

# Journalism, politics and citizenship: Keys to a new relationship from Spain

Periodismo, política y ciudadanía:  
claves para una nueva relación desde España

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Innovation has not only modified routines and professional profiles, but also raises questions about public legitimacy and the institutional character of journalism as a political actor with the emergence of new actors, such as digital platforms and their algorithms, and the reconfiguration of the communicative space. This article aims to present the foundations of the relationship between journalism and politics today, along with future trends. **Methodology:** It does so through a study developed in February 2020–February 2021 in Spain based on methodological triangulation that includes, in addition to the literature review, a survey of journalists, a survey of citizens and a panel of experts with researchers in the area. **Discussion:** The results confirm journalists as a filter between society and politics, although the citizens are critical. **Conclusions:** Some dangerous trends for democracy are revealed: the choice of media agenda items in political parties, low audience participation, the

concealment of the importance of algorithms and digital platforms, and the high automation of information to influence public opinion and generate disinformation.

**KEYWORDS:** news media; journalism; politics; citizens; Spain; survey; democracy.

## RESUMEN

**Introducción:** La innovación modificó no solo las rutinas y los perfiles profesionales, sino que cuestionó la legitimidad pública y el carácter institucional del periodismo como actor político con la aparición de nuevos actores, como las plataformas digitales y sus algoritmos, y la reconfiguración del espacio comunicativo. Este artículo pretende fijar las bases de la relación entre el periodismo y la política en la actualidad y las tendencias de futuro. **Metodología:** La investigación se ha desarrollado a través de un estudio desarrollado entre febrero de 2020 y febrero de 2021 en España basado en la triangulación metodológica que incluye, además de la revisión bibliográfica, una encuesta a periodistas, una encuesta a ciudadanos y un panel de expertos con investigadores del área de periodismo. **Discusión:** Los resultados confirman a los periodistas como filtro entre la sociedad y la política, aunque la ciudadanía se muestra crítica. **Conclusiones:** Se revelan tendencias peligrosas para la democracia: la elección de los temas de la agenda mediática en los partidos políticos, la escasa participación de la audiencia, el ocultamiento de la importancia de los algoritmos y las plataformas digitales, y la alta automatización de la información para influir en la opinión pública y generar desinformación.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** medios de comunicación; periodismo; política; ciudadanos; España; encuesta; democracia.

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### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1. Redefining Journalism

The public legitimacy and institutional character of journalism – objectives achieved in the second millennium – need to be revalidated, at a time of so many changes in the journalistic field. Mediatization since modernity, understood in its double aspect (Schulz, 2004), shows that the media has emerged as an independent institution with its own logic while simultaneously becoming an integrated part of other institutions, such as politics, work or family, as more and more of these activities are carried out through interactive and collective media (Hjarvard, 2008). But the changing roles of media and journalists, which are a constant because of the transformations in the ecosystem in recent years, make it advisable, if we want to rethink journalism in the current communicative ecosystem, to analyze those most relevant aspects of the moves, among which is the institutionalization of new media, that cause the transition from mediation to mediatization (Kammer, 2013; Hjarvard, 2014).

The fact that the media are at the center of social processes, together with political institutions and citizenship (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999), has positioned them within the information and knowledge society. The network at the heart of this society is the center of communicative strategies, populated by a set of actors that have penetrated the fabric of politics, war and even everyday life to the extent that they no longer ‘mediate’ events external to them, but have merged with those events (Hutchings, 2019). Interactions between journalists and politicians have moved from being close and sometimes uncomfortable (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1981) to a more or less intimate relationship, with constant

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negotiation (Casero-Ripollés, 2008). This relationship kept the shadow of conflict very present, in a context where many politicians need the media to be politically successful (Aalberg and Strömbäck, 2011; Strömbäck and van Aelst, 2013).

In the current communicative ecosystem, where technological and social platforms take center stage, political coverage is still strongly influenced by interactions between journalists and political actors (Maurer and Beiler, 2018), which grants degrees of power to journalists and politicians. The prosumption of ‘politainment’ on the Internet is characterized by a massive consumption of information, but a very passive behavior in its production and participation (Berrocal-Gonzalo et al., 2014). Prosumption in social networks has a positive relationship with online participation and with the heterogeneity of the discussion (Yamamoto et al., 2020). The use of social networks, however – highly present in modern journalism – has led to the need for many journalists to compete more directly with experts, commentators, sources and other actors, which implies renewed interactions between political journalists and their audiences (Bruns and Nuernbergk, 2019), as well as with politicians.

Institutional logics remain in today’s network society, where affordance and homogenization shape dominant news that is oriented to serve the public interest (Benson et al., 2018). The renewal of the public sphere, through the new dispersion and deliberative dimensions inspired by the Internet (Dahlgren, 2005) and the great transformation in the digital scenario this century (Desai, 2013), has established a new scenario for relations between journalists and politicians, deliberation and audiences, initially greeted with optimism about the renewed possibilities of strengthening democracy through current technologies, which has become, in recent years, a critical skepticism (Masip et al., 2019). What is certain is that social networks have instituted new parameters for political conversation in the digital public sphere and that demographics, cultural factors and proximity to centers of political power are now factors that condition the structure of digital political debate (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2020).

The current ecology of hybrid media – embedded in decision-making in political institutions and the media – demands new approaches to rethinking political communication (Bennett and Pfetsch, 2018) and rethinking journalism (Peters and Broersma, 2017). This reinvention of the media and journalism, necessary due to the metamorphosis experienced in recent years, is what frames much of current journalistic research and the pronouncements of the main professional organizations.

## 1.2. 25 years of transformations and methodological challenges

During the last 25 years, changes in all the actors involved in journalism and politics have followed parallel and, at times, interrelated paths. The hybridization of actors and strategies has been common not only to journalism but also to old and new political actors, such as political parties, public administrations and citizens.

After several years of convergence, the media bet on the hybridization of content and professional practices (Chadwick, 2013; Hamilton, 2016). In a stage that is sometimes described as seismic (Rashidian, 2020), work routines (Spryridou et al., 2013) and news flows in daily life have been modified (Carlson, 2020). Recent reports such as the Reuters Institute’s *Digital News Report 2020* (Newman et al., 2020) and *The Impact of Digital Platforms on News and Journalistic Content* by the Centre for Media Transition (Wilding et al., 2018) confirm changes in production as well as in reception.

Closely linked to the relationship with the audience, professional profiles have been modified (Berganza et al., 2017; Weaver and Willnat, 2012). Journalistic forms of storytelling are also undergoing changes with new crossmedia and transmedia strategies (Gander, 1999; Jenkins, 2003; Mabrook and Singer,

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2019), while new typologies of multichannel, polysynthetic and integrative journalistic language are being delimited (Vulchanova et al., 2017; Castro et al., 2016), within a narrative of hyper-fragmented textualities and a varied number of actors involved in the production of the message (Adami, 2016), among which the audience stands out. Strategies of user participation (Hujanen, 2016), the emotional charge of information (Beckett and Deuze, 2016), the search for empathy between journalists and users (Glück, 2016) and, above all, the importance given to audience metrics in news production processes (Ferrer-Conill and Tandoc, 2018) are some of the strategies highlighted by previous research.

The media are betting on new ways of relating to the user, aimed at building reader loyalty by stimulating community membership and rewarding them with a more participatory and horizontal interactivity with the newsroom, sometimes in productive forms such as bloggers or expert sources. The differences in the strategies lie in the value attributed to the community through participatory strategies and thematic specialization in different degrees of development according to each organization (García-Orosa et al., 2020). These trends are also common in information sources (García-Orosa, 2018), a role played by the audience in a first phase of this the relationship.

In this sense, political parties – initially a source of media information – also registered the transformations indicated above as well as important changes in their communicative role. They no longer only have a determining influence as creators of the media agenda (Hopmann et al., 2012), but technology also allows them to establish a direct relationship with citizens, thus skipping the intermediate step of the media. Already situated in a fourth wave, the communication of political parties now seeks the participation of citizens.

In the middle of two of the traditional actors – journalists and politicians – the citizenship and, above all, social movements are strongly emerging. The concept of citizenship and the role of the citizen in politics, understood in a broad sense (McNair, 2017; Clarke et al., 2006), varies. In the network society, where power is multidimensional and organized around networks programmed by the interests and values of empowered actors in each field of human action (Castells, 2009), citizens acquire a greater relevance in the traditional relationship between media and political parties. Among other examples of fluidity, one can indicate how political parties emerging from social movements have acquired considerable political power (Siddarth et al., 2021). Take, for example, *Teruel existe* – a local social movement in Spain that has managed to lodge its ‘empty Spain’ framework on the public agenda and in political discourse (Author). After humble beginnings, this social movement – a constituency grouping in the language of Spanish electoral law – now has representation in the Spanish Parliament. Social movements such as the Arab Spring and others in Brazil, Turkey, Mexico and Chile also stand out.

The audience as a relevant part of the discourse (Coleman and Ross, 2010) has thus acquired, in recent decades, a special dimension in the media system. Its role as prosumer and the blurring of the boundaries between the traditional actors of public opinion (Carlson and Lewis, 2015; Jensen et al., 2016; Witschge et al., 2016) promote the search for new relationship formulas. In this context, engagement with the recipient has emerged as one of the main challenges of digital media in recent years (Newman et al., 2016; Newman et al., 2020) to the point that some authors have called it the era of engagement (Morehouse and Saffer, 2019).

In this path, journalism remains above all a filter for information (García-Orosa et al., 2020) and audience participation. In this context, voices have called for a methodological and hermeneutic revision (Mitchelstein and Boczkowski, 2009) that overcomes technological determinism (Örnebring, 2010; Deuze, 2021) and advances the understanding of the social role of the media. Journalism as ‘sense making news’ with a social benefit has influence on power structures and civic life (Abeele et al., 2018) and, at the same time, social and political changes modify journalism. Recent research

reaffirms the political role of media influenced by different democratic models, usually in line with constructive journalism or solution journalism (Aitamurto and Varma, 2018; Mast et al., 2019).

This article intends to illuminate the relationship between journalism and politics now and in the future through an interpretation of citizens/receivers, journalists and researchers in the area. It considers not only the modifications in the media system but also the redefinition of the role of the user and the transformations in the information sources in the digital world. It is also relevant to consider the incorporation of new actors such as digital platforms. In the latter case, the role of technology in all these processes is configured in different ways, but its importance has resurfaced in recent decades. Machines are revealed as controllers through algorithms (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019) or the use of drones (Pavlik, 2020). Automation (Vállez and Codina, 2018) affects all actors of public opinion. Platformization – with technology companies becoming political and media actors (Smyrnaiois and Rebillard, 2019) – poses new challenges in the reshaping and erosion of informational plurality (Tamir and Davidson, 2020; Cardenal et al., 2019) with hardly detectable risks.

In the Spanish case, the evolution was parallel to that of neighboring countries. The journalistic profiles are among the most cited by the scientific literature: participatory/interpreter/educator/watchdog, mobilizer of citizenship, entertainer or favorer of the status quo (Novoa-Jaso, Sánchez-Aranda and Serrano-Puche, 2019). However, Roses-Campos and Humanes-Humanes (2019) highlight, after conducting a survey of 122 journalists from four Spanish newspapers, the existence of a gap between the ideals and practice of these typologies.

The evolution of these traditional profiles towards the transformation caused, among other factors, by technological innovation and the pandemic, is still an open road. One of the most recent studies, conducted through 390 surveys to Spanish journalists, demonstrates the relevance of technological skills and competences, of audiences in the production process and of new journalistic profiles with the arrival of Web 2.0, which accelerates the production flow and makes journalists have less time (Berganza et al., 2018). These characteristics are similar to those detected in surrounding countries.

This liquid and permeable situation not only poses new challenges for the legitimization of journalists and the media as social actors, but also forces us to reflect on the essence of journalism in society. In different latitudes, initiatives have been taken in this direction so through the creation of innovative journalism such as *De Correspondent* or *Mediapart*, activist journalism such as *Rombe* in Equatorial Guinea, or by creating international media such as *AlJazeera*. Following these first experiences, this research explores the perception of this reality and the new challenges.

## 2. Objectives

The main objective of this article is to forge a new approach to the redefinition of journalism today through its relationship with the political sphere. In previous studies, politics, understood in a broad sense, was confirmed to be one of the most relevant areas in journalism (García-Orosa et al., 2020), both in its thematic agenda and its daily activity or, from a more abstract point of view, in the role of journalism in society. After analyzing the activity of digital native media in this area, an approach is proposed through the interpretation of journalists, citizens and researchers in this field.

The specific objectives are:

- To define the perception of journalistic activity through the analyzed collectives.
- To identify the relationship between journalism and politics.
- To analyze the changes in the perception of digital journalism.

After reviewing the literature, this article starts from the hypothesis that the role of social filter or political actor could be being questioned by the entry of new actors such as digital platforms and algorithms, or the participation of the public not only in the edition of the informative message but, above all, in the design of the media agenda in Spain.

### 3. Methodology

Methodological triangulation and three different techniques are used for data extraction: (1) survey of Spanish citizens; (2) survey of journalists in Spain; and (3) a panel of experts with researchers in journalism.

The survey of Spanish citizens was conducted among the population aged 18 and over in October and November 2020. The sample consisted of 700 computer-assisted telephone interviews (Supplementary Information file) ( $n_1=700$ ) and was composed proportionally to the population of each autonomous community first and, subsequently, by gender and age quotas within each stratum (Table 1). The margin of error is  $\pm 3.10\%$ , with a confidence interval of 95.5% (2 sigmas), for the assumption of maximum indeterminacy ( $p=q=50\%$ ) and for overall results.

**Table 1.** *Characteristics of the sample of the survey of Spanish citizens ( $n_1=700$ )*

<b>Gender</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Female	392	51.4
Male	340	48.6

<b>Age</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
18–24	70	10.0
25–34	100	14.3
35–44	128	18.3
45–54	133	19.0
55–64	111	15.9
65 and over	158	22.6

<b>Level of education</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
No primary education	19	2.7
Primary	106	15.1
Secondary	186	26.6
University	379	54.1
No answer	10	1.4

<b>Employment status</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Employee	314	44.9
Self-employment	59	8.4
Unemployed	107	15.3
Student	44	6.3
Retired or pensioner	165	23.6
No answer	11	1.6

**Source:** own elaboration.

The survey of journalists was managed through professional associations affiliated to the Spanish federation FAPE (71 in total), which distributed the survey to 4,400 journalists (approximate census of associates, according to data provided by the organizations to the researchers). It was carried out through a structured online questionnaire (Supplementary Information file) that included the research objectives, between February and May 2020. A total of 208 responses were obtained, 197 of them valid ( $n_2=197$ ), with the characteristics shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** *Characteristics of the sample of the survey of journalists ( $n_2=197$ )*

<b>Gender</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Female	90	45.7
Male	104	52.8
No answer	2	1.0
Other	1	0.5

<b>Years in the profession</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
< 1	2	1.0
1–4	11	5.7
5–9	23	11.9
10–19	28	14.4
20–29	63	32.5
≥ 30	67	34.5

<b>Employment status</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Employee	126	60.6
Self-employment	48	23.1
Unemployed	18	8.7
Retired	16	7.7

<b>Section</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Politics (only)	3	2.9
Other sections including political news (national, local, newscast)	61	58.7
Other sections	40	38.4

**Source:** own elaboration.

The panel of experts was conducted between December 2020 and February 2021, using a structured questionnaire (Supplementary File) based on the objectives of the study and the data obtained in the two previous techniques. The sampling ( $n_3=14$ ) was purposive based on two databases (Communication and Digital Culture section of the Spanish association AE-IC and relevant publications on the research topic in Google Scholar – searching for those terms combined in different ways: journalism, journalists, politics, Spain). To estimate the level of consensus, the interquartile range and relative interquartile range ( $RIR = (Q_3 - Q_1) / Q_2$ ) were calculated for quantitative scale variables, with an expected consensus of  $RIR \leq 0.5$ .

**Table 3.** *Characteristics of the group of experts (n3=14)*

<b>Gender</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Female	5	35.7
Male	9	64.3

<b>Country</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Spain	9	64.3
Ecuador	2	14.2
Jordan	1	7.1
Palestine	1	7.1
Portugal	1	7.1

**Source:** own elaboration.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Roles of journalism and the practice of the profession

The perception of journalistic activity by professionals, citizens and experts allows us to evaluate the current state of journalism in Spain, as an initial step to investigate the relationship with the political sphere.

Journalists undoubtedly consider that their main role at present (Table 4) is to inform (71.8% chose this option). This category is related to other roles they indicate for journalism: some journalists state that their main roles include controlling power and sources (11.7%), denouncing and giving voice (4.3%) or mediating between facts, power and society (3.7%); functions of control and vigilance form the tasks of the profession: to investigate, analyze and go deeper (17.0%), to educate society and form public opinion (8.5%), to verify in response to disinformation (5.9%), to explain (3.2%) or to explain and contextualize (5.9%). Some 4.3% of journalists consider that among their main roles is also the need to entertain.

**Table 4.** *Role of the journalist (survey of journalists)*

<b>Main roles identified</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>%</b>
Inform	135	71.8
Investigate, analyze, and analyze in depth	32	17.0
Control power and sources	22	11.7
Educate society and form public opinion	16	8.5
Explain and contextualize	11	5.9
Verify in response to misinformation	11	5.9
Denounce and give voice	8	4.3
Entertain	8	4.3
Mediate between facts, power and society	7	3.7

**Note:** categories coded from open-ended questions. **Source:** own elaboration.

From the point of view of the experts consulted, the most important – and consensual – functions of journalism today (Table 5) are: providing information (4.1 out of 5), analyzing and interpreting events (4.1), acting as verifiers (3.9), and monitoring the government (3.7). Regarding the role of journalists today (Table 6), the experts point out that they should act as intermediaries between society and the public, economic and social powers (3.6 out of 5), loudspeakers for citizens (3.5) and watchdogs (3.4). In all cases the assessments achieved the expected level of consensus ( $RIR \leq 0.5$ ).

**Table 5.** *Functions of today's journalism (group of experts)*

Function	Average	Interquartile Range	Relative Interquartile Range
Provide information	4.1	1	0.25
Analyze and interpret events	4.1	1.75	0.39
Act as verifiers	3.9	2	0.50
Monitor government	3.7	1	0.25
Being platforms for transparent intermediation in the public debate	3.4	2.75	0.69
Conduct militant reporting	3.0	2.75	0.79

**Source:** own elaboration.

**Table 6.** *Role of the journalist (group of experts)*

Role	Average	Interquartile Range	Relative Interquartile Range
Watchdog	3.4	1	0.33
Citizen's loudspeaker	3.5	1	0.25
Instructor of the audience	2.8	1.75	0.58
<i>Statu quo</i> enabler	3.1	2	0.57
Entertainer of public opinion	2.9	2	0.67
Disseminator of objective information	3.5	2.75	0.69
Intermediary between society and public, economic and social authorities	3.6	1	0.25

**Source:** own elaboration.

The perception of journalists in relation to the trust that Spanish citizens have in them is not positive (4.6 out of 10) and they ascribe this to the low credibility of media and professionals, an audience aware of the bias and interests that influence them, and sensationalism and spectacularization, among other reasons, but also due to the influence of social networks and misinformation, or that the audience seeks affinity and reaffirmation of their ideas.

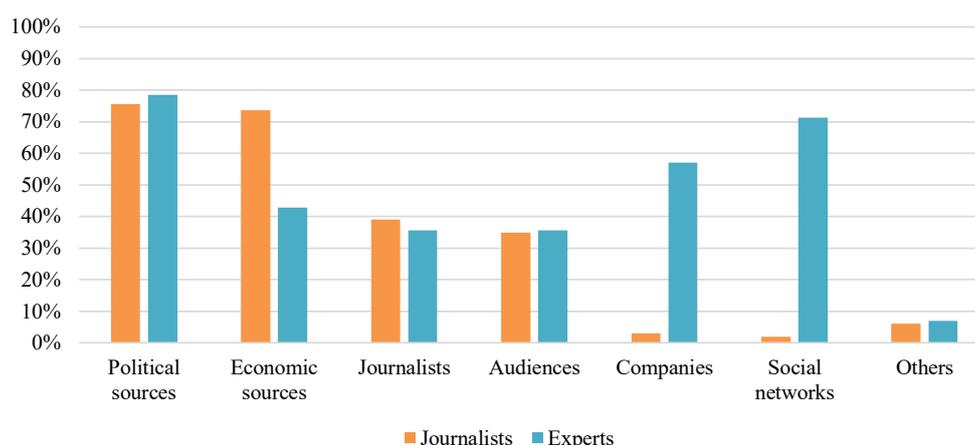
On the other hand, citizens express a critical view of the practice of journalism: 59.0% perceive that journalists do not comply with the codes of their profession, such as objectivity, impartiality or honesty. Nevertheless, Spanish citizens consider themselves to be sufficiently well informed (Avg.=6.25), with 52.1% scoring 7 or more on a scale of 1 to 10. Spanish society is therefore critical of the professional practice of journalism, although they consider themselves to be well informed. In light of these data,

and given the skepticism towards journalism professionals noted above, we wonder what criteria citizens value in order to consider a journalist trustworthy and we find that they prioritize multiple sources and fact-checking (59.3%), being a specialist in some subject (29.4%) and working in a medium with a good reputation (28.4%). Analyzing these results by age group, we observe that the youngest (18-44 years old) appreciate more the fact that they are present in social media. Regarding whether they are loyal to an ideological line, those over 65 are the ones who value this quality the most, who also take into account if they work in a news media outlet with a good reputation.

#### 4.2. Interferences and relationship with politics

The issues that shape public opinion (Figure 1), according to journalists, are mainly defined by political (75.6%) and economic (73.6%) sources. This marked bias contrasts with 39.1% who consider that journalists themselves define the issues, or 35.0% who include the audience as a determining factor. Among the responses outside the main categories, 4.6% mentioned pressure groups, opinion leaders and other influences as actors in the definition of priority issues.

The experts agree that it is political sources that determine public opinion issues to a greater extent (78.6%), but they also point to virality in social networks, a cause that determines the issues for 71.4% of the experts in the study. Less common determinants of public opinion were said to be the journalistic organizations themselves, economic sources, the audience, and journalists.



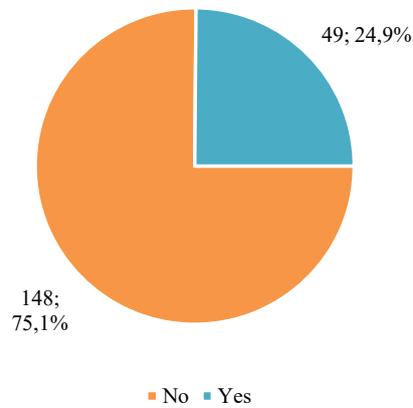
**Figure 1:** Who decides the issues that shape public opinion?

**Source:** own elaboration.

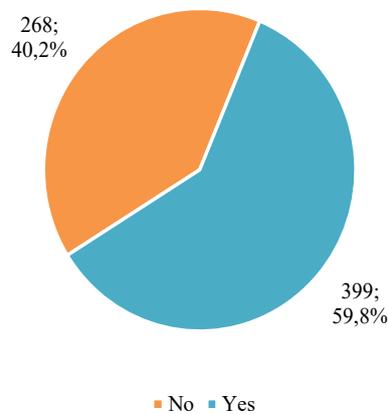
Although the topics are largely defined by political and economic sources, 50.3% of journalists say that they are the ones who decide on the approach to the topics, compared to the news sources that provide the information first (37.1%) and the directors and managers of newspaper companies (24.9%). The experts' perspective differs from that of the professionals, since they all agree that it is the companies that define the approaches, together with the journalists (57.1%) and other factors such as the sources.

The journalism-politics relationship is a central issue for journalism professionals and for citizens. Journalists consider their profession to be incompatible with involvement in a political party (3.8 out of 10 points): 42.6% indicated that they totally disagreed, while 23.8% agreed (scoring 7 or more). As for citizens, they perceive that journalists' surveillance towards politicians is moderate (6.0) and believe that they are more interested in getting along with power than in reporting what is happening in society (6.8) – in this aspect, 58.1% scored 7 or more out of 10. By age, those over 65 score highest both in

recognizing journalists' surveillance of politicians and possible interest in getting along with power. Figures 2, 3 and 4 visualize these data in simplified form, showing the degree of agreement with the statements under the category "no" (responses from 1 to 5) and "yes" (from 6 to 10).

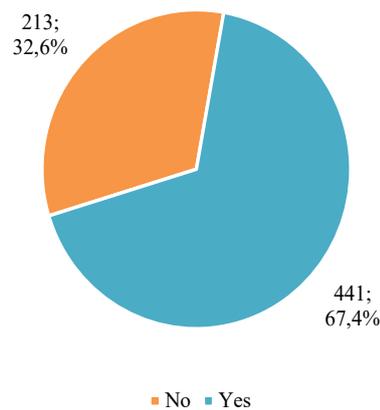


**Figure 2:** "A journalist can combine his or her informative work and political militancy" (survey of journalists).



**Figure 3:** "Journalists monitor politicians and powers to inform citizens" (survey of citizens).

**Source:** own elaboration.



**Figure 4:** "Journalists are more interested in getting along with those in power than in reporting what's going on" (survey of citizens).

**Source:** own elaboration.

### 4.3. Digital journalism: Challenges and threats for the future

Recent changes in the field of communication have also affected journalism and, by extension, its relationship with politics. According to the experts, the development of digital journalism has led to changes at three levels: in the very conception of journalism, in the faster publication and updating of information, and in the inclusion of citizen participation (nine of the fourteen experts consulted named all three levels). For half of the experts, it has meant the definition of new professional roles; two out of ten consider that it has affected the quality of information, and one thinks that it has improved the relationship with sources.

Regarding the relationship with the audience, journalists consider that citizenship can help to improve the veracity of information and add value as sources and collaborators. In support of this idea, they emphasize that taking care of this connection contributes to a better listening to society (29.9% of professionals point out this reason), since citizens are sources and provide testimonies and specialized or localized knowledge. In addition, they state that the audience is responsible, critical and controls journalism (9.6%), while openness to receiving feedback and the management of the relationship with the audience are positive for the debate (4.1%). However, those who see more risks than opportunities in collaboration with the public justify their position in distrusting citizen journalism (5.1%), skepticism towards the role of citizens (4.6%) – because of its partial, polarized and even propagandistic vision – and because the production of truthful information is a responsibility of journalists and the media (2.5%).

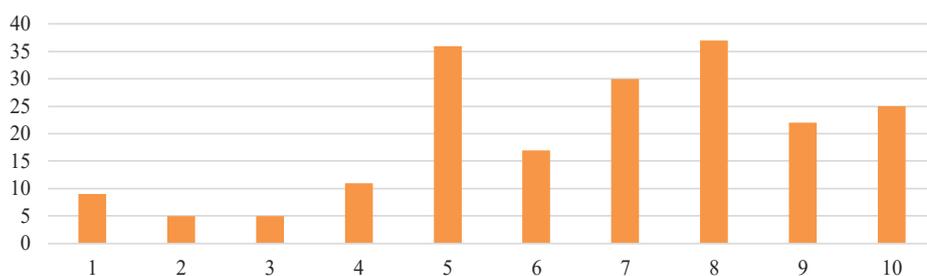
Delving into the relationship between journalists and the audience, 53.1% of the professionals consider that a specialized team should manage this relationship, while the remaining 46.9% consider that it is the direct responsibility of each reporter. The main methods of collaboration they point out are: direct contact with journalists through email and social networks (81.8%), sending confidential or sensitive information using secure mailboxes (75.3%), and participation in open processes of elaboration of journalistic pieces (25.9%).

Regarding the challenges of digital journalism, experts point out the search for new professional roles, the lack of income derived from open access to content, the need to engage the dispersed audience and technological adaptation (in all cases with the expected level of consensus). Interference by governments and politicians was rated at a medium-high level, without reaching consensus (3.4 points out of 5; RIR=0.63).

Social networks have an unquestionable impact on the information context, in production, distribution and reception. A total of 44.8% of Spanish citizens say that they use social media once or several times a day to get informed, with significantly lower data for those over 55 years of age. By gender, although it is not the objective of this research, 48.8% of women and 40.0% of men indicate this daily use of social media platforms for information. The close link between social networks and the rise of circulating misinformation prompted a question to citizens about the effect of hoaxes and fake news on the informative process – they expressed significant concern because they hinder access to information (8.2 out of 10). It is noteworthy that 43.6% of respondents indicated the highest level on the scale (10) and 80.8% chose a value greater than or equal to 7. Despite the concern about misinformation in the current context, citizens do not blame journalists for this phenomenon (4.8), with only 6.0% indicating the highest level of agreement.

The contemporary digital communication scenario cannot be understood without the impact of artificial intelligence. Journalists report a moderate level of influence of automation in the media in which they work (6.8 out of 10), with a mode of 8 pointing to a frequent influence. Experts rate it similarly and with consensus at a high level (3.9 out of 5; RIR=0). In turn, journalists perceive that the automation of sources in journalistic work is slightly more present (7.2). The experts point out that this use in political sources has a medium influence (2.9 out of 5), without reaching the expected consensus (RIR=0.67).

When asked specifically about the use of bots in political communication, journalists indicate that their presence is moderate (6.7), but relevant, since 72.0% scored 7 or more. The purposes of these tools are: (a) to generate disinformation, infoxication and biased information; (b) to influence public opinion; (c) to guide the debate and the news agenda; and (d) to feed political campaigns.



**Figure 5:** Presence of bots in political communication (scale 1–10; survey of journalists).

**Note:** 1 means "extremely low"; 10 means "extremely high". **Source:** own elaboration.

## 5. Discusión y conclusión

The public legitimization and institutional character that the media acquired in the last century is being redefined not only by the intensive transformations in technology, but also by the modifications suffered by the surrounding systems, especially the political one. This article was based on the hypothesis that

the role of social filter or political actor could be being questioned by the entry of new actors such as digital platforms and algorithms, or the participation of the public not only in the edition of the informative message but, above all, in the design of the media agenda in Spain.

The trends revealed for Spain mark clear and, at times, worrying lines for public opinion and democracy. Firstly, as in previous studies carried out through the analysis of news pieces and the voice of media managers (García-Orosa et al., 2020), the role claimed for journalism by communication professionals is that of a filter between sources and society, and the main function is to inform. Functions such as controlling power or giving a voice to the invisible were also present in previous studies (Humanes & Roses, 2018), but in smaller percentages. These assessments are shared by academic experts, who added some challenges for digital journalism in relation to its role, such as “the fight against disinformation” and the “specialization and deepening in topics closer to the community or communities”. They also suggest strengthening business models and “restoring their brand, prestige and credibility in the context of increasing penetration and influence of actors outside the professional media”. Regarding narratives and innovative ways of spreading news, experts state that journalism must face the “creation of new formats for the dissemination of information that adapt to the new reading habits of media consumers”. These challenges, which are opportunities to continue developing the priority function of informing, point to paths of future exploration for journalism and its relationship with the information actors and the audience.

Citizens also claim the role of journalism is to act as a filter but express their criticism of the level of compliance at this time and show their disaffection with journalists; they demand specialized, honest journalists who check informative sources.

In addition to the confirmation by all sectors of the maintenance of the traditional role of journalism in digital journalism, the data provides a glimpse of three situations that could become a major risk for public opinion and even for journalism in the coming years: control of the media agenda, audience participation and the impact of algorithms and platforms.

The first of these is the control of the media agenda by hegemonic sectors, fundamentally political, which has been hinted at in previous research (Hopmann, 2012). It is confirmed that the fundamental origins of the topics that appear in the media are politicians and, therefore, interested sources. While it is true that it is journalists who seem to decide the approach subsequently given to those topics, the initial selection implies that most of the topics and actors will be excluded from the media agenda and that the topics that do appear benefit a strategy, usually, of a particular political party.

The second situation is the scant importance given to the participation of the audience in the journalistic production process; it is relegated to an appendix of the circulation of the message chosen, let us remember, by political sources and elaborated in the editorial offices of the media. This is surprising since recent studies and reports insist on the importance of audience participation and, specifically, audience engagement for the survival of the media as a fundamental actor in politics (Newman et al., 2016; Newman et al., 2020; Campbell and Lambright, 2020; Anduiza and Rico, 2016). Lately, engagement with citizenship is gaining great relevance with different terms such as ‘public engagement’, ‘engaging the public’, and ‘engaging with the public’ (Carvalho et al., 2017).

Thirdly, the scant attention paid to the power of algorithms and platforms as communicative actors stands out. The high level of automation is noteworthy for the purposes of: (a) generating disinformation, infoxication and biased information; (b) influencing public opinion; (c) guiding the debate and the information agenda; and (d) feeding political campaigns. This perception is also in line with recent studies on automation of information and real use of algorithms in journalism, which is becoming increasingly important.

If we combine the different interpretations, we could observe journalists who define themselves as a filter between society and politicians, but whose agenda is mainly defined by political parties, who use automation systems where the main objective is to influence public opinion, sometimes generating disinformation, infoxication and biased information.

A relatively high percentage of participants from the three sectors consulted coincide in highlighting these trends that could not only redefine the role of journalism and its relationship with politics, but also the processes of generating public opinion. Therefore, we can summarize the trends recorded as follows:

1. Confirmation of the hybrid and liquid relationship between the main actors of journalism and politics, which points to an uncertain future.

2. Journalism maintains its main role as a filter, as a mediator between society and other political actors, but always linked to the maintenance of the basic principles of the profession.

3. Confirmation of the danger posed by the supplanting of the journalistic role of selecting information topics as opposed to the role of sources.

4. Reinforcement of the citizenship as a fundamental actor, although with little awareness of this change.

5. Audience as a challenge for journalistic and political strategies.

6. Need for new methodologies and hermeneutic perspectives for the study of the new reality.

## 6. Limitations

This research continues a line of work carried out previously through other research methods but which, in essence, confirms the trends. It would be interesting to complete the study with the analysis of the sources of information and the news media agenda. The proposed methodology can also be transferred to other geographical areas that allow comparative analysis with that studied in this research. For this purpose, it should be taken into account that Spain has a consolidated media map with a significant number of digital native media – 1361, representing 47.4% of the total (Negredo & Martínez-Costa, 2021) – and where scientific evidence indicates that citizens' trust in the media is conditioned by the legacy or digital-native nature of the media (López-García, 2022; Author), in favor of the former. For the generalization of results, it should be taken into account that the use of certain samples and methods – such as the telephone survey, the online survey and the panel of experts – may introduce biases.

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