

# The politicisation of journalism in Spain: three obstacles to the professional autonomy of journalists

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**Recommended citation:** CASERO-RIPOLLÉS, A.; GARCÍA SANTAMARÍA, J.V.; FERNÁNDEZ-BEAUMONT; J. (2015). "The politicisation of journalism in Spain: three obstacles to the professional autonomy of journalists". *Anàlisi. Quaderns de Comunicació i Cultura*, 53, págs. 95-109. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7238/a.v0i53.2622>

**Fecha de presentación:** mayo de 2015

**Fecha de aceptación:** octubre de 2015

**Fecha de publicación:** diciembre de 2015

## Abstract

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Political journalism plays a key role in current democracies. However, its functional features and dynamics change depending on the geographic context within which they are set. One of the distinctive features of the Spanish case is the high level of political commitment on the part of the media. The aim of this paper is to analyse the main problems that currently result from this high level of politicisation and, consequently, the obstacles it produces for the proper functioning of democracy. Thus, this issue is analysed in depth in terms of three fundamental aspects: soundbite journalism, the influence of press offices, and the television coverage of electoral campaigns based on the proportion of parliamentary representation.

The methodology is based on in-depth interviews conducted with a sample of 45 individuals (22 journalists, 16 political actors, and 7 spin doctors). The results show that the three obstacles defined are factors that boost politicisation. They limit journalism's traditional functions of observing and supervising politics and pave the way for political actors to control the media through interference in their productive routines. Similarly, significant differences are detected when assessing these interferences depending on the actors involved. Journalists assess these interferences negatively due to their involvement in reducing their professional autonomy. However, they recognise their inability to provide a joint response to these obstacles. Politicians deploy a double discourse. They lament how widespread these practices are but also justify their existence as a lesser evil or deflect responsibility towards journalists, whom they blame for their current presence.

**Keywords:** political journalism, political communication, Spain, politicisation.

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**Resumen.** *La politización del periodismo en España: tres obstáculos para la autonomía profesional de los periodistas*

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El periodismo político desempeña un papel clave en las democracias actuales. No obstante, sus características y dinámicas de funcionamiento cambian en función del contexto geográfico en el que se insertan. En el caso español, uno de sus rasgos distintivos es el alto nivel de compromiso político de los medios. El objetivo de este artículo es analizar los principales problemas que se derivan actualmente de ese elevado grado de politización y, en consecuencia, los obstáculos que se presentan para el correcto funcionamiento de la democracia. Para ello, se profundiza en esta cuestión a partir de tres aspectos fundamentales: el periodismo declarativo, la influencia de los gabinetes de comunicación y la cobertura televisiva en campaña electoral basada en la proporcionalidad parlamentaria.

La metodología se basa en la aplicación de entrevistas en profundidad a una muestra de 45 sujetos (22 periodistas, 16 actores políticos y 7 consultores políticos). Los resultados demuestran que los tres obstáculos definidos actúan como factor potenciador de la politización, ya que limitan las funciones tradicionales de observación y supervisión de la política operadas por el periodismo y abren las puertas al control de los medios por parte de los actores políticos mediante la interferencia en las rutinas productivas. Igualmente, se detectan diferencias significativas a la hora de valorar estas obstrucciones entre los actores implicados. Los periodistas las valoran negativamente por sus implicaciones en la reducción de su autonomía profesional, pero reconocen su incapacidad para dar una respuesta conjunta a las mismas. Por su parte, los políticos despliegan un doble discurso, lamentando la generalización de estas prácticas pero justificando también su existencia como un mal menor o desviando la responsabilidad hacia los periodistas, a quienes se culpa de su vigencia.

**Palabras clave:** periodismo político, comunicación política, España, politización.

## 1. Introduction. Political Journalism in Spain<sup>1</sup>

Political information is a basic component of the democratic process. The presence of journalism and the existence of the free media are requirements that help reinforce the vitality of a democracy, given that the media coverage of politics has an important impact at individual, institutional and social levels. Political news allows citizens to understand what is occurring in the political system, to access public debates, and to familiarise themselves with the platforms of political actors. A public agenda is established and the process of creating public opinion is begun in this manner and by predetermining collective concerns, even to the extent of influencing the decision-making process within the political system itself. For all of these reasons, political journalism plays a key role in our societies.

1. This article is part of research project CSO2010-16313, directed by Dr. Andreu Casero Ripollés (Universitat Jaume I de Castelló), funded by the Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad (the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness) of the Spanish Government as part of the National Plan I+D+i 2008-2011.

However, political journalism does not operate in the same way in all places (Albæk *et al.*, 2014). Its operative characteristics and dynamics change with regard to the necessity of the particular geographic context of its environment (Kuhn and Nielsen, 2014). Therefore, its potential contribution to democracy can vary from nation to nation. Different journalistic cultures (Hanitzsch, 2011), on one hand, and the multiple variations of political systems (political culture, electoral system, party systems, etc.) (Hallin and Mancini, 2004), on the other, explain these differences. Similarly, historical evolution leads to changes in political journalism that may generate notable differences between nations (Neveu, 2002).

Hallin and Mancini (2004) suggest the possibility of three major media-system models that determine the different ways in which political journalism is conducted. These models are the liberal, corporatist democratic and polarised pluralist models. Based on an analysis of analysing the different journalistic cultures, Hanitzsch (2011) proposes four major types of identities that define journalists: populist disseminators, detached watchdogs, critical change agents and opportunist facilitators.

Given that this article centres on an analysis of Spanish political journalism, we situate ourselves within the polarised pluralist model, according to the categorisation defined by Hallin and Mancini (2004). One of its unique traits is the high degree of political parallelism. Moreover, the literature underlines the high degree of the politicisation of political journalism in Spain (Casero-Ripollés, 2012; Van Dalen, 2012; Dader, 2012; Humanes *et al.*, 2013a; Pérez Herrero, 2011; Sampedro and Seoane, 2008).

This politicisation entails the media having major political involvement, which means that they are able to undertake intense political action, actively defending the ideological values linked with their editorial line. Thus, they can attain a high degree of influence over the general public, determining both the formation of public opinion and conditioning the decision-making process (Casero-Ripollés and López-Rabadán, 2014), while simultaneously protecting their corporate and business interests economically. As a result, the politicisation of Spanish journalism is based on both political (ideological alignments) and economic stakes (mass commercialisation and commodification).

## **2. Consequences of the journalistic politicisation of Spain**

Increased politicisation induces political parties to dominate the journalist-politician relationship, and they are heavily involved in the negotiation for media attention (Cook, 2005). In this manner, they influence and manipulate the media agenda, imposing their own topics (Humanes *et al.*, 2013). Party logic takes centre stage. Consequently, journalists are less motivated to pursue their own particular interests (Berganza *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, party dominance results from this antagonistic bipolarism (Sampedro and Seoane, 2008). The two dominant parties, the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party

(Partido Socialista Obrero Español - PSOE) and the People's Party (Partido Popular - PP), acquire and dominate the media coverage of politics in Spanish journalism. This fact grants them an omnipresent locus in political events, a greater ability to determine the agenda in the Spanish media, and a strong, centralised role in political debate (Casero-Ripollés, 2012).

The politicisation of Spanish journalism also produces a low degree of professional autonomy for journalists themselves. The origin of this phenomenon is the lack of an entrenched professional tradition, based on self-regulation, among Spanish journalists (Berganza *et al.*, 2010). This degree of connection also aligns with the predominance of political parallelism (Hallin and Mancini, 2004), which in turn facilitates the application of pressures and control mechanisms from political actors who wish to subordinate the media. At times, the lack of media autonomy appears limited due to external forces that emanate from both the political sphere and the economic sphere (Hanitzsch and Mellado, 2011). However, there are two major entities that reduce the autonomy of Spanish political journalists: press offices, on one hand, and the media companies and media organisations themselves, on the other (Casero-Ripollés *et al.*, 2014).

Furthermore, this combination of factors determines how Spanish political journalism has very little tendency towards the adversarial media or watchdog model, which is designed to elicit political accountability. Spanish journalists fill the role of populist disseminators (Hanitzsch, 2011). Following this pattern and given the task of attracting greater audience attention, the duty of journalists is to provide interesting and sensational information on politics to the general public, who are regarded as consumers. The watchdog role in Spain, when it does occur, does not seek to defend the public interest but instead a political strategy led by the media (Mazzoleni, 2012).

Van Dalen (2012: 475) has identified that the four inhibitors of professional autonomy, according to the Spanish professional journalists' own perceptions, are ranked in the following order of importance: the political pressure from within media organisations, the time and space available to produce the news, difficult access to information – imposed by the professionalisation of political communication – and, finally, the commercial pressures dictated by advertisers.

The preeminent politicisation of Spanish journalism elicits a high degree of cynicism from journalists towards politicians, which is among the highest levels of all European countries (Albæk *et al.*, 2014). In the mid-1990s, the period of collaboration between journalists and politicians broke down, having begun 20 years earlier after the return to democracy (Martínez Nicolás *et al.*, 2014). Currently, the complementary antagonist model prevails (Ortega, 2003). The increased mistrust of journalists with regard to politicians may activate a spiralling cynicism that may also generate more negative coverage of politics, with adverse effects for civic duty (Brants *et al.*, 2010). In this respect, this politicisation in Spain acts as a type of catalyst that increases the cynicism of journalists towards politics.

Similarly, this politicisation also fosters the polarisation of political information. In Spain's case, broadcast journalism – especially opinion

programs and talk shows – has been a driving force behind this phenomenon in recent years (Humanes *et al.*, 2013b). Polarisation not only means a reduction in the plurality of political news but also increased radicalism in the media.

### 3. Research questions

The literature considers politicisation as the main characteristic of Spanish political journalism. In this regard, there are many studies that analyse the impact of politicisation on media content and in journalists' attitudes. However, few empirical studies examine both the obstacles and the causes that actually lead to this high degree of politicisation and also represent a practical expression of this politicisation. This situation leads us to propose the following research question:

P1: What are the primary professional obstacles that affect Spanish political journalism from the perspective of politicisation, and how are these perceived by the actors involved?

Similarly, another question in need of answering concerns the consequences of these obstacles, in both journalistic and democratic terms. The effects of politicisation on Spanish journalism have also received scant attention in the literature. This situation gives rise to our second research question:

P2: What effects do these professional obstacles have on political journalism and on Spanish democracy?

### 4. Methodology

The aim of this article is to analyse the degree of prevalence of these obstacles and their consequences for democracy from the perspective of the actors involved. Therefore, the enquiry is conducted in the form of three professionally relevant and current phenomena that serve as obstacles to the proper practice of political journalism in Spain:

- a) The rise of soundbite journalism and the announcements through press conferences without opportunities for questions and answers (Q&A).
- b) The growing influence of political press offices.
- c) The legal mandate for fixed amounts of televised coverage during election campaigns that are proportionate with parliamentary representation.

The study of these three phenomena begins with an empirical analysis of the perceptions of the two professional groups that are directly involved:

journalists and political actors. The methodology is based on the applied technique of in-depth interviews. This study features two significant methodological contributions: the analysis is based on the perceptions of the protagonists themselves; and these perceptions include the precise perspectives of not only journalists but also political actors.

The sample consisted of a total of 45 interviewees (22 journalists, 16 political actors and 7 spin doctors) who are affiliated with the political and media systems in Spain. The in-person interviews were conducted in Spain between January and May 2012, with an approximate duration of 45 to 70 minutes. With regard to the journalists, a balanced selection was composed of professionals from the different media branches (press, radio, television, and the Internet) and from different professional levels (directors, intermediate positions and reporters). With regard to political actors, representatives of all of the different administrations (national, regional and local) were interviewed, as were representatives from the opposition parties. Finally, with regard to spin doctors, a balanced selection of government and opposition party spokespersons was selected. The interviewees from these three groups were affiliated with three autonomous regions in Spain selected by population and by political and media importance (the communities of Madrid, Catalonia, and Valencia). The interviewees' names have been withheld in response to their request to keep their identity confidential.

## 5. Results

### 5.1. *The generalisation of soundbite journalism*

The rise of one particular type of journalism – soundbite journalism (which includes resorting to the practice of planning press conferences without opportunities for Q&A) – is unanimously rated very negatively by journalists. In this case, this phenomenon is considered to be professionally pointless and regarded as a counterproductive exercise because it negates the professional functions of journalism and converts the practice into a simple mouthpiece for the political power to which it is subordinated. The journalists interviewed are very critical of this:

“I find it an affront to use mass media as a mouthpiece because the massmedia cannot be mouthpieces for anyone.” (Journalist 4)

“Press conferences without Q&A are a contradiction [...]. It's clearly a step back for journalism. The primary function of a journalist is to investigate and then to ask questions.” (Journalist 22)

With regard to the actual impact of these professional practices, reference is made to two very harmful consequences. Firstly, within the confines of the industry, it is understood that this generalisation signifies the death of

journalism, the end of its existence. This situation creates journalism without free reign to offer information, analysis or interpretation of current events, which is completely pointless in the digital age.

“I think this is the death of journalism. Soundbite journalism is something anyone can do without any credentials whatsoever. That’s not journalism, it is a manipulation of the mass media in order to generate propaganda.” (Journalist 6)

Secondly, from a broader social and public perspective, the profoundly undemocratic nature of one-sided press conferences is underscored. This disputed professional practice is utterly rejected by professionals because it represents an attack on the right to freedom of information.

“I feel press conferences without Q&A are outrageous. It’s undemocratic, and it should be stopped. And it is becoming all too common in Spain [...]. It concerns me personally, and it concerns us as a professional association,” (Journalist 15)

“Aside from being utterly boring for the reader, it is, in terms of democratic principles, a mockery. One should have the right to question, above all else in the exercise of professional journalism.” (Journalist 7)

However, despite this clear diagnosis of the problem, the journalistic profession equally criticises the absence of a uniform response from the mass media. Although many journalists insist on the need to reject negative practices such as press conferences without Q&A and many even propose boycotts as well, the reality is, in the end, they accept the practices, either for political or business reasons. Therefore, we find a certain inconsistency: although the entire journalism sector is opposed to it, ultimately everyone ends up attending and collaborating in the continued practice.

“It’s trendy to say how everyone shies away from soundbite journalism and from press conferences without Q&A, but everyone still shows up to the briefings. The truth is that this has always existed and will always exist.” (Journalist 5)

A possible explanation in business terms is offered on the part of the profession of journalism with respect to the tolerance of this practice: soundbite journalism is comfortable for professionals. Within a context in which productive routines have had their funding cut considerably, pushing this type of news product, ready-made for broadcast, is very strategic for politicians, useful for journalists and inexpensive for the industry.

“I myself do not like it. It’s harmful journalism. Sadly, it is the journalism I practice, but there are only two reporters, and we must cover the Parliament, the parties, the reactions, etc., and there aren’t enough resources for all of it.

I cannot finish a press conference and stay behind for questions, insist on or further investigate that part of the news that interests me, or simply not attend that press conference and change my topics. I don't have enough time. It's easy for both the politician and the journalist, but it weakens the level of journalism." (Journalist 11)

Politicians also have a somewhat negative opinion of these practices, particularly of press conferences without Q&A. Again, they recognise the popularity of the phenomenon and that these types of press conferences are considered absurd or an obvious professional contradiction that makes journalism irrelevant. Furthermore, politicians themselves insist on the need to eliminate or severely limit this style of journalism.

"Press conferences without Q&A are nonsense, a contradiction in terms. Without questions, it's not a press conference, they are just simple statements." (Politician 1)

"I myself don't think of this as journalism. If you hold a press conference without Q&A, you don't need to include journalists. You can make a video and send it to them. That's not journalism, it's something else." (Politician 7)

"Unfortunately, (these practices) are commonplace in Spain. Press conferences without Q&A should not be accepted by journalists." (Politician 2)

However, when one tries to delve more deeply into the origins and consequences of this phenomenon, the political actors and the spin doctors offer a very brief explanation, lacking in both context and criticism. Surprisingly, they typically do not assume any responsibility, instead attributing its prevalence to the crisis situation in the media and to lazy journalists, whom the politicians blame for this phenomenon.

"The lack of time demands the search for a headline, and that means headlines get 'manufactured' because, ultimately, that is what the journalists come for. [...]. It's the primary draw for media attention." (Press officer 3)

## *5.2. The influence of political press offices*

With regard to the actions of press offices, journalists recognise – with a certain powerlessness – the growing involvement they have had over the last few years in the sphere of political communication and, above all, their influence as a control mechanism for journalistic work.

"I believe they play an increasing key role, and even though they do a good job, it's also true that they push the speeches that interest them the most. They

even dictate which television channel they wish to use, and even the press clippings they want printed in the digital and print media.” (Journalist 1)

“Extremely influential. Press offices have been created expressly to control all information released by the Ministries, official organisations and businesses. Not only do they control the information released but also the information that comes in. This harms us journalists because we often wish to speak with a politician, with a minister, and unless we can stop them on the street, the ministry filters everything through the press office, which is evidently what controls the interview entirely.” (Journalist 4)

Specifically, due to the unique role that political press offices play, journalists denounce their ability to dictate the news agenda.

“Unfortunately, they are extreme influential. We do not stray from the agenda, the press offices dictate the agenda to us. Journalists scurry about in order to cover the agenda and don’t see beyond it.” (Journalist 5)

Politicians clearly recognise how these offices have become an essential intermediary in managing their dealings with the media overall. Their key advantages are the guarantee of systematic and professional access, which permits the development of medium-term strategies and also minimises the chances of making communication errors.

“Press offices are essential for the process of generating political information because they guarantee you systematic access to the press. They professionalise the relationship with the media, and they remove the more emotional side of it. We must set certain objectives and certain results, and the emotional burden of this interpersonal relationship tends to disappear.” (Politician 12)

When it comes time to evaluate the impact that these offices have on the media, political actors and spin doctors appear direct and sincere, and they admit to greater control. Specifically, they underscore their ability to dictate – decisively – the news agenda.

“Right now, they have a lot of power because this has become standard operating procedure. One need only look at the mass media, every day, to see how they direct the news. Of all political information, only 20-25% of it is information produced by each media outlet itself.” (Press officer 3)

“Greater [influence]. If you dictate your agenda according to press conferences, public appearances, you have an interesting topic that you push publicly to a certain degree, you are dictating the day’s agenda, and everything revolves around that agenda. We dictate a lot.” (Press officer 4)

### 5.3. *Election coverage based on parliamentary representation*

Once again, journalists strongly criticise this phenomenon, which involves assigning a fixed, daily slot on public television news programmes for political parties during the electoral campaign according to their proportional stake in Parliament. They view this phenomenon as a serious and unprofessional error that has severely negative consequences for the profession and society. In this case, they offer multiple arguments against this deep-rooted practice.

The first of these arguments contends that electoral timeslots are deeply non-informative. This situation is due to content that lacks any professional criteria but that instead is based on external and political criteria. Therefore, they generate inferior content that is bereft of both journalistic norms and standards.

“It’s an aberration imposed on journalists and on the media at large. Slots cannot be bound by political criteria or by parliamentary representation. It’s crucial that journalistic standards exist. I think it’s barbaric, a very dangerous obstacle to the work of journalists.” (Journalist 2)

According to journalists, another major argument against the proportional timeslots of electoral information is their unjust basis, given that they limit minority political access and they ignore key groups of abstaining voters.

“Parliamentary proportionality is a lie, and the D’Hondt Law is also a lie, and so any electoral campaigns based on these concepts are, consequently, also lies. In a country where participation is at 70%, it’s important to understand that many people want nothing to do with this system, and one must accept that reality accordingly. Parliamentary proportionality is very convenient, very hypocritical, and very major party-oriented. [...]. So, any electoral campaign based on those criteria is a lie.” (Journalist 10)

Finally, a third argument that rejects this obstacle of electoral information considers the informational product to be somewhat boring and, moreover, virtually incomprehensible, unattractive and useless to the audience. Political information has seen its professional interest and objectivity severely diminished, mutating into another mere propaganda tool for campaigns.

“It’s just another charade because we are always doing the same thing, with the timeslots dictated to us by some guy who has no clue about television, radio, press or the Internet. Lately, they also even give you doctored images of the candidates so that they appear more handsome. It’s terrible.” (Journalist 5)

“The electoral timeslots are rubbish, and as a customer, I think the audience simply turns off the device, and ‘on to the next’ while this type of information continues to be broadcast.” (Journalist 20)

Despite these bold arguments, when it comes time to provide a professional response to this phenomenon, journalists once again fall into a deep contradiction between their discursive approaches and their practical realities. In the interviews, we find the occasional reference to opposition to the practice from a collective perspective. However, when it comes time to stand firm, there are many more examples of resigned acceptance due to tradition or to professional realism in a context of complicated informational content, such as electoral campaigns and strong oppositional protests.

“It’s absurd. [...] It keeps happening over and over, and it’s very American... that is something that both the Federated Association of Spanish Press [Federación de Asociaciones de la Prensa de España - FAPE] and the Journalists’ Union [Unión de Periodistas] have criticised. It’s a scandal. We journalists are the ones who categorise the information, and we determine what is newsworthy and what is not.” (Journalist 15)

“I don’t like it, but I recognise that, in consolidated democracies in Europe, that proportionality has been established and regulated by law since the Second World War. I’m thinking about Germany or Italy, to give two examples.” (Journalist 8)

“During the 15-day electoral campaigns, all the parties complain because they want more television time. There has to be a way to organise this.” (Journalist 13)

Political actors evaluate the phenomenon completely differently: they minimise the scope of their involvement and, additionally, they justify the existence of these types of coverage for logistical reasons. In this respect, the majority of political actors play down the importance of this practice by underscoring its unique character, given that it affects only the public media and only during electoral time. Additionally, some defend it to attempt to avoid ideological bias in campaign news. Moreover, they insist on their own minimal actual influence on the final end results. Only in rare cases of minority parties is there any reference to the negative consequences of this media coverage.

“Perhaps it’s not the best system, but perhaps it’s the fairest method. If we were to operate according to professional journalistic criteria, it’s obvious each professional has his or her own political ideology that would lead to much more biased information beyond the current framework. The public media probably has no other option but to operate in this manner.” (Politician 11)

“But I just think the influence of political campaigns is increasingly scarce, quite scarce. When it’s time for an electoral campaign, the public already has a largely preconceived idea. There is less uncertainty than it may seem. People aren’t convinced just during the electoral campaign.” (Politician 9)

Apart from the problems indicated above, politicians insist that there is no better alternative and that this is the universally accepted option by the main political parties to justify proportional coverage during the electoral season. Thus, they indirectly recognise their own desire to control campaign information and their own inability to do so satisfactorily for all parties involved.

“It’s very forced and very artificial, but no other alternative seems to exist that is acceptable for everyone.” (Political 2)

“The electoral spaces must be regulated in some fashion. We cannot have timeslots around the clock. I don’t know if proportionality is the best idea or not, but the fact is that it is a form of organisation, and I think informative coverage of electoral campaigns must exist (regulated by law).” (Politician 7)

## 6. Conclusions

The existence and vitality of the three analysed obstacles confirm the high degree of the politicisation of Spanish journalism, demonstrated previously in the literature. Certainly, it is possible to establish a direct correlation between the main theoretical characteristics of politicisation (the control of partisan logic, the low level of professional journalistic autonomy and scarce monitoring activity or watchdog oversight) and the imposition of the professional obstacles analysed in this article. Thus, many of the restrictions placed on professional autonomy that have been suggested by recent studies (Van Dalen, 2012), especially those related to political pressure and the rise of a professional political communication industry, would explain the true effect of these obstacles. They relate to the establishment of both limitations placed on the traditional functions of checks on political power (soundbite journalism) and limitations linked with the intentions to control and to interfere with the productive routines by political sources (political press offices influence and television coverage proportional to parliamentary representation).

The results demonstrate the special coincidence between two of the three obstacles in Spanish political journalism: soundbite journalism and the influence of political press offices. Within the context of the largely negative attitude towards the three analysed phenomena, both political and media actors alike agree when they designate these two obstacles due to the extent to which they are widespread in Spain and due to their powerful influence in limiting the professional autonomy of journalists.

Similarly, the results highlight the significant differences between the perceptions of the actors involved when it comes time to examine these professional limitations. Journalists roundly criticise all of these obstacles, but they also recognise a certain lack of coordination, powerlessness, inability and resignation when it comes time to offer a collective professional response. Conversely, a two-tiered discourse predominates among political actors in

which the generalisation of these dynamics are lamented as long as they are presented with more nuance, as long as they are considered as a necessary evil, and with no one accepting any culpability whatsoever or placing the responsibility on journalists or other political actors.

The results also clearly indicate many consequences of these obstacles that may be disconcerting in both professional and democratic terms. In terms of the former, the advancement and consolidation of these limitations is symptomatic of the critical moment and the weakness running through the journalistic sector of Spain, in general, and through political journalism, in particular. Certainly, this weakness causes a significant decline in the degree of pluralistic and independent information from the Spanish media with regard to political news coverage.

At a broader democratic level, the existence of these obstacles and, consequently, the high degree of politicisation that they imply for Spanish journalism creates significant impacts. The results suggest that these obstacles that affect political journalism result in a reduction in public interest in politics. Similarly, they involve an increase in journalist mistrust towards politics and political actors, increasing their cynicism when it comes time to relate to the latter and to inform about their political activities. Consequently, the quality of democracy is also visibly affected by these obstacles that reduce the contributions of Spanish political journalism to the strength and vigour of democracy.

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