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**Submitted**

November 27th, 2020

**Approved**

May 3rd, 2021

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Communication & Society

ISSN 0214-0039

E ISSN 2386-7876

doi: 10.15581/003.34.4.99-115

www.communication-society.com

2021 – Vol. 34(4)

pp. 99-115

**How to cite this article:**

Herrero-Jiménez, B. & Carratalá, A.

(2021). The proceedings of

Spanish Audiovisual Councils on

discriminatory discourse.

*Communication & Society*, 34(4), 99-

115.

## The proceedings of Spanish Audiovisual Councils on discriminatory discourse

**Abstract**

Mass media, and especially television, are powerful discursive instruments, responsible for the construction of social imagery through ideologically determined content. For this reason, the creation of a regulatory body with authority over the audiovisual sector in countries without one was urged by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe in 2000. Spain is the only EU country without an audiovisual council with authority at the state level. Currently, only the Audiovisual Council of Catalonia (CAC), created in 2000, and the Audiovisual Council of Andalusia (CAA), which dates from 2004, operate in Spain. Within an environment increasingly marked by hate speech, this research analyzes the proceedings of the Andalusian and Catalan Audiovisual Councils between 2004 and 2019 as it pertains to discrimination against vulnerable groups. Every pronouncement made by both councils on potentially discriminatory discourses was retrieved (n=156). These were content analyzed by codifying, among others, the following variables: type of action, the source that motivated it, the disseminating media outlet, the evaluated content, the type of discrimination alleged, the decision taken, and the type of sanction imposed by the councils, as the case may be. The results indicate that most of the actions concerned involve discrimination against women, originate from third-party complaints and target content broadcast on public television.

**Keywords**

**Audiovisual Council, hate speech, discrimination, regulation, diversity, media ethics, media.**

### 1. Audiovisual Councils, the media, and discrimination: the current state of the issue in Spain

#### 1.1. Audiovisual Supervisory Councils and their partial development in the Spanish state

The necessity for an independent authority tasked with monitoring the audiovisual sector is widely recognized in Europe, where the majority of nations have institutions that regulate and control content broadcast on radio and television (Boix, 2017; Guichot Reina & Carrillo Donaire, 2007). Such is the case, for example, in Great Britain, France, Italy and Portugal, which boast, respectively, the Office of Communications (OFCOM), the Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel (CSA), la Autorità per le Garanzie nelle Comunicazioni (AGCOM) and the Entidade Reguladora para a Comunicação Social (ERC). The duties of these bodies, which are

characterized by their independence and technical capacity (Tornos Mas, 2007), revolve around three axes (Ramírez Alvarado, 2005): ensuring that content complies with existing legislation, granting licenses, and imposing penalties, although in practice these bodies rarely do much more than issue calls to order (Zallo, 2006). In addition, they prepare periodical reports on televisual activity and viewer complaints (Ribés Alegría, 2005).

The trajectory of these entities has been shaped by the evolution of the audiovisual sector. Once the gates to competition were opened as the audiovisual sector was liberalized, the creation of such entities was justified given that governments were not regarded as the most adequate arbiters for supervising content objectively or neutrally since they often had partial stakes in the ownership of public channels (Guichot Reina & Carrillo Donaire, 2007) and therefore had a “direct interest in the activity of the sector that they were tasked with regulating” (Tornos Mas, 2007, p. 2).

Unlike its European peers, however, Spain remains without a state-run audiovisual supervisory board, making its case unique: an inexplicable rarity within the whole of the EU (Bustamante Ramírez, 2006; Moreno Domínguez, 2015; Fernández Alonso, 2016). This “thorny” (Sopena Palomar, 2008, p. 120) and “singular” (Camps, 2009, p. 141) situation constitutes a challenge (Ramírez Alvarado, 2005) and, in terms of social communication, remains unfinished business dating from Spain’s transition to democracy (Bustamante Ramírez, 2006). In any case, Spain is an “anomaly” when compared to the most advanced societies in the world (Marzal Felici & Casero-Ripollés, 2018, p. 13). Although the 1993-1996 legislature took the first steps toward creating such bodies when the Senate formed the Commission on Televised Content (Ramírez Alvarado, 2005; Ribés Alegría, 2005), the resulting report, which recommended the creation of a Spanish audiovisual supervisory board, was not enough to galvanize the various political parties into passing the idea into law (Camps, 2009). Nor was European Council able to do so when in 2000 it urged member states to create independent regulatory bodies to monitor audiovisual content (Ramírez Alvarado, 2005). Further projects and legislative proposals also failed (Tornos Mas, 2007).

Finally, the General Audiovisual Communications Law 7/2010 of March 31 dedicated its Title V to a State Council on Audiovisual Media (CEMA), although this latter never materialized due to the lack of political consensus on the issue (Fernández Alonso, 2016). Currently, any momentum toward creating a state council has been stalled (Nogales-Bocio, Huaiquian-Billeke & Véliz-Burgos, 2020). Indeed, the articles that provided for its creation were effectively annulled with the passing of the law that, in 2013, created the National Commission on Markets and Competition (CNMC) (Tornos Mas, 2007), the new nation-wide, multi-sectorial macro-regulator tasked with controlling audiovisual content, which replaced the Commission on the Telecommunications Market (CMT). The 2017 State Pact against Gender Violence stipulates in point 50 the restoration of the CEMA in accordance with Directive 2010/13/UE.

For those who oppose the creation of an audiovisual board, the regulation of the sector is regarded as an infringement; for them, the need to safeguard freedom of speech is of paramount importance (Sopena Palomar, 2008), hence the frequent accusations of censorship levelled against these bodies. Moreover, the instrumental and partisan use made of radio and television by governing parties, together with the economic factor and lack of consensus in the sector itself (Serrano Moreno, 2016), are reason enough for putting the brakes on the creation of such regulatory bodies (Bustamante Ramírez, 2006). On the other hand, several authors have sought to remind opponents that such entities are necessary for bolstering basic citizen rights and fomenting pluralism (Sopena Palomar, 2008) and are indispensable in light of the state’s lack of response to the emergence of sensationalism within the televisual field (Ribés Alegría, 2005).

In the face of this state-wide void, some autonomous communities decided to form their own audiovisual councils, but the results were generally weak and disconnected (Labio, 2017).

These bodies, which emerged by statutory mandate within the context of a territorial and local communications problematic that proved unmanageable at a larger scale (Zallo, 2006), ensure that certain content, in particular advertising content and everything related to the protection of minors, remains within the limits of current laws (Labio, 2017).

Apart from the Supervisory Board on Audiovisual and Telecommunications of Galicia, which was launched in 1999 and which, it must be noted, is hardly a truly independent audiovisual board since it is composed of businesses, agents and entities from the sector itself (Ramírez Alvarado, 2005), six other autonomous communities have expressed interest in creating councils to monitor television and radio operating within their territories, although the results have been unequal. Those created in Madrid and Navarre, both in 2001, were dissolved in 2006 and 2011, respectively. Two other autonomous communities concerned, the Balearic Islands and the Valencian Community, approved the creation of such bodies via different laws promulgated in 2010 and 2018, but the pathway forward remains blocked in both cases. Only Catalonia and Andalusia currently boast working audiovisual supervisory councils, both of which serve as models of their kind. They are regarded as the most active, and have the greatest social and political authority, of any such organization that has thus far operated in Spain (Zallo, 2006). In these two communities, which possess the richest local, autonomous audiovisual spheres within the entire country, regional audiovisual regulators have become legitimate and widely accepted figures within the communications field (Labio, 2017).

### 1.2. *The experience of Catalanian and Andalusian Audiovisual Councils*

The Audiovisual Council of Catalonia (CAC) was the first of its kind to be created in Spain and soon became a touchstone for other communities (Ribés Alegría, 2005; Rodríguez-Martínez *et al.*, 2017). It also possesses the amplest jurisdiction and resources (Tornos Mas, 2007) as well as the longest and most exhaustive trajectory (Fernández Alonso, 2016). Although it was created by Law 8/1996 of June 5, it was only after the approval of Law 2/2000 of May 4 regarding the Audiovisual Council of Catalonia that this body became fully comparable to the most independent and most empowered councils operating on the international stage (Camps, 2009). Since then, the CAC has accrued greater responsibilities, especially those of a punitive nature, thanks to Law 22/2005 of December 29 regarding Audiovisual Communications in Catalonia, as well as by dint of its recognition as a statutory institution by means of the 2006 reform (Tornos Mas, 2007; Fernández Alonso, 2016). Among its most notable functions, it concedes licenses to radio and television operators (Pacheco Barrio, 2016) and supervises content, either *motu proprio* or via petition from legal or physical persons, appearing on media whose (regional or local) licenses it monitors. It also oversees the transmission of regional content on TVE (Fernández Alonso, 2016) and prepares reports, suggests conduct, and foment self-regulation (Tornos Mas, 2007).

Its legal authority to impose penalties has caused some sectors of the profession and society to reject its presence (Serrano Moreno, 2016), since it is argued that this power might unduly influence the ways information is presented in media (Tornos Mas, 2007). Together with accusations of censorship, there are also increasingly widespread concerns about its independence from political influence, which are related to the way its members are appointed and the body's instrumental proceedings (Labio, 2017). A study on the accords adopted between 2012 and 2014, which were passed within the context of the Catalanian independence movement, demonstrates that in the 15 cases in which dissenting votes were cast, the overwhelming majority were done so by council members appointed by parties strongly opposed to independence (Fernández Alonso, 2016).

The Audiovisual Council of Andalusia (CAA) was launched by means of Law 1/2004 of December 17. It began operations in 2005. Two years later, its organic rule and function were approved by decree (Serrano Moreno, 2016). Its responsibilities, which, since it cannot grant

licenses, are more limited than those of the CAC (Pacheco Barrio, 2016; Labio, 2017), include regulatory and control duties –by way of decisions, instructions, and recommendations– as well as consultative tasks, at the behest of private parties or by its own motion. It also possesses the authority to inspect and impose penalties (Guichot Reina & Carrillo Donaire, 2007), although the obstacles it encounters hinder its ability to do much more than direct public warnings at operators (Pérez Pérez & Fernández Morillo, 2009). Especially significant is its commitment to guaranteeing political pluralism and freedom of speech for diverse religious, cultural, and social actors, as well as ensuring respect for minorities and for the equality for women (Suárez Villegas, Zuberogoitia & Gostín Elorza, 2019).

While it is true that politically partisan tensions can be observed within this body, especially when it comes to approving reports on political pluralism (Labio, 2017), most of its proceedings, on advertising content and the protection of minors (Fernández Alonso, 2016), occasion little disagreement among its members. Some studies have scrutinized punitive proceedings against local television stations in various provinces for broadcasting content that is detrimental to the development of minors during restricted timeslots (Pacheco Barrio, 2016) or resolutions adopted in light of sexist advertising content, an issue that is present in complaints collected by CAA through its Office for the Defense of Audiences, as illustrated by the fact that 9% of the 312 claims filed between 2006 and 2008 involved the protection of women's rights (Pérez Pérez & Fernández Morillo, 2009).

### 1.3. *Media content and discriminatory discourse*

The ways in which the media unequally represent different social groups worry audiences. The instruments of self-regulation, such as the Commission on Arbitration, Complaints and Journalistic Ethics of the Federation of Associations of Journalists in Spain (FAPE), deal with this issue, as is demonstrated by the fact that 12.15% of the 107 claims received between 2005 and 2014 involved discrimination against vulnerable social groups (Serrano Moreno, 2016). Similarly, other complaints have been lodged by members of civil society, such as associations of vulnerable social groups, in response to the ways they are depicted in the media (Suárez-Villegas *et al.*, 2017). Audiovisual councils, in their hetero-regulatory role, have hardly been uninvolved in this issue. As Ramírez Alvarado (2005) has suggested, these bodies fulfil a social function by protecting the rights of minors, young people, the elderly, people with disabilities, immigrants, and society's most vulnerable groups in general, from the effects of audiovisual media, both with regard to programming and advertising.

The CAA is distinguished by its sensitivity toward discrimination against groups with special needs (Moreno Domínguez, 2007) and by its commitment to gender equality (Pérez Pérez & Fernández Morillo, 2009), in compliance with the relevant stipulations included in the Andalusian statutory regulations found in Article 217 and Law 12/2007 of November 26 for the promotion of gender equality in its Article 66. This is reflected in the Ethics Code to which the members of this council subscribe, which explicitly states both the need to combat gender inequality and the means by which to do so (Rivas-de-Roca, 2020). Likewise, Law 8/2017 of December 28, which guarantees rights, equal treatment and freedom from discrimination for the LGBTI community and their family members in Andalusia, alludes to the CAA in its articles 41.2 and 42.2, as well as in Article 15 of Law 11/2015 of October 10 to guarantee the rights of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender and intersex persons and eradicate homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in Catalonia, which presents the CAC as a guarantor of the media's compliance with the law in the area of traditional media (Carratalá & Herrero-Jiménez, 2019).

The preoccupation of these Councils with discrimination against certain social groups in the media can be observed in several ways, such as in the meetings held by CAA leaders, at the beginning of that body's mandate, with members of marginalized groups or in their organizing of the panels "Minorities and audiovisual media: the bid for diversity in the information society" in 2006 (Moreno Domínguez, 2007) and "Shared visions: a panel on

migration and audiovisual media” in 2007. Moreover, the CAA has edited ethics handbooks that address the ways immigration (2006) is depicted, eliminate gender stereotypes in advertising for toys (2014), and on how to cover disability with the requisite sensitivity (2019). For its part, the CAC has drafted codes on the mediatic treatment of different social groups, among which stand out those dealing with ways to represent immigration (2002), LGBTI persons (2017), and the gypsy community (2018), among others. It also was instrumental in organizing the Roundtable on Audiovisual Diversity in 2005.

The role of the media in reinforcing or combating the inequality (van Dijk, 1992) experienced by certain social groups includes recognizing the impact of the former on reinforcing the prejudices held by the public with respect to the “other” (Rodrigo Alsina, 2004; Israel Garzón, 2006). A few studies have investigated the role of journalistic information on the (re)production of prejudiced discourse about ethnic and religious minorities (Hussain, 2000). These studies also emphasize that the consumption of audiovisual content is often key to how audiences develop positive or negative perceptions of communities that are vulnerable due to their ethnicity (Ramasubramanian, 2011; Tukachinsky, Mastro & Yarchi, 2015) or sexual orientation (Bond & Compton, 2015).

This relation between the media and discrimination has led several independent agencies with regulatory capacities in the audiovisual field as well as certain television operators to draft policies that promote diversity and protect minorities in media content both in the United States (Worthy, 1996) and in Europe (Horsti & Hultén, 2015). In Spain, the data published annually by the Ministry of the Interior show that hate speech, transmitted by “diverse media of social diffusion with the goal of fomenting hate and prejudice and inciting violence against certain individuals” (Rodríguez Expósito, 2016, p. 2), has steadily increased since 2015, when it began to be officially recorded. These cases, which especially involve discrimination based on ideology, racism or LGBTIphobia, occurred to a large degree on the internet (45.2%) and on social networks (25.9%), although 4.8% did so on traditional media.

This study analyzes the proceedings that have been undertaken since the creation of the Andalusian and Catalan Audiovisual Councils with respect to content that presumably leads to discrimination. Considering what has been previously outlined above, we hereby propose our research questions:

- RQ1. What types of discrimination are most commonly analyzed by the Andalusian and Catalan Audiovisual Councils?
- RQ2. What types of media and discourses are most frequently acted upon by these Audiovisual Councils?
- RQ3. Do the Audiovisual Councils establish punitive and/or symbolic measures when they conclude that the content at issue leads to discrimination?
- RQ4. When acting with respect to discriminatory content, are there any differences between the Councils? Do these depend on the type of discourse, the ownership of the media at issue, or the origin of the action?
- RQ5. When dissenting votes are cast in the Councils, is it possible to discern any influence on council members with respect to those differences stemming from the political formation that proposed his/her appointment?

## 2. Methodology

To gather the sample of documents produced by the Andalusian and Catalan Councils, we downloaded all those dealing with content incurring discrimination, from the date the Councils began their duties until December of 2019. In the case of the Andalusian council, the search engine included a filter option for “discriminatory content,” whereas for the

Catalonian council the search was performed by way of key word searches<sup>1</sup>. The final sample consists of 156 documents, distributed into 35 decisions, 11 settlements, and 27 rulings made by the CAA (n=73), as well as 24 decisions, 53 settlements, and 6 judgements made by the CAC (n=83). 26% of these documents (n=41) consist of statements made by the Councils based on conclusions reached in reports and studies done under their own initiative (24 by the CAA and 17 by the CAC). Previously, 28 documents were eliminated because they did not concord with the goals of this study. In this way, in addition to compiling documents involving a single case, we also eliminated those that, in the end, did not evaluate discriminatory content.

The sample was analyzed using the methodology of content analysis. To this end, we developed a codebook for content analysis by means of which the researchers codified the following variables: the type of action performed, the source motivating it (complaints from individuals, institutions/entities, or the Council itself), the media supporting the content (televisions, radios, or websites), the ownership of the broadcast media at issue (public or private), as well its range (local, autonomic, national, or others), the discursive object of evaluation (journalistic, entertainment, audiovisual fiction, advertisement, or others), the type of discrimination studied (following the classification provided by the Report on Hate Crimes of the Ministry of the Interior), and whether the Council took a decision itself or delegated it to another body. In the former case, we codified the judgement of the Council on the requested action and potential discriminatory content, as well as, ultimately, the punitive or symbolic measures taken by the Councils, the legal documents upon which they base their assessments, and the level of consensus regarding the decision by means of dissenting votes cast (or not cast). Most of the variables were measured based on matters upon closed-ended questions, with the exception of those related to legal documents and the symbolic measurements proposed. These latter were subsequently submitted to a content analysis to establish an exhaustive classification and, ultimately, to obtain quantitative results. Lastly, a qualitative analysis was performed on individual votes cast by the Councils to explore the possibility that votes were influenced by the political appointment of Council members in those cases when the decisions and judgements made by the bodies show divergences.

The coding was performed by researchers during the months of March and April of 2020. To check the reliability of the inter-coders, a random sample of n=18 (11.54%) was chosen. Using the Cohen Kappa Index (Cohen, 1960), measured from 0 to 1, where 1 represents maximum agreement, the lowest reliability was discovered with respect to the variable “media supporting the evaluated content” (k=0,863), while many others evinced complete reliability (k=1), by which it can be concluded that the level of concordance is nearly perfect (McHugh, 2012). The statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 19).

### 3. Analysis and results

To answer our research questions, a descriptive statistical analysis was performed to determine the distribution and frequency of the results. An inferential statistical analysis was also carried out, namely the Chi-Square Test ( $\chi^2$ ), to determine the existing association between the coded categorical variables. Further, longitudinal analyses were performed to study the evolution of the data.

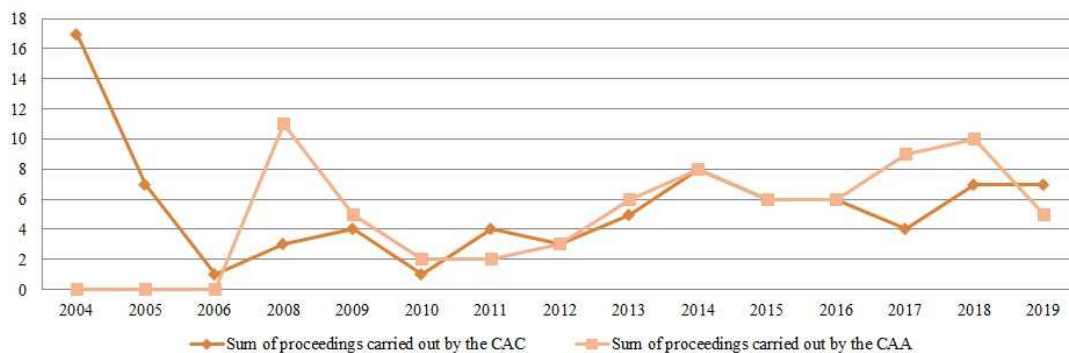
The results reveal that 53.2% of the documents belong to the CAC and 46.8% to the CAA. Figure 1 shows the quantitative evolution of the proceedings undertaken by both Councils,

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<sup>1</sup> The documents of the Audiovisual Council of Catalonia (CAC) were gathered by means of successive searches of the *Acords del CAC* section of its webpage through keywords in Catalanian related to the discriminatory categories considered in this study (gènere, sexe, LGBTI, racisme, religió, discapacitat...) [gender, sex, LGBTI, racism, religion, disability], as well as transversal concepts (discrimina\*, estereotip, odi) [discriminat\*, stereotyp\*, hat\*]. A subsequent review of all the documents published on the web platform allowed us to confirm reliability and complete the results obtained on the search engine.

where it can be observed that those undertaken by the CAC began before those of the CAA, in accordance with the dates of their creation, and that the first year (2004) saw the peak number of proceedings against discriminatory content. The curve descends to its minimum in 2006, only then to increase year by year in nearly continuous fashion. The same pattern is repeated in the case of the CAA, which generally, since it began operating, has shown greater activity in this regard than the CAC (RQ4).

**Figure 1:** Temporal evolution of proceedings according to Council.



Source: Own elaboration.

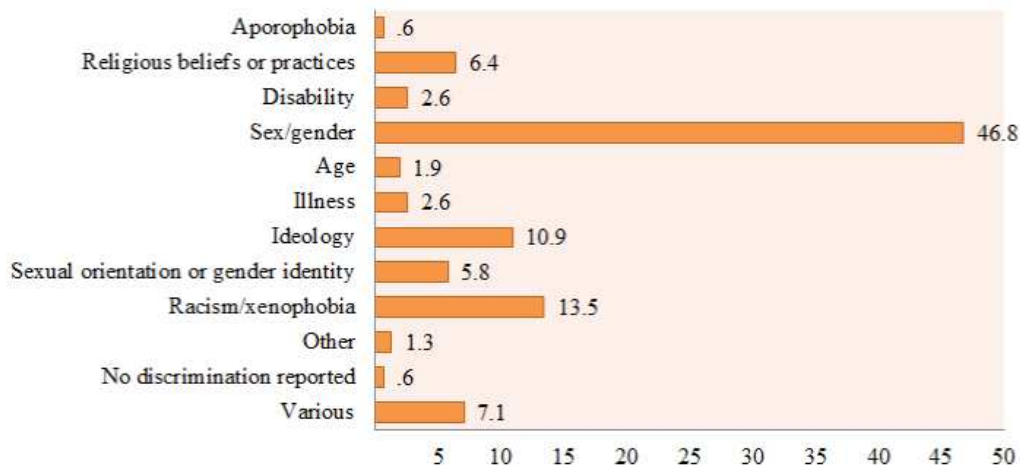
These proceedings were mainly spurred by complaints lodged by third parties (68%). Specifically, we found that 35.9% of the requests were made by individuals, 27.6% by institutions, and 4.5% by both. On the other hand, 29.5% of the cases were initiated via instruments belonging to the Councils themselves (reports or studies or official proceedings). The remaining 2.6% do not state the origin of the proceedings. Of the requests that have their origin in complaints lodged by entities or institutions, 39.5% were made by civil associations and union-based entities, 18.6% by governmental institutions, and 2.3% by clubs, while in 9.3% of the cases the entity was not identified in the documents of the Audiovisual Councils.

83.3% of the judgements involve content broadcast on television (RQ2). The rest appeared on radio (9.6%), the internet (3.2%), diverse media (1.3%), or on unspecified media (2.6%). 60% of the cases were linked to publicly owned media, while 11% were linked to both public and private media. Moreover, the areas in which this content was broadcast were mainly the autonomous communities (68%) and localities where the Councils operated, while the content emitted by national operators clocked in at 18.6%. The rest was transmitted in various areas, on television in other autonomous communities, the internet, and via satellite.

42.9% of the proceedings targeted journalistic discourses (news shows, along with discussions of current events and debates on the programs at issue) (RQ2), 23.7% entertainment content (game shows, talk shows, and non-news segments on the shows concerned), 20.5% advertisements, and 5.8% fictional content. 2.6% corresponded to various kinds of content, while 1.3% made reference to other types of media, such as videoclips.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of the frequency of alleged discrimination (RQ1), either by the claimants or within proceedings undertaken by the Councils themselves. The most common complaints were related to sex/gender (46.8%) issues, followed by racism or xenophobia (13.5%), discrimination for reasons of ideology (10.9%), religious practices or beliefs (6.4%), and sexual orientation and gender identity (5.8%).

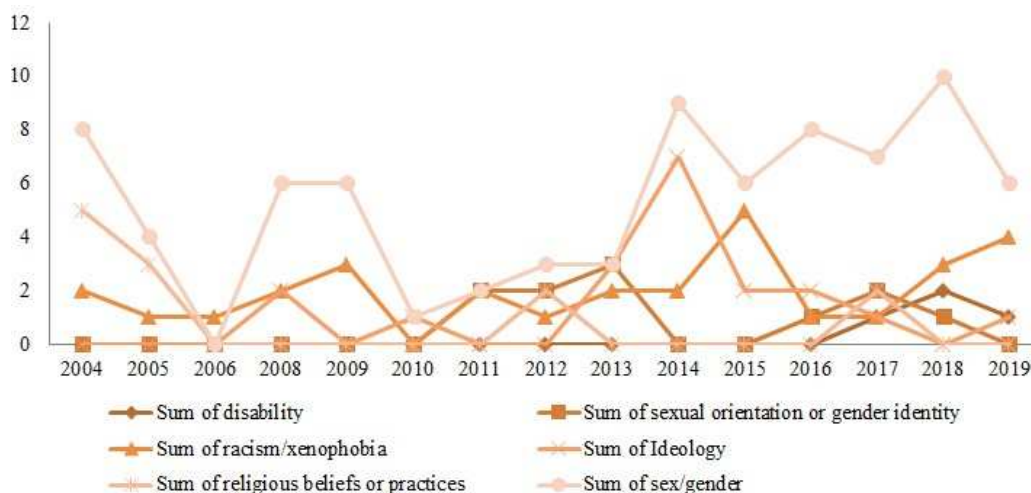
**Figure 2:** Distribution of frequencies according to type of discrimination analyzed by the Audiovisual Councils.



Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 3 shows the evolution of proceedings carried out by the Councils according to the type of discrimination concerned. It can be observed that, whereas proceedings involving discrimination based on sex/gender and racism/xenophobia remain constant across the years, the same is not true for the others. Thus, discrimination based on religious practices or beliefs appears only in certain years (2004, when it reaches its peak, along with 2005, 2012, and 2017). Discrimination based on ideology gathers strength from 2013 onwards, when it becomes a regular type; prior to this year, it appears only briefly in 2008 and 2010. Discrimination based on sexual orientation appears in 2011 and subsequently remains present across the years, whereas discrimination based on disability makes its first appearance in 2017.

**Figure 3:** Temporal evolution of proceedings according to type of discrimination analyzed by the Audiovisual Councils.



Source: Own elaboration.

Analyzing these separately, it can be observed that, in the case of discrimination based on sex/gender (n=78), 83.3% of the cases involve the female gender, 1.3% the male gender, and 15.4% both genders. As for racism/xenophobia (n=30), 23.3% of the cases deal with the gypsy ethnicity and 13.3% with people of Spanish origin. This same percentage holds in the cases of



people discriminated against because of their African or Asiatic origins. 6.7% of the cases involve people from Eastern Europe, 3.3% from Andalusia, and 3.3% from Catalonia.

As for discrimination based on ideology (n=19), what we have called “constitutionalism”<sup>2</sup> accounts for 57.9% of the case total, while 26.3% involves discrimination based on peripheral nationalism within Spain. Only 1.2% of the cases deal with the extreme left–extreme right spectrum. Further, 58.3% of the cases involving discrimination based on religious practices or beliefs (n=12) deal with Christianity and 25% with Islam. The former are concentrated between the years 2004 and 2005, the latter from 2012 onward. Lastly, in cases of discrimination involving sexual orientation or gender identity (n=11), 63.6% involve homosexuality, 9.1% transsexuality, and 27.3% various categories.

The relation between the source of the proceeding and the alleged discrimination (RQ4) turned out to be statistically significant [ $\chi^2$  (8, N(138)=29.554;  $p<0.001$ ]. The adjusted standardized residuals indicate that the Councils more often initiate proceedings involving discrimination based on sex/gender ( $|4|>2.58$ ) and disability ( $|1.9|>1.65$ ), although the latter was only a trend. Third parties had a greater probability of lodging complaints related to religious beliefs and practices ( $|2.2|>1.96$ ) or ideology ( $|2.8|>2.58$ ). The Cramer’s V estimate confirms that the value of this relation is average ( $|V|=0.463$ ).

Likewise, the relation between the typology of the discrimination and the acting Council (RQ4) also turns out to be statistically significant [ $\chi^2$  (8, N(142)=30.79;  $p<0.001$ ]. The CAC more frequently issues judgements on content dealing with religious beliefs or practices ( $|2.6|>2.58$ ) and ideology ( $|2.8|>2.58$ ), whereas the CAA does so more often on that dealing with disability ( $|2.0|>1.96$ ), the sex/gender binary ( $|2.5|>1.96$ ), or illness ( $|2.0|>1.96$ ). The other types of discrimination have the same probability of being reviewed in both Councils. The Cramer’s V estimate confirms that the value of this relation is average ( $|V|=0.463$ ).

In general, the Councils reach judgements without any discrepancies (85.3%), but in 14.7% of the cases there were individual votes. There are no differences between Councils in this respect (RQ4), but when it comes to the type of discrimination studied [ $\chi^2$  (8, N(142)=23.482;  $p<0.01$ ] there are. Specifically, the probability of individual votes being cast is greater when the Councils are faced with cases of discrimination linked to ideology ( $|4.7|>2.58$ ) or illnesses ( $|2.0|>1.96$ ). The Cramer’s V estimate confirms that the value of this relation is average ( $|V|=0.407$ ).

Table 1 shows the distribution of individual votes, divided by Council and council members, when these diverge from the majority (RQ5)<sup>3</sup>. In the Catalan Audiovisual Council, the case of Daniel Sirera, who was proposed by the PP, is especially notable, although the political party in question reached an agreement with the CiU to support each other’s their candidates mutually. Sirera participated in 90% of the dissenting votes, above all in cases in which settlements were reached involving discrimination based on ideology. As for the Andalusian Audiovisual Council, particularly noteworthy are the cases of three members who have taken part in most of the disagreements. These are Carmen Elías, Carlos del Barco and José María Arenzana, each of whom was proposed by the PP. These members mainly opposed resolutions involving discrimination based on sex/gender.

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<sup>2</sup> Constitutionalism, as it is understood in this study, alludes to the school of political thought that, when faced with the emergence of independence projects in certain Spanish territories, relies on the Constitution of 1978, even though it is open to changing it, and is therefore against the independence of autonomic communities without holding referendums with sufficient legal guarantees.

<sup>3</sup> On occasion, the council members also cast individual votes to reaffirm the decision taken by the Council, to explain their vote for the agreement reached, or even to show that they are in favour of adopting stronger measures. These cases do not appear in the table for reasons of clarity, in light of the fact that those which might reveal certain levels of interference in the functioning of the Councils, due to system by which their own members are elected, are those that involve discrepancies with final judgements. Likewise, the percentage of individual votes of each member only refers to the total number of actions in which these votes express abstention or are against the agreement adopted by the Council.

**Table 1:** Distribution of individual votes cast by the council members of the CAC and the CAA.

Council	Council Member	Period of time	Proposed by	Number of dissenting votes	Type of discrimination	Direction of vote
Audiovisual Council of Catalonia	Daniel Sirera Bellés	From 2012	PP and CiU	9 (90%)	Ideology (6) Racism/Xenophobia + age Racism/Xenophobia + ideology Racism/xenophobia	Nay
	Carme Figueras i Siñol	From 2010	PSC-CpC	4 (40%)	Ideology (4)	Nay
	Eva Parera i ESCRIBS	2014-2019	CiU and ERC	3 (30%)	Ideology (3)	Nay
Audiovisual Council of Andalusia	Carmen Elías Iglesias	2005-2018	PP	9 (81.81%)	Based on sex/gender (7) Racism/xenophobia (1) Ideology (1)	Nay Abstained Nay
	José María Arenzana Seisdedos	2005-2018	PA (2005-2010) PP (2010-2018)	8 (72.72%)	Based on sex/gender (6) Racism/xenophobia (1) Ideology (1)	Nay Abstained Nay
	Carlos del Barco Galván	2005-2010	PP	6 (54.54%)	Based on sex/gender (4) Racism/xenophobia (1) Ideology (1)	Nay Abstained Nay
	Jaime Bretón Besnier	2005-2010	PP	1 (9.09%)	Based on sex/gender	Nay
	Francisco Cervantes Bolaños	2005-2018	PSOE	1 (9.09%)	Illness	Abstained
	Cristina Cruces Roldán	2005-2018	PSOE	1 (9.09%)	Illness	Abstained
	Mercedes de Pablos Candón	2005-2010	PSOE	1 (9.09%)	Illness	Abstained
	María Luisa Pérez Pérez	2005-2018	PSOE	1 (9.09%)	Illness	Abstained
	Carmen Fernández Morillo	2005-2018	PSOE	1 (9.09%)	Illness	Abstained

Source: Own elaboration.

On the other hand, the Councils found that 18.6% of the cases they reviewed were judged outside their purview and the claims forwarded to state bodies. Among those resolved by the councils themselves (n=127), 57.5% were accepted, while 42.5% of the complaints were rejected. These decisions are statistically correlated with the type of discourse being reviewed [ $X^2(3, N(117)=14.150; p<0.01)$ ] (PI4). Thus, proceedings undertaken involving journalistic discourses were accepted more frequently ( $|3.7|>2.58$ ), whereas those involving advertising ( $|-2.0|<-1.96$ ) were less likely to be accepted.

Likewise, the outcomes of the proceedings were also related to which Council was acting [ $X^2(1, N(127)=4.413; p<0.05)$ ] (RQ4). Specifically, the CAA ( $|2.1|>1.96$ ) more frequently evaluated cases positively than did the CAC ( $|-2.1|<-1.96$ ). The phi estimate shows that, although significant, this relation is weak ( $|\phi|=0.186$ ).

The coding of the documents revealed that the Councils often vote on matters of discrimination, although they then shelve the complaints or delegate the process to other bodies. Only in 5.8% of the cases are the judgements on discrimination inconclusive and the decision is delegated to another body. The Councils hold that discrimination exists in 55.8% of

the cases concerned and that it does not in 32.1% of them. This suggests that the Councils believe that discrimination exists in content more frequently ( $n=87$ ) than they act on claims ( $n=73$ ). The relation between the judgement that discrimination exists and the type of discourse or Council concerned was not significant (RQ4), but trends with respect to the type of ownership of the media at issue [ $X^2(1, N(118))=3.196; p=0.074$ ]. Specifically, the content found to be discriminatory was more frequently transmitted by private media ( $|1.8|>1.65$ ) than public media ( $|-1.8|<-1.65$ ). The phi estimate shows that the underlying relation is weak ( $|\theta|=0.165$ ).

Even when the Councils find that content is discriminatory, they never impose penalties (RQ3). When they take measures (78.2%), these turn out to be of a mainly symbolic nature. Even in the 26% of cases in which it is assessed that there is no discrimination, mainly symbolic judgements are made. Among these, the most commonly made recommendation to distributors is to avoid stereotypical, stigmatizing or discriminatory content (37.3%)<sup>4</sup>. In 21.7% of the cases, they demand that their recommendations and existing ethical codes are applied, whereas in 16.9% they request that the media at issue take extra caution when dealing with sensitive topics. Likewise, in 16.9% of the cases, they remind the media of its obligation to broadcast egalitarian content, or at least recommend that it broadcast this type of content, while in 12% they warn of the need to establish or review laws or ethical codes regulating the content being broadcast.

With respect to the laws upon which the Councils are founded allowing them to rule on discriminatory content, it can be observed that in the majority of cases autonomous regulations are used exclusively (42.9%), while resolutions backed by national (6.4%) or supranational laws (0.6%) are less frequently drawn upon. Habitually, moreover, both Councils use both autonomous and national laws in conjunction (25%), along with autonomous, national and supranational ones (12.8%).

#### 4. Discussion

The results of this research point to some factors that should be interpreted in light of the Councils' own mechanisms, the context in which they carry out their duties, and previous work done on this object of study, about which the present research has found some connections. In the first place, the data raises questions about why there is a greater chance that content of a possibly discriminatory character is submitted for review when it comes to specific types of media and content. As has already been indicated, most proceedings undertaken by the Councils arise from third-party complaints and pertain to television, especially public television, which may suggest that the public demands greater responsibility from public media than it does from private media. The content found in the former, moreover, tends to be less discriminatory than that which is broadcast by privately owned media, which would indicate less commitment from private operators when it comes to the adequate treatment of matters of diversity.

The findings also indicate that content of a journalistic character is more frequently reviewed, which may suggest that the profession's own self-regulatory mechanisms are unable to control content of a discriminatory content, given that the Councils are so often required to intervene in response to these types of messages. The complaints and claims involving such messages are, moreover, also those that are the least frequently dismissed by the Councils, which suggests that ethical norms on equality are more well-established when it comes to news and information than for fictional content, advertising, and entertainment. In fact, in the 18.52% of occasions wherein claims were dismissed, the Councils alleged that the discriminatory content's appearance within humoristic, parodic, and satirical contexts

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<sup>4</sup> The Councils often take more than one symbolic measure. In such cases, the coding options were not exclusionary, which is why the addition of these percentages does not amount to 100%.

put a limit on regulatory action<sup>5</sup>. The relative lack of attention paid to content on the internet (3.2%) stands in contrast, however, with the importance that this form of media has in the diffusion of hate speech and suggests that authorities need to tackle with greater force content disseminated online.

The fact that, as the results reveal, the most frequent pronouncements made by the Councils revolve around the axis of sex/gender, and that the reviews leading to them were launched primarily by their own initiative, indicates their heightened commitment to gender equality, especially in the case of the CAA, which confirms previous research on the topic (Pérez Pérez & Fernández Morillo, 2009). Their predisposition to monitor and investigate discriminatory content involving gender is related to the creation in recent years of an autonomic but also state legislative apparatus that focuses on the media as a principal actor, among others, in transmitting egalitarian images of men and women, as stipulated by Title 3 of Organic Law 3/2007, of March 22, on the equality of men and women, which specifically refers to equality and the media.

However, the Councils do not similarly monitor other forms of hate speech. Specifically, in cases of discrimination based on sexual orientation, the task of lodging complaints with the Councils falls mainly to private individuals. Among the reports filed by the Councils themselves, only one focuses on this issue throughout all the years examined here. This latter was proposed by the CAC in 2017 and had as its goal the analysis of the presence on the internet of content that could be interpreted as justifying homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia. The absence of state legislation protecting LGBTI people from discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity (Carratalá & Herrero, 2019) may be taking momentum away from the struggle against this type of hate speech in the media, despite the fact that, as the data from the Annual Report on Hate Crimes filed by the Ministry of the Interior (2019) reveals, this is the third most commonly reported type, only outpaced by that based on ideology or racism.

As the results demonstrate, complaints about discrimination based on sexual orientation only began appearing in 2011, which shows that proceedings carried out by the Councils evolve jointly with society, since it was not until 2014 that autonomic laws were passed against LGBTIphobia. This same thing is true when it comes to discrimination based on religious practices or beliefs, the focus of which has shifted over the years from early complaints against discrimination based on Christian beliefs and practice in the period 2004-2005, during which the neo-con movement with its strong Catholic affiliations was reanimated and denounced persecution by the socialist government (Carratalá, 2013), to claims involving discrimination against Muslims, which were concurrent with the rise in recent years of “low intensity” Islamophobia in the media and on social networks (Plataforma Ciudadana contra la Islamofobia, 2018, p. 17).

The same pattern can be discerned in the content examined by the Councils involving possible discrimination based on ideology, which is generally initiated by third parties and is most commonly found in connection with the CAC. These gained ground beginning in 2013, when the Catalanian Parliament approved the Declaration of Sovereignty and Right to Decide for the Catalanian People, which was subsequently repealed by the Constitutional Court. This may explain why most of the reported complaints make no reference to the left-right political spectrum, but rather allude to matters related to peripheric nationalism within Spain, and above all to constitutionalism, discrimination against which is the most frequently denounced type within the category of ideology. The results confirm that, in cases involving this type of discrimination, the Councils reveal themselves to be especially divided in their decisions, as

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<sup>5</sup> For example, the Accord 11/2015 of February 4 adopted by CAC, alludes to the 2009 CAC document *Los límites del humor y de la sátira política en la televisión: elementos para la reflexión* in which the Council indicates that humoristic sketches ask their audiences to respond actively to their messages, a reading between the lines that allows for jokes to be decoupled from their literal meaning, based on the understanding that their end is humorous.

is shown in the greater number of individual votes. This corroborates earlier research (Fernández Alonso, 2016) which observed that, in the case of the CAC, these dissenting votes were cast by council members appointed by constitutionalist parties.

As the results reveal, individual votes were more likely cast when it came to discrimination based on ideology, above all in the Catalanian body. Likewise, the CAC often finds it difficult to express itself unanimously when evaluating media content susceptible to interpretation as discriminatory against political positions against or for independence. In this latter case, the council members proposed by constitutionalist parties typically do not find such content discriminatory, while in those cases involving arguments claiming that the political position being discriminated against is in favour of constitutionalism, those same members, a minority on the Council, diverge from the majority opinion due to their belief that this type of discrimination is indeed observable.

Nevertheless, these individual votes are also present in documents referring to other types of discrimination, such as those involving sex/gender. Thus, a qualitative reading of dissenting votes cast by the three council members of the CAA that diverge most notably from the decisions of the majority on this topic, all of which were proposed by the PP, shows that those members believe that at issue is what they call a gender bias, much closer to egalitarianism than true equality, and they further claim that an excessive amount of resources is being devoted to matters involving gender<sup>6</sup>. Equally noteworthy is the argument generated by Decision 45/2017 of June 21 in the CAA over the representation of men and women on the news broadcast on public television in Andalusia, in which the Andalusian Council shows greater concern about the poorly evolving representation of women in news programs broadcast on public television and, especially, the scant participation of women as experts therein. Dissenting votes on this decision, which argue that gender representation on the news in reality is a reflection of society, were cast by two council members proposed by conservative parties.

Hence, the analysis of dissenting votes appears to point to a need to depoliticize these Audiovisual Councils, as argues Labio (2017) when he claims that one of the main problems affecting these bodies is the system by means of which council member are chosen according to the partisan quotas required by autonomic parliaments. Currently, the members of the Audiovisual Councils are appointed by parliamentary groups, according to their political representation, for a maximum period of six years in the Catalanian parliament, and in the Andalusian, with the same duration as the legislature, with the possibility of renewal. Thus, the origin of the apparent lack of political independence lies in the proposal process, which is in the purview of parliamentary groups. Thus, loss of confidence among the parliamentary groups proposing council members might lead to the removal of the latter, as happened to the first president of the CAA (Lucio, 2008).

On the other hand, it is especially noteworthy that the Councils judge discriminatory matters even when complaints are rejected –which indicates that the current regulations lack sufficient instruments by which regulatory entities can act against media-driven generators of discrimination– or are delegated to another body overseeing state-level broadcast media, currently the CNMC, given the cited absence of a state council. Still, judging is not the same as penalizing, a step that the Councils, not even the CAC, which has greater powers (Tornos Mas, 2007), have yet to take in these matters, revealing their weak punitive authority, as has been pointed out by numerous authors (Zallo, 2006). Future research into this topic should tackle the resolutions and penalties imposed by the CNMC with respect to the issue of discrimination. It is especially revealing that even in 12% of the cases, the Councils claim the need to establish or update laws or ethical codes to regulate content, given that as Pérez Pérez

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<sup>6</sup> These opinions can be found in Resolutions 6/2008, 10/2008, 4/2010 and in Decision 39/2016 of the Audiovisual Council of Andalusia.

and Fernández Morillo (2009) have warned, the absence of clear criteria has paralyzed economic sanctions. The proliferation of autonomic laws on discrimination in its different forms as well as the absence of clear state regulation on the limits of what can be broadcast –which has its correlate in the diversity of laws upon which the Councils base their decisions– may be understood as one of the things preventing them from carrying out one of their key duties.

## 5. Conclusions

The investigation carried out here has revealed the nature of proceedings undertaken by the Catalanian and Andalusian Audiovisual Councils with respect to content of a presumably discriminatory nature. The analysis of documents emitted by both bodies between 2004 and 2019 show, in the first place, a progressive increase in the proceedings of both Councils dealing with this matter throughout the period studied, with the CAA showing greater activity in this regard in the years examined.

The data obtained indicate, moreover, that discrimination based on sex/gender is by far the type which both Councils analyze to a greater extent throughout the entire time period examined. On the other hand, reviews of other discriminatory phenomena are concentrated within specific periods and show great irregularity throughout the 15 years examined. Some forms of discrimination identified by state institutions in their role as watchdogs against hate crimes in Spain, such as those involving aporophobia, agism or ableism, were barely examined by these Audiovisual Councils.

The analysis of the results allows one to identify with clarity the type of discourse that is most often the object of analysis for the CAC and the CAA because it constitutes a sample of discriminatory expression: the most common types of cases are journalistic in nature and are broadcast on autonomic, public television stations. By contrast, the relatively low number of proceedings by both Councils on possible discriminatory content transmitted on the internet or by means of formats linked to audiovisual fiction, which are rarely objects of analysis, is revealing.

On the other hand, despite the fact that in over half of the cases analyzed the Councils concluded that there was indeed observable discriminatory content against certain segments of the population, our investigation reveals that the measures taken were mainly symbolic in nature and usually amounted to recommendations and/or reminders about the need to take greater caution and responsibility when approaching certain topics or dealing with certain social groups. The bodies studied never penalized media transmitting content that they deemed discriminatory.

Lastly, it should be pointed out that our comparative analysis of both Councils reveals differences between them; to wit, the CAC focuses more often on discriminatory expression against religious practices/beliefs and ideology, while the CAA more often reviews messages with possible discriminatory content targeting disability, sex/gender and illness.

Although the autonomic character of the Councils analyzed may be considered a limitation with respect to the general relevance of the results, the fact that the CAC and the CAA are the only two Audiovisual Councils operating in Spain, and that they are so widely accepted after fulfilling their duties for so many years, makes these conclusions a contribution to the scientific study of how media, discriminatory discourse, and regulations on communications are related to each other. Moreover, the most notable findings of these bodies might serve as a springboard for future studies on the work of those Audiovisual Councils currently approved by law but not yet active, among them the CEMA, whose proceedings might be compared to the CAC and the CAA. Likewise, it would be interesting to contrast the findings of the current study with those on entities and institutions dedicated to self-regulation and media responsibility, such as those on ethical commissions linked to professional organizations as well as such figures as press ombudsmen. Knowing how

discrimination articulated in the media is reflected and judged is essential in societies that are subject to clear manifestations of inequality and crisscrossed by networks of channels and discourses that increase in complexity with each passing day.

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