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## Miscellaneous

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**Juan-Carlos Suárez-Villegas**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2199-7028>

[jcsuarez@us.es](mailto:jcsuarez@us.es)

Universidad de Sevilla

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**Ruth Rodríguez-Martínez**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4690-6794>

[ruth.rodriguez@upf.edu](mailto:ruth.rodriguez@upf.edu)

Universidad Pompeu-Fabra

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**Jesús Díaz-Campo**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5014-8749>

[jesus.diaz@unir.net](mailto:jesus.diaz@unir.net)

Universidad Internacional de La Rioja

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## Accountability of the media as seen by Spanish citizens

### Abstract

This article analyses the opinions of citizens on the core values of the so-called Media accountability: truthfulness, independence, transparency, public participation and respect for peoples' rights. It also analyses citizens' perceptions of various deontological instruments to measure the effectiveness of compliance with these ethical values. The qualitative methodology used to carry out this analysis is part of the R+D+I research project "Accountability and Journalistic Cultures project in Spain. Impact and proposal of good practices in the Spanish media" (MediaACES), which has been achieved through six focus groups in different Spanish cities. The results of the analysis reflect the critical spirit of citizens towards the media due to the following factors: the absence of objectivity, the mixture of economic interests with their editorial line and an ambiguous participation of the public, which requires a better definition of their role within the information process. The conclusions derived from this analysis allow us to reflect on several aspects: among others, the competition in a deregulated market leads to infotainment and affects the quality of information, as well as the rights of people affected by the news. At the same time, the excess of information channels leads to greater disinformation, under the appearance of a spontaneous pluralism that is superfluous. Ethics, therefore, seems to be a necessary requirement to differentiate professional journalism from other inappropriate information channels and to guarantee the right to information of citizens.

### Keywords

**Media accountability, ethics, transparency, citizenship, independence, responsibility.**

### 1. Introduction

Media accountability is a fundamental aspect to ensure the health of any democratic system (Mauri-Ríos & Ramón-Vegas, 2015). In the current hybrid media system, characterised by the coexistence of traditional and digital media, with their respective practices and contents, we can observe a decrease in the citizens' trust in the media and, at the same time, a growing concern regarding the ethics that should characterise the daily work of journalists (Plaisance, 2013; van der Wurff & Schönbach, 2014).

The Council of Europe has highlighted this need in two documents, a recommendation (2015a) and a resolution (2015b) on the ethics and responsibility of the media. To regain such confidence, it seems necessary to conduct a review of the appropriate deontological guidelines for the new digital environment (Cruz-Álvarez & Suárez-Villegas, 2017) and to

observe to what extent the different journalistic cultures (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) have been affected by the dynamics of this new communication ecosystem, which is characterised by interaction.

Therefore, the objective of this article is to analyse the opinions of citizens about the main values of accountability. At the same time, it is intended to study the perception of citizens towards various deontological instruments, in order to measure the effectiveness of compliance with these ethical values. Along the same lines, it is worth highlighting recent works on citizens' perception of news activity, such as Serrano-Puche (2017), Roses and Gómez-Calderón (2015) or the regular updates of the Center for Internet Studies and Digital Life of the University of Navarra (<http://www.digitalnewsreport.es/>) which include reports on news consumption and credibility by citizens on the internet.

The MediaACES research project, of which part of the results are included in this article, has carried out in-depth interviews with experts and institutional heads of the media or media-related entities, such as Associations of Journalists, Audiovisual Councils and Deontological Commissions in order to find out their opinion on the existing accountability systems in Spain; it has conducted a survey of journalists in the Spanish territory to find out their satisfaction with the current situation of the journalistic profession; and it has consulted the public's opinion on the current situation of accountability in the Spanish media through the constitution of six focus groups. It will be precisely this last phase of the project that we will analyse in this article: the opinion of citizens on the different values that govern accountability, such as truthfulness, independence, transparency, public participation and respect for people's rights. Finally, we aim to find out what citizens think about the different accountability instruments. The opinion of citizens has already been gathered in other reference studies which have used various methodologies, such as discussion groups (Karlsson & Clerwall, 2019), content analysis of public comments (Craft, Vos & Wolfgang, 2016) or online questionnaires (Gil de Zuñiga & Hinsley, 2013).

This project has a direct antecedent in a previous one: "Ethics and informative excellence: media deontology and citizens expectations," which was carried out between 2007 and 2009 with the participation of four Spanish universities (Pompeu Fabra, Carlos III, The Basque Country and Seville). Within the framework of this project, various publications were produced, both collectively and by each of the sub-projects in their respective autonomous communities (Herrera Damas & Maciá-Barber, 2010; Suárez-Villegas, 2011; Zalbidea *et al.*, 2011). The similarity between both projects and the use of similar methodologies (focus group), allows the comparison of results and thus identifies the evolution of public opinion towards the media in the last ten years. The period of time being compared is considered to be of special interest, as it coincides with the serious economic crisis that the media has experienced since 2008 and the consolidation of the digital environment.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

As stated by the MediaACT study research group on the state of media accountability in the European context, for which 1762 journalists from twelve European and two North African countries were surveyed, European journalists consider that accountability instruments, both traditional and online, are insufficient to guarantee the quality of information (Fengler *et al.*, 2015). The audience, in turn, demands that the media be transparent, accountable and adopt self-regulation in a more professional manner to improve the quality of the news they publish. These are the conclusions drawn from a study based on a survey answered by 3,203 Dutch citizens (van der Wurff & Schönbach, 2014). Other studies that have reflected the opinion of citizens have agreed with this critical view, pointing out that more than the validity of the rules themselves, the problem lies in the interpretation that journalists make of them or, more specifically, in the way they put them into practice (Craft, Vos & Wolfgang, 2016; Karlsson & Clerwall, 2019). Meanwhile, other research carried out in the United States offers a more

positive view, although citizens' perception is lower than that of the professionals themselves (Gil de Zuñiga & Hinsley, 2013). The perception of journalists and citizens leads us to think about the need to promote ethics at the service of the public interest and information quality (Frost, 2011; Rodríguez-Martínez *et al.*, 2017), which comes from the media themselves, not through state intervention. State intervention would be rejected by journalists, as it would allow political abuse (Rodríguez-Martínez, Mauri-De los Ríos & Fedele, 2017).

According to Eberwein *et al.* (2011, p. 20), the media accountability instruments can be defined as "Any informal institution, both offline and online, performed by both media professionals and media users, which intends to monitor, comment on and criticize journalism and seeks to expose and debate problems of journalism at the individual, media routines, organizational and extra-media levels." These authors group accountability instruments in the digital age into two broad categories: *traditional instruments* (press councils, readers' advocates, articles on journalism in specialized magazines, criticism of the mass media in the mass media itself, letters to the editor, erratum sections, etc.) and *innovative instruments* (such as online readers' advocates, websites and blogs that monitor the content of the news or accounts dedicated to media criticism on social networks such as Twitter and Facebook). Meanwhile, Mauri-Ríos and Ramón-Vegas (2015) have categorized the new online accountability systems that have emerged in the Spanish media landscape, grouping them into two categories: systems produced in media companies or groups and those implemented externally. Among the first category would be: 1) newsroom blogs; 2) blogs of journalists included in the media's website; 3) online reader advocates; 4) chats and digital meetings with readers; 5) users' contribution to content creation; 6) error notification buttons; 7) social networks and comments; and 8) corporate transparency instruments. On the other hand, those produced externally to media companies or groups would be: 1) observatories and electronic publications of media criticism; 2) websites of institutions and professional associations; 3) individual blog initiatives by journalists or communicators; 4) blogs by citizen or academics; 5) social networks; and 6) other participatory initiatives promoted by citizens, such as blogs of journalists or communicators, academics or individual citizens or through their activity on social networks to refer to the media's treatment of information. Among these blogs, it is worth highlighting the one directed by Professor Hugo Aznar at the CEU-San Pablo University, *Deliberocracia*, a good example of how a platform can facilitate interaction between citizens, the media and official organizations, helping to carry out this task, as suggested, for example, by Ojala, Pantti and Laaksonen (2019).

According to this background, the following research question is posed:

RQ1. What do Spanish citizens think about the accountability of the media and its main values?

### 3. Methodology

The focus group discussion technique has been used to carry out this analysis (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). The focus group is a qualitative technique in which a group of 6 to 8 people, usually unknown to each other, is brought together to discuss a specific topic under the guidance of a moderator who introduces questions based on a pre-defined script. This is a very valuable technique for obtaining qualitative material, since a series of interactions are generated between the people who form the group that allow obtaining different information from that which would be obtained individually. In this sense, the participants in the group are influenced by and influence the rest of the participants, interacting and sharing opinions and experiences.

The different discussion groups have been carried out by a single moderator, with a specialized profile. The dates on which the six focus groups took place were as follows: Barcelona, April 12, 2018; Castellón, April 19, 2018; Madrid, May 17, 2018; Seville, May 21, 2018; Mondragón, May 24, 2018; and Santiago de Compostela, May 31, 2018.

Prior to the events, the topics to be explored were planned and the questions to guide the discussion were defined. During the discussions, the moderator focused on the topics on which the discussion was most intense and adapted the sequence and formulation of the questions to the development of each group. Each focus group session lasted 120 minutes and was divided into three blocks (see Table 1).

**Table 1:** List of questions posed in the focus groups.

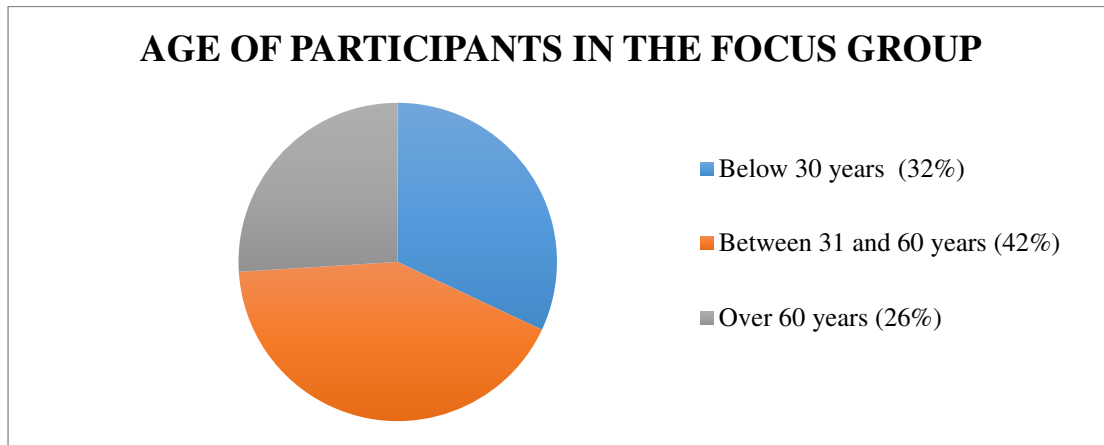
<b>First Block: General assessment of ethics in current journalism</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What do you think about the way journalism is done today?</li> <li>- From your point of view as citizens, what would you say are the main problems affecting journalism today?</li> </ul>
<b>Second Block: Instruments to ensure media ethics</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Would you say that freedom of the press exists in your Autonomous Community / Spain?</li> <li>- What can the media do to ensure that they act ethically?</li> <li>- If they are not (e.g., posting fake news / being sensationalist / not showing different points of view), do you think they should be sanctioned?</li> <li>- Do you think that the advent of the internet has made the media more transparent and of higher quality?</li> <li>- What do you think the media should do to ensure they act ethically?</li> <li>- Which of these instruments are you aware of?</li> <li>- Are you aware of the existing bodies and norms to regulate the practice of journalism?</li> </ul>
<b>Third block: The ethics of journalists</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What do you think journalists should do when they report on governments and political representatives? What do you think their priorities should be?</li> <li>- Do you think it is right for journalists to accept gifts of any kind?</li> <li>- To whom do you think the journalist should feel responsible?</li> </ul>

Source: Own elaboration.

The six focus groups were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim in the original language in which the discussions took place. The final report was compiled from the coding and analysis of the information collected. The report contains the verbatim quotations from the participants in the focus groups referred to. At the end of each quote, the focus group from which it is taken is identified (GDo1 to GDo6) and the gender of the people whose quote is given is specified.

For the recruitment of the participants in the six focus groups, it was taken into account that it was an adequate structural sample, capable of representing the diversity of the Spanish population. To do this, attention was paid to different segmentation variables, including sex, age, socioeconomic status, education and media habits, among other elements. In the final selection, carried out by the research members and following the instructions detailed by the opinion research organization that developed the focus groups, 38 people were included, 22 women and 16 men. The age of the participants was balanced, with 42% in the middle age bracket and the rest almost equally divided between those under 30 and those over 60.

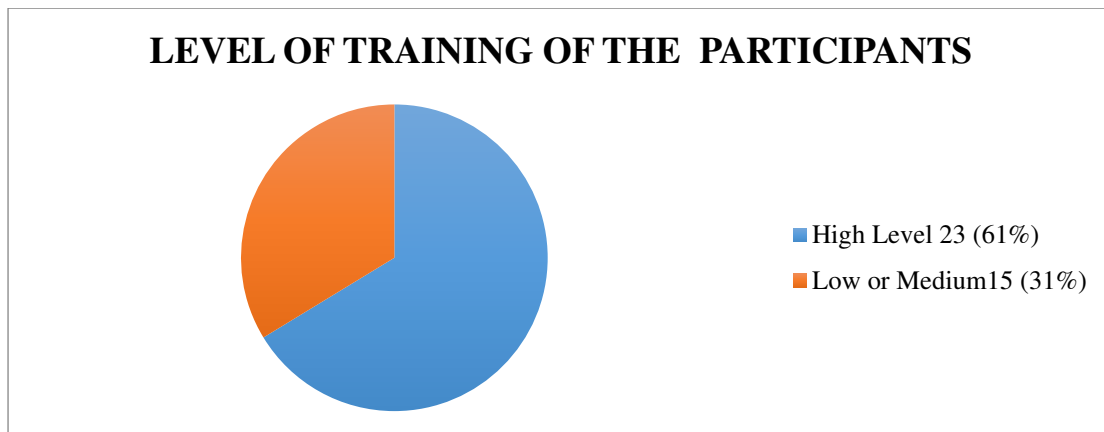
**Graph 1:** Age of the participants in the focus groups.



Source: Own elaboration.

A bias towards higher educational levels is detected in the level of training of the members of the discussion groups. In fact, some people with doctorates, university professors and specialists in audiovisual communication or journalism stand out in the group. On the other hand, the members of the focus groups with medium or low training have administrative or commercial occupations. Only in one case, a member holds a position that could be considered as very unqualified or unskilled, as maintenance personnel.

**Graph 2:** Level of training of the participants in the focus groups.



Source: Own elaboration.

With regard to media habits, some aspects should be highlighted, such as the following. Among the most popular media are La Sexta (almost 40%), *El País* (30% of the participants), El Diario.es (25%) and Twitter (30%). The vast majority of people consumes online press. Only on a few occasions is reference made to reading newspapers on paper, and when this is the case, normally the medium is not bought, but rather it is “found” (in a bar, on transportation services, at work) or borrowed from someone known (neighbours, relatives). A common way to access news online is through the social networks Twitter or, secondly, Facebook. In other words, the news is not read until someone highlights or refers to it. To a lesser extent, specific journalists are followed directly. Television consumption seems to be being replaced by the internet in the case of younger people, but it still carries significant weight, especially the La Sexta channel. It is also common to tune in to Antena 3 or La 1 (the latter channels are watched by less than 20% of participants). On the other hand, in very few cases regional channels such as TV3, Canal Sur or EITB are named.

## 4. Results

Of all the results collected in the focus group, only some of the core issues on which the main contributions of the participants revolved have been selected. For example, their assessment of the migration of journalism to the digital environment and how in this ecosystem the main value functions of accountability are fulfilled: informational veracity, independence and transparency. These questions are related to some of the central ideas of the three blocks of the discussion group script: 1) the ethics of current journalism; 2) the instruments to guarantee the ethics of the media; and 3) opinion on the attitudes of journalists from an ethical point of view. At the end of each appointment, the focus group from which it is extracted (from GDo1 to GDo6) is identified and the sex of the people whose appointment is exposed is specified.

### 4.1. General considerations on Journalism in the digital Ecosystem

As a general rule, the groups clearly express the perception of greater freedom to inform and express opinions by the new generation media, associated with the internet and social networks, especially in the written press. Online newspapers are considered to have fewer structures and, therefore, less dependence on funding. Consequently, they can assume higher levels of freedom to communicate. This type of journalism is perceived as “oxygen” for the current media, as more independent media that bring plurality to the range of media and diverse voices. In some cases, it is even suggested that the information pluralism allowed by the new digital environment is associated with the breakdown of the two-party system in Spain, thanks to these new media born on the internet.

If we say that the bipartisanship has been politically broken, it has been broken largely thanks to digital media, because without digital media here we would have two newspapers, three televisions that are all the same, eh? (GDo2-H).

It is stated that these media also have a *clear competitive advantage* over traditional newspapers, and that is their ease of moving in the digital world and generating visibility strategies on social networks, etc. Some people believe that in the face of these competitors, the big newspapers will eventually end up “falling.”

I think that, for example, Eldiario.es has done it very well, and I also think that it is the digital media outlet that will come first when the media that have the most name, such as *ABC*, *El Mundo* or *El País*, fall, rather than *El Confidencial*. In other words, I think they have managed to handle it very well and channel the new digital age very well, as well as the new ways of media consumption (GDo3-M).

This type of press generates *trust especially when it does not accept advertising* and it is financed exclusively through subscribers. This way of financing is considered as the economic model of the future in the press.

They do not attend to advertising, this is super important in a certain way because if Santander Bank pays advertising and you hear about a scandal from the Santander Bank, then you are not going to talk about it. So, I think that this chosen independence will be the channel that all the media are going to take [...]. In other words, in the end we have change the mentality of the user and the consumer who has to pay for the information they are receiving, in terms of private matters so that good information can really be produced (GDo3-M).

For many participants, new generation journalism has the memory to denounce. The proliferation of these new channels has also generated media that are highly questionable ethically, since they end up practicing journalism with little contrasted and low-quality information. The proposed solution is not to curtail the existence of these new media, but rather to focus on training and ensuring ethical attitudes in journalism.

I think it is a bit of a double-edged sword, in the sense that, of course, it is good to encourage the creation of other media that allow greater diffusion, to free itself a little from that economic pressure... But also creating a digital medium is relatively easy right now. There are many untrained people who write, like... OK Diario, and I think that also hurts. That is good because it opens up other views, but I think that you also have to give training to journalists, or the person who is going to write in a media outlet ... because, otherwise, you can achieve the opposite effect (GDo4-M).

Beyond the influence of corporations for economic reasons, a strong competition between media outlets for access to audiences is detected. A competition that has multiplied greatly in the era of telematic information. This influence, also economic, generates, according to the participants, a bias towards the search for easy sensationalism and is detrimental to journalistic quality. The logic of achieving “exclusivity” by betting on investigative journalism gives way to that of “positioning on the internet.”

Yes, and the way the system works is also sensationalist, so before digital newspapers, a newspaper and its prestige depended on an exclusive, investigation was one of the political terms, investigation was having an informed person, with contacts and all the relationships, all this to get exclusives; and now the prestige does not depend on the exclusives but rather on the positioning in internet searches, which depend on a private company (GDo6-H).

The risk of “fake news,” which is much more common due to the rapid effect of social networks, is also discussed, although the reader can counteract the information relatively easily online. On the other hand, certain information that would have been much more difficult to bring to light at other times, such as Wikileaks, is now possible and this is therefore an advance in access to information. Participants also referred to the decline in the quality of internet journalism. This fact is related to the demands of immediacy inherent to the internet and the change in the consumption of information. Nowadays, it is argued, the user of online media does not stop to read an article as he/she used to do, which causes another way of exposing the information, which is less in-depth and shorter. The enormous amount of information currently available ends up causing the publication of less contrasted and lower quality news. Another cause mentioned is the precariousness of the profession, the lack of protection by organisations and the “de-professionalisation” of many journalists, who have been forced to combine their profession with other work or communication activities.

In social networks, interaction with other people is essential and helps to generate the idea of community, of opinion groups. They are, therefore, important opinion-producing spaces, but the type of opinion generated is developed through short texts that end up *discouraging the deepening of information*. Social networks, due to their characteristics, become the appropriate space for expanding the so-called fake news, which is why some people comment on their suspicion or mistrust with this type of websites.

## **4.2. Accountability values analysed by citizens**

### **4.2.1. Truthfulness, credibility and objectivity**

Regarding the veracity and objectivity of the media, some suspicion is expressed about the lack of credibility of the media. Citizens criticise the lack of objectivity of the media, the treatment of information as entertainment or spectacle, restrictions on freedom of expression, the influence of political parties and corporations and, as a consequence, the current lack of trust generated by the media. Even for those people who, because of their age, may have a greater historical perspective, *the current landscape of journalism is questionable and is perceived as in decline*.

It is hard for me to think that journalism today has, or can have, an ethic, because it is not free, journalists are not free in any case, they are not free because they are conditioned to work for a specific company, they are not free because of ideology, they are not free because of the economic pressure to sell the news (GDo1-M).

The first issue that undermines objectivity is the choice of what is considered news, and how it stands out.

Who makes the news? Today it is news, tomorrow it is news, and the day after that it disappears, everywhere, because this whole issue has had to be resolved, the refugee issue, a lot of issues, it seems to have been resolved, now it is no longer news, now let's go to something else (GDo5-M).

However, the processing of information can be treated in different ways to generate different, even opposing, opinions. This happens, for example, when choosing the data to provide the information, when the situation in which the information is presented is "contextualised" in different ways or when the data are presented in a different order of priority.

Objectivity, as you have said [...], in my opinion it does not exist, because the moment you select or do not select, or you put information in one place and not in another, objectivity is lost, it does not exist. And then who can tell if it's objective? Who? (GDo3-H).

In any case, trying to achieve objectivity in the media is a chimera for many of the participants, since they all assume a position before the news, a point of view. "And even *El Independiente* will have its angle" (GDo1-H). On the other hand, some believe that showing their point of view is positive, without pretending to give the absolute truth, which does not exist. In fact, what is important in this regard is to make clear the editorial line, the ideological position of the newspaper. In general terms, the citizens consulted believe that for ideological and opinion journalism the verification of the facts has lost its strength because they only select and highlight those that matter to them in order to defend their understanding of reality. This is their main purpose, which only becomes effective if they gain an audience, since in addition to making advertising costs profitable, they ensure indoctrinated audiences. For this reason, the market has united the spectacle and the ideology to ideologise by entertaining. Likewise, journalism has become a spectacle whose objective is to increase the audience at any price, especially on television.

For their part, leisure or entertainment content programmes invite political figures who accept, in turn, to increase their chances of winning an election or becoming more popular or accepted among citizens.

I think there are two big basic problems. One is that journalism has become a reality show, especially television journalism, and another is the lack of ideology, or the non-existence of political ideology today. So, speaking of reality TV, in what has to do with television journalism, I believe that the excess of political information on televisions that exists today has been greatly influenced because two new channels emerged twelve or thirteen years ago, which are Cuatro and La Sexta, La Sexta found a terrific niche in political information, and is dedicated to that. I am not saying that it does it well or badly, I am saying that it has found that niche until crushing Antena 3, which is the other main network of the group (GDo3-H).

Others, on the other hand, consider that there is still a commitment to investigative journalism in the more serious media, although it is sometimes exercised at the discretion of the media to monitor the actions of administrations with a different political orientation or economic powers on which the media does not depend.



I think that they can do many things, for example investigative journalism has brought information to light and in our country unfortunately not much, but in other countries it has had a great impact, the Panama's papers led to the fall of the president of Iceland, didn't it? In other words, I believe that yes, indeed investigative journalism can do many things, in some societies more and in others less, but yes; or that Cifuentes hangs by a thread and these things that we see, right? (GDo1-M).

#### 4.2.2. Independence

Another way of influencing the media is through press releases which, together with the limitation of immediacy, as will be seen later, generate direct proposals for news writing in the different media. According to some participants, people who are close to the political power, even paid by some political profiles, dedicate themselves to participate in gatherings to support political ideas:

The majority of the participants in the discussion groups consider that there is a biased treatment depending on the interests of the media and that only from a contrasted reading between different media can a certain approximation to the veracity of the facts emerge. The media maintain an ideological position and an economic dependence which condition an authentic and committed treatment of the truth of facts. Some examples of the political control over public information are the media laws or the choice by each government of the main management positions in the public broadcasting organizations, which act as a transmission mechanism for their discourses.

Later, of course, all politicians have their adviser and those not only dedicate themselves to writing institutional press releases, they also participate a lot in the media, therefore politicians with power and the means have journalists who participate mostly in talk shows and who are paid, I think that this has a lot of weight (GDo2-H).

#### 4.2.3. Transparency

For the participants, it should be mandatory for the media to explain to their readers the commercial or institutional links, subsidies and public aid, if they have any. The debate focuses on the degree of relevance of these mechanisms. For some people it is important and necessary.

Many times, we do not know who it is really behind, what political groups or what economic powers are behind that media outlet (GDo1-H).

For others, however, it is less so, as it is easily accessible information and is usually already known by the audience.

I think it is very easy to know where a newspaper or an editorial group or such is economically nourished from. Fundamentally, who is feeding this company or what are the interests of this economic company? (GDo2-H).

Another nuance arises, such as the differences in the scale of the media: small structures have a greater capacity to finance themselves exclusively from subscriptions, but for large media this is very difficult, which makes them more subject to external influences.

The whole issue of explaining commercial links, publishing income statements and such, there is... the Diario.es, for example, as it is a newspaper that is nourished by people who pay a fee and do not have... it is not a newspaper that has a large company behind it such as the Prisa group or... that is a little more... you can see it, it is palpable, what happens is that it is a small company, extrapolating it to a company like the Prisa group, I see it unfeasible, totally impossible (GDo2-H).

The publication of the income statement is interpreted as an act of transparency and generates general approval by the discussion groups, especially in the context of distrust that prevails among citizens.

I think that it does have something to do with journalism, it is no longer just how the news is approached, it is that there is a background that if everything really came to light... the map that would come out with relationships among others, I guess oil companies just to say something, right? everything... I do think it would be good to know, in that case, it seems to me... hopefully but it seems like a utopia to think that this can be achieved... hopefully to untangle something... (GDo2-M).

In order to be transparent, the citizens consulted suggest that the media put in place mechanisms that allow them to explain their editorial decisions in a specific section, provide links to the sources that have been used to produce a piece of information.

#### 4.2.4. Participation and interactivity with the public

For the participants of the focus groups, this space is positive and can have various functions, such as creating content by users, denouncing a reality that ends up causing changes, providing new information, encouraging debate among the audience, reflecting and even contributing to the change of opinion of the audience about the news. For some it is a more democratic space in the journalistic field, which did not exist before. It is a “meeting point.”

I was saying that the comments, it seems to me, to be one of the greatest contribution in current journalism thanks to the internet, because it is clear that on paper there is nothing more than letters to the editor, and I also almost read the comments more, just like her, instead of all the news, I mean, that seems to me... (GDo6-H).

There are doubts, however, that journalists read these sections and it is suspected that these participated spaces are more a way of “moving” the news and do not respond to a real interest in knowing the opinion of the audience. Despite this, some examples are given of journalists who respond to the criticism that their articles receive.

On the question of responding to the comments, suggestions and criticisms they receive from the public through the official Facebook and Twitter accounts, the consulted citizens consider that this is a more agile method of being in contact with the public and generating a collective flow of the media’s positions on certain issues. Readers’ participation in news production, which is seen as increasingly common, is also very favourably appreciated. For example, through the transmission of videos recorded from the mobile phone. However, it is up to the media outlet to take precautions not to rush or, in any case, to contextualise and explain the documents used within the life of the news story.

Someone comments that it is precisely this participation of the public in the content of the news –to provide new information or to correct some aspect of a given information that is believed to be wrong– that is really changing the way of doing journalism.

In the end, I think that audience participation is what is causing this change, that is, there is a change in the media and it is through fact check that readers, users, people who are connected to the internet do it, and it is often thanks to them, through which a news is well generated or at least the common thread is followed to investigate something that they are telling you: hey, this is happening and you are not telling it or you are talking about this and it’s wrong, it’s a hoax (GDo3-M).

However, some of the consulted citizens doubt the contributions of the audience since they consider that they are partial points of view and that they can greatly complicate the preparation of the news and its veracity.

I believe that the correction of the news, let’s see... there are professionals who have spent a long time studying for something, to be journalists; I think not there. [...] But in correcting the news I think there have to be professionals (GDo1-M).

#### 4.2.5. Respect for the rights of people affected by the news and social responsibilities of the media

One of the issues that arises in the developed focus groups is whether or not to set limits on what is considered publishable. In the case of a “leak” to the media, some questions arise such as: is it a matter of state? If so, where do they come from and with what intentions are they produced, what interests are they serving? If it is a relevant information, when is it the right time to publish it? For some, it is important to define in advance which news items are not publishable under any circumstances, and to justify this limitation. An example could be those news that affects the safety of individuals or groups of people. One of the participants in the focus group, who has previous experience as a journalist, sees it as follows:

Of course, there is a responsibility. We are not sellers of potatoes, I mean, logically in the profession you work with information, it is a public service and for me it is fundamental, the most important thing about the journalist is the responsibility that he has with the readers, otherwise he should do something else, that is, for me this is the fundamental (GDo3-M).

Some consider certain news to be unpublishable due to the social alarm that they can produce, or the so-called “call effect,” such as suicide or the disappearance of people.

It is a social issue. If you knew the number of suicides in Madrid per month, maybe we would be left like... really? And since there are people who may have suicidal ideas, if they see that someone else has done it, then they can say... me too (GDo3-M).

Finally, ethical questions arise regarding the limits of what is publishable. For example, should a video of a person in public office stealing from a supermarket be shown? The answer is no, as such an act could be prosecuted and be won by the person concerned.

Another thing is the ethical question of a person who has held a public position, but the very fact of an illegal video being broadcast will make that person denounce it and win (GDo3-H).

Another ethical question is where the limit lies in the image in the face of a dramatic event, such as an attack or an accident. Here a difference is made between what is said and what is displayed.

In the case of attacks, for example, putting it as an example, I believe that there are different types of information, you always have to tell the truth, and what would the limits be? Well, police investigations on the one hand, and on the other hand, especially on televisions, it is also key to limit... if the truth is that people are badly wounded, perhaps they don't have to show it, this is the truth... (GDo2-H).

#### 4.3. *Assessments around self-regulation*

The citizens participating in the focus groups show confidence in the possible functioning of accountability instruments, but the way in which they are conceived makes them distrustful of their effectiveness:

The code of ethics has a problem of cheating on its own, because you publish your code of ethics and you follow it as you want. That is why I was emphasising an external body, what happens is that of course, in this country the state organisations are all politically intervened, so in a model like this, the system must be completely changed. If it were not so politicised, meaning politicised by specific political parties, these public media could have it, but of course I do the code of ethics (GDo6-H).

Along the same lines, they also question the usefulness of journalism style books in the information age, in which internet searches are faster. On the other hand, the immediacy to which journalists are accustomed nowadays does not allow them to stop and reflect on the way of writing, therefore it is an instrument that has fallen into disuse on a daily basis.

I believe that with the immediacy that exists today in the world of journalism, the style book is used less and less, because in the end the editor works hard to finish the story quickly before the editor next to him does, and he uses it practically nothing. At least this is for day-to-day information, when writing something special, maybe they do, yes (GDO3-H).

They hold a similar opinion about the figure of the Reader's Ombudsman and propose other more interactive forms that allow visibility to the rest of the audience as well. The general opinion about traditional accountability channels is that they resemble "the charitable sisters," which in the end help to appease criticism, sweeten it or even put a stop to it. Secondly, there are doubts about the impartiality, for example, of the figure of the reader's ombudsman, who is seen more as a "makeover" than an effective and transparent function. They suggest the convenience of establishing mechanisms with greater visibility and accessibility so that the audience can submit complaints about the published content. Likewise, they are also more in favour of instruments such as news commentaries or editorial blogs, provided that they are regulated or are more reasoned and public ways of maintaining the relationship between users.

Most celebrate the interactivity of the media, considering it as the main instrument of the public vis-à-vis the media, either in the spaces provided by the media for this purpose or because of what we could call peripheral interactivity around the actions of media outlets on social media or independent blogs that observe the conduct of the media.

## **5. Discussion and Conclusions**

This study is inserted within a trajectory of sociological research that seeks to determine how the object of the information activity is seen and valued by its users, that is, by the citizens. More than a decade ago, a coordinated project of four Spanish universities, led by Professor Salvador Alsus, carried out a project with similar characteristics, within the framework of the Ethics and Excellence project. Specifically, between March and June 2009 in Catalonia, 7 focus groups (35 women and 21 men) were held in Barcelona, Manresa and Olot; in the city of Madrid, another 7 were carried out (35 women and 20 men); in the Basque Country 4 (16 men and 16 women) in Bilbao, Vitoria and Donostia; and in Andalusia 6 (30 men and 18 women) in Seville and Malaga. This qualitative methodology was complemented on that occasion with a quantitative methodology, since a total of 2000 citizens were surveyed. Although a decade separates the two studies, the coincidence of results from both projects is relevant, among which the following aspects stand out.

A high number of participants show a notable distrust towards the media, which translates into a critical view of the received information. If the negative perception of the consulted citizens towards journalism is compared with the one they had ten years ago, it is observed that this critical and sceptical perception towards journalism is not new. Therefore, the crisis of public trust in the media is an existing phenomenon that seems to have worsened for various reasons. These reasons include ideological trench journalism, the competition marked by an unscrupulous audience that prioritises sensationalist news over rigorous information and the new ways of getting information that have turned news into statements and comments through social networks.

Another aspect on which citizens consulted in 2009 and 2018 coincide is in criticising the media's lack of objectivity (Alsus, 2010). The citizens stress that this lack of objectivity is largely due to the media's economic and business ties. The media's obligation to generate income through advertising, especially nowadays, means that the influence of economic powers is very high, which leaves little room for freedom and objectivity.

For their part, the need for journalists to earn a living in a precarious professional context controlled by large media outlets affects their freedom and the possibility of self-criticism of their work. The opinions expressed in 2018 on this issue coincide with those of

the citizens consulted in 2009, who already emphasised the absence of negative information regarding large firms that hire advertising in the media. Citizens also criticised how the media neglect their social responsibilities to observe their own economic benefits (Alsius, 2010). Citizens also denounced the spectacularisation of information, especially in television format, with the aim of increasing the audience at any price. Although the citizens consulted consider that the media should feel responsible and accountable to their audience (Chaparro-Domínguez, Suárez-Villegas & Rodríguez-Martínez, 2019), they ask for a more nuanced concept of audience. This is essential to prevent the media from participating in the tyranny of its audience and to prioritise the need for the media to be accountable to society, putting into practice the basis of accountability. Ethics appears here as a fundamental tool for avoiding the dictatorship of the click and the transformation of information into a market product.

When citizens are asked in 2018 about the effect of the digital environment on the media, their opinions suggest that the quality of the media has declined. This fact is related to the immediacy of the internet itself and the change in the consumption of information, since part of the citizenry does not have the habit of contrasting information on the internet, they are not very critical or do not know how to do so. Likewise, the relationship between digital media and social networks makes it possible to expand the transmission of news, measure the impact of the media on the internet, know the audience and explain, in part, the viral effect of fake news. However, citizens also make a positive assessment of what the digital environment has brought to the profession in the last 10 years, as they consider that there is greater freedom to inform and express opinions in the new generation of media, associated with the internet and social networks, especially in the written press. This type of journalism is perceived as “oxygen” for the current media, as more independent media that contribute plurality to the range of media and diverse voices. These media manage to generate greater trust among the consulted citizens when they do not accept advertising and are financed exclusively through subscribers.

The interaction with other people that social networks allow is also considered positive, as it generates the idea of community, but this can also result in mere noise. The abundance of information does not guarantee quality and can lead to misinformation. This is why, given the plurality of existing channels, it is essential that the media reinforce their social function.

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