

Journalists' perceptions about regulation and conflicts in their work: the case of Madrid-based news professionals

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Abstract

This study attempts to analyze how journalists from companies based in Madrid (Spain) perceive the main problems they face in their work and their views about media regulation. Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, our research shows Madrid-based media professionals' perceptions about the conflicts and the obstacles they face in their daily work tend to be quite pessimistic. They emphasize the companies' need to achieve profits and the lack of ethical leadership at the management level as their main problems, and they also increasingly advocate for more external media regulation.

Keywords: journalism, professional practices, conflicts, media regulation, ethics.

Journalists' professional standards: a global dimension

Scholars have extensively explored the standards and practices of journalism. Of particular relevance to this study it has been research into how news professionals perceive the pressures and conflicts they face in their daily work. Many surveys of journalists have attempted to measure ethical orientations in terms of questionable reporting methods that might be justified by some employees while not by others (Weaver and Wilhoit, 1986; Henningham, 1996; Plaisance et al., 2012). After establishing that the professional criteria of journalists were mostly based on values learnt from their socio-cultural background, research has often focused on investigating journalists' roles and their degree of acceptance of the deontological codes of their profession (Deuze, 2002; O'Sullivan and Heinonen, 2008).

Journalistic practice is experiencing a dialectical tension between the prevailing social values, which shape journalists' professional standards, and the deontological codes, which contain norms that counteract particular professional practices, which are based on the dominant ethos (Eberwein et al., 2011). In order to resolve this tension, it seems important to introduce a thoughtful perspective, based on comparing journalistic cultures, media systems and training programs for journalists, as Plaisance et al. (2012) imply.

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Hanitzsch et al. (2011) reported key findings from a comparative survey of the role perceptions and ethical views of journalists from 18 countries. The results showed that "impartiality and the reliability of information, as well as adherence to universal ethical principles are considered essential journalistic functions worldwide" (p. 273). Various aspects of objectivism and the importance of separating facts from opinion seem to play out differently around the globe. Western journalists are usually less supportive of any active promotion of particular values and social change, and they adhere more to universal principles in their ethical decisions. Journalists from non-western contexts, on the other hand, tend to be more interventionist in their role perceptions and more flexible in their ethical views (Hanitzsch et al. 2011, p. 284).

Inquiring about the ethical conflicts that journalists face in their daily work provides useful information in order to attempt to find pragmatic solutions. Research has enquired about the nature of these ethical dilemmas and how they are perceived by news professionals. In considering ethical issues in converged newsrooms, Singer (2006) suggests that an integrated news operation, with its constant deadlines and fierce competition, can create enormous pressure to run stories before they are verified. According to Singer, journalists increasingly raise concerns related to lack of accuracy, the growth of sensationalism and dependence from economic pressures. At the same time, news professionals rate fact checking, investigating and standards of accuracy high among the qualities that set them apart from amateur reporters and bloggers (Phillips, 2010) as media implement new forms of audience participation (García-Avilés, 2011).

As Phillips (2010) documented, the loss of exclusivity is impacting on practices of reporting and on standards of "accuracy" and "sincerity"; she argues that establishing new standards of transparency could help protect professional reporting in the networked era, as well as improving ethical standards in journalism (p. 373).

Recent international studies about the journalistic profession have taken into account the idiosyncrasies of different media cultures, so as to shed some light on their ethical concerns. Rao and Johal (2006) enquired about the ethical issues Indian journalists face in a globalized media environment. Their findings revealed that although journalists encounter serious ethical issues, media ethics is not a topic being widely discussed in Indian newsrooms and television stations. For its part, Mellado and Humanes (2012) examined the professional autonomy of Chilean journalists. Both authors concluded that while news professionals enjoy a high level of freedom in making editorial decisions, they are influenced by political and organizational constraints, the media's political orientation and their geographical location. Likewise, Grynko (2012) explored Ukrainian journalists' perceptions of unethical practices, through focus groups discussions conducted among editors and journalists. He found that journalism in Ukraine is more than a societal

institution serving democracy, and he also evidenced an increasing commoditization of news and their ethical failures in a commercial market.

Cross-national comparison has proven useful to interpret national news cultures and to analyze to what extent ethical conflicts reveal a common pattern across nations. According to O'Sullivan and Heinonen's (2008) study of European journalists in eleven countries, online journalism raises an array of questions about practices and values, some of which relate to the defining essentials of the profession. The new media ecology, with its principles of interactivity, participation and multimediality, and with a growing domain of bloggers and citizen reporters, presents a variety of issues and opportunities. In this context, O'Sullivan and Heinonen (2008) highlight some of the tensions between "traditional" journalism and the new expectations and pressures of digital journalism in an increasingly inter-connected media environment. Herscovitz (2004) analyzes the perceptions of journalists in São Paulo, Brazil's main media hub, concerning media roles, ethics and foreign influences on journalism and she compares them with perceptions held by American and French journalists. Her study employs quantitative and qualitative methods to illustrate that Brazilian journalists embrace a particular pluralistic view regarding their role in society and appear to be quite tolerant of controversial journalistic practices. In a similar way, Lo et al. (2005) carried out a comparative survey of journalists' attitudes and perceptions concerning conflicts of interest in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Journalists in all three regions were found to be receptive to freebies in the form of small gifts, meals and trips. However, they almost unanimously agreed that monetary benefits from news sources are unacceptable.

Scholars have contended that the globalization of news media requires a radical rethinking of the principles and standards of journalistic standards, through the adoption of a cosmopolitan attitude (Ward, 2005; Plaisance et al., 2012). Autonomy is conventionally assumed to be one of the most fundamental requirements for professional journalistic practice within the editorial organization and structures that govern news work (Hanitzsch et al. 2011). In addition, other studies have revealed that country-level or ideological factors also appear to have an impact on journalists' degrees of ethical thinking (Wasserman and Rao, 2008).

The context of media standards and practices in Spain: an overview

According to the media systems outlined by Hallin and Mancini (2004), Spain is included among the traditional Latin countries where the dependency of the media on the political parties is very strong. Spanish public media have always been heavily dependent on the government. However, rising public cynicism about the Spanish media, as evidenced by low approval ratings, both for journalists and those companies they represent, seems to indicate that journalism as a profession is undergoing a deep "identity

crisis" (Diaz Nosty, 2011, p. 23). In a national poll carried out in March 2013 (CIS, 2013), journalism was rated as the second worst profession out of twelve. Only 53% of Spaniards say journalists are honest, compared to 51% for lawyers, 80% for police, 88% for teachers, and more than 90% for health professionals.

The current media crisis in Spain is also due to the general economic critical situation, a decline in the newspaper business, and a technological transformation in the sector (de Mateo et al., 2010). From 2008 to 2012, over ten thousands of media jobs were lost and 73 of outlets shut down, denying newsrooms of some of its most veteran professionals (Diaz Nosty, 2011; APM, 2012). In 2012, two national dailies, *ADN* and *Público*, closed down and other newspapers based in Madrid, such as *El País*, *Abc* and *El Mundo*, issued labor force adjustment plans. Also, several regional public broadcasters, such as *Televisió de Catalunya* and *Telemadrid*, issued labor force adjustment plans which affected to their staff, while the Valencian public broadcaster, *RTVV*, was closed down in November 2013. As the Madrid Press Association stated in its 2012 report, "it has been another *black* year for journalism which reflects the growth of precariousness, job insecurity and unemployment, among extremely difficult working conditions" (APM, 2012: 5).

A small number of media organizations and associations of journalists launched self-regulatory ethical codes, which were integrated in editorial statutes, collective agreements and even style books. Most of these documents emerged in the late 1990s and addressed the deontological issues faced by journalists who belong to professional associations, such as the Spanish Federation of Associations of Journalists [FAPE], the Association of Economic Information Journalists and the College of Journalists of Catalonia. Large media companies, such as *El País*, *El Mundo*, *El Periódico de Catalunya*, *Vocento* and public broadcaster *RTVE*, have also issued their own ethics codebooks. However, the number of media organizations that have developed ethical codes is scarce, compared to other European countries (González et al., 2011).

As several authors (Masip and Micó, 2006; Maciá and Herrera, 2010) have shown, confidence in Spanish journalists has dropped in recent years as a consequence of increasing ethically reprehensible instances. Increased politicization and the weakening of editorial practices are bending journalists to government and corporate pressure, with instances of manipulation and serious mistakes in even the most prestigious media outlets. An embarrassing case involved *El País*, one of Spain's most respected dailies. On January 4 2013, the newspaper made "one of the most serious mistakes of its history", as it admitted in a report about its error. *El País* published a cover picture provided by an agency, which allegedly showed Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez after undergoing surgery. In a time when Mr. Chávez was receiving cancer treatment, his condition was kept under tight wraps by the Venezuelan government. Nevertheless, instead of being a picture of Mr. Chavez, it turned out to be a fake and *El País'* editors had to apologize.

Recent surveys indicate that most journalists have been pressured by political powers. As reported by the Madrid Press Association (APM, 2012), 70.7% of journalists say they have less economic support in their work and 57.8% carry out more tasks than before. The vast majority (80.4%) admit they have received pressures from their companies and bosses and also from political instances (27.7%). Their level of perceived independence is rated 4.09 on a 1 to 10 scale (APM, 2012). In addition, the recent economic crisis has put great pressure on the work conditions of journalists and their independence (Roses and Farias, 2013).

According to Mateo et al. (2010), economic trends and social policies have led almost all Spanish media to an increasing degree of business and political dependence. Cuts in corporate budgets and in the workforce have been associated with a high level of job insecurity in the profession, which has made journalists more dependent on information coming from official sources. Unethical practices related to the inappropriate use of sources and images and bias in news selection and editing, are also growing in Spanish media, as Garcia-Santamaría (2010) has shown.

Interest in the ethical aspects of journalism is not new in Spain, but it has achieved greater attention lately. Masip and Micó (2006) revealed that Spaniards have witnessed to publishing fake news, misappropriation of personal details through e-mail or broadcasting manipulated images. Both authors surveyed the professional codes of conduct and newsroom ethics policies in online Spanish media and they found there was a lack of clear guidelines and consensus. Other reports focusing on the analysis of professional practices in Spanish online media have also evidenced problems of credibility, accuracy and arbitrariness in news selection (García-Santamaría, 2010; Figueras-Maz et al., 2012).

A growing body of research about Spanish journalists' ethical attitudes has recently been published. Rodríguez-Martínez et al. (2013) questioned journalists representing four regions -Catalonia, Madrid, the Basque Country and Andalusia- regarding their opinions about the interdependency between their work and the political sources they interact with. Their study found Spanish journalists are less inclined to follow directions from official sources than are citizens. Tensions caused by the relationship between the media and political actors in Spain are increasing the polarization of journalists and a growing ideological dependence in their news agenda and coverage (Rodríguez-Martínez et al., 2013, p. 112).

In a related study, Alsius (2010) led a comprehensive research about Catalan journalists' ethical attitudes, which showed that one out of ten professionals admitted to having received pressures to act against the good practice of journalistic ethics (p. 235). Additionally, more than half of those surveyed admitted to having occasionally received such pressures. Trust and confidence in the usefulness of self-regulation tools was somewhat low (44% of respondents said they have no faith in them), although this is an issue about which there is a great diversity of opinion among those surveyed.

Similarly, Suárez (2013) explored the journalistic ethics that configures the unwritten guidelines adopted by Andalusian journalists as pragmatic criteria to resolve the dilemmas they face on their daily work. Suárez concluded that "self-regulation is important" and almost all respondents support it because "if someone tries to force us, we will do nothing" (p. 322). However, some respondents contend that self-regulation must be accompanied by effective measures to compel journalists to comply with their mission. According to Suárez (2013), the professional work of Andalusian journalists is based more on their communities' predominant values than on the professional deontological codes, which are unknown by the majority of them.

Research questions and method

The findings of this article present and discuss the perceptions among journalists who work in Madrid-based media. They build up on a growing body of studies of this kind which have recently been carried out in Spain. Two basic research questions were established:

RQ1: What are the main problems and ethical conflicts that journalists are facing in their work?

RQ2: How do journalists perceive the usefulness of self-regulation systems in their news companies, in order to ensure ethical practice?

The methodology combined quantitative techniques (surveys) and qualitative techniques (in-depth interviews and focus groups). In September 2012, the research team made a list of the professional journalists who work in the Community of Madrid. An electronic survey was sent to 1000 journalists by email and we received a total of 146 valid answers, which amounts to a 14.6% response rate. After other requests, 83 new surveys were completed. In November 2012, invitations to participate were also submitted to journalists who had their own blog or website, as well as to press associations and journalists' trade unions. Finally, throughout December 2012 and January 2013, journalists were also contacted through phone calls and the social networks (*Twitter* and *LinkedIn*), and 181 additional surveys were completed, thus reaching a total number of 410.

Survey pre-testing was carried out, so that answers were verified in 17% of the sample. Later, when all surveys were checked out, a total of 39 surveys were eliminated: those which contained no identification about the journalist or the company (29), repeated surveys (4) and those which included blank answers (6). Thus, the survey sample amounted to 371 valid questionnaires. The universe of journalists who work in the Community of Madrid amounts to 27.000, according to 2013 data from the Madrid Press Association.

The qualitative method was divided into two stages. The first one consisted of 30 open ended, semi-structured interviews with managers from a sample of the media companies based in Madrid, both public and commercial ones, with print, broadcast and online platforms. Interview questionnaires were based on the questions used in the survey, so as to be able to co-relate and compare the results, following the standard practices outlined by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009). All interviews were recorded and transcribed by June 2012 and their content was then codified according to key topics using a statistical software program. Key words were assigned to each coding category. All textual data (interview transcripts) were coded in a systematic way, so as to fit the categories.

In a second stage, six discussion groups were conducted, each of them made up of six to eight news professionals and executives from a media sample. Group discussions lasted for an average of 96 minutes and followed a set of topics posed by a moderator, following Krueger and Casey's (2009) recommendations. The conversations were recorded and transcribed; transcripts were coded according to the main research categories.

Demographics and job profile

The survey sample amounts to 371 individuals. Of these, 58% are male and 42% are female. As regards age groups, 22.9% of respondents are under 30 years old; 48.2% are between 30 and 50 years old, while 28.8% are over 50 years old. Regarding the level of studies, the vast majority (91.9%) have college education. Their education is highly qualified: 44.4% of them hold a journalism degree; 11.2% hold a degree in some other discipline; 16.5% hold at least two degrees, and 16.7% hold a masters or doctorate in journalism.

There is a correlation between age and occupation among survey participants, which signals a deteriorating level of job security. Younger professionals under 30 years old tend to work part time, as freelance or with precarious contracts. Professionals between 30 and 50 years old, tend to work with full time contracts, although still 20% of them work as autonomous employees or freelance. Some 57.5% are employed by a media company; other 22.4% are freelance, autonomous workers or collaborators and 13% are unemployed. The types of contracts show that 56.8% enjoy a full-time permanent contract; 10.8% a full-time non-permanent contract; 3% a part-time non-permanent contract, and 20.9% are freelance.

These findings indicate that almost 16% of respondents either have no income or earn below 500€ monthly. At the same time, 14.1% say they earned over 3.000€ monthly. Some 11.6% earn between 500€ and 1.000€ monthly and 15.8% earn between 1000€ and 1500€. The largest group (22%) earns between 1.500€ and 2.000€ monthly, while 20.5% earn between 2000€ and 3000€. The average monthly salary reaches 1.556€.

Journalists display a high level of enrolment in professional associations: only 6.8% do not belong to any professional association at all. The largest percentage (45.5%) belongs to the Professional Association of Journalists. Another 13.2% belong to the Journalists' College, which is more actively involved in defending their rights. Also, 10.3% belong to some journalists' trade union and 7.4% to other general trade union. There are also 16.8% who are members of other press associations.

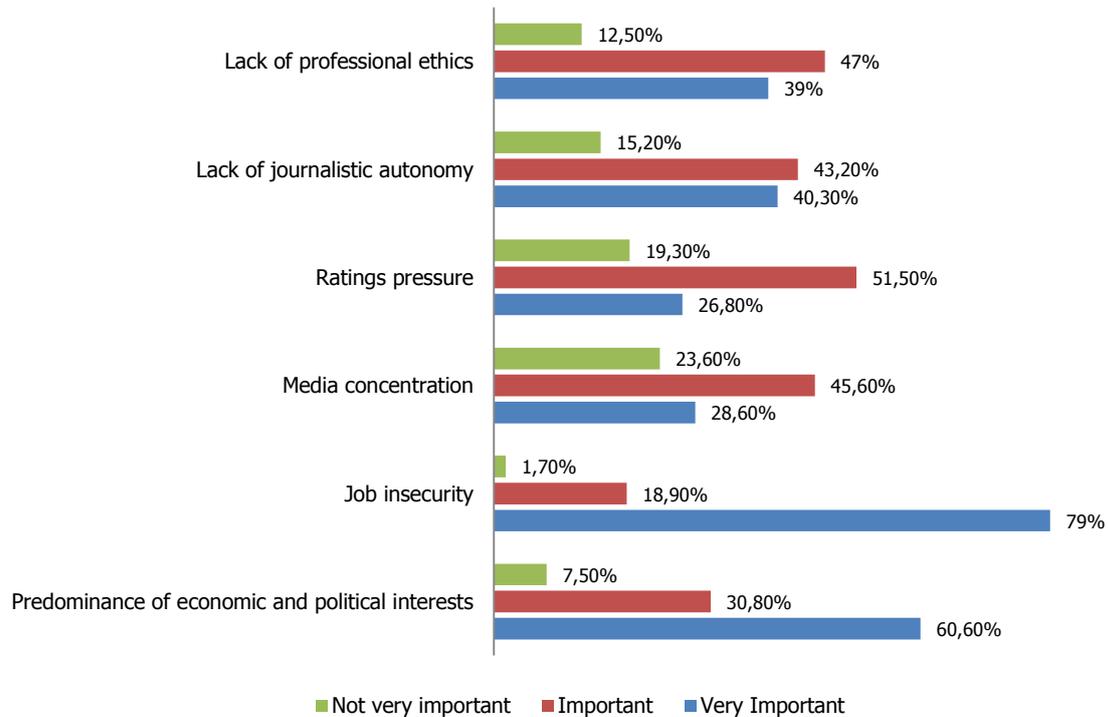
Journalists from the sample work in variety of media. The largest group (25.2%) works in a newspaper and 22% do so in a communication department. About 13% work in online media, while 10.2% work in television and 10.4% in magazines; 7.3% are employed in radio and 4.8% work in news agencies. They mostly work in private media (78%), rather than in the public sector (22%). The current economic situation in Spain and the precarious job conditions also increase the need to accumulate several jobs. Although the majority of them, 63.6%, are employed just in one company, a significant 14% of journalists work for four or more companies in order to make ends meet. Also, 7.7% work for three media and 14.7% for two different media.

Journalists' ideology was measured on a seven-point scale, being 3.5 the ideological center. The average value of the sample is 3.2, which is slightly leaned towards left wing positions. When describing their own ideology, nobody chose the far right wing position, while 5.7% identified themselves with the right, and 34.2% chose the center right. On the other scale of the spectrum, 1.7% chose the far left wing while 23.4% chose a left wing ideology and 34.7% identified themselves with the center left.

Findings

Professional problems (quantitative results)

According to the survey results, the main problems for journalists based in Madrid relates to job insecurity and precarious working conditions (79%). Young people who are entering the labor market are facing more difficulties to get a stable job, while journalists over 40 years old feel their positions are increasingly threatened.

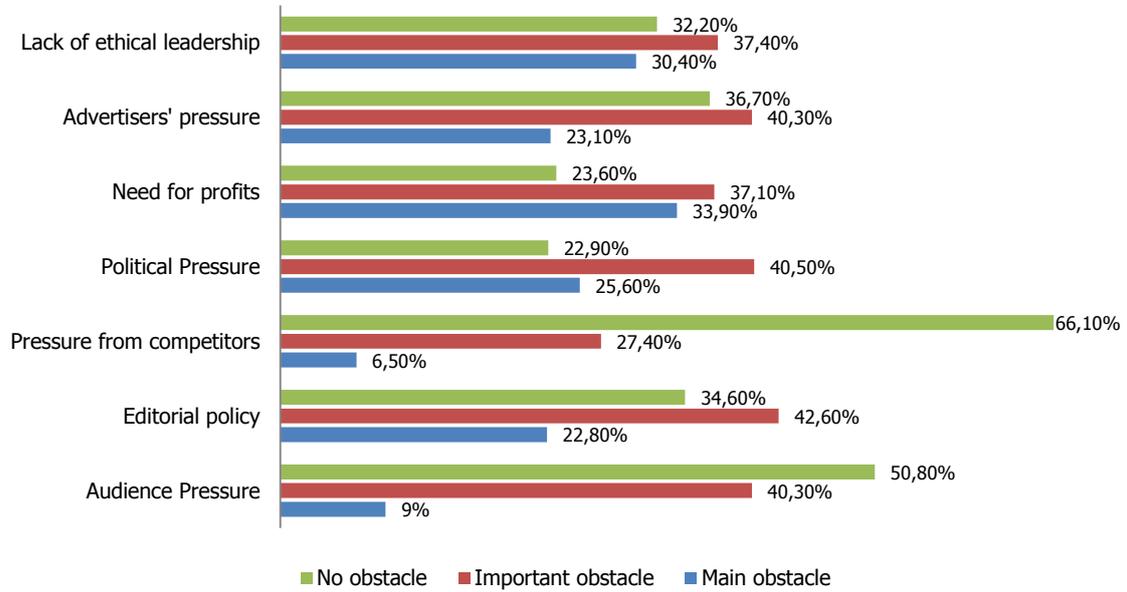
Graph 1. What are the most important problems you face in your daily work?

Source: Author's own research.

As Graph 1 shows, the second biggest problem refers to the predominance of political and economic interests over journalistic values (60.60%), followed by the lack of journalistic autonomy (40.30%). The influence of audience ratings or circulation is considered as the main problem by 26.80% and the concentration of media companies is highlighted by 28.60%. Journalists say they are less concerned about professional encroachment than other problems such as the lack of professional ethics, which is considered as the main problem by 39% of respondents.

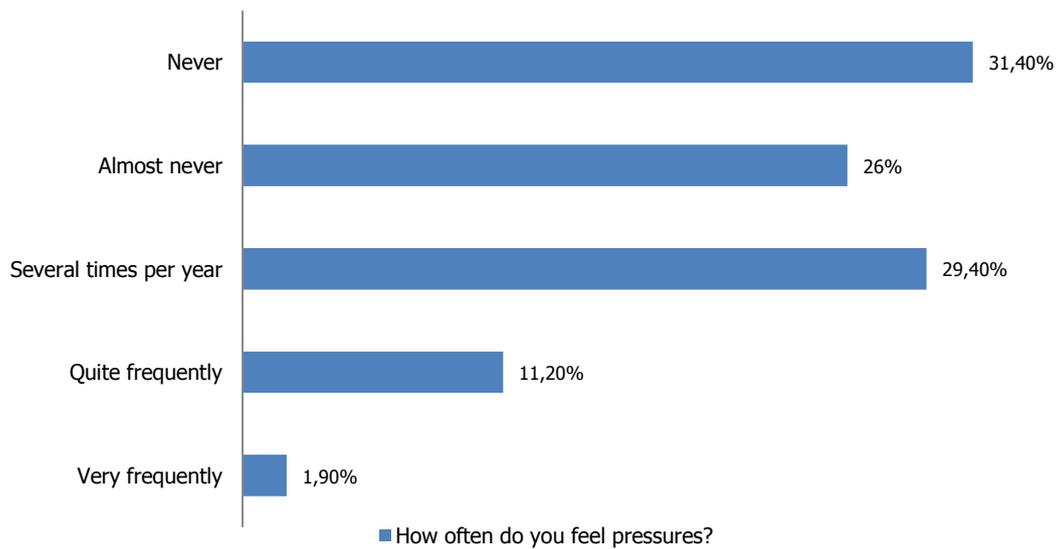
When asked about the main obstacles journalists face for good ethical decision making (Graph 2, next page), 39% emphasize the companies' need to achieve profits and 30.40%, the lack of ethical leadership at the management level. Other relevant obstacles mentioned by respondents are political pressure (25.60%) as well as pressure from advertisers (23.10%). The influence of the media's own editorial policy is considered as the main obstacle by 22.80% of respondents. Other issues, such as the influence of ratings and circulation data (9%) and pressure from competitors (6%), seem to have a marginal relevance.

Graph 2. What are the main obstacles for good ethical decision making?



Source: Author's own research.

Graph 3. How frequently do you receive pressures in your work?



Source: Author's own research.

Only one third (31.40%) of the surveyed journalists have never received pressures to behave in a way which hinders journalistic ethics in their company, as Graphic 3 shows. On the contrary, 29.40% say they receive pressures "several times per year" and 11.20% experience them "quite frequently". Managers and news executives rank higher among those who say they have received less pressure, compared to the perceptions of reporters and news professionals with no managing responsibilities.

Professional conflicts (qualitative results)

With the objective of analyzing the data obtained both in the interviews and in the discussion groups with media professionals, we focused on the aspects related to the main ethical conflicts and dilemmas they face in their daily journalistic practice. The findings show that from almost one hundred references to some kind of ethical conflicts, many journalists emphasize they face the greatest pressure in the social arena. Quite frequently, they mentioned conflicts originated in the political sphere, and the economic field was also highlighted as the main area of ethical conflict. However, interviewees tended to talk more openly about social problems than about political or business conflicts because they are less sensitive for them.

Another significant issue relates to the origin of these conflicts. Interview results indicate that most conflicts are related to their own companies. The main actors in ethical conflicts are news reporters, followed by editors. Other actors involved are top management, section editors, colleagues and other internal players. Among the external actors who play a role in the ethical conflicts, respondents highlight the news sources and subjects. Next we find politicians and advertisers and business people. Other external actors mentioned in a distant place are the courts of justice as well as consumers' associations.

Professional conflicts are managed in different ways. When a conflict breaks up, the editor tends to get involved. Another way of dealing with ethical problems is self-regulation, using ethical systems which have been implemented within the news organization. A third possibility is the "lack of action" when an ethical conflict arises, which is also mentioned by the interviewees.

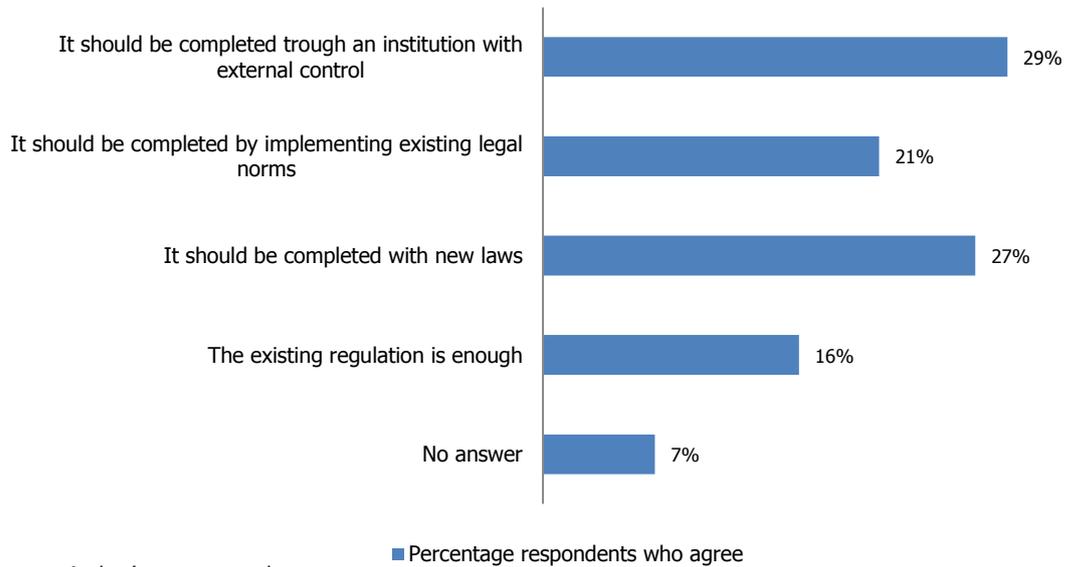
Media companies tend to be the most damaged actors when a conflict arises, according to many respondents. According to them, the sources or subjects of the news are also damaged, as well as third parties. A few interviewees support the view that conflicts have consequences in their own lives. However, interviews show that only in a limited number of cases, such ethical conflicts have brought about the adoption of guidelines that could be incorporated into journalistic practice. According to several interviewees, these conflicts have resulted in sanctions to the journalists involved or in the implementation of tougher control systems within the newsroom.

When dealing with the kind of issues that motivate ethical conflicts, interviewees perceive they are related to the principles of truthfulness and freedom and to the principle of responsibility. Other conflicts involved issues dealing with business ethics and the principle of justice. Several interviewees question the boundaries of sensationalism and the advertisers' influence on the news agenda. Some media are criticized for their "unethical behavior", especially television programmes and magazines dealing with celebrity gossip and tabloid journalism. Among the key issues, some editors point out to the dilemma of verifying sources and checking the data versus immediacy and the impact on the audience. However, professional practices in their own media tend to be justified in a rational way by news managers, and there is often a lament about the competition doing a poorer job, with lower ethical standards.

Online media are also mentioned as a source of new ethical conflicts, mostly related to the publication of users' comments which might hinder the honorability of some news people. One of the participants in the discussion groups explained that many users' contributions had to be refused because of their low quality: "There is a lot of noise in the submitted content and some comments point to potential libel and slander".

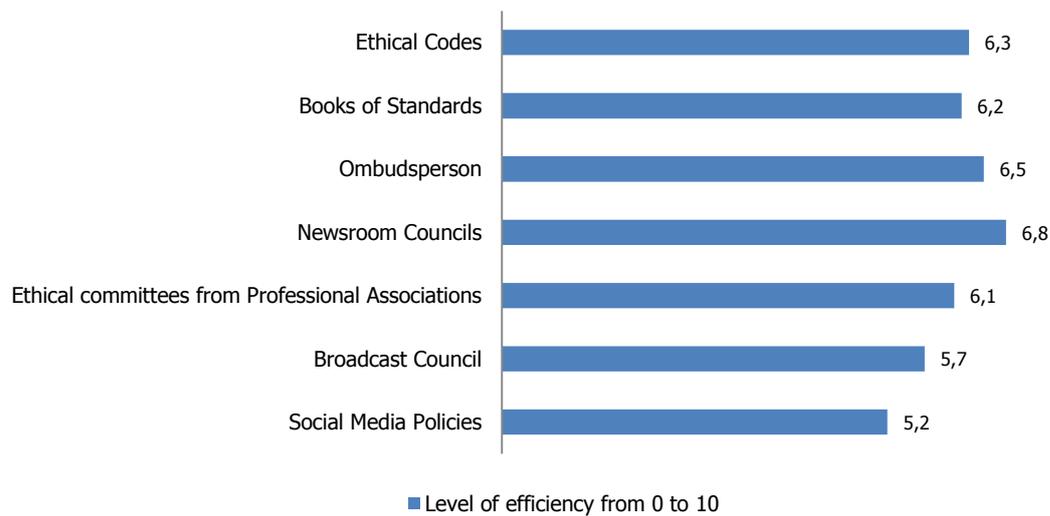
Media regulation (quantitative results)

A large variety of opinions is to be found on the issue of regulation's usefulness to guarantee ethical standards in the newsrooms, as shown in Graphic 4; there is even a large non-response rate (7%), compared to other questions. It seems the minority opinion (16%) is that self-regulation initiatives are enough to enforce ethical practice. Most respondents support the need of external regulation, which could be specified in a legal framework for the journalistic profession (27%) or in the implementation of existing legal norms (21%). A significant percentage of the responses (29%) agree that self-regulation should be combined with some kind of external regulator.

Graph 4. How much more regulation in the media is needed?

Source: Author's own research.

Similarly, journalists tend to value the usefulness of new self-regulation initiatives, such as newsroom councils (6.8 on a 10-point scale), rather than older self-regulation tools, such as ethical committees from professional associations (6.1). News Councils and Ombudspersons rank the highest among the self-regulation tools, while guidelines about the use of social networks seem to be less popular (Graphic 5). Some respondents consider that users' pressure through social media might have a beneficial effect on the ethical awareness of journalists, and others also emphasize the need that high management should know the profession "from the inside" and not just become business administrators.

Graph 5. How efficient are self-regulation tools?

Source: Author's own research.

Media regulation (qualitative results)

The analysis of the interviews draws some patterns that would account for distinctions among the ethical responsibility of news professionals. A large number of journalists tend to regard self-regulation tools as not very useful, with some exceptions: those tools which have been implemented for many years in some companies, which do not usually interfere with journalistic autonomy. Our findings support the view that journalist's self-regulation is the very first step to guarantee the ethical behavior of news companies. The "ethical base" is sustained by the journalists themselves, so that the "ethical DNA" of a particular media outlet would exclusively depend on the ethical compromise of its workers. One manager contended that:

It is an issue which pertains only to the bosses, because ethics works like a heavy burden on each journalist's conscience 24 hours around the clock, and a reporter enjoys a great deal of power, and if he or she publishes something which is not entirely true, his or her responsibility should be the same as the editor's.

A consensus emerged about journalism being a profession based on trust. As a newspaper editor put it, "people need to know that the news they are consuming is fair and accurate. If it isn't, then journalists and their employers have betrayed not only their profession but also the public interest they are supposed to serve".

At least three of the professionals interviewed argued that self-regulation tools tend to make it more difficult for ethical decision making within the newsroom. "Ethics codes and regulations are issued as a PR exercise, to be able to show off, rather than to use them responsibly", a press reporter said.

A significant issue raised in the discussion groups was that several professionals claim for the implementation of an "ethical sheriff", a regulator who will keep order and will be in charge of solving ethical problems. As one participant argued:

Our main problem is that we don't have an ethical sheriff who is watching over us, so that people come and say: why you don't do this or that, and we feel an enormous pressure from the audience, from advertisers, from politicians... But because there is no sheriff who fulfils his duty of establishing what's right or wrong, we face a difficult situation.

Therefore, some journalists support the need for a regulatory framework which tends to be identified with the State, so that no other external actors will end up regulating the media. In the regulatory discourse, the "sheriff" appears to be a relevant figure, which might control a difficult, unstructured territory. In fact, the "sheriff" is the only one who can carry out effectively this regulatory job. Instead of using other regulatory figures, such as the referee, the judge or the policeman, the "sheriff" was preferred. This figure echoes "the far west", a wild territory where there is no law and where the "sheriff" becomes the only authority to whom everyone should abide. In conclusion, the "sheriff" symbolizes the State, which provides and supervises the regulations in a tumultuous media market, represented as a "wild territory", where players behave unethically with hardly any restrictions. What it is at stake here is who controls the media, whether that is primarily a job for the professionals and the owners, as well as the audience and advertisers, or is it part of the State's role.

Conclusions

These findings show that the ethical environment in Spanish media companies is strained. At times, an organization's internal atmosphere proves impossible to bear for the professionals who work there. Also,

the context aggravated by the economic crisis and the lack of a regulatory framework, can become a determining factor for the ethical conflicts in the newsroom and, as a consequence, be one of the causes of the progressive weakening of the democratic health of a country where the public is suffering from the severe effects of an information deficit.

The discourse of "professional ethics" tends to be centered on the figure and values of the journalist, described as someone who is aware about what is good or bad ethical decision making, and therefore, he or she becomes the "ethical self-regulator" of the company. Thus, a journalist should be able to make a decision when an ethical conflict arises, according to a set of standards and practices. In the end, the news professional is viewed as the guarantee of the company's ethics. This discourse tends to place the responsibility of content on the reporter and the resolution of the ethical dilemmas on the editor.

A second discourse about self-regulation is structured around the media company as the guarantee of journalistic ethics and practices. Defendants of this view argue that self-regulation tools (ethical codes, news councils, ombudsmen...) are necessary in order to maintain ethical standards, because the company leads the resolution of conflicts and it also promotes the existence of ethical procedures. In this way, ethical standards and responsibility spring from the company itself, so that its professionals' behavior should be a reflection of those standards.

An opposing discourse emphasizes the need of regulation, which is expressed as the implementation of "ethical sheriffs", that is, increasing a regulatory framework of the media, which tends to be identified with the State and external regulatory bodies. Furthermore, this growing awareness among journalists echoes the fear and the precarious working conditions which are considered the main obstacle for ethical decision making.

The arguments that sustain the "professional ethics" discourse are spurred by worsening of the working conditions, newsroom job cuts and the decrease in advertising income in the Spanish media. Journalists surveyed in this study argue these factors are eroding their freedom and editorial independence, and also undermine the ethical quality of their work.

The bulk of Madrid journalists' criticism on unethical practices is geared towards the growing climate of ideological polarization which is to be found on the main newspapers and broadcast media. The editorial positions reflect partisan lines on many issues, and there is an increasing bias in the way the news is reported. Some interviewees argue that in a context of economic crisis, advertisers are now more eager to set their own conditions, which tend to limit news independence.

Our results are supportive of previous studies, such as Figueras-Maz et al. (2012), who found that precarious and uncertain job security were the issues of most concern to journalists in four Spanish regions: Catalonia, Madrid, Basque Country and Andalusia. Our research indicates that the crisis has

aggravated Madrid news professionals' perceptions about the problems they face, because newsrooms must now do the same work with fewer people and smaller salaries. This trend is harming the quality of news coverage, for if news organizations are weakened, they cannot fulfill their role of guaranteeing the citizens' right to free information (Ward, 2005).

These results are consistent with those of Maciá and Herrera (2010), who found that Madrid-based journalists tend to support the view that freedom of expression should be respected when dealing with sensitive issues, which must be solved according to the particular circumstances of each case. However, as both authors argued, many journalists still see self-regulation as wishful thinking in contemporary media. It is striking that, in a similar study carried out in the Basque country, the majority of respondents admitted to ignore the deontological codes and other self-regulation mechanisms of the profession of journalism (Zalbidea et al., 2010).

Our findings indicate that the companies' need to achieve profits and the lack of ethical leadership at the management level as their main problems. News professionals' politicization is illustrated especially in the absence of transparency as a result of the downgrading of journalism; they ascribe to different sides because they have no other choice. Media credibility and ethical procedures are increasingly questioned, and many journalists advocate for enforcing the law tougher and introducing external regulators. Reporters should be addressing society's concerns, and they shouldn't be conditioned by political or business players and neither by their companies' owners, but Spanish newsrooms are witnessing the opposite.

This study has explored Madrid-based journalists' views about the problems and media regulation. However, its findings are limited to our sample, within a specific time frame. With a more diverse sample, other scholars would be able to test the validity of our conclusions. Further research on this topic is needed to shed as much light on the phenomenon and to strengthen its comparative dimensions.

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