

Othering in the times of coronavirus? Analysis of the coverage of a major health crisis by the China correspondents of *El País* and *ABC*

*L'alterització en temps de coronavirus.
Anàlisi de la cobertura d'una crisi sanitària
pels corresponents a la Xina d'El País i l'ABC*

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ABSTRACT:

This study seeks to investigate the cultural representations in the early coverage of the coronavirus crisis by the China correspondents of two Spanish newspapers: *El País* and *ABC*. An exhaustive sample of the correspondents' coverage has been gathered and examined through a critical discourse analysis. After reviewing 89 news stories, this study finds that Chinese authorities are the main social actor represented by both newspapers, because the coverage focuses on the Government's response to the epidemic and its effects on society. China's lack of transparency is the prevailing story line for both outlets. With the exception of Doctor Li Wenliang, the public face of the coronavirus crisis in China, people affected by the virus are usually represented as speechless statistics and, thus, othered.

KEYWORDS:

coronavirus, Covid-19, foreign correspondents, intercultural communication, ideological square, story lines.



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RESUM:

Aquest estudi es proposa investigar les representacions culturals de la cobertura inicial de la crisi del coronavirus per part dels corresponents a la Xina de dos diaris espanyols: *El País* i *l'ABC*. S'ha reunit una exhaustiva mostra de la cobertura dels corresponents i ha estat examinada a través d'una anàlisi crítica del discurs. Després de revisar vuitanta-nou notícies, aquest estudi conclou que les autoritats xineses són el principal actor social representat per ambdós diaris, perquè la seva cobertura se centra en la resposta del Govern a l'epidèmia i en els seus efectes en la societat. La falta de transparència de la Xina és la línia narrativa prevalent en ambdós mitjans. Amb l'excepció del doctor Li Wenliang, rostre de la crisi del coronavirus a la Xina, les persones afectades pel virus són representades de manera estadística i sense veu i, per tant, supeditades a l'alterització.

PARAULES CLAU:

coronavirus, Covid-19, corresponents estrangers, comunicació intercultural, quadrat ideològic, línies narratives.

1. Introduction

Before the new coronavirus pandemic upended the world, it was an issue circumscribed to China. How did the world first get to know about it? For many, their initial sources of information were the news reports from foreign correspondents based in China.

This study aims to investigate the early coverage of this major health crisis by focusing on the reports written from China by the foreign correspondents of the Spanish press. In particular, the coverage of the China correspondents of *El País* and *ABC* will be analyzed.

As part of a larger research project, this study seeks to set the work of foreign correspondents in relation to intercultural communication. It thus looks at foreign correspondents as producers of intercultural discourses, which then might shape their audiences' expectations for future intercultural encounters. This means that the analysis carried out here will focus on the cultural dimension included in the coverage produced by these correspondents. That is, references to both the correspondents' own culture and representations of foreign cultures in texts will be examined.

2. Theoretical framework

The academic community has devoted considerable attention to foreign correspondents and international news, but the bulk of the research published so far consists of descriptive studies either of the people who work as correspondents or of what they have produced. Hamilton and Lawrence lamented the shortcomings of scholarly work on foreign correspondents and called for more multidisciplinary approaches to the study of foreign coverage (Hamilton and Lawrence, 2010). In a similar vein, Gross and Kopper rather eloquently defended the need for a "marriage of theory and practice in academic research on foreign correspondence" (Gross and Kopper, 2011: X).

In recent years, many researchers have tried to step in and fill these gaps. Studies on the foreign correspondent corps stationed in China have been among the most prolific. As a result, it is now known from De Swert and Wouters's study of the news coverage of China on Belgian television news that stationing a foreign correspondent in a distant country increased the attention given to that country but did not lead to changes in the content coverage, thus having limited impact on the overall portrait of China (De Swert and Wouters, 2011). Sun showed how China's public diplomacy efforts have not been fruitful in courting foreign correspondents due, among other factors, to the Chinese government's inability to understand how foreign correspondents work (Sun, 2015). And Zeng concluded, after

studying China correspondents of international media, that national journalistic culture holds a strong grip on how foreign correspondents perceive and execute their professional role (Zeng, 2017). Moreover, Zeng also developed a new typology for classifying China correspondents based on their experience as journalists and their experience connected with China, a typology which has the potential to be applied to non-Chinese contexts by making appropriate adjustments (Zeng, 2018).

Following the recommendations mentioned above from Gross and Kopper, the author has argued elsewhere that intercultural communication could be one such theoretical approach for a practical study of foreign correspondence (Gross and Kopper, 2011) (Calatayud Vaello, 2019). In Samovar, Porter and McDaniel's words, "intercultural communication involves interaction between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems differ enough to influence the communication event" (Samovar *et al.*, 2013: 8). Ting-Toomey and Dorjee define it as "the symbolic exchange process whereby individuals from two (or more) different cultural communities attempt to negotiate shared meanings in an interactive situation and in a larger sociocultural-macro environment" (Ting-Toomey and Dorjee, 2018: 22).

There is a small number of precedents of research on foreign correspondents from an intercultural perspective. To name a few, Starck and Villanueva's, Fürsich and Kavoori's, Yang's, Hahn and Lönnendonker's, Brown and Youmans's, Li's and Woolley's studies point in that direction (Starck and Villanueva, 1992) (Kavoori and Fürsich, 2001) (Yang, 2003) (Hahn and Lönnendonker, 2009) (Brown and Youmans, 2012) (Li, 2012) (Woolley, 2017).

As Starck and Villanueva maintain, studying foreign correspondence from the lens of intercultural communication means emphasizing the cultural implications of the correspondents' task (Starck and Villanueva, 1992). Foreign correspondents work at the intersection of different cultures: their own and that of the place where they work. On paper, they may be seen as bridges between cultures. This metaphor, however, is not without its own problems.

For one, Rodrigo Alsina has explained that journalists are ethnocentric to some extent (Rodrigo Alsina, 2004). Indeed, many researchers have paid attention to the role of media representation and framing in the formation and reproduction of stereotypes about certain cultural groups. Tang, in a study of how China's image was represented in three U.S. mainstream newspapers between 2008 and 2010 – which contemplated the work of foreign correspondents – concluded that American media representations of China were constantly stereotyped, incomplete, unbalanced, and distorted (Tang, 2018).

On the other hand, assuming that correspondents act as bridges between cultures just because they report on foreign societies could be seen as overly simplistic. As shown by Bonfadelli, an understanding of media effects across and between cultures must take into account that there are multiple inter- and transcultural relations at play on the various levels of communication processes (global, national, local and individual) which affect how individuals belonging at the same time to

different societal groups and cultural segments experience media and communication phenomena (Bonfadelli, 2016).

However, the analysis of media effects is beyond the scope of this study, which is concerned with the analysis of foreign correspondents in their role as producers of intercultural discourses. To materialize this approach in practical research, two theoretical elaborations may help: Van Dijk's ideological square model and Hannerz's notion of story lines of foreign correspondence (Dijk, 2011) (Hannerz, 2004). The former seeks to study ideological strategies of polarization in discourse, and the latter explains how correspondents frame news stories within bigger, long-term chains of developments.

Van Dijk's ideological square model posits that members of a group will tend to present themselves in a positive light and present negatively the outgroups, or others, which they see as opponents, competitors or enemies (Dijk, 2011). This can be viewed as a four-angled approach, as shown in figure 1:

Emphasize <i>our</i> good things	Emphasize <i>their</i> bad things
De-emphasize <i>our</i> bad things	De-emphasize <i>their</i> good things

Figure 1. Van Dijk's ideological square model

Source: Dijk, 2011: 396.

The ideological square model, then, provides a theoretical grounding for analyzing representations of identity and otherness in foreign correspondents' discourses. Van Dijk cites a variety of semantic structures that can be used in discourse to represent others' negative characteristics: negative topics, level of description (generality vs. specificity) and degree of completeness at each level of description, granularity (preciseness vs. vagueness), implications, presuppositions, denomination, predication, modality, agency, topic vs. comment organization (distribution of known vs. new information in sentences) and focus (Dijk, 2011: 397-398).

On the other hand, story lines can be defined as frames that simplify narrative threads which situate individual events in a chain of developments and give them coherence. In short, story lines are the bigger, long-term picture. Story lines are thus connected to framing. The concept of story line presented above roughly aligns with Iyengar's notion of thematic frame, or frames that place issues in a more general or abstract context (Iyengar, 1991).

According to Hannerz, a problem with story lines is that they concentrate too much attention on some single sets of characteristics when more diversity would help to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of reality (Hannerz, 2004: 145-146). Indeed, as Hannerz points out, though story lines might represent major chains of events, the representations may perhaps entail misrepresentations (Hannerz, 2004: 144).

3. Objectives and methodology

This study has the following objectives:

- To conduct an analysis of the articles written by the China correspondents of *El País* and *ABC* published in the selected period.

- To examine the social actors, sources, story lines, topics, representations of social actors, and strategies of identification and differentiation of the sample.

- To compare the coverage of the China correspondents of *El País* and *ABC*.

In order to achieve these objectives, it aims to answer the following research questions:

- Are cultural references found in the coverage of the coronavirus health crisis by the correspondents analyzed?

- Do the correspondents employ strategies of identification or othering toward the social actors present in the analyzed sample?

- Are there notable differences between the correspondents of the two newspapers analyzed?

This study consists of an exercise in discourse analysis from the perspective of critical discourse analysis, or CDA. According to Richardson, CDA is an interpretative, contextual and constructivist approach that aims to link linguistic analysis to social analysis by exposing meanings that represent, or contribute to, social structures and ideologies (Richardson, 2007: 15).

To this effect, a model has been designed which contains quantitative and qualitative elements. Following Fairclough and Richardson, this will be done on three levels: textual analysis, discursive practices analysis and socio-cultural practices analysis (Fairclough, 1992) (Richardson, 2007). The resulting analysis model is shown in table 1:

Dimension	Category	Findings
Text	Macrostructure (topic)	
	Microstructure	Social actors
		Referential and predicational strategies
Discursive practices	Sources	
Socio-cultural practices	Identity/otherness representation	
	Story lines	

Table 1. Model template for analysis of cultural dimensions in discourse

Source: Own elaboration.

Having briefly explained how the analysis will be carried out, it is time to look at the sample used in this study.

4. Sample

The sample of this study is made up of a total of 89 articles – 45 from *El País* and 44 from *ABC* – written by these newspapers' correspondents based in China: Macarena Vidal Liy and Jaime Santirso at *El País*, and Pablo M. Díez at *ABC*. This represents all stories focused on China produced by these correspondents from the time they began covering the outbreak of a novel coronavirus in Wuhan until China ceased to be considered the center of the pandemic. Thus, the sample runs from January 2020 (January 17 in the case of *El País* and January 21 for *ABC*) to March 13, 2020, when the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that Europe had replaced China as the center of the pandemic.

The content was gathered through the news database Factiva by entering the following search: "(china or wuhan) and (virus or coronavirus or covid-19 or *neumonía* or *brote* or *epidemia* or *pandemia*)".

Factiva's language filter was activated for Spanish. The date range selected was from December 1, 2019 to March 13, 2020. In both cases, Factiva's filter for "similar" duplicates was activated. For *El País*, the source "*El País* – Nacional (Spain, Spanish language)" was chosen. For *ABC*, the source was "*ABC* (Spain)", but in order to avoid duplications the source "*ABC* Sevilla (Córdoba, Spain, Spanish language)" was blocked in the search.

The search for *El País* delivered 596 results, and for *ABC* 326 results were obtained. These results were then manually checked to make sure, first, that the articles were authored by the newspapers' correspondents in China (including joint bylines) and, later, that they focused on China. This means that articles written by reporters based in newspapers' main newsrooms were not taken into account. Likewise, some articles by Santirso while in quarantine in Madrid after being evacuated from Wuhan were excluded from the sample as they did not report on China. Some articles written by Díez about Japan or South Korea were not included either. The results thus obtained were then cross-referenced with further searches using Factiva's author category.

This study focuses on *El País* and *ABC* because these were the only two Spanish newspapers that maintained at least a mainland China correspondent throughout the analyzed period.

4.1. Defining the sample

The first article of this sample, published on January 17 by *El País*, is a piece in which Santirso and a reporter based in Madrid, Pablo Linde, have a joint byline.

A four-day hiatus followed. From January 22 until February 12 (both included), this newspaper's China correspondents covered the coronavirus story without interruption. Vidal Lij joined the coverage on January 24, from Beijing. Santirso covered the outbreak from Wuhan between January 24 and February 1, when he was evacuated from Wuhan along with other Spanish citizens. From February 1 onward, the coverage of *El País* contemplated in the sample of this study was the responsibility of Vidal Lij alone.

In the last week of January and the first half of February, two pieces were published daily in most cases, although on January 26 the sample includes three articles. The pace slows down markedly in the second half of February and early March – the sample includes 11 articles between February 15 and March 13 – as the news focus shifted away from China to countries like South Korea, Iran, Italy and Spain.

ABC started covering the coronavirus outbreak from its main newsroom in Madrid, and Díez joined the coverage on January 21 from Shanghai. Between January 21 and February 19, the sample includes 34 articles, including two joint bylines with *ABC*'s Geneva correspondent, María Teresa Benítez de Lugo, and one with its Berlin correspondent Rosalía Sánchez. *ABC*'s news flow on China follows a trend similar to that of *El País* and after the intensity of late January and early February, the frequency of publication diminishes toward the end of February and the beginning of March. The articles also tend to be shorter toward the end of the coverage.

It is worth noting that, although written by foreign correspondents, the bulk of the articles contained in the sample were not published in the newspapers' "World" sections. Both *El País* and *ABC* published most of them in their respective "Society" sections.

5. Results

As for results, some statistical findings based on the parts of the analysis model suitable for quantification will provide an overview of the coverage of the coronavirus crisis carried out by the China correspondents of *El País* and *ABC*. Following this quantitative view, a more qualitative approach will be taken to the results of the analysis.

5.1. Statistical findings

Three categories included in the analysis model shown in table 1 have been quantified and have provided meaningful findings: social actors, sources and story lines. Based on the frequency with which social actors were mentioned in each article, the main social actors of the newspapers' coverage can be established. The sources cited in each article can also be counted and classified. Lastly, the story lines present in the articles and their recurrence are likewise identified.

5.1.1. *El País*

5.1.1.1. SOCIAL ACTORS

Hundreds of social actors are mentioned in the 45 *El País* articles analyzed for this study. Needless to say, not all of them receive the same consideration: 21 social actors stand out in the coverage of *El País* as being the most frequently cited.

As figure 2 shows, Chinese authorities are the social actor that draws the most attention from *El País's* China correspondents. Based on the frequency of mentions, Chinese authorities are the principal social actor in eight of the 45 articles collected from *El País* (17.8% of the total). Chinese society as a whole comes in second place and is the main social actor in five of the 45 articles (11.1%).

People affected by coronavirus come in third position, tied with Spaniards in Wuhan, each being the most-cited social actor in four articles (8.9%). Hubei and Wuhan's population is the main social actor in three articles (6.7% of the total), making them the fifth most prominent social actor in the coverage of the China correspondents of *El País*.

Other outstanding social actors included Li Wenliang, the World Health Organization, the dyad China-United States, Chinese students, Xi Jinping – in the articles in which he is highlighted above the collective of Chinese authorities – and the Chinese working class. All of them were the main social actors in two articles of the sample. Lastly, the *El País* sample also highlighted the following social actors: the Spanish government, Wuhan and Hubei's authorities, governments cutting ties with China, Chinese scholars demanding freedom of expression, construction

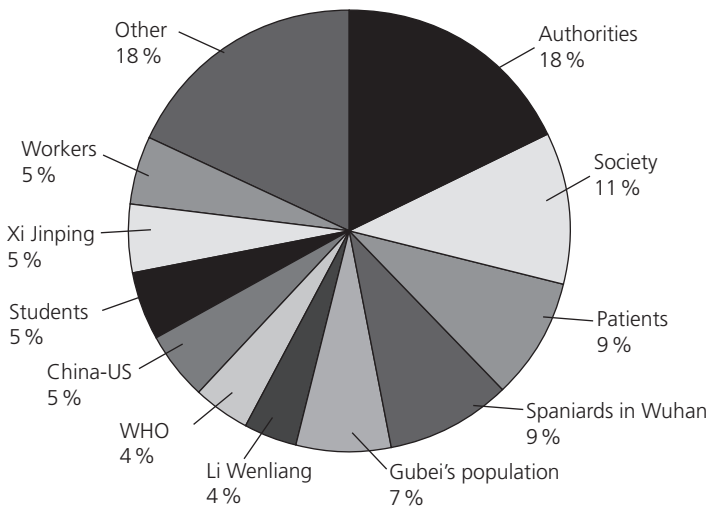


Figure 2. Main social actors in the coverage of *El País's* China correspondents

Source: Own elaboration.

workers building a hospital in Wuhan, recurring patients of coronavirus, people living under lockdown and patients quarantined inside a hotel that collapsed. Each of them was the main social actor in one article included in the sample.

5.1.1.2. SOURCES

With regard to sourcing, a total of 228 sources are cited in the 45 *El País* articles of the sample. That gives an average of 5.1 sources per article. Direct observation by the correspondents of the text is important in four articles. Figure 3 shows graphically the distribution of these sources across different categories.

Again, Chinese central authorities – or leaders or senior officials of bodies of the central government – come on top as the most-frequently cited source: information is attributed to them in 49 cases. That implies that 21% of the sources cited are associated to the central apparatus of the Chinese public administration. It must be clarified that in some articles more than one source belonging to China’s central government is cited. Official data, cited five times in the sample, have been counted as sources from China’s official government too. However, Hubei and Wuhan’s authorities, which are cited six times, have been considered as a separate source. Likewise, sources affiliated with other Chinese local authorities, also cited six times, have also been counted separately.

Ordinary people, be they from Wuhan and Hubei or from other parts of China, are the second most important sources with 31 citations, making up 13.6% of the total sources. The vast majority of citations to people from Wuhan and Hubei occurred in the articles published while Santirso was stationed in Wuhan. This ex-

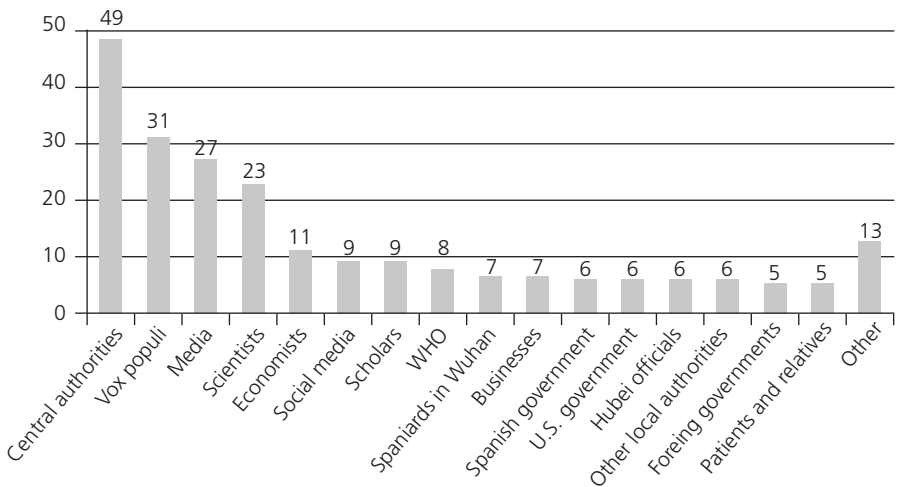


Figure 3. Sourcing in the coverage of *El País*'s China correspondents

Source: Own elaboration.

cludes Spanish nationals who reside in Wuhan, who have been counted separately and act as sources seven times.

News agencies and media are the third most important source, cited 27 times, which means that they represent 11.9% of the total sources. This includes Chinese official media, a frequent resource for foreign correspondents based in the country.

The fourth source by frequency of citation is a large umbrella category that encompasses scientists, scientific institutions (including hospitals), papers and reports produced by such institutions, as well as doctors. They are used as sources 23 times, or one tenth of the total. The WHO and experts attached to this organization have been counted separately, and are cited as sources eight times.

Economic institutions as well as economists and analysts that work at them are cited as sources 11 times. Social media contents are another important source, being cited nine times. There are seven instances where companies and business lobbies act as sources. By contrast, coronavirus patients and their relatives are only cited five times as sources.

Other sources include Hong Kong's authorities, Chinese courts, the police and bodies of the Communist Party of China, among others. However, these are sparingly cited: 13 times in aggregate.

5.1.1.3. STORY LINES

A total of seven different story lines have been identified in the *El País* sample. While some articles introduce more than one story line, in others there is none to be found. Figure 4 illustrates the story lines found, based on frequency of appearances.

"China lacks transparency" is the story line that *El País* correspondents use most often: it appears in 12 out of the 45 articles. This story line is linked to the behavior of the Chinese government during the SARS epidemic. It is followed by

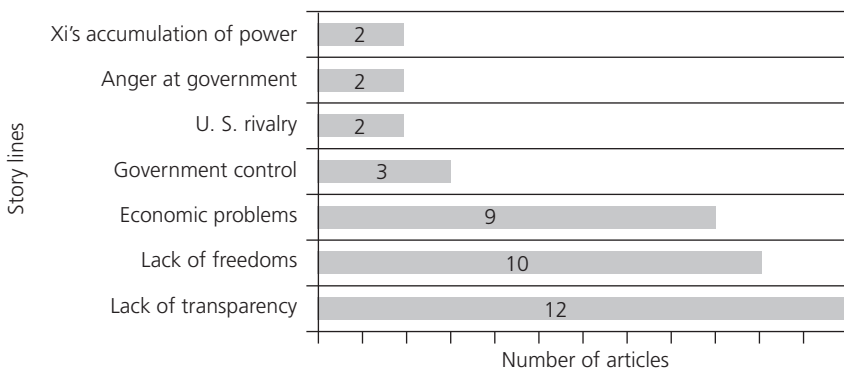


Figure 4. Story lines in the coverage of *El País's* China correspondents

Source: Own elaboration.

"Freedoms are lacking in China", which can be identified in 10 articles, and by "China faces economic problems", which features in nine stories. "Government controls people in China" is present in three articles. Finally, a series of other story lines appear in two articles of the sample: "Xi Jinping has accumulated power", "China and the U.S. are rivals" and "Chinese people could revolt".

Therefore, an analysis of the coverage produced by the China correspondents of *El País* shows that they link the coronavirus crisis with story lines that go well beyond the topics strictly related to a major health crisis.

5.1.2. ABC

5.1.2.1. SOCIAL ACTORS

There are hundreds of social actors in the sample collected from ABC's China correspondent. Taking into account the regularity with which they are presented as the main social actors in articles, a total of 19 social actors are mentioned. Figure 5 shows them.

Chinese authorities are the main social actors in nine out of the 44 articles written by ABC's correspondent in China, or one fifth of the total. Authorities are followed by people affected by coronavirus, who attract prominent attention in six articles, or 13.6% of the total.

Chinese society as a whole and the World Health Organization are each the most important social actors in four articles, or about 9.1% of the total sample

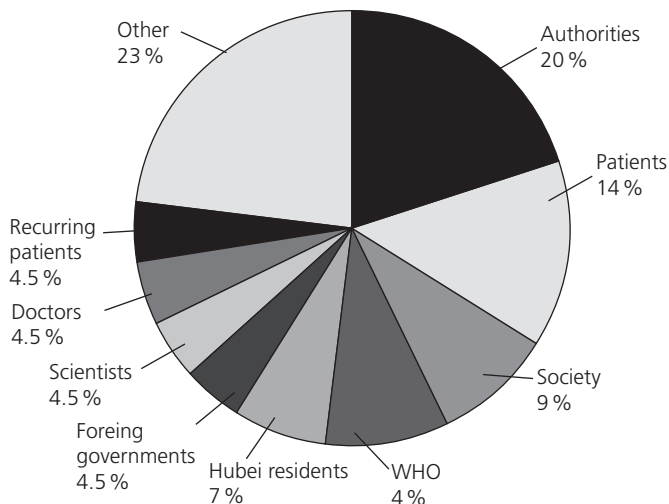


Figure 5. Main social actors in the coverage of ABC's China correspondent

Source: Own elaboration.

each. Hubei and Wuhan's residents are the main social actor in three articles. Meanwhile, foreign governments implementing restrictions toward China and people arriving in their territories from China are the most important actors in two articles, as are scientists, doctors and recurring coronavirus patients.

A further 10 social actors appear as the main actor in one article each. These are: the Spanish government, Hong Kong's government, Macau's government, Li Wenliang, a man who died in Paris and became the first coronavirus death in Europe, Xi Jinping, Hubei's authorities, German authorities, construction workers of hospitals in Wuhan, and activists.

It is worth noting, however, that some social actors that might be considered under the category of people affected by the virus as well have been classified as separate social actors because of the prominence they received in the coverage. This is the case of coronavirus patients believed to have been reinfected but also of the first death in Europe – both are given enough prominence as to be considered separately – and arguably even the case of Doctor Li Wenliang. The same can be said about Xi Jinping or Hubei's authorities: they could have been included under the banner of "Chinese authorities", but have been considered on their own because the attention they drew in the articles so justifies.

5.1.2.2. SOURCES

In the coverage by ABC's China correspondent under analysis here, a total of 138 sources are cited. Direct first-hand observation is of key importance in three articles, while no source is cited in a further two articles. As a result, the average of sources per article is 3.1. Figure 6 shows them ordered by frequency of citations.

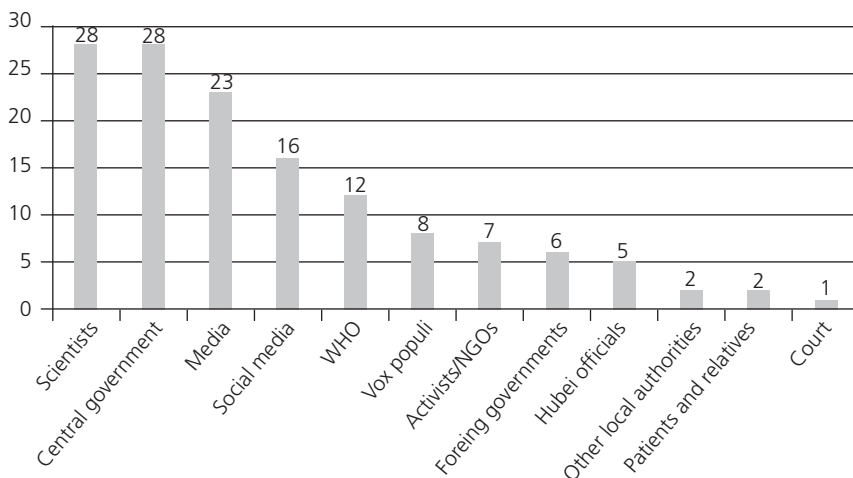


Figure 6. Sourcing in the coverage of ABC's China correspondent

Source: Own elaboration.

Scientists and doctors, on the one hand, and China’s central government, on the other, are the top sources in the coverage of *ABC*’s correspondent. It should be clarified that the category “scientists” includes scientific institutions, hospitals and doctors, as well as papers or reports written by them. Likewise, the category “central government” includes documents released by the government, including official statistics. Scientists are cited as sources in 28 cases, the same amount as the central Chinese government. This means that these two types of sources alone account for about two-fifths of the total.

Media outlets come in third position with 23 citations, or 16.7% of all sources cited. Social media is the fourth most frequently used source, with 16 citations, making up 11.5% of the total. The World Health Organization is cited as a source in 12 instances, accounting for less than 8.7% of the total sources.

The rest of the sources are not cited as often. There are eight cases of ordinary people being cited as sources; seven of activists or non-governmental organizations; six of officials from Hubei province, and two from other local authorities. Coronavirus patients and relatives are cited as sources twice, while a court is cited once.

There is diversity in the sourcing of *ABC*’s China correspondent and, while scientists and the central government are the most-frequently used, the top four sources are cited fairly often in his coverage.

5.1.2.3. STORY LINES

ABC’s articles included in the sample contain six different story lines. Again, some articles include more than one while some others have none at all. Figure 7 shows them according to their prevalence in the coverage.

“China lacks transparency” is the story line that *ABC*’s correspondent uses most often: it is found in 13 of the 44 articles considered. This story line is introduced

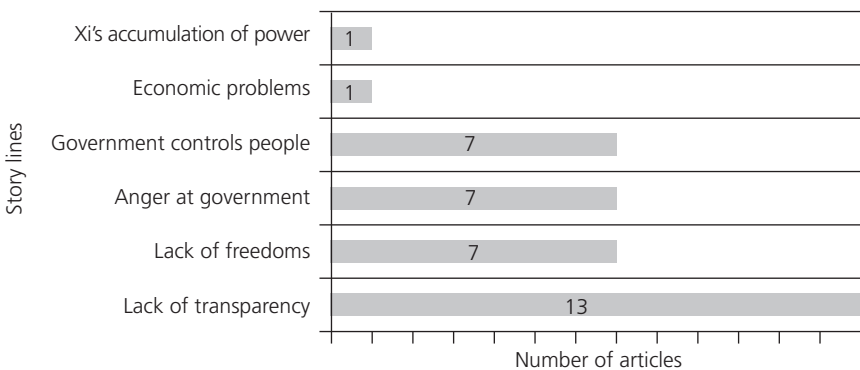


Figure 7. Story lines in the coverage of *ABC*’s China correspondent
 Source: Own elaboration.

citing the historic precedent of the SARS epidemic. “Government controls people in China”, “Freedoms are lacking in China” and “Chinese could revolt” appear each in seven articles. There are a couple of additional story lines which are found just in one article: “China faces economic problems” and “Xi Jinping has accumulated power”.

The above shows that coverage of the coronavirus epidemic in China by *ABC*'s correspondent makes reference to long-term trends that go well beyond the immediate health crisis.

5.2. Qualitative findings

In addition to the quantitative findings summarized above, the analysis of the sample was complemented by a qualitative component that addresses some of the meaning-making resources used by the China correspondents of *El País* and *ABC* in their coverage of the coronavirus epidemic. Three aspects are highlighted here: the topics of the articles analyzed, how they represent the main social actors present in the coverage, and possible strategies of identification and differentiation used with respect to the social actors represented. In order to facilitate references to articles, the stories are cited using a code – articles published by *El País* are designated as EP and those by *ABC* as A – and their number is drawn from the sample reference list provided at the end of this study.

5.2.1. *El País*

5.2.1.1. TOPICS

The initial focus for *El País* is on the new coronavirus and its international spread, as reflected in the topics of the first two articles (“Virus discovered in China is spreading internationally” in EP1 and “The Wuhan virus reaches the U.S.” in EP2). After the Chinese government introduced a lockdown in Wuhan to curb the spread of the virus, the attention of the coverage shifted to the government’s measures and their effects on the population (EP3’s topic is “China acts to contain spread of virus”). From then on, the story becomes the policy response to the epidemic as much as the spread of the virus itself.

Starting from the fourth article, Santirso covers the virus from Wuhan, while Vidal Lij joins the coverage from Beijing. During the following days, a pattern emerges in which Santirso tries to focus on specific aspects of the epidemic (“Coronavirus saddens Lunar New Year celebrations in Wuhan” in EP7 or “Coronavirus overwhelms Wuhan’s healthcare workers” in EP8) or the lockdown measures (“Wuhan’s residents try to adapt to lockdown” in EP4). Meanwhile, Vidal Lij focuses on the authorities’ response (as shown by EP9’s topic “Chinese leaders show they have learned a lesson from SARS” or by “China forbids wild animal trade” in EP12). As from EP10, Santirso starts writing about the Spanish community in Wuhan and its eventual evacuation from the city – Santirso included. This Spanish

theme features in the topic of five articles of the sample (EP10, EP14, EP15, EP17 and EP18).

As Santirso focuses on the Spaniards in Wuhan, Vidal Liy takes full responsibility for covering the epidemic and begins to look into the consequences of the measures introduced to contain it both in the social sphere (as evidenced by the topic of EP13, "China seeks to control people from Hubei", or EP19, "Chinese get angry with Wuhan's authorities due to coronavirus") and in the economic realm ("The coronavirus outbreak will hurt the Chinese economy" in EP16).

The economic and social impacts of the lockdown continue to be important topics in the coverage through to the end of the sample. Articles that explain the economic fallout abound in *El País's* coverage (EP21, EP26, EP29, EP32 and EP38). Within the articles showing a preoccupation with social aspects, there are two articles focused on education (EP35 and EP40) and one on psychological problems arising from the lockdown measures (EP41).

The effects of the epidemic on China's international relations are also examined in a number of articles. There is a story about countries cutting ties with China because of coronavirus (EP20). The effect of the epidemic on the bilateral relationship between China and the U.S. attracts a close scrutiny (it features in EP20, but also in EP22 and EP26). This has led to the consideration of the China-U.S. dyad as a social actor for the analysis of the sample.

Another milestone in *El País's* coverage is the death of Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist who gave the alert about the virus before the Chinese authorities publicly acknowledged the outbreak, who was reprimanded by police – the authorities later apologized for this – and who became viral in the Chinese social media. There are two articles (EP25 and EP27) about the impact caused by his death on Chinese society, a profile of Li (EP28) and a further article (EP30) about scholars calling for freedom of expression in response to his death.

After Li's decease, articles about the social and economic consequences of the epidemic referenced above alternate with stories which track the epidemic. This latter group encompasses articles EP31, EP33, EP34 and EP39, leading up to the three final articles of the sample EP43, EP44 and EP45, which report on the containment of the epidemic in China. As stated above, the frequency of publication in the sample diminished as the disease hit other countries like South Korea, Italy or Spain and slowed down in China toward the end of February and early March.

5.2.1.2. REPRESENTATION OF SOCIAL ACTORS

As explained by the statistical findings, the Chinese authorities are the social actor to whom *El País's* China correspondents devote the most attention. This is the case particularly in the articles written by Vidal Liy.

Chinese authorities are mostly referred to in an impersonalized way as "the Government", "China" or "Beijing", and often generic references like "the authorities"

are used. Sometimes, references to specific institutions like China's National Health Commission or the State Council are made, but less frequently. Whenever there is a personalized and individual reference to authorities, China's president, Xi Jinping, is usually the one who is singled out. There are also specific references to individuals who act as sources, when they intervene in press conferences or are interviewed by the official press, for example.

The portrayal of Chinese authorities in some articles published by *El País* is in negative terms. Their handling of the coronavirus crisis is deemed a disaster (EP28) and they are blamed for actions like hiding information for political reasons (EP23), undercounting deaths (EP23), ordering propaganda production (EP23) or censoring (EP27). *El País* also reports that China's central government tries to distance itself from the initial handling of the crisis by local authorities in Wuhan and Hubei (like in EP19, EP27 or EP36).

The second most important social actor is Chinese society as a whole. Here, generic references are combined with specific references to individuals who serve as personalizations of the phenomena being explained in the articles. This happens in every single article of the Wuhan series by Santirso, but also in most articles by Vidal Liy about the economic and social consequences of the lockdowns. For instance, in EP21, Yuanyuan and her mother Mingming are mentioned to describe how people are dealing with the return to work after the extended Lunar New Year vacation; in EP35, Lena Wang and her family are used as an illustration of the problems of education.

Often, Chinese society is presented as the object of the actions of the Chinese authorities. Furthermore, while Chinese society is presented as the agent of some actions, there are many instances in which their agency is omitted. This is the case of the headlines of EP19, EP25, EP27 and EP30, where actions carried out by Chinese society – or, at least, part of it – are nominalized as “outcry”, “anger” or “outrage”, and their agency, therefore, becomes somewhat blurred.

In EP6 and EP7, China's celebration of the Lunar New Year is highlighted. In EP5 and EP12, the Chinese people are presented as having a taste for eating wild animals or exotic food, which is linked to outbreaks of infectious diseases like the new coronavirus or SARS. EP35 and EP40 reference the “obsession” of the Chinese with education, while EP41 claims that mental health is a taboo in China.

Finally, people affected by coronavirus is the third main social actor, tied with Spaniards in Wuhan, in the sample from *El País*. The vast majority of references to people affected by the virus are impersonalized, as they usually appear aggregated as statistics or are referred to in generic terms. However, there is a great deal of attention paid to the death of Li Wenliang, who serves as a personalization of this collective. A profile on Li (EP28) goes even further and describes him as a symbol of the coronavirus crisis. In that profile, Li is presented as a “hero”, “public face”, “figure” or “emblem”.

5.2.1.3. IDENTITY/OTHERNESS

A certain degree of discourse polarization is observed in the coverage on the Spanish community in Wuhan and their evacuation from the city (EP10, EP14, EP15, EP17 and EP18), following Van Dijk's ideological square model (Dijk, 2011). There are personalizations of the collective of Spanish people living in Wuhan in all the articles, some members of the collective are cited as sources and, whenever that happens, each individual is introduced and described with a fair degree of detail. In the rest of the coverage, when the subjects are not Spanish, that degree of detail is not provided with the same consistency.

This relative polarization is illustrated in EP15, a piece about a Sino-Spanish couple: Dácil Sánchez and Sun Naitian. While the couple is of course formed by both these people, the article focuses mainly on Dácil Sánchez and the decision she has to make: whether to stay in Wuhan during the lockdown or leave without her husband. Both Dácil Sánchez and Sun Naitian are interviewed, but Dácil is cited more. Furthermore, Sun Naitian is often referred to in terms of his relation to her (as "her husband").

While negative representations of Chinese authorities are sometimes provided, that does not necessarily apply to the broader Chinese society. It should be noted that the correspondents distinguish between the Chinese authorities and the rest of society.

If lack of detail is an indication of a group being othered, as Van Dijk suggests, then people affected by the virus are the one collective that is "othered" most frequently in the coverage of *El País's* China correspondents (Dijk, 2011). Most of the time, there are only vague, statistical references to them, and they remain speechless for most of the coverage. However, this is somewhat mitigated by the attention devoted to the death of Li Wenliang, who – quoting Vidal Liy's words in EP28 – gives a "public face" to the crisis.

5.2.2. ABC

5.2.2.1. TOPICS

ABC's coverage of the new coronavirus was not started by its China correspondent but rather by its reporters in Madrid. When the correspondent does join in, his first two articles on the subject focus on the spread of the virus ("New coronavirus infects more people" and "Virus threatens to become epidemic" are the topics of A1 and A2, respectively). From A3 onward, the focus moves to measures implemented by the Chinese authorities to contain the expansion of the virus ("Authorities ask Wuhan residents to stay in the city" in A3), as well as to the effects of these measures on the population ("Lockdown leaves Wuhan's population trapped" in A4 and "Outbreak saddens China's New Year Celebrations" in A5).

The international evacuation of Wuhan receives attention in A7 and A12, while the travel restrictions to and from China are addressed in A15. Also on the interna-

tional front, *ABC* uses milestones in the worldwide spread of the virus (first local infections in Germany in A10, first death outside of China in A17 or first death in Europe A31) as a peg to report on the latest developments in China, hence requiring its correspondent there to take part in the coverage. *ABC*'s China correspondent teams up with the newspaper's Geneva correspondent to cover the WHO's view on what is happening in China. A13, A28 and A35 are the result.

Attention is devoted to the stress produced on China's healthcare system by the coronavirus (as in A8, A14 or A34), as well as to the hospitals built to address the problem (A11). The failures of local authorities to contain the outbreak in its early days (A9) are scrutinized too, as is the fear of the virus among the population (A16) and the widespread anger with the authorities (A19). This is heightened in the series of articles that follow Li Wenliang's death (A23, A24, A25, A30 and A32).

However, after these articles focused on the failures or shortcomings in the handling of the crisis by the Chinese authorities, the tone of *ABC*'s correspondent took a turn from A35 onward. This article reports on the findings of a mission sent by the WHO to China, which lauds Beijing's response. In A39, *ABC*'s correspondent reports that the WHO believes only measures like those implemented by China can contain the epidemic.

Moreover, there are articles about the stigma suffered by people from Hubei in other parts of the country (A20), the warlike vocabulary employed by the authorities to refer to the virus (A33) and how people try to overcome boredom during lockdown (A38).

Alternating with the stories more closely focused on the social consequences of the epidemic and the lockdown, there is a preoccupation with the rising number of infections and deaths (A18, A26 and A 30) when the epidemic is on the rise, as well as potential new dangers like reinfections (A36 and A41), human-animal transmissions (A40) and the possible link between the spread of the virus and temperature (A43). Finally, news of the containment of the epidemic is also reported (in A42 and A44).

5.2.2.2. REPRESENTATION OF SOCIAL ACTORS

As seen above, the Chinese authorities are the main social actors in the coverage of *ABC*'s China correspondent of the coronavirus crisis, followed by people affected by the virus. With regard to authorities, impersonalized references to "the Government" or "the regime" abound. Whenever there is an individualized reference, it is usually to mention Xi Jinping. There are references to specific government bodies like the National Health Commission or the Ministry of Public, but they are less frequent than the generic ones.

China is said to be "authoritarian" or "an authoritarian regime of the Communist Party" in several articles. In A25, China is referred to as a "superpower that spends billions on pharaonic projects but neglects the health of its people". The idea that the Chinese government does not care about its people also appears in A14.

In A20, the correspondent summarizes how the epidemic has changed the relationship between the Chinese people and their government: "With the initial concealment of the outbreak and the subsequently delayed response as acknowledged by local authorities, a break has occurred in the existing social contract in China, which imposed an authoritarian system in exchange for economic progress and stability."¹ That article refers to China as "a giant with feet of clay" and reports on people killing themselves in Wuhan "for not being able to go back to their homes after being rejected by hospitals", a claim that is not followed up in subsequent articles.

In A24, the coronavirus epidemic is compared to Chernobyl's nuclear accident, and the idea is further elaborated in A25: "In spite of the seriousness of the situation, no one believes that in China a revolution against the party is about to break out because of coronavirus. However, no one thought that the USSR was going to fall either, but that's just what it did five years after trying to cover up Chernobyl."² Likewise, the correspondent suggests in several articles that China's social stability could be at risk. Meanwhile, articles 20 and 33 compare the response to the epidemic from China's society as a whole with the Cultural Revolution, the campaign of political agitation and personality cult which was launched by Mao Zedong in 1966 and which lasted – with some ups and downs – until 1976. Referring to Chinese society more generally, the fact that it celebrates the Lunar New Year is flagged in several articles (A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, A8 and A38). A taste for exotic food is mentioned in A15. In A15, it is also said that there is a "growing anti-Chinese sentiment all over the world", while A12 notes that, after imposing a lockdown on Hubei, China "risks being put under quarantine in turn by the rest of the world".

When it comes to Chinese people affected by the virus, in most articles the references to them are generic ("patients", "dead people", "lives claimed") or statistical. Despite the frequency with which they are mentioned, there are few personalizations of this collective, with the obvious exception of Li Wenliang. In addition to Li, another person who has been infected by the coronavirus is identified by name in A33 and cited as a source.

5.2.2.3. IDENTITY/OTHERNESS

ABC's correspondent presents China's authorities in negative terms. However, while Chinese society is sometimes presented negatively ("China is also the country with the largest number of volunteers, informants or plain sneaks at the service of the government"³ in A20), in other cases there is an identification of the author with a population that suffers the government's "authoritarianism". This is seen in article A25, where the correspondent's identification is made explicit through the use of a first-person plural: "The regime does the same thing with dissidents and activists, but this time it is not a political, environmental, economic or labor issue. It is health-related and concerns something that affects us all: life itself."⁴

In general terms, there is a tendency to provide little detail about the Chinese people referred to in the articles, something which, in Van Dijk's terms, contributes

to their “othering” (Dijk, 2011). This is particularly true of the people affected by the virus, who tend to be referred to merely in a generic, anonymized way or aggregated as statistics. When the infected people are found outside of China, however, the representation changes: greater detail is offered of a Chinese man who died of coronavirus in the Philippines or of a Chinese tourist who passed away in France than of any other victim of the epidemic – save for Li Wenliang.

5.3. Comparative analysis

A comparative analysis of the coverage of the coronavirus crisis by the China correspondents of *El País* and *ABC* shows a number of parallels between the two newspapers, but also some significant differences.

In both cases, the Chinese authorities are the main social actors. While Chinese society as a whole is the second most prominent social actor for *El País*, *ABC* pays more attention to people affected by the virus. The correspondents of both newspapers tend to make impersonalized references to the Chinese authorities and to use generic and statistical formulations to introduce the people who have fallen ill from the virus. There is more personalization – in both cases but particularly in *El País* – in references to Chinese society. With respect to sourcing, there is a notable contrast between the two newspapers. To begin with, *El País* cites many more sources, 5.1 sources per article on average versus 3.1 in *ABC*. As a result, there is more plurality of voices in *El País*. In the case of *El País*, it is clearly the voice of China’s central government that dominates, followed by ordinary people, media, and scientists. *ABC* gives more prominence to scientists and central authorities, followed by the media and social media contents.

As for story lines, both newspapers highlight China’s lack of transparency, mainly by referencing the precedent of the government’s action during the SARS epidemic in 2002 and 2003. For *El País*, the country’s lack of freedoms and the economic problems it faces come next. *ABC*, on the other hand, points out governmental control over the population, the lack of freedoms and the potential for a revolt. It is interesting to observe that one long-term trend mentioned by *El País*, the rivalry between China and the U.S., is not found in *ABC*’s coverage.

Cross-referencing the topics identified in the sample, there are only seven instances in which the correspondents address the same issue with an angle that is close enough to lead to a similar summary of their resulting pieces. Which topics are these? They include high-impact events (like the introduction of lockdown measures, Li Wenliang’s death, the WHO raising its alarm about coronavirus and the rise in the official count of victims following a change in methodology); follow-ups on these events (like travel restrictions after the lockdown or the widespread anger after Li’s death); or pre-scheduled events like the Lunar New Year’s Eve.

Beyond these cases, the topics addressed by each newspaper diverge significantly. *El País*’s correspondents deal with a greater variety of topics, as they write a

number of articles about the economic fallout of the epidemic, a topic nearly absent from the coverage of *ABC's* correspondent; education; social consequences; the evacuation of the Spanish community of Wuhan; and the China-U.S. rivalry. *ABC's* correspondent puts emphasis on the shortcomings of China's healthcare system and on the government's repression of dissidents and activists, and although both topics are addressed in the coverage of the *El País* correspondents, one does not find the same insistence. Lastly, with regard to the identification and differentiation strategies employed by the correspondents, the discourse polarization observed in the articles from *El País* about the evacuation of Spaniards from Wuhan is not echoed by *ABC's* correspondent. This is because the latter does not cover this story with the same intensity.

Both newspapers coincide in portraying the Chinese authorities in negative terms, although that does not necessarily apply to Chinese society as whole: *ABC's* correspondent, in fact, identifies himself once with the people who suffer the actions of the Chinese government. The two papers' correspondents are also similar in representing people affected by the coronavirus in vague terms, which contributes to their "othering." This lack of detail on coronavirus patients in China becomes particularly marked when the correspondents report on infections or deaths in other countries (as in the U.S. in EP2 or Germany in A10), where much more information is given on the people who have been infected.

6. Discussion and future research opportunities

This critical analysis of the discourse on the coronavirus crisis in China of *El País* and *ABC* has tried to identify cultural representations that emerged when the correspondents in China of both newspapers covered the issue. Statistical findings on the presence of social actors, sources and story lines in each outlet have been provided, followed by a more qualitative approach to the topics addressed in their coverage, the representation of those social actors, as well as to indicators of identity or otherness. A comparative analysis has also been conducted to determine how the coverage of the correspondents of *El País* and *ABC*, respectively, differ from each other.

One topic that came up in the preceding pages was the overarching presence of the Chinese authorities in the coverage of the correspondents of both newspapers. The Chinese authorities are the main social actor for both publications. Likewise, they are one of the top sources of information – the most-frequently cited by the correspondents of *El País*, while for *ABC's* correspondent, authorities and scientists are tied as the top sources – and the most prominent story lines can also be attributed to their actions: lack of transparency, lack of freedoms, government control, and Xi's accumulation of power all can be traced back to the authorities.

A possible explanation for this preeminence is the fact that, following an initial concern with the coronavirus outbreak, the focus of the coverage in both newspapers soon shifted to the measures imposed by the Chinese government to contain the epidemic. This perspective implies that it is the government, or the authorities, who has the agency to perform actions, while society is only the object of those actions.

Moreover, this emphasis on China's authorities and on their action contrasts with the relative lack of attention paid to the people infected by the disease or who die from it. Not only are they not the main social actors, but when they do take the spotlight generic and anonymized references, or statistical mentions, dominate. People affected by the virus are nearly always speechless. The one exception – and no doubt a notable one – is Li Wenliang, who is presented as a symbol of the crisis. The result of this vagueness is the representation of people affected by the virus as "others" with whom little identification is possible.

A possible cause for this differing representation is the difficult access to sources that could relay their views. Indeed, getting to speak with people in a quarantine facility or with their relatives must have been challenging. Meanwhile, the official information provided by government bodies was readily available.

Nevertheless, when Santirso covered the epidemic in Wuhan, he got to speak with local people, some of whom had relatives who were infected. Those sources were lost when he was evacuated. If anything, this underscores the importance of being on site. In *ABC's* coverage, the skepticism of its correspondent with respect to the information provided by the government is evidenced by his reliance on other media, scientists or social media.

Even when dealing with a public health issue, there is a notable cultural dimension in the articles of the China correspondents of *El País* and *ABC*. After all, they may be covering an epidemic, but they are still covering China.

What has been discussed here is inferred only from an analysis of the *El País's* and *ABC's* China correspondents. Obviously, the correspondents themselves may have something to say about their coverage. Thus, one possible direction of future research could be to interview them. 🗨️

Notes

- 1** The original in Spanish reads: "Con la ocultación inicial del brote y la tardía respuesta posterior, admitida por las autoridades locales, se ha roto el contrato social vigente en China, que imponía un sistema autoritario a cambio de progreso económico y estabilidad."
- 2** The original in Spanish reads: "A pesar de la gravedad de la situación, nadie cree que en China vaya a estallar una revolución contra el partido por el coronavirus. Pero tampoco pensaba nadie que la URSS iba a caer y lo hizo cinco años después de intentar ocultar Chernóbil."
- 3** The original full sentence in Spanish reads: "Por si todo esto falla, siempre se puede recurrir a la antigua usanza, que para eso China es también el país con mayor número de voluntarios, informantes o simplemente chivatos al servicio del Gobierno."
- 4** The original in Spanish reads: "Lo mismo el régimen hace con los disidentes y activistas, pero esta vez no es asunto político, medioambiental, económico o laboral. Es sanitario y afecta a algo que nos toca a todos: la vida."

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