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News shareability in the COVID-19 period

Abstract

The aim of the study is to empirically verify the COVID-19 topics that were most frequently shared on Facebook by multicultural audiences. The author collected news published between 1st January and 30th April 2020 on the websites of CNN International (USA), BBC World (Great Britain), Deutsche Welle (Germany), RT (Russia), France24 (France), EuroNews (France/Europe), Al-Jazeera (Qatar), and shareability score data by using BuzzSumo's platform. This study combines various methods, including content analysis based on quantitative and qualitative approaches, topic modelling, and NLP (natural language processing). It was observed that globally, audiences paid attention to other topics despite the global threat. Significant differences were also noted in how news was shared.

Keywords: news shareability, COVID-19, global television, social media, Facebook.

Udostępnianie wiadomości w okresie COVID-19

Streszczenie

Celem badania jest empiryczna weryfikacja tematów związanych z COVID-19, które były najczęściej udostępniane na Facebooku przez wielokulturowych odbiorców. Autor zebrał artykuły opublikowane w okresie od 1 stycznia do 30 kwietnia 2020 roku na stronach internetowych CNN International (USA), BBC World (Wielka Brytania), Deutsche Welle (Niemcy), RT (Rosja), France24 (Francja), EuroNews (Francja/Europa), Al-Jazeera (Katar) i dane dotyczące ich udostępniania pochodzące z platformy BuzzSumo. Badanie łączy różne metody, w tym analizę treści opartą na podejściach ilościowym i jakościowym, modelowanie tematyczne oraz NLP (przetwarzanie języka naturalnego). Pomimo globalnego zagrożenia publiczność mediów zwracała uwagę na zróżnicowane tematy. Odnotowano także znaczące różnice w sposobie przekazywania wiadomości.

Słowa kluczowe: udostępnianie wiadomości, COVID-19, globalne stacje telewizyjne, media społecznościowe, Facebook.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected the functioning of society. The news media focused on the development of the pandemic for months. Unprecedented in history, the media's concentration on a global scale on one topic has significantly contributed to the increase in the sense of threat among societies. News consumption

is growing across the globe. This is confirmed by international research conducted by the Kantar company¹, the Reuters Institute², and other academic research³. The results also show a significant increase in confidence in traditional news media. National media channels, government agencies, and international advisory body websites have proven exceptionally reliable sources of information regarding the pandemic in Western, Central, and Eastern Europe, North America, and Asia⁴. According to the EBU Report⁵ (2020), the news reached up to twice the audience, especially on crisis peak days in the most affected markets: on the days when key announcements were made, there was a declaration of a state of emergency or movement restrictions were imposed. During the pandemic, television news media were also important for young audiences. They tried to understand the new reality around them through them. TV news channels played a more significant role than social media during some moments of the first wave of COVID⁶.

Following the above data, the research aims to empirically verify the dominant topics of COVID-19 news on global TV news channels' websites and identify and analyse the most frequently shared information by multicultural audiences on Facebook. To implement the project, the author collected news published between 1st January and 30th April 2020 on the websites of CNN International (USA), BBC World (Great Britain), Deutsche Welle (Germany), RT (Russia), France24 (France), EuroNews (France/Europe), Al-Jazeera (Qatar) and shareability score data, relying on to BuzzSumo platform's database. The selection of media entities uses a European Audiovisual

¹ *COVID-19 Monitor Wave 1 results for Poland and the key markets around the world*, https://radiotrack.pl/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Kantar_COVID-19_Monitor_Full_Report_POLAND_Wave.pdf. (accessed: 4.03.2021).

² *Navigating the "Infodemic": How People in Six Countries Access and Rate News and Information about Coronavirus*, eds. R. Kleis Nielsen, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/infodemic-how-people-six-countries-access-and-rate-news-and-information-about-coronavirus> (accessed: 2.03.2021).

³ A. Mora-Rodríguez, I. Molero-Lopez, *Seguimiento informativo y percepción del riesgo ante la Covid-19 en España*, "Comunicar" 2021, Vol. 29, Issue 66, pp. 71–81, <https://doi.org/10.3916/C66-2021-06>, www.revistacomunicar.com; E.K. Maloney, A. Bleakley, D.G. Young, K.J. Silk, J.P. Crowley, J.L. Lambe, *Television News Media Consumption and Misperceptions about COVID-19 among US Populations at High Risk for Severe Health Outcomes Early in the Pandemic*, "Health Communication" 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2021.2023381>.

⁴ Kantar, *COVID-19 Monitor Wave 1 results for Poland and the key markets around the world*, https://radiotrack.pl/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Kantar_COVID-19_Monitor_Full_Report_POLAND_Wave.pdf (accessed: 4.03.2021).

⁵ F. Cimino, L. Besson, *COVID-19 Crisis PSM Audience Performance*, <https://www.ebu.ch/publications/research/memberonly/report/covid-19-crisis-psm-audience-performance> (04.03.2021).

⁶ T. Groot Kormelink, A. Klein Gunnewiek, *From "Far Away" to "Shock" to "Fatigue" to "Back to Normal": How Young People Experienced News During the First Wave of the COVID-19 Pandemic*, "Journalism Studies" 2022, Vol. 23, Issue 5–6, pp. 669–686, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.1932560>.

Observatory classification⁷. These stations are distinguished by the fact that they reach a global audience and focus on a global thematic agenda.

The study relies on the shareability concept as theoretical background. It combines different methodological approaches: quantitative and qualitative content analysis with elements of topic modelling based on semiautomated NLP (natural language processing) analysis, as well as the KWIC (Keyword in Context) technique. Topic modelling involves scanning a collection of documents, detecting patterns in words and phrases within them, and automatically clustering words into word groups and similar expressions that best describe the documents.

Theoretical background

Social media have become a permanent part of the media ecosystem. They have a significant impact on changing the strategy of traditional media, the work of journalists, and the way they report and connect with their audiences⁸. It can be assumed that most, if not all, media entities are present on various social media platforms. Technology companies such as Twitter and Facebook have become an integral part of the communication between classical media and their audiences. Social media offer new channels for content distribution, allowing editors to take advantage of the global reach of the platforms. Many newsrooms use social platforms to audience metrics and monitor the reception of their products⁹. Collecting and processing data allows them to improve the content and deliver more personalised messages. On the other hand, social media are also a tool in the hands of the audience. Content deemed relevant by the audience is shared on private profiles and discussed among friends or publicly. The possibility of sharing information between people is the core aspect of Internet communication¹⁰. Shares are usually highly correlated with the level of emotions and the meaning of news for audiences¹¹. As F. Martin and T. Dwyer¹² marks “users recirculating digital news than creating it, making online news ‘sharing’ a more significant form of cultural production than citizen journalism.” Using social

⁷ L. Ene, *TV News Channels in Europe: Offer, Establishment and Ownership* 2018, <http://www.obs.coe.int> (accessed: 2.03.2021).

⁸ R. Hanna, A. Rohm, V.L. Crittenden, *We're all connected: The power of the social media ecosystem*, “Business Horizons” 2021, Vol. 54, Issue 3, pp. 265–273, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2011.01.007>.

⁹ J. Harambam, N. Helberger, J. van Hoboken, *Democratizing algorithmic news recommenders: how to materialize voice in a technologically saturated media ecosystem*, “Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A: Mathematical, Physical and Engineering Sciences” 2018, Vol. 376, Issue 2133, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1098/rsta.2018.0088>.

¹⁰ M. Smiciklas, *Infographics Using Pictures to Communicate and Connect with Your Audiences*, QUE, Indianapolis 2012.

¹¹ A. Wong, A. Kee, R. Yazdanifard, *The Review of Content Marketing as a New Trend in Marketing Practices*, “International Journal of Management, Accounting and Economics” 2015, Vol. 2, Issue 9, pp. 1055–1064.

¹² F. Martin, T. Dwyer, *Sharing News Online*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2019, p. 2.

media to rate and recommend news to recirculate it internationally quickly has given social media users a more considerable influence over what journalism is perceived and valued than ever before¹³. In natural disasters, sharing is an expression of emotion and establishes how to best respond to the crisis¹⁴.

Research on shareability is still increasing. A meta-analysis conducted by A.S. Kumpel, V. Karnowski, T. Keyling¹⁵ of nearly 100 research articles provides essential findings. Three main lines of interest are observed according to them: users or organizations, content, and sharing networks.

The first group of research focuses on people and organizations and tries to find answers to who shares news on social media and what motivates people and organizations to share news on social networks? The second group concentrates on content of news sharing and tries to understand what kind of news content is shared on social media? What general sharing patterns can be observed – also, and especially, in specific communication settings (e.g., during natural disasters and political crises)? The last group focuses on the question of how do network structures influence news sharing? How do social media platforms differ in their news sharing processes (e.g. Twitter versus Facebook)? The present research is located in the second group and analyses news sharing content, especially the issues and topics of COVID-19 articles.

The choice of Facebook as a content distribution channel is due to two main factors. First, it is currently the largest social media platform in the world. In the second quarter of 2021, 2,89 billion active users used the medium (2,6 billion during the research period)¹⁶. Secondly, in contrast to Twitter, it is used mainly by ordinary people and not mainly by the elite. It means that the monitoring of news shares can involve the mass user and produce more objective results.

The uniqueness of the results of the presented study is based on the limited availability of analytics data. Facebook consistently blocks third-party access. It makes it challenging to conduct research. Researchers are forced to apply for data access to a unique, internal CrowdTangle platform or use some commercial solutions. In this case, the author chose the second solution. The aim was to track the sharing of content from websites, not materials published directly on Facebook profiles. BuzzSumo, one of the largest commercial platforms for internet marketing, was used. BuzzSumo determines texts' relevance (popularity) by tracking millions of articles shared from websites to social media. The monitoring information is made available as numerical data.

¹³ *Ibidem*, s. 16.

¹⁴ F. Shaw et al., *Sharing news, making sense, saying thanks: patterns of talk on twitter during the Queensland floods*, "Australian Journal of Communication" 2013, Vol. 40, Issue 1, pp. 23–40.

¹⁵ A.S. Kumpel, V. Karnowski, T. Keyling, *News Sharing in Social Media: A Review of Current Research on News Sharing Users, Content, and Networks*, "Social Media + Society" 2015, Vol. 1, Issue 2, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115610141>, p. 4–5.

¹⁶ Statista Research Department, *Number of monthly active Facebook users worldwide as of 2nd quarter*, "Statista.com", <https://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/> (accessed: 7.10.2021).

Research methodology

In the first stage of the research, the author verified the popularity of the websites of selected global television stations. For this purpose, publicly available data of Similar-Web platform was used. The results coincide with the information about the audience of these stations. During the research period (January–April 2020), all analysed websites noted an increase in page views. The undisputed leader was CNN, with more than 3 billion unique visitors. Second was the BBC with over two billion views and RT with more than 600 million visitors (Table 1).

Table 1. Website visits in millions (January–April 2020)

TV stations	Total
CNN	3088,1
BBC	2018,9
RT	612,5
Al Jazeera	195,4
DW	191,9
EuroNews	95,2
France24	67,4
Total site visits	6269,4

Source: SimilarWe.

The second phase consisted of gathering news stories about COVID-19 that appeared on individual sites. The selection was based on the most frequent keywords (“COVID-19”, “pandemic”, and “virus”). In the third step, the focus was on extracting data on the news stories were most shared on Facebook. Data on keywords for COVID-19 news and number of shares were obtained from the BuzzSumo platform. For content analysis, the final phase of news selection was to extract the ten most important news items for each station’s audience (with the highest share rate). Thus, the 70 media reports that received the most shares during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic were selected.

The main questions asked in the article are the following: What was the content of the most shared news? Were there differences between the shared news? What was the geography of the news stories? Following the results of other studies on social media news sharing, the author wanted to verify whether, in a moment of global emergency, global audiences focus on information regarding the actions of political actors (or lack thereof) or on the individuals and social groups affected by the tragedy.

The content analysis of the most shared news has been done by use of Word-Stat software. As Kimberly A. Neudorf mentioned¹⁷, content analysis is one of the fastest-growing techniques, and computer advances have made the organised

¹⁷ K. Neudendorf, *The Content Analysis Guidebook*, Sage, London 2001, p. 1.

study of messages quicker and easier. In the Krippendorff's opinion¹⁸ content analysis is also one of the most important techniques in the social sciences.

The first step of the automated processes included topic evaluation (including suggestions for topic names, associated phrases, exceptions, and spelling corrections). Due to spelling errors in the original data set, the correction feature helps reduce the number of false negatives. Using factor analysis, the topic modelling module identifies the most important topics in a text collection. A topic extraction method is implemented in WordStat in two ways. WordStat computes a word x word correlation matrix using NNMF and extracts topics using non-negative matrix factoring. In parallel, Factor Analysis performs a principal component analysis with VARIMAX rotation to extract the same information. In comparison to factor analysis, the NNMF method is faster and can handle larger matrices. However, it is probabilistic in nature, producing different, yet likely similar, results every time, unlike factor analysis, which is always the same¹⁹.

In the present research, the NNFM method has been used, but it has been repeated a few times to check the quality of the results. The enrichment topic option has been used additionally. Topic modelling solutions usually consists of a series of words listed in descending order of topic specificity. The combined presence of those words in a text is used to identify whether a topic is present or not. This "bag-of-word" approach may result in imprecise topic identification and measurement since words often have multiple meanings and are often used in very different contexts. The topic enrichment feature allows you to go beyond this "bag-of-word" approach by attempting to identify some phrases highly associated with the extracted topic, as well as other phrases that may represent exceptions and help disambiguate the various meanings of words²⁰.

The second step was to create a dictionary based on content analysis' results and examine shared news via Facebook using co-occurrence analysis and crosstabulation. KWIC (Keyword-in-Context) technology is used to understand the context of the text. It provides an effective method to filter large-scale texts as well as summarize them.

Results

On the basis of the NNFM method, the main topics have been extracted. Repeating the procedure and checking the results several times allowed the subjects to be named. The most common threads included governments, coronavirus outbreak and spread, testing action, World Health Organization and global public health as well as death toll. They appeared in 78,6 to 100% of the news stories analysed (Table 2).

¹⁸ K. Krippendorff, *Content Analysis An Introduction to Its Methodology*, Sage, London 2018, p. XIII.

¹⁹ *Wordstat 9. Text Analysis Software*, Montreal 2021.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

Table 2. Topic modelling results based on the NNMF method

Topics	Frequency	No. Cases	% Cases
Governments	139	67	95,7
Coronavirus outbreak & spread	87	70	100,0
Testing action	72	55	78,6
World Health Organization & global public health	59	67	95,7
Death toll	32	69	98,6

Source: author's own.

The topic “governments” stand for a group of words and phrases related to state institutions or government bodies (e.g., government, minister, ministry, prime minister, president). The second group consists of keywords like coronavirus (case, cases, outbreak, pandemic), covid outbreak or spread of the coronavirus. The “testing action” block contains phrases referring to test execution and results (negative, positive). The next theme focuses on the global public health threads, people, and WHO activities. The last issue is distinguished by words like death, number of the dead, deceased, death toll, or report.

The most frequent phrases, excluding “coronavirus pandemic”, clearly reflect the content of the topics. The dominant phrase is prime minister, positive test outcome, or World Health Organization. In parts? of the cases, there are activities concerning state bodies and medical entities. A significant amount of material also includes emotional elements of the tragedy of many people (Table 3).

Table 3. The most frequent phrases

	Frequency	No. Cases	% Cases	TF • IDF
Coronavirus pandemic	25	19	27,1%	14,2
Prime minister	64	18	25,7%	37,7
Test positive	30	16	22,9%	19,2
World Health Organization	19	15	21,4%	12,7
Confirm case	28	14	20,0%	19,6
Death toll	32	13	18,6%	23,4
Coronavirus outbreak	23	13	18,6%	16,8
Health minister	17	12	17,1%	13,0
Spread have the virus	12	11	15,7%	9,6
Million people	16	11	15,7%	12,9
Health ministry	30	10	14,3%	25,4

Source: author's own.

An analysis of the co-occurrence of each theme within the articles examined shows significant relationships between public health and pandemic outbreaks (0.957) or governments' activity (0.970), public health and information about subsequent deaths (0.986), and public health and governments' actions (0.970) (Figure 1).

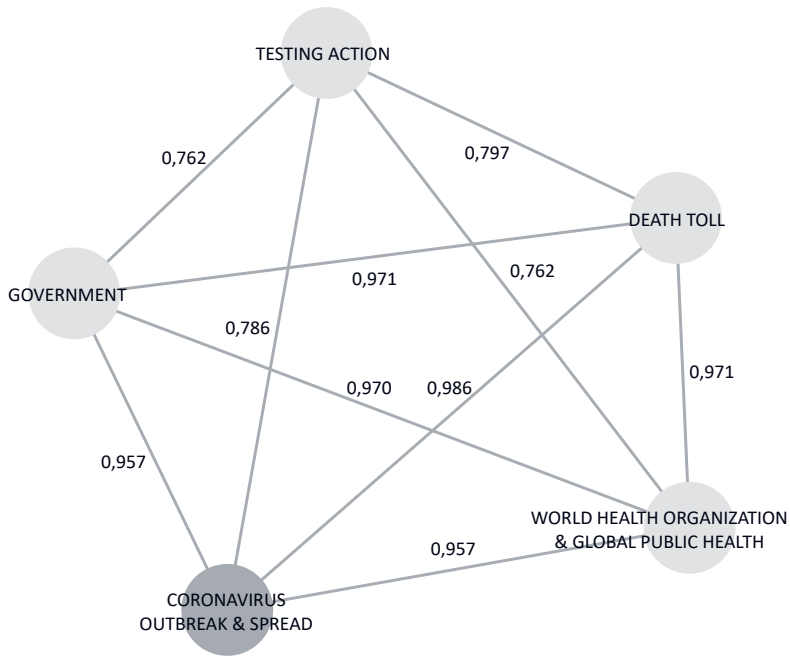


Figure 1. Co-occurrence of topics in the same article
Source: author's own.

The first significant differences in the shared news can be found by counting the number of words related to the topic. In the case of Al Jazeera, the frequency correlates with topics of the outbreak and spread of the coronavirus and the activity or decisions of governments. The BBC audience shared mostly news about the activity and decisions of political actors and the massive action of testing. The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic also dominated the topic layer of news from CNN and EuroNews websites. DW news mainly focused on governments. News shared from the France24 site contained mostly medical themes and related to the role of the WHO. A definite difference is noticeable with RT. Here, most of the words were about death. (Table 4).

Table 4. Keywords frequency by main topics in news of TV stations [in percent]

Topics	AlJazeera	BBC	CNN	DW	EuroNews	France24	RT	Total
Coronavirus outbreak & spread	33,9	6,9	35,0	21,1	28,0	16,1	17,9	100,0
Death toll	8,3	3,0	5,0	7,9	12,0	0,0	32,1	100,0
Government	38,0	52,5	10,0	36,8	24,0	25,8	14,3	100,0
Testing action	9,1	26,7	30,0	18,4	16,0	32,3	10,7	100,0
World Health Organization & global public health	10,7	10,9	20,0	15,8	20,0	25,8	25,0	100,0

Source: author's own.

The results of the correspondence analysis present these differences in more detail. The closer a keyword or content category is to the origin, the more similar it will be to the distribution of all words within subgroups. The most significant discrepancy is observed between the BBC and RT. Their audiences shared news of different content and different contexts on social media (Figure 2).

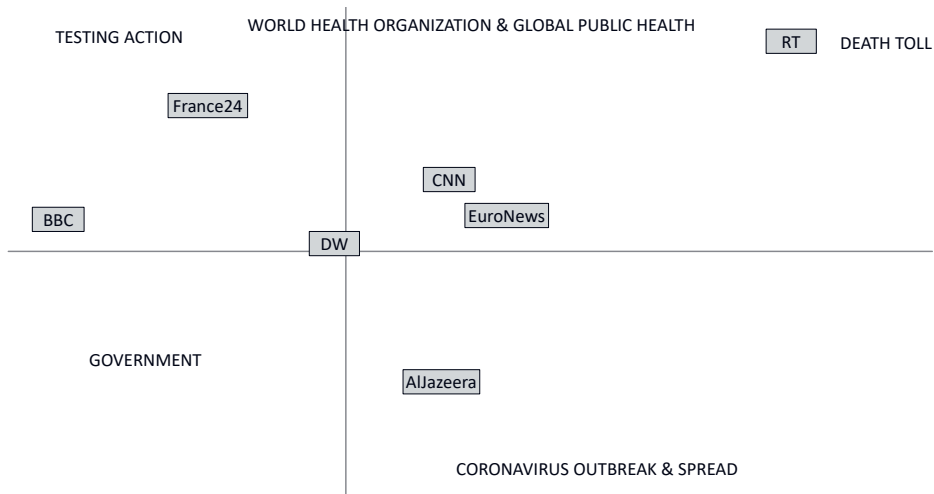


Figure 2. Correspondence analysis of topics distribution
Source: author’s own.

A more detailed content analysis considering the technique of words in context allowed for identifying three additional subtopics. They were specific to the period of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. They didn’t appear in every news story, but they were allowed to understand further differences in the relevance of particular issues (Table 5).

Table 5. Subtopics and Their Meaning

	Frequency	No. Cases	Cases [%]	TF • IDF
Pandemic_rules	231	45	64,3	44,3
Religion	110	13	18,6	80,4
Protests	25	8	11,4	23,6

Source: author’s own.

“Pandemic rules” addressed issues of covering faces, keeping distance, staying home, quarantine, lockdown and vaccination. The theme “religion” was created based on words and topics referring to the church, names of religions and denominations (Islam, Muslims, Catholics), religious functions and hierarchy like pope or priest. The last group reflected the problem of protests and protesters.

Pandemic rules dominated the content of Al Jazeera and EuroNews’ website (Table 6). In these cases, people’s perspective played a crucial role, often as a result of the actions of political actors.

The main northern Philippine region of Luzon is home to more than 57 million people and under a month-long lockdown. Provincial and town executives from others parts of the country have also rolled out similar measures in their communities, virtually putting more than 100 million people under quarantine.

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has warned he would order the country’s police and military to shoot dead anyone “who creates trouble” during a month-long lockdown of the island of Luzon enforced to halt the spread of the coronavirus. (Al Jazeera)

Table 6. Keywords frequency by subtopics in news of TV stations [in percent]

	Al Jazeera	BBC	CNN	DW	Euro News	France24	RT	Total
Pandemic_rules	23,2	8,9	5,4	20,7	22,2	10,8	8,9	100,0
Protests	16,0	12,0	0,0	36,0	8,0	0,0	28,0	100,0
Religion	46,8	0,0	4,6	24,8	21,1	0,0	2,8	100,0

Source: author’s own.

Protests dominated the DW and RT news. Recipients shared articles about events in Germany (DW) or the US (RT). Protests expressed opposition to the introduction of social and economic blockades.

People in Berlin and Stuttgart took to the streets to protest against a loss of freedoms amid the coronavirus pandemic. Despite the demonstrations, most Germans back restrictions aimed at curbing the spread of COVID-19.

RT emphasised that the First Amendment was being suspended in the US.

Governments in America suspended the First Amendment freedom of millions of citizens with shutdown, stay-at-home, curfew orders that prohibit obtaining a petition for a public protest, or even being physically present for a public protest. Indeed, even meetings in “more than ten” are prohibited by various governing jurisdictions within the United States.

Threads on religion and belief appeared mainly in AL Jazeera and DW articles. They raised the problem of closing places of worship, holding masses despite bans. Attention was also drawn to the religious segregation of patients in India.

Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque and Dome of the Rock have closed their doors as a precaution against the coronavirus, Islamic religious authorities have said, while outdoor prayers will still be allowed at the complex that houses Islam's third holiest site. (Al Jazeera)

In what many are calling a case of "apartheid" during a global pandemic, a government-run hospital in Ahmedabad, the main city in the western Indian state of Gujarat, has segregated coronavirus patients based on their religion, claiming the order came from the government. (Al Jazeera)

Further differences in audience responses are evident in the so-called news geography. The author identified five most frequently appearing countries. Because the region of Africa seemed to be in multiple times in the materials examined, it was also counted additionally. This step was also decided due to the high TD-IDF index. The countries where the pandemic emerged most quickly and resulted in the first mass casualties appear in the compilation. In the case of European countries, the geography of information is related to political actors' activity, roles, and decisions. Somewhat surprising is the absence of the United States. This does not mean that people did not share content dedicated to the US, but their numbers were significantly lower and were not included in the compilation (Table 7).

Table 7. News geography – frequency and relevance in the articles

	Frequency	No. Cases	% Cases	TF • IDF
China	232	32	45,7%	78,9
Africa	120	15	21,4%	80,3
France	105	19	27,1%	59,5
Italy	97	18	25,7%	57,2
Iran	84	14	20,0%	58,7
Germany	78	16	22,9%	50,0
UK	62	13	18,6%	45,3

Source: author's own.

Although China appeared in nearly 46% of all analysed news stories, the highest percentage was in news stories shared from CNN and BBC websites (Figure 3). In the case of Al Jazeera, all selected countries were covered (with a slight predominance of news on Iran and Italy). These themes also appeared in the news from RT. The situation in Africa, in turn, dominated the content of France24 and Al Jazeera.

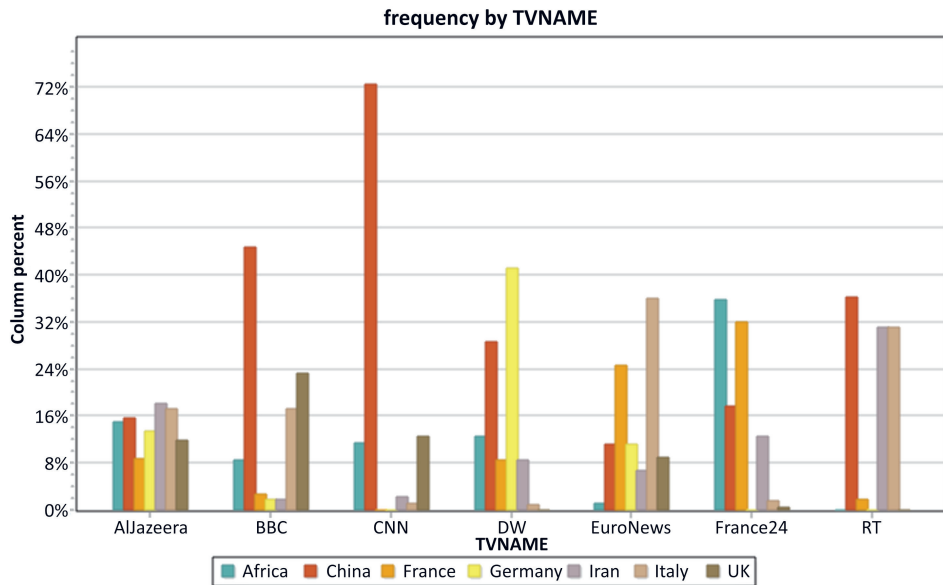


Figure 3. News geography by TV stations
Source: author’s own.

Africa was presented in Al Jazeera reports as an area of rapidly spreading virus. Information about human deaths, blocks to move across national borders was prevalent. Specific deaths were highlighted. People from Africa working in Western countries who died in the fight against COVID-19 have been mentioned. Doctors with long experience of work for the NHS in Great Britain can be here presented as cases:

Alfa Sa’adu, who was born in Nigeria, worked with the NHS for nearly 40 years. He died aged 68 after a two-week battle with the virus.

The United Kingdom is paying tribute to the first doctors on the front lines of the coronavirus pandemic who have died after contracting COVID-19 were Muslim and had ancestry in regions including Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

France24 news was dominated by the medical theme. It was pointed out which countries had the best system of care.

In a study published in The Lancet medical journal on the preparedness and vulnerability of African countries against the importation of Covid-19, an international team of scientists identified Algeria, Egypt and South Africa as the most likely to import new coronavirus cases into Africa, though they also have the best prepared health systems in the continent and are the least vulnerable.

Very often, the material was shared, in which the problem of China's racism and segregation of patients was publicised.

Africans in southern China's largest city say they have become targets of suspicion and subjected to forced evictions, arbitrary quarantines and mass coronavirus testing as the country steps up its fight against imported infections. "All the people I've seen tested are Africans. Chinese are walking around freely but if you're black you can't go out."

China issues dominated the news stories shared on the CNN website. These were mainly about the actions of the Chinese government, its control over the narrative of the origins of the pandemic and questions about China's responsibility. There was also a theme of research by Chinese doctors who warned of the threat. CNN viewers also relayed information about the death of a young doctor who was most instrumental in publicising the impending pandemic:

Since late January, Chinese researchers have published a series of COVID-19 studies in influential international medical journals. Some findings of early coronavirus cases — such as when human-to-human transition first appeared — have raised questions over the official government account of the outbreak and sparked controversy on Chinese social media.

Li Wenliang, the Chinese whistleblower doctor who warned the public of a potential "SARS-like" disease in December 2019, has died, according to Wuhan Central Hospital. The confirmation follows a series of conflicting statements about his condition from the hospital and Chinese state media outlets.

Discussion

It is not surprising to find many articles about political actors on the websites of global stations. The fact that audiences shared them during a pandemic may indicate the importance of topics related to policymakers' decisions. Quarantine, border closures, or rearranging state structures for functioning in a global health crisis depended on them. Many articles also dealt with the COVID-19 cases of essential politicians and their families. Articles like these were emotionally appealing. The second group of topics focused on people (human interest) and confirmed COVID-19 cases or death tolls. The World Health Organisation and its recommendations were also a crucial element in the news, too.

A comparison of audience reactions reveals differences and similarities. CNN and BBC's audience mainly shared news relating to political issues and elites. News distribution from the websites of RT, Al Jazeera on Facebook had a more international context. Some articles raised personal histories or had a religious background. In the case of EuroNews, the dominant news had a neutral perspective and referred to medical data. Viewers of DW shared articles on a variety of topics. Most of the articles shared on Facebook during the first wave had shareability characteristics, such as references

to the elites, significance of topics (events impact people generally or individually), personification, human interest (heroes of the events were identified and presented personally), unexpectedness, negativity, conflict, and controversy. The research methods and techniques used in the project allowed one to visualise similarities and differences in the thematic and linguistic layers. Using the concept of shareability allowed the author to understand what was important or intriguing to the audience and at the same time to learn about some of the thematic agendas of the largest global television stations. The research of the news geography made also enabled us to understand that during the first wave of COVID-19 other regions of the world than the USA dominated the structure of the most popular news.

This analysis was conducted as a pilot study to test the software's capabilities and to see how it could be applied to a future project involving thousands of media reports over several years in an attempt to understand and investigate the 'culture of news sharing'.

Annotation

Research project supported by program "excellence initiative – research university" for years 2020–2026 for University of Wrocław.

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