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RESEARCH ARTICLE / *ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ*

Childhood and the Media during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: During the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the Argentinian Government established a nationwide policy of Preventive and Mandatory Social Isolation. As a consequence of the measures, children were confined to their homes. During this period children adopted multiple symbolic images generated by the media. In order to evaluate how children were affected during the first months of lockdown we decided to analyze the way in which children were considered on digital media.

Objectives: To identify the space children had on digital media in Argentina at the beginning of the pandemic and to characterize those aspects related to child rights during that period.

Methods: Using a quantitative method, information about children and digital media in Argentina was collected from 10th March to 9th June 2020. In total 119,103 news items which made reference to the COVID-19 pandemic were found. Out of this universe, 14,543 (12.3%) matched the selected search terms. All the articles were checked one by one to discard those that did not make reference to the selected dimensions related to child rights. Descriptive statistics was applied for selected categories.

Results: The news reports analyzed (a total of 1,620) were distributed between the following categories: Education (26.42%), Play (26.05%), Health care (18.52%), General care (11.23%), Violence (5.06%), Nutrition (4.94%), Protection (3.95%), Children's voice (2.28%), Poverty (1.54%). The way the media characterized child rights categories varied according to the type of media (national or regional) and the rights considered. The space given by the media to children at this stage in the pandemic was much lower compared to that given to the adult population.

Conclusions: The space devoted to childhood in the digital media was based on emergent situations associated with COVID-19. During the period of analysis, and in the light of the rights paradigm, children were affected in the recognition of their rights. This situation demands a proactive response from different sectors of society to identify and recognize child rights violations.

Keywords: Childhood, Media, Pandemic, Argentina, Child Rights

INTRODUCTION

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Argentinian National Government established a country-wide policy of Preventive and Mandatory Social Isolation (ASPO) from March 20th, 2020. This measure, passed in response to the WHO's declaration of the pandemic (1), established that all people should remain in their homes, refraining from going to work. The use of transport, gatherings in public spaces, attendance at educational institutions, cultural, recreational, sport and religious events and commercial activity with some exceptions were prohibited.

During this period, the children adopted different images and stereotypes generated by the media, which ranged from their being ignored to their stigmatization as potential contagious agents.

In this scenario of restrictions, children's rights were partially invisible to the different social actors. The pandemic arrived and inequalities that affect vast segments of the population grew worse (2, 3).

After a study carried out by UNICEF Argentina (4) on the negative effects of lockdown on children, adolescents and their families, the President of Argentina authorized 1-hour

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outings on weekdays for both boys and girls up to a distance of 500 meters from their homes. Despite what was clearly stated in the decree, the authorities of the more populated jurisdictions refused to obey it, creating growing pressure on political leadership and health authorities to modify such restrictions (5).

Due to the restrictions, various consequences resulted in unequal access to virtual learning for children and no possibilities of socializing other than by being connected to the internet. Professionals, academic institutions and children's rights organizations reacted to this via the media and social networks, questioning leaders and citizens about the harmful consequences of virtual learning, and how this situation affected other rights.

In this context, an innovative method was applied to monitor the response of digital media in relation to children during the initial period of the pandemic in Argentina.

The purpose of this study is to describe how childhood appears in the journalistic discourse in terms of topics and representative ideas. Our hypothesis was that the media do not treat children as being subject to rights but as being in a different category from others. Our main objective was to understand how children were considered and depicted by the digital media during the first months of the pandemic.

The conceptual framework of this project is centered in the recognition of infancy as a collective in society given its demographic, social and health importance. In population studies, children are subsumed in the domestic sphere and the institutions that house them. Consequently, there is an idea of conferring on them not only a collective identity but also an entity and representative character.

Second, and in regards to the effects of COVID-19, the project highlights the syndemic approach (6). The third approach is related with how child rights are considered.

Aims of this study

- To identify the space children had in digital media in Argentina at the beginning of the pandemic (March-June 2020).
- To characterize those aspects related to the rights of boys and girls during the period of lockdown.
- To analyze the different narratives found in digital media which included experiences of children during periods of lockdown.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

With the aid of software provided by Global News that identified search words and metrics in digital media, a quantitative method was used to collect information about children and digital media in Argentina. The sampling framework is presented on Figure 1.

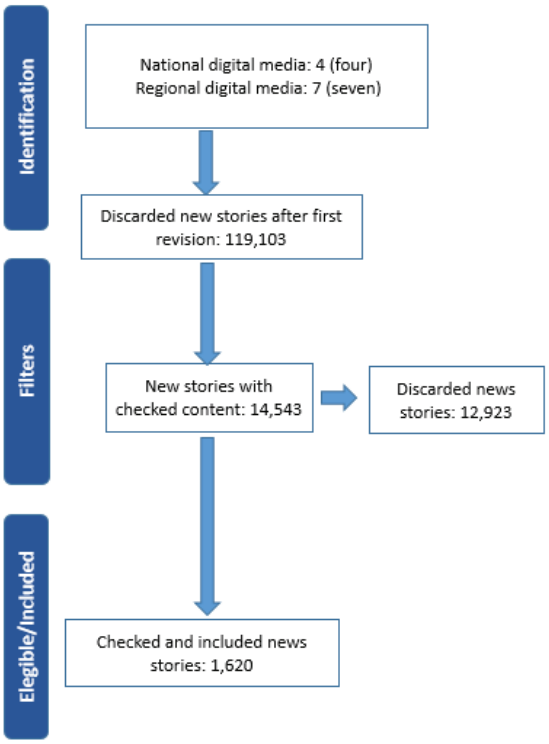


Figure 1: Sampling framework composition of this study

Two groups of words were compared to configure the search procedure:1) Pandemic: COVID 19 - coronavirus - pandemic - quarantine – confinement and 2) Children: childhood - boy - girl - kid - infancy - kids - sons - daughters. The following online media were selected: National media: Clarín, La Nación, Pagina 12, Infobae, and Regional (Provincial) media: La Gaceta (Tucumán), Norte (Chaco), Diario Río Negro (Rio Negro), Los Andes (Mendoza), La voz del interior (Córdoba), La Capital (Santa Fe) and El Día (Buenos Aires). These media are the most widely read in Argentina both at national and local level.

From 10th March to 9th June 2020, 119,103 news stories that made reference to the COVID-19 pandemic were found. Out of these, 14,543 (12.3%) matched the search terms. All articles were checked to discard those that were not related to child rights topics: Education, Health, Health care, Protection, Life conditions, Violence, Children's voices (participation), Play, and Nutrition. The age group under consideration was up to 12 years old.

For analytical purposes, sub-dimensions were created for the first four dimensions (Education, Play, Health and Care) to make the differences between the articles explicit. In the cases in which the article could be classified under more than one sub-dimension, and to simplify the analysis, only one relevant category was chosen. The chosen dimensions and their relations with child rights are described in Table 1.

Table 1: Dimensions, Articles from the CRC and typologies adopted to characterize media news

Dimensions	Articles from the Convention on the Rights of the Child about the identified typologies	Typologies related to childhood during the pandemic
Education	**Article 28** · Recognize the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity. · Make educational and vocational information and guidance available and accessible to all children. · Take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and the reduction of drop-out rates. Ensure that school discipline is administered in a manner consistent with the child's human dignity. · Contribute to the elimination of ignorance and illiteracy throughout the world. · Facilitate access to scientific and technical knowledge and modern teaching methods. **Article 29** · Development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential. · Development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.	**Subject to educate:** -Schools -Homeschooling -Teaching methods **Educational Policies:** -Governmental decisions in relation with schools' opening and closure -Changes in the syllabus, in the way of evaluation -Broadband **Transmission agents:** -Boys and girls as transmission agent
Play	**Article 31** · The right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts. · The right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life will be respected and promoted.	**Entertainment:** -Space at home -Cultural resource –Screens **Leisure:** -The importance of outings -Physical activity -Socialization
Health	**Article 6** · Every child has the inherent right to life. The survival and development of the child shall be ensured to the maximum extent possible. **Article 24** · The right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and to facilities for the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health. · To diminish infant and child mortality. · To combat disease and malnutrition, including within the framework of primary health care, through, inter alia, the application of readily available technology and through the provision of adequate nutritious foods and clean drinking-water, taking into consideration the dangers and risks of environmental pollution. · To ensure appropriate pre-natal and post-natal health care for mothers **Article 25** · The right of a child who has been placed by the competent authorities for the purposes of care, protection or treatment of his or her physical or mental Health.	**Transmission agents:** -Boys and girls as a threat -Risk factors **Mental health:** -Consequences and symptoms due to confinement. **Prevention/Promotion:** -Access to health care. Fears about the future. **Disability:**
General care	**Article 3** · In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration. · Ensure that the institutions, services and facilities responsible for the care or protection of children shall conform to the standards established by competent authorities. **Article 9** · Ensure that a child shall not be separated from his or her parents against their will, except when such separation is necessary for the best interests of the child. **Article 18** · Ensure recognition of the principle that both parents have common responsibilities for the upbringing and development of the child. · Render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children. · Take all appropriate measures to ensure that children of working parents have the right to benefit from child-care services and facilities for which they are eligible. **Article 19** · Take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse. **Article 34** · Protect the child from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse.	**Recommendations:** -Advice from the media and experts to help boys and girls deal with quarantine **Family Organization:** -Measures that affect the family -Separated parents. Girls and boys transportation. **Parental care role:** -Parental care responsibility at home.

Table 1: Dimensions, Articles from the CRC and typologies adopted to characterize media news (continued)

Dimensions	Articles from the Convention on the Rights of the Child about the identified typologies	Typologies related to childhood during the pandemic
Children's voice (Participation)	**Article 12** · Assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. · Provide the child the opportunity to be……? **Article 13** · Have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds. **Article 14** · Respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. **Article 15** · Respect the rights of the child to freedom of association and to freedom of peaceful assembly. · No restrictions may be placed on the exercise of these rights other than those imposed in conformity with the law.	-Right to be heard
Poverty	**Article 9** · States Parties shall promote the strengthening of international cooperation in order to address the root causes, such as poverty and underdevelopment, contributing to the vulnerability of children.	-Impact of confinement. -Restrictions to take part
Violence	**Article 19** · Take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse.	-Violence -Negligent treatment -Abuse
Nutrition	**Article 24** · To combat disease and malnutrition, including within the framework of primary health care, through, inter alia, the application of readily available technology and through the provision of adequate nutritious foods and clean drinking-water, taking into consideration the dangers and risks of environmental pollution. · Have Access to basic knowledge of child health and nutrition, and of the advantages of breastfeeding. **Article 27** · Recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. · The parent(s) or others responsible for the child have the primary responsibility to secure, within their abilities and financial capacities, the conditions of living necessary for the child's development. · Take appropriate measures to assist parents and others responsible for the child to implement this right and in case of need provide material assistance and support programmes, particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing. · All appropriate measures to secure the recovery of maintenance for the child from the parents shall be taken.	- Nutrition - Packed lunch - Food safety
Protection	**Article 20** · A child temporarily or permanently deprived of his or her family environment, or in whose own best interests cannot be allowed to remain in that environment, shall be entitled to special protection and assistance provided by the State. **Article 26** · States Parties shall recognize for every child the right to benefit from social security, including social insurance.	- Safety measures associated with the pandemic

RESULTS

During the selected period, the topics mostly related to children were centered in Education, Health care, Play and General care. The total of news reports analyzed was 1,620 (100%) and the number and percentage of topics in these dimensions is shown in Table 2.

The news reports expressed the concern of the adult population regarding the implications of home confinement for children. The topic of how the education process and play should be continued is included in more than half of the news reports. The inclusion of topics related to health care occurs in 7 out of 10 published news reports.

The treatment of the topics was similar when comparing national and regional media. However the level of importance they provided was different. The relative weight given to news reports on education in the regional media was higher than that in national ones (32% vs 21%), whereas the proportion of news reports related to the right to play (leisure and entertainment) was higher in national than regional ones (28% vs 22%) (Figure 2).

Table 2: Dimensions and subdimensions of children's rights published in digital media in Argentina during the first period of the COVID-19 pandemic with the correspondent Articles of the CRC

Dimensions	Proportion % and (n)	Subdimensions	Proportion % and (n)	Articles of the CRC
Education	26.42 (428)	Subject to educate	44.39 (190)	28 29
		Educational policies	39.25 (167)	
		Transmission agents	16.36 (71)	
Health care	18.52 (300)	Tansmisssion agents	58.00 (174)	6 24 25
		Mental health	20.00 (60)	
		Prevention/promotion	11.67 (36)	
		Disabilities	10.33 (30)	
General care	11.23 (182)	Recommendations	42.86 (79)	3, 9 18, 19 34
		Family organization	41.21 (74)	
		Parental care role	15.93 (29)	
Play	26.05 (422)	Entertainment	66.59 (21)	31
		Leisure	33.41 (10)	
Violence	5.06 (82)			19
Nutrition	4.94 (80)			24 27
Protection	3.95 (64)			20 26
Participation (Children's voices)	2.28 (37)			12, 13 14, 15
Poverty	1.54 (25)			9

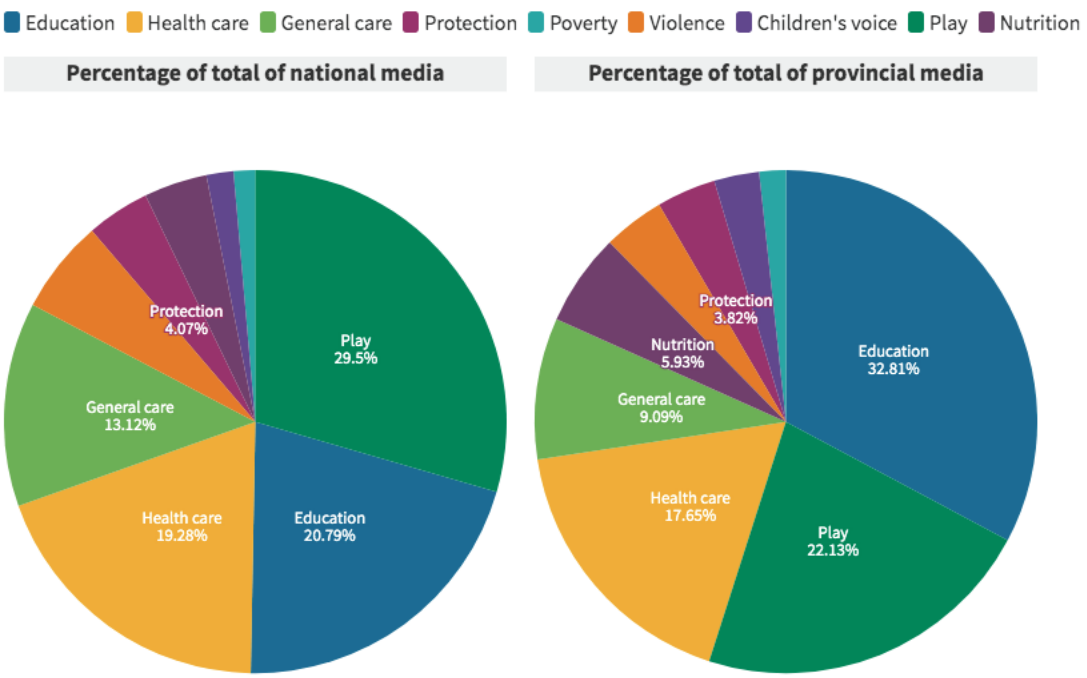


Figure 2: Distribution of news in national and regional (provincial) media (%)

From a monthly cross-sectional analysis, it can be seen how the first news reports analyzed were related to Health and Education. From March 30th onwards, the category Play was positioned between Education and Health (Figure 2).

Monthly cross-sectional variation by dimension

Taking into account the content of the news reports and its development, we get the following results for each dimension.

Education

As regards the right to education, most news pieces were related to virtual learning and the challenges of the "School at home". At the same time, concern about unequal access to technologies and the difficulties of families who do not have access to the Internet, or have limited access through their phones, is reflected. Reports related to education policies represented 39.25% of the news about education, focusing primarily on the school lockdown.

Within the category of education, and in regard to children as agents of infectious transmission (16.36% of the reports on education), the temporal evolution of the information could clearly be seen in the uncertainty and changes of stance about the need of keeping schools open or closed which seemed to be tied to the definition of children as possible virus carriers.

In relation to the education dimension in general, local news reports about protocols, closures, openings, grading methods and online sexual education appeared in some places in particular. Given the central place that school has as an institution that organizes the social life of millions of children and their families, education was a central topic in the media's coverage of the pandemic.

Play

As regards the news reports on Play (26.05% of the total), a distinction can be made between what was considered as entertainment and as leisure. The sub-category of entertainment was related to the domestic sphere and mainly included activities at home and games and resources to be used "without leaving home". The reports had to do with reading recommendations, series, movies, games and activities to be adopted during quarantine. The entertainment category appeared in 66.6% of the reports and leisure in the remaining 33.4%.

There were initiatives from different sectors, public and private organizations, institutions (UNICEF), cable channels (Disney, Discovery Kids, Paka Paka), and actors that helped children at home.

The subcategory Leisure relates to the public space, outings and playing outside. It was only after the first month of ASPO that the debate about children and the need to go outside became visible in the media. Figure 4 shows how news reports on Leisure increased from April 2020 and includes the possibility of openings and outings.

Health

As regards Health (18.52% of the total), most of the news reports considered children to be agents of infectious

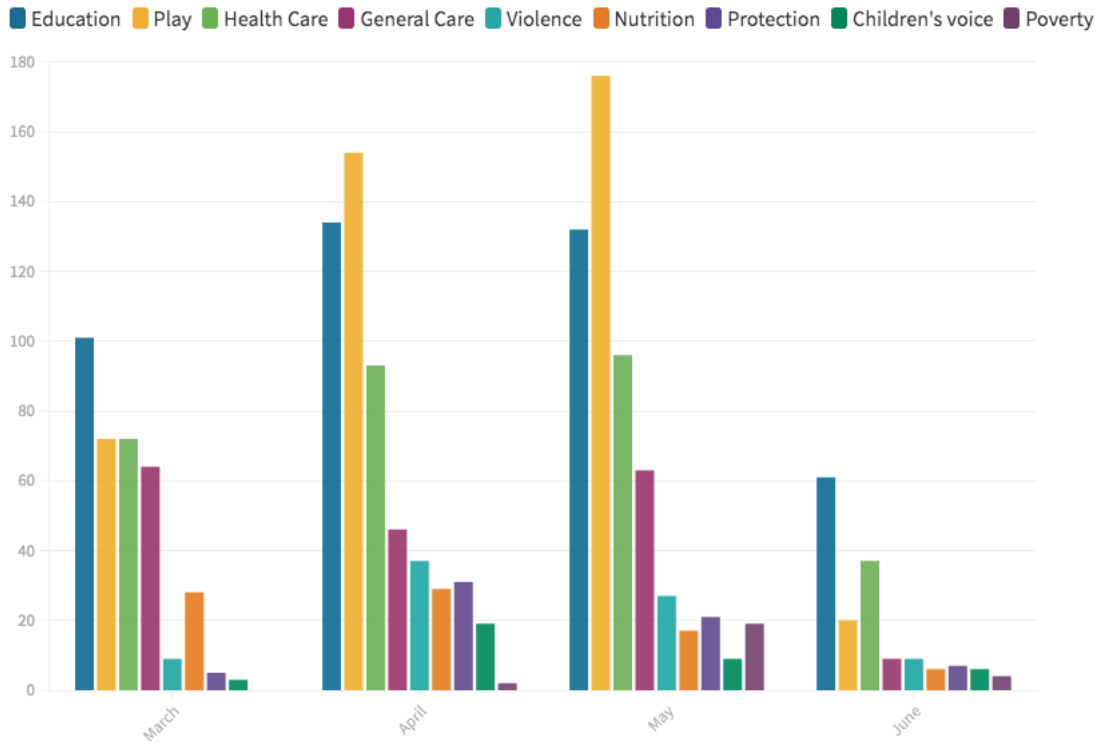


Figure 3: Monthly cross-sectional variation by dimension

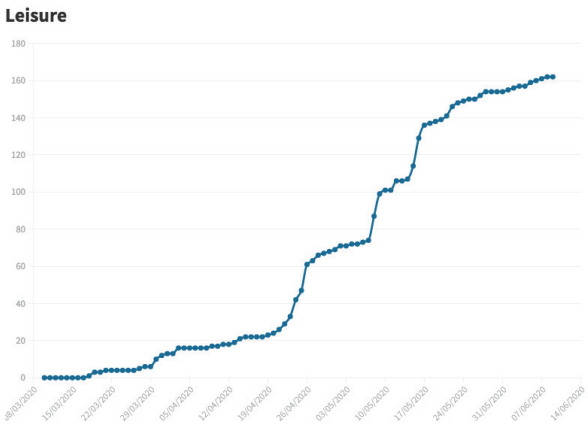


Figure 4: Temporal variation in news regarding leisure during April 2020 in Argentine digital media

transmission (58%). This was followed by Mental Health (20%), Prevention/Promotion (11.67%), and Disabilities (10.33%).

The topic of children as potential carriers of infection can be seen in news reports from the beginning of the ASPO. From May onwards there were news reports in different regions regarding cases of hospitalized children with suspicious symptoms. Some examples included the few reports on Kawasaki disease and Multiple Inflammatory Syndrome, both associated with COVID-19.

The prohibition on children entering places such as post offices, supermarkets or other stores was also reported. In addition, contradictory positions on the severity of the disease in children and the possibilities of transmission were expressed in the media. News reports within the category of Health which were related to disability focused mainly on the autism spectrum, the difficulties due to confinement and the need for specific protocols and outings. The reports related to mental health (20%) included the topic of the emotional consequences (anguish, anxiety and fear) of life in lockdown.

Lastly, within the topic of health promotion and risk prevention, the focus was on the continuity of the vaccination plans, a possible new outbreak of measles and the importance of pediatric controls on children despite lockdown.

In relation to the news reports on general care (11.23% of the total), most had to do with tips and recommendations (42.86%) and family organization (41.21%), and fewer with parental care roles (15.93%). Most of the news reports related to family organization focused on logistics and how families separated by divorce should be organized.

The reports on tips and recommendations were mainly about what to do with children in quarantine, how to promote less exposure to screens and how to talk about coronavirus with the youngest family members. Since the information analysis corresponded to the first months of ASPO, knowledge about the characteristics of the coronavirus and transmission mechanisms was new.

The reports on parental care roles were mostly related to making the role of the mother more visible by focusing on bigger responsibilities in care tasks, emphasizing "mothers and teachers", emphasizing the importance of sharing and acknowledging how difficult it is to harmonize work and care. The reports on general care, in comparison with the rest of the categories, focused more on children and the importance of their care.

Violence

Most of the news reports related to violence (5.6% of the total of reports) referred to two groups of topics: first intrafamily violence and second, to a lesser extent, child abuse, cyberbullying and violence against native communities.

Nutrition

Reports on nutrition (4.94% of the total) focused on how difficult lockdown was for families with children in more vulnerable populations. Such reports gave information about community kitchens, community meals and packed meals. They appeared both in regional and national media. The Minister of Social Affairs recognized that mandatory confinement increased the number of people who benefitted from community kitchens. Also, but to a lesser extent, there were reports on *Tarjeta Alimentar* (National protection program to access to the basic basket of food).

Child Protection

As regards the news reports on child protection (3.95% of the total), the main topics presented had to do with the vulnerable situation of children's homes, the consequences on legal processes for child adoption, and the importance of the protection of children.

Children's voices

The reports on children's voices (2.28% of the total) were based on anecdotes and experiences of boys and girls who sent their questions to the National President expressing doubts about coronavirus. These reports also included expressions of thanks from the president for the messages and drawings. Drawings and letters to teachers and health staff were also included.

Poverty

As an expression of multidimensional approach to child rights, poverty appeared in 1.54% of the news reports. This topic focused on the consequences of the pandemic in relation to a rise in inequality and poverty and "hard data" were presented, as in the following examples: "Coronavirus: by the end of 2020 there will be 756 thousand new poor children and adolescents" (21/5, Página 12); "Child poverty in Argentina will reach 58.6% by the end of the year" (20/5, Diario Norte).

DISCUSSION

The COVID-19 pandemic constitutes a total social event (7), which captures and impacts every other field of culture and society. As such, it impacted journalism and news production. Facing an unknown disease created a global scenario characterized by uncertainty in which the media

took center stage as privileged sources of information that also built different representations related to the pandemic (8). Moreover, given the fast expansion of the virus worldwide and its unpredictability, it was also an object of public and media knowledge before being an object of scientific and medical knowledge (9).

The digital News Report 2021 produced by Reuters and the Oxford Internet Institute (10) confirms that news consumption and trust in the news grew during 2020, though one key finding reports that the media were seen to be representing young people (especially young women) less fairly. This situation creates opportunities to foster more inclusive and trained newsrooms in which children's rights feature more prominently.

Our research shows how the digital media's dedication of space to the topic of childhood was based on emergent situations related to the characterization of boys and girls and to assumptions associated with the COVID-19 problematic. During the period of analysis and considering a rights paradigm, children as a social group have been affected by the lack of recognition and respect for their rights. This is not new in terms of how the media narrates and depicts children, mostly from an adult perspective, as victims or passive actors (11). During the extraordinary days of the pandemic, the media reproduced this dynamic which in turn provided an opportunity to rethink and to improve practices.

During the first stage of the pandemic, the way that children were depicted was based on an expression of ignorance and a lack of recognition of their rights. Assumptions were made which associated children with the mortality that accompanied the pandemic in this country. These categorizations evolved and were modified as the pandemic progressed.

Our findings show that, during the studied period, children were initially reported as being possible agents of transmission (58% of the news reports on health). The reports referred to the risks that being with children implied, to the possibility of their transmitting the virus, to the quantity of infected children and to the numbers of those in hospital.

The news during the first months of ASPO centered around the private sphere and focused on how to educate at home and how the home became the learning institution. There was also a great focus on the syllabus, more than on the social and emotional aspects that take place at school. As regards entertainment, the focus centered on how to generate play spaces at home.

During the period of this study, the news regarding children and adolescents which appeared on the digital media in most cases reflected a collective imagination of middle-class families from big population clusters mainly from the City of Buenos Aires and its suburbs.

The assumption was made that each home had several digital devices, all of them with connectivity, and that boys and girls continued their teaching-learning process and could spend their free time enjoying video games (entertainment) and socializing with friends through the net. There were scarcely any news reports that showed another reality. In July 2020, the National Ministry of Education and UNICEF surveyed remote school practices and reported deep inequalities in terms of access and connectivity (12, 13). Pedagogical continuity frequently entailed adults going to school to pick up handouts which had to be completed with the children at home, and which were then handed in to their teachers for correction. It also relied on a massive use of WhatsApp to keep teachers and students connected (14, 15).

The disposition and capacity of the adults at home to daily accompany the learning process was taken for granted, ignoring other obligations which demanded time and effort, such as their regular jobs (home office) or leaving the house for essentials such as odd jobs, going to community kitchens and getting packed lunches, groceries, and doing other necessary household chores.

School closures imposed a major commitment on care givers, not only in regard to increased time spent on attending to the needs of the children, but also to participating in their education process in a more active way than when schools were open.

In the same way, preventive measures against the pandemic, such as washing hands, cleaning surfaces, hygiene with alcohol or diluted bleach on the food and other products that entered the house, presuppose the availability of tap water in all homes. However, there are thousands of families who do not have access to drinking water at home, and consequently, these families had bigger risks of becoming victims of the pandemic, as they are, in fact, of all infectious diseases.

Many of the news reports on children and adolescents in the context of Health and Education place children as potential carriers of infection. This deepens the social atmosphere of fear and uncertainty about children as potential spreaders and those responsible for transmission.

Moreover, living conditions in working-class neighborhoods, with overcrowded homes and all sorts of limitations that people suffer who live there, make confinement to the home difficult. In such conditions children are forced to be outside their house much of the time. In these neighborhoods, the lockdown was limited to the borders of the neighborhood, which, in some cases, turned into actual "ghettos", guarded by security forces, when things turned worse some months later.

In Argentina in 2019, before the pandemic, more than half of children were poor. This percentage increased considerably as a consequence of COVID-19. Currently, according to UNICEF, more than 60% of those under 18 years of age are poor. The seriousness of this situation was not reflected in social media.

Was the authorities' and media's tendency to "invisibilize childhood" supported by an intention to "hide" the magnitude of poverty in this population? Even though this question does

not have a correct answer from the analysis of the news reports published in the first three months of the pandemic in the country, we can certainly state that the way the media referred to children from Argentina was scarcely representative of the different children who live there . And not recognizing their deprivations, which were worsened by the pandemic, translated into a ratification of the negation of their rights.

As usually happens when complex social phenomena take place, the partial improvement in the recognition of children's rights needed a proactive role from different sectors of society: health and social sciences professionals, intellectuals, NGOs, and organized communities.

As regards the recognition of children rights, this study participates in different debates. One of these is that public opinion, the media and political discourse give more importance to certain rights (for example health) than to others (education, play, protection, cares, among others). Today's debate is not consistent with the meaning and exercise of rights where social co-responsibility (from the State and civil society) is central when guaranteeing them. There are no rights more important than others, they are all essential for life, they are all equally important, they are universal.

CONCLUSIONS

- As a total social event, the pandemic poses a series of challenges in terms of children´s rights and the key role of the media in fostering a better social consciousness about them. Based on our report, we share some conclusions seeking to contribute with new lines of research about children and digital media from a rights perspective.
- As previous research shows, children are frequently depicted from an adult centered perspective and childhood is considered as an undifferentiated urban middle class age group. Approaching Girls and boys in their diversity can promote a better understanding of different situations, addressing inequality as a phenomenon that deeply affects children´s lives and rights.
- More discussion is needed about how health issues related to children are addressed by the media. This is not only a newsroom problem. It needs to be tackled by different public and civil society actors in order to reach an ethical agreement.
- The media plays a very important role in amplifying the reach of the children´s rights approach. There is an opportunity to extend training and build case studies about children, and the media can greatly contribute to this with the construction of a rights-based critical perspective towards children and the media, particularly during the COVID 19 pandemic.

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