

Sources of social protest in Chile: between the official and the unofficial

*Fuentes de la protesta social en Chile:
entre lo oficial y lo no oficial*

*Fontes do protesto social no Chile: entre o
oficial e o não oficial*

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This research aims to analyze the journalistic sources used by web portals, television news programs, and the print media in their coverage of the 2019 social unrest in Chile. Using content analysis and a deductive methodological approach, the results indicated that, contrary to the protest paradigm, there was a predominant use of unofficial sources, although these did not necessarily convey the movement's demands. Likewise, it was the news websites that demonstrated the greatest pluralism in the use of journalistic sources.

KEYWORDS: Journalistic sources, official sources, unofficial sources, social protest, Chile.

Esta investigación tiene por objetivo analizar las fuentes periodísticas que usaron los portales web, los noticieros de televisión y la prensa escrita en la construcción de las noticias del estallido social chileno de 2019. A través de un análisis de contenido y una estrategia metodológica deductiva, los resultados indican que, contrario al paradigma de protesta, hubo un uso mayoritario de fuentes no oficiales, aunque estas no necesariamente dieron a conocer las demandas del movimiento. Asimismo, fueron los portales web de noticias los que mostraron un mayor pluralismo en el uso de fuentes.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Fuentes periodísticas, fuentes oficiales, fuentes no oficiales, protesta social, Chile.

Esta pesquisa tem como objetivo analisar as fontes jornalísticas utilizadas por portais da internet, noticiários de televisão e imprensa escrita na construção das notícias sobre a revolta social chilena de 2019. Por meio de uma análise de conteúdo e de uma estratégia metodológica dedutiva, os resultados indicam que, contrariamente ao paradigma dos protestos, houve um uso predominante de fontes não oficiais, embora estas não tenham necessariamente divulgado as reivindicações do movimento. Da mesma forma, foram os portais de notícias na internet que demonstraram maior pluralismo no uso de fontes.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Fontes jornalísticas, fontes oficiais, fontes não oficiais, protesto social, Chile.

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INTRODUCTION

The use of journalistic sources is a fundamental part of constructing news stories. These sources can be used to convey relevant information and opinions and to instill confidence in the credibility of the facts (Tuchman, 1978). However, their selection is not random but rather follows a combination of routines and standards (Díaz & Mellado, 2017; Laursen & Trapp, 2021; Reich, 2011). The study of news sources is based on questions regarding biases, power, and influences. Generally, the use of journalistic sources involves a two-way relationship, sometimes controlled by communication professionals through their respective frameworks and ideologies, and at other times by political power (Casero Ripollés & López Rabadán, 2012b; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Harjuniemi, 2023).

The social unrest that erupted in Chile in October 2019 is one of the most significant events to have occurred in the country since the return to democracy in 1990; although it was accompanied by high levels of violence, it was also marked by massive demonstrations (Blumel, 2023; Matamala, 2019; Peña, 2020; Salazar, 2023). From a communication perspective, evidence indicates that the media promoted agendas that did not necessarily prioritize the demands of these protests (Harlow & Bachmann, 2023; Ivanova & Almendras, 2021; Proust & Saldaña, 2022; Tagle, 2025; Tagle et al., 2022). This was exacerbated by the poor evaluation of journalistic work, particularly that of traditional media such as broadcast television and newspapers (CEP, 2019; Grassau et al., 2019; Newman et al., 2020). It is worth noting that evidence indicates that the mass media system in Chile exhibits a low level of pluralism, with the majority of Chileans stating that the media fail to equally reflect the diverse opinions and voices of society (Del Valle & Carreño, 2020; Godoy, 2016; Rodríguez & Zechmeister, 2018; Sáez et al., 2022).

The aim of this research is to examine the journalistic sources used to construct news narratives about the Chilean social unrest in the print media, television, and online news portals. This is done with a focus on the plurality of journalistic sources in the news of these media systems, in which, at least in theory, it is posited that websites would be a space of greater pluralism (Mellado & Scherman, 2020).

Examining the journalistic sources that the media use to construct their news narratives on significant events such as social protests allows us to assess not only their editorial and ideological stances, but also their media pluralism and power dynamics.

Journalistic sources and their use in the Chilean media

Journalistic sources are a fundamental and essential component in the construction of news stories; they shape the content, the angle of the reporting itself, and the credibility of the media in the eyes of their audiences (Casero-Ripollés & López Rabadán, 2012a; Díaz & Mellado, 2017; Laursen & Trapp, 2021).

Various studies have shown that there is a prevalence of official sources in the media, which has implications for both the maintenance of the *status quo* and media pluralism (Amado, 2015; Mayoral, 2005; Reich, 2011). The use of official sources stems from multiple reasons, ranging from the demands of media organizations themselves to the authority and legitimacy of such sources and their ease of access (Pérez Curiel et al., 2015). However, when there are crises or emergencies, such as natural disasters, the media tend to rely more heavily on unofficial sources, such as the victims of these events (Grassau et al., 2021; Mayo Cubero, 2019).

With regard to the social protest paradigm (Gitlin, 1980; Boyle et al., 2012; Tarrow, 1997), the evidence indicates that the media tend to rely on the official narrative provided by authorities, meaning that news stories are constructed based on official sources, while disregarding those that challenge the establishment (Hermida et al., 2012; Mourão, 2023).

While one of the most significant criticisms of the Chilean media system has been its lack of informational diversity (Del Valle & Carreño, 2020; Godoy, 2016), the same holds true for the use of journalistic sources, where evidence points to a lack of diversity in their use across print media, radio, and television (Díaz & Mellado, 2017). Furthermore, news reporting in Chilean journalism is characterized by a greater reliance on direct quotes from sources to demonstrate the objectivity of the information, which contrasts with a lesser use of sources to balance and weigh different perspectives on the news (Humanes et al., 2017). Furthermore, there is evidence that online media are not necessarily

more pluralistic in their use of sources than traditional media (Melado & Scherman, 2020). Other studies have shown a predominance of official sources in corruption scandals (Tagle & Claro, 2018) and a predominance of victim or non-official sources in natural disasters (Grassau et al., 2021).

Media systems in Chile

The Chilean print media is characterized by a high concentration of ownership and a low level of pluralism (Del Valle & Carreño, 2020; Godoy, 2016; Sáez et al., 2022). In this media system, the key players are El Mercurio SAP and the Copesa group. In terms of the typology developed by Hallin and Mancini (2004), the Chilean print media system can be classified as liberal pluralist, although some authors describe it specifically as polarized pluralist, characterized by low readership and a high degree of political alignment not only with the political system but also with the economic system (Humanes et al., 2017). This takes into account that journalists share the perception that their outlets are internally pluralistic, but that there is a limitation imposed by business groups on editorial lines (Del Valle & Carreño, 2020).

Since its inception in the early 1960s, Chilean broadcast television has been characterized as a university-led initiative, as the government granted licenses exclusively to universities, among other reasons, to ensure the public and educational nature of this medium (Santa Cruz, 2017). However, with the privatization process that began in the 1990s, universities gradually withdrew from these concessions, making way for influential business groups (Anguita & Labrador, 2019). The only public channel, Televisión Nacional de Chile (TVN), is funded exclusively by advertising and competes on equal terms with the other private stations (Godoy, 2016).

In this limited ecosystem, the Internet and news websites have emerged as key players that could help increase pluralism in Chile's news landscape (Navia & Ulriksen, 2017; Tagle, 2025; Sáez et al., 2022). For example, unlike their counterparts in print media, journalists working for news websites in Chile identify as having a left-wing ideology and describe their outlets' editorial line as more pluralistic than that of media in other formats (Del Valle et al., 2018). However, there

is evidence that online news portals are not necessarily more pluralistic in their use of journalistic sources, as several of the major online media outlets belong to the same conglomerates that dominate other formats (Mellado & Scherman, 2020).

How the social unrest was covered in the media

The social unrest that swept through Chile in October 2019 came as an unexpected challenge to the country's political, economic, and social spheres. These massive protests, which spread across the major cities, were aimed at demanding greater economic equality and criticizing political and economic power. However, they were accompanied by high levels of violence, particularly against public spaces, where churches and subway stations were set on fire. Additionally, numerous cases of police abuse were reported (Blumel, 2023; Matamala, 2019; Peña, 2020; Salazar, 2023).

This phenomenon also posed a challenge for the mass media, which, according to the public, failed to rise to the occasion in their reporting. A survey conducted by Grassau et al. (2019) during the outbreak gave poor ratings to the information provided by newspapers and, above all, television. Likewise, regarding the work of journalists, more than 80 % of respondents noted that they failed to cover the important events of the protests, driven by a desire for sensationalism, and more than 70 % felt that they presented only one side of the story.

Furthermore, regarding research on media coverage itself, the evidence suggests that the media focused on acts of violence rather than on the movement's demands (Harlow & Bachmann, 2023; Ivanova & Almendras, 2021; Proust & Saldaña, 2022; Tagle, 2025; Tagle et al., 2022). According to the Reuters Institute's *Digital News Report* (Newman et al., 2020), trust in the media fell substantially compared to previous years, a decline attributed in part to the lack of diverse and opposing viewpoints in the media.

METHODOLOGY

The objective of this research is to study the journalistic sources used by news websites, television news programs, and the print media to report on the social unrest that occurred in this country in 2019.

Thus, the three questions on which this research is based are:

- Q1: What were the characteristics of the journalistic sources used by the Chilean media to construct their news narrative of the social unrest?
- Q2: Were there differences in the use of journalistic sources among print media, television, and online news sites during the Chilean social unrest?
- Q3: How do the characteristics of the use of journalistic sources reflect in the media's coverage of the social unrest?

Furthermore, the three hypotheses of this study are:

- H1: In their news coverage of the Chilean social unrest, the media relied more heavily on official sources than on unofficial ones.
- H2: The journalistic sources used by the Chilean media to cover the social unrest did not adequately reflect the demands of the protests.
- H3: Online news portals were more pluralistic in their use of journalistic sources than print media and television.

This study is deductive in nature, as it analyzes the use of journalistic sources in the news coverage of the 2019 Chilean social uprising based on categories of official and unofficial sources (Amado, 2015; Mayoral, 2005; Reich, 2011) and others derived from the social protest paradigm (Gitlin, 1980; Boyle et al., 2012; Tarrow, 1997). Thus, this research is quantitative in nature, as these categories were operationalized using content analysis, a scientifically rigorous technique for interpreting messages across a wide variety of media formats (Bardin, 2002). Finally, the relationship between these categories was analyzed using contingency tables and their degrees of association.

The dataset consists of all news reports on the Chilean social unrest from the main news programs of the country's four over-the-air television networks (TVN, Canal 13, CHV, and Mega), the six most-visited news websites (*Radio Bio Bio*, *The Clinic*, *Radio Cooperativa*, *Emol*, *La Tercera online*, and *El Mostrador*), and the two major national newspapers (*El Mercurio* and *La Tercera*) from October 18 –the day the

protests began— through November 15 —the day Congress reached an agreement to draft a new constitution.

The sample consists of news content from 12 Chilean media outlets: the two political newspapers with the highest national circulation in the print media sector (Válida, 2021); the four prime-time news programs on broadcast television with the highest ratings (Kantar-Ibope Media, 2021), and the six news websites with the highest number of visits (Branch, 2020). For this study, it was appropriate to use a broader sample of news websites, since among the major outlets in this medium, some are owned by the same entities as the newspapers (*Emol* belongs to El Mercurio SAP and *La Tercera.cl* to Copesa).

The sample of media coverage was obtained from Litoral Press, a media news aggregation company. Given the overwhelming number of data points, and to make this study feasible, the sample was reduced using the constructed week strategy (Hester & Dougall, 2007), albeit with modifications. Thus, the number of days to be analyzed was reduced from 28 to five. The selected days were Friday, October 18; Monday, November 21; Tuesday, November 29; Wednesday, June 6; and Thursday, November 14.

A coding manual was used, in which, in addition to listing the categories of news sources to be classified in the content analysis, the date and the media outlet to which each news item belonged were noted. The sample was coded by three former students who had graduated with degrees in the social sciences. To ensure the reliability of the coding, a test was first conducted on 10 % of the sample until a reliability of over 90 % was achieved (Krippendorff, 2010; Lacy et al., 2015).

RESULTS

A total of 916 news articles were analyzed in the web portal system. Figure 1 shows how these news articles were distributed across the various media outlets.

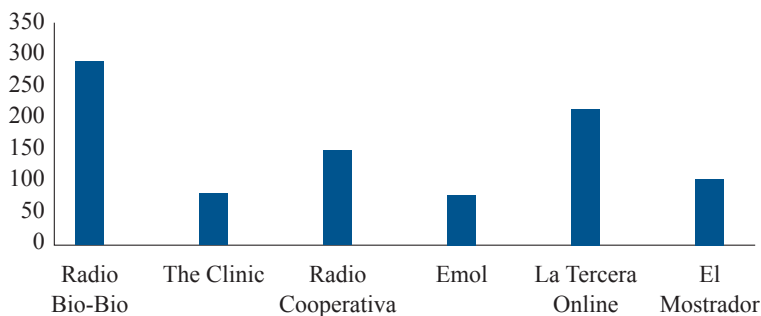
Regarding television news programs, 286 news items were analyzed. Figure 2 shows how many news items correspond to each of the broadcast television news programs.

A total of 42 news articles were analyzed in the print media system. As shown in Figure 3, these articles appeared in the leading print newspapers, *El Mercurio* and *La Tercera*.

Journalistic sources on the Chilean social uprising

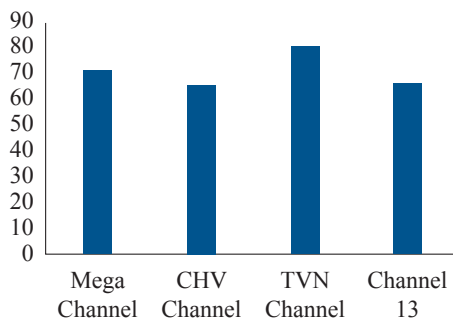
The distinction between official and unofficial sources (Amado, 2015; Mayoral, 2005; Reich, 2011) was replicated in order to determine the extent to which the media constructed the narrative of the Chilean so-

FIGURE 1
NUMBER OF NEWS ITEMS ANALYZED ON NEWS PORTAL
WEBSITES BY MEDIA OUTLET



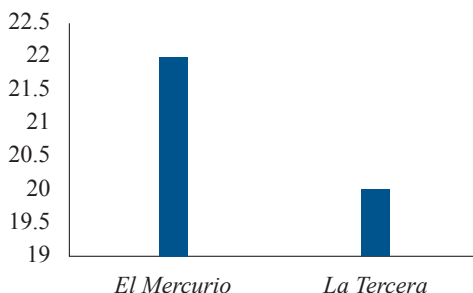
Source: The author.

FIGURE 2
NUMBER OF NEWS ITEMS ANALYZED ON TELEVISION BY NEWS PROGRAM



Source: The author.

FIGURE 3
NUMBER OF NEWS ARTICLES ANALYZED IN THE
PRINT MEDIA SYSTEM BY NEWSPAPER



Source: The author.

cial protests using sources from the establishment or, conversely, from its challengers. Thus, as shown in Figure 4, unofficial sources predominated in the print media, news websites and television news programs. Consequently, these results do not confirm the premise of the social protest paradigm that the media rely on official sources in their coverage of protests (Mourão, 2023).

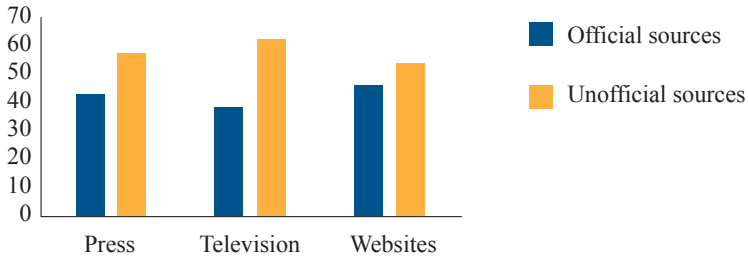
However, as shown in Figure 5, when official and unofficial sources are broken down by their respective actors, it becomes apparent that, in the case of unofficial sources, the majority are not from protesters and movement representatives, but rather those affected by the violence of the protests.

As shown in Figure 6, this is confirmed when categorizing whether the sources reported on the demands of the social uprising. Predominantly on television and in the print media, the sources did not report on the demands of the protests.

Thus, when comparing this last category –whether or not the media report on the demands of social protests– with official and unofficial sources broken down by their main participants, and as shown in Table 1 regarding the print media, it becomes clear that, although protesters are the group most frequently cited as a journalistic source, they reported their demands only on a fairly occasional basis. Thus, the

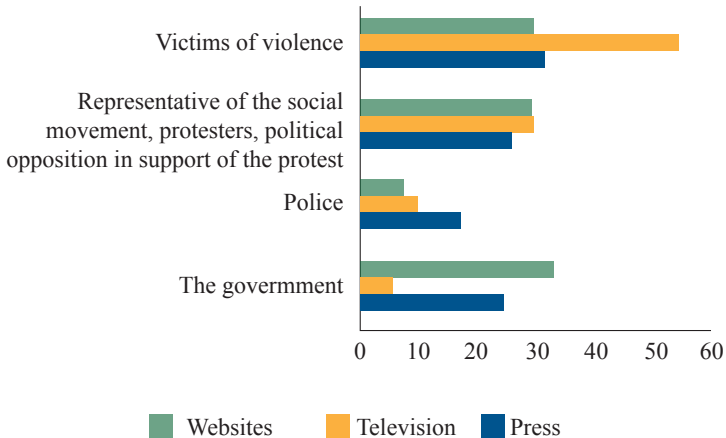
chi-square test ($0.265, p > 0.05$) demonstrates that there is no statistically significant association between these categories.

FIGURE 4
PERCENTAGES BY MEDIA OUTLET OF OFFICIAL
AND UNOFFICIAL SOURCES



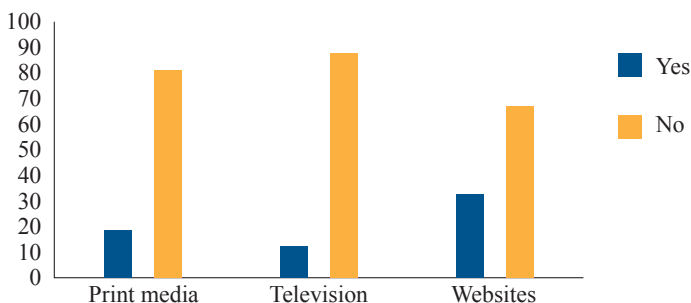
Source: The author.

FIGURE 5
PERCENTAGE BY MEDIA OUTLET OF JOURNALISTIC SOURCES USED
REGARDING VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE, REPRESENTATIVES OF SOCIAL
MOVEMENTS, THE POLICE, AND THE GOVERNMENT



Source: The author.

FIGURE 6
PERCENTAGE OF NEWS SOURCES THAT REPORTED ON THE DEMANDS OF
THE SOCIAL UPRISING, BY MEDIA SYSTEM



Source: The author.

The same pattern emerges when analyzing this relationship in television news programs, where it is shown that, although those affected by violence constitute the majority of sources used by journalists, when news programs feature protesters as sources, they do not necessarily do so to publicize their demands. This is evident when performing the chi-square test, which reveals that there is no statistically significant association between these two categories (0.231, $p > 0.05$).

Finally, the only media platform where a significant difference is observed is news websites. Not only are more than two-thirds of the sources unofficial –half of which are protesters– but also, in half of the cases, they did indeed report on the demands of the uprising. A chi-square test reveals a statistically significant association between these two categories (0.00, $p < 0.05$).

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Regarding Question 1 of this study –which examined the characteristics of the journalistic sources used by Chilean media outlets to construct their news narratives of the social uprising– the main finding is that unofficial sources predominated over official ones in the news coverage of the

TABLE 1
CONTINGENCY TABLE COMPARING OFFICIAL AND UNOFFICIAL SOURCES, AND WHETHER THE SOURCES REPORT
ON THE MOVEMENT'S DEMANDS IN THE PRINT MEDIA

| | | Print media | | | | Total | |
|---------|-----|----------------|------------|--------|---------------------|--------|---------|
| | | The Government | Protesters | Police | Victims of violence | | |
| Demands | No | Count | 7 | 10 | 7 | 11 | 35 |
| | | % of total | 16.7 % | 23.8 % | 16.7 % | 26.2 % | 83.4 % |
| | Yes | Count | 3 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 7 |
| | | % of total | 7.1 % | 7.1 % | 2.4 % | 0.0 % | 16.6 % |
| Total | | Count | 10 | 13 | 8 | 11 | 42 |
| | | % of total | 23.8 % | 30.9 % | 19.1 % | 26.2 % | 100.0 % |

Source: The author.

TABLE 2
CONTINGENCY TABLE SHOWING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN OFFICIAL AND UNOFFICIAL SOURCES,
AND WHETHER THESE SOURCES REPORT ON THE MOVEMENT'S DEMANDS IN TELEVISION NEWS PROGRAMS

| | | TV news | | | | Total | |
|---------|-----|----------------|------------|--------|---------------------|--------|---------|
| | | The Government | Protesters | Police | Victims of violence | | |
| Demands | No | Count | 14 | 73 | 28 | 137 | 252 |
| | | % of total | 4.9 % | 25.5 % | 9.8 % | 47.9 % | 88.1 % |
| | Yes | Count | 2 | 12 | 0 | 20 | 34 |
| | | % of total | 0.7 % | 4.2 % | 0.0 % | 7.0 % | 11.9 % |
| Total | | Count | 16 | 85 | 28 | 157 | 286 |
| | | % of total | 5.6 % | 29.7 % | 9.8 % | 54.9 % | 100.0 % |

Source: The author.

TABLE 3
 CONTINGENCY TABLE COMPARING OFFICIAL AND UNOFFICIAL SOURCES,
 AND WHETHER THEY REPORT ON THE MOVEMENT'S DEMANDS ON NEWS WEBSITES

| | | News websites | | | | Total | |
|---------|------------|----------------|------------|--------|---------------------|---------|--------|
| | | The Government | Protesters | Police | Victims of violence | | |
| Demands | No | Count | 198 | 144 | 67 | 205 | 614 |
| | | % of total | 21.6 % | 15.7 % | 7.3 % | 22.4 % | 67.0 % |
| | Yes | Count | 82 | 138 | 8 | 74 | 302 |
| | | % of total | 9.0 % | 15.0 % | 0.9 % | 8.1 % | 33.0 % |
| Total | Count | 280 | 282 | 75 | 279 | 916 | |
| | % of total | 30.6 % | 30.7 % | 8.2 % | 30.5 % | 100.0 % | |

Source: The author.

social protests. Although this result can be interpreted in two ways, since the use of unofficial sources was not intended to report on the demands of the social unrest (Mourão, 2023), but rather to construct narratives based on eyewitnesses and other actors regarding the violence during the protests. Meanwhile, Hypothesis 1 –that the media used mostly official sources rather than unofficial ones– is rejected, given that the Chilean media used mostly unofficial sources; Hypothesis 2 –which states that the journalistic sources did not report on the demands of the protests– is accepted. This is because the majority of the sources did not publicize the protesters’ demands. Thus, it can be established as a characteristic of the media coverage of the social unrest that the media primarily used unofficial sources, although not necessarily to publicize the movement’s demands.

Regarding Question 2 –whether there were differences in the use of journalistic sources by print media, television, and news websites during the Chilean social uprising– an analysis of the differences among the various media systems studied in this research reveals that news websites drew on a greater variety of sources than print media and television. On the other hand, it was the print media that showed the least coverage of the demands of the social unrest, which is consistent with previous evidence of its low pluralism and more conservative bias (Del Valle & Carreño, 2020; Godoy, 2016).

Hypothesis 3 is thus accepted: web portals were more pluralistic in its use of journalistic sources than print and television, given that, of the three media systems studied, it was the web portals that most extensively reported on the demands of the social uprising. Finally, Question 3 of this study –regarding which characteristics of journalistic source usage are reflected in how the media covered the social uprising– revealed a lower use of sources that reported on the demands of the uprising, while, conversely, sources reporting on the violence that occurred during this event were abundant. All of this is consistent with previous studies regarding the poor evaluation of the Chilean media’s coverage of the social uprising (Grassau et al., 2019; Newman et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

This study examined the journalistic sources that Chilean media outlets used in their news coverage of the 2019 social unrest. This was done bearing in mind that the media's work was viewed negatively by the public during the weeks that this event lasted (CEP, 2019; Grassau et al., 2019; Newman et al., 2020). Thus, it was established that the journalistic sources used in news reports on the social unrest were mostly unofficial. At first glance, one might argue that this was done to report on the demands of the social protests, thereby contradicting the social protest paradigm (Gitlin, 1980; Boyle et al., 2012; Mourão, 2023; Tarrow, 1997). However, the analyses demonstrated that, for the most part, the use of these unofficial sources was to reproduce accounts from witnesses and victims regarding what was happening in situations of violence. Thus, a certain similarity could be established with the way the Chilean media cover catastrophes, such as earthquakes or other natural disasters, because, just as in the case of the social uprising, there is a predominance in the use of unofficial sources to report on the unfolding emergency (Grassau et al., 2021; Mayo Cubero, 2019).

On the other hand, it became evident that news websites were a space—at least in terms of journalistic sources—that offered greater diversity than print media and television. Taking all this into account, and given the limitations of this study, a second phase of research that includes a qualitative analysis of how those sources assessed the protest and its demands is necessary. Thus, future research should address the study of journalistic sources through qualitative methods and the routines that the media outlets themselves and their journalists employ when using news sources in the context of social protests.

Journalistic sources are likely the primary foundation of news stories in the media. Beyond simply providing credibility to news reports, they also reflect a wide range of power dynamics. Understanding how the media cover social protests is of significant importance, as the public's perception of such movements is closely tied to the way the media reports on them.

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