

The journalism of conjecture or rumors in Peru

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ABSTRACT

The article addresses the use of verbs in the conditional mode of rumor and conjecture in journalism, which have been the subject of analysis and discussion by experts and academics who warn that resorting to these verbal modes makes the information unreliable since it is unverified information on which the editor or journalist is not committed, bringing as a consequence that the quality and credibility of journalism declines. In this sense, it is necessary to verify whether Peruvian journalism maintains good practices. To address this task, four newspapers of national circulation and varied styles in the approach to news have been selected. Between the months of October and November 2022, the newspapers were reviewed and these verbs were identified by type or mode of conditional, their frequency of use in the texts, likewise, it was seen in which sections they are most used and the ethical factor was added to see if this limit was crossed. It was concluded that Peruvian journalism tends to use conditional verbs, although the conditional of conjecture and to a lesser extent the conditional of rumor, despite the parameters established by the media.

Keywords: journalism; conjecture; rumor; conditional mode.

INTRODUCTION

Journalism today is going through a unique process due to the influence of the Internet, especially social networks, through which people are flooded with information that is often not corroborated and, as they are presented, they seek to influence public opinion either for or against a political, economic, health or even ideological vision. The so-called fake news has become a great challenge for journalism, which now has to form special teams to confirm or verify the information circulating on social networks.

In the current circumstances, the challenge of journalism is to ensure that the information, even that which journalists themselves prepare, is of quality, and one of the aspects of this quality is the verification of the information. However, many specialists have observed that journalists continue to use the conditional of rumor or the conditional of conjecture in informative texts, although there are manuals or editorial policies that avoid them. The verbs "would have been" and "would be" are used by journalists as a way of taking distance or not taking responsibility for unconfirmed information, which detracts from the journalistic work, affects credibility, but above all, goes against journalistic ethics.

The study of this topic is justified on the basis that a conjecture or rumor is an indicator of a person's behavior because it affects human interactions and worldviews. The present work aims to know the frequency and how Peruvian journalism uses these verbs in conditional. For this purpose, four outstanding media were selected. This way of approaching reality will allow to know better the journalistic practice and to make the necessary adjustments to editorial policies, for better journalism.

FRAME OF REFERENCE

Journalism today is one of the areas most affected by the rapid development of communication network technology, becoming an important platform for communication and exchange in today's society. The Internet is promoting these platforms as main vectors that provide the right conditions for rumors in the news and, thus, changing the way people interact, giving them an anonymous space (Zhang et al., 2021), through a newsroom that allows using a journalistic language of conjecture or rumors. In this way, a news item is offered that contains doubts about its veracity.

As stated by Ghazzali (2020), the rumor phenomenon is a mixture of many factors in addition to the natural one: sociological, economic, and psychological. Also, this phenomenon of rumor has caused many changes in its composition, in line with the changes known to societies and the development of everyday life in general with the increasing use of technological tools and modern technologies increasing its speed of propagation. "Serious news provides clear information about the author, whose identity is verifiable, and whose prior knowledge about the subject is documented somewhere" (Rass, 2021, p. 131). However, some people prefer

to preserve their pre-existing beliefs. The validity of the rumor is tied to whether some beliefs and goals align or conflict with the new information, and, therefore, may be positive or negative, respectively. From this edge, one of the scopes of journalism emerges the nature of the news, in order not to go into another field, we will only classify it, based on Grover et al. (2019), simply into positive information content, which leads to more positive dispositions towards the source, sharing positive information is more popular and strengthens a person's sense of well-being; on the other hand, sharing negative information inhibits people, no one likes bad news.

Journalism develops its work based on rules designed to preserve objectivity, so that trust in this medium arises based on how its processes work (Zahay et al., 2021), whose pillar of operation is the newsroom. With respect to its ontology, "journalism" possesses a dual capacity: (a) directly shaping the audience's understanding of an event, thereby (b) indirectly shaping the decisions that are made about that event, both by the audience and collectively and individually (Schwartz, 2021).

When speaking of objectivity, one cannot leave aside the principles of seeking the truth and verifying information before it is published, both of which are contained in the Code of Journalistic Ethics of all journalistic guilds, including the Peruvian one (CPP, 2015).

However, in journalism in general, conditional verbs are frequently used to give news. *Habría, sería, estaría, podría*, i.e., simple or compound conditional verbs are usually read in headlines and texts that often raise allegations and rumors.

It can be seen in "afirman que Garré habría manejado dos cuentas en Irán", headlines in Clarín newspaper (Santoro, 2015) of Argentina, in a report that involves the former ambassador of Argentina in Venezuela in the triangulation of money linked to the relationship between the Kirchner family and the then Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez. The report even uses several conditionals such as "'sería", "habría", "figuraría", "manejaría", "estaría", "trataría" and "tendría". In this way, it is expressing the possibility of the occurrence of a fact or event that has not taken place, or that is desired to take place. This case is related to investigative journalism.

But where the use of the conditional is most observed is in entertainment journalism. Recently, the Colombian newspaper El Espectador headlined "Shakira y Piqué: Las duras palabras con las que Piqué habría terminado la relación (con Shakira)" (Diario El Espectador, 2022). It will not go into details of the news, but it should be noted that the source was a paparazzi who gave an account of the sayings of the soccer player and the singer, i.e., it is the use of a third party as a source, in which the journalist or author of the article was not responsible.

In sports, there is perhaps a greater abuse of the conditional. Journalist Xavier Román of the GABO Foundation, when analyzing the front pages of Latin American and European sports media during the Russia 2018 World Cup, points out that speculation and rumor, despite being outside the ethical practice of journalism, are frequent in the coverage. The most illustrative examples of this trend can be found in the "rumorology" about transfers, which was also cultivated during the World Cup (Ramon, 2018).

"F.C. Barcelona's alleged interest in William, Rabiot and Hazard, or rumors about changes of direction in the Mexico and Peru national teams occupied prominent spaces on the analyzed front pages," Ramón points out (para 7); but he underlines that rumors about Cristiano Ronaldo's signing for Juventus grabbed the headlines of TuttoSport, A Bola, Marca, As or Corriere dello Sport. "The transfer was eventually finalized, but for more than 10 days, the European media maximized the space of this rumor on the front page, taking away opportunities to deal with other relevant issues about Russia 2018, on and off the pitch" (para. 7).

The specialist Javier Gómez-Bueno is much more critical in his analysis of the use of rumor or the conditional of rumor by the Spanish sports press. He concludes that it does not comply with the deontological codes. And he adds: "The use of rumor is commonplace in sports journalism. This causes serious harm to the public, in its right to reliable information, and to the press itself, which is discredited by its lack of rigorousness" (Gómez-Bueno, 2014, p. 478).

In turn, Hurtado (2021), when analyzing the headlines of the Spanish-speaking press, concludes that the use of the conditional mode, whether rumor or conjecture, is more frequent in Latin America than in Spain.

Specifically, the highest figures correspond to the press in Argentina, Colombia, Chile, and Peru. In the rest of the Hispanic American newspapers examined (from Venezuela, Ecuador, and Mexico) as well as in the Spanish mainland, the percentage of occurrences is much lower. This is especially so in the case of the compound conditional, whose presence in the corpus is scarce" (p. 176)

It is worth mentioning that among the media analyzed by Hurtado is the newspaper La República, a national journalism reference.

The fact is that the use of the conditional is not a phenomenon specific to international journalism. In Peru, it is also common to read headlines or texts with these verbs. Recently, the dean of the national press *El Comercio* headlined: "Pedro Castillo would have received a payment of S/30 thousand from Zamir Villaverde" (Ortiz, 2022). The headline is based on the statements of an effective collaborator before the Public Prosecutor's Office, in which he indicates that the businessman -favored by bids- delivered this sum to the President through Juan Silva when he was still head of the MTC. These statements, however, have to be corroborated according to the process of effective collaboration established by the justice system.

Peruvian sports and entertainment journalism are also the most infected by the use of conditional verbs. For example, the Peruvian press speculated a lot about the possible signing of Paolo Guerrero, a striker of the national team, by the Argentine sports club Boca Junior. This rumor was later denied by the player himself.

This phenomenon, i.e., the frequent use of verbs in simple or compound conditional has been warned by several scholars as a way for journalists or media to avoid criminal liability in the face of a defamation complaint by the affected party, but also, in many cases, as a lax way of contrasting facts, a job that is not only an obligation but a principle of journalism in general and investigative journalism in particular.

While several authors have tried to identify the origin of the use of conditional verbs -some identify it as a Gallicism, others have detected its use much earlier among historians- the Real Academia de la Lengua Española (RAE) has tried to qualify it in recent years, ending up by including it within indicative as a postpretérito or future of the past, as it recalls it (Bermúdez, 2016)

In this regard, Grijelmo (2015) points out that the use of these conditionals has the purpose of warning that the information is not verified. "And they can be answered, to begin with, that if the news is not verified it should not be disseminated" (para. 15).

The author also points out that exposing this kind of doubt, conjecture, or unconfirmed fact leaves the public with the feeling that journalists are increasingly less likely to verify what they say. However, it should be added that this situation, therefore, also affects the credibility of the media that publishes such information.

In the same vein, Ochoa (2012) indicates that "journalism is not a discipline of hypotheses, much less of conjecture" and that having fallen into this fashion has distorted interpretive or investigative journalism (para. 5).

It should be noted that the style manuals of the Spanish newspaper *El País* (2021) and the newspaper *El Comercio* (2021) state that no rumor is news; therefore, the conditional of the rumor should be banned from the headlines of these media; however, this is not a practice in all national media.

The use of the conditional of the rumor or conditional of conjecture is frequent, even affecting honors without having a clear responsibility and going over the codes of ethics. Hence, the a need to address this phenomenon in the Peruvian press. To what extent is its use frequent, which would give a sign of compliance with the Code of Ethics? Borah (cited in Schwartz, 2021) states that while it is commonly considered that journalism-as-power is in its effects: it manages the symbolic resources of society, provides its audience with a way of understanding the world, shaping public opinion, shaping politics, etc.

METHODOLOGY

For this reason, the present research attempts to identify the practice in the use of the conditional verbs of rumor and conjecture in national journalism; therefore, it is descriptive and analytical, based on the measurement of the frequency of the use of these verbs, which will allow to point out how rigorous is the practice of journalism in Peru. For this purpose, four written media that deal with different topics or approach information in different ways were analyzed. They are *El Comercio*, *La República*, *Gestión* and *El Trome*. The first two have a political slant and clearly express a right-wing and left-wing ideology, respectively. The last two approach reality from the point of view of the economy and the popular the use of the replana, respectively.

Two serious newspapers have been chosen, one specialized and one popular. Gargurevich (2001) identifies the latter as a popular and sensationalist newspaper that fits the denomination of "chicha" newspapers, that is, a tabloid newspaper with a lower price than serious newspapers, "informatively sensationalist and with a very colorful front page" (p.242). It should be noted that the period of analysis was from October 17 to November 15, 2022. The factors or variables established were the type of conditional, the mode of the conditional, its frequent use, the sections of the media, and whether journalistic ethics are affected. Not only the headlines of the newspapers were taken into account, but also the texts of the news items to identify whether they dealt with rumors or conjectures. For example, in the article published in the newspaper *El Comercio* titled: "Gobierno dilata reposición de Daniel Soria y mantiene a León en la Procuraduría General" (Reyes, 2022), it is added the statements of specialists who speculate about the possibility that the government of Professor Pedro Castillo could be denounced for having incurred in the crime of disobedience.

Another detail to be taken into account is that the international and opinion sections were not included. In the first case, they are much more rigorous in their treatment because their main source is international news agencies, and in the second case because of the subjectivity of the commentators or opinion writers.

For the analysis of the data and information collected, the New Grammar of the Spanish Language (NGLE, 2009) identifies the simple conditional (Susana would give 100 soles to Marco) and the compound conditional (Susana would have given 100 soles to Marco), and also establishes four modes of conditionals: the non-factual conditional, the conditional of attenuation, the conditional of conjecture and the conditional of rumor, the last two being the ones used in the development of this work.

Concerning the conditional of conjecture, which is also called the conditional of probability or epistemic conditional, according to the RAE (year), it refers to the future and is equivalent to: probably + imperfect or could + infinitive. For example, It would be 10 a.m. It was probably ten o'clock at night. I would be thirty years old then, I could be thirty years old then.

There is also the conditional of rumor, a variant of the conditional of conjecture, which the RAE itself admits is frequently used in journalistic language to present information cautiously or to give news that is not sufficiently contrasted. This conditional of rumor is not grammatically incorrect for the RAE, even though the journalistic style manuals of El País in Spain or El Comercio in Peru consider its use inappropriate because it presents a rumor as news.

Axelle Vatrican points out that language scholars agree that the rumor conditional allows the presentation of a fact without the editor, writer, or speaker committing to the truth of what is said or written. He adds that this mode makes it clear that the source of the information is not the speaker himself (Vatrican, 2014).

Ecuadorian journalist Simón Espinosa Cordero (2002) adds that the conditional of rumor with *ría* (...) expresses probability, uncertainty, and approximation, but not concerning a past time but to a future time.

Taking these aspects into account, it was observed which sections of the news use these conditionals the most and how often, in addition to whether it crosses the threshold of ethics.

RESULTS

The newspapers were analyzed from October 17, 2022, to November 15, 2022, that is, a month in which the political situation of the country was mainly at the political level, framed in the accusations or complaints against the regime of Professor Pedro Castillo for misuse of public resources, and the possibility of a presidential vacancy. In the mentioned period, 236 notes were identified that used conditional.

Table 1
Use of the conditional

Press	Number	%
El Comercio	64	27.12
La República	58	24.58
Gestión	55	23.31
Trome	59	24.99
Total	236	100.00

Note: Table 1 shows that El Decano is the newspaper that uses the conditional the most, but only two percentage points above the other newspapers. It should be noted here that Gestión and Trome belong to the journalistic conglomerate of the El Comercio group and it can be inferred that they follow the same style manual. However, La República also follows the same line.

Table 2
Use of conditional types

TYPE OF CONDITIONAL Formats	El Comercio		La República		Gestión		TROME		TOTAL	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Simple	57	89.1	55	94.8	50	90.9	50	84.8	212	89.9
Compound	7	10.9	3	5.2	5	9.1	9	15.2	24	10.1
Total	64	100.0	58	100.0	55	100.0	59	100.0	236	100.0

Note: Table 2 reveals that, of the two types of conditional (simple and compound), 89% of the news items identified, in the four newspapers cited, use the simple conditional, i.e., could, would, would be, would be, etc. Only 10% use the compound conditional.

Table3
Conditional mode

CONDITIONAL MODE Formats	El Comercio		La República		Gestión		Trome		TOTAL	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
1. De Conjetura	48	75.0	43	74.1	49	89.1	17	28.8	157	66.5
2. De Rumor	16	25.0	15	25.9	6	10.9	42	71.2	79	33.5
Total	64	100.0	58	100.0	55	100	59	100.0	236	100.0

Note: In Table 3, at the mode level, the use of the conditional of conjecture was identified in 66%, much higher than the conditional of rumor (33%). Although the latter is lower, the use of the conditional rumor should be noted as it allows the identification of non-contrasted information, as the critics of the use of this conditional mode warn.

Table4
Frequency of use

FREQUENCY OF USE Formats	El Comercio		La República		Gestión		Trome		TOTAL	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%		
1. Very frequent	4	6.2	2	3.4	00	0.0	1	1.7	7	3.0
2. Frequent	17	26.6	20	34.5	20	36.4	20	33.9	77	32.6
3. Infrequent	43	67.2	36	62.1	35	63.6	38	64.4	152	64.4
Total	64	100.0	58	100.0	55	100.0	59	100.0	236	100.0

Note: In Table 4, however, the statistics show that in the texts that use conditionals, the use is infrequent (64%) versus frequent (32%) and very frequent (3%). This gives the idea that the editors are careful not to overuse these verbs.

Table5
Use by sections

SECTIONS Formats	El Comercio		La República		Gestión		Trome		TOTAL	
	Número	%	Número	%	Número	%	Número	%		
Politics	28	43.8	30	51.7	4	7.3	7	11.9	69	29.2
Economics	17	26.6	16	27.6	51	92.7	1	1.7	85	36
Local/National	13	20.3	11	19.0	00	0.0	19	32.2	43	18.2
Spectacle	2	3.1	00	0.0	00	0.0	3	5.0	5	2.1
Sports	4	6.2	01	1.7	00	0.0	29	49.2	34	14.5
TOTAL	64	100.0	58	100.0	55	100.0	59	100.0	236	100.0

Note: In Table 5, it can be seen that the ones that use conditionals the most are the economy, politics, and local/national sections, followed by sports and entertainment. But if we go deeper, 79 articles use the rumor conditional, of which 29 (36.7%) are from the sports section, 27 (34.2%) from the political section, 18 (22.8%) from the local/national section, 3 from the economy (3.8%) and 4 (2.5%) from the entertainment section. This can be explained by the fact that the period under analysis coincided with the end of the national soccer tournament, with the immediate opening of the transfer market and therefore the rumors of which soccer player stays or leaves this or that team. The political section is also inclined to the use of the conditional of rumor, but linked to the judicial notes in which politicians are involved.

Table6
Use by sections

AFFECTS ETHICS										
Formats	El Comercio		La República		Gestión		Trome		TOTAL	
	Número	%	Número	%	Número	%	Número	%	Número	%
1. Yes	00	0.0	1	1.7	00	0.0	00	0.0	1	0.4
2. No	62	96.9	53	91.4	55	100.0	58	98.3	228	96.6
3. Maybe	2	3.1	4	6.9	00	0.0	1	1.7	7	3.0
Total	64	100.0	58	100.0	55	100.0	59	100.0	236	100.0

Note: In Table 6, referring to the effect on ethics, it was identified that 96.6% of the notes that use conditionals do not cross this limit, but there are notes that cross (3.4%), or perhaps do not, these limits.

DISCUSSION

From the analysis of newspapers, it is possible to confirm the use of the conditional mode, conjecture, and rumor, in the headlines and text of the analyzed newspapers, as Hurtado (2021) had already noticed when he compared the headlines of newspapers in Spain with those of Latin America, among them the newspaper La República, being the Spanish-speaking ones those that frequently use the conditional mode.

This situation contrasts with what has been warned above by several academics regarding the fact that the use of the conditional of rumor or conjecture only diminishes the quality and credibility of journalistic work, since the author of the articles does not take responsibility for the content or takes distance from it and, worst of all, does not verify the information.

The analysis reveals that the newspapers are inclined to use the simple conditional, i.e., could, would, would be, etc., and in a lower percentage, the compound (would have been, would have had, etc.). However, when the conditional mode is approached, it is observed that the analyzed newspapers prefer the use of the conjectural conditional (such as the headline "poverty rate stagnates at 26%" published by the newspaper Gestión, a conclusion based on official statistics) and not the rumor conditional.

In this last part, it is necessary to be cautious because although rumor conditionalities have been detected, they have not resulted in an affectation on journalistic ethics per se. This is mainly noticeable in the rumors that are published when the transfer market opens in Peruvian soccer, that is to say, about whether this or that player is wanted by any sports club.

As for the sections of the newspapers, although the frequent use of the conditional has been identified in the political and local sections, the use of the conditional of rumor is more present in the sports section, which confirms what was already pointed out by journalist Xavier Ramón when he analyzed the use of the conditional in the sports press after the Russia 2018 World Cup.

Here it should be made clear: the use of hypothesis and conjecture as a working method, especially in investigative journalism, should not be confused with the publication or dissemination of conjecture itself, i.e., unverified information.

Investigative journalism starts with a hypothesis or conjecture, as several authors and journalists have pointed out. Carlos Lizárraga, a journalist who was part of the team in the case known as "Casa Blanca", told in a workshop for the Gabo Foundation the working method used to start the investigation that involved the president of Mexico, Enrique Peña Nieto, and his family in acts of corruption. The team began their investigations when they saw the interview that the president's wife, actress Angélica Rivera, had given to

Hola magazine in a luxurious house. The premise with which they started was how did she get that house, with bribes, they speculated. From there came the investigation that revealed sometime later that the company Grupo Higa had benefited from contracts by Peña Nieto since his time as Governor, at the same time that he began to finance and build the mansion -now known as "the white house"- to the liking of the couple, in the most valuable area of Mexico (Aristegui et al., 2015).

Hunter (2013), in his book on investigative journalism, points out that by analyzing a hypothetical story, the journalist can more easily detect what information he or she needs to look for. He adds that the hypothesis defines specific questions that must be answered to find out whether or not it makes sense. This happens through a process by which we dismantle the hypothesis and analyze each of the statements it contains. Then we can verify each of these statements and will also see what meaning the words we use to tell the story have because to begin the work we must first discover and define their meaning.

Hunter goes on to warn that many errors originate from,

In the natural tendency of our minds to fill in the gaps in history with conjecture. (...) It happens, for example, when they say to themselves: "I don't know what exactly happened, but it must have been this way". Often what happened is more interesting. Either explain to the reader that yours is speculation or acknowledge that you don't know what happened. If you don't know something, there is no mistake in admitting it, and you will reinforce the authority of what you do know (Hunter, 2013, p. 81)

It can be said then that the instrument, i.e., the hypothesis has become the end. Newspaper headlines continue to use *habría*, *sería*, and *podría*, attributing unverified facts that in some cases have affected honors.

In this sense, the Fundación Español Urgente (Fundéu RAE, 2020) recommends replacing these verbs "with other formulas that highlight the conjectural nature of the information, such as, according to sources consulted, possibly, it may be possible that, it is believed that..." (para. 2).

The objective then is that the journalist does not lose his route, which is to inform and to take responsibility for what he transmits, not only by checking the information but also by assuming its content.

CONCLUSIONS

Peruvian journalism tends to use conditionals, especially the conditional of conjecture, although to a lesser extent the conditional of rumor. The conjectural conditional is based on establishing possible scenarios or decisions in the future, while the rumor conditional is based on unconfirmed actions or facts.

Regarding the latter, it should be noted that the use of the conditional rumor occurs more in the sports section, since the period of analysis coincided with the opening of the transfer market, and in the political section, due to the dissemination of judicial information related to politicians. However, although there is an inclination to use the conditional of rumor and conjecture, this does not exceed the limits of journalistic ethics.

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