



[Research](#) - [How to cite this article](#) - [referees' reports](#) - [scheduling](#) - [metadata](#) - [PDF](#) - [Creative Commons](#)

[DOI](#): 10.4185/RLCS-65-2010-916-516-537-EN - ISSN 1138 - 5820 - RLCS # 65 - 2010

## The crisis of investigative Journalism in Spain. The journalism practice in the Spanair accident

José Vicente García-Santamaría, Ph.D. [\[C.V.\]](#) Assistant Professor at the Department of Journalism and Audiovisual Communication, Carlos III University [josevicente.garcia@uc3m.es](mailto:josevicente.garcia@uc3m.es)

**Abstract:** The crash of the McDonnell Douglas plane operated by the Spanish airline Spanair, on 20 August 2008 at Barajas Airport, and the journalistic treatment it received undoubtedly represent a unique opportunity to address the current state of journalism in Spain. In particular, this article studies the use of information sources in a crisis situation, which requires a major effort to find the maximum number of primary and specialised sources to provide, in a short period of time, the audience with the key facts to understand the event. This accident also represents an excellent opportunity to study some practices within investigative journalism and the different factors that condition the media agenda. Finally, as in any other air tragedy, where millionaire compensations can be paid to the victims, it is important to examine the application of a series of ethical frameworks, which have been captured in deontological codes designed to assure fair journalistic practices.

**Keywords:** Journalistic sources; investigative journalism; crisis communication, Journalism ethics.

**Summary:** 1. Introduction. 2. The catastrophe as an extraordinary news event. 3. Methodology. 4. Investigative journalism in the Spanair plane crash. 5. Lack of sources in Spanish journalism. 5.1. Information on television. 6. The journalistic treatment given to a crisis situation and its noises. 6.1. Analysis of the main "information noises". 6.2. Crisis communication strategies. 7. The ethics of journalism. 8. Conclusions. 9. Bibliographical References. 10. Notes.

Translation by **Cruz Alberto Martínez-Arcos** (University of London)

### 1. Introduction

The media coverage of the Spanair crash has been without a doubt one of the most revealing news events of the Spanish media panorama in recent times, because it has uncovered, as few events have, the structural limitations of the current Spanish journalism in aspects that are as important as the journalistic routines, the job insecurity, the supremacy of "declarative journalism" in the important press conferences, the absence of work methodologies and ethical frameworks in crisis situations, and even the constraints imposed by the governmental authorities to reduce the autonomy of the journalistic profession.

The opportunity to make some reflections on some key aspects of the journalistic routines in Spain is undoubtedly brought by the inability of the Spanish journalists and media to inform on time what happened on 20 August, 2008, in one of the runways at the Terminal 4 of Barajas airport; to subsequently offer an accurate reconstruction of events; and to eventually clarify, without confusion or informational poisonings, the different hypotheses and explain the causes of this catastrophe.

Investigative journalism occupies a central role in this research, but there are other essential aspects to address the Spanair case, such as the communication treatment in crisis situations or the ethics of journalism. The media coverage of a catastrophe is certainly a test for any news professional or editorial team, as they have to work harder to present the maximum number of sources and viewpoints on the accident, in order to offer their audiences different informational and interpretative keys. And this is because in these situations, which are not new to the Spanish media (e.g. the Prestige case or the 11M terrorist attacks), the public not only relies on the media to know what happened (Vicente, 2006: 351) but also expects the media to rise to the occasion.

On the other hand, and as in all plane crashes, where millionaire or billionaire compensations are settled, a myriad of crossed interests represented by lobbyists, communication agencies, lawyers, politicians and, of course, some media teams who defend, in many cases, clearly conflicting positions, soon come into play. The aim of all these factors influencing the media agenda is to benefit one of the parties in dispute, by clearly supporting the research lines that exculpate their clients or sponsors, and at the same time to try to put the blame on any of the other parties involved.

Finally, we believe that the fact that this accident occurred in August, when most veteran journalists are on holiday and therefore there is a good amount of intern students covering the news, does not exonerate the Spanish media's poor

performance. Journalists were lacking sources, but also methodologies and procedures that enabled them to work systematically. According to their expressions and the way their questions were posed to those allegedly involved in the accident, Spanish journalists seemed clearly *contaminated* by the techniques of trash TV. The poor performance during those days also raised numerous questions about the methodologies that were applied -if any- in the Spanish media newsrooms and about the training of journalists in those newsrooms.

## 2. The catastrophe as an extraordinary news event

A catastrophe is a journalistically extraordinary and popularly striking event, which can make the pulse of journalism beat like just few other events can (León Gross, 2008). And in those tragic days of August 2008 the reporters that covered the Spanair disaster might have taken into account some principles that are the essence of journalistic information:

- 1) The practice of journalism is always inquiry and search (Santoro 2004: 17).
- 2) In any research it is necessary to formulate different working hypotheses to clarify the major news events. And all hypotheses should be based on certain underlying assumptions and basic points (Elizalde, 2004), which are capable of guiding us in putting back together, piece by piece, the puzzle that will allow us to achieve an accurate reconstruction of events.
- 3) A hypothesis is an attempt of reconstruction that is capable of clarifying a set of facts, and can be tested in subsequent research (Ellet, 2007). This reconstruction must be carried out in the shortest time possible, since the *Prestige* case demonstrated that a bad treatment of information can delay the discovery of the truth and make it irrelevant when it finally comes out, and in this case the truth "will not be interesting for anybody, it will not become news" (Gómez and Ordaz, 2003).
- 4) The speed in the pursuit of information is essential to avoid rumours from replacing the reality.
- 5) The news stories produced and disseminated by the media system become a vital link for citizens (Casero 2009).

## 3. Methodology

The methodology used to obtain reliable conclusions about the treatment of investigative journalism and the handling of the crisis is based, like the analysis of León Gross (2008), on the content analysis of the presence of this disaster on the news agenda.

Our analysis has investigated the agenda of six big national newspapers (*El País*, *El Mundo*, *ABC*, *La Vanguardia*, *El Periódico*, and *La Razón*), the news programmes of four large radio networks (*Ser*, *Cope*, *Onda Cero* and *RNE*), and the news programmes of five mainstream TV networks (*TVE*, *Telecinco*, *Antena 3*, *Cuatro* and *La Sexta*). In this way, the article will evaluate the treatment given by each media platform and the similarities and differences among them.

In particular, the study examined all the news programmes broadcast by the mainstream national TV and radio networks from 20 August, the date of the accident to 21 December 2008. Most of the news items about the accident were broadcast during this period of time. In this stage we collected more than 150 pieces of information (news, comments, editorials, documentaries, etc.) from the major mainstream quality newspapers and a sample of regional newspapers from Andalusia, the Canary Islands and the Balearic Islands.

The stage of more informative impact was closed after the preliminary report of the *Investigation Commission* was made public, and the judge in charge of the case interviewed the people involved in the accident. From 15 April 2009 onwards there was only a trickle of news, derived from the proceedings of the judge of Madrid's 11th Court of first instance, the statements of some survivors, and the crossing accusations of some media (mainly *El País*, *El Periódico*, and *El Mundo*), exculpating or blaming some parties involved in this event. The Investigation Commission terminated the enquiries about the accident on 23 December 2009, which was the date of its final report. Of this second stage, the study only monitored quality newspapers, and collected around 45 pieces of information, most of which were news articles and chronicles.

This content analysis also took into account the geographical dimension of the event, which reached all the national press but had special relevance in those communities and provinces that were most directly affected by the accident and/or were most dependent on income from tourism, such as Andalusia, Balearic Islands, and Canary Islands. The analysis of these media, from which a non-exhaustive sampling was extracted (Malaga's *Diario Sur*, Granada's *La Opinión*, *Diario de Ibiza*, *Canarias 7*, and *El Día* from Santa Cruz Tenerife) allowed observing certain differences from the national press, like the formulation, in some cases, of different hypotheses and the use of sources that were closer to those affected by the disaster.

In this way, we have been able, on the one hand, to undertake a qualitative assessment of the major news events, and their specific treatment in printed press, radio and television. And, on the other hand, we have also analysed the genres that have been used throughout this time: interviews, articles, chronicles or simply news; and the protagonist role assumed by primary and secondary sources.

Regarding the qualitative methodology employed and the variables studied, we have started from three categories: 1) The treatment of informational sources, 2) the hypothesis handled in the accident and their translation in the information media, and 3) the handling of the crisis and the creation of certain information "noises".

The first of these categories includes the different variables of "primary sources", which are understood as the direct

witnesses of the accident and/or those who attended the accident scene and were able to help understand what happened. The "specialised sources" refer primarily to pilots of different companies, technicians, maintenance associations and aeronautical experts. And finally the study has also taken into account the absence of both primary and specialized sources.

In the second category, the hypothesis of the accident, we detected the following variables: human errors from the crew of the MD-82 or from Spanair's maintenance staff, technical failures attributable to the manufacturer, and causes of accidental nature (wind, birds, etc.), unfolding of the aircraft's flaps, or overloading of the airplane.

The third category, the crisis communication and informational noises, mainly referred to the press conferences held by the SAS Group, which is the majoritarian shareholder of Spanair; the joint press conferences of regional, local, and federal authorities, and the incitements of the Victims Commission. Regarding the creation of "informational noises" the study took into account the editorials and their analysis in different editions of *El Mundo*, *El País* and *El Periódico*. With these three categories we have drawn the conclusions set out in throughout this article.

Furthermore, in annex 1, as well as in some notes, we have allowed us to include, concrete references published especially between August and December 2008 by news agencies and comments from some blogs that we consider relevant to offer a more complete picture; although their only objective –given the daunting character of the task- is to show viewpoints that diverge from the version offered by the big media companies.

Finally, the monitoring of news in the press throughout 2009 has allowed us to verify that a catastrophe of this type generates a large number of news over a lengthy period of time, which coincides (see annex 2) with the court hearing and the conclusions of the experts in charge of determining the causes of the accident.

In summary, and as Gross (2008) indicates, content analysis should enable us to draw a complete x-ray of the informative sources; "to determine the present and absent voices; to identify what voices own the discourse about the plane crash and become the actors that help understand the phenomenon; to determine the level of transparency, contrast and plurality". And likewise, content analysis should also enable us to know what characters involved in this event have become the protagonists or, conversely, have remained in the darkness. And although this content analysis could also include other fields of research (surface of texts, identification of sections or authorship), we believe that this objective would be more approachable from a collective research aimed to study the set of circumstances surrounding this singular event, while the object of our analysis, in our view, would be covered with the sample selected.

#### 4. Investigative journalism in the Spanair plane crash

Information sources are an essential aspect of journalism, since they decisively influence and condition the process of production of news and other information products (Casero, 2008a). Information sources permeate everything, and thus become a central apex of the journalistic activity (Armentia Vizuete and Marcet Caminos, 2002). In other words, the sources are the intermediate link, which cannot be ignored in the news cycle (Borrat, 2003: 76), and are a key element in the construction of the journalistic story. Without sources there is no journalism, but only propaganda (De Pablos Coello, 2006).

Therefore, and since the sources are also part of the audience (Gomis, 1991: 63), the task of the journalist starts with their analysis, because when professionals can confront different sources they can build their own interpretation of reality (Díaz Arias, 2006: 157). After having finished the analysis of the news broadcast after the accident; as well as the radio and television interviews, it is important to interpret certain methodological shortcomings in a substantial share of the journalists who covered this event. For example, who can be considered as an "information source", or what primary and secondary sources must a journalist take into consideration. All of these questions are essential in the daily work of journalism and they acquire a relevant importance in exceptional times. Blanca Castilla (2004: 100) considers that an *information source* can be a person or a group of people, organized or not, which *have witnessed* and know the facts that the journalist will eventually turn into news.

Thus, a poor professional practice can lead the journalist to interview, in the first moments after the accident, the airplane passengers' relatives and not those who witnessed what happened or were present at the scene of the accident, and in this way prevent the accurate reconstruction of the events. Kapuscinski (2003) has already pointed out that the secret of information is the quantity and quality of facts that we are able to *find* and *crosscheck* in a short time. To find out we need the primary sources, which are the witnesses of the accident, and to crosscheck we undoubtedly need a wide panoply of sources that explain the causes (although, the unstoppable tendency of new journalists towards the spectacularisation is stronger than any other informational input).

How do journalists tend to select their sources? The first step is very simple: they make a list with the names of institutions and individuals who have information about the event under investigation (Sorrentino, 2006: 61) i.e. the "involved sources" (Rodríguez, 1994), and then they establish a series of requirements that the sources should meet: credibility, authority, accessibility, availability and productivity.

So the methodology to be used to find the sources of information about the MD-82 disaster firstly involved making a list of those groups that had immediately come to the place of the accident, as well as the eye witnesses who could provide some information [1]. Secondly, it was also urgent to make a second list of people able to help understanding

this complicated situation and to reconstruct what happen: the *specialised sources*, which are essential for investigative journalism (Camino Marcet, 1997). These sources should be selected based on their willingness to express their opinions on radio and television, their communication and reflection abilities, and their strength to explain things without being too emotional.

According to the news broadcast, the results of such search were unproductive. Especially in the first days after the event, the weaknesses of the editorial teams and journalists in obtaining the information were evident. The notable lack of primary and specialized sources tarnished the work of many media and generated certain rejection towards their work among the public. The chaos of the first hours and Spanair's lack of agility prevented the public from knowing the same day the total number of dead and missing persons, the number of survivors and their medical status.

The complete list of passengers was provided by the carrier, at the request of the Government, eight hours after the accident through its website, but without any additional information. In addition, the director of AENA (Spanish Airports and Air Navigation) was unreachable and did not show up throughout that tough day, which cracked the chain of authority [2]. So, as in any crisis situation, journalists immediately turned to the search for alternative sources (Berganza, 2006: 392).

The darkness and lack of transparency of AENA and Spanair after the first hours of the accident led an avalanche of journalists to harass the potential victims' relatives at Terminal 4 of Barajas airport (this was shown live by numerous television channels). Journalists were asking questions that in no case could be answered by people who had not witnessed the event, and that in no case could act as primary sources [3]. People who just turned on the TV at that time and witnessed this mixture of communicative styles surely struggled to distinguish whether they were watching a newscast or a reality show (García Canclini, 2008: 30).

Really, most known primary sources (witness or alleged witnesses) were working on the runways, and the chaos did not allow establishing the number of deaths, missing people or survivors. It was, then, the moment for journalists to use their "agenda" containing the reliable contacts capable of ensuring solvent and privileged information (Martínez Reverte, 2002:134). It was also the time to put into practice a collaboration between the different sections of the editorial department, since, at least in theory, each of the sections should have its own permanent and stable sources.

The *potential sources* which, under our consideration, could or should have been contacted by journalists covering the accident, both in the first instants and successive days, are (in addition to the primary sources) the sources linked to the public authorities (the *Ministry of Public Works*, the Minister of Public Administrations, the City Council/Community of Madrid, the Government of the Canary Islands, among others); sources linked to aeronautical industry (e.g. associations of pilots and maintenance technicians, professional institutions, trade unions, employees of Spanair or the SAS Group, pilots from other airlines); as well as other secondary sources related to consumer and business associations, law firms, and different national and international lobbying firms (see annex 3).

An appropriate journalistic routine indicates that, after many experiences with terrorist attacks, natural disasters and events of different types, any reporter must know that the best primary sources tend to be those groups arriving first at the scene of the accident: firefighters, SAMUR (doctors and nurses), forces and bodies of national security or AENA workers. As the former head inspector of the firefighters squad from Madrid (Redondo Toral, 2002) has pointed out, this squad tends to be the first to reach the scene of these types of accidents, and must act quickly and efficiently, even if that puts in risk their personal integrity. In addition, all these interventions are always recorded on video to be subsequently used as case studies.

Also as a consequence of these methodological shortcomings, the journalists covering the accident did not draw a map of specialised sources that were capable of guiding them through the forest of shadows, capable of confirming hypothesis, capable of providing consistency to the statements, and capable of confirming the collected data. However, it is almost impossible to reach these sources when there has not existed previously, and during a quite long time, a relationship of knowledge and trust between the reporter and the source. To strengthen that relationship it is necessary that the two parties had previously accumulated some positive experiences. In this dynamic relationship, the journalist's agenda and network of information sources is been constantly rebuilt and configuring a core of relations that is continuous change (Armentia Vizuete and Caminos Marcet, 2002: 99).

Therefore, the analysis of the TV news programmes and major quality newspapers during those days has shown that these sources, so essential in crisis situations, were conspicuous by their absence. They lacked statements and exclusive testimonies from the security forces, the medical bodies and hospitals where the survivors were sent. Only the head of the firefighters voluntarily made a statement the same day of the accident. His statement was very emotive but lack journalistic content. Days later, a television channel, *Tele 5*, managed, by unknown means, to obtain exclusive images of the accident.

Similarly, this lack of sources prevented knowing first-hand the strong discrepancies existing between the rescue teams and the lack of coordination of different agencies in the rescuing work (which was later denounced by survivors and relatives), as well as the confusion of powers between organisms of different government administrations.

But, is it appropriate to blame only the information sources of the lack of information during those days, or should we also blame the current state of the investigative journalism and the journalistic practices in general in Spain?

## 5. Lack of sources in Spanish journalism

We know that the Spanish journalism suffers from a shortage of sources (Chicote Lerena, 2006). Therefore, as Pilar Diezhandino (2007:148) points out, the information from a single source is no longer condemned, and sometimes is seen as a great virtue when compared to the "rather widespread abandoned practice of obtaining and quoting sources". The "informative paralysis" of those days was neither a result of the concern (or lack of it) for trying to find the best communicators. Undoubtedly, the worrying thing was this adverse situation that has affected the journalistic profession for a long time (Rodríguez, 1994), and has led journalists to sit at the editorial table and wait for someone to call them and resolve their problems.

Relying completely on the new technological media, these professionals do not have, in many cases, a personally-created agenda, and their usual contacts match the official sources (communication offices), and in addition they almost exclusively depend on the information provided by these agencies; and in doing so they forget McNair's affirmation (1998) that undoubtedly the information agenda and the news obtained by the journalist are part of the journalistic sources. With the particularity that in a situation of emergency (which immediately gets judicial authorities involved), i.e. in a *journalism of events*, the official information is always concise, minimal, and almost always provided in little bits, when they are not the fruit of directed leaks: "hence the obligation of all good journalists of events is to go always beyond what the official sources can offer" (Quesada, 2007: 19).

The lack of reliable testimonies capable of supporting the hypotheses formulated in the days following the catastrophe can also be closely related to the current state of the investigative journalism in Spanish and the gradual abandonment of own sources among journalists. In the words of Diezhandino (2008), this work should be carried out "with sources that are direct, justified, relevant to the subject, sufficient in number and expressly identified".

Therefore, we not only regret the absence of investigative journalism, but also its main result which undoubtedly is the *ignored stories*; i.e. those newsworthy events that are barely mentioned, and which go unnoticed or almost unnoticed, for journalists, and therefore unknown to the public. In the case under study, there is an almost complete absence of information on some particularly relevant facts: the inter-ministerial conflicts; the lack of coordination between security forces, ministries and other authorities; the behaviour of people responsible for AENA and their abdication of functions in the first moments; the conflicts of competences between firefighters and police officers; the internal situation of Spanair [4]; as well as the responsibilities of the manufacturer of the airplane, which had already experienced similar events. Not to mention also the little attention paid to the tragedy of many families, from Spain and other countries; or the despair of some survivors, like three of them who in their statement to the first instance judge on April 27, 2009, demanded to know the truth "about what happened, why it happened and what things were done wrong to avoid the tragedy from happening again".

### 5.1. Information on television

The information broadcast on television in those days deserves special consideration. As León Gross (2008: 49) indicates, the information of pain has not been properly developed in the Spanish journalistic profession.

In the first hours of the accident, the judge responsible for the accident banned the dissemination of images of the wrecked aircraft, "to the surprise of worldwide media" [5]. As the aircraft fell into a river bed, far from the terminal, and the perimeter of the event was cordoned off, the media was not able to use own material and had to request images to the bodies that had been acting in that place. At the end of the night, and under the pressure of the Spanish and foreign media, someone let news agency *EFE* to circulate four photographs, which was an unusual decision [6] for many professionals. But something that was even more unusual was the fact that the media were intimidated by this decision to control the images of the accident.

In view of the absence of images and testimonies of the survivors, during the first days, television stations renounced to the *self-referentiality* and handled other different keys. In other words, the medium did not give itself the protagonist role (Blanco, 2006: 580), and an unwritten rule about the treatment of this type of events predominated: the renunciation to the spectacularisation and to the *media event* format (Katz and Dayan, 1995). The reasons are obvious: when these types of events occur the viewer sympathises with those suffering pain (González Requena, 1992), as Susan Sontag (2003) has emotionally described.

In any case, the medium of television did not see itself as protagonist: on the night of the crash TVE did not suspended the retransmission of the match of the Spanish national team, nor the private networks abandoned their usual reality or talk shows, which in a macabre mockery used the usual guests as experts in the aeronautical field. Only some regional television networks, including *Telemadrid*, resorted to an unusual practice: the use of interviews in the news broadcasts to help clarify the most controversial aspects of the accident. As Roca Cuberes (2008) points out, the interview has as its mission the dissemination of experts' information or opinions. In this case, experts in the field of civil aviation and air accidents were presented in order to describe the audience what happened.

In short, we can say that the media did not install an informative logic based on the "exceptional case" (Grossi, 1985; and Casero, 2008b); did not even *prioritise* the informative event, or organised special teams to investigate the causes of the event, all simply because the strong editorial teams no longer exist (after the great decapitalisation of the network of news programmes with the deep restructuring of staff of a few years ago), and the current teams now offer few news items and too many comments, which many times do not come from specialized sources.



In other words, Spanish television news programmes are dominated since some time ago by the events information (León Gross, 2006). The news programmes have become a spectacle, "in which sometimes is not easy to distinguish reality from fiction" (Casals Carro, 1999: 49), and real efforts are made daily to select those events and approaches that allow adapting what happened to the ideology of the network (Cebrián Herreros, 2004: 16). The chronicle of events (of which the violence-based genre is part) repeatedly opens the daily news broadcasts, and also constitutes, along with sports, the main block of news. Therefore, what a tragedy is for the journalists to face a major disaster and not having the images and not making the necessary efforts to get them! [7].

Thus, it was not strange that in the absence of news in the days after the accident (about the state of the survivors, the emergence of more working hypothesis, etc.), there was a boom of the journalistic report genre: air accidents in Spain (Los Rodeos, Tenerife), air disasters in other countries (United States); the suffering of family members; the emotional impact on Spanish municipalities that had lost some of its inhabitants; the tragedy of the foreign travellers, etc. But while the differentiating element of the report is to explore the essence and the why of things (Vilalta Casas, 2006: 31); the unique novelties were reduced, practically, to the elements of air safety, with the help of experts in the field.

This insistence on security -a detail that caused some anxiety in viewers- ended up becoming an important news item for many networks. And this was because, as Bauman (2007: 23) has already pointed out, personal security has become a major selling point, perhaps the most important in all sorts of marketing strategies.

Another consequence was the innovation that occurred in the TV format: the transformation of the evening talk shows into informational commodities. The hosts of these programmes left aside the celebrity gossip and became experts about the accident. In other words, they ended up increasing the values inherent to the medium of television, especially those directly related to entertainment and spectacularisation.

Another innovation produced these days, though not attributable to the Spanish media, was carried out by the Argentinian television programme, *Todo noticias* (All news), where, obviating any journalistic code, the reality of the accident was "fictionalised". That is, the reality was modified with the parameters of fiction, making it look real. This Latin American network presented an alleged conversation between the pilots of the aircraft moments before the accident. According to information gathered by the *Público* newspaper, on 28 August [8], the Argentine journalist explained that the conversation did not come from a black box, but from a *military source* that provided three words that he used to produce the information: "el izquierdo" (the left one), "engine fire", and "se me va, más pedal" (I'm losing it, more pedal).

Naturally, the interest of the news programmes of mainstream television networks on the accident did not transcend beyond the first weeks. An analysis of the chronology of the investigation of the accident and its representations on the media confirms that once the video of the catastrophe was leaked (on 18 September 2008), and the preliminary report of the Investigation Commission was published (on 9 October 2008), the references to the accident practically disappeared from the news programmes until the survivors of the event gave their statements to the judge and the celebration of the first anniversary of the accident took place.

## 6. The journalistic treatment given to a crisis situation and its noises

In a disaster of this magnitude, the intervention of the judicial authorities and the immediate opening of a judicial summary may lead that at the end of the process, both in Spain and the US, the parties found guilty are sentenced to pay strong compensations [9]. Hence the Spanair crash is a paradigmatic case of creation of "informational noise". Here it is important to remember the axiom that says that the techniques of misinformation flourish primarily in situations that generate conflicts of any nature (Camino Marcet, 1997: 199); which are on this occasion generated by the strong battle of conflicting interests.

When we speak of *noises*, or rather *informative distortions*, we refer broadly to the transmission of information (*rumours*) via unofficial channels (Del Pozo, 2004) and to the *informational poisoning*, which act as curtains of smoke (Quesada, 1997), trying to divert attention to the elements of culpability in order to safeguard the interests of a company or institution. These distortions are undoubtedly the most damaging to the clarification of a catastrophe, because their objective is to "rush" the drawing of conclusions before the completion of the investigation, in favour of the interests of one of the parties involved.

In particular, these distortions seek to influence the media agenda; to lead certain lines of research; to modify the story to favour certain interests, and to privilege the "experts" that are most supportive of certain thesis. Or, in the words of Mayoral Sánchez (2005: 94): "the sources are not accustomed to provide information to journalists out of generosity and altruism. Instead they are moved by the ambition of creating a certain account of the events".

Regarding the elements involved in this informative distortion, we could mention: the communication offices of different institutions, communication offices of commercial companies, communication agencies, lobbying and law firms, and organizations of professionals. Each of them, in many cases, represents the interests of different actors: McDonnell Douglas, Spanair, AENA, COPAC, the Ministry of Public Works, etc.

The timetable that we have produced (annex 2) about the informational reality of this accident indicates that, apart from the verification of the initial hypotheses about the causes of the accident, the informational noise was prolonged not only until the publication of the official report, but, extended even for a longer period of time. The experience of

previous events, which occurred in other countries and Spain, indicates that this trickle of news does not stop until the *Civil Aviation Accident and Incident Investigation Commission* (Spanish: *Comisión de Investigación de Accidentes e Incidentes de Aviación Civil*, aka CIAIAC) is able to reach certain conclusions [10]. Usually, this period of time is never less than one year. That is why the filtration of "partial conclusions" appeared frequently at different stages of the research.

Essential elements of this distortion, as it is evident from the analysis of the information, published during August and December 2008, are the lobbyists and some official communication offices. In these cases, the agents that tend to press the most are usually, according to the *Llibre Blanc* of the Catalan Association of journalists (2004: 91): the public authorities (29%), the political groups (24.4%), the communication offices (21%) and the lobbyists (18%).

Other important objects of "informative noise" were the undisclosed sources of the different leaks and the exclusive pieces of information: from the exclusive images of the accident obtained by *Tele 5*, to the dissemination of the official report of the *Investigation Commission* published by *El Periódico* two days before its official publication.

Some of them were obtained by the usual methods of journalism, and others, were leaked exclusively by official sources. If as noted by the *Catalan Association of Journalists*, the professional relationship between investigative journalists and the media has to be marked by mutual respect and transparency, what is clear -as we will see later- is that some official communication offices have exhibited very bad practices.

The first of the significant events that happened, in chronological order, was the dissemination by the *Grupo Prisa's* newspaper, in its printed and digital editions, of the images of the wrecked MD-82 aircraft [11]. According to *El País*, this fact caused "a huge stir" in the Vice-presidency of the Government and the Popular Party which wanted to know the origin of these leaks. The author of the information, Francisco Mercado, wrote the article "*Journalism and leaks*" (*El País*, 21/09/08) to deny that it had been an "interested leak" or "the manoeuvres of the Ministry of Public Works".

The journalist explained the methodology to obtain the exclusive news. According to him, the news arrived "(...) thanks to the traditional procedures of any honest writer and through the oldest and most conscientious approach: what people have the material? And subsequently approach those people one by one". The journalist then defended himself from the criticism coming from the rest of the media: "this is not new. The bad losers call exclusive news to the information they obtain and 'leaks' to what the competition publishes".

The second important event was the dissemination of the recorded conversation between the person in charge of Spanair's operations and Madrid's Chief of operations, which were personally handed to the TV networks by the person responsible for the communications of the Ministry of Public Works. In view of the criticism of different media and institutions, the spokesman of the Ministry was forced to recognise that it had been responsible for the distribution of such information. As a result, the ministry could have committed the crime of concealment and disclosure of secrets, punished with imprisonment for two to five years [12]

### 6.1. Analysis of the main "information noises"

The first *noise* -that made difficult, and sometimes prevented, the construction of the news story and the reconstruction of the event- was the development of different hypotheses about the causes of the accident -some of them contradictory- by official spokespersons, experts, and several agencies (see the list of noises in annex 5). Let's remember some of these hypotheses: the failure of one engine of the aircraft; the "reverse" system being activated in one of the two engines; the inappropriate maintenance; the poor performance of the pilots; the excessive tailwind, the overloading of the aircraft, the collision of birds with the engines; and the deficiencies in the activation of the brake mechanisms, among others.

Some of these hypotheses barely resisted (like the collision of birds) two consecutive editions, and others, such as the maintenance failures or the activation of the reverse system, have remained strong for a long time and have been seen as material of special monitoring by the judge in charge of the case [13]. Another one of the most important noises matches the lines of research which tend to blame the *Boeing* for the M-82's manufacturing defects, or those lines of research that tried to exonerate the American firm and to divert the attention towards Spanair taking advantage of the crisis situation suffered by the company. Both positions led to a questionable journalistic praxis and to the dissemination of improvable hypotheses, which included elements of culpability over the large firms that had bought insurance of high civil liability.

Similarly, the statements made by the judge of Madrid's 11th court, which was responsible for the investigation of the accident, seriously questioned whether the causes of the accident could ever be clarified. To avoid relying on the official commission of the Ministry of Public Works, which was questioned from the outset, this judge established on 2 December 2008 its own *Commission of Investigation*. But after disqualifying all experts for failing to meet the requirements of "impartiality", on April 15 2009 the judge requested the EU's *European Aviation Safety Agency* to issue a report on the causes of the tragedy. This request seemed to cast doubts on the appropriateness and impartiality of the experts from the *Ministry of Public Works*, which was the subject of harsh criticism on different blogs [14].

In any case, it seemed that the reality of the events was simpler than the representation in the web of conflicting statements and news items disseminated over several months (the main of these news items are listed in annex 1). The conclusion we have reached after analysing all the stages of investigation on the accident (see annex with the

chronology) is similar to the hypothesis presented by a foreign media, *The Wall Street Journal*, two weeks after the accident (on 4 September 2008): the crew failed to lift the aircraft because it did not extend the flaps. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, the sources of this hypothesis were people close to the *Investigation Commission*, which in August 2009, when the first draft of the official report of the CIAIAC was made public, turned out to be completely right (although the report of the CIAIAC also attributed the final causes to a concatenation of technical and human errors).

The Spanish press had to await the outcome of the preliminary report of the official Investigation Commission to reach the same conclusion. On 17 September 2009 *El Periódico de Catalunya* attributed the cause of the disaster to a human error: "*The crew of the MD-82 also failed by forgetting to activate the flaps*". And apart from this cover news, the paper presented abundant information in inner pages: including an editorial entitled "*The shadow of human error in Barajas*", the letter a pilot from Spanair, and the news that the pilots abandoned the investigation in protest for "irregularities".

It is important, therefore, that once the main hypothesis of the accident was verified (the activation of the flaps), some put the blame exclusively on human errors (the crew of MD-82), and others put the blame on a combination of technical and human errors, in which the plane manufacturer (Boeing) was involved to a lesser or greater extent, since it had already experienced similar situations; the airline Spanair (because of the pressure exerted on pilots' working conditions), and even the government agencies such as AENA.

Proof of this defence of different interests is the three different research lines represented by the newspapers of *Grupo Zeta*, *El País* and *El Mundo*. A common link in all of them is the editorialisation of the events, since the knowledge of the editorial section, according to León Gross and Blanco Castilla (2009), is a self-portrait that is open to the public and is very clarifying of the theses defended by the media. Similarly, these editorial comments were in some cases accompanied by extensive reports, signed by their authors, who discover some new aspects of the case, and which could fit on a line of investigative journalism.

*El Periódico de Catalunya* and the newspapers from *Grupo Zeta* attributed the causes of the accident to a "human error". They maintained this thesis until the preliminary report of the *Investigation Commission* was published. And once the final draft was made public, and which was accessible to them before its publication (on 16 August 2009), they argued that the expert opinion accused Spanair of "ignoring" Boeing's manual of use because the pilots of the MD-82 were not able to detect the failure.

The other two lines of research belonged to the newspapers *El País* and *El Mundo*, which in October 2008 engaged in an informational battle, whose most important milestones we want to emphasize. We must underline that both newspapers held different positions: *El Mundo* supported some of the theses of the *Grupo Zeta*, while the *Grupo Prisa's* newspaper offered a version of the accident that was different on certain aspects. Let's see some significant examples:

- On 3 October 2008 the cover headline of *El Mundo* was: "*The repair of the last failure of the MD-82 breached the rules of Boeing*", and this was accompanied by exclusive images of the remains of the aircraft.
- On 10 October 2008 *El Mundo* indicated that Spanair's report confirmed a faulty take-off, due to a malfunction in the system of alerts. In its opinion, it was also clear that there were two different faults in this accident: one of operation and another of maintenance, both attributable to the carrier and not to *Boeing*.
- In an editorial published on 17 October 2008 ("*Spanair in the spotlight after the imputation of its mechanics*"), *El Mundo* deduced the responsibility of this company after the Judge blamed for alleged murder offences to those responsible for reviewing the aircraft. In this editorial, the newspaper reached a definitive conclusion about the accident: "*the pieces begin to fit*", and "*the operating chaos of a company working under extreme pressure could have affected its procedures*".
- Finally, in an article published on 24 October 2008 (on page 12) *El Mundo* presented another hypothesis explaining the cause of the failure of the aircraft: "*NASA blames the 'distraction' of pilots as one cause of the Spanair crash*". Citing sources from the *USA Today*, for the author of the story, "*a human distraction could have rendered the sound alerts system of the aircraft useless*".

On the contrary, *El País* maintained a different line. It did not support any of theses of *El Mundo*, which seemed to exonerate the manufacturer from liability; and, even, offered another version on certain aspects. Let's see:

- On 5 October 2008 it published on page 12 some statements made by a 63 year-old veteran pilot, MD captain, with 17,200 hours of flying experience, who apparently had the same problems with the same *Boeing* model months earlier at *Lanzarote* airport. "I notified Spain that what happened to the *MD* could happen again and they did nothing", said the captain. The newspaper added a table saying that "*His findings implicate Boeing, mechanics, pilots and investigators*".
- Contradicting the version of *El Mundo*, on 17 October 2008 *El País* clarified that Spanair and its pilots were satisfied by the new expert report requested by the judge and also presented a statement from the *Aircrafts*



*Maintenance Technicians Association*, which considered it was outrageous that the judge had blamed three fellow workers based on a draft of the preliminary report.

The "battle" of October gave way to a period of truce that ended when the draft of the report of the experts of the Ministry of Public Works was made public. From that moment on both newspapers exhibited divergent views once again, both on the causes of the event and on the responsible parties:

- The cover headline of *El País* on 18 August 2009 was: "*The MD-82 crashed due to pilots' rush and a recurrent mechanical failure*", which indicated that the crew did not configured the aircraft properly for take-off and did not check correctly the position of the flaps, which are indispensable to lift the plane. And added,

"(...) *the most serious thing is that this cluster of errors already happened in 1987 in Detroit (where a similar accident also caused 154 deaths). And similar failures occurred in 2005 in Indonesia and in 2007 in Lanzarote, and nobody – nor Boeing, the airlines, or the air authorities - imposed the reforms now requested by the Spanish authority*".

- The next day (19 August 2009), this newspaper highlighted that the US *Air Security Agency* (NTSB) confirmed that the failures of the MD-82 had already occurred on 5 June 2007 at Lanzarote airport.
- On 23 December 2009, *El País* denounced that the CIAIAC had terminated two years and half later (more than twice the recommended time) its investigation into the accident at Lanzarote airport: an event which, according to this medium, bore great similarities with the crash at Barajas.

Regarding the opinions of *El Mundo* during these dates, we must highlight the contradictory nature of its information:

- On 16 August 2009, two days before the report of the CIAIAC was made public, in an essay entitled "*The 10 unknown facts of the accident a year later*", written by Marisa Recuero [15], the newspaper seemed extremely critical of some performances. The reporter pointed out that the investigation was still blocked and nobody was held responsible for the accident. In other words, it did not blame Spanair or Boeing and in addition highlighted the following aspects:

"The accident of Spanair's MD-82 that crashed at Madrid-Barajas airport almost a year ago remains a mystery. A total of 154 people died in the accident and no one knows why. The technical research has not clarified the events, nor has the judicial investigation found the people responsible for the tragedy. But the worst thing is that each investigation took different directions. The CIAIAC, which is under the authority of the Ministry of Public Works, tries to blame the (deceased) pilots for not configuring properly the aircraft for take-off. On the other hand, the judge that instructs the case, Javier Pérez, focuses his research in the review of the failure suffered by the aircraft moments before the crashing".

- Two days later (on 18 August 2009), echoing the official report, the same journalist [16] blamed the pilots for the crash of the MD-82, and confirmed that the aircraft had experienced maintenance errors, which was an information not presented by other media.

## 6.2. Crisis communication strategies

Finally, let's address the management of a "crisis situation" with very special features. A crisis is unpredictable and can occur in any company or institution, but there are sectors that are more prone to suffer them, like airline companies. But in this case, to the typical catastrophic situation were added other serious risks. Firstly, the assumption of a new variable: "country-risk", i.e. the conception of Spain as a safe holiday destination, with solvent airlines, and modern and reliable airports [17]. In addition, there was a clear business risk, resulting from the probable bankruptcy of Spanair; the multi-million dollar compensations that the manufacturer, McDonnell Douglas, could be sentenced to pay, as well as the compensations from the insurance companies. And finally, a risk of family character: the uncertainty and pain suffered by many families.

It is obvious that handling with solvency these items could not be done by a single actor. The number of actors involved was, in this case, large, and included the Presidency of the Spanish Government, several ministers, various local and regional authorities, and by extension, also all those communities that have traditionally had a high dependence on tourism. The crisis also clearly implicated the airline and the aircraft manufacturer. Boeing opted for a discreet attitude, always at the background, without making statements, and allowing third parties to defend it. On the other hand, Spanair handled this crisis from the beginning and faced everyone involved, through several press conferences.

Thus, excluding the first eight hours in which it did not provide any information, Spanair reacted quickly to some demands. Its Crisis Commission, appointed by the senior management team of the company, developed a *Manual* that established the steps to follow in such situations (Fita Frias, 2000; Jay, 2001; Molero (2002). In this way, the day after the accident, the company organized a press conference, which was only attended by the commercial director of the company, Sergio Allard, who did not provide any specific information or hypothesis about the causes of the accident. Spanair's second conference was attended by the senior management team of the company: the President of the SAS

Group, the general director, the deputy general director, and director of human resources.

However, in spite of the presence of senior executives from both companies, their short statements and the lack of additional explanations about the accident left the journalists once again with many uncertainties. The fact that Spanair organised two press conferences, and reacted quickly to the demands of information did not necessarily mean the provision of more "transparent information". Undoubtedly, this was an important demonstration of responsibility from this company and its major partners (SAS), but the fact that they did not bring technical speakers to provide explanations or to help confirming or disproving some of the existing hypotheses reduced the effectiveness to these appearances. Although until recently, the simple fact that a company had convened a meeting with the media would have produced a favourable public opinion towards the company, today this measure seems inadequate when it is not accompanied by some exclusive or interesting information (see annex 4).

In total, seven press conferences were held in Madrid -almost a journalistic landmark- by the airline and different ministerial authorities, and by one of the survivors [18]. However, these conferences were not particularly empathic towards the people affected by the disaster and their families, and neither contributed to clarify the real causes of the event.

The (communicative) effectiveness of these public hearings was also called into question when some of the conveners used a journalistic practice, which was very successful in the 2008 general elections: the so-called *declarative journalism*, whose major exponent is the holding of press conferences, which convene a group of informers to hear the reading of a press release but do not allow them to make questions afterwards. It is a "game" where the information professionals assume their role as elements of the "figuration", which is so necessary for the holding of a major event.

Four Government Ministers and a representative of the community of Madrid gave a press conference at Barajas the day after the catastrophe. They only read a statement containing few new data and then left without giving the multitude of journalists the opportunity to talk and ask questions.

## 7. The ethics of journalism

A final thought on the Spanair crash must make some brief notes on journalistic ethics and their practical application in this particular case. In the ethical code, the practice of self-regulation remains to be an unresolved subject in journalism (Aznar, 2000: 61), which was not addressed in exceptional situations like the Spanair crash [19].

Since Spain has also been one of the last countries to adopt a code of ethics for journalism (Aznar, 2000: 61), it is not surprising that journalists believe that, in this environment, the ethical criteria are not applicable to real life, because this may make them look uncompetitive and lead them to lose their job. For the same reason it is neither surprising the deep division existing between those professionals who believe in the desirability of urgently implementing codes for the news-making process, and those who think that this is not necessary. As M. Reverte (2002:14) points out, "Fortunately the basics of the ethical codes tend to match. Unfortunately, they tend to be forgotten in the shelves of the documentation services".

In view of this panorama, we propose two lines of work that could strengthen these ethical behaviours: the first proposal, formulated by Piqué in 2004, highlights that the professionalism, the knowledge of the profession, and its competent exercise are without a doubt the best guarantee of an ethical behaviour. The second proposal is related to the teaching of Journalism. Although the schools of communication -as Sánchez Tabernero (2001: 27) indicates- are the right place to increase the ethical behaviour of the media, perhaps it is necessary to undertake other changes to strengthen these behaviours. These changes would go from the questioning of certain productive routines to the review of some business criteria, which could damage the fairness of the media's news reporting.

## 8. Conclusions

The analysis has verified the initial hypothesis, which focused on establishing comparisons between the homogeneous data in order to discover gaps between knowledge and reality (Darandin, 1993: 35). We have seen how the lack of a methodology to address the use of sources leads to media audiences' misinformation. The article has also shown how for more than a year of abundant information about the accident none of the hypotheses proposed by the different media managed to gain credibility among the public, and that this fact caused audiences' deep scepticism towards the media they usually relied on.

Based on the qualitative analysis of the news published during the period under study, it can be concluded that in this catastrophe there were informative situations that also occurred in similar events -e.g. the Prestige case-, but also some situations that were different from those already known.

In the first case, we observe how in all serious accidents generally there were several very important situations:

- *Great difficulties to access primary sources*, even official sources, with an almost chronic deficit of specialised journalists.

- *Limited use of secondary sources*: documents, statistics, reports, etc. All this also reflects a serious methodological deficiency from journalists and editorial departments. And, in cases like the JK5022 flight, a more strict methodology had to be designed and applied by journalists in view that their information needs were not being served by the usual channels of information or official sources.
- *Majoritarian preference for the use of official sources, and a poor use of specialised sources*. The problem of working without the collaboration of the latter leads to the absence of differences between the discourse and the knowledge of the facts.
- *Great deficit in the crosschecking of different sources*: the informative balance needs to merge sources aligned with the protagonist of the interaction with sources aligned with its antagonist, and to give both of them a fair treatment.
- Tendency to engage in a *journalism of vagueness*, where, as Domínguez (1999: 116) emphasises, the more or less founded hypotheses, non-verifiable news and pure speculation replaced the facts. Therefore, as García Gómez (2008:90) has pointed out, in similar events the journalists have been more concerned with transmitting the *pathos* that the *ethos* of the events.

Regarding the journalistic situations that have been original of this event, we can highlight the following:

- The alignment of the main media, with few exceptions, with the official theses of the *Investigation Commission*, which is under the authority of the Ministry of Public Works, and the little coverage of survivors' testimonies and the judge's successive statements. Other lines of research widely disseminated on the Internet (e.g. the unfavourable winds at the time of landing, the overloading of the aircraft, or the repetition of previous incidents in the same aircraft model) were neither taken into account, which made resolution of this case more complex.
- Unlike what happened in the 11-M bombings, there was little *empathy* for the pain and suffering of the victims and their families. This was reflected in the fact that the requests of the survivors and their families were not properly covered by the mainstream media. However, the free press (*20 minutes* and *ADN*) and the so-called "regional press" (especially, from Malaga, Balearic Islands and Canary Islands) paid special attention to the aftermath of the tragedy and the statements of the survivors and the associations they formed (*Association of Victims of flight JK5022*).
- The news broadcast by television stations during the days following the accident, be they about the causes of the accident, Spanair's responsibility, or the status of their employees, were strongly criticised ("regrettable" was the most widely used description) by Internet users (see YouTube and footnote 5).

*The holding of seven press conferences* by Spanair (a unique case in a private company) and various government agencies, and one of the survivors (these press conferences were attended by the President and vice-president of the Spanish Government, the President of the community of the Canary Islands, the general director of civil aviation, the general director and president of the SAS Group, and Beatriz Reyes from the Canary Islands, among others), did not result in more "informative transparency", or more reassurance for the relatives of the victims or the Spanish public. In spite of this commendable attempt, it should be taken into account that when a meeting with journalists is organised, it is necessary to provide content and news for their media. Similarly, when a company faces a crisis situation and meets with the families of the victims it must provide sufficient explanations and useful proposals to alleviate their pain [20].

- For the first time the mediocre handling of a crisis situation by an official government body allowed the person in charge of communication to commit criminal actions.
- All this has given rise to very different alignments in the mainstream media at the moment of identifying the people responsible for the catastrophe, and also confirms once again that the most corrosive point of the current journalistic system, and therefore, the most pathogenic factor of the credibility of the media, lies precisely in the junction between the pressures of the pre-agenda and the bad practices in the editorial departments.

## 9. Bibliographical references

Armentia Vizuete, J.I.; Caminos Marcet, J. M<sup>a</sup> (2002): *Fundamentos de periodismo impreso* (Fundamentals of Printed Journalism). Barcelona: Ariel.

Aznar, H. (2000): *Ética y periodismo* (Ethics and Journalism). Barcelona: Paidós.

Bauman, Z. (2007): *Tiempos líquidos. Vivir en una época de incertidumbre* (Liquid times. Living in an era of uncertainty). Barcelona: Tusquets.

Berganza, M<sup>a</sup> R. (2006): "Medios de comunicación y fuentes interpersonales" (Media and interpersonal sources). In

- Vara, A., Virgili, J.R., Jiménez, E. and Díaz, M. (2006): *La comunicación en situaciones de crisis: del 11-M al 14-M* (Communication in crisis situations: from 11-M to 14-M). Pamplona: Eunsa,
- Blanco, L. (2006): "Tratamientos informativos del dolor en televisión" (Journalistic treatments of pain in television). In Vara, A., Virgili, J.R., Jiménez, E. and Díaz, M. (2006): *La comunicación en situaciones de crisis: del 11-M al 14-M* (Communication in crisis situations: from 11-M to 14-M). Pamplona: Eunsa,
- Blanco Castilla, E. (2004): "Emisores de mensajes informativos. Características, tipologías y comportamientos de las fuentes especializadas" (Senders of informative messages. The characteristics, typologies and behaviours of specialised sources). In Fernández del Moral, J.: *Periodismo especializado* (Specialised Journalism). Barcelona: Ariel.
- Borrat, H. (2003): "Las relaciones noticiables: fuentes-autores" (Newsworthy relations: sources-authors), in Losada Vázquez, A.; Esteve Ramírez, F. (Eds): *El periodismo de fuente* (Investigative Journalism). Salamanca: Publicaciones de la Universidad Pontificia de Salamanca.
- Camino Marcet, J. M<sup>a</sup> (1997): *Periodismo de investigación. Teoría y práctica* (Investigative journalism. Theory and practice). Madrid: Síntesis.
- Casals Carro, M<sup>a</sup> J. (1999): "El arte de la realidad: prospectivas sobreracionalidadperiodística" (The art of reality: prospectives on journalistic rationality). In *Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico*. N<sup>o</sup> 5, pp.: 37-62.
- Casero Ripollés, A. (2008a): *La producción de la información audiovisual* (Production of audio-visual information), en MARZAL FELICI, J. and LOPEZ CANTOS, F: *Teoría y técnica de la producción audiovisual* (Theory and technique of audiovisual production), pp. 181-227. Tirant lo Blanch: Valencia.
- (2008b): "Modelos de relación entre periodistas y políticos. La perspectiva de la negociación constante" (Models of relationship between journalists and politicians. The constant negotiation perspective). In ZER, N<sup>o</sup> 14. 2008, pp. 111-128.
- (2009): "El control político de la información periodística" (The political control of journalistic information). In RCLS, *Revista Latina de Comunicación social*, 64, pp. 354 - 366. La Laguna (Tenerife): University of La Laguna, retrived on 30 November 2009, from: [http://www.revistalatinas.org/09/art/29\\_828\\_47\\_ULEPICC\\_08/Andreu\\_Casero.html](http://www.revistalatinas.org/09/art/29_828_47_ULEPICC_08/Andreu_Casero.html)
- Cebrián Herreros, M. (2004): *La información en televisión. Obsesión mercantil y mediática* (Information in television. Commercial and media obsession). Barcelona: Gedisa.
- Chicote Lerena, J. (2006): "Los enemigos del periodismo de investigación" (Enemies of investigative journalism). In *Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico*, n<sup>o</sup> 12, pp. 71-90. Madrid.
- Col·legi de Periodistes de Catalunya/Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (2004): *Llibre blanc de la professió periodística a Catalunya*. P. 137. Barcelona.
- Col·legi de Periodistes de Catalunya (2009): *Els gabinets de comunicació. Criteris de bones practiques professionals*. Barcelona.
- Darandin, G. (1993): *La información, la desinformación y la realidad* (Information, misinformation and reality). Barcelona: Paidós.
- De Pablos Coello, J.M. (2006): *Fuentes mudas en la web: periodismo transit propaganda* (Silent sources on the web: journalism transit propaganda). In *Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico*. N<sup>o</sup> 12. pp: Madrid.
- Del Pozo Lite, M. (2004): "Comunicación interna y cultura empresarial: herramientas estratégicas en los mercados internacionales" (Internal communication and business culture: strategic tools in international markets). In Fernández del Moral, J. (Coord.): *Periodismo especializado* (Specialised Journalism). Barcelona: Ariel.
- Díaz Arias, R. (2006): *Periodismo en televisión* (Journalism in television). Barcelona: Bosch.
- Diezhandino, P. (2007): *Periodismo y poder* (Journalism and power). Madrid: Pearson Educación.
- Díezhandino, P. (Coord.) (2008): *Periodismo en la era de Internet. Claves para entender la situación actual de la información periodística en España* (Journalism in the Internet era. Keys to understand the current situation of journalism in Spain). Madrid: Ariel/Fundación Telefónica.
- Domínguez, F. (1999): "Los medios ante el terrorismo de ETA" (The media and ETA terrorism). In Rodríguez Andrés, R. and Sádaba Garraza, T. (Eds.). *Periodistas ante conflictos* (Journalists in conflicts). Pamplona: Eunsa.
- Elizalde, L. H. (2004): *Estrategias en las crisis públicas. La función de la comunicación* (Strategies in public crises. The

- role of communication). Buenos Aires: La Crujía Ediciones.
- Fita Frías, J. (1999): *Comunicación en programas de crisis* (Communication in crisis programmes). Barcelona: Gestión 2000.
- Gallego Díaz, S. (2008): *Comunicación en crisis* (Communication in crisis). El País, 7/9/08.
- García Canclini, N. (2008): *Libros, pantallas y audiencias: ¿qué está cambiando?* (Books, screens and audiences: what is changing?). *Comunicar*. Nº 30, XV. Pp. 27-32.
- García Gómez (2008): "La estructura narrativa de sucesos catastróficos en los medios de comunicación" (The narrative structure of catastrophic events in the media). In Francescutti, P. *Comunicación de riesgo. Comunicación de crisis* (Risk communication. Crisis communication). Madrid: Universidad Rey Juan Carlos/Dykinson.
- Gómez, L. and Ordaz, P. (2003): *Crónica negra del Prestige* (Black chronicle of the Prestige). Madrid: Ediciones El País.
- Gomis, L. (1991): *Teoría del periodismo* (Theory of journalism). Barcelona: Paidós.
- González Requena, J. (1992): *El discurso televisivo: espectáculo de la modernidad* (Televisual discourse: the spectacle of modernity). Madrid: Cátedra.
- Grossi, G. (1985): "Profesionalità giornalistica e costruzione sociale dellarealtà". In *Problemi dell'informazione*, X, 3:375-378.
- Jay, Ros (2001): *Situaciones de crisis* (Crisis situations). Madrid: Prentice Hall,
- Kapuscinski, R. (2003): *Los cínicos no valen para este oficio* (Cynics are not worthy for this profession). Barcelona: Anagrama.
- Katz y Dayan (1995): *La historia en directo. La retransmisión televisiva de los acontecimientos* (History live. Televisual broadcasting of events). Barcelona: Gustavo Gili.
- León Gross, T. (2006): "La agenda de los noticiarios" (The agenda of news programmes). In Díaz Nosty, B. (dir.): *Tendencias '06. Medios de comunicación. El año de la televisión* (2006 Trends. Media. Television's year). Madrid: Fundación Telefónica.
- (2008): "Catástrofe aérea en Barajas: la demanda ética de una auditoría deontológica sobre el tratamiento de los medios" (Air disaster at Barajas airport: the ethical demand in the media treatment). In *Informe Anual de la profesión periodística 2008* (2008 annual report of the profession of journalism). Madrid: Asociación de la Prensa de Madrid.
- León Gross, T. and Blanco Castilla, E. (2009): "Identidad editorial en la prensa nacional española e interrelación con la agenda mediática" (Editorial identity in the Spanish national press and the interrelation with the media agenda), in RCLS, *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 64, pp. 602-611. La Laguna (Tenerife): University of La Laguna. Retrieved on 2 December 2009 from: [http://www.revistalatinacs.org/09/art/49\\_848\\_UMA/58Blanco.html](http://www.revistalatinacs.org/09/art/49_848_UMA/58Blanco.html).
- McNair, B. (1998): *The sociology at journalism*. London: Arnold.
- Martínez Reverte, J. (2002): *Perro come perro. Guía para leer los periódicos* (Dog eats dog. Guide to read newspapers). Barcelona: Ares y Mares.
- Mayoral Sánchez, J. (2005): "Fuentes de información y credibilidad periodística" (Sources of information and journalistic credibility). In *Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico*. Nº 11, 2005, pp. 93-102.
- Molero, Víctor (2002): "La comunicación empresarial en tiempos de crisis" (Corporate communication in crisis situations). In *Cuenta y Razón*, nº 127, Oct-Nov 2002, pp. 59-64.
- Piqué, A.M. (2004): "La ética es parte de la profesionalidad" (Ethics are part of the professionalism). *Mediación: Universidad de Navarra*. Abril 2004.
- Quesada Pérez, M. (1997): *Periodismo de investigación o el derecho a denunciar* (Investigative journalism or the right to denounce). Barcelona: CIMS.
- (2007): *Periodismo de sucesos* (Journalism of events). Madrid: Síntesis
- Redondo Toral, J. (2002): *Memorias de un bombero* (Memoirs of a firefighter). Madrid: La esfera de los libros.



Roca Cuberes, C. (2008): "Algunos usos de las formulaciones en la entrevista en las noticias" (Some uses of interview formulations in news programmes), in RLCS, *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 63, pp. 463-472. La Laguna (Tenerife): University of La Laguna. Retrieved on 6 December 2009, from: [http://www.revistalatinacs.org/08/39\\_796\\_58\\_Pompeu/Carles\\_Roca\\_Cuberes.html](http://www.revistalatinacs.org/08/39_796_58_Pompeu/Carles_Roca_Cuberes.html).

Rodríguez, P. (1994): *Periodismo de investigación: técnicas y estrategias* (Investigative journalism: techniques and strategies). Barcelona: Paidós.

Sánchez Tabernero, A. (2001): "El comportamiento ético en las empresas de comunicación" (The ethical behaviour in communication companies). In Codina, M.: *De la ética desprotegida: ensayos sobre una deontología de la comunicación* (Unprotected ethics: Essays on the ethics of communication). Barcelona: Paidós.

Santoro, D. (2004): *Técnicas de investigación* (Research techniques). Fondo de Cultura Económico: México.

Sontag, S. (2003): *Ante el dolor de los demás* (Facing the pain of others). Madrid: Alfaguara.

Sorrentino, C. (2006): "I Newsmaking". In Mancini, P.; Marini, R. (Eds.): *Le comunicación di massa*. Roma: Carocci.

Vicente, M. (2006): "El tratamiento televisivo de la catástrofe del *Prestige*" (The television treatment of the *Prestige* catastrophe). In Vara, A., Virgili, J.R., Jiménez, E. and Díaz, M. (2006): *La comunicación en situaciones de crisis: del 11-M al 14-M* (Communication in crisis situations: from 11-M to 14-M). Pamplona: Eunsa.

Vilalta Casas, J. (2006): *El espíritu del reportaje* (The spirit of the news report). Barcelona: Publicacions i Edicions UB.

## 10. Notes

[1] Different modalities can be set here. For example, those who have been only eye witnesses from outside the scene (from roads of access to the terminal) or the pilots of an aircraft that at that moment landed at another runway, or the survivors of the catastrophe.

[2] The website *Confidencial.com* published the day after the accident a news item saying that the Home Secretary (*Ministro del Interior*) had instructed the Guardia Civil to proceed with the search for the person responsible from AENA.

[3] The journalists only had one *shared source*: the statements of a person responsible for the fire-fighters squad, but his statements were so emotional that they did not clear any of the existing questions.

[4] It is still symptomatic of certain corporate culture that a company pending a dossier of regulation, in which a significant share of its human resources will end up out of the company, all of them closed ranks after the accident: from pilots to maintenance technicians, and even the members of unions.

[5] Editorial of *El País* (21/08/2008).

[6] See the article of Soledad Gallego-Díaz in *El País* (7/09/2008).

[7] Days later *Tele 5* obtained exclusive pictures of the accident. This video was posted on *YouTube* with the title: "Unfortunate news item from Tele 5 about the accident" (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?V=XZsHdTkM068>).

[8] Also repeated on the news programmes of *Cadena SER*.

[9] The law firm *Ribbeck Law* filed a lawsuit in Illinois (United States) against *Boeing* on behalf of three families who lost seven of their members, in relation to "the human and electrical failures", detected in the analysis of 15 aircrafts of the MD-80 series that have fallen in recent years. The law firms *The Gallagher Law Firm* and *Mathews & Associates*, with offices in Houston and New York, also filed lawsuits after catastrophe. The presence of these law firms was not without some controversy. Some, like *El Periódico de Catalunya* (5/9/2008), criticised them for being "scavengers". However other approaches were offered on the same in the *Diario de Ibiza* and online at <http://www.adn.es/pdf/ADN-2008-09-05-BCN.pdf>.

[10] According to a 1998 Royal Decree and the *International Agreement of Civil Aviation*, the CIAIAC has one month to publish its preliminary report, but this period was exceeded more than ten days in this accident. The 1998 decree also establishes that the final report should be ready, if possible, within one year. In this case the authorities tried to meet this limit of time since the report was made available online on the website of the Ministry of Public Works in August 2009. However the CIAIAC's 92-page report was entitled "provisional", and is, therefore, not final.

[11] This video was made available at: <http://noticetoairmen.wordpress.com/2008/09/18/imagenes-del-accidente-de-Spanair-en-barajas>.

[12] Besides from reflecting a poor handling of the crisis by the *Ministry of Public Works*, this fact has set clear limits to the dissemination of official information.

[13] The essence of investigative journalism and the journalistic profession in general is verifying and valuing hypotheses, clarifying the events; dismissing the less credible hypotheses, and supporting the most plausible ones.

[14] Although the difficult analysis of the many blogs created after the accident is not the subject of this investigation, we should highlight the importance acquired over time

by some of them, as it was the case with <http://lasmentirasdebarajas.blogspot.com>, which housed a number of opinions from experts about the accident and questioned very harshly the official version of the events. A good example is the information published on 18 August 2009, entitled "The lies of Barajas", which included the internal research report of the CIAIAC, and questions the fact that two essential factors were not taken into consideration: the unfavourable wind conditions in which the aircraft tried to take off, and the absence of explicit references to the MD-83 accident, which took place in Lanzarote in 2007. According to this blog, on that occasion the Boeing managed to take off without the flaps extended, as shown by a photo taken by a pilot from another airline.

[15] [www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2009/08/16/espana/1250377322.html](http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2009/08/16/espana/1250377322.html)

[16] [www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2009/08/17/espana/1250520887.html](http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2009/08/17/espana/1250520887.html)

[17] A review of the newspapers published during those days in the Balearic Islands, the Canary Islands, Málaga and Levante allows assessing the anxiety that invaded these places, which feared negative consequences for their touristic projects. For example, the article published by Malaga's *Sur* newspaper (on the 1st of September 2008): "Tension in Barajas airport provoked by Spanair's flights delays. The families of the three French who died in the accident on August 20 sue the company" (<http://www.diariosur.es/20080901/espana/tension-barajas-retrasos-vuelos-20080901.html>), and the news article published by Granada's *La Opinión* newspaper (on 25 August 2008) about the forced landing of another Spanair MD-82 aircraft at Malaga's airport (<http://www.laopiniondegranada.es/Espana/2008/08/25/Spanair-suspendido-seis-vuelos-dia-medio-problemas-tecnicos-o-asuntos-operacionales/75526.html>).

[18] In an article published by the *Canary 7* newspaper (<http://www.canarias7.es/articulo.cfm?id=107135>), one of the survivors, Loreto González, was very critical about the performance of some groups during the disaster, and stated that the responsibilities of the accident had to be divided among a wide group of people: from air traffic controllers who did not see the accident to Spanair and the *Ministry of Public Works*. On the other hand, another survivor, Beatriz Reyes also shared the same opinion, on 26 August 2008 ([http://www.laprovincia.es/secciones/noticia.jsp?pRef=2008082600\\_3\\_172\\_canarias-beatriz-Reyes-vuelto-nacer](http://www.laprovincia.es/secciones/noticia.jsp?pRef=2008082600_3_172_canarias-beatriz-Reyes-vuelto-nacer)). And on 24 December 2009 ([www.eldigitaldecanarias.net/noticia35053.php](http://www.eldigitaldecanarias.net/noticia35053.php)) the representative of the *Association of Victims* published some statements of this survivor, requesting the government to set measures, like regular inspections to aircrafts, to avoid disasters like the MD-82. The same opinion was further developed by José Pablo Flores, who in statements made to the EFE agency, and published by Tenerife's *La Opinión* newspaper (on 19 August 2009), demanded the authorities to strengthen the quality and quantity of aircraft inspections.

[19] The 2004 *Llibre Blanc* of Catalonia's Association of Journalists highlighted that in almost 50% of cases the application of ethical standards is not guaranteed. This figure confirms that there are irregularities in the creation of information, and it is the journalists themselves who recognise that the creation of an *ad hoc* agency would facilitate them their professional work.

[20] According to *El Economista*, on 21 August 2008 (<http://www.eleconomista.es/flash/noticias/713878/08/08/Accidente-en-Barajas-Plante-de-los-familiares-de-las-victimas-a-directivos-de-spanair.html>), the meeting between the families of the victims and Spanair executives was planned to last about three hours, but was abandoned by the executives fifteen minutes after it started. Yurena Fernández, who lost two sisters and a niece, stated regarding the treatment given to her by the directors of the company that they did not inform relatives about the causes of the accident or the potential compensations they would receive.

## Annexes:

### Annex 1. Chronology of the Spanair crash investigation

- 20 August 2008: The flight JK5022, an MD-82 operated by *Spanair*, crashes at Barajas airport. 154 people died. The two black boxes of the aircraft were retrieved the same day.

The *Air Accidents Investigation Commission* responsible for clarifying the case works from the first day in its resolution, and in parallel to the judicial investigation, directed by the judge of Madrid, Juan Javier Pérez.

- 21 August 2008: Spain's *Official College of Aeronautical Engineers* (COIAE) affirms that an accident of this kind usually does not obey to a single cause, but to a concatenation of several causes. Civil aviation sources say that the accident may have been caused by damages in the aircraft's rudder or the right engine, caused by a failure in the left

engine, whose pieces acted as "missiles" against the rudder and the other engine.

- 22 August 2008: the public prosecutor assigned to the case, Emilio Valerio, expects that the report of the analysis of the black boxes will be available to the Court within a month. SEPLA's spokesman, José M<sup>a</sup> Iscar, says in RTVE.es that it "is absurd to deduce that the aircraft fell down due to the failure that made it return".

- 23 August 2008: The director of human resources of *Spanair*, Hector Sandoval, affirms that the internal investigation of the company revealed that "there is no sign of human error" in relation to the crashed airplane.

- 24 August 2008: The Deputy Director of *Spanair*, Javier Mendoza, explains in a meeting with the families of the victims that they were unable to know the conversations of the pilots recorded in the black boxes because they are subject to a "confidentiality code". He also announces that *Civil Aviation* is committed to provide the "latest" data from the investigation on its website.

- 25 August 2008: Juan Javier Pérez, the judge in charge of the investigation, watches the seven-second recordings of the takeoff (made by an AENA camera). Not further data is shared.

The *General Council of the Judicial Power of Spain* expects that in the middle of week Madrid's 11th Court will begin operating to assist Judge Perez in the investigation of the accident.

SEPLA affirms that *Spanair's* aircrafts and flights "are absolutely safe and meet the operational safety standards required by the national and international aeronautical organizations".

- 26 August 2008: The judge in charge of the case receives the first technical reports from *Accidents Investigation Committee*. The Civil Guard reviews, and sends to the court, 18 video recordings (from video cameras and mobile phones) of the accident and charged the video-makers an offence against the right to privacy, as reported by the EFE agency. The Judge will decide whether it is necessary to delete the images and to charge the authors with any offence. The same day of the accident the judge prohibited the dissemination of images captured by Emergencias Madrid.

*El Mundo* newspaper, citing sources from the Investigation Commission, affirms that the researchers have not found any indication that the engines had suffered a fire or explosion. This paper and *El País* affirmed that the reverse of one of the engines was open.

- 27 August 2008: According to Investigation sources, the pilot did not communicate to the control tower, after the first failure of the thermostat, that there was a problem before the take-off. This information was declared by one air traffic controllers to the Civil Guard.

- 28 August 2008: AENA reports that the actions of emergency to assist the victims of the accident were started immediately, and affirmed that the team of firefighters acted in little more than two minutes.

- 29 August 2008: the Minister of Public Works, Magdalena Álvarez, said at a hearing in Congress that *Spanair* informed Barajas airport about the possibility of replacing the aircraft with destination to Gran Canaria, but finally decided to continue using the same.

- 30 August 2008: *Spanair* makes public a statement that says that it never intended to change the damaged aircraft after the first failure was detected. After this statement, AENA confirms that they had a recording in which *Spanair* informed the Management Center (CGA) of Barajas Airport about the possibility of replacing the aircraft.

- 4 September 2008: according to sources close to the Investigation Commission cited by *The Wall Street Journal*, the MD-82 pilots were not able to extend the flaps of the aircraft before the takeoff, although the noise made it difficult to understand the conversation between them.

- 13 September 2008: the first details about the recordings of the black boxes are leaked. According to *El País*, in the last seconds of the recording one can hear how all alarms start off in the cabin.

- 15 September 2008: *Cadena SER* obtains access to the declaration before the Civil Guard of the Commander of Iberia which landed at the same time the MD-82 was taking off. This Commander declares that during the take-off there had been a major change in the speed and the direction of the wind.

- 16 September 2008: The draft of preliminary report issued by the Investigation Commission. Apparently is leaked. Apparently *Spanair* did not check the cabin's alerting system that allows pilots to know whether the flaps and slats of the wings functioned correctly.

- 18 September 2008: The video of the crash is leaked on the same day the judge of Madrid's 11th Court, in charge of investigating the accident, met with the CIAIAC technicians to listen to the content of the aircraft's black boxes. *El País* and *El Periódico of Catalunya* disseminated the recording of AENA which showed how the MD-82 crashes and explodes shortly after the takeoff. This leak has immediate consequences: the representative of the pilots in the Investigation Commission resigns in protest for the dissemination of the draft of the preliminary report. The Judge in charge of the case announces take the leak will be investigated.

- 19 September 2008: The Minister of Public Works speaks for the first time to the media about the leak of video of Barajas. She points out that she is outraged by the events, and calls for respect towards the Investigation Commission and explains that the draft was circulated to 16 people, members of aeronautical institutions.
- 24 September 2008: The Minister of Public Works appears before the Congress of Deputies, where she engages in a bitter controversy with deputies of the Popular Party, who accuse her having leaked information from the Commission analysing the accident.
- 25 September 2008: *El Mundo* publishes a complaint which affirms that most of the personal belongings of passengers remained scattered around the runway. The Judge from Madrid's 11th Court demands the authorities to pick up the remains after the inspection of the scene is completed.
- 26 September 2008: the group United Left announces that, in spite of the rejection of Congress to the creation of an Investigation Sub-commission, its goal is to negotiate with the political groups the creation of another Commission to investigate the accident.
- 30 September 2008: An US judge sets the 6th of October as the date for the first hearing in civil action in the city of Chicago, in which *Boeing* will act as defendant. 18 families of the passengers sued this company and a US law firm represents them.
- 9 October 2008: The preliminary report of the CIAIAC says that the alarm systems were not activated during the take-off, and as a result the pilots did not know that the flaps were not extended.
- 16 October 2008: the judge in charge of the case named Spanair's chief mechanic and the two mechanics who reviewed the damaged aircraft before takeoff as suspects of negligent homicide and injuries.
- 14 November 2008: The air controllers who worked the day of the accident at the airport's control tower stated before the judge that they did not cut the traffic in the runways because it was not a matter out of their competence. This fact made the emergency services to waste several minutes surrounding the perimeter of the airport.
- 18 November 2008: the judge Juan Javier Pérez raises the imputation over the maintenance technician, Julio N. B., because he considered that his intervention in the inspection of the ram air turbine (RAT) was "merely auxiliary"; although the judge maintained that the imputation against the engineer Felipe G. R. and Spanair's chief of maintenance, against the opinion the Public Prosecutor.
- 2 December 2008: The Investigation Commission proposed by the judge to clarify the cause or causes of the accident is constituted. The new commission consists of two pilots, two senior aeronautical engineers and two technical engineers, and also a substitute for each of the four categories. The first survivors of the accident declare before the Court. One of them claims that the medical services took more than half an hour to come to their aid and denounces the pressures of the airline to avoid more delays for that flight.
- 10 December 2008: The pilot and mechanic who reviewed the MD-82 in Barcelona the day before the crash argue that the failure they detected in the ram air turbine (RAT) was not the same that failed in Madrid. The first failed takeoff of the aircraft was suspended due to a failure in this device.
- 21 December 2008: The general director of emergencies and civil protection, Alfonso del Álamo, explained in an *ordinary municipal commission of security and mobility* that the emergency services of the City Council took nine minutes to reach the airport runway.
- 15 April 2009: The judge of Madrid's 11th Court requests the EU to analyse the accident as there are not independent experts for this matter in Spain, and asks the European aviation safety agency to consider issuing an expert report on the causes of the tragedy. So far, all the experts had been rejected because they did not meet the requirements of impartiality.
- 27 April 2009: three survivors of the accident demand in their statement before the judge "to know the truth about what happened, the causes and what errors were committed to avoid these kinds of accidents". Victims demand a "air safety" to be as good as possible.
- 5 May 2009: The director of Barajas Airport acknowledged before the Court, that as a result of the accident, *Spanair* is considering to change the security protocols because "everything can be improved".
- 16 August 2009: *El Periódico de Catalunya* gets access to the draft of the Investigation Commission and points out that this report accuses *Spanair* of ignoring Boeing's manual use. The manufacturer suggested a check before each take-off after an accident in Detroit, but the poor Protocol of Spanair prevented the pilot from knowing that the flaps were not activated.
- 17 August 2009: The Investigation Commission points out that due to a failure of the crew the slats and the flaps, which were essential during the takeoff, remained closed.

- 18 August 2009: *El País* affirms that the cause of the accident was “a string of technical and human errors”. The crew did not properly configure the aircraft for take-off and did not check correctly the position of the slats and flaps, which are indispensable for taking off, and the alarm that should alert the pilots did not function.
- 19 August 2009: The US's Air Security Agency (NTSB) confirms that the failures in the MD-82 occurred previously at Lanzarote airport, when an MD-83 aircraft that took off from this airport on 5 June 2007 suffered a similar incident.
- 23 December 2009: *El País* denounces that the Investigation Commission has just concluded -two years and half later, more than twice the recommended time and 16 months after the Spanair accident- its investigation into the accident of the MD-83 on 5 June 2007 during takeoff at Lanzarote Airport, an event that is very similar to the crash at Barajas.

Annex 2. Time line of the informative reality of the MD-82 accident (August 2008 - December 2009). Source: Author's creation.

	First week	September 2008	October 2008	December 2008	January 2008	May 2008	August 2008	December 2009
First reconstruction of events								
Initial hypothesis								
Verification of initial hypotheses								
First official reports (CIAIAC)								
First official draft of the CIAIAC								
Judicial investigation								
Information noises								

Annex 3. Primary and Secondary Sources in the Spanair accident. Source: Author's creation.



Annex 4. Variables in crisis communication: actions and consequences

ANALYSED VARIABLES	ACTIONS	CONSEQUENCES
Prevention communication programmes	Drafting of the crisis management plan	Very little reaction after the first hours of the accident.
Public hearings	Holding of six press conferences	Lack of new data. Use of “declarative” journalism by the political class
Strategies of Communication	Big media: radio and TV	Spectacularisation and poor expert analysis
Implicated institutions	National, regional and local	Communication strategies that were



Communication of events to external publics Spokespersons	governments Press conferences and press releases Different spokespersons: commercial director, director of personnel, President of SAS Group	"contaminated" or fixed by the institutions Always dragging the media without giving them the opportunity to lead the agenda Poor choice of spokespersons, who were not given specific tasks
Tools of communication with affected Post-crisis evaluation	PR for victims and their relatives: personalised treatment Executed, but with doubts	Little empathy. Many questions were left unanswered Inability to finish the crisis effectively

Annex 5. Elements of the informative distortion

**ELEMENTS OF THE INFORMATIVE DISTORTION**

LEAKS	<p>- First details on the recordings of the aircraft's black boxes (<i>El País</i>, 13 September 2008).</p> <p>- <i>Cadena SER</i> (15 September 2008) obtains the statement made before the civil guard by the Commander of Iberia who landed at the time the MD-82 took off.</p> <p>- Dissemination through different media of the draft of the preliminary report, written by the Investigation Commission (16 September 2008).</p> <p>- Emergence of the video of the crash (<i>El País</i>, <i>El Periódico</i>), on 18 September 2008, the same day the judge responsible for the accident met with engineers investigating the causes of the disaster.</p>	
VARIOUS FICTIONS	<p>- <i>El Periódico</i> gets its hands on the final draft of the Investigation Commission (16 August 2009), and highlights that the report accuses <i>Spanair</i> of ignoring Boeing's manual of use. On 27 August 2008, the Argentinean television programme "Todo Noticias" (All news) disseminates a fake conversation between the pilots of the aircraft, moments before the accident.</p>	
POISONINGS AND "NOISE"	<p>Development of different hypotheses about the accident, blaming or exonerating the aircraft manufacturer (<i>Boeing</i>) or the airline <i>Spanair</i>.</p> <p>There are two opposed blocks in all the analysed process:                      - <i>Group Zeta/Unedisa</i> supported <i>Boeing</i>: Defended the hypothesis pointing at "human error" and the ignoring of the <i>Boeing</i> manuals as the causes of the accident.                      - <i>Group Prisa</i> supported <i>Spanair</i>. It put the blame on the recurrent failures in the aircrafts manufactured by the American company. But after the final report emerged, it recognised "a string of technical and human errors"</p>	
BAD JOURNALISTIC PRACTICES	<p>Both theses were backed up by appealing to the argument of "authority", the centrality of the editorial comment, and the critical comments and chronicles of senior editors.</p> <p>- The video of the accident is leaked by the Ministry of Public Works (on 24 September 2008). The members of Parliament from the Popular Party accuse the person responsible for leaking the video.</p> <p>- Dissemination of the recordings of the conversation between <i>Spanair's</i> operations director and the Chief of operations of Madrid. This information was provided personally to broadcasters by the director of communications of the Ministry of Public Works.</p>	























### HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE IN BIBLIOGRAPHIES / REFERENCES:

José Vicente García-Santamaría (2010): "The crisis of investigative Journalism in Spain. The journalism practice in the Spanair accident", at *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 65, pages 516 to 537. La Laguna (Tenerife, Canary Islands): La Laguna University, retrieved on \_\_\_\_th of \_\_\_\_ of 2\_\_\_\_\_, from [http://www.revistalatinacs.org/10/art3/916\\_U3M/38\\_SantamariaEN.html](http://www.revistalatinacs.org/10/art3/916_U3M/38_SantamariaEN.html)  
DOI: 10.4185/RLCS-65-2010-916-516-537-EN

**Note:** the [DOI](#) number is **part** of the bibliographic references and it must be cited if you cited this article.

To send this article to a friend, just click on the little envelope: 