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Collaborative Journalism and COVID-19: The Pandemic's News Coverage in Mexican Digital Media

ABSTRACT: This article presents an interpretative analysis of the news coverage of COVID-19 during the first months of its appearance in Mexico, in the context of a collaborative journalism initiative, intending to understand the practices of news production from a civic role of journalism concerning the pandemic. The study applied structured interviews to twenty-six journalists from different media and states of the country, most of whom were members of the #TómaloEnSerioMx initiative against disseminating false information. The results contribute to understanding news production practices, agenda-building, and newsworthiness criteria deployed in the coverage of pandemics under a collaborative journalism effort performed by independent digital media.¹

KEYWORDS: Journalism; pandemics; Information Media.

Periodismo colaborativo y COVID-19: cobertura de la pandemia en medios digitales mexicanos

RESUMEN: Este artículo presenta un análisis interpretativo sobre la cobertura noticiosa del COVID-19 durante los primeros meses de su aparición en México, en el marco de una iniciativa de periodismo colaborativo; con el objetivo de comprender las prácticas de producción informativa desde un rol cívico del periodismo, en relación con la pandemia. Se aplicaron entrevistas estructuradas a 26 periodistas de distintos medios y estados del país, la mayoría de ellos integrantes de la iniciativa #TómaloEnSerioMX contra la diseminación de información falsa. Los resultados contribuyen a la comprensión de las prácticas de producción periodística, la construcción de la agenda informativa y los criterios de noticiabilidad que se despliegan en la cobertura de la pandemia bajo un esfuerzo colaborativo de medios digitales independientes.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Periodismo; pandemia; medios de información.

HOW TO QUOTE

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¹ Some data presented in this article were used in the elaboration of the paper "El Periodismo Colaborativo en México en la Cobertura de la Pandemia de COVID-19", in the panel *Questões emergentes do trabalho jornalístico: olhares cruzados entre Argentina, Bélgica, México e Portugal el marco del 18 Encontro Nacional de Pesquisadores em Jornalismo*, de la Associação Brasileira de Pesquisadores em Jornalismo, developed from November 2 to 6, 2020, in digital platform.

Introduction

This is an interpretative analysis of the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic made by Mexican digital media journalists during the first months of the contingency. The analytical object was built around a collaborative initiative convened by the *Pie de Página* news website of the *Red de Periodistas de a Pie*. The study is elaborated from the individuals' point of view, in other words, through a respectful approach to the social world pre-interpreted by the participants and subsequently interpreted by the researchers (Giddens, 2006; Thompson, 1998).

For this purpose, a comprehensive-qualitative approach was used, whose foundations recognize that "one of the characteristics of social research is that the 'objects' we study are actually 'subjects' who for themselves produce accounts of the world" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1994, p. 141). To theoretically order the work, we used as a basis the categories of the sociology of journalism (Hernández, 2018), emphasizing the practices that define collaborative journalism (Martínez & Ramos, 2020), in the context of the health emergency.

On March 31, 2020, through a presidential decree published in the *Diario Oficial de la Federación* (Official Journal of the Federation in English), the *Jornada Nacional de Sana Distancia* (National Day of Physical Distancing in English) was established in Mexico as a federal government measure to contain the spread of the SARS-Cov2 virus. The immediate suspension of all activities in the country was ordered, except for those considered

“essential”, among which was the information media² (Secretaría de Salud, 2020). This paper explores collaborative journalism (Calvo, 2013; Ford, Gonzales, & Quade, 2020; Martínez & Ramos, 2020) which has antecedents in experiences such as:

- *México Leaks*³
- *Panama Papers*⁴
- *Red Rompe el Miedo*⁵
- *Verificado19s* and *Verificado2018*⁶

As a strategy to approach the phenomenon, the initiative *#TómaloEnSerioMX* (*TakeItSeriouslyMX* in English), convened by the *Red de Periodistas de a Pie*, was seized upon (Red de Periodistas de a Pie, 2021b). This Network is a recognized organization in the field of independent journalism in Mexico. In addition to leading the formation of networks of journalists in most of the states of the country, it has formed the *Alianza de Medios para la Libertad de Expresión* (Media Alliance for Freedom of Expression in English) (Ramos & Mendoza, 2021; Red de Periodistas de a Pie, 2021a), a synergic effort –that is, coordinated,

² Among the various appellatives given to the media (communication, information, diffusion, among the most commonly used), in this paper, we decided to use those that emphasize journalistic activity. In this sense, we use the terms information media, news media, or journalistic media.

³ *México Leaks* is an electronic resource through which citizens can make anonymous reports, which the associated media will verify, to disclose critical information of public interest (Méxicoleaks, 2020).

⁴ *Panama Papers* consisted of a collaborative initiative, in which journalists from different countries participated with the objective of analyzing thousands of documents from Mossack Fonseca firm to identify fraud and tax evasion of prominent individuals. Several Mexican journalists collaborated on this project (International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, 2020; Zaidi, Wang, Ahmad, & Ping, 2017).

⁵ *Rompe el Miedo* functions as a network of journalists and human rights defenders. This network is activated whenever any incident of violence against them occurs, and is coordinated by the organization Article 19 (Article 19, 2019).

⁶ The *Verificado19s* and *Verificado2018* initiatives were carried out to verify false information related to the earthquake of September 19, 2017, as well as the 2018 federal elections. Media, analysts, higher education institutions, and civil society organizations jointly participated in these initiatives (“Verificado 2018”, 2018; “Verificado19S”, 2019).

cooperative, and participatory— for the practice of journalism with high-quality parameters and civic commitment.

The *#TómateloEnSerioMX* initiative brought together 48 digital media from different regions of the country, which aimed to generate and disseminate coordinated messages related to the outbreak of COVID-19 in Mexico, as well as to verify information (Red de Periodistas de a Pie, 2020). Table 1 shows the list of the media incorporated into the initiative.

Table 1
Digital native media participating in the *#TómateloEnSerioMX* initiative.

Name	Webside	Location
1. <i>Agencia Sien</i>	http://agenciasien.com.mx/	Campeche
2. <i>Animal Político</i>	https://www.animalpolitico.com/	Mexico City
3. <i>Apuntes de Rabona</i>	https://apuntesderabona.com/	Mexico City
4. <i>Aquí Noticias</i>	https://aquinoticias.mx/	Chiapas
5. <i>Así es Cancún</i>	https://asiescancun.mx/	Quintana Roo
6. <i>CDMX</i>	https://capital-cdmx.org/	Mexico City
7. <i>Chiapas Paralelo</i>	https://www.chiapasparalelo.com/	Chiapas
8. <i>Chilango</i>	https://www.chilango.com/	Mexico City
9. <i>Conexión Migrante</i>	https://conexionmigrante.com/	Los Angeles, California
10. <i>Crónicas de Asfalto</i>	https://cronicasdeasfalto.com/	Mexico City
11. <i>Distintas Latitudes</i>	https://distintaslatitudes.net/	Indefinite
12. <i>El Despertador Panamericano</i>	http://eldespertadorpanamericano.com/	Jalisco
13. <i>El Madrazo</i>	https://elmadrazo.com.mx/	Quintana Roo
14. <i>El Mal Pensado</i>	https://elmalpensado.com/inicio/	Sonora
15. <i>El Mister</i>	http://elmister.info/	Indefinite
16. <i>El Otro Enfoque</i>	https://elotroenfoque.mx/	Guanajuato
17. <i>Escenario Tlaxcala</i>	https://escenariotlx.com/	Tlaxcala
18. <i>Factual</i>	https://www.factual.com.mx/	Indefinite
19. <i>Generación Medios</i>	http://www.generacionmedios.com/	Quintana Roo
20. <i>La Brecha</i>	https://labrecha.me/	San Luis Potosí
21. <i>La Verdad</i>	https://laverdadjuarez.com/	Chihuahua
22. <i>Lado B</i>	https://ladobe.com.mx/	Puebla
23. <i>Letra Fría</i>	https://letrafria.com/	Jalisco
24. <i>Los Ángeles Press</i>	https://losangelespress.org/	Los Angeles, California
25. <i>Malvestida</i>	https://malvestida.com/	Indefinite
26. <i>Manatí</i>	https://manati.mx/	Puebla
27. <i>Mundo Nuestro</i>	http://mundonuestro.mx/	Puebla
28. <i>Noroeste</i>	https://www.noroeste.com.mx/	Sinaloa

29. <i>ObturadorMX</i>	http://www.obturador.mx/	Mexico City
30. <i>Página 3</i>	https://pagina3.mx/	Oaxaca
31. <i>Perimetral</i>	https://perimetral.press/	Jalisco
32. <i>Pie de Página</i>	https://piedepagina.mx/	Mexico City
33. <i>Poblanerías</i>	https://www.poblanerias.com/	Puebla
34. <i>Pop Lab</i>	https://poplab.mx/	Guanajuato
35. <i>Quinto Elemento</i>	https://quintoelab.org/	Mexico City
36. <i>Red es Poder</i>	https://www.redespoder.com/	Coahuila
37. <i>Rodada 2.0</i>	https://rodadadospuntocero.mx/	Mexico City
38. <i>Ruido</i>	https://www.hazruido.mx/	Yucatán
39. <i>RuidoEnLaRed</i>	https://ruidoenlared.com/	Mexico City
40. <i>Ruptura 360</i>	https://ruptura360.mx/	Quintana Roo
41. <i>Serendipia</i>	https://serendipia.digital/	Indefinite
42. <i>SinEmbargo</i>	https://www.sinembargo.mx/	Mexico City
43. <i>Social TIC</i>	https://socialtic.org/	Veracruz
44. <i>Son Playas</i>	https://sonplayas.com/	Sinaloa
45. <i>Telokwento</i>	https://www.telokwento.com/	Indefinite
46. <i>Verificado</i>	https://verificado.com.mx/	Nuevo León
47. <i>Voz es Guanajuato</i>	https://bit.ly/3a84Vsd	Guanajuato
48. <i>Zona Docs</i>	https://www.zonadocs.mx/	Jalisco

Source: Own elaboration with data from the *Pie de Página* website (Red de Periodistas de a Pie, 2020).

This initiative, by representing a space of confluence for a group of well-identified journalistic media, makes it possible to approach this object of study analytically. The objective of the initiative, published on the *Pie de Página* website, shows its willingness to participate in a *motu proprio* communication strategy in favor of the population:

Generate and promote coordinated and verified messages on the measures of social isolation, physical distancing, care, and health protection implemented by the Mexican government in the face of the increase of contagions in our country, inform on time the mechanisms of care for vulnerable groups at this juncture (elderly, women, migrants, populations with comorbidities), provide digital security tips to our users, to avoid falling into traps or cybercrime in this emergency, share best practices of health security for our teams, reporters, and journalists covering the emergency associated with COVID-19. (Red de Periodistas de a Pie, 2020, p. 1)

It should be noted that the digital media sector is not the dominant one in terms of journalistic supply. There are no figures that allow establishing it with certainty; a recent estimate considers that they constitute 4.8% of the total media with informative content in Mexico (Márquez-Ramírez & Hughes, 2017). However, in qualitative terms, this sector has achieved great recognition in public presence, obtaining regional, national, and international awards for work and trajectories, in addition to obtaining resources from various agencies to develop journalistic projects with a democratic approach (De León-Vázquez, 2018b; Harlow & Salaverría, 2016; Ramos & Mendoza, 2021).

The article consists of five parts: the first corresponds to this introduction; the second includes the background and theoretical formulations of the study; the third part presents the qualitative methodological strategy based on semi-structured interviews; the fourth part shows the results and, finally, the fifth part presents the conclusions, which offer a comprehensive reflection based on the data.

Background and Theoretical Approaches

Risk Communication and Collaborative Journalism.

There is a varied set of works on the study of journalism in the context of health crises. Hallin et al. (2020) compared the coverage of the AH1N1 influenza epidemic in three newspapers in Argentina, the United States of America, and Venezuela, respectively. They found that the media favored the health efforts of the authorities and the panic containment in the discourse on the virus. Meanwhile, Muñiz (2011) identified the news consumption patterns for information on the spread of the AH1N1 virus. Thompson's (2019) analysis of the media coverage of the Ebola epidemic in Ghana shows the

importance of the media in disseminating health information to a multilingual and illiterate population.

There are several studies and analyses carried out from different fields to understand the journalistic problems associated with the outbreak of COVID-19. The first group of works deals with non-academic diagnoses conducted by journalists and civil organizations concerned about the risks reporters assume when covering the pandemic. Such risks are contagion, increased precariousness, employer abuses (Morales, 2020; Red de Periodistas de a Pie, 2021c; Red de Periodistas de Quintana Roo, 2020), and violations of freedom of expression (Freedom House, 2020).

The second group deals with academic studies, among which it is possible to identify four major trends. First, there are those aimed at finding out citizen perception of the disease through media consumption (Bratu, 2020; Casero-Ripolles, 2020; A. Hernández, 2020; Khairy, 2019; Lázaro-Rodríguez & Herrera-Viedma, 2020; Muñiz, 2020). The second trend corresponds to the works developed to identify the characteristics and effects of false information about COVID-19 (Akintande & Olubusoye, 2020; Elías & Catalan-Matamoros, 2020; Salaverría et al., 2020).

The third trend is represented by analyses of the role of journalism, the news agenda, and the responsibility of the news media in the production of stories about the pandemic (Kunelius, 2020; La et al., 2020; Lewis, 2020; Navarro, 2021; Olsen, Pickard, & Westlund, 2020; Papapicco, 2020; Sharma et al., 2020; Wormer, 2020). The fourth trend refers to studies on the strategies established by governmental communication to deal with the pandemic (Cárdenas & Pineda, 2021; Llano & Águila, 2020).

As a starting point in our analysis, we proceed from the premise of the proliferation of digital platforms that allow unrestricted access to information for a large number of individuals, who can also interact with the contents that circulate on those platforms (Padilla, De León-Vázquez, & Medina, 2019). This access facility brings with it the problem of misinformation and overinformation, since much of that content is produced without reliable standards and constitutes a problem on different scales, dimensions, and topics, including health.

This study is based on three theoretical axes: a) journalistic activity in the risk communication system, b) the proliferation of false information, and c) collaborative journalism. These axes are articulated because the proliferation of false news represents a problem that public health agencies must address, and it is the responsibility of States to formulate risk communication strategies.

Collaborative journalism, on the other hand, is a coordinated practice of various teams of journalists under a civic orientation. As such, it should participate as an ally to support health promotion strategies. These strategies are part of risk communication actions. Meanwhile, risk communication represents an area of specialization integrated into the discipline of public health. Its objective is oriented to the recovery of evidence and the generation of information that allows the identification of the type of sanitary action needed to face infectious outbreaks, as well as diverse health emergencies:

The current main distinction between risk communication and other forms of communication is that risk communication facilitates an effective outbreak response by addressing challenges in the social environment of the disease outbreak. It does this by

replacing one-way communication with a two-way dialogue among the various stakeholders: decision-makers, scientists, technical experts, response teams, communities, health workers, partners, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and individuals; and across the many sectors that are inevitably involved in disease outbreak response⁷ (Gamhewage, 2016, p. 89).

Consequently, specialized health journalism is a practice directly related to the actions of risk communication. Its specificity lies in facilitating the interaction of health experts with the citizens, in terms of information needs.

Montes de Oca and Urbina (2015) indicate that this type of journalism generates plural and complex news messages in which health, individual, and collective processes are reported. It also serves to favor the exchange of knowledge among the different public health actors.

However, it is important to distinguish, along with Navarro (2021), that in the context of Latin America, health journalism is a subject of coverage but not a specialized practice. In this region, the consolidation of the journalistic profession has not reached that level of specialization. Journalists who cover health and science in the general media usually do so within a set of coverage assignments that they may be close to or distant from, depending on the current situation and informative agendas. There is no rule that makes it possible to specify this.

⁷ This is a retranslation from the original "OWN TRANSLATION".

On the other hand, the proliferation of false information or fake news has been one of the main debates related to the COVID-19 pandemic news. Rodrigo-Alsina (2019) posits that fake news is embedded within another more complex problem: post-truth. The author conceptualizes it as an intentional action to force someone to believe in something. This action is supported by technological tools. Among the most common tools are social media, the shaping of algorithms, and the use of bots. Ethical journalism represents one of the best options to prevail over falsified narratives.

This occurs because, according to Rodrigo-Alsina (2019, p. 229), "The journalist is credited with professional competencies and a code of ethics" that are conditions of their professionalization, and are required as part of their informative work. This constitutes a substantial difference with other actors who inform, and who do not have this ethical mediation in the production of their messages.

Collaborative journalism is a type of journalism that is particularly convinced of this approach to ethics and civic responsibility. It originates from the experiences of independent journalists who organize themselves into work teams and seek to support each other, using digital tools, influenced by the wiki culture of collaboration and working in a network. They constitute an alternative to the large corporate, industrial, or mainstream press (Calvo, 2013; Celecia, 2019, 2020; De León-Vázquez, 2018a; Ford et al., 2020; Harlow & Salaverría, 2016; Heft, Alfter, & Barbara, 2019; Martínez & Ramos, 2020). Authors Martínez and Ramos (2020, p. 4) provide the following definition:

We understand collaborative journalism as a formal or informal project in which journalists from a number of information media, and frequently from different geographic areas, unite

efforts to gather public-interest information, process and disseminate it jointly, supported on communication technologies and on citizens interested and/or involved in the issues of the informative agenda.

Collaborative journalism is an emerging phenomenon in Latin America. It is generally practiced by independent, low-budget, and civic-oriented digital media; it is presented as an alternative to the large industrial press (Celecia, 2020; Harlow & Salaverría, 2016). This is relevant because the industrial press is strongly determined by the capitalist business logic of commoditization of journalistic spaces and products (Fishman, 1983; González-Molina, 1990; McNair, 1998; Ramonet, 2011; Voltmer, 2013).

Academic works on alternative digital media involved in collaborative practices provide evidence that, due to their financing bets –through funders, foundations, and international agencies for democratic development–, their agendas, news values, and production routines privilege journalistic treatments of civic responsibility, not necessarily governed by the mercantile determinations of the industrial press, and in that sense, closer to citizen issues (Celecia, 2020; De León-Vázquez, 2018b; Martínez & Ramos, 2020; Salaverría, Sádaba, Breiner, & Warner, 2019).

These experiences can also be understood as professional communities of practice (Meltzer & Martik, 2017). Journalists who participate in collaborative projects assume themselves as a community that shares values, ideals, ways of exercising their profession, and even a critical attitude towards the characteristics of the industrial press. In the case of Mexico, it is also involved in a form of political clientelism known as “officialism”

(Bohmann, 1994; Hallin, 2000), against which journalists who assume this type of civic role position themselves (Martínez & Ramos, 2020).

Methodology

The research has an interpretative-comprehensive orientation, and was conducted under the question: *How do journalists conceive their practice in the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic, within the framework of a collaborative experience in Mexico?* For this research, the #*TómateloEnSerioMX* initiative mentioned paragraphs above was taken as a starting point. A semi-structured interview was used, in which defined and ordered questions were posed in an instrument known as an interview guide. The guide is applied equally to all study subjects (Díaz-Bravo, Torruco-García, Martínez-Hernández, & Varela-Ruiz, 2013). For this case, an interview guide organized into four items was formulated:

1. General data of the participating journalists (age, gender, activity, length of experience, etc.).
2. Particularities of their journalistic message production procedures (processes, information sources, data processing).
3. Construction of the agenda and newsworthiness criteria (topics and their attributes, news values).
4. Considerations on the role of journalism in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The interviews were self-administered through an online form. One of the researchers was remotely assisting the interviewees –at the time, the social confinement remained in place– between April and July 2020. The responses were analyzed through the

categories of journalistic production routines and news values from the perspective of sociology of journalism (Schudson, 1997), in articulation with the conditions of the health emergency. The participants were summoned through direct contact using the contact data provided on their websites, and a positive response was obtained from 26 journalists. The participants were distributed among 15 states, as shown in Table 2. The data were anonymized to respect the confidentiality of the journalists.

Table 2
General characteristics of the journalists interviewed.

Code	Gender	Location	Occupation	Age	Experience	Other activity
				Years		
E1	Female	Aguascalientes	Journalist	31 to 40	6 to 10	None
E2	Female	Aguascalientes	Journalist	41 to 50	20 +	Other profession
E3	Female	Baja California	Journalist	18 to 30	6 to 10	Other profession
E4	Female	Baja California	Journalist	41 to 50	20 +	Other profession
E5	Female	Baja California	Journalist	41 to 50	20 +	Own business
E6	Female	Baja California	Journalist	31 to 40	6 to 10	Agricultural producer
E7	Female	Mexico City	Journalist	31 to 40	11 to 15	None
E8	Female	Mexico City	Executive	31 to 40	11 to 15	Content manager
E9	Female	Chihuahua	Journalist	41 to 50	20 +	None
E10	Female	Coahuila	Journalist	41 to 50	20 +	Own business
E11	Female	Guanajuato	Journalist	18 to 30	1 to 5	Own business
E12	Female	Querétaro	Executive	31 to 40	16 to 20	Teaching
E13	Female	Quintana Roo	Journalist	18 to 30	6 to 10	None
E14	Female	Tamaulipas	Journalist	41 to 50	20 +	None
E15	Female	Tamaulipas	Executive	51 +	16 to 20	Construction
E16	Female	Veracruz	Journalist	41 to 50	20 +	Teaching
E17	Female	Yucatán	Journalist	18 to 30	1 to 5	None
E18	Male	Oaxaca	Journalist	31 to 40	16 to 20	Own business
E19	Male	Mexico City	Journalist	51 +	20 +	Teaching
E20	Male	Sinaloa	Publisher	51 +	20 +	Teaching
E21	Male	Veracruz	Content Producer	41 to 50	20 +	Teaching
E22	Male	Puebla	Executive	31 to 40	11 to 15	Teaching
E23	Male	Baja California	Journalist	31 to 40	6 to 10	Proofreading
E24	Male	San Luis Potosí	Executive	51 +	20 +	Own business
E25	Male	Jalisco	Publisher	31 to 40	16 to 20	Teaching
E26	Male	Quintana Roo	Publisher	31 to 40	6 to 10	Other profession

Source: Own elaboration.

Findings

The data in Table 2 show different characteristics of the participating journalists. It is observed that the majority are women; a total of 17, compared to 9 men. As this is a qualitative study, it should not be considered that the distribution of this group is representative of the population of digital media journalists in Mexico⁸; therefore, its usefulness is merely descriptive of the traits of the participants.

In relation to their work activity, we found that 17 interviewees were journalists, five were executives, three were editors, and one was a content producer. If we relate both characteristics, we observe that 14 reporters are women, while only three men work as reporters. It also shows that three women and two men hold managerial positions. The editors and the content producer are all men. Although these data are insufficient to evaluate gender conditions, as clarified before, it is convenient to consider that works elaborated with a gender perspective, such as that of Lagunes and Celestino (2015), indicate that a higher percentage of women occupy non-managerial positions in the news media.

In terms of age, most of the interviewees are over 30 years old, while more than half of them have been in the field for more than 10 years. In this sense, it is possible to consider that the group presents stability and experience in the practice of journalism, as they consistently inhabit this social world (Pereira, 2010).

⁸ To have a point of reference regarding statistical representativeness, Márquez and Hughes (2017) calculated that 44.4 % of Mexican digital media journalists are women.

The last column of Table 2 offers data on the combination of the practice of journalism with other professional activities. This aspect constitutes a debate in the case of alternative digital media, in view of the discussion of their recognition as journalists when they engage in other professional activities. This ambivalent professional condition usually acquires relevance, particularly, in cases of violence against journalists, when authorities are reluctant to relate aggressions with their informative activity (Brambila, 2018; De la Rosa & Salgado, 2020; De León-Vázquez & González, 2020). In this case, it is observed that half are dedicated only to journalism or combine it with teaching, while the other half do have other types of work or professional activities other than journalism.

The data collected for this dimension show that the participants are diversely conformed: they are women and men located in different geographical locations, occupy different job positions, there is a wide distribution regarding their age, as well as the time of experience in the exercise of their profession. These aspects signify different positions and visions within the information production structure concerning the pandemic's coverage.

a) Journalistic Production Practices: Covering the News during a Pandemic, Challenges and Risks

The first phases of the confinement ordered by the Mexican State to mitigate the pandemic posed challenges for journalistic work. The findings of this research show that part of the journalistic coverage practices were transformed during this period, in relation to the normality of news production routines. It is not yet clear to what extent these

changes may become permanent. One of the fundamental aspects of this change was remote work.

Interviewees acknowledge that social confinement modified aspects of information gathering routines by limiting rounds to the information sources. This significantly reduced the co-presence of journalists and their informants during the first months of the pandemic in Mexico. The relevance consists in the fact that it shifted the direct witnessing of events –insofar as the journalist is invested with this privilege to scrutinize the public (Bernier, 2005)–, to the witnessing mediated by remote communication devices and platforms.

Journalists' ability to report from home, facing the screens, diminished their agency by reducing the opportunities to confront and question the representatives of the information sources directly. This aspect contributed to institutional agendas remaining above news agendas in the coverage, not only of the pandemic, but of practically all public issues during the period of confinement. An illustrative example is provided by one of the interviewees, referring to the strategies of their sources to disseminate information during the quarantine: "communication with local government sources has not been open, they have opted for videos where there is no openness to questions. It is a one-way communication channel" (Interview with E6⁹).

This situation was recurrently mentioned in the interviews, although in different ways and implications: the use of social confinement as an excuse for lack of transparency, non-compliance with institutional procedures and timelines, secrecy on sensitive issues,

⁹ The anonymized codes (in this case: E6) placed as reference of the testimonies correspond to those assigned to the participants in Table 2.

the use of digital resources to disseminate customized information given the impossibility of journalists to question the statements at the time, as well as the difficulty of establishing contact with informants, among the main ones. But in all cases, it suggests that one of the risks of social distancing for journalistic work was the appearance of information gaps that could lead to the dissemination of false news.

As happened in other areas of social life, journalists had to change some of their practices in the face of the demand to stay at home. Collaborative journalism made it possible to solve some of the problems through cooperation. According to the interviewees, collaboration consisted mainly of linking up with each other to share, first hand, information related to COVID-19. This made it possible to deploy a network of local reporters in different states and, hence, to have the possibility of contrasting information between regions, as well as with the one coming from sources of national hierarchy. This exercise coincides with previous studies on the practice of collaborative journalism.

Under the new condition of migrating journalistic work to digital devices and platforms, the renowned implicit contract between sources and reporters –a symbiotic relationship– remained, for the interviewees, as the main structure of data access. That relationship represents the bond by which trust between the actors remains, even without face-to-face interaction. In one of the interviews, a reporter synthesizes it as follows: “I rely on my relationships with political and private actors to contact them via telephone, in addition to following up on the live transmissions they make on social networks or *communiqués*” (Interview with E4).

At the same time, in some areas, journalistic coverage remained on a face-to-face basis. This occurred, firstly, because the presidential order that decreed the containment in March 2020 excluded activities considered “essential”, among which were the work of the news media, given the importance of keeping the citizens informed during the contingency (Secretaría de Salud, 2020).

Secondly, it was due to the occurrence of activities that required face-to-face coverage, for example: protests, monitoring the hardships of citizens to obtain oxygen, specific stories of contagions, and the press conferences and other media events convened by the institutions. In those cases, journalists established health safety protocols, almost always on a personal basis, as most of the media did not provide the necessary equipment to preserve health. In this regard, an interview states the following:

In case of protests, security incidents or other events that require physical presence, I first try to corroborate with other media or colleagues and then I show up. I do not have security equipment. It is worth mentioning that the head of information does not order me to go out, I do it on my own initiative to get the information (Interview with E17).

Although, in his speech, the interviewee absolved the management and assumed the risks of his outings, this does not exempt the media from their responsibility of providing safety to its workers in exercising their duties. In a deeper sense, the interviewee forces herself to physically cover certain events, not because she is reckless, but because she has internalized in her practice the demands of the profession, materialized in the organizational criteria of the media to have first-hand information (De León-Vázquez, 2003). Thus, the discussion moves from an individual decision to the organizational

demands implicit in the expectations of reporters (Hernández, 1992). According to the theory, it is possible that some of these organizational demands are put on hold in the face of a health emergency, when the extraordinary conditions of the context rearticulate the routines of journalistic production (Berkowitz, 1992), but this is not the case in all cases.

This situation was frequent among the participants, as it was revealed as a new dimension of the precariousness and lack of social protection faced by journalists¹⁰. In the first months of the pandemic in Mexico, journalistic activity was recognized as a high-risk activity due to the personal contact and the presence in activities that congregate a large number of individuals. Most freelance journalists are outside the social security scheme, which implies a higher risk in case of getting COVID-19. At the end of July 2020, 18 deaths of reporters related to COVID-19 were registered in Mexico (Villa, 2020).

b) Agenda and Newsworthiness

Participating journalists were asked to indicate which topics and subtopics became important for their media in the pandemic coverage. They were also asked to evaluate the criteria of newsworthiness or news values. The starting point for this dimension was the assumption that COVID-19 was one of the major, if not the most important, topics in news messages worldwide. However, this is not a monolithic theme; Table 3 lists the main sub-themes that interviewees recognized as constituents of the journalistic discourses on the pandemic in their news media.

¹⁰ To approach the discussion on the labor precariousness of journalists in Mexico, one can review Reyna (2018, 2019), Blanco-Herrero, Oller, and Arcila (2020), and González and Cepeda (2021).

Table 3

COVID-19 subtopics on the journalistic agenda, according to mentions by interviewees (top 10).

	Subtopic	Number of mentions
1.	Economy, economic, economic crisis	25
2.	Politics, public policy	10
3.	Health	9
4.	Social concerns	9
5.	Violence, insecurity	9
6.	Rights	5
7.	Measures against COVID-19	5
8.	Closure (of businesses, schools, institutions, etc.)	4
9.	Employment	4
10.	Entertainment	4

Source: Own elaboration.

The importance of Table 3 is that it reveals the maintenance of the traditional thematic structure of news coverage, centered on economic and political issues. The news produced in this way is known in the jargon as *hard news*, named after the liberal model of the *watchdog press*, a scope where what is “important”, what should be publicly scrutinized, happens. There is, by contrast, *soft news*, in which events of everyday life, of human interest, of “color”, and even frivolous, are recorded, which would correspond to the subtopic fourth and onwards, and which, as suggested by the hierarchy of the list, receive less attention (Berkowitz, 1992; Reinemann et al., 2012).

Health, which ranks third, was identified as a hinge sub-topic in the pandemic context. It acted as a background plot on which the other themes were updated, being the point of reference for most events. Despite this, we consider that the journalistic behavior of the pandemic did not really disrupt the informative narratives of the media participating

in the *#TómateloEnSerioMX* initiative, but rather built on the already existing thematic structure.

This does not mean that sub-topics other than the political-economic are underestimated. As we said previously, the pandemic does not represent a monolithic theme, and these other sub-topics show the breadth of informative approaches to the pandemic, such as insecurity, violence, human rights, employment, and recreation. In the voice of the interviewees, such sub-topics acquire meaning in different ways: “we have tried to work in two areas: the incidence of the epidemic and what it generates beyond the contagions, focused above all on the violation of human rights” (Interview with E20); “we need to go deeper into the stories of context and the contingency does not allow it, everything becomes figures of sick and dead people and does not help to understand the social repercussion of the contagion” (Interview with E21).

Concerning newsworthiness, Table 4 indicates how the interviewees evaluated the news values according to an order scale. The items refer to the consultation made to the interviewees about their own perception of the news treatment of COVID-19, during the first months of the pandemic in Mexico. Traditional news-values are considered, such as the exclusivity of the information, the notoriety of the news source, the geography of the news –which we refer to here as the context of reference–, and the notoriety of the topic –which we refer to here as content– (Gans, 1980; González-Molina, 1986). We add a recent one that has been incorporated as part of the practice of collaborative journalism: data verification (Galarza-Molina, 2020).

Table 4
Elements of newsworthiness during the first months of COVID-19 outbreak coverage in Mexico, as perceived by interviewees, N=26.

Items evaluated	Scale				
	1	2	3	4	5
Exclusivity of the information	3	2	10	5	6
Information source	0	0	1	6	19
Content or topic	0	0	2	6	18
Reference context	0	0	1	10	15
Verification of information	0	1	3	1	21

Note: In the scale, the value of 1 corresponds to the lowest importance and 5 to the highest. The numbers in the distribution are the number of interviewees who agree on each scale value.

Source: Own elaboration.

It shows that the news value known as exclusivity of information acquires a different evaluation to the others, as it seems to be gradually shifting towards a lesser importance. This data is very relevant in the paradigm of collaborative journalism, as the solidarity of sharing information becomes stronger among these actors, as opposed to jealously preserving the scoop conceived in the industrial press. Nevertheless, a positive evaluation persists by placing this news-value in the media range to greater importance.

This apparent ambivalence is explicable, if we consider that the dominant model of journalism in contemporary societies is the liberal one, with features based on the market, business competition, capitalist ideology, separation of the press and the State, differentiation between news and opinions, among others (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). The importance of the exclusivity of information is part of the professional ideology of journalists in this context, but professional values are not watertight and can be modified

when other conditions or characteristics are assumed for their practice (Waisbord, 2013), as seems to be the case of collaborative journalism.

The other news values behave in a very similar way to traditional journalism. After exclusivity, the importance of information sources is widely recognized, i.e., the need to have institutional endorsements that validate the veracity of the data used to prepare the news. This value is fundamental in the fight against false information, particularly that which has circulated concerning the COVID-19 outbreak, since recognized sources of information –and recognizable, since they can be cited in the body of the news–, offer the reliability of the verification and contrasting of the data.

The interviewees recognized the need to obtain validated information, first of all, by official and expert information sources, to avoid misinformation, both locally and nationally: “I receive official communications from the agencies, compare the information with databases and consult medical, chemists, and academics experts, among others” (Interview with E17).

The third news value is the news content, that is, the quality of the data with which the news texts are elaborated. Although it may seem obvious, because it is to be assumed that journalistic products present organized data on the events they report, it is not always the content of the information that is relevant. There are occasions in which the information source becomes more relevant than the information itself¹¹, as it happened constantly in Mexico with the figure of the Undersecretary of Health Prevention and

¹¹ That the source acquires greater informative relevance is, in fact, the theoretical foundation of the recognition of the notoriety of the informative source as newsworthiness, ascertained in the body of work from the perspective of the sociology of journalism (Espino, 2016; McNair, 1998; Schudson, 1997).

Promotion, Hugo Lopez-Gatell, appointed as spokesman for the pandemic situation in Mexico. Frequently, the official was the news rather than the data offered. The journalists interviewed for this paper considered that focusing on the content is as important –judging by the numbers in the table– as the assessment of the information source from which those data come; they are complementary. There is a dialectic between the information source and the news content (McNair, 1998), which is perceptible in these results.

A fourth value considered in the study is the context of reference, which, like the previous one, is evaluated very favorably by the interviewees. The importance of this value consists in the way in which news topics acquire the greatest meaning for journalists –and presumably for their audiences– when they are encoded with local and regional characteristics. So, while the pandemic is a global problem, it takes on particular dimensions in local coverage of issues in specific contexts. In a collaborative initiative such as the one under study, this makes it possible to contrast and, therefore, compare the progress, conditions, conflicts, and solutions that appear in the different contexts of coverage.

In the evaluation of news-values, an innovative activity for journalism was incorporated: fact-checking, which has found a prominent place in native digital media¹². This criterion was added because, according to Galarza-Molina (2020), it is a practice of collaborative journalism; likewise, the statement of the *#TómateloEnSerioMX* initiative explicitly states it as part of its objective: “to generate and disseminate coordinated and

¹² *Native digital media* is a term used to designate news media that appeared on the Internet without having antecedents in any other medium other than digital, such as print, radio, or television (Suárez-Villegas, 2015; Tejedor & Pla, 2020; Tirado Pascual, 2016; Trujillo & Montero, 2019).

verified messages about the measures of social isolation, physical distancing, care, and health protection implemented by the Mexican government in the face of the increase of contagions in our country” (Red de Periodistas de a Pie, 2020, p. 1).

Fact-checking is in charge of reviewing news that is suspected of being false (fake news) and identifying its origin in order to recognize its veracity. The verification of information acquires great importance under the idea of infodemics. We found that, although this practice is incipient, there is a consensus among the participants to evaluate it favorably regarding the news value it acquires.

Conclusion

The evidence presented above shows how participants developed strategies to maintain journalistic coverage during the first months of confinement. In some cases, it meant adapting journalistic production routines to work-at-home. In others, it meant assuming the risk of going out to report in an uncertain context due to the high contagion rate, without the media providing them with adequate sanitary equipment, revealing another face of the precariousness of journalistic work that became visible thanks to the pandemic context.

It was identified that the epidemic has been thematized journalistically, and this major topic is disaggregated for its informative representation into subtopics such as the economy, politics, health, human rights, and violence, among others. Equally, these subtopics show a parallelism with the organization of news into hard-news and soft-news, of the traditional coverage in the journalistic media. If we take into account the process of

building the media agenda, or agenda-building (McCombs, 2006), the data suggest that COVID-19 overlaps –journalistically– with the broad processes faced by society, such as economic, political, social, and cultural ones.

Consistently with the practice of collaborative journalism, it is observed that the value associated with the exclusivity of the information loses relevance for the participants, in favor of socializing and sharing data that several media can use to guide the citizens better. But other news-values, such as the importance of the news source, the notoriety of the topic, and the context of reference, remain as basic professional parameters for quality news production recognized by the participants in this study.

At the same time, and given the specificity of the subject matter of the coverage – COVID-19–, the participants' assessment confirms the incorporation of a relatively new practice in collaborative journalism: the verification of fake news, which coincides with the findings of Galarza-Molina (2020). This practice is seen as a new criterion of newsworthiness by providing procedures to elucidate the veracity of news information.

Therefore, these features and their description, presented in the results section, offer an answer to the research question. The collected data allow us to identify, from the point of view of the social actors, how the news coverage of the first months of the pandemic was carried out through the practice of collaborative journalism in Mexico. It is identified that it was a civic effort of service to the citizens but, despite the good intentions, it reproduced structural problems of Mexican journalism, such as risk and precariousness. Nevertheless, it also revealed adaptations in the routines of news production and in the

criteria of newsworthiness in the face of the great challenge of the global health crisis caused by the outbreak of COVID-19.

One of the main concerns in the world concerning the COVID-19 pandemic has been to influence the information-overinformation-disinformation loop. The dissemination of accurate information supports the risk communication strategies carried out by States, international organizations, and institutions. This requires serious and sufficient information proposals, both in quantity and in quality, that allow for a truthful knowledge of the situation in order to make vital decisions, and that false information is thus made evident.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the director of the World Health Organization, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus (2020), pointed out that the fight is equally against the pandemic and the "infodemic", because "false news spreads faster and more easily than the virus itself, and is just as dangerous".

In this sense, it is expected that risk communication platforms and health journalism will contribute to addressing this problem. However, a professionalization of health journalism does not exist in Mexico. This represents an obstacle, together with the facility for the dissemination of false, or at least confusing, information. Whether it is produced with a deliberate intention to misinform or simply lacks professional parameters, it represents a challenge for promoting inappropriate health practices or unfounded ideological positions.

At the international level, data verification initiatives such as the International Fact-Checking Network have promoted actions such as #CoronavirusFactsAlliance

(Örsek, 2021). In Mexico, the *#TómateloEnSerioMX* initiative, which has served as the basis for this study, has represented a collaborative effort of digital media, convened by the *Pie de Página* news website, in which journalistic activity has been exercised under a civic role, with the explicit purpose of contributing to the containment of the pandemic through the development of journalistic products that guide citizens. The civic role of collaborative digital journalism, as opposed to the clientelistic and commercial attitude of traditional corporate media, has already been documented by other authors (Harlow & Salaverría, 2016; Martínez & Ramos, 2020; Salaverría et al., 2019), and our results confirm it again.

On the other hand, several news media participating in the *#TómateloEnSerioMX* initiative, including the one that called for the initiative, are related to journalist collectives or networks. They are independent groups of reporters that have achieved an important presence in the Mexican journalistic space. Several of their members have won awards inside and outside the country for the quality of their journalistic work and are highly committed to issues such as the improvement of the profession, the decrease of violence against reporters, transparency, human rights, the fight against corruption, among other issues (De León-Vázquez, 2018a; Duarte, De León, & Hernández, 2019; García & Salazar, 2015; Ramos, 2021; Rely & González de Bustamante, 2014). This lends prestige to the initiative.

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