






Spanish Journalists and the Loss of News Quality: Professional Judgement

Los periodistas españoles y la pérdida de la calidad de la información: el juicio profesional

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the opinions of Spanish journalists on the quality of their professional work and how it is being affected by the current economic, technological, commercial and professional context. The results are based on a questionnaire in which 363 Spanish journalists participated, all with a minimum of three years experience. Their answers reflect on the structure and behavior of media companies and current production of news. The article specifically focuses on exposing the journalists' opinions on the quality of their work. The results show that 81% of the participants state that standards of quality in journalistic production has deteriorated. This deterioration is believed to be connected to the effect of the economic struggles in the sector. They suggested that the main motives of this decline lie in the lack of economic and political independence, a lack of private investment and in the problems caused by technological changes. These situations all fall into the context of a precarious labor market within the sector. The article also links the results with academic works that have analyzed the quality of journalism over recent years. It offers, for the first time in the Spanish academic context, the Spanish journalists' own point of view on these issues.

RESUMEN

Este artículo expone los resultados de una investigación acerca del modo en el que los periodistas españoles en ejercicio enjuician la calidad periodística y cómo esta se ve afectada por el contexto económico, tecnológico, empresarial, laboral y profesional actual del periodismo. El texto recoge los resultados de una encuesta en la que participan 363 periodistas españoles con al menos tres años de experiencia en medios de comunicación. Sus respuestas aluden, entre otros aspectos, a las reflexiones acerca de la estructura y el comportamiento de las empresas informativas, así como las características predominantes de la información periodística en la actualidad. En particular, el artículo se centra en exponer las consideraciones de los periodistas acerca del cuidado o esmero de su labor profesional. Entre los principales resultados destaca que el 81% de los encuestados reconoce un empeoramiento de los patrones de calidad del producto periodístico, que ligan a la crisis del sector. Entre las posibles causas se mencionan la falta de independencia económica y política de los medios, la falta de inversión empresarial y los problemas derivados de los cambios tecnológicos, todo ello en un contexto de precarización del mercado laboral periodístico. El artículo vincula estos resultados a otros estudios internacionales que han abordado, de manera sistemática, la calidad periodística, aportando por primera vez en el contexto académico español una perspectiva de la cuestión a partir de los propios profesionales.

KEYWORDS | PALABRAS CLAVE

News quality, quality standards, journalism, professional values, journalistic ethics, crisis, technological changes, survey. Calidad periodística, estándares de calidad, periodismo, valores profesionales, ética periodística, crisis, cambios tecnológicos, encuesta.

1. Introduction and state of affairs

For years, traditional media have been immersed in a technological transition towards digitization that does not only affect the business models and management of media companies but also has a bearing on the manner in which they produce the information they offer their readership or audience. Recent studies on the strategies implemented by major media groups have shown that, in the long run, the push for profitability in the online versions of print media, for instance, influences fundamental factors affecting the quality of the information, even in the case of «top-end» media (Ramírez-de-la-Piscina & al., 2014).

The need to undertake an analysis of quality in journalism has generally been linked to a variety of methodological traditions and to different goals in studies undertaken on an international level (Gómez-Mompert & al., 2013). While, for the most part, research in the US has focused on the push for profitability, studies undertaken in Germany have concentrated on the issue of professionalism. Furthermore, Scandinavian countries broke new ground in Europe by basing their research on the notion of «informativeness», a notion linked to the amount of information and the space devoted by each media outlet to a series of given events. Another trend, mostly prevalent in Latin American countries –and the focus of several research studies in Spain–, has concentrated on social responsibility and democratic quality, based on the concept of journalism as a public good. Without good quality and honest journalism social well-being and democratic development are unthinkable.

In line with this research, our paper sets out to reveal the perceptions of Spanish journalists with different responsibilities and at least three years of experience concerning the quality of the content they write and present to the public, assuming that minimum standards are essential in order to guarantee robust journalistic practices serving a democratic society.

Along the same lines as the debate on quality in television (Caffarel, 2005), the growing number of proposals that have attempted to study the quality of journalism are diverse and have resulted in a body of literature that ranges from catalogues on what journalism is and should be in a democratic society to methodologies and techniques that analyze journalism in relation to news companies. In addition, these reports study the product based on professional practices, probe into the environment in which this relevant social activity is carried out and scrutinize the perception of journalism among the public (Gómez-Mompert & al., 2013).

Given the leading role that journalism plays in the field of communication, its close ties to political spheres and its impact on public opinion, establishing to what extent and in what way public information meets the requirements expected of it and considered necessary in an advanced society has led researchers and international organizations that oversee good practices to establish qualitative, and in the case of certain factors, quantitative methods when pursuing their conclusions.

In this respect, the data recording, analysis and evaluation methods employed in the design of the methodology that serves as the basis for this report are based, primarily, on the theories of gatekeeping and newsmaking. This is because, on the one hand, these theories consider the professional journalist to be a gatekeeper who is expected to guarantee good journalism as a fundamental right of citizens in open societies. On the other, the theoretical framework for this research is also based on the requirement that newsmaking responds to the criteria of newsworthiness based on values of unquestionable public interest. Furthermore, the reliability between the fact and the account thereof must fall within the basic principles of veracity, verification, contrast and honesty.

Considering the aforementioned communication theories, we have used a range of methods and techniques that draw, both explicitly and implicitly, from several sources that partly fall within different fields of knowledge, including sociology, economics, linguistics, law and political science applied to communication. The ultimate goal is to paint the picture of how the main players in providing information assess their own work and the criteria they use to assess its quality, by means of a methodology that combines a quantitative and qualitative approach to the object under study.

2. Material and methods

We have based our research on an online survey consisting of 45 questions (38 closed-ended answers and 7 open-ended answers), completed by Spanish journalists from different news outlets. When selecting the respondents, we contacted journalists currently employed by a news company who have at least three year experience in the profession, irrespective of their professional category. The survey was sent out with the help of Spanish professional journalism associations, using several in-house communication tools and social media (associations involved in the distribution of the survey included the Association of Journalists of Madrid, the Catalanian Association of Journalists, the Andalusian Federation of Press Associations, the

Andalusian Union of Journalists and the Union of Journalists of Valencia). Data was collected over the months of June and July 2013, and 363 journalists took the survey anonymously (45% women and 55% men). The criteria of being actively employed and having a proven experience of at least three years makes it difficult to establish the statistical scope of the end sample, although the 363 completed questionnaires do, in fact, support the results obtained.

The survey was designed around four main pillars: structure and behavior of the news outlet (17 closed-ended questions); processing of the information (10 questions); due care and diligence in news production (11 questions); causes and reasons behind the loss of quality (7 questions). The latter section combined closed-ended and open-ended questions so as to let respondents provide us with their insights and views when outlining their perception of quality in journalism. The focus was placed on «quality in journalism» rather than on «quality of information», given that we are attempting to analyze the professional perception of the actual journalistic output and also that of the entire information-communication process, which involves both journalists and editors or administrators in a news company.

2.1. The theoretical foundations of the survey design

The questionnaire used to survey how journalists perceive quality in journalism was designed based on experience gained from previous research concerned partially or totally with the issue under study. Several international studies have turned their attention to theoretical factors linked to the professional values of journalism (Deuze, 2005). Others have used surveys to weigh fundamental concepts—such as objectivity—against daily practices developed in Denmark (Skovsgaard, Albæk, Bro & De-Vreese, 2012; Pihl-Thingvad, 2014), Sweden (Strömbäck, Karlsson & Hopmann, 2012) and Brazil (Herscovitz, 2004). Other research has compared ideological bias in professional work (Patterson & Donsbach, 2010) or has mapped out journalistic cultures in 18 countries (Hanitzsch & al., 2011). Papers such as Amado's report on Argentina (2012) also point to a need for a methodological effort to assess the state of the profession.

Studies undertaken recently in Spain have established similar approaches, albeit not focused on quality but on the general question of professionalism (Túñez & Martínez, 2014). Gómez-Mompart (2010) studied the topic of social and political issues and professional culture among journalists based on two hundred long interviews with media professionals working in the Region of Valencia (Spain) with an average of at least twenty years of experience. The report asked journalists about corporate internal and external factors or ideological issues that may determine their work. Their nuanced and subjective answers helped shift the focus of the survey towards specific parame-

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ters and scales that simplified conclusions (Gómez-Mompart, 2010:33). When defining the questionnaire, the aforementioned experiences were considered alongside the specific scientific background referred to hereunder for each section.

The first part focused on issues concerning the structure and behavior of the news outlet in terms of quality. To that end, indicators proposed by Merrill and Lowenstein in «Media, Messages and Men» (1971) and Bogart in «Press and Public» (1989), were contrasted against all three groups of indices (work, journalistic and corporate) described by De-Pablos and Mateos (2004), in addition to the journalistic ethics thesaurus prepared by the research team managed by Alsius (Alsius & Salgado, 2010). Consequently, the indicators and questions in the first section of the survey refer to: independence of the news outlet; press freedom; diversity among columnists; role of the business owner; newsroom statute; level of education of the journalist; job security; decent wage; reasonable working hours; percentage of advertising; compliance with ethical standards; recognition of a conscience clause; level of transparency when processing information; issues avoided; use of news agencies; number of writers in terms of the work load or relevant topics.

The questions in the second section (Information processing) were based on «Added Value Journalism» (AVJ), a measurement pattern developed by researchers from the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile (Alessandri & al., 2001), and specifically on the definition set out subsequently by Téramo (2006). Téramo established ten standards for Quality in Journalistic Information (reliability, relevance, interest, proportion, adaptation, transparency, clarity, intelligibility, integration and impact). These standards were taken into account alongside a selection of the indicators tested for TV news programs by Israel & Pomares (2013: 156-157), such as indicators linked to topic (relevance and hierarchy of the news); selection criteria (news values); indicators on the processing and presentation of news; on people, sources and intercultural diversity, and space-time indicators or news location.

As a result, the questions in this section focused on the use of primary data sources; the presence of relevant information; percentage of original topics; original features; news addressing similar realities; direct access to events; handling of protagonists; investigative journalism; quality of photojournalism and original infographics and graphs.

In the third section of the survey, we posed eleven questions on due care and diligence in news production. To do so, we considered a selection of AVJ indices alongside indicators proposed by the Mexican Network of Quality in Journalism (Various, 2006). Consequently, questions touch upon principles that are directly related, on the one hand, to the journalist's work, education, commitment and professional ethics, and on the other, to other issues linked to values or principles that depend directly on the work environment. We also took into consideration factors developed in the thesis written by González (2011: 258-345), who combined an analysis of formal factors, aiming to detect potential technical flaws and errors in the presentation and transmission, with a content analysis that focused on three elements: diversity, independence (including the level of facticity, distinguishing between facts, statements and conjectures) and news production.

As a result, the third section concentrates on questions linked to indicators specifically tied to the quality of the journalist's work: quality of copy/broadcast; linguistic proficiency; appropriate language; facticity of information; diversity of topics, protagonists and spheres; intercultural diversity; frequency of quotes; plurality of sources; corroboration of data offered; percentage of institutional and/or corporate sources; predominant focus in the choice between «emotion» as

opposed to «information». These results will be studied in detail and broken down in the following section.

The last section of the questionnaire sounds out professionals to record their opinion on the causes and reasons that undermine quality in journalism. Previous qualitative research (Parreño, 2013:112-113) was used to this effect. The seven issues addressed set out a series of distinctions and clarifications that link the quality of the news product or the lack thereof to factors such as job insecurity, the economic downturn, adaptation to new technologies; the generation gap; and trends including content homogenization, the prevalence of instant, real-time information; and the loss of professional values.

The point of departure for the main hypothesis was as follows: Journalism professionals in Spain know that both the economic crisis –which has been affecting the economy, media and technology for several years– and job insecurity are having a serious impact on quality in journalism and a loss of values in the profession. As aforementioned, for the purpose of the survey, we contacted a varied sample of professionals practicing journalism in Spain at present.

3. Analysis and results

The general opinion among respondents is that there has been a widespread loss of the core values of the profession over the last few years, as noted by 81% of the respondents, compared to 19% who deny the existence of the decrease. On the whole, a detailed analysis of the respondents does not present notable differences in terms of sex, age or position: 80% of the sample (managers, editors-in-chief, editors and section editors) acknowledge the decline.

The most relevant factor when offering a pessimistic view of the values upheld by the profession is the variable linked to the news outlet of employment, with differences exceeding 25%. While 70% of radio journalists admit to the decline, this figure rises to 96% in the case of television. By age, it is notable to see that professionals aged 51-65 are more aware (by eight percentage points) of the loss of values than journalists under 50 years old. Nevertheless, journalists with more than two decades of experience perceived the deterioration most clearly.

When considering the reasons that influence this crisis of the professional model, half of the journalists (51%) pinpoint the neglect of four fundamental elements in journalism: contrast, rigor, honesty and quality. Television journalists once again take first place (76%) when identifying this cause, followed at a rela-

Table 1. Online survey Quality in journalism as perceived by Journalists
(June/July 2013)

363 journalists: 55% Men (198); 45% Women (165)					
News outlet		Position		Type of contract	
Print newspaper	31% (114)	Reporter	58% (210)	Staff	69% (249)
Television	21% (75)	Section editor or editor	12% (45)	Contributor	15% (54)
Online newspaper	18% (66)	Editor in chief or deputy director	7% (27)	Freelance	13% (48)
Radio	14% (51)	Manager	5% (18)	Intern	3% (12)
Print magazine	11% (39)	Other	18% (63)		
Online magazine	5% (18)				

tive distance by print journalists (working at newspapers and magazines), who account for 60% of the respondents. The second cause listed by respondents in interpreting the loss of values is the devaluation of the social prestige of the profession, an opinion shared by one in three journalists.

3.1. Professional opinion regarding due care and diligence in news production

Findings referring to care and diligence due in news production reveal that, despite the aforementioned responses, Spanish journalists are highly satisfied with the quality of the journalism in their news outlets. Approximately 80% of the respondents consider the narrative and copy in their media and the level of linguistic proficiency to be sufficient or good.

Similarly, 59% of the respondents consider that their news outlets almost always use appropriate language (only 5% state it is almost never used; 36% say it is used inconsistently). In general, there is a consensus among the answers in this section; around 40-50% consider the quality of the informative output, in its diversity of forms, to be sufficient. Therefore, we need to look at the nuances to draw more detailed conclusions regarding their perception of the quality of journalism in their corresponding companies. We see a clear paradox in terms of cultural or social representation (topics, protagonists or spheres) on the one hand and the presence of statements from personal sources in information on the other. As a result, 88% told us that the number of statements or quotes in the journalistic genres is adequate or even abundant.

However, this presence runs contrary to the representativeness of journalistic output, where only 68% defined the plurality of the sources in their reports as «adequate» (56%) or «high» (12%). The difference, therefore, between the use of statements (88%) and

their plurality (68%) is 20% in the most neutral or positive considerations. These results obviously infer that this negatively affects the quality of the information.

Alongside the sizeable presence of institu-

tional and corporate sources, according to 30% of the respondents, the diversity of topics, protagonists and spheres in the information is poor. Nevertheless, the majority consider it to be adequate (53%). In a similar vein, 45% consider intercultural diversity in their news outlet to be poor, whereas 44% define it as adequate and only 12% describe it as high. In any case, the majority (53%) states that there is a balance in terms of the protagonists of the information, although this balance is considered to be «poor» by 35% of the respondents. With regards to contrasting the information provided by the sources, the majority note that verification protocols are adequate (48%), although 33% consider that data is corroborated poorly. Equally significant, in terms of the social and professional context of the journalist, is the answer provided in relation to the level of «facticity», i.e. what journalists do to stop their reports mixing up facts, statements and conjectures. Considering their responses, 50% state that they sometimes get mixed up and 18% state that this occurs most of the time.

Last but not least, we asked journalists to assess whether the information presented in their news outlet lent more towards emotion or pure information. Their responses showed that there does not seem to be a huge difference between both options. Consequently, 45% believe both models (emotion vs. information) are evenly balanced in their offer; 33% consider information trumps emotion; and 23% affirm that emotion currently predominates over information.

Table 2. Quality in copy and linguistic proficiency

Define the copy/broadcast in your news outlet.		
Good	126	35%
Acceptable	162	45%
Poor	72	20%
Define linguistic proficiency in your news outlet.		
Good	141	40%
Acceptable	141	40%
Poor	72	20%

Table 3. On the presence of personal sources

Define the frequency of statements or quotes in your news outlet.		
Poor	45	13%
Adequate	186	52%
High	129	36%

4. Discussion. Reasons influencing the loss of quality in journalism

Results show that Spanish journalism professionals, despite being aware of the loss of quality in news production, attribute this situation to professional context and not to their lack of education or knowledge of the values required to perform their job. This positive, albeit not excellent, self-perception ties in with the high level of professionalism that exists in the newsrooms according to the respondents (85% stated the average level of education in their news outlets corresponds to degrees in Journalism or Audiovisual Communication; 95% when this is extended to university degrees in other fields).

If this is the case, what causes the deterioration in the quality of news production that they themselves have detected? To answer this question, respondents fall back on a range of factors that can be classified into three broad groups of reasons:

1) Current conditions in which professional work is undertaken. Journalists maintain that the decline in quality is closely linked to the conditions under which they perform their work. Respondents with a high level of job security represent 38% of the total, whereas 34% note that only half of the staff in their news outlet enjoys this security and almost one third (28%) states the level of job security is poor. Apart from these facts, which are linked to the crisis affecting the sector, other issues should also be considered: 39% claim that wage levels are barely sufficient. An identical figure (39%) refers to those who assert that this occurs only in certain positions. Those claiming to have an appropriate salary amount to 22% of the respondents. As regards working hours, 36% say they barely enjoy reasonable working hours, whilst 34% are relatively happy with their working hours. This ties in with the different production routines in each type of medium. Consequently, 54% of respondents with unreasonable working hours are employed by print newspapers, whereas 27% of those with the opposite opinion work in television. There is a great deal of consensus (69%) when

noting that the reporter-workload ratio is poor. Indeed, one in seven journalists claims that another of the causes of the loss of quality could be the accumulation of tasks. The perception that the lack of time prevents an in-depth analysis of the content is upheld by 22% of the respondents; 18% believe that immediacy and instant communication in real time leads to serious errors in information.

In this sense, job insecurity stands as the greatest threat to optimal professional standards. One in five respondents claims that the lack of job security weakens the critical capacity of journalists and, consequently, affects the quality of their work. The data collected also reveals that this insecurity runs parallel to fact that experienced reporters are being replaced by contributors or interns.

2) Lack of investment by news companies. The survey brought to light that 37% of the journalists associate the lack of investment in this field with the decline in the quality of journalism. Two in ten professionals perceive that the media corporations have little interest in quality, and maintain that they put wage costs and advertising income above quality. Along these lines, 16% of the respondents claim that companies hardly ever invest in the production of good information or original content. This also results in another negative issue affecting the quality of journalism: homogeneous content across media. According to 14% of the respondents, «topics or coverage that did well on other media are imitated». Nevertheless, the honesty of the respondents is revealed upon admitting (11%) that the inaccuracies that prevent them offering a quality product are, in a general sense, «the result of a range of bad habits». Additionally, one in ten claimed that journalists are often negligent with content and form when presenting the information.

Table 4. On the plurality of sources and informative diversity.

Define the plurality of sources offered by your news outlet.		
Poor	114	32%
Adequate	201	56%
High	42	12%
Qualify the percentage of institutional and/or corporate sources quoted in the information in your news outlet		
Very high	168	48%
Average	159	46%
Low	21	6%
Define the diversity of topics, protagonists or spheres in the information in your news outlet.		
Poor	108	30%
Adequate	189	53%
High	60	17%

Table 5. On data verification and «facticity»

Define data verification in the information provided by your news outlet.		
Poor	117	33%
Adequate	171	48%
High	72	20%
As regards the level of «facticity» of the information, do you think facts, statements and conjectures get mixed up in your news outlet?		
Hardly ever	114	32%
Sometimes	180	50%
Always	66	18%

Table 6. On the prevalent emphasis in the news

Would you say «emotion» or «information» prevails in your news outlet?		
Emotion	81	23%
Balance	159	45%
Information	117	33%

3) Adaptation to new technologies. One in four respondents (23%) refers to the lack of time to reflect on information as the main factor in the loss of quality. Approximately 15% consider that contemporary production methods improve the possibilities, but give them «less capacity to cover content», which can increase the number of potential errors. In terms of social media, 12% consider that competition in these networks has a negative effect on the content. Similarly, 24% claim there is a large gap between traditional and online newsrooms. The latter consists mainly of younger journalists. According to the respondents, this has a negative effect on journalism as it hinders the contact between senior and junior journalists. This fact is further complicated by the early retirement and redundancies of senior journalists, who are unable to pass established journalism standards onto the new generations of professionals.

5. Conclusions

The picture painted by the results of the questionnaire corroborates our initial hypothesis. Deriving from both the circumstances of the economic crisis and a combination of internal and external factors, 81% of active Spanish journalists that responded to the questionnaire believe there has been a drop in the quality of the journalistic output. Furthermore, 34% perceive a devaluation of the social prestige of journalism as a profession in line with surveys undertaken by CIS (2013). The limited level of political and economic independence of the news outlets (noted by 48%) or the interference of employers in their work (which 44% found to be excessive) exacerbate the changing scenario in the context of the economic downturn. Although they do not feel that this circumstance jeopardizes press freedom, they are aware of the existen-

ce of topics that are systematically ignored in their companies (41%), and of the poor plurality of opinion offered to the audience (42%).

Respondents attribute the decline in quality to the job insecurity in journalism (inexperienced contributors replacing experienced writers; accumulation of tasks; etc.). These ideas tie in with the findings of the 2014 Annual Report on Journalism (Spanish acronym, IAPP), which revealed that 59.6% of media professionals pointed to the increase in unemployment and the job insecurity it causes as the main problems affecting journalism, followed by a lack of economic or political independence (11%) (IAPP, 2014:45).

Answers concerning the manner in which information is presented (their most direct responsibility) generate a consensus of around 40-50% who consider the quality of the information to be adequate or sufficient. It is important to note that approximately 80% of the respondents consider news is written or reported in an adequate or correct manner. However, they are more critical towards the lack of representation and the plurality of sources, intercultural diversity, lack of diversity in topics, relevance of information and the corroboration of the sources of information.

Therefore, journalists are aware of the hindrances that condition their work and that job insecurity is an evident threat to quality. Despite offering a generous, albeit critical, view of the information they produce, they acknowledge the need to boost original content, allow closer access to events and to generally strengthen compliance with ethical standards and offer a greater access to professional tools to improve the performance of their work in a democratic society.

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