since the CCMA works with many very diverse production companies every year, only outsourcing contracts for audiovisual productions were chosen, while other types of contracts, such as those regarding technological developments, were omitted. The entire universe, therefore, was defined from the public procurement data that can be checked in the contract search engine, by extracting only

the contracts that reflect production commissions to established production companies, while omitting private parties and other entities and distributing the data by year. Then, the ten contracts with the highest economic amount each year were identified to include the most production companies used the most. This has yielded a list of fourteen companies: production companies with a more stable volume of outsourcing, and cases in which a company was only hired one year but had a sufficiently high volume to be among the most significant that year. There is no base figure from which to work, as the productions are very different from each other depending on the format. Finally, six new outsourced production companies with scholarly criteria and analytical relevance were included in the period 2022-2023 in order to gain a more comprehensive view and meet the research objectives. Thus, from the initial universe of 189 production companies, a sample of twenty was chosen for analysis (Figure 1). The analysis performed on the sample is the compilation of contracts related to production commissions by the CCMA over the period analysed (2013-2023), their amounts, the identification of formats and the historical evolution of the outsourcing received by each production company over the years in monetary amounts.

The analyses contained in the results of this study refer to outsourced production as a whole, except in sections 4.5 (on the evolution of outsourced production companies) and 4.7 (on their geographical diversity), where the sample of selected production companies in Figure 1 is applied.

In-depth interviews were conducted with Cristian Trepas, head of Content and Programming for TV3, on the organisational structure of internal production and types of outsourcing; Eric Dexeus, head of TV3 format entertainment, on the relationship between public service and outsourcing; and Adria Serra, head of Digital Content and Transmedia Strategy at CCMA-3, on the criteria and standards that digital outsourced content must follow. All interviews were conducted during the month of March 2024, after developing the theoretical framework and prior to the drafting of the results. These three professionals from the Corporation have responsibilities within different areas and complementary perspectives, which allow the questions raised in the objectives to be answered. In addition, inquiries were made at the CCMA's Audience Attention Service [Servei d'Atenció a l'Audiència], whose answers were used to develop the results of the study.

4. Results

This section analyses the selection and contracting procedure for companies that produce content for the Corporation, and it quantifies the evolution of outsourced production in relation to the budget and the type of outsourced content. Finally, it studies the evolution of the companies contracted in the period 2013-2023 and their geographical diversity.

Figure 1. Audiovisual production companies analysed and selection criteria

PRODUCTION COMPANY NAME	JUSTIFICATION OF THE CHOICE
ABACUS, SOCIETAT COOPERATIVA	New contract, significant volume
AGUACATE & CALABAZA, SL	New contract, significant volume
ALGUNA PREGUNTA, SL	Large volume of recurring outsourcing
BRUTAL MEDIA, SL	Large volume of recurring outsourcing
EL CORRAL DE L'HUMOR, SLU	Large volume of recurring outsourcing
EL TERRAT GESTIONES XXI, SLU	Large volume of recurring outsourcing
FEM PRODUCCIONS, SL	New contract, content for young/adolescent audiences
GESTMUSIC ENDEMOL, SA	New contract, content for young/adolescent audiences
GRUP MEDIAPRO, SLU	Large volume of recurring outsourcing
LA BOMBILLA MEDIA, SL	New contract, content for young/adolescent audiences
LA MANCHESTER RADIOFÒNICA, SL	Large volume of recurring outsourcing
MAGNOLIA TV ESPAÑA, SLU	Large volume of recurring outsourcing
MINORIA ABSOLUTA, SL	Large volume of recurring outsourcing
SHINE IBERIA SLU	New contract, significant volume
TRIACOM AUDIOVISUAL, SL	Large volume of recurring outsourcing
TRUE CRIME FACTORY, SL / GOROKA CONTENTS, SL	Large volume of recurring outsourcing
TURRUÀ LLÀCER, SLU	New contract, significant volume
VERANDA MEDIA, SLU	Large volume of recurring outsourcing
VÉRTIGO FILMS, SL	New contract, significant volume
YOUPLANET PRODUCTIONS, SL	New contract, content for young/adolescent audiences

Source: Own work based on the CCMA's contract search engine.

4.1 Categories of the CCMA's outsourced production

Any production that is outsourced either totally or partially, or in which an external production company is contracted, is called an associated production. The concept of associated production includes the following degrees of outsourcing: mixed or hybrid production for an external production assignment in which part of it is done internally, such as using the Corporations' resources or facilities; or 'turnkey', when the Corporation only provides funds and sets a delivery date for the finished product. There are also co-productions in which the CCMA participates in joint productions with other companies or operators.

4.2 Selection and outsourcing procedure at the CCMA

The audiovisual projects that will become part of the content that the CCMA offers are selected and outsourced through the processes called Calls in accordance with the 'Regulatory Standard of the procedure for selecting and outsourcing audiovisual content for the CCMA media', approved by the Governing Council agreement 31/2016, which amends agreement 14/2016.

The Regulatory Standard is a document that sets the procedure for the submission, selection, processing and outsourcing of all the projects involving the production, direction and supply of audiovisual content to be integrated in the programming line-up of CCMA media, as well as the assignment of intellectual property and operating rights (CCMA, 2016). This explains the CCMA's distribution windows, what products are offered and their themes. It also sets out provisions regarding the format for submitting the proposals, the CCMA's programming needs, the economic conditions and the maximum orientative production amounts for each content genre.

The Corporation makes a distinction by category within the contents meant for linear TV, which it does not do with the other radio and digital contents (CCMA, 2016:27). It also sets maximum orientative amounts per minute for each content category: €4,000 for large format serial fiction, €2,700 for 'situational' fiction, €1,500 for large on-set entertainment programmes, €1,200 for format entertainment programmes, €1,000 for 'spoken' entertainment programmes, €700 for serialisable entertainment and €1,000 for docuseries (CCMA, 2016: 25-26).

In contrast, it does not set categories or amounts for the contents of the other media; in the digital media category, it states that as a new category without precedents, each project will be valued based on an individual assessment and reaching an agreement. The standard also stipulates an industrial profit limit for production companies to which a production is outsourced by the Corporation: a percentage of 8%, except in the first season, in which an initial percentage of 10% is applied (Art. 2.2 of Annexe 2). Within this framework, when the Corporation requires a production need to be covered by an external audiovisual production companies, a call for the submission of audiovisual projects is announced through its public website. These calls do not have an established

publication period, nor are they published or notified specifically to the interested production companies.

In order for a project to be more likely to be chosen in a call from the Corporation, in addition to fulfilling the specifications, aspects such as gender parity, the visibility of diverse sexual identities, types of diverse bodies and production without an ecological footprint are also positively assessed, all of which make a project valuable from the standpoint of public service. Each project is intended to fulfil one of these 'points' so the Corporation's content as a whole covers all these areas (Eric Dexeus, 2024, personal interview).

However, many aspects of the Regulatory Standard are considered obsolete today, as the document dates from 2016. The audiovisual scene has changed a lot in recent years, and for this reason the Corporation is working on an updated Regulatory Standard on the selection and outsourcing procedure. However, it is not expected to set maximum production amounts per minute, because the Corporation 'must have the ability to acquire productions that can be competitive' and 'generate interest in national and international markets' (CCMA Audience Attention Service, 2024, email).

Currently, contracts with production companies do not have to set the product's distribution window (linear channel, OTT platform, etc.), since it can vary depending on the Corporation's strategies. Therefore, content is outsourced and then the CCMA can define the most suitable distribution window. An example is the case of *La travessa*, which was initially outsourced with the intention of being for linear TV (TV3). However, dovetailing with the launch strategy of the 3Cat platform, it was decided to launch the first program for the OTT on demand (Eric Dexeus, 2024, personal interview).

4.3 The evolution of outsourced production in relation to the budget

This section compares the associated production expenditure over total production expenditure to better understand the proportion of outsourced production companies within the Corporation's total content. The total production expenditure between 2013 and 2023 (Figure 2) was calculated based on all the productive costs of the programmes and was obtained directly through a request to the Corporation.

In the period analysed (2013-2023), the years in which more money was allocated to the outsourcing of productions were 2022, with a total of €44,130,000, and in 2023, with €63,988,000, as shown in Figure 2. The two years in which the highest percentage of the budget was allocated to outsourced productions within the total expenditure in production are 2013, with 29.2% of the total budget, and 2023 with 32.9% (Figure 2).

There was an upward trend in total euros for outsourced productions from 2018 to 2023, although it is not reflected in the same way in the percentage of outsourcing compared to total production during the same period, which has fluctuated more. The lowest percentage spent on associated productions

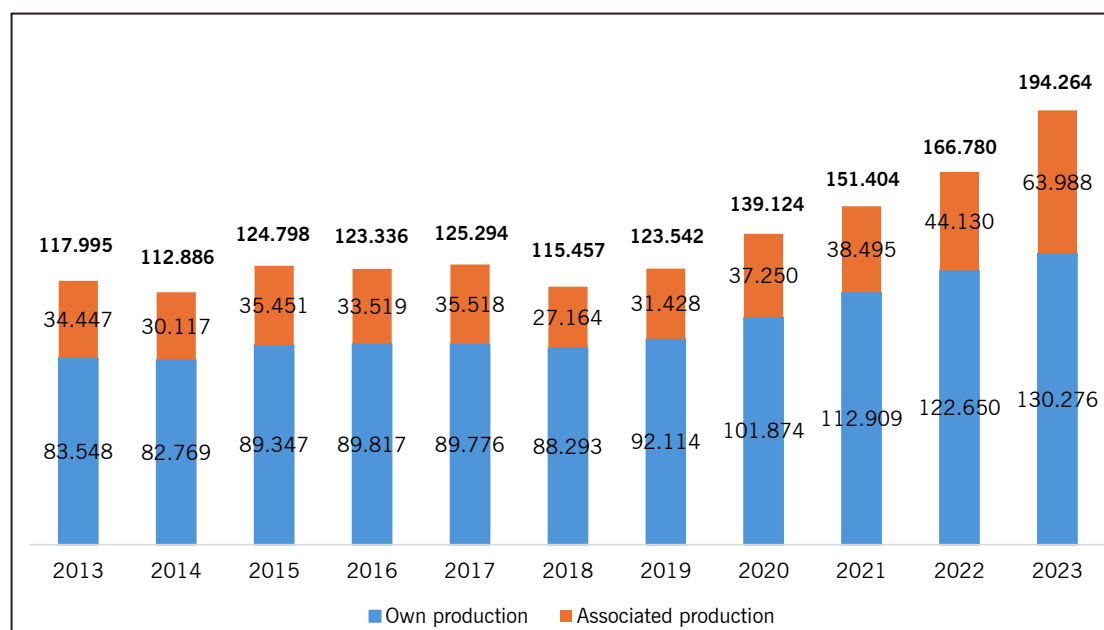
over the total in the period analysed was in 2018, with 23.5%, and subsequently 2019 and 2021, both with 25.4%. With regard to the total in euros, the year with the lowest budget for associated productions was 2018, with €27,164,000, followed by 2014, with €30,117,000.

Thus, 2023 was the year with the largest total budget for associated productions both in absolute terms and percentages. In fact, the increase was so significant (almost 20 million euros) that it led to a very significant increase in the percentage allocated to associated productions over the total public

contribution to the Corporation. The Government of Catalonia's total contribution to the CCMA's budget increased 16.8% in 2023 compared to the previous year. Associated productions went from €44,130,000 in 2022 to €63,988,000 in 2023 (Figure 2). This is a total increase in spending of 45% on associated productions, if we include co-productions in these calculations.

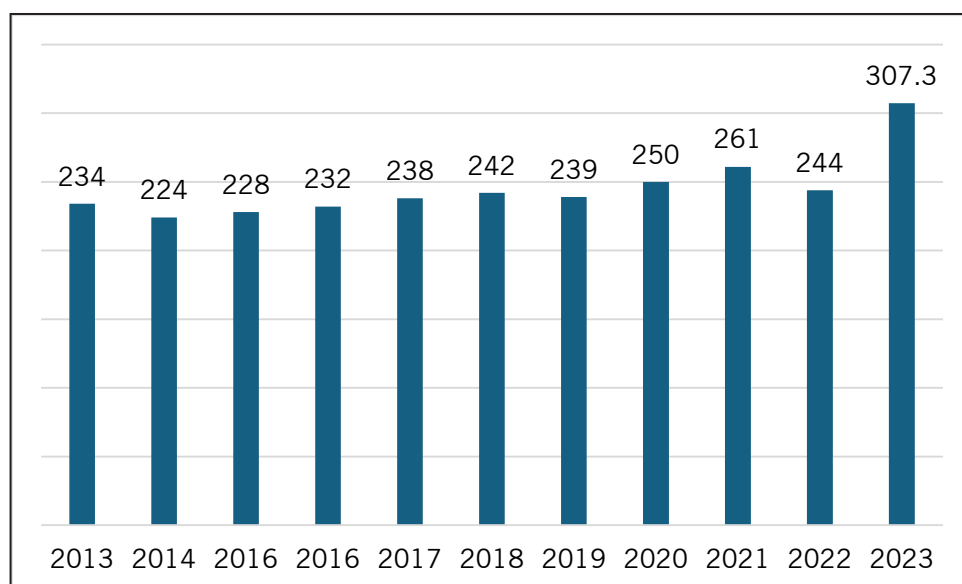
Therefore, the public contribution to the CCMA has increased, especially in 2023 (Figure 3), which has led to an increase in outsourced productions. The fact that the Corporation had

Figure 2. Evolution of the CCMA's expenditure on its own and associated productions (2013-2023)



Source. Own work based on data provided by the CCMA.

Figure 3. Evolution of the public contribution to the CCMA (2013-2023)



Source: Own work. Source of data 2013-2022: *Connectem per arribar a tothom: Pla estratègic de la nova CCMA* (CCMA, 2022:21). Source of data 2023: Annual accounts Audit Report of the CCMA (CCMA 2023:78).

a higher budget allowed it to outsource productions to feed the linear media line-up and especially furnish content for the OTT platforms as a result of promotion the digital strategy: the 3Cat platform, which was launched that same year, and the SX3 platform, which had been launched in 2022. The following section shows that the contents for digital media and for children and youth audiences have the higher proportion of outsourcing over the budget of each area (Figure 4). This is explained by the need to feed the digital platforms (the CCMA's OTT and the Corporation's social media profiles) when 100% of its own resources was already in use, which required the contents to be produced by external companies.

4.4 Type of outsourced content

The categories of News and Sports had a low percentage of outsourcing throughout the period 2013-2023: between 0 and 1% for Sports and 2 and 4% for News. These percentages are due to exceptional contracts, such as that of Ramon Pellicer, who works as director and presenter of *TN cap de setmana* through the production company Sticaki SL, with a contract of €133,000 per year, according to data extracted from the CCMA's contract finder. In contrast, the category with the highest percentage of outsourcing is entertainment and culture, around 50% in all the years analysed. This category shows an upward trend in spending since 2019 (Figure 5), with a budget increasing from €15,797,000 (49.6%) to €28,198,000 (52.1%) in 2023.

The most pronounced increase in outsourcing is in children's and youth programming (Children and Youth category in Figure 4), with a budget that went from €3,380,000 in 2021 to €6,943,000 in 2022 (Figure 5). This more than doubling of the budget can be explained by the restructuring project of the Super3 channel by Gestmusic Endemol, operating since 10

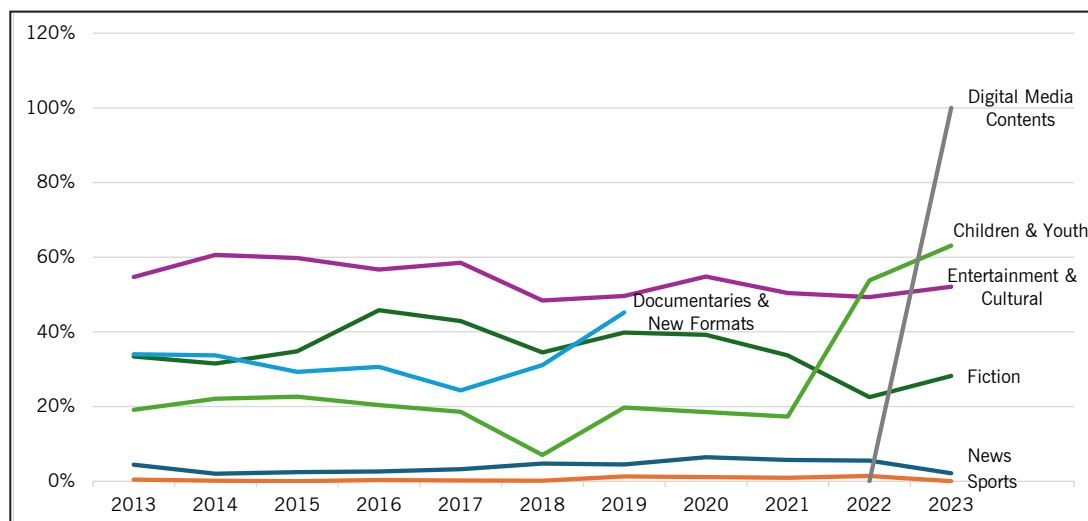
October 2022. The renovation of Super3, which became SX3, and the creation of an OTT platform with the same name for children's content involved significant changes in programming, including the return of anime series in Catalan such as *One Piece* and *El detectiu Conan* and a greater commitment to entertainment and digital content.

Regarding the Fiction category, the data show a slight decrease in the percentage of the budget allocated between 2019 and 2022 (Figure 4). In 2020, the budget for this area fell to 9 million euros, 5 million less than the previous year (Figure 5).

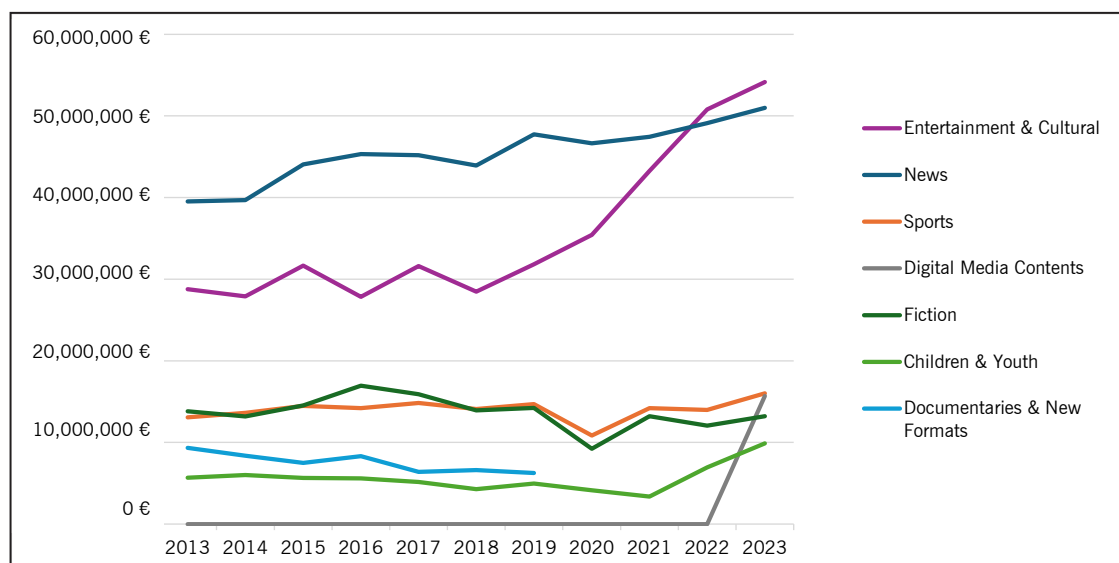
In 2023, investment in fiction went back up. This is because the series *Jo mai mai*, which premièred in 2024, was outsourced to Cooperativa Abacus for a value of €2,979,272.68. It consists of eight 45-minute chapters, with a cost of more than €8,000 per minute, doubling the maximum cost ceiling stipulated in the Regulatory Standard of €4,000 per minute for serial fiction, as mentioned in section 4.2. The Corporation believes that it has to adapt to the current dynamics of the audiovisual sector in order to compete with the productions of other stations and platforms (CCMA Audience Attention Service, 2024, email).

The budgets for audiovisual productions have changed and no longer take into account only the cost of making a production, but also all the content linked to it, such as the creation of digital dissemination strategies, exclusive content to share on social media, music recorded specifically for the production (new songs or new arrangements of existing music), specific videoclips, interviews and materials with actors and on the shooting, etc. In other words, the outsourcing of current production also includes the digital dissemination strategy, which is the responsibility of the production companies. Therefore, when outsourcing, new services have to be taken into account that did not have to be considered in the past.

Figure 4. Evolution of outsourcing by productive areas, in percentage over the total budget of each category (2013-2023)



Source: Own work based on data provided by the CCMA.

Figure 5. Evolution of outsourcing by productive areas, in absolute values in € (2013-2023).

Source: Own work based on data provided by the CCMA.

In the analysis of the evolution of production at the CCMA, the specific item called Digital Media Content, created in 2023 with a budget of 15 million euros, is wholly earmarked to content produced by external companies. This item includes the productions of EVA, a CCMA digital content window, which are distributed via the social media. Some of them are produced by ELAB studio, while other contents of new exclusively digital formats (*La turra*, *Truca quan arribis*, *Spursito & Company*, *Xef Marín*, *Pisos d'estudiants*, etc.) are made by companies such as La Manchester Radiofònica, El Terrat, Monmedia Productions and Fem Produccions.

With the Corporation's own resources already stretched to the utmost, any budget increase for new productions had to be outsourced (Cristian Trepà, personal interview, 2024). Outsourcing allows it to bring in younger perspectives outside the CCMA staff with more knowledge of the digital environment (Adrià Serra, personal interview, 2024).

4.5 Evolution of the outsourced production companies

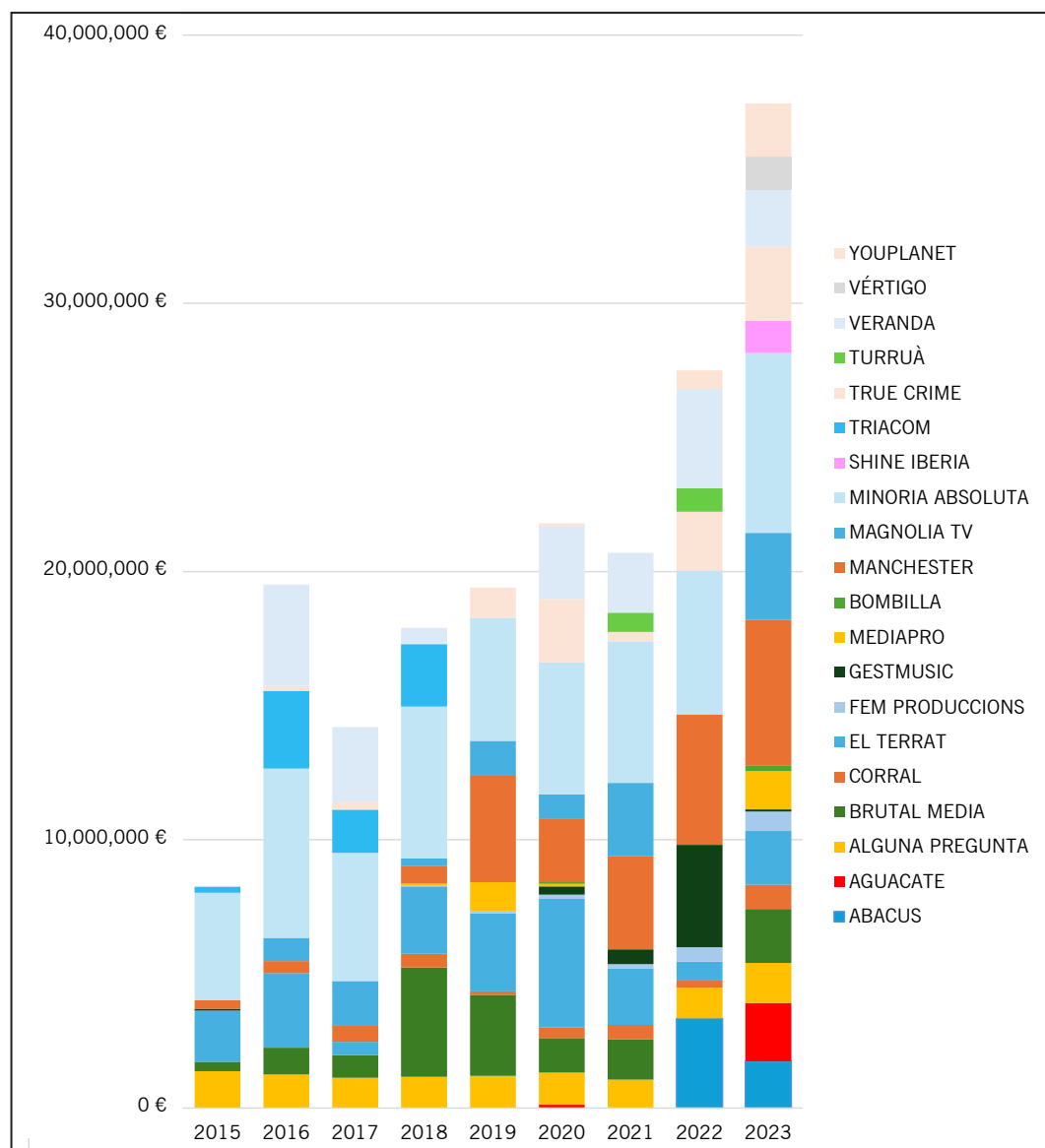
Minoria Absoluta is the company that has the largest outsourcing investment by the CCMA, with fluctuating but high amounts thanks to programmes such as *Polònia* (between 3 million and 3.5 million per season; running since 2006) or *Està passant* (1.6 million euros per season; airing since 2017). Of all the production companies, the most is spent on these two programmes. In 2023, the outsourcing of content to Minoria Absoluta rose further with the programmes targeted at the digital platforms *Love cost*, *Èpic nails* and *Fuet*, which together totalled more than 1 million euros.

Alguna Pregunta is another veteran production company that has remained steady throughout the period analysed (Figure 6) due to the annual and regular renewal of the programme *APM* (1 million euros per season) and the production of other formats

such as *GIT GUD* for SX3 or *40 pals*, which is exclusively digital content.

The volume of outsourcing with the production company El Corral de l'Humor, associated with the humorist Peyu, has also remained steady at around 500,000 euros for formats such as *BricoHeroes* and *El búnquer*. A decline can be seen in some more veteran production companies such as El Terrat, which reached the maximum budget awarded in 2020 thanks to the outsourcing of *Última nit del karaoke* and a second season of *Tabús*, in addition to the entrenched *Preguntes freqüents*. From then until 2022, the CCMA's outsourcing to this production company fell significantly, but it rallied in 2023 with the production of the show *Vosaltres mateixos*. Veranda Media earned the maximum budget in the period 2016-2017 with the production of the fiction *Merlí*, with approximately 3.7 million euros in 2016. Magnolia TV has a considerable volume but more irregular outsourcing; with the production of the show *Joc de cartes*, it has earned around 1 to 1.5 million euros in 2016, 2017, 2019 and 2020, and about 3 million euros in 2021 and 2023.

In recent years, there has been a greater commitment to newer production companies led by younger people, such as Roger Carandell's Fem Produccions (*LOFT*, *Que no surti d'aquí*), with an investment that has grown year after year to 700,000 euros in 2023, and La Bombilla Media, incorporated from a youth association that after producing *Generació Z* in 2020, agreed to produce the dating show *Clímax* for 200,000 euros in 2023 as one of the main projects of EVA, the CCMA's digital brand targeted at young people. Aguacate & Calabaza has also entered the game with little experience in large productions; it received a peak budget of about 800,000 euros for the production of *La travessa*. As a result of the first season's success, the contract was renewed for a second season with almost twice the budget.

Figure 6. Evolution of the CCMA's expenditure by production company and year (2015-2023).

Source: Own work based on the CCMA's contract search engine.

Note: Data for the period 2013-2015 is not available because it is not publicly available.

This outsourcing of productions to newer companies led by young people can be explained by the fact that the internal staff of the CCMA and traditional production companies still lack age diversity. For this reason, the Corporation bears in mind that young professionals are hired by the production companies who can supply the digital content demands and have knowledge of dissemination on social media required in the programmes that are outsourced, and that their teams represent diversity (Adrià Serra, 2024, personal interview).

Regarding other new outsourced production companies, Turruà Llàcer, run by Àngel Llàcer, produced a format for the Corporation for the first time in 2021: *El llop*. In 2022, it did again with *La puntual*, and the two formats were worth about 800,000 euros each. Gestmusic, a longstanding Catalan

production company behind successful large formats for national stations like *Operation Triunfo* (TVE, Prime Video), *Tu cara me suena* (Antena 3) and *Tú sí que vales* (Telecinco), had occasionally worked with the Corporation with the format *Benvinguts al Poble* (2015), but it did not land an outsourcing contract for *Caigut del Cel* until 2021 and the award for the new SX3 project for more than 2.5 million euros, including the transmedia fiction project *BETA* and the development of a videogame, which explains its peak in 2022 (Figure 6). The show *Ràndom* is produced by YouPlanet, a production company and agency for faces familiar to young audiences on the Internet. In 2023, Vértigo Films was also added with a contract of more than 1 million euros for the production of the series *Nudes*.

The production companies that grew the most in outsourcing

are True Crime Factory, Goroka Contents and La Manchester Radiofònica. Goroka Contents has experienced an increase since 2019, with around 2 million euros per year spent on the production of *Crims*; and La Manchester Radiofònica experienced the highest growth in outsourcing in terms of amounts, number of contracts and speed of growth: from the approximate 600,000 euros that was allocated to it annually until 2018, to more than 3.5 million euros in 2019, to almost 5.5 million in 2023, for productions like *Quatre gats*, *Planta baixa* and *Col·lapse*, as well as the morning radio show *El matí de Catalunya Ràdio*, all four hosted by the journalist Ricard Ustrell.

One striking case is Abacus Societat Cooperativa. The company, which has a long history linked to the educational community, has been working on the audiovisual scene since 2022 by producing content in Catalan for the public corporation. In total, more than 5 million euros have been allocated for nine formats in its first two years working with the CCMA (2022 and 2023).

4.6 Outsourcing and digital platforms

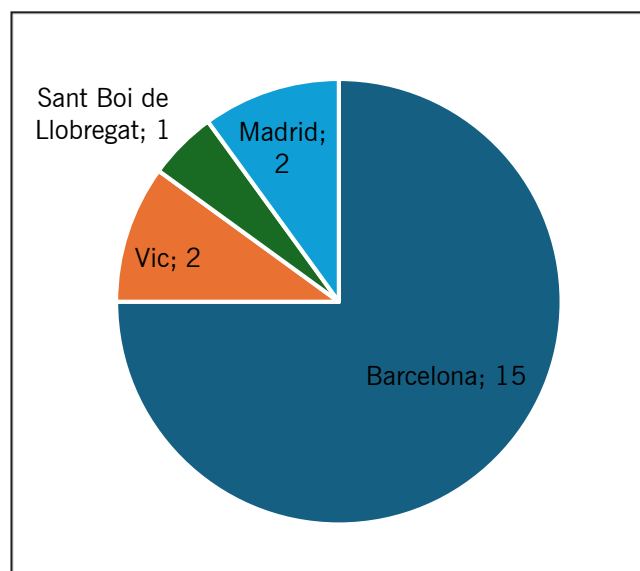
The launch of the 3Cat platform, which has been operating since October 2023, has impacted the outsourcing dynamics of the CCMA, which has needed content to feed it. The CCMA's adaptation to the platform context has also materialised with the launch of SX3 – the platform for the children's audience – and the digital brand EVA targeted at young people – which distributes content mainly via the social media – both of which are available in 3Cat. The promotion of digital content has affected outsourcing with an increase in both content outsourcing (as shown by the data presented) and the productions' requirements, whose formats have to be adapted to digital dynamics and which have to include the digital and transmedia strategy for the contents.

The analysis of the outsourcing of productions to external companies shows that although the Corporation has worked with consolidated production companies in recent years, it has also opened the door to new companies led by younger professionals, dovetailing with the need to have more content to feed digital platforms and the available budget at a time when the CCMA was internally working with its resources stretched to the utmost. The introduction of new and more diverse production companies within its workforce has enabled it to bring in a more current take on the productions, with a digital approach to the contents (either initially broadcast on digital channels, or because they have a digital dissemination strategy that complements the linear broadcasts).

4.7 Geographical diversity of production companies

Regarding the domicile of the production companies working for the CCMA, 18 of the 20 companies analysed are domiciled in Catalonia. This indicates effective invigoration of the Catalan audiovisual business community. The two exceptions are Shine Iberia and Vértigo Films, which are based in Madrid. Shine

Figure 7. Domicile of the production companies analysed



Source: Own work.

Iberia produced *El tros* in 2023 for almost 1 million euros and co-produced the documentary series *Generació porno* for more than 200,000 euros the same year. Vértigo Films received 1.2 million euros for the series *Nudes* in 2023. Some of the Catalan production companies are domiciled outside the city of Barcelona, such as Crisàlde Studio in Vic and La Bombilla Media in Sant Boi de Llobregat, while the other 15 are in the Catalan capital and all are in the province of Barcelona.

Therefore, shortcomings in the geographical diversity of Catalan productions can be detected, given that none of the 18 Catalonia-based production companies analysed is located outside the Barcelona province.

5. Conclusions

The outsourcing of some of the productions of the Corporació Catalana de Mitjans Audiovisuals (CCMA) [Catalan Audiovisual Media Corporation], as a public service, reflects the fulfilment of the CCMA's functions entrusted by law of serving as an engine and promoter of the regional industry. This research concludes that the Regulatory Standard of the procedure for selecting and outsourcing audiovisual content for the CCMA's media needs to be updated so it takes into account the Corporation's current digital dynamics and the context of platformisation (specific objective 1).

In addition, the momentum of the digital strategy and the launch of 3Cat have increased investment in outsourced productions in both absolute figures and percentage of the budget, which grew in 2023 and reached 33% of the total (specific objective 2). In 2023, there was a notable increase in the CCMA's public funding in order to reverse its declining production capacity, boost digital content and create and nurture the OTT platform

with its own exclusive content. Given that the use of the Corporation's own resources, such as sets and personnel, was maxed out, as seen from the interviews conducted, the new contents produced as a result of this budgetary increase had to be outsourced to external production companies, as they could not be handled internally.

In relation to the objective of studying the type of content that is outsourced the most (specific objective 3), the contents that have been outsourced the most in the period analysed are entertainment and culture, with about half of the productions outsourced to private companies in the period 2013-2023. In 2022, with the creation of the SX3 platform and its new programming, the outsourcing of children's and youth content exceeded entertainment, with 60% of the volume produced by external companies. Finally, since 2023, the category of digital media content was included, with 100% outsourced production. On the other hand, the programmes with lower outsourcing rates are in the categories of sports, with an average of 0.5%, and news, with an average of 3% of the budget allocated to external production companies.

In the analysis of which production companies the CCMA uses for content outsourcing (specific objective 4), the company that has received the highest contracting by the CCMA during the entire period analysed is Minoria Absoluta, followed by La Manchester Radiofònica, which experienced the highest growth in programming orders. Other production companies that have received a notable level of outsourced programming are Brutal Media, Magnolia TV and Veranda TV. Abacus Cooperativa, Aguacate & Calabaza and Vértigo Films, among others, were added as new production companies in recent years.

Regarding how the drive for digital strategy affects the dynamics of outsourcing (specific objective 5), it currently includes new services that did not need to be considered before, such as the digital dissemination strategy and the creation of digital and transmedia content, which production companies have to cover. Outsourcing production allows public corporations to be flexible and adapt to market demands in content, so they can meet new consumption models and audiovisual languages.

In this sense, the CCMA is focusing on youth-led companies that produce content for this target audience, such as La Bombilla Media, Fem Produccions and YouPlanet. In this way, the public media can have content targeted at young audiences and adapted to the new digital consumption dynamics and thus offset the lack of age diversity and younger profiles in the Corporation's internal staff. In addition, when selecting a project, the CCMA takes into account aspects such as gender parity, sexual and bodily diversity and sustainable production, in addition to fulfilling the established specifications, in order to reinforce its value as a public service.

With regard to the study of the geographical diversity of the production companies (specific objective 6), we can conclude that the domicile of the production companies commissioned to produce content for the CCMA are mainly Catalan, so the resources earmarked for external productions serve to promote

the regional audiovisual industry. However, there is a lack of geographical diversity in the domicile of the companies, with a clear concentration in the province of Barcelona; therefore, the audiovisual sector is not promoted equitably throughout the territory.

This article provides information on the outsourcing of production by the public media, which must be adapted to the context of digitalisation and platforms, and with new content creation dynamics that affect the contracting and outsourcing of programming to external companies.

The platform scenario requires competitive productions, a higher volume of content and innovative formats to reach a diversity of audiences, beyond the time slots allowed by linear TV. Therefore, the production companies working for the CCMA have to adapt to digital languages and produce content for digital channels. This has led to the emergence of a series of new production companies led by young people and is forcing the traditional ones to adapt to the new context. In addition, there is innovation in the contents to feed the 3Cat platform, the EVA youth channel and the SX3 children's platform. Thus, the CCMA's digital drive and the launch of the new platform have invigorated the Catalan audiovisual industry by giving rise to new production companies led by young professionals, in addition to promoting innovation.

Future research on this subject can seek to compare the outsourcing dynamics in different international case studies, as well as to detect the future professionals required by public corporations and audiovisual production companies as a result of adaptation to consumer trends that also affect changes in the way content is produced.

Endnote

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Notes

1. This article is a part of the first author's final degree project (TFG) and was submitted to the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona in June 2024.
2. Public procurement data only include contracts since 2015.
3. The legal name with which the production company is established and as it appears in the contracts is 'FEM Produccions, SL', although in its communication, website and social media it presents itself under the brand 'Crisàlide Studio', which is its commercial name.

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Sobre la evolución de los medios: Emergencia, adaptación y supervivencia

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The challenging future of media evolution

Some books are capable of condensing and assembling the contributions of an entire academic discipline to offer a precise synthesis of what has been done in the past. Others are capable of ushering in a new field by proposing new concepts to offer points of departure for what remains to be done. Very few books are capable of doing both. *Sobre la evolución de los medios* [On Media Evolution] is one of those few books that concentrates and yet expands, that proposes through integration and connects the dots of what has already been developed to outline what has yet to be constructed.

The author of this book, Carlos A. Scolari, a professor in the Communication Department at Universitat Pompeu Fabra, offers a map of the *evolution of the media* as a discipline capable of responding to the uniqueness of the media change and a meeting point of theories and models that address this widely variable phenomenon. The book, which is organised into three parts, offers a very constructive theoretical and practical overview to shed light on the context, concepts and methods that make this new discipline meaningful.

The current paradigm of technological acceleration and the incessant appearance of new communication situations presents a context that has never been seen in history before, which requires a revision of the scholarly approach used to study this scenario (Scolari, 2022). In the first part of the book, the author connects contributions by different authors and fields that study the media to shape a new theoretical framework that encompasses these contributions and puts them in dialogue with each other. Examples of this are the connections with Verón

(1997) and the articulation between technologies and social practices, with Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 1999; Law, 1999) and its relations between human and nonhuman actors, or with Meyrowitz, McLuhan and Postman and their multiple different and complementary contributions to our understanding of the media, its interactions and technological change, among many others. These conversations establish a map of the *media ecology*, which the author started in this same journal (Scolari, 2010) and is used to weave a network of contributions that serve as a theoretical foundation for the emergence of *media evolution* as a discipline. All this confirms the transition from the ecological gaze to the evolutionary gaze, from space to time, from what De Saussure (1945) called the *synchronic* and the *diachronic*, which the author once again revisits here.

Having set the context for the *media evolution* as an academic discipline, the author presents it as an area under construction and development, which should extend its gaze into the long term, revisiting intermediality and embracing a systemic and complex approach, in that it views the media as interrelated elements that co-evolve and are framed in intertwined systems. To address the foundations of this new discipline, the second part introduces a tentative dictionary of concepts that applies biological metaphors to explain media change processes, thus avoiding reductions or linear gazes. Each concept is followed by a case study that enables the reader to understand how these metaphors materialise and what mechanisms are put into motion when studying the evolution of media like faxes, vinyl records or comics; or media practices like news consumption; or evolutionary relations among media, like painting, photography and cinema.

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Metaphors like the life cycle draw from previously proposed models, like the one set forth by Lehman-Wilzig and Cohen-Avigdor (2004), and update them in accordance with the changes in the contemporary world. This first cyclical metaphor may be the source of the most suggestive categories for understanding the current paradigm mentioned above. Concepts like *emergence*, *domination* and *adaptation* offer opportunities to interpret the rising, collision and resignification of media and social practices fostered by the advent of artificial intelligence (AI) as a catalyst of media change. Therefore, the metaphors in the second part of the book help to compile experiences and lessons from many disciplines that have a particular potential to contribute to understanding media change, and unite them under the same theoretical framework. The concepts and the respective case studies which complete this tentative dictionary fulfil their mission: they lay the groundwork for what might become a discipline that studies media evolution broadly, incisively and attentively.

To apply these concepts and make them meaningful, the third part of the book offers an initial set of methods that could be used to research this evolution. The methodological approach, once again applied with an integrative aim, contains some of the most important qualitative and quantitative methods for this new scholarly field. Particular methodologies are included in this third part, like quantitative *cultural analytics* (Manovich, 2020) or qualitative ethnography, as well as entire disciplines like semiotics and media archaeology studies. Once again, the author brings into dialogue disciplines, methods and techniques that present a significant potential to offer responses and open new perspectives within the framework of a new discipline.

In conclusion, this book is a bridge to what may be this new discipline, which studies transformations in the media ecosystem. It is also an extensive, profound bibliographic source that concentrates decades of scientific knowledge and maps the relationships among works. The book is unquestionably a meeting point of theories and practices, authors and methods, which aims to make something as complex as technological and social change meaningful. *Sobre la evolución de los medios* is many things, but it is most importantly a starting point. It is an invitation to transdisciplinary investigation into the phenomenon of media evolution, revisiting concepts and methods but applying them with a new, deep and always critical gaze. This book is a call to action for anyone who wants to make sense of the media transformation and get ready for, as the author says, the challenging future lying ahead of us.

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La comunicación de Gobiernos e instituciones públicas. 80 cosas que he aprendido comunicando

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A logbook for communication by institutions

In the work *La comunicación de Gobiernos e instituciones públicas. 80 cosas que he aprendido comunicando* [The Communication of Governments and Public Institutions. 80 Things I Have Learned While Communicating] (UOC, 2024), author Pau Canaleta Heras offers up a practical manual for professionals in institutional and political communication. With over twenty years of experience in the field, Canaleta distills his knowledge into eighty key tips to improve communication within governments and public administrations. This manual is not only a compendium of practical recommendations but also a reflection on the importance of effective, honest and relatable communication placed at the service of citizens.

Canaleta provides us with a privileged vision of public communication based on his extensive experience as a consultant and professor of communication. Some of his major contributions to this work include the importance of strategy, transparency, professional honesty, and adaptation to technological and digital changes, which are increasingly important in the tasks undertaken by communication offices. Likewise, Canaleta insists on the need to develop a well-defined communication strategy in the medium and long term. As the author highlights in several chapters, communication without strategy is ineffective and often counterproductive. This advice resonates with academic theories on strategic communication, such as those developed by authors such as James E. Grunig, who defends the importance of planning and research in public communication.

In a world where distrust and discredit towards public institutions are growing, Canaleta emphasises the need to be transparent and honest, including within the style of communication adopted. For the author, transparency not only generates trust but is also a fundamental pillar of a healthy democracy. He is a firm proponent of good practices in communication in the context of disinformation and dubious practices on the internet. For this reason, Canaleta stresses the importance of adapting to new media and technologies, such as social networks and new digital platforms. For the author, these tools are not elements that public institutions must incorporate into their strategies, but rather they must have their own autonomous and well-defined communication plan in line with the global strategy. Moreover, he makes the case for multi-channelling as a backbone of the new communication, along with specialisation in digital narratives as a professional offering that is increasingly in demand.

Canaleta's book is especially valuable for the new generation of public communication professionals. Some of his most prominent pieces of advice include knowing your audience well, laying out a coherent narrative, and proper crisis management, which are becoming more and more emphasised. During the pandemic, institutional communication was crucial in managing the crisis. Governments worldwide had to inform the population about health measures, restrictions and vaccines. Governments that used clear, transparent and science-based communication were far more successful in gaining public trust.

This book, although designed for communication offices in governments and public administrations, is also useful for

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communication undertaken by companies, non-profit entities and other social actors. Civic movements are often among the first to innovate in communication, connecting with new audiences and establishing new ways of connecting with the citizenry. Canaleta also calls for us to learn from these players in order to improve and innovate in public communication.

To sum up, the work *La comunicación de Gobiernos e instituciones públicas. 80 cosas que he aprendido comunicando* (The Communication of Governments and Public Institutions. 80 Things I Have Learned While Communicating) is a pocket collection of experiences that the author makes available to professionals and learners; it is a kind of logbook that seeks to guide the grinders of information in times of difficulty. In an increasingly complex and interconnected environment, Canaleta's practical and well-founded contributions are appreciated after years of trial and error and a handful of communicative triumphs. Without a doubt, the book will be a reference manual for moments of difficulty, crisis contexts and other communicative adversities that we communication professionals face.

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