

BALANCING INFORMATIONAL RIGOR AND SENSATIONALISM IN THE CRIME HEADLINES OF *LA VANGUARDIA ONLINE*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how digital crime headlines balance informational rigor and sensationalist strategies in a European legacy newspaper. Focusing on the Crime section of *La Vanguardia Online*, the study analyzes a sample of 50 headlines using a coding framework based on theoretically grounded indicators of informational rigor and sensationalism, including emotional or evaluative language, focus on shocking or violent elements, exaggeration, ambiguity, curiosity gaps, and sensational narrative framing. The study asks: To what extent do crime headlines in *La Vanguardia Online* balance informational rigor and sensationalist discursive strategies during the study period? The findings reveal a predominance of hybrid headlines, with 31 out of 50 (62%) classified as mixed, indicating a moderate and selective integration of sensationalist elements within an overall informative structure. The results suggest that digital crime headlines do not operate within a strict dichotomy between informational rigor and sensationalism, but rather through intermediate constructions that combine both logics. The study provides an initial empirical basis for interpreting this pattern as a form of selective sensationalism, understood as the controlled incorporation of attention-oriented elements within otherwise informative headline structures. The findings illustrate how a European legacy newspaper can navigate attention-driven digital environments while maintaining recognizable journalistic standards.

Keywords: Crime journalism, Digital headlines, Media ethics, Informational rigor, Sensationalism.

INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1990s, the rapid digitalization of communication processes has profoundly transformed the global media landscape. The emergence and mass adoption of the Internet, followed by mobile technologies and social platforms, have reshaped the media ecosystem, altering not only how news is distributed but also how newspapers operate and sustain their audiences. As Canavilhas (2015) argues, the incorporation of new “species” such as the Web and mobile devices has disrupted previous media balances and redefined the relationships between journalists, audiences, and information flows, and journalism has not remained unaffected by this transformation. Traditional newspapers have been compelled to adapt to a digital environment characterized by immediacy, permanent connectivity, and intensified competition for public attention. In this new ecosystem, information no longer waits for audiences to seek it; instead, it must constantly reach users across multiple platforms and devices (Canavilhas, 2015). As a consequence, news outlets compete within increasingly saturated communicative environments, where capturing and retaining audience attention has become a central challenge.

Acknowledgement: This article originated from an initial research idea developed in the author’s undergraduate Journalism thesis at Universitat Abat Oliba CEU. The research presented here was subsequently developed as an independent line of inquiry, substantially expanding the initial approach through additional literature, methodological development, data analysis, and theoretical discussion. The present study therefore represents a substantially expanded research project beyond the scope of the original thesis.

This scenario has been described by several scholars as a context of infoxication, a term originally coined to refer to the excessive accumulation of data and stimuli that saturates individuals and hinders their ability to process and interpret information effectively (Casas-Mas, 2014, p. 3). In environments characterized by informational overabundance, audiences are exposed to continuous streams of content, reducing the time and cognitive attention dedicated to each news item. Consequently, media outlets compete not only for visibility but for seconds of fragmented attention within saturated communicative spaces. Within this context, headlines acquire a particularly strategic role. As the primary entry point to digital news, headlines function not only as summaries of information, but also as discursive devices designed to attract the reader's attention and guide interpretation. This dual function becomes especially relevant in sections dealing with sensitive topics such as crime, where the balance between informational rigor and audience engagement raises important ethical questions.

This study focuses specifically on the Crime section of *La Vanguardia Online*, a prominent European legacy newspaper with more than 150 years of history in the Spanish media system. Founded in 1881 and among the first Spanish newspapers to adopt a digital presence in the 1990s, *La Vanguardia* represents a paradigmatic case of a traditional news organization adapting to the demands of the contemporary digital environment. Its digital edition maintains a structured and frequently updated Crime section authored by multiple journalists, which allows the collection of a diversified sample of headlines and provides an appropriate corpus for examining discursive tendencies in crime reporting within the digital press.

To investigate how these dynamics materialize in journalistic practice, this study examines the construction of headlines in the Crime section of *La Vanguardia Online*. By focusing specifically on headline formulation, the research seeks to assess whether these textual entry points prioritize informational clarity and journalistic rigor or whether they incorporate attention-oriented strategies commonly associated with sensationalist digital news discourse.

The main objective of this study is therefore to determine whether a prominent legacy newspaper prioritizes informational rigor in the construction of crime headlines or whether it incorporates sensationalist strategies associated with click-driven digital environments. By examining how these discursive mechanisms operate in crime reporting, this study aims to contribute to the broader discussion on media ethics, digital competition, and the evolving role of headlines in shaping how audiences encounter and interpret sensitive news content.

LITERATURE REVIEW

New Digital Media Ecosystem and Attention Competition

The digital transformation of the media ecosystem has profoundly altered the conditions under which journalistic content is produced, distributed, and consumed. The proliferation of online platforms, mobile devices, and social networks has created an environment characterized by permanent connectivity and an unprecedented circulation of information. In this context, audiences are exposed to a continuous stream of content originating from multiple sources simultaneously, which has intensified competition among media organizations for public attention (Canavilhas, 2015). As a result, the presentation of news increasingly responds to the need to capture and retain the interest of users navigating highly saturated informational environments. This transformation has reinforced what several scholars describe as a situation of informational overload or infoxication, a phenomenon in which the volume of available

information exceeds individuals' cognitive capacity to process it effectively (Casas-Mas, 2014). Under such conditions, users tend to dedicate only limited time and attention to each piece of content they encounter. Consequently, media organizations must compete not only with other news outlets but also with the broader digital ecosystem composed of social media platforms, entertainment content, and algorithmically curated information flows. Within this context, attracting and retaining the user's attention becomes a central challenge for contemporary digital journalism.

Digital Headlines in an Attention Economy

One of the most visible manifestations of this competition for attention is the increasing strategic importance of headlines. In digital news environments, headlines frequently function as key entry points through which audiences encounter journalistic content. Their functions have also adapted to digital forms of news distribution, where headlines operate across websites, search engines, social media, and other online platforms (García Orosa & López García, 2015, 838). In this context, headlines must simultaneously provide information and attract attention within an environment characterized by multiple competing sources of content. From a functional perspective, Dor (2003, p. 696) conceptualizes headlines as relevance optimizers, emphasizing their role in guiding readers toward the most relevant aspects of a news story.

The growing competition for audience attention has encouraged the development of linguistic strategies aimed at increasing the attractiveness of headlines. Research on digital journalism shows that headlines increasingly incorporate attention-oriented elements such as emotional language, suspense structures, or curiosity gaps that stimulate users to click on the article (Lischka & Garz, 2023). These strategies are commonly associated with the phenomenon of clickbait, understood by authors such as Lischka and Garz (2023, p. 2075) as the use of textual formulations designed to arouse curiosity and stimulate user interaction by withholding key information or emphasizing emotionally engaging elements. In this sense, clickbait can be interpreted as a discursive strategy that prioritizes audience attraction and engagement over purely informative headline construction in highly competitive digital media environments. This strategy primarily aims to generate user clicks rather than to optimize engagement after users access the linked content. Its purpose is therefore distinct from measuring the amount of time users spend engaging with that content. Its purpose is not to quantify the amount of time that the user spends reading the content that is inside the link.

From an analytical perspective, focusing on headlines also allows the study of discursive tendencies in journalistic production through a clearly identifiable unit of analysis. Given the scope and length limitations of this research, analyzing headlines provides a practical methodological approach that enables the systematic examination of textual strategies used in crime reporting without requiring the analysis of entire news articles. This approach makes it possible to evaluate patterns of sensationalist framing while maintaining a corpus that is methodologically manageable within the constraints of the present study.

Sensationalism and Tabloidization in Contemporary Journalism

Sensationalism has long been identified as a distinctive mode of journalistic production characterized by the prioritization of emotionally engaging, dramatic, or shocking elements in the presentation of news. Although its presence has become especially visible in contemporary digital media environments, where competition for audience attention is particularly intense,

sensationalism is not a new phenomenon. As noted in earlier research, processes such as tabloidization already pointed to a shift toward more commercially driven forms of journalism. In this regard, Esser (1999, p. 291) defines tabloidization as “The direct result of commercialized media, most often promoted by the pressures of advertisers to reach large audiences”, highlighting the structural conditions that encourage the incorporation of attention-oriented strategies into news production. Building on this perspective, sensationalism can be understood as a discursive and communicative practice that transforms the representation of reality in order to maximize its impact on the audience. In her work on sensationalist journalism, Pedrosa (1983) argues that this type of discourse does not merely report events but reconstructs them through expressive, narrative, and stylistic resources that emphasize their emotional, exceptional, or striking dimensions. This transformation often involves the intensification of certain aspects of reality, the prioritization of what is unusual or extreme, and the presentation of events in ways that appeal directly to the reader’s curiosity, emotions, or sense of shock.

From a discursive standpoint, sensationalism is associated with a set of identifiable linguistic and narrative strategies. Among these, previous research highlights the use of emotionally charged or evaluative language, exaggeration and dramatization, the selective emphasis on violence or deviance, and the construction of narratives that foreground impact over contextual explanation (Jewkes, 2004, pp. 40-62; Lischka & Garz, 2023). In line with Pedrosa’s analysis, headlines play a particularly central role in this process, as they concentrate a significant part of the communicative and persuasive effects of news discourse, functioning as key elements in attracting attention and guiding interpretation.

Moreover, sensationalist discourse frequently relies on strategies such as ambiguity, omission of key information, and the creation of suspense, which encourage the reader to seek further information and engage with the content. As Pedrosa highlights, the headline itself becomes a fundamental site where these effects are concentrated, often privileging impact, curiosity, and emotional engagement over purely informational clarity. These mechanisms are closely related to the logic of contemporary digital media, where headlines must compete within highly saturated informational environments and where attracting user attention becomes a fundamental condition for visibility and economic sustainability. In this sense, sensationalism can be interpreted not only as a stylistic feature of journalism but also as a strategic response to the structural dynamics of the digital media ecosystem. The need to capture fragmented attention, increase engagement, and generate traffic reinforces the use of discursive strategies that enhance the perceived relevance, urgency, or emotional impact of news content.

While these dynamics can be observed across different journalistic domains, previous research suggests that certain types of news are particularly prone to the use of sensationalist strategies. Among them, crime journalism stands out as a field in which the inherent characteristics of the events reported, such as violence, deviance, and risk, make it especially susceptible to forms of representation that emphasize drama, fear, and emotional impact. This makes crime news an especially relevant context for examining the tension between informational rigor and sensationalist discourse.

Crime Journalism

Crime journalism occupies a distinctive position within the media landscape due to the inherent characteristics of the events it covers. Incidents involving violence, deviance, or threats to social order are typically perceived as highly newsworthy because they directly relate to issues

of safety, morality, and collective concern. Jewkes (2004, pp. 40–62) identifies a set of news values that shape the construction of crime news, including threshold, predictability, simplification, individualism, risk, proximity, violence, and spectacle or graphic imagery. Elements such as violence, risk, immediacy, and the presence of identifiable victims or offenders increase the likelihood that a story will be reported and prominently featured. As a result, crime news tends to attract significant media attention and occupies a visible position within news agendas. At the same time, these characteristics shape the way crime is narratively constructed in the media. The emphasis on dramatic, unusual, or emotionally impactful aspects of events facilitates the transformation of complex realities into accessible and engaging stories. As previous research has shown, media coverage of crime often highlights elements such as danger, fear, and conflict, which enhance the perceived relevance and immediacy of the event for the audience (Cere, Jewkes & Ugelvik, 2014; Jewkes, 2004). These news values may also create opportunities for sensationalist treatment, particularly when violence, spectacle, or other highly dramatic elements are foregrounded.

RESEARCH QUESTION

To frame the research question, the following section first identifies the specific gap addressed by the study.

Previous research has examined digital headlines from different perspectives, including their role in attracting audience attention, the use of click-oriented strategies, and the relationship between headline construction and sensationalist discourse (Dor, 2003; Lischka & Garz, 2023). Research on crime journalism has also established that the characteristics of crime events, particularly violence, risk, deviance, and conflict, contribute to their newsworthiness and shape their media representation (Jewkes, 2004, pp. 40–62). However, these strands of research are not always examined together at the level of individual crime headlines. In particular, there is limited empirical attention to how informational and attention-oriented strategies coexist within crime headlines produced by legacy news organizations in contemporary digital environments.

This study addresses this gap by examining the extent to which crime headlines in *La Vanguardia Online* combine informational and sensationalist discursive strategies. Rather than treating informational rigor and sensationalism as mutually exclusive categories, the study examines their coexistence through a set of theoretically grounded textual indicators. In doing so, it examines whether sensationalist strategies appear as dominant features of headline construction or whether they coexist with predominantly informative structures. Based on this research gap, the following research question guides the present study:

To what extent do crime headlines in *La Vanguardia Online* balance informational rigor and sensationalist discursive strategies during the study period?

METHODS

Study Design

This study employs an exploratory descriptive content analysis to examine the presence of informational and sensationalist discursive strategies in 50 crime headlines published in *La Vanguardia Online*. The analysis is based on a set of theoretically grounded textual indicators used to identify and describe recurring features of sensationalist headline construction.

Content analysis is particularly suitable for this study as it enables the systematic and replicable examination of clearly defined units of analysis. In this case, each headline is treated as an autonomous and self-contained textual unit, allowing for the identification of recurring discursive patterns in the way news is framed in digital environments (Dor, 2003). As key entry points to news content, headlines provide a concise yet meaningful representation of how events are constructed and presented to audiences, making them especially appropriate for detecting underlying discursive tendencies.

Given the exploratory and descriptive nature of the study, the analysis relies on descriptive statistics, specifically frequencies and percentages, to summarize the distribution of headline classifications and individual sensationalist indicators. No inferential statistical tests were applied because the study does not formulate statistical hypotheses or involve comparison groups.

Sample and Data Collection

The empirical analysis focuses on a purposive sample of 50 headlines published in the Crime section of *La Vanguardia Online* between December 10, 2025, and March 23, 2026. The sampling frame consisted of the crime-related headlines published in the section during this period. The sample was purposively constructed to ensure temporal coverage across the study period and to avoid concentrating the corpus within a limited temporal window. The final corpus included nine headlines from December 2025, 12 from January 2026, 17 from February 2026, and 12 from March 2026. Given the exploratory and descriptive purpose of the study, the sample is intended to provide a focused corpus for identifying and describing recurring discursive patterns rather than to support statistical generalization beyond the analyzed headlines.

The selection criteria focused on publication in the Crime section of *La Vanguardia Online* during the study period. No specific crime-news format or crime subtype was systematically excluded, allowing the sample to reflect the diversity of events and coverage represented in the section.

During the collection period, no duplicate publications referring to the same article were identified. Updates to existing articles did not appear as separate news items and therefore did not result in duplicate observations in the corpus.

Coding Procedure

Each headline constitutes the unit of analysis and is examined according to the presence or absence of a set of predefined indicators associated with sensationalist discourse. These indicators, grounded in the works of Dor (2003), Esser (1999), Jewkes (2004), and Lischka and Garz (2023), among others, reflect recurrent linguistic and narrative strategies identified in research on news discourse, tabloidization, crime reporting, and click-driven journalism. Importantly, these features are not treated as isolated or mutually exclusive elements; rather, as previous research on clickbait has shown, multiple strategies can coexist within a single headline, contributing cumulatively to its overall communicative effect. The coding process was conducted manually by the author, who systematically evaluated each headline according to the defined indicators. This manual approach allows for a context-sensitive interpretation of the textual features under analysis, ensuring consistency in the application of the coding criteria across the dataset following a predefined protocol for all headlines of this study.

In order to ensure transparency and replicability, the coding process was structured through a data collection template developed in *Excel*. This template includes identification variables for each headline (such as publication date, author, and URL), as well as the presence or absence of each analytical indicator. It also incorporates a final classification column based on the cumulative number of indicators. All headlines were originally published in Spanish and were translated into English. The translations were subsequently reviewed to ensure accuracy and preserve the original meaning.

Coding Framework

To systematically evaluate this balance, the study applies a coding framework based on a set of textual indicators derived from established literature on sensationalism, tabloidization, crime news values, and clickbait practices in digital journalism. Drawing on the work of scholars such as Dor (2003), Esser (1999), and Jewkes (2004), among many others, the framework identifies several discursive strategies commonly associated with sensationalist headline construction. These include the use of emotionally evaluative language, exaggeration or dramatization of events, the creation of curiosity gaps through the withholding of key information, the prioritization of shocking or violent elements, ambiguous or vague formulations, and narrative framing that emphasizes danger or fear. For analytical purposes, headlines are evaluated according to the presence or absence of these indicators. When three or more of these elements are identified within the same headline, the headline is categorized as sensationalist; otherwise, it is considered informational or mixed.

To ensure consistency and transparency in the coding process, each indicator was operationalized through a specific decision rule defining the conditions under which it was coded as present or absent. The coding framework presented in Table 1, also includes examples and counterexamples to clarify the application of each indicator and distinguish conceptually related categories.

Table 1. Coding Framework

Indicator	Operational Definition	Theoretical Basis	Decision rule	Example	Counter example
Emotional or evaluative language	The headline includes emotionally charged adjectives or expressions that amplify the emotional reaction of the reader rather than neutrally describing the event.	Sensationalist media discourse often relies on emotionalization to increase audience engagement (Esser, 1999; Jewkes, 2004).	Code as present when the headline uses explicitly emotionally charged, morally evaluative, or affectively loaded wording that goes beyond a neutral description of the event and is likely to intensify the reader's emotional response.	<i>"The assistant to the carer who murdered an elderly man helped move the body without realizing it: 'It broke my heart'"</i>	<i>"The TSJC has upheld a 57-year prison sentence for the man who raped his underage cousins and forced one into prostitution"</i>

Indicator	Operational Definition	Theoretical Basis	Decision rule	Example	Counter example
Exaggeration	The headline intensifies the perceived impact or danger of an event using hyperbolic or dramatic expressions that go beyond the factual information of the news.	Tabloidization processes often involve exaggeration and dramatization to increase the perceived news value of events (Esser, 1999).	Code as present when the event is presented in an exaggerated or hyperbolic manner rather than described literally.	<i>“He smashed up the terrace of a bar in Palma after being refused a drink”</i>	<i>“A pile-up on the AP-7 has left 10 people injured: 2 are in a critical condition”</i>
Curiosity gap	The headline intentionally withholds key information or constructs suspense to provoke curiosity and encourage the reader to click on the story.	Clickbait headlines frequently use curiosity gaps as a linguistic strategy to attract attention (Lischka & Garz, 2023, pp. 2073-2094).	Code as present when key information is deliberately withheld to create curiosity.	<i>“They lived for weeks with a dead body in the building’s meter room”</i>	<i>“Seven people, including three children, were injured in a house fire in Girona”</i>
Focus on shocking or violent elements	The headline selectively foregrounds a particularly shocking or violent aspect of the event rather than presenting it as part of a balanced informational summary.	Crime news reporting often prioritizes negativity and dramatic elements as part of news values (Cere et al., 2014; Jewkes, 2004).	Code as present when shocking or violent details are selectively foregrounded.	<i>“The bodies of two sisters were found buried inside two suitcases in Cleveland”</i>	<i>“A shootout between two cars in Vila-seca leaves one person injured and one vehicle damaged”</i>
Ambiguity	The headline lacks precise information (such as actors, location, or context), generating ambiguity or suspense about the event withholding key contextual elements.	Headlines sometimes foreground intrigue or uncertainty to attract readers rather than provide clear informational summaries, also known as “clickbait” (Dor, 2003; pp. 695-721).	Code as present when key aspects of the event remain unclear or open to interpretation.	<i>“Ordered to pay more than 2,600 euros for throwing a trash bag at a car’s windshield at a crosswalk”</i>	<i>“Marijuana ring broken up in Tarragona: 11 arrested and drugs worth €80,000 seized”</i>

Indicator	Operational Definition	Theoretical Basis	Decision rule	Example	Counter example
Sensational narrative framing	The headline frames the event using narrative elements associated with danger, scandal, fear, or moral panic rather than straightforward reporting.	Sensationalist crime coverage frequently constructs dramatic narratives around crime events (Jewkes, 2004, pp. 40-62).	Code as present when the event is framed through drama, fear, danger, or moral alarm.	<i>“A travelling gang that moved around in a convoy and burgled luxury homes along the coast has been arrested”</i>	<i>“A man has been arrested on suspicion of murdering his partner in Pedreña, Cantabria”</i>

Importantly, the presence of violence or other inherently newsworthy characteristics of crime was not considered sufficient, on its own, to classify a headline as sensationalist. Violent events such as stabbings, shootings, deaths, or serious injuries may constitute legitimate news values without involving sensationalist treatment. The coding therefore focused on how such elements were presented in the headline rather than on their mere presence. A violent element was coded as sensationalist only when it was selectively foregrounded, dramatized, emotionally intensified, or otherwise presented in a manner that went beyond straightforward factual reporting. This distinction was applied consistently across the coding process.

Classification Criteria

To classify headlines according to their overall degree of sensationalist orientation, the six binary indicators were combined to identify the number of sensationalist features present in each headline. Headlines containing no indicators were classified as informational, those containing one or two indicators were classified as mixed, and those containing three or more indicators were classified as sensationalist. This approach was based on the assumption that a single sensationalist feature may represent an isolated stylistic characteristic, whereas the co-occurrence of several indicators provides stronger evidence of a broader sensationalist orientation. The threshold of three indicators was retained as the primary classification criterion after descriptively examining alternative thresholds. Specifically, the distribution of the corpus was tested using thresholds of two and four indicators for classification as sensationalist. A threshold of two indicators would substantially increase the number of headlines classified as sensationalist, whereas a threshold of four indicators would result in a very small sensationalist category. The three-indicator threshold therefore provides an intermediate and more conservative criterion that preserves the distinction between isolated or limited sensationalist features and the cumulative presence of multiple indicators.

As an additional descriptive measure, the number of indicators present in each headline was also considered as a sensationalism score, ranging from zero to six. This score provides a more granular indication of the concentration of sensationalist features while allowing the three-category classification to be retained for the main analysis.

Taken together, these criteria provide a structured framework for assessing whether headlines primarily fulfill an informative and summarizing function or incorporate attention-seeking mechanisms associated with sensationalist or click-driven digital journalism. The analytical

model therefore allows the study to examine how digital crime headlines negotiate the tension between journalistic rigor and audience attraction within the specific context of *La Vanguardia Online*.

Methodological Limitations

Finally, it is important to acknowledge certain methodological limitations. As an exploratory study based on a relatively small sample and manual coding, the findings should be interpreted with caution. Future research could expand the dataset, incorporate multiple coders to enhance inter-coder reliability, and apply the model to different media outlets or national contexts in order to strengthen the generalizability of the results.

RESULTS

In order to systematically examine the presence of sensationalist and informational strategies, a coding framework based on six theoretically grounded indicators was applied to a sample of 50 crime headlines. Each headline was manually evaluated according to the presence or absence of these indicators, following the criteria outlined in the analytical model. The full heading coding template was developed in *Excel*. This approach enables a structured and replicable analysis of discursive patterns, allowing for the identification of dominant tendencies in digital crime headline construction.

Out of the 50 analyzed headlines, 31 (62%) were categorized as mixed, 11 (22%) as informational, and 8 (16%) as sensationalist. A more detailed examination of the distribution of indicators further reinforces this pattern. Of the total sample, 11 headlines (22%) did not present any sensationalist indicators, while 15 (30%) contained one indicator and 16 (32%) contained two. In contrast, 7 headlines (14%) presented three indicators, and only 1 (2%) contained four sensationalist indicators. The distribution was concentrated at one and two indicators, which accounted for 30% and 32% of the sample, respectively.

Table 2. Results of the Study in Terms of Sensationalist Classification

	Number of sensationalist elements	Number of headlines	Total Headlines
Informational	0	11 (22%)	11 (22%)
Mixed	1	15 (30%)	31 (62%)
	2	16 (32%)	
Sensationalism	3	7 (14%)	8 (16%)
	4	1 (2%)	

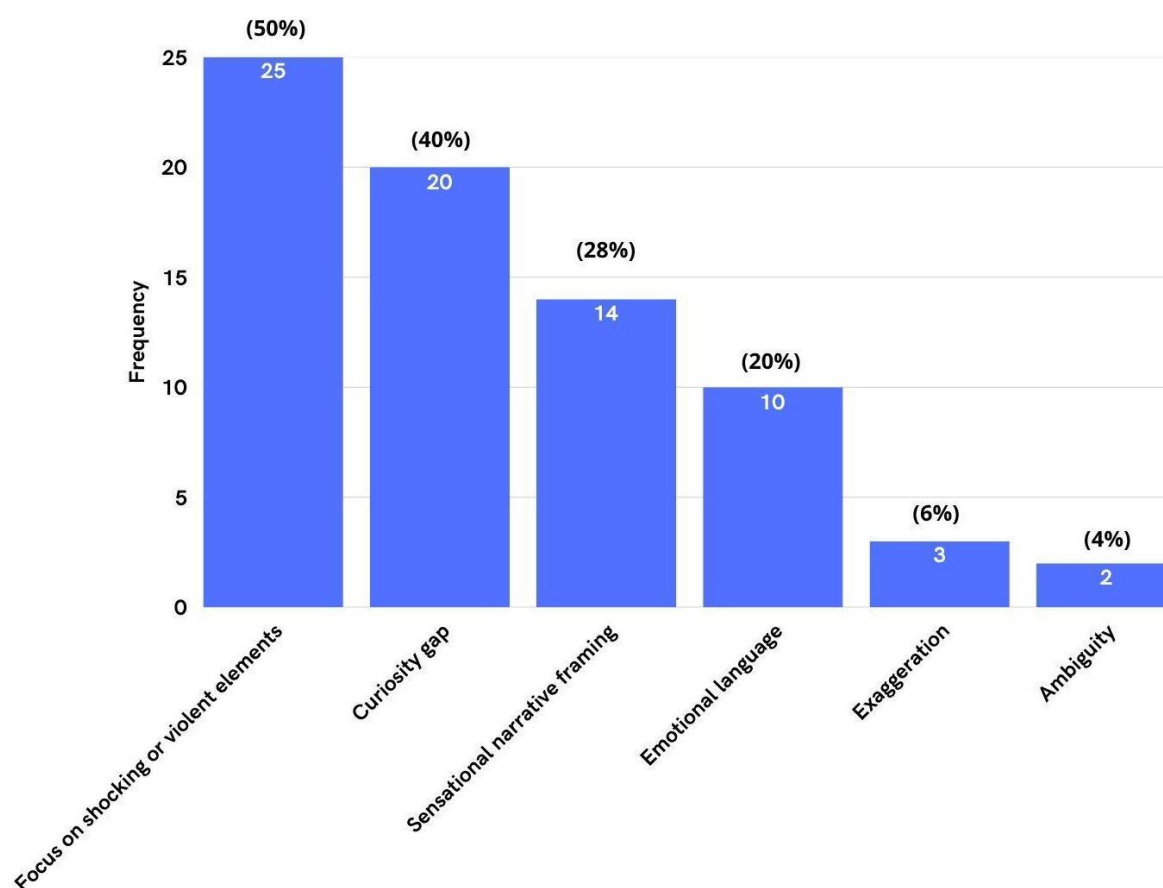
To assess the robustness of the classification criterion, alternative thresholds were also examined. Using two or more indicators as the threshold for sensationalist classification would result in 24 headlines (48%) being classified as sensationalist, whereas a threshold of four or more indicators would identify only 1 headline (2%) as sensationalist. Under the primary threshold of three or more indicators, 8 headlines (16%) are classified as sensationalist, while 31 (62%) are classified as mixed and 11 (22%) as informational. The three-indicator threshold therefore provides an intermediate classification between the more inclusive two-indicator threshold and the more restrictive four-indicator threshold. As a complementary descriptive

measure, a sensationalism score, calculated from the six binary indicators, could range from 0 to 6. In the analyzed sample, observed scores ranged from 0 to 4. The distribution presented in Table 2 provides a more granular view of the concentration of sensationalist features than the three-category classification alone.

Predominant Sensationalist Indicators

The analysis of indicator frequency reveals a clear pattern in the discursive construction of digital crime headlines. The most recurrent elements identified in the sample were the focus on shocking or violent aspects, present in 25 out of 50 headlines (50%), and the use of curiosity gaps, identified in 20 cases (40%). These were followed by sensational narrative framing (14 occurrences, 28%) and emotional or evaluative language (10 occurrences, 20%). In contrast, more explicit strategies such as exaggeration (3 cases, 6%) and ambiguity or vagueness (2 cases, 4%) appeared only marginally within the dataset. The frequency of the six sensationalist indicators across the analyzed corpus is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Frequency of Sensationalism Indicators



DISCUSSION

Hybridization of Digital Crime Headlines

The results of this study reveal a clear predominance of hybrid headline constructions within the analyzed sample. With 31 out of 50 headlines (62%) classified as mixed, the findings

suggest that the headlines examined do not operate within a strict dichotomy between informational rigor and sensationalism. Instead, they reflect a continuum in which elements of both approaches coexist within the same textual unit. This pattern is consistent with the understanding of digital headlines as texts that must simultaneously communicate the relevance of an event and attract audience attention (Dor, 2003; Canavilhas, 2015). Rather than indicating a clear shift toward sensationalism, the predominance of mixed headlines suggests that informational and attention-oriented strategies can coexist within the same headline construction.

The distribution of sensationalist indicators provides further insight into how this hybridization is achieved. The most frequent indicator was the focus on shocking or violent elements, identified in 25 headlines (50%), followed by curiosity gaps, present in 20 headlines (40%). Narrative framing appeared in 14 headlines (28%), while emotional or evaluative language was identified in 10 (20%). By contrast, exaggeration and ambiguity were considerably less frequent, appearing in only 3 (6%) and 2 (4%) headlines, respectively. This distribution suggests that the headlines examined relied more frequently on selective emphasis and attention-oriented strategies than on explicit forms of exaggeration or ambiguity.

The high frequency of the “focus on shocking or violent elements” indicator requires particular consideration because violence is also an established news value in crime reporting. As Jewkes (2004, pp. 40-62) argues, characteristics such as violence, risk, immediacy, and deviance contribute to the newsworthiness of crime events. Consequently, the presence of a violent event should not, by itself, be interpreted as evidence of sensationalism. In the present study, this indicator was assigned only when the violent or shocking aspect was selectively foregrounded rather than simply reported as part of the event. The fact that this indicator appeared in 25 headlines (50%) therefore reflects the prominence of selectively emphasized violent elements in the analyzed headlines, while acknowledging that violence itself may constitute legitimate informational content. This distinction is important for avoiding the conflation of the subject matter of crime reporting with the discursive treatment of that subject matter.

The comparatively lower frequency of exaggeration and ambiguity, identified in only 3 (6%) and 2 (4%) headlines, respectively, further suggests that more explicit forms of sensationalism were less common in the analyzed corpus. Instead, the headlines examined appear to rely more heavily on subtler strategies, such as the selective emphasis of impactful elements and curiosity-oriented formulations. This pattern may partly reflect the inherently newsworthy nature of crime reporting, as crime events frequently involve violence, injury, death, or other forms of social deviance that can provide substantial information and news value in themselves. As a result, there may be less need to rely on explicit exaggeration or distortion to establish the relevance of an event. However, this interpretation should be treated cautiously, as the present study does not independently measure the intrinsic newsworthiness or impact of each event. What the data demonstrate more directly is that explicit exaggeration and ambiguity occurred less frequently than selective emphasis and curiosity gaps. The contrast between these illustrative cases further highlights the intermediate position occupied by most headlines in the sample: rather than fully conforming to either category, they tend to incorporate selected sensationalist elements without abandoning their underlying informational structure. In the analyzed sample, sensationalist indicators were most often present alongside informational features, while more explicit forms of exaggeration and ambiguity remained uncommon. Rather than suggesting a complete shift from informational to sensationalist journalism, this pattern points to the coexistence of different communicative logics within the same headline.

Nevertheless, the analysis also identifies a subset of headlines that adhere more closely to traditional journalistic standards of informational clarity. The 11 headlines classified as informational (22%) are characterized by a neutral and descriptive tone, the inclusion of key contextual elements, and the absence of the attention-oriented strategies included in the coding framework. In these cases, the headline functions primarily as a concise summary of the news event, providing essential information without relying on emotional language, ambiguity, exaggeration, or curiosity-inducing formulations. A representative example is the headline “A shootout between two cars in Vila-seca leaves one person injured and one vehicle damaged,” which presents the event in a predominantly neutral and descriptive manner and does not exhibit any of the identified sensationalist indicators.

Dor’s (2003, p. 696) conceptualization of headlines as relevance optimizers also provides a useful framework for interpreting these findings. Rather than encouraging curiosity through omission or dramatization, these headlines prioritize clarity and accuracy, allowing audiences to understand the event at a glance. Their presence within the sample indicates that, despite the attention pressures associated with digital environments, conventional informational practices remain visible in crime headline construction.

In contrast to these informational constructions, the analysis also identifies a smaller group of headlines that incorporate multiple attention-oriented strategies, resulting in a sensationalist classification. The 8 headlines classified as sensationalist (16%) provide a contrasting example of how several indicators can accumulate within the same headline. A representative case is the headline “They lived for weeks with a dead body in the building’s meter room.” The headline illustrates the accumulation of several indicators. The reference to “a dead body” introduces an emotionally charged and disturbing element, while the foregrounding of the morbid aspect of the event corresponds to the focus on shocking or violent elements. The use of “they” without immediately identifying the actors also creates a curiosity gap by withholding contextual information. Finally, the unusual and dramatic presentation of the event contributes to sensational narrative framing, emphasizing its exceptional character and emotional impact.

From a discursive perspective, this type of headline aligns with what Pedroso (1983) describes as the transformation of reality through expressive and narrative resources that amplify its emotional and exceptional dimensions. Similarly, it reflects the dynamics identified by Jewkes (2004), in which crime news tends to emphasize elements of deviance, shock, and impact that contribute to newsworthiness. In digital environments, such strategies are also closely related to click-oriented practices, where the withholding of information and the emphasis on striking details function as mechanisms to attract user attention (Lischka & Garz, 2023).

The example illustrates how the accumulation of multiple discursive strategies can shift a headline toward a more attention-driven construction. Unlike predominantly informational headlines, which prioritize clarity and contextualization, this type of headline relies on emotional impact, narrative tension, and selective emphasis to engage the audience.

Selective Sensationalism and the Balance Between Information and Attraction

Taken together, the findings indicate that, in the analyzed corpus, informational rigor and sensationalist strategies were balanced to a moderate and selective extent. Rather than showing a dominance of either purely informational or overtly sensationalist constructions, the results reveal a strong concentration of headlines within the intermediate category defined in this study as mixed. Most headlines maintain a core informative structure while incorporating a limited

number of attention-oriented elements. The predominance of headlines containing one or two sensationalist indicators further supports this interpretation, as these headlines do not fully abandon informational clarity nor rely on extreme or exaggerated forms of sensationalism.

The predominance of mixed headlines, which accounted for 31 of the 50 headlines (62%), indicates that the balance between informational rigor and sensationalism is not resolved in favor of one dimension, but instead negotiated through hybrid headline constructions. Most of these headlines maintain a core informative structure while incorporating a limited number of attention-oriented elements. As a result, informational clarity is generally preserved but complemented by selective strategies designed to enhance audience engagement. This dynamic can be understood within the broader context of the contemporary digital media ecosystem, characterized by high levels of competition and informational overload. As discussed in the theoretical framework, processes of “infoxication” (Casas-Mas, 2014) expose users to a constant flow of stimuli, reducing the time and cognitive attention dedicated to each piece of content. In this environment, headlines become crucial strategic devices, as they must capture attention within seconds while still fulfilling their informative function. This attention-oriented environment creates a structural tension between the need to attract audience attention and the normative foundations of journalism, which emphasize accuracy, clarity, and informational responsibility. The results of this study suggest that, in the analyzed corpus, this tension is not resolved by prioritizing one dimension over the other, but rather through a negotiated balance reflected in hybrid headline constructions. The predominance of headlines containing one or two indicators, which together account for 31 of the 50 headlines (62%), reinforces this interpretation. These headlines do not fully abandon journalistic standards, nor do they rely on extreme or exaggerated forms of sensationalism. Instead, they reflect a controlled integration of discursive features such as the emphasis on impactful elements or the creation of curiosity, allowing them to remain informative while increasing their attractiveness.

The comparison of alternative classification thresholds further supports the interpretation of the corpus as predominantly intermediate rather than overtly sensationalist. While applying a threshold of two or more indicators would classify 24 headlines (48%) as sensationalist, the more restrictive threshold of four or more indicators would identify only 1 headline (2%). The selected threshold of three or more indicators therefore identifies 8 headlines (16%) as sensationalist while preserving the larger mixed category of 31 headlines (62%). This distribution suggests that the classification is sensitive to the degree of indicator accumulation, and that the identification of sensationalist headlines as a distinct category depends on the simultaneous presence of multiple discursive features rather than on isolated indicators alone. The sensationalism score, based on the six binary indicators, could range from 0 to 6, although observed scores in the sample ranged from 0 to 4. This measure provides a complementary view of the degree to which multiple indicators converged within individual headlines.

These patterns may be interpreted as an emerging form of what this study provisionally refers to as “selective sensationalism.” The term is used here to describe the selective incorporation of attention-oriented elements within headlines that generally retain an informative structure. In the analyzed corpus, these elements were not applied uniformly, but appeared in a measured and context-dependent manner, most often alongside informational features. Rather than representing a rupture with journalistic norms, this pattern may reflect an adaptive response to the competing demands of digital news environments, in which attracting attention must coexist with credibility and informational rigor.

In the specific case examined, *La Vanguardia Online* appears to navigate this tension by

maintaining a recognizable journalistic standard while incorporating moderate and strategically selected sensationalist elements. This observation should not be interpreted as evidence that the same pattern characterizes European legacy newspapers or digital journalism more broadly. Rather, it illustrates how the balance between informational rigor and audience attraction can manifest within the specific media context examined in this study.

Overall, these findings provide an initial empirical basis for considering “selective sensationalism” as a possible interpretation of how attention-oriented and informational strategies coexist in crime headlines. However, the concept should not be regarded as an established theoretical category on the basis of the present study. Its theoretical validity and broader applicability require further examination through larger samples, multiple news outlets, and comparative studies across different media contexts. Such research could determine whether the pattern identified here extends beyond the analyzed corpus and whether “selective sensationalism” provides a useful framework for understanding similar forms of headline construction in other contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine to what extent crime headlines in *La Vanguardia Online* balance informational rigor and sensationalist discursive strategies during the study period. Within the analyzed corpus, 31 of the 50 headlines (62%) were classified as mixed, indicating a moderate and selective balance between informational rigor and sensationalist strategies. The majority of headlines, with 31 headlines (62%) containing one or two sensationalist indicators, incorporated attention-oriented strategies while generally maintaining an overall informative structure. This pattern can be understood within the broader logic of the contemporary attention economy, where news organizations compete for visibility in highly saturated digital environments. In this context, the need to produce attractive and engaging content becomes a structural condition of journalistic production. However, this demand coexists with the normative foundations of journalism, which prioritize accuracy, clarity, and informational responsibility. Within the analyzed corpus, this tension was not resolved in favor of one dimension but was instead reflected in hybrid headline constructions that combined both logics. Across the 50 headlines examined, sensationalist elements were generally limited rather than dominant, appearing selectively alongside predominantly informative constructions. In the case of *La Vanguardia Online*, this pattern may be interpreted as a form of “selective sensationalism”, in which elements such as the emphasis on shocking aspects or the use of curiosity gaps are incorporated selectively without fully compromising informational clarity. Rather than necessarily representing a deviation from journalistic standards, this pattern may reflect an adaptive response to the structural pressures of the digital environment, where attracting attention must coexist with professional norms.

The study also provides an empirical operationalization of sensationalist indicators for the analyzed corpus, showing that their presence varied across the 50 headlines and that different combinations of indicators contributed to the classification of headlines as informational, mixed, or sensationalist. These findings highlight the value of examining sensationalist strategies at the level of individual headline construction rather than treating sensationalism as a uniform characteristic of crime reporting. However, the study should be understood as a qualitative, descriptive analysis supported by descriptive frequency counts rather than statistical inference. The relatively small sample size, the use of manual coding by a single coder, and the absence of statistical analysis limit the generalizability and reliability of the findings. In this sense, future research could expand the scope of analysis by examining larger

datasets, incorporating multiple coders to improve reliability, and conducting comparative studies across different media outlets and national contexts. Additionally, further research could move beyond headlines to analyze the relationship between headline construction and the content of the full news article, in order to better understand how sensationalist strategies operate throughout the entire journalistic narrative. Such approaches would help determine whether the patterns identified in this study, including the tentative interpretation of “selective sensationalism”, extend beyond the analyzed corpus and across different digital journalism contexts.

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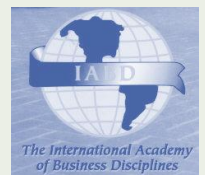
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