

Traditional Press in the Face of Competition From Digital Journalism

Dr. Ángeles LÓPEZ HERNÁNDEZ

Faculty of Communication. University of Seville

Rubén DOMINGUEZ DELGADO

Faculty of Communication. University of Seville

Abstract:

Studies keyed to analyzing the advances, virtues and defects of digital journalism are increasingly more commonplace. In this context, to talk of the traditional press, researching its trends, development and, ultimately, functioning in a world dominated by technology seems to have become an obsolete, uninteresting task. But it should not be forgotten that the written press is still alive and kicking, and in Spain there are still a large number of people that remain faithful to their daily print newspapers to keep themselves up to date on the latest political, economic and social news. This precise moment in Spanish journalistic history is therefore marked by the coexistence of both types of journalism: traditional and digital. So much so that mixed news – i.e., printed news items that direct readers to the digital version for more in-depth information – are increasingly more in vogue. Thus, research into the traditional press should not be abandoned so hastily, above all as regards the repercussions electronic media have on the conventional kind. In this paper, new trends in the Spanish press will be analyzed by exploring several of the country's national and local newspapers, focusing on three quality indicators: the predominant type of journalistic discourse; the depth of news coverage; and the preservation and defence of traditional journalistic values. The study of these indicators makes it possible to check whether printed newspapers are doing their utmost to increase the quality of their information products so as to be able to compete with the digital media on an equal footing.

Keywords: traditional press, digital press, quality indicators, printed information products.

Introduction

Many authors point to the expansion of the Internet as the chief cause of the current decline of the written press¹, even going so far as to state – sometimes too categorically – that newspapers have seen their day and, sooner or later, will disappear. The same was said with the advent of radio and, later on, with that of

¹ Among different authors who focus on the decline of journalism in Spain and note down some of the main causes of it, we can remark José Luis Martínez Albertos (MARTÍNEZ ALBERTOS, José Luis: *El ocaso del periodismo*, Barcelona: Editorial CIMS, 1997. 340 pp.).

Predominant type of journalistic discourse

News is one of the main pillars on which our knowledge of current affairs – daily events – is founded. Ultimately, it comprises the backbone of social communication, testifying to the current situation.

All theoreticians in the field of journalism⁶ believe, with good reason, that the ultimate objective of the journalistic profession is simply that of effectively meeting the information demands of citizens. Therefore, the preliminary assessment of events which will finally be converted into news should not be conducted without first taking into account the type of citizen for which current news is being chosen. In other words, so as to be able to increase their potential distribution, newspapers should familiarize themselves with new social trends and be capable of predicting the degree of interest of their readership in a specific event according to factors like, for instance, its public and/or human implications. All events are undoubtedly interesting for somebody, but they will only be of value and use to the majority of readers in a certain context.

However, when the content of practically all Spanish newspapers is subject to scrutiny, this observation made from a utopian perspective of journalism seems to lose weight, becoming a mere conjecture. Nowadays, information content is more than ever monopolized by the very highest levels of economic and political power in the country, the interests of the “powerful” taking clear precedence over those of the general public. This dirigisme of the written press, which is becoming increasingly more accentuated every day, is shown openly in its – let us say – “subservience” towards news items provided by the news agencies and press offices of organizations, a point that can be corroborated by the evidence observed in the Spanish press, like, for instance, the fact that unsigned news stories are increasingly more frequent. This problem affects above all Spanish newspapers with limited economic resources, which obviate the authorship of the news stories they publish so as to avoid giving a “bad” image of their true capacity to cover current events by themselves. Logically, if a media company resorts insistently to the term “agency” or the name of the institution or organization whose press office has sent the information, readers will end up by thinking – with good reason – that the newspaper they are reading is no more than a botched job (not to mention a “propaganda leaflet”), which, in addition, costs them money every day. And if this is so, then why buy it anyway? Given that habit of excluding the name of the reporter affects the credibility of news items and creates a bad image, newspapers tend to conceal news that has not been covered by their own staff behind a thick veil of

⁶ Among this theorists we can emphasize, for example, these two ones:

DESANTES GUANTER, José María: *La información como deber*, Buenos Aires: Ábaco, 1994

MÍNGUEZ SANTOS, Luis: *¡Peligro! Periodistas. Un análisis crítico del oficio de informar*, Sevilla: Pedro J. Crespo, 2005

neutral journalistic terms, such as “News office,” the name of the newspaper or, simply, the place where the event occurred, instead of the name of the reporter. Evidence of this can be seen in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Unsigned news items. Newspaper: ABC Translation: Athletics. *Lamela Suffers Mental Breakdown.* ABC. Madrid. *The Spanish Ex-long Jumper has been committed to a psychiatric hospital with symptoms of depression.*

Thus, an overview of the national newspapers allows us to confirm our opinion that the type of journalistic discourse currently predominating in Spanish newspapers does not seem to respond to the interests of the public – to what really concerns citizens – but to the will of the de facto powers, to such an extent that the *social interest* of many news items published by newspapers is dearly wanting, non-existent, an interest manipulated by the “clandestine” profits obtained by newspaper companies from such news stories. For this reason, it is understandable, although unacceptable, that, barring honourable exceptions, the media unilaterally decide – without attending to the needs of their readership – what events must be interesting, giving them media coverage that does not always reflect their social impact. That is why a large number of published news items fall into complete oblivion from one day to the next; i.e., there is no media follow-up, which contributes to the newspaper’s negative image, a frankly superficial and insignificant image of the news it publishes, as well as that of the newspaper as a disposable product, to be used and then thrown away.

In addition to the aforementioned aspects, there is also the habit – which is becoming an increasingly more frequent phenomenon in Spanish dailies – of inserting between news on issues of social interest:

- Firstly, *unimportant* news items that do not make any positive contribution to society, as can be seen in Figure 2.
- Secondly, news items of *limited importance*, which are only of interest to very specific collectives or social group, as can be seen in Figure 3.
- And, lastly, *apparently harmless* news items which conceal propagandistic “ruses,” orchestrated by the political sphere or the corporate world, among others. These news items are presented to readers normally in a “speculative” format and have the hidden purpose of observing public reaction to the news, in such a way that newspapers are surreptitiously becoming one of the best tools for sounding out Spanish public opinion, by means of all kinds of informational strategies for testing the waters. An illustrative example of this can be seen in Figure 4,

In the light of what we read in the general-interest press in Spain, it would seem that journalistic research, free of covert political taint, has thrown in the towel, but why? There are many reasons behind this phenomenon, including:

- Firstly, the economic crisis has also affected the media. As a consequence, journalists are currently working in precarious conditions – earning low wages and doing a job that should be shared by several others – and, even so, they do not dare to question the decisions of their bosses for fear of being sacked. This permanent job insecurity makes journalists forget their ethical principles of community service, abandon the streets where news stories that really concern the public are to be found and, ultimately, lose interest, not only in journalistic research, but also in the simple but essential task of contextualizing, completing and, above all, verifying information delivered by the political and economic powers.
- Secondly, the restrictions that Spanish legislation imposes on access to newsworthy archives make serious and rigorous journalistic research all but impossible in Spain. Hence, resorting to biased leaks, which, furthermore, are difficult to verify, since consultable information resources are truly few and far between, has become a frequently more commonplace practice. We should ask ourselves what is the true legal framework for the journalistic profession in Spain, and in what legal arguments can journalists seek protection to disseminate certain information, in such a way that they know what is to be done when they receive news about an event of immense social interest and impact, but do not have the means of producing evidence because their sources are confidential and cannot be brought to light. Logic, based on the Spanish legislation currently in force, tells us that we should refrain from publishing it. But our morals and ethics as journalists (i.e., the “conscience clause” to which Article 20.1d of the Spanish Constitution refers) makes us think that, if we do not publish it, society cannot be warned and, possibly,

the courts will not take suitable action. The lack of a Press Act in Spain exacerbates even more the defencelessness of journalists when faced with the decision of whether or not to pursue news stories with a social impact.

Figure 2: Unimportant news item.

Newspaper: ABC

Translation: Style Gastronomy. "Cuban Cigars under a Summer Sky". "Cuban cigars never go out of fashion. And cigar tubes have become collector's items".



Figure 3: News item of limited.

Newspaper: El Correo de Andalucía

Translation: El Rocio.

Departures from Seville

"The Saviour Begins its Pilgrimage".

"Yesterday, the last of the city's five religious brotherhoods began its pilgrimage to Rocio, accompanied by 2,500 pilgrims".



Figure 4: Apparently harmless importance news item.

Newspaper: ABC de Sevilla

Translation: "Trichet Signals Further ECB Rate Increase in April with Spain Still Under Stress".

"The ECB fears that the rise in crude prices could contaminate the rest of the economy and affect the EU's recovery". "Economists warn that a premature ECB rate increase could have a negative impact on peripheral countries".



On the basis of what has been commented on up until now, it seems clear that the Spanish public is not currently conducting, baton in hand, the information reality of the media, but, on the contrary, they are the ones that are creating a false illusion of what is interesting or not in the field of current affairs. As regards this point, what newspapers have seemingly forgotten is that the intellectual level of the average Spanish reader is currently higher, for which reason he or she does not stop at reading and accepting as it stands what the newspapers tell him or her, but is capable of assessing news according to its informational contribution, while at the same time checking to see whether content has been suitably researched and is therefore truthful and trustworthy. In this way, Manuel López⁷ believes *a lot of newspapers still offer their news ignoring their readers are people who consume different media at the same time. Readers already know the main content of news and what they expect is, most of all, that the newspaper put news into context, as well as an interpretation of events and a widening.*

So, on the basis of what has been said, it is not surprising that readers are increasingly more distrustful of the journalistic discourse of Spanish newspapers, and that, as a result, this encourages them to abandon the habit of reading print newspapers (this is especially true of the younger generations, now perfectly adapted to the digital ecosystem), preferring to resort to e-newspapers and, more specifically, digital blogs, where journalists, free from corporate constraints, are at complete liberty to express their opinions, telling their readership what they have not been able to say openly in the print newspaper they work for, due to the veiled “censorship” to which they are submitted.

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to end this section without first stating that the media hype and dirigisme of the journalistic discourse is not a problem solely involving print newspapers, but also equally affects all Spanish media – radio, television and digital press – although it is indeed true that the traditional press is the medium that has most suffered the consequences of this, losing a considerable portion of its market share. Specifically, it is estimated that the distribution of Spanish dailies has dropped by 30% over the last two decades⁸.

Depth of news coverage

The only way to combat the flat, conformist and institutional journalism described above is to develop serious journalistic practice, committed to society and in-depth news coverage, applying to this end the informational resources and research methods characterizing the journalistic profession. Certainly, the precarious work conditions of Spanish journalists – as already mentioned – prevents them from

⁷ LÓPEZ, Manuel (2004) *op. cit.*, p. 85

⁸ Information obtained from the following newspaper report: MOLINA, Marta: “¡Que paren las rotativas!”, *Revista Periodistas*, nº 24, Spring 2011, pp. 8-10

processing the huge amount of news that is published on a daily basis by their newspapers with sufficient thoroughness, but it is also true that the more superficially treated news is, the lower its quality. So it is necessary to provide a different vision of daily news, giving it a minimum degree of accuracy and ridding it of that institutional “whiff” which is so damaging to journalistic veracity and reliability, even though journalists have to put quality before quantity.

In this way, another quality indicator – in our opinion, the most decisive – of a newspaper is its capacity to delve into the events on which it reports; i.e., so as to contextualize, complete, cross-check and verify news items. In short, the idea is to provide carefully gathered information about the most important news, instead of superficially covering a large number of disparate events. In other words, the aim of all news selection policies must be systematically that of putting *quality* before *quantity*. However, a quick glance at the dailies published in Spain brings to light an all but generalized phenomenon, that of the enormous quantity of news stories – always more than 100 – published daily, to which must be added the fact that many of these stories are presented as news “in brief” (occupying less than a quarter of a page). This tendency to “minimize” stories in a multitude of news items in brief transmits a chaotic image of a newspaper, since many of its pages are an authentic jumble of independent stories, to wit, totally unrelated as regards content. As can be seen in Figure 5, this type of page layout can put readers off, even before they have started to read.



Figure 5: Tendency to publish news in brief. Newspaper: ABC de Sevilla

It might seem logical that newspapers, governed by the so-called laws of offer and demand, and driven by the urge to gain a large readership, currently attach so much importance to achieving the widest news coverage possible, to the detriment of journalistic precision and thoroughness. Yet, in the light of the decline of the daily press, it could be assumed that habitual newspaper consumers do not want that burdensome amount of daily news or, in other words, prefer a newspaper with fewer pages (which would also make it more manageable) and a more limited number of news stories, provided that they are well researched from a journalistic point of view. And even though our hypothesis would have to be further researched before we could confirm it categorically, what we indeed know from a documentary perspective is that news saturation only serves to tire readers who pick up their newspapers every day knowing that it will be impossible for them to read and process all the news they contain in a suitable and intelligent fashion.

Furthermore, the thematic heterogeneity and the diversity of current events covered by newspapers on a daily basis leads to an informational disparity that, in our opinion, works against print newspapers, since the greater the number of disparate news stories that are published, the less likely it is that the most relevant stories will be suitably researched, and even – and above all – that other news stories that have yet to be covered by other media, such as radio, television and the digital press, will be looked into. If the traditional press wants to survive the fierce competition put up nowadays by radio stations, audiovisual media and multimedia, it cannot afford to tag behind the information disseminated by these media (radio, television and the Internet), but should compete with a new vision of journalism.

And this new vision of journalism being proposed here is based, as already mentioned, on the quality of news published rather than quantity. This can only be achieved by implementing a predefined plan, based on a special willingness shown by journalists to news research and tracking. As far as we see it, what is involved is not the daily publication of a large number of news stories, with the erroneous and misleading idea that, in this way, the interests of the broadest possible spectrum of the general public will be catered to, since readers do not want newspapers to simply be a news reference guide (which is indeed available to them in digital media), but to find out about the most important daily events occurring locally, as well as on a national and international level, in a convenient way.

In short, we believe that the fact that newspapers try to cover – surely a pointless exercise – all current affairs is not so important as the fact that they should be capable of developing preferential thematic areas so as to develop their personality. An example of this news disparity can be seen in Figure 6.

Figure 6: News disparity in newspapers.
Newspaper: *El Correo de Andalucía*

Headlines:

- 1.- Public Health. "Two Multiorgan Donations in 48 Hours Allow Three Transplants"
- 2.- University. "Students Demonstrate Against Automatic Enrolment System"
- 3.- Polígono Sur. "Idea Competition for Café Cultural"



We know full well that the aim of general-interest newspapers is to cover the “universal.” That is to say, any story can become the centre of interest at any moment. Not even the most experienced journalists – the opinion leaders – are capable of defining which issues are exclusively regarded – beyond temporary boundaries – as being of interest, since the said interest has blurred, or on occasions even confusing, boundaries (social interest, public interest, human interest...) in continuous movement. Therefore, and in the face of this inevitable ignorance, it is logical that newspapers are always alert to specific events which will have to be necessarily covered, beyond their thematic core areas, because of the unprecedented temporary interest they awaken in society. For this same reason, and because – as we insist – social interest is of a changing nature, the principles on which news selection policies are based should be examined and revised periodically so as to reflect the increasing more sophisticated information demands of newspaper readers.

But, irrespective of those specific and peculiar events that enter the arena at a particular time and then hit the headlines in any newspaper, the general rule is that the media decide which thematic areas are going to be especially relevant in order to create, over time, a specific reader profile.

This does not mean that we defend a tendency towards specialization of general-interest newspapers, which would basically be a contradiction of the channel’s own nature, but towards deciding, according to their news policy, which stories should be covered daily with more accuracy before being disseminated to their readership. And by more accuracy we mean – as already mentioned – that stories should be sufficiently

covered so as to keep readers informed in a timely and appropriate fashion, instead of making do with mere press releases sent by press agencies or offices, or statements made in press conferences. It would be a very different issue altogether were newspapers to use their digital editions to offer all those news stories, whose publication in their print editions has been ruled out, which might be of interest, depending on the newspaper, to a more or less broad sector of society.

Preservation and defence of traditional journalistic values

It should not be forgotten that the real importance of the press does not solely lie in being a mere transmitter of information. Newspapers do not limit themselves exclusively to delivering more or less in-depth news, but also constitute an element conforming social values, being on occasions a valuable tool for generating ideas and opinions.

The habitual eagerness of newspapers not to be left untouched by events and on the sidelines, but to take a stand in favour or against an ideology or a certain government, means the daily reality of what newspapers publish is delivered to readers in a intrusive and biased fashion, be this due to ideological or economic interests, both of which are, more frequently than would otherwise be desired, insurmountable barriers for serious and rigorous journalism. It is in this way that newspapers end up by transmitting their own norms and values to the general public.

Print newspapers can be seen as an element that enhances the political, economic and cultural personality traits of the geographical area where they are distributed and, consequently, reinforces traditions – above all in the case of conservative newspapers – that tend to consolidate group unity beyond political leanings. Given their geopolitical differences, this reality can be frequently seen in Spain's autonomous regions, some of which, like the Basque Country and Catalonia, are making a strong bid for independence.

This would seem paradoxical, above all in the knowledge that the information media have managed to broaden our living environment, familiarizing us with the rest of the world, which now does not seem so distant, unknown or alien. We have become "global citizens," and newspapers have contributed enormously to this.

But it is equally true that, in the face of the trend towards the world globalization of information, those who work in the field of journalistic research have observed over the last few decades, through the analysis of newspapers, how the continued struggle of specific regions in Spain to preserve their identity, in contrast to the modern world's tendency towards transculturalization, has gained impetus (see Figures 7 and 8). Indeed, everyone would agree that a news story cannot be generated in a vacuum, it being necessary to place it, within the context of human societies, in its respective culture.

Figures 7 and 8: The cultural value of newspapers.
Newspaper: El Mundo / ABC



Figure 7 translation: “Regional Government to Educate Children as Members of Catalan Nation” “The new Education Act imposes the cultivation of the sense of belonging in schools”.

Figure 8 translation: Basque expansionism. “Navarre Not to Finance Textbooks Including Region in Basque Country”. “The regional order affects the textbooks of five publishing houses used in 31 educational centres”.

Furthermore, the traditional press is also seen in Spain as a valuable educational tool, which has earned it the sobriquet of “parallel school.” Newspapers have made a considerable contribution to the dissemination of the most important scientific advances to date. Thanks to journalism, knowledge that was kept from the general public until a relatively short time ago now forms the core of general-interest news stories. The media are therefore social agents for the promotion of science. Using a natural and down-to-earth language – far removed from technical and scientific jargon – they have made it possible for citizens to clearly understand thoughts and knowledge that seemed to be the exclusive reserve of the cultured.

However, for journalism to be truly educational, newspapers should remedy some of their most frequent defects, including alteration or distortion of news, as well as the use of sensationalism or yellow journalism techniques, leading to tension and misunderstandings between experts and journalists. This problem – which is more commonplace than it ought to be – stems from the profession’s lack of

qualified training to handle the news that is covered. Indeed, being realistic, journalists cannot be expected to be experts in all areas of knowledge, but their lack of training can be compensated by revising and consulting a variety of information and documentary sources. Likewise, newspapers must treat the scientific information they publish with caution, without letting themselves be influenced by propaganda campaigns, be they public or private (for instance, instigated by pharmaceutical companies), so as to avoid misleading readers by offering them, under the false guise of a publicity editorial, information that only serves to roll out the red carpet for the institution or organization in question.

Likewise, the educational function of newspapers takes for granted that they are capable of enhancing the general public's capacity for critical thinking as regards the news they publish, involving them in the story and encouraging them to act in consequence. This is the best way that journalism can favour social development. Of this there are many examples, above all the outreach effort of the media and the fact that they have contributed to raising social awareness as regards the importance of certain attitudes, habits, etc., geared to protecting the environment or improving our health. A good example of this is shown in Figure 9.



Figure 9: The educational value of newspapers.
 Newspaper: *Diario de Sevilla*

Translation: "Study Reveals Yet Again Remedial Effect of Siesta".
 "Long working hours, television and the Internet affect the quality of sleep to such an extent that people sleep on average two hours less than 50 years ago".
 45 minutes. "Less than one hour of siesta helps to recover blood pressure after mental stress accumulated".

Conclusions

In view of the above, it would therefore be exceedingly simplistic to attribute the decline of the Spanish press to one sole cause. In this paper, we have analyzed three of the quality indicators that we regard as fundamental for identifying the current situation of the written press in Spain. Nonetheless, it is vital to continue to conduct more in-depth research into the current characteristics of traditional journalism, studying other quality indicators (like, for instance, the authorship of news stories, the journalistic use of information sources, etc.) which can help us to shed light on the weak points of the written press. Only by knowing their defects, accepting them and correcting them will newspapers be able to look forward a less uncertain future.

In conclusion, traditional journalism is not only being eroded by the competition of digital journalism – which is becoming a culture increasingly more deeply rooted each day – but its own incapacity – or incompetence – to reinvent itself so as to be able to compete with the new digital ecosystem on an equal footing that is forcing it to dig its own grave. If it is incapable of severing ties with the general journalistic panorama in Spain, differentiating itself positively from audiovisual and electronic media; if it does not free itself from the chains of the prevailing political and economic powers, reconverting its discourse to echo the voice of the people and not exclusively that of the powerful; if it does not change its news content, adapting it to the real information needs of readers; if it is incapable of endowing its news stories with compulsory veracity and journalistic thoroughness; if it does not do anything to help journalists to regain their motivation and reawaken their interest in research and enquiry, etc., it is very doubtful that it will survive the pressure of the electronic media, especially journalistic blogs where it is indeed still possible to find that “freshness,” those winds of freedom lost – maybe forever, who knows – to the world of the written press.

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