'Crazy Chinese' and the 2017 nuclear crisis: A Peruvian newspaper representation of Kim Jong-Un

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Abstracts

This study analyzes the narrative characteristics of graphic and written language regarding Kim Jong-Un in the peruvian newspaper 'El Trome'. This occurred in May of 2017, when mainstream press in Peru closely followed national corruption scandals, whilst 'El Trome' focused on a different news story: the nuclear crisis between the United States and North Korea, popularizing the term "Crazy Chinese" in order to refer to the controversial Asian leader. Grounded Theory precepts were employed, which included content analysis of the newspaper covers as well as in depth interviews of the newspapers with both Trome's General Editor and Design Editor. The newspaper maximized the fear associated with an impending nuclear war, constructing a journalistic message from a sequence of events with two main protagonists: Donald Trump and Kim Jong-Un, unpredictable leaders with access to nuclear weapons. The strategy appealed to black humor and entertainment in order to position an agenda independent from mainstream press, which focused on internal politics at the time.

Keywords: Kim Jong-Un, Peruvian popular press, Media Representation, Grounded Theory, Journalism.

Introduction

This article analyzes the graphic and textual representation of the Kim Jong-Un, as depicted in a Peruvian newspaper ('El Trome') in the context of the May 2017 nuclear crisis between the US and North Korea. The aforementioned news outlet focused its coverage on this international affair while the rest of the mainstream newspapers closely covered the 'Lava Jato' agenda: a widespread international corruption scandal in which the Brazilian construction firm Odebrecht paid more than US 29 million in bribes to Peruvian politicians and entrepreneurs, financing political campaigns and bids for infrastructure. More than 38 cases and over 250 officials have been investigated, including 3 former presidents (Lagunes & Svejnar, 2020). At the same time, the international press was primarily focused on the increasing tension between the United States and North Korea regarding the latter's nuclear program.

The then US president, Donald Trump, showed his willingness to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un, although later mentioning that he "had no idea" if his counterpart was 'mentally stable'. These statements came a few days after Pyongyang conducted its second failed missile test in two weeks (Talev & Jacobs, 2017).

Official media in North Korea reported that the United States attempted to assassinate its leader Kim Jong-un through the use of biochemical substances (BBC News, 2017). The North Korean Ministry of State Security claimed that a terrorist group, supported by the US CIA and the South Korean intelligence agency, entered the country to attack the leader with a biochemical substance during a military parade and a public procession. The tensions continued to escalate. Donald Trump described Kim Jong-un as 'a madman with nuclear weapons' who cannot be left alone" in a conversation with his then counterpart in the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte (Reuters Staff, 2017). The transcript of these statements was leaked from a call made the previous month, in which the President of the United States also claimed that he would take care of North Korea due his current military power available in that geographical area. He also mentioned that Washington sent two nuclear submarines to the waters of the Korean Peninsula.

In Peru, the first instance that news about North Korea appeared on the front cover of a newspaper was on the 16th of April, 2017, in both 'El Comercio' and 'El Trome', in the context of the supposed missile launch by the Kim Jong-Un regime. In May, whilst 'El Trome' continued its coverage on the nuclear crisis, 'El Comercio' and 'La República', the newspapers with most readers on the country, focused their efforts on the internal political scandals, mainly the the 'Lava Jato' case, with Marcelo Odebrecht testifying in Brazil and giving names of officials linked to bribes to win contracts for projects in Peru.

The second most followed scandal was the 'Madre Mía' (a locality in northern Peru) case, where the accused was former President Ollanta Humala for covering up extrajudicial executions and disappearances committed at the aforementioned military base. The third case involved the then Minister of Transport Martin Vizcarra, abandoning his plan to build an airport in Chinchero, a plan questioned for its proximity to archaeological remains protected by UNESCO as a Cultural Heritage of Humanity. He resigned under pressure from the opposition caucus in Congress (Tanaka, 2022).

In the midst of internal scandals, 'El Trome' maintained front page coverage of the international conflict between the United States and North Korea, whose main protagonists were Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un, respectively. This detailed and highlighted the elements of graphic and written language that contributed to the construction of a threatening narrative. The treatment given to the sequence of events around this conflict turned it into almost a serialized novel, popularizing Kim Jong-Un as the 'Crazy Chinese'. It is worth noting that 'El Trome' is the best-selling popular newspaper in Peru (Quevedo, 2018), primarily due to its visual representations and knowledge of the popular culture (also known as 'chicha culture'). The following figure compares front page covers of mainstream newspapers and popular press: The headlines of 'El Comercio' and 'La República' focus on the USD 3 Million in bribes received by the former president and first lady, while 'El Trome' reports that "Kim Jong-Un is pointing missiles at the United States of America".

Figure 1. Front cover comparison between 'El Trome', 'El Comercio' and 'La República' newspapers (may 16, 2017)

El Trome	El Comercio	La República

"Crazy Chinese points missile at US"

"Marcelo Odebrecht gave Nadine (first lady) 3 million USD"

"Yes, we gave USD 3 million to Humala and Nadine (Former president and first lady)"

Source: 'El Trome', 'El Comercio' and 'La República' (may 16, 2017).

Peruvian Popular Press

Peruvian newspapers have a particular subgenre of media: the 'chicha press'. It refers to a type of popular press that emerged after World War II, characterized by its sensationalist style, use of graphic images, and focus on entertainment and celebrity news. This type of press was often criticized for its lack of journalistic ethics and its close relationship with political power, notably during Fujimori's government in the 1990s (Torres Vitolas, 2022). It gained prominence between 1968 and 1980 when the government declared a state of emergency and took control of the written press (Requejo, 2017).

During this period, the government employed various strategies to control the press, including imposing restrictions on press freedom, censoring critical content, and creating state-owned newspapers to compete with private press. It was during this time that the "Diarios Chicha" or "Chicha Diaries" emerged. The term 'Chicha' has indigenous roots and is associated with the fermented beverage of the same name. Independent newspapers that emerged during this period played a role in the democratization process in Peru by resisting government censorship

Since the 1990s, crime news coverage has increased alongside public perception of crime and a decline in trust in Peruvian institutions (Velásquez et al., 2018), particularly the police and traditional media, which showed evidence that media framing of crime news could shape public perceptions. It is not surprising, then, that frames or narratives promoted by certain media could influence public opinion, as seen in the case of the 'Chapa tu choro y déjalo paralítico' campaign. Roughly translating to 'maim a robber, leave him paralyzed', this citizen movement was created in 2015 through social media to combat rising crime rates. Media coverage of the campaign contributed to the stigmatization and criminalization of young people from low-income neighborhoods, perpetuating a discourse of violence and social exclusion (Onofre Paredes, 2021)

These studies are relevant because 'El Trome' is one of the primary news outlets categorized under the 'chicha press', shaping popular news and beliefs in Peru. This newspaper serves as a major news source for popular sectors in both urban and rural Peruvian communities, constructing a specific version of cultural and popular representations in the country associated with sensationalism, violence, and entertainment, and its implications for social inequality and exclusion (López Vargas, 2016). In this way, the newspaper was able to popularize the 'Crazy Chinese' trend through a distinctive graphic and written style featured on its front covers.

Figure 2. "Crazy Chinese is a Danger, yesterday he launched a new missile that fell on Japanese seas", 'El Trome' of May 22, 2017

Source: 'El Trome' Newspaper (2017)

Media representations of Kim Jong-Un across the world

Several studies have analyzed the journalistic representations Kim Jong-Un from various perspectives,, both in isolation and as an eastern opposition to the United States of America. For

example, Khairuandi's (2020) dissertation analyzed the body language of Donald Trump and Kim Jong-Un in a news video, finding that Trump's body language conveyed confidence and a sense of dominance, while Kim Jong-Un's body language displayed submissiveness and an eagerness to please.

Another interpretation places the North Korean as a charming individual, who employed his image when photographed at the PyeongChang Winter Olympics until the Trump-Kim summit in 2018 (Sonnevend & Kim, 2020). This was part of a larger strategy to improve North Korea's image and gain international recognition. Park and Kaye (2020) investigated the framing effects of news about the 2018 Trump-Kim Jong-Un summit in Singapore on American college students. The study found that news framing had a significant impact on the students' perceptions of the summit, with students who read negatively framed news having less trust in the outcomes of the summit than those who read positively framed news.

On the other hand, Curran and Gibson (2020) conducted a content analysis of American news media organizations' framing of North Korea. The study found that American news media frames North Korea as a source of conflict and as responsible for its own plight. Similarly, Song (2021) analyzed the translation-mediated framing of direct quotations in the news, using Trump's remarks at the press conference on the North Korea summit as a case study. The study found that the ideological position of the news outlet influenced the translation and framing of Trump's remarks. In contrast, Ding (2021) examined North Korean media's coverage of Kim Jong-Un's diplomatic summits. The study found that North Korean media portrayed Kim Jong-Un as a successful leader and portrayed the summits as evidence of North Korea's increasing international recognition.

The North Korean Leader has been the main subject of several studies. In particular, Jeong and Lee's (2021) explore different types of media personalization about Kim Jong-Un, noting that the North Korean leader has been portrayed as an individualized leader or a private person in media coverage, and this can influence public perceptions of him. Lee et al. (2020) examine the media framing of Kim Jong-Un's images in South Korean and US newspapers, finding that South Korean newspapers portray him more negatively than US newspapers. Meanwhile, Sim's (2017) thesis analyzes media coverage of Kim Jong-Un in Norwegian newspapers from 2010 to 2016, finding that the coverage mostly satanized him, which contrasts with Byun Young-wook (2017) work, which examines the visual framing of Kim Jong-Un in a North Korean newspaper, the Rodong Shinmun, finding internally, the shot compositions are used to legitimize the Leader's authority. This follows the same trend of propaganda photographs centered around the supreme leader, generated and distributed by the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) in order to improve perceptions of North Korea among audiences with near limited knowledge of politics (Hellmann & Oppermann, 2022).

Park and Kaye (2020) investigated the framing effects of the news about the 2018 Trump-Kim Jong Un summit on American college students, finding that news sources influence how individuals perceive Kim Jong-Un. Tizzard's (2021) article discusses the power dynamics that led to the ascent of Kim Jong-Un, as the hardliners within the North Korean government played a significant role in his rise to power. Gibson and Curran's (2021) book chapter analyze the visual portrayals of North Korea in Western media, focusing on the 'Rocket Man' and 'Rocket Nation'

motifs. Baek and Jeong (2020) examine the source reliance of South Korean and US news outlets regarding Kim Jong-Un, finding that South Korean newspapers use a greater variety of sources than US newspapers. Hinck and Cooley's (2020) study analyzes the strategic narratives of North Korean media in Chinese and Russian media during the 2017-2018 nuclear confrontation. Finally, Peters' (2019) article discusses the threat of nuclear war and the need for peace studies in a contemporary world that privileges political coverage centered around emotions (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019; 2020), which is particularly useful for populist leaders such as Kim Jong-Un or Donald Trump who want to mobilize masses for their own agendas.

Method

This qualitative research is based on Grounded Theory precepts (Birks & Mill, 2022; White & Cooper, 2022), which allowed the team to examine and decipher the elements of graphic and written language present on the "Trome" newspaper's covers from May 2017 (30 issues). Textual and visual elements were coded and analyzed on this specific month due to the rise on their sales (up to 453.201 units) and readership (15,17% increase from the previous month, up to 2,412,170 readers per day). This newspaper continues to be the most read by Peruvians (Rondinelli & Peña, 2020; Roman Calzada, 2022). A media monitoring (Milivojevic, 2003) was conducted, resulting in 14 international news regarding the missile crisis starred by Kim Jong-Un, which were then related to the Trome's news agenda.

Data regarding the coverage of the nuclear crisis was collected using content analysis (Kyngäs, 2020; Friedrichs, 2023). A Record Sheet was constructed as an instrument, which allowed the information to be organized according to the categories and subcategories of the study. The three main categories were:

- The construction of the journalistic message: involves headings, location on the cover
- Narrative characteristics of graphic language: has iconic elements, typographies, colors, use of images, infographics, photo montages.
- Narrative characteristics of written language: verbs, exclamations, adverbs, adjectives, headings, sub headings.

Additionally, a comparative analysis of the covers of the "Trome" newspaper with El Comercio and La República newspapers was carried out in the same time frame, from May 1st to May 31st, 2017. During this period, the conflict between North Korea versus the United States, personified by the verbal war between Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump, was published as the main news on the front page of "El Trome".

In order to complement the obtained information, three in-depth interviews were conducted (Deterding & Waters, 2021; Tavory, 2020). For this, an interview guide was used based on the knowledge of each professional. From three different perspectives, specialists contributed from their experience in the design and layout of newspaper pages, creation of journalistic content, and from an anthropological perspective of message receivers. The interviewees were:

- The Design and Web Editor of "El Trome", 45 minutes.
- The General Editor of "El Trome", 53 minutes.
- An external marketing consultant contracted by "El Trome", 48 minutes.

Results

Of the 30 covers published in May 2017, 14 had as their main theme the issue of the conflict between the United States and North Korea, which had the unequivocal protagonist of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. This allowed the construction of a message aligned with the popular cut of the Trome newspaper, a message reflected in its design and layout with the excessive use of colors, fonts and visual resources such as photomontages or infographics; as well as in the part of textual contents with the constant use of adjectives and hyperboles.

Figure 3. Timeline of front pages on the United States-North Korea conflict

May 2, 2017

"Crazy Chinese" is surrounded

May 3, 2017

Ready to Attack. US prepares to destroy North Korean Missiles

May 4, 2017

Tensions around the world. US sends a missile from California and the "crazy Chinese" becomes furious. The north Korean leader threatens with nuclear bombs.

May 17, 2017

May 16, 2017

"Crazy Chinese" points a missile towards the US.

North Korea assures it can reach Los Angeles.

DANGER! "Crazy Chinese" challenges the "gringos". If attacked, he'll use nuclear and chemical weapons.

May 18, 2017

Terror due to missiles.

South Korea warns that "Crazy Chinese" can begin a nuclear conflict.

May 20, 2017

Ready to Strike.

"Crazy Chinese" wards that if bombarded, North Korea will unleash a hellish catastrophe.

May 22, 2017

"Crazy Chinese" is a menace.

US, South Korea, Japan and Germany plead to stop him.

24 may, 2017

"Crazy Chinese" is attacked.

"Gringos" fear that north Korean missiles reach the US.

May 25, 2017

He's a Lunatic with atomic bombs.

Trump says that north Korean dictator poses a danger, and assures that they are 20 times more powerful.

May 27, 2017

"Crazy Chinese" on sight

North Korean Ambassador in Peru claims the US are threatening them, and they will answer.

May 29, 2017

He scares the world.

Pentagon top brass assures that a war would be "catastrophic" and millions would die.

May 30, 2017

Tie up the "Crazy Chinese"

US has thousands of men in South Korea ready to strike. Russia asks not to provoke Kim Jong-Un.

May 31, 2017

"Gringos" on Maximum Alert against "Crazy Chinese". US tests a missile interceptor.

Source: El Trome newspaper (2017)

The Interviews supported the findings of the Content Analysis: the newspaper controlled specific aspects of the narrative such as headlines, subheadings, photographs, colors, infographics, and the context in which these elements unfold, in order to frame a message of imminent nuclear conflict between Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump.

The Design and Web Editor stated that the cover story is fundamental, it should always be illustrated with a good photo montage in order to stir emotions in the readers, otherwise it will not be published. He emphasized the importance this newspaper gives to its visual narrative. He also explained that his newspaper always employs an image on the cover (photo, photomontage or infographic), even if it is a small note, since their readers pay more attention to the visual elements than the written content. Regarding the colors, they have always been warm (mostly

yellow, red and orange). As for the fonts used on the cover, they typically employ sans serif, which lacks details that could be distracting to the readers.

Likewise, The General Editor highlighted the dynamism in the construction of the journalistic message as a horse race between 2 major powers. In this specific case, the coverage of the conflict between North Korea and the United States was adapted to the popular press. According to him, all political issues are treated with the same journalistic rigor, but in the case of this specific conflict, Kim Jong-Un was chosen as the main character in their covers due to having a name that's "difficult to pronounce", which would then be referred to with a different nickname that "El Trome" would position in the public agenda. Former president Trump was already a well-known public figure at the time, and the United States is an allied country to Peru. Hence, it was easier grasp the attention of the readers by presenting a picturesque character such as a secluded communist leader of which the average Peruvian did know nothing about. The main point of interest was the advertisement of the "Crazy Chinese" brand in order to appeal to the masses using fear and entertainment. The Editor reported that some detractors such as news anchors and politicians criticized their strategy for serving as a "smoke screen" that would distract the population from the ongoing corruption scandals at the time. However, he assures that the use of this nickname and narrative was employed to set a distinct agenda from the usual political agenda.

This was backed by the marketing consultant, brought in specifically to construct this strategy. He was asked to strategize an agenda that would differentiate "El Trome" from other mainstream press. The journalistic message constructed is what the reader sees published, that is, an interaction between image and text that tells a larger story. He states that one of the reasons for choosing Kim Jong-un as the protagonist was because he is a character with bizarre characteristics and an unstable character, contrary to the classic president of a country, such as a conservative statesman. His unique characteristics also added to the mystery and secrecy that surrounded him, which in turn increased readers interest in his private life.

The construction of this character worked as both fear and entertainment. By giving him that nickname ("Crazy Chinese") a comic narrative was constituted, to the point that the visual elements were arranged together to generate a distant, fictional character, that, at the same time, is a real person whose actions can have impactful consequences on the world, mainly, that his behavior could trigger a third world war. These results are consistent with literature (Adum, 2018), since popular media can promote messages that reach large audiences using narrative elements such as obscenity, pain, death, among others, affecting the rationality of communication. This is common in Peru, since "El Trome" is known for creating a climate of chaos and uncertainty in Peru, by strategically positioning the most shocking news on their front covers (Bejarano, 2020), generating their own agenda apart from mainstream media. For example, on May 18, 2017, the tabloid featured Kim Jong-Un in its cover by warning about the "Crazy Chinese" who could start an atomic conflict. In contrast, 'El Comercio' and 'La República' were covering new leads on the Odebrecht scandal, this time related to the Governor of the Cusco province, who received more than 1 million USD in bribes.

Figure 4. Comparison between the most prominent peruvian media and the Trome newspaper (may 18, 2017)

Trome	El Comercio	La República
"Missile Terror. South Korea warns that Crazy Chinese can start an atomic conflict"	"Cusco Governor falls due to Odebrecht"	"Cusco Governor received US 1,250,000 from Odebrecht"

Source: El Trome, El Comercio, La República newspapers (2017)

Discussion

While in the 'El Trome' newspaper, the front page highlighted the so-called "Crazy Chinese" topic, in the newspapers El Comercio and La República, the media agenda for the month was dominated by the country's political agenda, highlighting the corruption scandals associated with the "Lava Jato" and "Odebrecht" cases. The political figures implicated in these issues were former President Ollanta Humala, his wife Nadine Heredia, and former governor of Cusco Jorge Acurio, among others. By making this comparison, the thesis of the "Smoke Screen", which some media critics appeal to, is refuted because it is evident that the 'El Trome' newspaper, rather than serving as a media tool for political distraction, was following its own news agenda focused on the success of the media diversion strategy centered around two eccentric characters like Kim Jong-Un and Donald Trump. Based on the findings, it has been possible to describe the narrative characteristics of graphic language and written language in the construction of the journalistic message of the nuclear crisis between the United States and North Korea, on the front pages of the Trome newspaper during May 2017, finding that the construction of the journalistic message is based on elements of written language (through the use of adjectives and hyperbole) and graphic language (warm color palette: red for headlines and a combination of black and red for the subheadings). In addition to the use of silhouetted photographs and infographics facilitated the creation a scenario of warlike confrontation and nuclear threat.

Regarding the written language, The General Editor of the Trome newspaper considers that the main criterion for making the front page of this newspaper is to understand what interests the "ordinary" person (a name that is repeatedly mentioned in journalistic newsrooms for refer to the archetype of the common person). It is for this reason that they are in a permanent search through their editors, who are in direct and constant contact with the main characters in the news. No less important is the work of the photographers, who are expected to go further and feel the human side of the events: the feeling, the pain, the joy of the protagonists. In this sense, the decision to show a seemingly deadly situation with bizarre graphic elements was, according to him, not at odds with objectivity, given that, although they began to call it "crazy Chinese", the development of the news was based on concrete facts and an international news agenda.

The narrative characteristics of the written language for the construction of the journalistic message on the covers of 'El Trome' newspaper is aimed at its target audience: citizens of the lower-middle and lower strata, linked to the informal economy and cultural practices of a popular nature ('chicha press'). In this sense, the newspaper uses colloquial, direct language and appeals to the use of qualifying adjectives and hyperbole, in order to generate feelings of fear and expectation in the face of events such as the imminent war confrontation and nuclear threat.

Conclusions

The current used grounded theory precepts in order to analyze the coverage of the 2017 nuclear crisis between The United States and North Korea in May 2017 as presented on the cover of the Peruvian newspaper 'El Trome'. By employing Content Analysis on the 30 issues of the aforementioned month, 14 distinct covers were found that alluded to the character nicknamed the "Crazy Chinese". This information was contrasted with 3 in depth interviews with the General and Design and Web Editors of the newspaper, as well as an external marketing consultant who envisioned this strategy. The findings reveal that the best-selling Peruvian newspaper turned the threat of imminent nuclear war into a spectacle in order to increase sales, and decided not to compete with mainstream media that was covering large corruption scandals such as Odebrecht and 'Madre Mía', which involved former presidents and governors. Instead, this popular newspaper created its own agenda by showing a sequential narrative with a peculiar protagonist who appeared fictious but was evidently real. The analysis of both the content analysis and the interviews has allowed the team to verify that both the graphic and textual elements present in the Trome front covers complement each other, producing an impact that generates expectation in the reader. In this way, the order of the front covers and photo montages turned Kim Jong-Un, nicknamed "Crazy Chinese", into an approachable character, despite hailing from such a distant country to Peru. This editorial decision was not employed with the intention to serve as a "smokescreen" to the country's political turmoil, but was a mere marketing exercise that, based on the acceptance of the character by the readers, was sustained until the boost in newspapers sales slowed down. This situation is a reflection of a new Latin American trend, in which the large media conglomerates found a niche market in popular tabloid-format newspapers that reach audiences that would not necessarily connect to or would be able to afford paid subscriptions to mainstream news outlets. Humor, fear, tragedy and political scandals are the raw material of his process of spectacularizing the news agenda, fulfilling the unspoken mandate: "give the people what they want".

Regarding the narrative characteristics of the graphic language and the written language in the construction of the journalistic message on the covers of the Trome newspaper, these follow the popular trends of the so called 'chicha press', following the traditions impactful one-liners. The graphic narrative is reflected in the excessive use of warm colors, such that the red color stands out in the headlines and the combination of black and red in the subheadings. The usage of fonts, photomontages and infographics, seek to generate visual impact rather than promote consumption of the written content. The text is created by carefully selecting qualifying adjectives and hyperboles that stand out. Colloquial and direct language is privileged instead of technical or objective descriptions, which produces sensations of fear and generates expectations of events that are happening on the other side of the world. The Peruvian readers could feel the sensation of an imminent warlike confrontation and potential nuclear threat. This contrasted with the media representation of the nuclear crisis between the United States and North Korea in the same time period that the front pages of the most important newspapers in Peru created. Outlets such as 'La República' or 'El Comercio' did follow the events of the nuclear crisis in their international sections. However, these were not the focus of their front covers, but rather the political agenda that shifted several governments since 2017. In contrast, 'El Trome' newspaper took the decision to place these events further on their pages and focused on creating an information agenda on their cover that could capture the attention of popular readers. By offering unique and fresh news that were distinct from the mainstream media agenda, 'El Trome' editors considered that they would increase sales, since most news outlets focused on topics that will not attract the attention of their consumer base. This work can serve as a background for other investigations and the results will serve as reference material when making an analysis of the characters that emerge and attract the eyes of the readers of popular newspapers: these could be personalities that seem to have the capabilities of "endangering the free world", such as Saddam Hussein, then Osama Bin Laden, and now the so-called "Crazy Chinese" Kim Jong-Un. The trends die down, but the usage of fear politics and threats will always have a niche in the media accustomed to having a sensationalist agenda. Every time a character with these characteristics appears, they will be a candidate to be used by the mass media as a banner to create sequential narratives, much like the saga of the "Crazy Chinese".

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