

# The construction of news in Julen's case: a comparative study of media coverage\*

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## Abstract

The present article, containing a mixed and comparative press study, aims to analyse the media coverage of a news story eventually known as "Julen's case". The impact of the story has been analysed with a specific method: First, 72 national and international media sources were analysed using *Mynewsonline*. Then, these were compared with the different perspectives offered by Spanish newspapers *El País*, *El Mundo* and *ABC*, with special attention paid to the theory of Framing. Julen's story was selected as the case study due to its extraordinary impact on both local and international media. The results confirm that the coverage analysed in the sample did not merely recount the event in a factual manner. Instead, the media focused on sensationalist angles and criteria, such as emotional conflicts related to sorrow, pain and morbid fascination. In

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order to increase their income, the media let themselves get entangled in a mediatic circus.

**Keywords:** science communication; mixed study; theory of framing; critical communication; international media

**Resum.** *La construcció de les notícies en «el cas del Julen»: un estudi comparatiu de la cobertura mediàtica*

El present article, que conté un estudi de premsa mixt i comparatiu, té com a objectiu analitzar la cobertura mediàtica d'una notícia coneguda com «el cas de Julen». L'impacte de la història s'ha analitzat amb un mètode específic: en primer lloc, es van analitzar 72 fonts de mitjans nacionals i internacionals utilitzant Mynewsonline. A continuació, es van comparar amb les diferents perspectives que n'ofereixen els diaris espanyols *El País*, *El Mundo* i *ABC*, amb especial atenció a la teoria de l'enquadrament (*framing*). La història de Julen va ser seleccionada com a estudi de cas pel seu extraordinari impacte en els mitjans locals i internacionals. Els resultats confirmen que la cobertura analitzada en la mostra no sols va relatar el fet de manera fàctica. Els mitjans es van centrar en angles i criteris sensacionalistes, com els conflictes emocionals relacionats amb la pena, el dolor i la fasciació mòrbida. Per incrementar els seus ingressos, els mitjans de comunicació es van deixar enredar en un circ mediàtic.

**Paraules clau:** ciències de la informació; mitjans internacionals; estudi mixt; teoria del *framing*; comunicació crítica; mitjans internacionals

**Resumen.** *La construcción de las noticias en «el caso de Julen»: un estudio comparativo de la cobertura mediática*

El presente artículo, que contiene un estudio de prensa mixto y comparativo, tiene como objetivo analizar la cobertura mediática de una noticia eventualmente conocida como «el caso de Julen». El impacto de la historia se ha analizado con un método específico: en primer lugar, se analizaron 72 fuentes de medios nacionales e internacionales utilizando Mynewsonline. A continuación, se compararon con las distintas perspectivas que ofrecen los diarios españoles *El País*, *El Mundo* y *ABC*, con especial atención a la teoría del encuadre (*framing*). La historia de Julen fue seleccionada como estudio de caso debido a su extraordinario impacto en los medios locales e internacionales. Los resultados confirman que la cobertura analizada en la muestra no solo relató el hecho de manera fáctica. Los medios se centraron en ángulos y criterios sensacionalistas, como los conflictos emocionales relacionados con la pena, el dolor y la fascinación mórbida. Para incrementar sus ingresos, los medios de comunicación se dejaron enredar en un circo mediático.

**Palabras clave:** ciencias de la comunicación; estudio mixto; teoría del *framing*; comunicación crítica; medios internacionales

## 1. Introduction

On January 14, 2019, news broke of a two-year-old toddler falling down a 110-meter borehole in Totalán, in the southern Spanish province of Málaga, shaping a media ecosystem from a proximity perspective (López, Soengas and Rodríguez, 2016). The story instantly made headlines in print, online

and audio-visual media alike. Security forces were immediately deployed: emergency medical services, *Guardia Civil* police forces, representatives from both the local and the regional governments, criminal investigation police, volunteers, the fire department, etc. Later, a team of specialized underground mining rescuers from the northern region of Asturias joined the search and rescue effort. The boy's lifeless body was finally retrieved in the early hours of January 26.

The story soon went viral and was covered by over fifty TV networks worldwide from a discourse based on the atrophic principle of information and the Watzlawickian axiom that "it is impossible not to communicate" (Civila de Dios, Romero-Rodríguez and Aguaded, 2020b). This is the reason for its selection as the present study case (Stake, 2010). The study aims to acknowledge the media stories, analyse their style, and examine whether they report in an objective fact-based way (Weber, 1910). First, the impact of the event in the press and on TV is thoroughly examined; then, a comparative method is applied to the stories published in *El País*, *El Mundo* and *ABC* to provide a sound reflection on whether the reality shown is based on an objective transmission of facts, or on sensationalistic news values such as sadness, pain or morbid fascination. The study focused on covers and first pages, the main photo chosen in each case, and the headlines of secondary stories. In addition, any further information contained in subsequent pages was analysed, depending on the number of pages granted to the story. The study highlights the moments of highest mediatic impact and shows that all the examined newspapers used a number of strategies with a sensationalistic bias, typical of tabloid journalism (Torres da Silva and Santos Silva, 2014).

The agenda-setting theory states that the media does not rely purely on news values and instead highlights information that causes a greater impact, or that arouses more interest in their audience (McCombs and Dixie, 1995). Chomsky (1979) described media manipulation strategies as a simple yet effective method. The success of broadcast media messages is ensured through a strategy based on distraction, a drip-feed of information that keeps audiences ignorant, and a delivery style that encourages individuals to be content with mediocrity through the use of emotional elements rather than rational reflection (Aguilera, Sosa and Aguilera, 2018; Contreras, 2017; Martínez, 2005; Rojas, 2015). Society has always been fascinated by delicate issues in other people's lives, "of celebrities, of the most horrid crimes, of sex and violence. Not in vain death, violence and sex are the remaining elements from our past as rational animals" (Pérez, 2004: 83). This trait, inherent in media, uses framing to draw the audience's attention toward a particular issue instead of another. According to Ardèvol-Abreu (2015), framing theory takes the communicator, the text, the receiver, and the culture as essential elements. The Framing Theory (Entman, 1993; Sádaba-Garraza, 2001) has been applied to analyse a number of topics, mainly political, such as George W. Bush's discourse on the "war on terror" (Azpíroz, 2013), education politics

(Cabalin, 2013), issues concerning health prevention campaigns such as Spain's Anti-tobacco Act (Camacho and Aiestaran, 2013) and those focused on alcohol consumption (Paricio-Esteban, Rodríguez-Luque and Rabadán-Zaragoza, 2012). Referring to current-event news, there are studies of some highly relevant events such as the Fukushima disaster (Gómez, Roses and Rivera, 2014) and media coverage of ETA murders (Caminos, Arménia and Marín, 2012). From an agenda-setting perspective, empirical analysis can also be found on socially-sensitive topics, such as women-related issues (Gómez Patiño, 2014), gender-based violence (Varona and Gabarrón, 2015), immigration (Igartua, Muñiz and Cheng, 2005) and xenophobic discourse (Rodríguez, 2010).

Despite their ever-decreasing credibility (Marta Lazo and Farias Batlle, 2019; Tornero and Becerra, 2019), media stories are edited to present the news using evocative language (Lakoff, 2007), emphasising interest in certain moments and, subsequently, framing reality within these decisions on what classifies as news. Eventually, "the concept of truth itself might be unenforceable" (McLuhan, 1969: 122), thus conditioning our identity from an early age (Osuna-Acedo, Gil-Quintana and Cantillo-Valero, 2018).

By updating the ideas of Noam Chomsky (1979) to the present moment, it can be observed how media follow these strategies to create greater impact on the public (Navas, 2005; Pérez-Serrano, Alcolea-Díaz and Nogales-Bocio, 2018) like a court that expropriates our lives (Pérez Tornero, 2020). Experts in Educommunication, aiming to inspire a critical approach to media, denounce that "beautiful, grandiloquent and spectacular are tags used by the media-centred society to let massified audiences get lost in the immediate pleasure that media provide" (Arango-Lopera, 2015: 516). This method of gaining attention through the use of showy elements and by telling stories of ordinary people related to violence and death, aims to generate emotion in the public (Sarabia-Sánchez, Aguado and Martínez-Martínez, 2019). When a subject is highlighted in the media, it becomes important for the audience and the "media agenda becomes the public agenda, the public opinion" (Rubio Ferreres, 2009: 1) through multiple formats (Negredo et al., 2020). In the present case study, due to its considerable media impact, the event affected people to a great extent and became a major topic of conversation in public forums, real-life gatherings and on social media.

## 2. Methods

The present work follows a mixed, comparative research method (Callejo and Viedma, 2009). On one hand, the social impact of the incident in the press and on TV is measured generally and quantitatively; on the other, the discourse and the framing theory (Entman, 1993). This is carried out in accordance with Goffman's (1974) proposal that the media generate and modify the social frameworks of the interpretation of information through the choice of certain elements and in the way they construct the news, con-

tributing to the creation of a shared social discourse. In this way, we will take into account the aspect of the “frame” described by Tuchman (1978), from the perspective of a news item as a frame that delimits the fragment of reality selected within a whole, as a window to which there is limited access and access only to a part of the reality that has occurred, to a specific part of the news event. From this perspective, in this research, we will analyse only the selected fragment of the event studied by the media, i.e. the formal elements (section in which the news item is located, position where it is shown on the page) and the content (analysis of the discourse, voices and sources that appear reflected, relationship with the news values that are addressed by the choice of the event, analysis of the headlines, transmission of emotions and formulation of the impact), as well as the consequent choice of the topic in the agenda, to the detriment of other news events that are given less prominence and coverage in the media. The elements are analysed in depth in order to study the journalistic message (Tankard, 2001; Trimble and Sampert, 2004; Ballesteros, 2017) and its construction process in Spain's three biggest newspapers. The general objective of this study is:

- To analyse the performance of the three main newspapers which covered the news around the boy's accident in Totalán, from the first day after the accident on January 31, 2019, to the day after the final outcome, on January 26.

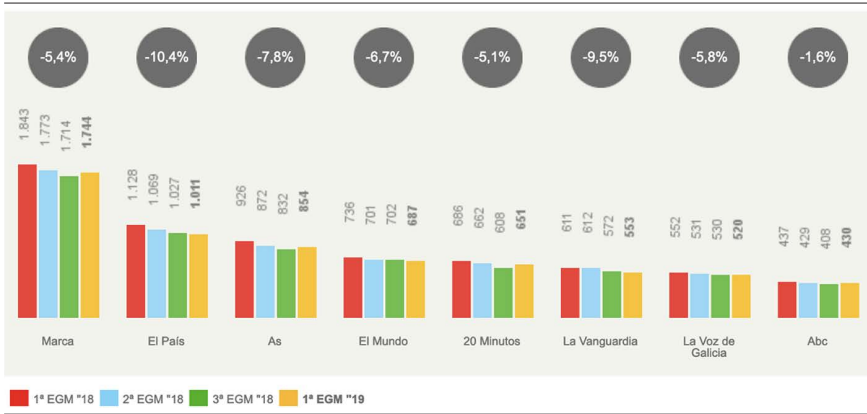
Overall, the subject of analysis is none other than the production of reality by certain newspapers and TV networks, “because the informative product is defined by the chosen discourse to represent the reality” (Mouchon, 1999: 44). According to these criteria, the following specific objectives were considered:

- Objective 1: To determine the impact of Julen's case in the international media.
- Objective 2: To examine the structural elements of the information available, in order to assess the relevance granted to that specific news-story in the three most-read general-interest newspapers published in Spain.
- Objective 3: To analyse the discourse in the aforementioned newspapers according to their different approaches and the focus of the story.

The first stage of the study consisted of selecting a sample to collect the quantitative data needed to carry out a longitudinal retrospective study of the story of Julen's accident. The consulted source was *MyNewsOnline* (Gualar and Abadal, 2009). Using *MyNewsOnline* to index over 200 papers and TV networks provided a thorough coverage of Spanish media; however, its international sample is not as wide (González-Riaño, Repiso and Delgado-López-Cózar, 2014). The source supplying the study corpus was the anal-

ysis of news stories published in the issue between June 14 and June 27, 2019. By searching for “Julen” and “pozo”, 1,469 entries were found from 72 papers covering this news item — but the final number of news stories was reduced to 1,421 after 48 entries were discarded because they didn’t correspond to the study subject. For the second stage of the study, the largest national, paid-for printed newspapers were selected (Figure 1) according to their circulation both in and out of Spain. According to Spain’s General Media Study (in Spanish, EGM) the selected newspapers were: *El País*, *El Mundo* and *ABC*.

**Figure 1.** Audience stats on printed daily newspapers



Source: EGM (Spain’s General Media Study).

Of the three selected newspapers, the information corpus referring to the study case is approached from multiple angles in order to observe linguistic, semiotic and graphic elements (Parodi, 2010). According to these criteria, attention was paid to the presentation of the qualitative elements considered in this study: the headline, the main image, how the cover or front page is structured, the story’s relative length and the discourse analysis (Andrew, 2007). From this perspective, the information is presented considering design, order of news blocks and graphic elements with discursive values, all of which contribute to shaping either the real or fictional “facts” (Berger, Luckmann and Zuleta, 1968). Within this study frame, the following hypotheses were formulated:

- Hypothesis 1: News of Julen’s disappearance after falling down the borehole had a large media impact, both in Spain and internationally.
- Hypothesis 2: The largest, paid-for national printed newspapers (*El País*, *El Mundo* and *ABC*) go beyond the objective facts in Julen’s case and emphasize sorrow, pain and curiosity in order to engage readers through sensationalism.

### 3. Analysis of the results

As seen in Table 1, the data show that news about Julen had a larger presence in the media on January 15, 26 and 27.

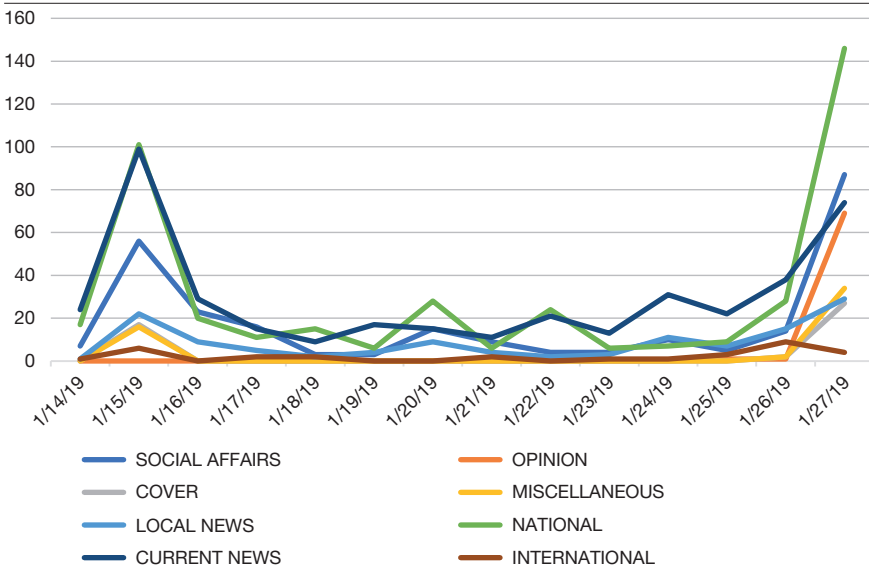
**Table 1.** Frequency and percentage of news published in newspapers from January 14 to January 27, 2019

Date	Frequency	Percentage
14/01/2019	50	3.5
15/01/2019	317	22.3
16/01/2019	81	5.7
17/01/2019	49	3.4
18/01/2019	31	2.2
19/01/2019	30	2.1
20/01/2019	67	4.7
21/01/2019	32	2.3
22/01/2019	51	3.6
23/01/2019	27	1.9
24/01/2019	60	4.2
25/01/2019	47	3.3
26/01/2019	109	7.7
27/01/2019	467	32.9
Total	1421	100.0

Source: Own elaboration.

On January 15, it was reported that emergency services worked day and night trying to rescue Julen alive and that, with Asturias' Mining Rescue Brigade having just joined the rescue efforts, the boy might be reached in the next 48 hours. Two related facts were also published on January 15: Julen's elder brother had died suddenly in 2017 aged three, and the worker in charge of sealing the well claimed to have done the job correctly and denied all responsibility, stating that someone else had probably reopened it. On January 26, Julen's body was found 71 metres underground and the subsequent autopsy confirmed that the boy had died on the same day the accident took place. Finally, on January 27, the mining rescuers returned home to Asturias, where they provided details on how the rescue effort had been carried out. They shared strong feelings of weariness and frustration. It was also on January 27 that Julen was buried at the local El Palo cemetery, with many people attending the ceremony. Figure 2 shows the evolution of media tension as the news story was covered.

Notably, when the boy's body was found, the media impact soared in all news sections except for the International news. As observed in Table 2, each newspaper section shows a different reaction to Julen's accident and rescue.

**Figure 2.** Number of stories published in the media from January 14 to January 27, 2019

Source: Own elaboration.

The sections that covered Julen's case most frequently and widely were, first, the breaking news section, with 424 stories, followed by front page news, with 256 mentions and, third, national (Spanish) news, with 123 stories. Out of the 72 media organizations covering the story, 18 were non-Spanish, based in: Argentina (*clarin.com*, *infobae.com*, *lanacion.com.ar*, *lavoz.com.ar*, *losandes.com.ar*, *pagina12.com.ar* and *perfil.com*), Chile (*elmostrador.cl*, *emol.com*, *lanacion.cl*, *latercera.com*, *mercuriovalpo.cl* and *soychile.cl*), Mexico (*milenio.com* and *elsoldemexico.com.mx*), Colombia (*elcolombiano.com* and *elpais.com.co*), the United Kingdom (*reuters.com*) and Germany (*sueddeutsche.de*). In addition to the international impact of the news story registered by *MyNewsOnline*, further international media not indexed in the database also picked up the story, including: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Sky News*, *Globo*, *Le Matin*, *Le Figaro*, *Br24*, *Polsat News*, *Bild*, *52Hrtt*, *News.com*, *The Telegraph*, *The Guardian*, *The Daily Mirror*, *Der Spiegel*, and *Krone Nachrichten*, among others, as well as the quoted Spanish media.

For the in-depth analysis of Julen's case in the three selected newspapers, the related stories published in *El País* (P), *El Mundo* (M) and *ABC* (A), were classified according to the time of publication (day and month are numerically noted). A total of 36 newspaper copies were taken as samples in order to analyse the content and structure of their front pages, the discourse used, and the length of Julen-related stories. A copy of each newspaper was analysed over 12 days. *El País* and *El Mundo* (4) included Julen on their front pages four times, while *ABC* gave the issue a complete cover on the day after the body was found.



**Table 2.** Frequency and percentage of coverage, according to newspaper section

Date	News section								Total
	Social affairs	Opinion	Cover/front page	Miscellaneous	Local news	National news	Breaking news	International	
14/01/2019	7	0	2	0	1	17	25	1	53
	0.5%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.1%	1.2%	1.8%	0.1%	3.7%
15/01/2019	57	0	15	16	22	103	98	6	317
	4.0%	0.0%	1.2%	1.2%	1.5%	7.2%	6.9%	0.4%	22.3%
16/01/2019	23	0	0	0	9	18	31	0	81
	1.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.6%	1.3%	2.2%	0.0%	19.2%
17/01/2019	15	0	0	0	5	13	14	2	49
	1.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%	0.9%	1.0%	0.1%	3.4%
18/01/2019	3	0	0	0	2	13	11	2	31
	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.9%	0.8%	0.1%	2.2%
19/01/2019	4	0	0	0	4	6	16	0	30
	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%	0.4%	1.2%	0.0%	2.1%
20/01/2019	14	0	0	0	10	28	15	0	67
	1.1%	0.0%	1.1%	0.0%	0.6%	2.0%	1.1%	0.0%	4.7%
21/01/2019	9	0	0	0	3	7	11	2	32
	0.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%	0.5%	0.8%	0.1%	2.3%
22/01/2019	4	0	0	0	2	24	21	0	51
	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	1.7%	1.5%	0.0%	3.6%
23/01/2019	4	0	0	0	5	5	12	1	27
	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%	0.4%	0.8%	0.1%	1.9%
24/01/2019	10	0	0	0	9	7	33	1	60
	0.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.6%	0.5%	2.3%	0.1%	4.2%
25/01/2019	6	1	0	0	7	10	20	3	47
	0.4%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.5%	0.7%	1.4%	0.2%	3.3%
26/01/2019	13	3	2	2	15	28	37	9	109
	0.9%	0.2%	0.1%	0.1%	1.1%	1.9%	2.6%	0.6%	7.7%
27/01/2019	87	67	27	34	29	145	74	4	467
	6.1%	4.7%	1.9%	2.4%	2.0%	10.2%	5.2%	0.2%	32.9%
Total	256	71	46	52	123	424	418	31	1421
	18.0%	5.0%	3.2%	3.2%	8.7%	30.0%	29.5%	2.2%	100.0%

Source: Own elaboration.

**Table 3.** Contingency table. Stories about Julen per publication

	P	M	A	Total
N° front pages including Julen	4	4	1	9
N° front pages not including Julen	8	8	11	27
N° of front pages in the sample	12	12	12	36

Source: Own elaboration.

When examined on a 100% scale, the relative size that each newspaper gave to Julen's case on their front pages, compared to the total available space

on the three papers' cover models, it is observed that *El País* devoted 25% of its front page to Julen's case on January 26 and January 27; *El Mundo* displays the story on 35% of its front page on January 15 and it occupies a smaller space on January 20, 26 and 27; *ABC* only grants Julen 100% of its one-story cover on January 27, although the news was covered on page two on several occasions. In order to measure the relevance of the story, we have followed a Z-shaped reading pattern, considering the upper sections as more relevant than the lines lower down, and the left side as more relevant than the right. By dividing a front page in four quarters and following the Z-shaped pattern, it can be observed that, on January 15 *El País* placed Julen's case on the lower-left quarter of its front page. *El Mundo* granted its upper-left quarter to Julen on January 26 and the lower-left quarter on January 27, while *El País* displayed the information on its lower-right quarter on January 17 and on its upper-right quarter on January 26 (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Newspapers' front pages on January 27, 2019



Source: Own elaboration.

Considering the sources quoted by each newspaper when they reported Julen's case (Table 4), the parents, the rescue teams and the miners are the most frequently mentioned: they were quoted twice as often as the town's mayor or the firefighters, three times as often as the worker in charge of sealing the well, and five times more often than emergency services or the national police. It is also notable that the father is quoted more often than the mother.

It must be taken into account that, despite the significant impact of Julen's case, the media also covered some other significant events at the time. During this period, Spain's right-wing political party called the Popular Party won the regional elections in Andalusia, after 40 years of being governed by PSOE (Spain's Socialist Party); taxi drivers went on a long strike, and Juan Guaidó proclaimed himself President of Venezuela. These stories effected Julen's case position in the newspapers but didn't affect the story's relevance.

**Table 4.** Contingency table. People quoted in Julen-related news between January 14 and January 27, 2019

	P	M	A	Total
Father	3	3	3	9
Mother	3	2	2	7
Relatives	1	3	7	11
Rescue miners	2	3	5	10
Guardia Civil police corps	2	2	3	7
Emergency services	0	1	1	2
Well worker	1	2	0	3
Town's Mayor	1	2	2	5
Nacional Police	1	0	1	2
Firefighters	1	2	2	5
Rescue team	3	5	2	10

Source: Own elaboration.

The headlines listed on Table 5 initially focused on the search and rescue efforts running against the clock and the wait for further news. This was designed to engage the reader so that they would keep looking for further news in subsequent publications. As the days went on, new elements appealing to the reader's emotions were included, as can be seen in sentences such as "Totalán (citizens) hold their breath waiting for Julen to be found" or "four-hundred trucks loaded with earth to find Julen". When the body was finally found, *ABC* used words that sparked an emotional shock in its headline, such as "a well of sorrow" and "a toy-ball to heaven", triggering strong feelings of grief in the face of death.

**Table 5.** Headlines related to Julen's case story included in the corpus of front pages (from January 14 to January 27, 2019)

	14-1	15-1	17-1	18-1	19-1	20-1	21-1	25-1	26-1	27-1
M		Restless search in Totalán				A photograph proves that Julen fell down the well, Guardia Civil confirms.			Clogged earth above Julen confuses experts	Julen died instantly due to the trauma suffered in the fall down the well
P		Rescue against the clock in a 100 meter-deep well	Totalán holds their breath waiting for Julen to be found						High-precision work for the last stage of Julen's rescue	Preliminary evidence indicates that Julen might have died in the fall
A										A well of sorrow

Source: Own elaboration.

The analysed newspapers use a discourse, within informative text, to inspire a feeling of despair associated with sorrow, sadness and morbid fascination. Such events, loaded with a heavy emotional component, encourage the development of social community actions, “solidarity has developed in the shape of crayons and markers; local children show their concern the best way they can: drawing” (A-27-1), “Neighbours and non-resident owners of houses near the search area have volunteered on *Facebook* to provide accommodation to the members of the huge rescue team deployed” (P-17-1), “Julen’s parents, together with other relatives, were hosted yesterday by a neighbour in the area” (M-19-1), “when the heart rules”, “Totalán fills up with solidarity to get Julen out” (A-24-1), “a house lent by a lady resident in Totalán is used as headquarters for a 300-people strong rescue operation” (P-22-1) and “warm meals are offered by restaurants to the 300 workers, distributed in 100-people strong shifts” (A-20-1).

The story gradually becomes more relevant due to constantly repeated figures throughout the analysed discourse, such as those referring to the situation updated by the day and by the hour, the number of Totalán inhabitants (715), people engaged in rescue efforts (300), the depth of the well and the child’s location (110 metres, 71 metres), each centimetre left (25 centimetres) to reach the boy, depicting the rescue works as “against the clock”, with expressions such as “Julen’s elder brother died of sudden death at 3 years of age” (M-15-1), “Julen enters a time limit to get out of the well alive” (A-21-1), “a dozen endless days have gone by” (A-25-1). Difficulties are highlighted: “nothing can get done in Totalán without difficulties appearing” (A-23-1), “Alex cries his heart out. His tears come from anguish, the kind that makes your chest sink and takes your breath away, the kind that blocks your speech and turns words into a clumsy, stammering sound. Alex cries like a child” (27-1). The rescue is constantly described as imminent, an event to be expected in a matter of hours or maybe the following day, so that a dynamic based on the rescuers expected discovery of Julen feeds the reader’s impatience: “Asturias’ miners expect to enter the well where Julen is trapped today” (A-19-1), “time is running short” (A-21-1). In addition, impatience is presented in a similar way as in a *reality show*, exaggerated, with the introduction of the team of “elite” rescue miners (A-22-1), “they’re just eight lads. Eight quiet, discreet young men, strong as bulls, who silently stay at a hotel of Rincón de la Victoria (Málaga) and who live to face death” (M-24-1).

Allusions to religious elements also abound, “Many asked for an explanation from the Holy Virgin of Carmen, to whom they had been praying for a miracle that didn’t happen” (M-27-1), “a miracle is prayed for in the hills of Totalán” (A-21-1), “to reach the little one with the hope of finding him still alive” (P-16-1), “I believe in miracles” (P-17-1), “to pray with strong faith” (A-22-1), “masses are offered so that everything turns out well” (A-24-1). Natural elements also play a significant role: “twelve days buried in the absolute darkness of a mountain that keeps him in its bowels and refuses to let him go”, “the mountain rules” (P-26-1).

The emotional focus on “helplessness, void, sadness, pain” (A-27-1) represents conflict as a key for countervalue, “the village has experienced a convulsion, an emotional turmoil and the neighbours are now in a post-traumatic stress situation” (A-27-1), very different from the hopeful attitude during the first few days, when “some light” could still be seen (P-17-1). Morbid fascination reaches unimaginable levels when Julen's family history is depicted as marked by tragedy. Stories highlighting in every possible way that the couple had previously lost another child, “José, who lost another son to sudden death on a nearby beach some years ago” (M-25-1). Likewise, the father's empathy towards his son is stressed in quotes such as: “I wish it was impossible for him to be in the well. I wish it was me down there, buried in the well, and he was up here with his mother” (P-20-1).

#### 4. Conclusion

The formulated hypotheses have been confirmed by observing how media interest increased as events unfolded. When there was some progress in the search or when the story's finale approached, the media pressure was noticeably higher, and the number of related stories published increased. On the contrary, on January 14 and between January 16 and January 25, interest was clearly lower.

However, the analysed daily newspapers go beyond reporting facts and exploit morbid fascination, sorrow or pain in order to engage readers (Da Silva Catela, 2019; Ponce-Tarré, 2018) in contexts of conflict and violence (Tejedor, Cervi and Tusa, 2020). The editor's intention is to attract audiences by appealing to their emotional sense (Molina, 2018; Carratalá, 2019), knowing that humans feel attracted to whatever is tragic, forbidden or painful, that which is close to the consumer (López et al., 2016). In this way, the narration of developing events is combined with a sensationalistic discourse in order to produce an information flow that keeps the audience intrigued and in anticipation of the final outcome. Once again, late in the 21st century, an ecosystem dominated by media consumption continues to be maintained, generating dangers of social control already defined by the Frankfurt School (Valdez, Romero-Rodríguez and Hernando, 2020).

The elements and actors shaping the story (the case's peculiarity, the vulnerable victim, the anxious parents, the altruistic help of an entire village, the deployment of police forces and volunteers coming from across in the country) contribute to increasing its interest and making the story spread, wrapped in a sort of show-like allure, through both traditional mass media and online social media. As pointed out by the Agenda setting theory, “people tend to include or exclude from their cognitions what the media include or exclude from their own content” (Shaw, 1979: 96).

In this case study, all addressed factors were taken into account, in order to turn a local, low-impact event into an internationally shared, high-impact news piece, worth opening the evening news before world affairs such as the

Venezuelan political crisis or national news such as the victory of Spain's Popular Party in Andalusia's regional elections after 40 years. In fact, the impact of Julen's case was higher than other cases of social interest such as the murders of high school teacher Laura Luelmo or child Gabriel Cruz (Marta-Lazo, Osuna-Acedo and Gil-Quintana, 2019).

Considering the news values, the analysed newspapers used to cover the present case study, it is important to reflect on the journalistic grounds and the deontological base on which information itself should be built. Paraphrasing Nieto (2014: 133) a good journalist could contribute to "better digest information, to propose news pieces which go further beyond the mere accumulation of data produced on a reader-overwhelming cascade". In today's media environment where news consumption has undergone radical changes in terms of form and possibilities (Soengas, López-Cepeda and Sixto-García, 2019) large media companies face a big challenge. Large media corporations should set an example, providing factual information, transparency and veracity, and stay away from using death to arouse feelings of sorrow, pain and morbid fascination in their audiences, even if these relate to obtaining economic benefit (Mattelart, 2014) or political thinking (Guerrero-Solé et al., 2020).

We have again observed that the media-driven society and the digitalisation of the information sector have brought about a major change in the media ecosystem. (Canavilhas, 2011). In this context of emotional manipulation by the media, it is of vital importance to encourage the development of media and information literacy (Civila de Dios, Romero-Rodríguez and Aguaded, 2020a). After the experience of disinformation and distortion of the imagination in the pandemic caused by Covid-19 (Magallón, 2020), the role of media education and media literacy as a critical element of ideology and values of emotional consumption must be revitalised. From this perspective, this study aims to provide a point of reflection that will enable more extensive research to be carried out in the future.

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