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CRISIS AS REVELATION AND OPPORTUNITY: THE ITALIAN PRESS STORYTELLING OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC FIRST PHASE

Abstract

In this paper, we analyse how the most read newspaper in Italy, *Corriere della Sera*, elaborated the storytelling of the COVID-19 outbreak. The study was carried out according to three research questions: how was Italian society represented at the beginning of the spread of the virus? Who were the main actors of the story, and what were their roles and responsibilities? Are there any transversal narratives that became predominant over time? For each research question, as prescribed by the Thematic Analysis methodological tradition, some themes have been developed to explain the insights emerged from the analysis of 650 articles. With this technique, it was possible to see how the storytelling of the crisis went through different stages, gradually transcending the mere chronicle of the healthcare emergency and decentring the virus as the main character. While the virus' existence gradually became part of our taken for granted, the epidemic has been represented as a revelation of pre-existing and unsustainable social problems (such as the consistent weakening of the public welfare system), and eventually as an opportunity to solve them rebuilding from the rubble.

Keywords

COVID-19; newspapers' representation; thematic analysis; media narratives.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In December 2019, a novel pathogen called SARS-CoV-2 has spread and, within weeks, led to the emergence of a global health crisis. The unprecedented speed of the infection diffusion and the mortality of the related syndrome COVID-19 provoked a state of panic worldwide.

Since lockdown was imposed in Lombardy and other regions of northern Italy on March 8th (to be extended to the rest of the country two days later), the mass media agenda has been dominated by pandemic-related updates and reportages. Social media, on the other hand, has been the scene of misinformation which has fuelled a perva-

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sive feeling of dissent towards government and scientific institutions. In this context of widespread anxiety about health and economic issues, especially in the first months of adjustment to this world-changing event, newspapers assumed the obligation of social responsibility and public service by providing, as much as possible, the most accurate, verifiable, and factual reporting¹. Considering that mass media stories about the pandemic have been found to have substantial effects on peoples' beliefs regarding its origins and opinions about appropriate policy responses², it is crucial for media scholars to examine the way newspapers narrated the evolution of the crisis during the most critical moments of the outbreak.

Many studies pursuing this objective, mainly with a quantitative approach, are based on samples limited to the articles on the front pages – see for example the research proposed by Krawczyk and colleagues³. Limiting the analysis to only the first pages may not return a complete representation of the topics' coverage and of the way the crisis was told in these newspapers. For instance, in the study entitled *Information on the COVID-19 Pandemic in Daily Newspapers' Front Pages: Case Study of Spain and Italy* by Tejedor and colleagues, where only front pages have been considered, a predominance of informative journalistic genres emerged, which consisted of “brief, short news items, which lack contextual information, and do not offer in depth information to the readership”⁴. As we will see, the result is not the same when newspapers are considered in their entirety. This is the case with studies such as the one by Mahima *et al.*⁵, or the one by Basch and colleagues on *COVID-19 coverage in U.S. Daily Newspapers between January and March 2020*, in which they found that “coverage from the early days of the COVID-19 outbreak was varied and captured the complexity of issues and concerns raised by the situation”. According to the authors, “did not just report the numbers (number of infections, ventilators, deaths, economic losses) but they also reported the context of the pandemic, such as, impact on economy, efforts to slow the spread of infection, switch to working from home, presence of health disparities, scientific search for reliable COVID-19 tests, and effect on supply chains”⁶. The pandemic has in fact been represented as affecting many areas of society: the travel restrictions being imposed by different countries have turned it into a story about tourism; the economic impact of fear on the stock market and the impact of people not attending work have turned it into a finance and business story; and the cancellation of football matches and Tokyo 2020 Olympics have made it a sports story.

In this study, to ensure an adequate level of analytical depth, we focused on a single newspaper, analysing it in its entirety for almost two months with a qualitative

¹ C.H. Basch, A. Kecojevic, V.H. Wagner, “Coverage of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Online Versions of Highly Circulated U.S. Daily Newspapers”, *Journal of Community Health*, 45, 6 (2020): 1089-1097.

² T. Bolsen, R. Palm, J.T. Kingsland, “Framing the Origins of COVID-19”, *Science Communication*, 42, 5 (2020): 562-585; P.S. Hart, S. Chinn, S. Soroka. “Politicization and Polarization in COVID-19 News Coverage”, *Science Communication*, 42, 5 (2020): 679-697.

³ K. Krawczyk, T. Chelkowski, S. Mishra, D. Xifara, B. Gibert, D.J. Laydon, S. Flaxman, T. Mellan, V. Schwämmle, R. Röttger, J.T. Hadsund, S. Bhatt, “Quantifying the Online News Media Coverage of the Covid-19 Pandemic: Text Mining Study and Resource”, *Journal of Medical Internet Research Increases Impact Factor*, 23, 6 (2021).

⁴ S. Tejedor, L. Cervi, F. Tusa, M. Portales, M. Zabotina, “Information on the COVID-19 Pandemic in Daily Newspapers' Front Pages: Case Study of Spain and Italy”, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17, 17 (2020).

⁵ B.N. Mahima, H.K. Tiwari, P. Mahapatra, S. Amudhan, G.N. Rao, “COVID-19 Epidemiology: Through the Eyes of Vernacular Newspapers”, *Indian Journal of Public Health*, 64 (2020).

⁶ C.H. Basch, A. Kecojevic, V.H. Wagner, “Coverage of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Online Versions of Highly Circulated U.S. Daily Newspapers”, *Journal of Community Health*, 45, 6 (2020): 1089-1097.

approach. We have therefore reconstructed how the most bought and read newspaper in Italy⁷, *Corriere della Sera* (often abbreviated as *Corriere*, considered a moderate, authoritative, and centre-right-leaning newspaper), elaborated the storytelling of the COVID-19 outbreak and of how the crisis has impacted various aspects of our lives. The analysis was carried out according to three research questions:

Q1. How was Italian society represented by this newspaper at the beginning of the spread of the virus in the country? To answer this, some early codes have been identified relatively to certain domains of society: economy, mobility/geography, media, policy, science, daily life.

Q2. Who were the main actors of the story and what were their roles and responsibilities? More precisely, we wanted to identify who/what caused the greatest danger, who/what was in danger, and what was the solution.

Q3. Are there any transversal narratives that become predominant over time? To answer this, it is necessary to take into consideration the answers previously elaborated on a temporal level.

For each research question, as prescribed by the Thematic Analysis tradition, some themes have been elaborated to explain the insights that emerged from the analysis. To answer Q1, 6 themes were identified; to answer Q2, 3 themes were elaborated; finally, to answer Q3, two macro-themes were identified. Themes are explained in the following paragraphs with the help of graphs. Differences between the pre- and post-national lockdown (which started on March 10th 2020) are considered when significant.

2. SOURCES AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This research relies on a sample of 650 articles – including breaking news, reportages, and editorials – selected in the time window from February 15th to March 31st 2020; that is, from the days preceding the discovery of the first Italian COVID-19 patient (or ‘patient 1’) and the days leading to the so-called ‘plateau phase’, when – for the first time since the spread of the virus – the number of intensive care patients started to decline (leaving the primacy of COVID-19 cases to the United States). Since we wanted to analyse a vast body of data while maintaining the good level of depth of analysis that qualitative approaches guarantee, we have chosen to adopt an approach ascribable to the tradition of Thematic Analysis (TA) as formalised by Braun and Clarke⁸. TA is usually described as an umbrella term for a set of methodological approaches that, although differing significantly in epistemological values and procedures, share a focus on identifying, organising, describing, and analysing themes in a dataset. This qualitative approach conceptualises a code as an analytic unit or tool used by researchers to develop (initial) themes. Here, codes can be thought of as entities that capture one observation. Themes, in contrast, are like multi-faceted crystals, as they capture multiple observations or facets. They are patterns of shared meaning, united by a central concept or idea: Braun and Clarke describe themes as “stories we tell about our data”⁹.

⁷ According to the ADS (Accertamenti Diffusione Stampa) criteria, which is the company that certifies the data relating to the distribution of any kind of Italian press.

⁸ V. Braun, V. Clarke “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology”, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 2 (2006): 77-101; V. Braun, V. Clarke, “One Size Fits All? What Counts as Quality Practice in (Reflexive) Thematic Analysis?”, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 18, 3 (2020): 328-352.

⁹ Braun, Clarke, “One Size Fits All? What Counts as Quality Practice in (Reflexive) Thematic Analysis?”: 328-352 (342).

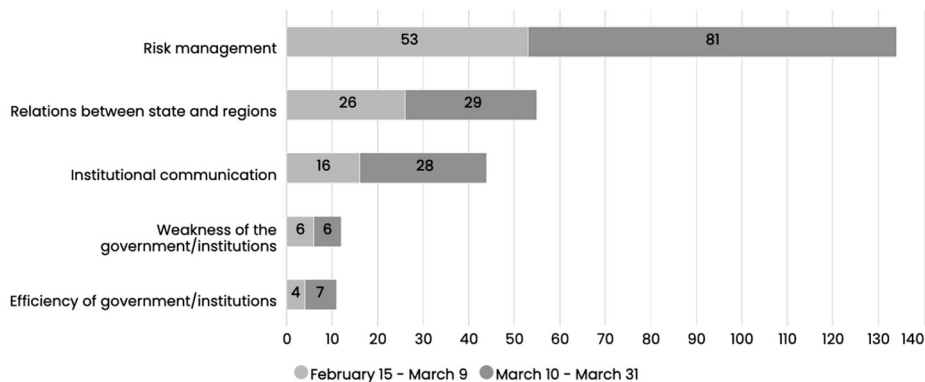
Among the range of TA approaches, we adopted ‘Codebook TA’ characterised by the use of a structured coding framework by multiple coders who work independently – although sticking to a measurement of between-coder agreement, or inter-rater reliability – according to a standardised coding procedure, resumable in a six-phase process: 1) data familiarisation and writing notes; 2) systematic data coding; 3) generating initial themes from coded data; 4) developing and reviewing themes; 5) refining, defining and naming themes; and 6) writing the report. The process can be iterative and reflexive¹⁰, with movement back and forth between phases, as happened in our study where the coding framework was constantly updated as new codes were generated.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Main themes across social domains (Q1)

3.1.1. Theme Q1/T1 - Lack of coordination and distrust in the institutions were represented as major obstacles to risk management

Table 1 - Policy-related codes which served as building blocks for the theme Q1-T1



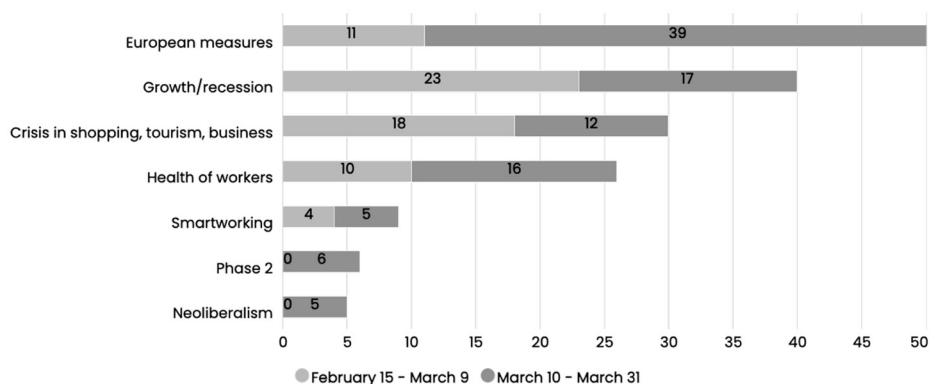
Policy-related topics were the most present in the sample. The focus was especially on risk management, meaning both the implementation of containment measures (such as lockdowns) and the cushioning of consequent economic and social crises. This topic also included representations of institutions as efficient or weak. The newspaper reported on successful actions against the epidemics (but also against the so-called shared ‘psychosis’), and often called politicians and scientists to comment on it. Conflicting opinions emerged regarding preparedness, concerning lack of preparation in facing the outbreak and the administrative level primarily responsible for such a lack (national or regional, with the latter being first-level administrative units). Some accused Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte of centralizing too much decisional power at the national level;

¹⁰ L.S. Nowell, J.M., Norris, D.E. White, N.J. Moules, “Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria”, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16, 1 (2017).

others complained about the lack of national coordination as regions enforced their own measures. This polarisation of the debate was also reflected at the administrative level. Discourse on institutional communication was more coherent: transparency of information relative to tracking and containment policies was deemed very important – and a further source of criticism to the lack of cooperation between government and regions and their respective data. Conversely, frequent chaotic and contradictory communication was represented as the cause of alarmism and internal conflicts (e.g. the incorrect story of a divided Italy in which the virus was circulating only in the Northern part), of anxiety (e.g. the vague declarations of PM Conte), and of financial and social distrust (e.g. the decision announced by the director of the European Central Bank to leave interest rates untouched; or when the Italian situation was perceived as an anomaly by other European countries).

3.1.2. Theme Q1/T2 - Economy's sustenance was represented as increasingly dependent on European solidarity

Table 2 - *Economy-related codes which served as building blocks for the theme Q1-T2*



In the *Corriere della Sera*, the economic dimension is usually preponderant. Even before the Italian outbreak of the virus, the pandemic was presented as a potential trigger of economic recession, to which the country should have been prepared. Some articles, however, suggested the idea that, after recession, a re-boom could arise, as happened after World War II, both in terms of demographic growth and European unity. Core concerns were administrative and judicial simplification, new forms of welfare (e.g., for self-employed workers), reduction of digital divide (related to remote work and distant learning), national solidarity, and, most of all, European solidarity. Some politicians were vocal about the need to reform neoliberalist approaches (e.g., Giulio Tremonti¹¹, prime minister Giuseppe Conte); this global and general discourse, while remaining in the background, was consistently present especially in the second phase.

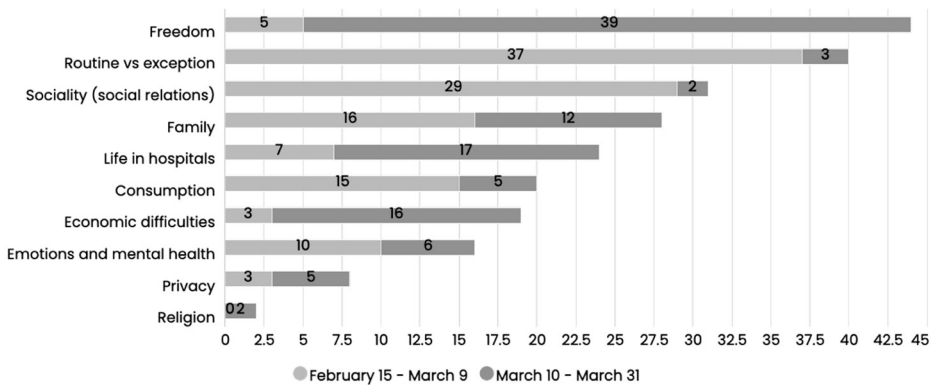
The bulk of attention was paid to the main affected economic sectors such as sports, tourism, and manufacturing export. The anti-COVID measures – controls and closures –

¹¹ Former Minister of Finance under Silvio Berlusconi's governments.

were seen as barriers to those economic activities. There was a brief phase in which local administrators asked for a re-opening of Milan and Lombardy, the territory representing the industrial and financial centre of Italy. There were some conflicts about the right balance between the demand of safer working conditions and the urge to leave production facilities open, with trade unions asking both depending on the situation. Finally, the most discussed economy-related topic, especially in the second part of the period analysed, was European aid. To promote a new positive image of public debt, most Italian politicians and commentators insisted on the metaphor of ‘whatever it takes’ to save the economy, quoting the emblematic expression used by President of the European Central Bank Mario Draghi in 2012, which has become a slogan used by journalists to identify a specific pro-European political style. Observers saw eventual actions or declarations by European institutions and Central Bank as a ‘sign’ needed to ‘build trust’ among the social and economic fabric of the country.

3.1.3. Theme Q1/T3 - To give up freedom was increasingly represented as a major sacrifice and potential risk for privacy, although necessary and temporary

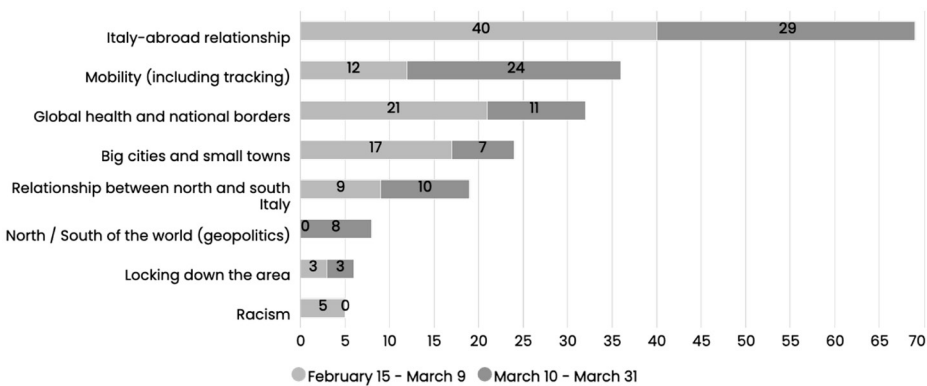
Table 3 - *Daily-life-related codes which served as building blocks for the theme Q1-T3*



The newspaper gave a lot of space, through reportages, interviews, and news reports, to ordinary lives. The element of novelty and exception, which upset daily routines, permeated the articles of the first period. Quarantine and the risks of mobility (both for holiday and work) and ordinary gestures (such as handshakes) were represented as detrimental to relationships. Sociality was deemed the major responsible for the spread, as exemplified by the storytelling of the sociable and busy lifestyle of ‘patient 1’. Over time, other issues gained the foreground, such as the exceptionally exhausting work and life conditions in hospitals, the importance of families and ‘household sociality’, and the irresponsibility of young people and those who escaped from Milanese lockdown potentially carrying the virus to other regions. After the national lockdown, topics relative to freedom restrictions, represented as a potential, although necessary, long-term threat to privacy and democracy, became prevalent.

3.1.4. Theme Q1/T4 - The fear of the virus was represented as causing a blame game which fragmented the Italian territory, despite the global nature of the pandemic

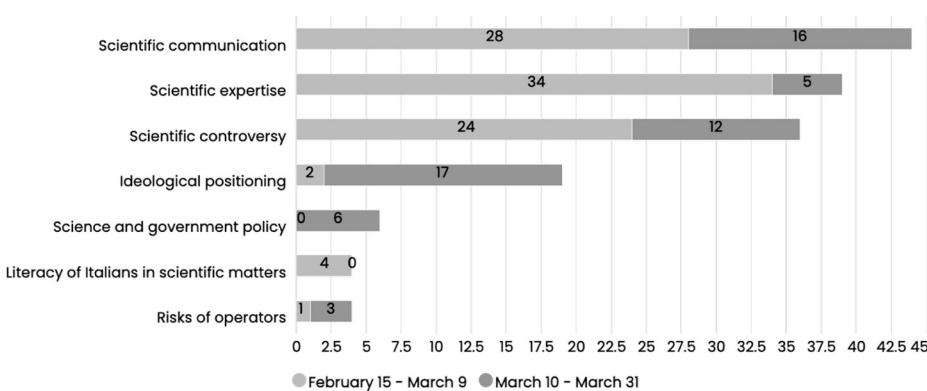
Table 4 - *Mobility/geography-related codes which served as building blocks for the theme Q1-T4*



The geographical topics figured prominently. Especially at the beginning, globalisation and modern urbanisation were represented as the main enabling factors of the pandemic. International and well-connected big cities like Milan were often opposed to small towns, which were praised for their lifestyle and their early efficient containment measures. Relevant importance was attached to geographical prejudices. Chinese were the first represented as plague-spreaders, and racism was called out; then northern Italians were blamed by southern ones for the spread. The first affected areas were concerned by the idea of becoming permanently associated with the plague. At the international level, Italy was represented as mistrusted for being affected by it, as if it had some intrinsic responsibility. The geopolitical aspect of the pandemic was however taken into consideration also regarding the trade and donations of medical and protective equipment.

3.1.5. Theme Q1/T5 - Science was represented as the main and vital epistemological authority, but became controversial when made in charge of decision-making responsibility

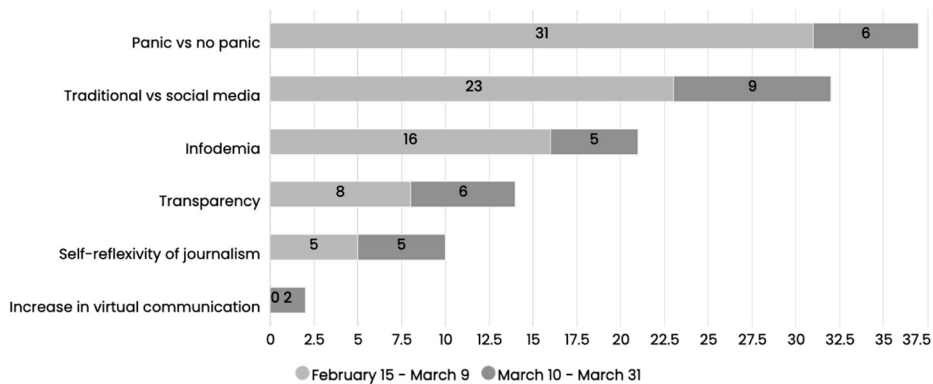
Table 5 - *Science-related codes which served as building blocks for the theme Q1-T5*



Scientists in the newspaper's storytelling appeared as the main epistemological authorities for both ordinary people and politicians, as they presented behaviour guidelines and explained symptoms and risks of an exponential spread. A relevant number of articles acknowledged the problematic status of contradictory scientific claims, while explaining the structural uncertainty and experimentalism which inherently characterises scientific debates. In the same spirit, many controversies were represented as resulting from the limited knowledge about COVID-19. For example, different scientists argued about the advisable duration of the quarantine, or the virus' degree of lethality and infectiousness. Finally, scientists often claimed that the decisions were of political competence, while at the same time also lamenting the ideological appropriation of their declarations (e.g. the discussion about the supposed racism underlying the decision to forbid Italy-China flights).

3.1.6. Theme Q1/T6 - The narration of traditional mass media's responsibility in provoking panic (later attributed mainly to social media) developed and expired within the early stage of the crisis

Table 6 - *Media-related codes which served as building blocks for the theme Q1-T6*

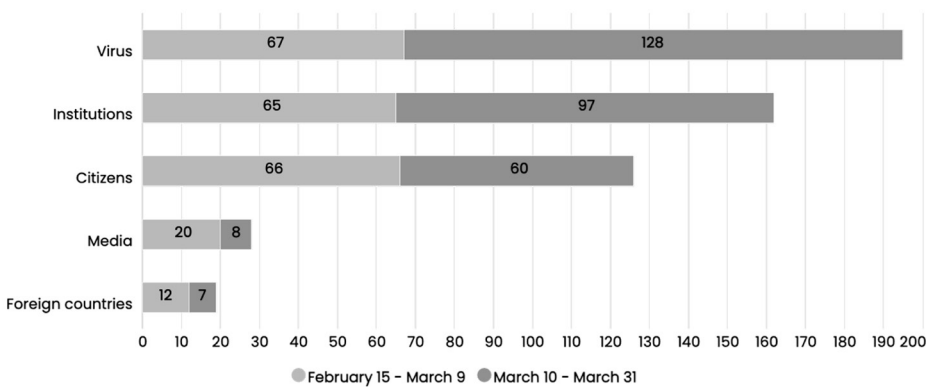


Articles on the role of mass and social media were preponderant at the beginning of the observation window. Journalists represented themselves as attacked for their way to tell and show the epidemic, showing a strong rooting of the fear of journalistic manipulation in Italian culture. Interestingly, the newspaper's editor-in-chief later apologized for not having raised a real alarm in the very first phase of the pandemic. This indicates how much that idea of alarmist manipulation was interiorized by journalists themselves, leading to an excessive minimization. They also blamed other media outlets, especially foreign ones, depicting apocalyptic scenarios regarding Italy. Little by little, this self-justification consolidated in a representation wherein journalists saw themselves as a bulwark of reason against the 'psychosis' or panic fuelled by social media and political institutions – which also drove the call for transparent and clear institutional communication. This topic then started to dwindle, reappearing as underpinning the criticism of disinformation circulating on social media. There is only one case where the conflict of internet media and traditional media is inverted: in an article from March 1st, social media's irony appears as cathartic and an antidote to alarmist, fear-producing, and apocalyptic broadcast media.

3.2. *The main ‘characters’ in Corriere’s storytelling of the first pandemic phase (Q2)*

3.2.1. Theme Q2/T1 - The virus, institutions, and citizens – in descending order – were represented as the main producers of danger

Table 7 - *Codes representing who/what caused the greatest danger*



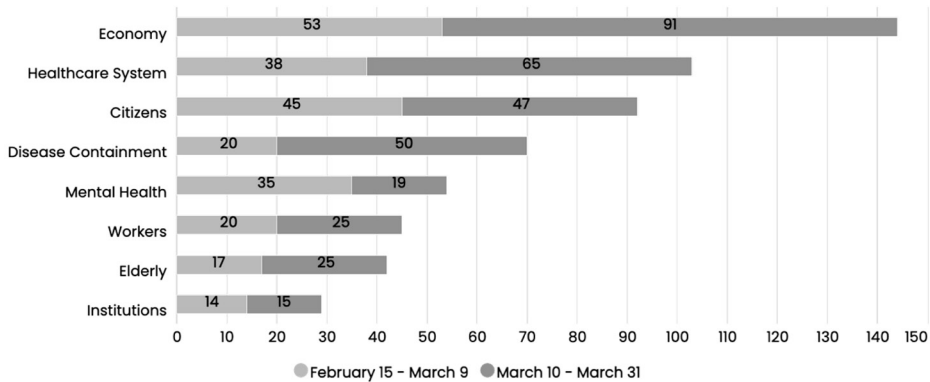
Journalistic storytelling often employed and crafted ‘characters’ or ‘actors’ responsible for danger during the pandemic outbreak. Of these, we identified three recurrent represented categories of ‘dangerous actors’: the virus, citizens, and institutions. At an early stage, perhaps due to the indeterminacy and lack of knowledge that journalists were facing, press coverage often personified the virus as an agent of danger, representing it as a silent enemy against which all of society should rally, thus stressing the ‘invisible’ nature of the contagion process. The narrative construct of the agency of the personified virus also served to emphasise its spread dynamics through other channels, or on behalf of other actors. As a result, the subject of the virus as a threat gradually became associated with other agents. Beside portraying the virus as a hazardous subject, journalists often referred to citizens as either reducing or exacerbating the pandemic through their behaviour. Citizens’ actions were examined from a moral perspective: ‘misbehaviour’ was presented as an individual responsibility with systemic consequences. Non-compliance with distance rules, or failure to use protective equipment (such as masks), were frequent instances of journalistic attempts at raising awareness of citizens’ duties. Accordingly, excessive ‘sociability’ and ‘neglect’ – all dimensions pertaining to individual civic sense – undermined the system and exacerbated its risks.

Moving from individuals to broader societal structures, journalists have actively framed institutions as agents of danger during the pandemic outbreak. In this context, the category comprises all those organisations that exist to serve a public purpose and make impactful decisions, both politically and economically (e.g., governments or the European Central Bank) and with regard to health (e.g. the World Health Organisation). Specifically, organisations’ responsibility consisted of their failure to ensure the proper functioning of certain expected practices. In many articles, such practices or lack thereof were identified as central sources of danger as the pandemic spread. Significantly, health institutions and their ‘unpreparedness’ are presented as those leading to the most important consequences. Finally, political choices (at regional and state level, as well as their coordination) were deemed as one of the key pillars beneath the ‘mismanagement’ of the

crisis. For instance, ‘wrong’ policy choices, as the difficulty in finding health protection arrangements at state level, were portrayed as an integral cause of danger.

3.2.2. Theme Q2/T2 - The economy and the healthcare system were progressively represented as the ones most in danger

Table 8 - *Codes representing who/what is in danger*



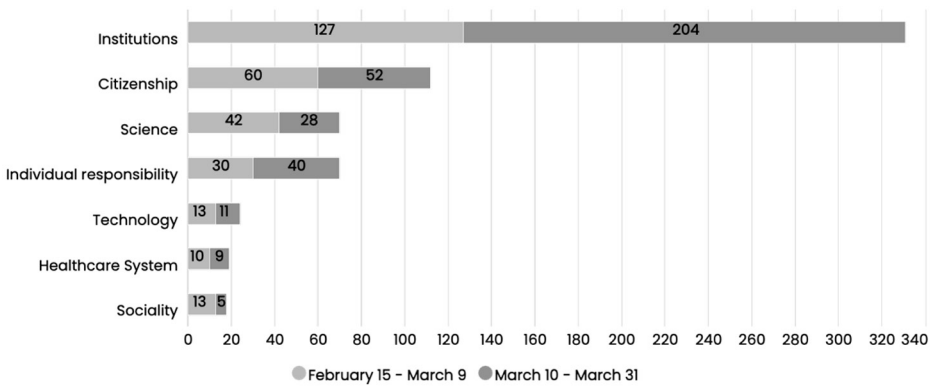
Our analysis focused on both subjects and groups who spread the risk as well as those exposed to danger. Examples of the latter are the economy, the healthcare system, citizens, mental health, and workers. All dimensions are closely linked to each other across all the articles we analysed.

First, economic-related articles focus on the impact of lockdown measures on the Italian economic system: forced closures were presented as inevitably implying a tightening of economic conditions, a decrease in consumption, and a loss of workers' protection, in a vicious circle affecting both 'citizens' and 'workers': the reduction in consumption would lead to stagnation in GDP, which in turn would reduce the purchasing power of citizens. Economic considerations became even more important as the pandemic continued, reflecting the increasing preoccupation around the economic implications. Under the broad category of 'citizens', most articles included the 'elderly' and the 'family' as the most vulnerable entities to health hazards. Similarly, the category 'workers' recurrently included 'doctors' and 'health workers', both of whom are equally exposed to health and psychological threats.

Moreover, the articles repeatedly stressed the dangers of the pandemic on citizens' health, and the solidity of the Italian health system. Most reports focused on the lack of institutional resources needed for reception, treatment, and risk prevention. Significantly, journalists framed the relationship between health and economic risks in terms of a trade-off: 'health' was symbolically set against 'economy'. Indeed, initially, the health risk was strongly placed before any economic consideration. Gradually, as the emergency continued and closures intensified, the economic dimension gained more and more space in the public debate and press coverage.

3.2.3. Theme Q2/T3 - As resolvers of the crisis, institutions were at the forefront, responsible citizens followed

Table 9 - Codes representing the solution



Several solutions to prevent the consequences of the pandemic were discussed. Of these, most fall into three main categories: institutions, civic responsibility, and science. More frequently, the articles focused on containment strategies, regulations, and decrees concerning the governmental and institutional sphere. In particular, journalists compared choices made at the local level (e.g., by the regions) and those at the central level (by the government). Among the proposals, press coverage emphasised the need for: restrictive measures (preventive isolation and security measures); collaboration and coordination; international agreements to mitigate the global effects of the pandemic; increased economic and health resources to reduce the contagion. Institutional solutions got at the forefront of the journalistic discourse with even more intensity in the second timeframe. Alongside the institutional and governmental spheres, many articles have referred to citizens’ civic sense, cooperation, trust, and solidarity as intangible – but fundamental – resources to contain the virus. For instance, citizens’ precautions were invoked as a crucial component of social cohesion that could help fighting the common enemy. Moreover, science has been invoked as a privileged source of expertise and strategic solutions to counter the crisis. Numerous articles have invoked scientists, virologists, and immunologists as bearers of expert knowledge. However, the analysis showed that journalists have sometimes opposed political and economic solutions to proposals based on scientific knowledge.

3.3. Transversal narratives becoming predominant over time (Q3)

Until the beginning of the national lockdown, on the 10th of March, we observed a sort of seesaw in the press coverage. In an initial phase, the newspaper has gone after the unstable restrictive measures employed by the government in different domains of social life and geographical areas. The general uncertainty about the actual danger of the virus contributed to the construction of a dualistic frame – panic vs. no panic – shifting day by day. Accordingly, between the end of February and the beginning of March, representations quickly swung between a ‘securitarian’ discourse and a more ‘permissive’ one.

Gradually, as the healthcare emergency worsened, newspaper contents became more and more aligned on advocating the need of stricter measures.

After the implementation of the hard lockdown, as the COVID-19 emergency ended up occupying the whole newspaper, many editorial articles started proposing more general reflections on Italian society facing an overwhelming crisis. In the observed sample of articles, two main narratives gradually arose. On the one hand, as we have already seen before, the pandemic has been depicted as a revelation of pre-existing problems. On the other hand, it has been presented as an opportunity for change in any social domain. Being non-mutually exclusive – yet, interlinked – both frames indicate a process of sense-making related to a momentous event. In this vein, by elaborating meanings and sense around it, we observed that the pandemic gradually became the mirror of something else.

3.3.1. Theme Q3/T1 - The COVID-19 emergency as a revelation of pre-existing problems

A first ‘defeatist’ strand focused on institutional responsibilities. First and foremost, a public communication issue emerged. Government institutions were criticised for being unable to communicate with citizens; at the same time, the role of the scientific community was represented ambiguously. Scientists were alternatively framed as ‘decision-makers’ or as ‘technical policy advisors’ of the government, questioning who bore the responsibility of establishing the restrictive measures.

A second narrative associated the COVID-19 emergency with pre-existing deficiencies related to the neoliberal paradigm, particularly the frailties of the welfare system. For instance, hospitals saturation was framed as the consequence of an increasingly privatised healthcare system – particularly with reference to Lombardy, the epicentre of the first wave and adopters of one of the most privatized healthcare systems in the country. Similarly, the COVID-19 emergency was reported as highlighting the drawbacks of cuts in public funding for scientific research and public spending overall.

Thirdly, the pandemic was reported as challenging governmental relation between administrative levels. At the national level, the crisis was discussed as raising the need to rethink the constitutional mandate to Italian regions to manage healthcare. Indeed, the division of responsibilities between local and national authorities has been said to provoke a general misalignment in the emergency management – e.g., regarding the epidemic tracking and tests supply management. On an international level, the virus has been framed as a threat to the European project, revealing structural potential weaknesses of the European Union. For instance, the absence of a communitarian fiscal policy returned to the forefront, exacerbating pre-existent divisions between EU countries based on whether easing or not the austerity on public debt. Many articles have contributed to frame the pandemic as a sort of nemesis of unsustainable economic sectors – e.g., the football economy’s excessive reliance on TV revenues – and social lifestyles, the latter being epitomised by white-collar commuting executives, who suddenly became a main vector of contagion. Similarly, due to the increasing mobility characterising urban lifestyles, large cities were argued to foster the virus spread. Nevertheless, by virtue of the huge economic interests they were able to attract, large cities as Milan were also framed as ‘too big to close’. This attitude was epitomized by the hashtag *#milanononsiferma* (*#nostoppingmilan*) launched by the Milan municipality and shared in many newspaper contents. In the February 28 op-ed signed by the *Corriere*’s director, *#milanononsiferma* is evoked an opportunity to rethink our relationship with risks and dangers.

3.3.2. Theme Q3/T2 - The COVID-19 emergency as an opportunity for social change

In a parallel narrative, the COVID-19 crisis has been framed as an opportunity to rethink social life and institutions. In this vein, COVID-19 was discussed as reflecting the validity of past choices and orienting future ones. For instance, it was framed as the ‘opportunity’ for a paradigm shift for Europe and the European Central Bank, in favour of a greater European solidarity between EU countries, and greater flexibility with respect to debt policies. Overall, the pandemic has been portrayed as an opportunity to enhance international cooperation on healthcare, treatments, and medical research. On a national basis, the war metaphor has often been used to indicate the possibility of a post-Covid economic boom and the need for a ‘new Marshall plan’. Similarly, the need of a reconstruction was indicated as the chance to improve public administration’s efficacy. As we already observed, the healthcare emergency was represented as the chance to reorganise the National healthcare service in favour of a greater territorial capillarity. In this vein, the so-called ‘Genova model’¹² was often employed as the ideal type to follow to accelerate public investments. Moreover, the COVID-19 emergency was reported to renew public attention towards any social problems that have been disregarded in the last years, such as the prisons overcrowding and blue-collars working condition.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper showed that the press storytelling of the COVID-19 crisis in Italy went through different stages, gradually transcending the mere chronicle of the epidemic and decentring the virus as the main character. Through a chronological analysis of the articles, we identified different narrative frames. Initially, the COVID-19 emergency was mainly depicted as a risk for the healthcare system and the economy. Consistently, the danger was identified in the virus, responsible for disrupting everyday life – e.g., people gatherings – economy, education, and so on. While the virus’ existence gradually became part of the ‘taken for granted’, editorial articles started to address side issues arising from the epidemic crisis. In this vein, the emergency has been represented as the *litmus test* of a deeper and structural crisis involving Western societies at various levels. In short, the COVID-19 has been reported to reveal and to exacerbate pre-existing social problems no longer negligible, such as the ongoing weakening of the public welfare system. Then, in line with Giuseppe Conte’s slogan “we will come through as better people” (“*Ne usciremo migliori*”), the epidemic was eventually represented as an opportunity to rethink those dimensions of social life that have proven to be unsustainable. From being represented as the only danger, the virus has gradually become just a facet of the problem e an opportunity for practicing collective reflexivity.

¹² This was a reference to the fast reconstruction of the Morandi Bridge in Genoa, which collapsed in 2018.