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Open Access Journal

Media Framing of Government Crisis Communication During Covid-19

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Abstract

During the early phase of the Covid-19 crisis, televised speeches and press conferences were one of the preferred means of government communication. They emphasized the urgency and severity of the situation and allowed actors to lead news coverage. While in the immediate phase of the crisis these press conferences were also directed at the general public, their original function was, of course, to inform and influence media coverage. The article investigates how government press conferences were received in newspapers in the first phase of Covid-19, answering two research questions: Did a rally-around-the-flag effect occur among journalists during Covid-19? And how did government press conferences influence salience and sentiment in newspaper opinion pieces? To answer these questions, I draw on a unique dataset, including transcripts of all Covid-19 press conferences in five European countries between January and July 2020, as well as opinion pieces from tabloid and broadsheet newspapers. Based on a mix of automated and manual content analysis, the results reveal how factors such as country context, newspaper type, and the progress of a pandemic can influence how the government agenda is reflected in the media in times of crisis.

Keywords

agenda setting; crisis communication; Covid-19; media framing; political communication; political journalism

1. Introduction

The first phase of Covid-19 was not only a health crisis, but also a global communication "event"—one that led to an unexpected increase in the use of two seemingly old-fashioned communication instruments: government press conferences and legacy mass media (Kjeldsen, 2023). Mass media acted as a bridge between government actors and their publics, being involved in a constant negotiation of frames and meanings, and ultimately

joining governments in shaping the narrative of the crisis (Coman et al., 2021, pp. 4–5). This study examines the agenda-setting relationship between government crisis communication and newspaper journalism in the high-density communication environment of the very first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic in Spring 2020.

During the early phase of the Covid-19 crisis, government press conferences received unprecedented attention. Many governments used these (almost always televised) press conferences and speeches as their main means of communication, emphasizing the urgency and severity of the situation (Craig, 2016; Ekström & Eriksson, 2017). In some countries, the heads of governments used these press conferences to guide their citizens through the crisis, while in others, public health officials became the figureheads of the fight against the pandemic. Millions of citizens around the globe were glued to their TVs to watch governments handle the crisis and to gain practical information about the development of the crisis and how things would unfold in the days to follow. However, press conferences' main and foremost function remained to inform journalists and influence media coverage (Carpenter et al., 2019; Pollard, 1951). Governments in any phase strive to set the media agenda (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2016). However, in times of severe crisis, it seems even more important for them to get their message across—not only to outline the government's position but also to call the public to action and inform them of crisis measures. Televised speeches during the first phase of Covid-19 have been shown to effectively influence distress and risk perception in the population (Teufel et al., 2020).

While governments use strategic communication to inform the public and frame the crisis, it is the media's duty to contextualize and evaluate the government's performance. The well-researched agenda-setting power of the media (e.g., McCombs & Guo, 2014) becomes even more important in times of imminent crisis. Legacy media are not the only source at the center of the agenda-setting process anymore (Dalton et al., 1998), but they do remain significant agenda-setters, even in a high-choice media environment (Djerf-Pierre & Shehata, 2017). The crisis even showed a resurgence of classical media: During the first phase of the pandemic, more people turned to traditional news outlets for reliable sources of information (Tejedor et al., 2020).

Around Europe, there has been a common downward trend in newspaper sales and circulation (Papathanassopoulos et al., 2023). Circulation of newspapers is steadily declining, economic pressure on publishers is high, news dissemination now also happens through social media, and in future years, artificial intelligence will play an increasing role in news production. A journalist's traditional role as the discoverer and producer of news has transformed into multiple roles, such as a "harvester" or "curator" of information (Bakker, 2014). However, newspapers and print journalists remain an important source for understanding and interpreting events or issues (Djerf-Pierre & Shehata, 2017) and "continue to play an important agenda-setting role in raising debate about the stories they select and editorially frame" (Cushion et al., 2018, p. 163). In times of crisis, particularly high-profile political commentators can gain extra leverage (Opperhuizen et al., 2021), as they play an important part in contextualizing and explaining the government's actions to the public.

This article empirically brings together government crisis communication and newspaper commentary coverage of the crisis, trying to establish communicative links between the two. It investigates how government press conferences were received in newspapers in the first phase of Covid-19, answering two research questions:

RQ1: Did a rally-around-the-flag effect occur among journalists during Covid-19?

RQ2: How did government press conferences influence salience and sentiment in newspaper opinion pieces?

To answer these questions, I draw on two unique datasets. First, a collection of 176 transcripts of government press conferences in five European OECD countries (Austria, France, Germany, Spain, and the UK) between January and July 2020; second, opinion pieces from one tabloid and one quality newspaper in each of these countries to reflect the media's take on government communication. Quality newspapers are broadsheet newspapers providing longer articles and more in-depth analysis, while tabloids try to catch readers' attention, e.g., through sensational headlines and a high degree of visualization with large and colored pictures (see, e.g., Magin & Stark, 2015).

The results show that the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic was a particularly elite-centered phase of political communication and agenda-setting in the public discourse. In the comment sections of some newspapers, we can establish a rally-around-the-flag effect towards the government. Generally, commentary writers seemed to be responsive to what happens in government press conferences; however, no clear pattern emerges. The study contributes to the literature on government crisis communication and media agenda-setting and establishes a link between the two, shedding light on leading journalists' role in shaping the crisis narrative and evaluating the governments' crisis management performance.

2. Covid-19 Crisis Communication Between Press Conferences and Opinion Pieces

In this article, I analyze data from government press conferences and opinion pieces in newspapers—two formats used to express (policy) stances and influence public opinion.

2.1. Opinion Pieces to Capture Framing

Editorial pieces (allowing members of the editorial board of a newspaper to express a personal stance on an issue) and op-eds (the page "opposite the editorial," which is used as a platform for guest authors and experts) are important agenda-setters in shaping public discourse. Opinion pieces (in this study, I summarize editorials and op-eds under this term) serve as an indicator of frames and opinions present in the public discourse at a certain time (Drewski, 2015). They can be very powerful agenda-setters (Savage, 2014), allowing alternative perspectives and new voices in addition to regular news reporting. The tone of opinion pieces and the selection of issues they take up play an important role in setting the agenda in public discourse (Golan & Munno, 2014).

During a crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic, regular everyday news coverage was dominated by one topic, the pandemic—an issue that touched upon many aspects of individuals' and society's daily business. Most parts of a newspaper, from the front pages to local news reporting or the sports and culture pages (if there were any), dealt with the implications of the pandemic and its countermeasures (Crabu et al., 2021). This number of news articles would be impossible to analyze within the scope of this study. Therefore, rather than drawing on news coverage as a reflection of public discourse, this study relies on opinion pieces (editorials, commentaries, op-eds) to capture the assessment of the crisis and, more specifically, the government's performance during this crisis.

Research on the content and sentiment of opinion pieces during the Covid-19 crisis is scarce. Natow (2022) analyzed op-eds published by college presidents in various US newspapers to highlight the topic of higher education during the pandemic, finding that they "not only communicated this way during a time of crisis but have also used op-eds to express leadership priorities and to confirm their own organization's important role within the community" (Natow, 2022, p. 1461). Capurro et al. (2022) analyzed the opinion discourse in Canadian newspapers on people who were not following the public health guidelines ("covidiots"). They state that this opinion discourse "contributed to the creation of a moral panic around the use of facemasks, safe physical distancing, quarantine, and isolation" (Capurro et al., 2022, p. 12). Both papers emphasized the importance of opinion pieces for shaping public discourse during the crisis.

2.2. The "Rally-Around-the-Flag" Effect in Times of Crisis

It is crucial for leaders in times of crisis to achieve a "'permissive consensus' to effectuate their policies and bolster their reputation" (Boin et al., 2016, p. 70). To achieve this goal, they need solidarity from many different parts of society. In severe crises, governments can receive support from actors that are usually much more critical towards them. This is called a "rally-around-the-flag effect"—government actors become more popular if they steer their country through a crisis (Mueller, 1970). Very often, this goes for public opinion, which shows rising levels of trust in governments (e.g., Hegewald & Schraff, 2022; Kritzinger et al., 2021) or support for government measures, as in the case of the pandemic (Kittel et al., 2021). However, this newly won popularity can quickly decrease (Lee, 1977). Sometimes, if the crisis seems particularly threatening, such as after terrorist attacks, even opposition parties root for the government (Chowanietz, 2011).

The same effect can be shown for journalists, as Barnett and Roselle (2008) did for the time after the September 11 attacks. In an article on media attention concerning earthquake risks, Opperhuizen et al. (2021) showed that regarding specific risks, the media served as strategic instruments for network actor communication.

A number of articles have already investigated the role of the media during the Covid-19 pandemic, albeit not explicitly the rally-around-the-flag effect. Fonn and Hyde-Clarke (2023) showed, for the second phase of Covid-19 in Norway, that the national crisis policy was rarely questioned by the media, as they supposedly contributed to the act of national solidarity that the government had asked for (Fonn & Hyde-Clarke, 2023, p. 1478). Ghersetti et al. (2023, p. 237) found in a comparative study of pandemic media coverage in Sweden and Iceland that "much emphasis [was] placed on supporting authorities' strategies, and little room was given to outside voices and criticism." Lu et al. (2023, p. 301) pointed towards what they call a "herd behavior of the news media" during the first phase of the pandemic, which also increased the media's agenda-setting power during that phase.

During the very early phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, we experienced a rally-around-the-flag effect among voters in all countries included in the study (Cardenal et al., 2021; Kritzinger et al., 2021). With this study, I want to show whether this was also true for opinion leaders in the media, as "the focus of coverage is expected to shift across different stages of the crisis" (Coman et al., 2021, p. 4). The first hypothesis, therefore, reads

> **H1:** Sentiment in the media towards the government increased and then decreased over the course of the first phase of the crisis (inverse U-shaped effect).

2.3. The Influence of Press Conferences on Media Coverage

Generally, press conferences are used by politicians as an opportunity to lead public opinion (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2003, 2013a; Lancendorfer & Lee, 2010). As a unique event in which politicians can directly interact with journalists, they get the opportunity to justify their policy decisions directly and, therefore, influence media coverage.

Government press conferences, in particular, are an effective tool for leading news coverage. Eshbaugh-Soha (2013a, 2013b) found that press conferences held by US President George W. Bush had a high probability of being covered on the evening news, and the president's opening remarks dictated a solid percentage of news coverage. Televised press conferences were particularly effective in attracting short-term media attention (Peake & Eshbaugh-Soha, 2008). When the government is considered the most important and relevant source of information, such as on the progress of (international) crises, it is more likely that they lead news coverage, as Wanta and Foote (1994) showed in an analysis of President George H. W. Bush's press coverage.

Research shows that government actors are likely to lead news coverage through their press conferences and that topics of high relevance amplify these effects. Given the very particular situation of the initial phase of the Covid-19 crisis, governments chose press conferences as their main means of communication for these reasons. During the first phase of Covid-19, it is probably not accurate to look for evidence of agenda setting (McCombs, 1997), as the media agenda was dominated by the progression of the crisis. However, it is noteworthy to see whether the messages that governments extensively tried to communicate came across and were received in the newspapers. Hart et al. (2020) found that newspaper coverage in the early phase of the pandemic was highly politicized, so political actors were highly visible in newspapers. We expect that the likelihood of government press conference appearances and messages being reflected in short-term media coverage also holds for opinion pieces in newspapers, arguing that:

> **H2a:** Opinion pieces were more likely to reference the government the day after a press conference.

In addition to leading news coverage in the first place, governments also have an interest in influencing the sentiment of opinion pieces. Outside of crisis periods, governments usually aim to generate positive media coverage (Liu et al., 2012) by informing the public about their achievements and having a positive outlook. In an acute crisis, however, governments might sometimes be interested in more negative coverage to help convince the public of the seriousness of the situation. In the early days of Covid-19, governments faced the possible collapse of the healthcare system, as hospitals were overwhelmed with patients (Woods et al., 2020). Political executives likely believed that conveying negative messages, which evoke a sense of fear and alarm, could help them raise awareness of the crisis among the public (Eisele et al., 2022; Stolow et al., 2020).

Research shows that at the beginning of the crisis, at least parts of the media coverage matched the tone of the government's press conferences (Krupenkin et al., 2020). Comparative empirical evidence for sentiment in newspapers on Covid-19 is still scarce; however, some country examples show that the variation of tone in newspapers over time was considerable (e.g., Basch et al., 2020; Ghasiya & Okamura, 2021; Šķestere & Darģis, 2022). As such, I hypothesize that:

> **H2b:** Sentiment in opinion pieces was positively influenced by sentiment in press conferences (t-1).

3. Case Selection, Data, and Methods

3.1. Case Selection

This study draws on two unique datasets containing transcripts of press conferences from government press conferences and op-eds from two newspapers in Austria, France, Germany, Spain, and the UK. These five European countries were hit by the pandemic at a similar time and had similar responses. All five went into lockdown (or a "delay phase," as it was called in the UK) on very similar dates (between March 11 and 23; Secco & Conte, 2022) and were therefore confronted with similar communicative challenges during the timeframe used in this analysis.

In all five countries, governments relied heavily on press conferences to inform the public about Covid-19 developments and countermeasures. While all of these press conferences were orchestrated by the governments, the setting differed between countries (Dingler et al., 2024). In Austria, 75% of statements were made by members of the government, with the rest being spread across civil servants, NGO representatives, and other experts from various fields (Bates & Hayek, 2021). In Germany, France, and the UK, government members were present at about half the press conferences—spokespeople and civil servants took over for the other half. In Spain, only 22% of press conference statements were delivered by members of the government. The main communicators were the chief health epidemiologist Fernando Simón and General José Santiago; the prime minister only addressed the public every Saturday (Castaños & Rodríguez, 2021, p. 147).

For every country, I selected one quality newspaper and one tabloid newspaper (Austria—*Der Standard* and *Kronen Zeitung*; France—*Liberation* and *Le Figaro*; Germany—*Sueddeutsche Zeitung* and *Bild Zeitung*; Spain—*El País* and *El Mundo*; UK—*The Guardian* and *Daily Mail*). The newspapers were selected according to their daily reach, newspaper type, political leaning, and availability in the Lexis-Nexis database. The country selection includes different types of traditional media systems: Germany and Austria have a democratic-corporatist media system with a high newspaper circulation, while the UK has a liberal model with medium circulation and a commercially-orientated press. France and Spain are categorized into the polarized pluralist model with low newspaper circulation and a high degree of political parallelism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). While the media systems of the five countries are fairly different, commentary-oriented journalism is widely present in all of the selected newspapers.

The time frame for the analysis includes the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, from January 21 to July 31, 2020. This timespan extends from the first detected case of Covid-19 in one of the five countries (Spain) until the lifting of the measures in the first wave (end of "first lockdown"). While the pandemic as a whole lasted much longer (the WHO declared an end to the pandemic on May 5, 2023), this first, unprecedented phase of Covid-19 in the spring of 2020 is considered an immediate crisis in terms of crisis management and crisis communication (see e.g., Fasth et al., 2022).

3.2. Data Collection

First, to assess government crisis communication in these countries, I draw on transcripts of all televised speeches and press conferences of governments during the immediate phase of the Covid-19 crisis (Hayek

et al., 2024). For each country, the sampling period spans from the first public address held on Covid-19 up to the first public address in which a government announced a relaxation of the restrictive measures put in place to contain the virus. Since this study focuses on this initial phase of the crisis, which is crucial for crisis communication (Coombs & Holladay, 2022), rather than the whole period of the pandemic, I do not restrict the analysis to singular events but to all televised government speeches and press conferences during the initial phase. These press conferences usually consisted of one or more introductory speeches, followed by a question-and-answer session with journalists (Ekström & Eriksson, 2017). Video recordings of press conferences were downloaded and then transcribed using a combination of automatic speech recognition software and manual transcription proofreading (for a more detailed description of the data, see Dingler et al., 2024).

Second, I draw on editorials and opinion pieces to measure the reflection of these government press conferences in the media. Rather than regular daily news coverage, which during this initial phase of the crisis focused mainly on reporting the progression of the pandemic and explaining the implications of crisis measures for the public, opinion pieces are written to frame current political events and offer an opinion on, in this case, the government's management of the crisis. Editorials and opinion pieces "published in high-circulation quality newspapers can significantly shape the agenda-setting and opinion-making process in the public sphere" (Drewski, 2015, p. 267).

The opinion pieces were collected from the LexisNexis Academic Database (https://advance.lexis.com/ bisacademicresearchhome) for all newspapers except *Kronen Zeitung* (Austria) and *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* (Germany), for which the data was collected from APA DeFacto (http://www.campus.defacto.at/act/ psp/welcome.htm). Depending on the filter and search options provided by the databases and based on the unique structure of each newspaper, a set of keywords was used to collect only those articles featured in the newspaper's opinion or editorial sections. After the initial data collection, the data was processed using a script programmed to extract information from the articles to record the publication date, author, title, section, and subsection (where applicable). The resulting data set was then filtered further to include only those articles that were confirmed to be opinion pieces (based on the extracted section) and featured the topic of Covid-19, as confirmed by a dictionary-based search. In the final round of data cleaning, the remaining opinion pieces were assessed manually, which made it possible to fill any gaps in contextual information not provided by the database. The final data set comprises 2,744 opinion pieces in total.

An overview of the data is provided in Table 1. Over 193 days (January to July 2020), the five governments held between 18 (France) and 52 (UK) Covid-19-related press conferences. Quality newspaper opinion pieces were fairly evenly distributed across France, Germany, and Austria, with more opinion pieces published in the UK and Spain. Among tabloid newspapers, *Liberation* and *El Mundo* stand out, having published more than two opinion pieces a day on average. This is in line with Hallin and Mancini's (2004) categorization of the two media systems as having a high degree of commentary-oriented journalism. Guigo (2021, p. 95) even identified an "obsessive media coverage" for the case of France.

3.3. Methodological Approach

The article focuses on single news articles as the units of analysis. To assess the tone of opinion pieces, I used automated sentiment analysis in four languages, employing the NRCsentiment dictionary that was

Table 1. Data: Press conferences and newspaper opinion pieces.

Country	# of press conferences	Tabloid newspapers	Political alignment (tabloids)	# of articles (tabloid)	Quality newspapers	Political alignment (quality)	# of articles (quality)
Austria	42	*Kronen Zeitung*	Right-wing populism/ conservativism	66	*Der Standard*	Social liberalism	166
France	18	*Liberation*	Center-left	417	*Le Figaro*	Center-right/ conservativism	129
Germany	24	*Bild Zeitung*	Center-right to right-wing populism/ conservativism	99	*Sueddeutsche Zeitung*	Progressive liberalism	173
Spain	42	*El Mundo*	Center-right	381	*El País*	Center-left	536
UK	52	*Daily Mail*	Right-wing	155	*The Guardian*	Center-left	709

built through Amazon's Mechanical Turk. The sentiment lexicon covers a number of emotions; however, I focused only on negative and positive emotions (Mohammad & Turney, 2013). Negative or positive sentiment scores were calculated for those opinion pieces that directly dealt with the government, i.e., included terms like "government" (*gouvernement*, *Regierung*, *gobierno*) or "president/prime minister" (*président*, *Bundeskanzler*, *presidente del gobierno*), or the names of leading members of government, or if there was a direct reference to a press conference. Opinion pieces that did not include these references to the government were coded as neutral. Sentiment scores were computed using log-odds ratios (Lowe et al., 2011).

As control variables, I include publicly available information on the epidemiological situation in the country, expressed through Covid-19 death rates per 100,000 inhabitants, based on the death rates reported by the WHO (OECD, 2021; WHO, 2021). These indicators were measured on a daily basis.

To test the hypotheses, I rely on panel data analysis with lagged independent variables. I draw on the approach developed by Wanta and Foote (1994), who "examined the relationship between the President and press through an agenda-setting framework that suggests that the President could be an important determinant of the issues the press covers" (Wanta & Foote, 1994, p. 439).

The panel data set comprises 725 observations across five countries and 193 days. If more than one opinion piece appeared on one day (238 cases for tabloid newspapers, 375 for quality newspapers), mean sentiment scores for each day were calculated.

4. Results

First, I examine whether journalists "sided" with governments in the initial weeks of the pandemic. For the rally-around-the-flag effect (H1), the analyses return mixed results. In quality newspapers (Figure 1), we can observe an inversed U-shaped effect for the sentiment scores in Austria (*Der Standard*) and Germany (*Sueddeutsche Zeitung*). Quality newspapers in France, Spain, and the UK generally seem to show much less

variation in sentiment over time. The most positive opinion piece in a quality newspaper appeared in the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* on April 29, a succinct hymn at the end of the first lockdown in Austria:

> Austria is opening up and breathing a sigh of relief. After the first stores reopened two weeks ago, the lockdown restrictions have now been lifted after seven long weeks: People are allowed out on May 1st. There is also a timetable for the opening of schools, restaurants, and hotels until the end of May. This is not yet normality with compulsory masks and social distancing rules. But it is a success story in times of the coronavirus pandemic, at least in chapter one.

> The government and the population have done a lot of things right in this crisis, and this success at this stage should now give the strength to look in two directions at once: boldly forward and critically back. (Münch, 2020, p. 4, translation by the author)

For tabloid newspapers (Figure 2), I have to reject H1. Apart from the German *BILD*, no significant quadratic effects can be observed. However, sentiment in opinion pieces on Covid-19 varied a lot more in tabloid media—which also speaks to the nature of the newspaper type. The most negative opinion piece in a tabloid newspaper appeared in *El Mundo* on February 24—an alarmist piece criticizing journalists and health officials for not taking the pandemic seriously enough:

> Some journalists who minimize the potential seriousness of the Covid-19 epidemic with the false mantra that its mortality rate (around 3% in the confined area of China) is much lower than that of seasonal influenza (between 0.1% and 0.3% in first world countries) are embarrassing, but it is alarming that specialists do the same, such as Amparo Larrauri, Epidemiological Coordinator of the Carlos III Hospital in Madrid, who stated that the coronavirus "is a virus that is within the normal range." (Tadeu, 2020)

Figure 1. Sentiment on Covid-19 in quality newspapers, 2020.
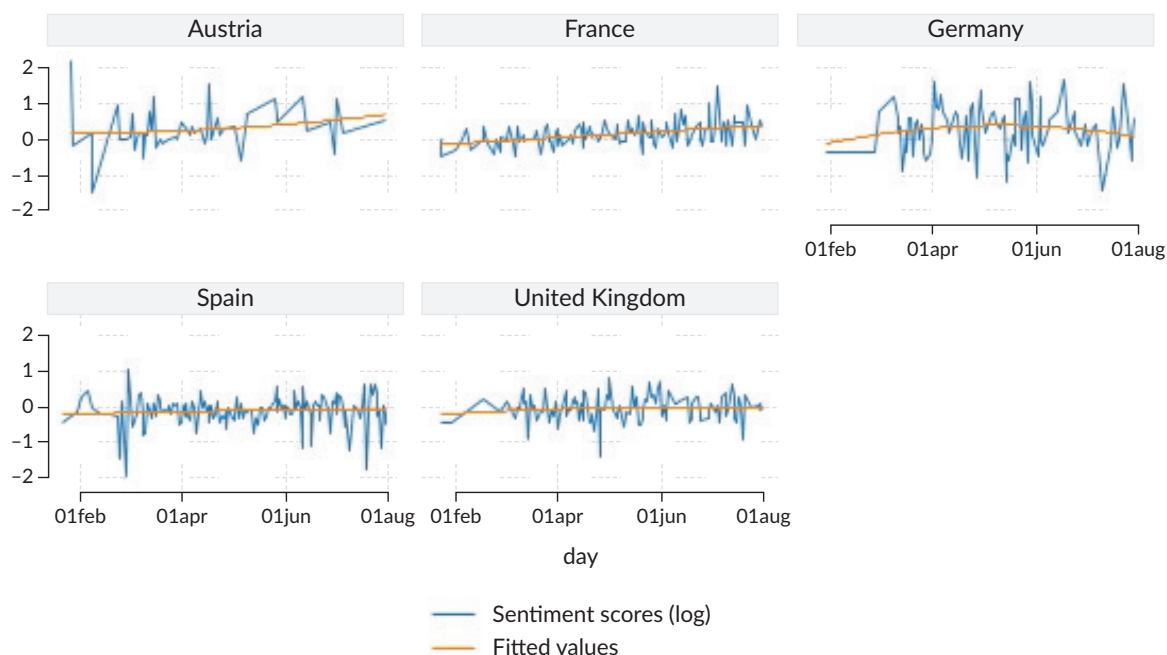
Figure 2. Sentiment on Covid-19 in tabloid newspapers, 2020.

In H2a, I expected that opinion pieces would be more likely to reference the government the day after a press conference. Governments' presence in this case was measured as the occurrence of the name of the head of government, health minister, or the word for "government" in the respective language. This varies considerably across countries: In Austria (34%) and Germany (44.7%), governments were only mentioned in less than half the opinion pieces, while in Spain (77.8%), France (85.1%), and the UK (93.6%), the government was almost always at the center of political commentators' attention.

Table 2 shows the results of a logistic regression model with the government's presence in an opinion piece as the dependent variable, the first lag of whether a press conference was held or not as an independent variable, and time, Covid-19 death rates, and country fixed effects as controls. The results in Table 2 show that this hypothesis can be confirmed. The government was 1.5 times more likely to be referenced in opinion pieces the day after a press conference. This indicates the strong relationship between legacy mass media and government actors during the first phase of the crisis, where they interacted at these press conferences almost daily. The effect is strongly driven by the UK and, in particular, by the comments section of *The Guardian*, where Boris Johnson alone was mentioned in 92.6% of the opinion pieces and amplified by the fact that Johnson was absent from the daily press briefings for almost a month because he himself fell ill with the virus (Garland & Lilleker, 2021).

In H2b, I expected sentiment in opinion pieces to vary with the sentiment on the press conferences from the day before. Table 3 shows the results of a linear regression model with sentiment in opinion pieces as the dependent variable, sentiment in press conferences (lagged) as an independent variable, and time, Covid-19 death rates, and country fixed effects as controls.

This hypothesis has to be rejected. None of the effects in the model are significant. Other studies show that governments showed very little variation in their communication strategies throughout the first phase of the

Table 2. Logistic regression: Governments' presence in opinion pieces.

Dependent variable: Presence of government in opinion pieces	Odds ratio	Standard error
Pressconf (lagged)	2.500***	0.797
Day	1.072***	0.016
Day^2	0.999***	0.000
Deaths.L1	0.998	0.012
Country fixed effects (baseline: Austria)		
France	15.477***	7.050
Germany	1.929	0.681
Spain	13.792***	7.340
UK	82.380***	50.848
Constant	0.110	0.009

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; number of observations—593; pseudo $R^2 = 0.295$.

Table 3. Linear regression: Sentiment in opinion pieces.

Dependent variable: Sentiment (log) in opinion pieces	Coefficient	Standard error
Sentiment_Pressconf.L1	0.141	0.098
Day	0.012	0.007
Day^2	0.000	0.000
Deaths.L1	0.000	0.003
Country fixed effects (baseline: Austria)		
France	0.112	0.106
Germany	0.034	0.094
Spain	−0.097	0.103
UK	−0.277***	0.088
Constant	−0.511	0.356

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; number of observations—158; $R^2 = 0.143$.

pandemic. Once they had adopted a certain tone and communication style, they went through with it for the rest of that crisis phase (e.g., Dingler et al., 2024; Kjeldsen, 2023). This is in line with the tests for H1, which show us that in most newspapers, sentiment varied slightly over the examination period—sentiment in government press conferences, however, followed a very different pattern (see Figure 1 in the Supplementary File).

5. Conclusions

In this article, I sought to examine the empirical relationship between government press conferences and newspaper opinion pieces during the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic. A time of crisis is also a time of intensified political communication for both political actors and journalists. First, I examined whether opinion-leading journalists engaged in a rallying-around-the-flag effect, i.e., sided with the government in the initial phase of the crisis. While the results are mixed, this effect could be observed for opinion pieces in

some newspapers during the first phase of the pandemic. This is particularly interesting for tabloid newspapers such as the German *Bild Zeitung*, whose commentators usually show a critical, even cynical, stance towards the government and politics in general. Overall, the results are in line with country-case studies of the first phase of the pandemic (Bates & Hayek, 2021; Borucki & Klinger, 2021; Castaños & Rodríguez, 2021; Garland & Lilleker, 2021; Guigo, 2021), which found that after fairly firm and conclusive first responses, confusion and early forms of resistance against the measures set in. This seems to be reflected in the media's contextualization of unfolding events.

Press conferences in times of crisis seem to be a very effective way of leading news coverage and editorial pages. Opinion-leading journalists readily talk about (heads of) governments the day after they hold their press conferences, particularly in the UK, where Boris Johnson dominated the government communication strategy and also seemed to be omnipresent in newspaper commentaries. However, the sentiment of press conferences did not translate into opinion pieces. Here, government communication and journalistic classification diverged more than expected—from a perspective of media diversity and democracy in public discourse, this is obviously a good thing.

This study sheds some exploratory light on the agenda-setting relationship between government crisis communication and newspaper journalism: Further research into the topic, particularly on the rally-around-the-flag effect, will be appreciated. A more detailed qualitative analysis might help uncover some patterns between the two forms of communication, e.g., some phrases or symbolic expressions that were created and used only during the pandemic.

Looking back and summing up, the initial phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, when it was still actually called a crisis, was a great communication challenge for political actors and journalists. Politicians found themselves in the role of caretakers or managers rather than competing actors; journalists had to find a balance between critical assessment and support for containing the health crisis.

Generally, one can probably characterize this first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic as a particularly elite-centered phase of political communication and agenda-setting in the public discourse. During a time of confusion, complexity, and new, unexpected developments every day, with citizens being somewhat limited as to cross-checking information "with their own eyes," government actors and elite journalists got together on an almost daily basis to craft a crisis narrative. While the biggest "agenda-setter" at the time was the virus, both legacy media and governments found themselves in an unprecedented agenda-setting power position.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The underlying core dataset is available at Hayek, L., Dingler, S. C., Senn, M., Schwaderer, C., Kraxberger, A. M., & Ragheb, N. M. (2024). *Communicating the Covid-19 crisis: A comparative analysis of crisis communication by governments and heads of state* [dataset]. AUSSDA. https://doi.org/10.11587/RWHCSF. Additional materials and replication data can be requested from the author.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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