Femicides in native digital news outlets: greater and better coverage? A study of violence against women in the Spanish media

Irene Liberia Vayá*, Belén Zurbano-Berenguer*, Aurora Edo**

*University of Seville, Spain
**University CEU Cardenal Herrera, Spain

Abstract

This paper presents the main findings of a qualitative study of news on femicides appearing in leading native digital news outlets in Spain. The study focused on 267 news items published in five digital news outlets between 1 January and 31 December 2017. The selection of the news outlets was based on their readership numbers and whether or not their editorial lines adopted a gender or feminist perspective. In order to assess ethical quality, the tool designed by Zurbano-Berenguer and García-Gordillo (2017) was used. Based on this tool, the results indicate the following: (1) news about femicides is of medium quality; (2) native digital news outlets with a gender perspective offer better and higher quality coverage; and (3) the extent to which ethical recommendations are followed is still very patchy, thus calling for more in-depth multi-methodological analyses. These findings allow us to conclude that there is a need to conduct further qualitative research involving media professionals that helps us to understand why, despite the clear recommendations and rules established in media ethical codes, there are still considerable deficiencies in ethical quality and sensitivity when reporting on such a key issue for democratic society.

Keywords: Spanish native digital news outlets, ethics, femicide, journalism, quality, violence against women

Introduction: there can be no democracy without equality

This work is premised on the understanding that the media has the power to build democratic societies free from violence against women (hereinafter, VAW). Specifically, here we perform a study to reveal whether or not the main Spanish native digital news outlets report this type of violence better and with greater ethical quality than the traditional media, according to the consensus on this issue (Edo, 2017; Zurbano-Berenguer & García-Gordillo, 2017; Sutherland et al., 2016). In order to conduct our study, we used an appropriate and validated tool to measure the ethical quality of news on femicides.

At present, it is impossible to consider media representations and the treatment of social problems from a non-digital perspective. For this reason, this research tackles the issue of the relationship between VAW, the media and the new digital convergence for the first time. Focusing on the Spanish scenario, previous studies have warned against some characteristics of the digital context that can be harmful for the construction of a critical citizenship and a journalistic practice truly committed to equality and the eradication of gender-based violence: "The result of the analysis of only digital media in Spain shows a non-plural scenario, dominated by projects that have a markedly unitary bias, located to the right of the ideological spectrum, with consolidated business projects and with intensive capital needs" (Almirón, 2006, p. 30).

In addition, Casero-Ripollés (2012) warns of a gender gap in digital media consumption that can minimise the impact of good practices in digital environments. Similarly, Zurbano-Berenguer (2016) calls attention to the negative consequences that the constant updating of news has on the production of VAW content.

Nonetheless, the new digital platforms have several advantages that should be considered. On the one hand, they provide the opportunity to introduce new explanatory-didactic resources. On the other,

digitisation allows facilitates access to new sources and data. Both contribute to an ethical and quality transmission of news on femicides. Likewise, another pro of the digital era is the generation of specific resources for the media treatment of this social problem, such as several expert databases and information verification tools.

At this point, it is essential to note another element of crucial importance for the analysis of information on VAW: the remarkable influence of feminist movements on the enactment of laws that, both in Spain and abroad, have contributed to build legal frameworks that—albeit in need of review—have been historical milestones in preventing and protecting against gender-based violence. "A strong, autonomous feminist movement is both substantively and statistically significant as a predictor of government action to redress violence against women" (Htun & Weldon, 2012, p. 560).

All of which begs the following question: does feminism, channelled through the media, have the same degree of influence? Are the openly self-declared feminist media more respectful and do they provide higher quality news on VAW than their traditional counterparts? Has media digitisation helped to improve content from a gender perspective? These are some of the questions that this research attempts to answer.

Broadly speaking, the media have an inescapable responsibility as guarantors of an informed and sensitive public opinion. In the words of Menéndez (2010, p. 35), "the media's capacity to intervene in the way in which the world is perceived by stipulating from which perspective social reality should be observed influences the functioning of society." The conclusions of this study also point in the same direction as regards the media influence on narratives, representations and discourses concerning VAW, which single out the media as the actors primarily responsible for shaping social imaginaries and for raising the general public's level of awareness in this respect.

> It has been known for some time that news stories influence public perceptions of social reality, reflect public interest, and play a large role in how people understand certain societal problems, especially crime (e.g., Curran, Gurevitch & Woollacott, 1979), and IPV[1] is no exception. […] A connection between crime reporting and attitudes about crime has been demonstrated, illustrating the influence that the media have on public opinion and perceptions (Gilliam & Iyengar 2000, 2005; Holbert, Shah, & Kwak, 2004). There are numerous reasons why this is so (Wozniak & McCloskey, 2010, 937-938).

In recent years, there has been a sharp increase in the number of studies performed on the news coverage of VAW: Simons & Khan, 2018; Simons & Morgan, 2018; Kangere, Kemitare & Michau, 2017; Sutherland et al., 2016; Sutherland et al., 2015; Easteal, Holland & Judd, 2015; Ahmed, 2014; Lindsay-Brisbin, DePrince & Welton-Mitchell, 2014; Roberto, McCann & Brossoie, 2013; Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013; Richards, Gillespie & Smith, 2011; Morgan & Politoff, 2012; Wozniak & McCloskey, 2010; Halim & Meyers, 2010; Carlyle, Slater & Chakroff, 2008; Bullock & Cubert, 2002; and Anastasio & Costa, 2004 (among others).

By the same token, research on news quality criteria and journalistic awareness has proliferated in Spain over the past decade: Edo, 2017; Zurbano-Berenguer & García-Gordillo, 2017; Peris, 2016; Zurbano-

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[1] Intimate partner violence.

Berenguer, 2016, 2015 and 2012; Zurbano-Berenguer & Liberia Vayá, 2014; Martínez, 2013, 2012 and 2010; Bandrés, 2011; Carballido, 2009 and 2007; López, 2008 and 2006; and Aznar 2005 (to name but a few).

The on-going debate on the media's treatment of VAW tends to revolve around whether or not this kind of news is socially beneficial and in line with established ethical principles. Secondly, the question of whether or not digitisation, with all its consequences (the acceleration of information flows, the increase in news production, the blurring of journalistic genres and so on and so forth), has improved news coverage of VAW has also become exceedingly relevant.

With respect to the first of these challenges—i.e. current ethical quality standards—it should be noted that although this is a complex scenario with a plethora of coherent and convergent ethical criteria, inappropriate news coverage of VAW and its female victims and survivors continues to be the target of criticism: "[…] the majority of news stories, owing to the fact that they laid the blame on them, increased the victims' discomfort and led them to believe that they prevented the emotional recovery of those who, like themselves, had experienced sexual violence" (Fernández, 2016, unp.)[2].

In relation to the digitisation of news making, there are many studies that have stressed the dangers of immediacy, information overload and the changes in public opinion formation in digital environments. In this respect, some studies have put forward novel and useful concepts such as the "emotional public sphere"[3] (Rosas, 2016) and that of "troll" or "trolling" (Donath, 1999; Herring et al. 2002, among others). For its part, the European Institute for Gender Equality has reported that digital environments "can be empowering in places where public opinion is formed and in forums of discussion and mobilisation. However, cyberbullying restricts the opportunities offered by digitisation. Young people, especially women, are prevented from participating in political or online debates" (Tribuna Feminista, 2018[4]).

Further research has underscored the fact that, even though the tyranny of unidirectional media outlets is now a thing of the past in the generation of discursive forms—some authors have even developed ways of empirically measuring the liquidity of digital news (Karlsson, 2012)—new spaces for "dialogue" and public debate have become instruments of violence.

> Ultimately, we see Internet trolling as a manifestation of a much broader phenomenon whereby individuals take pleasure in disrupting the social order out of anger, perversity or contempt. […] Mediated disruption makes its strategies more apparent and leads to insights that would otherwise elude us in spoken interactions, but which can then be applied to offline as well as online situations (Herring et al., 2002, p. 382).

In the case of written journalism, the digital migration of the traditional media and the proliferation of native cyber media (Cebrián, 2009)—as "technological communication and relational devices" (Zafra, 2013, p. 128)—have simultaneously fostered and complicated reflection on these issues and their social impact. Especially pertinent here is the research on how media digitisation has affected women (Ross et al., 2018;

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[2] Fernández, J. (29 November 2016). Contar mi historia para honrar mi vida. *Eldiario.es.* Retrieved from https://www.eldiario.es/pikara/Contar-historia-honrar-vida_6_585551461.html
[3] "A space in which emotions and feelings find a legitimate justification as part and parcel of the public affairs that are debated on in our contemporary societies" (Rosas 2016, 130).
[4] Tribuna Feminista (4 November 2018). El ciberacoso restringe las voces de las mujeres jóvenes en línea. *Tribuna Feminista.* Retrieved from https://tribunafeminista.elplural.com/2018/11/el-ciberacoso-restringe-las-voces-de-las-mujeres-jovenes-en-linea/

Jung Yun et al., 2007), primarily those contributions that address feminist initiatives aimed at tackling the problem of violence—such as those of black feminism (Williams, 2015)—or the counter-hegemonic capacity of the digital space in the context of sexual violence (Salter, 2013).

The aim of this work, which falls within the scope of this now not so novel digital news environment, is to (re)consider whether or not the ways in which VAW is publically conveyed have been affected and, if so, how. To this end, allowances have been made for those approaches that contend that one of the key aspects when discussing different types of gender-based violence, news quality and the digital environment is the (professional) feminist perspective. In this sense and from a broad perspective, women have found in the consolidation of digital platforms and media "a renewed opportunity to promote their active presence in information content and to tackle their under-representation in the media" (Rivero Santamarina & Larrondo Ureta, 2016, p. 121). Likewise, as Fernández observes, it speaks volumes that "the feminist media have also played an important role in the denaturalisation of day-to-day sexual and gender-based violence" (2016, unp.).

Objectives, sample scope and analytical procedure

Study objectives

The aim of this research is to perform an initial approach to the treatment of femicides in Spanish native digital news outlets.

The main objectives of this study can be summarised as follows:

1. To compare the number of news stories on femicides published in the five native digital outlets analysed here, during the calendar year of 2017, with the number of femicides committed during the same period.

2. To assess the average quality of news stories on femicides published in the five native digital outlets analysed here.

3. To identify any significant differences between the average news quality of the native digital news outlets with an explicit gender/feminist perspective and those without one.

4. To determine which quality indicators had a higher or lower frequency, as well as any possible differences between the native digital news outlets with an explicit gender/feminist perspective and those without one.

5. To contribute to fine tune and validate the tool designed by Zurbano-Berenguer and García-Gordillo (2017), reviewing the indicators and adapting them to new digital formats.

Study sample and justification

The news items selected for analysis were all retrieved from the Spanish native digital news outlets analysed here, given that the prime objective of this study was to identify patterns in and to gauge the quality of

their news coverage and treatment of femicides. The three most important native digital news outlets in terms of readership numbers—*El Confidencial*, *OkDiario* and *El Español*—plus another two with an explicit gender/feminist perspective and a relevant circulation—*eldiario.es* and *El Huffington Post*[5]—were chosen from a universe formed by all of the native digital news outlets displaying these characteristics[6].

To obtain significant but not necessarily unversalizable data it was decided to limit the study time frame to one year. Accordingly, all the news items on femicides published in the aforementioned digital news outlets during 2017, the last full calendar year before undertaking the research, were retrieved.

With respect to the "news" genre, priority was given to the newsworthiness of the information and the type of headline over the purity of the genre itself, since allowances were made for the fact that new digital formats have undeniably expedited news making. Thus, with regard to those news items that, albeit of an informational nature, were on the border between current affairs and court reporting, the established criterion was in the main inclusive. That is, news stories of a hybrid or ambiguous genre—although very few in contrast to pieces making up the "news" in the more traditional sense—were also included in the sample, due to the fact that the aim was to analyse all those texts that, meeting the established criteria, contributed to generate maps of femicides in the minds of the public at large. For their part, news items belonging to the opinion piece or interpretation genre were excluded.

Sample selection procedure

When creating the analytical corpus, all those news stories on femicides published in 2017 were retrieved (a total of 276). Broadly speaking, the following selection criteria were employed:

- A search, using the tools inherent to the native digital news outlets (all of which have general search engines), was performed on the following keywords: "gender violence", "gender-based violence", "domestic violence", "murder" and "woman"[7].
- Similarly, the five digital news outlets analysed here were browsed to check whether or not they included specific VAW-related sections, sub-sections, tabs, etc., and if so, all of the new items published in 2017 were retrieved and analysed.
- News items on cases occurring both in Spain and in other countries appearing in the search results (admittedly very few and far between or non-existent in the majority of the native digital outlets analysed here) were taken into account.

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[5] In order to obtain the most comprehensive results, it was initially intended to include a third native digital news outlet with a gender perspective. The only one with an explicitly feminist editorial line, apart from *eldiario.es* and *El Huffington Post*, is *lamarea.com*. However, after performing the relevant searches, it was impossible to obtain results complying with the selection criteria of this study, due to the fact that this digital news outlet, extremely concerned about quality news on VAW, mainly publishes critical-reflective texts and content inherent to more analytical and opinion-interpretive genres.
[6] A selection based on the data provided by ComsCore, a leading international company in measuring digital audiences and chosen in 2018 as the yardstick for the digital ecosystem in Spain by the Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB Spain), the Association for Communication Media Research (AIMC) and the Spanish Advertisers Association (AEA).
[7] The Spanish keywords employed in the searches were as follows (in the same order as they appear here): "*violencia de género*", "*violencia machista*", "*violencia doméstica*", "*asesinato*" and "*mujer*".

—   From these results, only those stories dealing with murders and whose formal parameters fell, generally speaking, into the "news" category were considered, while discarding opinion pieces, reports, news on other types of VAW, etc.

Some of the particularities of the documentary search performed on each one of the five native digital outlets analysed here are described in further detail below:

—   *El Confidencial*: its tags included "gender violence" and "deaths caused by gender violence". All the news items from 2017 that satisfied the criteria described above for those grouped under these two tags were selected, while the corpus was completed by performing a search on the aforementioned keywords.

—   *OkDiario*: since this digital news outlet neither has specific sections or tags relating to the topic, a general search was performed on the term "gender violence", yielding 941 results at the time, of which it was only possible to access the content of 10 search engine results pages (hereinafter, SERPs) (where, needless to say, not all the 941 items were to be found). After ordering the results by relevance (since when ordered by date, only news items published as from December 2017 could be accessed), all those news items published in 2017 were selected. Following this, the operation was repeated with the search results for "gender-based violence", "domestic violence" and "murder of women". Consequently, it was assumed that in all likelihood there were news items that had not appeared in the 10 SERPs that *OkDiario* allows users to consult because it had not considered them to be "relevant enough".

—   *El Español*: "Topics" includes a "Gender violence" section from where all the news items published in 2017 that met the selection criteria described above were retrieved. Furthermore, the documentary search was supplemented by other related topics such as "sexual abuse", "rape", "murder" and "sexual harassment". To this were added keyword searches using the news outlet's general search engine.

—   *eldiario.es*: "Gender violence" and "Gender-based violence" appear in the news outlet's "Topics" and "Further approaches" sections, in which a search was performed on these two terms to retrieve news items published in 2017 that satisfied the aforementioned criteria. This was then supplemented by keyword searches using *eldiario.es*' general search engine.

—   *El Huffington Post*: the "Politics" section includes a "Gender-based violence" subsection, from where useful information for the study was retrieved. The search performed in this specific section was then supplemented, as before, by others on the aforesaid keywords using the news outlet's general search engine.

Quality measurement tool

To assess news quality, a version of the tool designed by Zurbano-Berenguer and García-Gordillo (2017) (see Table 1) was employed. The process of adapting and fine tuning the tool involved eliminating Item 22, referring to the placement of news items "in visible positions", on the understanding that this item should

be thoroughly reconsidered in the digital environment. Additionally, some of the indicators were described more clearly in order to adapt them to the digital context.

Table 1: Tool for measuring the ethical quality of news on VAW.

Adaptation of the "Ethical review worksheet for news on VAW", designed by Zurbano-Berenguer and García-Gordillo (2017).

INSTRUCTIONS		
Item assessment: to evaluate compliance with the ethical quality standards for news on VAW, analysts should answer the questions posed in the following questionnaire. Answers are presented in a dichotomous form (i.e. it is only possible to answer "yes" or "no"). In some cases, broader explanations and/or specific cases are provided to facilitate its application. If doubts persist, the criterion that should be followed is that of answering the question posed.		
ASSESSMENT		
The assessment of ethical quality is the result of a positive evaluation of the items or a non-evaluation of ethical non-compliance. The greater the compliance with ethical recommendations, the higher the score and, therefore, the higher the quality.		
N = 0 6 13 21 N = numerical score obtained		
Q = Low Medium High Q = ethical assessment of the news story		
CONTEXT	**No**	**Yes**
1. Are some of the following terms literally mentioned in the news story: human rights, social problem and/or structural problem?	0	1
2. Is a specific term employed to frame the news story? • Like, for example, "gender violence", "femicide", "new gender crime", etc.	0	1
3. Are statistics on VAW at a different level (global, state, regional) provided to frame the case being reported in the context of a more widespread social problem?	0	1
APPROACH		
4. Is more than one form of violence mentioned? Namely, do two or more forms of violence—physical, psychological, sexual, etc.—appear in the news story? • It does not matter whether the forms of violence are related to the case or included to discuss VAW in general.	0	1
SOURCES		
5. Are there at least two clearly identified information sources in the news story? • For instance: the police and neighbours.	0	1
6. Are all the sources employed official and/or expert? • The term "official sources" refers to those of an institutional nature: the police, local councils, health services, etc.; and "expert sources" to those with a specific knowledge of the subject: women's associations, specialised health workers, investigators, etc.	0	1
7. Do some of the expert sources consulted belong to women's and/or care organisations? • These "sources" include the following: women's associations, specialised services for victims as a whole, feminist groups, governmental and non-governmental organisations and institutions, etc. In short, they include all those (more or less informal) organisations dedicated to women's care (irrespective of whether or not they are victims) on a daily basis.	0	1
IDENTITY		
8. Does the information provided (including photographs, if they exist) allow for the identification of the victim or her immediate circle?	1	0

TERMINOLOGY		
9. Do the terms employed to refer to the problem in question include any of the following: violence against women, gender violence or gender-based violence?	0	1
10. Do any of the following terms appear in the news story: domestic violence, love, quarrels, normal-normality, good man or woman?	1	0
11. Are several terms employed in the news story to refer to this problem? • For instance, do the terms "gender violence" and "gender-based violence" or "gender violence" and "femicide" appear in the news story (in any combination, but more than one of the terms recommended in ethical codes)?	0	1
CAUSES		
12. Are any causal explanations offered for the reported violence? • Is a "specific" explanation offered (separation, divorce, disputes, jealousy, etc.) for the aggression committed?	1	0
13. Is the reported violence associated with mental problems? • If no relationship has been established between VAW and mental problems, you should tick Box "No=1". • If VAW has been directly associated with a specific person or persons suffering from mental problems, but the case in question has been adequately explained and VAW has not been generally associated with mental problems, you should tick Box "No=1". • If a general relationship has been established between VAW and mental problems or the case in question has not been adequately explained, thus showing that a person's mental problems might have been the cause behind a case of VAW, you should tick Box "Yes=0".	1	0
14. Has information on the socio-economic status, nationality or religion of the people involved been included? • If there is reference to any of these three aspects (socio-economic status, nationality or religion), without this being in any way relevant to the news story, you should tick Box "Yes=0". • If it has been deemed strictly necessary to include this type of information (socio-economic status, nationality or religion) in the particular context of the aggression being reported and if the fact that there is no such thing as "established profiles" of aggressors and victims in cases of gender violence has been adequately explained, you should tick Box "No=1".	1	0
NEWS WRITING		
15. Is the modus operandi of the aggressor described in detail? • "Modus operandi" refers to both the way in which the aggression has been carried out (stabbing, gunshot, etc.) and, in such an event, the weapon used.	1	0
16. Are repetitive formulas like "new victim", "another woman has been assaulted" and/or "a new case of … " employed to report on the aggression?	1	0
17. Are qualifiers used to describe the people involved and/or their way of life? • For example: "turbulent past", "strange".	1	0
18. Is the aggression described in a logical order ("a man has assaulted a women resulting in… "), rather than using the passive voice and thus reversing the roles ("a woman has died after being stabbed by her husband")? • If the active voice has been employed ("a man has assaulted a women resulting in … "), you should tick Box "Yes=1".	0	1
RESOURCES		
19. Is there any reference to the telephone number 016 or any other similar one, whether as an infographic resource (icon, photograph, etc.) or in the body copy of the news story?	0	1
20. Does the news story include at least one organisation specialising in women's care?	0	1

• Regardless of whether the organisation is governmental (a regional assistance service for victims, for example) or non-governmental (a women's association), if this information appears in the news story per se or as an interesting fact accompanying this, you should tick Box "Yes=1".		
PLACEMENT/SECTION		
21. Is the news story located in the "Society" section or the "National/Spain", "Politics", etc., section?	0	1
IMAGES		
[To be completed only when news stories include photographs, video and/or infographics]		
22. Does the news story include images of condemnation and/or repudiation (demonstrations, public statements, minutes of silence, etc.)?	0	1
23. Does the news story include images of the victims(s), the aggressor(s), the murder weapon, the crime scene or the immediate circle of the victim(s) (home, workplace, etc.)? • If any of these elements has been included, you should tick Box "Yes=0".	1	0
24. Does the news story contain some or other graphic resource (table, figure, etc.) with demographic statistics pertaining to VAW?	0	1
TOTAL SCORE		

Coding process

As to the analysis of the sample, a standard coding procedure was agreed upon. Afterwards, a pilot test was conducted with a view to verifying whether or not the coding was consistent with an identical reduced sample, thus achieving a high degree of inter-coder reliability. In addition, throughout the process ambiguous items were discussed and agreed upon to guarantee analytical coherence and minimise as much as possible the inter-coders' interpretive variability.

Results

The sample and its structure

The study sample comprised a total of 276 news items distributed as follows:

Table 2: Study sample and news published by benchmark native digital news outlet. Own elaboration.

Digital news outlet	News	Percentage of the sample
1. *El Español*	65	23.55%
2. *El Confidencial*	44	15.94%
3. *OkDiario*	29	10.51%
4. *eldiario.es*	72	26.09%
5. *El Huffington Post*	66	23.91%
TOTAL	**276**	**100.00%**

Of the 276 news items making up the sample, the vast majority (90.58 per cent) included some type of infographics, whereas 26 only included text.

Table 3: News items containing some or other graphic information. Own elaboration.

News with images	250	
News items by digital news outlet		
Digital news outlet	**News with images**	**% in relation to total news**
1. *El Español*	44	67.69%
2. *El Confidencial*	44	100.00%
3. *OkDiario*	29	100.00%
4. *eldiario.es*	68	94.44%
5. *El Huffington Post*	65	98.48%
TOTAL	**250**	**90.58%**

In light of the data provided by the sample in relation to the use of graphic resources, even though there were no significant differences, it is important to note certain coincidences between the native digital news outlets with a gender perspective, on the one hand, and the majority of those without a clear feminist slant, on the other. Specifically, the two feminist digital media had opted, at some time or another, not to offer this type of information, whereas all the news items of two of the three non-feminist news outlets were accompanied by some type of graphic resource.

Coverage

With respect to Objective 1 (to compare the number of news stories on femicides published in the native digital outlets analysed here, during the calendar year of 2017, with the number of femicides committed during the same period), it can be observed that versus the 51 femicides committed in Spain, according to the figures released by the Government Delegation for Gender-based Violence (Ministry of the Presidency, Parliament Relations and Equality), the average number of news stories published was 55.2. When this information is analysed while considering the criteria of "news follow-up" and "newsworthiness", an insightful conclusion can be drawn: not all femicides receive media coverage. In this respect, the news coverage indicators for *OkDiario* (29 news stories on femicides in 2017) and *El Confidencial* (44 items) were surprisingly low. For their part, the native digital news outlets that published the largest number of news items in this regard were those that profess to be feminist (*eldiario.es* and *El Huffington Post*), while *OkDiario*, whose stated ideology and editorial line have little or nothing to do with the pursuit of real and effective gender equality, the lowest number[8].

The criteria of "news follow-up" and "newsworthiness" influenced the fact that in specific cases (e.g. Diana Quer, the pilgrim Denise Theim, murdered on the Way of St James, and Marina Okarynska and Laura del Hoyo, both murdered by Sergio Morate in what has also come to be known as "the Cuenca crime") gave

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[8] Nonetheless, this affirmation should be treated with caution, since, as already noted, due to the problems that arose when using *OkDiario*'s search engine to access news on VAW, the number of news stories about femicides finally retrieved might have been quite a bit lower than that which it actually published in 2017. This caveat should be taken into account whenever attempting to interpret the results for this digital media outlet and the frequency with which it published this kind of news.

rise to several news stories, while other similar crimes with less media impact or which were not followed up on only merited one news story or, as indicated by the data, none whatsoever.

Average news quality and the differences between the feminist and non-feminist native digital news outlets

The results relating to Objectives 2 and 3 (to assess the average quality of news stories on femicides published in the five native digital outlets analysed here and to identify any significant differences between the average news quality of those with an explicit gender/feminist perspective and those without one) were as follows: (1) the average quality of the news items was 10.70 out of a maximum of 21 points, which, according to the assessment tool employed, corresponds to an "average" ethical quality; and (2) the average news quality of the native digital news outlets judged to be feminist was higher than that of those without a gender perspective.

Figure 1 shows in ascending order the average score obtained by each native digital news outlet, according to the degree of compliance with the ethical criteria employed when dealing with VAW.

Figure 1: Average news quality. Own elaboration.
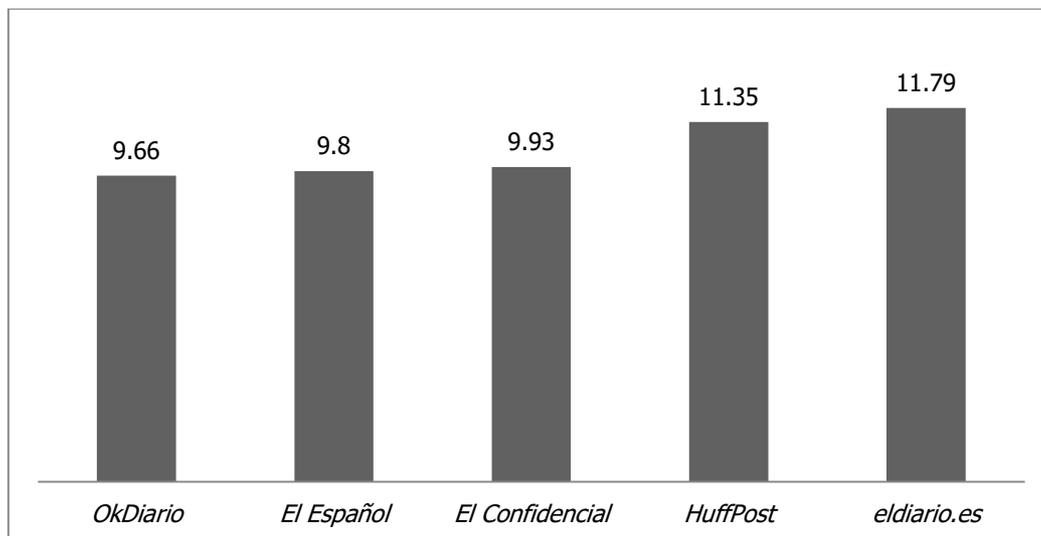
As can be seen in the previous graph, the difference between the feminist and non-feminist native digital news outlets in relation to the quality of the news published varied between 1.42 and 2.13 points.

Regarding the average quality of infographics (Items 22, 23 and 24), varying between 0 and 3 points, for the 250 news items published with some or other graphic or iconic resource this was 0.72, a relatively low figure. As was the case with the average quality of textual or conceptual news content, the infographics of the native digital news outlets with an openly feminist perspective were more positively assessed.

Figure 2: Average quality of graphic news content. Own elaboration.
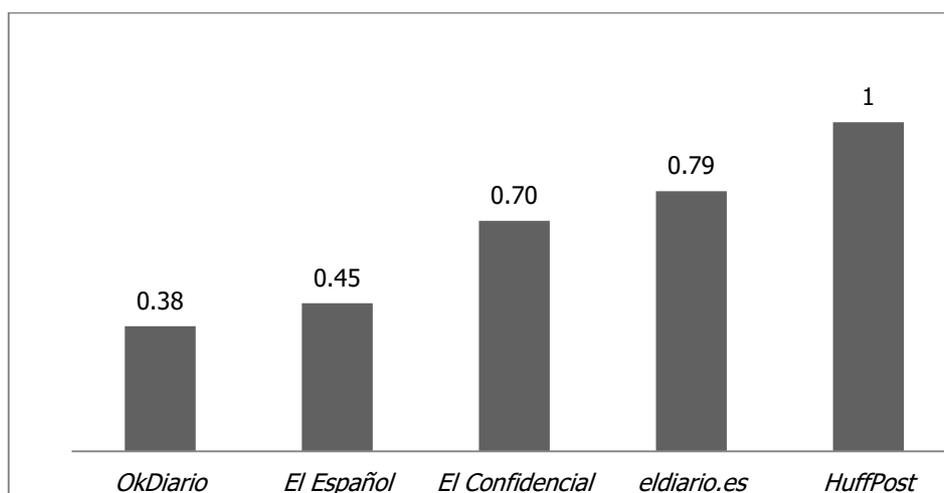
The level of compliance with ethical criteria

With respect to Objective 4 (to determine which quality indicators had a higher or lower frequency, as well as any possible differences between the native digital news outlets with an explicit gender/feminist perspective and those without one), the disparity between the frequency of some of the indicators is also noteworthy. Thus, the ethical consensuses that had a frequency of over 90 per cent and that, as a result, can be assumed to be more established in professional journalism, were as follows: Item 10 (*Do any of the following terms appear in the news story: domestic violence, love, quarrels, normal-normality, good man or woman?*); Item 13 (*Is the reported violence associated with mental problems?*); and Item 17 (*Are qualifiers used to describe the people involved and/or their way of life?*). The answer to all these questions was "no" in over 90 per cent of the cases analysed here, thus complying with ethical recommendations.

Likewise, Indicators 12 (*Are any causal explanations offered for the reported violence?*) and 16 (*Are repetitive formulas like "new victim", "another woman has been assaulted", "a new case of …" employed to report on the aggression?*) had a high frequency (over 80 per cent), given that the questions posed received negative answers in the vast majority of cases, again in keeping with the ethical consensus.

However, the data obtained also point to the existence of certain ethical considerations with currently little impact on the news treatment of femicides. As can be observed in Figure 3, the indicators with a frequency lower than 10 per cent were as follows:

(1) Item 1 (*Are some of the following terms literally mentioned in the news story: human rights, social problem and/or structural problem?*): barely 1.09 per cent of news stories complied with the criterion of including references to one or more of these terms.

(2) Item 4 (*Is more than one form of violence mentioned? Namely, do two or more forms of violence—physical, psychological, sexual, etc.—appear in the news story?*): only 6.88 per cent of the news stories reported on the frequent concurrence, according to the statistics, of several forms of violence.

(3) Item 7 (*Do some of the expert sources consulted belong to women's and/or care organisations?*):
8.33 per cent of the news stories had employed sources of this type.

(4) Item 20 (*Does the news story include at least one organisation specialising in women's care?*):
2.17 per cent of the news stories provided information on organisations of this type.

Figure 3: Level of compliance with quality indicators for textual and conceptual news content. Own elaboration.
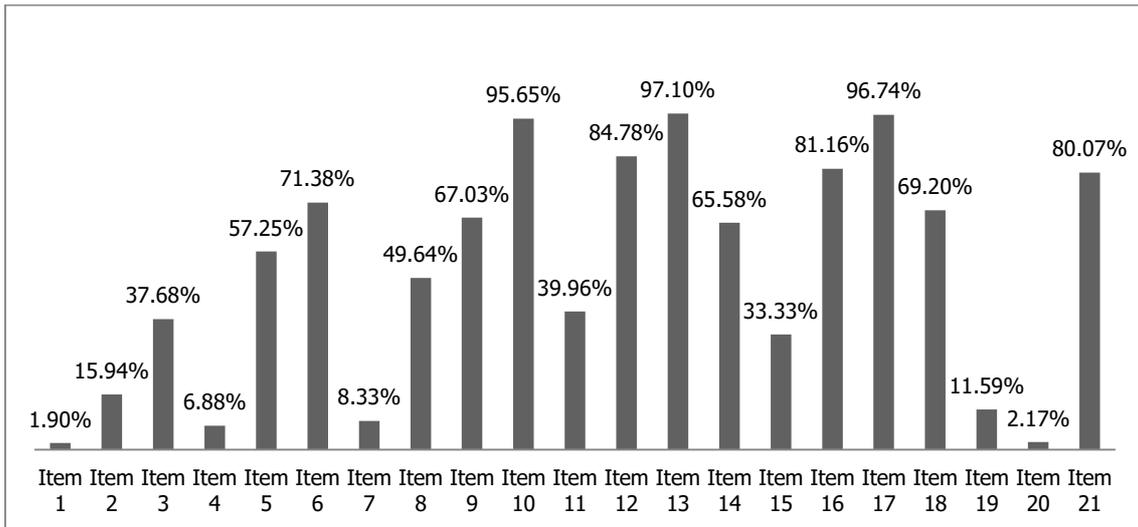
This analysis, especially designed to gain further insights into why certain recommendations go unheeded and how to contribute to remedy this state of affairs, employing other methodologies and techniques, has revealed compelling evidence as regards the graphic content indicators: Items 24 (*Does the news story contain some or other graphic resource (table, figure, etc.) with demographic statistics pertaining to VAW?*) and 22 (*Does the news story include images of condemnation and/or repudiation (demonstrations, public statements, minutes of silence, etc.)?*) were only considered in 7.2 and 11.2 per cent of the news stories, respectively. That is, most of the graphic resources employed were neither aimed at providing background statistical information (or of any other type), nor at calling attention to the public outcry against these aggressions.

In contrast, that 54 per cent of the news stories complied with Item 23 (i.e. that in 54 per cent of the cases the answer to the question, *does the news story include images of the victims(s), the aggressor(s), the murder weapon, the crime scene or the immediate circle of the victim(s) (home, workplace, etc.)?*, was "no", as can be seen in Figure 4) is a positive result. This is due to the fact that journalists are increasingly more reluctant to use photographs of the people involved, which, as indicated in ethical codes, only contributes to generate a social image of VAW associated with specific aggressions and one-off cases.

Figure 4: Level of compliance with quality indicators for news infographics. Own elaboration.
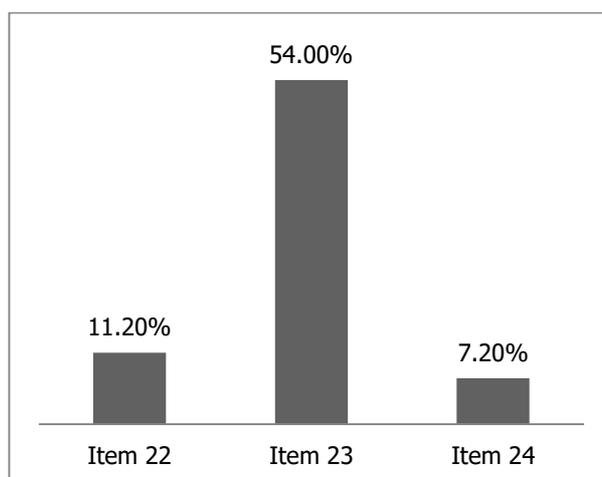
Moreover, some of the native digital news outlets analysed here normally included the telephone number 016[9] in their news stories or used infographics to contextualise the information, and even sometimes offered alternative—and more comprehensive—figures to the official ones, as was the case with *El Huffington Post*.

General qualitative questions

There are certain elements that qualitatively reinforce the numerical evidence of the higher average quality of the news published in the feminist native digital news outlets. These elements contribute to determine the real difference between those digital outlets with a gender perspective and those without one.

Noteworthy elements include the following:

(1) Alternative death tolls that supplement (and conceptually redefine) the official figures, such as that offered by *El Huffington Post*; (2) the quasi-systematic use of infographics to make data on the number of women who have lodged a complaint, of children murdered or orphaned, etc., easier to grasp; (3) the widespread inclusion of the telephone number 016 in their news stories and in different formats (even sometimes reminding readers that it should be erased from the call list); (4) the consideration of certain cases as "gender violence", even when they are not generally regarded as such; for instance, *eldiario.es* in relation to the murder of the young woman Diana Quer; and (5) the use of images that, albeit not condemnatory, protect the identity of the victims and their families, thus going beyond the habitual alternative, namely, photographs of the state security forces. It can thus be claimed that the feminist native digital news outlets analysed here made a creative and novel effort to create new identifications in the minds of the general public by including other types of graphic resources such as maps and symbolic images.

All these elements, some of which are concealed by the cold statistics on compliance with ethical recommendations, allow us to confirm without a shadow of doubt the existence of differences in the treatment of VAW between the native digital news outlets that expressly adopt a gender perspective and those that do not.

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[9] VAW telephone information and legal advice service, under the aegis of the Delegation for Gender-based Violence (Ministry of the Presidency, Parliament Relations and Equality).

Considerations on the quality measurement tool

In relation to Objective 5 (to contribute to fine tune and validate the tool designed by Zurbano-Berenguer & García-Gordillo, 2017), its review and adaptation to the digital data analysis performed here have led to: (1) the discursive reworking of some of the items with respect to the original tool, with the aim of facilitating their comprehension and practical application; (2) the temporary elimination of Item 22 from the original worksheet, until a greater consensus on what is exactly a "visible position" in the digital environment is reached; and (3) the incorporation of not only photographs but also videos and infographics in the image-related items, objects of analysis that are now just as valid as the "traditional" elements of print news (such as headlines, terminology, photographs, etc.).

Concerning the search engines and the organisation of information in the digital environment

It should be noted that a large number of problems were detected in the search engines of all the native digital news outlets analysed here, since many of their results were not directly related to the searches performed (or even had nothing to do with the keywords whatsoever on quite a few occasions). Furthermore, these search engines also left a lot to be desired regarding the order in which they provided results: the fact that searches could not be performed by year—which made it necessary to conduct a page-by-page review of all the results in order to find the dates of interest—was particularly exasperating. This meant that the data gathering process took much longer than expected, thus slowing down the research considerably.

Conclusions and discussion

The data obtained allow us to confirm: (1) that news on femicides appearing in the leading native digital news outlets in Spain is of an average quality; (2) that according to the ethical consensus, there is evidence of a better news treatment on the part of the self-declared feminist native digital news outlets; and (3) that the level of compliance with ethical recommendations is still very patchy, sometimes very high and sometimes non-existent.

On the whole, the Spanish media are gradually increasing their coverage of femicides and the greater news production in this respect is a fact that has been demonstrated here. From the so-called "police reports" or "crime news", dealing with particularly dramatic news stories (Menéndez, 2010), to current news coverage practices, the findings of this study coincide with the recent recognition of the media's proactivity (Carballido, 2009) and "positive" efforts (Alberdi & Matas, 2002) in this direction. Nevertheless, some news outlets continue to pay far too much attention to the most sensational and/or socially alarming murders. Accordingly, there is apparently no systematic coverage of, not to mention a uniform follow-up on, all the cases of femicides in Spain, with more importance (either quantitatively, in terms of the number of news stories published, or qualitatively: i.e. the length of the stories, the type of sources consulted, the journalistic resources employed, etc.) being given to some than to others. The greater coverage of femicides in the native digital news outlets considered to be feminist coincides with other studies that underscore both the

existence of new ways of increasing the visibility of women and the fact that the digital media are a key tool to connect girls with feminism (Jackson, 2018).

Concerning the quality standards of the news analysed here, this study has highlighted both the professional consensuses on specific attitudes (reflected by the exceedingly high level of compliance with certain ethical recommendations) and the fact that, at the same time, other recommendations were totally ignored in day-to-day newsroom practice. Thus, in light of the results, Spanish digital journalism is concerned with covering femicides and avoiding repetitive discursive patterns or painting an imprecise picture of the problem (i.e. by attributing aggressions to the victim and/or her environment, to mental problems, to certain socio-economic contexts, etc.). However, there are still some ethical consensuses (Sutherland et al. 2016; Zurbano-Berenguer & García-Gordillo, 2017), deriving from ongoing academic, professional and social debates on the matter, which are hardly reflected at all in current journalistic practice, for which reason they deserve special attention in these conclusions.

In this regard, acknowledging the progress made or congratulating ourselves on having reached a reasonable (although not necessarily positive or widely beneficial) level of news coverage of VAW in only a few decades is neither here nor there. And not because the authors of this study (one of the first to be performed on the quality of news on VAW in the Spanish digital environment) form part of a team of apocalyptic researchers, but because its ultimate purpose has been to understand how the digitisation of news outlets has hindered, or has not known how to integrate, some of the new developments. Versus a feminist use of digital media and technologies (Baer, 2015; Kangere, Kemitare & Michau, 2017, among many other studies), by and large the reconverted and digitised traditional media do not seem to have improved their news practices. These unmet equality challenges can be fairly clearly illustrated: digital journalism in Spain should raise its news quality standards relating to VAW if by covering and publishing this information it intends to generate a social benefit conducive to raising awareness and shaping critical collective imaginaries and, ultimately, to help to eradicate this kind of violence. A task in which the media are considered by Simons and Khan (2018) to be "spaces of primary prevention".

At the same time, academia and the journalistic profession should take a step back to reconsider together why some recommendations that are *so* unquestionably valid in the field of ethical theory are by no means accepted or implemented in daily newsroom practice.

On the other hand, it should be stressed that, as revealed by the data obtained here, feminist journalism is more (though not sufficiently) committed to publishing quality news and that, in addition, news outlets with a gender perspective give VAW more coverage. In this connection, this study has dealt with some of the questions that feminism has put to the new media and which some authors believe that academia should also address (Kingston, 2014).

To conclude, it should be recalled that this research has aimed, since the design stage, to offer a sort of initial snapshot of a variable, changing and highly dynamic situation that requires intersectional and multi-methodological approaches: a formidable challenge and complex endeavour. Accordingly, the results presented here should be understood as preliminary indications whose aim is to encourage, in successive stages, others types of analyses. These could be based, among other methodologies, on in-depth interviews with journalists responsible for the news coverage of VAW, as well as on an interpretation of current media structures in terms of the political economy of communication. And all this for the purpose of continuing to contribute to answer the question underlying this and other previous studies: in spite of the proliferation of

ethical codes and a greater social and professional awareness about the gravity of VAW, why are news quality standards still so wanting?

Lastly, the authors of this study believe that it is necessary to stress the valuable role of academic reflection on how the media address VAW or, in other words, how the new media environment has exacerbated some of the existing problems and has posed new challenges that need to be met (Vega, 2018[10]). In sum, now more than ever academic reflection—going beyond the strict bounds of academia—should contribute to raise public awareness about this serious social problem in order to help to eradicate it once and for all.

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How to quote this article:

Vayá, I. L., Zurbano-Berenguer, B. & Edo, A. (2020). Femicides in native digital news outlets: greater and better coverage? A study of violence against women in the Spanish media. *Observatorio*, 14(1), 45-44.