

The problem of hunger in Spain: analysis of digital media from 2008-2018

Mabel Gracia-Arnaiz^{1,a,*}, Montserrat García-Oliva^{2,b,**}, Flavia Demonte^{3,c,***}

¹ Universitat Rovira i Virgili, España

² Universitat Ramón Llull, España

³ Universidad de San Martín, Argentina

✉ ^a mabel.gracia@urv.cat

✉ ^b mgarcia2@peretarres.org

✉ ^c fdemonte@unsam.edu.ar

Received: 08/04/2022; Accepted: 04/06/2022

Abstract

In Spain, between 2008 and 2014, hunger was recognised as a social problem from different spheres. As a relevant actor, the press associated it with the increase in food insecurity as a result of the financial crisis, austerity policies and growing unemployment. This article takes up this previous analysis and compares it with the media discourses produced between 2015 and 2018, a period referred to as "post-crisis". A qualitative study of news stories in three digital newspapers evidences significant changes in the conditions that make hunger an issue of social interest, showing how the perception of what is problematic grows and declines according to the attention received in the media and political sphere. Not only is the amount of news about hunger reduced, but the collective meaning of its causes is re-semanticised. Food insecurity is presented as a health problem resulting from social precariousness and is associated with malnutrition and obesity. We discuss the role of media in the construction of the problem of hunger and food insecurity and we conclude that the socio-economic context and the interaction between social actors are explanatory factors of the discursive transformations identified in press.

Keywords: Food insecurity; hunger; obesity; media; Spain.

* **Mabel Gracia-Arnaiz** es catedrática de Antropología Social en la Universitat Rovira i Virgili y miembro del Centro de Investigación en Antropología Médica [MARC]. Su trabajo se centra en la intersección entre la antropología de la alimentación, la salud y el género. Ha coordinado diversos proyectos nacionales e internacionales relacionados con seguridad alimentaria o con política pública, desigualdades sociales y salud.

** **Montserrat García-Oliva** es doctora en Antropología Social y Cultural, máster en Gerontología y posgraduada en Violencia Familiar. Directora del grado en Educación Social y del máster en Gerontología Social de la Universitat Ramón Llull, Su tarea investigadora se centra en vejez, alimentación y modelos organizativos de entidades sociales.

*** **Flavia Demonte** es doctora en Ciencias Sociales y máster en Políticas Sociales por la Universidad de Buenos Aires. Es profesora de la Escuela Interdisciplinaria de Altos Estudios Sociales de la Universidad Nacional de San Martín y de la Facultad de Periodismo y Comunicación Social de la Universidad Nacional de La Plata. Su línea de investigación se centra en estudios socioculturales y mediáticos sobre alimentación y salud.



SUMMARY

1. Introduction.
2. Materials and methods.
3. Results.
 - 3.1. New forms of hunger.
 - 3.2. Actors that tell stories.
 - 3.3. Diagnoses, measures and controversies.
4. Discussion and Conclusions.

1. INTRODUCTION

In keeping with the fiscal austerity and monetary measures imposed by numerous European governments in response to the 2008 global economic crisis, which increased labor market precariousness, led to cutbacks in social services and contributed to increasing social inequalities, the Spanish government's initial response to the economic recession focused efforts on bank bailouts, labor market deregulation, reducing spending on health care and increasing both direct and indirect taxation (Navarro, 2015). Job destruction and a continuous increase in poverty went hand in hand with these measures until 2014 (Ayllón, 2015). From 2015 to 2019, some macroeconomic indicators related to growth and employment improved, giving way to the so-called post-crisis stage (Prada-Trigo, 2018), which then came to an end again with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, during this brief period of economic recovery, indicators related to social inequality and to the at-risk-of-poverty rate continued to be far from pre-crisis levels (Llano Ortiz, 2019).

Despite the lack of official studies on the processes generating food precariousness over the past decade and, particularly, over levels of food insecurity and hunger (Díaz Méndez et al., 2018; Gracia-Arnaiz, 2019a), many voices called attention to the fact that the "great recession" had brought hunger back to Spain. Among them, the digital press played an important role in revealing the existence of hunger and the measures taken in response to it (Gracia-Arnaiz & García-Oliva, 2017a; 2017b). This interest, however, has not been reflected in the literature on media analysis. Although for the last decade there have been several studies on how the media address health and food issues (Marín-Murillo et al., 2016; Fúster et al., 2009; Varela Suárez et al., 2020), food security (Marín-Murillo, et al., 2015; Elika, 2016) and other issues like obesity (Westall, 2010), there are hardly any studies on how the media have covered the issue of food deprivation in a context of increasing precariousness (Sánchez Sabaté et al., 2019). Some studies did analyze this issue within the framework of *agenda setting*, and more particularly *framing theory* (Marín-Murillo et al., 2020). While they provide useful methodological tools to show how hunger is discussed and understood as a social problem by the digital press, ethnography is an instrument that complements and contrasts the way in which these issues are understood and responded to by citizens.

As part of a broader study,¹ this article analyzes the digital press coverage of hunger, examining its quantitative and especially its discursive dimensions. In particular, we compare

¹ This study is part of two wider ethnographic projects titled "Eating in a time of "crisis": new health and dietary contexts in Spain" (CSO2012-31323, 2013-2015) and "The precarisation of everyday life: food (in)security, gender and

media coverage and treatment during the crisis period (2008-2014), as reported in a previous study (Gracia-Arnaiz & García-Oliva, 2017a), with the post-crisis treatment (2015-2018), identifying whether there are changes in terms of arguments used, attribution of responsibilities and causes, and actors involved. We work on the hypothesis that the media and their digital versions act as constructors and amplifiers of new social problems, understanding the latter as those issues that, within a wider field of conflicts, are prioritized regardless of the negativity that may characterize them – e.g. number of victims, damage caused, etc. Just as at specific moments certain issues are covered with greater intensity and repetition, on other occasions the same issues may disappear or appear infrequently, or with a different meaning. This is what has been happening in the Spanish digital press during the last decade. Rather than answering the question of whether hunger exists or not in Spain -ethnography offers data on very diverse and never extreme hunger experiences (Gracia-Arnaiz, 2019a)-, our study shows that unequal media coverage is determined both by the peculiar interpretation that the press makes of the socioeconomic and political context, and by the social debate generated by the general public.²

The media are sources of social communication that summarize social practices and synthesize various types of discourse, constituting ideal spaces for the re-creation and strengthening of cultural images (Gracia-Arnaiz, Moreras, García Acosta e Icazuriaga, 2015; Luengo Cruz, 2009). Thus, drawing on some of the key theoretical assumptions of agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972)³ and framing theory (Entman, 1993; Tankard, 2001)⁴ -especially those that view the media as leading actors in setting the agendas for certain issues to enter the public discussion and how these issues are presented-, we consider that the media generate a public space where, at any given moment and based on specific events, issues emerge that had previously been confined to more restricted spaces (institutional, scientific, health-related, etc.), contributing in this way to the problematization of certain phenomena over others. Furthermore, they not only inform their readers, they also provide them with interpretative frameworks. Newspapers, also in their digital versions, generate discourses that are anchored in time, produced by actors within various institutions and aimed at other actors within a specific historical context. In this process, they do something more than just provide information. In the case at hand, these discourses show how certain actors, points of view and debates around hunger are prioritized over others.

health” (CSO2016-74941-P, 2017-19), both financed by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation. They focused on the impact of the economic crisis in ways of eating habits among people living in precarious circumstances and policies to address the growing impoverishment.

Author’s contributions: Funding acquisition, Project administration, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Writing - original draft and Writing – review & editing, M.G-A.

Investigation, Methodology, Writing - original draft and Writing – review & editing, M.G-O and F.D

² A longer version of this study can be consulted in Gracia-Arnaiz, García-Oliva & Demonte (2021).

³ Agenda setting stems out of the North American functionalism of communication studies and it is based on the hypothesis that the media are not as powerful as to tell us how to think, but they are powerful enough to raise the issues on which to think. In doing so, they emphasize some aspects, pay less attention to others and make the rest invisible, affecting the way in which people think about the problems that are finally placed on the agenda.

⁴ Framing theory’s roots lie outside communication studies and within cognitive psychology and interpretative sociology. This perspective, taking up the postulates of social constructivism, is based on the notion that framing means selecting some aspects of a reality and giving them greater relevance, seeking not only to present a problem but also to define it, provide a causal interpretation, a moral evaluation and/or a treatment recommendation for that problem (Entman 1993). It is through selection, emphasis and exclusion of certain elements that themes and frames are constructed in news stories.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study builds on the results of a previous project that analyzed the contents of news stories about hunger published in Spain in 2008-2014 (Gracia-Arnaiz & García-Oliva, 2017a; 2017b). The analysis of the digital press was limited to determining which issues were the subject of debate, which actors were given a voice and what their positions were, with explanations offered about the causes, as well as attributions of responsibility and possible solutions. Here we set out to find out whether in the period immediately after, between 2015 and 2018, there were any significant shifts, both regarding the quantity/frequency of news stories and the content of their narratives. Within the framework of a new project titled “The precarisation of everyday life: food (in)security, gender and health” (CSO2016-74941-P, 2017-19) whose main objective was to examine the persistence of food insecurity among the most precarious sectors of the population, we chose to turn to the same newspapers as in the previous period. They were chosen based on criteria such as circulation, national coverage and editorial line. All the news stories were identified using our search terms in the newspapers *La Vanguardia* and *El País*, in their digital versions,⁵ and *eldiario.es*,⁶ which is only published online.

Our analysis focused on newspapers in their digital version, where information is presented in a different hierarchy than the one in the traditional hard copy (Peña-Fernández et al., 2016). Thus we have omitted here the analysis of front pages, length of texts and their relationship with other news items, as well as the predominant themes as indicators of priority for the topic. As an indicator of relevance, we focused on the analysis of the frequency of news based on search criteria or keywords, as well as on the actors and arguments put forward regarding the causality of hunger, as well as responsibility for it and solutions addressing it.

To achieve this, we used the same search terms as in the previous study: food and poverty, food assistance, crisis and hunger, and soup kitchens. The search engines used were the same as in the previous study and they were chosen for their relevance to the object of study, which had been constructed around precarization, the economic crisis, food poverty and social assistance. We asked whether news stories on the impact of the economic crisis on food insecurity continued to be published and whether they included the same or new ideas about the causes and consequences of precarization on material and food deprivation. We were also interested in analyzing which actors were given a voice and about possible responsibilities and solutions.

Once we had selected news items and analyzed their number, we carried out a qualitative thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2012), defined as a process in which themes are identified and described, and converging or diverging links between them are established and integrated

⁵ The choice of digital versions of print media responds to issues of accessibility to information sources for this research and is based on the transformation in the practices of production, dissemination and consumption of news in the traditional print media as a result of the digitization of communication processes. Therefore, taking into account the particular features of the digital presentation of news, throughout the article we include the three newspapers analyzed as digital press, newspapers or digital media.

⁶ The editorial lines of each of the selected newspapers represent different political/ideological interests: *La Vanguardia* was, in its origins, a newspaper linked to monarchical interests until relations between a former editor and the royal house deteriorated. In an earlier stage, it was supportive of the Catalan nationalist right wing and nowadays it could be said that it responds to the interests of the center/liberal sectors. It inaugurated its digital version in 1995. *El País* has shown an editorial line of social democratic tendencies. In recent years, it has undergone ideological changes, shifting from positions tied to socialism to an editorial line closer to the center or center-right. It inaugurated its digital version in 1996. Finally, *eldiario.es*, an entirely digital newspaper since its creation, holds an editorial line that responds to the interests of the sectors sympathetic to the left and aligned with republican positions.

into an interpretive model that, ultimately, requires the construction of a descriptive-analytical discourse.

We took on this task after observing that news stories about hunger had been numerous and recurring in the previous period (Gracia-Arnaiz & Garcia-Oliva, 2017a; 2017b), but that over the 2015 through 2018 period such stories decreased each year (though they increased again in the past year as a result of COVID-19). In what follows, we examine the total number of news stories related to hunger based on our search criteria and for the different digital newspapers mentioned for the 2015 to 2018 period, and compare them to those of the previous period.

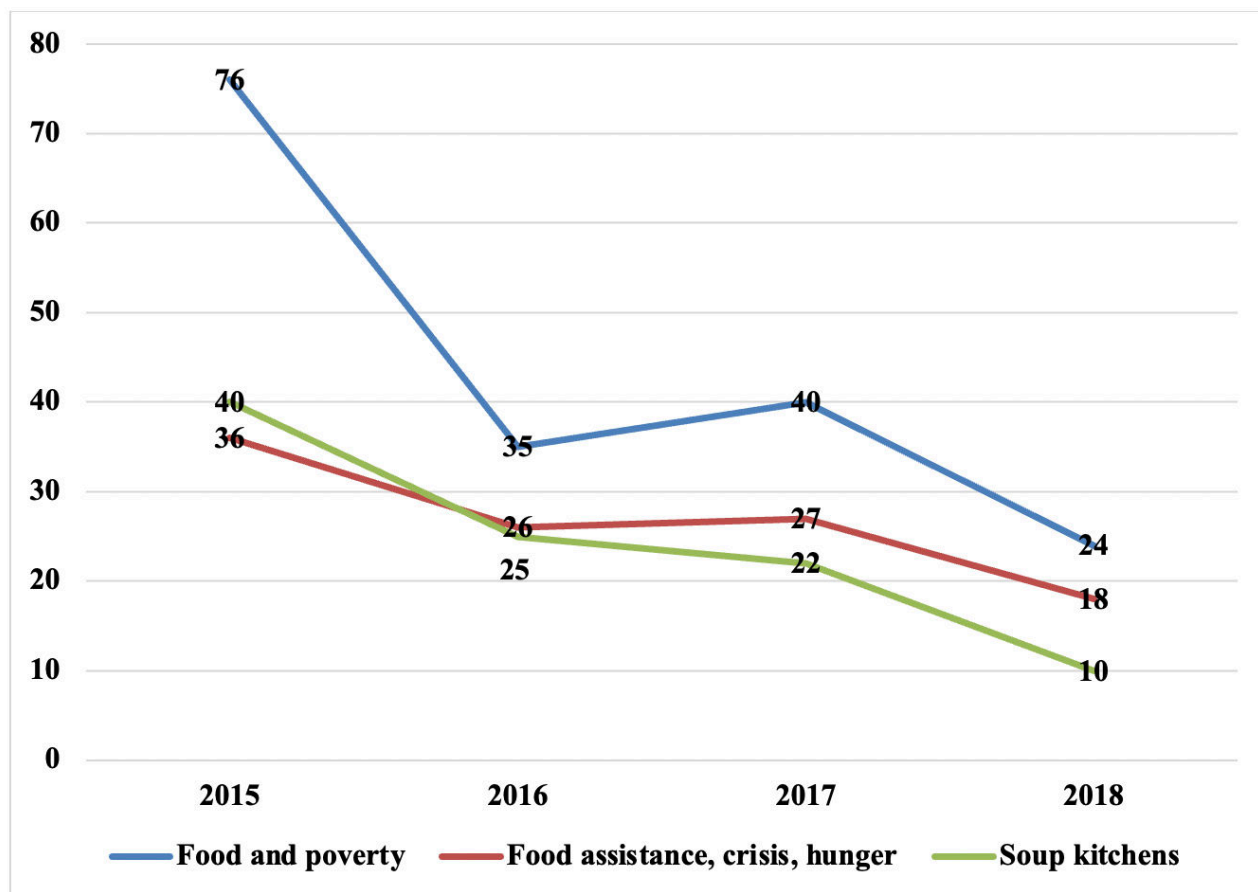


Figure 1. Total number of news stories analyzed according to search criteria (2015-2018)

Source: Authors' own research

Regarding *La Vanguardia*, we checked a total of 337 references from 1 January 2015 to 15 June 2018. Of these, we analyzed a total of 85 based on our research objectives and their geographic reach.

Table 1. Distribution of news gathered and analyzed, based on search criteria and years, from *La Vanguardia*, 2015-2018.

SEARCH CRITERIA	2015	2016	2017	2018	Total Analyzed
Food and poverty	23	4	4	0	31
Food assistance, crisis, hunger	6	1	3	0	10

SEARCH CRITERIA	2015	2016	2017	2018	Total AnalyZED
Soup kitchens	15	13	9	7	44
TOTAL ANALYZED	44	18	16	7	85

Source: Authors' own research

However, in the previous period for the same newspaper we reviewed a total of 146 articles using the search criterion "Food and Poverty", a total of 38 for the search criterion "Food assistance, crisis, hunger" and a total of 1530 articles for the criterion "Soup kitchens". The total number of articles analyzed for the 2008-2014 period was 1714 (Gracia-Arnaiz & Garcia-Oliva, 2017a; 2017b).

Regarding *El País* newspaper, the number of news stories was much greater than that of *La Vanguardia*. We used match percentage criteria to make the final selection. From this initial search we sorted the news by years. For the first search criterion, "Food and poverty", the total number of news stories that we checked was 2395; for the second criterion, "Food assistance, crisis, hunger" it was 3395 and for the third, "Soup kitchens", it was 1871. The results are shown in Table 2 and reveal a total of 217 news stories selected for our analysis.

Table 2. Distribution of news gathered and analyzed, based on search criteria and years, from *El País*, 2015-2018

SEARCH CRITERIA	2015	2016	2017	2018	Total AnalyZED
Food and poverty	37	25	29	18	109
Food assistance, crisis, hunger	11	15	16	16	58
Soup kitchens	24	12	11	3	50
TOTAL ANALYZED	72	52	56	37	217

Source: Authors' own research

For the previous study and under the same criteria the figures for *El País* were the following: 1476 for the first criterion, 3584 for the second and 1969 for the third search criterion. That means, news stories about hunger that matched our research criteria dropped significantly in the post-crisis period.

For the digital newspaper *eldiario.es*, we checked a total of 241 news stories for all the years and search criteria considered for both Spain and the rest of the world, and for both the main edition and local editions. Of these, we selected and analyzed a total of 76 stories for the 2015-2018 period. We must clarify that the years considered in the previous study for this newspaper were 2012-2014, as *eldiario.es*, a "digital native", began to publish in 2012. We have not established a numerical comparison in this case, as it would not be comparable with the other sources.

Table 3. Distribution of news gathered and analyzed, based on search criteria and years, from *eldiario.es*, 2015-2018.

SEARCH CRITERIA	2015	2016	2017	2018	Total analyzed
Food and poverty	16	6	7	6	35
Food assistance, crisis, hunger	19	10	8	1	38

Soup kitchens	1	0	2	0	3
TOTAL ANALYZED	36	16	17	7	76

Source: Authors' own research

The number of news stories on the topic decreased compared to the previous period (Gracia-Arnaiz & Garcia-Oliva, 2017a; 2017b) and as macroeconomic indicators such as GDP and employment improved (although relatively). During this period, the decrease also occurred in all the newspapers analysed (Figure 2).

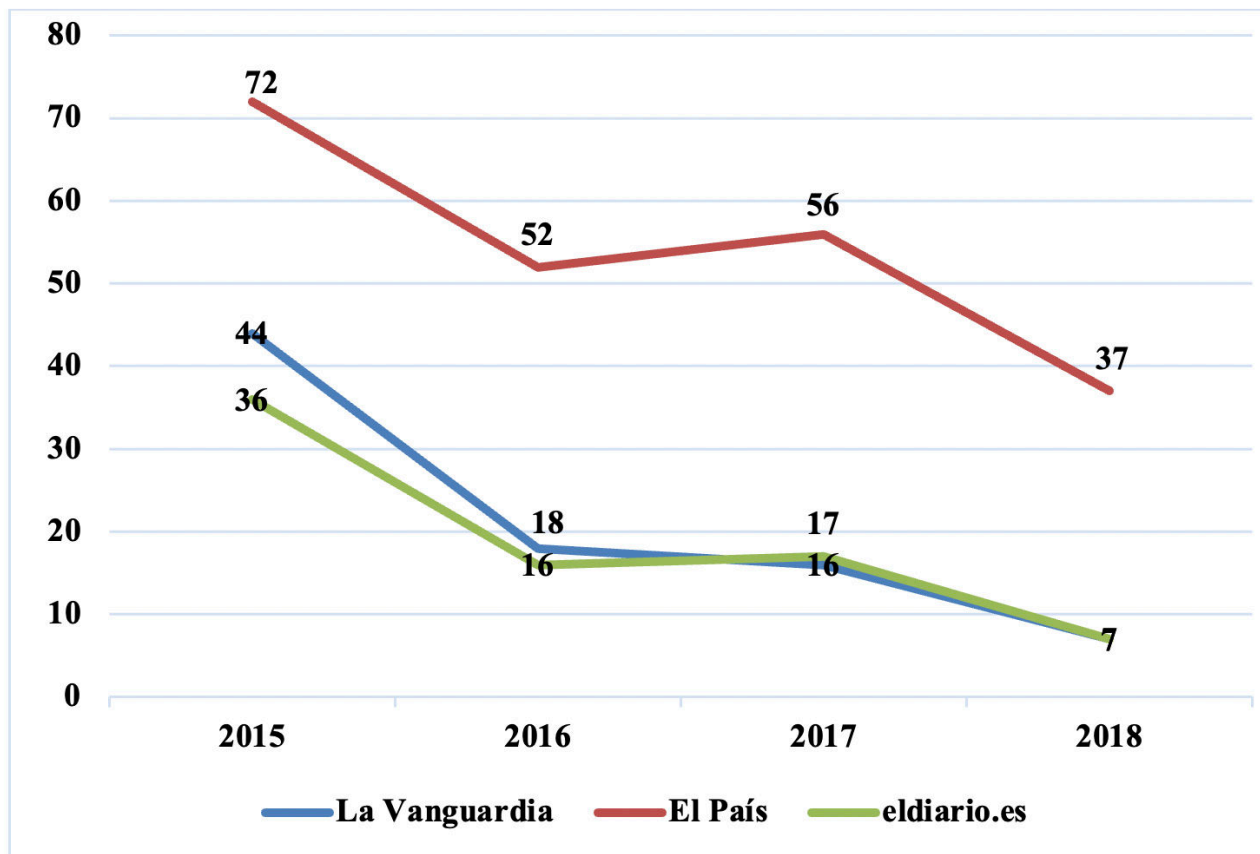


Figure 2. Number of news stories analyzed by each newspaper (2015-2018)

Source: Authors' own research

As we found in the previous period, these news stories were often published in the "Economy" and "Trends" sections, although the "Society" section was the most frequent location. There were also appearances in the "Religion", "Books" and "Opinion" sections as well. The Society section acquired increasing importance in addressing this issue, as well as other issues related to food and daily life. The news stories tended to be supported by narratives based on individual accounts of daily hardships, and showed great interest in bringing poverty to life for readers. Although the diversity of the location of these stories increased, their failure to appear in the "Politics" section continued, which suggests that for the digital press the problem of food hardship was defined, both during the crisis and in the post-crisis period, more by its socioeconomic dimensions and consequences and its impact on daily life than by its political dimensions. As will be shown below, the discursive strategies

also changed. During the post-crisis period references to “the return of *Carpanta*”.- or, in any other metaphorical form, of hunger - declined and virtually disappeared, which does not mean that such references will not reappear, particularly given the significance of food insecurity within the context of the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19.⁷

3. RESULTS

3.1. New forms of hunger

When both periods are compared, the way of dealing with the topic also changes in all three digital outlets analyzed, even if their editorial lines are quite dissimilar. In the sharpest stage of the crisis, hunger was portrayed as a household problem and the newspapers used different communicative strategies: thematic reiteration/insistence; unanimity over its causes and a growing negativity in the reporting of the problem, which was reinforced by the use of figures and percentages extracted from reports and by reporting on dramatic situations (Gracia-Arnaiz & García-Oliva, 2017a). However, starting in 2015, the issue of hunger began to be covered with reference to new manifestations. There were fewer explicit references to situations of hunger and its main consequence, malnutrition, as experiences caused by economic privation. Instead, as with the study by Marín-Murillo et al. (2020), the most frequent references were to situations of malnutrition and its main expression, the experience of hidden hunger, defined “as a lack of the necessary vitamins and minerals in the diet to strengthen immunity and healthy development” (*eldiario.es*, 26 May 2017) with obesity often being mentioned. Regarding the latter, the stories often referred to the World Health Organization (WHO), which considers that “[obesity] is caused by an increase in the ingestion of hyper-caloric foods rich in fats, salt and sugars and poor in vitamins, minerals and micro-nutrients, and by a decrease in physical activity, a result of an increasingly sedentary lifestyle” (*eldiario.es*, 12 December 2015).

These problems were no longer related to access to or quantity of food available, as was considered to be the case during the crisis period (Gracia-Arnaiz & Garcia-Oliva, 2017a; 2017b), but to their quality. The change in nutritional profiles is found in the voice of the individuals featured in the stories in these digital newspapers. For example, the president of the Madrid regional government, in the face of the controversy raised by the opening or closure of school lunchrooms in the summer, stated that the problem was not malnutrition but obesity: “As explained by the president of the regional government [...], his perspective is that the problem of nutrition among children is 'overweight not hunger'” (*eldiario.es*, 2 April 2015). Representation was also given to those responsible for projects for feeding children from humanitarian organizations like the Red Cross or those in situations of poverty: “Food, people do have, the problem is above all the quality of what they eat”, stated the individual responsible for projects for feeding children of the Red Cross in Catalonia. “What we are missing is fresh food, what I can make for my children is rice or soup, tons of soup”, says Mercedes (a woman affected by the financial crisis) (*eldiario.es*, 27 August 2015).

⁷ Although not an object of this study, we do want to know how the health crisis brought about by the pandemic is impacting the declining trend we found up until 2018. To do this, we gathered news stories from the same newspapers for the dates from 14 March to 15 April, 2020, applying the same search parameters but adding the search term COVID-19. The results show that the media are sensitive to the effects of the current economic and health crisis, and in the face of the rapidly felt increase in vulnerability, the digital press has again included food insecurity in its coverage as a recurring phenomenon.

A news story that clearly expresses this discursive shift appeared in an editorial column under the title "There is hunger in Spain" [*En España hay hambre*], and quoted in [eldiario.es](#) (17 October 2017).

Clearly not of the type we are used to see in images that come to us from Sudan, Guatemala and India, but of the type that makes one's stomach grumble many times during the year because you could not eat breakfast before school. Or you could not buy chicken, beef or fish three times a week [...] There are 589,000 households with children that do not eat an adequate breakfast or that eat the cheapest junk food that is making them obese.

Closely linked with this thematic shift, in the 2015-2018 period we begin to see excess weight and obesity presented as problems associated with situations of inequality, risk of poverty and social exclusion, but particularly with situations of food precariousness as part of this contextual shift. As a result, the center of concern was no longer the quantity of foods that households could access, as was the case during the crisis period, but their quality or cost and their effects on obesity: "44% of the Spanish population is unable to eat a healthy diet due to its cost" ([eldiario.es](#), 14 March 2018). Thus, the financial limitations of those affected by the crisis were considered to be the main cause of their inability to maintain a healthy diet. A report from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development from 2014 "warns of the prevalence of obesity...[and] that the crisis has forced many families to cut spending on food and adjust their food budgets, leading families to buy cheaper and less healthy foods"; while a specialist from the Spanish Society of Public Health and Health Administration stated that "social inequality is a very important component of childhood obesity, affecting three times more families with lower education levels" ([eldiario.es](#), 12 December 2015). A Spanish pediatrician from Cordoba in another article from [eldiario.es](#) (13 May 2017) stated that "poverty is the cause [of new manifestations of hunger], of why the number of cases of childhood obesity and malnutrition, as well as overweight, is growing. It is also related to lower school performance, early school leaving and iron deficiency".

These manifestations of food precariousness - malnutrition, hidden hunger and obesity - were defined as consequences of food prices, of poverty and of experiences of hardship resulting from the crisis. Therefore, although the form of conceptualizing hardships changed in the post-crisis period, what were considered the causes of hardships did not change. If, during the 2008-2014 period, the causes were associated with poverty and inequality resulting from the economic crisis experienced in Spain and the management of that crisis, the social, emotional and cultural consequences that the crisis and then the post-crisis produced impacted on and led to health problems, particularly obesity. And this is what the agenda of the digital media analyzed revolves around.

3.2. Actors that tell stories

From the perspective of the digital newspapers, what remained unaltered as compared to the earlier recession period were the voices of different actors: these were the *victims*; however, unlike at the height of the crisis, they no longer appeared as protagonists of collective demands for social and political action ([Gracia-Arnaiz & Garcia-Oliva, 2017a; 2017b](#)), but rather as protagonists of stories marked by daily hardships. In other words, what in the previous period appeared as a group that suffered the deep consequences of the recession, beginning in 2015, now appeared through individual testimonies that expressed the particular cases of individuals that were unable to improve their living conditions during this period of supposed economic recovery. Personal stories prevailed that starkly related the daily

situation of households suffering severe poverty and a resulting inaccessibility to sufficient food, while also explaining the tactics these households used so they could eat, and eat healthily also recognized by different researches (Gracia-Arnaiz, Moreras, García Acosta e Icazuriaga, 2015; 2019a; 2019b; Díaz Méndez et al., 2018; Medina et al., 2015). The digital media became storytellers, telling stories emphasizing the strategies used by the victims of poverty:

Mercedes: "I make soup or Cuban rice most days, the main thing is the food for the children, I can get by with anything". Verónica: "Well, I have even gone to a supermarket to ask the manager for food". These are two mothers [...] worried about their children. Their economic situation and their chronic poverty have made it difficult for them to provide enough food for their families. (*eldiario.es*, 27 August 2015).

Among the actors given a voice during this period were the elderly. In 2015, there were still testimonies from elderly people who, with their meager pensions, supported themselves and their children and grandchildren. *La Vanguardia*, in a news story, told the story of Antonio, who "once a week [...] travels from Calafell to Barcelona to go to the supermarket with his daughter. It's not because he can't write his own shopping list and needs help, rather it is he who accompanies his daughter and pays for her supplies [...] "They say the recession is coming to an end but I don't know, [...], I think this is going to go on for some more years" (*La Vanguardia*, 19 September 2015). Through these daily stories, these newspapers revealed new ways of suffering hunger in Spain, which we have also shown ethnographically: referring to experiences of suffering that individuals recount, such as eating very little during the day, skipping meals, giving the best food to children or drinking a lot of water to quiet the stomach.

These experiences of hardships were also recounted through other directly involved individuals and groups, not always based on first-person accounts. These actors, working in social organizations or local health services, told the same stories recounting how others lived or experienced poverty. Their experiences granted legitimacy to these stories: "The pediatrician [...] recounts that one mother ended up confessing to her that she could not provide yogurt to her child because of the economic hardship they were in" (*eldiario.es*, 13 May 2017).

Experts from health organizations appeared with greater frequency than in the previous period, challenging the existence of hunger and malnutrition in Spain, associating possible cases of food insecurity with problems related to the quality and cost of the foods being eaten and considering their impact on body weight. One health specialist stated that "[...] it has a lot to do with living conditions, resources, habits and behaviors, a series of factors that are very connected to access to food, availability, the influence of the media, etc., and this all varies a lot depending on the social level of each family" (*eldiario.es*, 12 December 2015). But precariousness goes beyond the connection between food and nutrition. Some voices, also in the health sphere, began to refer to other consequences, such as the negative impact on emotional health: "[...] psychiatric problems, the consumption of psycho-pharmaceuticals and diagnoses of severe mental health problems are three or even four times greater among children under 15 years of age in situations of poverty" (*La Vanguardia*, 2 March 2018).

The digital media diversified the content of its discourses from one period to the next. The problems associated with poverty in terms of health were no longer focused on hunger, because it was assumed that food was being distributed to those in the most precarious situations. Health problems were related to malnutrition, overweight and obesity, but also to mental health and the stress and stigmatization that children suffered when they saw that their families had to shop in food banks, which could affect their healthy development.

3.3. Diagnoses, measures and controversies

As in the most difficult moments of the economic crisis, the most common measures mentioned in the digital press in the post-crisis period were those carried out by non-profit organizations such as charitable, humanitarian and social action groups, some of a religious nature -such as Caritas-, the Red Cross and local associations or foundations that operated soup kitchens for persons in need. As we have seen in the previous period (Gracia-Arnaiz & Garcia-Oliva, 2017a; 2017b), and as stated as well by Marín-Murillo et al. (2020), these actors appeared in both the crisis and post-crisis period, showing uniformity in the digital press analyzed, even with differing editorial lines.

In addition to the important role of these types of organizations, the digital press, and particularly the newspapers *El País* y *La Vanguardia*, as an expression of their editorial lines, also reported on the business sphere as an integral part of the response (also identified by Marín-Murillo et al., 2020), for example, by making contributions such as supermarket leftovers and low-price menus in restaurants. Examples of this news coverage are the articles that were printed in *La Vanguardia* and *El País* in which an economist informed readers of the creation of an app, "weSAVEeat", through which foods made up of leftovers from large supermarkets were sold at low prices (*La Vanguardia*, 10 February 2018). In addition, and continuing with a focus on private initiatives, the digital press reported on the increasing numbers of businesses establishing corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs. Typically, within the framework of such programs, either a food product was being sold according to the rules of fair trade or a solidarity project was established with employee participation.

The measures implemented by governments were also frequently mentioned in both periods, especially school lunchrooms, which were presented as an intervention that contributed to mitigating food insecurity for poor families, although without ultimately resolving the problem. However, in the post-crisis period concern for the closure of lunchrooms during school recesses was frequently expressed as their closure implying a loss of a means for families with school-age children to access food. However, the digital press reported on alternatives -such as summer camps with scholarships for lunchrooms- which could alleviate the situations of families experiencing hardships. For *La Vanguardia* (2 August 2016), the relief this provided was twofold, because, on the one hand, children could enjoy vacations that they otherwise would not have and, on the other, parents were freed for a few weeks from the cost of providing food.

When the digital press reported on the different measures taken by social organizations, private entities and public administrations, it not only revealed who each of the digital media analyzed considered to be the leading actors, but also some of the controversies that marked this period which had not been reported on in the previous period (Gracia-Arnaiz & Garcia-Oliva, 2017a; 2017b). An initial controversy among public authorities, the managers of soup kitchens and the persons being served was not over whether there was or not actual hunger -as it was agreed that there were different ways of suffering and experiencing it-, but rather about whether or not the crisis had been overcome.

Then, in 2015, public authorities became convinced by macro-economic indicators that the crisis had been overcome. This diagnosis was debated among other actors who spoke in the digital media. This controversy was expressed in the following news story:

The data provided to this newspaper by the Red Cross [...] demonstrate not only that the problem of access to food has not diminished, but that in 2015 it has continued to grow [...]. Their input describes the situation in which they find themselves and contrasts with data showing the economy improving. "The

figures reveal a part of the reality; the situation of the families we serve has not improved; they are in situations of chronic poverty' lamented [...] a staff member [...] of the Red Cross [...] ([eldiario.es](#), 27 August 2015).

Even in 2016, 2017 and 2018 statements appeared about the continuing impact of the recession: "The economic crisis can still be felt in the refrigerators and meals of a lot of families" ([eldiario.es](#), 26 May 2017). As part of this argument, *La Vanguardia* reported that a social organization had published "A Michelin guide for the poor" (2 April 2017), which informed persons in need where they could eat, sleep and wash themselves in Barcelona. Denunciations in the media appeared through the figure of the Ombudsman of Barcelona. A report by the Department of the Ombudsman stated that "[...] severe material poverty is when households experience such circumstances as the inability to meet unforeseen expenses, problems in keeping the house at an adequate temperature in winter, difficulties in eating meat or fish every other day, inability to take at least a week's holiday [...] 14.2% of children under 16 years of age [...] are in this situation in Barcelona" (*La Vanguardia*, 9 March 2016). The results of this report revealed that the crisis was not over. In addition, food requests increased. According to *La Vanguardia*, the charity Caritas had to quadruple its food aid and opted for the provision of pre-paid cards for users to buy food instead of using the traditional means of distributing food. This new resource, in the words of one user, gave its users greater dignity: "I have the card since past October. For me it's a tool that gives us dignity, as it gives us anonymity. Not everyone likes to take the route of asking for assistance" (*La Vanguardia*, 15 December 2016). The organizations that form the *Third Sector Roundtable* reported that in 2016 social organizations provided assistance to 1,584,000 persons, 34 thousand more than in the previous year (*El País*, 30 November 2017).

On the macro level, this controversy was debated using statistics, a resource, as with direct testimonies, that was also amply used in the discourse of the digital press, and which was also found in the previous period (Gracia-Arnaiz & Garcia-Oliva, 2017a; 2017b). "The data are so clear that they speak for themselves. If this was the final map out of the crisis, have we really left the crisis behind?", asked a columnist after presenting the most recent economic and social indicators regarding wages, unemployment, distribution of income, severe poverty, the GINI index and other indicators ([eldiario.es](#), 1 January 2018).

A deep gap existed between what was proposed to address food insecurity and the actual measures taken, which generated a second controversy that had not been reported on in the crisis period (Gracia-Arnaiz & Garcia-Oliva, 2017a; 2017b). Increasing incomes and employment, improving systems of protection for individuals and households that did not have income or work (for example, establishing basic income programs or a so-called minimum solidarity income) were all presented as comprehensive policies that would guarantee access to healthy foods and resolve the new forms of hunger. Recognizing that in Spain and other EU countries food was still not a right (*El País*, 28 February 2017), a demand also appeared for a system of *universal food coverage* based on the idea of food as common good, in line with concepts such as food democracy, food sovereignty, agroecology, etc. However, in contrast to these proposals, we find mentions of some of the main measures taken: soup kitchens and school lunches, pre-paid cards for food shopping and grants for use in dining rooms. This reveals not only the continuation of past measures but also that some of the old debates persisted. One of these debates, also present at the height of the crisis, refers to the crucial presence of civil society agents and particularly social and charitable organizations, and the absence of the state in terms of interventions addressing food insecurity and the new hunger problems.

"Solidarity is great, but it should be the responsibility of the state", says Ana. The mantra of recovery, so repeated as of late by the government, does not convince this head teacher. "Let them come here and see how these children are faring". "There are huge shortcomings that are the responsibility of public institutions. The welfare state does not consider these children, who are also victims of the recession [...]" ([eldiario.es](#) May 2015).

Connected to the key role of these social organizations and the absence of the state, the digital press reconstructed another debate. "New assistance and subsidies are proposed to mitigate energy poverty, childhood poverty, food insecurity and dozens of other manifestations of poverty, without considering approaches to combat and overcome the causes that produce them" ([eldiario.es](#), 28 March 2015). These were old debates for new problems.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The digital press reveals the central role of the media in the construction of hunger as a social problem in Spain. The contrast between the two periods analyzed resulted not so much from the communication strategies used to cover the issue, as these are similar in the three digital newspapers examined, but in the quantitative and thematic treatment given to the issue of food insecurity and precariousness and the construction of hunger. The steep upward curve in news stories regarding hunger occurring in the years 2008 to 2014 was followed by a period (2015 to 2018) where references to hunger as deprivation and a limiting experience were progressively reduced, with references to extreme situations experienced in countries considered to be culturally and geographically distant from Spain becoming more frequent. This was a result of the declining media interest in the phenomenon of hunger, and of the media's capacity to choose issues, highlighting or omitting them depending on the economic, political and public health context in Spain. However, the media are sensitive to issues that the population considers important and especially to issues that interest their readers. We find the digital press changed its initial discourses on food insecurity when it noticed the existence of a social debate on its causes and responsibilities that went beyond the responses of public authorities and charitable organizations, which initially focused almost exclusively on the distribution of food to the most needy. This debate also appeared in the earlier ethnographic research ([Gracia-Arnaiz, 2019a; 2019b](#)).

In this sense, and drawing on the theoretical premises of agenda setting ([McCombs & Shaw, 1972](#)) our study shows, like other works of reference ([Marín-Murillo et al., 2020](#)) that the issue, with all its fluctuation and variation in coverage frequency, has been proposed as a relevant issue for public discussion, albeit based on thematic shifts according to framing theory ([Tankard, 2001; Entman, 1993](#)). It also shows that the press refines its conception of hunger and frames it as a problem caused less by lack of food and more by the changes in the material conditions for the population to meet their basic needs, and by the consequences of these changes. This shows that the relationship between the media and society involves a constant interaction of great complexity. The digital press weaves webs of opposing actors and discourses about the issues that will enter public discussion, which are then interpreted by the citizens. It reports on initiatives carried out by agencies that normally manage food emergencies, but it also included the emergence of alternative projects organized by social and community networks and in the business sphere. It also reported on sociological discussions and those among experts in public health that linked economic precariousness and food insecurity to an increase in certain diseases and conditions, such as obesity. Thus, we

find a shift in the treatment of the problem: from experiences of hunger and the spread of hungry bodies towards other problems associated with the quality and cost of foods. From the perspective of the digital media, we observed the exit of *Carpanta* from the scene, but the entry of new characters and new manifestations of hunger: in particular, excess weight caused by precariousness. Obesity, as some national epidemiological studies have shown, occurs more frequently in lower classes, in older adults and among poor women (MSCBS, 2018), constituting an example of precariousness that crystallizes in the particular form of precarious bodies (Gracia-Arnaiz, Demonte & Bom Kraemer, 2020).

Even recognizing the emergence of the latter perspective, we can also state that the digital media are interested in covering the issue of food insecurity through an economic and political agenda, and they are especially sensitive to co-constructing discourses on hunger, particularly in "crisis" scenarios. When critical economic situations become less tense, addressing food insecurity takes a back seat in the media agenda, even when the problem persists, as it is closely linked to increasing precarity. In short, during the post-recession period and despite the economic growth registered, Spain continued to present worrying indicators of a persistent social inequality. Although the risk-of-poverty rate declined by three points in comparison with the crisis period (INE, 2020), to 26.1%, it remains far from the rate prior to the economic crisis, which was 23.1% in 2008. In fact, European authorities (European Commission, 2019) have warned Spain that it must improve equity, and they have demanded urgent economic, fiscal and social policies that will reduce the high levels of income inequality. The voices convened in the digital press to argue in favor of or against the continuing existence and impact of the recession constitute an example of the different ways in which the digital media also promote political-ideological definitions regarding different socioeconomic scenarios, present controversies related to them, guide interpretations of the measures implemented and evaluate the actors involved (Tankard, 2001; Entman, 1993). The discourse in the digital press, however, tends to be more homogeneous than we think, even considering the varying ideological profiles of the different media (Menéndez & Di Pardo, 2009). In our analysis, not only has the discourse of the press been shown to be uniform in its quantitative treatment of hunger and in the shifting of the issue from privation toward other manifestations, such as obesity, but in other aspects the three sources we examined remained constant and unified in their outlook in both periods in terms of the main actors and the ways of referring to them: The victims and their stories of daily hardships; the saviors incarnated in social organizations and in the businesses seeking, through their actions, to contribute to alleviate these hardships without altering their causes; and the public authorities that did not act to resolve the problems but that implemented policies that deepened the same hardships, convinced by the indicators of macro-economic recovery that, ultimately, the country was exiting from the crisis. This controversial scenario may appear to be behind us now; however, in the context raised by COVID-19, new questions appear regarding how food insecurity is addressed in the digital press, encouraging future analysis. What we understand for now is that in times of high social vulnerability and COVID-19, food will again become a central issue in the digital press in Spain.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

- Ayllón, S. (2015). *Infancia, pobreza y crisis económica*. Obra Social La Caixa.
- Díaz Méndez, C., García Espejo, I. y Otero Estévez, S. (2018). Discursos sobre la escasez: estrategias de gestión de la privación alimentaria en tiempos de crisis. *EMPIRIA*, (40), 85-105. <https://doi.org/10.5944/empiria.40.2018.22012>

- Elika (2016). *Informe sobre la Seguridad Alimentaria en la prensa del País Vasco en 2015*. Universidad del País Vasco.
- Entman, R. (1993). Framing: Toward a clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51-58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>
- European Commission (2019). *Country Report Spain 2019*. https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/file_import/2019-european-semester-country-report-spain_en.pdf
- FAO, FIDA, OMS, PMA y UNICEF (2020). *El estado de la seguridad alimentaria y la nutrición en el mundo 2020*. FAO.
- Fúster, F., Ribes, M., Bardón, R. y Marino, E. (2009). Análisis cuantitativo de las noticias de alimentación en la prensa madrileña en 2006. *Revista española de documentación científica*, (32), 99-115. <https://doi.org/10.3989/redc.2009.1.664>
- Gracia-Arnaiz, M. (2019a). Otras formas de comer fuera de casa: Itinerarios alimentarios en un contexto de precariedad. En M.L. Magalhães Bosi, S. Prado, y L. Amparo Santos. (comps.) *Ciudad, cuerpo y alimentación: aproximaciones interdisciplinarias* (pp. 257-277). EDUFBA.
- Gracia-Arnaiz, M. (2019b). Eating outside the home: food practices as a consequence of economic crisis in Spain. In P. Collinson, I. Young, L. Antal et al., *Food and sustainability in the Twenty-first Century. Cross-disciplinary perspectives* (pp. 185-196). Berghahn Books.
- Gracia-Arnaiz, M., Moreras, J., García Acosta, V. y Icazuriaga Montes, C. (2015). Comer en tiempos de crisis: nuevos contextos alimentarios y de salud en España. *Arxiu d'etnografia de Catalunya: revista d'antropologia social*, (15), 155-159. <https://raco.cat/index.php/AEC/article/view/304835>
- Gracia-Arnaiz, M., Demonte, F. y Bom Kraemer, F. (2020). Prevenir la obesidad en contextos de precarización: respuestas locales a estrategias globales. *Salud Colectiva*, 16. <https://doi.org/10.18294/sc.2020.2838>
- Gracia-Arnaiz, M., García-Oliva, M. y Demonte, F. (2021). Retóricas del hambre en la prensa digital española (2015-2018): de penurias que vienen y se van. *Revista de Antropología Social*, 30(2), 135-149. <https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/raso.77895>
- Gracia-Arnaiz, M. y García-Oliva, M. (2017a). Comiendo en tiempo de crisis: retóricas del hambre en la prensa Digital. En M.J. Comelles, y E. Perdiguero-Gil (coords.) *Educación, comunicación y salud* (pp. 161-179). URV.
- Gracia-Arnaiz, M. y García-Oliva, M. (2017b). Carpanta en la era de la abundancia: retóricas del hambre en la prensa digital española. En L.M. Juárez, X. Medina y J. López García (eds). *Comida y mundo virtual. Internet, redes sociales y representaciones visuales* (pp. 71-84). OUC.
- Guest, G., Mac Queen, K. & Namey, E. (2012). *Applied Thematic Analysis*. Sage Publications.
- Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE) (2020). *Salarios, ingresos, cohesión social. Riesgo de pobreza y/o exclusión social*. Indicador AROPE. INE. <https://www.ine.es/jaxiT3/Datos.htm?t=11201#!:tab=tabla>
- Llano, J. (2019). *El estado de la pobreza. Seguimiento de la pobreza y exclusión social en España 2008-2018*. EAPN. https://www.eapn.es/estadodopobreza/ARCHIVO/documentos/Informe_AROPE_2019_Resumen_Ejecutivo.pdf
- Luengo, M. (2009). Desde los 'efectos' mediáticos a la influencia cultural: fundamentos analíticos para la interpretación simbólica de las noticias. *Anàlisi*, (39), 113-129. <https://raco.cat/index.php/Analisi/article/view/184492>
- Marín-Murillo, F., Armentia-Vizueté, J. y Olabarri-Fernández, E. (2016). Alimentación y Salud: Enfoques predominantes en prensa española. *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, (71), 632-653. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-2016-1113>
- Marín-Murillo, F., Armentia-Vizueté, J. y Caminos-Marcet, J. (2015). De lo global a lo local: el encuadre de la crisis de la carne de caballo en la prensa vasca. *Communication & Society*, 28(3), 29-50. <https://doi.org/10.15581/003.28.3.29-50>
- Marín-Murillo, F., Armentia-Vizueté, J., Marauri-Castillo, I. y Rodríguez González, M. (2020). La accesibilidad alimentaria en la prensa digital: encuadres y representación del hambre en España.

- Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, (75), 169-187. <https://www.doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-2020-1421>
- McCombs, M. & Shaw, D. (1972). The agenda-setting function of the mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36, 176-187. <https://doi.org/10.1086/267990>
- Medina, X., Aguilar, A. y Fornons, D. (2015). Alimentación, cultura y economía social. Los efectos de la crisis socioeconómica en la alimentación en Cataluña (España). *Sociedad y Cultura, Goiana*, 18(1), 55-64.
- Menéndez, E. & Di Pardo, R. (2009). *Miedos, riesgos e inseguridades*. Cuadernos de la Casa Chata.
- Ministerio de Sanidad, Consumo y Bienestar Social (MSCBS) (2018). *Encuesta Nacional de Salud*. Ministerio de Sanidad, Consumo y Bienestar Social. <https://www.msbs.gob.es/estadEstudios/estadisticas/encuestaNacional/home.htm>
- Navarro, V. (2015). *Ataque a la democracia y al bienestar*. Anagrama.
- Prada-Trigo, J. (2018). Vulnerabilidad territorial, crisis y "post-crisis económica": trayectoria y persistencia a escala intraurbana. *Scripta Nova*, 22, 1-23. <https://doi.org/10.1344/sn2018.22.19710>
- Peña-Fernández, S., Lazkano-Arillaga, I. y García-González, D. (2016). La transición digital de los diarios europeos: nuevos productos y nuevas audiencias. *Comunicar*, 46, 27-36. <https://doi.org/10.3916/C46-2016-03>
- Sánchez Sabaté, R., del Valle, C. y Mensa, M. (2019). Método para la construcción de grandes corpus temáticos de noticias de prensa digital. Hacia un corpus sobre el hecho alimentario. *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, (74), 594-617. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-2019-1347>
- Tankard, J. (2001). The empirical approach to the study of Media Framing. In S. Reese, O. Gandy and A. Grant *Framing public life. Perspectives on media and our understanding of the social world* (pp. 95-106). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Varela Suárez, A., Rodríguez Barcia, S. y Rifón, A. (2020). Expresión de la subjetividad y la contradicción en el discurso de la alimentación en la prensa escrita española. *Tonos Digital*, (39), 1-35. <http://hdl.handle.net/10201/95835>
- Westall, D. (2010). La obesidad infantil en la prensa española. *Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico*, 17(1), 225-239. http://dx.doi.org/10.5209/rev_ESMP.2001.v17.n1.13

News stories. El País

- Catá, J. (2017, November 30). Más de 190.000 personas recurren a entidades sociales por ropa y alimentos. *El País*. https://elpais.com/ccaa/2017/11/30/catalunya/1512065046_272452.html
- Giménez Beltrán, A. (2017, March 1). En España también se pasa hambre. *El País*. https://elpais.com/elpais/2017/03/01/planeta_futuro/1488378131_034735.html
- Laorden, C. (2017, February 28). ¿Tengo derecho a comer? *El País*. https://elpais.com/elpais/2017/02/28/planeta_futuro/1488281580_774214.html

eldiario.es

- Blay, B. (2017, May 26). Las entidades sociales alertan de la existencia de "hambre oculta" agravada por la crisis económica. *eldiario.es*. https://www.eldiario.es/catalunya/sanitat/entidades-sociales-existencia-agravada-economica_0_647436065.html
- Bosaho, R. y De la Concha, M. (2018, March 14). La alimentación que nos enferma. *eldiario.es*. https://www.eldiario.es/tribunaabierta/alimentacion-enferma_6_750035016.html
- Borraz, M. (2015, May). El colegio como trinchera. *eldiario.es*. <https://lab.eldiario.es/pobrezainfantil/colegios/>

- Caralp, M. y Català, E. (2015, August 27). El hambre no descansa en verano. *eldiario.es*. https://www.eldiario.es/catalunya/diarisanitat/hambre-descansa-verano_6_423867612.html
- Caralp, M. (2015, December 12). La obesidad infantil, más presente entre las clases desfavorecidas. *eldiario.es*. https://www.eldiario.es/catalunya/diarisanitat/obesidad-infantil-presente-clases-desfavorecidas_6_461663854.html
- Escolar, A. (2018, January 1). 10 comparaciones odiosas con las que entramos en un nuevo año de la desigualdad. *eldiario.es*. https://www.eldiario.es/arsenioescolar/comparaciones-odiosas-entramos-nuevo-desigualdad_6_724837518.html
- Galaup, L. (2015, April 2). Cuando las vacaciones son "un drama" por el cierre de los comedores escolares. *eldiario.es*. https://www.eldiario.es/sociedad/Vacaciones-drama-cierre-comedores-escolares_0_372713235.html
- Olazaga de Martínez, M. (2015, March 28). Pobrismo. *eldiario.es*. https://www.eldiario.es/norte/vientodelnorte/pobrismo-ayudas_sociales-Estado_de_bienestar-digitalizacion_6_371372873.html
- Solís Galván, R. (2017, May 13). Niños y niñas pobres de solemnidad en la cuarta economía de la Eurozona. *eldiario.es*. https://www.eldiario.es/andalucia/pobreza-infantil_0_641835978.html
- Vivero Pol, J. L. y Ferrando, T. (2017, October 17). Politizar la alimentación para acabar con el hambre. *eldiario.es*. https://www.eldiario.es/desalambre/Hambre-Espana_0_698180665.html

La Vanguardia

- Benvenuty, L. (2016, August 2). Els casals socials d'agost alleugen l'estiu a les famílies més necessitades. *La Vanguardia*. <http://hemeroteca.lavanguardia.com/preview/2016/08/02/pagina-3/97108871/pdf.html>
- Bosch, R. (2016, December 15). Càritas multiplica per quatre l'ajuda alimentària. *La Vanguardia*. <http://hemeroteca.lavanguardia.com/preview/2016/12/15/pagina-2/97482997/pdf.html>
- Jolonch, C. (2018, February 10). Salvar comida. *La Vanguardia*. <http://hemeroteca.lavanguardia.com/preview/2018/02/10/pagina-7/159765559/pdf.html>
- Macpherson, A. (2018, March 2). El estrés de la pobreza se ceba en la salud mental infantil. *La Vanguardia*. <http://hemeroteca.lavanguardia.com/preview/2018/03/02/pagina27/164917262/pdf.html>
- Marchena, D. (2016, March 9). La Síndica denuncia que crece la pobreza infantil. *La Vanguardia*. <https://www.lavanguardia.com/edicion-impres/20160309/40304246904/la-sindica-denuncia-que-crece-la-pobreza-infantil.html>
- Playà Maset, J. (2017, April 2). La Michelin de los pobres. *La Vanguardia*. <http://hemeroteca.lavanguardia.com/preview/2017/04/02/pagina-52/97805988/pdf.html>
- Sen, C. (2015, September 19). Los 840 euros de Antonio. *La Vanguardia*. <http://hemeroteca.lavanguardia.com/preview/2019/01/13/pagina-39/95880160/pdf.html?search=antonio>