





Invisibilised human rights: Trafficking in human beings in the media in Spain

Derechos humanos invisibilizados: La trata de seres humanos en los medios de comunicación en España

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is twofold: to examine the coverage of human trafficking in the digital press and the perceptions of media professionals and specialised entities regarding such news. The methodology employed is mixed and relies on the technique of content analysis of news stories between January 2019 and December 2020 to investigate how the phenomenon is addressed by digital newspapers. This is also combined with the semi-structured interview technique to identify the discourse of media professionals and the heads of specialised non-governmental organisations in relation to their assessment of the news production on trafficking in Spain. There is lack of information on trafficking of human beings, partly due to the lack of media resources to inform and investigate. The trafficking of human beings for the purpose of sexual exploitation continues to dominate media coverage. Addressing the trafficking of human beings from a holistic and human rights approach, including the visibility of all forms of trafficking, as well as deepening collaboration and cooperation between the media and specialised entities, are tasks of vital importance for further progress.

RESUMEN

El objetivo de esta investigación es doble: examinar la cobertura de la trata de seres humanos en la prensa digital y las percepciones de los profesionales de dichos medios de comunicación y de las entidades especializadas respecto a dichas noticias. La metodología empleada es mixta y se apoya en la técnica del análisis de contenido de las noticias entre enero de 2019 y diciembre de 2020 para investigar cómo se aborda el fenómeno por los diarios digitales. Asimismo, esto se combina con la técnica de la entrevista semiestructurada para identificar el discurso de los profesionales de los medios y de los responsables de las organizaciones no gubernamentales especializadas en relación con su valoración sobre la producción informativa en materia de trata en España. Se observa una carencia de informaciones que hagan referencia a la trata de seres humanos, debido en parte a la falta de recursos de los medios para informar e investigar. La trata de seres humanos con fines de explotación sexual sigue imperando en la cobertura de los medios de comunicación. El abordaje de la trata de seres humanos desde un enfoque integral y de derechos humanos, contemplando la visibilización de todas las formas de trata existentes, además de la profundización en la colaboración y cooperación entre medios de comunicación y entidades especializadas, son tareas de vital importancia para seguir avanzando.

KEYWORDS | PALABRAS CLAVE

Human rights, trafficking of human beings, media, digital journalism, qualitative analysis, social representations, information message.

Derechos humanos, trata de seres humanos, medios de comunicación, periodismo digital, análisis cualitativo, mensaje informativo.



1. Introduction

Trafficking of human beings is understood as the process by which a person is recruited, transferred, and received for subsequent exploitation, through the use of force, threats, abduction, fraud and, abuse of a situation of need or of a situation of power on behalf of the trafficker. This definition is included in several international and national legal documents, such as article 3 of the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2000), article 4 of the Council of Europe Convention on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings (2005), and Organic Law 5/2010, of 22 June, which introduces, in article 177 bis1 of the Criminal Code, the criminal offence of trafficking human beings.

In addition to this conceptual delimitation, and bearing in mind that trafficking of human beings is a very complex phenomenon, the relevance of its dimension and extent must be highlighted through the data recorded. The existence of a "dark figure" makes it extremely difficult to obtain reliable empirical data that would provide a true and global perspective of the problem. This is conditioned, to a large extent, by the very definition of the concept of trafficking, its invisible or hidden nature, the lack of valid mechanisms that guarantee the correct identification of victims, methodological problems in data collection, among others (Carrillo & De-Gasperis, 2019; Cabrera, 2017; Villacampa & Torres, 2021; Villanueva & Fernández-Llebrez, 2019).

However, for some years now, work on data collection has been carried out by different international and national bodies. Currently, according to the latest report of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2020), "Global Report on Trafficking in Persons", 50% of the detected victims, mostly women and girls, are sexually exploited, and 38% of the victims are exploited for labour exploitation, while 6% are exploited for forced criminal activities and more than 1% for begging. Victims of forced marriages, organ removal and other purposes are the lowest percentage. This reality is again highlighted in EUROPOL's latest SOCTA 2021 Report (2021), which notes that sexual exploitation is prevalent in all Member States, although without a significant increase in the last four years.

In the case of Spain, and according to the Statistical Balance (2016-2020), "Trafficking and exploitation of human beings in Spain", it is observed that women and girls continue to be the most frequent victims of trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, with 145 women and 2 girls (2020). With regard to trafficking for the purpose of labour exploitation, in the year 2019, men represent the largest number of victims with a total of 103 adults and 6 minors. However, in 2020, the trend is reversed and women are the most frequent victims with a total of 65 and only one case of a girl registered, compared to 33 men. For the remaining types of trafficking (forced marriages, for criminal activities, and begging), data are very scarce, following the trend recorded in international reports, and representing only the tip of the "iceberg".

Changing this situation requires the commitment of all actors involved in the field of human trafficking (legislators, judges, prosecutors, State Security Forces, Public Administration, civil society as a whole, including the media). This is because the media play a central role in constructing our images of reality (Lippmann, 2003). Thanks to the media, we can learn about our surroundings and have a vision of what is happening, a vision that in most cases could not easily be acquired, given that we are not at the scene of the events or "because most of the issues that interest us are outside our direct personal experience" (McCombs, 2006): 23). This is the case of trafficking of human beings that reaches public opinion through the media.

There are several studies that address human trafficking, mainly for the purpose of sexual exploitation and prostitution, through content and discourse analysis from agenda-setting perspectives, showing the coverage of the phenomenon in the media (Antolínez-Merchán & Cabrera-Rodríguez, 2018; Bozorova, 2019; Gregoriou & Ras, 2018; Gulati, 2010; Johnston et al., 2015; Krsmanovic, 2020; Madueño-Hidalgo & Sierra-Rodríguez, 2019; Rusnac, 2019; Sanford et al., 2016). However, there are no studies that address the perspectives of media professionals, except when studying human trafficking linked to prostitution (Fernández-Romero & Simón-Carrasco, 2019).

There is also a plethora of rules, recommendations and manuals from institutions working in the field of trafficking directed at the media (EU Anti-Trafficking Action, 2016; APRAMP, 2015, Barcelona City Council, 2015; Madrid City Council, 2014; Community of Madrid, 2015; Doctors of the World, 2017;

Save The Children, 2013; Commission for Refugee Aid in Euskadi, 2018), but their perceptions regarding the implementation of these recommendations have not been assessed.

Thus, in order to fill in the gaps in the perspectives of journalists covering human trafficking in Spain and specialist organisations working with victims of trafficking, the following research questions are posed: What image of human trafficking does the media portray? How does this image relate to the daily demands of news production in the media? What is the process for news production and the role of sources? What difficulties do they face? What is the approach? What is the relationship between specialist entities and the media?

2. Material and methods

The methodology underpinning this research is based on three axes:

- a) News stories dealing with trafficking in human beings from different journalistic genres are selected from those considered to be the most objective narrative within the journalistic discourse.
- b) The discourse of media professionals involved in the coverage of human trafficking.
- c) The discourse of NGOs that direct their work towards trafficking of human beings.

In order to carry out research based on these three axes, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodology is proposed: The quantitative methodology is applied to find out how human trafficking is dealt with in the media, using the technique of content analysis of news on human trafficking published in the most popular digital newspapers. The qualitative methodology is used to find out the discourse of news production in relation to human trafficking; open or semi-structured interviews with journalists and representatives of relevant organisations in the field of human trafficking are used to find out their interpretation and assessment of the messages and the news production.

The characteristics of quantitative content analysis, as a "technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the overt content of communication" (Berelson, 1984, in Cea-d'Ancona, 1999: 351), are particularly valid for the analysis of written and documentary material, as is the case of journalistic news. The choice of the semi-structured interview as the qualitative technique applied in this research is based on its suitability for investigating the level of practices (of information production) as well as on the possibilities it offers for gathering evaluative assessments of these practices (Alonso, 1995).

2.1. Content analysis

Objective criteria were used to select the media. The ranking of generalist digital newspapers compiled by Comscore was taken into account. Of the 10 most read generalist digital newspapers in Spain in 2019, 6 digital newspapers have been selected, of which four are the newspapers positioned at the top of the audience ranking according to Comscore (elpais.com, elmundo.es, la vanguardia.com and abc.es) and the two best positioned digital natives in the ranking (elespañol.com and elconfidencial.com).

The time frame of the news published in these newspapers is from 1st January 2019 to 31st December 2020, using the specialised search engine MyNews and the term "trafficking of human beings". The information units extracted from the above-mentioned search were 795 news items. After eliminating repeated news items and discarding those texts in which the term was only mentioned, but did not form part of the central theme of the news item, the sample was of 449 news items.

Table 1. Number of news items and sample per newspaper

Newspaper	Website	No. of news items on human trafficking (2019-2020)	No. of news items selected Sample (2019-2020)
La Vanguardia	www.lavanguardia.com	93	45
ABC	www.abc.es	338	195
El País	www.elpais.com	86	44
El Mundo	www.elmundo.es	71	44
El Español	www.elespañol.com	36	17
El Confidencial	www.elconfidencial.es	171	104
Total		795	449

Based on the selected news items, the information was coded according to the content analysis sheet. This sheet includes the following variables and categories:

- Media (lavanguardia.com, abc.es, elpais.com, elmundo.es, elespanol.com and elconfidencial.es).
- Types of human trafficking (sexual exploitation, labour exploitation, organ trafficking/extraction, forced marriages, begging, trafficking for forced criminal activities and unspecified).
- News item topic (police, judicial, politics, culture/society, other).
- Author of the news item (with identification of the author, without identification of the author).
- Type of sources (police, civil guard, judicial, NGOs, governmental, victims' testimonies, political parties, trade unions, media/journalists, news agencies and others).

In accordance with the above categories, the information was quantified by means of an analysis of frequencies (absolute and percentage) of occurrence.

2.2. Semi-structured interviews

Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted: Five with media professionals (journalists). The sample selection criterion was their extensive experience in the profession and in covering the phenomenon of trafficking of human beings. Initially, 12 journalists were selected (two per media outlet), five of whom expressed their willingness to be interviewed. Two interviews with NGO leaders were also made. The criterion for selection was the extent of their track record in the fight against, and assistance to victims of, human trafficking from a human rights perspective.

Interviewee code	Job title	Years of experience
E1	Journalist. El Confidencial	More than 20 years (professional) and 6 years in human trafficking
E2	Gender correspondent. El País	More than 15 years (professional) and 5 years in human trafficking
E3	Journalist. El Mundo	More than 30 years (professional) and 18 years in human trafficking
E4	Journalist. ABC	More than 20 years (professional) and 12 years in human trafficking
E5	Journalist. Freelance	More than 30 years
E6	Coordinator. NGO	More than 22 years
E7	Management. NGO	More than 25 years

The script for the interviews with journalists was structured with a total of 14 questions grouped into three dimensions:

- Dynamics of the media's work: the process of news production and the sources of information used by the journalists interviewed.
- Approach to the treatment of the news: knowledge and use of the action guides for the media drawn up by specialist bodies in the field.
- Assessment of the current work and aspects for improvement in the treatment of the news: assessment of the informative treatment of human trafficking in the media in Spain and the improvements that should be made to tackle the phenomenon, from a general approach and from the media itself.

For the interviews with NGOs, another script was developed with a total of 10 questions grouped into three other dimensions:

- Contextualisation of trafficking in human beings in the media: assessment of the media's approach to trafficking in human beings; the role played by the media in making the phenomenon visible and raising awareness, and the evolution of the media's treatment of news on the subject.
- Media and NGOs: relationship between the media and NGOs, the latter as sources of specialised information; existing working dynamics between the two actors.

3. Analysis and results

3.1. News production

When dealing with a news item on human trafficking, journalists state that the process is the same as for the elaboration of any other news item, with the media receiving the information "in a packaged

manner” through a press call, press conference, conferences or reports, or through an “active search” for this type of information. The latter, which is also called “proactive”, is the one that comes from the professional or the media itself to cover certain information or a certain aspect of trafficking.

However, all journalists agree on the scarce coverage given to human trafficking, which is dealt with at specific moments that coincide with specific dates. Therefore, human trafficking is not incorporated into the media’s agenda as an ongoing issue. Among the reasons mentioned in the interviews, is its lack of presence in the political agenda, which, together with the lack of interest on the part of the media, results in a lack of attention from media professionals on this issue. Also, relevancy factors are involved in the decision to publish an article or not. One of them is related to the emotion or human interest of the information, as well as personal stories to stir people’s consciences.

Another of the factors is the novelty of the news item, and finally, there is the criteria of accessibility. If the journalist can obtain information easily, they are more likely to consider writing a story than if they find it very difficult to access details or sources. According to the content analysis carried out, of the news items in which the sources appear, almost six out of ten sources that appear in the media when reporting on human trafficking belong to the State Security Forces and Corps.

Types of sources	Frequency	Percentages
Police	162	39.6%
Governmental	66	16.1%
Judiciary	58	14.2%
Spanish Civil Guard	54	13.2%
NGOs	27	6.6%
Victims	13	3.2%
Media/journalists	10	2.4%
Political parties	6	1.5%
Syndicates	3	0.7%
News agency	1	0.2%
Other	9	2.2%
Total	409	100%

The National Police and Civil Guard, as well as government agencies, provide information mainly through press releases and press conferences. Their presence as a source is evidently much greater than that of any other group, due to the fact that for some journalists it is the “most fluent and constant relationship” (E4). However, despite this relationship with the sources, it is not always easy to make the phenomenon visible because, for some interviewees, “the police are very reserved and the prosecutors the same, they are not used to dealing with the media” (E1).

Finally, working conditions themselves are another of the elements that influence the production of news. Journalists consider that the technical demands of news writing, together with the lack of personnel, mean that the time required to prepare the news is shorter, which has repercussions on the final production (E4, E5). NGOs also highlight the lack of training of some journalists, as they consider that some of them are “very young people who are still inexperienced” (E6), which, together with the lack of time “covering many hours of work” (E6), does not allow for them to focus or go into the depth required to provide the coverage this phenomenon deserves, often contacting the NGOs “by telephone and with great urgency” (E7). However, the NGOs state that there is a very unequal treatment depending on the media, finding media that “are aware and have dedicated, for example, weeks of work to produce different regular publications on the issue of trafficking, with different series, with the participation of many interlocutors to show a very complete perspective” (E6).

3.2. The role of the media in raising visibility and awareness of human trafficking

All the discourses agree on the existence of the fundamental role that the media can play in raising visibility and awareness, because “if the media do not play their true role, the role that the entities or the police or the Prosecutor’s Office believe they have to play, this is completely invisible” (E7). To this end, “it should have a more active role (...) it should be done in a way that involves the readers, the viewers, because very often this type of information sounds to us like something far away, that does not concern us, that does not correspond to us” (E2), and the professionals should be aware of the social function of their

work: "All of us journalists cannot lose sight of the social function of journalism, but even more so those of us who are dedicated to issues that involve people and the weakest part of the person, and I believe that this work can be much more active" (E4).

One aspect that emerges in the discourse of the interviewees when dealing with news related to human trafficking is the lack of "specialisation". On the one hand, it is indicated that in the media there is no area in charge of, or dedicated to these aspects or a person specialising in this area (E3). On the other hand, specialisation is linked to training, hence its necessity to address this issue.

This lack of specialisation or training has repercussions on the inadequate use of written language, because "very often they don't even know how to say women, how to say trafficked women, how to say sexually exploited women, how to say prostituted women" (E7), and also in the visual language "where in the raids they come out with their backs turned so that they are not seen, but with their heels on, with ladders in their tights, with their asses out" (E5). "Such training is necessary because not everyone can know about all the issues" (E7) and if "instead of saying 'whoremonger' you say 'clients' you are normalising" (E5). And not only is there a need for training or specialisation, but there is also the lack of "political, social and journalistic" sensitivity (E3), which should be developed prior to specialisation and that "this sensitivity does not exist either because there is no training" (E5). If we look at the way in which the written and audio-visual media communicate the news, it is important to point out the assessment made by the interviewees when considering the existence of more prepared, committed and sensitive media than others, "(...) I believe that we can talk and that there are more sensitive and less sensitive media" (E7), and there is a need to "continue working on awareness-raising, training and commitment of the media (...)" (E6).

Some journalists prefer to use the term "responsibility" (E2), considering that there has been an evolution in this respect and now the coverage is much more responsible, "we approach it with more head, with better work, with better craft" (E2). This lack of preparation is observed in the content analysis in relation to the authorship of the news items. In this respect, it can be seen in the table the percentage of news items that the media outlet conveniently identifies, meaning that they sign their news items either using their full name or the acronym, is only 56.2% in the case of El País, 52.94% in El Español, 47.73% in El Mundo, 15.38% in El Confidencial, 14.43% in ABC and 13.33% in La Vanguardia.

Table 4. Identification of the authors in the news items

Newspapers	No. of news items signs	% of signed news items in relation to published news items
ABC	28	14.43%
El Confidencial	16	15.38%
La Vanguardia	6	13.33%
El País	25	56.82%
El Mundo	21	47.73%
El Español	9	52.94%
Total	105	23.44%

Also noteworthy is the high percentage of journalists whose bylines appear only once over the two years studied (80.00% in El País, 77.78% in El Español, 75.00% in El Confidencial, 66.67% in La Vanguardia and 28.57% in ABC). This need for training, for responsibility, not only needs to occur among journalists, but throughout the entire media structure (E5), because "if we don't train people in what we are seeing, no one will see it" (E7).

3.3. Contextualisation and focus of the news items

In general, all interviewees agree that the evolution of how the phenomenon has been dealt with has been positive, both in terms of understanding and tackling it. All this progress is due to "the evolution that this country has followed with regard to issues of gender violence, I mean from classic violence (...)" (E2), "also as a result of the police plan against trafficking, the change in the penal code" (E1) and that there is "more sensitivity" (E5). However, all agree that there is still much room for progress and improvement.

One such area of opportunity is the type of human trafficking that is covered in the news. The media focus their attention on human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, which makes other types of trafficking invisible and therefore "there is still a long way to go in terms of addressing and conceiving

trafficking in its full extent, in all its complexity, addressing all forms of trafficking” (E6). The content analysis of the news shows that trafficking for sexual exploitation is the type of trafficking that receives the most coverage in the newspapers (69.0%), followed by trafficking for labour exploitation (18.9%).

Table 5. Type of human trafficking covered in the news (2019-2020)

Newspapers	Frequency	Percentages
Sexual exploitation	310	69.0%
Labour exploitation	85	18.9%
Trafficking or extraction of organs	10	2.2%
Forced marriage	6	1.3%
Begging	1	0.2%
Trafficking for forced criminal activities	0	0.0%
Unspecified	37	8.2%
Total	449	100.0%

Another aspect is the lack of contextualisation of the news item, providing elements to clarify the fact that is being described so that it does not appear in isolation but linked to various informative elements that enrich its comprehension. This contextualisation is lacking in the media and the information would need to be completed, which is why it is necessary to “turn to statistical sources, gender studies” (E3), also that the newsworthy event is framed and that “we see the before, during and after” (E5).

NGOs state that only part of the fight against trafficking is visualised (for example, the dismantling by the State Security Forces), “but there is no mention of what has happened to that woman” (E7). They also consider it necessary to go deeper into the experience of the victims, “to take a little more into account, and this should continue to be emphasised, the role and experience of the experts” (E6), and “in my experience, I believe that the victim’s perspective is very effective” (E3). They further state that “the aspects that are not being contemplated, I believe that there is no text that includes all this work, the information is biased, the police information, the prosecution of crime, assistance information from NGOs, I believe that it has to be a combination of all this because otherwise society is not going to understand it” (E7). The content analysis carried out confirms this discourse, where the majority of news items cover state actions and where police operations or prosecutions promoted by judicial institutions are the first actions that newspapers report on in the news.

Table 6. News topics

Topic	No. of news items	% of news items
Police	285	63.47%
Judiciary	72	16.04%
Political	38	8.46%
Culture/ society	23	5.12%
Other	31	6.90%
Total	449	100%

The aforementioned lack of plurality in information sources means that the information provided by the different media is fairly uniform and, above all, lacks specialised approaches that would favour analysis. In the interviews, this type of focus is also evident in the pieces finally produced and broadcasted, mainly police pieces, linked to the prosecution of crime or the capture of a network by the National Police or the Spanish Civil Guard (E4, E3). Even within this police/judicial perspective, the news focus more on organised crime, forgetting that trafficking “is not only about transnational organised crime but often also about individuals and informal groups” (E6).

On the other hand, both journalists and NGOs mention the need to use a “positive approach” when dealing with the phenomenon. In the discourse, expressions such as “recounting that it is possible to get out”, “recovered” or “recovery process” are used because “it is necessary to recount the drama, but also to recount that it is possible to get out of the drama” (E4), and “stories of people who have been there and are coming out” (E1). This is because “if these women talk, it is because they are recovered and rescued” (E7), and “with the right time and specialised help they can move forward and can also empower themselves by talking about their recovery process, their process of integration into Spanish society, their progress and their achievements” (E6).

3.4. Relation between NGOs and the media

NGOs consider that their role with the media who want to address the issue involves several different scenarios. On the one hand, it is requested that when journalists contact specialised entities, they do not demand to be provided with direct testimonies of victims of trafficking (E6, E7). The fact that the victim has to recount and remember the situation she has lived does not help her recovery process and leads to a possible re-victimisation, "it has a very strong impact on them, sometimes a setback in their recovery process" (E6).

In order for this practice to become more and more minimal, NGOs demand that this situation be changed and that they position themselves as specialised sources from which the media requests information; in this way, "there can be a very nice, very creative, very empowering work between the specialised staff of organisations and journalists who want to deal with the subject" (E6). The fundamental role that NGOs are given is that of "mediation", obtaining positive experiences that "require very important, very detailed prior work, and what we do is very intensive mediation, being present at all times during the process (...)" (E6). Despite this context of improvement, specialised entities report very positive experiences of working with the media, establishing a relationship of mutual trust and collaboration (E6) to the point that "when we do any event, we don't even have to raise our hands or pick up the phone" (E7).

For their part, the media express their relationship with NGOs in positive terms and point out the need for collaboration, commitment, and trust in order to act on the basis of social journalism that is sensitive to this issue, and which should be promoted more frequently. In view of the above, it is fundamental to have as a clear objective that cooperation and collaboration must be very close between both sides in order to promote good journalistic practice in this area. Above all, it is important in the relationship between the victim and the media, where the NGOs place value on their "mediation in everything that has to do with the victim's safety, not to reveal her identity, respect her privacy and, of course, not allow her to be recognised visually" (E6). Furthermore, they indicate that, in the case of audio-visual media, the treatment and exposure to make the news visible requires a more complicated process. "(...) when we speak for example about the collaboration of women who have been trafficked in an audio-visual news item, collaboration is much more complex, because it involves greater intimidation, greater risk" (E6).

4. Discussion and conclusions

The first thing that stands out in the content analysis of the interviews with online newspaper professionals is the scarcity of information referring to human trafficking. This lack of visibility of the issue is due in part to the criteria of newsworthiness (Wolf, 1987), mainly accessibility, relying mainly on official sources, as already pointed out by other studies (Sanford et al., 2016). The criterion of relativity to human emotion or interest (Warren, 1975) also causes certain news to be disseminated and not others.

The media's lack of resources to report -and, above all, investigate- on human trafficking, together with the work overload in the newsrooms, results in a dependence on information from news agencies (Gelado-Marcos, 2009) and from the "communications offices of the State Security Forces and Corps and of the entities working in the field of prostitution and trafficking" (Fernández-Romero & Simón-Carrasco, 2019: 170), as corroborated by national (Saiz-Echezarreta et al., 2021) and international studies (Gregoriou, 2018; Krsmanovic, 2018). All of this "contributes to the agenda-setting effect and leads not only to the repetition of issues, but also to the reinforcement of stereotypes and the perpetuation of the thematic status quo" (Gelado-Marcos, 2009): 270). Victims as sources hardly feature at all, something the media criticises. The interviews revealed a certain dissatisfaction with the sources of information (State Security Forces and NGOs) on the part of some of the professionals interviewed because they showed little understanding of their needs when it came to preparing their work or because they did not facilitate contact with the victims. This dissatisfaction is also reflected by those NGOs who feel that some media do not adequately represent trafficking. This is why organisations working with victims and their recovery are reluctant to facilitate contact between victims and the media and when it is done, it is with established criteria, which are included in their guidelines (APRAMP, 2015) and with trusted media. This unease is also shown in some international studies (Krsmanovic, 2018). With regard to the focus of the news, human trafficking for sexual exploitation continues to dominate media coverage, which displaces or renders invisible other

forms of trafficking (Meneses, 2019; Ruiz et al., 2018; Sanford et al., 2016). One possible explanation is that sex trafficking is easier to cover in a news story because it provides a clear and simple violation of the law, whereas labour trafficking cases are more complex and often involve civil rather than law enforcement issues (Austin & Farrel, 2017).

Human trafficking is seen as a problem of prostitution, migration or human trafficking, and the media neglect to delve into the heart of the problem (Papadouka et al., 2016) and sometimes, the lack of clear distinction regarding the term "trafficking" makes the media combine the phenomenon with other issues such as human trafficking, prostitution or slavery (Sanford et al., 2016), "it is not about prostitutes, it is about women forced into prostitution, into sexual slavery" (Comunidad de Madrid, 2015): 48).

The previous over-reliance on official sources, mainly State Security Forces (police and, to a lesser extent, judicial), means that the problem is treated as an event (Fernández-Romero & Simón-Carrasco, 2019; Comunidad de Madrid, 2015). The news reports show police raids or the dismantling of networks for trafficking and smuggling women for sexual exploitation, addressing the specific event, "exaggeratedly prioritising the criminological, police and judicial approach, and those associated with rescue and re-victimisation" (Saiz-Echezarreta et al., 2021): 163), detached from the causes and context that give rise to it, as a social problem. The fact of including trafficking in society and events sections shows how the media conceive human trafficking as a problem of security, law and order, and not as a problem of human rights violations (Howard & Lalani 2008), with a core focus on human rights (Comunidad de Madrid, 2015), as well as being an indicative pattern of the depoliticization of this problem (Madueño-Hidalgo & Sierra-Rodríguez, 2019). However, it is not only in the press that the narratives and common places inscribed in news stories are applied, but also in communication campaigns (Saiz-Echezarreta et al., 2018: 36).

It is important not only to change the focus, broadening the information beyond police and/or judicial actions (Save the Children, 2013), but to contextualise the problem as well. Contextualisation allows for deeper levels of information, providing the reader with as many elements as possible that contribute to the understanding of the messages conveyed (Verga & Micelli, 1994), showing other intrinsic aspects of human trafficking, such as the feminisation of poverty, structural inequalities and the scarce fulfilment of human rights (Madueño-Hidalgo & Sierra-Rodríguez, 2019).

In conclusion, and according to the research questions posed, the media portrayal of trafficking of human beings is biased, with most of the news focusing on sexual exploitation. In addition, the inadequate resources available to the media, the lack of specialised training, and the work overload of journalists make it impossible to adequately cover the news on trafficking.

The scarcity of resources, the need to obtain information quickly, the journalist's training, accessibility, etc., are elements that lead to an excessive use of institutional sources, which, in this case, are those derived from the State Security Forces and Corps. Despite the above, progress has been made, including coordination and collaboration with specialised entities, as well as the effort to broaden the approach to the issue in relation to the victims and to distinguish the concepts of prostitution and trafficking separately, but also linked to sexual exploitation.

In short, it is essential to delve deeper and expand the focus of this complex reality in order to approach the phenomenon from multiple perspectives: economic, showing the very high profits obtained from this illegal business; legal, with the protection of victims; political, showing the support measures for victims and the mechanisms to fight against traffickers; the social perspective of denouncing the violation of human rights; and the gender perspective. All of this without forgetting the victims, to give them a voice, with quality journalistic practices and with joint work between NGOs and the media that not only improves the treatment of news on human trafficking in accordance with the existing recommendations of specialised entities, but also strengthens and reinforces a firm commitment to coordination and collaboration between both sides, with the aim of making visible all forms of trafficking that occur in our country and that remain hidden.

Authors' Contribution

Idea, E.C., P.A.; Literature review (state of the art), E.C.; Methodology, P.A.; Data analysis, E.C., P.A.; Results, E.C., P.A.; Discussion and conclusions, E.C., P.A.; Writing (original draft), E.C.; Final revisions, E.C., P.A.; Project design and sponsorship, P.A.

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