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## The Story Behind the Story: Reporting Conditions in China During the Coronavirus Crisis as Told by the Correspondents of El País and ABC

La historia detrás de la historia: Las condiciones de trabajo periodístico en China durante la crisis del coronavirus contada por los corresponsales de El País y ABC

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**ABSTRACT** This study seeks to investigate the reporting conditions in the early coverage of the coronavirus crisis by the China correspondents of two Spanish newspapers: El País and ABC. After conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the correspondents, this study finds that they only started to focus on the viral outbreak once Wuhan city had been locked down. The interviewed correspondents faced logistical, political, professional and personal challenges while covering coronavirus in China due to the impossibility of entering Wuhan, censorship, difficulties in finding people that would speak to them and the general uncertainty of the situation, respectively. They also showed diverging perceptions with regards to the implications of their role for intercultural dialogue. The present study helps to contextualize foreign correspondents' coverage of Covid-19 in China by shedding light on the factors that constrained their professional practice.

**KEYWORDS** Coronavirus, Covid-19, foreign correspondents, reporting conditions, China, censorship

**RESUMEN** Este estudio busca investigar las condiciones de trabajo durante la cobertura inicial de la crisis del coronavirus por parte de los corresponsales en China de dos diarios españoles: El País y ABC. Después de realizar entrevistas en profundidad semiestructuradas con los corresponsales, este estudio muestra que los corresponsales solo empezaron a centrarse en el brote de coronavirus cuando la ciudad de Wuhan fue confinada. Los corresponsales entrevistados se encontraron con barreras de tipo logístico, político, profesional y personal en su cobertura de la crisis sanitaria, por la imposibilidad de entrar en Wuhan, la censura, la dificultad para encontrar fuentes y la incertidumbre general de la situación, respectivamente. Asimismo, mostraron percepciones diferentes en lo que respecta a las implicaciones de su trabajo para el diálogo intercultural. El presente estudio ayuda a contextualizar la cobertura de la Covid-19 en China por parte de los corresponsales internacionales al arrojar luz sobre los factores que constriñeron su práctica profesional.

### PALABRAS CLAVE

Coronavirus, covid-19, corresponsales internacionales, condiciones laborales, China, censura

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## The Story Behind the Story: Reporting Conditions in China During the Coronavirus Crisis as Told by the Correspondents of El País and ABC

### 1. Introduction

Journalists tell stories, but there is always a story behind the story. With regards to the Covid-19 pandemic, researchers have studied what specific stories journalists told, when and where; who was featured in them; how reporters told those stories, and why they might have done it that way. This study aims to go back to the origins of the pandemic and tell the story behind that story. It seeks to investigate the reporting conditions in the early coverage of the coronavirus crisis in China as experienced by the correspondents there of two Spanish newspapers, El País and ABC.

This study queries the correspondents of El País and ABC about their experiences, challenges and regrets in the early days of their reporting on Covid-19 in China. This is achieved through in-depth semi-structured interviews with Macarena Vidal Liy, China correspondent for El País, and Pablo M. Díez, ABC's correspondent in Asia.

From a broader perspective, this study seeks to link foreign correspondence with intercultural communication. Do foreign correspondents act as intercultural communicators or as constructors of foreign realities? Thus, another key element to be uncovered through the interviews is correspondents' approach to intercultural communication, focusing on their identity, skills and attitude toward interculturality.

In order to better understand the findings of this research, however, it is necessary first to summarize what research on media coverage of Covid-19 has found so far, focusing on Spanish media and on media coverage of the pandemic in China, and to offer an overview of the reporting conditions in China. Complementing this literature review, some brief theoretical notes portray foreign correspondence in the framework of intercultural communication. The goals of this study and the methodology used are outlined next, before delving deeper into the findings. Finally, a conclusion encapsulates the main takeaways from this research and compares it to previous studies.

### 2. Literature review on media coverage of Covid-19

Media coverage of Covid-19 has drawn attention from the scholarly community and has been studied from many angles. There have been studies looking at the health consequences of media exposure, linking the use of stigmatizing language in coronavirus media coverage in the U.S. to discrimination and bias toward Asian Americans, examining the social implications of labeling choices in news headlines or analyzing the use of metaphors—a classic topic in the academic literature on media coverage of diseases—

to refer to health workers (Garfin, Silver, and Holman, 2020; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Prieto-Ramos, Pei, and Cheng, 2020; Mohammed, Peter, Killackey, and Maciver, 2021).

With regards to media framing of Covid-19, Gui (2021) observed the deployment of the metaphorical war fame dominated news reports of Chinese mainstream media, although its meaning evolved over time and went from preventive war in the early days to people's war and total war at the height of the crisis. The evolving use of these metaphors entailed diverging expectations from the public's role in containing the spread of the virus and might have contribute to make people more willing to accept sacrifices in order to control the outbreak (Gui, 2021). Fernández-Pedemonte, Casillo and Jorge-Artigau (2020) noted that metaphors of war, care and time were predominant in the framings of the pandemic by digital media in Argentina. They found that each metaphor was promoted by a particular group of enunciators —war by politicians and economic experts, care by health specialists and the media, and time by health institutions and corporations— and that their use was linked to a point of view on the phenomenon that defined the political and social relationships activated by the pandemic (Fernández-Pedemonte et al., 2020).

In the case coverage of Covid-19 by Spanish media —the media system to which the objects of study of this research belong—, there is a considerable body of literature as well. Argiñano and Goikoetxea Bilbao (2020) analyzed the headlines and pictures in the front pages of five dailies from January 2020 to April 2020 and found that coronavirus was treated as a foreign matter in the first two months of their sample and flooded newspapers' front pages once it became a Spanish issue in March. Picazo Sánchez, de Frutos Torres and Gutiérrez Martín (2020) concluded in their analysis of the framings of alarm and reassurance used in the front pages of three daily newspapers that their framing choices were based on each outlet's ideological orientation toward the Spanish government rather than on the news events they reported or health reasons.

Another study observed that civil society and Spain's government were the subjects that attracted the most headlines in the coverage of the outbreak and initial expansion of Covid-19 by Spanish digital media (Abuín Vences, Sierra Sánchez, Mañas-Viniegra, and Núñez Gómez, 2020). Moreover, Iranzo-Cabrera and López-García (2021) studied how mass media used leading scientific figures' statements as sources of information during the first wave of Covid-19 in Spain to provide certainty in an uncertain context, but also paid attention to their aesthetics and communication style.

Casero-Ripollés's research showed that audiences reconnected to legacy media, especially television, during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, reducing inequalities in media consumption and revitalizing the public sphere (Casero-Ripollés, 2020). This suggests that, at least in the context of a major health crisis, the public turned away from social media and toward established media outlets with a long trajectory (Casero-Ripollés, 2020). Still, Sanjuán-Pérez et al. found that content on the coronavirus epidemic in the 24 hours of free-to-air Spanish television was slow to pay attention to Covid-19, as references to the disease were not significant until March, when some people infected with the virus had already died in Spain and death counts were spiking

in Italy (Sanjuán-Pérez et al., 2020). This evidences that Spanish generalist broadcasters failed to anticipate the effects of the pandemic until they were already visible (Sanjuán-Pérez et al., 2020).

As for media coverage of coronavirus in China—which constitutes the object of study of this research—, there have been some studies too. China's response to Covid-19 was depicted by Spanish mainstream newspapers as slow and passive initially and as draconian and bold following the lockdown of Wuhan, with criticisms of censorship and data manipulation and allegations of a cover-up of the first cases, according to Huo and Sautman (Huo and Sautman, 2021). However, these depictions did not make Spanish citizens' perception of China significantly more negative and newspapers' coverage of Covid-19 in China did not alter the image of China in Spain in a meaningful way (Huo and Sautman, 2021).

Zhang and Shaw looked at the coverage of China's handling of the coronavirus outbreak by three U.K. outlets (Zhang and Shaw, 2020). Taking articles published by the BBC, The Guardian and the Daily Mail over a 20-week period from January to May, Zhang and Shaw found that the three outlets covered similar topics and coincided in reporting coronavirus as a threat, although some topics as well as the sentiment they conveyed were different: the BBC tended to be neutral, with fewer direct criticism of China and absent praise; the Daily Mail packaged stories in a more sensational way and paid attention to social topics; while The Guardian was somewhat in the middle in terms of emotion and put human rights at the center of its coverage of China's handling of the crisis (Zhang and Shaw, 2020).

Another study undertook a critical discourse analysis of China's official media discourse during the Covid-19 epidemic by focusing on their tilting toward nationalist and globalist stances (Yang and Chen, 2020). While both globalism and nationalism were present, China's official media was seen as polarized in a nationalistic way. As Yang and Chen put it, "[...] China's media representation of the COVID-19 outbreak is characterized by a deliberate construction of a positive self-representation and a negative other-representation based on binary or antagonistic opposites of us versus them" (Yang and Chen, 2020). Yang and Chen's study showed that Chinese official media discourse sought to legitimize the Chinese Communist Party and defend the international reputation of China, pointing to a political influence on news reports that was also noted by Gui regarding the use of war metaphors (Yang and Chen, 2020; Gui, 2021).

Thomas, Wilson, Tonkin, Miller and Ward analyzed how Australian media attributed responsibility for the Covid-19 pandemic and observed that explicit blame was sparse, indirect and infrequent during the period they studied, ending in March 2020 (Thomas et al., 2020). While the virus was frequently described as originating from China, it was only at the end of their sample that direct criticism toward the response from the Chinese government was deployed, these researchers found (Thomas et al., 2020). In another analysis of Australian media coverage of China's efforts to contain Covid-19, Sun observed that there was a convergence across the ownership—public and commercial media—and ideological—liberal and conservative—spectrum around unfavorable reporting about China in relation to Covid-19 (Sun, 2021).

Hubner's analysis of the reporting on Covid-19 by major U.S. newspapers revealed that their early news coverage focused on the spread of the disease and subsequent detrimental effect on society (Hubner, 2021). This focus on the societal impact rather than on the health risks might have established Covid-19 as a threat to one's way of life rather than a serious threat to one's health, Hubner (2021) wrote. Meanwhile, Jia and Lu (2021) also observed an alignment between coverage of China's handling of Covid-19 by U.S. media and the strategy of the Trump administration toward Beijing.

Nevertheless, the most relevant piece of research for the purposes of this study is a critical discourse analysis of the coverage of the coronavirus crisis in China by the correspondents of *El País* and *ABC* previously carried out by the author (Calatayud Vaello, 2021). Since the present study follows on from an explicit recommendation outlined in that article—to interview correspondents who covered coronavirus for those newspapers to learn about their experiences—and builds on its findings, it is important to recall the main conclusions from that paper were that Chinese authorities had an overarching presence in the coverage by correspondents of both newspapers, as social actors represented in their stories, as sources of information and as agents of the story lines that gave context to their coverage, such as: lack of transparency, lack of freedoms, government control, and Xi's accumulation of power (Calatayud Vaello, 2021). By contrast, Covid-19 patients attracted comparatively little attention, with the exception of Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist from Wuhan who died from Covid-19 and who was portrayed as a symbol of the health crisis because he warned his colleagues about the outbreak and was reprimanded by police for it. That study found that correspondents' reporting focused on the Chinese government's response to the crisis rather than on the disease or the health situation, and that Chinese authorities were the main social actors found in their coverage and were represented in negative terms (Calatayud Vaello, 2021). As a result, coronavirus patients had a minor role in these correspondents' coverage and were usually represented as speechless statistics and, thus, othered. Moreover, it found a marked presence of references to Chinese culture. "Even when dealing with a public health issue, there is a notable cultural dimension in the articles of the China correspondents of *El País* and *ABC*. After all, they may be covering an epidemic, but they are still covering China" (Calatayud Vaello, 2021: 75).

### 3. Reporting conditions in China

In an analysis of the voices shaping the image of China portrayed by five weekly newspapers from the U.K., the U.S., Germany and France, Mokry found that access to sources, or lack thereof, due to China's reporting conditions was crucial (Mokry, 2017: 662):

"Journalists seem to be aware of these effects and try to mitigate them by drawing on diverse strategies: when access to sources within the government proves impossible, they quote Party-state media. When Chinese scholars refuse to talk to them, they turn to foreign experts. In cases where state institutions intimidate individual sources, foreign journalists draw on different measures of source protection, for example quoting sources anonymously by changing their name, location and gender."



Sun (2015) also put under the spotlight the often tense relations between China's authorities and foreign correspondents based there. Sun showed that China's public diplomacy efforts have not been fruitful in courting foreign correspondents due to, among other factors, the Chinese government's inability to understand how foreign correspondents work (Sun, 2015).

Zeng (2018) looked into the institutional constraints under which foreign correspondents work in China and concluded that state coercion is a major source of external pressure on the field of foreign correspondence. Zeng noted that blocking access to certain areas and information channels was the most common obstacle correspondents had to clear to do their job, but there were instances of surveillance, harassment and intimidation as well (Zeng, 2018). Although correspondents are aware of these challenges and try to anticipate and negotiate them, none of their tactics is enough to address the structural coercion (Zeng, 2018).

In this regard, the annual reports elaborated by the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China, or FCCC, can provide insights on the reporting conditions in the country too. The FCCC report from 2021 denounced that at least 20 foreign journalists had been expelled from the country the prior year, that Chinese nationals working for foreign media faced increasing pressure and that the coronavirus pandemic —and associated public-health measures— became another way to control and limit foreign journalists, as part of a broader decline in media freedom in China (FCCC, 2021). According to the report, none of the correspondents surveyed by the club responded that working conditions in China had improved during the previous year (FCCC, 2021).

#### 4. Foreign correspondents within intercultural communication

This study aspires to shed some light on foreign correspondents' role within intercultural communication. The author has outlined elsewhere a more comprehensive approach to a theorization of foreign correspondents within intercultural communication (Calatayud Vaello, 2019). At the very least, the links between the field of foreign correspondence and intercultural communication can be placed at two levels: at the interpersonal level, correspondents engage in intercultural communication processes; at the mediated level, their work may contribute to shaping intercultural expectations in their audiences.

A previous paper by the author cited above already explored the intercultural dimension of the discourses produced by the correspondents contemplated in this study about the coronavirus in China (Calatayud Vaello, 2021). By reviewing correspondents' role as participants in intercultural communication processes, this study can help understand the approach to intercultural communication adopted by the correspondents of *El País* and *ABC*.

Two concepts that have been developed by intercultural communication studies seem relevant for understanding foreign correspondents' condition as participants in processes of intercultural communication: identity and competence. While the former enables an examination on the socialization correspondents undergo once they are dispatched to their foreign postings, as newcomers, the latter looks at the skills participants in intercultural communication acquire.

With regards to identity, Kim's cross-cultural adaptation theory and Casmir's third-culture building theory can be used to gauge the degree to which correspondents' identity has changed as a result of their intercultural socialization (Kim, 2009; Casmir, 1997). Kim describes the intercultural transformations experienced by individuals that have completed their primary socialization in a culture and then have prolonged first-hand contact with a new culture (Kim, 2009). In contrast, Casmir's theory is purposive as it aims to be used by intercultural communication practitioners in real-life situations, not just for theoretical purposes in academic environments (Casmir, 1997). When it comes to competence, Chen's intercultural communication competence theory can aid in understanding the skills developed by correspondents (Chen, 2009).

## 5. Objectives and methodology

This study aims to understand the reporting conditions foreign correspondents encountered in China during their coverage of the Covid-19 outbreak specifically and, from a broader perspective, their approach to intercultural communication as correspondents. It focuses on the China correspondents of *El País* and *ABC*, as these two correspondents stayed in mainland China during the first quarter of 2020 —the peak of the health crisis in that country— and work for two generalist outlets that were selected due to their large circulation within Spain.

In order to achieve that general goal, this paper aspires to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1: How did the studied correspondents approach their coverage of the coronavirus crisis?
- RQ2: What obstacles did correspondents find during their coverage of the coronavirus crisis?
- RQ3: What skills have foreign correspondents developed to engage in intercultural communication processes?
- RQ4: Do foreign correspondents try to foster an intercultural dialogue through their work?
- RQ5: Are reporting conditions reflected somehow in correspondents' coverage of the crisis?

In order to answer those research questions, this study used a qualitative method: semi-structured interviews. This method is appropriate for the purposes of this study, as it is useful to gain an understanding of key practitioners within a given field (Ahlin, 2019). In journalism studies, semi-structured interviews have previously been deployed to research exchanges between media practitioners, news production practices, perceptions on reporting approaches, foreign correspondents' daily work routines or their interactions with sources, to name a few (Archetti, 2011; Cheng and Lee, 2015; Cooper, 2018; Madrid-Morales and Wasserman, 2018; Ouariachi and Peralta, 2021; van Antwerpen, Turnbull, and Searston, 2022; Zhang and Zhang, 2018).

The preparation of the interview questionnaire for this study followed the phases outlined by Kallio et al. (2016). Table 1 shows the questionnaire used as a starting point in the interviews:

**Table 1:** Questions for interviews with China correspondents who covered coronavirus

1 <sup>st</sup> Block: Coverage of the coronavirus crisis	
When did you first hear about the coronavirus?	
How did you plan your coverage? Was it more a matter of following events as they developed, or did you think about a series of topics you wanted to address?	
What difficulties did you find in your coverage?	
Did you have any problems finding sources?	
Would you attribute any of these difficulties to cultural elements?	
Did people around you affect your coverage in any way?	
In hindsight, is there anything you would have done differently or written differently?	
Did your approach to the coverage change at the time? Has it changed since then?	
2 <sup>nd</sup> Block: Intercultural communication	
How would you define your cultural identity?	
Being a foreign correspondent, you have to navigate between different cultures. Does that change the way you perceive them? How?	
Would you say that you have acquired intercultural competence by being a foreign correspondent?	
To obtain information while working as a foreign correspondent, do you use intercultural competence?	
In the stories you write, do you try to favor an intercultural dialogue?	
In your opinion, which of the two options below defines better what a foreign correspondent is? Why?	- An intercultural communicator
	- A constructor of foreign realities

Source: Own elaboration

Once the questionnaire had been prepared and tested, the next move was to reach out to correspondents to request the interviews. Given that the correspondents were in China and it was not possible to go there to conduct in-person interviews, the interviews were conducted using WeChat's videocall function. Both interviews took place in January 2021 and were recorded. The interview with ABC's correspondent lasted 1 hour and 18 minutes and the interview with El País's correspondent, 1 hour and 23 minutes.

During each interview, the questionnaire was followed with only small variations. Occasionally, follow-up questions were asked. Having done the interviews, the last step before analyzing the contents obtained from correspondents' responses was the transcription.



## 6. Findings

As for the findings, the contents generated from the interviews have been presented under two sections: their experiences on the coverage of coronavirus and their views on intercultural communication. Wherever there is a coincidence or pattern in correspondents' responses, that is singled out. The same happens where there is disagreement between them. Those observations are supplemented and supported with relevant quotes that illustrate correspondents' thinking. In order to shorten references to the interviewees, El País's correspondent will be referred to as EPC and ABC's correspondent, as ABCC.

### 6.1. Coverage of coronavirus crisis in China

#### 6.1.1. "It caught everyone off guard": Covid-19 breaks out

Both EPC and ABCC were outside of China when they first heard about the new coronavirus. For both, the initial news was when the Chinese government informed the World Health Organization about a viral outbreak affecting Wuhan on December 31, 2019. "I think it caught everyone off guard because of the date, just on New Year's Eve, and with most correspondents who cover China on vacation abroad," ABCC said.

On their return to Asia after the Christmas break, both correspondents went straight to Taiwan to cover the presidential election which was held on January 11, 2020. After Taiwan's vote, EPC went to Vietnam on a reporting trip and only returned to Beijing at the end of January, while ABCC headed to Shanghai. The correspondents coincided in highlighting the difficulty of making calls about the seriousness of the disease in the early days and pointed to another factor: recent precedents of infectious outbreaks that had ended up being lighter than they initially seemed. At the risk of sounding false alarms, the correspondents thought, news of the new virus had to be viewed with a grain of salt.

They had historical precedents in mind. EPC said she thought it would be a something like the MERS outbreak South Korea suffered in 2015. ABCC explained that he regarded a situation like SARS as the worst-case scenario that, hopefully, would not materialize:

"At the beginning —at least I talk from my own experience— you have that fear that it could be something like SARS. In any case, the worst you can think of is that this is going to be like SARS. That is what I thought at first. But since during the first weeks China doesn't say that there are infections among humans, that it doesn't seem likely or that, if there are, they are very limited, I believe at the beginning we didn't give it the importance it later had, because we didn't see it with that information."

Indeed, things would soon take a turn for the worse. That meant that new decisions over how to proceed with their coverage of the unfolding crisis awaited foreign correspondents.

#### 6.1.2. "The biggest regret of my career": Wuhan calling

The first important decision in the coverage of the coronavirus crisis was whether to go to Wuhan or not. EPC did not go to Wuhan, but a colleague did. On the day EPC came back

to Beijing from the reporting trip to Vietnam, a colleague had been told to go to Wuhan, just before the city was locked down. Nevertheless, EPC's colleague was evacuated from Wuhan days later, which meant that EPC had to assume the responsibility of covering Wuhan's lockdown from Beijing.

In ABCC's case, he finally made up his mind to go to Wuhan, but it was too late. The lockdown of the city had already been announced, and ABCC had missed the chance to get in. For ABCC, not being able to enter Wuhan represented a "failure." "That will be, I think, the biggest regret of my career," he said.

ABCC and EPC agree on pointing to January 23, 2020 the day Wuhan was locked down, as the turning point. Up until that day, the dimension of the crisis had not been clear for EPC. Out of China for weeks, EPC had been reassured by the information given by the Chinese government, so that she did not think that the situation could get out of hand the way it did.

ABCC, by contrast, acknowledged that he had been in a wait-and-see mode until January 23. From that point, ABCC focused on following the news flow out of Wuhan, and on reporting the situation in other parts of China. The coverage took a heavy toll on ABCC. There were days when he had to file several stories until late at night and wake up after a few hours' sleep the following only to check out the latest figures of infections and deaths.

### 6.1.3. "We were all very afraid": Uncertainty and stress

One issue that came up in the interviews was the emotional toll that the coronavirus crisis—that is, living in it, on top of reporting on it—left on the foreign correspondents. Uncertainty, stress, worries about their health and that of relatives, and physical fatigue were all part of the coverage as well.

Although Wuhan suffered the biggest coronavirus outbreak in China, EPC explained there so there were restrictions in Beijing too, as well as concerns about whether things could complicate further. "In my case, I spent 59 days in a row working without being able to take even one day off. I only had three half-days off that I requested, to be able to go buy groceries," EPC said. Adding to the fatigue, EPC was left alone for months, as their relatives left China following advice from their home government. ABCC admitted that he suffered from fear and uncertainty. At that time, it was not known what the disease was like, how deadly it could be, and how people could get infected. "The truth is we were all very afraid, and that affected the approach to the news. It wasn't only about telling what happened, it was also about what happened to you and how your life had been blown up at that time," ABCC said. Having reported on several natural disasters and revolutions in Asia, ABCC admitted that what worried them most about coronavirus was the fact that it could reach their own country, where ABCC feared for their family. "Of all the stories I have covered here, this is the one I like the least because it has been the most anxious one, the one that has scared me the most, the one I have had the worst time with," ABCC said.

#### 6.1.4. “There wasn’t time to think”: How correspondents approached the crisis

In terms of their approach to coverage of the crisis, there was a key difference between the two correspondents, at least at the beginning: EPC had a colleague in Wuhan, while ABCC was on his own in Shanghai.

For EPC, the last week of January was all about “putting fires out and patching things up,” trying to understand the dimension of the crisis. That involved reading the local press—with a degree of skepticism—and talking to people, EPC explained. Moreover, EPC had to coordinate from Beijing with a colleague who was in Wuhan. A division of labor between the two was implemented: EPC would focus on the more newsworthy aspects—like the building of makeshift hospitals in Wuhan, figures of infections and deaths, shortages of equipment, cases of discrimination against Hubei residents in other cities or censorship—, while the colleague explained the situation on the ground. According to EPC, planning anything on the coverage was challenging:

“There wasn’t much time to think or to plan anything because the accumulation of events was so big that we could barely report them. Doing that was enough. Planning big stories... was just not possible. A lot of things happened those days, and it all culminated with the death of physician Li Wenliang.”

Once ABCC was fully focused on covering the coronavirus crisis and realized that he would not be able to get into Wuhan, he tried to warn readers at home of what was about to come. To explain how China had adapted to the new circumstances brought about by the epidemic, as an advance of what awaited other parts of the world, was an objective for ABCC. “For me, reporting on coronavirus was a personal crusade,” ABCC said. That effort eventually had rewards for ABCC:

“I have been reached out by people to thank me because, while governments downplayed coronavirus, thanks to the reports we filed from China, they could protect themselves. That is the greatest satisfaction that your work can give you, especially in such a tough coverage.”

However, both EPC and ABCC highlighted that they had to overcome many obstacles, in addition to the uncertainty and stress mentioned above, in their coverage of the coronavirus crisis in China.

#### 6.1.5. “People were quite afraid to talk”: Difficulties in the coverage

Being barred from entering Wuhan, little transparency from the Chinese government, censorship of Chinese media, fake information, tensions with authorities and Chinese people’s reluctance to speak to foreign media were some of the top difficulties singled out by the correspondents of El País and ABCC in the interviews.

For EPC, the main difficulty was not being able to access Wuhan. EPC’s colleague managed to get into the city before the lockdown was introduced, but was evacuated a week later, leaving her in charge of covering the crisis from Beijing. “Even if you talked to people [in Wuhan] and they told you, you couldn’t verify at 100%. You could get an idea, but...” EPC recalled.

Moreover, EPC highlighted that, after a few days of relative freedom for Chinese media, authorities changed tack in the wake of Li Wenliang's death. According to EPC, the public anger caused by that event triggered a fierce wave of censorship:

"During the first days, Chinese media were able to report with relative freedom, but from then on that was cut. Everything moved to a much more benevolent narrative of what was happening, and it became more difficult to get people to talk to you, they started to be afraid to talk... As the situation improved and there were beds for the sick people, families that until then had been desperate and talked to anybody to see if anyone was able to help them get a bed was less willing to talk..."

The fact that the lockdown there became harsher from mid-February was another factor. "What people knew was little, only what they could see from their windows or what their friends told them via social media. It was difficult to access direct sources," EPC said. EPC also referred to a spike in fake information, and to the difficulties of verifying what circulated on social media. "In all that maze, trying to figure out what really happened was more difficult than it is under normal circumstances," she said.

EPC also described tensions with authorities. "The moment you start to ask you are being negative, not helping, and 'this isn't about blaming anyone, but about rowing all together in the same direction to solve it,'" EPC said.

ABCC coincided in pointing to the lack of transparency of the Chinese government as a key obstacle. The government did provide official information about the balance of figures. Nevertheless, ABCC never believed that the numbers of coronavirus infections of deaths from Wuhan given by authorities were accurate, and was frustrated by authorities' refusal to answer questions about that topic. Beyond that, ABCC found difficulties to dig deeper. "It is very difficult that unofficial sources from the Chinese government talk to a foreign journalist," ABCC said. Therefore, ABCC resorted to scientific studies to try to get a more comprehensive understanding of what the coronavirus was.

ABCC attributed people's reluctance to talk to propaganda disseminated by the Chinese government:

"This is a political issue. I have seen in the 16 years I have been here that it is increasingly hard to work for journalists. Chinese people have more reluctance, fear, and apprehension to Westerners and, obviously, to journalists because the regime's propaganda has labeled us as enemies of China, even if what we are is critics of a government, not enemies of any country. We are journalists and our mission is to report what happens, denounce things that aren't right so they can be fixed, and that is what we do in our own country as well. But that isn't understood here, because the media's mission is propaganda."

EPC coincided with ABCC in pointing out that Chinese propaganda against foreign media did not help them in their coverage of coronavirus. To overcome that reluctance to speak to foreigners, having a Chinese fixer was crucial. "If the assistant goes on his own, it's easier that people open up," she insisted.

While correspondents faced diverse difficulties during their coverage of the coronavirus in China, they also had some regrets about what they did and how their stories were

received back at home.

#### 6.1.6. "If I had known what I know now...": Correspondents' regrets

EPC wished she had known about the potential danger of the disease to warn it was more serious than SARS. "We all thought that it would be a matter of a few months and it would stay limited to a geographic area more or less large but limited there, and that by the summer this would be over. But we didn't know," she said. On a more personal level, EPC said their stories would have been different if she had had at the time the information she later learned.

For ABCC, the biggest regret is a different one: he wished he had booked a flight ticket to Wuhan earlier to be able to cover the city's lockdown from inside. However, both ABCC and EPC showed a certain feeling of being ignored by their editors and audiences. EPC explained how once Wuhan and Hubei were put under lockdown, she realized that the virus was likely to spread all over the world, but her worries were met with a prejudiced "cultural self-indulgence":

"I talked to senior editors and they were like: 'Can you imagine that happening here?' 'No, that would be controlled quickly here.' Maybe we all fell for a certain degree of cultural self-indulgence. Since this was in China... It was like: 'In China, this can happen, because people are Chinese, hospitals are worse, but we are the first world and we are going to control it well.'"

ABCC emphasized how he tried to sound the alarm in their stories about the severity of the disease and its potential danger, and how some readers eventually expressed their gratitude for that. At the same time, ABCC believes not all the warnings were listened to. "At the beginning, we were accused of being alarmists for explaining what happened here," ABCC lamented. ABCC insisted that he tried to relay a sense of urgency and to give the impression that the outbreak could reach his home country as well. "You realize that, actually, people think catastrophes won't occur to them, but they can happen. This is what the coronavirus demonstrated," ABCC said.

### 6.2. Correspondents' views on intercultural communication

#### 6.2.1. "Who am I?": Identity

To induce the foreign correspondents to do some introspection about culture and interculturality, the block of the interviews focused on intercultural communication began with a personal question about their cultural identity.

"My cultural background is so mixed," EPC said. And EPC elaborated: she was born and raised in Spain but left more than half of their life ago, so EPC has spent more than half of their life abroad in different places. The cultural mix does not end there. "My mother is Chinese-Cuban, we have also that part of Cuban culture and Chinese culture. I have that in my DNA, I've had it breast-fed. I married to a Briton, we've lived most of our marriage in the U.S., now in China," EPC added. That made EPC conclude: "Where I'm from or where I feel from, I wouldn't know what to say. I don't know." After being asked whether a citizen of the world would be an answer, EPC hesitated somewhat before going for it: "I'm not very [from the country where EPC was born], but here certainly I'm



not Chinese. In the U.S., I'm an alien.... Who am I? I don't know. Citizen of the world, I guess, a bit from everywhere."

Meanwhile, ABCC gave multiple answers, which indicate a multi-layered identity or a feeling of multiple belongings to different cultural groups. But ABCC added an important caveat: "After 16 years [in Asia], and before I had traveled a lot around the world, I want to have a global vision of society and of the world we live in. Of course, you are always marked by your culture and your education."

ABCC explained that, in China, he felt like someone different. "Here, I know I am a Westerner in China. For being a Westerner in China, only by getting on the street, especially here in China that people are very curious, a Westerner is someone different, right?" ABCC said.

### 6.2.2. "Things are neither black nor white": Adaptation to the host country

An important aspect to grasp correspondents from the perspective of intercultural communication is to understand how they adapted to their host country, which in this case was China.

EPC explained that having a Chinese background made her adaptation to China easier. "Part of my family is Chinese, so there are cultural issues that are built in my DNA, so they don't shock me," EPC said. Moreover, working as a foreign correspondent allowed EPC to be exposed to different cultures, changing her view of the world in the process. "For sure, that helped me to be open to the fact that things can be done in a lot of ways. There is no single solution or one single response to things. Most often, things are neither black nor white, they have many nuances," EPC said. "Trying to explain those nuances is one of my obsessions as a journalist," she added.

ABCC explained that his condition of being culturally different can create communication problems, but has positive aspects as well. "Being seen as someone different also generates curiosity and can generate a certain empathy with people that approaches you and wants to talk to you," he said. ABCC defended that, by being a foreign correspondent, one gains humanity, a capability to understand perspectives that are different from their own, and empathy. However, ABCC argued that those are abilities all journalists need, regardless of where they work. "If you want people to talk to you, you have to be a forthcoming person, with empathy, able to win people's trust so that they tell you everything," ABCC said. Working in a foreign country, according to ABCC, boosted those abilities: "You have a translator to say whatever you want, but first, come your face and your eyes, and I believe that is a very important part." ABCC's reflection on cultural adaption has brought up language barriers, which are addressed fully next.

### 6.2.3. "You always lose some freshness": Language

The two correspondents had diverging views with regards to the importance of speaking the local language for their job, and their engagement in intercultural communication processes with local people.

ABCC downplayed the importance of language differences. "The linguistic differences

or differences that may exist can be easily solved with translators. That isn't a problem," ABCC said. According to ABCC, what matters most is to be able to find interviewees and people who tell good stories. Then, it is important to be able to engage with them and establish a trust relationship, which in ABCC's opinion, is more often achieved through non-verbal means. "Those things are a matter of good luck, certain karma, and also of having that kindness or empathy that here in Asia, [...] at least initially, are fundamental weapons to relate to people. It is part of that intercultural, non-verbal communication," ABCC said.

EPC mentioned "the problem of language" as one of the key limitations for working as a foreign correspondent. Contrary to ABCC, EPC was not particularly enthusiastic about resorting to translators. "Simply due to vocabulary problems, just to interview a doctor about the subtleties of coronavirus symptoms you need a translator. You always lose some freshness by needing a third person, however good they are," EPC said.

#### 6.2.4. "You try to avoid going native": Intercultural communication competence

In addition to speaking language or finding a bridge language, correspondents need other skills to successfully participate in intercultural communication processes. Having an open mind, being culturally self-aware, empathy, treating different kinds of people differently, curiosity about other perspectives, learning new languages were the specific skills that came up in the interviews.

ABCC believes working as a journalist made him a more social being. Humanity, an open mind to understand different perspectives, empathy, forthcomingness are qualities ABCC claims to have acquired since he entered journalism in his home country and were boosted after moving abroad. "Being in contact with very different people makes you see, makes you understand, how each one of us handles their own human condition," ABCC said. ABCC claimed that the intercultural skillset needed to be a foreign correspondent had been integrated into his personality. "It's not that I use skills, I think I'm like that. My job has turned me this way," ABCC said.

EPC explained her multicultural upbringing meant intercultural competence was there almost from the crib. "I was raised in an environment of tolerance toward difference. In any case, being an international correspondent has fostered that feature that I had from the beginning. Of course, I've always been very keen on languages and I love to learn them," EPC expanded. However, EPC believes correspondents need to be cautious in their assimilation or they risk going native:

"Traveling around makes you keener on learning languages, and also wanting to learn everything about the culture of reception in different ways: go to eat local food, reading as much as possible about that place, try to adopt even hand gestures... [...] But then comes the correspondent's perspective to try to avoid what is called 'to go native'—to assimilate yourself so much that you lose objectivity and you see everything from the local point of view, without paying attention to the problems of the nuances that that culture may have."

### 6.2.5. Attitudes toward intercultural dialogue

When asked about whether they tried to favor an intercultural dialogue with their stories, the foreign correspondents interviewed were divided. Some of them held views that could not be more contradictory.

"I don't think it's a journalist's mission. I think a journalist's mission is to tell what happens, to give as much information as possible, as many perspectives as possible, and let the reader act accordingly," ABCC said. However, EPC replied to the same question by saying: "That's one of the pillars and the mission of a correspondent."

ABCC added that intercultural dialogue is not correspondents' job, as there is a risk that for fear of reporting something that might not be taken well, they miss important parts of the news, which would amount to self-censorship. "Almost all stories that we journalists publish are negative, which affect the image people have about a country. They affect the image people may have of China obviously, or of Asia... That's not something I can control," ABCC said.

Even though ABCC personally favors an intercultural dialogue, he does not believe that a correspondent's job is to foster it:

"What we have to do is to tell what there is as best as we can, and then people can dialogue if that's what they want. Obviously, I'm personally in favor of that intercultural dialogue, and of knowing other countries and knowing other societies and accepting the differences. I'm for that and try that my work contributes to show something else. I hope that's the case, but can't take for granted that that's the case either."

EPC disagreed with that. "We have a responsibility and a role in creating a narrative or an image, or allowing to understand the country we cover," EPC said. And she elaborated:

"I think a correspondent's role is to build bridges and to facilitate that the readers' culture—that of the country of the medium you work for— can better understand the culture of the country or the continent you are covering. I think we play a paramount role as the front line. When you are curious about a country, the first thing you do is check the news about that country."

Thus, the correspondents' views on the issue of intercultural dialogue are not just different, they are contradictory. It is important, though, to look closely at the arguments that support those confronted views.

ABCC was against the notion of foreign correspondents as facilitators of intercultural dialogue and argued that news takes priority, and that news should aspire to reflect reality as best as a reporter can. Other considerations—that is, considerations other than news such as preoccupation with fostering an intercultural dialogue— entail a risk of missing parts of the news, thus misrepresenting reality.

By contrast, EPC, who favors the view of foreign correspondents as facilitators of intercultural dialogue, defends that the way stories are framed leaves scope to try to build bridges between cultures. Since all news stories are written from a given perspective, let that perspective be one that allows readers to understand the country that is being covered.

## 7. Conclusion

This study set out to respond to five research questions. Namely, it aimed to understand how the China correspondents of El País and ABC approached their coverage of the coronavirus crisis (RQ1), what obstacles they faced (RQ2), what intercultural skills they developed (RQ3), whether they sought to foster an intercultural dialogue through their work (RQ4), and whether reporting conditions were somehow reflected in their coverage of the crisis (RQ5).

As for RQ1, the findings of this research show the correspondents interviewed for the study adopted a reactive attitude in the early days of the health crisis, as the potential impact of the outbreak was unknown and the authorities claimed the situation was under control. That wait-and-see mode was abandoned when Wuhan was locked down. From then on, correspondents became more proactive in their coverage of the crisis, although they encountered some constraints.

In response to RQ2, this study found that the China correspondents of El País and ABC encountered logistical, political, professional and personal difficulties while covering the coronavirus crisis. They could not enter Wuhan, they had to deal with the Chinese government's lack of transparency and media censorship, they were not able to talk to people who could tell them their personal stories about the crisis and the correspondents themselves suffered stress and fear because of the situation they found themselves in.

The respondents claimed to have gained cultural self-awareness, empathy, curiosity and interaction management skills in their career as correspondents, which addresses RQ3. That is, their responses point to the cognitive, affective and behavioral skills that Chen and Starosta (1996) identify as the basis for intercultural communication competence. It must be noted, though, that the correspondents disagreed over the importance of speaking the local language. Moreover, correspondents' perceptions of their cultural identity are somewhat aligned with what Casmir calls "third culture", but not with Kim's cross-cultural adaptation as that would entail going native and, perhaps, losing the perspective of their audience back at home (Kim, 2009; Casmir, 1997).

With regards to RQ4, the interviewed correspondents had opposed viewpoints when asked about whether they should foster an intercultural dialogue or not. El País's correspondent thought that was an essential part of a correspondent's job, but ABC's correspondent disagreed and insisted that journalists must reflect reality. In other words, El País's correspondent sees herself as an intercultural communicator that makes sense of other cultures to allow her audience to understand them, whereas ABC's correspondent understands that his task is to report on reality, without worrying about other considerations.

To aid in answering RQ5, it is necessary to review the main findings obtained in a critical discourse analysis of the coverage of the coronavirus crisis in China by the correspondents of El País and ABC carried out by the author elsewhere (Calatayud Vaello, 2021). As explained in the literature review, the analysis found that correspondents' coverage predominantly focused on Chinese authorities and that it was largely critical of the

Chinese government's handling of the health crisis. At the same time, the discourse analysis noted a significant presence of references to Chinese culture.

Thus, one initial takeaway from a comparison between the results of the analysis of correspondents' coverage and the findings from the interviews conducted for the present study may be that the reporting conditions faced by the correspondents explain the story behind the story. Without being able to access the center of the coronavirus crisis in China and of finding people to interview that could tell the human side of the crisis, the correspondents focused on what they could report: the Chinese government's response.

Indeed, there is a direct link between the reporting conditions the correspondents experienced and the content of their coverage. Chinese authorities' lack of transparency was the main story line found in the coverage of El País and ABC's coverage about the coronavirus crisis in China. Covid-19 patients were nearly absent from these correspondents' coverage because they were unable to interview people who had been affected by the disease or their relatives. And correspondents' critical representation of authorities should be read against the background of tensions between the Chinese government and foreign journalists.

As for the abundance of references to Chinese culture also observed in the analysis of correspondents' coverage, that may be seen as a way of enlarging—or updating—their audiences' knowledge of a foreign culture. In the interviews, the correspondents showed opposed attitudes toward whether they should foster intercultural communication, with El País's correspondent tilting toward a more interventionist role that seeks a greater understanding between cultures and ABC's correspondent more inclined toward a detached position. This might suggest that reporters' individual preferences end up somewhat blurred by the professional practices to which they adhere.

That being said, the fact that this study is based on only two interviews represents a severe limitation when it comes to the extrapolation of the findings. Zeng's study of China correspondents classified nearly half of the correspondents surveyed within the "populist watchdog" role—characterized by a willingness to play a watchdog role for Chinese elites while trying to maintain a strong audience orientation—, more than one third were considered "detached disseminators"—with emphasis on detachment and neutral reporting—and 13.9% were defined as "facilitative change agent"—showing the strongest interventionist emphasis to keep the Chinese government in check, while willing to cooperate with their home government—(Zeng, 2018). Meanwhile, Humanes and Roses (2018) found that the professional practices in the Spanish national press are mainly defined by an interventionist profile, a high presence of the watchdog role, and a conceptualization of the audience as citizens, but that a homogeneous model of journalism does not exist. If anything, the findings from this qualitative study of the reporting conditions for Spanish correspondents in China align with those observations.



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