News interests and quality: Preferences and audience perception in Spain

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The aim of this article is to analyze the information preferences of the Spanish population, the media they trust and their perceptions of journalistic quality. **Methodology:** A quantitative approach based on the survey technique is used for the purpose of this study. The online questionnaire was completed by 1,200 people aged over 16 from all over Spain between March 8 and 15, 2023. The sample was distributed proportionally by autonomous community, gender, age and population size. **Results:** Spanish citizens consider themselves to have a high level of information and interest in national current affairs and highly relevant issues such as health (46.1%), economy (38%) and politics (33.9%). Respondents see politicization as the main media problem and journalistic quality as low or very low (63%). Among the measures that could improve quality, they identify better contextualization, greater diversity of opinion, more relevant topics and more varied information. They identify television as the medium that provides the highest quality of information and the most contrasting news. **Discussion and conclusions:** This article focuses on the weight that self-ideology has on the perception of the media and its ideological positioning, as well as on the perception that Spaniards have of the quality of journalism in the Spanish media.

Keywords: journalistic quality; information consumption; news interest; politicization; ideology; media; survey; partisan media bias; selective exposure.

1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship of audiences with news content has undergone a major change in the last two decades, derived both from the technological context and new forms of consumption (Boczkowski et al., 2018) and from the distrust in the information provided by the media (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019). The consolidation of a hybrid media ecosystem (Chadwick, 2017) has represented, on the one hand, a shift in the information habits of the population. Reports such as those of the Pew Research Center in the United States highlight a majority tendency to be informed through online channels and social networks since the last decade (Shearer & Matsa, 2018), an option that has been consolidated in the Spanish case. The latest study by the *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism* shows that half of the Spanish population has social networks as its main source of information, and that three quarters of it is informed online (Vara et al., 2023).

On the other hand, several studies have noted a worrying evolution in recent years, especially in the Spanish context. Data from the 2023 *Digital News Report Spain* reveal that 40% of Spanish people distrust the news (Vara, 2023), the highest percentage in the historical series that began in 2015. These results are in line with those offered by the *Trust Barometer 2023*. It shows that trust in the media in Spain (38%) is well below the global average (50%) (Edelman, 2023).

At the European level, the Eurobarometer —the standard survey in the different countries of the European Union— of January 2023 shows that only 27% of Spanish people trust the media, compared to 70% who do not. Once again, the difference with respect to the European average (38%) is more than 10 points (European Commission, 2023). For its part, the *Social Trends Survey* conducted by the Sociological Research Center (CIS, in Spanish) shows a loss of confidence among Spanish citizens in the traditional media. On a scale of 1 to 10, respondents rate this trust with 4,1, two tenths less than in the two previous years (CIS, 2023).

In a complex context in which the media are facing a serious crisis caused by external circumstances such as the economic crisis of 2008, the change of business model or phenomena such as the rise of social networks, disinformation and polarization (Tucker et al., 2018), but also derived from professional praxis, it is necessary not only to recover the lost trust (Laviana, 2024), but especially to analyze what are the information preferences of the audience and their perceptions of the media. This research looks into these aspects by means of a survey based on 1.200 responses, with the aim of finding out what are the informative interests of the Spanish population, which media they trust and what is their perception of the quality of information.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Information consumption: Preferences and influences

Concern for the dynamics that influence media consumption and the influence it can have on the perception of citizenship has been the focus of academic attention since the beginnings of mass communication. The uses and gratifications theory focuses on citizens' motives for consuming certain content, in an active process of selecting topics and media, with the aim of satisfying needs such as entertainment, social relations, personal identity and environmental monitoring (Strömbäck et al., 2020). For its part, the agenda setting theory states that the media manage to transfer to citizens the issues that are important, through a process of selection and repetition of the information that appears in the media coverage (McCombs et al., 2014). One of the elements that motivates the consumption of information is the audience's need for orientation, which is based on the idea that individuals have an innate curiosity about the world around them (McCombs, 2005).

The evolution in access and type of consumption in a hybrid media context (Chadwick, 2017) have revealed the existence of a news gap between the media agenda and the information preferences of the public (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013), attracted by the so-called soft news of digital media (Diez-Gracia & Sánchez-García, 2022), news on topics of little political and social relevance (Reinemann et al., 2012) and which tend to focus their attention on curiosities and celebrities. Thus, the concerns of citizens, expressed in surveys such as the Eurobarometer (European Commission, 2023) or those conducted by the CIS (2023), are in contradiction with the real information diet, expressed in audience studies or in the most viewed content.

The sociodemographic characteristics of the audience are related, as pointed out by different studies, to the type of information they consume. Gender differences influence audience uses and gratifications (Lucas & Sherry, 2004), with different information consumption patterns (Boulianne & Shehata, 2022). Similarly, different informational preferences are found according to age (Boulianne & Shehata, 2022), educational level and audience interest in politics (Strömbäck et al., 2013). The proximity component, besides representing a news value (Shoemaker et al., 2007), also implies a conditioning factor in media attention (Gebremeskel & de Vries, 2015). In affectively or ideologically polarized people, the relevance of the topics that interest them may be conditioned by selective exposure processes, in which certain topics are actively sought, while others are avoided in order not to experience cognitive dissonance (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). Bearing these issues in mind, this research aims to assess the perception of the level of information of Spanish citizens and which aspects generate more attention, through the following research questions:

- RQ1: What degree of information do Spanish people consider they have? What are their information preferences?

2.2. Politicization and ideological positioning of the media

The perception of the politicization of the media and its ideological positioning are crucial aspects for understanding the relationship of citizens with the communication system and with specific information organizations, in terms of trust and exposure.

On the one hand, the politicization of the media is one of the multiple consequences of social polarization, which implies the alignment in a single dimension of the multiple axes of debate on public issues. Consequently, it simplifies and reduces political and social relations to a continuous conflict between opposing blocs (Waisbord, 2020), dominated by ideological issues (Iyengar et al., 2012). From the citizens' point of view, polarization generates a lower feeling of neutrality and a higher tendency to clearly positive or negative perceptions about political groups, which in turn strengthens partisan identification (Hetherington, 2001) and reduces trust in the media (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019). In the media system,

polarization results in a high level of political parallelism that reflects ideological divisions and aligns news coverage and editorial lines with partisan interests (Hallin & Mancini, 2008).

The 2022 *Digital News Report* notes the high level of polarization in the Spanish context, pointing out that Spain is, together with Italy, the second country among the 46 included with the lowest percentage of population (13%) convinced that the media are free of undue political influence, only behind Greece (7%) (Newman et al., 2022). In addition, it is also the second with the second highest proportion of the population that considers the media to be polarized (49%), only behind Poland (54%). The Spanish population's distrust of the media is higher than the European average (European Commission, 2023) and increases over the years, although it is much higher in television and social networks than in radio and the press (CIS, 2023). The perception of media bias is associated with a lower use of news in general, both in traditional and social media (Ardèvol-Abreu & Gil de Zúñiga, 2017). However, although most digital users bet on unbiased news, in Spain there is a greater preference for reinforcement news than in other countries (Rodríguez-Virgili et al., 2022).

On the other hand, the perception of media bias refers to how news consumers believe that the media offer partial coverage of certain points of view. This affects polarization (Berrocal-Gonzalo et al., 2023), causes mainstream and alternative media to converge in the eyes of the audience (Steppat et al., 2021) and, when the perceived bias is hostile, increases the intention to participate in politics (Gill et al., 2024; Lee & Kim, 2023). In one of the earliest studies of hostile media bias, Vallone et al. (1985) observed that both supporters and opponents of an issue perceive the media to be biased against them, suggesting that perceptions of bias are strongly influenced by individuals' preexisting beliefs. Although partisan media bias is sometimes real — by systematically favoring one option over another (Entman, 2007)— in the selection, ranking, or treatment of information (Shultziner & Stukalin, 2021), perceptions of bias are generally mediated by consumers' prejudices (D'Alessio & Allen, 2000). This provides evidence of the importance of ideological predispositions in the perception of media content. In this regard, Gunther and Schmitt (2004) found that voters tend to consider the same media as biased in opposite directions depending on their ideology.

Although since the late 90s many studies have addressed the phenomenon of selective exposure in Spain and have found a correlation between the political preferences of the audience and their media consumption preferences (Humanes, 2014), independently of other variables (Valera-Ordaz, 2023), there are fewer studies that have dealt with the perception of media bias. Ramírez-Dueñas and Vinuesa-Tejero (2021) observed with data referring to the General Elections of April 2019 that the partisan polarization of the audience is not only closely related to the consumption of certain media, but also to the rejection of receiving content contrary to one's own political convictions. Using data from the 2019 *Digital News Report*, Moreno-Moreno and Sanjurjo-San-Martín (2020) found that the user's political orientation moderates or enhances the consumption of some journalistic brands by mediating trust. In turn, Masip et al. (2020) observed that the ideological self-positioning of Spanish citizens is related to the trust they declare towards specific media; moreover, ideologically more distant media are more frequently perceived as generators of disinformation (Miller et al., 2024; van der Linden et al., 2020). In order to deepen our knowledge of the perception of politicization and media bias in Spain, this research question is formulated:

- RQ2: How do respondents perceive the degree of politicization of the media and assess their ideological standpoint?

2.3. Perception of journalistic quality and threats

Although the concept of quality is presented as an essential ingredient in the debates on the state of journalism (Chen & Suen, 2023) and, therefore, on its influence on democratic quality itself (Lacy & Rosenstiel, 2015), not only its definition but also its evaluation is far from being crystalline (Gutiérrez-Coba,

2006; Gómez-Mompart et al., 2013; Meier, 2019; Bachmann et al., 2022). This difficulty lies both in the complexity of the processes of obtaining and managing information (Gómez-Mompart et al., 2013), and of the needs and expectations of the audiences (McQuail, 2012), but also of the political-social dimensions of the context under analysis (Vehkoo, 2010). In fact, approaches to estimating journalistic quality combine various criteria.

From the professional point of view, aspects such as gatekeeping and newsmaking have a relevant weight, as shown in the Journalistic Added Value proposal (Alessandri et al., 2001). Projects such as that of Lacy and Rosenstiel (2015) combine professional variables with an outstanding attention to the community to which they are addressed. Thus, aspects such as quality of presentation, reliability, diversity, depth and breadth of information, comprehensiveness, treatment of public issues or geographical relevance are established according to the needs and priorities of those who make up the audience. Meier (2019) goes further and considers that the quality of journalism should be analyzed from a triple perspective that brings together the classic values of the profession (independence, truth/factuality and relevance/context) in combination with the activity developed and the final product from the point of view of the audiences.

Despite the limitations in the conceptualization and apprehension of the ingredients that constitute journalistic quality, the perception of this is presided, to a large extent, by the common denominator of pessimism (Meier, 2019). On the part of journalists, the assessment is far from a consideration of excellence.

The results of a survey conducted in 2013 revealed that, for 81% of the journalists who were surveyed ($N =$ 363), the quality standards of the journalistic product had worsened in recent years, particularly as a result of the crisis in the sector (Gómez-Mompart et al., 2015). Among the causes mentioned are the lack of economic and political independence of the media, low business investment and problems arising from technological changes, in a context of labor market precariousness. These threats not only remain in force but have worsened in recent years due to the lack of resources (Wert, 2024) and viable business models (Palacio, 2018), phenomena such as disinformation and polarization (González Urbaneja, 2021), or the unknowns generated by the irruption of artificial intelligence (Serrano Oceja, 2023).

In 2020, answering the question on how journalists evaluate the quality of the coverage of complex information, almost four out of five professionals indicated that it was poor —very poor (12%) or somewhat (65%) poor—, compared to 22% who considered it acceptable and only 1% as very good (Madrid Association Press [APM, in Spanish], 2020). The report of the Madrid Press Association also reveals that, for almost half of the journalists, the lack of rigor and quality of information is one of the main reasons for the lack of confidence of the Spanish people in journalism (APM, 2022).

Lippman's (1922) assertion about the gap between public expectations and media offerings has only widened over the last century, especially since the emergence of digital media (Bachmann et al., 2022). However, despite the references to the poor quality of the media or its influence on the lack of trust in the media (APM, 2022), the difficulty of making a definition of quality operational, its intangible nature or the complexity of transferring it to sectors of the population that do not always have a direct consumption reference has limited access to citizen perception of the quality of information. In order to address this limitation, this research has set out to explore citizen perception through the following two research questions:

- – RQ3: How do Spanish respondents rate the quality of the media and what are the main problems they identify in achieving it?

- – RQ4: What measures do respondents propose to improve quality? Who do they hold responsible?

3. METHODOLOGY

This research is quantitative and aimed at analyzing the relationship between quantified variables (Strauss, 1987). For this purpose, it relies on the survey as a methodological technique, one of the most recurrent research instruments in the field of Social Sciences (Bello & Guerra, 2014), which allows for systematic, anonymous and representative questioning of a population (Camarero, 2001; López-Roldán & Fachelli, 2015). For this purpose, a questionnaire was designed which included dichotomous and multiple responses, open-ended responses and rating scales (Likert model) to determine the degree of agreement or disagreement on a statement (Bertram, 2008).

The questionnaire, with a total of 48 questions, was structured in three blocks: information consumption (what type of content and through what channels they consume it); perception of the quality of information and evaluation of disinformation (what they think of the quality of the media in Spain and how they assess the current situation), and evaluation of disinformation. This article is based on 30 questions related to the first two blocks.

The online survey, with an average response time of 14 minutes, was conducted throughout Spain between March 8 and 15, 2023. The choice of this date responds to the desire to evaluate the issues mentioned two months before the municipal and regional elections (except in Catalonia, the Basque Country, Andalusia, Galicia and Castilla-León), in a year in which the general elections were also scheduled, finally brought forward to the month of July.

A total of 1,200 questionnaires were completed for a population universe of 16 years of age or older. The margin of error for the total sample is +2.83, with P = Q = 50% and under the assumption of maximum indeterminacy. For the survey, based on stratified sampling, study quotas have been established in proportion to the population by gender, age, autonomous community and size of municipality. In this regard, 52% of the responses correspond to women and 48% to men. Six age bands have been considered as representative of the demographic pyramid: 16-24 (11.1%), 25-34 (12.7%), 35-44 (16.8%); 45-54 (19.0%); 55-64 (16.4%) and over 65 (23.9%). Likewise, for the distribution of the sample by size of municipality, five segments have been established: less than 10,000 (20.2%); from 10,001 to 50,000 (26.7%), from 50,001 to 200,000 (22.8%) and from 20,001 to 500,000 (13.9%) and more than 500,000 (16.4%). In addition, the survey included variables referring to the level of education, positioning with respect to religion and political self-positioning.

The results were analyzed with the SPSS 25.0 program, through descriptive and inferential statistical analysis.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Perception of the degree of information and topics of interest in the news

The results of the survey indicate that the majority of Spanish people are optimistic about their degree of information (Table 1). The Chi-square test confirms that the relationship between both variables is statistically significant [$\chi 2$ (2, *N* = 1203) = 15.45, *p* < .001]. In response to PI1, more than three out of four claim to be sufficiently informed about current affairs and almost half of them note that they are more so than a few years ago (46.6%). For 43.1%, their level of information has not changed. However, there are statistically significant gender differences: men are more confident about their level of information than women. Women, however, perceive themselves to be more informed than a few years ago, surpassing men's perception by eight points.

Table 1. *Do you think you are sufficiently informed about the issues that interest you?*

| | Gender | | | | Total | |
| | Man | | Woman | | | |
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes	464	80.3%*	453	72.5%	917	76.2%
No	92	15.9%	117	18.7%	209	17.4%
NS/NC	22	3.8%	55	8.8%*	77	6.4%
Total	578	100.0%	625	100.0%	1203	100.0%

* Standardized corrected residuals > 1,96.

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

In terms of coverage, national news is the most interesting (90.6%), followed by local news (73.9%) and regional news (71.7%). International news, on the other hand, is attractive to four out of ten Spanish citizens (42.2%). However, men (50.9%) and people with master's and doctoral degrees (52.7%) are more interested in them. In general, the main information topic (Figure 1) is health (46.1%), followed by economy (38%) and politics (33.9%).

However, preferences vary according to certain parameters. On the one hand, gender is reflected in women's interest in health (54.9%), education (38.6%), culture (34.6%), social life (30.2%) and gender equality (10.9%), while men prefer topics on politics (45.8%), economics (47.6%) or science and technology (35.5%). The greatest difference is observed in sports, where men's attention (36.7%) is four times that of women (9.9%).

On the other hand, ideology has a decisive impact on interest in politics. Respondents who define themselves as extreme left and extreme right are the most attentive to politics (46.2% and 50.9%, respectively). On the other hand, differences are observed at the extremes of the axis on issues such as the environment or gender equality. Those who define themselves as extreme left (22.3% and 15.4%) are three times more concerned than those who define themselves as extreme right (8.8% and 5.3%, respectively). While the economy prevails in the interest of people who position themselves as right-wing voters (45.6%), science and technology (32.8%) and culture (36%) do so among those who present themselves as left-wing. Finally, age favors the consumption of health, politics and economics content among those over 55, while those under 25 opt for science and technology, social life and sports.

Figure 1. *Fields and topics of interest according to gender (%)*
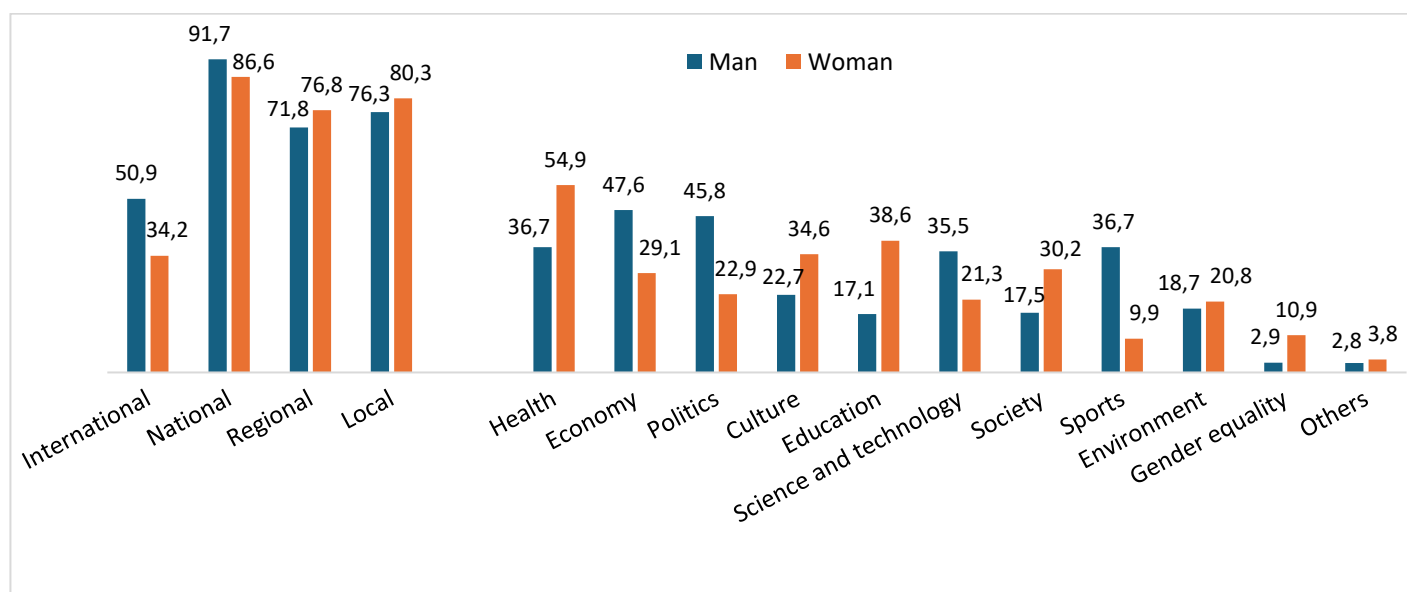
Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Along with interests, the survey also asked what type of news Spanish people avoid (Figure 2). The contents that generate most rejection are those that include an excessive amount of advertising (69.1%), followed by very extensive information (32.4%). The 16 to 24 age group is the most tolerant of advertising and the least tolerant of extensive news. Those with more than a university degree, on the other hand, show a greater rejection of advertising and news containing only video. One in six respondents say they do not avoid any particular type of content.

Figure 2. *Type of content avoided by Spanish people*
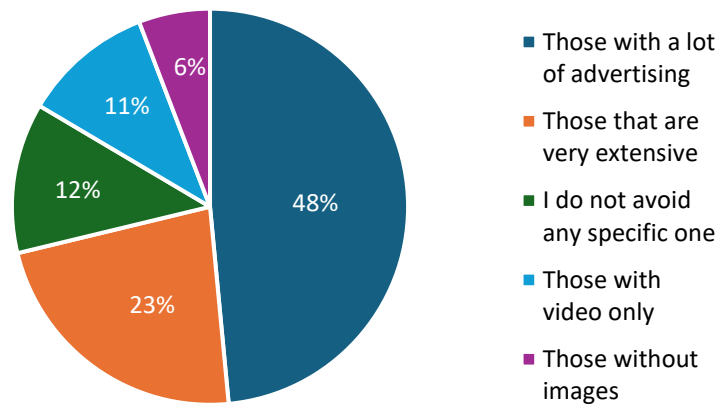
Source: Elaborated by the authors.

4.2. Perception of politicization and ideological positioning

To respond to RQ2, the survey defined the current level of politicization of the media in Spain. Nine out of ten Spaniards claim that the media are very or fairly politicized (Table 2), a perception that contrasts with their ideal: 94.3% state that the media should not be politicized, while 5.7% consider that they should be. The results of the χ^2 test for independence are statistically significant [χ^2 (12, N = 1203) = 29.35, p = .003]. Perception fluctuates in relation to political self-positioning, with a greater sensitivity to seeing them as "very politicized" among those who position themselves on the extremes, especially on the extreme right (64.9%). Also significant is the feeling of being "quite" politicized among the left (50.8%). Paradoxically, those at the extremes of the political spectrum score above the average when asked whether the media should be politicized. It is statistically noteworthy that people who position themselves in the ideological center are those who most frequently answer NS/NC in reference to the politicization of the media.

Table 2. *Degree of media politicization according to ideological self-positioning*

| | Ideological self-positioning | | | | | | | | | | Total | |
| | Extr. left | | Left | | Center | | Right | | Extr. right | | | |
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
A lot	70	53.8%	150	42.4%	228	47.5%	83	45.6%	37	**64.9%***	568	47.2%
Quite a lot	50	38.5%	180	**50.8%***	199	41.5%	90	49.5%	16	28.1%	535	44.5%
A little	2	1.5%	12	3.4%	19	4.0%	6	3.3%	1	1.8%	40	3.3%
Not at all	4	**3.1%***	2	0.6%	3	0.6%	1	0.5%	1	1.8%	11	0.9%
NS/NC	4	3.1%	10	2.8%	31	**6.5%***	2	1.1%	2	3.5%	49	4.1%
Total	130	100.0%	354	100.0%	480	100.0%	182	100.0%	57	100.0%	1203	100.0%

*   Standardized corrected residuals > 1,96.

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Almost three out of every four Spanish citizens (73.4%) say they choose to be informed by the media they consider "more balanced and objective", while 11.6% confess that they opt for those that "coincide more" with their way of thinking (Figure 3). This figure is doubled among those who position themselves as extreme left-wing (23.1%) and extreme right-wing (21.1%). Only 4.7% seek out media that offer information from a perspective different from their own, while 10.4% are indifferent.

In a hybrid media environment, 47.4% of those surveyed believe that it is not necessary to turn to the traditional media to be well informed, compared to 42% who say they do. The generational factor is a determining factor, especially among those over 45 years of age, while for six out of ten respondents between 16 and 35 years of age, it is possible to be well informed without using the conventional media. Ideological positioning is once again key: while 54.4% of those who identify themselves as extreme right-wing defend the importance of traditional media to be informed —ten points above the extreme left—, 31.6% say they can be informed without following conventional media -21 points above their ideological stance.

Figure 3. *Preferences in the choice of media for information (%)*
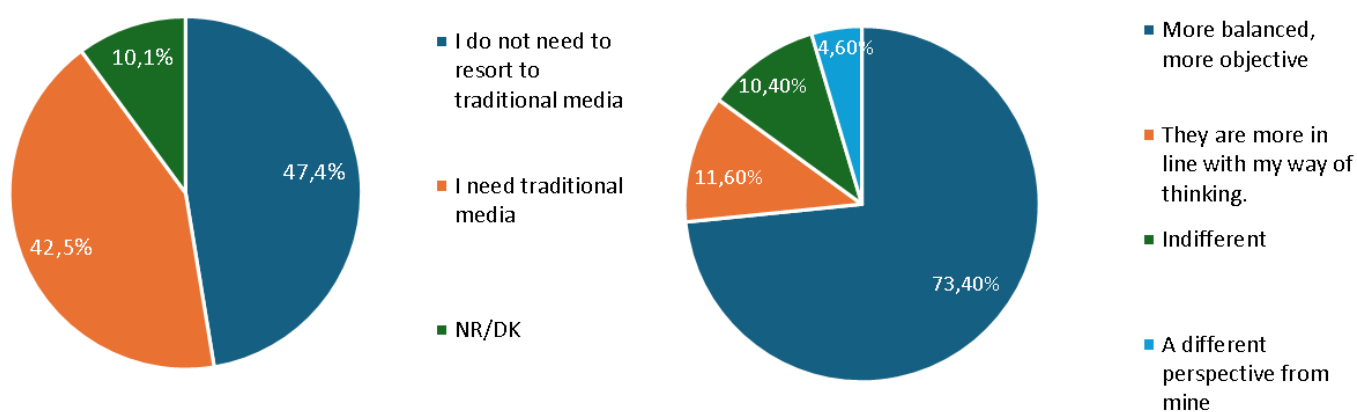
Source: Elaborated by the authors.

On a scale of 1 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right), the Spanish place a selection of 14 average highlights between ranks 4.33 and 7,60 (Table 3), which shows a general tendency to position them in the center-right spectrum. However, some nuances can be observed. In general, women score the media that are positioned as right or center-right slightly more to the center, while they tend to see those identified as left or center-left as more progressive. In this sense, the *Student's t-test* shows that there are statistically significant differences in the positioning of *ABC* or Onda Cero by men, and that of *elDiario.es*, Radio Nacional, Cadena Ser and TVE in the case of women.

In the case of age groups, the 16-24 age group tends to notice less pronounced conservative ideology in COPE, *ABC* or *La Razón*. The one-factor ANOVA test indicates that the differences between the age groups of the five media considered most conservative in the ranking are statistically relevant, although in the case of COPE only in a trending manner (p = .060). Tukey's post hoc tests reveal that people over 25 years of age (35 in the case of *ABC*) have a more conservative view of these media than the younger age group. The multiple comparisons test shows the opposite phenomenon in two of the most progressive media (*El País* and TVE), where younger people have a more conservative perception of the ideological positioning of these media. Religion also plays a role as an element of perception. Thus, those who declare themselves atheists tend to value conservative media more to the right: COPE (8,07), *ABC* (7,7) or *La Razón* (7,85), while practicing Catholics value more to the left those identified as progressive: La Sexta (3,86), El País (4,24), TVE (4,21) or Cadena Ser (4,70).

Table 3. *Average ideological positioning of the main media in Spain on a scale of 1 to 10, by gender and age*

Media	Gender		Age						Mean
	M	W	16-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	Total
COPE	7.67	7.53	6.97	7.42	7.55	7.71	7.74	7.76	7.60
ABC	**7.46***	7.05	6.31	6.85	**7.21****	**7.39****	**7.72****	**7.41****	7.26
La Razón	7.16	6.85	5.67	**6.86****	**7.33****	**7.06****	**7.46****	**7.06****	7.01
El Mundo	6.75	6.58	6.05	**6.65***	**6.95***	**6.68***	**6.89***	**6.58***	6.67
Onda Cero	**6.34****	5.94	5.52	**5.86****	**6.00****	**6.19****	**6.45****	**6.37****	6.16
Antena 3	6.19	6.10	5.83	6.28	6.37	6.20	6.28	5.96	6.14
El Confidencial	5.83	5.66	5.56	6.06	5.64	5.71	5.99	5.61	5.75
TELE 5	5.59	5.49	5.62	6.00	5.40	5.30	5.77	5.39	5.54
elDiario.es	5.05	**5.44***	5.31	5.51	5.51	4.95	5.50	4.97	5.24
Radio Nacional	4.89	**5.52****	5.42	5.71	5.34	5.05	5.27	4.89	5.19
El País	4.70	4.95	**5.22****	**5.36****	**5.06****	4.50	**5.07****	4.38	4.82
Cadena Ser	4.59	**5.04***	5.30	5.16	4.82	4.57	4.92	4.56	4.80
TVE	4.58	**5.00***	**4.96****	**5.52****	**4.91****	4.51	4.82	4.51	4.79
La Sexta	4.23	4.43	4.46	4.35	4.38	4.20	4.54	4.18	4.33

* p < .01 **p < .001. Media ordered according to ideological positioning.

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

When evaluating the ideological positioning of the main media, Spanish respondents placed La Sexta (46.3%), *El País* (36.2%) and Cadena Ser (33.4) in the most progressive position (Table 4). From the Chi-square test it can be concluded that the relationship between the variables is statistically significant [χ2 (65, *N* = 16842) = 3361.69, *p* < .001]. In the three media, the left or extreme left ratings are significant, as is the case of Telecinco. In the most conservative corner (right and extreme right), Spanish citizens identify the COPE channel (55.4%), *ABC* (52.8%), *La Razón* (46.3%) and *El Mundo* (43.6%). In the first two cases, right-wing and extreme right-wing positions are statistically significant, while in the last two cases, extreme right-wing positions are statistically significant. In Antena 3 and Onda Cero, center and right-wing evaluations are statistically relevant, while in *El Confidencial* and Radio Nacional, those of the center are statistically relevant. In the last three media, the high percentage of NS/NC is striking, which may indicate that in the case of a lack of knowledge of the media, they prefer to place it in the center. *elDiario.es*, the second most difficult to position, is significantly included as a left-wing media.

Table 4. *Percentage of ideological positioning of the main media outlets in Spain*

	Ideological positioning of the medium					
	Extr. left	Left	Center	Right	Extr. right	NS/NC
El Confidencial	3.6%	10.5%	**30.5%***	14.8%	6.2%	**34.4%***
elDiario.es	6.8%	**16.0%***	27.8%	11.8%	5.2%	**32.4%***
Onda Cero	2.0%	8.4%	**32.7%***	**20.0%***	8.5%	**28.4%***
Radio Nacional	7.4%	13.3%	**36.7%***	9.2%	6.1%	**27.3%***
Cadena Ser	**10.5%***	**22.9%***	27.1%	10.5%	4.7%	24.4%
La Razón	4.7%	6.3%	19.5%	**20.0%***	**26.3%***	23.3%
COPE	2.9%	3.7%	15.0%	**22.9%***	**32.8%***	22.6%
ABC	4.2%	4.8%	16.5%	**25.1%***	**27.7%***	21.7%
El Mundo	2.8%	7.6%	25.4%	**27.3%***	**16.3%***	20.6%
Tele 5	**8.8%***	**17.0%***	25.9%	18.5%	9.2%	20.6%
El País	**10.1%***	**26.1%***	25.7%	13.5%	4.0%	20.5%
Antena 3	3.2%	12.7%	**31.6%***	**26.0%***	10.2%	16.3%
TVE	**12.2%***	**20.5%***	**36.2%***	10.9%	4.6%	15.6%
La Sexta	**20.6%***	**25.7%***	23.4%	10.0%	4.9%	15.4%
Total	7.1%	14.0%	26.7%	17.2%	11.9%	23.1%

* Standardized corrected residuals > 1.96.
Media ordered according to NS/NC response of their ideological positioning.
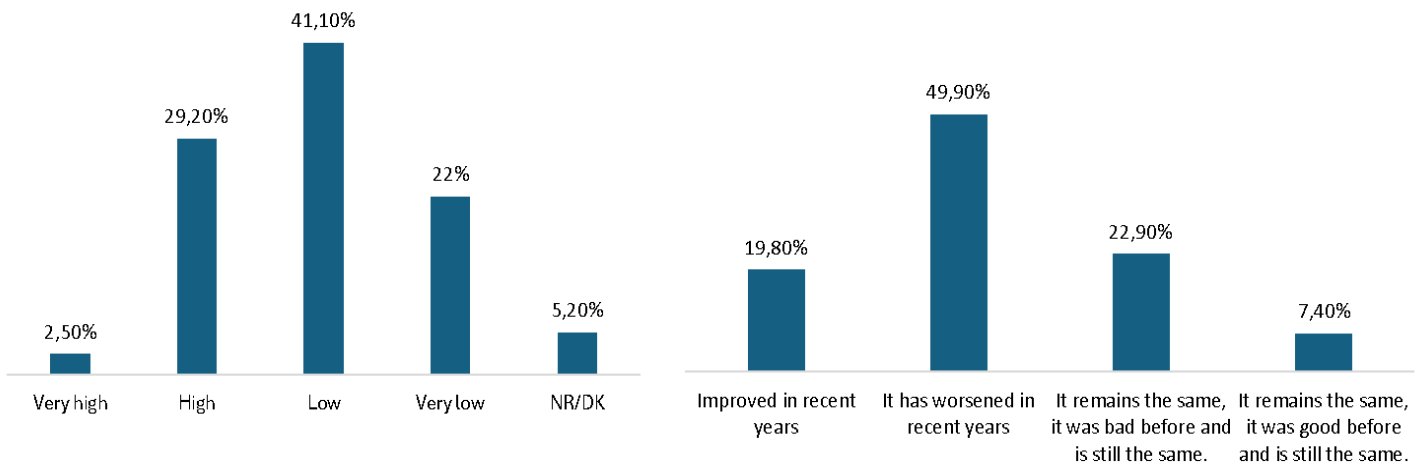
Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The ideological positioning of the media appears to be influenced by the self-positioning of the respondents, particularly when it comes to defining those who are more extreme. Thus, while 46.9% of those who identify themselves as extreme left-wing consider *La Razón* to be an extreme right-wing media, only 17.5% of those who position themselves at the opposite extreme consider it to be in this ideological position. The differences in the evaluation of COPE or *ABC* as an extreme right-wing media ranged between 20 and 25 points in the eyes of people who positioned themselves on the extreme left or right. A similar situation occurs in the media identified as left or extreme left. La Sexta is considered an extreme left-wing media for 50,9% of those who identify themselves as extreme right-wing and for 10% of those who position themselves as extreme left-wing. In the case of *El País* and Cadena Ser, the differences are 30 percentage points. Also in media considered to be of the center, the differences in perception are remarkable: for 42.3% of those who are on the extreme left, RNE is a centrist ideology media, while only 15.8% of those on the extreme right share this point of view. The differences in perception also reflect thirty points of discrepancy in the case of TVE, or even exceed them in the case of Telecinco: for 40.6% of those who self-position themselves as extreme right-wing, it is an extreme left-wing media, but only 6.9% of those who include themselves in this spectrum identify it as such. In the case of *elDiario.es* or *El Confidencial*, the differences are minimal.

4.3. Observed quality and main problems

The survey results show a pessimistic picture regarding the level of quality observed (RQ3). Six out of ten respondents consider the quality of the media in Spain to be low or very low (Figure 4a). In addition, half of the population considers that quality has worsened in recent years and 22.9% that it was and continues to be poor (Figure 4b). The perception that quality is "very bad" grows with advancing education —from 14.3% among people with less than primary education to 29.7% among those with Master's/Doctorate degrees— and among those on the political extremes —32.3% on the extreme left and 38.6% on the extreme right. The

survey reveals that, although a third of the population trusts that public and private media equally guarantee quality, 20.9% prefer public media and another 20% prefer private. Slightly more than a quarter of those surveyed said that neither of the two guarantee quality. Confidence is also very compartmentalized when asked about the scope of dissemination: 18.5% have more faith in state media, 16.2% in regional media and 16.3% in local media, while a third (34.3%) affirms that they have no faith in any of them. In terms of age, those under 34 years of age value the quality of the local media more, compared to those over 55, who trust more in the state media.

Figure 4 (a). Perception of media quality in Spain and **(b)** Evolution (%)

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Among the reasons given by respondents for their negative assessment of quality, the most important were politicization (71.6%) and sensationalism (48.9%), followed by the economic interests of publishing and business groups (44.8%) and the mixture of information and opinion (35.2%). The contents that respondents consider most problematic in terms of quality are those in the political sphere (79.4%), economics (53.8%) and health (37.8%). Men (84.8%), those over 65 years of age (92%) and those who position themselves on the left (85.6%) are the most critical of the poor quality of political information.

4.4. Proposals for improvement and responsibility

In an attempt to identify which measures could improve quality (RQ4), respondents mainly valued four options: to provide more contextualized information (33.1%), to propose a greater diversity of opinions (24.3%), to deal with more relevant topics (11.3%) and to offer more varied information (10.8%). The answers are influenced by issues such as education —43.9% of people with a master's or doctorate degree demand better contextualized news—, ideology —those on the extreme right ask for more variety of information and more relevant topics, while the left and extreme left value contextualization— and gender —women highlight the variety of information (13.3%) as an element of quality—. When it comes to going deeper into some information, however, conventional media, with the exception of television (33.7%), are relatively important: search engines (48.5%) and social networks (29.8%) are in the lead.

Respondents identified television (53.2%) as the medium offering the highest quality information and the most contrasted news (Table 5), followed by live radio or podcasts (48.2%) and traditional newspapers in print or on the Internet (45.1%). Both ideological self-positioning and level of education were decisive. Thus, people on the extreme right value television, traditional newspapers, other traditional digital media and social networks as quality media. In the latter, they agree with the extreme left. On the other hand, there are coincidences between the extreme left, left and right in the preference for live radio or podcasts and digital newspapers.

The degree of education also determines a growing preference for radio, reaching the highest percentage among respondents with a Master's Degree/Doctorate (52.7%). On the other hand, they are the least likely to use television as a source of quality (39.2%) and the most likely to rely on digital newspapers or other traditional media on the Internet.

Table 5. *Media offering the highest quality and most contrasted information according to political self-positioning and level of studies (%)*

Type of media	Average	Ideological self-positioning					Level of studies				
		Extreme Left	Left	Center	Right	Extreme Right	Below primary	Primary education	Intermediate studies	University studies	Master's degree and doctorate
Television live/on demand	53.2	51.5	52.8	52.3	56.0	57.9	57.1	63.6	55.9	53.8	39.2
Radio live/podcast	48.2	51.5	50.3	45.6	51.6	38.6	14.3	41.1	48.5	49.5	52.7
Traditional newspapers print/Internet	45.1	41.5	48.0	44.6	40.7	52.6	28.6	43.9	44.3	47.4	45.9
Digital newspapers	41.6	43.8	43.8	39.0	46.2	29.8	28.6	39.3	35.3	46.9	50.7
Other traditional digital media	18.0	12.3	18.9	18.1	18.1	24.6	14.3	18.7	19.0	16.2	20.3
Social media	31.9	38.5	29.1	30.6	33.0	42.1	57.1	30.8	32.7	30.8	33.8
Other	12.4	14.6	13.0	10.4	14.8	12.3	14.3	9.3	11.4	11.0	23.0
None	16.5	15.4	14.7	19.8	13.2	14.0	28.6	17.8	17.6	14.8	11.5

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Responsibility for ensuring quality is primarily shared among journalists (63.1%) and media managers (61.1%), although also, to a lesser extent, among society as a whole and the media-consuming audience in particular (42.7%) and the authorities (29.8%) (Figure 5a). The tendency to hold journalists and media managers responsible increases in proportion to the level of education, with maximum percentages among respondents with Master's/Doctorate degrees (63.5% and 69.6%). Likewise, respondents with less than primary education tend to blame the authorities more for the lack of legislation in the field (71.4%) as well as the politicians (28.9%).

Figure 5 (a). *Those responsible for media quality and* **(b)** *Assessment of the work of journalists*
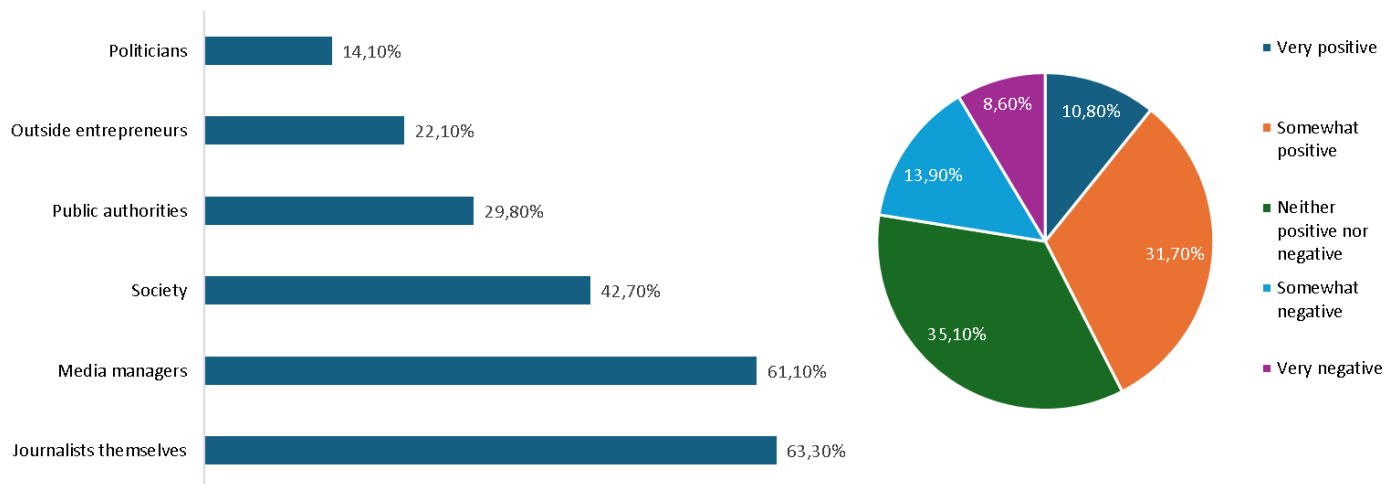
Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Respondents generally have a moderate image of the work of journalists (Figure 5b). In fact, the value with the greatest weight is "neither positive nor negative" (35.1%), while for one in three it is "somewhat positive" and for 13.9% it is "somewhat negative". Although unanimous support is discreet (10.8%), it exceeds by two points those who value it as "very negative".

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This research explores some of the main concerns of Spanish citizens with respect to the media and delves into the audience's demands for information. The data offer a relevant approach on how they perceive its quality, from a survey of more than a thousand people, based on a stratified sampling. These contributions are significant in a context characterized by low confidence in the media and the search for viable business formulas (Nafría, 2022). The results also point to the overlapping of three dynamics that feedback on each other: selective exposure to ideologically related media; the fact that the media are attributed values of balance and reliability; and the self-perception of being sufficiently informed with the content they consume. The conclusions are grouped into five blocks.

Firstly, it is worth noting the weight of the gender and generational factors in determining interest in certain news topics, while proximity has a relatively greater influence, with more weight given to national topics than to those of greater proximity. The interest expressed in issues of great social and political importance contrasts with studies that show a preference for soft news (Diez-Gracia & Sánchez-García, 2022). The results have shown the rejection of information with a lot of advertising, but also the association of quality with three aspects: independence from economic interests and the correct identification of advertising; accuracy, the separation between opinion and information and the professionalism of journalists; and the commitment to a greater diversity of opinions, closer issues that affect the audience and a greater variety of information.

Secondly, Spanish citizens' opinion about the media is not very positive, with only a third of those interviewed having a positive assessment of its quality and a negative view of its evolution over the last few years. For Spanish citizens, the fundamental problem with the media is politicization, an aspect that clashes radically with the ideal of "non-politicization" shared by the vast majority of those surveyed. These results are consistent with the fact that citizens find political content to be the most problematic in terms of quality, since it is there where this positioning is most clearly evidenced.

However, the problem of the politicization of the media must be put in context with another of the survey's results: political self-positioning. Thus, thirdly, it is worth highlighting the influence of political standpoint not only when it comes to consuming certain media, but also when it comes to assessing their ideological point of view. The political self-positioning of the respondents is a determining factor in the hypersensitivity to see as politicized those contents that move away from their own ideology. This would explain the limitations of the majority affirmation among respondents that they are informed through the "most balanced and objective" media, since the point of balance would be located in those media more consistent with their own ideology. This perception would act not only as a response to selective exposure mechanisms but also to confirmation bias and the predisposition to consume news considered reliable and balanced because they align with previous attitudes and beliefs (Barnidge et al., 2020; Nelson & Lewis, 2023), in line with what has been observed with the phenomenon of disinformation (Tandoc, 2019).

Fourthly, the results also allow us to contrast the high self-perception of being informed with the identification of television as the medium to be used when looking for higher quality information. In this sense, the length of news pieces on television and the trend towards infotainment observed in the last two decades (García-Avilés, 2021) clash not only with the respondents' proposal that quality can be improved with better contextualized information, but also with the criticism of sensationalism, which is a problem for almost half of the respondents. The demand for contextualization also contrasts with the tendency to avoid lengthy information, the second biggest predictor of content avoidance. Likewise, the confidence of almost five out of ten citizens that they can be well informed without resorting to traditional media, or resorting to search engines and social networks for further information, raises doubts about the limitations of self-perception.

Fifthly, despite the fact that different research (Vara, 2023; Edelman, 2023; European Commission, 2023; CIS, 2023) stresses the lack of confidence of Spanish citizens in information and the media, and even the majority of journalists perceive that society's opinion of journalism is negative (APM, 2020), the survey reveals a more nuanced perception, with a clear rejection of their work that does not exceed a quarter of the population. Nevertheless, the survey points to them as the main responsible stakeholders for quality, almost on a par with media managers, and places society's responsibility ahead of public authorities and politicians.

This research, based on a quantitative methodology, presents some limitations that can be overcome with future studies of a more qualitative nature, such as focus groups (Wilkinson, 1998), which allow a more nuanced approach to the interests of citizens and their perception of the work of the media. In this sense, it would be possible to obtain a more precise vision of a concept as difficult to define as that of quality, and to delve deeper into the elements involved in the perception of media politicization and ideological self-positioning.

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