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Ethical and deontological aspects of online journalism. Their perception by journalists

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Abstract: Digital journalists from three countries (Belgium, Spain and Italy) argue that the ethical exercise of journalism depends on the personal and professional values of journalists as well as on external factors (of commercial, economic, political and technological nature). Journalism ethics is, thus, influenced by the working conditions as well as the technology used to carry out the professional activity. However, the degree of independence of the media companies where journalists work, and their personal values are perceived as the most influential factors in the ethical practice of journalism, while the influence of the interaction with the public and its opinions are considered as secondary.

Keywords: Ethics, deontology, journalism, digital journalism, self-regulation, social function, freedom, pluralism, independence, transparency, citizen journalism.

Contents: 1. Introduction. 2. Methods. 3. Results. 4. Discussion and Conclusions. 5. Notes. 6. List of References.

Translation by **CA Martínez Arcos**, Ph.D. (Universidad Autónoma de Tamaulipas)

1. Introduction

In January 2013, the High Level Group on Media Freedom and Pluralism published the report titled *A free and pluralistic media to sustain European democracy*, which highlights the fundamental and

necessary role of both media freedom and pluralism for the existence of democracy, as well as the active role that governments should play for their procurement and maintenance.

The Group, which was established in October 2011 by the European Commission Vice-President Neelie Kroes, makes a series of recommendations about three aspects: the importance of freedom and pluralism in the media; the on-going evolution of the media context, and the guarantees needed for journalists to do their work.

The report points out that the main obstacles for media freedom and pluralism are political interferences, commercial pressures, and the concentration and control associated with the development of new technologies. However, it also highlights the importance of journalists' behaviour, which in some cases affects their own credibility and, thus, the credibility of the media where they work, conditioning the future of journalism.

The report also makes clear that a *conditio sine qua non* to ensure freedom and pluralism in the media is the recognition of journalists' rights: professional secrecy, conscience clause, free and non-discriminatory access to public or official events. At the same time, the report acknowledges that journalists have obligations, especially towards citizens, such as the dissemination of truthful information and the respect to privacy and honour. In this sense, the report proposes the exercise of journalism to be ruled by ethical standards, which must be of general knowledge.

This reference to the deontological principles is linked to an apparently unchallenged academic and professional tradition, at least from a conceptual point of view. But how is this aspect really perceived by journalists? Are ethical approaches still current in a context of economic crisis, job insecurity, technological changes, and new business models that put into question the very foundation of the journalistic work, its social function and its professional status? Recently in Spain, several research studies have been conducted on this subject (Maciá, 2010; Berganza Conde, 2010; Suárez Villegas, 2013). Other issues have emerged in relation to this subject, such as the introduction of self-regulation models in a more open information scenario, and the conception of the journalistic profession and the virtues of journalists in such circumstances (Fernández Areal, 2010; González-Esteban *et al.*, 2011; Santos Sainz, 2013).

These and other issues are investigated in the R&D project titled “The ethical challenges of digital journalism. A comparative analysis in three European countries: Spain, Italy and Belgium”. Originally, this project aimed to also include England and France in the comparative analysis, but the inclusion of these countries became impossible due to a reduction in the project's budget. However, we have tried to establish pertinent comparisons with these countries based on the data provided by other works whose analysis has focused on some of these countries (Riordan, 2014)

This project was carried out by a multidisciplinary team, composed of members from different universities. Among its objectives, the project aimed to examine journalists' perception of the ethical challenges associated with the different dimensions of the practice of journalism: news production; news dissemination; their reception by the public, and the lines of action to deal with any misdoings.

This study is a philosophical approximation that complements the studies that address these dimensions from a more instrumental, social or political point of view. It takes into account such aspects as the use of sources in the collection of information; the respect to privacy and people's dignity; the transparency of media companies and their sources of funding; the relationship between editors and companies; the role of advertising; the promotion of an active reception and social participation in the information process; and the credibility and quality of information.

The results presented here are based on the results of a survey applied to a sample of information professionals from different European countries, and the analysis of the abovementioned issues from an integrated empirical ethics point of view [1]. This quantitative survey investigated the psychological, social, and cultural principles that underlie the classical ethical models, without privileging *a priori* a specific model or ethical principle.

2. Method

To accomplish these objectives we adopted an integrated qualitative and quantitative perspective, which includes, in a first phase, the implementation of a survey among journalists, and, in a second phase, in-depth interviews with a subgroup of the sample of participants.

Thus, the quantitative part of the research provides measurable results on the state of the art, while the qualitative stage goes beyond this statistical observation and delves into the “whys” of the results. We believe that this mixed methodological approach is the most appropriate, taking into account the discursive, argumentative and conceptual character of our object of research.

With regards to the quantitative research, which is detailed later in this article, we selected a sample of the universe of European Journalists according to the following environmental, socio-demographic and specific variables: men and women, aged 18 to 65 years, working in journalism, with at least one year of experience, at different levels of responsibility (from interns to directors, including editors, head of section, etc.), in digital media (native) or in print media with digital versions.

The selection of the sample units, and subsequent field work, was carried out in three countries: Belgium, Spain and Italy.

To select the sample, we invited a very large number of professionals working for media companies with the greatest penetration and importance in the aforementioned countries. These potential participants were identified with the help of different sources: professional associations, news media workers, and prior business contacts, etc. Each contacted journalists was asked to answer a self-administered online questionnaire, within a deadline. Invited professionals were sent several reminders within the deadline. Given the territorial dispersion of the potential participants, the use of this type of on-line questionnaire was considered to be the most effective option to carry out the field work, despite the disadvantages associated with this type of survey: the high level of non-response; the greater possibility of errors in responses, including uncompleted questionnaires, and the impossibility to controlling the final sample.

In our case, despite the low rate of response, the wide call to participation produced a sample of 663 participating journalists, which in terms of randomness ($p=q=50$) and confidence level (95%), yielded a margin of statistical error estimate of ± 7 [2].

In addition, the absence of segmentation variables in the statistical exploitation of data, at least in regards to the results concerning this article, decreased the need to rebalance or ponder the sample at a later stage.

Finally, it should be noted that the questionnaire used in the survey consisted of 42 questions, most of which were closed items, based on the Likert-scale of agreement and intensity about the ethical efficacy perceived in relation to the different realities of the media environment, journalists and the public. This structure allowed for statistical and multivariate analyses.

3. Results

3.1. Factors that determine the ethical exercise of online journalism

Online journalism has brought about important changes in the dynamics of news production. The celerity of the information processes, the interaction with citizens, and the use of social networking sites as instruments of journalistic work are some of the most significant changes, but not the only ones (García Aviles, 2014). For this reason, one of the objectives of this research study was to determine the extent to what the different ideological, economic, professional, technological and social factors influence journalists' work in the new professional culture generated by the digital media. To that end, the survey questionnaire investigated how journalists perceive or value the degree of influence of such factors in the ethical exercise of journalism.

What degree of influence do the following factors have in what you consider to be the ethical exercise of online journalism?

ECONOMIC FACTORS

The restructuring or convergence of media to establish a viable economic model
Transparency of the media about their sources of influence
The competition to attract users (click-based profitability)
The precarious work of journalists

PROFESSIONAL FACTORS

Work and information selection routines
Protocols to follow-up and correct errors
Protocols for the use of hyperlinks to cite and contextualise online news
Journalist's individual values
Journalist's professional training
Journalist's experience
Journalist's selected contacts and partners

IDEOLOGICAL FACTORS

The independence of the media from the pressure of political lobbyists and advertisers
The power of media owners and editors to set the agenda
Journalist's loyalty towards the ideological line of the media company they work for

TECHNOLOGICAL FACTORS

- The speed of online news production and dissemination
- Monitoring of sources' profiles in online forums and social networks
- The constant updating of online information
- The difficulty to verify and monitor some information online

SOCIAL FACTORS

- Citizen participation in the production and contextualisation of information
- The questioning of journalistic practices
- The credibility and trust of the public in the media

For each of these variables the questionnaire included a Likert-scale type of question to investigate the perceived degree of influence of the factor (strong, some, little, none) in the ethical practice of journalism. The following table presents the responses obtained from the whole sample:

What degree of influence do the following factors have in what you consider to be the ethical exercise of journalism?	Very influential	Fairly influential	Little influential	Not influential	NA	Total
The restructuring or convergence of media to establish a viable economic model	27.2	29.6	9.9	2.8	30.5	100.0
Transparency of the media about their sources of influence	27.7	28.2	11.3	1.9	31.0	100.0
The competition to attract users (click-based profitability)	26.8	28.6	11.3	2.3	31.0	100.0
The precarious work of journalists	41.3	15.0	10.3	2.8	30.5	100.0
The independence of the media from the pressure of political lobbyists and advertisers	39.9	20.7	8.0	0.9	30.5	100.0
The power of media owners and editors to set the agenda	33.3	25.8	6.6	3.3	31.0	100.0
Journalist's loyalty towards the ideological line of the media company they work for	22.1	18.8	23.9	3.3	31.9	100.0
The speed of online news production and dissemination	22.1	18.8	23.9	3.3	31.9	100.0
Monitoring of sources' profiles in online forums and social networks	14.6	30.0	20.7	2.8	31.9	100.0
The constant updating of online information	27.2	27.7	12.2	1.4	31.5	100.0
The difficulty to verify and monitor some information online	23.0	31.9	11.7	1.4	31.9	100.0
Work and information selection routines	27.2	30.5	8.0	2.8	31.5	100.0
Protocols to follow-up and correct errors	17.4	29.6	16.4	4.2	32.4	100.0
Protocols for the use of hyperlinks to cite and contextualise online news	15.0	27.2	19.2	6.1	32.4	100.0

What degree of influence do the following factors have in what you consider to be the ethical exercise of journalism?	Very influential	Fairly influential	Little influential	Not influential	NA	Total
Journalist's individual values	43.2	16.9	6.6	2.8	30.5	100.0
Journalist's professional training	39.4	19.2	9.4	1.9	30.0	100.0
Journalist's experience	39.0	17.8	9.4	3.3	30.5	100.0
Journalist's selected contacts and partners	36.6	20.7	10.8	0.9	31.0	100.0
Citizen participation in the production and contextualisation of information	13.6	28.6	22.1	5.2	30.5	100.0
The questioning of journalistic practices	14.6	28.2	22.5	4.2	30.5	100.0
The credibility and trust of the public in the media	26.3	22.5	17.4	3.3	30.5	100.0

The factors perceived as most influential to facilitate or inhibit the exercise of ethical journalism are the degree of independence of the media company for which journalists work and journalists' personal values. These factors are considered to be very or fairly influential by 60.6% and 60.1% of respondents, respectively.

This dual vision, in which both external and internal factors are seen as influential to facilitate or hinder the ethical exercise of journalism, is also reflected by respondents in relation to the other factors. If we examine those factors considered as very or fairly influential by more than 50% of respondents, we can observe the following:

The influence of the media company in the ethical practice of journalism is primarily associated not only to its independence, which seems to be a *conditio sine qua non* for its exercise, but also to a similar factor, the economic viability of the media company and its capacity for restructuring and convergence in the changing environment (56.8%). On the other hand, and even to a greater extent, the influence of the media company is associated to its power (and its owners) to set the agenda (59.1%). In this case, participating journalists seem to point out that the ethical principles of journalism are undermined by the impunity with which a particular media company can disregard the *imperative of reality* in the fulfilling of its function, adapting the information priorities to its own interests and using that criterion to decide what is reported and what is censored.

In relation to the media company, more than half of respondents (55.9%) highlighted the transparency or opacity of media companies when it comes to disclose the interest groups that may be influencing their work, and in many cases explain their position towards certain matters. It is worth mentioning here that only 9.9% of respondents answered positively when asked whether the media company they work for has any policy or traditional position regarding the transparency of sources of funding and the conflicts of interest of journalists. Also significant is that while 29.6% answered negatively, 60.5% did not know or did not answer.

Regarding the factors most associated with the professional and personal dimension, beyond the axiological universe of the journalist, these include education (58.6%), work routines (57.7%) and journalist's criteria to select contacts and partners (57.3%). These are important conclusions given that respondents seem to perceive that journalists with a solid education are not only more efficient

in their professional performance and more capable to interpret and assess news events, but also that they adopt an ethical position towards the object of their journalistic activities and their own professional function. The same can be said about work routines, since many seemingly instrumental or practical decisions hide decisions with tangible ethical consequences. In terms of the selection of appropriate contacts and partners for the exercise of journalists' work, an indicator of the good professional work is the ethical dimension derived from these criteria, from the point of view of pluralism, and the relevance and confidentiality of sources, etc.

Participating journalists also valued the influence derived from certain aspects associated with the changes brought about by digitisation, on the ethical practice of journalism. In particular, the immediacy of online information (59.1%); but also the difficulty to verify and monitor such information and its updating capacity (54.9% in both cases), and the increasing pressure put on journalists to attract readers (the click as audience meter and sales support) particularly in digital media (54.4%). These aspects sometimes complicate the responsible implementation of such principles as the verification of sources, the analysis of the facts and information rigour; but also enable the rapid rectification of errors when necessary. It is worth noting that, in global terms, almost half of the respondents (49.8%) considered that ICTs are influencing the ethical behaviour of journalists.

In contrast, it seems that consulted journalists put in second place the aspects concerning the relationship with the public (social interaction), beyond its consideration as clients or audience. So respondents consider as less influential on the ethical exercise of the profession: the credibility and trust of the public in the media, (48.8%); the monitoring of the sources' profiles in online forums and social networks (44.6%); the social questioning of the journalistic practices (42.8%), and the participation of citizens in the construction and contextualisation of information (42.2%). This is in spite of very significant events such as the current crisis of credibility faced by the media, and the increasing active role of citizens through social networks and the so-called "citizen journalism".

Also worth noting is the lesser importance that journalists give, as an element of ethical dilemmas, to the protocols for the use of hyperlinks and for the contextualisation of online information (42.2%), and to the loyalty of journalists towards the ideological position of the media company they work for (40.9%). Also outstanding is the little importance that respondents give to the latter parameter, which seems to reflect the uncritical assumption of such ideological subjugation.

Finally, we should note the persistence of a high percentage of non-response in relation to the influence of the aforementioned factors. In global terms, about one third of the sample that does share opinions on the other extremes of the profession does not seem to have opinion on the ethical issues. This can be interpreted as a significant disaffection, lack of interest or credibility on the role played by the ethical constraints in the exercise of today's journalism.

3.2. The ethical and deontological aspects of the everyday practice of journalism

In order to examine deeper those journalistic practices that, in the daily exercise of the profession, can generate ethical or deontological dilemmas, respondents were asked to indicate their degree of

agreement or disagreement towards a series of activities that could be considered to be ethical dilemmas:

- To modify a news story to avoid falling out with a politician or political group.
- To adapt a news story to avoid losing a source of funding.
- To rewrite a news story to avoid criticisms from users or the boycott of a current of public opinion on the Internet.
- To rewrite a news story to get more traffic or visits.
- To devote too much time to resolve technical aspects (use of software, editing, etc.) to the detriment of investigative journalism.

On this question the lack of response was slightly greater than in the previous question, which seems to indicate a worrying lack of judgement, which is even more evident the more concrete the issue is.

Do you consider these activities to be an ethical dilemma?	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	NA	Total
To modify a news story to avoid falling out with a politician or political group.	3.8	1.9	6.6	20.2	34.3	33.3	100.0
To adapt a news story to avoid losing a source of funding.	3.3	2.8	11.3	18.8	31.0	32.9	100.0
To rewrite a news story to avoid criticisms from users or the boycott of a current of public opinion on the Internet.	2.3	4.7	7.5	22.1	29.1	34.3	100.0
To rewrite a news story to get more traffic or visits.	3.3	8.0	16.9	16.0	22.1	33.8	100.0
To devote too much time to resolve technical aspects (use of software, editing, etc.) to the detriment of investigative journalism.	5.2	4.7	27.7	13.6	15.0	33.8	100.0

As we can see, respondents seem to be particularly sensitive against the practice of modifying, rewriting or adapting news stories according to non-journalistic interests, either to avoid falling out with any person, group or party political (54.5% of the sample disagree or strongly disagree with this practice); to avoid criticisms from users or opinion groups (51.2%), or to avoid losing a source of funding (49.8%).

However, respondents are somewhat more tolerant towards the practice of rewriting news to get more traffic or visits (disagreement does not exceed 38.1% of the sample) and devoting too much time to technical issues to the detriment of investigative journalism (38.6%).

However, these are practices that in principle may not be far away from the daily reality of respondents, so they were asked whether they have been forced to do this kind of activities by the media companies they work for.

Indicate how often the media company you work for asks you to do the following activities	Every day	Several times a week	Several times a month	Once a year	Never	NA	Total
To modify a news story to avoid falling out with a politician or political group.	5.6	3.3	7.0	20.2	28.2	35.7	100.0
To adapt a news story to avoid losing a source of funding.	4.7	4.7	5.6	22.1	26.8	36.2	100.0
To rewrite a news story to avoid criticisms form users or the boycott of a current of public opinion on the Internet.	3.3	4.7	8.5	16.4	30.5	36.6	100.0
To rewrite a news story to get more traffic or visits.	5.6	8.5	11.7	12.7	25.8	35.7	100.0
To devote too much time to resolve technical aspects (use of software, editing, etc.) to the detriment of investigative journalism.	9.4	9.4	10.8	16.0	18.8	35.7	100.0

In relation to this question, the percentage of non-response is even higher, and exceeds in all cases a third of the sample.

The responses indicate that the most common request made to journalists by the media companies they work for was to devote too much time to solve technical issues to the detriment of investigative journalism (requested to 45.6% of the sample). The following most requested activities were to rewrite news stories to get more traffic or visits (38.5%); to adapt news to avoid losing a source of funding (37.1%); to modify news stories to avoid falling out with political figures (36.1%), and, finally, to rewrite news stories to avoid users' criticisms or the boycott of a current of public opinion on the Internet (32.9%).

In addition, these requests have very different levels of frequency. The modification of news stories to get more visits and the dedication of too much time to technical aspects are also the most frequent requests made by media companies: a 25.8% and 29.6%, respectively, of respondents claim to have been requested to do this several times a month, a week, and even daily. The modification of news stories for economic or political reasons are, on the other hand, more sporadic requests (20.2% and 22.1% of respondents indicated receiving this requests once a year). The request to modify news stories according to the social interests lies in a middle position: 16.5% of respondents point out this is a regular request while 16.4% says it is sporadic.

These situations require an adaptation of the deontological codes of journalism to the new situations provoked by the changes in the dynamics of news production in the digital environment, such as the use of social networks and the participation of the public in the media. To this day, few of the general codes of journalists from European countries have introduced modifications in this respect (Díaz-Campo and Segado-Boj, 2014).

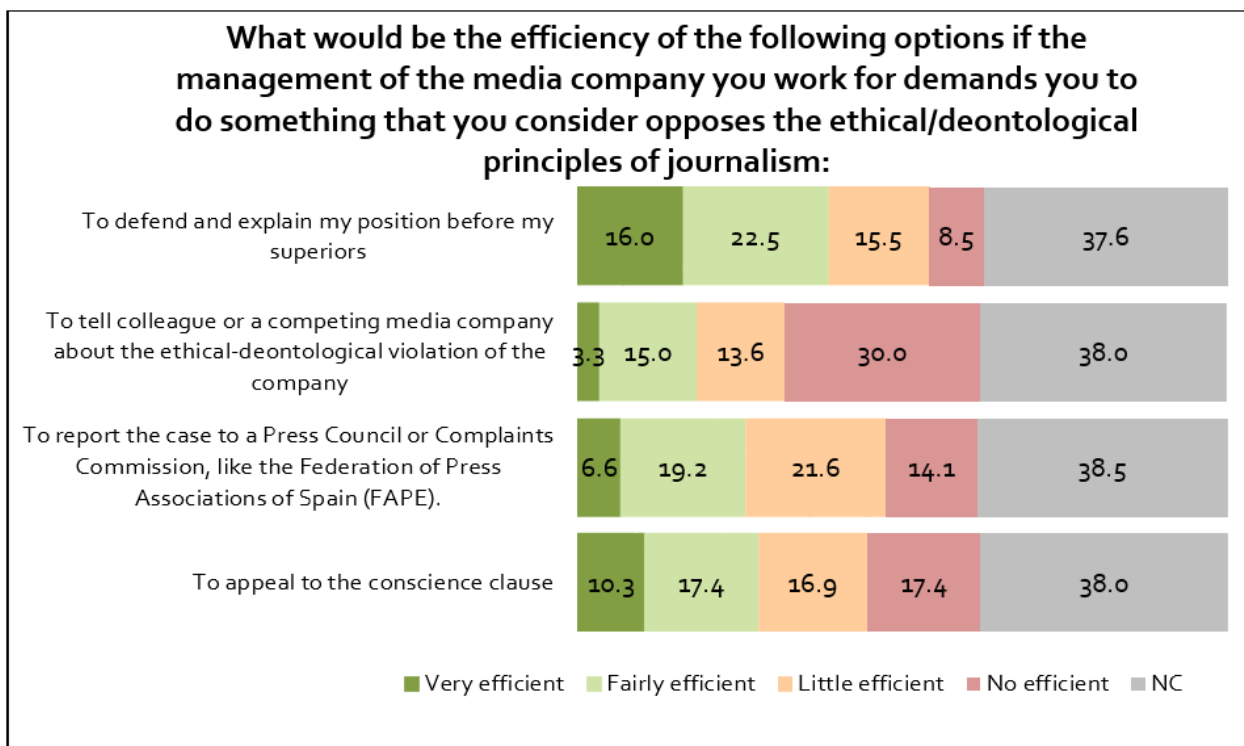
3.3. Dilemmas and decisions in the ethical practice of journalism

To delve into the ethical dilemmas of the relation between journalists and media companies, the questionnaire asked respondents to evaluate the efficiency of a series of possible reactions in the case that the direction of the media company they work for demanded them to do something that opposed the ethical principles of the profession. The options respondents had to evaluate were the following:

- To defend and explain their position before their superiors.
- To tell colleague or a competing media company about the ethical-deontological violation of the company.
- To report the case to a Press Council or Complaints Commission, like the Federation of Press Associations of Spain (FAPE).
- To appeal to the conscience clause.

In these situations, with a percentage of response generally one point higher, the most selected possibility is to defend and explain one’s position with the superiors, although only 38.5% of the sample considered this option to be very or fairly effective.

The other preferred options were appealing to the conscience clause (27.7%); to report the case to a Press Council or Complaints Commission such as the Federation of Press Associations of Spain, FAPE (25.7%); and to tell a colleague or a competing media company about the violations committed by the company (18.3%).

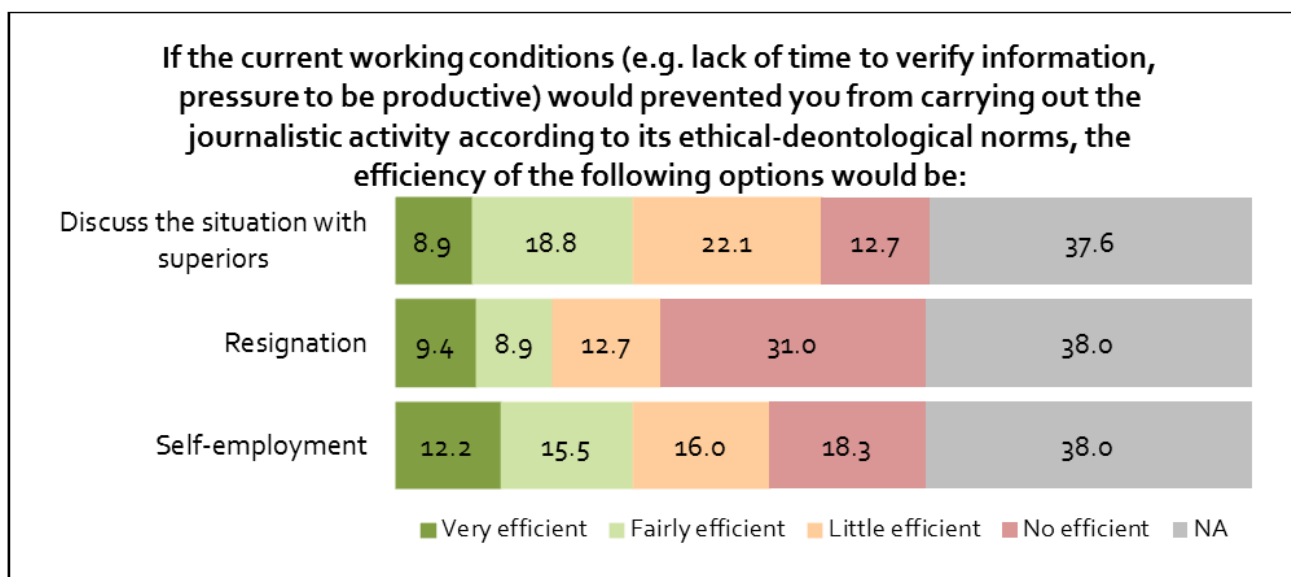


What consequences can be drawn from the previous answers? Journalists do not seem to have great confidence in the resolution of ethical conflicts, but their distrust is even greater towards the actual usefulness of the tools developed precisely to safeguard their rights. They trust more in the favourable resolution of such conflicts through internal and individual negotiation within the medium, despite the differences of interests and even objectives that can exist between the management and the staff, than through the appealing of rights of the professional statute (conscience clause). Moreover, they have less trust in reporting the case to external bodies that defend journalists. These pathways are considered little or no efficient by 35.7% and 34.3% of respondents, respectively.

More reservations are shown towards the possibility of telling about the violations to colleagues or competing media about, as a means for public denunciation. In fact, 43.6% of respondents doubt about the efficacy of this option, although this response may also reflect reservations towards its suitability or legality.

This interpretation is confirmed by two groups of questions that explore lines of action that have to do more with their relation with their bosses and are more professionally-radical.

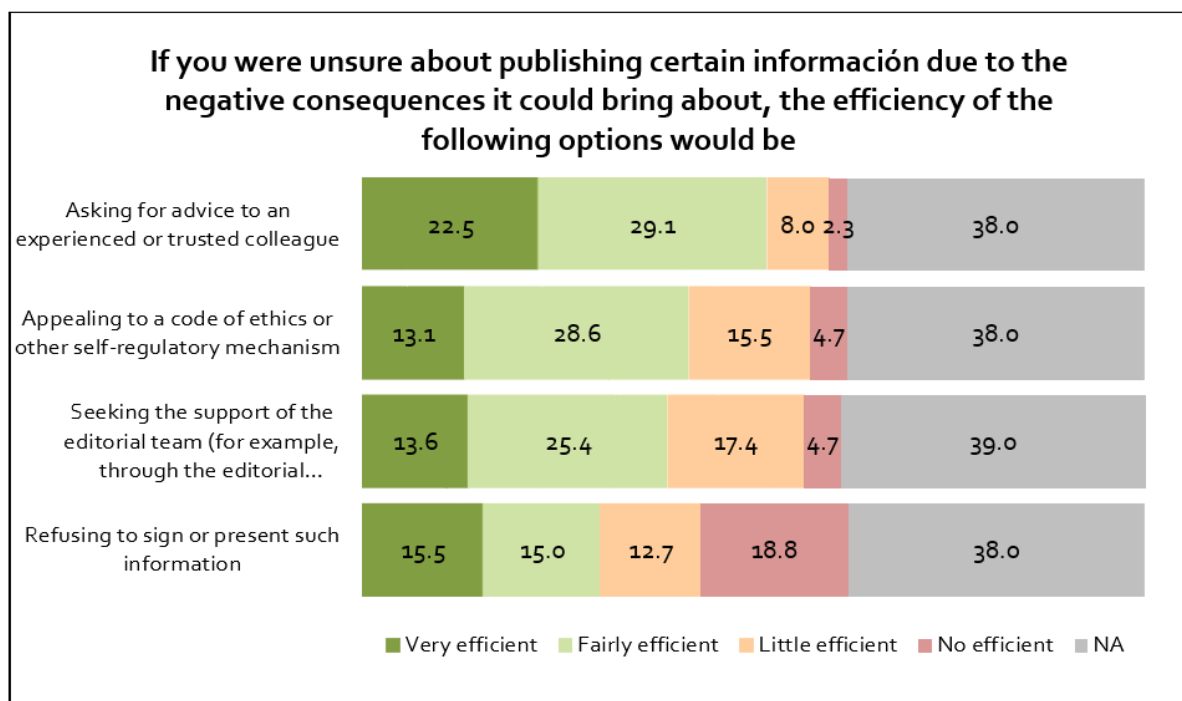
Thus, on the one hand, participating journalists were asked which of the following decisions might be most effective when the working conditions in the media company they work for prevented them from carry out their work in accordance with the ethical and deontological standards: to discuss the situation with their superiors; to resign from their job, in accordance with these principles; to move to another company as a salaried journalist subjected to the decisions of the company; or to experience the alternative of self-employment as freelance journalist.



As we can see, with a percentage of non-response similar to the previous questions, the scepticism of respondents towards any of those possibilities is very high. The perception of inefficiency (no or little efficient) exceeds in all cases the perception of efficiency (very or fairly efficient), especially in the case of resignation, which is the most rejected option.

On the other hand, faced with the ethical dilemma of publishing or not certain information that may bring about negative consequences, respondents had to evaluate the effectiveness of: asking for advice to an experienced or trusted colleague; appealing to a code of ethics or other self-regulatory mechanism; seeking the support of the editorial team (for example, through the editorial committee), and refusing to sign or present such information.

Also outstanding in this case is the solution of internal and individual nature, since 51.6% of respondents considered as very or fairly effective to seek advice from an experienced or trusted colleague (51.6%).



The effectiveness of the rest of the options aroused less confidence, although it should be noted that in any case the effectiveness of the possibility of appealing to a code of ethics or other self-regulatory mechanism (41.7%) was higher than the possibility of seeking the collective support of colleagues, for example through the editorial committee (39%).

Also as in previous questions, the most belligerent possibility, in this case refusing to sign or present the information, remained in last place, and with divided opinions on its effectiveness (30% of responses) or ineffectiveness (31.5%).

3.4. The big picture: how ethical principles should be guaranteed in the media?

Finally, by way of summary, we asked respondents to indicate their degree of agreement towards a series of affirmations about the nature, sense and pursuit of the ethical and deontological principles of journalism, in order to clarify some of the previously discussed results.

The affirmations were the following:

- The solution to the ethical problems is in the hands of each media editor or businessmen.
- The solution to the ethical problems is in the hands of every journalist.
- The solution to the ethical problems is in the ethical education of businessmen and journalists.
- Editors should promulgate a code of ethics and create an institution to ensure its compliance.
- Journalists should update their ethical codes and support the institutions that ensure their compliance.
- These institutions should be able to sanction violations.
- The State should intervene and ensure the conditions for the responsible exercise of journalism.
- There is no solution: ethical problems are inherent to the nature of journalism.

With some of the highest percentages of non-response, around 38% of the sample, the results are the following:

Can you indicate your degree of agreement with the following affirmations?	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	NA	Total
The solution to the ethical problems is in the hands of each media editor or businessmen.	14.1	25.4	9.4	6.6	6.6	38.0	100.0
The solution to the ethical problems is in the hands of every journalist.	23.5	26.8	6.1	3.8	2.3	37.6	100.0
The solution to the ethical problems is in the ethical education of businessmen and journalists.	21.6	26.3	8.9	2.3	2.8	38.0	100.0
Editors should promulgate a code of ethics and create an institution to ensure its compliance.	20.7	26.8	9.9	3.3	1.4	38.0	100.0
Journalists should update their ethical codes and support the institutions that ensure their compliance.	25.8	23.9	9.4	1.9	0.9	38.0	100.0
These institutions should be able to sanction violations.	18.8	21.1	13.6	5.6	2.8	38.0	100.0
The State should intervene and ensure the conditions for the responsible exercise of journalism.	16.4	15.0	10.3	9.9	9.9	38.5	100.0

Can you indicate your degree of agreement with the following affirmations?	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	NA	Total
There is no solution: ethical problems are inherent to the nature of journalism.	7.5	10.3	15.0	15.5	13.6	38.0	100.0

Respondents attributed more responsibility or greater capacity in resolving ethical and deontological problems to journalism professionals than to media businessmen. However, they consider that the promotion of the codes of ethics and the institutions in charge of ensuring their compliance is the responsibility of both journalists (49.7% agreed or strongly agreed) and media businessmen (47.5% agreed). Respondents also emphasise the importance of training journalists and media businessmen (47.9%), which is also in line with some of the abovementioned results. Yet, 50.3% of the sample agrees or strongly agrees with the assertion that the solution to the ethical problems is in the hands of each journalist, while only 39.5% agrees with the idea that the solution to the ethical problems is in the hands of each editor or media businessmen.

In short, the results confirm in different ways, the weight of the individualistic vision of the ethical problems, which is close to the *caveat emptor* doctrine of the commercial transactions that we have emphasised in previous sections: journalists act in an isolated manner in the field of ethical dilemmas, and the resolution of this type of problems depends on them; their responsibility being greater than that of the media companies. This is compatible with an ideal view of the ethical codes and their application, not so much for their current reality as their possibilities.

In any case, the predominant view on the self-regulation models associated with this type of ethical codes is little ambitious from the point of view of their capacity and competences: only 39.9% of the sample agreed that the institutions in charge of ensuring compliance with the codes of ethics to have the power to sanction violations, which was considered a basic element for its effectiveness by the analysts of voluntary regulation and the European Commission. And with regards to the possibility that the State could intervene to ensure the conditions for the responsible practice of journalism, without going into whether that intervention should occur through positive legislation or through co-regulation systems, the percentage of agreement descends to 31.4%.

The affirmation most clearly rejected by survey participants is that the ethical problems cannot be solved through regulation, either voluntary or legal, because it has to do with issues inherent to the very nature of journalism: only 17.8% agree with this solution, while 30.5% disagreed with it. This is a positive result from the point of view of the “utility” of the ethical and deontological principles, which allows us to aspire to a safer and more dignified professional environment that is more conscious of its social function, avoiding a naturalistic pessimism that ends in resignation and melancholy.

4. Discussion and conclusions

It is necessary to highlight that the adoption and adaptation processes provoked by the new digital information and communication technologies bring about ethical challenges to the professional identity of journalists, the social and moral values that underlie their digital practices and the

standards of excellence that the public demands to ensure the relevance and necessity of online journalism in a democratic society (Singer & Friend, 2007; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). In this sense, it can be observed that the definitions of “journalism” and “journalist” have undergone deep reconfigurations, partly as a result of the digitisation of the collection, processing and dissemination of information, but also as a consequence of the gradual change in the role of the audience that used to be perceived as a “passive” consumer of the media (Allan, 2006 and Gillmor, 2006). These circumstances demand more open and versatile journalists and a reaffirmation of the ethical values as an unmistakable hallmark of the social commitment of journalists, as reflected on the results presented here.

The demand for instant information prompted by the rapid expansion of social networks, the attacks against privacy derived from the misuse of the new ICTs, the anonymous information leaks, the increasingly blurred borders between advertising and journalism, the liquid identity of journalists given the large number of digital users, and the precision needed to produce news are just some of the ethical dilemmas posed by the Internet as a tool to produce and disseminate journalistic content (Wilkins & Christians, 2009).

The permanent updating of news that ICTs have enabled should be accompanied by the verification of facts and direct sources, and rigour, to avoid speculations over still unknown issues. In this regard, it is worth remembering that sometimes technology can be a slippery slope for journalistic malpractice, because the viral dissemination of news can cause false impressions regarding about the reality of facts. Therefore, although the pace of digital media requires speed, this objective should not be achieved at any price and sacrifice the minimum requirements established to ensure the accuracy of information. As pointed out by Mico, “the race to be the first to publish a news motivates the dissemination of errors and contemptible practices such as the publication of manipulated images or the publication of unverified news” (Micó *et al.*, 2008: 17).

On the other hand, in the field of journalism this relationship between “the truth” as ethical requirement and “credibility” may be separated, so that credibility is conceived as the subjective effect of the trust of the public in the information regardless of its veracity. So, the media might choose to worry about being credible, through other elements that favour citizens’ psychological disposition to trust in the news, such as the use of videos or the rapid dissemination of news that arouse expectation that is attractive from the commercial point of view, rather than for being truthful, which requires a more rigorous process that does not always follow the rhythm of an informative market that has made of “urgency” its *modus operandi*. It seems that news is “the latest” just for being the latest and that this is not necessarily related to the intrinsic value of the events for the public interest.

In these cases, the presumption of credibility that would be associated with the media may be impaired by a professional malpractice and transferred to the opinion leaders or the alternative media that leave aside commercial journalism and seek to tell “the truth” in accordance with the social commitment of journalism. The reader is also torn about the informational benefits of these new ways of communication between citizens (Rosas, 2012)

On the other hand, citizens have acquired a greater role in the information process, adding to their traditional recipient role the production of their own information, which they can disseminate through the Internet (Castells, 2001). However, this informative, although non-journalistic, activity of citizens cannot put in question the need for professional journalists as managers of citizens' right to information, without prejudice towards the use of other complementary or alternative channels.

In the particular case under study, the sample of journalists, who carry out their professional activity in three European countries (Belgium, Spain and Italy) have a dual view about the most influential aspects in the promotion or hindering of the ethical practice of journalism, in which the external factors (commercial and economic, political and technological) are as important as the personal factors. The degree of independence of the media company for which journalists work and their personal professional values are perceived as the most influential factors. In comparison, the influence of the interaction with the public and its feedback or opinion is considered to be secondary.

Journalists seem to be particularly sensitive against the practice of modifying, rewriting or adapting news stories according to the interests of political, economic or social groups. However, according to participating journalists, media companies rarely made this kind of requests, but do request them to rewrite news stories in order to get more traffic or visits or force them to devote too much time to resolve technical issues to the detriment of the journalistic investigation.

They believe that the most effective way of resolving the ethical conflicts that occur in their everyday work is the internal and individual negotiation with employers and editors, which is considered to be more effective than other alternatives such as appealing to the conscience clause or taking the case to external bodies in charge of protecting journalists. Public denunciation or seeking the support of colleagues from other competing media is the possibility that generate greater reluctance.

Moreover, faced with the ethical dilemma of publishing or no information that may bring about negative consequences, respondents' preferred solution is to seek advice from an experienced or trusted colleague. This solution is preferred over the possibility of defend themselves with a code of ethics or other self-regulatory mechanism or seeking the collective support of their colleagues, for example through the editorial committee. Also in this case, the most belligerent possibility, refusing to sign, submit or present the information in question, remains as the last option.

Respondents attributed greater responsibility and power in the resolution of ethical and deontological problems, to the practitioners of journalism than to the media businessmen, although they also stress the need for the training of journalists and media owners.

The predominant view on the self-regulation models associated with ethical codes is little ambitious from the point of view of their capacity and competence; for example, in relation to their sanctioning power. The intervention of the state to ensure the conditions for the responsible exercise of journalism is neither supported by the majority of respondents. However, only a minority think that the ethical problems cannot be solved through regulation (whether voluntary or legal), as they are issues inherent to the very nature of journalism.

These results give us a positive assessment of the “utility” of the ethical and deontological principles, which allow us to aspire to a professional safer and more dignified environment that is more conscious of its social function, avoiding a naturalistic pessimism that leads to resignation and melancholy. In general terms, this research study has shown that regardless of the platform in which news are produced, the ethical principles of journalism do not change. The idea is to adapt such basic principles as the commitment to the search for truth and the respect for human rights to the changes provoked by the technological processes that have prompted a new journalistic culture.

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5. Notes

[1] *Integrated Empirical Ethics*, as methodological choice, has produced interesting and relevant results in research on technology and users’ quality of life, and on different sub-fields of bioethics (*Health Care Ethics and Nursing Ethics*). See Bert Molewijk, Anne M. Stiggelbout, Wilma Otten, Heleen M. Dupuis and Job Kievit (2004). Empirical Data and Moral Theory: A Plea for Integrated Empirical Ethics. *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy*, 7 (1): 55-69.

[2] Of these journalists, 39.1% work in Spain, 29.9% in Italy, and 23.5% in Belgium.

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