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Analysis of media observatories in Spain. A tool for civil society in media reform processes

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Abstract

Introduction: Since the late 20th century, media observatories, or watch groups, have played an important role among the institutions devoted to the promotion of media reform, since they constitute an essential tool for the monitoring and analysis of the media by citizens. This article presents the results of a pioneering study aiming to map the landscape of media observatories in Spain and to systematise their main features, such as origin, evolution, objectives, promoters and fields of specialisation. **Methods:** Based on an extensive literature review, the study identifies 28 observatories which are subsequently analysed through an observation protocol and qualitative interviews with the directors of 10 of the observatories. **Results and conclusions:** The results confirm the existence of a heterogeneous landscape, characterised by a predominance of observatories focused on auditing activities and observatories promoted by universities. Nevertheless, most observatories are characterised by unsustainability and by an irregular research activity.

Keywords

Media observatories, media monitoring, citizenship, accountability, media reform, communication for social change.

Contents

1. Introduction. 1.1. The media as watchdogs and the monitoring of the media. 1.2. Conceptualisation of media observatories. Promoters and functions. 1.3. Historical context of

international observatories. 2. Methods. 3. Results. 3.1. Origin and evolution of media observatories in Spain. 3.2. Characterisation of media observatories. 4. Conclusions and recommendations. 5. Notes. 6. References.

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1. Introduction

This article presents a pioneering mapping of the landscape of media observatories in Spain, a phenomenon that started at the end of the 20th century and now constitutes a vital tool for citizens in the analysis and critical evaluation of the media system. According to this objective, the article systematises and interprets the main constituent features of the existing observatories, focusing in such aspects as: origin and promoters, ideology and areas of specialisation. These aspects are analysed based on their adequacy to the agreed conceptualisation of “observatories” in the scientific community and on their comparison with other more established projects (particularly Latin American organisations), which are proposed as models to examine the phenomenon.

The introduction of this article consists of three blocks. The first one examines the role played by the media as watchdogs of the socio-political reality and the need for mechanisms to ensure the accountability of the same media. The second block defines and characterises media observatories in Spain, particularly with regards to their promoters, functions, and fields of specialisation. The third block describes the origins of this phenomenon at the global arena and lays down some paradigmatic experiences in the European, American, and Latin American contexts.

The second section describes the methodological design of the study, which is based on an extensive literature review. This section describes the group of observatories under analysis and the sample of key interviewed informants. The third section of the article presents the results derived from the observation and the in-depth interviews and systematises the defining features of media observatories in the Spanish context. Finally, the article presents a conclusions section and offers recommendations for the strengthening of the sector.

1.1. The media as watchdogs and the monitoring of the media

Democratic societies become consolidated when the institutions that constitute them fulfil the role for which they were designed and there are mechanisms that guarantee the separation of powers, enabling a system of checks and balances. In this context, and from the time of the Enlightenment, the media have been defined as the “fourth power”, because their mission is to oversee the economic and political powers and to represent the citizenry of which, ultimately, they are spokesmen and representatives (Weill, 2007).

This is the perspective that underlined, in the late 1940s, the discussions of the Hutchins Commission about the role of journalism in democratic societies and which gave rise to the so-called “theory of social responsibility” of the media (Siebert, Peterson and Schramm, 1956), which has had a long

tradition of followers (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2012; Ramonet, 2011). The theory warns that there should be mechanisms to regulate the media and hold it accountable in order to make sure the media performs their civic function regardless of the pressure from corporations and political parties [1].

These mechanisms would limit, moreover, the “pre-agenda” interests and their derivation in “editorial values and discursive limitations”, which in recent times have led to the growing disaffection from citizen towards the media system (Díaz Nosty, 2013: 117). Overseeing these determinants is also related to what Silvio Waisbord has called “media patrimonialism”, or the predominance of a particular and discretionary policy in the management of the media that moves them away from the public interest and the necessary tasks of transparency and accountability (Waisbord, 2013).

In recent times monitoring has become one of the explanatory elements of contemporary democracies, whose consolidation becomes difficult when they conceive people as mere voters and not as vigilant citizens, with the right judge and veto governmental actions. This is the thesis of Pierre Rosanvallón (2007) when he defines political systems from the perspective of “counter-democracy”, or a scenario in which political disaffection coexists with claims of transparency and accountability, particularly in order to reduce the problems derived from any delegation of power.

In this context, monitoring and accountability are perceived as fundamental tasks to recover the lost legitimacy of many institutions, if we consider, in the words of Claus Offe, that “trust is the residue that remains after the propensity to distrust has turned out to be unfounded” (Offe, 2001: 76). In other words, the variable trust/distrust is constitutive of the two moments of the life of any democracy. And it is in this vector where the media should act as critical and distrustful watchdogs and as a “third researcher” with respect to other organisations in order to engage them in the defence of the common good (Rosanvallón, 2007: 270).

However, if the media monitor the rest of the powers, the resulting question is who monitors the media and enables the monitoring of the media by the subjects the media claim to represent, citizens? Who gives citizens the tools to question certain decisions, to denounce fraudulent behaviours, and to raise new issues and problems related to the media? Indeed, media observatories often tend to emerge to monitor that fourth power that monitors other institutions but “lacks mechanisms to watch, assess and control itself” (Christofolletti, 2005 in Herrera, 2006c).

1.2. Conceptualisation of media observatories. Promoters and functions

To this day there is not a clear definition of media observatories, given that their conceptualisation derives from the context in which they emerge (Castellanos, 2010: 11), and so the definitions that have been offered have been as varied as the entities responsible for implementing them: public administrations, universities, organised civil society, associations of journalists, etc. In the academic field, most of the analyses tend to define observatories, either in relation to their functions and tasks, or according to the civic role that inspired them.

Within the functions, the literature tends to agree on the importance of the work of analysis, research and monitoring of the content and activity of the media as a prelude to the exercise of surveillance

and auditing (Castellanos, 2009, 2013; Checa, 2011; Herrera, 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2006 c). From this perspective, media observatories are defined as “forms of media supervision” (Herrera, 2005: 3); as “spaces of supervision of the performance of the media, particularly in the field of news” (Torrico, 2009); and as “laboratories of experimentation to analyse the mass media and their effects on society” (Ortiz and Fernando López, 2002: 6). In other words, while their point of departure is to “observe” – which is implicit in etymology of the term -, their point of arrival is the activation of critical conscience and the proposal of alternatives for improvement, or to “observe to change”, in the words of Rosa María Alfaro (2013: 8). In relation to this, observatories are just one of the multiple insights that can be offered from “outside of the media” and aside from the media’s monitoring of themselves (for example, through their self-regulation codes) or aside from the monitoring carried out by the political and legal authorities responsible for ensuring the proper functioning and regulation of the media (Checa, 2011: 50) [2].

Secondly, the definitions proposed by the organisations responsible for their implementation are frequent. Along this line, and beyond their specific promoters (universities, NGOs, public administrations, etc.) many authors agree that media observatories should be tools that activate the role of citizens in the media system and tools that allow citizens to fully exercised their right to communication (Christofoletti, 2006; Christofoletti and Gonzaga, 2008; Tellez, 2012). This is the position of Ignacio Ramonet (2003), which considers observatories as the “fifth power” that is focused on the denunciation of the power of large media groups. This position is shared by Latin American pioneers such as Rosa María Alfaro and Germán Rey, who relate the activity of observatories with the activities of social movements in which communicative citizenship and democratic politics are thought and built on a daily basis (Alfaro, 2005a, 2013; Rey, 2003). The latter is the objective of the so-called “auditing observatories”, which, according to Albornoz and Herschmann (2006, 2007), focus on analysis and accountability and tend to be led by groups of researchers, journalists and media users. These observatories radically differ from “statistical observatories”, which are dedicated to the collection, categorisation, and dissemination of data beneficial for the market and tend to be managed by public administrations.

Finally, and according to the reviewed literature, we can distinguish five major activities performed by media observatories, all of which might or might not be performed by the Spanish observatories that are discussed later:

1. *Analysis and research* of one or more of the following media parameters: media content and discourse; development of indicators of quality, independence and pluralism (Carrascal, 2011)[3]; analysis of stereotypes and biased representation of vulnerable and/or minority groups (like women, children, immigrants, elderly people, etc.); compliance with laws, codes of conduct and self-regulation rules; levels of concentration and monopolisation in the media industry; review of the working conditions of journalists, etc.
2. *Media literacy*: many observatories are oriented to the promotion of media literacy in order to raise critical awareness among both citizens and the media, through activities such as: the presentation of research results in reports and documents; and the presentation of their activities in web platforms and social networks; and the periodic organisation of events, seminars, workshops and festivals, etc.

3. *Intermediation between citizens and media*: Some observatories act as catalysts for audiences' criticism and allegations towards the media, so they act as mediators between the civil society and the communication system, through consumer associations (Rosique and García García, 2011) and other digital media monitoring initiatives (Mauri and Ramon, 2015).
4. *Consulting and advisory services*. Other observatories are oriented to the provision of advisory services and accompaniment to the business and public sectors based on their own market and audience research studies. This is the fundamental task of the so-called “statistical observatories”, which are often run by national and regional public administrations (Albornoz and Herschmann, 2006, 2007).
5. *Mass mobilisation and lobbying*: while observatories have no legal authority (Rodríguez and Correyero, 2008: 20), some projects carry out research and dissemination work prior to citizen mobilization tasks. The aim of these observatories is to activate the critical consciousness of citizens to encourage them to demand pro-democracy policies for the media structure.

1.3. Historical context of international observatories

It is complex to locate the origins of media observatories because their functions and competencies are not exclusive but parallel, although with nuances, to those of other organisations such as: audiovisual councils, associations of media consumers and users, ombudsmen, self-regulatory bodies, trade unions and associations of journalists, etc. (Bichler et al., 2012). In fact, their origins in different parts of the world are related to the progressive de-legitimation and deterioration of journalistic activity and citizen's perception of the media as neglecting their obligation to oversee the rest of the powers.

In general terms, there are three historical points related to the emergence of media observatories. First of all, observatories harmonise with the media criticism fostered by social movements and by large supranational organisations for communication and culture. In this case, it is important to highlight the debates of the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) of the 1970s, promoted by UNESCO and the Non-aligned Movement (MPNA). The milestone of the NWICO was the publication of the McBride Commission's Report (1980), which denounced the radical imbalances between North and South, as well as demands for a more plural and participatory media spectrum and around the concept of the “right to communication” (D'Arcy, 1969; Aguirre, 2013).

On the other hand, in the field of social movements, it is important to mention the work carried out by the anti-globalisation movement since the late 1990s, which always paid attention to the problems related to the media. The various international and regional forums and meetings of this movement have articulated a strong censorship against media deregulation processes and have led to the creation of international watchdog groups such as the ambitious *Media Watch Global*, launched by Ignacio Ramonet in the Porto Alegre Forum (2003). This scope of this organisation has only reached some countries, but despite its slow development, it has generated spaces for dialogue among

initiatives such as the Brazilian Media Observatory (Observatório Brasileiro de Mídia, OBM), the French Media Observatory (Observatoire Français des medias, OFM), and the Media Observatory of Venezuela (Almiron, 2006; Rubini, 2013). In recent years, media criticism also has been felt in public protest movements (like 15M, Arab spring, Occupy, etc.), while the question of the observatories has not become part of their agendas.

The second important antecedent is the emergence of the *press ombudsman*, which began to operate in many newspapers in the 1970s. The *ombudsmen* expanded the level of intervention of audiences in the addressing of the complaints and suggestions of the public and, above all, in ensuring the media's compliance with ethical and professional standards (Aznar, 1999; Macià, 2006). In recent years these monitoring activities have had to focus on the digital scene, where accountability mechanisms have emerged, some of which are managed by media companies themselves and, in most cases, are externally managed: news blogs, chats, social networks, “report an error” buttons in news websites, specialised platforms, etc. (Mauri and Ramon, 2015) [4]. However, media observatories transcend the mission of the *ombudsman* and the regulatory codes, given that *ombudsmen* are selected by the media, while the observatories operate by themselves and for the benefit of citizens (Alfaro, 2013; Rey, 2003).

The third factor that triggered the emergence of media observatories is the development of media studies, which from critical perspectives have sought to socialise their work to the public (Paláu and Larrosa, 2014), which in some cases have resulted in the creation of observatories (Télliez, 2007). We are referring to the approaches known as *media criticism* and *communication/media reform*, of Anglo-Saxon origin (McChesney, 2009; Napoli, 2007), and communication for social change, which has a strong presence in Latin America and demands the creation of alternative media to improve the current media landscape, especially in private and commercial media organisations.

It is precisely in Latin America where there is a longer tradition of media observatories, despite the fact that some projects have disappeared with the passage of time. Table 1 shows the list of important and active Latin American observatories with reference to their country of origin, year of foundation and URL [5]:

Table 1. Important Latin American observatories

Name	Country	Year	URL
<i>Observatorio de la TV (OTV)</i>	Argentina	2005	www.austral.edu.ar/comunicacion/observatorio-de-la-television
<i>Foro de Periodismo Argentino (FOPEA)</i>	Argentina	2002	www.fopea.org
<i>Observatorio Universitario de Medios (UOM Córdoba)</i>	Argentina	2011	https://oumcordoba.wordpress.com/oum
<i>Observatorio de la Televisión de la Universidad Austral</i>	Argentina	2005	http://oteve-austral.blogspot.com.es
<i>Observatorio Nacional de Medios (ONADEM)</i>	Bolivia	2004	http://onadembolivia.blogspot.com.es
<i>Agencia de Noticias por los</i>	Brazil	1996	www.andi.org.br

<i>Derechos de la Infancia (ANDI)</i>			
<i>Observatório da Imprensa</i>	Brazil	1996	http://observatoriodaimprensa.com.br
<i>Monitor di Mídia</i>	Brazil	2001	http://www.univali.br/monitor
<i>Observatorio de Medios de la Fundación para la capacitación e investigación en televisión y técnicas audiovisuales (FUCATEL)</i>	Chile	2003	www.observatoriodofucatel.cl
<i>Observatorio de Medios y Movimientos Sociales: Comunicación, Ciudadanía y Política</i>	Chile	2012	http://www.mediosmovimientosociales.cl/
<i>Observatorio de Medios de la Universidad de La Sabana</i>	Colombia	1999	www.unisabana.edu.co/grupos-de-investigacion/observatorio-de-medios
<i>Medios para la Paz (MPP)</i>	Colombia	1998	http://mediosparalapaz.blogspot.com.es
<i>Observatorio de Medios del Centro de Estudios e Investigaciones en Comunicación y Publicidad (CEICOP)</i>	Colombia	2002	http://192.64.74.193/~genera/es/mapas/cyg/detalle.php?id=79
<i>Observatorio Nacional de Medios (ONM)</i>	Colombia	2010	http://agenciadenoticias.unal.edu.co/detalle/article/observatorio-de-medios-para-incidir-y-participar.html
<i>Fundación Andina para la Observación y Estudio de Medios (Fundamedios)</i>	Ecuador	2007	www.fundamedios.org
<i>Observatorio de Investigación en medios (FLACSO-Ecuador)</i>	Ecuador	2010	www.flacsoandes.org/comunicacion/observatorio/quienessomos.php
<i>Observatorio de Medios de la Fundación Esperanza</i>	Ecuador / Colombia	2012	http://observatoriodemigraciones.org/observatorios/quienessomos.shtml
<i>Observatorio de Periodistas del Centro de Reportes Informativos sobre Guatemala (Cerigua)</i>	Guatemala	2004	http://cerigua.org/category/el-observatorio-de-los-periodistas
<i>Centro Civitas</i>	Guatemala	2002	http://centrocivitas.com
<i>Observatorio de Medios del Comité por la Libertad de Expresión (C-Libre)</i>	Honduras	2001	www.clibrehonduras.com
<i>Observatorio Latinoamericano de Regulación, Medios y Convergencia (Observacom)</i>	Latin America	2012	http://observacom.org
<i>Observatorio Ciudadano por</i>	Mexico	1999	www.observatorioequidadmedios.org

<i>la Equidad de Género en los medios de comunicación</i>			
<i>Observatorio de Medios de la Universidad Iberoamericana</i>	Mexico	2008	https://observatoriomediosuia3.wordpress.com/que-es-el-blog-del-observatorio-de-medios-de-la-uia/
<i>Quid. observatorio</i>	Mexico	2008	http://qmedios.iteso.mx/
<i>Veeduría Ciudadana de la Comunicación Social, de Calandria</i>	Peru	1999	www.calandria.org.pe
<i>Media Watch Global, Venezuela</i>	Venezuela	2002	www.observatoriomedios.org.ve
<i>Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social</i>	Venezuela	2015	http://www.observatoriodeconflictos.org.ve/

Source: Authors' own creation.

In this scenario, one of the best types of observatories directly promoted by civil society are the so-called citizens' media oversight committees (*veedurías ciudadanas de la comunicación*), which emerged in the 1990s and bring together NGOs, social movements, trade unions, etc. (Castellanos, 2013) [6]. Citizens' media oversight committees have a strong component of media criticism and tend to take a very active role in the monitoring of the obligations and pledges of the media with regards to society (Alfaro, 2005b, 2013; Téllez, 2012). In this context, we must mention the work of the *Veeduría Ciudadana de la Comunicación Social* (citizens' social media oversight committee), which was created by the Calandria group of Peru, and since 1999 has promoted campaigns, provided consulting and advisory services, carried out signature petitions, and even designed a Bill on National Broadcasting (Alfaro, 2005b, 2013; Téllez, 2011) [7].

The efforts of the observatories and citizens' media oversight committees (*veedurias*) have highlighted the need to create supranational platforms in Latin American, such as the aforementioned Media Watch Global, or more recent projects such as the Ibero-American Observatory of Fiction Television (OBITEL), created in 2005, and the Latin American Observatory of Regulation, Media and Convergence (Observacom), created in 2012. For its part, CIESPAL is today leading an interesting process of convergence between different Latin American experiences, which largely retakes the structuring attempts developed by Calandria at the end of 2000. Currently, the Latin American Communication Observatory (OLACOM) (www.olacom.org) holds conferences [8] and promotes strategies for the international exchange and positioning for the different initiatives, including: *Centro Civitas* (Guatemala), *Veeduría Ciudadana de la Comunicación Social* (Peru), FUCATEL (Chile), *Observatório da Imprensa* and ANDI (Brasil), Observatorio Nacional de Medios ONADEM (Bolivia), Observatorio de TV del Instituto de Investigación de Medios (Argentina), Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social de la Universidad Católica Andrés Bello (Venezuela) and FundaMedios (Ecuador) (Cardoso, 2014).

In northern countries, the European tradition has been marked by the leadership of “statistical observatories”, such as the European Audiovisual Observatory (www.obs.coe.int), which was founded in 1992, and “auditing observatories”, such as the French Action Critique Medias (ACRIMED) (www.acrimed.org), founded in 1996, Observatoire de la déontologie de l'information

(ODI)(www.odi.media) founded in 2012, and the now-defunct Observatoire français des médias, which emerged from the Social Forum of Porto Alegre and is member of the Media Watch Global. On the other hand, there are also European networks of academic observatories such as The European Journalism Observatory (EJO) (<http://en.ejo.ch>), which was launched in 2002 by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism of Oxford University (<http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk>) and the Università della Svizzera italiana.

In addition, since the 1970's in the USA there is a tradition of observatories ascribed to the ideals of media criticism, even though their model is usually inclined to either one side of the political spectrum, liberal or conservative (Broullón, Hernández, López and Pereira, 2005). In the liberal side stand out institutions like Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) (<http://fair.org>), which was founded in 1986, and Free Press (www.freepress.net), which was founded more recently by critics such as Robert McChesney. Other interesting experiences such as the Project for Excellence in Journalism (www.journalism.org), founded in 1997, and the now-defunct Committee of Concerned Journalists (www.rjionline.org/ccj), whose work is based on the principles of journalism proposed by Kovach and Rosenstiel (2012). On the Republican side, there are initiatives with a long history, such as the Accuracy in Media (AIM) (www.aim.org), founded in 1969, and the Media Research Center (MRC) (www.mrc.org), founded in 1987. [9]

2. Methods

According to the objectives of this study, the first step consisted in taking a census of the media observatories currently operating in Spain, taking into account the following selection criteria: 1) self-identification as “observatories”, given that there are groups with other legal forms (viewers associations, unions, guilds, alternative communication networks, etc.) that have similar functions but are not taken into account in this work; 2) a geographical scope limited to Spain or any of its different regions and autonomous communities, regardless of their affiliation to international observatories; 3) research activity centred in, at least, one medium of communication, regardless of other objectives and functions: counselling and advisory services, media literacy, political mobilisation, etc. According to these criteria, we selected the following 28 observatories (see Table 2).

Table 2. Media observatories in Spain

Full name	Acronym	URL	Organisation
Observatorio Europeo de la Televisión Infantil	OETI	www.oeti.org	Audiovisual Arts Association of Barcelona Commissioner, and universities, research centres, NGOs, associations and other institutions not related to

			communication
Observatorio Galego dos Medios	OM	www.observatoriodosmedios.org	Association of Journalists of Galicia
Observatori de les Dones en els Mitjans de Comunicació		www.observatoridelesdones.org	Generalitat of Catalonia and Council of Barcelona
Observatorio Audiovisual Galego – Observatorio da Sociedade da Información e a Modernización de Galicia	OSIMGA	http://www.osimga.gal/es/actualidade/historico/experiencias/obs_tic/2004/37861.html	Government of Galicia
Observatorio y Grupo de Investigación en Migración y Comunicación	Migracom	www.uab.cat/web/migracom-1274251163556.html	Autonomous University of Barcelona
Observatorio de Contenidos Televisivos y Audiovisuales	OCTA	www.octa.es	NGOs, associations of media consumers and users (iCmedia, TAC, AUC), Pro-human rights of Spain, CEAPA, CECU, among others
Observatorio sobre la cobertura informativa de conflictos	OCC	http://observatoricoberturaconflictos.uab.cat/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=44&Itemid=58	Autonomous University of Barcelona
Observatorio de los Contenidos Audiovisuales	OCA	www.usal.es/webusal/node/283	University of Salamanca
Observatorio de Mayores y Medios de Comunicación	UPUA	http://observatoriomayoresymedios.com	University of Alicante
Observatorio del Ocio y el	OCENDI	www.ocendi.com/observatorio	NGOs, universities, and

Entretimiento Digital			other media
Mèdia.cat Observatori crític dels mitjans	Mèdia.cat	www.media.cat	Catalonia Foundation. Association of journalists (<i>Grup de Periodistes Ramon Barnils</i>)
Observatorio de la Libertad de Expresión		http://libex.funciva.org	Citizenry and values Foundation (<i>Fundación Ciudadanía y Valores</i>)
Observatorio de Medios		http://www.unipamplona.edu.co/unipamplona/portalIG/home_52/recursos/01general/12062012/observatorio.jsp	University of Pamplona
Observatorio Iberoamericano de la Comunicación	OIC	http://centresderecerca.uab.cat/oic/	Autonomous University of Barcelona
Observatorio de la Calidad de la Información en Televisión	OCITV	http://eprints.ucm.es/30379	Complutense University of Madrid
Observatorio AEA de la Publicidad		http://www.anunciantes.com/seccion.php?s=20	Spanish Association of advertisers
Observatorio de la Imagen de las Mujeres	OIM	www.inmujer.gob.es/observatorios/observimg/home.htm	Women's Institute
Observatorio de Medios Mugak	Mugak	www.mugak.eu/observatorio-de-medios	Mugak Association
Observatorio de Publicidad		http://www.fundacion-ipade.org/observatorio-publicidad/observatorio-de-publicidad	IPADE Foundation
Observatorio del Audiovisual		www.observatoriodelaudiovisual.com	University of Valencia
Observatorio Europeo del Audiovisual		http://www.obs.coe.int/	Council of Europe
Observatorio do Audiovisual Galego	ODA	http://culturagalega.gal/avg/entidades_detalle.php?Cod_cmpna=88&busca=ODA	University of Santiago de Compostela

Observatorio Andaluz de la Publicidad no sexista		www.juntadeandalucia.es/institutodelamujer/index.php/observatorio-andaluz-de-publicidad-no-sexista	Government of Andalusia. Department of Social Policy and Equality. Andalusian Women's Institute
Observatorio de Investigación en Medios Digitales	OIMED	www.oimed.com	San Pablo CEU-Cardenal Herrera University
Observatorio de Medios de Comunicación y la Inmigración en Andalucía	OMECIA	http://www.gloobal.net/iepala/gloobal/fichas/ficha.php?entidad=Agentes&id=31056&opcion=descripcion	University of Granada
Observatorio de la Comunicación Local	OCL	http://www.portalcomunicacion.com/ocl/es/p/home.asp	Autonomous University of Barcelona
Observatorio de Comunicación y Salud	OCS	http://incom-uab.net/incom/observatori-i-grups-de-recerca/observatori-de-comunicacio-i-salut-incom-uab/	Autonomous University of Barcelona
Observatorio Mediterráneo de la Comunicación	OMEC	http://omec.uab.cat/index.php	Autonomous University of Barcelona

Source: Authors' own creation.

Once the observatories were identified, we designed an observation and quantification protocol that took into account the principles defined in the theoretical framework and, in particular, the categorisation developed by Herrera (2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c), and Alborno and Herschmann (2006, 2007) [10]. Finally, the protocol takes into account the following set of variables: geographic origin (city and autonomous community in which the organisation is based); type of organisation that funds the observatory; objectives and functions; medium of communication monitored; general or specialised scope; and funding model. In a secondary level, we also analysed, but no quantified, features such as organisation system; collaboration networks established between observatories and related organisations; previous experiences that inspired them; and types of activities and tasks that are usually involved (Table 3):

Table 3. Observation protocol

Variables	Values
Geographic origin	City and autonomous community
Year of foundation	
Organisation behind it	Universities and research centres; NGOs and citizen associations; Public

	administrations; trade unions and professional associations; other (specify)
Objectives / functions	Analysis and research; Media literacy; Intermediation between citizens and media; Consulting and advisory services; Mass mobilisation and lobbying.
Types of media under watch	Print press, Television, Radio, Film, Digital media, Advertising
Scope	General or specialist
Source of funding	Public funds; obtained from companies and foundations; donations; crowd funding; other (specify)

Source: Authors' own creation

According to the protocol, we chose the qualitative in-depth interview (Vallés, 1997) with key informants based on a questionnaire that was distributed via e-mail to the people directing or managing the different observatories, and with phone support to encourage participation and clarify and contrast data provided by respondents. The questions investigated the morphology, activities and responsibilities of these organisations, in line with the observation protocol. The questionnaire is divided in two parts: 1. General data of the observatory (city and year of foundation, name and type of organisation behind it; goals and key activities; and source of funding); 2. Type of research: media under investigation; main geographical coverage (European, national, regional, local); and target audience of the studies [11]. Finally, respondents were asked whether they were inspired by and/or had established networks of collaboration with any other observatory or related organisation.

In the case of the observatories that did not answer the questionnaire, and partially unanswered questionnaires, we proceeded to collect information from the web, with the consequent loss of details that this procedure entails in comparison to the in-depth interviews and taking into account the difficulties encountered by similar works (Albornoz and Herschmann, 2007): poor public information, out-of-date websites, absence of censuses, etc. Table 4 presents the list of observatories that participated in the survey, the position of the key respondents and the date of the interview [12]:

Table 4. List of key respondents and their observatories of ascription

Name of the observatory	Position / function of the informant in the observatory	Date of questionnaire reception and/or interview
Observatorio Europeo de la Televisión Infantil (OETI)	Director	15/03/2015
Observatorio de la Mujer y los Medios de Comunicación	Collaborator	16/02/2016
Observatorio Audiovisual Galego	Collaborator	29/03/2015
Observatorio de Contenidos Televisivos y Audiovisuales (OCTA)	Director	03/04/2015
Observatorio de los Contenidos Audiovisuales-OCA	Director	21/02/2015

Observatorio del Ocio y el Entretenimiento Digital-OCENDI	Collaborator	17/02/2016
Observatorio de la Calidad de la Información en Televisión-OCITV	Director	10/02/2016
Observatorio de la Imagen de las Mujeres	Collaborator	24/02/2016
Observatorio Iberoamericano de la Comunicación (OIC)	Director	21/03/2016
Mèdia.cat	Editor	21/03/2016

Source: Author's own creation.

3. Results

3.1. Origin and evolution of media observatories in Spain

The first observatories emerged in Spain in the mid-1990s, concurrently with the incipient international interest, but with a minor development than in other countries. Their emergence is framed in a set of historical factors, including: 1) the birth of an excess of private television channels (1989) concentrated in a few corporations –e.g. the current duopoly of *Atresmedia* and *Mediaset* (Bustamante, 2013; Zallo, 2011) and the criticism to the lack of quality and diversity in terms of programming; 2) the emergence of the first TV audience reception and rating studies, which impose the *share* indicator as a synonym for public acceptance at the expense of quality and ethical indicators; 3) the absence of regulatory mechanisms, such as a National Audiovisual Council, in contrast to other countries of the European Union, and as a consequence of changing public policies that were little concerned about the quality of the audiovisual products (Orenes, 2014; Reyes, 2014); 4) the little or non-existent enforcement of ethical and self-regulatory codes by the media.

In this context, most of the media observatories started to operate in the boom years of private television, in the mid-1990s, when the civil society and other institutions began to perceive the changes in a sector which, unlike public media, focused on competing for the audience, which translated into an increase in advertising revenues and a decrease in the quality of contents. It is then when the media began to move away from their responsibility as public service providers and their role of mediators between the political power and the civil society, which according to Alborno and Herschmann (2006), are factors that determine the origin of the Latin American observatories.

In addition to participating in European projects, like the aforementioned European Audiovisual Observatory, the first Spanish observatories were specialised projects whose common denominator was the analysis of the news and advertising treatment of vulnerable sectors of the population. We refer here to the European Observatory of Children's Television (OETI) (1997) and two projects specialised in genre: the Observatory of Women's Image (1994) and the Observatory of Women and the Media (1995).

From the year 2000 onwards there is greater development of monitoring organisations, starting with the emergence of The Observatory of the Coverage of Conflicts (OCC) (2001); the Ibero-American Communication Observatory (OIC) (2003); and the Observatory of Audiovisual Contents (OCA), the Communication and Health Observatory, and the Observatory of Audiovisual Television Content (OCTA). Moreover, the mid of the first decade of the 21st century witnessed the emergence of other initiatives that had a more ephemeral life, such as: The Observatory of Communication Policies of the Communication Institute of the Autonomous University of Barcelona (OPC InCom-UAB), which became a lien of research; and the now-defunct Radio-monitor and Euro-monitor of the GRISS research group of the same university.

More recently, an outstanding media monitoring work has been carried out by professional associations of journalists, like the Press Association of Madrid (APM) and the Federation of Press Associations of Spain (FAPE), which, since the beginning of the crisis in Spain (2008), have monitored the situation of unemployment and precariousness in the journalistic sector. We refer to the FAPE Observatory of Employment (www.fape.es), the APM Observatory of the Monitoring of the Crisis (www.apmadrid.es), and the most recent work of denunciation of the Federation of Unions of Journalists (FESP) (www.fesp.org) through seminars, meetings, manifestos and an interesting weekly newsletter that gives an account of the journalistic activity in Spain and the world. There are also observatories of the “statistical” type that are not strictly focused on media, but rather on the implementation of telecommunications and digital services at the service of the regional governments of Spain, such as Aragon’s Observatory of the Information Society (OASI) (www.aragon.es/oasi), founded in 2004, and Navarre’s now defunct Observatory for Information Society [13].

Original projects have also emerged in recent years, such as Media.cat, which is an online media observatory created in 2009 by an association of professional journalists. This observatory publishes daily commentary on news coverage by the media and journalistic voluntary contributions by members of the association and other journalists. For its part, and attentive to the aforementioned context of digitisation, there are recent initiatives that monitor the digital dimension, such as the Observatory of Information Quality on Television (OCENDI, 2010), and the Observatory of the Quality of Information on Television (OCITV, 2013), among others.

3.2. Characterisation of media observatories

Based on the census carried out for this study, we can point out that Spanish observatories are characterised, first, by an extreme diversity in terms of objectives, promoters, competencies and organisation modes. So it is appropriate to speak of a plurality of models rather than of the existence of a unique and closed model. This diversity has to do with the fact that many of the observatories are unaware of each other and only very few observatories collaborate with similar initiatives. Exceptionally, this is the case of the European Observatory of Children’s Television (OETI) and the Observatory of Audiovisual and Television Content (OCTA), which work together on several projects. In addition, the OCTA is part of the Observatory of Advertising. Moreover, the gender-based observatories usually have links with each other and with other activists and research initiatives. More recently, Media.cat has strengthened its contacts with organisations such as the Observatory of Conflicts of the Autonomous University of Barcelona.

Second, and perhaps due to their relative newness, the tradition of media observatories in Spain reflects, in all aspects, its lack of consolidation, a fact that has been worsened by the economic crisis that started in 2008, in which many organisations have substantially reduced their activity, in particular due to the lack of funds [14]. In this regard, it should be noted that some observatories were born with very ambitious agendas but with the passage of time the activities they were actually carrying out did not correspond to the original agenda. Such is the case of the international project *Media Watch Global*, which is associated to Spanish initiatives such as the Galician Media Observatory (OM).

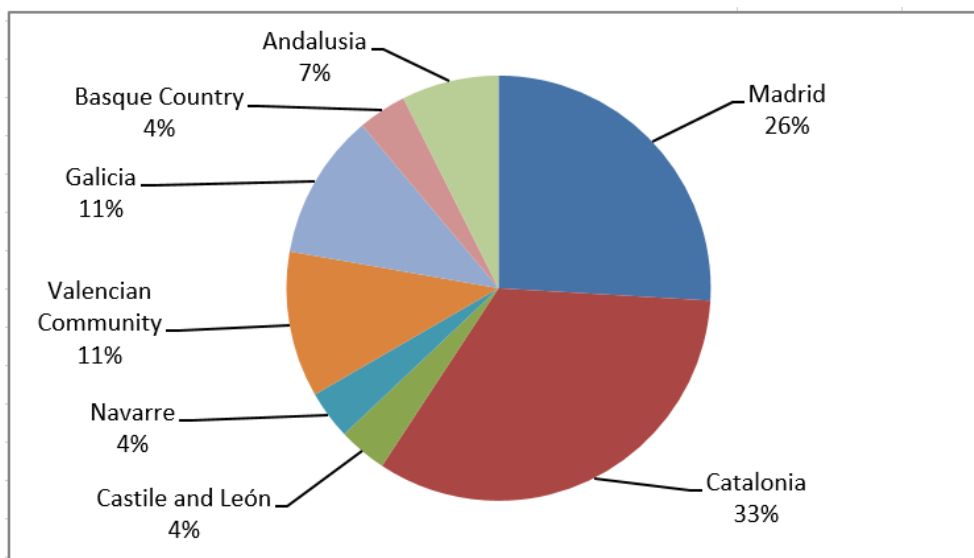
Third, there is a coexistence of the two models defined by Alborno and Herschmann (2006, 2007): “auditing observatories” and “statistical observatories”. However, most of the analysed observatories correspond to the “auditing” type (89%), since they work as pivotal spaces for citizens and are promoted by universities and, to a lesser extent, by NGOs and associations, and even by agreements between the two, as shown in table 2. Moreover, “auditing observatories” stand out as the most active and assertive in their actions and, in the Spanish case, it is common to find specialised observatories on minority or vulnerable population sectors, such as immigrants (e.g. the MUGAK and Migracom Media Observatory); elderly people (*Observatorio Mayores* and *Medios de Comunicación-UPUA*); young people (Observatory of Leisure and Digital Entertainment); children (Observatory of Audiovisual and Television Content-OCTA and the European Observatory of Children’s Education-OETI); and women (Observatory of Women’s Image, *Observatori de les Dones en els Mitjans de Comunicació* and the Andalusian Observatory of Non-sexist Advertising).

The presence of observatories run by public administrations that are responsible for collecting and disseminating data for the business sector, or “statistical observatories”, is much lower. A good example is the Galician Audiovisual Observatory of the Government of Galicia, which provides data and updated indicators of the Galician audiovisual market (listing of companies, regulatory framework, statistics of the sector, etc.) and is directed to the agents involved in this area: companies and institutions. Also part of this category is the European Audiovisual Observatory, which analyses the different audiovisual markets in Europe and has Spain as a member since its foundation, as well as the Observatory of the Spanish Association of Advertisers (AEA), which focuses on the creation of periodical reports of the television, radio and digital media sectors. However, all “statistical” observatories lack a critical and auditing component towards the media system, which is an unlikely component given that their purpose is to diagnose the behaviour of the audiovisual sector as a prelude to the development of public policies and as a kind of think tanks at the service of the economic power of big corporations in the audiovisual service: television, cinema, production companies, advertisers, etc.

Fourth, and with regards to the autonomous community in which the observatories reside, Catalonia (33%) and Madrid (26%) stand out by a great distance above other regions such as Galicia (11%) and the Valencian Community (11%), as shown in Figure 1. In this regard, we must emphasise the insignificant representation in regions such as Andalusia, Castile and León and the Basque Country, which have, respectively, the Andalusian Observatory of non-sexist Advertising, the Observatory of Media and Migration (OMECIA), the Observatory of Audiovisual Contents (OCA) and the MUGAK Media Observatory. On the other hand, their geographical scope tends to be national, although two

regional observatories concentrate their activity in their region of origin: The Andalusian Observatory of Non-sexist Advertising and the Galician Audiovisual Observatory (ODE). On the other hand, there are exceptional cases of international observatories, such as: The Observatory of Freedom of Expression, which covers the Ibero-American context; the European Observatory of Children’s Television (OETI), which operates at the national and European levels; and the European Audiovisual Observatory, which has a supranational nature. In addition, there are scarce partnerships between Spanish initiatives and their Latin American counterparts, with few exceptions such as the Ibero-American Communication Observatory (OIC) [15].

Graphic 1. Distribution of observatories by autonomous communities

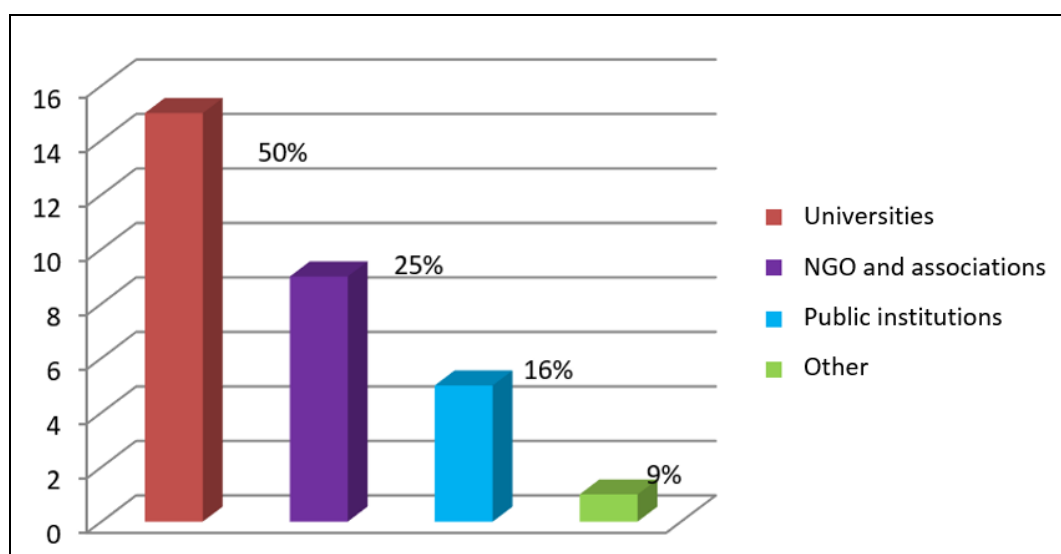


Source: Authors’ own creation.

Fifth, observatories are driven by different promoters, but those promoted by academic and university research centres and groups represent half of all the cases (50%), as shown in Figure 2 and Table 2 (column of promoters). Also important is the percentage (25%) of the projects that are promoted by the organised civil society (NGOs and associations), including the European Observatory of Children’s Television (OETI) and the Observatory of Audiovisual and Television Content (OCTA). The third most common type of sponsor is the government institutions (16%), which manage two observatories specialised in gender (*Observatori de les Dones en els Mitjans de Comunicació* and Andalusia’s Observatory of Non-sexist Advertising) and two statistical observatories: The Galician Audiovisual Observatory (Xunta of Galicia) and the European Audiovisual Observatory (European Union). For its part, the *Observatorio Galego dos Medios* (OM) is the only Spanish organisation linked to an association of professional journalists: The Professional Association of Galician Journalists (CPXG). To this organisation we must add the more recent Media.cat, which is linked to an association of journalists, and the monitoring of the journalistic profession carried out by the Press Association of Madrid (APM), the Federation of Press Associations of Spain (FAPE) and the EPHF, which were not taken into account in this study.

Sixth, with regards to the functions defined in the introductory section, most observatories usually contemplate more than one function, and so the items investigating this aspect included multiple response options. In addition to their orientation to research (which was a criterion for the selection of the universe), 25 of the 28 observatories (all the non-statistical ones) declared that their objective was to monitor and improve the activity of the media. The number of the observatories whose objective is media literacy, with an informative orientation and the public presentation of results through events and conferences (10 of 28), is smaller. The least common functions among Spanish observatories are intermediation between media and citizens (5), and provision of consulting and advisory services, and citizen mobilisation and lobbying (both with 4 cases).

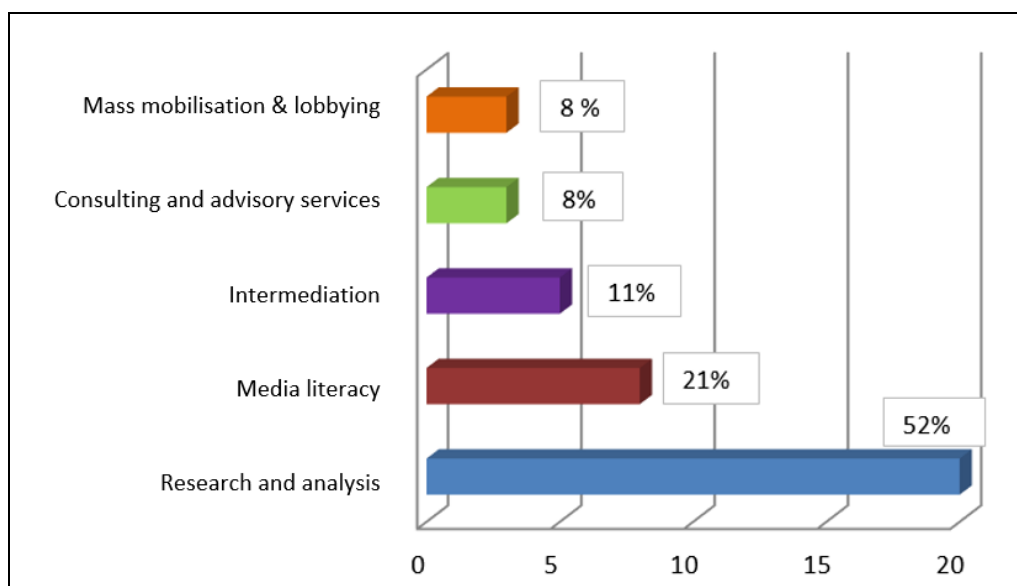
Figure 2. Promoters of the media observatories



Source: Authors' own creation.

This aspect it is important to highlight that most of the initiatives tend to prioritise on the organisation of events, seminars, conferences and festivals [16], well above the publication of reports, articles, or academic books, which explains once again the discontinuous character of their research activity. On the other hand, few observatories carry out activities related to literacy about audiovisual audiences and media (among which the subjects of gender, children and migration stand out) and very few observatories have the intention of performing public mobilisation work to promote favourable regulations in the field of communication. In this sense, few observatories are invited to act as speakers in meetings in which public policy is defined, except in the case of the observatories dedicated to children: The European Observatory of Children's Television (OETI) and the Observatory of Audiovisual and Television content (OCTA). For their part, "auditing" observatories (like the Galician Audiovisual Observatory, the AEA Observatory of Advertising and the European Audiovisual Observatory) generate statistical information for the private sector. Finally, some observatories are limited to gathering information in the form of daily news magazines (e.g. the MUGAK Media Observatory) or carrying out specific research (e.g. *Observatorios Mayores* and *Medios de Comunicación-UPUA*).

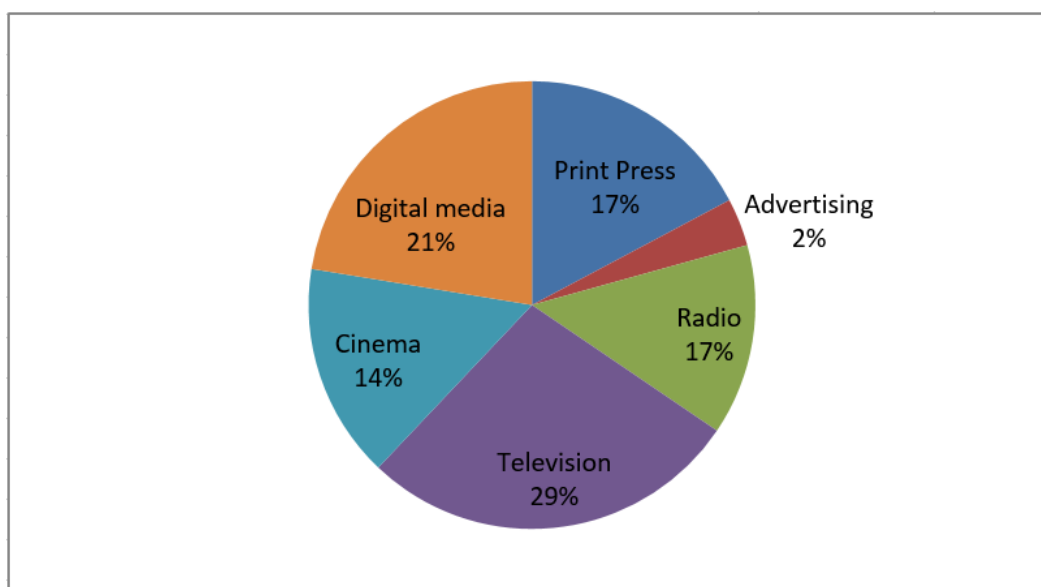
Figure 3. Functions of the media observatories



Source: Authors' own creation.

Seventh, with regards to the type of media investigated by the observatories, the analysis of television is predominant and hegemonic (29%), followed by digital media, blogs and social networks (21%). On the other hand, the share of observatories that focus on radio (17%), cinema (14%), print press (17%) and advertising (2%) is rather small, as shown in Figure 4. In this case, each observatory focuses on a single medium in order to detect the dominant research trends:

Figure 4. Media platforms monitored by the observatories



Source: Authors' own creation.

With regards to funding, there is a predominance of public funds, with the exception of the Observatory of television and Audiovisual Content (OCTA), which is run with its own funds (mainly derived from research and event organisation), and the Observatory of Leisure and Digital Entertainment (OCENDI), whose money comes from consulting and advisory services and online training, among other activities. Moreover, the European Observatory of Children's Television (OETI) and the Observatory of Leisure and Digital Entertainment (OCENDI) are two of the few observatories with a mixed funding model. The model of the former (OETI) combines funds from the government, businesses and foundations, while (OCENDI) has a financing model based on subscriber fees, internal funds and funding from foundations and other companies. Finally, the Women and Media Observatory also combines public funds with member fees while the most recent Media.cat receives most of its funds from the Catalonia Foundation.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

This research has attempted to describe the current landscape of media observatories in Spain. In the absence of a 'unified concept' (Castellanos, 2010: 4), the first conclusion derived from the study is the extreme plurality of models, which include different objectives, promoters and areas of specialisation. In this sense, and beyond the fact that all the analysed observatories define themselves as such, many of them are characterised by irregular, unstable and, sometimes, minimal research activity. Moreover, only few observatories perform the tasks that are typically performed by the more consolidated observatories that operate on the other side of the Atlantic, such as media literacy activities, intermediation for citizens and citizen mobilisation for the improvement of public policies.

In addition, there is a clear distinction between the observatories promoted by public universities and other bodies linked to civil society (NGOs, consumer associations, etc.) and those directly financed with public funds. The former type, known as "auditing observatories", stands out for their research and social denunciation activities, so they sometimes look for representation in government bodies in order to be heard as active agents in the construction of the media system. The second type, known as "statistical observatories", receive a permanent allocation of public resources that allow for the collection of data and information, although none of them shows a desire to criticise the media and hold it accountable.

The lack of a regular and constant research activity has to do, first of all, with the difficult economic sustainability of research projects, since many are financed by cooperation funds, donations and public subsidies (e.g. NGOs, associations) or research funding (e.g. R&D programmes), which have been depleted since the beginning of the economic crisis. Secondly, the initial agenda of objectives of new observatories is excessively ambitious, especially for projects that lack funds and hired staff to deal with their daily management.

However, and although this is not always materialised into concrete results, all of the "auditing observatories" show the intention to analyse the media landscape to report mismatches, irregularities and disregard for the public service function of the media. On the other hand, many of the initiatives claim to be committed to the well-being of citizens but this is not always obvious because citizens are not called to participate directly in their management. In other words, civil society is not taken

into account in the daily life of the Observatory, but is rather “represented” by instances such as non-profit and, in particular, public universities.

With regards the fields of specialisation, there is a growing interest in creating sectorial observatories which focus on social groups at risk of exclusion and inequality: women, children and teens, immigrants, etc. However, there is a predominance of media-in-general type of observatories, which lately worried about the digital realm and telecommunications, but focus on television. In another order of things, and although the regional coverage of many of them is national, it is necessary for future observatories to specialise in regions of Spain given that attention to the local level could improve the agenda of expectations and cater to groups and populations that are rarely represented in the mainstream media.

This research study has also confirmed that group identity and network awareness is null among Spanish media observatories. A good example of this is that none of the observatories that responded to the questionnaire declared to be based on previous experiences and, on the other hand, the synergies between them is, without a doubt, scarce and symbolic. From this perspective, we believe that the sustainability of the observatories should include not only the constant remnant of funds and specialised staff, but also the creation of networks of trust and cooperation that allow for comparison and the achievement of common results, the development of joint actions for the dissemination of results, and the setting of transformative political agendas. These synergies are not only the responsibility of the observatories, but of the entire group of organisations working in pro of reform media, such as trade unions, media consumer associations, and third sector communication organisations, among others.

In short, and perhaps due to their late incorporation to the work of media criticism and reform, media observatories in Spain still face difficulties to achieve consolidation while their impact is still limited in the public sphere and in the public institutions that are responsible for communication policy making. Finally, critical approaches insist that the observatories need to integrate citizens and expand their work of criticism, media literacy and the dissemination, especially if we take into account that the activity of the media should be subject to public service principles and the ideals of social transformation.

5. Notes

1. From this perspective, and based on the delimitation of functions proposed by Harold D. Lasswell (1948), the media are institutions that are in charge not only of portraying the surrounding reality but also of overseeing and monitoring the environment.
2. In this regard, Juliana Castellanos (2010) proposes an interesting conceptualisation based on the self-definitions used by 25 Latin American observatories (11 of them are Colombian), in which there is a predominance of approaches based on objectives and functions.
3. This is the case of the indicators developed by the Journalistic group of the *Mediaciones* news website of the International Centre for Advanced Studies in Communications for Latin America (CIESPAL), as part of the tasks of its Media Observatory (Carrascal, 2011).

4. There are also interesting initiatives for the monitoring of media content, such as news discussion forums and tools that citizens themselves can use to correct inaccurate news published by the media, like *Fixmedia* and *Fíltrala* in the case of Spain.
5. To learn more about the history of media observatories in Latin America see: Christofolletti & Gonzaga (2008), Téllez (2012), Hernández (2005), Herrera & Christofolletti (2006), and Paláu & Larrosa (2014). Latin America has also published the largest volume of books that analyse this phenomenon, some of them derived from conferences, such as: Christofolletti & Gonzaga (2008), Natal & Díaz (2014) and Paláu & Larrosa (2014).
6. According to the Castellanos's latest study (2013: 75), there are also some legal differences between observatories and *veedurías*.
7. In the description of concrete experiences, apart from the accounts of Rosa María Alfaro on citizen oversight committees (*veedurías*), there are outstanding case studies in Christofolletti (2006), Carrascal (2011), Natal & Diaz (2014) and Rubini (2013).
8. As it is the case of the First Latin American Meeting of Media and Communication Observatories, held in Quito in July 2015.
9. Almirón (2006) and Broullón, Hernández, López and Pereira (2005) offer a journey through different observatories worldwide, although the landscape has changed substantially in the last decade.
10. Susana Herrera (2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c) includes dimensions such as origin and social composition, geographic coverage, analysed media and methods of analysis; whereas Albornoz and Herschmann (2006, 2007) covers issues such as geographic location, scope of action and sources of funding.
11. It is important to note that many of the observatories did not answer the second part of the questionnaire, which is an indicator of limited and short-term research.
12. We thank them for their collaboration in this study, given that it would not had been possible to fulfil the objectives of this study without their testimony.
13. The observatories of APM and FAPE and the monitoring activity of the EPHF were discarded from the study because they were not focused on researching a medium in particular, but rather the situation of the journalistic profession. By the same token, we also excluded from the study the “statistical” observatories of the implementation of ICT and telecommunications.
14. This is the case of some observatories that did not answer the questionnaire and from which we infer a limited activity based on the scarce updating of content in their websites. On the other hand, some of the testimonies of the informants confirm the existence of irregular and unsystematic research activity.

15. From 2011, the OIC promotes, together with 15 universities, the Euro-Latin American network for the modernisation of the higher education institutions (REMIES) with the aim of developing new educational strategies for university studies in communication in Latin America, based on competency-based education for integration and social inclusion.

16. This is the case of the European Observatory of Children's Television which, since more than 15 years ago, organises every year the *L'Audiovisual* International Festival of Barcelona and the World Forum of Children's TV, both focused on the promotion of children's ethical content in the audiovisual industry.

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