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Criticism in journalism as an accountability instrument: the opinion of Spanish journalists

Abstract

Criticism in journalism has become a core accountability instrument, especially in recent years, thanks to the Internet and Web 2.0 technology. This paper presents part of an international study of journalism ethics, focusing on Spanish journalists' relationship with criticism. The paper analyzes how they express, receive and value criticism, comparing their opinions to those of journalists in the international sample. An online survey was administered to 123 Spanish journalists, from an international sample composed of 1762 professionals. Most Spanish journalists responded that they express criticism "occasionally" or "frequently", as did their international colleagues. They especially do so through direct communication with colleagues (42.1%), even if with a lower frequency compared to the overall sample, or through online blog comments (38.8%), with a higher frequency compared to the rest of the participants. On the other hand, Spanish journalists claim to have received criticism from their supervisors (90%) and colleagues (86.6%), like the overall sample does. But they report having received a greater number of complaints than the overall sample from regulatory and self-regulatory bodies (e.g.: ombudsman 21.8%), from users/citizens (63.9%), and from the public though social media (52.9%). Finally, Spanish journalists consider the criticism they receive as less fair than does the overall sample, although they rate criticism from audience members as less unfair. The paper suggests that Spanish journalists do not employ peer criticism to the same degree as their international colleagues, but they do strongly associate the idea of transparency and accountability with their audience.

Keywords
Journalism, Accountability, Criticism, Media regulation, Media Self-regulation, Journalism practices

1. Introduction

In 1947, the Commission on Freedom of the Press (known as the Hutchins Commission after its president, Richard M. Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago) warned that press errata and omissions were ignored by the journalistic community. The commission recommended that "members of the press engage in vigorous mutual criticism" as the best solution to faulty journalistic practice, as Reese Cleghorn (1998), president of the American Journalism Review and dean of the School of Journalism at the University of Maryland, pointed out. Cleghorn echoes the concerns of the commission, stating that peer criticism is the best protection against bad journalistic practice (Cleghorn, 1998).

The conclusions reached by the Hutchins commission, which emphasized the media's social responsibility to the public, determined best practice in journalism for the second half of the 20th century. The underlying premise was (and still is) that the media play a crucial role in the health of democratic society. In keeping with the right of the citizenry to be informed, the media are thus responsible for providing information of the highest quality.

This view of journalistic responsibility sees accountability "as a requirement of the media in return for the freedom and privileges (access to information, tax reductions, etc.) that they receive" (Lauk, Harro-Loit & Väliverronen, 2014: 83) as well as MAIs (Media Accountability Instruments). *Accountability* refers to commitment on the part of the media, journalists and all participants in the communicative process to take responsibility for the quality and consequences of what is published, and to answer to society for their activity (McQuail, 2003; Fengler, 2015). It "is habitually linked to the acceptance of certain responsibilities, tasks or objectives" (Christians et al., 2009: 132), and involves the commitment on the part of journalists to professionally self-regulate, provide information in a transparent manner and promote citizen participation. To the extent that a media cultivates these professional values, it can be considered to exercise public accountability (Mauri & Ramon, 2015).

Thus accountability as a concept depends on the media's commitment to taking social responsibility for its activities, which includes accepting criticism. Media responsibility can be defined "as the general compliance of all ethical principles as well as that general attitude shown by media and journalists according to which a process of reflection as well as appropriate behaviour and applied conscience are brought into play when carrying out certain professional tasks" (Alsius, 2010: 172). The process of creating and implementing rules and sanctions and having members of the profession self-apply them is the essence of media self regulation (Fengler, 2015: 251).

This responsibility is one of the professional values that authors such as Lambeth (1986) and Cooper (1989) have defined as basic universal principles of journalism present in all journalistic cultures worldwide. Alsius (2010) groups these principles into four major categories: truth, freedom, justice and responsibility.

Media accountability systems (Bertrand, 2000) are key indicators of the existence of these professional principles; they also indicate media transparency and pluralism in a democratic state and serve as a means to voice criticism of the media. This is the case insofar as their essential role is to supervise, control, critique and study the development and quality of journalistic information; and doubly so in the current context of media crisis and consolidation (Eberwein, 2010).

A culture of accountability "requires an open and honest dialogue -in other words, sufficient feedback to journalists who take criticism seriously and constructively" (Lauk, Harro-Loit & Väliverronen, 2014: 95). In a profession that operates in many aspects in a very individualized way (Merrill, 1989), however, it is important to determine the degree to which a professional culture of constructive criticism is established, or whether, as Lambeth (1986)

claimed, journalists are resistant to any type of criticism. It is worth noting, for example, that only one European code of ethics, the Code of Ethics of the Norwegian Press, openly mentions criticism as a means of improving professional practice, in Article 1.4: "It is a press obligation to shed critical light on how the media themselves exercise their role" (Tretterud, 2008). The situation extends to the academic study of journalism: little research has studied journalistic criticism, even if Alsius (2010) has argued that it is of utmost importance that journalists take criticism seriously as an accountability instrument, in order to fulfill the professional principles and values of their respective journalistic cultures.

Given the profound changes occurring in contemporary journalism, accountability systems have changed considerably in recent years, adapting to the possibilities afforded by the Internet and Web 2.0 technology (Fengler, Eberwein, Mazzoleni et al, 2014). Traditional accountability instruments (ombudsmen, codes of ethics and letters to the editor, to name a few) are located at the professional level (Fengler, 2015: 252); they have a limited effect on actual journalistic practice and are little used among the general public (Alsius & Salgado, 2010). As Eberwein et al (2011) note, accountability efforts by individual news outlets (the organizational level) have played an increasing role since the 1970s, when media organizations started to employ ombudsmen and introduce organizational codes of ethics. However, the digital environment provides new types of transparency and information quality control, while enabling citizens to participate and comment on the quality of the media with regard to media accountability. Thus, we can observe that in the digital age, new spaces of freedom for media criticism and other media-critical activities have emerged (Fengler, 2014: 19). These spaces are turning out to be crucial in enabling the public to contribute, through critical debate, to improving information quality.

Until the present, most research on accountability instruments has focused on traditional measures such as codes of ethics (Barroso, 1984; Nordenstreng & Hannikainen, 1984), internal codes and style guides (Aznar, 1999; Alsius, 1999; García-Avilés, 1996; Pérez-Fuentes, 2004), and ombudsmen (Evers, 2010; Maciá, 2006; Starck, 2010). Very few studies, however, analyze the impact of media criticism (whether internal or external) as an aspect of accountability. In Spain, as Macià (2010: 83) pointed out, the ethical principles that journalists and communicators assume and implement have been rarely studied in depth. Also, the lack of many international or cross-national studies of this kind must be emphasized.

MediaAct, the cross-national project that produced this article, was created with the goal of contributing to scientific knowledge of journalistic ethics, media accountability and self-regulation through a cross-national study carried out in twelve European countries (Austria, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Romania, Spain, Switzerland, Holland and the United Kingdom) and two Arab Mediterranean neighbors (Tunisia and Jordan). The study analyzes the different media systems of the mentioned countries, their accountability systems and, in its latter phase, journalists' knowledge and opinions regarding several regulation and self-regulation instruments, and other topics related to journalistic practices and ethics. It also emphasizes media criticism as a form of accountability.

This paper focuses on Spanish journalists' relationship with criticism. It analyses the channels through which they express and receive criticism, discusses how they receive criticism, and compares their practices and opinions to those of journalists in the international sample in order to understand the extent to which criticism is perceived by Spanish journalists (as compared to other European journalists) to be an effective accountability instrument in promoting quality journalism.

2. Methodology

As mentioned above, the final phase of the MediaAct project included a study of the opinions of journalists in 14 countries regarding several regulation and self-regulation instruments. During this phase, the basis of this article, a strictly quantitative methodology was used. A survey of journalists' opinions regarding the effects of media accountability instruments (n=1762) was administered in the twelve European countries and the two Arab Mediterranean countries participating in MediaAct. Such an instrument presents the obvious advantage of providing a large quantity of comparable data, but also the disadvantage of not being able to explore the opinions of the survey participants more in-depth regarding, for example, the causes and reasons behind certain opinions given.

The countries in the study were chosen principally in terms of the media systems models proposed by Hallin & Mancini (2004): liberal model, democratic corporatist model, and polarized pluralist model. The liberal model (as in the UK) involves little state intervention in the media sector and a high degree of deregulation, as well as a well-developed journalistic professional culture. In the democratic corporatist model (Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Scandinavian countries) there is a high level of professionalization among journalists and while public media play a prominent role in the media landscape, political power is clearly separate from the media. On the other hand, the Mediterranean or polarized pluralist model (France, Italy and Spain) is characterized by a relatively weak professional culture, and while public media systems are present, there is a high degree of political influence in both public and private media.

Secondly, the study goes beyond Hallin and Mancini by adding three Eastern European countries (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2012: 28) in different stages of political transformation (Poland, Estonia and Romania), and two Arab Mediterranean countries, Jordan and Tunisia. The Eastern European Countries model is a transitional one observed in countries that have undergone a political transformation from dictatorship to democracy in the relatively recent past, where the media system is still adapting to the new situation (i.e., the lack of authoritarian media control) (Fengler, Eberwein, Mazzoleni et al, 2014: 13). Lastly, the Arab Mediterranean Countries model (Jordan and Tunisia) includes countries with a weak tradition of democracy and, thus, little press freedom, where, however, signs of greater openness have appeared in recent years (since the Arab Spring uprisings) (Fengler, Eberwein, Mazzoleni et al, 2014: 14).

Quota sampling was used. First, survey participants were selected from among journalists who possessed the following characteristics, according to Weischenberg, Malik & Scholl's (2006: 227) definition:

- They were working in news media (thus professionals working in public relations and/or press offices were excluded);
- They were undertaking journalistic activity (thus professionals working in technical areas or in media industry organization were excluded);
- They were working full time or earning at least half their income from journalistic work (thus freelancers were also included if at least 50% of their income came from their journalistic activity).

Furthermore, the sample was selected taking into account the different types of news media journalists worked in, according to the following categories: Daily newspaper; Weekly papers; Magazines; Public radio; Commercial radio; Public television; Commercial television; Digital communication media; News agencies.

Also, the position occupied by the professionals was taken into account, according to the following categories: Chief editor, Editor in leading position, Editor, Trainee, and Freelancer.

As for the number of participants, each country participating in the project had to justify the representativeness of its sub-sample in the country's journalistic sector, as well as in comparison with the other sub-samples.

In order to calculate the exact number of journalists needed for each country's sub-sample, first the total number of journalists in each country was determined, following the definition by Weischenberg, Malik & Scholl (2006) mentioned above. Where there was an evident lack of reliable statistical data on journalists in some of the countries analyzed, such as Spain, published scientific literature, registers of professional associations and other statistical archives were used. Furthermore, three more aspects were taken into account:

- The number of journalists who were members of a professional association,
- The number of journalists by media type,
- The number of journalists by geographical region.

After comparing the results obtained through these measures, the number of journalists was estimated for each country, and the number of participants was determined for each sub-sample. The minimum national sample size was set at 100 for those countries with a population of journalists of 15,000 or less. For those countries with a population of 15,000 to 25,000, the number of journalists surveyed was 123, as in the case of Spain. For countries with a population of 25,000 to 40,000, the number of journalists surveyed was between 183 and 196. For Germany, the country with the largest population (more than 48,000), 237 journalists were surveyed.

Since the average response rate for web-based surveys is about 20% (Nulty, 2008), and in order to achieve the minimum national sample sizes described above, about 8000 potential participants, selected in accordance with our quota sampling strategy, were sent an e-mail invitation to participate in the survey. The survey was implemented online, which permitted a reasonable cost of distribution, speedy response times, and ease of processing of the data collected. The response rates for the online survey were between 5% for Austria and 43% for Finland. At first sight, these variations can be interpreted as an indicator that the validity of the results might be limited in some of the national surveys. However, a comparison of the basic sample parameters and the socio-demographic data of the basic populations in the countries analyzed showed that any noticeable sampling bias had been avoided. Overall, the survey achieved an average response rate of 23%, which is in line with the turnout that can generally be expected for web-based surveys among well-researched populations like journalists, as mentioned above (Nulty, 2008).

As for the Spanish sub-sample (n=123), as in other countries, there was a certain degree of difficulty in establishing the population, due to the inexistence of required membership in professional associations and the lack of an official census of Spanish journalists, which prevented completely reliable data about the number of journalists from being obtained. However, an estimate was calculated, taking into account three factors: the number of journalists who were members of a professional association, the journalist media types existing in Spain (e.g., newspapers, television channels), and the aproximate number of journalists by region. In particular, for the first factor it should be mentioned that at selection time for the MediaAct sub-sample, FAPE data (Federación de Asociaciones de la Prensa de España [Federation of Press Associations in Spain]) showed 12,500 journalists associated with 45 press associations. Also, 3,500 were members of the Colegio de Periodistas de Cataluña [Catalan Association of Journalists], and 1,000 were members of the Colegio de Periodistas de Galicia [Galician Association of Journalists], while about 3000 journalists were members of a union. A final population estimate of around 25,000 journalists was made, suggesting a sub-sample of at least 100 participants (123 in the final results).

The survey's questionnaire, which was designed in collaboration with researchers in the participating countries, contained 25 questions related to several items that can

influence journalistic behavior. Journalists were asked to rate the perceived impact of various MAIs and describe their own experiences with media self-regulation.

For the sake of variety, questions using a Likert scale (from 1 to 5), items alternating with several multiple choice questions, questions allowing multiple answers and some (very few) open questions were included in the questionnaire.

This article focuses on four of the questions:

1. Q6: *I have criticized a piece of journalism myself (Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, Frequently, No answer).*

2. Q6a: *How did you voice your criticism? (Multiple answers possible):*
   Writing to or calling a colleague
   Contacting the news outlet
   Making a complaint to the Press council/media regulator
   Commenting online/via my blog
   Speaking out in public (e.g. at a conference)
   Other – please specify:

1. Q6b: *I have been criticized (please rate: never/rarely/sometimes/often/frequently) by...*
   ... My supervisors
   ... My colleagues
   ... By reference to guidelines
   ... The ombudsman/complaints officer within my news organization
   ... Our newsroom blog
   ... Our legal department
   ... Press council
   ... Regulatory authority
   ... Judge/court ruling
   ... Journalists – via journalism trade journal
   ... Journalists – via media criticism in the news media
   ... Journalists – via journalists' media blogs
   ... Satire/comedy about the media (in TV, radio, print, online)
   ... Blogs about the media, written by members of the public
   ... Members of the public using social media
   ... Academics/Media scholars
   ... NGOs/Foundations
   ... Politicians
   ... Media user(s)/citizen(s)
   ... Person(s) reported about
   ... Others – please specify:

2. Q6c: *Please rate the fairness of the complaint(s) you got from the following groups: Please use a scale from 1 (not fair at all) to 5 (very fair).*
   No answer, Doesn't apply
   Other media professionals
   Members of the public
   Advertisers
   Politicians/political groups
   Religious leaders/groups
   Scholars/journalism educators
   Others – please specify:

The data presented in this paper were analyzed with version 19 of IBM–SPSS Statistics software (significance set at <0.05). Bivariable analysis took into account variables like age, training, gender, position or job title, the type of media the journalists worked in, and

whether it was public or private. Chi-square tests, Mann-Whitney U tests and Kruskal-Wallis tests were used to verify significant relations among the variables.

3. Results

3.1. General description of the Spanish sample

The Spanish journalists interviewed represented 7% (n=123) of the total MediaAct survey sample (totaling 1762 journalists from the 14 European and Arab countries mentioned above).

Unlike the overall sample, where a majority of participants are men (61%, n=1073), the Spanish sample contained 54.5% (n=67) women and 45.5% (n=56) men. The age of participants in the Spanish sample ranged from 24 to 63, with a mean age of 37.63 and a median of 36. Nearly half of participants were young adults, under 35 years of age (45%, n= 54), and 75% (n=90) were under 45. In terms of education, most of the Spanish participants had an undergraduate degree (58.8%, n=72) or master's (31.7%, n=39). Furthermore, 79.7% (n=98) had an undergraduate degree in journalism, and 17.9% (n=22) had a journalism-related postgraduate degree. Lastly, 68.3% (n=84) of the sample reported that their training had included topics related to journalistic ethics.

As regards employment, nearly all Spanish journalists interviewed were employed full-time (91.1%, n=112); 6.5% (n=8) part-time and only 2.4% (n=3) freelance, although all reported that journalism was their sole source of income. The majority worked as "Reporter" (61%, n=75), 24.4% (n=30) as "Chief editor" and 10,6% (n=13) as "Leading editor"; the rest were Interns or freelancers (4.1%, n=5). As expected, the positions they held were related to their age (p<0.001): young adults (25-34) were most frequently "Reporters" (75%, n=39) and most of those above 55 were "Chief editors" (87.5%, n=7). As for media type, 30.9% (n=38) of participants work in daily newspapers (25.2%, n=31) or weeklies (5.7%, n=7); 25.2% (n= 31) in television, 18.7% (n=23) in radio, 15.4% (n=19) in online information media and 9.8% (n=12) in news agencies. Nearly half of the Spanish journalists reported working in politically left-oriented media (49%, n=47), 36.4% (n=35) in right-oriented media, with 14.6% (n=14) working in more centrist media. It should be noted that 22% (n=28) of the sample did not respond to this question. In terms of content area, 44.7% (n=55) reported covering only one area, 26% (n=32) covered two or three, and the rest (27%, n=34) covered between four and nine areas. Figure 1 presents the areas covered by the respondents.
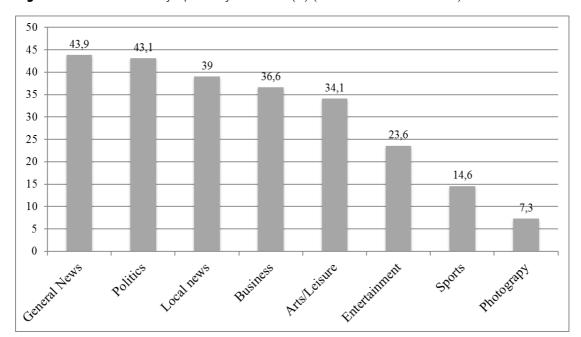
Figure 1. Areas covered by Spanish journalists (%) (Source: own elaboration)

Lastly, more than half earned less than 2000 euros monthly, with 13.8% (n=17) earning less than 1000 euros/month, 41.5% (n=51) earning 1000-1999 euros/month, and nearly a third earning 2000-3000 euros/month. Although there were no significant sex-based differences, there were differences in terms of age, as expected (p<0.001): younger journalists earn less (only one person under 35 earned more than 3000 euros/month). Unexpectedly, salaries are not related to the media-internal position held.

3.2. Do journalists express criticism?

The overall (international) sample contained a very low percentage (6.1%, n=661) of participants who had never submitted criticism, while the majority did so occasionally (38.1%, n=661) or often (23.5%, n=408). A chi-squared test revealed a non-homogeneous distribution of this variable in terms of country of origin (p<0.001), although the data in the Spanish subsample were rather similar to the sample as a whole: 4.2% (n=5) never having expressed criticism, 40.8% (n=49) doing so occasionally, and 25.8% (n=31) frequently. More remarkable are the channels that Spanish journalists use to express criticism, as compared to the rest of the participants.

3.3. Channels that journalists use to express criticism

Firstly, a comparison of the channels used by Spanish journalists and those used by the overall sample is shown in Figure 2, where certain significant differences are apparent (p<0.001).
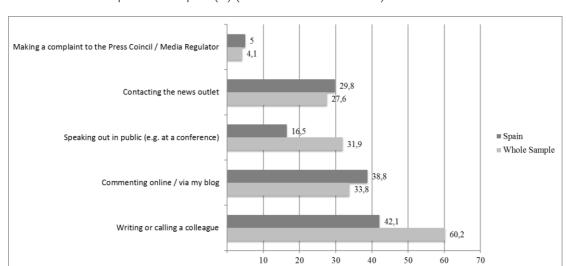
Figure 2. Channels used by journalists to express criticism: differences between the international and Spanish samples (%) (Source: own elaboration)

The most frequent channel used by journalists to express criticism in the overall sample, as well as the Spanish sub-sample, was direct communication with colleagues, although there is nearly a 20% difference between the two, 60.2% (n=1017) and 42.1% (n=51), respectively. While criticism of colleagues is the most common type among all journalists, Spain is one of the countries where it is least used. This could be due to the high importance of hierarchy in Spanish newsrooms as compared to the rest of the countries studied. As seen above, there is no direct relationship between position held and salary received, but position can still influence the professional relationship between the members of a press office. Similarly, it is noteworthy that Spanish journalists report "speaking in public" the least of any of the countries studied, with 31.9% (n=539) in the overall sample and 16.5% (n=20) in the Spanish sub-sample. This could either be due to journalists' choice not to use this channel, or perhaps to a lack of fora or spaces for debate where professionals can publicly express criticism of their colleagues or the profession at large.

This general attitude probably amounts to a way of showing respect for colleagues, although a more in-depth study of the participants' motivations, particularly those of the Spanish sub-sample, should be carried out. It should be remembered that criticism "behind closed doors" is generally better accepted by journalists than public criticism (Pettersson, 2008: 85-86). On the other hand, the Spanish participants reported using the other options more frequently: for example, 27.6%, (n=466) of the overall sample expressed criticism by "contacting the media"; 29.8% (n=36) of the Spanish sub-sample did so. It is significant that despite there being no state regulatory body in Spain, (5%, n=6) report using one to voice criticism as opposed to 4.1%, (n=65) overall for Europe. This could be due to the participants from Catalonia, Andalusia and Navarra, whose regional governments do possess an official regulatory organism (or did previously, in the case of Navarra). Also, it is reasonable to suppose that a similar regulatory authority would be well-received and effectively used in the rest of Spain, as is the case of these regions.

Another channel more frequently used in Spain than in other countries is "online blog comments", which was used by more Spanish participants (38.8%, n=47) than the overall sample (33.8%, n=571). It is the youngest journalists who most frequently use their blogs as a platform, both in the general sample (p<0.001), and the Spanish sub-sample (p=0.006).
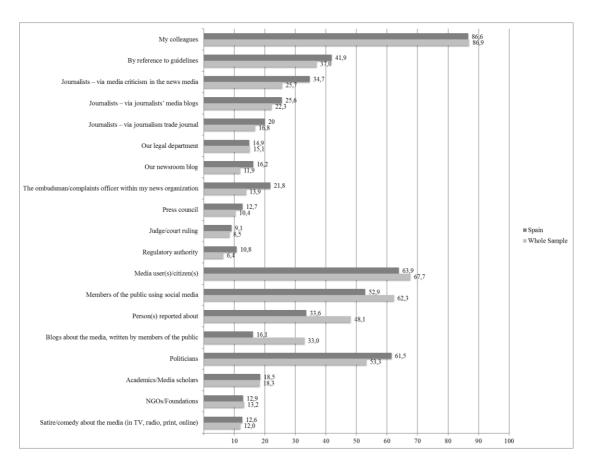
3.4. Channels used by journalists to receive criticism

The channels through which journalists receive criticism are divided into four categories:

- Internal channels (belonging to the media/profession): Our newsroom blog, Our legal department, Journalists via journalism trade journals, Journalists via journalists' media blogs, Journalists via criticism in the news media, Reference to guidelines, My colleagues, My supervisors
- Regulation/Self-regulation channels: Regulatory authority, Judge/court ruling, Press councils, Ombudsman/Complaints officer within my news organization
- Public/Audience channels: Blogs about the media written by members of the public, Members of the public using social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.), Media users/citizens, People reported about
- Channels involving other social agents: NGOs/Foundations, Satire/comedy about the media (in TV, radio, print, online), Academics/Media Scholars, Politicians.

These results show that the overall sample does not appear to receive criticism frequently, due to the high percentages of participants who had never received criticism through various channels – as high as 90% for channels such as a regulatory body or judicial authority (Figure 3). In addition, those that did receive criticism through these channels did so rarely or, (in even fewer cases) occasionally.

Figure 3. Channels through which journalists rarely receive criticism: differences between the international and Spanish samples (%) (Source: own elaboration)

The channel through which the most journalists reported having received criticism, at least rarely, was their supervisors (a fact that probably results from the production process itself, although there is no significant relationship with the position held by journalists in

the media) and from colleagues (although this does not translate into a significant relationship with the channel through which journalists express criticism, p=0.153). It should be emphasized that, 46.5% (n=786) of participants were rarely criticized by their supervisors, 37.6% (n=635) occasionally, and 46% (n=767) were rarely criticized by their colleagues, 34.7% (n=578) occasionally.

Unlike supervisors, whose criticism of journalists strongly impacts the rest of the items, regulatory and self-regulatory bodies are weakly present in criticism of journalists in the countries studied. Bivariate analysis reveals significant differences between countries of origin among participants in all channels listed (p<0.001 for all except satire/comedy (p=0.003); judge/court ruling (p= 0.008); press council (p= 0.016); politicians (p=0,018)). Spain, as Figure 3 shows, differs from other countries because Spanish journalists reported having received a greater number of complaints from these bodies than the overall sample. These are the instruments through which Spanish journalists received the most complains:

- Ombudsmen or complaints officers: 21.8% (n=26) in Spain versus 13.9% (n=212) in the overall sample
- Press councils: 12.7% (n=15) in Spain versus 10.4% (n=151) in the overall sample
- Regulatory authority: 10.8% (n=13) in Spain versus 6.4% (n=86) in the overall sample

To put these data in context, it must be remembered that despite the high results for these instruments, Spain only has 10 ombudsmen and 15 complaints offices; there is no press council at the state level (although they do exist on the regional level in the *Consell de la Informació de Catalunya*); nor is there a state-level regulatory body. To adequately interpret these results, it would be necessary to conduct in-depth interviews with the journalists, which would provide qualitative data for understanding why the Spanish journalists responded as they did for these instruments. It is also important to consider the low impact of these instruments as channels for criticism in all countries studied. This suggests the necessity of considering means to update their connection with the profession, as well as their role as authorities in European journalistic practice.

As for the influence of the audience, 65% of the sample reported receiving criticism (at least rarely) from the public. Social media serve as an important channel for receiving criticism: nearly half of participants have been criticized on social media (48.1%, n=780). Results show that Spanish journalists receive more criticism (at least rarely) from users/citizens (63.9%, n=76, against 62.3% for the overall sample) and from the public using social media (52.9%, n=63, against 48.1% for the overall sample) than the rest of the journalists in the sample. It should be pointed out that new online instruments are crucial for explaining the importance of the audience as a channel of criticism. Most young journalists report having received audience criticism through Facebook or Twitter, which suggests that digital-era users are more accustomed to criticizing journalists, and that journalists who use these platforms are more exposed and accustomed to receiving criticism. This can be helpful insofar as it allows for observation of new spaces for user criticism of journalists, new ways for users to express criticism, and an increased frequency of user criticism, as well as increased reception of criticism by journalists.

3.5. Reception of criticism

In general, the overall sample neither agrees nor disagrees with the idea that "Journalists are concerned about the criticism they get from their audience" (x=3.35; median=3; mode=3); their answers show a neutral degree of (dis)agreement (where 1="agree completely" and 5="disagree completely"). However, there are significant differences between participant countries of origin (p<0.001). Spanish journalists tend to agree more with the idea that "Journalists are concerned about the criticism they get from their audience" (x=3,48; median=4; mode=4).

Furthermore, according to most respondents, the criticism fielded from different sources (other media professionals, members of the public, advertisers, politicians, religious groups/leaders, academics/media scholars) is generally unfair, as demonstrated by the means obtained from the various listed items, all of which were under 3 (where 1=totally unfair; 5=totally fair).

Bivariate analysis shows significant differences between countries of origin (p<0.001 for all except religious groups/leaders, p=0.001), as shown in Table 1. It should be emphasized that in general, Spanish journalists consider the criticism they receive as less fair than does the overall sample (while all means are less than 3, the Spanish medians and modes are lower than those of the international sample). Unlike the overall sample, where criticism fielded from other media professionals and from academics/media scholars are considered less unfair (x=2.88 in both cases), Spanish journalists rate criticism from audience members as less unfair (x= 2.69, median=2, mode=1). Furthermore, the Spanish sub-sample considered the most unfair criticism to come from politicians (x= 1.85, median=1, mode=1), while the overall sample does so for criticism from advertisers (x=1.69). It should be noted that Spanish journalists reported the highest rate of criticism from politicians, eight percentage points above other European countries (61.5%, n=72, against 53.3%, n=873 for the overall sample), as shown in Figure 3.

Although journalists generally tend to reject criticism coming from politicians, audiences, etc., Spanish journalists, it should be noted, show greater acceptance of criticism from their audience than from politicians, academics, etc. This suggests that Spanish journalists associate the idea of transparency and accountability with their audience, not with other sources like those just mentioned. Such a case would suggest that journalists are open to critical debate about potential problems and weaknesses, and they take their audience into account, while desiring to protect their independence from other social, political and religious agents.

Table 1. Reception of criticism (means): differences between Spain and the overall sample (Source: own elaboration)

	Other media professionals	Members of the public	Advertisers	Politicians	Religious groups/leaders	Academics/Media scholars
Whole Sample	2,88	2,74	1,69	1,91	1,80	2,88
Spain	2,39	2,69	2,06	1,85	1,89	2,36

These data should be compared to the aspects towards which journalists feel responsible within their profession: journalists feel almost no responsibility toward political parties and ideas, or toward the government, while they feel somewhat responsible to other media professionals, and, as a tendency, very much so towards journalistic ethics–related aspects such as conscience, journalistic standards and the audience (Rodríguez-Martínez & Fedele, forthcoming).

4. Discussion

The static picture of Spanish journalists resulting from this study is that of young adult professionals, with specialized education in journalism and media, working full-time in different journalistic media (newspapers, radio, television, online media and news agencies), often covering several topics or areas at once, from general news and politics to

entertainment or photography, regardless of their salaries, which are generally not related to the media-internal position held.

The results of this study show that Spanish journalists care about accountability and feel responsibility towards their audience, whose critiques are considered as less unfair than those coming from other regulatory and/or social agents, including academics. Furthermore, Spanish journalists tend to include criticism – giving and receiving it – in their work routines. In fact, almost all of the Spanish journalists in the sample have expressed criticism, especially through direct communication with colleagues, if admittedly to a lesser degree than their European colleagues. Also, it is worth noting that Spanish journalists express criticism through online blog comments more than the rest of the international sample, as well as receiving more criticism from social media than the rest of the sample.

The comparative approach used in this paper, between European and Spanish journalists, also allows us to identify common problems, similarities and tendencies within these two contexts. As for journalists' intentions to safeguard the proper functioning of communications media and their peers' performance, our results permit a certain degree of optimism. It is shown that most European journalists consider criticism of their profession as a routine aspect of journalism. However, not all European countries uniformly employ peer criticism of journalists or media to the same degree. For instance, while this is commonplace in countries like Finland it is not so much the case in Spain. The hierarchical structure of newsrooms and the lack of forums or platforms for debate, where journalists could publicly express criticism of their colleagues or profession as a whole could explain Spanish journalists' difficulty expressing a more critical view of media performance. This supports previous studies (Pettersson, 2008), which demonstrated that journalists prefer criticism "behind closed doors" to public criticism.

The concept of "behind closed doors" casts doubt on the question of new free spaces for media criticism that have emerged in the digital age, where audience participation has been essential in enabling the public to contribute, through critical debate, to improving information quality. The public responsibility frame must be considered, since it can be understood as the public service focus in professional decision-making (Groenhart, 2012). Thus, the concept of criticism cannot merely be linked to the concept of self regulation, because criticism can refer not only to practices the media implements to regulate itself, but also practices undertaken by other agents, such as the audience, to safeguard media quality (and not merely information quality). Here we must invoke Bertrand's (2000) concept of feedback, which is understood as listening to the grievances of media users to stay better informed.

In this respect, it is interesting to observe the generational difference that appears surrounding the question of criticism, because the majority of young journalists have received criticism directly from their audience through social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. This suggests that one of the key elements of accountability, reader's response, is perhaps being channeled through this type of platform. Social networks both allow users to express their opinions about media-produced information, and allow journalists to become accustomed to receiving criticism and come to see the change from unidirectional to bidirectional communication as normal. The role of social media in changing this conception of criticism is in agreement with Bardoel and d'Haens (2004): media accountability has moved away from general and abstract thinking in terms of responsibility to more practical and concrete interpretation of these concepts. Additionally, young journalists' acceptance of criticism highlights the fact that accountability no longer has negative connotations (liability) but more positive ones (answerability). Media are thus able to shift emphasis from harm that may arise from media action towards answerability and non-confrontational debate and negotiation (McQuail, 2010). Comparative studies of

traditional and new accountability instruments (Fengler, Eberwein, Mazzoleni et al, 2014; Fengler et al, 2015; Mauri & Ramon, 2015) indicate that the mechanisms that appeared after the advent of the Internet and social networks have the greatest impact on journalists' behavior. In this study, it is shown how journalists themselves admit that a good part of the criticism they receive comes through these new accountability channels.

Young journalists' acceptance of audience-generated criticism through social networks is strengthened by the degree to which Spanish journalists accept audience criticism in general, as well as their rejection of criticism from politicians. This suggests that journalists are open to critical debate about possible problems and weaknesses, and that they take their audience's views into account, all while considering it necessary to maintain their independence from other social, political and religious agents.

The last relevant observation is Spanish journalists' low degree of acceptance of academic criticism. Despite the existence of scientific and professional journals that reflect critically on the state of the profession, they do not have a great impact on it. This seems to indicate the need to further develop the critical role of universities and research centers as well as the need to stimulate the creation of new, more efficient and more effective lines of communication between the academic and journalistic worlds.

5. Conclusion

The matter of criticism is presented as a key element in research on media ethics and media accountability systems. As discussed above, criticism can be considered the best solution to faulty journalistic practice, as well as one of the fundamental aspects of accountability. It can be considered one of the interactive forces that permit media to explain and occasionally give a correction and/or reason for their activities to their stakeholders (Von Krogh, 2012). It also permits observation of how journalists relate to their desire to evaluate and criticize their own activity in the profession as a whole, on the one hand, and how they respond to being the object of evaluation and criticism, on the other. To the extent that criticism, as a fundamental aspect of media accountability, allows journalistic quality to improve, it is imperative to understand what channels it uses and how professionals receive it. The concept of criticism is related to that of the media's commitment to social responsibility for their activities, because it enables them to question their own activities and those of other journalists with regard to society ; it is a means of improving professional practice. This is essential in such an individualistic profession, because it gives greater weight to the necessity of sharing and agreeing on ideas and opinions with other journalists, as well as the audience.

To conclude, criticism is increasingly coming to be seen as a powerful and current accountability instrument in journalism, which can not only improve the information quality of a media system, but also increase transparency surrounding journalistic production, clearly show the responsibility of journalists, and improve public trust in information professionals. The possibilities afforded by Web 2.0 technology, particularly, can contribute to a significant improvement in all these aspects, if the technology is used correctly by the media. Research can contribute to improving these instruments, by providing the professional sector not only the opinions of real journalists and audience members, but also guidance as to which accountability instruments to use and how to use them more effectively.

Thus, this article shows the need for further study, at both national and international levels, in order to understand how new accountability instruments such as social media are able to change journalists' perception of criticism; and to analyze the most suitable channels for promoting constructive criticism between colleagues and from the audience.

Furthermore, this article highlights certain relevant aspects of criticism and Media Accountability Systems, which provide a basis for necessary in-depth qualitative study. A structured quantitative survey using closed-ended questions, such as the one use in this study, cannot always provide enough detail on certain items, especially those related to causes and possible consequences of certain opinions expressed by participants. The question of colleague criticism, for example, should be studied qualitatively, in order to uncover and analyze reasons behind the responses given. Another question for qualitative research is the relative indifference of Spanish journalists towards the opinions of academics.

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