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News consumption by children during the Covid-19 pandemic: a study with readers of a children's newspaper¹

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Abstract

This article presents data from a quantitative survey carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 with close to 150 readers of one of the leading children's newspapers in Brazil called Joca. Joca is a news publication which covers current events and has increased its digital circulation during the quarantine. The objective of this survey was to examine the consumption of journalistic content by children and adolescents during the quarantine period. This survey showed how important teacher guidance (and not parental guidance) is for reading newspapers during the quarantine period, although independent consumption does occur in one-third of the cases. In addition, almost 60% of respondents said that they watch or listen to more news than they did before the quarantine period (even if they are not instructed to do so) in order to keep up with the news or learn more about the disease.

Keywords

Journalism for children; Pandemic; Covid-19; Reception; Children.

Introduction

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and the need to avoid physical contact to prevent the disease from spreading, public and private schools in Brazil suspended their activities in March 2020. Students and their families, including teachers, all had to quickly adapt to a previously unexplored dynamic of learning and teaching from own home, using whatever resources were available while sharing the spaces with family members. The increased spread of the virus in the country meant remote activities had to be extended; there was no end in sight which caused children and their families to experience feelings of fatigue and anxiety.

In this sense, about 2,000 boys and girls responded to an online questionnaire posted by the Federal University of Minas Gerais in 2020. The results of this questionnaire showed that 93.3% of them were worried about their relatives getting ill and 88.8% were worried about their own health status. About 80% were concerned about unemployment and family hardships, and 74% showed the same concern about a possible lack of food (Silva et al., 2021). Close to 65% of these children attended public schools, which may indicate that they belong to lower-income families.

This shows that the lack of socialization and development of boys and girls during this period is exacerbated with the social inequalities of the Brazilian reality, expressed in the different ways in which children grow up: "There are some parents and children who live crammed together in a single room that contains a bedroom, a living room, a kitchen and a space for pets. So how do we keep children healthy in these kinds of conditions [...]?" (Araújo, 2020, p. 116, free translation).

In this context, journalism can act as a mediator between children and events related to the pandemic in different sectors of society by either increasing their anxiety or helping them to better understand the reality of this new disease. The "Digital connectivity during COVID-19: access to vital information for all children" report by Innocenti, the UNICEF's office of research, published in June 2020, shows that most young people were already routinely searching for information on health and trying to understand what information was true and what was not:

Our data show that, among children who usually do have internet access, a large proportion use it to search for health information at least monthly. The data also show that while a majority of children in most countries say that they are able to verify if the information they find online is true, a considerable proportion say that they are unable to do so. The proliferation of misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic may have made this task even more difficult (Kardefelt-Winther et al., 2020, p. 5)

This article presents data from a quantitative survey carried out with readers of the *Joca* newspaper during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. It is a Brazilian (São Paulo-based) newspaper for children and teenagers founded in 2011 that provides general coverage of current events. It is not sold at newsstands and is only available by subscription. It is primarily marketed to students attending private schools, but also to some public schools. In addition to news content, the newspaper offers support material for use in the classroom.

This research is a partnership between the academy and the newspaper's production team, both of whom were interested in better understanding their readers' news consumption habits during the quarantine period. This interest comes from the fact that, due to the suspension of in-person school activities, the printed version is no longer delivered to most subscribers which in turn has changed the way in which readers access the paper. As a result, some of the children began to read the digital versions of the paper. The research objectives, therefore, were to determine whether the children continued to read the newspaper, even in online form, and to also detect possible changes in their news consumption habits

as a result of the pandemic, which includes possible contact with *fake news*¹ and verifying how these boys and girls felt about the discourse in the news on the pandemic.

It is important to highlight that the respondents of the survey are a specific group of children, whose teachers and parents encourage them to read the news, but we consider the findings to be relevant in view of the importance regarding media consumption and children's development, and the lack of studies in the area of journalistic content for children and youth, as we have shown in our work (Doretto, 2015), and as we shall explore further below.

Journalistic consumption in childhood and in schools

Orofino (2014) and Baccega (2014) address the wide presence of the media in society and say that the limited reports made by the communication outlets on the representation of realities and experiences point to the need to give subsidies to media consumers - especially children - so that they are better able to understand it. Thus, we understand media consumption as one of the ways in which children start to interpret the world they live in; they experience things that are close to and also distant from them, perceive differences and similarities between people, and create empathy for others in vulnerable situations.

In order to reach this understanding, individuals need instruments to consume and critique the media (as part of the critical consumption of the world in which they live), approaching and appropriating discourses which they may identify with, while also differentiating themselves from those they do not identify with. The act of consuming, whether material or symbolic, is part of contemporary culture. For Baccega (2014, p. 197, free translation), consuming "reveals the insertion in a culture, in a system of values and cultural symbols" and is, therefore, a constituent element of the identities of human beings. In this way, the author proposes the idea of whether consumption is intrinsically related to identity formation and to social and cultural participation, and as such, is part of the role citizens must play in their communities.

Understanding schools and media as two socialization agencies (Baccega, 2009a), we start from the principle that these can also be spaces to provide a deeper understanding of the world, to explore issues and raise discussions that lead citizens to understand and to dissolve (or at least reduce) conflicts.

In terms of media forms, we focus on journalism, starting from the assertion that through its products (news, comments, reflections and analyses) the school is able to make sense of the content debated in several school subjects. Through these contributions, the institution obtains resources that support its work, dedicated to learning that occurs "outside the walls", as these walls "no longer hold all the knowledge and values of the outside world that are fundamental for learning and for the social performance and citizenship of students" (Velasco, 2015, p. 69, free translation). In addition, Baccega (2009a, p. 23) points to the media as great producers of social meanings, which are beginning to be shared and negotiated among children, young people and adults. In this sense, it is extremely important that they are also present in school learning.

We understand news consumption to be a socially and culturally established practice and, as such, is a relevant practice which schools and teachers should present and instill. For Empinotti and Paulino,

Incorporating journalistic practices at school is, therefore, adding natural possibilities to children around cultural perpetuation. Natural because they are a means of communication, present from a very early age in contemporary childhood, and not only a means of information, but also of entertainment. The proximity between entertainment and information can be key to arousing one's interest in the search for knowledge (Empinotti & Paulino, 2018, p. 60, free translation).

¹ The term fake news was used in the research because we understand it to be a more common term in society. However, its use in circulation covers a wide range of false information, which does not refer solely to news; that is, simulations of journalistic content.

In Brazil, however, few professional media outlets focus on children and youths and report on daily events using the language and approach best suited to that public – and this kind of content could facilitate the teaching-learning processes. Open television (or any other form of television) does not offer any such program or content. There are two radio podcasts that do have youth-based content: the Radinho BdF program² by the *Brasil de Fato* group; and *Revisteen*,³ a partnership between CBN radio and the *Joca* newspaper. There are also other print publications, in addition to *Joca*, that are geared towards children in school: *Jornal da Criança*,⁴ launched in 2019, *Qualé Magazine*,⁵ created in 2020, and the news service *Árvore Atualidades*, which operates on an autonomous digital platform.

Another media outlet available in print and digital versions is *Ciência Hoje das Crianças*, a magazine dedicated to scientific dissemination. According to the magazine's website,⁶ it reaches around 60,000 public school students but, unlike the other media outlets mentioned previously, it does not have a teacher support service for teaching activities; that is, it does not offer much in the way of supplemental aids or material. This magazine is only sold through subscriptions.

Lastly, there are also some daily newspaper supplements such as *Cruzeirinho*⁷ from Sorocaba (SP), the *Diarinho*⁸ from *Diário do Grande ABC* (SP), and *JC Criança* from Bauru (SP)⁹. The printed version of *Folhinha*¹⁰ in the weekend editions of the *Folha de S. Paulo* newspaper stopped being published in 2006. The newspaper's website page continued to publish some material under the *Folhinha* name, reporting on issues such as culture and children's literature. More recently, however, the newspaper has circulated some *Folhinha* content in its weekend print version, which is no longer written as a section or an editorial, but as texts aimed at children and young people mostly on cultural coverage. This type of media outlet was much more common in the Brazilian journalistic market in the 1990s; however, due to the expansion of the digital market and the increasing financial crisis that followed for print newspapers, periodicals have been investing less and less in publications directed toward this audience (Doretto, 2015).

We believe that the critical consumption of news by children requires adult mediation in terms of writing professional journalism texts that are suitable for their age group (although some adult content can also be included) and also in terms of schools supplying these texts for boys and girls and to read (in addition to family encouragement):

A system built by the mass media, the media historically works in convergence with education, particularly schools, where citizenship takes place under the support of the state. [...] Despite operating according to different logics, the two systems are in frequent relationship, having ties of dependence (cf. Empinotti & Paulino, 2018, p. 54)

In this study, we start from this understanding when analyzing news consumption by children during the Covid-19 pandemic, supported and encouraged by school practices (but not limited to them). We consider the relevance of the meanings constructed by children from the media discourses and their

² Retrieved February 4, 2021 from: <https://www.brasildefato.com.br/radioagencia/podcasts/radinho-bdf>.

³ Retrieved February 4, 2021 from: <https://audioglobo.globo.com/cbn/podcast/feed/752/revisteen-cbn-joca>.

⁴ Retrieved February 4, 2021 from: <https://jornaldacrianca.com.br/>.

⁵ Retrieved February 4, 2021 from: <https://www.revistaquale.com.br>.

⁶ Retrieved February 4, 2021 from: <http://chc.org.br/sobre-a-chc>.

⁷ Retrieved February 4, 2021 from: <https://www.jornalcruzeiro.com.br/suplementos/especial-cruzeirinho/eu-e-o-cruzeirinho/>.

⁸ Retrieved February 4, 2021 from: <https://www.dgabc.com.br/Editoria/11/diarinho>.

⁹ Retrieved February 4, 2021 from: https://www.jcnet.com.br/jc_crianca/2021/01/748004-tom-ou-nina.html.

¹⁰ Retrieved February 4, 2021 from: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/folhinha>.

inclusion as participants in society.

Methodology

The main objective of the research was to try to understand how the newspaper's discontinued distribution impacted the informative reading of children; however, we also investigated other issues: the main sources of information they had access to before and during the pandemic; how news covering Covid-19 made them feel; and their contact with *fake news*. To do this, we created an *online* structured questionnaire on Google Forms for children to explain their new routines and, using data analysis, to suggest changes to the children's journal or reinforce any positive points readers may have reported. This interpretation of the numbers was conducted by academic researchers, while the structuring and implementation of the questionnaire was organized by the editorial staff; however, both groups have contributed on some level to these different stages.

A text inviting readers to respond to the survey, with a link to the questionnaire added to it, was posted on the newspaper's website¹¹ from June 23 to August 13, 2020. The text read: "We want to know how you, the *Joca* reader, are following the news during the quarantine and how you feel about the information you are receiving about the new coronavirus. This is a very quick survey that an adult may help you with if needed".

The text, written by the newspaper's legal team, explained that the survey would not ask any personal data from the child: "make sure not to write any personal data in the spaces provided, such as your name, email address, telephone number, home address or the name of your school". The text went on to say: "We are not asking for any of this data in this research and your name will not appear anywhere. We would really like to know how you keep updated on what is happening in Brazil and the world". Due to this non-collection of personal information, the legal team did not need to request authorization from children's parents or guardians to participate. None of the respondents provided any data that could identify them.¹²

There was a call for research in a printed edition of the periodical, which circulated in the first week in August, and two on the newspaper's website, in addition to the research being published on the publication's social networks for parents and teachers to see. Due to the privacy policy and terms of use established with customers, young readers and their parents could not receive communications about the survey directly in their emails, thus encouraging them to respond to the questionnaire.

It is also important to emphasize that the disclosure was made during the time when school is usually closed for holidays because, at the time, not all schools had chosen to stop their activities for 30 consecutive days. They also did not know the extent of the pandemic and the intention was to be able to map the behavior of the child readers at that time, in whatever way possible. The month of July registered only a few responses, which was expected, but the resumption of classes in August led to a higher participation rate. Once the number of responses began to decline, the newspaper decided to end the collection. In the next section, we will present the data and the resulting analysis.

¹¹ This was an open questionnaire available on the media outlet's website, but the questions were addressed to the newspaper's readership. The newspaper's page allows access to five free news contents per month, in addition to providing some open texts on specific pages. To have full access you must be a subscriber.

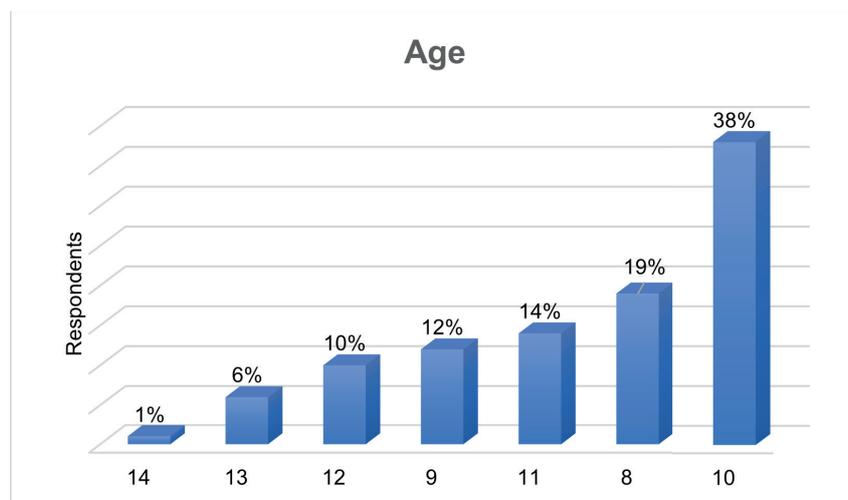
¹² Since data collection was performed by the publishing company and not the researchers, the project was not approved by the ethics committee. The researchers, in this case, processed the raw data, that was submitted to us by the newspaper.

Results and Discussions

A total of 156 respondents participated in the study. It is not, of course, a representative sample of the newspaper’s readers but, due to the difficulty in conducting research with children during social isolation, we believe it relevant for study as it provides clues about the consumption of news during a very unique period in time. The study considers only the responses from children between the ages of 8 and 14, a decision both the newspaper and the researchers agreed to. This is a sample that best represents the age range of the publication's readers, as can be seen in the participation itself. Even though some children outside the aforementioned age range may have had access to the link, they would not be able to actually complete the online form as a filter was designed that would prevent them from completing the form - only nine children and adolescents who were not included in the sample tried to fill out the questionnaire.

Out of the 147 valid responses, the highest participation rate came from 10-year-old children (Figure 1), representing almost 40% of cases (the highest age group in both genders, representing 40% among girls and 1/3 of boys). In a previous work (Doretto, 2015), we verified the most common age of children who sent letters to the youth media outlets in Brazil as being between 10 and 11, which demonstrates that this group is evident among younger readers. We saw that this is an age group which already has a good command of the written language, and that gives them autonomy. However, we must also take into account the fact that pre-teens generally tend to distance themselves from issues associated with children, which includes children's journalism.

Figure 1 – Age of respondents¹³



Source: Prepared by the authors

In terms of gender, 61.2% of respondents were girls, 36.7% were boys, and the others (2.1%) preferred not to give this information¹⁴. When comparing previous data to this current data, we identified that the group for 10-year-old girls represents 1/4 of the participants.

In general, previous studies on the consumption of journalism do not identify differences in news contact between boys and girls, but only in the type of content they consume or the feelings that they get from that content (Silveira, 2015). However, in a study we previously cited (Doretto, 2015) which analyzes correspondence sent in to youth-based media outlets, we noticed that girls tend to send in more correspondence than boys. In addition, the TIC Kids Online Brazil survey, which deals with the consumption

¹³ Total of 147 respondents.

¹⁴ The question read: "2) You are: a girl; a boy; don't know or don't want to answer".

of news on the internet, shows that girls access this type of content more than boys, although the difference is small: the latest data, released in 2019, shows that 59% of girls say they read news content on the internet, compared to 52% of boys;¹⁵ in 2018, those rates were 56% and 51%, respectively. These differences between the genders will be further explored below.

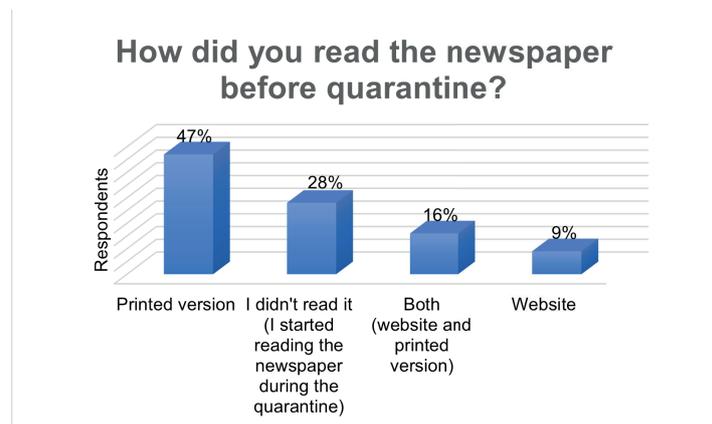
In relation to geographic distribution, the data shows that 88% of respondents are from the Southeast region, especially the states of São Paulo (68%) and Minas Gerais (15%). There were only small representations from the north of the country (one respondent from Pará) and the south (one respondent from Paraná), regions where the newspaper has few subscribers.

Digital reading and mediations

As mentioned, during the pandemic, the printed version of the newspaper was no longer being sent to most schools as they had closed. There was also no one to receive the material and distribute it given that almost all school activities were being held remotely. As a result, the survey also tried to identify whether the public continued to access the media outlet during the quarantine through its website. To ascertain this, two questions were asked.

The first question asked the children if they only read the printed version of *Joca* before the pandemic, or if they also accessed the site.¹⁶ About half of the participants consumed only the printed version, which is mostly used by schools in their classrooms.¹⁷ Of note was the increased access to the media outlet during the quarantine, as almost 30% stated that they continued to read the paper while they were quarantined at home (Figure 2). Some theories about why this data increased are: 1. Some schools did not used to work with the *Joca* newspaper, but once the quarantine started, they subscribed in order to supplement their students' studies while isolated, similar to many other applications that schools already adopt; 2. Some schools that had already established regular activities with the printed newspaper migrated to the digital version.

Figure 2 – Forms of news reading before the quarantine¹⁸



Source: Prepared by the authors

¹⁵ Retrieved February 5, 2021 from: <https://cetic.br/pt/tics/kidsonline/2019/criancas/B1A/expandido>.

¹⁶ The question read: "Before quarantining, did you read the printed version of *Joca* or access its website?"

¹⁷ It is important to consider that classrooms in Brazil with enough electronic devices for children to read individually or in pairs are rare. There is also the issue surrounding the children's focus of attention when it comes to digital resources, as they can easily be distracted and access other websites, apps, etc. With a print-based version, teachers can keep an eye on their students and make sure that they are doing the activity and not focusing their attention elsewhere.

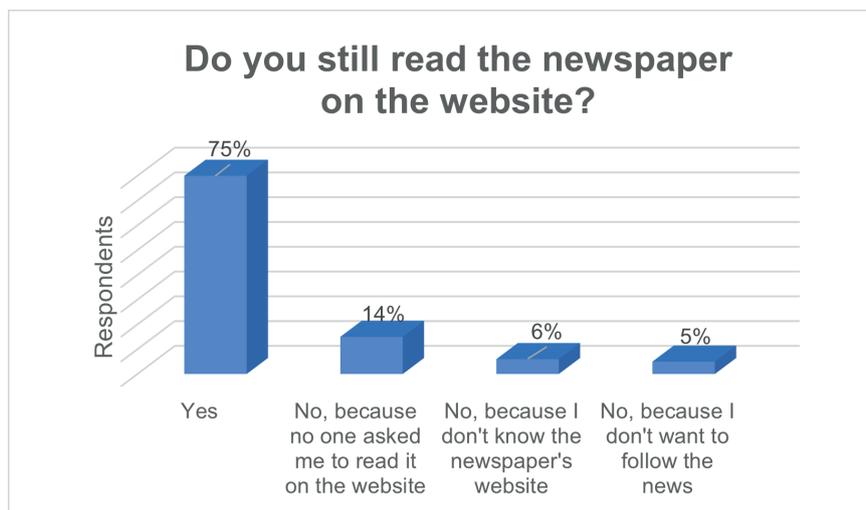
¹⁸ Total of 147 respondents.

The survey also asked the children that if they had stopped receiving the printed version of *Joca* during the quarantine,¹⁹ did they continue to access the newspaper’s content through its website (Figure 3). There were 106 responses in total (the remaining 40 children who reported not having read the newspaper before the quarantine did not have access to this question; this was achieved using a filter). 75% of the 106 respondents (Figure 3) said they continued to read the news on the newspaper’s website, which certifies that the link between reader and newspaper remained.

However, another 14% said they did not continue to read the newspaper because no one had asked them to do so. This illustrates how contact with the newspaper was established only as a school task or through adult mediation (not only teachers, but perhaps parents as well).

Despite the relevance of mediation, the fact that only 5% of readers said *they do not want to follow the news*, even during the pandemic, is striking. We believe that this data should be interpreted by also taking into account the teachers’ constant encouragement of students to read the news (in this way, reading the news would become a school obligation, and not just a choice), which we shall look at further below. Regardless, it draws attention to the low percentage of uninterested people, another aspect we will further explore below.

Figure 3 – Forms of news reading after the quarantine²⁰



Source: Prepared by the authors

The survey also tried to understand how much, if any, these 106 readers read the newspaper before the quarantine was put in place.²¹ In this case, the children were allowed to give more than one answer. The results presented in Figure 4 reinforce the importance of teachers and their role in encouraging children and young people to read the newspaper.

The teachers’ encouragement is very relevant, being present in 75% of all answers (adding together all the options where the children mentioned this action). A further 41% reported this reason as the only reason for reading the newspaper. The alternative that indicates a more casual reading of the newspaper ("When I felt like it") appears as a single answer in only 7% of cases, but, adding up all the times

¹⁹ Subscribers who opted to have the newspaper delivered to their homes did not have their subscriptions suspended. Suspension of delivery only occurred to schools.

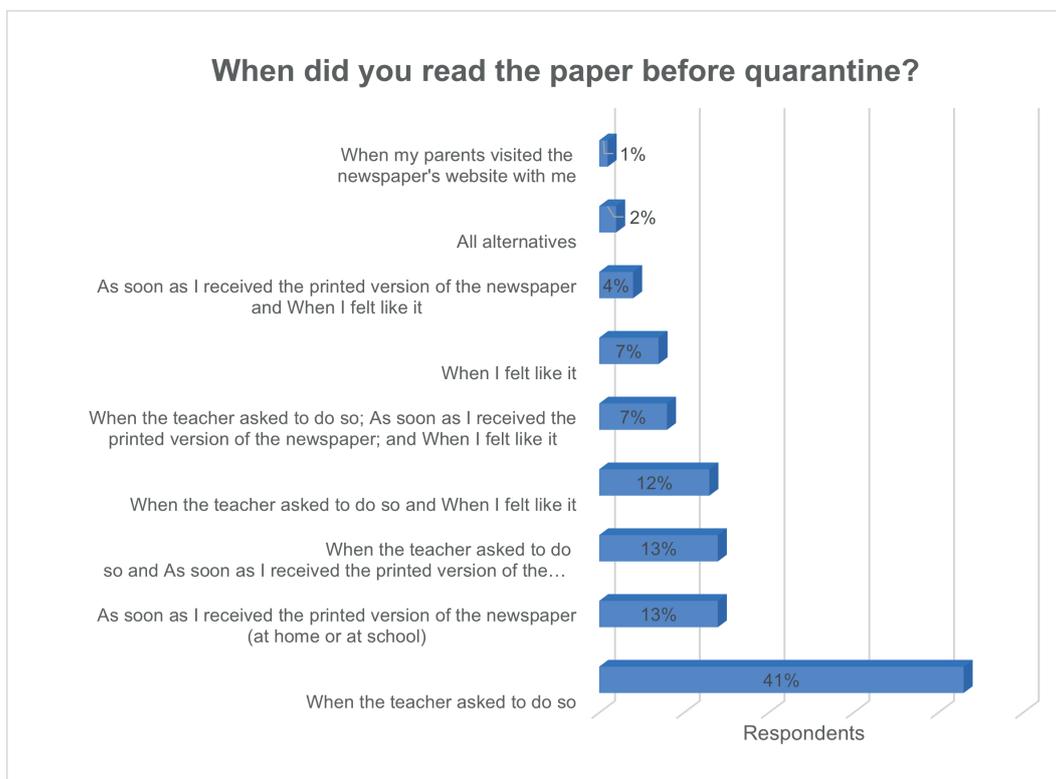
²⁰ Total of 106 respondents.

²¹ The entire question read: "How often did you read the paper before quarantine?"

this answer was given, it represents about 1/3 of respondents.

The answer that indicates the preference for consuming news immediately ("As soon as I received the paper") was mentioned as a single answer by 13% of boys and girls, but represented 39% of all cases in which it appears. When we add together all the answers where at least one of the last two options appears, both of which demonstrate the reader's personal interest in consuming news, we get a total of 58%. The alternatives where only casual reading appears (meaning, without adult mediation) make up 1/4 of the answers. In summary: having the school encourage students to read the paper is essential, but the consumption of news is not limited to this mediation; it also occurs on a voluntary basis in almost 60% of cases. Even though the act of reading the news can be encouraged by teachers, it is also autonomous. Parental mediation, however, was quite limited prior to quarantine.

Figure 4 – Reasons given for reading news before the quarantine²²

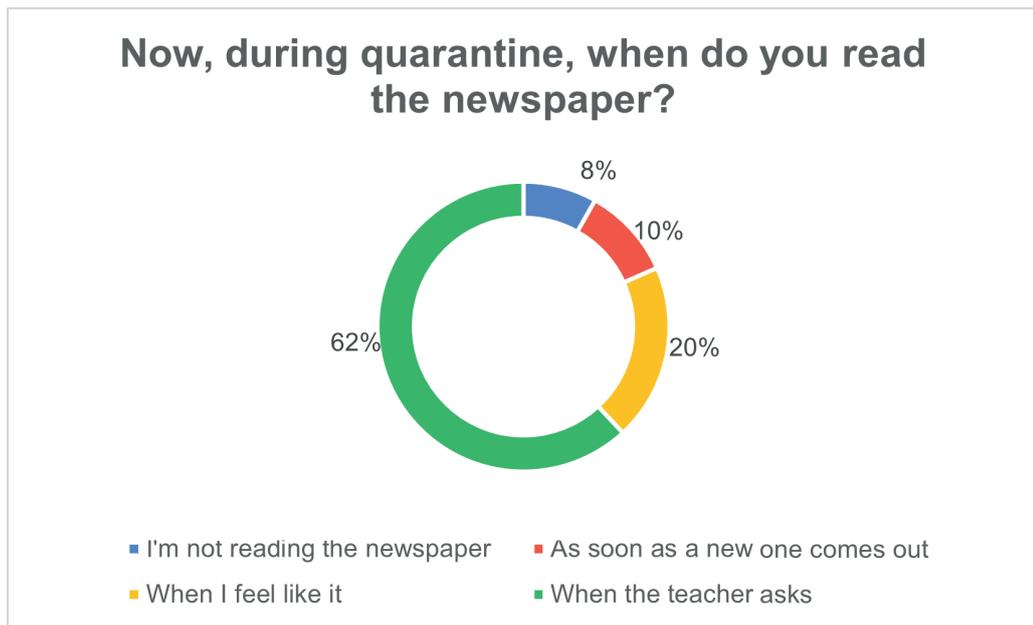


Source: Prepared by the authors.

In order to verify their reading stimulus during the pandemic, the question was modified, and the children now had to select the option that best identified their behavior during the period of online classes (Figure 5). All 147 readers responded. 62% said they read the newspaper when the teacher told them to do so and 20% reported reading the newspaper "when I feel like it". The alternative "As soon as a new one comes out" was chosen by 10% of respondents, while 8% said they did not read the newspaper. Once again, we can see the predominance of teacher mediation, but casual reading increases slightly, representing about 1/3 of the responses. There is, however, a small index of disinterest regarding the newspaper, which was further explored in other questions in the survey, as we shall look at later. It is important to note that, despite attending remote classes, i.e., in the home, parent mediation was not selected as an answer. The choice "When my parents visited the website with me" was not chosen by any of the respondents.

²² Total of 106 respondents.

Figure 5 – Reasons given for reading news during the quarantine²³



Source: Prepared by the authors

Changes to news consumption during the pandemic

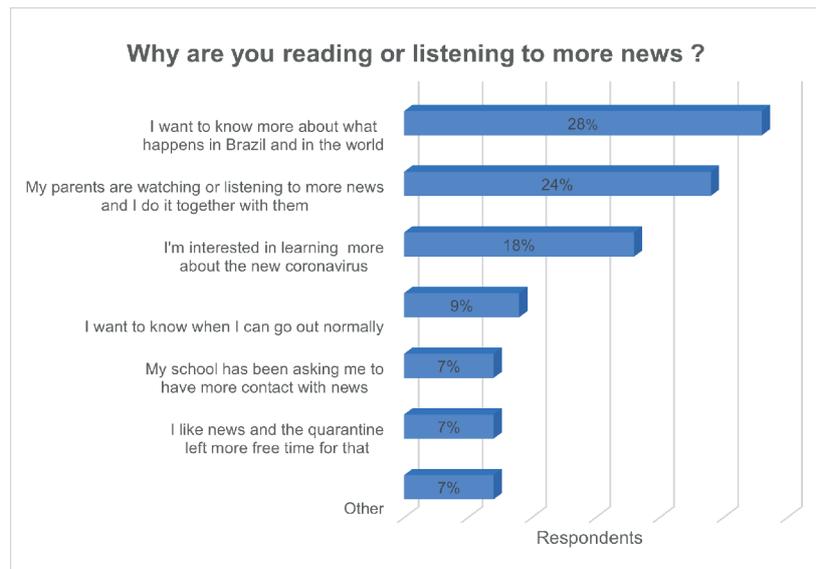
The children were also asked about the overall frequency of their news consumption during the quarantine:²⁴ nearly 60% of respondents said they read or listen to more news than they did before, while 28% said nothing had changed for them. Lastly, 14% said they read or listened to news less frequently than before. This data helped towards better understanding why changes in news consumption took place.

Children who said their consumption increased were also asked to choose the option that best described the reason for this increase (Figure 6). The children were only allowed to choose one option. Most of the children showed an interest in following general news stories (28%) or news specifically about the pandemic (18%), and their parents' influence was also registered (24%). Another mediation, an external one, that affects the consumption of news is the fact that the school requires the children to do this, which represented 7% of the responses. In short, around 30% of the increase in contact with news reports can be attributed to adult influence, which means that most of the increased interest is a result of the children's own initiative.

²³ Total of 147 respondents.

²⁴ The question read: "Now, in the quarantine".

Figure 6: Reasons for increased news consumption during the quarantine²⁵



Source: Prepared by the authors.

The data relating to all children who responded to the survey shows us that about 38% of respondents demonstrated a spontaneous increase in their news consumption. This represents a need to create and sustain media outlets that dialogue with children and young people outside of school, and do so in such a way that they can effectively integrate themselves into the society in which they live, thus contributing to its constant construction and development.

To think about children today is not just a matter of their age group or their maturity, nor is it about imagining them disconnected from society — a separate “being”, alien to everything that surrounds them. To think about children today is to consider them as a social being, fully integrated into their environment, influencing and being influenced by it (Rimoli, 2016, p. 51, free translation)

61% of the group with the highest rate of news consumption are girls (those aged 10 represent 1/4 of this group), which proportionally reflects the data in the highest number of responses to the questionnaire; girls not only participated more in the survey, but also indicated a greater interest in journalism during the pandemic. In a review of previous literature, we noted that girls, normally raised to be more committed to the home and family and to avoid conflict, were more interested in so-called *soft news* on issues such as culture and behavior (Doretto, 2015). The 2018 TIC Kids Online survey reinforces this perception: “Considering activities relative to searching for information, a higher proportion of girls than boys looked up information on the Internet about health (33% and 24%, respectively)” (NIC.BR, 2019, p. 240). In the case of the pandemic, news about precautionary measures to avoid being infected with the virus may have brought out the innate caregiver role in the girls, something they are submitted to from birth due to the social construction of the genders.

On the other hand, it is also worth emphasizing the growing importance - especially during a pandemic - of caring for the other, something that should be encouraged in the social development of the child as an active subject (regardless of gender), who not only interprets what he or she sees, hears or reads, but also gives new meaning to “messages from the media, including the set of their cultural practices, whether modifying them or not” (Baccega, 2009a, p. 19, free translation). Baccega

²⁵ Total of respondents who claimed to read or listen to more news than before is 86.

also claims the connection between school and media – which is already established by the National Common Curriculum Base (BNCC) – operates “to pave social changes towards the construction of effective citizenship” (Baccega, 2009b, p. 20, free translation), and we understand that reframing gender roles is also part of this process. Thus, it is necessary that schools and children's journalism raise discussions of this type with children and discuss stereotypes between the male and female genders.

The question presented in Figure 6 allowed the children to select the option “Other” and then write their own answer.²⁶ Most of the records reinforce the above alternatives, demonstrating the importance of parents' routines (although readers do not always demonstrate that they enjoy this habit) and also the children's interest in understanding what is happening around them: “I get my news from the *Joca* newspaper and read it to learn more about the new coronavirus”; “Because, nowadays my family reads a lot of newspapers and so I started to read them and like it, I also like to be well informed, and in these times it is important to be aware of what we are going through”; “My parents listen to the news so I also listen to it, but I don't like to do this very much”; “because of the quarantine, I have watched and read more news on TV and in newspapers and websites to find out if the corona virus is getting better”; “When I want to spend time with my parents watching TV.” One child also reinforced the school stimulus: “when the teacher tells me to read”.

The survey used another item to try and understand which sources the children used to consume news before the quarantine. Participants could indicate more than one item, and in the figure below (7) we grouped the alternatives according to how they appeared in the questionnaires. The print version of *Joca* was quite prominent here, cited by about half of the children (50%), as well as TV news (54%), a very common medium in the children's information routine (Delorme, 2008).

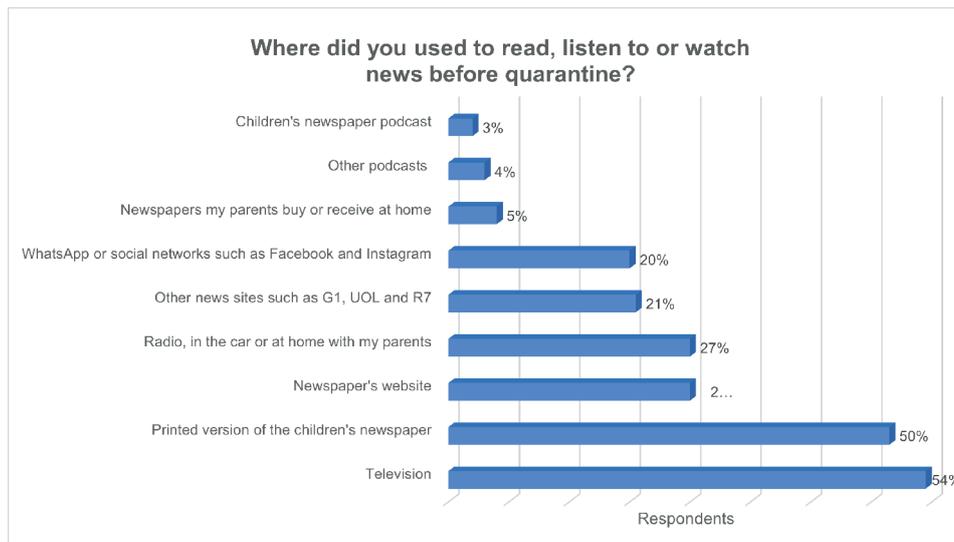
The *Joca* website was mentioned by almost 1/3 of the children (the same number as radio consumption), showing a certain strength of this medium in the children's information routine, as we have already seen in a previous literature review (Doretto, 2020). Other news portals and social networks were mentioned by 20% of respondents. General print newspapers or *podcasts* were rarely cited.

Of note is the gender and age that appear the most in some of these responses: 31% of those who said they had read *Joca* before the pandemic were ten-year-old girls. For television news, girls are also the more prominent group, but in a smaller proportion (21% of responses), since the consumption by age groups and genders of this medium is more balanced out. These data once again reinforce the interest girls at that age have in the news, as we have indicated, and show that this interest existed even before the pandemic.

It is also worth mentioning that 60% of the children who said they consume news on websites are between 11 and 14 years old (68% are girls). Research in the area has already shown that the consumption of digital media increases during pre-adolescence: according to data from the TIC Kids Online 2019 survey (2020), 28% of children aged 9 and 10 use the internet. This percentage increases with children between 11 and 12 years old. 78% of children between 13 and 14 years old use the internet and 91% between 15 and 17 years old use the internet.

²⁶ These are the translation in English of the original words the children used in their responses. It is important to note that, since many of them are still learning to read and write, grammatical and spelling errors are common.

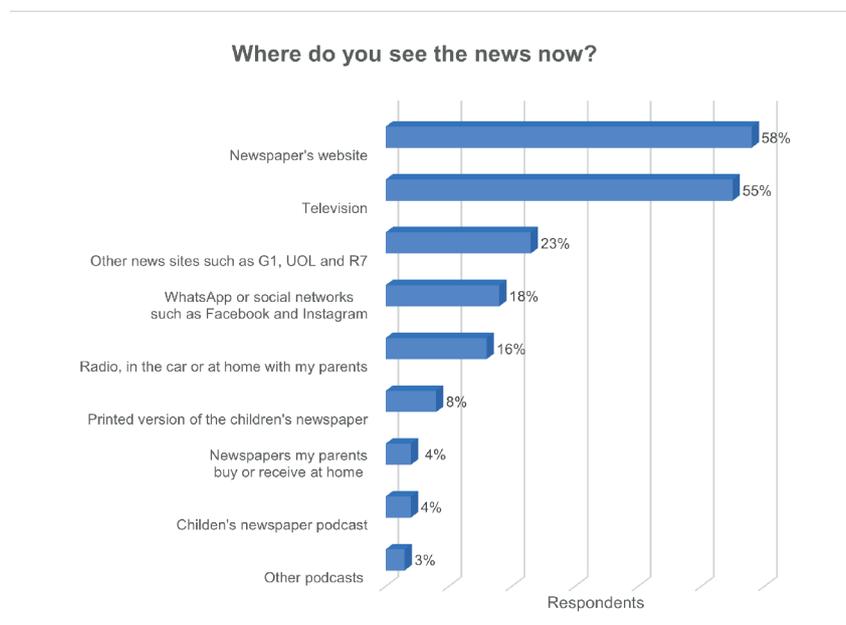
Figure 7 – News consumption before the pandemic²⁷



Source: Prepared by the authors

During the quarantine, there was a clear transition from reading the print version of the paper to reading its website. This occurred due to the suspension of paper circulation, and as a result, the online page increased from 27% readership to 58% (Figure 8). Television news consumption remained constant while radio news consumption decreased by ten points due to the fact that people were not driving around as much and listening to their car radios. This decrease also shows that, at least in this age group, listeners have not migrated over to *podcast* news forms.

Figure 8 – News consumption during the pandemic²⁸



Source: Prepared by the authors

²⁷ Total of 147 respondents.

²⁸ Total of 147 respondents.

The social emotional impact of news and fake news

The survey also asked children how news about the pandemic made them feel. Boys and girls were allowed to check more than one answer. In the graph below (Figure 9), we present the number of children who checked each option; for this reason, the sum is greater than 100%. About 50% of children said they felt anxious because they wanted the situation to end soon, while another 38% said they were frightened when they realized that some people were not following the safety measures that were put in place to prevent the spread of the virus. Another 38% said they wanted to know more about what was going on. The consumption of news generates a feeling of fear in around 30% of children. About 20% of children reported that news stories were reassuring. This indicates that news coverage of the pandemic did not reassure the children due to the seriousness of the situation; it did however tend to generate feelings of anxiety and fear in them. This was not the only feeling that was generated, considering that almost 40% of children wanted to know even more about the virus, to better understand what was happening. Only 20% of respondents reported having even more questions after reading or listening to the reports.

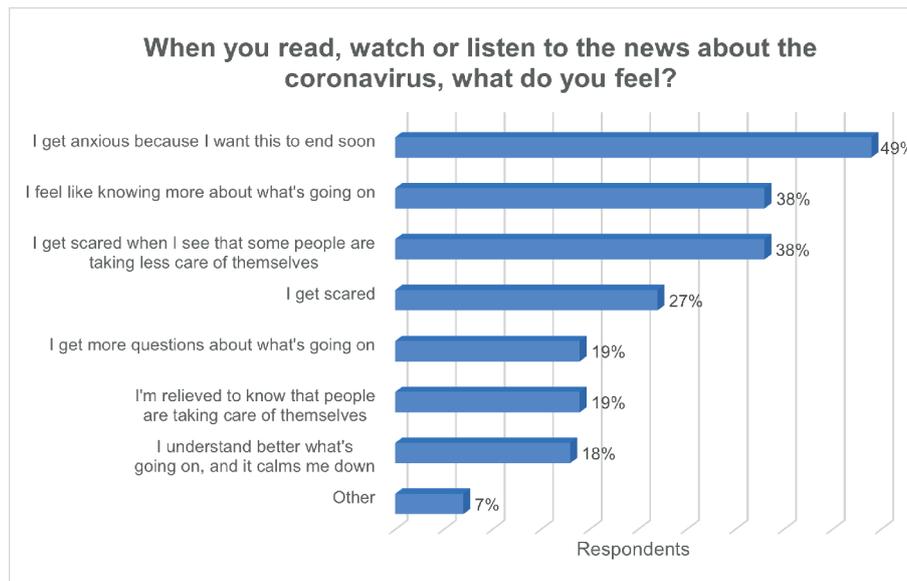
Comparing this data with previous indicators, we believe that by allowing boy and girl readers to better understand the pandemic, journalism has made them even more aware of coronavirus-related problems, which include fear and anxiety. However, about half of the children were neither disgusted by the news nor had any autonomous desire to consume more of this type of material. Another 40%, however, demonstrated more interest in news reports. In other words, children seem to have maintained their news consumption habits during the pandemic, or even increased them.

Continuing with feelings caused by news on the pandemic, only 10 respondents chose the option “Other” and entered their own description. The idea here was to detect possible responses not listed among the options, including cases where the children stated that they were unaffected by the news (which we believe to be something residual due to the seriousness of the situation).

Some children reinforce the idea of anxiety and concern — “[I’m] sad that no one takes care of themselves and that I can’t leave the house”; “I’m worried about my family getting infected”; “I get angry, because a lot of people don’t take care of themselves”; “I get scared, I get angry”. Two other children claimed they were unaffected emotionally — “nothing” and “I don’t worry”.²⁹ Only one child associated the news with anxiety felt over the pandemic: “I want this to end soon, most of the time I don’t read the newspaper and I end up forgetting about this coronavirus”. Another child talks about the different feelings brought on by the quarantine: “Sometimes I feel happy that people are taking care of themselves, sometimes I feel sad”.

²⁹ The children’s spelling was unedited.

Figure 9 – Feelings caused by news on the pandemic³⁰



Source: Prepared by the authors

One strategy that may have been adopted by children's journalism and the media, with the goal of attracting those who did not actively seek out news or those who may have suffered from a social emotional impact and ended up being scared by the news, could have been to act against infodemics. The subjects (children, young people and adults) already receive an avalanche of information about the pandemic through the media, their families, friends, schools, and other "socialization agencies" (Baccega, 2009a) in the form of inconsistent political discourses that reinforce this informational epidemic. The term infodemic was used by Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, general director of the World Health Organization, to bring attention to the fact that in early 2020, information about the new coronavirus (true or false³¹) was spreading faster than the virus itself³².

If the crisis has revealed and amplified many broader trends, this has also been the case in relation to media and information. The 'infodemic' – if such it can be called – didn't start here. It is not confined to social media, or even to media more broadly: it is something in which governments themselves are active participants, and indeed perpetrators (Buckingham, 2020a, online).

There is still the question of the importance of communication journalism, which can select some of the more important news reports for children (and help readers learn how to perform this procedure themselves) amidst the excess of information in the world, as we have seen with infodemics. For Buckingham, it is important to make people aware that we are not just talking about the spread of *fake news* or performing more accurate fact-checking nor is it about poorly qualified press. Yes, these are factors, but we are also talking about users who are more aware of the information circulating in society, "the nature of public debate, the roles and responsibilities of governments and experts, as well

³⁰ Total of 147 respondents.

³¹ Furthermore, much about the disease was still unknown during the first half of 2020. There was no vaccine and there was no mention of variants and mutations. We do recognize that even though we are in 2021, there is still a lot to learn about the pandemic, the disease, and the virus itself. New speculations and discoveries are still to be made and, therefore, the flow of information on the issue must continue to remain high.

³² Retrieved February 13, 2021 from: <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/un-tackling-%E2%80%99infodemic%E2%80%99-misinformation-and-cybercrime-covid-19>.

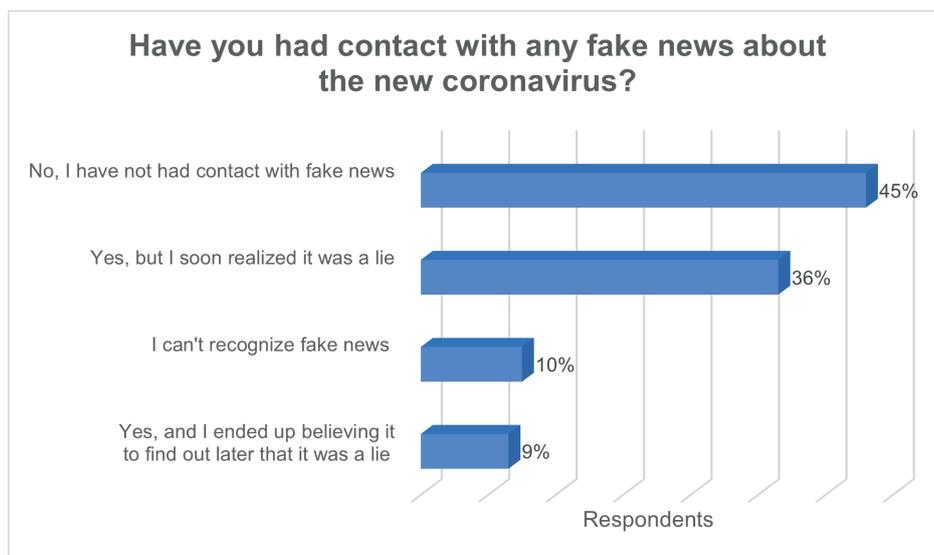
as public trust and accountability. These are issues that media and information literacy educators cannot avoid” (Buckingham, 2020b, online). Once again, we look at bringing the media and school closer together, and the important mediator role teachers have regarding the media consumption of their students, however, we realize that this is also something the media outlets need to do as well.

Thus, news for children is important towards helping them understand what society can do to minimize or resolve social problems, including possible actions that they can (and have the right) to take. This corroborates what the literature says about children’s interest in everyday issues covered by journalism, as per the example of a review by Pereira et al.:

Younger audiences tend to follow and look for news that explore themes that interest them, and this interest can be extended to other subjects, even those that often come from the adult world (politics and economics, for instance), if those subjects are written in a language that attracts the attention of young people and that they can understand (Pereira et al., 2015, p. 386-387, free translation).

Lastly, the children were asked if they had come into contact with any *fake news* about the coronavirus. Almost half of them said they had not come into contact with this type of information, while just over 1/3 reported seeing or reading some *fake news*, but quickly identified it as being untruthful. Only 20% said they believed the so-called news or did not know how to identify whether it was a false narrative or not.

Figure 10 – Consumption of fake news³³



Source: Prepared by the authors.

A few observations can be made here. It is true that, among the percentage of boys and girls who reported not having read false news, there are also cases where children were not able to identify them as being untruthful. The fact that the children in the study’s age group rarely got their news from social media or WhatsApp (currently the most popular forms of media used for circulating disinformation)³⁴ may be the reason they have not had much contact with *fake news*.

³³ Total of 147 respondents.

³⁴ We consider the ecosystem that promotes information disorder to be composed of a lack of information and misinformation, as proposed by Clair Wardle. Retrieved February 13, 2021 from: <https://firstdraft-news.org/latest/information-disorder-the-techniques-we-saw-in-2016-have-evolved/>.

Final Considerations

This research conducted on children and adolescents, with the support of the media outlet *Joca*, aimed to better understand their consumption of news content during the pandemic – which they repeatedly read about in classrooms while mediated by teachers. This survey has reinforced the importance of teacher mediation for consuming material published by *Joca*: even with schools being closed and young readers confined to their homes, the role of teachers is important, as they continue, through *online* classes, to be responsible for encouraging and promoting this type of reading (as opposed to family mediation), which is now performed in digital format. Even still, 1/3 of the participating children also indicated their own interest in consuming news during the pandemic by reading the editions of *Joca* as soon as they were released or by accessing the site when they felt like it.

Another aspect we observed is that children also reported an overall increase in news consumption during the quarantine: almost 60% of respondents said they watched or listened to more news than they did before the pandemic, either on their accord or as a by-product of being around their parents who themselves would consume the news at home. Girls tended to make more of an effort to read or watch journalism, an aspect that could be further investigated in future studies.

We recognize that this increase in consumption must also be analyzed in the light of the infodemic, which can cause social emotional damage to children (and adults as well). The need for media education in schools is clearly important, one that more broadly works with literacy to help develop proficient and critical readers in society, whether physically or digitally.

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