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# Accountability and Media Systems in Spain: Real impact and good practices in Spanish Media

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## Abstract

Media accountability must be performed through mechanisms that allow the public to measure the commitment of journalists and information professionals to such values as pluralism, transparency and accuracy. This article seeks to identify the journalistic cultures existing in the several Spanish autonomous communities and to measure the impact of the media accountability systems implemented in each one of these communities. The study is based on the hypothesis that journalistic culture in Spain does not respond to a unique media system or model (like the mediterranean or polarised pluralist models), as argued by Hallin and Mancini in *Comparing Media Systems*. Conversely, researchers believe that a wide range of journalistic cultures coexist in Spain, and that this fact demands the review of such classification. The research design combines an online survey among different media actors and focus groups of citizens, media experts, and media professionals. The results will allow the design and assessment of media accountability models in which values such as transparency and plurality are integrated.

## Keywords

Media accountability systems, journalistic cultures, self-regulation, transparency, journalism ethics, Spain.

## Contents

1. Introduction. 2. Accountability systems. 3. Journalistic cultures in Spain. 4. Methods. 5. Discussion and expected results. 6. Notes. 7. References.

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### 1. Introduction [1]

The idea that communication is a basic function in any democratic society is widely accepted. The role of the press as the ‘fourth power’, termed this way since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, has been complemented and even replaced based on the conviction that free and plural information is a nuclear element in any democracy. The media, as key players in setting the agenda and the public opinion, have a responsibility in the transmission of values to society (Hardy, 2008), which is to guarantee the right to information and expression in accordance with the principles of professional responsibilities.

Professional ethics is anchored on criteria that allow measuring the degree of compliance with a code of proper professional practice. These guidelines are included in the codes of ethics and self-regulation bodies. More recently, they have also been materialised through social networks, which speed up the interaction between media and citizens, who can contribute to the task of demanding responsibility from journalists. However, social networks are more diffuse ways and it is difficult to weigh and materialise the complaints made on these forums (Suárez-Villegas and Cruz-Alvarez, 2016).

On the other hand, the responsibility of journalists can also be exercised collectively, through press or journalism associations, through the Arbitration, Complaints and Ethics Commission, the Federation of Press Associations of Spain (FAPE), and the Catalan Information Council, for example. In the field of audiovisual media, this work is performed by the audiovisual media councils (which exist in Catalonia and Andalusia, for example). It is also worth mentioning others figures promoted by the civil society, such as the associations of TV viewers or media users and the associations of vulnerable groups with special sensitivity to the treatment by the media. The blogs on communication ethics run by journalists or citizens, who monitor the content that may violate the rights of people, are also part of this mosaic of accountability instruments. For example, blogs advocating for gender equality, immigration or the environment. All these instruments are based on the idea that the media are decisive in the social construction of the collective imaginary.

Previous research projects that have been carried out by members of our research team have confirmed journalists’ desire to outline a framework of professional performance that differentiates their work from the activities carried out by citizens. For this purpose, accountability mechanisms can contribute to the identification of those actors who practice journalism with professional criteria and responsibility. In this way, the profession of journalism would be able to better guarantee the

protection of the fundamental right to information, as outlined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and most of the constitutions of democratic States, including the Spanish Constitution. This would also ensure ethical guidelines that are sensible to situations that violate the rights of citizens (Suárez-Villegas, 2015a).

## 2. Accountability systems

Media accountability is a concept that refers to the willingness of media companies to behave in certain ways to contribute to the public good (Alsius, Mauri-Ríos, Rodríguez-Martínez, 2011). Accountability tends to be linked to “accepting certain responsibilities, tasks or objectives” (Christians *et al.*, 2009: 132), and this translates into the will of the journalistic profession to regulate itself and guarantee transparency of information and public participation. According to recent publications on media ethics and self-regulation (Puppis, 2009; Díaz-Campo and Segado-Boj, 2014), a media company can be said to be fulfilling its public accountability duties depending on the degree to what it complies with these three professional values.

In a journalistic context of profound transformation, accountability systems have recently experienced a noticeable evolution to take advantage of the potential of the Internet and the Web 2.0 (Fengler *et al.*, 2014). While traditional accountability instruments (the offline newspaper ombudsman, the codes of ethics, and letters to the director) have a limited impact on professional practice and a limited use among citizens (Alsius and Salgado, 2010), the digital environment fosters new forms of information transparency and quality control, and makes it possible for citizens to participate and comment on the quality of the media. In this sense, our research team [2] has investigated (traditional and new) instruments developed exogenously to the newsrooms, to ensure the fulfilment of the functions of the media in a democratic society (Rodríguez-Martínez *et al.*, 2013), such as information councils (Suárez-Villegas, 2015b) and blogs that hold the media accountable (Ramón-Vegas, Mauri-Ríos and Alcalá, 2016).

It is essential to identify the accountability systems that are used by the media to show their professional responsibility and their appreciation of the public opinion in the establishment of their ethical criteria. These Media Accountability Systems (Bertrand, 2003) are key indicators to measure the pluralism and transparency of the media landscape of any democratic State, insofar as their essential function is to monitor, control, criticise, and examine the evolution and quality of journalistic information, particularly in a context of economic crisis and media concentration (Eberwein, 2010). Measuring the real impact of these instruments, as well as their ability to replace political and regulatory intervention mechanisms, is essential to establish the extent to what they are useful to preserve media pluralism.

In this context, the antecedent of this research project is the “Media-Act-Media Accountability Systems in Europe and Beyond” (2010-2014), which had the participation of 14 universities from European and North African countries. This project studied the impact of accountability systems based on the classification of media systems of Hallin and Mancini. In this project, the Journalism Research Group of the Pompeu Fabra University worked with various European research groups. As a response to the incipient development of innovative systems, European and American scholars have recently published works on the channels that use the potential of the Internet to hold journalists

accountable (Domingo and Heinonen, 2008; Eberwein, 2010; Fengler *et al.*, 2014). In Spain, there are not many contributions on this issue, beyond the approaches made by Herrera-Damas (2013) and the Journalism Research Group of the Pompeu Fabra University (Mauri-Ríos and Ramón-Vegas, 2015; Ramón-Vegas, Mauri-Ríos and Alcalá, 2016).

### 3. Journalistic cultures in Spain

This article describes the research study that resumes the work undertaken by the Journalism Research Group (*Grup de Recerca en Periodisme*, GRP) of the Pompeu Fabra University, and incorporates researchers from other Spanish universities to verify the presence of new accountability instruments in different communities of Spain, such as Andalusia, Catalonia, Galicia, Madrid, the Basque Country and Valencia. This study will allow us to determine whether the Spanish journalistic reality responds to a unique media system, identified by Hallin and Mancini as the Mediterranean model, according to their classification of journalistic cultures, or whether it has different shades that delve into its complexity. Moreover, this project proposes the generation of maps that allow to check for the presence of these accountability systems in different territories of Spain, the evaluation of the usefulness of these systems, according to the perspective of media professionals and citizens, and the development of templates to assess their impact and promote good practices among communications professionals.

This project is based on the hypothesis that the journalistic culture in Spain does not respond to a single media system. According to the classification developed by Hallin and Mancini, Spain fits in the Mediterranean or polarised pluralist model. However, the diversity of professional cultures existing in the different territories of Spain can put this classification into context.

On the other hand, accountability instruments have a relative impact among journalism professionals, and a very considerable impact among citizens, which could annul their purpose if they are not accompanied by an adequate media literacy. It is convenient to determine whether the public knows these mechanisms and whether these mechanisms are sufficiently understandable and friendly to be used with ease. These mechanisms are key to media pluralism and transparency. In this regard, it is important to identify the specific measures that underpin pluralism and transparency as two basic criteria for accountability. This project aims to develop models of social responsibility for the media, designed according to guidelines that ensure and promote the principles of accountability.

In accordance with the objectives and hypotheses, this article will analyse the different accountability systems used in each of the autonomous communities included in the research project, to identify the predominant journalistic culture in each of these communities, and to establish how effective the accountability models are or not to make citizens more active and aware of the quality of their right to information. This analysis is based on the comparison of these instruments (table 1 and table 2) and on the measuring of their impact in contexts that respond to the same professional culture.

**Table 1. Analysis of traditional accountability mechanisms in Spanish media**

<b>Mechanisms produced by/within media companies or groups</b>
<b>Self-regulation:</b> the newspaper ombudsman, books of style, internal codes, writing statute, professional committees, complaint offices.
<b>Transparency:</b> information on corporate data.
<b>Participation:</b> letters to the director, calls, SMS.
<b>Mechanisms produced externally to media companies or groups</b>
<b>Self-regulation:</b> external codes of ethics, press and education councils.
<b>Transparency:</b> market studies, media criticism, specialised publications, academia, opinion surveys.
<b>Participation:</b> media users' associations.

Source: Authors' own creation based on the results of the TRIP project.

**Table 2. Analysis of accountability mechanisms in Spanish online media**

<b>Mechanisms produced by/within media companies or groups</b>
Blogs of media newsrooms; blogs of journalists included on the website of the medium; online newspaper ombudsmen, chats and digital spaces to interact with readers; contribution of users in the creation of content; error notification buttons; social networks and comments; corporate transparency instruments.
<b>Mechanisms produced externally to media companies or groups</b>
Online observatories and publications of media criticism; websites of journalism institutions and associations; particular initiatives such as blogs of journalists or communicators; blogs of citizens and academics; social networks; other instruments promoted by citizens.

Source: Authors' own creation based on the results of the TRIP project.

This research is linked to the need to rehabilitate participatory citizenship, which is the essential objective of both the Spanish Strategy 2013-2020 for Science, Technology and Innovation, and *Horizon 2020*, the European research and innovation programme. In accordance to the hypotheses, the following specific objectives have been established:

1. Identify the journalistic cultures that exist in the different territories of Spain after the review of the theoretical formulation made by Hallin and Mancini.
2. Generate a map of the accountability instruments implemented in each of the analysed territories.
3. Evaluate the perception of the value and effectiveness of the accountability instruments according to the opinions of journalists of each territory, collected by means of a questionnaire and the subsequent analysis of their responses.
4. Evaluate the perception of the value and effectiveness of the accountability instruments according to the opinion of citizens of each territory, collected through focus groups.
5. Assess the impact of the accountability instruments based on templates designed *ad hoc* for this project.
6. Analyse to what extent the instruments detected in each territory are key for media pluralism and transparency.
7. Design templates to evaluate accountability instruments.

#### 4. Methods

This project combines different empirical methods in order to perform a solid analysis of the use of accountability systems by Spanish media, and detect their presence, absence, impact or inefficiency. The autonomous communities included in the sample are: Andalusia, Catalonia, Galicia, Madrid [3], the Basque Country and Valencia. It is of special interest to identify the nature, quantity and quality of the accountability systems used by the Spanish media, and to relate the results with the economic, legislative and political conditions of the respective autonomous communities, to establish equivalencies and connections with the social, economic and journalistic context of each region.

The research design combines the literature review and field analysis based on quantitative and qualitative techniques. This diversity of methods allows us to meet the objectives of the different phases of the project. To be precise, the following procedures were used in this research study:

First, we review the scientific literature on accountability systems in Spain and the international context, to identify the state of the art, taking as starting point the media systems proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004). This research design allows us to determine whether the media system proposed by these two authors still predominates or coexist with other media models in the Spanish journalistic context.

Subsequently, we analyse the different self-regulation instruments existing in each autonomous community, in the media and public or professional bodies that oversee the actions of the media (codes of conduct, books of styles, audiovisual councils, ethics commissions and other initiatives used as accountability mechanisms). This stage also involves an online survey, based on a closed and semi-open questionnaire, among the journalists of each community, to collect their views on the different instruments. This allows us to identify the advantages or disadvantages of the accountability systems of each territory. Subsequently, qualitative techniques are used with various panels of experts who provide a broader view on the feasibility and effectiveness of the various self-regulation

mechanisms. In this way, we collect information on the most consolidated self-regulation and accountability instruments, but also on the most innovative mechanisms that have emerged thanks to the Internet. Specifically, we analyse the instruments identified in tables 1 and 2. In short, the objectives are to analyse consolidated accountability systems and their impact on each of the Spanish communities under study, as well as to identify the most innovative systems that were developed thanks to the tools of the digital environment.

Finally, focus groups of citizens are conducted to know their assessments and comments on the different various media accountability mechanisms, to determine whether they use those mechanisms, as we do not only seek to identify the most effective accountability instruments, but also to identify the most accessible and easy-to-use instruments according to the public.

## **5. Discussion and expected results**

Despite the project is in its first year of life and we still do not know what data will actually derive from the field work, it is possible to present some of the expected results. In this sense, we expect the generation of reliable and validated models to assess the degree of satisfaction of the various self-regulation mechanisms of journalists and the media. We distinguish between journalists and the media because, due to the effects of the economic crisis and the opportunities offered by the digital environment, new professional profiles and skills have emerged. In this line, new forms to practice journalism have emerged, in part, because the journalist has the possibility of building an identity (a personal brand) differentiated from a specific medium, for example, by creating his own blog or an account on social networks. In this sense, citizens may also directly require journalists to offer consistent and quality information. They would be new forms of accountability to assess the professional performance of journalists.

In this regard, we aim to develop (self-)evaluation templates for journalists and academics. These templates will allow the identification, firstly, of the specific characteristics of the accountability instruments and, secondly, of their common tendencies, strengths and weaknesses; and thirdly, will propose a model that will serve for the creation or redesign of accountability instruments based on the indicators included in the templates. For the moment, we have identified three dimensions that are suitable for the accountability instruments under analysis:

- Transparency. This concept includes the need for the media to release to the public corporate information about themselves, to allow the audience to understand the principles and editorial processes, organisational and financial structure of the media.
- Self-regulation. This term refers to the standards or guidelines of conduct that the media and journalists impose on themselves as a compromise with the public, to carry out a rigorous, responsible and ethical communication. This self-regulation translates into instruments created by the media, journalists or journalistic institutions for public accountability.
- Participation: Includes those activities that encourage direct contact with the public, to facilitate their active participation in the process of creating journalistic contents. These formulas involve the creation of instruments that enable this two-way relationship, either from the media to the public or vice versa.

Based on these parameters, we will establish the indicators that will be used to define and detail the characteristics of the accountability instruments. In this way, we can develop evaluation templates for these instruments. To validate or rectify the design of these templates, various pilot tests will be carried out in the media. The tests will allow us to evaluate usefulness and effectiveness, as well as the degree of implementation of the accountability instruments in the media. The templates of good practices will also be useful to media directors and journalistic institutions for their self-evaluation, and as a source of inspiration to create new accountability instruments or to improve the existing ones.

In addition, our research team will organise international conferences throughout the course of the project to receive feedback from researchers in the field of media ethics. In the frame of these meetings, debate sessions will be held with international experts to test the different hypotheses of the project.

\*This article introduces to the scientific community the research project on media accountability systems in different Spanish communities: “MediaACES. Accountability and Journalistic Cultures in Spain. Impact and good practices in the Spanish media” (CSO2015-66404-P), funded by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness of the Government of Spain, and directed by Ruth Rodríguez-Martínez and Marcel Mauri-Ríos (Pompeu Fabra University). The project involves the participation of six universities from six Spanish autonomous communities: Andalusia, Catalonia, Galicia, Madrid, the Basque Country and Valencia.

## 6. Notes

1. This work is part of the research project titled “MediaACES. Accountability and Journalistic Cultures in Spain. Impact and good practices in the Spanish media” (CSO2015-66404-P), which is funded by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness of the Government of Spain.

2. The MediaACES team is formed by Ruth Rodríguez-Martínez, Marcel Mauri-Ríos, Laura Torre, Marta Narberhaus and Xavier Ramón-Vegas (Universidad Pompeu Fabra); Aitor Zuberogoitia and Andrés Gostin (Universidad de Mondragón); Marta Pérez-Pereiro (Universidad de Santiago de Compostela); Adoración Merino, Marian Chaparro and Jesús Díaz-Campo (Universidad Internacional de la Rioja); Amparo López-Meri (Universidad Jaume I de Castellón); and Juan Carlos Suárez-Villegas (Universidad de Sevilla).

3. The analysis of the Community of Madrid is being carried out by the Faculty of the International University of La Rioja, an online university with headquarters in Madrid.

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