

Journalists' Self-Perception of Their Profession in Spain: Analysis of Social and Technological Challenges

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The influence of social and technological factors—from the shadow of disinformation to automation and emerging forms of journalism—redefines the role of journalism and its practices. Journalistic metamorphosis has not been traumatic, but it has been complex, leading to tensions, reflections and controversies. The challenges facing journalism during the global pandemic caused by COVID-19 are assessed with a focus on Spain. The research consists of a survey of 197 Spanish journalists and nine interviews with prestigious academics and internationally recognized professionals. Changes within journalism are addressed in five major themes: the role

of journalism today; the relationship between journalism and politics; the incidence of bots and artificial intelligence; mobile journalism and social media; and emerging forms of journalism. The results show that the role of journalism remains unchanged, but the pandemic has strengthened some of its functions. The influence of politics in journalism is very prominent, as well as the concern about automation and misinformation. To face the future, high specialization is needed due to the fast technological evolution and the emergence of new techniques.

Keywords: journalism, profession, role, Spain, survey.

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Throughout the history of journalism, researchers have studied changes within the field. Many have argued that it is best summarized using a quote from Roman mythology that was used to describe the face of the god Janus: looking towards the future while rooted in the past (Nerone, 2006). Although the field of communication has always been forward thinking, with technological determinism as a prominent element of a dominant narrative within the history of the media (Curran, 2002), the future of journalism has been defined by the sedimentations of its practice over the years (Conboy, 2010).

Despite the fact that predictions about the future of journalism are often inaccurate (Curran, 2010), the popularization of the Internet has fuelled new debates. The Internet Galaxy emerged as an environment that fostered a structural change, posing as many opportunities as challenges (Castells, 2001). From the offset, it had a noticeable impact on journalism and journalistic culture, especially in regards to digital journalism, multimedia, hypertextuality and interactivity (Deuze, 2003).

The media tried to adapt to the new environment by embracing a culture of innovation that was based on a combination of reactive, defensive and pragmatic characteristics, far from technological determinism (Boczkowski, 2004). In the new territory of the Internet, media outlets attempted to pioneer informational products, tested payment systems, and saw the arrival of blogs and more participatory journalism models, though their strategies were vague. As early as the start of the first decade of the third millennium, conversations were being had about new opportunities and avenues for journalism (Jarvis, 2014; Rusbridger, 2018). There were those that spoke of the potential for entrepreneurship and production integrating content generated by users (Hermida and Thurman, 2008), and those who warned of online products undermining journalistic quality (Usher, 2014), and of modern changes contributing to job insecurity (Bakker, 2012). Many voices agreed that journalism was in crisis (Russial et al., 2015), warning that the transformations in the media sector had negative consequences both for the media economy and for the quality of journalism (Franklin, 2014). Other journalistic figures argued that digital journalism was redefining the traditional norms of the profession towards the routines and practices of online media (Agarwal and Barthel, 2015). The tension between old and new that has marked the production of online journalism (Mitchelstein and Boczkowski, 2009) remained as the media system adopted a hybrid model (Chadwick, 2013).

Despite the crisis brought about by the potential threat that technology poses towards the integrity of quality journalism, there was no doubt that the future of digital journalism was on the web (Haak et al., 2012). Meanwhile, academics from different disciplines theorized and categorized a consistent body of knowledge within the journalistic field (Deuze and Witschge, 2018). The pressure on professional journalism has increased as both the political right wing and the left wing accuse the media of malpractice (Freedman, 2019). The debate on the future of journalism is taking place in an era of digital media and economic uncertainty (Franklin, 2014). At the same time, although there are differences between the way in which journalists interpret their role depending

on whether they belong to online or offline media, today's journalists share the same professional ideology overall (Henkel et al., 2020).

More than two decades after the appearance of online media triggered an existential crisis in journalism, the necessary adaptations and changes were made that modernized and reshaped the journalistic landscape. Currently, digital journalism is a tangible reality, not only professionally, but also academically (Salaverría, 2019). Having reinvented itself, journalism is more alive than ever. This metamorphosis (Vázquez et al., 2020) allows journalism to maintain its key role in society, and also to conquer the future that originates from the new scenario of the network society.

In order to assess the journalists' perception of their profession in Spain, we set the following specific objectives:

- a. to evaluate and understand the role of journalism in contemporary society from the perspective of journalists;
- b. to analyze the journalists' perception of the relationships between journalism and politics;
- c. to assess the impact of technological changes in journalistic culture, especially those derived from new techniques and platforms, from the journalists' point of view.

BACKGROUND

THE RELATIONS BETWEEN JOURNALISM AND POLITICS

Journalism has always been at the center of political debate. The reason lies in the inalienable political nature of journalism (Dader, 2012). Journalism and politics are inextricably linked, and this relationship is inherent to democracy (Casero, 2012). The very concept of journalism and its role rests on the commitment of monitoring public life, offering information of public interest and putting forward societal solutions.

Empirical studies on journalistic activity, and how journalists perceive that activity, show the existence of two large groups of professionals. The first are those that perceive their functions as stimulating or active from a political and social point of view, as controlling power and encouraging and instructing the audience. The second are those who promote the status quo establishment by drowsing or "drugging" public opinion, as pointed out from the Spanish perspective by Berganza et al. (2017) within the comparative transnational research "Worlds of journalism".

The relations between politics and journalism are close and dynamic in democratic spaces. Without journalism there is no democracy, and without democracy there is no journalism either (Glasser, 1999). Though we cannot affirm that the media and journalism contribute to democracy per se, it remains essential to analyse the different models of democracy and their implications for the media and journalism (Strömbäck, 2005). Democracies demand media that

are committed to the public interest and uneasy with the power most of the time (Schudson, 2008).

Relationships between politicians, journalists and the media are complex. Contact between the press and politicians does not necessarily increase mutual understanding and trust (Binder et al., 2009). There is even evidence of the phenomenon of hostile media (Matthes et al., 2019), which makes politicians even less trusting of the media and journalists.

Within the framework of this intimate connection, journalistic change must occur, spurred on by emerging forms of innovation that expose the dichotomy between the need for change and the immobility of the actors (Carlson and Usher, 2016). Professionals themselves understand that the practice and conceptualization of journalism is a continuous, context-specific and diverse process (Wagemans et al., 2019).

THE SHADOW OF OLD AND NEW DEBATES

The noise and misinformation that characterize the network society have created a new context for journalism in democratic societies. A healthy democracy requires healthy media (Gans, 2003). This makes the search for sustainable business models based on increasing the value of journalistic organizations for their users a priority (Picard, 2012).

The reinvention of journalism, driven by professional practice, innovation and experimentation processes and scientific research, is fed by the kind of journalism practiced in alternative media, new media and conventional media. Despite journalism's reluctance to abandon the essential core elements that have long been championed within the field (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014), the result of this complex process in professional practice provides journalism with hybridizations of expressive modalities and formats, and a stage for interaction and mutual influences.

Digital journalism moves forward aiming to secure a greater commitment from audiences to generate community, with a participatory dimension of the media that does not entail a discourse of modification of existing hegemonies (Masip et al., 2015). Digital journalism also seeks to strengthen trust in a more transparent and involved form of news reporting, although in many cases with significant gaps between theory and practice (Schmidt et al., 2020). In this complex process of adaptation and reinvention, a renewed journalistic identity is emerging (Vos and Ferrucci, 2018) as are new forms of collaborative journalism with other professionals (Gans, 2018), together with more attention to the psychological framework (McIntyre and Gyldensted, 2018). Also evident is that more attention is being paid to human-machine relations in news writing (Lewis et al., 2019), as well as to journalistic friction with advertising and public relations professionals (Hanusch et al., 2020). Additionally, greater concern is shown for professional autonomy and professional status (Picard, 2005, 2012).

This is the course that journalism is on for the third decade of the third millennium. It is one of greater communicative ubiquity, thanks to the Internet of things, and one of automation that frames the so-called fourth industrial

revolution (Schwab, 2016) and the era of quantum computing. Journalists have faced this challenge primarily by implementing the tools of the traditional journalism that they have inherited, although they have also adopted a number of rules that now conform to renovated professional practices and routines (Henkel et al., 2020). The new standards feed on permanent adaptation under the long shadow of old and new debates.

THREATS AND CHALLENGES

The gap between ideal journalism and real journalism is difficult ground to navigate. It is filled with nuances and is the product of a combination of variable factors. The shadow of disinformation distorts journalism's output and makes it more necessary for the proper functioning of plural and democratic societies. In recent years, journalism has reflected on its limits (Carlson and Lewis, 2015) and the relevant threats and challenges have been identified.

Historically, many media outlets have been weighed down by their dependence on the most influential actors in the economic and labor spheres. Journalism faces enormous commercial challenges (Picard, 2014), as it is affected by the work of pressure groups, by marketing and advertisers (Lischka et al., 2017), by clickbait strategies (Kuiken et al., 2017; Bazaco et al., 2019) and by different personalized persuasion initiatives. From a working perspective, the practice of journalism has always been accompanied by precarious job conditions (Salamon, 2016).

Furthermore, governments have always tried to control the media through direct or indirect means (Dragomir, 2018). This practice has been associated with the cultivation of deregulation, the absence of communication policies, the scant attention to media and digital literacy (Wallis and Buckingham, 2019), the low level of involvement in the training of citizens, the insecurity of journalists in conflict zones and the increase in the digital divide.

From an ideological perspective, obscurantism in editorial lines and the lack of transparency from publishing companies and professionals have led to a greater distrust in journalism, as transparency tends to reinforce credibility (Curry and Stround, 2021). Propaganda often finds a breeding ground in the media and in polarized professionals, and because the field of journalism lacks real autonomy, the response capacity is limited. Accountability mechanisms have been weakened or are very scarce (Karlsson and Clerwal, 2018). At times, impartiality, coherence, honesty and fortitude are undermined.

From a technological dimension, the implications of the increased prominence of digital tools have not been enough to prompt increased transparency measures. Artificial intelligence, which today is a reality in journalistic practice (Broussard et al., 2019), has been implemented without clear strategies. Journalists are still unaware of the extent to which AI can participate in search, production and dissemination processes. However, no risk of the robot replacing the journalist is identified (Calvo and Ufarte, 2020; Murcia and Ufarte, 2019). Bots tend to complicate communication processes (Hilbert and Darmon, 2020), while infomediation has become convoluted without the adoption of measures that illuminate possible biases.

In the professional block, non-compliance with the precepts included in the deontological codes to the unbridled exploitation of infotainment (Thussu, 2007) is detected, as well as lax verification processes and abuse of anonymous sources.

The impact of the social, political and economic changes that have accompanied the evolution of the network society in the last two decades pose threats to journalists and citizens, as well as to business models and established journalistic functions and practices. Hence, old debates linger and new ones arise. Nonetheless, these uncertainties also open up opportunities. Field research shows that the journalistic landscape offers opportunities based on technological, social and economic developments, and forms of innovation (Wahl Jorgensen et al., 2016).

METHODS

To obtain a current snapshot of the journalistic landscape and the main challenges for the future, the study consisted of a survey of Spanish journalists and in-depth interviews with academics and professionals with an international perspective. The survey (Hansen and Machin, 2013) uses a systematic and structured quantitative method, in this case through an online questionnaire. It was disseminated between February and May 2020 through the communication channels of fourteen Spanish professional associations and press associations to obtain the final sample (N=197) characterized in Table 1. The self-administered online questionnaire (Hesse, 2017) contained twenty-eight questions, combining closed answers with scale and open ones. The survey dealt with global trends as organized into the following five blocks: the role of journalism, automation, audience and participation, technologies and skills.

Table 1. Survey sample (N=197)

Gender identity	N	%
Female	90	45.7
Male	104	52.8
Don't answer	2	1.0
Other	1	0.5
Employment situation	N	%
Employee	126	60.6
Self-employed	48	23.1
Unemployed	18	8.7
Retired	16	7.7

Type of organization	N	%
Public administration and institutions	7	3.7
News agency	6	3.2
Digital media	22	11.8
Digital and press	38	20.3
Digital, press and radio/TV	10	5.1
Traditional media (press, radio, TV)	63	32.0
Communication office	20	10.7
Other media and communication companies	15	8.0
Other organizations	6	3.0
Don't answer	10	5.1

Source: Own elaboration.

The other methodological technique opted for was in-depth interviews (Taylor and Bogdan, 1990), with an aim to understanding the perspective that respondents have regarding their experiences and where an open script is proposed that allows a conversational exchange (Cicourel, 1982; Castillo and Vásquez, 2003). In-depth interviews are an appropriate technique when the objective of the research is pragmatic in nature as they provide insight into the modes of action of the actors in relation to their system of social representation as subjects immersed in social praxis (Sierra, 2019). The unstructured nature of these interviews allows the collection of a large amount of information and the recording of unexpected variables.

A convenience sample was drawn up from a list of fifty candidates, twenty-five academics and twenty-five professionals. From there the variables of generation/age, academic rank (most veteran / junior) and professional position (management / writing) were applied. Experience in paper media, digital native media and leading media were all also considered. Thus, between May and October 2020, nine interviews were obtained with renowned academics and prominent professionals in the journalism sector (Table 2) to contrast and enhance the results from the survey with a qualitative perspective. Due to the open nature of the interviews, no specific questions were established, but rather five thematic blocks defined from the “background” and from which the research results were subsequently structured:

1. The role of journalism in today's society
2. Journalism and politics
3. The impact of technology, bots and artificial intelligence in journalism
4. Mobile journalism and social media
5. Emerging forms of journalism and future challenges

Table 2. List of interviewees

Interviewees	Workplace
David Domingo	University Libre de Bruxelles (Belgium)
José Luis Dader	Complutense University of Madrid (Spain)
Silvio Waisbord	George Washington University (USA)
Amanda Alencar	Erasmus University Rotterdam (The Netherlands)
Bernardo Díaz Nosty	University of Málaga (Spain)
Mark Deuze	University of Amsterdam (The Netherlands)
Emilio García-Ruiz	Managing Editor at <i>The Washington Post</i> (USA)
Alfonso Sobrado Palomares	Retired. Former general director at Agencia Efe and former director at <i>Diario Córdoba</i> (Spain)
Ignacio Escolar	Director at <i>elDiario.es</i> (Spain)

Source: Own elaboration.

RESULTS

THE ROLE OF JOURNALISM IN TODAY’S SOCIETY

The majority of the journalists who took part in the survey assert that the main role of journalism is to inform (71.8%). Some of them state that the main functions are more specific, such as controlling power and sources (11.7%) and shaping society and public opinion (8.5%). When asked about the role of journalism specifically in Spain, 26.2% agreed to maintain the same answer as above. However, different roles emerge, such as militant and ideological journalism (12.2%), transmitter of power (11.5%) or subordination to power (7.9%). This attitude of the journalists themselves towards their profession in the country invites us to delve further into the relationship with the political sphere.

From the experts’ perspective, as was said by Sobrado Palomares, journalism “is proof that freedom exists. If there is freedom there must be journalism; democracy is also based on journalism, which is the public expression of freedom”. Escolar agrees that the power oversight function is fundamental to journalism, which acts as a watchdog of power. Díaz Nosty adds, “As a nutrient for public opinion and the quality of democracy, it should contribute to reducing uncertainty and avoiding the tensions of polarizing anomalies”. Dader, like Waisbord, believes that journalism in today’s society must maintain the same role as ever: providing relevant, up-to-date, verified, exact and exhaustive information; incorporating analysis and interpretation of the most important events and processes; and acting as a transparent mediation platform in public debate. Domingo agrees with this position, arguing that journalism “should promote political pluralism and public debate, defend social justice and report discrimination and abuse of power”. To this commitment to the truth, García

Ruiz adds the need to offer “the first version of the history of the moment”. Professionals have not reached a consensus in relation to the fulfilment of their duty to report truthfully. Among the aspects that hinder such consensus, the following stand out: pressure from political and economic interests (21.8%), working conditions and company conditions (19.8%) and editorial control or control from superiors (18.8%).

None of the experts mention new roles for journalism during the pandemic. Nonetheless, as Dader asserts, a more radical commitment to accuracy and plurality is expected. “Journalism plays an important role in the sense that people feel the need to have access to reliable information in the face of misleading content that technological advances have helped to accentuate,” says Alencar. This is a trend that Deuze also touches on when noting that journalism should help to gather people around verified content. According to García Ruiz, it is still important “to chronicle and keep our vigilance on governments, the largest companies and individuals who are going to make critical decisions that will affect us all”. As put by professor Domingo, this need to “duplicate” the “commitment to justice and pluralism” should be understood as “the opportunity to build the legitimacy of journalism based upon the methodological rigor in the verification of the facts, and to claim its social responsibility linked to the respect for the fundamental rights of all citizens”. This point is even more pertinent given Professor Dader’s argument that a great polarizing bias in the selection and treatment of politically “sensitive” information has occurred throughout the pandemic. Díaz Nosty urges journalism to “recover the signs of identity to distinguish itself from purely commercial initiatives or those inductive of illegitimate interests”. Regarding the development of the profession, Escolar points out that trends that were already underway have accelerated (remote working, videoconferences...), to the extent that “in six months we have seen changes that would otherwise have taken 10 years to occur”.

JOURNALISM AND POLITICS

“There are politicians who have come to believe that attacking the press is a way to gain popularity and power”, says García Ruiz. This causes them to create an alternative reality full of half-truths and lies. For this reason, they discredit journalists, which constitutes “one of the greatest dangers for democracy”. Three out of four journalists (75.6%) believe that political sources decide the issues that make up public opinion, although 50.3% of those surveyed state that it is the journalist who decides the journalistic focus followed by the information sources that are the first to report (37.1%) and those responsible for journalistic companies (24.9%).

As David Domingo points out, the challenge of interpreting complex information from different sources during the coverage of COVID-19 proved to be even more challenging than usual. It was revealed how the usual provisionality of scientific knowledge was in conflict with the citizens’ need for certainty. Díaz Nosty contends that politicians have put their electoral advantage before responsible and ethical management, while journalistic investigation has been

absent. Dader adds, “In a large number of cases, newspapers have propagated militant information, which prevents citizens from reaching a realistic and insightful vision of the complex situation experienced”.

In regard to political sources, Professor Dader points out that journalism has a duty to fulfil public service functions yet also has a tendency to neglect such responsibilities and even to attribute them to adversaries. He states that “a very important number of political sources have sought a propaganda intervention, namely the central government” during the pandemic. “Politicians have used the media as vehicles for biased views, while most journalists have lacked the autonomy to provide an independent view,” concludes Díaz Nosty. García Ruíz emphasizes the importance of having sources that can provide internal information and not only experts. Lastly, Escolar points out the difficulties that come from the fact that “for many media outlets, their sources of information are also sources of income”.

THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY, BOTS AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN JOURNALISM

For journalists, the influence of automation technologies is moderate both in terms of the media (6.8/10) and in terms of news sources (7.2/10). They attribute the same amount of influence to bots in political communication. Some point out the harmful effects of automated distribution for journalism and society: disinformation, infoxication and biased information (17.8%), influence on public opinion (13.2%) and guidance of both the debate and the information agenda (8.1%).

From the professional perspective, García Ruiz limits the main function of bots to the rapid transmission of information, since, as put by Sobrado, “the journalist is still a human journalist and must verify that the truth is being told”. Escolar states categorically that “our trade has a long, long way to go before it can be replaced by a machine”. He views automation as a cheap way to generate page views for search engines, which he cares “very little” about.

From the academy, Waisbord affirms that the role of bots in journalism is unclear and links them to the circulation of information. Meanwhile, Díaz Nosty compares them with “termites of journalism and democratic culture”. Dader explains that it would be the death of journalism if artificial intelligence meant that the machines were to select the topics and write the news. He emphasizes that this is different from the fact that certain procedures can help journalists gain a better understanding of general trending topics. Thus, Deuze finds a certain level of usefulness in artificial intelligence for the sake of sports broadcasting, statistical or financial data. Nonetheless, he stresses that AI’s regulation requires policies of responsibility and transparency. Domingo is less receptive to AI, seeing no current use for bots. He argues that the “illusion of customization they allow is still very rudimentary” and believes that we are still far from their evolution into something useful. Alencar sees the role of technology in connection to the acquisition and verification of large amounts of data, microtargeting for specific stories and immediate interaction between sources and audiences.

MOBILE JOURNALISM AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Journalists see technology as a useful tool for journalism (8.8/10) and rank social networks and instant messaging apps among the most used. Some 68.5% claim to possess the skills and abilities to work as journalists in the distribution of content through social networks, whilst 62.9% consider themselves competent enough to practice mobile journalism (Table 3).

Table 3. Competences and skills reported by journalists

Competences and skills	N	%
Distribution of content through social networks	135	68.5
Information verification	129	65.5
Mobile journalism	124	62.9
Data journalism	90	45.7
Interactive storytelling	88	44.7
Transmedia strategies	53	26.9
Data visualization	34	17.3
Immersive journalism	31	15.7
Gamification	19	9.6

Source: Own elaboration.

Deuze believes that mobile journalism should be given further relevance as it functions as a gateway for news access. Professor Domingo asserts that all forms of journalism will revolve around mobile and multiplatform journalism in the future, since this is the format most widely used by citizens. In line with this idea, the managing editor at The Washington Post puts forward the belief that mobile is not the future, but the present, stating that mobile journalism occupies a preeminent position at his paper. They are aware that they must adapt to consumer habits given the majority of their audiences come indirectly from social networks or instant messaging, hence the need to use such platforms for their own benefit.

According to Dader, mobile journalism cannot be interpreted as the “individual work of a freelance journalist who uses a multitasking technological device to launch isolated pieces of information into the cyberspace”. If that was the case, “we would be talking about ersatz journalism, an inferior substitute that falls short of the quality standards of the best professional journalism”. Also, it is the media outlets themselves, those that distribute journalistic stories, which lend the stories their credibility. In addition, Dader explains that mobile journalism must invest in precision and data journalism. In recent decades, the added value of both disciplines has become apparent.

Escolar contends, “It is a mistake to build audiences on a ground that is not yours. It is very important that the media are built on their own turf, not

on Facebook's or Google's". His understanding is that this practice "involves supporting readers and not algorithms". In Domingo's opinion, social networks "could be understood as a space for conversation between journalists, their audiences and their sources". Although he is aware that some journalists understand social networks as such, he also believes that "they are a minority as this philosophy requires rethinking journalism's principle of autonomy and reimagining the profession as an engine for social dialogue". According to Dader, social networks "allow journalists to tap into the multiple components of a phenomenon on which that professional will later report". However, he clarifies that "the credibility of journalism should always prevail" to help the public discern between verified information and the enormous amount of content circulating on these networks. The problem lies, according to Díaz Nosty, "in the transfer of influence from journalism to social networks during the last three or four years. Journalism is engulfed by remote control interventions (...) Social networks should reinforce journalism, but the entrepreneurial framework of large-scale global corporations seems to be travelling in the other direction".

EMERGING JOURNALISMS AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

In reference to the new journalistic modalities that are blossoming, journalists identify competences and skills in various specialization and techniques (Table 3) such as information verification (65.5%), data journalism (45.7%), interactive narratives (44.7%), transmedia strategies (26.9%), data visualization (17.3%), immersive journalism (15.7%) and gamification (9.6%). Therefore, their versatility and the progressive consolidation of new areas and resources are made apparent.

"Conversational journalism that are more heavily involved in local or thematic communities. Their work in these areas gives voice to people who are at their same level, and who will display a higher commitment towards activism and a lower attachment to traditional objectivity and distance" (Domingo); local media that get confrontational with the most powerful and global (García Ruiz), "explanatory and perspective journalism" (Dader), "more collaborative journalism between companies and journalists, and more critical and constructive versions in relation to data ethics responsibility and moral values" (Alencar), "hard data journalism" (Escolar) or "more independent and net-native journalism" (Deuze) are some of the emerging modalities towards which journalism will gravitate in the next years.

For journalists, the main changes introduced by technologies in the last five years are linked to the speed and immediacy of the information process (43.1%), access to sources and documentation (28.4%), the creation of new formats and products (13.2%), and interaction with the audience and participation (10.7%). However, some blame certain negative trends on the influence of technology, such as poor practice or low quality of journalistic products (10.7%), the increase in noise and misinformation (7.1%) or job insecurity (4.1%).

Looking at the future, the surveyed journalists recognize improvements in information activity through technology. Some 19.8% predict that technology

will mitigate misinformation thanks to the possibility of contrasting sources, while 8.1% see the potential to facilitate access to sources, databases and documentation. Regarding processes and the transmission of information, 7.6% contend that these will provide agility and speed. In contrast, 6.1% of those surveyed expressed a sceptical view.

“Deep down, journalism is a technological determinism”, since “technology determines the way journalism is served” as has always happened throughout history, says the former president of Efe. Dader anticipates “a journalistic practice increasingly supported by new production and publishing technologies” and at the same time the expanding duties of a “journalism capable of integrating a wealth of data and alternative versions (...) that help the citizens of the information society to have some solvent guidelines”. “The main challenge is for the paper newspapers, not the digital natives,” says Escolar, because “the media that depend on reader pay will grow more and more, while advertising will continue to decline”.

Domingo warns about the challenge of constructive journalism to be understood as “journalism aimed at understanding problems, their origins and alternative solutions”, thus overcoming the simplistic vision of interpreting it as positive journalism that avoids negative news. Alencar warns about more pessimistic views linked to journalistic polarization and political favouring that would have serious consequences in relation to disinformation. Díaz Nosty makes similar arguments, although he understands that “it is not a specific problem of journalism, but of a systemic nature”. More media literacy, a stronger relationship between journalists and audiences and more societal dialogue regarding its dangerous consequences are the means that Deuze proposes to fight against disinformation.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of journalistic change as perceived by professionals and experts provides an up-to-date view of the evolution of a key element of democracy after the first 25 years of digital life. Old pressures on journalism, its development and its professionals still persist as the media world undergoes radical changes. However, the relationship between journalism and politics—a keystone for the social role of journalism—and the influence of technologies—promising despite its patchiness—, remain.

Our survey to Spanish journalists and in-depth interviews with academic experts and internationally recognized professionals have confirmed that the journalistic metamorphosis is complex and that challenges occur as the network society evolves. The role of journalism remains unchanged as a source of verified information. Thus, its crucial role in democracy as a watchdog of power and promoter of public debate in a pluralistic political framework is established. According to the professionals, the influence of politics in journalism is very prominent, to the extent that the sources are the ones that determine the news agenda for three out of four respondents. The pandemic has not modified the role of journalism, but it has strengthened some of its functions such as surveillance

and credibility in the face of a climate conducive to disinformation. At the same time, it has at times struggled to effectively combat militant rhetoric and been less than totally effective at getting accurate information through to the citizens.

The impact of automation on the media and their sources is moderate. However, journalists are concerned about its potential negative effects in relation to misinformation, the influence on public opinion and the orientation of the debate and the news agenda. Experts value the human nature of journalists in contrast to the work of bots. They even state that we are far from replacing journalist with machines, although specific regulation will be required in order to handle the technological challenges posed by artificial intelligence.

Mobile journalism is considered an acquired and essential element of modern-day technology. Professionals claim to possess the necessary skills and abilities for the production and distribution of information from mobile phones. However, high levels of specialization are needed due to the rapid evolution of the network society and the appearance of emerging journalism. These new formats also open new debates about the changes that are introduced in journalistic practice. 21st century journalism is at ease with constant change. Tensions, pressures, reflections and controversies will reinforce it amidst a complex process where old and new debates continue to resurface.

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