

Media Content Analysis during Quarantine Owing to the Health Emergency in 2020 in Colombia

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Abstract

Quarantine, as a social protection strategy, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, has generated circumstances of transition for the public. One of the greatest challenges for means of communication is helping to direct these transitions toward useful, healthy behavior. This implies a deconstructive analysis of information management and its relationship with audiences. In the present article, media behavioral changes, in traditional and official means of communications, social networks, and audiences is analyzed in Manizales, Colombia. The main conclusion of the investigation indicates that the public is more connected to the information that comes to them via *WhatsApp* and other social media, which today, are consumed more and more.

Key words: Mass communication; Media consumption; Social networks; Quarantine; Audiences.

1. Introduction

Means of communication are essential in circumstances such as those which society faces. By way of informative dissemination and media behavior, they may generate panic, calm, impulsive reactions, or responsible enthusiasm.

As of COVID-19's arrival to Latin America, the majority of world governments, including that of Colombia, decreed obligatory preventative isolation, or quarantine, which in the case of Colombia, extended until April 27th. This decision has generated completely new reactions in this generation, and so the media has been granted a fundamental role, not only for access to information about the pandemic, but also regarding citizen confrontation with a virus that is affecting countries worldwide.

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In the field of documentary research (use of secondary sources), this study proposes three questions regarding the problem that is the object of interest:

1. What has informative coverage been like for both traditional and official means of communication?
2. What role have social networks had in the dissemination of news and *fake news*?
3. How may the public's media behavior be characterized in Manizales?

2. Conceptual framework

Just as argued by the General Director of the World Health Organization (WHO), Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus: "The evolution of the coronavirus outbreak will depend on the measures taken to convey the correct information to those who need it" (El País, 2020). This is a starting point for the present investigation, as the general director of the WHO not only directs their gaze toward medical and scientific contributions that may mitigate the COVID-19 risk, but approach the media, and offers them leading roles that will determine the path by which the epidemic advances.

While preventative isolation remains valid, the media's handling of means of communication still varies and differs with the circumstances. There have been investigations that have studied means of communication -*hereinafter CM*- during the pandemic, but also in social environments of shock, or very nearly, panic.

As explained by Argentinian researcher María Soledad Segura, in her article, *Con alerta pero sin pánico* (2020). The role of the media during the pandemic is to provide an essential public service for the construction of criteria and human mobilization.

The media have a central role in slowing the advance of the pandemic, to care for our physical health, as the general director of the WHO said. They also play a role in how it is addressed: vigilantly, but calmly, so as to care for our mental health, as requested by the Colombian president, but also such that we do not surrender additional rights, in which social ties are strengthened, and democracy is further entrenched (Segura, 2020, p. 57).

As this information contributes to social health, it may become, as Segura says, sensitive information that waffles between a news story that ensures veracity, and provokes rational reactions, or media formats that induce stress and generate panic in audiences. From there, an important question for current media emerges: how to inform the public about a serious epidemic, which may affect any type of person, and which may claim the lives of an important percentage of the population, without producing panic. How do we create a media product that contributes to good public health practices?

At the beginning of 2013, dengue affected several capital cities in Argentina. For several communication theorists, the media behavior of the principal media in Colombia focused on inflating the story, generating panic, instead of its real dilemmas to combat said

illness. *El Clarín*, for example, published the following in January: *Alert: dengue returns* (2013), and in March: *Dengue case native to the capital confirmed* (2013a). Florencia Cendali, researcher at the Universidad de Luján, believes that CM decided to open with those titles, with the intent to generate reactions of terror in the Colombian population and in the capital. Dengue, which does not have high mortality or severe complication rates, is an easy-to-treat illness for a country with Colombia's resources. Why did *El Clarín* concentrate on the arrival and propagation of dengue, and not on the medical abilities of each city to face the epidemic?

While CM may be left to the side, as traditional communication media, it was found that social networks, in the digital boom era, have permitted users to interact with others, ask about the virus, learn about worldwide cases, and even make light of them. These have generated a factor that begins as a rumor, but which may end with reactions such as excessive food product hoarding in national supermarkets, or in the progressive increase of firearm purchase, as in the USA. "Rumors are the oldest means of communication in the world" (Jean-Noel, 1989) and although they are not reliable sources of information, they are the most accessible for many worldwide, by way of social media.

In this case, the risk is increased. Public opinion about an event no longer depends only upon that which the media considers relevant. Now, it is also influenced by *WhatsApp* chains, anonymous publications sent via *Facebook* or other similar social networks, and by memes themselves, as Gago (2009) indicates.

3. Methodology

This investigation may be framed within socio-journalistic work, with a mixed focus, on the typological classification of the research processes of Hernández-Sampiere (2014), which combines qualitative and quantitative data. However, the analysis favors semantic theory, in the case of written articles, semiotics for mostly official communication means, which are supported by graphic pieces, and cultural studies, with respect to audiences in Manizales. These respond to the following research question: How have means of communication and their audiences behaved, in terms of media function, during the quarantine established in Colombia, owing to the health emergency?

In order to delimit the research corpus, the following were applied as secondary sources: two articles written about the arrival of the virus to Colombia, three communicative products transmitted by the accounts of the Colombian presidency and mayor of Manizales, transmissions emitted by official national, departmental, and municipal accounts, two chains that were informally disseminated on *WhatsApp*, among other social media, and the results of the Universidad de Manizales' Media and Opinion Observatory's survey regarding media consumption in times of quarantine.

4. Analysis

4.1. Traditional communication media

As the first piece to be analyzed, an article published by *El Espectador* on March 6th was selected. On this day, the first patient with coronavirus, in Colombia, was diagnosed (El Espectador, 2020). The article is somber, precise in terms of official and scientific information about the patient, whose illness was confirmed (Image 1). Its headline, while sensitive to the fear associated with contracting this type of virus in Colombia, does not attempt to call attention with words that generate emotional reactions. This, from the standpoint of journalistic technique, in accordance with la Fuente-González (1991), is called an expressive headline (referring to a fact that most of the audience is aware of, without lending it more protagonism than that necessary).



Source: El Espectador (2020)

their audience may, at any time, abandon the article, having read the fundamental information.

In digital media that do not have audiences comparable to that of *El Espectador*, it is more complex to locate a large audience. For that reason, beyond the restrictions of administrative policies, they take advantage of these circumstances to

create expressive headlines. This is the case of the newspaper *Minuto30.com*, which, in terms of the same news story, the first case in Colombia, begins its headline with a large *ATTENTION!* (Image 2), which catches the eye, and as such, may predispose the audience to think that the piece of news following the warning may be influential to their daily lives. The heading aims to be expressive, once again, as it continues: "Coronavirus has arrived in Colombia", and ends with the basics of the story, expressed in the same way as in *El Espectador*: "The first case of infection in the country has been confirmed" (El Espectador, 2020a).

Based on stories like these, audiences leave their comfort zones and find that the hegemonic system in which they have lived their entire lives is not as infallible as they thought.

This investigation lends relevance to the study of headlines in news or journalistic products, independent of their formats, as readers of journalism are different from readers of novels. Titles, within the guidelines put forth by Sánchez (1990), serve to hook and inform the reader sufficiently, via an inverted pyramid, such that



Source: minuto30.com

They feel that the threat is closer than ever, that death is present and may cheat them of the opportunity for a full life that extends well into old age. As expressed by Bauman in *Miedo líquido*:

Given that these successive outbreaks of panic tend to be preceded by some news story that indicates that a given human institution [...] is not as infallible and does not function as perfectly as we had assumed (and as we had been encouraged to assume), the resulting fear tends to be explained as the product of bad intentions and actions (2006).

In Colombia, since the week in which coronavirus entered the country, some decided that the enemies and causes of the pandemic were Asians or Iberians infected with the virus, or world governments. In Neiva, in fact, various individuals attacked a home of the first local individuals infected with the virus with stones.

As such, technical title decisions, creating a lead for any news story regarding COVID-19, should carry a fundamental ethical character. Given that traditional news, with events that do not directly affect audience health, is met with important repercussions, this type of headline may mobilize large numbers of people for irrational and impulsive behavior.

4.2. Official communication media

The CM of governmental institutions charged with the implementation of public policies for care and good practices have capitalized, especially on social networks, to communicate the main characteristics of their decisions and advances in virus mitigation to the public. This has been an interesting transition, given that, while social networks were previously important for social communication, owing to their accessibility by the masses, today they are even more vital, as they are efficient channels that do not require physically-present gatherings.

The Colombian presidency and health ministry have implemented a social network communications plan, mainly on *Twitter*, which could be classified in three ways. Firstly, official releases from the presidency and said ministry that have been published include concrete information that does not elicit emotion, but rather the simple reality of the national situation. This first form has been replicated by official accounts of the Caldas government and the mayoral office of Manizales, with respect to municipal and departmental action. Secondly, they feature graphic pieces which overturn their interest in audience identification and portray emotivity by way of illustrations with somber colors.

The communicative concern of leaders has not changed conventional strategies, such as graphic pieces or releases such as those mentioned above. President Iván Duque used on the country's health circumstances as an opportunity to implement a live program, transmitted daily, in the evening hours, by an institutional channel and via official government social network pages. This third form of communication uses objects as signs which may be interpreted by the audience, and are constructed premeditatedly by his assistants, so as to frame the leader's personality in the midst of the pandemic. No politician would like

to be seen, at this time, as a timid or fearful leader. Instead, a narrative, framed within collective notions, with cannons of sympathy and courage, in times of crisis, has been created (Richard, 2011).

To the left (Image 3) is the Colombian flag, which is characteristic of presidential interventions, even before Duque Márquez was elected to the *Casa de Nariño* (Richard, 2008). In the middle of the frame, in front of his right arm, is an orange thermos, a color used in his electoral campaign, and which represents, among other things, energy and social ability (Segura, 2016), along with a glass of water, which is also typical in these cases. On the other side are three objects of import: firstly, a soap dispenser, which has become the most-used tool to combat the virus in Colombian homes, owing to the importance of hand-washing, and an industrial mask that, while not being worn, represents the president's prudence. Lastly, in the frame, is a group of four markers, similar Sharpies, which may be interpreted as tools with which the government proposes solutions. The president reaches beyond personal presentation, gestures, and verbal positions, to present himself as a sensible man who protects himself with a mask and soap. These are kept with him, as are his principle policies, via his campaign colors, which he brings together with plans implemented by the state.

As with Iván Duque, the mayor of Manizales, Carlos Mario Marín (Image 4) initiated, on Tuesday, March 8th, a strategy called *Manizales + GRANDE TV*, which alludes to his campaign slogan and governance. By way of his personal Facebook account and the Coffee Axis institutional channel, *Telecafé*, he explains to the public the way in which the pandemic has

advanced in the municipal territory, as well as those actions that his cabinet has implemented. The scene shown in the attached image has three important elements:

Image 3



Source: Twitter user @infopresidencia

Image 4



Source: www.facebook.com/AlcaldeDeManizales

- The *copy* of the publication argues: “La crisis es más GRAVE...” (The crisis is more SERIOUS...), the adjective with most emphasis in the sentence, and which happens coincide with one of his campaign slogans, “...than we think”. This sentence is sensationalist and may even be construed as apocalyptic, for the audience, because it accepts that the crisis has gotten out of control, and because it causes the observer to interpret their life plans as invalid in the current situation.
- The neon green vest, which alludes directly to the mayor’s political party (*Green Alliance Party*) and that of his campaign. This displays the Manizales Mayoral Office logo together with his slogan: Manizales + GRANDE. The vest has been used in all of his public presentations and publicitary pieces disseminated online.
- He moves the screen with his own hands to show indices, illustrations, and complete graphs about that which is occurring in the capital of Caldas.

The mayor is construed, on the program, as a leader who is familiar with the most vulnerable sectors of the population, by way of a map. He is interpreted as one who has created solid solutions with a small budget, by way of his declarations and a series of Excel pages that are shown in the video, and has “put on his team jersey”, as one might say, colloquially. In this case, he has put on his vest, which represents the entity that he has led since the beginning of the year.

Carlos Mario Marín is a young candidate whose main tool for political persuasion has been mass social media, such as *Facebook*. In the beginning, he used this to state his ideas and construct his ideal for the public. Today, however, his social networks are used, among other things, to disseminate any alarming content which he may come across, as explained above, to produce generalized panic. In the attached photograph (Image 5), one of the publications which gleaned the most interaction on his account seeks to highlight a compilation of amateur videos, characteristic of meme semiotics. In these videos, various people, who seem not to be related in any way, record videos, with their phones, to show corpses in Ecuadorian streets. Some of these are in front of their houses, and others are abandoned at the doors of Ecuadorian health institutions.

Image 5



Source: www.facebook.com/AlcaldeDeManizales

What is the objective of the dissemination of an audiovisual product devoid of official governmental information, and which may make people more susceptible to panic? Umberto Eco (2012) calls this: construction of the enemy. Governments choose, for *marketing* purposes, a concept, person, or movement to attack, so that the force of their arguments gains traction, and their sympathizers believe that the ends are worth more than the means applied by governmental decisions. As Fazio (2013) reports, Trump constructed enmity with immigrants, especially Latinos, who sought work opportunities in the United States. Bush, before him, created the anti-terrorist policy, availing Islam's attack on the twin towers in 2001. There is no better stage for a politician who relies on fear, than a society that trembles in unresolvable dread.

4.3. Digital transmissions and communication

Leader social network media use has led to the production of *live* or *streaming* content. Audiences have reacted well to this phenomenon, and have generated massive results in participation and interaction therewith. The following are data regarding live transmissions of declarations, among other types of products, made by the presidency of Colombia, governorate of Caldas, and Mayoral office of Manizales, between March and April (to May 5th: day of observation).

Table 1

Media use	Iván Duque (Col.)	Luis Carlos Velásquez (Cal)	Carlos Mario Marín (Mzles)
Social network	Twitter	Facebook	Facebook
# Transmissions	56	5	22
Plays (FB) - Spectators (TL)	3 million	48.1 thousand	2.1 million
Total transmission time	36.6 hours	4.08 hours	7.15 hours
Average transmission time	17:02	17:18	16:34
Interaction	58,069	794	87,672

Source: Media Observatory Universidad de Manizales.

Iván Duque fared best on social networks to communicate with the public. He spoke to them, by these means, for a total of 2,200 minutes, and thereby earned approximately 58 interactions by way of comments, *retweets*, and likes. However, the leader with the best ratio between minutes transmitted and public participation was the mayor of Manizales, who garnered, in 429 minutes, a total of 87,672 (likes and comments). Note, however, that these individuals used different social networks as primary communicative bridges, and as such, interaction cannot be compared 1:1.

4.4. Social networks and *WhatsApp* chains

For Rodríguez & Lévy (2004), social networks, and with these, web 2.0, have condemned today's humans to be corporatively intelligent, or have collective intelligence. These networks, in accordance to the above-mentioned authors, create a media environment that is so accessible and easily transformed that the economy, politics, and obviously, communication, must cease to be traditionally administrated and become imbued with traits of the public.

Article 20 of the Political Constitution of Colombia (1991) states that any entity subject to rights has the freedom to create and disseminate information ("Freedom of expression and dissemination of their thoughts and opinions, as well as notification is guaranteed"). This, in the past few decades, has become focused on social networks. Today, it is not necessary to have a company name, print newspapers, or informative brochures. Many times, a *twitter* profile or an *Instagram influencer* has more influence than outlets with minimal media production. On one hand, this is satisfactory for purposes of democracy and opinions, given that the public may now choose personalized information, and if they wish, create it themselves, by way of personal communication channels.

While democracy is strengthened by the access to and obtention of a media product, it is also violated when those without journalistic filters, which not only include veracity or impartiality, but also decision ethics, disseminate false, exaggerated, or outdated material.

Fake news, in times of social tension, tends to be magnified. There is much more of it, and owing to fear, more individuals accept this information, without verifying with official sources or trustworthy means of communication. In this case, a chain that shared news, by way of *WhatsApp* and a video, published on various social networks, will be analyzed.

Coronavirus is a ghost enemy with the strength to topple first-world health systems, and as such, the lives of a great number of people. Human beings have the need to understand the causes of our problems, and are accustomed to blaming someone or something. In the absence of an obvious culprit, science indicates that we proceed to invent them. One of the conspiracy theories created as a result of COVID-19 accuses China for having created the virus as a geopolitical strategy. "A group of Chinese researchers grafted a surface protein taken from bats onto the virus that causes SARS, derived from rats (creating) a super virus that could affect humans" (El Clarín, 2020).

Reality and fiction intermix to create convincing semantic situations that, repeatedly, achieve a degree of truth for its audience, indicates Fernández-García (2017). Thus, a citizen with little criteria may easily be persuaded to believe that China sought to taint the western world with its communist ideas, or that, if the coronavirus comes from bats, as suspected today, it is more probable that it was created in a laboratory via "protein graft" (El Espectador, 2020b).

The same occurs with the video attached as a previsualization (Image 6). A Colombian woman with a Spanish accent claims to have first-hand sources from the government and Ministry of Health that told her--at that time, when Colombia had approximately 100 con-

firmed cases--that the country was really approaching 30,000 cases. In addition to providing this information, in the twenty and one half minutes that the video lasts, the woman seems uneasy. At one point, she cries, and repeatedly says things like: "...they know that this has gotten out of hand [...] the government, right now, knows that this is going to be a catastrophe [...] may lightning strike me down if I am lying". This case is even worse than the previous examples, as it goes beyond providing questionable, unconfirmed theories regarding the causes of COVID-19 to affirming that Colombia would be the scenario of a catastrophe. As shown in the image of the video, the original video was eliminated by Facebook for constituting false information. It had significant reach, with over 9,000 plays and nearly 200 audience interactions. The majority of these individuals believed that the information provided in the video was true.

4.5. Audiences

The Universidad de Manizales' Media and Opinion Observatory performed, between March and April, a study about that which is consumed by audiences in times of obligatory confinement. One of the most relevant results for the present investigation was the satisfaction and confidence of audiences with the media behavior of the CM that they consume, although, in accordance with the parameters of this study, the results leave much to be desired.

The opinion is divided, regarding satisfaction with the informative management of Colombian media (Graph 1). Exactly 45.5% of those consulted were satisfied, while 41.7% were not. The question would be why these individuals are unsatisfied with the information management if the majority of them have extended their hours, words, and resources to provide all available information about those infected and scientific discoveries to do with the virus. The response may be found in the second attached image, in which audiences are questioned about whether, for them, communication media has served to mitigate the impact of the crisis or to magnify it. Here, 35.2% believe that the media has inadequately reported correct information to their audiences, given that, by way of their products, fear of the crisis has been exacerbated.

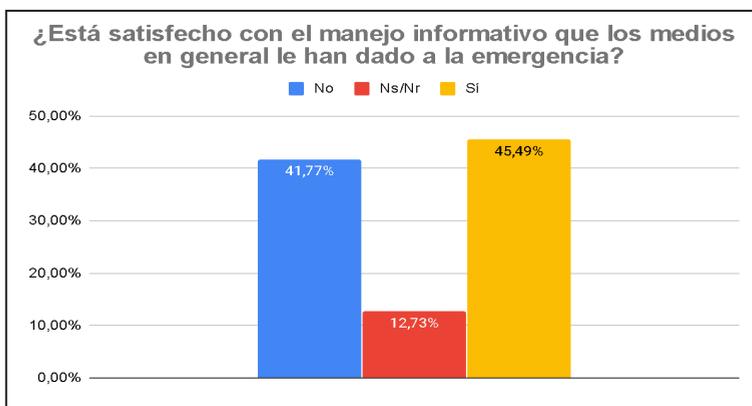
Image 6



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/murielesesteban.anayacotiz/videos/976575602744763>

Chart 1

Are you satisfied with the way in which the media, in general, has managed information about the emergency? No, Don't know/Doesn't respond, Yes. 41.77%, 12.73%, 45.49%



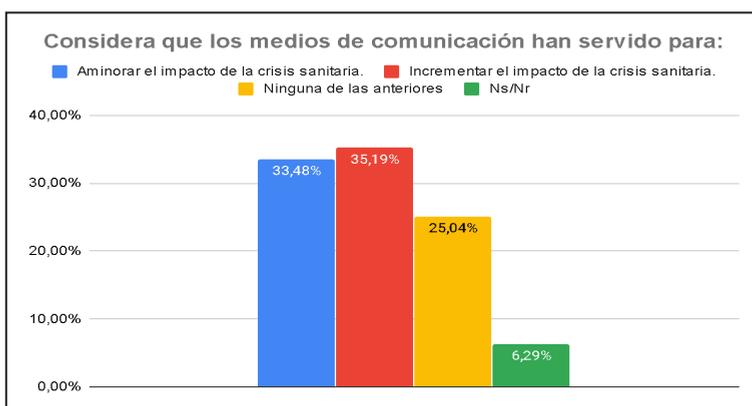
Source: Media Observatory Universidad de Manizales

The reasons, above all, are associated with the fact that, according to the same study (Graph 2):

- The information tends to be the same as that transmitted before.
- They generate information overload, as well as alarmism or the sensation of chaos in audiences.
- The information can easily be manipulated for the benefit of political or economic interests.

Chart 2

Do you believe that communication media have served to: Reduce the impact of the health crisis. Increase the impact of the health crisis. Neither of the above. Don't know/Doesn't respond. 33.48%, 35.19%, 25.04%, 6.29%

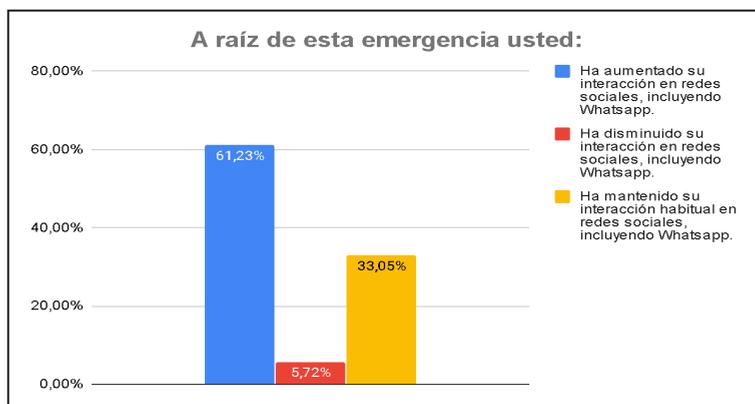


Source: Media Observatory Universidad de Manizales

As mentioned above, these chaotic situations are breeding grounds for false information that seeks to trick a distracted reader. As shown in Chart 3, 61.2% of citizens increased their social network interaction, which makes them more likely to be exposed to *fake news* or commit the error of sharing this with their social circle. In fact, the study confirmed that at least 14% tends to share information prior to verifying whether it is, in fact, true. While this is a small percentage, it is sufficient for audiences, by way of *surfing*, to make a fake message trend attractive to the human psychology.

Chart 3

As a result of this emergency, you: Have increased your social network interaction, including WhatsApp. Have decreased your social network interaction, including WhatsApp. Have maintained your normal social network interaction, including WhatsApp. 61.23%, 5.72%, 33.05%



Source: Media Observatory Universidad de Manizales

5. To conclude

5.1. General considerations

The communication exercise may be defined as the principal tool of democracy. Its objective lies in the diffusion of criteria which teaches global audiences a true and impartial cosmivision. For this reason, the receiver of information is the most important part of the process, and their response to the information is the goal of any journalist or communicator.

The channel, however, has changed. Audiences no longer consume physical information, as before, via newspapers. Every day, more people prefer to see televised news by way of free or paid websites. The present investigation not only indicates that citizens relate more to the information that comes to them via WhatsApp and other social media, but that, in circumstances such as today's, society consumes much more from digital channels.

Means of communication must make these channels their own, learn to monetize, their content efficiently, and above all, teach the public to have criteria and a process, such that

when a media product arrives to their devices, and seems reliable, it can be accessed and confronted with a negotiated, counter-hegemonic reading. The problem of *fake news* is not only the responsibility of CM. However, audiences are not going to move, en masse, to learn to oppose information, even when it seems true and is confirmed by influential people. The media must cultivate a critical audience that, in times such as the present, understands that the solution is not to panic, but to employ good social and individual health practices.

Government media should never divulge information that creates fear, as the mayor of Manizales did, or as Donald Trump does, disseminating news that points to a story of good and bad, East and West. They must take advantage of the fact that they are trustworthy sources for the masses, unite in circumstances that tend to individualize human beings and make use of a storyline that does not view panic as their best electoral ally.

5.2. Solution foci

- The *La Patria* newspaper has implemented focus frames that, through examination of hiring practices, has been charged with the fiscal transparency of the resources dedicated to confronting the pandemic. In its last publication, the work of the mayoral office of Manizales was questioned, regarding groceries that were to support community members in the lowest strata. From said publication, note the following:
 - ✓ It does not generate information overload about the virus, nor does it reproduce news that, on a national level, is transmitted daily. It seeks irregularities that may be capitalized upon, in this chaotic time, and exposes this to administrations both as a question and a solution.
 - ✓ While approach to this event is still being tested by the newspaper, innovative and hyper-media forms are reflected. These, via visualization, access to databases, and free information for audiences, create journalistic collaboration and assistance from users.
- *ColombiaCheck* is a journalistic network that verifies popular information, that is similar to rumors, which strikes fear into, and occasionally deceives, society. As indicated before, these circumstances are petri dishes for disinformation. Media like this, which form part of global check networks, are fundamental for democracy to remain current with true and accurate arguments.
- *El Espectador*, in its article: *Coronavirus, murciélagos y una conspiración perfecta* (2020), makes use of scientific journalism in order to divulge, but also to confront those theories that attempt to tie up loose ends to better understand the origin of COVID-19. By way of scientific voices, they are able to generate moderate calm and clearly explain to the reader the way in which the virus has functioned, as well as the real probability of whether this was planned by Chinese authorities.

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