Thematic Analysis and Use of Journalistic Sources in the COVID-19 Crisis: *The New York Times*, *El Universal,* and *El País*

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The present research analyzes topics addressed in relation to COVID-19 and the use of journalistic sources at the beginning of the pandemic, an exceptional situation for newsrooms in which press work routines were substantially modified. For this purpose, a comparative study has been carried out on three leading newspapers: *The New York Times* (United States), *El Universal* (Mexico), and *El País* (Spain). A content analysis of 185 cover pages has revealed that *The New York Times* and *El País* focused primarily on the social consequences of the pandemic, while *El Universal* concentrated on the disease itself. The three newspapers coincide in using a predominance of institutional sources, with government ones being dominant. Sources actively sought by the journalists themselves were in the second position, with experts predominating. News agency information and confidential sources were not significant.

Keywords: journalism, sources, The New York Times, El Universal, El País, COVID-19

The declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020, was an exceptional situation with global consequences. An epidemiological and health phenomenon was unleashed with serious sanitary, social, and economic repercussions, having a devastating effect worldwide both on people's lives and on countries' economies.

The effects of the pandemic were felt in all areas, including newsrooms. There was an increased need for constant information about the very new, changing, and alarming situation by citizens around the world. The media was required to fulfill their social role and service to the citizenship and the general interest, with ethics and content verification being essential, providing value for audiences that demanded rigorous information, public service content, and local stories (Saguier, 2020). For their part, governments adopted emergency measures to protect public health, which, in some cases, ultimately posed a threat to the freedom of the press (Papadopoulou & Maniou, 2021).

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At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the advertising business, which plays such a vital role in funding news production, particularly at the local level. It accelerated changes in news production, distribution, and business models (Olsen, Pickard, & Westlund, 2020).

The pandemic affected not only the daily activities of media companies, but also their business structure and their employees' personal lives. Journalistic production was altered, and problematic issues arose, such as work overload, psychological distress, and job insecurity (García-Avilés, 2021). Journalists likewise found reporting to be problematic during the pandemic and sought to mitigate the forces challenging their work as they struggled to reverse the flow of misinformation (Perreault & Perreault, 2021).

As Kim (2020) points out, it is relevant to examine the production processes of outbreak news, with much research still to be done on how the journalistic practice is altered by global health crises. In this sense, the COVID-19 outbreak was an exceptional and unprecedented situation, as explained before, leading to diverse fields of study to explore.

This unique situation of a global pandemic makes it especially relevant to observe in detail how it affected a specific part of the news production: the selection of sources and the thematic coverage carried out by the media. In particular, given that it was a global crisis, it was compelling to study if, in this very exceptional context, there were any differences between countries—and geographical areas—in these journalistic practices, following up previous research about journalism and sources during COVID-19 (Mellado et al., 2021).

When approaching this analysis, it must be borne in mind that newsrooms were experiencing an exceptional situation, in which journalistic work routines were substantially modified, as face-to-face work had to be reduced, most public events were canceled, virtual press conferences were scheduled, and interviews had to be conducted by videoconference. Additionally, a relevant role was played by press offices and government spokespersons, within a scenario where messages were sometimes broadcast without press control (García Avilés, 2020).

This article explores the case analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic news coverage by three reference newspapers (*The New York Times*, *El País,* and *El Universal*). Specifically, the study focuses on two aspects: the topics addressed related to the virus, and the use of sources. The research objectives are:

1. To observe which issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic have been given most attention in the analyzed media.

2. To identify what types of sources have been used and if some have prevailed over others.

The three papers in the sample are distinguished media in their countries and in global journalism. They are characterized by their declared democratic nature, for being at the forefront of information in their respective countries, and for being leaders in circulation in their territories.

These three journals on which the analysis focuses belong to three territorial areas hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, but clearly differentiated: the United States, Spain, and Mexico. The three countries differ in their political, economic, and health system contexts. In addition, in the case of Mexico, we must bear in mind that it is one of the most dangerous countries in the world in which to practice journalism. This means that its citizens have fewer means for demanding accountability from the government (Arribas, 2016). This situation has led the European Parliament itself in March 2022 to approve a resolution requesting that the Mexican authorities guarantee the protection of journalists in their country.

The three countries also experienced different timelines of the COVID-19 outbreak, which could have influenced the topics of interest for their media's agendas. The development of the epidemiological curves of positive cases and mortality were highly variable in the different territories. Europe and the United States felt the effects of COVID-19 earlier. On the other hand, Latin America had more time to react, although its lower economic growth forced authorities there to face the pandemic with greater limitations in health infrastructure and with less room for financial maneuvering (Peñafiel-Chang, Camelli, & Peñafiel-Chang, 2020).

The present study focuses on the first two months after the WHO declared the pandemic on March 11, 2020. Although it is true that the spread of the disease was not even in all countries, the global alarm did become widespread after that date. In the case of the United States, a national emergency was declared on March 13, 2020. As of March 26, 2020, it became the country with the most cases worldwide, and on April 11 it also registered the highest number of deaths. In Spain, a state of alarm was declared throughout the country on March 14. The highest number of deaths there was recorded on April 2, and as of April 28, an asymmetric de-escalation plan began by province. In Mexico, on March 24, phase 2 of the health contingency was decreed, and on March 30, a health emergency was declared because of force majeure. Phase 3 began there on April 21, extending prevention and control activities until the end of May.

Conceptual Framework and State of the Art

Information Sources in Journalistic Practice

Sources constitute an essential part of journalism activity (Armentia-Vizuete & Caminos-Marcet, 2003; Pavlik, 2004). Mayoral (2005) points out that they should not be considered as simple providers of information: "As they almost always obey a precise rhetorical and discursive strategy, the sources not only offer information, but also, with much (and increasing) frequency, hope to obtain a benefit from their approach to journalists" (p. 94). Additionally, sources are the first gatekeepers (Shoemaker, 2017) since they select what information to share and what to omit.

Journalistic sources are a recurrent object of research. Various scholars have examined the use of sources in national media (Conway, 2021; Franklin & Carlson, 2011; Lewis, Williams, & Franklin, 2008), local press (Mathisen, 2021; O'Neill & O'Connor, 2008; Splendore, 2017), online (Alonso González, 2016; Splendore, 2017), and citizen journalism (Carpenter, 2008). Other authors have classified sources into different typologies, as those included in the Methodology section, and numerous scholars have shown the predominance of some sources over others.

In the late 1970s, Tuchman (1978) had already demonstrated the prevalence of official sources. Lewis, Williams, Franklin, Thomas, & Mosdell (2007) show the excessive dependence of the media on "prepackaged news" (p. 16). This has been criticized by authors such as Casero-Ripollés and López-Rabadán (2016), and Mayoral (2018), among many others. The clear predominance of political (Vázquez Bermúdez, 2006), institutional (Alonso González, 2016; Edo, 2003; Splendore, 2017), or governmental sources (Méndez Nieto, León Gross, & Paniagua Ronao, 2018) has repeatedly been observed.

Ortega and Humanes (2000) consider that dependence on institutional sources causes both a disaffection from reality in journalists (facts are replaced by statements from sources), and a biased view, built exclusively from a few focal points. In this sense, Pérez Curiel, Gutiérrez Rubio, Sánchez González, and Zurbano Berenguer (2015) warn that "journalistic work has been oriented towards the predominance of official and government sources in the news" (p. 103). And, more recently, Bernaola-Serrano (2022) observes an increasing influence of external sources—mainly political and governmental—on the construction of the media agenda, especially since the 2008 financial crisis.

Sourcing decisions by journalists demonstrate dependency on routines, especially official sources (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013). Traditional journalists have been known to rely heavily on routine sources to cope with time constraints and the ambiguous definition of news (Carpenter, 2008). Along these lines, García Santamaría (2010) pointed out the shortcomings of newsrooms and journalists in obtaining information, with "notable absences from primary sources, as well as the lack of specialized sources" (p. 527).

These expert sources are becoming an increasingly important component of the source routine as they are the individuals relied upon by journalists to put events into context and to explain the meaning of news (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013). In health news production, these types of sources are used extensively because of the complexity involved in this coverage (Briggs & Hallin, 2016).

Likewise, online sources (Van Leuven, Kruikemeier, Lecheler, & Hermans, 2018) and social media are increasingly being used in news coverage. For many of today's newspaper journalists, monitoring social media platforms has become a part of their daily newsgathering routines (Paulussen & Harder, 2014), although, "the lack of total credibility makes journalists distrust social media as sources" (Varona-Aramburu & Sánchez Muñoz, 2016, p. 801).

The study of the role of sources as influencers in the shaping of media content (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013) and in the construction of the media agenda because of their role as agenda-setters (Weaver & Choi, 2017) is an interesting field to explore. Diverse studies have examined how sources have been gaining importance in the news production process, reducing the independence of the media. According to Mayoral (2018): "the media are increasingly dependent on these enormous machines that produce press releases, announcements, statements, press conferences, etc." (p. 47).

At the same time, the interrelation between journalists and sources has been observed by numerous researchers, such as Berkowitz (2009), Broersma, Den Herder, and Schohaus (2013), Casero-Ripollés and López-Rabadán (2016), Franklin and Carlson (2011), Gans (1980), and Hallin and Mancini

(2004). Malling (2021) offers a matrix model to map and compare the usage of formal and informal and the visible and invisible interactions between journalists and political sources, showing different source roles such as gatekeepers or agenda-setters in the news process.

Accuracy and independence are elements that influence media credibility, a value that, as Armentia-Vizuete and Caminos-Marcet (2003) emphasize, "depends on the quality of the information it provides, but the greater or lesser credibility depends on the quality of the information it has provided in the past" (p. 39). According to Atton and Wickenden (2005), credibility is also influenced by the source hierarchy, a concept that is also related to the notions of power, legitimacy, and authority.

The management of sources is a factor of journalistic quality. As Pérez Curiel and colleagues (2015) observe, it is "based on deontological principles such as truthfulness, contrast, coherence and equity, which at the same time encounter political, economic, ideological and labour-professional constraints" (p. 104).

Consequences of the Pandemic on Journalistic Practice and Use of Sources

Disaster communication has been used as a framework for understanding pandemic journalism in diverse studies (Perreault & Perreault, 2021; Woda, Birowo, Vidiadari, & Nuswantoro, 2021). Communication resources used in a disaster and crisis situation—such as the COVID-19 pandemic—may be different from those used outside of those contexts (Perreault & Perreault, 2021). In these situations, journalism serves as a conduit for communications from public officials and experts to the broader public, which is known as the facilitative role of journalism (Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng, & White, 2010). Journalists and emergency managers share the common goal of delivering vital information to the public during a disaster situation (Veil, 2012).

COVID-19 is not the first global health crisis in which news production disruptions have been explored (Kim, 2020). In the case of this recent pandemic, it has had significant repercussions on journalists' work routines. These consequences have been similar in the diverse media as no significant differences have been found between the strategies developed by editors from digital/print outlets and digital-only ones, although the latter appeared to be better prepared for remote work because of previous experiences (García Avilés, 2020).

Other studies have explored various aspects of the pandemic's effects on journalistic practices. Krawczyk and colleagues (2021) found that COVID-19 coverage accounted for approximately 25.3% of all front-page online news articles between January and October 2020, while Pentzold, Fechner, and Zuber (2021) studied the use of data-driven journalism and visualization to cover the pandemic.

Perreault and Perreault (2021) explain that there was an overabundance of information posted by numerous sources and describe how journalists constructed their relationship with information sources during the pandemic as being innately problematic given the circulation of misinformation. In fact, different research studies have focused on disinformation during the COVID-19 crisis and how it was combatted from the newsrooms (Aguado-Guadalupe & Bernaola-Serrano, 2020; Luengo & García-Marín, 2020; Nakov & San Martino, 2021; Scott Brennen, Simon, Howard, & Nielsen, 2020).

Less research has been focused on the use of journalistic sources and the prevalence of any of them during the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic, even though in a situation of uncertainty, confusion, and constant change, the use of sources is essential for processing information. Under these circumstances, reporters rarely use their own direct experience, and news is mainly constructed from information provided by sources (Veil, 2012).

News media and journalists—in their gatekeeper function—have the power to select the sources that get a voice in press coverage. Under the extraordinary circumstances of a crisis, their role takes on an especially noteworthy dimension as they are expected to play a pivotal social function in providing relevant and accurate information (Van der Meer, Verhoeven, Beentjes, & Vliegenthart, 2017). Moreover, they can provoke or prevent public panic and hence play an important part in crisis de-escalation (Van der Meer, Verhoeven, Beentjes, & Vliegenthart, 2014).

Catalán-Matamoros and Elías (2020) indicate that sources related to the government, professional associations, and scientific entities were those most frequently used. At the same time, Mellado and colleagues (2021) analyze the use of sources in the media from seven different countries, revealing the strong role of the state in constructing pandemic news, as well as the prominence of health sources.

Public health authorities have managed a large part of the communication of the pandemic through their official social media channels. In fact, the pandemic has also confirmed the move to social media as an information source (Quandt &Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021). But social media is also where citizens can connect far too easily with rumors, unverified information, or misinformation related to health issues. This necessitates a new strategic approach by governments and public health organizations to mitigate the spread of this misinformation, especially in times of fear and uncertainty, such as COVID-19 (Lovari, Ducci, & Righetti, 2021).

In general, official sources, such as government figures, are often preferred by journalists, not only because they are more easily available but also because journalists and their editors accept what official sources say as factual (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013). However, Wu (2021) critically examines the supposedly objective nature of data and shows that data can never be viewed as neutral. In fact, the figures tend to be disseminated top-down by governments and public health organizations, and this explains how data's presumed objectivity may be in fact a powerful tool in shaping public opinion in times of crisis. This is especially significant in our object of study as news reports on the COVID-19 pandemic have largely been data-driven.

Considering the above, it was relevant to examine differences in media practice from diverse territories for some very specific matters during the first months of the pandemic. Thus, we propose the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1:   *Have the three newspapers analyzed given equal importance to the different issues related to COVID-19 during the first months of the pandemic?*

RQ2: Is there a differentiated use of sources for the elaboration of news pieces in the three media analyzed?

Methodology

The methodological design used for this research is descriptive, applying content analysis through a sequenced procedure in four phases: pre-analysis, development of the category system, coding, and treatment and interpretation of the results.

In the initial pre-analysis phase, objectives were determined, and the sample was selected. First, three general information newspapers were chosen from countries belonging to three clearly differentiated territorial areas affected by the COVID-19 pandemic: the United States, Spain, and Mexico. These are the three leading newspapers with the highest circulation in each of their countries, with distinct political, economic, and sanitary contexts.

The cover pages from over a two month-period were selected for each paper, starting as of March 11 (the day the WHO declared the pandemic) and going up to May 11, 2020. In total, 185 front pages of the three newspapers were selected, 62 from *The New York Times* and *El País* and 61 from *El Universal*, since this newspaper's April 10 cover was not available for consultation. In all, 1,090 news items were analyzed. Of the three newspapers, *The New York Times* has the most news items on its front pages (408), while the number of front-page stories in *El País* (343) and *El Universal* (339) is very similar, with the latter having one less cover page. Because of this disparity in the number of news items, all the results were converted to percentages for the comparative study.

In the second phase, the category system was set up. To do this, a bibliographic review was undertaken to establish a proposal for journalistic source categories. Finally, cataloging was defined (Table 1) based on the source categories established by Armentia-Vizuete and Caminos-Marcet (2003), López (1995), Mayoral (2005), and Ruiz and Albertini (2008), including several subcategories.

Thus, four main source categories were established:

1) Own sources actively searched for by the journalist. A distinction is made between expert and primary sources, information based on the direct testimony of the journalist as witness of the events, and others.

2) Institutional sources. A distinction is made between governmental (central governments, regional governments, municipal governments, and public administration), political (political parties), and other institutions (companies, employer associations, unions, other associations). In the latter case, the institutions have been specified.

3) Confidential and anonymous sources, which provide the journalist with exclusive information.

4) News agencies.

The information included in Table 1 was gathered from each news item in the analyzed sample. First, the date and title of the news article were registered. Second, a distinction was made between news about the coronavirus and its consequences, and those news stories dealing with other topics, since the analysis of sources was exclusively on news related to the pandemic. Likewise, it was considered of interest to differentiate between news that addressed national and international issues, and the aspect of COVID-19 that was dealt with (the disease itself, or its political, economic, or social consequences) to better contextualize the subsequent analysis of sources.

Table 1. Cataloging of Analyzed News.

1	**Date and Title**	
2	**Topic**	**Subtopic**
	Non-COVID	–
	COVID	Disease
		Political consequences
		Economic consequences
		Social consequences
	National/International	
3	**Source Categories**	**Subcategories**
	Own	Expert
		Primary
		Journalist as witness
		Others
	Institutional	Governmental
		Political
		Other institutions
	Confidential and Anonymous	
	News Agencies	

In the third phase, a content analysis of each news item was carried out, cataloging the sources used according to the categories established in Table 1. This analysis and cataloging of sources was done exclusively with the information contained on the cover page and not with the whole news story from the inner pages. Finally, in the fourth phase, the data were extracted, obtaining the results shown in the tables.

In the analysis of the sources used in front-page news, opinion articles were not included in the sample, nor were news stories cataloged as "non-COVID."

Throughout the study, it was observed that in the case of *The New York Times*, sources from the newspaper itself were frequently used. To carry out the analysis, these sources were cataloged as "other sources" (within the journalist's own sources).

Results

Predominant Issues Related to the COVID-19 Pandemic

When analyzing the 1,090 news items registered from the 185 front pages of the three newspapers from March 11 to May 11, 2020, it was observed that most are related to COVID-19. The coronavirus became the only topic dealt with in many of the cover pages in the sample, although some variations are detected among the three papers. Thus, *El País* is the one that most addresses issues related to the pandemic (92.7% of its information is linked to the coronavirus), followed by *The New York Times* (89.2%) and *El Universal* (74.4%). This could be related to the health crisis that reached Spain before affecting the United States and Mexico. In fact, *El Universal* publishes the least news about COVID-19, as Mexico, of the three countries analyzed, was the last one to be affected by the pandemic.

If we examine the issues, *The New York Times* and *El País* dedicate more news articles to social consequences deriving from the pandemic situation, while *El Universal* focuses primarily on the disease itself. This may have influenced the types of sources used by the three newspapers.

Table 2. Cataloging of News by Topic.

	NYT		El Universal		El País	
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*
Non-COVID	**44**	**10.8**	**87**	**25.6**	**25**	**7.3**
COVID	**364**	**89.2**	**252**	**74.4**	**318**	**92.7**
Disease	92	25.2	137	54.3	92	28.9
Economic consequences	68	18.7	47	18.6	71	22.3
Political consequences	77	21.1	12	4.7	55	17.3
Social consequences	127	34.9	56	22.2	100	31.4

The analyzed sample reveals that most of the front-page information is national: 81.9% in the case of *The New York Times*, 83.4% in *El Universal*, and 76.4% in *El País*. These percentages are very similar if only COVID-19-related information is counted. Of the three newspapers, *El País* publishes the most international information on its front pages, especially if only the news pieces about the coronavirus are taken into account. This may be because of the importance given to the European sphere in Spain, since 30% of the international news for the Spanish paper is related to the European Union. In any case, national information about the pandemic prevails in all three media, probably because of the increased interest in more local content during situations of crisis and uncertainty such as that caused by COVID-19.

Additionally, it was observed how the temporal evolution of the pandemic's incidence in the three countries affected the topics of the news stories published on the cover pages. In the case of *The New York Times*, during the two months analyzed, its covers are devoted almost exclusively to two subject matters: the presidential primaries in November and, fundamentally, COVID-19. Since March 11, the coronavirus monopolized the paper's front pages, observing significant interest in the consequences (political, economic, and social) deriving from the pandemic. In this sense, during the first days studied, greater attention is paid

to the first two consequences (political and economic); while as of April, the social repercussions of the health crisis were increasingly present.

In *El Universal*, on March 11, no information related to the coronavirus appears on the cover page. On March 12, the paper published a news item referring to the U.S. ban on flights to Europe because of the pandemic. On March 13, a first national news article related to the virus and its economic consequences was observed and another related to the United States again. It can be seen how, as of March 17, attention on COVID-19 increases, with five front pages dedicated to the subject, compared with the one not related. From that moment on, this pattern began to be commonplace, with days where the coronavirus occupied all the front-page information. This news coverage remains constant throughout the second half of March and into the first half of April after the state of health emergency was proclaimed in Mexico on March 30.

In *El País*, it can be observed how the topic "COVID" monopolizes the news attention from earlier dates than in the case of *El Universal*. Along these lines, on March 11, there is already a predominance of news related to the coronavirus on the front page. This situation is maintained throughout the studied period, with days when all the front-page information is devoted to the pandemic, especially between April 18 and May 4.

For the topics that attracted the papers' interest on their front pages, which could constrain the type of sources used, the three cases are similar. *The New York Times* provides extensive coverage of the measures adopted by both the U.S. government and those of other countries, as well as follow-up on the evolution of infections and deaths, the economic crisis and its repercussions in different sectors, the lockdown, the lack of means in hospitals, the disease epicenter in New York, the stimulus plans, unemployment, education, President Trump's interventions, nursing homes, and de-escalation, among others.

In *El Universal*, the topics covered on its front pages are basically related to the evolution of infections, the crisis in healthcare, and the lack of equipment, the number of deaths, quarantines and lockdown, the halt of essential activities, the economic crisis and job loss, supply problems, funeral protocols and rituals, violence against women, production of face masks, and solidarity actions.

In *El País*, the topics highlighted included the cancelation of events, the state of alarm, confinement and police and military presence in the streets, the evolution of infections, the death count, the situation of funeral homes, the death of the elderly in nursing homes, hospital saturation and lack of toilets, isolation measures and their noncompliance by some citizens, the stock market crash, the economic crisis, risks to employment, minimum income, employer concerns, problems with coronavirus tests, solidarity actions, educational agreements, de-confinement, applause for healthcare workers, and the so-called new normality.

In the news related to COVID-19 with an international framing, in *The New York Times*, those items related to European countries—especially Italy and the United Kingdom—and China predominated, while both in *El Universal* and *El País*, the most frequent international stories were those referring to the United States, Europe, and China.

The topics addressed by the three newspapers are related to the pandemic's impact on health, economics, and society. We must keep in mind that the measures adopted by the different countries led to social transformations in daily life for their citizens beyond cultural conditions and forms of government. In addition, the suspension of activities brought about a global economic contraction. Distribution of goods, all levels of production, and the entire supply chain were affected. This entailed financial repercussions for companies and the stock markets, with implications for employment, income inequality, and poverty levels.

Institutional Sources Versus Journalists' Own Sources

For the sources used, the results show (Table 3) a higher number used by *The New York Times* (942), followed by *El País* (509) and *El Universal* (398). In all three cases, institutional sources predominate. The use of confidential sources is scarce or even null, as in *El Universal*, and news agency information is seldom employed.

El País ranks first in terms of the use of institutional sources compared with its own sources. *The New York Times* uses the least institutional sources and is the paper that most uses its journalists' own sources. This utilization of institutional sources has also been discerned in the specific analysis of their use and concentration in each of the front-page news items, especially in the case of *El País*.

This clear predominance of institutional sources—mainly governmental—can be explained partly by the difficulty in accessing other types of sources because of the exceptional situation during the period studied. First, lockdown measures hindered journalists' movements. Second, there were numerous daily press conferences and live appearances of official spokespersons throughout the entire period. During these two first months of the pandemic, these sources (national, regional, and local governments) were in charge of providing official data on the numbers of infected, hospitalized, and deceased. These unusual elements could have led to the imbalance observed between institutional sources and those actively sought by journalists.

It is significant that within the institutional sources, the use of governmental sources predominates in the three cases. Also relevant is the scant use of political sources in general and particularly in *El Universal*, at just 2.8%, a figure that is in line with the limited space devoted to the political consequences of the pandemic in this newspaper (4.7%). This informative treatment could be connected to the editorial line of the Mexican newspaper, which maintains a tense relationship with the López Obrador government. It could also be related to the less active role of the Mexican government in adopting measures and communicating with citizens during the pandemic, compared with that of the United States and Spain.

With regard to their own sources reached by the journalists themselves, the most used by the three newspapers are expert sources, followed by primary sources and the journalists as direct witnesses. In the case of institutional sources, after governments, those most widely used are other institutions (financial, business organizations, WHO, etc.) and political sources.

Table 3. Cataloging of Sources.

	NYT		El Universal		El País	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Own Sources	**455**	**48.3**	**162**	**40.8**	**178**	**34.9**
Expert	152	33.4	53	32.7	88	49.4
Primary	134	29.4	52	32.1	34	19.1
Journalist as witness	125	27.5	38	23.4	32	18.0
Other	44	9.7	20	12.3	24	13.5
Institutional Sources	**464**	**49.2**	**220**	**55.2**	**322**	**63.2**
Government	312	67.2	148	67.2	236	73.3
Political	47	10.2	6	2.8	40	12.4
Other institutions	105	22.6	66	30.0	46	14.3
Confidential Sources	**15**	**1.6**	**0**	**0**	**2**	**0.4**
News Agencies	**8**	**0.8**	**16**	**4.0**	**7**	**1.4**

About the use of government sources and expert sources, it is noteworthy that in the case of *El País* and *The New York Times*, there were cases detected in which more than a dozen sources of this type were used in a single news item, as a high number of experts or government sources were consulted, usually from different states or different autonomous regions, depending on the country. It is also noteworthy in the case of *El Universal*, that despite being the paper dedicating most coverage to news related to COVID as a disease (43.3%), it consults the fewest expert sources (32.7%).

The predominance of expert sources over primary sources and the experience and testimony of the journalists themselves as direct witnesses of the events may have been favored by the lockdown situation. This exceptional circumstance hindered the work of street reporters, while consultations with experts could be carried out online thanks to new technologies.

As for consultation of other organizations within institutional sources, in the case of *The New York Times*, business entities stand out, followed by banks and financial and stock exchange entities. In *El Universal*, banks and financial entities are the most consulted organizations, followed very far behind by the WHO, business entities, and the stock exchange market. On the other hand, in *El País*, banks and financial entities predominate, followed by the WHO, business entities, and the stock exchange market.

Informing Without Institutional Sources

It was considered of interest to analyze the particularized use of sources in the different news items to determine if there is uniformity or dissimilarities in the use of sources depending on the news. For this purpose, it was observed both in absolute numbers and in percentages, how many news stories from the sample do not cite any institutional sources and how many do not use government sources. This makes it possible to assess whether the use of these sources is concentrated in certain news items while not being used in others.

Table 4. News Without Institutional Sources.

	n	%
NYT	151	42.3
El Universal	122	48.4
El País	98	30.8

Although the three papers all range below 50% in volume of news that does not consult institutional sources, this is especially significant in the case of *El País*. Only 30.8% of the Spanish paper's news articles do not use this type of source.

Table 5. News Without Governmental Sources.

	n	%
NYT	178	49.8
El Universal	161	63.8
El País	142	44.6

About the use of government sources, *El País* most often resorts to the use of these sources and uses them in a greater number of news items. In fact, only 44.6% are without them. *The New York Times* and *El Universal* also use these sources frequently.

When analyzing the news individually, *El Universal* displays a very unequal use. In 63.8% of the news in the Mexican newspaper, no government source is used. This different use of governmental sources could be because of the diverse management of the pandemic in terms of communication by governments through press conferences or press releases.

Conclusions

The thematic analysis and the use of sources by *The New York Times*, *El País*, and *El Universal*, have enabled us to compare the news coverage during the COVID-19 pandemic of the three leading newspapers in three very different territories. This has allowed us to assess whether these media have given similar importance to the different issues or whether some topics have prevailed over others. We were also able to determine if there was a parallel use of sources when producing the news.

The results obtained lead us to conclude that the crisis brought about by COVID-19 monopolized most of the three newspapers' agendas during the analyzed period, starting when the WHO declared the pandemic on March 11, 2020. However, attention devoted to COVID-19 issues was not the same over time. The differences in the incidence of the pandemic in the three countries are reflected in the papers' news coverage.

Although the social effects and the disease itself received most attention from the three journals, a preponderance of some topics over others was observed depending on the media. *The New York Times* and *El País* maintained a greater balance between the different issues analyzed, and, in both cases, those

related to the pandemic's social effects predominated. *El Universal* focuses mainly on the disease itself, devoting less attention to the social consequences than the other two papers. A difference is also detected in terms of attention paid to political consequences, which *The New York Times* and *El País* focused on much more. In contrast, *El Universal* devotes little space to these types of issues. This could have to do with the fact that fewer measures were adopted by the Mexican authorities to combat the pandemic compared with the United States and Spain, as reflected in the content analysis of the published topics. The political situation of each country with public power accountability may have also had an impact in this sense.

The three newspapers do coincide in a greater predominance of national over international news. This reflects the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought with it uncertainty and social risk, with citizens in need of service journalism and more local news.

In the three newspapers, institutional sources have been predominant, especially those of a governmental nature, with *El País* using them the most. This turned governments into an essential source of information during the COVID-19 crisis. During those first months of the pandemic, media were more dependent than ever on elite sources, as other studies such as Mellado and colleagues (2021) have also revealed. This may be explained by the continuous adoption of measures by governments because of the pandemic, which prompted regular press releases and conferences. However, it must be borne in mind that the foregoing implies that the predominant sources were the same agents who managed the crisis and over whose work the media had to exercise a watchdog function. This vital role of the state in constructing pandemic news has led to a dependence of the media on what Lewis and colleagues (2007) call "prepackaged" information.

This overuse of institutional sources, and especially of government ones—in line with observations by other authors such as Catalán-Matamoros and Elías (2020) and Mellado and colleagues (2021)—has relegated the journalists' own sources—those that arise from the initiative and search on the part of the reporters, such as experts or primary sources—to a secondary place. This is in line with studies by scholars such as Pérez Curiel and colleagues (2015), who warned about the predominance of official and governmental sources in journalistic work being common even before COVID-19. This has an impact on who takes the initiative and control over what, how, and when to inform about events, and therefore has consequences on the media agenda building.

In disaster and crisis communication, the facilitative role of journalism (Christians et al., 2010) acquires a special value, enabling communications from public officials and experts to the general public. However, dependence on institutional sources can produce a disaffection from reality by the journalists themselves, besides creating a biased view of it (Ortega & Humanes, 2000). The aforementioned practices can also affect citizens' perception about the quality of the information they receive, thereby contributing to the loss of credibility in journalism that has been detected in recent years (Mayoral, 2018).

The importance acquired by the topics related to the disease itself justifies that, of all the sources sought out by the journalists, those mostly used are experts. In this case, it has been necessary to consult specialists, especially in relation to health and economics.

In a pandemic situation, expert sources inspire confidence among citizens. Furthermore, in such a context, verification and fact-checking journalism are necessary, giving priority to data and the contextualization of facts. Public service journalism is required in times of crisis, and expert and official sources are needed for each topic, in addition to official data. Nevertheless, this could entail a risk of relying on nonobjective data provided by governments and institutions (Wu, 2021).

In a matter such as the global pandemic, this predominance of expert sources was to be expected because of the complexity of health news production (Brigg & Hallin, 2016). It is striking, however, that in *El Universal*, despite dedicating more than half of its content to COVID-19 as a disease, the use of expert sources was not what might be supposed, being proportionally lower than the other headers. This seems to reflect the diverse ways of approaching the professional practice.

The scant presence of journalists on the ground is significant, as has been observed in other crisis situations, not necessarily health-related ones (Veil, 2012), with the consequent repercussions on the elaboration of the news and in the approach to actuality. In this case, it was likely because of one of the peculiarities of this crisis, the lockdowns imposed by the different governments, which made it very difficult for journalists to pursue their work outside their homes.

Not all the results obtained in the research coincide with what was observed in previous crises, such as the scant use of news agency information seen during these first months of the pandemic. In studies by other scholars, such as Van der Meer and colleagues (2017), crisis coverage appears to be mainly constructed from information provided by news agencies.

The present study analyzes the first months of the pandemic. It would be interesting for future lines of research to examine if these findings are maintained or vary over time, depending on the evolution of the pandemic and the social, economic, and political context in the different territories.

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