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# Framing Pandemic News

## *Empirical Research on COVID-19 Representation in the Italian TV News*

### Abstract

The article contributes to the vast literature on the media representation of COVID-19, by exposing the results of a quantitative and qualitative analysis of Covid-19 media coverage in Italy, run on the full archive of prime-time TV news — Tg1, Tg2, Tg3, Tg4, Tg5, Studio Aperto, Tg La7 — between February 28, 2020, and February 27, 2021. All verbal contents of TV news have been analyzed, based on a sample of 2,555 news shows and 14,304 news stories related to the epidemic, for a total of 1.6 million words. By applying the media framing models, we realized a two-step work: a mapping of TV coverage across one year; and an in-depth investigation on the most relevant keywords, *gathering* and *variant*. The main results show how the different Italian television news broadcast the pandemic “waves”, paying attention to issues considered as emergencies. Through a cluster analysis, we found some recurring and absent narratives of the media representation on COVID19. Along with the reflection on the framing of the pandemic, we will come out with some insights into the blaming strategies put in motion by the TV news.

### Keywords

TV news, quantitative analysis, COVID-19 coverage, Italian television

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## 1. Background

The role of information in shaping the perception of Sars-Cov-2 is a widely discussed issue and the literature analyzing the media representation of COVID-19 is currently very extensive. So it's difficult to reconstruct a global overview of how the pandemic has been

treated in the media ecosystem, since various studies have analyzed the media coverage of this phenomenon, with different backgrounds and methodologies.

Most research deal with on-line discussion and the so-called *infodemic*: a sort of parallel epidemic, already defined as a main threat by both national institutions and the WHO<sup>1</sup>). All in all, the idea is that of a “co-evolution” between the spread of the contagion and its social media coverage, likely to jeopardize the implementation of public health policies<sup>2</sup>). Social media infodemic and misinformation campaigns have drawn the attention of quantitative analysts<sup>3</sup>), with a focus on the coordinated activity of social media (as Twitter, Facebook, Youtube and Reddit) vested with some formal credibility, but also active in the production of such fake news<sup>4</sup>). In some analysis, the emphasis has been placed on the integration between old and new channels: so that the on-line Covid-related news increases and decreases in time according to the TV coverage of the epidemic, rather than to its actual evolution<sup>5</sup>). The excessive accessibility to sources of information — *infodemia* — can also be modulated by “how” the phenomenon is described by the journalists<sup>6</sup>). In empirical studies relating to COVID-19 and social media during the first outbreak of 2020, themes concerning the role of online platforms focused on: identifying infodemics, surveying public attitudes, assessing mental health, detecting or predicting COVID-19 cases, analysing government responses to the pandemic, and evaluating the quality of health information in prevention education videos<sup>7</sup>).

In Europe and UK, a specific body of research focused on the role and power of journalism and news media as such, with a critical approach<sup>8</sup>). The Italian case was an excellent case study to analyze the role of the news making during the pandemic, because it represents an example of a “polarized pluralist” model of journalism, characterized by high levels of politicization and where this “service role” of journalism is not commonly exercised. The analysis of the press in the management of the COVID-19 emergency

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- 1) Salman Bin Naeem and Rubina Bhatti, “The Covid-19 ‘infodemic’: a new front for information professionals,” *NCBI*, 2020, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7323420>; “The Covid-19 infodemic: Editorial,” *The Lancet Infection Diseases* 20, no. 8 (2020), accessed May 20, 2023, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/laninf/article/PIIS1473-3099\(20\)30565-X/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/laninf/article/PIIS1473-3099(20)30565-X/fulltext).
  - 2) John Zarocostas, “How to Fight an Infodemic,” *The Lancet* 395, February 29, 2020, accessed May 15, 2023, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30461-X/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30461-X/fulltext).
  - 3) Firoj Alam et al., “Fighting the COVID-19 Infodemic in Social Media: A Holistic Perspective and a Call to Arms, Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence,” *ArXiv*, 2021, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://arxiv.org/pdf/2007.07996.pdf>.
  - 4) Shu-Feng Tsao, Helen Chen, Therese Tisseverasinghe, Yang Yang, Lianghua Li, and Zahid A Butt, “What social media told us in the time of COVID-19: a scoping review,” *The Lancet Digital Health* 3, no. 3 (2021), e175–e194, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2589-7500\(20\)30315-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2589-7500(20)30315-0).
  - 5) Bernardo Sousa-Pinto et al., “Assessment of the Impact of Media Coverage on COVID-19-Related Google Trends Data: Infodemiology Study,” *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 22, no. 8 (2020), doi: 10.2196/19611.
  - 6) Concetta Papapicco, “Informative Contagion: The Coronavirus (COVID-19) in Italian journalism,” *Journal of Communication and Media Technologies* 10, no. 3 (2020), e202014, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.29333/ojcm/7938>.
  - 7) Tsao et al., “What social media told us in the time of COVID-19: a scoping review.”
  - 8) E.g.: for Spain, Carlos Elías and Daniel Catalan-Matamoros, “Coronavirus in Spain: Fear of ‘ Official’ fake News Boosts WhatsApp and Alternative Sources,” *Media and Communication* 8, no. 2 (2020), 462–466; for Italy, Andrea Miconi, *Epidemia e controllo sociale* (Roma: manifestolibri, 2020); for the UK, David Seedhouse, *The Case for Democracy in the Covid-19 Pandemic* (London: Sage, 2020); for France, Barbara Stiegler, *De la démocratie en pandémie: Santé, recherche, éducation* (Paris: Gallimard, 2021).

showed its contribution to the spread of the policies implemented by the Government to fight the virus<sup>9</sup>). Several studies have analyzed the role of news media, press, and online newspapers, showing metaphors, rhetoric, and narratives used, as well as their role in creating a social representation of the Covid phenomenon<sup>10</sup>). Some research has also dealt with the television news coverage of COVID-19, critically analyzing the role and power of the broadcasting system in representing and promoting certain behaviours in support of government responses to the pandemic<sup>11</sup>).

Sol Hart, Chinn and Soroka observed the coverage of the first month of the epidemic in the US and found a difference between newspapers and TV news: with the first more inclined to politicization, and the second giving more space to health specialists. Both media systems, in any case, reveal a tendency towards the polarization of the debate<sup>12</sup>). Villena-Alarcón and Caballero-Galeote released a quantitative assessment of 2,620 news broadcasted by the Spanish TV channel TVE1, between February and March 2020. The emerging pattern distinguishes between four stages: an uncertain period, with TVE1 trying to “separate” the Spanish case from the global trend; the alert stage; the depression stage; the acceptance of the emergence as a state of fact<sup>13</sup>). More general results are highlighted by Garfin, Silver and Holman<sup>14</sup>), while reflecting on the overestimation of the epidemic risk due to information overload, fueled at the same time by news media and social media.

It is more difficult to assess the work of the Ningxia Chinese-based group, focused on the importance of media coverage for the correct implementation of quarantine and stay-at-home orders<sup>15</sup>). That media would play a main role, though, has been confirmed by a survey on 9,000 people, living in 771 rural counties of the US. It appears how the adoption

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- 9) Marco Mazzoni, Susanna Pagiotti, Anna Stanziano, Roberto Mincigrucchi, and Sofia Verza, “La rappresentazione del Covid-19 in un sistema mediale polarizzato: Un’analisi del ruolo dei media in tempo di pandemia,” *Comunicazione politica*, no. 3 (2021), 413–436, doi: 10.3270/102419.
  - 10) Lucia Busso and Ottavia Tordini, “How do media talk about the Covid-19 pandemic? Metaphorical thematic clustering in Italian online newspapers,” *arXiv*, 2022, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2204.02106>; Jorge Milan Fitera, Natalia Abuín-Vences, and Javier Sierra Sánchez, “The coronavirus pandemic narratives in Italian digital media,” *JCOM* 20, no. 2 (2021), A07, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.22323/2.20020207>.
  - 11) Oberiri Destiny Apuke and Bahiyah Omar, “Television News Coverage of COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria: Missed Opportunities to Promote Health Due to Ownership and Politics,” *SAGE Open*, July 15, 2021, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/21582440211032675>; Endah Saptorini, Xin Zhao, and Daniel Jackson, “Place, Power and the Pandemic: The Disrupted Material Settings of Television News Making During Covid-19 in an Indonesian Broadcaster,” *Journalism Studies* 23, no. 5–6 (2021), 611–628.
  - 12) P. Sol Art, Sedona Chinn, and Stuart Soroka, “Politicization and Polarization in COVID-19 News Coverage,” *Science Communication* 42, no. 5 (2020), 679–697.
  - 13) Eduardo Villena-Alarcón and Lidia Caballero-Galeote, “COVID-19 media coverage in Spanish public TV,” *Tripodos* 2, no. 47 (2020), 103–125.
  - 14) Dana Rose Garfin, Roxane Cohen Silver, and E. Alison Holman, “The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak: Amplification of public health consequences by media exposure,” *Health Psychology* 39, no. 5 (2020), 355–357.
  - 15) LI-Xiang Feng et al., “Modelling the effects of media coverage and quarantine on the COVID-19 infections in the UK,” *Mathematical Bioscience and Engineering* 17, no. 4 (2020), 3618–3636; Ahmed A Mohsen et al., “Global stability of COVID-19 model involving the quarantine strategy and media coverage effects,” *AIMS Public Health* 7, no. 3 (2020), 587–605.

of social distancing rules were more frequent in the areas characterized by a strong TV and media consumption, rather than in those characterized by a higher risk of contagion. Far from being part of a systematic inquiry on the role of news media, these studies reveal a quite fragmented scenario.

Starting with these premises, our analysis on media framing is to be intended as being complementary to those focusing on Italian on-line news and press, instead deepening the coverage of the TV broadcast media on the pandemic. As detailed in the methodological section, we took into consideration the contents of prime-time TV news, transmitted by the Italian national broadcasters from February 28, 2020, to February 27, 2021. More precisely, the sample includes three Italian public TV news — TG1, TG2, and TG3 — and the main four private TV news: TG4, TG5, Studio Aperto, La7 TG.

The overarching reason is to come to terms with the centrality of TV, often overlooked in the age of social media — which is the most relevant in the specific case of Italy, for both high illiteracy rates and demographic composition. Needless to say, more advanced research will be necessary for a complete analysis of the integrated media ecosystem, based on the “agenda-melding” principle<sup>16</sup>).

We draw the research on the backdrop of *framing* models. The theoretical scheme is that provided by Goffman, with the frame being defined as the pre-understanding structure, able to make meaning of out the material sequence of plain events. In its turn, media coverage feeds the public’s perception of reality, providing people with categories through which to elaborate on the experience and to answer to the question “what is going on here”<sup>17</sup>). The case of *fabrication* is also possible, according to Goffman, which is based on one or more individuals providing a false understanding of the events: so that only actors standing on the right side are aware of the existence of the frame itself. Even though Goffman puts little attention on the media, the power imbalance between journalists and readers may well fit this specific case.

According to Goffman, framing also requires the so-called “keying” operations put in place by social actors involved in a given situation — in our case, an *information* situation. Frames become properly effective, in other words, when “a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else”<sup>18</sup>).

With this respect, the concept of keying takes together the *negotiation* nature of social construction of meaning, and the *unbalanced* power relation among the players involved in the process: to the point that, for most citizens, such negotiation is nothing but the adaptation of available definitions to their own life, which are provided by more influential actors. By means of this, the framing process refers to the adding (or elimination) of frames to the reality in order to produce a different reality, and to replacing a shared interpretation with a new one. The crisis due to both COVID-19 outbreak and related govern-

16) Donald L. Shaw, Maxwell McCombs, David H. Weaver, and Bradley J. Hamm, “Individuals, groups, and agenda melding: A theory of social dissonance,” *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 11, no. 1 (1999), 2–24.

17) Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essays on the Organization of Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), 7.

18) *Ibid.*, 44.

ment measures, in this sense, has made it necessary an unprecedented reinterpretation of daily situations or a continuous re-framing of the experience<sup>19)</sup>.

The way in which the news media frame information can influence audiences' perceptions of public issues and, therefore, the development of public debates on such issues. This effect can be magnified in the face of health crises, such as pandemics, because people turn more to the media when faced with unknown issues, related to their safety, and where multiple perspectives coexist. Some studies give an account of the informative framing of the news coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic during the stage of increased transmission on national newscasts<sup>20)</sup> and the powerful role of these *fabricated* frames to influence public perceptions and real-world behaviours during public health crises<sup>21)</sup>.

In our empirical study we try to sort out the role of national TV newscasts in a framing process based on a content analysis of news making during COVID-19 pandemic.

The importation of the *frame* analysis into communication research is often limited to a terminological adaption, with the notion itself easily overlapping with more vague categories: with applications ranging from the case of immigrants<sup>22)</sup> to the anthropology of the body<sup>23)</sup>. For what concerns the operational definition, we therefore need to stick to Entman's basic and widely cited formula:

to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation<sup>24)</sup>.

By drawing on the multi-faceted nature of frame analysis, a research path can be identified, which involves the breakdown of the main issues into some sub-issues. Here the theoretical pattern perfectly overlaps with the Italian TV narrative, as COVID-19 appears to be a "meta-argument" occasionally splitting into more specific sub-sets: for instance, economic recovery after COVID; tourism in the age of Covid; and so forth. Media framing can be defined here as an organizing principle establishing the salience of news, by means of such steps as selection, highlighting, exclusion, and elaboration<sup>25)</sup>. Similarities

19) Angelina Parfenova, "Will you shake my hand? Factors of noncompliance with COVID-19 behavioral rules in the framework of enforced social isolation in Russia," *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 40, no. 9–10 (2020), 1–15; Vincenzo Romania, "Interactional Anomie? Imaging Social Distance after COVID-19: A Goffmanian Perspective," *Sociologica* 14, no. 1 (2020), 51–66.

20) Frida V. Rodelo, "El framing sobre la pandemia de Covid-19 y sus factores indicadores organizacionales," *Cuadernos.info*, no. 50 (2021), 91–112.

21) Yotam Ophir, Dror Walter, Daniel Arnon, Ayse Lokmanoglu, Michele Tizzoni, Jöelle Carota, Lorenzo D'Antiga, and Emanuele Nicastro, "The Framing of COVID-19 in Italian Media and Its Relationship with Community Mobility: A Mixed-Method Approach," *Journal of Health Communication* 26, no. 3 (2021), 161–173.

22) Alessandro Dal Lago, *Non-persone: L'esclusione dei migranti in una società globale* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1999).

23) Frederico Boni, *Il corpo mediale del leader: Rituali del potere e sacralità del corpo nell'epoca della comunicazione globale* (Roma: Meltemi, 2002), 191–193.

24) Robert M. Entman, "Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm," *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (1993), 52.

25) James Tankard et al., "Media Frames: Approaches to Conceptualisation and Measurement, Association in Journalism and Mass Communication," *BibSonomy*, 1991, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://www.bibsonomy.org/bibtex/2c6f5e56eeb1b608b80953f996229089d/vanatteveldt>.

between the framing model and the agenda-setting theory are quite evident, in particular in the case of the so-called “second-level agenda”<sup>26)</sup>, focusing on the specific tones taken on by news reporting. As we know, the idea goes that media have little effect on people’s opinions, while having a strong impact on the centrality and salience of the discussion issues. In other words, media do not tell people *what* to think but *what to think about*<sup>27)</sup>. Agenda-setting is not a common variant of framing, but it requires a specific pattern: the convergence of different media frames towards the same representation of reality, as affirmed by Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann in her call for a new *powerful media* protocol<sup>28)</sup>. Homogeneity in Italian TV coverage will therefore be addressed, with attention placed on the practices of *labeling* and *blaming*, and with the individuation of scapegoats.

The idea of labeling was originally used for instance in the sociology of deviance, with Goffman providing again the ideal synthesis in his theory of *stigma*<sup>29)</sup>. Goffman’s theoretical relevance has to do with the stigma being a social artifact: a “virtual identity” capable of anticipating and even erasing the individual identity. In other words, Goffman shows how the contingent features of stigmatized figures are way less important than the very *social process* by which the stigma is created and reinforced.

As to media studies, in the other way, labeling is often used with no reference made to its sociological implication. This notwithstanding, a few interesting research can be traced, which deal with media labeling of several stigmatized identities: the political enemy<sup>30)</sup>; the terrorist<sup>31)</sup>; the Muslim<sup>32)</sup>. This is partially due to TV formats themselves, which favor the exaggeration of emotional aspects and the over-simplification of complicated issues in terms of stereotypes. As to TV news, which will be studied here, their narrative structure easily produces well-rounded and unproblematic characters — the victim; the executioner; the corrupt — which play a main part in their social effects<sup>33)</sup>.

By drawing on this, blaming processes can easily be detected in media discourses: for instance, Ittefaq and others<sup>34)</sup> studied social representations of COVID-19 in mainstream newspapers in three countries (China, the US, and the UK), and they have revealed a *pan-*

26) Maxwell McCombs and Salma I. Ghanem, “The Convergence of Agenda Setting and Framing,” in *Framing Public Life: Perspectives on Media and Our Understanding of the Social World*, eds. Stephen D. Reese, Oscar H. Gandy, and August E. Grant (Manwah and London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2021), 67–81.

27) Donald L. Shaw and Maxwell E. McCombs, “The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1972), 176–187.

28) Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann and R. Mathes, “The ‘Events as Event’ and the ‘Event as News’: The Significance of ‘Consonance’ for Media Effects Research,” *European Journal of Communication*, no. 1 (1987), 391–414.

29) Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1963).

30) Robert M. Eisinger, Loring R. Veenstra, and John P. Koehm, “What Media Bias? Conservative and Liberal Labeling in Major U.S. Newspapers,” *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 12, no. 1 (2007), 17–36.

31) Matthew J. Dolliver and Erin M. Keans, “Is it Terrorism? Public Perceptions, Media and Labeling the Las Vegas Shooting,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 45, no. 1 (2022), 1–19.

32) Keon West and Joda Loyd, “The Role of Labeling and Bias in the Portrayal of Acts of ‘Terrorism’: Media Representations of Muslims vs. Non-Muslims,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 37, no. 2 (2017), 1–12.

33) David L. Altheide, “The News Media, the Problem Frame, and the Production of Fear,” *Sociological Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (1997), 647–668.

34) Muhammad Ittefaq, Mauryne Abwao, Annalise Baines, Genelle Belmas, Shafiq Ahmad Kamboh, and Ever Josue Figueroa, “A pandemic of hate: Social representations of COVID-19 in the media,” *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* 22, no. 1 (2022), 225–252.

*demic of hate* in terms of the racialization of COVID-19 and speculative solutions to end discrimination against Asians. This phenomenon can also be seen in the Italian media, which alternatively point to the most disparate directions: runners; those not using masks<sup>35</sup>; protesters; the stereotyped and unifying label of “No-Vax” which enclosed dissidents towards the dreaded common war against the virus, *stigmatized* leveraging on known sociological processes. As it is often the case, categories are used in an improper way: exactly as the stigma of potential terrorist has been applied to all Muslims; that of criminal to all migrants; or that of deviant to youngsters as such. It seems that a similar labeling operation has been set in motion here, with the definition of *denialist* being used for all or anti-government opinions rather than for expressing its original meaning — literally, those who doubt the existence of Sars-Cov-2 diffusion, which do not have any space in Italian mainstream media discourse.

## 2. Methodological design

The main research questions are “what were the recurring themes in the Italian television news during the period between February 28, 2020 and February 27, 2021? What differences emerge longitudinally and between the various broadcasters? Can the narratives that emerge be traced back to a frame constructed by the news media?”

The dataset includes the full transcription of verbal contents of 2,555 TV news — the prime-time TV news of Rai 1, Rai 2, Rai 3, Rete 4, Canale 5, Italia Uno, and La7 — whose average duration is 35 minutes. The analysis will deal with all segments containing the “COVID” and “epidemic” keywords, for a total of 12,578 entries<sup>36</sup>.

The study took place in two phases by means of automatic and semi-automatic text analysis techniques:

1. First, we conducted an analysis on the entire database from the news archive of the Pavia Observatory<sup>37</sup>. This phase aims to deduce the issues most related to the media representation of COVID-19, through a *topic detection analysis*<sup>38</sup>. The investigation was

35) Federico Boni, “Frammenti di un discorso virale: Le cornici del coronavirus,” *MediaScapes Journal*, no. 15 (2020), 1–12.

36) This is an *example of a news segment* of a TV news broadcast on 3/21/2020 on Rai 1 (translated in English by authors): “A new ordinance said the governor of the Lombardy Region Fontana dictated by the worsening situation, which will be in force until April 15th. Some details: first of all, the closure of construction sites, except for those related to the emergency, the suspension of the activities of public offices and professional studios, the closure of hotels except those related to the emergency, and fines of up to 5,000 euros for any gathering who does not keep the distances required by the Prime Minister’s Decree. The ban on entry and exit from the Region is also reaffirmed, except for urgent and indifferent reasons”.

37) The Pavia Observatory (Italy) carries out several studies related to issues of social, political and economic interest. Thanks to these long-term activities this observatory has gained credit at national and international level as a centre in the field of media, democracy, and pluralism (<https://www.osservatorio.it/en/>).

38) In communication studies, text and content analysis has established since the 1950s (Berelson, 1952): it is a set of methods aimed at verifying certain hypotheses on elements of media communication through the analytical decomposition and classification of texts. In this study, both the „first type“ content analysis — in which the units of analysis are the elements of the linguistic structure (words, phrases) — and the “second type” content analysis — in which the units of analysis don’t have linguistic recognition as signifiers but have

able to bring out both general trends and some specificities that emerged with a longitudinal inquiry focused on the different TV channels.

2. In addition to a descriptive analysis, we secondly made a qualitative-quantitative content analysis focus useful for reflecting on some important and recurring themes. This paper shows also the findings of the semantic association's analysis relating to an emblematic keyword of the pandemic: *gathering*.

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1 Pandemic waves and different TV coverages

The position of a news item and the breadth of a topic on a newscast are both indicators of so-called media coverage. The news “agenda” is connected to the aforementioned agenda-setting phenomenon<sup>39)</sup>. We have found that the position of the news dedicated to the COVID-19 issue during the news, and the number of words of the extracted news segments, are significantly different<sup>40)</sup> among the broadcasters.

During the observation period, the news related to the COVID-19 pandemic assumed the top positions on all the news broadcasts<sup>41)</sup>. However, it was found that Rai1 sometimes covered the top news space with other topics, while Rete4 — after the summer of 2020 — chose not to dedicate the first news to the health crisis, instead broadcasting pandemic news subsequently to other contingent issues. These same broadcasters, together with Rai3, are also those for which the length of the news segment was significantly shorter than the TV news of the other channels.

As other studies have also tried to do<sup>42)</sup>, we investigate the day-wise distribution of news over some sub-periods as well as the distribution of the COVID-19 daily new cases in Italy in the same period.

An interesting result is related to the longitudinal analysis of the news media coverage of COVID-19. Chart 1 illustrates the trend in the number of segments of news on the pandemic crisis during the considered period: media attention on Covid-related themes grows in correspondence to the period immediately preceding the so-called second phase or wave of the pandemic infectious disease in Italy. This was the peak moment of the absolute number of infections in 2020, to the point that the subsequent Prime Minister's Decree would divide Italy into “zones” of different colors, depending on the social and travel

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high relevance as meanings (topic or key characters) — were used (Rositi, 1988). Text analysis software was T-lab, Orange, and Phyton, and they were used to build unsupervised topic models and clustering algorithms.

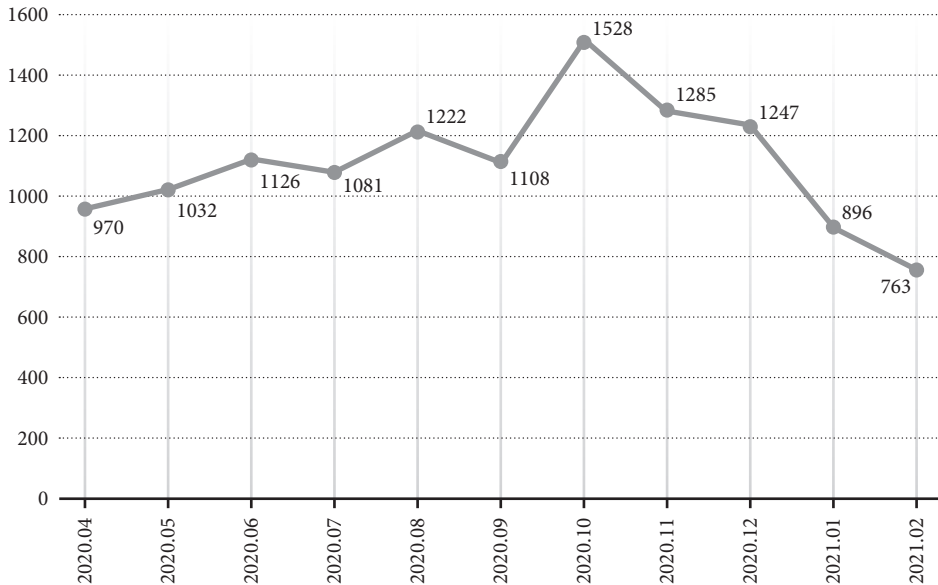
39) Shaw and McCombs, “The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media”.

40) The position index is automatically assigned by the Pavia Observatory. It is a number ranging from 1 to N, which is smaller when the news segment is present at the beginning of the broadcast, and larger when it is at the end of the TV news. The difference between broadcasters was significant with Anova and Kruskal-Wallis statistical tests ( $H(6)=402.1$ ,  $p<0.0005$ ).

41) By dichotomising the variable relating to the position of the news in a newscast, a significant relationship between it and the broadcaster was also found. Canale5, Italia1, La7, and Rai2 broadcast news on Covid significantly more in the first half of the TV news.

42) Massimo Aria, Corrado Cuccurullo, Luca D'Aniello, Michelangelo Misuraca, and Maria Spano, “Thematic Analysis as a New Culturomic Tool: The Social Media Coverage on COVID-19 Pandemic in Italy,” *Sustainability* 14, no. 6 (2022), 3643. MDPI AG.



**Chart 1.** Number of news on COVID-19 per month

restrictions. The volume of television news on COVID-19 was therefore greater in October 2020, anticipating the national peak of infections that occurred the following month.

We can note that TV played a dual role: on the one hand, it constituted powerful control tools through a narrative aimed at informing about the limits and behaviors required of citizens oriented toward containing the spread of the virus; on the other hand, they represented a source for the construction of frames of meaning. The interpretative hypothesis that we can support is that the more television images that circulate on a topic, the more the audience will configure a certain phenomenon as something salient and to deal with/concern about (resuming the theory of agenda setting<sup>43</sup>).

### 3.2 Media representation of COVID-19: recurring and absent narratives

The representation of COVID-19 was reconstructed through the textual analysis of the TV news verbal contents, excluding the analysis of images, which will be interesting to carry out as a future qualitative study. Through multivariate text analysis techniques, we were able to put together the characteristic and significantly different words<sup>44</sup> that connoted the narration of:

- the “first wave” of virus spread versus the “second wave” and subsequent ones (before and after September 2020);
- prime time news programs of the seven television stations included in our sample.

43) McCombs and Ghanem, “Convergence of Agenda Setting and Framing”.

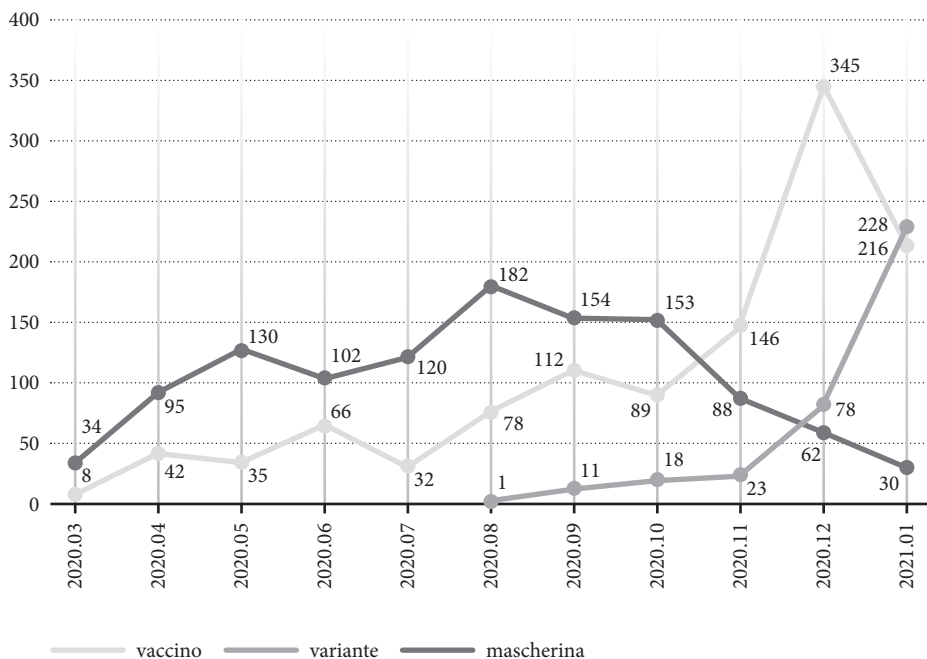
44) Only words with a Chi-square significance <.005 are considered.

The results suggest important differences in media narratives. The first phase is mainly focused on issues related to the virus itself, on fast growing deaths and on PPE (personal protective equipment). This was the period of explosion of the health crisis in the regions of Northern Italy, in the weekend that preceded the closure of schools in Lombardy (February 24, 2020), then followed by the so-called “phase 1” and the national lockdown period. The more frequent words in the TV narrative were, for example: coronavirus; contagion; virus; emergency; crisis; outbreak; deaths; Lombardy; hit; people; mask. The second period placed more attention on government policies, on the vaccination campaign at the start, and on the spread of variants. The words that are significantly associated with the second phase (from September 2020) were, for example: Government; “red zone”; measure; school; Conte (Prime Minister); Speranza (Minister of Health); anti (Covid); vaccine; campaign; variant.

Starting from these results, we longitudinally analyzed the presence of three keywords as recurring and therefore characteristics of the media representation of COVID-19: mask; vaccine and variant.

As can be seen in the graph, the constant appeal of the media to wear masks started in March 2020, and it became a leitmotiv from April to October 2020. From November 2020 the issue related to vaccines took over, modifying the prevention narrative (focused solely on the restricted actions of Italian citizens): from the obligation to wear facemasks to the exhortation to get the jab. From late 2020 on, the TV agenda brought to the attention of

**Chart 2.** Monthly trend of the words *mascherina* (mask), *vaccino* (vaccine), and *variante* (variant) in the observation period



the citizens a new alarm: the spread of variants of the virus. In January 2020 this topic even exceeds, in terms of occurrences, the mentions related to vaccines.

We analyzed the differences among the prime-time news of seven Italian broadcasters by extracting the characteristic words of each news program.

The results show that Rai1 news flow was significantly characterized by the citation of political actors and the issuance of decrees and laws. This confirms the role of broadcasting media in support of government responses to the pandemic<sup>45)</sup> and therefore sounding boards of government emanations. This has arguably to do with the institutional nature of Rai1, which was the first Tv channel in Italian history, and it is commonly perceived as a Public Service Medium. The news on this channel, together with those of Rai 3, were also characterized by narratives that we can consider as “micro stories of pain”. We found a set of characteristic words for example: “face”, “pain”, “patient”, “hospitalize”, “Bergamo” (Italy’s first outbreak city), “son”, “ward”, “rescue”, “elderly”, “dead”, “life”. Accounts of death and grief were largely homogenous in news<sup>46)</sup> and presented as a series of tragedies, and there was limited practical advice about what to do if a loved one became seriously ill or died.

As mentioned, Rai 3 media coverage of COVID-19 has grown after the second wave and in the prime-time news we found “vaccines” and “variants” as characteristic words. The same words also appeared in the Canale5 newscasts, where, however, attention is focused on reports, data and comparisons with foreign countries. Significant lemmas are in fact “millions”, “cases”, “America”, “Trump”, “record”, “daily”.

The news flow of LA7 also had significantly typical lemmas relating to numbers and data, but with fewer international references. The characteristic words focused precisely on “region”, “Lombardy”, “today”, “number”, “positive”, “tampons”, “situation”, and “Milan”.

Italia 1 and Rete 4 are the broadcasters in which the news programs presented a more emergency narrative, especially through the voice of “experts” or medical celebrities (“professor”, “medical executive”, “virologist”). We found three significantly characteristic words (also in terms of occurrences): “problem”, “alarm”, and the verb “to worry”.

In the Italia 1 news, the alarm was generated by the sociality of people and by their alleged irresponsibility: alongside the words related to “worry”, we found in a significant way such terms as “celebrate”, “desire”, “tourists”, “Christmas”, “Vacation”, “young”, “people”.

For Rete 4, the issues concerning worries were economic aspects: similarly, to Rai 2 characteristic words were “money”, “taxes”, “expense”, “Recovery”, “measure”, and “fund”. Rai 2, however, was also connoted for the narrative relating to the migration issue, the possible COVID-19 cases among immigrants who landed in Lampedusa at the end of August 2020, and the political debate generated thereafter.

Faced with the multiplicity and diversity of the emerged topics, we analyzed some key issues that have thematized a possible dominant discourse. In order to synthesize the corpus of textual data, we therefore carried out a *cluster analysis*,<sup>47)</sup> which made it possible to

45) Apuke and Omar, “Television News Coverage of COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria”; Saptorini, Zhao, and Jackson, “Place, Power and the Pandemic”.

46) Ryann Sowden, Erica Borgstrom, Lucy E Selman, “It’s like being in a war with an invisible enemy’: A document analysis of bereavement due to COVID-19 in UK newspapers,” *PLoS ONE* 16, no. 3 (2021).

47) This statistical technique is the *clustering bisecting k means*, which uses a non-hierarchical cluster algorithm, useful in the analysis of unlabelled texts.

locate six significantly distinct groups on two Cartesian axes. These groups gravitate around what in statistics are called *centroids*, which can be conceptually considered as the media macro-narratives of COVID-19. As seen in Chart 3, we have identified the clusters referring to the following six themes: 1) politics; 2) economy; 3) data; 4) health; 5) sociality; 6) vaccine. These macro narratives have also been found in other research<sup>48)</sup>, thus showing the insistence and rebound of the same topics in the media ecosystem.

These clusters represent the macro-themes on which television programs have focused much of their discursive production through the news. The first cluster contains the narrative of politics, often concerning the actions and statements of the leaders who have appeared on the media stage, following the personalization style of contemporary politics.

The second cluster refers to economic issues, and we find here all the narratives relating to the effects of the lockdown: such as layoffs, bonuses offered by the government, and the so-called Recovery Fund.

The third cluster concerns the discourse on the pandemic data: in Italy there was a specific ritual, that is the 6.00 pm live “bulletin” during which the government, through the TV channels, updated the population on the data relating to the infections. It’s important to take into consideration how political leaders have set the master-frame for the representation of the virus and the related crisis. Some studies<sup>49)</sup> analyzed presidential speeches in different countries — including Italy — and showed the similarity of the speeches and the war rhetoric used in them.

This information then bounced between mainstream media and social media: it refers to all numbers on tampons, virus-positive people, deaths, and ICU places. This cluster contains the narrative that was used by public institutions to justify political actions such as in a war period<sup>50)</sup>: they were promoted “on the basis of numbers”, with respect to which a faithful positivist obedience of citizens was required.

The fourth cluster is the most numerous — in terms of occurrences — as it is related to the whole health discourse that has fueled most of the media narratives. They contain all those media representations of doctors and nurses represented both as heroes and as victims during the first months of the spread of COVID-19<sup>51)</sup>.

Our data seem to confirm that ideological discourses of individual heroics have been deployed, to patch up the damage done to neoliberal reforms, particularly in terms of access to healthcare and financial inequality.

As other studies on news<sup>52)</sup> have shown, the rhetorical framing of frontline workers

48) Fitera, Abuín-Vences, and Sierra Sánchez, “The coronavirus pandemic narratives in Italian digital media.”

49) José Manuel Pérez Tornero, Carles Marín Lladó, and Laura Cervi, “Pandemic and war: crisis narrative and leadership: Analysis of the presidential speeches at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic,” *Revista Latinoamericana de Comunicación Social*, no. 79 (2021), 1–21.

50) Lorenzo Donghi, Andrea Miconi, and Simona Pezzano, “Para bellum: Use and abuse of military rhetoric in communicating the pandemic in Italy,” in *(S)comunicazione e pandemia: Ricategorizzazioni e contrapposizioni di un'emergenza infinita*, eds. Maria Angela Polesana and Elisabetta Risi (Milano: Mimesis Editore, 2023).

51) Annamaria Bagnasco, Gianluca Catania, Ann Gallagher, and Georgina Morley, “Media representations of nurses in the pandemic: Just doing our job?” *Nursing Ethics* 27, no. 4 (2020), 901–905; G. Petti, “From heroes to no-vax: Sanitary demons and punitive sanity,” in *(S)comunicazione e Pandemia*, eds. Polesana and Risi.

52) Ben A. Lohmeyer and Nik Taylor, “War, heroes and sacrifice: Masking neoliberal violence during the COVID-19 pandemic,” *Critical Sociology* 47, no. 4–5 (2021), 625–639; N. S. Dankova and E. V. Krekhtunova,

during the COVID-19 pandemic covered themes about ‘personal sacrifice’ and ‘the heroes of war’.

The news related to health discourse mainly concerned also doctors or hospital chiefs, who were told as spokespersons of the epidemiological emergency, so that, some of them have become so-called *medical celebrities*. We can consider how the media representation of the pandemic has been completely focused on health and hospitalization rather than on responsible prevention. We have therefore detected a media (and political) discourse based on the imaginary of an endless *emergency*<sup>53)</sup> and not rather on the *health crisis*, which are two very different concepts in public health programs.

The fifth group contains the narratives concerning sociality and the moments of aggregation that were demonized by the televised discourse. The dominant themes do not seem to concern the conditions and consequences of the lockdown and forced domestic confinement; the news rarely dealt with the exacerbation of social inequalities and the difficulties of citizens, whether economic or relational. Instead, in the corpus of the analyzed text we found a negative meaning of the media narrative relating to social aggregation — with words such as party, holidays, and beaches. *People* as a collective name — concerning small or large groups of individuals — as well as that of the youngster, seem to have represented the scapegoats against which to vent the public resentment. A rhetoric that we can hypothesize has been used to conceal the lack, in this period, of specific public policies for the benefit of the younger sections of the population.

The last cluster, also in chronological order, concerns the narration on the vaccination campaign: in the analyzed period, the news focuses on the experimental phases and the start of the large-scale distribution of vaccines. The theme of variants is also significantly associated with this group: announcements of new variants of the virus were then added to the succession of a new flow of data on the administration of vaccines, to feed the media agenda.

The results show that on the one hand, the COVID-19 narrative presents some specific theming, distinguished according to the different broadcasters and the stages of the spread of the virus (first and second wave); on the other hand, the media narrative has generated a cohesive representation of people’s responsibility, characterized by the attributes of consonance and repetition that can somehow be found in the hypotheses on the *strong effects of the media*<sup>54)</sup>. We can therefore assume that this is a rare — but possible — case, where the mainstream media adopt the same ideological bent obscuring all that is not broadcast, which is absorbed by the so-called *spiral of silence*<sup>55)</sup>.

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“Media Representation of the Pandemic: a Metaphorical Image of War (based on American Newspapers),” *Nauchnyi dialog*, no. 8 (2023), 69–83.

53) Maria Angela Polesana and Elisabetta Risi, *(S)comunicazione e pandemia: Ricategorizzazioni e contrapposizioni di un'emergenza infinita* (Milano: Mimesis Edizioni, 2021); Andrea Miconi, “The time of variations, or the re-framing of infinite emergence,” March 27, 2021, accessed May 20, 2023, <https://www.fondazione-hume.it/societa/il-tempo-delle-varianti-o-il-re-framing-dellemergenza-infinita>.

54) Mauro Wolf, *Gli effetti sociali dei media* (Milan: Bompiani, 1992), 48–57.

55) Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, “Mass Media and Social Change in Developed Societies,” in *Mass Media and Social Change*, eds. Elihu Katz and Tamás Szczskö (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1981), 137–165; Noelle-Neumann and Mathes, “The ‘Events as Event’ and the ‘Event as News.’”

**Chart 3.** The six clusters in the COVID-19 television macro-theming: politics; economy; data; health; sociality; vaccine



On the other hand, it must be also considered that the different frames are interconnected and reflect the relationship between media and Government/politicians...

**4. From framing to blaming: gatherings**

The recurrence of the word (both singular and plural) *gathering/gatherings* offers interesting information, as seen on Chart 4.

Firstly, it is evident how this term wasn't relevant in ordinary language, so much so that it never appears in the first months of 2020, not even after the Prime Ministerial Decree dated March 8, which introduced it in the history of the country. It raised during May, in correspondence with the first weekends following mass surveillance containment — those of May 23–24 and 30–31, 2020 — as could be expected. From that time on, however, it follows an irregular trend: it disappears *de facto* in the Summer of 2020, for emerging again from the second half of August, and then occupying the debate between October and November. Interestingly enough since it is quite unlikely, in terms of news reports, that outdoor gatherings were more common in Autumn than in Summer.

If in July 2020 we count 93 segments of TV news on this issue, in October 166, and in November 133, it means that it is not a matter of *real* gatherings here — since, for climate reasons, we saw many more so-called-gatherings in July than in autumn. After the frame opening moment at the end of May, the peaks of occurrence of the term coincides with mostly “anonymous” dates (except for Christmas shopping, which explains the 15 cases of December 19).

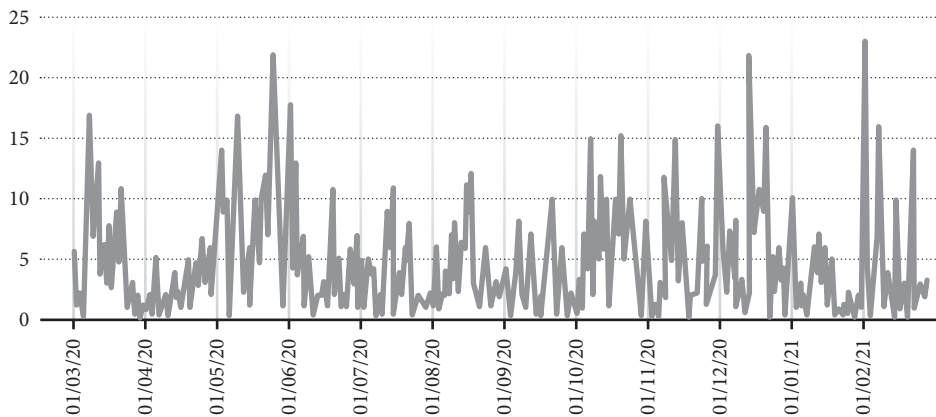
In other words, it seems that, under the narrative of gatherings, transpires the epidemic *tout-court*: an indication that the term is used as a metonymy for any contagion situations, for carrying out a specific framing, together with all the attribution of responsibility which derives from it.

A rhetorical pressure based on the oldest technique in the world — *repetition*<sup>56)</sup> — which takes away from any other counter-reasoning, including the relative contagiousness of outdoor situations, which, for some reasons, the State decided to prevent rather than favor. As Summer begins — in correspondence with the curve of Chart 4 — the term disappears completely. It is not by chance that the periodic return of the word — with the latent period in Summer and the peak in Autumn — follows the same trend as the epidemic curve, as to suggest a cause-effect relationship between the two.

Among other things, we bring to an end with a trivial remark: among so many recommendations to avoid gatherings, in the 1742 related newscast segments, no one *has ever explained* what a gathering is.

As for the language and its power of framing, such a line of reasoning can be made for the other dominant 2020 symbolic labeling, namely *distancing*.<sup>57)</sup> Whether it was a conscious decision or not — as similarly, Barbara Stiegler<sup>58)</sup> wonders for France — 149 times in the newscasts has been used “social distancing” instead of the most correct “physical distancing” (only 11 times). What it seems here at work is something more elusive, such as the questioning of rules of conduct we were accustomed to.

**Chart 4.** Recurrence of the word *gathering* in prime time newscasts



56) See Dennis Chong and James N. Druckman, “A Theory of Framing and Opinion Formation in Competitive Elite Environments,” *Journal of Communication* 57, no. 1 (2007), 108–112.

57) *Distanza e distanziamento* (distance and distancing) have different meanings. The word *distanza* refers to an external physical factor, that is “the space that separates two places, two objects, two people” (Devoto-Oli dictionary, 2020) and it is attested in the Italian language starting from the XIV century. *Distanziamento* dates back to 1892, and is instead the result of an action, distancing, and indicates “separation, departure” (Di Valvasone, 2021).

58) Stiegler, *De la démocratie en pandémie*, 40.

To get deeper, concerning the evidence of the recurrences, we took into consideration a specific topic of the journalistic reports. We focus our analysis on the recurrence of the word *gathering* during May 2020. At this time the term has become commonly used, in parallel with the so-called “Phase 2”, when people have taken back the streets emptied from home confinement, returning to make cities the place of sociality instead of a misunderstanding purification, described by media through the rhetorical figure of “nature has retaken its spaces”<sup>59</sup>.

The term has been used in a generic way in the relative majority of cases: whether it is a question of remembering the prohibition of gatherings, their dangerousness, or the need to stay away from them. What is interesting is that the most reported situation is the *outdoor* walks — as in the 2020 archetypal image, the photo of the Navigli (Milan’s canals and the district named after them) shot using a telephoto lens which compresses space and distances — which is, as far as is known, the *least dangerous* situation in terms of transmission.



The impression that the media have worked on a strategy for making citizens feel guilty — already from the month in which the framing of the story took shape<sup>60</sup> — seems here confirmed. It will therefore come as no surprise that in May 2020 the most quoted non-auxiliary verb is *to avoid*, with 94 occurrences: that’s like saying that dangerous gatherings are those that depend on the choices of individuals (which, precisely for this, can be avoided), and not those people are *subjected to* on the bus or in the factory.

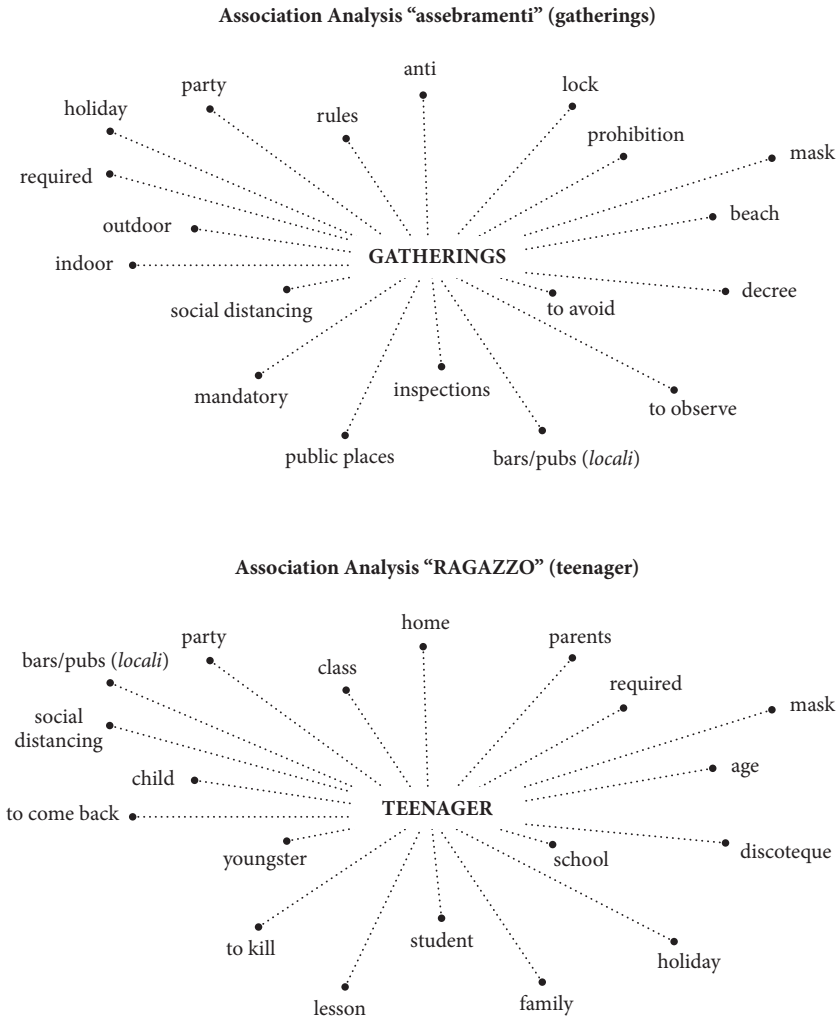
Similar suggestions come from lexical distances (Chart 5), which give a complete measure of the blaming strategy put in place by the media. The presence of two *topos* of summer fun — beach and party (*spiagge* and *feste*) — in gatherings is emblematic, espe-

59) Alessandro Ricci, *Spazi d’eccezione: Riflessioni geografiche sul virus e il “nuovo ordine spaziale”*, (Roma: Castelvecchi, 2021), 36–40.

60) Matthew Flinders, “Democracy and the Politics of Coronavirus: Trust, Blame and Understanding,” *Parliamentary Affairs* 74, no. 2 (2021), 483–502.



**Chart 5.** Representation of lexical distances (analysis of significant associations) of “gatherings” and “teenagers”



cially since the former evokes a situation with a very low-risk of contagion. Equally meaningful is that there are no indicative terms for *high* transmission risk places: buses, factories, warehouses. Once again, newscasts insist on individual responsibility, placing the infections followed by spontaneous aggregations at the center of the debate, and not those caused by situations of forced space sharing, which implies some responsibility of the ruling class (i.e., the reorganization of public transport). So it can not really be surprising that the most used verb associated with “gathering” is consistent with the general tone of paternalism and blaming of citizens — *to avoid* —, nor that it is the same verb used in the 2020 Prime Ministerial Decrees.

Finally, it must surprise that one of the most often associated verbs with the term *youngster or teenager* is “to kill”: a cruel manifestation of those *blaming* strategies which the more emphasized are, the more evident the failure of public health measures is — as Flinders pointed out in the English case<sup>61</sup>. And hence perhaps the extreme example, and the most incredible headline (published in one of the most read Italian newspapers): “Young people who have an aperitivo outdoor are murderers<sup>62</sup>”.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

The media reflect and reinforce cultural conventions and sense-making, offering a lens that shapes personal experiences and attitudes. Our research aims at filling a hole in current studies on *infodemic*, which are mostly dedicated to the case, undoubtedly relevant, of on-line media coverage. The proposed results come from a content analysis of the representation of COVID-19 in Italian prime-time TV news.

We draw on the idea of media framing, to split the COVID-19 narrative into more granular parts. As a result of the text analysis, six main clusters have emerged, which describe the main associations used for framing the public understanding of the COVID crisis: politics; economics; statistics; health issues; social life; vaccines. Findings show also a marked blaming attitude, with different social figures being stigmatized as possible spreaders. In terms of Goffman’s keying, hyperbolic tones have always been used, thus imposing the frame of *emergency* suggesting the management of uncertainty and fear via prediction of the future through data and calls for behavior change, imposed with the use of war metaphors. The limitations of this study have to be laid out as well, which are related to three main aspects. Firstly, we have only worked — and intentionally so — on mainstream communication, by analyzing the prime-time TV shows offered by the seven national channels. In this way, we took out of the picture not only the bottom-up communication and the social media discussion but also all the contents that are disseminated in the long-tail of media distribution — ranging from minor broadcasters to local networks, to independent sources. Secondly, and due to the extension of the sample, we inferred the framing strategies from the *quantitative* recurrences of the keywords, while other approaches to media framing are possible, which deal with the qualitative analysis of how the narratives are built. Additionally, we could not consider the visual dimension of TV-news, which, by definition, is of paramount importance in the representation of reality as portrayed by the audiovisual media. Finally, we need to remark that our work is focused on media discourse, and — as is almost inevitable in content analysis — it cannot scale into a general evaluation of the public narrative related to the Sars-Cov-2 epidemic. In particular, it is the political institution that have adopted a military language since the beginning of the sanitary crisis, as highlighted by several studies<sup>63</sup>. In the other way, though, that the media

61) Matthew Flinders, “Gotcha! Coronavirus, Crisis and the Politics of Blame Game,” *Political Insight* 11, no. 2 (2020), 22–25.

62) Antonio Sechi, Italian hospital chief (San Raffaele Hospital of Milano), “Young people who have an aperitif in the square are murderers,” *Corriere della Sera*, May 22, 2020.

63) Ilona Frances Walker, “Beyond the Military Metaphor: Comparing antimicrobial resistance and the

would follow the thematization of the crisis put forward by the governments, may well be considered as a main acquisition of the research.

With all this in mind, we do believe that the unusual extension of the sample we have come to analyze — more than 14,000 news stories and 1.6 million words — allows for some reliable considerations about the media representation of the Sars-CoV-2 epidemic in Italy. Based on our data, the major indication — as already anticipated — is that the Italian broadcasters have endorsed the point of view of the State authorities, with the media coverage basically being in line with the decisions taken by the government over the first year of the sanitary crisis. If we put this in Stanley Cohen's words, we can add that the media have been acting as "moral entrepreneurs", in both meanings of the expression. In one way, the Tv reporting has ignited something similar to a *moral panic*; in the other way, the media have also adopted the most productive frame in terms of audience reaching: whether we refer to it as the spectacularization of the disease, as the "distant suffering" of the watchers<sup>64</sup>, or as the so-called mechanism of "fear arousing appeal".

That the mainstream media have reinforced the perspective of political authorities, what is more, is consistent with the findings coming from other studies. An analogous media framing has been unraveled in the United Kingdom by David Seedhouse, with a focus on the distorted accounting of the epidemic risk and the lethality rate<sup>65</sup>. As to the English media, Flinders<sup>66</sup> also detected the role of the mainstream outlets in amplifying the strategies of blaming and scapegoating, as put in place by the government and by the medical institutions. Fazi and Green<sup>67</sup>, from a global perspective, analyzed the convergence of authorities and media towards a shared interpretation and framing of reality, also implying the blacklisting of alternative sources and their indiscriminate labeling as disinformation. Consistently, the investigation of the media coverage of COVID-19 in Australia shows the adoption of the ideological frames established by the Chinese government at the early stage of the crisis and embraced also by local authorities<sup>68</sup>. Media biases in favor of the extremization of the epidemic risk can also be indirectly inferred by the work of Riehm and others<sup>69</sup> on the people's perception in the United States: showing how those who were

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COVID-19 pandemic in the United Kingdom," *Medicine Anthropology Today* 7, no. 2 (2020), as UK case; Benjamin R. Bates, "The (In)Appropriateness of the WAR Metaphor in Response to SARS-COV-2: A Rapid Analysis of Donald J. Trump's Rhetoric," *Frontiers in Communication* 5, June (2020); Connor M. Chapman and DeMond Shondell Miller, "From metaphor to militarized response: the social implications of 'we are at war with COVID-19' — crisis, disasters, and pandemics yet to come," *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 40, no. 9–10 (2020), 1107–1124 as USA study; Charlotte Brives, "The politics of Amphibiosis: the war against viruses will not take place," *Somatosphère: Science, Medicine, and Anthropology*, April 4, 2020, as analysis of Macron's style in addressing the French population.

- 64) Luc Boltanski, "The legitimacy of humanitarian actions and their media representation: The case of France," *Ethical Perspectives* 7, no. 1 (2000), 3–16.
- 65) Seedhouse, "The Case for Democracy in the Covid-19 Pandemic," 22–27.
- 66) Flinders, "Gotcha! Coronavirus, Crisis and the Politics of Blame Game," 22–25; Flinders, "Democracy and the Politics of Coronavirus," 483–502.
- 67) Thomas Fazi and Toby Green, *The Covid Consensus: The Global Assault to Democracy and the Poor — A Critique from the Left* (London: Hurst, 2023), 157–162.
- 68) Wanning Sun, "The virus of fear and anxiety: China, COVID-19, and the Australian Media," *Global Media and China* 6, no. 1 (2021), 24–39.
- 69) Kira E. Riehm et al., "Associations Between Media Exposure and Mental Distress Among U. S. Adults at the Beginning of the COVID-19 Pandemic," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 59, no. 5 (2020), 630–638.

more exposed to the TV news, statistically speaking, were also more likely to develop mental distress of different types. Similarly, Sacerdote, Sehgal, and Cook<sup>70</sup> measured a bias in American media coverage, with attention always placed on the most negative tones, and positive news being generally sidelined or taken out of the discourse. These findings would be also coupled with the evidence of a particularly intense use of the war metaphor, detected by Jaworska<sup>71</sup> in her comparative scrutiny of the newspaper's coverage of the coronavirus in the UK, Germany, and USA; and in the case of Italian mainstream media<sup>72</sup>. The alignment of media narratives to the government's position has been also denounced by an eminent epidemiologist, John Ioannidis, pointing to the discrepancy between the actual state of the medical debate and its representation in public communication<sup>73</sup>.

It makes sense to recall, in conclusion, that a major corpus of scientific research is devoted to the representation of the epidemic crisis in social media, which cannot be addressed in this article. As already stated, this also caused some under-estimation of the role played by the legacy media in the covering of the events, in their framing, and in the imposition of a particular angle. There is little doubt that future research will have to consider the combination between the two — the top-down communication of traditional outlets, and the shared discourse in social media — or what we also define the agenda-melding of contemporary public opinion.

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70) Bruce Sacerdote, Ranjan Sehgal, and Molly Cook, “Why Is All Covid-19 News Bad News?,” *NBER Working Paper Series*, no. 28110, November 2020, Cambridge, National Bureau of Economic Research.

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