



The construction of child malnutrition in Argentine print media during the 2001 crisis

La construcción de la malnutrición infantil en la prensa escrita argentina durante la crisis de 2001

Demonte, Flavia¹

¹Bachelor in Communication Sciences. Master in Social Policies. PhD in Social Sciences, Faculty of Social Sciences, Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA). Scholar in the Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (CONICET), Instituto de Altos Estudios Sociales (IDAES), Universidad Nacional de San Martín (UNSAM), Argentina.
flaviademonte@yahoo.com.ar

ABSTRACT In the Argentina of 2001, there was great concern expressed in political, technical, academic and media circles regarding the impact the crisis could have the nutritional status of the poor. The media emerged as a major actor in the process of constructing the problem within that context. In this article the construction of child malnutrition in the period of December 2001 to December 2002 is discussed, and the representations upon which the print media, as a key actor in the public arena, based its discourse are identified. The methodology used was a qualitative approach and an exploratory-descriptive investigation. The data collection technique consisted of document analysis; the information was processed and analyzed using a discourse analysis methodology. The main results demonstrate the persistence of certain representations linked to the problem, even in contrast to epidemiological data generated during the same period. The identified representations, understood as the basis for defining intervention strategies, reveal meanings ensconced in the concepts of food, disease, and sick bodies, the measures needed to "solve the problem", the place of actors within the social network, and the interaction between the State and society.

KEY WORDS Child Malnutrition; Economic Recession; Communications Media; Press; Argentina.

RESUMEN En la Argentina de 2001, en diferentes ámbitos (político-técnicos, académicos, mediáticos) se temía sobre el impacto que la situación de crisis podía tener en el estado nutricional de la población en situación de pobreza. Los medios de comunicación se erigieron como los actores protagónicos en el proceso de construcción del problema en ese contexto. En este artículo se analiza la construcción de la malnutrición infantil entre diciembre de 2001 y diciembre 2002, identificando las representaciones que sobre la misma organizaron el discurso de la prensa escrita en tanto actor representativo del espacio público. Metodológicamente, se utilizó un enfoque cualitativo y un tipo de investigación exploratoria-descriptiva. La técnica de recolección de la información fue la documental y el procesamiento y análisis se realizó bajo la metodología del análisis del discurso. Los principales resultados evidencian la persistencia de ciertas representaciones ligadas al problema, aun en contra de los datos epidemiológicos producidos durante el mismo período. Las representaciones identificadas, estructuradoras de las estrategias de intervención, dan cuenta de los sentidos que adquieren la alimentación, la enfermedad y el cuerpo enfermo, las medidas necesarias para "resolverla", el lugar de los actores en el espacio social y la interacción entre Estado y sociedad.

PALABRAS CLAVE Desnutrición Infantil; Recesión Económica; Medios de Comunicación; Prensa; Argentina.

THE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT IN WHICH A COMPLEX PROBLEM IS CONSTRUCTED

In 2001, Argentina went through one of the deepest crisis of its recent history. This crisis, which continued in subsequent years, was the result of a profoundly unequal socioeconomic model that abruptly brought into evidence the effects of the social exclusion that had been deepening for more than 20 years due to a combination of economic recession and inflation (1). The looting wave, the "cacerolazos" [demonstrations in which pots were banged as a sign of protest] in the city of Buenos Aires, the resignation of the president followed by a succession of five presidents within ten days were events of great political, institutional and social impact that remain vivid in our memory (2). The extent of the crisis is reflected in the social indicators: as a result of unemployment, devaluation and inflation, the number of families below the poverty line increased from 28% in October 2001 to 41.4% in May 2002 and 45.7% in October 2002, while families below the indigence line increased from 9.4% in October 2001 to 18% in May 2002 and to 19.5% in October 2002 (3).

The enactment of the Public Emergency Act 25561 regarding social, economic and administrative issues at the beginning of 2002 was evidence of the situation the country was enduring. Employment, health and food access were the social issues on the political agenda. Thus, child malnutrition and food access issues were made visible socially and politically and there was great concern in diverse areas (technical-political, academic and media circles) about the impact the crisis could have on the poor and on families below the indigence line. An increase in acute malnutrition was predicted, in disregard of other clinical manifestations such as chronic and hidden malnutrition, obesity and overweight. As a consequence, the contents and the implementation of nutritional programs were intensely debated and different actions were taken in order to attempt to reduce the problem (promoting the consumption of goods produced in the home, direct and indirect assistance through state nutrition programs, activities of

social and community organizations, proposals of new bills and the enactment of the Nutritional Security Act 25724 in December 2002, under which the Nutrition and Food Provision Program was created).

Despite the debates held on this subject, child malnutrition figures have remained steady in Argentina during the last 20 years, revealing a complex nutritional profile. With respect to this, surveys carried out in different provinces during the 90s by the Center for Studies on Child Nutrition (CESNI, from the Spanish *Centro de Estudios sobre Nutrición Infantil*), information provided by the Permanent Home Survey (EPH, from the Spanish *Encuesta Permanente de Hogares*) in 1994 of the National Census and Statistics Institute, and Aguirre's contributions (4) (a), all described the same malnutrition pattern in which chronic malnutrition prevailed over acute malnutrition and, at the same time, overweight and obesity were becoming increasingly important as public health and nutritional issues. In 1995, the National Health Ministry conducted the First National Anthropometric Survey among children between 0 and 6 years that were seen in the public health system. The second national survey was carried out in 2002. Although not all age groups were evaluated, the results of these surveys were significant because the use of same methodology permitted their comparison. No differences were found among the 1995 and 2002 population samples regarding weight/age, height/age, and weight/height distributions; the most prevalent nutritional problem shown in both surveys was chronic malnutrition and the second, in terms of frequency, was overweight; the anthropometric indicators regarding acute malnutrition remained at low levels, and had even decreased in the total sample. Finally, the most adequate nutritional conditions were found in children under 12 months of age; whereas among children between 12 and 24 months of age the prevalence of low height and low weight considerably increased, being the only group where low weight/age figures in 2002-2003 were higher than the results of the 1995 survey (5,6). Similarly, the data from the National Health and Nutrition Survey carried out in 2003 (b) confirmed this epidemiological trend: anemia

and iron deficiency, low height, overweight and obesity were the most prevalent nutritional disorders shown in all the age groups studied (7).

These changes in nutritional patterns, as well as the debates among different actors during the crisis, gave rise to the central question of this study: how was the issue of child malnutrition constructed in the print media after the political-institutional, economic, social and cultural rupture provoked by the crisis from December 2001 to the enactment of Act 25724 in December 2002? For this purpose, the representations at work in the media discourse were identified and analyzed, understanding the print media as an actor representative of the public sphere, and, as such, central to and conditioning of the issues and forms expressed in the public arena.

As was previously highlighted, the context generated a climate that put the issue of malnutrition in the center of the socio-political scene, giving rise to debates, positions, definitions and interventions on the part of different social actors (state institutions, social and community organizations, networks of experts, etc.). This study deals with that particular moment, focusing specifically on the discourse of the press as a key actor in the process, without losing sight of the larger context and the connections with other actors and their discourses also produced within the print media. In this sense, the press and the media in general constituted an analytical space in which different perspectives and meanings in use, especially within the political and technical arena, were brought together.

THE MEDIA: KEY ACTORS IN THE PROCESS OF CONSTRUCTING A PROBLEM

Underlying the central question guiding this work is a certain way of comprehending the social realm and how it is experienced, perceived, interpreted and understood. According to this perspective, problems do not exist in reality waiting to be discovered and explained, but rather are constructed through complex processes characterized by competition and conflicts in

principles that produce representations expressing different interests (8). Therefore, it is assumed that social reality is constructed both by objective conditions and by the way the social agents perceive and interpret the world (9). Bourdieu's notion of points of view refers in this sense to the perspectives, to the subjective visions produced from a particular point, from a certain position in the social space. In other words, the place one occupies in the social space predisposes one to perceive, to evaluate and interpret the world in a certain way, crystallizing into representations that determine the actions of individuals and groups. On the other hand, the representations regarding a problem — in this case, child malnutrition embodies a complex health problem in which socioeconomic, cultural and psychological factors converge — materialize into a variety of discourses. These discourses not only can be found in the arena of "politics" as a practice confined to political powers as "makers" of public policy (or practices, measures, actions), but also emerge as a social practice for producing meanings that express categories with which to apprehend the world, in accordance with the different perspectives or points of view of the agents involved in its construction, suggesting possible goals and courses of action (10).

While all individuals and groups perceive or undergo diverse types of problems, the establishment of an issue as a matter of public debate deserving public attention and action (11) depends upon the construction of subjects according to power relationships. Actors from different fields take part in this scenario, and with different quantities of capital they try to impose or to hegemonize different definitions of the problem and its legitimate context of reference: political parties, bureaucrats, networks of experts and academics, mass media, the Executive and Legislative Powers, interest and public opinion groups (12,8). Even when these actors hold enough cultural, economic, or social capital to introduce the problem into the social agenda, elements of social unrest become visible when the media speaks about them, that is, when journalists recognize the problems as such, according to the interests of the sector upon which they depend (13). Not only do the media

make visible, set and construct the agendas of problems, but they also condition the manner in which the problem will be discussed in the public arena. However, no discourse can be analyzed isolated from its political, social economic and cultural context, nor as "mere" discourse: many actors with different interests circulate within the press, therefore the media are shaped within discursive scenarios. In other words, media discourses are connected with discourses coming from other fields and other actors that, as a whole, contribute to the construction of reality as they establish and shape the daily experiences of individuals and social groups.

THE JOURNALISTIC DISCOURSE IN THE WRITTEN PRESS: BETWEEN FACT AND FICTION

As shapers of the agendas of problems and of public discussion, the media and the journalists that work in them are not neutral mediators of the relationship between information and the public. On the contrary, the news is influenced by corporate, political, and individual interests, as well as by diverse social representations (14). Furthermore, news items are stories constructed by a process that implies deploying different strategies recurrent in media discourse in preparing the version that will be made public. The selection of topics, the perspective from which they are approached, the extent with which and the way in which they are covered, the sources consulted, and the systems of classification used all organize and explain the topic's significance in a certain historical moment, thus conditioning the public debate (14).

Topics are organized and placed into certain categories. These classifications depend on where the events take place and respond to a common or sector-based interest (15). When the topic is important enough, it can be presented serially, that is, discussed over time, as it represents a serious or unresolved problem that needs to be developed and that produces other related events. Therefore, it must be continuously fed with new information.

The informative sources have two different, more or less explicit, consequences: to grant credibility to the narrated event as well as to emphasize some ideas and to exclude or minimize others. On certain occasions, when an issue is regularly discussed, the same set of sources is habitually consulted. Thus, the media can ensure the continuity and homogeneity of the worldview presented, naturalizing certain discourses and contributing to an economic construction of the information (15).

The discourse of the press intertwines and overlaps several formats: informative (chronicles), narrative (news regarding daily life with descriptions and anecdotes) and argumentative (opinion columns, editorials). They are sometimes accompanied by images intended to demonstrate the relevance of the topic, to make it more credible and, sometimes, to move or shock the public (14).

The way in which these dimensions of the journalistic discourse are coordinated reflects the editorial profile and the point of view of each media source regarding the information presented.

METHODOLOGY

The specific question that originated and guided this study was: What were the different views and meanings conferred to child malnutrition by the print media during the heat of the critical situation that emerged from the crisis of 2001? A qualitative approach with a transversal, exploratory-descriptive design was used to attempt to answer this question in order to analyze the construction of child malnutrition, with the general objective of identifying the representations found in the discourses of three different Argentine newspapers during a context of social and political emergency.

The sample was not probabilistic. The technique used to collect data was document analysis, so the corpus was built from secondary sources given by the articles themselves, which can be analyzed for research purposes although they were produced with objectives different from those of this study.

The media sources and the articles were intentionally selected. The inclusion criteria to select material to be analyzed were that they be daily newspapers of the widest national circulation and that they possess different editorial profiles thereby appealing to different audiences. The newspapers that met these criteria were *La Nación*, *Clarín* and *Crónica*, therefore these newspapers made up the corpus of analysis.

The articles were selected using a direct thematic reference criterion. In other words, all articles published in those newspapers between December 20, 2001 and December 31, 2002 that directly mention child malnutrition as a topic/problem were included. This criterion entailed the collection of all the articles published in these three newspapers during the established period that address the issue of child malnutrition in Argentina, its causes and consequences, its magnitude, and the interventions conducted. The specific timeframe was determined taking December 20, 2001 as the starting point, as this date marked the beginning of the crisis in institutional, social and political terms, when the president of the nation resigned. The end date was established as December 31, 2002 in order to find references to Act 25574 (d) and to its enactment process (passed on December 27, 2002), as it was one of the political responses to the problem and one of the analyzed newspapers actively influenced its process through a campaign coined "The most urgent hunger."

The entire corpus of analysis was made up of 690 articles (journalistic articles, opinion columns, editorials and interviews), distributed as follows: 297 articles from *La Nación*, 212 articles from *Clarín* and 181 articles from *Crónica* (e) (Table 1). The data processing and information analysis were performed using a discourse analysis methodology, supported by Nvivo 1.3 software.

The texts were considered to belong to a specific discursive (journalistic) and social (social and historical context, the crisis in 2001) context, attempting to produce descriptions through two main dimensions: the statements made in each text and the strategies used to produce them, taking into account the theoretical and contextual aspects which provided information essential for approaching the analysis and interpretation of the texts. Thus, the first stage focused on fragmenting each document into units of codification, in order to group them into general categories that answered the following questions: What is the predominant nutritional profile in the three newspapers? What main causes (socio-economic, political, cultural and biological) are given to explain the problem? What consequences (biological, social, political) are portrayed? What is the magnitude of the problem in terms of the amount of people affected? How is the affected population described? What other actors appear to be principally involved in the situation and how are their interventions characterized? What reference

Table 1. Distribution of the journalistic articles referring to malnutrition published in *La Nación*, *Clarín* and *Crónica*, by genre. Argentina, December 2001-December 2002 (n=690).

Genre	La Nación	Clarín	Crónica	Total
Informative articles	259	176	181	616
Opinion Columns	22	19	-	41
Editorials	11	15	-	26
Interviews	5	2	-	7
Total	297	212	181	690

Source: own elaboration.

is made to the enactment of Act 25724, taking into account that it was one of the State responses during the context selected for this research? What points of view can be pinpointed regarding food policies? At the same time, aspects connected to the most relevant rhetorical and stylistic strategies were analyzed. These strategies are considered to be elements that cut across the journalistic texts and that demonstrate the relevance of the issue and the enunciative modality chosen (predominant genres, section placement, use of sources, serialization, use of images, etc.).

MAIN RESULTS

The problem of malnutrition became socially and politically visible because of the power of the context. Thus, it was included in the government agenda and became a legal and institutional issue which resulted in bill proposals, law enactments, executive orders and resolutions, restructuring and reorganizing of programs, implementation of specific measures, etc. Also owing to the power of the context, child malnutrition was a widely and vastly discussed matter in the media sources analyzed during the selected historical period, as happens whenever the media is able to install a topic of debate. The extent of this discussion as well as its relevance is demonstrated by the abundance of information on the subject in terms of quantity, length of the articles, presence in the front page and perseverance over time. Indeed, the subject appeared in all three newspapers during the first half of 2002, and its presence increased during the second half. November was the month in which all three of the selected newspapers published the greatest number articles on the issue. The case of *La Nación*, considered to be a central force behind "The most urgent hunger" campaign, is particularly significant as the newspaper published at least one article on the subject in almost every daily edition during the month, as well as two special supplements entitled "*El hambre en la Argentina*" (Hunger in Argentina) and "*Desnutrición infantil*" (Child malnutrition) (June 1 and October 12, respectively).

Not only have these newspapers been uniform in their agenda, but they have also treated the information using the same journalistic strategies. They regularly placed the articles in the "general interest" or "society" sections, assuming it to be a matter involving all of society. The fact that this issue was principally placed in these sections, as a method of classification, is related to the genres from which this issue was developed: it appears mainly in informative articles, as chronicles or narrations, rather than in opinion columns or editorials (Table 1). Likewise, the serialized treatment (its long-term presence), the appeal to population statistics and specially to the description of particularly horrifying cases, the widespread coverage and discussion of the primary measures implemented, the regular references to informative sources (doctors, governmental officials, leaders of social organizations, technical experts), the use of shocking and moving images, were other aspects regularly found in the newspapers analyzed, demonstrating some of the features of media discourse that have been outlined previously.

Additionally, and despite the differences in the editorial profiles of each of the media sources analyzed (f), the contents of the information also placed them within the same field: the predominant nutritional profile was that of acute and chronic malnutrition due to lack of food, even contradicting the epidemiological data during the period (g).

That the figures are now official is not surprising here in Tucuman where [...] the curtain behind which a heartbreaking reality was hidden was pushed aside, never to be replaced again: the curtain that hid the big eyes of skeleton-like children in need of food and social justice (Informative article) (17).

What hunger caused in [D.A.R.] is not just painful. It is despicable. She is five and weighs only seven kilos. She is no taller than 60 centimeters and she can hardly stand. [D.] is another victim of this cruel and shameful poverty. She is another member of the army of starved children [...]. (Informative article) (18)

[A.] is small, skinny, but nothing can darken her bright eyes. She asks over and over again to have her picture taken [...]. (Informative article) (19)

The image of [D.], a young girl from Salta turned into a specter, with protruding ribs and delusional eyes, is a pathetic reflection of the suffering of the forgotten population of the Northwest. (20)

Misery continues to devastate all the regions of the country, starting with the northwest, where a six year-old girl weighing only four kilos remains hospitalized due to acute malnutrition [...]. (20)

The strategies used for the treatment of information were also similar in the three newspapers: both acute and chronic malnutrition were referred to as if they were an "infectious" disease that propagates, spreads and must be attacked, using as a base the shock and compassion provoked rather than logical arguments and epidemiological information:

Hunger is another front which holds [M.A.] in check. Malnutrition takes a step forward whenever it is given the chance. (Informative article) (21)

Hunger stalks San Juan. (Headline) (22)

Serious malnutrition cases were seen there, which forced doctors to take preventive measures to stop its progression. (23)

Malnutrition goes uncontrolled in the North. (Headline) (24)

When narrating the events in this way, as a disease progressing uncontrollably, the use of military language complemented the description of the problem, situations or interventions:

The mortality rate due to malnutrition has opened a new battle front in Chaco. [...] This time, hunger attacks from behind. [...] (Informative article) (25)

...the effects of child malnutrition, which killed sixteen children and put ten others in danger. (26)

After three years governing one of the most conflictive provinces; [...] Governor Julio Miranda was aware that his administration showed more failures than good decisions. But he did not expect that, just a few days later, the death of 11 children due to malnutrition would explode in his face like a bomb. (Informative article) (27)

The brave fight of the "mate cocido" [Infusion made from yerba mate] warriors. (Headline) (28)

Salta will fight against hunger. (Headline) (29)

The testimonial images accompanying these narrative articles were another resource utilized to address the problem as a whole. The gaunt bodies of boys and girls, in a hospital bed or in the context of their daily lives, were displayed as something horrible, as a symbol of misfortune and alienation, of that which for society is unresolved, unexplainable and incomprehensible and, therefore, revealing of the society's precariousness (30). These cases of malnutrition and death were thus presented with their full names; these girls and boys were defined by their weight and height, depicted as the victims of hunger, accompanied by their pictures; pity and shock were used as a method to approach the problem.

The main cause of malnutrition for the three newspapers was poverty. In this way, malnutrition is construed as disease of deprivation, of poverty due to lack of food. But even when poverty, as an expression of the crisis, was presented as the most immediate cause for this incomprehensible precariousness developing within a country of prolific food production, known as "the breadbasket of the world," from a biological point of view, a direct and mechanistic relationship between poverty, food inaccessibility, hunger and malnutrition was established. This obscured the relationship between poverty and the distribution and/or allocation of social resources, and the asymmetrical relationship between food availability and food accessibility.

Deaths due to malnutrition do not stop and the figures are increasing in a country with the highest rate of food per capita in the world. (31)

...70 million tons of grains are produced per year, which translates into 2 million tons per capita. What is more, with only 4% of our soy exports, we could eradicate this calamity! Argentina, even from the deep hole into which it has fallen, produces enough food for 320 million people. How is it possible that hunger can exist in such a country? (Editorial) (32)

In the country of plenty there are tables without food. (Headline) (33)

Hunger exists in "the breadbasket of the world." In spite of record harvests and exports of grains, meat, and foodstuffs, poverty hits 20 million Argentines. (Informative article) (34)

This construction of poverty within a country abounding with "wealth" led to a prevailing construction of the poor as people in need of food, and as passive, dependent and needy beings, minimizing or discrediting their knowledge and practices in relation their nutrition and health (5,6,35,36). The discourse within the media sources analyzed uses an individual case to conclude that "the majority" of the poor know little about how to feed and care for their children, or that they are not able to do it. They lack income, jobs, food, training and information:

The young mother has custody of her children, and generally feeds them at the communal soup kitchen in her neighborhood [...] but most of the time the children go off on their own in search of food. (Informative article) (37)

As LA NACIÓN confirmed, concepts such as dinner, breakfast and snack time have disappeared from the diet of many people in Tucuman. They can only afford one meal a day, and only then when they are able to work [...] (Informative article) (38)

Unemployment leads to hunger, to overcrowding, and to the possibility of contracting all types of

diseases. In addition, [...] the impossibility of accessing a health care center, along with lack of information and education, makes it so that many parents don't recognize that they themselves or their children are suffering from malnutrition or from other illnesses. (Informative article) (39)

A great part of the root of this evil is the lack of education of the majority of the poor and indigent sectors of our country. We are surprised at the degree of destitution in which whole families live, but even more so at their small amount of training regarding how to feed their children or how to develop family gardens that could help to solve the basic problems of those most in need. (Editorial) (40)

The poor must be "rescued" by the health services, especially by doctors, who on account of their self-sacrifice are exempt from all criticism; or by efficient, transparent and controlled health care programs.

The acknowledgement of the social dimension of the problem and its placement within the social context obscured the problem's economic dimension in terms of inequality. Explanations were sought in the world of politics, represented only by the "political class": given the situation of poverty and wealth, the deficient actions of State agencies in the management and distribution of programs and resources, and problems with the leadership as a whole, whether due to incompetence or corruption.

Differences in the positions of the three media analyzed can be observed in the characterizations of certain actors and their role in intervention strategies, attributable to the editorial profile of each newspaper. Thus, while *La Nación* considers that the State is inefficient in the management of nutritional programs and should transfer the task to non-governmental organizations, *Clarín* considers that although the State is inefficient or carries out low quality management, its intervention is still necessary.

Food exists: it is good and abundant. What is needed here is good management and [...] a genuine interest in solving the problem. (Editorial) (41)

The State has amply proved to be unable and unwilling to act efficiently to find a solution not linked to government handouts or bribery in exchange for votes. (Editorial) (42)

There are clear reasons to mistrust the plans of action and abundant slogans invented, of questionable practical value. The State does not appear to have found its way and perhaps is in need of more efficient entities to take the lead. (Editorial) (43)

...the responsibility for malnourished children must be sought in the economic crisis and in political deficiencies [...] Corruption, inefficiency and political crisis have been, to a great extent, responsible for the suffering of our society [...] (Editorial) (44).

Fighting against hunger should be the first national priority, and putting an end to child malnutrition, the most urgent task. To achieve this, all material and organizational resources of the State and of society which are essential to putting an end to this attack on human dignity should be mobilized. (Editorial) (45)

Within this framework and as a counterpart, the coverage of services provided by other actors such as the Catholic Church, non-governmental organizations and even socially conscious businessmen became especially important for *La Nación* and *Clarín*, in accordance with neo-philanthropic principles governed by a logic of good will and worthiness that intervene in a transparent and efficient way.

...if we just observe the behavior of some non-governmental organizations that efficiently manage, organize and provide assistance to the sectors most affected by poverty, achieving the goal [...] of keeping many people well-fed. (Editorial) (41)

It is impossible to understand that such things happen in a country in which the solidarity of people, of producers, and of businesses is available, awaiting the initiative of the public power to provide the necessary organizational capacity. (Editorial) (42)

It is essential to systematically include the numerous organizations from civil society that are already dealing with the problem [...] The only way of avoiding embezzlements and distortions in the use of welfare funds, as well as the abuse of unscrupulous political figures [...] is to fully involve society in the control of the management [...] of social resources. (Editorial) (45)

On the other hand, *Crónica* devoted little coverage to considering the State's role or the efficiency or transparency in the management of resources. As "the voice of the people," what was demanded was an end to the "destitution," without concern for who ought to do it. Similarly, the newspaper beclouded the action of organizations and completely excluded businessmen. Unlike *Clarín* and *La Nación*, that considered the imminent danger that poverty and indigence could entail, harkening back to the dangerous classes of the 19th century, *Crónica* covered such collective actions of the poor as marches denouncing the situation and demanding food and jobs.

Notwithstanding the different positions held by the three newspapers in relation to the actors involved in the problem, the three media sources operated as a corporation, honoring the role of the media in general, and of the written press in particular, when considering the problems that affect society, though some differences can be seen. At one extreme was *La Nación*, imposing the terms of the debate, simultaneously propelling and defining the possible solutions along with other allies consistent with the newspaper's ideas, as a witness committed to the cause (46). The "The most urgent hunger" campaign clearly showed the newspaper's position regarding the issue, what should be done and who should do it. The campaign began at the end of August 2002 and was aimed at guaranteeing legislative consideration of a bill proposed by Grupo Sophia, Red Solidaria, Poder Ciudadano, the reporter Luis Majul and *La Nación*. The newspaper reported on this initiative and encouraged its support, dedicating ample space in most of the editions to the transcription of the proposed bill, to the process of consideration of

what were termed popular initiatives within the legislature, to ways to support the bill, to the support being gained, to the public hearings which they openly encouraged readers to attend, to the process of collecting signatures. Not only was the newspaper a driving force behind the campaign and the proposed bill, but also, like *Clarín*, it wrote about the enactment of Act 25724 as if it were a result of popular and media initiative, downplaying the importance of the debates brought about by the project as well as the existence of other legislative proposals related to the problem that were presented during that year, specifically the bill that became law on December 27, 2002.

It is worth noting that in contrast to the active participation of *La Nación* during the last months of the analyzed period regarding the problem and the interventions it proposed, *Clarín* and *Crónica* adopted a less committed attitude in terms of actions, though not in terms of words. *Clarín* chose ambiguity as the most frequent strategy to encourage the debate, consistent with the newspaper's style. At the opposite end, the strategy mostly used by *Crónica*, as a collective that brings together the popular sectors without needing to appeal to doctrinal principles, called for a fight for the people; their motto, "*firme junto al pueblo*" [firmly beside the people] clearly characterizes this newspaper.

In LA NACIÓN, as an active extension of our editorial policy, we do not want to be neutral reporters of this distressing reality that impacts us day after day. As a representative of the communications media, not only do we want to describe reality, but we also want to promote action to overcome the many ills afflicting the Argentine society. (Informative article) (47)

The group set off in December after hearing the news about Argentina. (Informative article) (48)

The article produced such a great impact in my country that a group of citizens felt the need to help. (Informative article) (48)

The true and detailed images and information published by *Crónica* produced obvious commotion in all sectors of society and in the

highest spheres of power, only comparable to the astonishment that a citizen of any nation of the civilized world would experience when witnessing their children's death from malnutrition in a country abounding in food resources. We said it first, even though it hurts [...] (50)

The positions these media take should be analyzed in relation to the definitions of the problem offered by other social actors during the same period, as it is considered that the construction and definition of a problem are not mere constructions of the documents published by the written press. It can be said that these definitions are gathered from a whole series of actors (doctors, nutritionists, social policy experts, government officials, victims, etc.) who sometimes become information sources, as symptom-observers according to Sidicaro (46); the media then revise and reproduce these definitions according to the rules of the journalistic discourse. In this sense, there exists a dynamic relationship, moved by the force of the occurring events, which intertwines the voices of different actors who according to the newspapers are involved in the problem. However, this dynamic relationship also moves in the opposite direction. In this way, through the arguments of legislators, the discourse of politicians, and the speeches of social leaders, communication media have appeared as a source of argumentation, as revealers of situations, as denouncers of injustice, as central actors in making visible the problem.

In this joint construction, put in evidence during this process, certain representations that not only explain aspects that could be considered as restricted (prevailing nutritional profile, causes, consequences, actors directly involved), but which also explain the social organization as a whole, were revised. In other words, in the construction of malnutrition converged representations of disease and sick bodies, but also representations of food, of the measures necessary to "solve the problem," of the actors and institutions involved and even of the model of production. Accordingly, the recurrent representations that organized the discourses established an argumentative plot, based on certain homologies and ruptures that are detailed as follows:

- Argentina as a country historically prolific in food production, through the metaphor "the breadbasket of the world."
- Argentina as a country submerged in a serious social, economic and political crisis, seen as a critical, catastrophic context.
- Malnutrition, especially acute and chronic malnutrition, related to a problem of access to food (mainly in terms of quantity) and therefore, as a consequence of poverty.
- The focus of poverty as a symbol of emaciation produced by hunger and deprivation, mainly based on the definition of nutrition as a biological necessity and to a smaller degree on the political definition of food as a right, revealing two types of arguments with strong implications for the interventions in terms of policies to be conducted.
- Measures to fight the problem depicted as a fierce struggle, through metaphors related to war: struggle, fight, combat, battle, and search and rescue were different words taken from military language and widely applied in the biomedical discourse. Nutrition and health, as complex social issues, were restricted to two elements: food and medication. Giving something to eat was "the" measure that synthesized the war strategy.
- Two other groups of representations linked to the actors who were able (or unable) to "face" the problem: the State, incompetent and inefficient in this fight, should make room for civil society organizations; and the State, as guarantor of the rights related to food access, should act in coordination with other social actors.

DISCUSSION

How can the fact that the journalistic strategies used to report about the problem have been similar in different media sources with completely different editorial profiles be understood?

According to Bordieu (51), the uniformity of journalistic products can be explained as a consequence of the constraints imposed by the

sources and by the setting in motion of a series of mechanisms that correspond to the logic of the journalism field, one of the most important being the logic of competition among media professionals. It is also a consequence of the subjugation of the journalism field to the logic of the economic field. In this sense, the struggle is not for cultural capital but rather for economic capital, sustained by a command of the logic of the journalistic game that reporters gain through the exercise of the profession and that transcends conscience and discourse: journalists do what they have to do, whatever the game requires, so long as they have common interests connected to their position in the field and share certain cognitive structures and categories of perception and valuation linked to their social and professional trajectories.

What the game requires within the field is ruled by the logic of journalists competing to attract readers. In a field oriented towards the production of perishable goods like the news, the competition tends to adopt the form of competing to get the first scoop, which means keeping an eye on the activities of other journalists or media sources and trying to use similar strategies: special edition topics that must be imitated, columnists that must be recruited, subjects that must be covered because others have covered them. Thus, the decisions on what is important and on what deserves to be published stem not only from sources, whether official and non-official, but also from the informers themselves. These processes of comparative reading, a tacit requirement of the profession, make it a true "mirror game," a process of *circular circulation of information*. Therefore, the competition among professionals of the press, far from generating originality, tends to favor uniformity in the journalistic supply, regarding what is defined as news, the events to be covered and the style and format through which such events are narrated.

To the economic and corporative interests regulating media activity, as well as to the logics inherent to the journalistic field which make uniform what and how to narrate that which is considered newsworthy, another dimension of analysis must be added. This dimension is related

to the representations underlying the discussion of a problem that contribute to its construction and/or reproduction, as was stated in the previous section. The presence of representations linked to the treatment of this problem was evidenced; these representations transcend the logic of the journalistic discourse and expose argumentative plots that support the construction of the problem.

In this sense, another question not related to the strategies of journalistic discourse, but to the contents themselves, must be asked. That is, how can certain representations that organized those discourses be understood? Approaching these representations through the metaphoric transpositions used can offer an indication of the reasons certain elements persist.

Numerous metaphors have been revised to speak about child malnutrition and its expressions, but those most systematically used were Argentina as "the breadbasket of the world" and the interventions as strategies or tactics in the context of a war. Both organized a great part of the argumentative plot utilized.

The metaphor "the breadbasket of the world" appeared for the first time in the early 1900s, when Argentina was one of the most important exporters of agricultural products. This discursive operation obscures and obstructs understanding of the changes produced over almost a century: in the organization of production, in the social structure, in the types of products produced, in the asymmetrical relationship between availability and access to food (35). Even though it is true that Argentina can produce foodstuffs of sufficient quantity and quality, it is also true that this potential is at risk, as what is being questioned is if the necessary quantity and diversity can be sustained in the long term (6,35,53). In other words, what is at risk is the production sustainability, which has been left out of the debate. On the other hand, the metaphor "the breadbasket of the world" impedes comprehension of the relationship to availability of food and access to food in terms of inequality in the distribution of social income. Facing the misfortune of "no longer being" the "breadbasket of the world," an explanation is sought elsewhere, mainly in the situation of crisis, putting the blame especially on politicians and on the model implemented in the 90s. Thus,

the crisis was substantialized, as happened in the 90s, in the same way that the political class and the crisis of representation connected to it were substantialized, leaving a narrow margin to acknowledge the role of actors understood individually or collectively. The crisis is a consequence of a historical, political and economic process. As such, and as in other moments, the crisis provided the foundation and the explanation for acknowledging the problem. But the risk of operating in a "substantialized" crisis is to remain attached to that particular conjuncture in the situation, to debate and act in a state of emergency, providing responses that tend to solve the effects, but that do not debate or deal with the causes.

The focus on poverty as an effect of the crisis and understood from a biologicistic and mechanistic perspective, along with the prevailing characterization of the poor as passive actors in need of food, has obtruded the comprehension of the complex configuration of the consumption patterns of these actors and the impacts their own strategies (5,6,35,36), State programs, solidarity initiatives, and the food market have on the kind of food they consume and the resulting consequences in the current nutritional pattern (5,6).

In correlation to the way poverty and the poor are constructed, there is a prevailing conception of food and this conception appears linked to the definition of food as a biological need. Though the biological dimension of eating is acknowledged, it is a complex phenomenon: it entails biological aspects, connected to the needs and capacities of the body and the characteristics of the food; but it also entails ecological and demographical aspects, referred to quantity and quality of food that can be produced in a specific place in relation to its population and standards of living; technological and economic aspects, referred to circuits of production and distribution to enable the population access through the market, the State or mutual assistance networks; and socio-political and cultural aspects, referred to the norms of distribution according to class, age and gender as well as the type of food depending on the occasion (54). Considering only the biological dimension of eating in the political arena:

...places us in the biological reductionism of the social world and the political-academic struggle for the definition of the limits of what is "necessary." Associated with this definition is the concept of poverty as "lack" and the "human" standards of necessities under which the biological, cultural, axiological and other requirements are not covered (6 p. 226).

This construction of the problem as a whole (in terms of causes, affected populations and interventions promoted) contradicts the prevalent nutritional profile. Though epidemiological studies demonstrate the existence of an inversion of nutritional patterns, from the historical material and symbolic relation between poverty-thinness and wealth-fatness to wealth-thinness and poverty-fatness, it can be said that the representations have not coincided with these nutritional profiles (35). As has been analyzed, the representations of malnutrition linked to lack of food and of poverty linked to thinness are still in effect. These representations have been constructed and reconstructed over centuries and they are not exclusive to the media discourse. Such representations of the healthy or sick body are still in operation to date, though their connotation greatly differs depending on the social class: the thin bodies of the poor are a synonym of illness, while middle and upper-class thin bodies are a synonym not only of health, but also of beauty (6,55). However, the fat bodies of the poor also reveal nutritional problems related to deficiency. The problem is that the consequences of the inaccessibility of food in poverty, such as overweight and obesity, are still less visible to society. This visibility would contradict the interventions that have been carried out by various sectors, giving rise not only to public health but also to economic and political consequences. The direct provision of non-perishable food reproduces the food that the poor consume: cheap, filling food that goes a long way and also provides political containment (6).

At the same time, the thin bodies of the poor, as synonym of hunger, evidence representations connected to the biomedical discourse and, as such, appear strongly naturalized. Also linked to the medical discourse are war strategies. The fight against disease is an

example of the use of war language and its transposition to the field of disease. According to Sontag (56), the military metaphor appeared around 1880, when bacteria were identified as pathogenic agents. This explains the focus on malnutrition as a disease behaving like an infectious disease: epidemic, propagation, struggle, advance, devastation, etc. This also explains the silence regarding the strategies of families regarding health and illness: search and rescue represent two actions to save victims and the doctor embodies that salvation in the health field. As happens in every fight, there are victims and victimizers, faults and those at fault. But, unlike other diseases in which the responsibility is directly vested on the person suffering them (such is the case of HIV /AIDS), the fault is shared by the neo-liberal model, the political class, the "poor" management and administration of resources, and by the individuals in each home affected, for the deficiency and passivity attributed them.

These perspectives turn into principles that guide and condition the policy interventions and the promotion of policies: if the country produces enough food to feed the entire population, "if the food is abundant and good," if the country is going through a crisis where children from poor and indigent sectors are not satisfying their basic biological needs due to lack of food and this is reflected in their bodies, then giving them something to eat is the most effective public health and political intervention to "fight" against malnutrition.

Therefore, the lack of problematization related to the predominant nutritional profile and its causes implies that the intervention strategies, explicitly or implicitly promoted by the media, reproduce a logic as successful (in economic and political terms) as it is counterproductive (in public health terms).

Not only is the persistence and regularity of the discourses important, but also the omissions, the delays and the silences. What was excluded and/or minimized in this argumentative plot? Food as a human right ratified in numerous documents (i) and the role of the State as guarantor; the changes in the socioeconomic model, the organization of production and the asymmetrical relationship

between food availability and access; unequal income distribution and social exclusion; the crisis as a result of a political-economic process and the strategies of families in this context; the inversion of nutritional patterns; and the need for other (integral and inter-sectoral) interventions. The reason for these successive omissions or minimizations was not lack of awareness. To speak of the right to food is to speak of citizenship, which not only implies responsibility, commitment, guarantees and duties, laws and people responsible for enforcing them, but also should result in income redistribution (6). However, this would mean modifying most of the rules of the game and therefore, the power of certain players to impose those rules (9).

FINAL THOUGHTS

Representations condition and guide interventions. "Giving something to eat" was the intervention strategy that unified the three newspapers, in close connection to the construction of the critical context of 2001-2002 also supported by other discourses and actors. But in addition to the persistence and regularity of the discourse, as well as the omissions, delays and the silences mentioned above, some differences and ruptures must be highlighted. In other words, the functioning of the media according to logics specific to the journalism field, according to unifying topics and styles, does not impede an analysis of elements particular to each newspaper. Thus, there are nuances of perspective and meaning within this

general framework, consistent with each newspaper's editorial profile, with the representations of their readership as constructed discursively and with the political-ideological positions that they defend and/or promote. On the one hand, *La Nación* proposes "The most urgent hunger" campaign, managed by nongovernmental organizations with neo-philanthropic assumptions and with the values of transparency and efficiency, in contraposition to governmental institutions. On the other, *Clarín* proposes technical rather than political programs, efficiency and transparency in the management and distribution of assistance or "controlled management of social resources," but under State control with the participation of non-governmental organizations and of society. Finally, *Crónica* proposes to protect the "people," without questioning or criticizing the political, technical or ideological principles guiding these measures, programs and policies. Underlying these proposals is a definition of food as a "biological need." By privileging only this dimension, the social, political and cultural processes are obscured and we are placed in the biological realm. On the other hand, if we take these other dimensions into account, we can understand the consequences of nutrition as a product of certain social-historical modes of production, distribution, access and consumption of food. However, through what is expressed or omitted, defined or proposed, silenced, minimized or reproduced, the analysis carried out helps us to understand the social character of food and its consequences, as a social construct, as a product and as a producer of social relationships.

END NOTES

a. Despite being part of Peña y Bacallao's compilation *Obesidad en la pobreza, un nuevo reto para la salud pública*, published in 2002 by the Pan American Health Organization and the World Health Organization, "Aspectos socio-antropológicos de la obesidad en la pobreza" was written in 1995.

b. The National Health and Nutrition Survey was aimed at collecting data about the nutritional status and health of children aged six months to five years, women of childbearing age and pregnant women; assessing factors related to nutritional profiles; and obtaining information about access to health care services and the coverage of the food programs in those populations.

c. This article is based on the Master's Thesis in Social Policies (Faculty of Social Sciences, UBA) entitled "*Dar de comer. La construcción social del problema de la malnutrición infantil, desde la perspectiva del Estado y la prensa escrita. Diciembre 2001-diciembre 2002*," under the direction of Dr. Patricia Aguirre. The thesis was defended in September 2009.

d. Act 25724 was based on a project presented in the Chamber of Deputies in mid-December 2002. It was passed by the Chamber of Senators on December 27 of the same year and allowed for the creation of the National Nutrition and Food Program. It was published in the Official Bulletin in January 2003 and reglemented by the Decree 1.018/03. Its first two articles (Articles 1 and 2) provide for the creation of the National Nutrition and Food Program (later called the National Food Security Plan) "in compliance with the undeniable duty of the State to guarantee the right of food to all citizens" (16). This law provides that "Said Program during times of emergency is aimed at covering the nutritional requirements of children up to 14 years of age, pregnant women, the disabled and the elderly above 70 years of age in a situation of poverty [...] priority is granted to pregnant women and children under 5 years of age" (16). It establishes different actions according to the relevant jurisdictional level (national, provincial or municipal). Some of the actions proposed are the following: nutritional and health care services, nutritional education, permanent assessment of the nutritional status of the population, nutritional training for families, promotion of breastfeeding, child development and low-priced stores, incentives for regional food production in order to supply the local food programs with the

necessary goods, among others. It also provided for the unification and coordination of all programs in operation to avoid overlapping budget items, with the aim of "*eradicating malnutrition from the entire national territory*" (16).

e. Unlike *La Nación* and *Clarín*, *Crónica* does not utilize a diversity of journalistic genres in any of the issues approached. Using as a point of reference the categories established in this work (informative article, opinion column, editorial and interview), it could be said that the informative article is the only journalistic genre used in *Crónica*. This does not apply exclusively to the subject matter of this work, as most of topics are dealt with according to the rules of this genre. Indeed, the edition analyzed in this study (the sixth) does not utilize the editorial genre. Though it is in the editorials where certain positions are explicitly assumed, this does not prevent the reconstruction of such positions from the analysis of the informative article genre, as the selection of and the approach to the problem, the consulted sources, and the particular style of informing allow the implicit positions to be reconstructed.

f. *La Nación* has traditionally been the mouthpiece for ideas representing the Argentine middle- and upper-classes: defenders of the agroexport sector, politically conservative and economically liberal. *Clarín* has traditionally spoken for the urban middle class, historically fighting for the national bourgeoisie. *Crónica* posits itself as representing the popular sectors, acting as the people's voice, reflecting their vicissitudes, misfortunes and demands; it orients itself towards and supports them. It has been historically considered sensationalist journalism.

g. The fragments that have been quoted result from a selection of those that most accurately expressed the presented ideas. Their function is to support the statements arising from the analysis. Though the informative articles published the children's names, it was decided to write only their initials in the selected quotations used as examples, in order to avoid once again infringing their right to protect their identity.

h. A metaphor is a figure of speech that consists of giving one thing the name of another, and it is a widely-used operation of knowledge, both in the daily use of language and in scientific discourse. However, these resources of language are not always creative rhetorical operations; they sometimes order, structure, naturalize and block (52) certain social processes. Therefore, it is essential to highlight them, criticize them, and

trace their history in order to untangle the discursive operation their usage and naturalization entails.

i. The Convention on the Rights of the Child resulted from the enactment of Act 23849 in 1990 and was included in the National Constitution after the 1994 reform; the World

Declaration on Nutrition and the Plan of Action for Nutrition arising from the International Conference on Nutrition in 1992; the Rome Declaration on World Food Security and the World Food Summit Plan of Action resulting from the International Symposium on Food and Nutrition Security in 1996; among other documents.

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