Habits and Feelings Regarding COVID-19 News Coverage During Lockdown in Spain
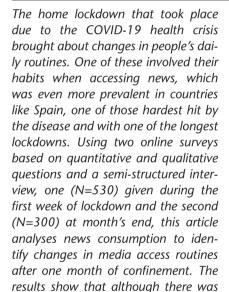
Ana Bernal-Triviño
Open University of Catalonia (Spain)

The home lockdown that took place due to the COVID-19 health crisis brought about changes in people's daily routines. One of these involved their habits when accessing news, which was even more prevalent in countries like Spain, one of those hardest hit by the disease and with one of the longest lockdowns. Using two online surveys based on quantitative and qualitative questions and a semi-structured interview, one (N=530) given during the first week of lockdown and the second (N=300) at month's end, this article analyses news consumption to identify changes in media access routines after one month of confinement. The results show that although there was a high level of interest in the news during the first week, time spent on news about the coronavirus subsequently decreased due to sensations such as information overload, stress or anxiety or the absence of novelty, and because people followed the media, social networks and journalists more selectively. Respondents expressed criticism of disinformation, fake news, sensationalism, lack of ethics among certain news outlets and constant doubt about the ideological intent of the information.

Keywords: COVID-19, coronavirus, habits, information, media, journalists, social media networks, hoaxes, disinformation, fake news.

On 14 March 2020, the *Official State Gazette* (BOE) confirmed the declaration of a state of emergency in Spain due to the coronavirus epidemic, thereby placing homes under lockdown. As other countries were affected around the world, they also implemented similar measures. The obligation to stay at home caused changes in routines that also affected the media. The aim of this research is to analyse the changes in habits and feelings in the first week of lockdown and detect feelings one month later, using an online survey and semi-structured interview. The study sample included online users to establish whether the behaviour and reaction with regard to media consumption among

this group was mainly restricted to their online environment or whether they chose alternative news sources.

CONTEXT

The developing pandemic in Spain not only involved a specific health situation, as the country suffered some of the highest death and infection rates worldwide, but also affected news reporting. The first analyses on changes in habits in society with regard to the media during the first days of the pandemic appeared soon after lockdown was imposed.

Initial reports identified greater news consumption on television and the Internet, more credibility given to radio (Kantar.es, 2020; Digilab.cat, 2020, *elpublicista.es*, 2020) and distrust of the social media, despite a 55% increase in use (*abc.es*, 2020). A Barlovento Comunicación report (2020) noted that both weekly and daily records had been set for television consumption, at 4 viewing hours a day, along with an increase in audience figures for news services. The report also highlighted a significant increase in consumption among the younger population, aged 13 to 24. A Havas Media study (2020) focused on changes in habits in aspects other than the media, such as higher viewing figures for series and films, visits to digital platforms and online shopping. The report highlighted a number of points regarding the public's feelings and reactions, such as the impression that television was more sensationalist or politically biased or that people were overwhelmed by the amount of information. A further study by the Reuters Institute (2020a) drew attention to greater confidence in social media and messaging apps among users with low levels of formal education and young people.

Despite some of the initial data suggesting a feeling of saturation, they all show a greater interest in news due to the uncertain situation, at least in terms of media use. Casero-Ripollés (2020) considered that, in the United States, the situation created by the pandemic has led to democratization, as the need for news among all social classes and age groups has brought "the news to those citizens most distanced from information".

In the context of health crises, the media is essential for raising public awareness on health and influencing people's decision-making (Mebane, 2003). The spread of false information can have very serious consequences, as it produces fear, poorer response to social distancing and hygiene measures, mistrust of medical advice and inappropriate, ineffective or harmful use of prescriptions (Rosenberg, Syed, and Rezaie, 2020). At the same time, the need for more information may produce greater anxiety (Thompson *et al.*, 2017); hence, journalism should maintain a balance between all different aspects.

However, numerous professionals are involved in this health news. This leads to "biomediatization" (Briggs and Hallin, 2016; Kim, Fast, and Markuzon, 2019), which is the coproduction of health knowledge through connections between different sources and forms of specialization. Although journalists have proved a less reliable source of information than experts themselves (Ferraresi, 2020),

the former's goal has been to offer journalism with "solutions", given the doubts raised by the epidemic, thereby empowering the public instead of generating alarm or anxiety among their audience (Kunova, 2020).

This construction of reality not only involves news media, but also social media and messaging channels are used to spread information created by anonymous or poorly educated users, creating hoaxes or distortions on health issues. The public's trust in information as it is shared by families and friends and the credibility given to fake news interfere with the dissemination of health news (Montero-Liberona and Halpern, 2019). WhatsApp and the Google search engine play an important role in this localization and distribution of fake news (Ehon, 2019), WhatsApp in particular during this pandemic (Salaverría *et al.*, 2020). Even before the pandemic, two out of every three doctors in Spain stated they had received visits based on medical hoaxes, occasionally leading to patients' mistrusting healthcare professionals as a source of information (Doctoralia, 2019), only to face around 14,000 news stories a day on the virus (PMFarma, 2020) in the early days of lockdown.

In the COVID-19 health crisis the number of fake news stories in English grew by 900% between January and March. In such stories, 59% of the information is true but "twisted or recontextualized" to produce errors (Reuters Institute, 2020b). The European Union verification agency (EUvsDisinfo, 2020) detected 8,223 fake stories on the coronavirus and, in Spain, Maldito Bulo and Newtral have listed hundreds of cases of misinformation. Even before COVID-19, Spain was among the European countries that received the most fake news (European Commission, 2018) and the public doubted the media due to its lack of ethics (Maciá-Barber and Herrera-Damas, 2010). Media coverage on this topic has no precedent in other diseases (Lázaro-Rodríguez and Herrera-Viedma, 2020). Ducharme (2020) demonstrated this, calculating that in January 2020 alone the number of articles published on the coronavirus was 23 times higher than for the Ebola crisis in 2018. Salaverría *et al.* (2020) made the same point, stating that no other health crisis has had the same impact with regard to disinformation as the COVID-19 pandemic.

In a context such as this, the challenge of providing reliable information and ensuring it reaches the public is affected by three specific factors. Firstly, there is an initial climate of anxiety, disillusion and shock among the general public and health workers (Xiang *et al.*, 2020). Secondly, people are not only more exposed to fake news, they are also likely to believe it (Vicario *et al.*, 2016). And thirdly, people prefer and are more likely to believe information matching their pre-existing beliefs (Vicario *et al.*, 2016; Lazer *et al.*, 2018; Lewandowsky *et al.*, 2012), a phenomenon known as "confirmation bias" (Wason, 1960). As Pulido *et al.* (2020) summarize it, "party political ideology makes individuals more likely to ignore or reject dissonant information and also less likely to accept fact-checking that questions their own belief system". Nevertheless, an initial analysis of the dynamics of fake news stories on Twitter concluded that "false information is tweeted more frequently, but retweeted less than scientific evidence or fact-checking tweets, while that latter have a greater level of commitment" (Pulido *et al.*, 2020).

Under normal conditions, the break in the news cycle tends to impede verification (López-Borrull, Vives-Gràcia, and Badell, 2018) and this situation is exacerbated during a pandemic. This brings about an "infodemia", or "misinformation pandemic", which spreads rapidly over social media platforms to "pose a serious problem for public health" (Zarocostas, 2020; Cinelli *et al.*, 2020). Bots and false accounts on social media distribute hundreds of such fake stories (*eldiario.es,* 2020), some even containing messages that the Prosecutor's Office has reported as hate crimes (*Ser*, 2020).

As seen in the United States, the spread of misinformation can become a breeding ground for the media to create a narrative based on negativity and sensationalism marked by uncertainty surrounding the evolution of the virus (Mejova and Kalimeri, 2020), and polarization in the narrative (Papapicco, 2020).

OBJECTIVE AND METHOD

The objective of this research is to identify the change in habits in use of devices and formats, news media and social media and the feelings and motives associated with these dynamics during lockdown.

When the study was first designed, the authors were unaware that companies were already conducting the other studies referred to the previous section. However, in some cases their methods and objectives differ from this study, such as providing greater quantitative detail (Barlovento Comunicación and Kantar) and setting broader objectives for media analysis (Havas Media). After becoming aware of these studies, the focus of this research switched to establishing whether the trends observed in online interviewees were similar to those identified in these studies. Consequently, the results are less conclusive as inferential statistics but more descriptive, as they explore changes in habits and feelings in reaction to the news load during the initial days. A quantitative and qualitative methodology was developed, meeting the need to "explain relations" (Flick, 2004) and respond to the nature of social science itself (Ortí, 1995).

Two stages were established in the research. In the first stage (N=530), a survey on media use and feelings in the first week of lockdown (from 17 to 24 March) was distributed on social media as an initial approach to feelings and motives. The second stage (N=300) asked about changes in access to media via a questionnaire, which also included a semi-structured interview to obtain information on motives. Some interviews were conducted online and others by phone, depending on interviewees' preferences. The sample breaks down into the following age groups: 18-30 (13.6%), 30-40 (23.4%), 40-50 (30.1%) and 50-65 (27.9%), with a slightly higher proportion of women (65%). The survey was conducted online, as this was the most accessible medium during lockdown and a method used in other studies, such as that of the Reuters Institute. Although this has its disadvantages, such as lack of face-to-face contact or limiting interviewees to social media users, it does permit analysis of whether the trends among the online sample are found mainly in online consumption or whether there is diversification in media use over the study

period. The second stage in the research was conducted a month later, from 17 to 24 April.

The first questionnaire, distributed online, consisted of eight multiple-choice or single-answer questions. Each question also included an optional open answer to express the reasons behind the closed answers. This helped detect feelings and reactions, which were then used to outline the questions for the second questionnaire. The questions were based more on device and format preferences (a point not studied in the aforementioned surveys), channel and social media preferences, consumption time, initial opinion on news coverage and the media's work and reaction in relation to fake news.

Table 1. Survey first stage

Questions	Objective
1. What device or format do you mostly use these days for news? Mobile/television/computer/radio/printed press.	To determine the most widely used device or format, given the conditions
2. Preferred channel or media for news Television/radio/online press/printed press/Internet/social media.	To determine the most widely accepted news channels
3. If a media outlet reports fake stories, do you stop using it for news? Yes, because by lying they lose all credibility / No, because I'm loyal to the media outlet / I don't mind, anyone can make a mistake and I'll give them a second chance.	To assess the behaviour and consequences of fake news in the media
4. Rate each social network from 0 (worst) to 5 (best), based on information received, trustworthiness and reliability: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, Tik Tok, WhatsApp.	To assess social media acceptance by profile
5. What channels have you received most fake news from? Television, radio, online or printed press, *WhatsApp*, social media.	To assess in which media people detect or perceive the most fake news
6. What feelings does each media outlet convey? Credibility, reliability, fear, anxiety, hope, pride, calm, anger, hate.	To determine feelings generated by media outlet
7. How do you react when you sense you have received a fake news story?	To determine reactions to fake news
8. How do you feel about news coverage in the news and social media in recent days?	To assess the psychological sensation produced by the media during lockdown

Source: Own elaboration.

After the first survey, the design of the second questionnaire was modified to combine quantitative with qualitative questions to explain the reasons behind changes, with the aim of looking more closely at feelings experienced in subsequent weeks. On this occasion, the questions were designed to ascertain routines, preferences and time spent on news (for comparison with the first survey), opinions on social media networks not included in the first survey

(Telegram) and feelings regarding news, media outlets and social media in general as channels for receiving and spreading news. The study was exploratory and inductive. The analysis categories were constructed from the information obtained in the interviews.

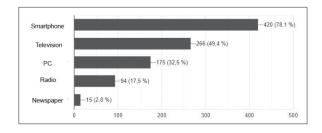**Table 2. Questionnaire and interview. Second stage**

Questions * (each closed question is followed by an open one for reflection)	Categories
1. How have your news consumption routines changed in recent days?	decrease, increase, stability, other media, anxiety, anger, stress, excess information, journalists
2. During this crisis, have you focussed more on getting information from specific media outlets and specific journalists?	media, journalists, other
3. How much time do you spend on the news a day?	over five hours, less than five hours
4. If you use *Telegram* as well as *WhatsApp*, can you explain why and what the advantages are?	channels, fake news, saturation, disinformation
7. What is your opinion on television studio guests discussing COVID-19?	disinformation, politicization, non-experts
8. How would you rate the news referred to and the feeling it conveys?	credibility, confusion, exhaustion, objectivity, graphics, social information
9. What feelings does the news media convey now after the first month of lockdown?	disinformation, fear, anxiety, pride, hate, credibility, company
10. What feelings does the social media convey now after the first month of lockdown?	disinformation, fear, anxiety, pride, hate, credibility, company

Source: Own elaboration.

RESULTS

Mobiles were used more than any other information or entertainment device (78.1%), followed by television (49.4%) and computers (32,5%). Only 2.8% of the sample used the printed press, due to the limitations imposed by lockdown.

Graph 1. Devices most widely used to obtain news during lockdown

Source: Own elaboration.

When searching for information (not entertainment), most of the people in the sample preferred the online press (50.4%), followed by social media (33.3%), as their main channel for finding news. Television represented 31%. Thirty-five percent stated they preferred to search for their own information from specific and official sources, such as the *Official State Gazette* (BOE), the World Health Organization (WHO) and scientific articles on COVID-19. The popularity of the online press is explained by the fact that that it published the most information on the pandemic (Lázaro-Rodríguez, 2020).

Faced with fake news, most interviewees stated they stopped accessing media that published excessive amounts of false information because of "losing credibility", while 10% stated they remained faithful to the media outlet even if it published such news items. They claimed that most of the fake news they received came via WhatsApp (90.5%) and social media (87.9%), followed by television (18.2%).

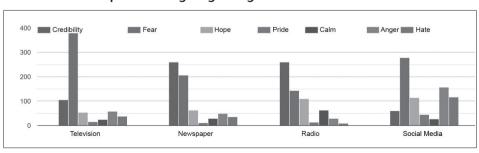**Graph 2. Reception channels for fake news**

Source: Own elaboration.

With regard to feelings, audiovisual media such as television and social media networks were the leading cause of fear or anxiety. Radio and the press were considered the most credible and trustworthy, but with a different between them: while the second most widely associated feeling with press and radio was "fear or anxiety", radio was the only medium to score higher for feelings of "pride" and "hope".
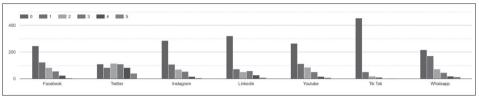
Graph 3. Feelings regarding news and social media

Source: Own elaboration.

The most frequently mentioned feelings in relation to social media were fear, anxiety, anger and hate. With regard to the usefulness of social media, Facebook, Instagram and Tick Tok rated badly as information channels. Only Twitter scored higher, rated from 2 to 4.

Graph 4. Ratings for the social media

Source: Own elaboration.

Forty-one percent admitted they had felt the need to switch off due to excessive information, 27% thought they had been very selective in choosing their news and 22% acknowledged they had felt overwhelmed by news, yet had been unable to switch off. Seventy-two percent admitted having spent more than five hours consuming news, due particularly to the novel situation and wanting to know more about the disease and lockdown measures.

In their assessment of the first days in lockdown, interviewees' main concerns were the number of fake news stories from certain media outlets, politicization of the disease, hate speech and lack of ethics in some television programmes. Morning magazine programmes such as *AR* and *Espejo Público* were regularly mentioned as sources of bad news practices, especially because "they terrify elderly people" or behave irresponsibly, as occurred with a reporter who entered the protected area of the IFEMA field hospital in Madrid without permission. Interviewees also expressed their concern over lack of scientific rigour in such a delicate public health situation and sensationalism with regard to the number of deaths, while they rejected the language of war used to describe the crisis. They also expressed the feeling that the media prioritized speed over depth, leading to "contradictions or misunderstandings that have to be corrected later on, but without acknowledging making such corrections".

The second stage of the survey was conducted in the fourth week of lockdown. Over half of the respondents (55%) confirmed they had reduced the time they spent on news sessions compared to the previous phase, while still preferring to use mobiles and social media as communication channels. They mentioned feeling overwhelmed by news in general and fed up with fake news. They expressed feelings of exhaustion or impatience with the lack of new developments and repetitive content, confrontations based on controversies and media exclusives, sensationalism and "macabre" use of more personal stories about patients and their families, doubts regarding data and their different interpretations depending on the media outlet, and the creation of "alarm or hysteria". To avoid direct news input, some interviewees stated they preferred social media as it gave them greater choice in selecting their sources of information, while enabling them

to keep up-to-date with the measures they considered most important, such as isolation notifications, coordination and implementation of health measures.

The qualitative interview asked whether they felt better informed about the disease now than a few weeks earlier. Compared to the novel news situation in the first week, most interviewees answered "the same" or "even less, because there are lots of grey areas and contradictory information regarding the virus". Some 84.6% stated that they consumed a maximum of five hours of news and information.

Fifty-two percent insisted the media had failed to adequately convey information on economic measures, subsidies and hygiene measures, while offering content that made little sense in the middle of a health crisis. Examples of such content were occasionally excessive optimism in an unusual setting, such as dances or applause at the doors of hospitals. Some interviewees stated that turning such moments into a performance distanced the public from the real situation in hospitals with regard to lack of materials, contagion among healthcare professionals and hospital workers or even recognizing that people were dying. They also complained that the media did not provide sufficiently clear explanations on the economic impact and the process for applying for work or benefits for the unemployed, including information on how to proceed, where to ask for information and websites to send applications, in the absence of a public information service.

In social media use there was a trend of deleting more widely used media (such as Facebook) and focussing on news networks, in some cases as an alternative to media that had less impact in the usual channels, although interviewees mentioned having detected hate speech on these sites, fed by certain media outlets. They stressed the need to maintain a degree of distance on the subject or steer clear of social media debates to reduce anxiety. However, on a number of occasions, they admitted exercising a degree of control over content and calling out fake news when they were sure it was false, after it had been shared by someone they knew, especially in WhatsApp groups. They also pointed out certain media outlets, such as *Periodista Digital* and *OK Diario,* as sources of poorly checked information more frequently shared over these channels.

Some interviewees mentioned having installed the Telegram app to get away from family and friend groups in WhatsApp, due to the flood of content and groups in the initial weeks. Other reasons mentioned for this change were reducing exposure to fake news, choosing more secure channels and seemingly more pleasant access to news content.

In the last few weeks, interviewees acknowledged being more selective of news sources and media, trying to reduce the noise of information or seeking calm after the initial stage of information overload. Seventy-three percent stated they were following specific journalists more frequently, "because you can find all sorts in the media, journalists worth reading and others who aren't".

Interviewees constantly referred to feelings of anxiety, pressure, unease and disinformation. Along with changes in access, 30 interviewees admitted not following the news to avoid stress, especially when there was family and emotional involvement. A total of 23.9% expressed feelings of fear or anxiety in

the questionnaire. The majority claimed that they had switched from "constant" news consumption from a large number of sources during the pandemic to shorter periods to avoid obsessing over the subject and for reasons of "mental health", given that there were few alternatives on offer during lockdown. Selecting news was constantly mentioned, but so was a preference for media outlets that avoided sensationalism and alarm, with a preference for those with a calmer, more settled, analytical tone, along with transparency and critical appraisal. This is where many interviewees stated they chose radio programmes more frequently. In some cases they recognized that over-exposure to news had caused suffering in relation to immediate family members, such as parents in nursing homes or children, which was exacerbated when media outlets offered contradictory information and created uncertainty. The fact that the daily news agenda led with such stories caused feelings of anxiety and lack of sleep among some interviewees, leading to greater Internet use to find other types of cultural content, such as films and books.

One consequence of overexposure to disinformation (36.2%) was feelings of confusion, where interviewees used expressions such as "not knowing what's true and what's false", "what we have to do and what not" and "I know we're being manipulated but it's hard to identify how".

A total of 41.5% stated that the media did not use quality sources or invite sufficiently well-informed studio guests. Various interviewees agreed that experts or studio guests were politicized. They considered this one of the main reasons why disinformation was mostly concentrated in morning and evening magazine programmes. They claimed the media looked for experts whose political opinions matched the programme's editorial line or who created controversy in the debate. This generated not only a sensation of misinformation but also disaffection with the news, as interviewees concluded that a lack of independent experts meant fake or distorted news could spread. The result was the media were becoming "news sellers", where authority and knowledge were no longer basic requirements as long as audience ratings were high. They specifically mentioned morning magazine programmes such as *Espejo Público* and *AR* and discussion programmes as the most frequent examples of this, where guests were invited who were neither professionals nor experts and who lacked "legitimacy" to discuss all aspects of public health. The interviewees considered the figure of know-it-all studio guest to be a source of controversy and lacking authority, and noted presenters tended to protect them while they spread lies in the debate, seeing this as a lack of respect for the public.

They also expressed doubts regarding data and graphics used by journalists, noting that although the data might appear objective, someone always needed to interpret it, possibly leading to politically biased assessments or manipulation. Some interviewees stated comparative statistical data on countries caused greater confusion, as data collection was not based on the same methods, thus permitting different interpretations. They could also provide an easier way of "manipulating the public", as the distortion would be harder to detect. Hence, some interviewees considered it important to know what the sources were and how data was collected, noting that this information was not always made clear on television and discussion programmes.

They stated that they looked for simpler interpretations of the data, ensuring the source of the data was always clear. Several interviewees also noted that it should be made clear whether the sources were official or who was behind the data, in terms of political opinion.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In general terms the study provides quantitative results similar to other reports from the same period that look at news consumption (Kantar.es, 2020; Digilab. cat, 2020, *elpublicista.es*, 2020) and lack of trust in the social media, even though the interviewees were online users who increased their session time by 55% during lockdown (*abc.es*, 2020). Nevertheless, these studies offer less insight into motives and changes to news consumption habits and feelings.

A number of habits were detected in the first phase: widespread mobile phone use, as a channel for centralizing information and entertainment needs, and a preference for television. The press remained the most credible media outlet, although interviewees exhibited alternative behaviours, such as searching for academic articles and directly accessing the BOE.

The prevalence of fake news identified in the reports (Reuters Institute, 2020b; EUvsDisinfo, 2020) is echoed here by the fact that most of the interviewees complained of an increase in such stories from the first week via a direct transmission channel on social media and messaging apps, such as WhatsApp. The most commonly mentioned feeling was fear generated by television and the social media, followed by credibility for the press and radio. It is striking how, in the first survey, interviewees were already mentioning how they were switching off the news due to overload, as well as being more selective with sources.

In the second phase, during the fourth week of lockdown, there was a change in the main habit, with a drop in news consumption. While 72% admitted consuming over 5 hours of news, 44% stated they now consumed less than 5 hours. Fifty-five percent stated this shorter time was due to overload caused by the volume of information and fake news, as well as media polarization along political lines (Pulido *et al*., 2020; Papapicco, 2020). The survey identified a trend in users switching to the Telegram messaging service, due to the barrage of fake news and lack of control in WhatsApp.

Feelings of anxiety, unease, confusion and disinformation were constant, especially in morning and afternoon television programmes. Feelings differed from one survey to the next: in the first stage, fear was expressed by 53% of participants, dropping to 39% in the second stage, while credibility represented 37% in the first stage, then dropped to 19.6%. With regard to the quality of information received, as well as mentioning fake news, interviewees also raised doubts about lack of expertise among studio guests and their political affinities as factors affecting information and the risk posed by some of these opinions, reflected in the idea of "infodemia". They also questioned graphics and data used by journalists to explain events.

In conclusion, in a period of burgeoning news output resulting from the lockdown, there was a change of habits as media consumption dropped after four weeks and interviewees showed greater selectivity in sources and channels. After the initial interest, there were also other reasons for this change in habits, not only familiarity with the virus, but also increased interest in more social content, a rise in disinformation, feelings of uncertainty and confusion, lack of expert opinion on broadcast programmes and constant doubts as to the ideological intentions of information.

Ana Bernal-Triviño (abernalt@uoc.edu). Doctor and graduate in Journalism and Master in Art History from the University of Malaga, professor and researcher at the Open University of Catalonia (UOC), journalist and columnist in Public, *El Periódico* and collaborator in TVE. Her academic research focuses on social media and mobile journalism and ethics. As a journalist, she has focused on defending human rights and, with special attention, on the human rights of women. She has received the Solidarity Prize from the Catalan Institute of Human Rights, the Non-Sexist Communication Prize from the Association of Women Journalists of Catalonia, the Caleta Prize and the Andalusian Women's Institute Prize.

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