**Aspects of news dramatization during the first wave of the pandemic**

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# Aspects of news dramatization during the first wave of the pandemic: Content analysis by time period, news coverage, and reference to the number of COVID-19 cases

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**Abstract**

Mass media largely construct our perceptions of the world through their representations. However, the boundaries between the actual conveying of information and the way it is presented by the media are blurred due to infotainment. The purpose of the current research is to analyze the dramatization elements of the news related to the pandemic. It also highlights specific technical aspects of dramatization (music, images, similes/metaphors, adjectives) and correlates them with the news release period, the news length, and whether or not a number of cases is reported. The research method implemented is quantitative content analysis considering the news item (for news bulletins) and the article (for news sites) as unit of analysis.

**Keywords:** health communication, content analysis, pandemics, news dramatization.

## Introduction

The research at hand aims to document the current trends in the dramatization of SARS-CoV-2-related news on television and on the internet. So, mainly, to investigate which dramatization techniques and to what extent were preferred by the television broadcasters and the journalists of the news websites during the presentation of news related to the pandemic caused by COVID-19.

For the needs of this research, content analysis was implied on a sample of television news stories and news articles. The sampled news was broadcasted or published from February 1, 2020, when the spread of the virus in China began to worsen, until April 30, 2020, when the quarantine ended after the first lockdown in Greece. Therefore, the research covers the period that has been widely described as the first wave of the pandemic.

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Its purpose is to investigate the extent to which the media used dramatization techniques to cover pandemic-related news. However, on the one hand, this is quite broad research. On the other hand, one should bear in mind that each of the four dramatization techniques investigated here (repetition of images, use of music and sound effects, use of metaphors and similes, and adjectives) is correlated with other variables that could influence the use of these techniques.

The first variable under investigation is the *time period of the pandemic*. The research period (1/2/2020 to 30/4/2020) is divided into two-time intervals. The first extends from February 1, 2020, to March 15, 2021, when there was no death in Greece, and the news of tragic events was coming from abroad. The first case in Greece was hospitalized on March 2, 2020, and was intubated on the 6th of the same month. The 66-year-old man did not make it and died in the early hours of March 12, 2020. Amid the rapid spread of the cases and the fear of more deaths, the Greek government, on March 16, 2020, imposed a quarantine on the entire Greek population except for specific exceptions. The government also established a daily afternoon broadcast for giving information about the response to pandemic under the auspices of the Ministry of Health. This daily information was covered live by all national television stations and concerned the evolution of the pandemic in Greece and abroad, as well as the government's decisions in response to the pandemic's hazards.

Meanwhile, on March 11, the World Health Organization had already renounced COVID-19 as a pandemic. Therefore, the second timeframe in which the survey's sample is divided extends from March 16, 2020, to April 30, 2020, and concerns the period during which the Greek people had to stay confined at home and not leave, except with a text message (SMS) or a written form and only for specific reasons. As a result, in this second time period, the media's role gained prominence as they were the primary source of information for people who couldn't leave their homes.

The second variable correlated with the dramatization techniques in this research is the *duration or the extent of the news*. Very eloquently, an attending colleague of mine had noticed that we attempt to count apples with oranges. For this reason, news on television is measured in seconds, while news articles on the internet are measured in words. If an article on the internet also contained a video, every second was counted as a word, as we assumed that every word needs a second to be said. The length and duration of the words were classified into six classes. However, because the vast majority of articles belonged to two or three classes, it was preferred to classify the relevant numbers based on the distribution percentage of the relevant values. The six classes are not equal in numbers but are equal in the percentage of the articles that belong to their range. The duration or extent of the news is related to the framing of a news item. To be as thematic and comprehensive as possible, it requires a larger area, spatially or temporally.

The third variable is *the number of cases or deaths in the news* from any country or worldwide. If a story contained either a number of cases or a death toll, it was coded as news containing

the relevant reference. Tragic events are an excellent opportunity for the use of dramatization. So, this variable may provide statistically significant data when correlated with dramatization techniques.

## News Dramatization

A news dramatization occurs even when one of the following three parameters is present to a news item (Klemm, Das, & Hartmann, 2016: 2). First, if the reported risk is magnified, it is described as more dangerous than it actually is. Second, if the media emphasize the information under presentation misleadingly and disproportionately, they portrait it as much more threatening than it actually is. In that case, it may be ranked high on the media agenda (Dearing & Rogers, 2005), without this being based on the actual risks involved. Third, the represented threat is presented through emotionally charged language and related features, which divert the journalist from the pragmatic discourse. That is, the journalist tries to frame the news through evaluative elements that he uses in his speech and not by standing attached to what really happened (Pleios, 2001: 63).

News dramatization is studied mainly for two reasons, with the second of them involving two components. First, to compare different transmitters, to analyze the characteristics that a medium adopts or rejects. Of course, this separation may concern individual media or whole categories of media. Second, to defend an "ideal type" of journalism. The relevant discussion is timeless (Thussu, 2008: 7, Briggs & Hallin, 2016: 100) and is distinguished for its pessimism, as well as its regulatory tendencies. However, it is not entirely rejected. Public health risks, in particular, produce news that should be presented since they hold public interest. And this is a fitting discussion with the objective approaches to journalism. In this case, discussing risks related to public health might contribute in the opposite direction to the "ideal type" of journalism, since a health crisis and a coming danger are not offered for objective approaches, mainly when the threat's size is discussed.

Since the beginning of the century, Hallin & Mancini (2004: 251) had noted the tendency of the media's liberal model to spread worldwide. For Thussu (2008: 68), this tendency is manifested through the adoption of specific practices, which can concern both the media content and also how these programs are organized. Thus, there is a widespread media culture, which focuses mainly on commercialization and advertising. Dramatization is related to these practices, as it aims to keep the interest of viewers, listeners, and visitors undiminished. In these cases, media discourse tends to prevail over political discourse. As a result, dramatization practices are more and more normalized when it comes to information (Pleios, 2001; Thussu 2008; Briggs & Hallin, 2016).

A typical example is *hard news*. Dramatization now comprises an integral part even of the most eminent news, which concerns the whole society. Public risks, including the current global pandemic, fall into hard news. The use of dramatization in hard news occurs for three reasons.

First, viewers and website users are attracted to the drama (Lee, 2014: 298), which the media utilizes for this purpose. Second, nowadays drama shapes political news (Lee, 2014: 298). Indeed, dramatization is not just a way of framing, but it is a broader process that forms the presentation of information, as well as information itself. The viewers experience a collective trauma and various other incidents in a mediated manner based on relevant rituals developed by the media industry (Cottle, 2006: 415). Third, the media act as a "booster" of risk (Kasperson et al., 2003: 23). They can either calm the viewers or spread panic by the way they present a news item. Because of their nature, it can be also observed that they contribute to the spread of moral panic, since a situation, an event, a person, or a group of people are presented stereotypically. Then, it is easy for a viewer to label them as a threat to social values and social interest (Cohen, 1972).

## Dramatization techniques

Despite the increasing use of dramatization in the news, the relative range of techniques seems a little bit stagnated (Pleios, 2011). This paradox, of course, may be related to a broader trend of the media, especially in Greece, not to allow radical changes in terms of the presenter, broadcast time, or duration of a program.

Therefore, in this case, four specific techniques are explored. Their following definitions demonstrate the way they are investigated in this research. The first of these is the *repetition of images*. Repetition of images is defined as the repeated presentation of images or videos within a specific news item. This practice makes the framing of an event much more straightforward. Images are a visual tool that allows the medium to maintain the viewers' attention and favor specific interpretations of events (Ben-Porath & Shaker, 2010: 470). Combining the above with the timeless proverb "repetition is the mother of all learning" used by the ancient Greeks and Latins (*"repetitio est mater studiorum"*), it is understood that the journalist frames an event based on the images he/she desires to show, but also can repeat them, to consolidate the specific perspective he/she reproduces. The censoring of projected images in the news has occupied various public services or figures who try to launch a particular image for themselves (Albritton & Mannheim, 1985: 44).

The second technique is *the use of music or sound effects in the news*. It is defined as the reproduction of unnatural sounds or music during the presentation of a news item to emphasize its specific elements or rouse specific emotional effects (anxiety, fear, curiosity, etc.). Television news often uses tunes that sound similar to compositions in mystery movies, adventure, thrillers, or horror. Grabe, Zhou & Barnett (2001: 642) argue that music can cause specific effects, reactions, and interpretations. Therefore, its use in the news has a psychological dimension.

The third technique is *the use of similes and metaphors*. The use of literary discourse forms is intended to relate a fact to events derived from public or private life, history or tradition, or the

use of nouns that reproduce meanings other than their literal meaning. With this technique, the journalists can, and does, give sharpness, vividness, and liveliness to their words. Simultaneously, the news is enriched with elements that are not in line with the pragmatic discourse (Pleios, 2001: 63) when presented without trying to frame it. On the contrary, similes and metaphors can give a different tone of sentimentality to the news. The use of metaphors is every day when presenting public health news (Wallis & Nerlich, 2005: 2630; Briggs & Hallin, 2016: 166).

The fourth and final technique is *the use of evaluative adjectives when presenting a news item*. The use of evaluative adjectives intends to evaluate an event, a person involved, a public service, or a process. With such adjectives, the journalist's speech becomes semantic (Pleios, 2001: 63), unique in its meaning, assuming subjective dimensions. By evaluating objects or subjects, the journalist can and does highlight the protagonists while creating different images of people, from that of the hero to that of the scapegoat.

The main finding of this research suggests that these four techniques can be grouped in pairs according to whether they occur in a spontaneous manner or they have been programmed before the start of the show. This, of course, mainly concerns television news. Repetition of images and the use of music and sound effects are two techniques in editing, which have been pre-decided and performed before the news bulletin is displayed. In contrast, on the internet, where videos and images are more limited than television news, their use is somewhat more nested, as they are inside the text or at the end of the article. On television, the program director has a say in use or not of these two techniques. Simultaneously, their use is related to the bulletin's general philosophy, which has usually been formed since October, when the television season begins in Greece. Therefore, we can characterize these two dramatization techniques as *directorial.*

On the other hand, the use of similes/metaphors and adjectives can occur spontaneously on the flow of news by the journalist or by anyone who presents a news item or comments on it. Both techniques are verbal. However, their use also serves specific journalistic functions, as mentioned earlier (Pleios, 2011). Therefore, the other two dramatization techniques can be described as *journalistic.*

## The research method

For the research needs, content analysis was chosen, as it is suitable for quantifying qualitative parameters researched in media texts (Stokes, 2003: 56). Content analysis helps to convert qualitative info, as in our case news, into quantitative data. That is why content analysis has been identified as the most accurate media research method (Kyriazi, 1999: 283). According to Dearing & Rogers (2005: 72), content analysis is defined as the quantification of content in a variety of items.

In this research, the unit of the research is the news item. The survey sample consists of 2389 news items in total. 1189 were broadcasted on television by six television stations of pan-Hellenic scope (ERT1, MEGA, ANT1, SKAI, ALPHA, and STAR). The remaining 1200 news were published in six of the most popular news websites in Greece (protothema.gr, in.gr, iefimerida.gr, news247.gr, newsit.gr, lifo.gr). These sites were chosen through the SimilarWeb application, which presents website traffic.

As was analyzed in the introduction, the research sample's date starts from 1/2/2020 to 30/4/2020, a period we divide into two equal, consecutive subperiods. In the first one (1153 news items), the pandemic occurs mainly abroad, while in the second (1236 news items), which starts on March 16, 2020, the first death from coronavirus has already happened in Greece, and the Greek population is under lockdown.

The results were analyzed with the use of SPSS 26. The Pearson Chi-Square or Fisher's exact test was used at a 95% confidence interval for the presence or absence of statistically significant results. The results show three types of graphs that cross tabulate the four dramatization techniques (image repetition, music/sound effects, simulations/metaphors, adjectives) with the three variables mentioned in the introduction (period, duration/extent of the news, report cases or deaths). In total, twelve graphs appeared in the results section.

## Results of the research

*Use of music or sound effects*

By correlating the use of music and sound effects with the period of the first wave of the pandemic, i.e., before or after the imposition of quarantine on the whole population, we see that the results are not statistically significant since the relative value in the caption of Figure 1a is more than 0.05. We see that this practice is slightly more intense before the quarantine. Therefore, music seems to be an element that does not show any significant change over the examined timeframe.
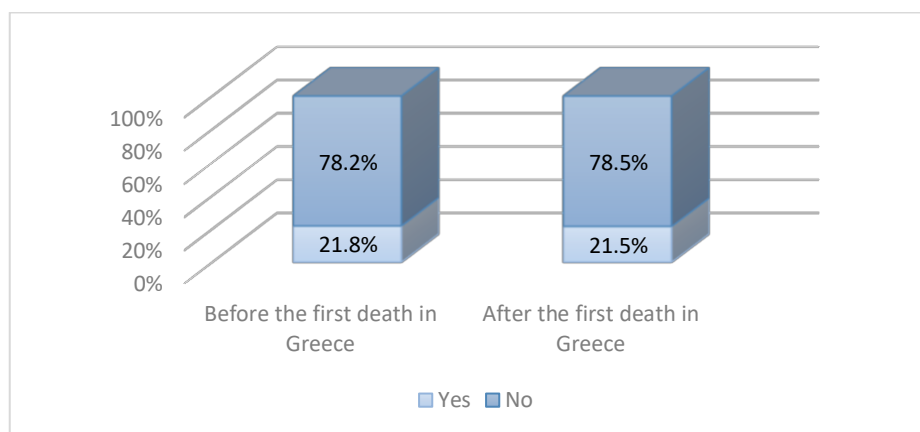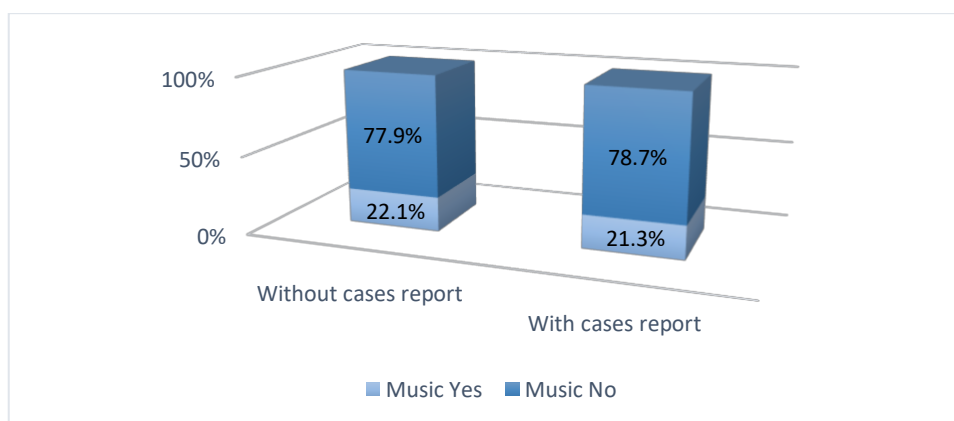


**Figure 1a.** Use of music by time period (Fisher's exact test p-value = .903).

Figure 1b shows that music or sound effects are used more in the news of five minutes duration or 312 words. It is observed that this dramatization technique is more common in the first and middle classes, especially in the latter. On the contrary, this technique is less common when news items/articles are longer by duration or extent. In contrast to the correlation between music and timeframe, the correlation between music and news duration/length classes is statistically significant.
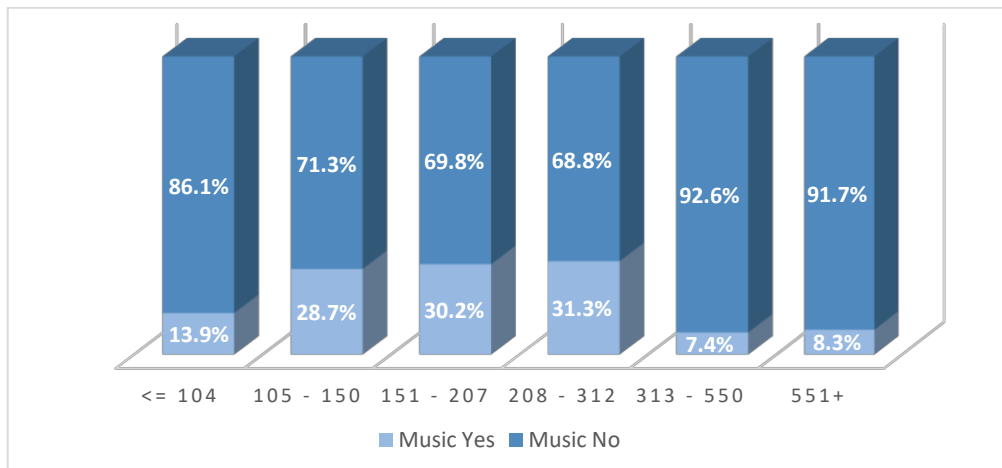


**Figure 1b.** Use of music per class of news duration/length in seconds/words (Fisher's exact test p-value = .000)

Figure 1c shows that this specific dramatization feature with the number of cases or deaths in the news is not statistically significant since the relative number in the caption is greater than 0.05 set limit. There may be a slight deviation (0.2%) when the number of cases or deaths is reported, but it is still not significant. We see that the use of music depends only on the extent and duration of the news, and not on the other two variables that were correlated with. Neither the date of presentation/publication, nor the reporting on the number of cases were found relevant.



**Figure 1c.** Use of music depending on whether a number of cases is reported
(Fisher's exact test p-value = .702).

*Images Repetition*

The repetition of images shows a slight increase in graph 2a (1%) during the quarantine period, i.e., after Greece's first death from COVID-19. However, this correlation is not statistically

significant, as the number in the caption is greater than 0.05. The repetition of images and the use of music or sound effects is a dramatization technique that falls into the directional methods based on the theoretical framework. We see that both the use of music and the repetition of images are not related to a specific timeframe.
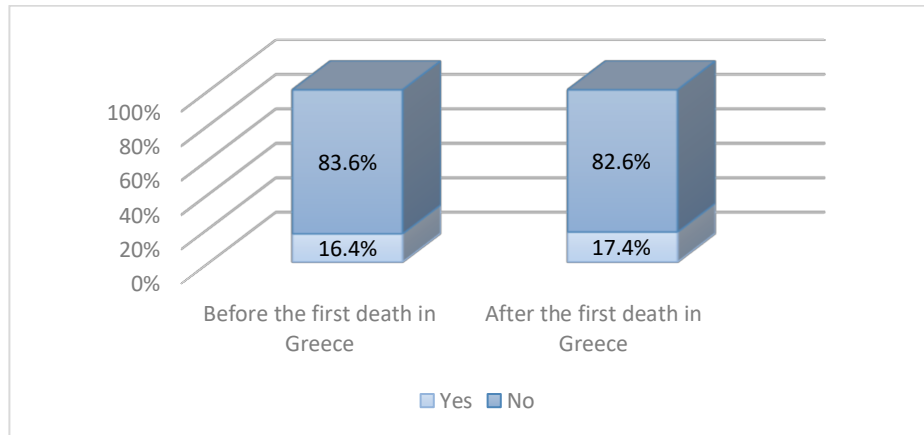


**Figure 2a**. Repetition of images per time period (Fisher's exact test p-value = .452).

Figure 2b shows that the projection of images is more frequently found in the middle classes of the news duration or extent. When the news is from 105 to 550 seconds/words, the relative dramatization technique is more common. Combining graph 2b with the corresponding 1b, we conclude that both directorial dramatization techniques show a similar trend: they are more common in the news's middle classes.
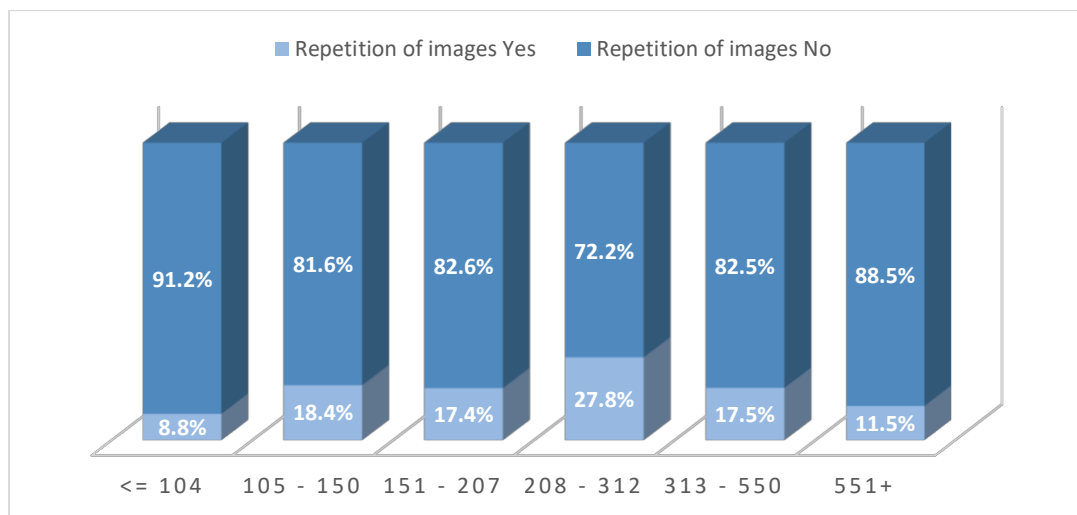


**Figure 2b.** Repetition of images per class of news duration/length in seconds/words
(Fisher's exact test p value = .000).

Figure 2c shows a statistically significant change in the repetition of images when the number of cases or deaths is reported in the news. The relative percentage rises by 5.7% (14% to 19.7%) when the said number is mentioned in the news. Based on this graph, for the first time, we see the two directorial techniques behave differently. While in Figure 1c, the use of music or sound

effects was independent of the mentioned number of cases or deaths, the repetition of images seems to be affected by the reference of that number.
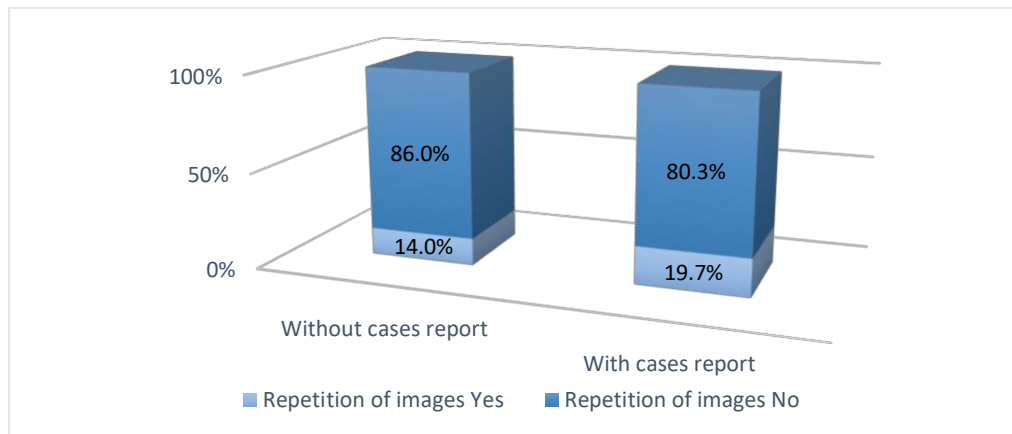


**Figure 2c.** Repetition of images depending on whether a number of cases is reported
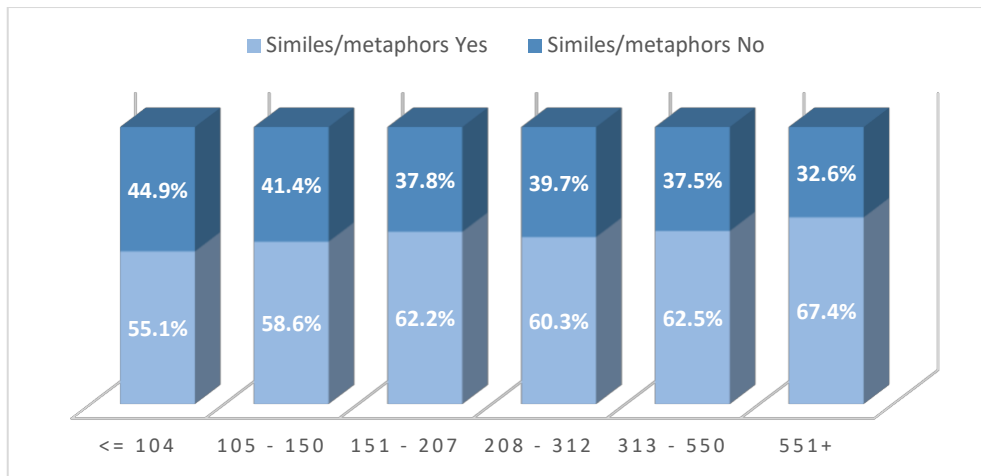(Fisher's exact test p value = .000).

*Use of similes or metaphors*

The following six figures move on to the study of journalistic dramatization techniques, which, as it was referred to in the theoretical framework, are also subjected to the main journalist's, or another participant's, spontaneity in the bulletin or article. Figure 3a shows that the use of similes and metaphors confirms the research's theoretical framework, which states that metaphors and similes are common during a pandemic. We see, therefore, an increase of 17.1% in this technique after the first death in Greece, which means that journalists tend to use much more metaphors and similes after March 16, 2020, when the population is also in quarantine.
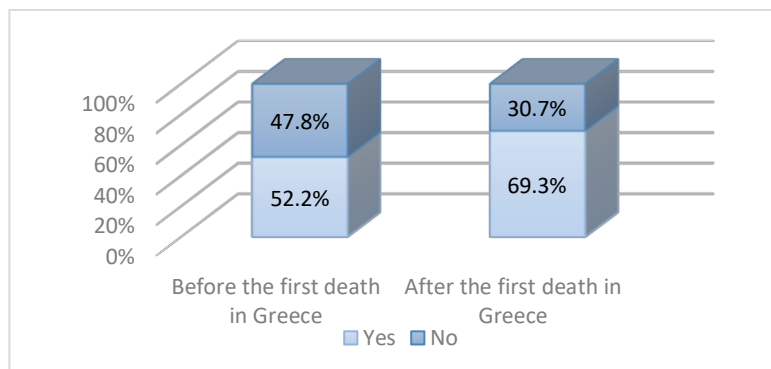


**Figure 3a.** Use of similes/metaphors by time period (Fisher's exact test p value = .000).

Figure 3b shows that metaphors or similes tend to increase along with the duration or extent of the news. The only exception appears between the third and fourth classes, where this technique is presented more frequently in the third class than in the fourth. Unlike the two previous directorial methods, similes or metaphors have an increasing tendency depending on the news's extent or duration, which is a statistically significant feature.

**Figure 3b.** Use of similes/metaphors per class of news duration/length in seconds/words
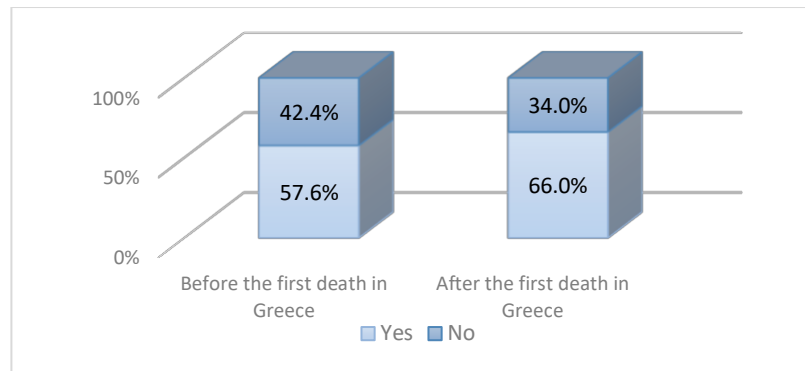(Fisher's exact test p value = .014).

In Figure 3c, on the one hand, a downward change (1.9%) of the relative value is observed when the number of cases or deaths is reported. On the other hand, the number in the graph's caption shows that the correlation is not statistically significant, as it is more than 0.05. Therefore, this result is not statistically significant. Therefore, although a death or an illness is an excellent opportunity to construct a dramatic event, this specific technique (use of similes or metaphors) seems to be independent of this reference.
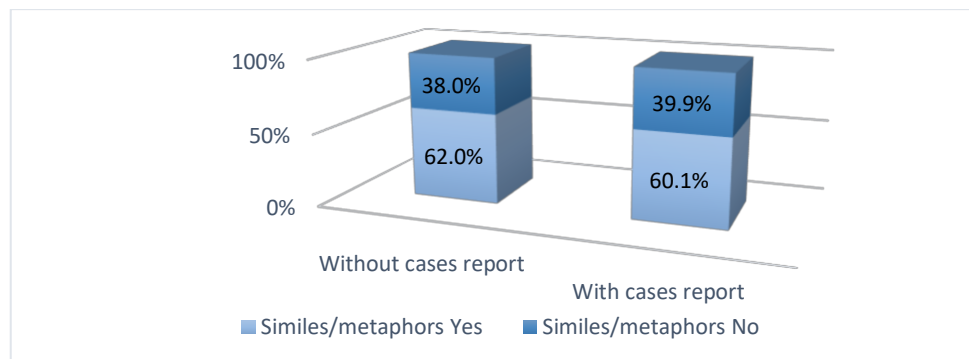


**Figure 3c.** Use of similes/metaphors depending on whether a number of cases is reported
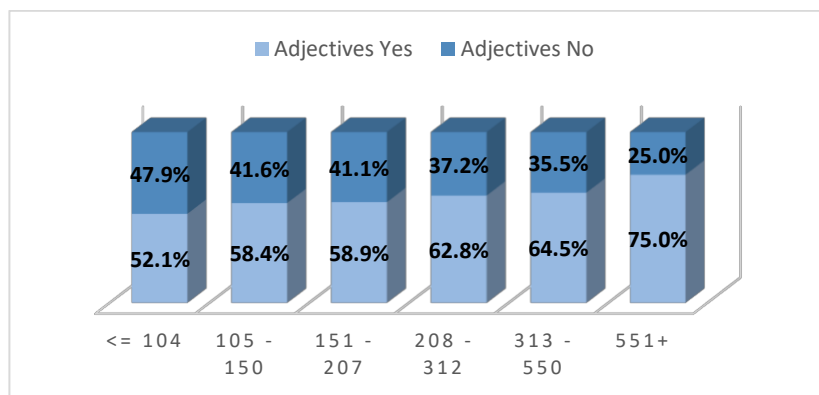(Fisher's exact test p-value = .356).

*Use of adjectives*

Figure 4a shows that after the first death in Greece, the use of adjectives increases significantly. Journalists seem to obtain a more emotionally charged speech, as demonstrated by the increased rate of this dramatization technique from 57.6% before the first death to 66% after. As we saw in Figure 3a, the use of the relevant method increases during the quarantine period. Therefore, we can say that journalistic dramatization techniques (use of metaphors or similes and adjectives) are related to the broadcast or publication time. This result was found statistically significant, according to the Pearson Chi Square test.

**Figure 4a.** Use of adjectives by time period (Fisher's exact test p-value = .000).

In Figure 4b, we see that adjectives' use becomes more often when the news' duration or extent is also bigger. The relative percentages seem to increase progressively per class. A similar trend is observed in graph 3b. Therefore, it appears that both journalistic dramatization techniques show similar behavior when correlated with the class of news duration/length in seconds/words. However, the use of similes or metaphors ranged from 55% to 67.4%, while that of adjectives ranged from 52.1% to 75%.



**Figure 4b.** Use of adjectives per class of news duration/length in seconds/words
(Fisher's exact test p value = .000).

In Figure 4c, it is observed that the correlation of adjectives regarding the number of cases or deaths in the news does not show any statistically significant change since the relative number in the caption is greater than 0.05. Indeed, there is a relative reduction in the use of adjectives when the number of cases or deaths is reported in a news item. The same trend was noticed in graph 3c regarding the use of similes or metaphors. There the deviation was 1.9% (62% to 60.1%), while in the use of adjectives, it is 1.1% (62.5% to 61.4%).
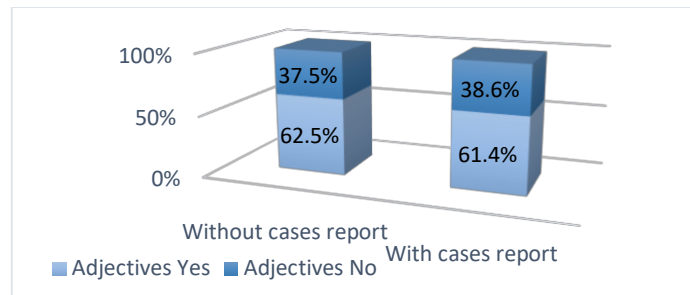
**Figure 4c.** Use of adjectives depending on whether a number of cases is reported
(Fisher's exact test p-value = .597).

## Conclusions

This research attempts to correlate four dramatization techniques with three independent variables (period, duration/word number of the news item, reference to COVID cases). Some techniques might be influenced more or not at all by the three independent variables of our research. Also, they might show similar or different behaviors. However, these deviations were to be expected.

As to whether these techniques are utilized, the answer is that journalistic practices seem much more common than the corresponding directorial one. Specifically, in the first six graphs of the presentation, relevant to the directorial dramatization techniques, the news percentages that use them were found less than 35%. In the respective last six graphs, which concern journalistic dramatization techniques, the minimum percentage was found more than 52%. Therefore, it seems that in quantitative terms, the use of journalistic techniques is much higher. These are relevant to the first part of the research.

As for the second part, which requires a more detailed presentation, the crosstabulations showed quite valuable but different elements. Regarding the time of the broadcast or publication of the news, the use of metaphors/similes and adjectives increases after the first announced death in Greece, in contrast to the use of music/sound effects and repetition of images. The repetition of images shows a slight increase after the first death (1%) but is not statistically significant. Music and the repetition of images show a greater tendency to appear in the middle classes of the news duration or extent. Simultaneously, the use of similes or metaphors and adjectives increases as the duration/extent of the news item grows.

Regarding the number of cases or deaths in the news, if we look at the graphs, we will notice that only the repetition of images is associated with it. This is shown by the relative percentage increase of 5.7% when this number is mentioned in the news. On the other hand, paradoxically, in relation to the theoretical framework, the other three dramatization techniques are less common in the news when referring to the number of cases or deaths from coronavirus.

Judging by the study's findings as a whole, the main result is that some dramatization techniques exhibit similar behavior to others when associated with this variable. The initial

distinction between directorial and journalistic variables is confirmed, as they seem to be similarly influenced by the three variables with which they are associated.

When correlated with the time period and the extent or duration of the news, both directional variables show similar trends. The use of music and repetition of images remain unchanged over time, while their presence is intensified in the middle classes of duration or extent of the news. On the contrary, they show different behavior when the news reports numbers of cases or deaths. As mentioned again earlier, the music remains almost unchanged in these instances, and the repetition of images increases when the number of deaths or cases is mentioned.

The two journalistic variables show similar behavior in all three examined correlations. The utilization of the relevant techniques becomes more intense after the first death in Greece, increases per class of duration or extent of the news, and remains unaffected by the reported number of cases or deaths in the news.

Therefore, we can assume that the use of directorial dramatization techniques remains relatively more static than journalistic techniques. The directorial techniques seem to be more predetermined and stable during the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic. On the other hand, journalistic dramatization techniques become more common after the first death in Greece and as the duration or extent of the news increases.

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