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A disconnect in media accountability: Spanish journalists' and citizens' perceptions of established and innovative instruments at the organizational level

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In the current media landscape, accountability can be promoted through a wide range of established and innovative instruments. Focusing on the Spanish context, this article examines journalists' perceptions of in-house accountability instrument effectiveness and analyses citizens' knowledge and understanding of these mechanisms. A mixed-methods approach was employed: an online survey was administered to Spanish journalists (N = 228), and six citizen focus groups (38 participants in total) were established in several regions of Spain (Andalusia, Basque Country, Catalonia, Galicia, Madrid and Valencia). Findings showed that journalists' evaluation of media accountability instruments is remarkably limited, scoring 5.82 out of 10 points in the highest case. From the citizens' perspective, the overwhelming lack of visibility and relative distrust towards these

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instruments are revealed. This double disconnect from accountability brings to light the need to rethink and reinvigorate the existing instruments so they can effectively contribute to the goal of rebuilding trust in journalism.

Keywords: media accountability; organizational level; journalism; Spain; journalists; citizens

Introduction

In the current cluttered and fluid media landscape that is characterized by a structural change, fierce competition, financial decline of legacy companies and journalism legitimacy crises (Serazio 2019; Waisbord 2019), media organizations should establish ethics and accountability as core objectives (Christians et al. 2009). From a normative standpoint, the preservation of ethical standards should be at the centre of the community of practice in journalism in a multiplatform scenario defined by myriad intertwined challenges that influence news quality. Among them, the discussion should focus on the hyper-acceleration of news cycles (Zelizer 2018), 'greater demands in terms of publishing platforms, technology, content and workloads' (English 2016: 1002), prioritization of metrics (Ferruci 2020) and expansion of practices linked to news commodification and tabloidization (Conboy 2014), such as clickbait, fake news and sponsored content (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Broersma 2019).

Despite being 'caught in a whirlwind of changes' (Neveu 2019: 198), journalism is not a game without rules (Fengler et al. 2014). As Karmasin et al. (2014: 246) highlighted, 'media enterprises are mainly corporate citizens, but to become good corporate citizens the balance between the ethical, democratic and economic performances must become a core element of their business as well as their publishing strategies'. Thus, accountability towards society overall (Harro-Loit 2015) is deemed as exceedingly important. According to McQuail (2003: 19), accountable communication occurs when professionals 'take responsibility for the quality and consequences of their publication, orient themselves to audiences and others affected, and respond to their expectations and those of the wider society'.

Media accountability: Essential values and instruments

To maintain accountability, media companies must consider three essential values: transparency, self-regulation and public participation (Ramon-Vegas et al. 2016). First, transparency refers to the media's requirement to disseminate corporate information about themselves, which allows audiences to assess their principles and editorial criteria as well as their structure, ownership and financial circumstances (Heikkilä et al. 2012). Concurrently, transparency refers to the media's responsibility to explain the editorial processes and news practices as well (Carlson 2019; Diakopoulos and

Koliska 2017). Providing an account of the strategic decisions underlying content production is essential in the contemporary 'fluid and commercially volatile context' (Hutchins and Boyle 2017: 496).

Second, we understand self-regulation as the norms or codes of conduct that media organizations establish as a commitment to audiences in order to maintain responsibility (Puppis 2009). According to the normative theories of the media, ethical principles 'cannot be legislated or compelled, but must be driven by deeper moral purposes and must arise primarily out of journalistic self-organization and self-activity' (Duncan 2014: 171). Self-regulation is argued to be a guarantee against external interference from governments and other actors (Evers 2012).

Finally, participation refers to the formulas that help establish a direct contact with citizens, allowing them to actively engage in the processes of journalistic creation, revision and criticism of information (Eberwein et al. 2011). Following an answerability model to ethics (McQuail 1997), media organizations can leverage technological advances to facilitate users' participation through myriad platforms. By expressing their thoughts, values and expectations, audiences can play a transformative role and become co-responsible in the task of holding media accountable (Culver 2017).

These three dimensions can be promoted 'through a mix of various practices with an implicit understanding that if journalism does not hold itself accountable, it will lose credibility and its ability to foster democracy' (Ferruci 2019: 290). Bertrand (2018) refers to media accountability instruments (MAIs) as non-state mechanisms (not controlled by governments but promoted by companies, journalists, organizations and citizens) whose main objective is to ensure that the media fulfils their established responsibilities and checks the quality of their output.

Different classifications have been used to categorize MAIs. Eberwein et al. (2011) distinguish between established and innovative instruments. They also identify MAIs produced on the individual, professional, organizational and extramedia levels. In this article, we place our focus on the MAIs created at the organizational level, that is, originated within newsrooms and news companies. According to the organizational approach to ethics, media companies are conceived 'as moral agents, and therefore, as subjects with ethical obligations and responsibilities' (Luengo et al. 2017: 1146). As the Resolution 2066 of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly (2015) highlights in its Article 10:

> Media outlets should play a predominant role in defining and upholding the professional standards of their staff as well as those contributing to their media content. In this context, corporate codes of ethics and media ombudspersons should be established by media outlets, as well as mechanisms for complaints or other reactions by their readers, listeners or viewers with regard to compliance with such corporate codes.

Most academic studies on accountability instruments at the organizational level have focused on examining traditional tools, such as ethical codes and in-house stylebooks (Himelboim and Limor 2011; Roberts 2012; Wilkins and Brenner 2004). Previous studies have extensively reported on the general traits of letters to the editor as a classic instrument of public participation (Raeymaeckers 2005; Torres da Silva 2012), along with the problematic legitimation of four rules – relevance, entertainment, brevity and authority – that influence their selection but often restrict the variety of voices at play (Wahl-Jorgensen 2002). The 'not yet fully exploited' potential of media criticism in mass media (Fengler 2012: 827) has also been outlined. According to research, journalistic performance is treated rather superficially (Alsius 2018), and the risk of 'intentionally or unintentionally introducing a positive spin' (Spiller et al. 2016: 155) in reporting is noteworthy.

A significant body of scholarly literature has focused on the value and functions of ombudsmen, which include 'opening a window on the inner working of news organizations' (Mayes 2004: 69), handling readers' 'complaints, questions or remarks about the content' (van Dalen and Deuze 2006: 461) and providing 'suggestions for how practice could be changed, and by whom' (Nolan and Majoribanks 2011: 13). Despite the expansion of ombudsmen blogs in the last decade, recent studies have highlighted how the public role of editors is dwindling at a rapidly increasing pace. Major organizations such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and, more recently, *ESPN* have discontinued this position on the basis that it has outlived its usefulness (Ferruci 2019). These companies contend that a 'horde of watchdogs' can provide real-time feedback and continued scrutiny through social media (Ramon-Vegas et al. 2019). However, ombudsmen's ability to act as a neutral third party and navigate the cluttered media landscape should not be underestimated.

Certainly, accountability systems have experienced a dramatic evolution in the digital environment (Fengler et al. 2014), which allows for new modes of ensuring transparency, self-regulation and quality supervision in which users' active participation (Eberwein et al. 2011) plays a decisive role. In this new landscape, media companies have adapted their in-house tools and created new online mechanisms, including editorial blogs that give insight to production processes (García-Avilés 2019; Spiller et al. 2016), Facebook pages on which 'editors and journalists tell the readers about their work' (Bjerke 2018: 184) and other mechanisms of corporate transparency (Campos-Domínguez and Redondo-García 2015). As Fengler et al. (2014: 272) highlighted, these practices 'can cultivate a more thorough understanding of the media among the public', thus contributing to 'increase the audience's media literacy' (van der Wurff and Schönbach 2014: 123).

Companies have also enforced tools to report errors and allow criticism via comments, e-mail, chats and social media posts (Craft et al. 2015; Karlsson et al. 2017). As Joseph (2011: 711) argued, 'the passive turned active news consumer has opened new avenues for the maintenance of accountability in contemporary journalism'.

MAIs in the Spanish landscape

Hallin and Mancini (2004) placed Spain in the Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralist model due to low newspaper circulation, weak professionalization, commentary-oriented journalism, a high level of politicization and polarization of public life, a high degree of state interventionism in the media and the political class' strong influence and control over the press. According to recent research, problems that have traditionally affected news independence in Spain, such as job precariousness and political and economic interferences, seem to be heightened in the present context (Luengo et al. 2017; Brogi et al. 2018).

In contrast to Anglo-Saxon and northern European states, countries pertaining to the Polarized Pluralist model have been argued to have a less developed accountability culture (Eberwein et al. 2018). Despite this, Spain presents a broader patchwork of established and online accountability instruments across the board (Mauri-Ríos et al. 2018). The country features a 'developed infrastructure of media self-regulation that has evolved after the end of the Franco regime, including national and regional press councils and several ombudsmen both in the print and broadcast media' (Fengler et al. 2015: 256).

The development of MAIs at the professional level has been asymmetric among the different Spanish regions. Zuberogoitia et al. (2019) highlighted the inexistence of a professional code of ethics in the Basque Country and Navarre. This situation contrasts with Catalonia, where MAIs at the professional level have been extensively developed in the form of a deontological code by the Catalan Journalists College, the Catalan Press Council and the Catalan Audiovisual Council (CAC) (Almiron et al. 2016). In other Spanish territories, such as Galicia and Valencia, the deployment of MAIs created by outside media organizations has been less prolific (Rodríguez-Martínez et al. 2017).

In contrast, at the organizational level, news companies throughout the country have been remarkably active in promoting diverse mechanisms to hold media to account. The EFE news agency pioneered the introduction of the stylebook in 1975 and was later followed by Spain's leading newspapers, including *El País*, *La Vanguardia*, *El Periódico de Catalunya*, *El Mundo*, *La Voz de Galicia* and *Marca*. Public media, including RTVE, the Catalan Corporation of Audiovisual Media (CCMA), Radio Television of Andalucía (RTVA) and Basque Radio-Television (EITB), have also been the driving force behind the development of stylebooks (Alsius 1999; Rojas-Torrijos and Ramon-Vegas 2017). In contrast, the presence and visibility of the ombudsman is limited in Spanish news outlets, despite that it has been long used by generalist newspapers and state-owned corporations (Maciá 2006).

Nowadays, social media channels are widely used for comment and criticism. Online transparency instruments are established among the leading Spanish media such as *El País*, *El Mundo*, *El Diario.es* and *El Confidencial* (Pérez-Díaz et al. 2020). However, other innovative in-house tools, such as newsrooms blogs, live chats and error buttons, have been implemented on a limited basis (García-Avilés 2019; Mauri-Ríos and Ramon-Vegas 2015).

In a pioneering study, Fengler et al. (2014) conducted a comparative survey with 1762 journalists from fourteen different countries (Austria, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Jordan, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Spain, Switzerland, Tunisia and the United Kingdom) to ascertain professionals' perceptions of accountability instruments. The 'Media Accountability and Transparency in Europe' (MediaAcT) project found that European journalists consider stylebooks to be established instruments created by media organizations that have the greatest influence on their professional performance (3.74 out of 5 points), followed by media criticism (2.73) and ombudsmen (2.32). Regarding innovative instruments, European journalists valued user comments (2.84) over criticism on social media (2.61) and in-house blogs (2.28). MediaAcT results within the Spanish landscape – obtained through a survey of 123 journalists – revealed that innovative instruments made inroads to journalists' mindsets, as comments (3.19) and criticism on social media (3.11) were rated higher than classical mechanisms such as stylebooks (2.86), media criticism (2.81) and ombudsmen (2.80).

In another project titled 'Professional Ethics and Press Excellence: The Implementation and Consolidation of Ethical Practices in the Business of Journalism', Herrera-Damas et al. (2018) analysed journalists' perceptions of the effectiveness of traditional and innovative MAIs. Through the combination of surveys, in-depth interviews and focus groups with practitioners in Madrid, the study revealed that for journalists 'one is not enough', given that 'the scale of the ethical dilemmas facing journalists today requires the introduction of more than one instrument' (Herrera-Damas et al. 2018: 228).

Despite their relevance, both studies were conducted between 2011 and 2012. Therefore, it is necessary to obtain recent results to identify the patterns of continuity and change regarding Spanish journalists' evaluation of and opinions towards in-house MAIs. Furthermore, we should go beyond to investigate Spanish citizens' knowledge, expectations and usage of MAIs. Given that 'media accountability is an issue that worries both journalists and their audiences' (Chaparro-Domínguez et al. 2019: 2), this research intends to reveal whether citizens are aware of the existence of MAIs and examine how citizens engage with these tools. Comparing the interactions of both agents – journalists and audiences – is integral to advancing investigations in this field of inquiry.

Method

As part of a larger project on media accountability, this research was guided by two research questions:

- RQ1: What are Spanish journalists' perceptions of in-house accountability instrument's effectiveness?
- RQ2: What is Spanish citizens' knowledge and understanding of accountability instruments created by media companies?

MAI
Chats and digital meetings with readers
Corporate information page on organization's websites
Criticism of journalism in media sections or spaces
Editorial blogs
Error correction buttons
In-house stylebooks
Letters to the editor
Ombudsmen/public editor's online blogs
Traditional ombudsmen/public editors
User comments in social media
Users' comments on published news articles
User contributions to content creation and revision

Table 1: Items included for the question 'what is your perception of the effectiveness of in-house accountability instruments?'

A mixed-methods approach was employed to answer these questions. This strategy refers to the integration of quantitative and qualitative research techniques with the goal of obtaining a stronger and more comprehensive account of the studied phenomena (Bryman 2016; Tashakkori and Teddlie 2009).

First, an online survey was administered to Spanish journalists to ascertain their perceptions of in-house accountability instruments. The survey questionnaire composed of 29 questions relating to various aspects of journalism ethics and accountability. This article presents the results of the analysis of two questions of the survey. In the first question ('What is your perception of the effectiveness of in-house accountability instruments?'), journalists were asked to rate – on a ten-point scale – their perceptions on the effectiveness of the different in-house accountability instruments (Table 1). 0 meant 'not effective at all' and 10 signified 'highly effective'. The second question ('Do you think that these mechanisms contribute to the promotion of responsibility?') was dichotomous, and journalists were asked to answer positively or negatively.

Following the criteria highlighted by Weischenberg et al. (2006) – and later employed by the MediaAcT project – respondents were selected on the basis of being 'professional actors who are occupied full-time or almost full-time with the collection, description and publication of topical, fact-oriented and relevant information in journalistic media' (Fengler et al. 2015: 254). In contrast to other countries such as France, Germany, Finland or Switzerland, an official census and demographics of journalism professionals does not exist in Spain (Rodríguez-Martínez et al. 2017). Due to this structural limitation, MediaAcT considered three essential criteria (number of journalists who are members of professional associations, different types of media and approximate number of journalists per region) and found that

the estimated population of professional journalists in Spain numbered 25,000. The minimum valid subsample size for examining Spanish journalists was estimated to be 100 participants (Eberwein et al. 2014: 72).

Bearing this in mind, to obtain a sufficient number of responses in the present research, we collaborated with several professional institutions, such as the Spanish Federation of Journalists (FAPE), the Catalan Journalists College and the Press Association of Madrid (APM), who distributed the questionnaire among their affiliates. The questionnaire was administered through the SurveyMonkey platform over the course of three months (17 October 2017– 17 January 2018). A total of 228 completed surveys were obtained (N = 228). Of all respondents, 52.2% (n = 119) were female and 47.8% (n = 109) were male. The majority of respondents (71.1%) attended a university-level programme in journalism; 24.1% journalists worked for print media companies (newspaper, weekly publication or magazine), 29.0% for radio stations, 26.0% for television stations, 9.2% for online media companies, 9.2% for news agencies and 7.9% are self-employed (freelance). Data were analysed using the IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences.

The results from the survey were triangulated with the qualitative information provided by citizen focus groups. Focus groups are a valuable technique to raise 'participants' consciousness about certain issues' and help 'them to learn new ways of seeing or talking about a situation' (Tracy 2020: 167). Through interactions, focus groups can reveal participants' 'shared and tacit beliefs' (Macnaghten and Myers 2004: 65) about an area of inquiry. In this research, focus groups were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of their knowledge of MAIs and how they perceive their impact on journalistic performance.

A total of six focus groups (with 38 participants in total) were conducted between 12 April and 31 May 2018 in different regions of Spain: Catalonia (FG01), Valencia (FG02), Madrid (FG03), Andalusia (FG04), the Basque Country (FG05) and Galicia (FG06). A researcher-driven recruitment strategy (Peek and Fothergill 2009) was employed: members of the research team – composed of six universities from the aforementioned territories – were responsible for recruiting participants for each focus group. Among the participants, 58 per cent were female (n = 22) and 42 per cent were male (n = 16). The age of participants was balanced: 42 per cent were aged between 31 and 60, and the rest were distributed almost equally between those under 30 and those over 60. Predominantly, participants accessed news via online newspapers and social media. Focus group scripts, based on the survey questionnaire, pivoted around the role of journalism ethics in the Spanish landscape and the value and effectiveness of traditional and innovative accountability instruments. Sessions were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality in the presentation of data, selected quotes are solely associated with the focus group ID and the gender of each participant (M, male; F, female).

Finally, to reinforce and contrast the data gathered by these techniques, a total of nineteen in-depth interviews were conducted with experts and representatives from professional associations in Spain. As Tracy (2020: 156) highlights, 'interviews

elucidate subjectively lived experiences and viewpoints from the respondents' perspective'. In-depth interviews allow researchers to gain a closer perspective towards a part of the object of study that cannot be approached through other techniques, providing them with the breadth and depth of nuances and details arising from first-hand descriptions. To guarantee consistency in the methodological approach, interview questionnaires – based on the survey questionnaire and the areas explored in the focus groups – included twelve questions revolving around the value and effectiveness of MAIs and the role of ethics in the Spanish landscape.

Purposive sampling was employed. Interviewees were chosen on the basis of strategic criteria such as their relevance, experience and knowledge of media ethics in the Spanish landscape. Participants belonged to the following professional categories: (1) academics and researchers in the field of journalism, (2) representatives from journalists' associations and professional colleges and (3) representatives from self-regulatory and regulatory bodies (Table 2). Face-to-face conversations were conducted between April and June 2018 and audio-recorded for subsequent transcription. Selected excerpts offer nuanced insights that complement journalists' and citizens' perspectives and allow a discussion of the findings.

Results

Journalists' perceptions of in-house accountability instruments (RQ1)

Spanish journalists' responses on the effectiveness of in-house accountability instruments, which was scored using a scale from 0 (not effective at all) to 10 (highly effective), revealed that they exhibit limited effectiveness (Table 3). Among all instruments, stylebooks were ranked highest, despite achieving a modest score (5.82). This tool's traditional background and implementation across many news organizations in Spain may explain this result; this argument is detailed in the discussion section. The stylebook is followed by two instruments that have been implemented recently: corporate information pages on organization's websites (5.50) and chats and digital meetings with readers (5.43). These findings indicate that journalists consider online mechanisms to be an effective tool for promoting the three core dimensions of accountability (transparency, self-regulation and users' participation). These mechanisms are followed by comments on social networks and user comments on articles published on organization's websites, which present slightly lower scores (5.32 and 5.00, respectively).

Another instrument that scored above 5 in this assessment is ombudsmen or public editors (5.35), a mechanism with a long tradition within Spanish organizations. Letters to the editor comprise an established instrument in Spain as well and obtained an average rating of 5.12. Ombudsmen blogs slightly exceeded a score of 5 (5.09). Among other accountability instruments, criticism of journalism in media sections or spaces was scored at 5.18. News organizations' editorial blogs (4.61) and error correction buttons (4.67) were considered the least effective accountability instruments created by media companies.

Interviewee	Position
Salvador Alsius	Vice-president of the CAC
Hugo Aznar	Member of FAPE's Complaints and Deontology Commission
Neus Bonet	Dean of the Catalan Journalists College
Txuskan Coterón	Dean of the Basque Journalists College
Carmen Fernández	Member of the Andalusian Audiovisual Council
María José Gómez-Biedma	Canal Sur's journalist and producer
Elsa González	Former president of the Spanish Federation of Journalists Association (FAPE)
Roger Jiménez	President of the Catalan Information Council
Arturo Maneiro	President of the Galician Association of Journalists
Antonio Manfredi	Director of RTVA in Huelva
Lorena Mejías	Member of the governing board of the Andalusian Professional Journalists College
Luis Menéndez	Spanish representative at the European Federation of Journalists
Rafael de Mendizábal	President of FAPE's Complaints and Deontology Commission
Xose Manuel Pereiro	Former dean of the Galician Professional Journalists College
Nemesio Rodríguez	President of the FAPE
Pepe Soto	President of the Press Association of Alicante
Violeta Tena	Vice-president of the Valencian Union of Journalists
Begoña Zabildea	Professor at the University of the Basque Country
Ramón Zallo	Senior professor at the University of the Basque Country

Table 2: Interviews conducted for the study.

MAI	Average rating
In-house stylebooks	5.82
Corporate information page on organization's websites	5.50
Chats and digital meetings with readers	5.43
Traditional ombudsmen/public editors	5.35
User comments in social media	5.32
Criticism of journalism in media sections or spaces	5.18
Letters to the editor	5.12
Ombudsmen/public editor's online blogs	5.09
Users' comments on published news articles	5.00
Error correction buttons	4.67
Editorial blogs	4.61
User contributions to content creation and revision	3.72

Table 3: Spanish journalists' assessment of in-house accountability instruments (means).

Attention now turns to the responses to the question 'what is your perception of the effectiveness of in-house accountability instruments?' with the answers to 'do you think that these mechanisms contribute to the promotion of responsibility?' divided between respondents answering to it positively (n = 150; 65.8 per cent) and negatively (n = 78; 34.2 per cent). Table 4 demonstrates that for those who believe that MAIs are effective, nine of these instruments seemed to promote professional responsibility. In the case of those believing that the instruments are ineffective, only one of the analysed instruments (stylebook) was considered to promote responsibility.

There are coincidences between the results obtained by each group as both rated the stylebook with the highest score. Ombudsmen and chats and digital meetings with readers were among the most valued mechanisms in both cases as well. Both groups agreed on the ineffectiveness of user contribution to content creation and review, along with editorial blogs and error correction buttons.

Citizens' knowledge and understanding of accountability instruments (RQ2)

In this section, we focus on analysing citizens' knowledge and understanding of MAIs. Above all, citizens highlighted the need to promote MAIs while counteracting their current lack of visibility. One participant clearly stressed, 'of course it matters that you have an ombudsman, but put it on the front page. If you have an ethical code, also put it on the front page' (FG06-M).

In-house stylebooks were positively valued and even considered 'fundamental' (FG01-M), especially for addressing sensitive issues such as sexism and racism. One widely known document is the stylebook published by *El País*, an organization

MAI	Do you believe that MAIs contribute to fostering responsibility?	
	Yes	No
In-house stylebooks	6.13	5.23
Traditional ombudsman/public editors	5.69	4.68
Ombudsman/public editor's online blogs	5.33	4.62
Editorial blogs	4.80	4.24
Criticism of journalism in media sections or spaces	5.62	4.32
User comments on published news articles	5.29	4.42
User comments in social media	5.70	4.59
Letters to the editor	5.29	4.81
Chats and digital meetings with readers	5.70	4.92
Error correction buttons	4.99	4.06
User contributions to content creation and revision	4.06	3.06
Corporate information page on organization's websites	5.91	4.71

Table 4: Spanish journalists' assessment of in-house accountability instruments according to their overall perception of MAIs (means).

recognized for placing a remarkable emphasis on accountability throughout its lifespan (Gutiérrez del Álamo 2015; Seoane and Sueiro 2004). That being said, there is a certain distrust in stylebook's actual effectiveness within news organizations. Given that 'you publish your code of ethics and you follow it as you want' (FG06-M), some citizens believe that creating these documents 'is very easy' (FG06-W), but they are sometimes not applied because of particular interests. Others argue that the accelerated news cycles imposed upon journalists makes it difficult to apply these styleguides: 'I believe that with the immediacy that exists today in the world of journalism, the stylebook is used less and less […] the journalist is working to finish the news quickly and probably doesn't use it at all' (FG03-M).

The ombudsman/public editor is generally not known. Some citizens question the validity of the role, questioning whether it is 'conditioned by the ideology of its media organizations' (FG01-W), maintains adequate 'distance' (FG03-M) or 'sweeten[s] the possible complaints in some way' (FG02-M). Other participants even believe that this position is not necessary in the digital age, since the audience can now comment on news, complain on social media or produce new content. Overall, the lack of visibility is a major problem: 'it has no visibility, nobody enters there [...] There are people who do it, just like the people who send doubts to the RAE [Royal Spanish Academy] but it is not a tool of mass use, so to speak' (FG06-W). Other options such as editorial blogs or criticism in media sections are not known by the participants.

Citizens' attitudes towards accountability tools that promote transparency are ambivalent. While some participants believe that these mechanisms are unnecessary because 'consumers already know what's behind' (FG01-W), others insist that consumers have the 'right to know' (FG03-W). According to these participants, 'there are many times that we do not know what political groups or what economic powers are behind an organization' (FG01-M); therefore, it is important to reveal 'the advertisers and shareholders behind the company' (FG02-M). The publication of income statement is interpreted as an act of transparency and generated general approval in discussion groups, despite the context of distrust towards journalism that reigns among the audience.

According to the participants, visible and accessible contact through which audiences can submit complaints about the published content 'is growing exponentially' (FG01-M), and this can help journalism professionals to perform their jobs more effectively. However, they are aware that media organizations tend to respond to criticism on social media according to the extent of interest that has been generated by a certain complaint. One participant emphasized, 'until they are not harmed by a large number of people, they will not react […] Then, they apologize because they are interested in keeping a good image to attract readers' (FG01-W). For citizens, audience participation in news production – information or video submission – has become also increasingly common. Citizens highlighted that sometimes a thread or tip sent by users 'is followed to investigate something' (FG03-W).

Users' comments in the news are generally considered positively. Citizens perceive that 'the Internet is a more democratic space' (FG04-W) and feel that it is important that 'virtual spaces for debate are open' (FG04-W). According to them, comments can have various functions, such as denouncing a situation, providing new information and encouraging debate. Despite this, citizens are aware that many comments contribute little or no meaningful information to the discussion, and there are 'many disrespectful' (FG02-W), offensive or innocuous comments. Interestingly, letters to the editor are considered to include more relaxed and thoughtful ideas; therefore, they are perceived as more valuable than online comments. One participant contended, 'a letter requires thinking about it, structuring it, involves an exercise of reflection on what is being said' (FG01-W).

Chats and digital meetings with readers are not widely known and used by participants. Those who have participated in some of these meetings recognized that they are interesting but contend that they are more playful than being critical or reflective: 'usually, you do not find much depth' (FG06-M). Finally, error correction buttons were relatively unknown. One participant stressed, 'it should be easier to correct errors' (FG01-W), but generally no 'Spanish news media outlet acknowledges the mistakes that it makes' (FG03-W).

Discussion and conclusion

Results from the survey and focus groups allowed us to visualize the similarities and differences between Spanish journalists' and citizens' perceptions of in-house accountability instrument effectiveness. The historical implementation of stylebooks in many organizations, from print newspapers such as *El País*, *La Vanguardia* or *El Mundo* to public broadcasters such as RTVE, TV3, EITB or Canal Sur (Alsius 1999; Rojas-Torrijos and Ramon-Vegas 2017), can explain Spanish journalists' preference for this instrument as it functions as a 'flashing light that helps to reinforce quality journalism' (Salvador Alsius) and contributes to 'educating citizens' (Neus Bonet).

Focus group participants also perceived the value of stylebooks but were sceptical about their actual effectiveness, nonetheless. A central problem, in the words of María José Gómez-Biedma, is that stylebooks are often 'barely used in daily work' due, in part, to the pressures connected with hyper-accelerated news cycles (Zelizer 2018). This factor, combined with their low visibility and the fact that they 'do not penalize their non-compliance' (Carmen Fernández Morillo) nor 'establish any sanction' (Xose Manuel Pereiro), may explain the low score obtained in the survey (5.82) and relative distrust reported by citizens in focus groups. This distrust cannot be disassociated from the 'public disenchantment with and widespread sense of disdain for social institutions' (Hanitzsch et al. 2018: 7).

Journalists consider some innovative mechanisms (corporate information on organization's websites, chats and digital meetings and comments on social media) to be among the most effective tools that promote accountability, thus reinforcing the results obtained by Fengler et al. (2014) in their examination of the Spanish media

landscape within the MediaAcT project. Spanish citizens' evaluations reflect those of journalists regarding the value of transparency strategies, such as publishing corporate information and financial statements online. According to Nemesio Rodríguez, president of FAPE, Spanish media organizations are 'quite opaque'. Therefore, it would be desirable for them to 'openly express their editorial line' and reveal 'where the money comes from' (Violeta Tena).

Journalists' and citizens' perceptions also intersect in considering comments (on organization's websites and social media) as a means of 'facilitating freedom of expression' (Lorena Mejías) and 'denouncing journalistic malpractice' (María José Gómez-Biedma). According to experts, both groups – journalists and citizens – are aware that 'criticism is healthy and necessary' (Elsa González) and 'feedback should be established' (Ramón Zallo), but they also contend that, in many occasions, comments generate clutter rather than contribute to the debate on the quality of media output. In the light of this, experts such as Txuskan Coterón and Pepe Soto propose introducing some filters that are associated with traditional letters to the editor, such as the requirement of providing identification (Pastor 2010).

When assessing chats and audience participation in news production, journalists' and citizens' views are dissimilar. In the first case, journalists believe that digital meetings are effective, but citizens are not generally aware of their existence or emphasize their 'playful' nature. In the second case, citizens perceive new options as increasingly common and potentially useful, while journalists of any age believe that this may be a less effective accountability mechanism.

When assessing another traditional instrument, ombudsmen, notable differences arise between journalists and citizens. The ombudsman is a long-established mechanism in Spain (Maciá 2006). In fact, *El País* introduced the ombudsman in 1985 (Gutiérrez del Álamo 2015), followed by *La Vanguardia*, *La Voz de Galicia*, *El Punt* or RTVE. The prestige associated with the ombudsman explains the positive perception among professionals – especially among those aged between 55 and 64 – towards this role, despite that very few news organizations have one currently. Similar to what has happened in other countries (Ferruci 2019), this role 'has almost disappeared in the media as they want to reduce costs' in Spain (Elsa González). We should bear in mind that, as Antonio Manfredi highlighted, news and economic crises have led to the 'closures or shrinking of newsrooms' across the country. As Violeta Tena emphasized, 'accountability mechanisms cost money, and in the situation we are right now, unfortunately, companies are not putting efforts on this'.

Many organizations across the globe also perceive that the ombudsman '[has] outlived its usefulness against the real-time feedback provided by social media' (Ramon-Vegas et al. 2019: 28). It is interesting to note that Spanish citizens feel similarly, believing that this position may be unnecessary in the digital age. They raise further concerns about the ombudsman's independence. Such perceptions are arguably influenced by the citizens' lack of knowledge of the characteristics and value of this position (Mayes 2004; van Dalen and Deuze 2006). The low visibility of the

ombudsman position – even in its digital form – among Spanish news organizations may also account for such perceptions.

Other accountability instruments such as editorial blogs and error correction buttons are embraced by neither journalists nor citizens. Arguably, this result can be explained by the low development of such tools among Spanish newsrooms (García-Avilés 2019; Mauri-Ríos and Ramon-Vegas 2015) and, therefore, the lack of awareness of their existence among audiences. Although 'no reputation or prestige is lost when mistakes are accepted and rectified' (Roger Jiménez), Spanish news outlets 'are not interested in being apologetic' (Begoña Zabildea). According to interviewed experts, error buttons would be 'highly effective' for the current news landscape in which 'the speed and immediacy in which we work may cause low lexical and content quality' (Luis Menéndez).

Findings of this research indicate that Spanish journalists believe that in-house MAIs 'promote quality of information' (Arturo Maneiro). Journalists prefer accountability to regulation, bearing in mind that 'laws always limit' (Rafael de Mendizábal). According to Hugo Aznar, professionals 'should not expect these mechanisms to change the landscape of the country from night to day, but they can promote a culture of greater responsibility'. This should not obscure that journalists' evaluation of these tools is remarkably modest, scoring 5.82 out of 10 points in the highest case. From the citizens' perspective, the overwhelming lack of visibility of many MAIs may explain why they are largely unused or valued as ineffective.

This double 'disconnect' from accountability (both from professionals' and citizens' perspectives) reveals the need to rethink and reinvigorate existing MAIs at the organizational level to promote their effectiveness in contributing to the goal of improving 'the services of media to the public' and restoring 'the prestige of media in the eyes of the population' (Bertrand 2018: 57).

The results of this study should be seen in the light of its limitations. Its findings should be interpreted within the Spanish context and cannot be generalized to all the countries in the Polarized Pluralist model. Other methods, such as interviews with decision-makers in leading media companies in Spain, would also add to our understanding. Yet, the results of this project can jointly inform news organizations and media groups of the need to revise and update their portfolio of existing MAIs to ensure their effective use in journalistic practice. Improving the visibility and implementation of existing and potential future instruments is considered essential. Placing these instruments at the forefront is fundamental to improving citizens' literacy and ensuring that they are actively involved in media accountability practices (Eberwein et al. 2011).

Beyond accountability instruments at the organizational level, future research should exceed the limitations of this study and interrogate how journalists and citizens perceive the effectiveness of mechanisms at the individual, professional and extramedia levels, such as general codes of ethics, press councils, media observatories or media criticism blogs promoted by audiences (Fengler et al. 2014). Monitoring how both groups assess traditional and innovative accountability instruments created

inside and outside of news organizations is considered essential to obtain a richer and more nuanced account of the evolution of media accountability in Spain and compare this understanding to the state of other territories and journalistic cultures in Europe and elsewhere.

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