



The ethical values within the Spanish journalistic culture

PAGE | 94

Martín Oller Alonso¹

Abstract

Based on data collected from 100 interviews with journalists in Spain², this paper analyzes the Spanish journalistic culture based on ethical values of journalists. Our goal is to determine the common traditional ethical values within western journalism and journalism in Spain. One of the conclusions of this study is that we do find global ethical influences on journalism, empiricism and work in Spanish journalistic culture. We also find universal ethical values within the Spanish journalistic culture. Although, the results show that Spanish journalists in their daily work do not pay excessive attention to these philosophical aspects. We could determine this, because our analysis of professional elements, organizations and procedures within the Spanish journalistic culture showed greater interference with practical factors.

Keywords: *worlds of journalism study*; journalistic culture; ethical dilemmas; Spain.

Introduction

This work is part of the *Worlds of Journalism Study* (WJS). For the first phase (from 2007 to 2011), called *Worlds of Journalism* (WoJ), were carried out a total of 2100 interviews with journalists from 400 news organizations (radio, television, newspapers, media agencies, etc.) in 21 countries. For our analysis of the Spanish journalistic culture we have based our study on 100 interviews with journalists in Spain. In the following table the basic parameters of the sample are reflected:

TABLE 1: Basic parameters of the sample in the studio *Woj Spain*.

Basic parameters of the sample	Spain
Journalists surveyed	100
Women journalists (%)	40
Age (M)	40
University degree (%)	99
Year worked as journalist (M)	17

SOURCE: Compiled from WoJ results.

The objective of this paper is to determine to what extent traditional ethical values common in Western journalism, can be applied to Spain.

Journalistic culture and ethical ideologies

We understand the journalistic culture as a particular set of ideas and practices by which journalists, consciously and unconsciously, legitimate their role in society and

¹ University Rey Juan Carlos, Madrid
martin.olleralonso@gmail.es

² Project *Worlds of journalism* (www.worldsofjournalism.org).



render their work meaningful for themselves and others (Hanitzsch 2007). Because the journalist's professional work is rooted in a particular culture. The theoretical construction of journalism culture is complex. Therefore its analysis should start from the representation of different institutional manifestations in different stages. We do this by creating three dimensions of analysis according to Hanitzsch (2007): institutional roles, epistemology, and ethical ideology.

PAGE | 95

Here we will focus on the study of the third block: ethical ideologies. This examines how journalists respond to ethical dilemmas. In this block are four perspectives: 1) the *standard professional approach*, when journalists are committed to universal ethical codes and editorial guidelines; 2) the *liberal professional approach*, which is based on the criteria of the pre-established perspectives through exposing a series of arguments; 3) the *cynical approach*, which appears when journalists do not give importance to ethical dilemmas; and 4) *ethical relativists*, who are journalists who promote *ad hoc* responses (a solution developed specifically for a specific problem or need) to ethical dilemmas.

An alternative approach was suggested by Plaisance (2005), who organized the ethical ideologies in two dimensions. Those Hanitzsch (2007: 371-379) has taken as reference when he created the dimensions within this block: 1) *relativism*, based on the belief and affirmation or rejection of universal ethical codes; and 2) *idealism*, based on certain actions by the media or their results. The intersection of these two dimensions results in four different perspectives: 1) *situationism*, journalists who reject universal ethical standards and analyze *case by case*; 2) *absolutism*, related to idealism but considers that best results are achieved from universal ethical rules; 3) *subjectivism*, defines journalists who support their judgments on personal values but are receptive to certain negative thoughts in order to achieve something new and better; and 4) the "*exceptionism*", in this group are the journalists who are guided by universal ethical codes, but also remain open to any exceptions provided to help prevent certain negative consequences.

Influence factors

Ethical values depend on the influences that journalists perceive in their daily work. More specifically, we detailed six areas of influence proposed by Hanitzsch and Mellado (2011:406-7): 1) *political influence* (government, politicians, censorship, etc.); 2) *economic influences* (expectations profit, market research, public, etc.); 3) *the influence of the organization* (the editorial decisions of journalistic routines, the influences of the owners of the media, supervisors or chief editors, etc.); 4) *the influences of the procedure* (common constraints such as lack of resources, space, rules, standards or routines); 5) *professional influences* (media beliefs, laws, guidelines, editorials, etc.); and 6) *the influences from the reference group* (other colleagues, competition among media organizations, audiences, friends, family, etc.).

This study shares the conceptual framework and the methodology of the project WoJ, assuming that this research conducted in Spanish journalistic culture allows us a comparative study. And thus, expands our range of issues and results, and can operate from various methodological perspectives intended to find the similarities and variances between different journalistic cultures (Mills et al., 2006: 620).

Results

Concerning the ethical ideology of journalists in Spain our results show that journalists tend to follow the universal ethical principles, regardless of the situation



and the context (90.2%). The table 2 shows the results relating to the analysis of ethical ideology of journalists in Spain:

TABLE 2: Journalistic culture in Spain: ethical values.

		N	Spain %
There are ethical principles which are so important that they should be followed by all journalists, regardless of situation and context		100	90.2
	M		4.51
	SD		0.87
Journalists should avoid questionable methods of reporting in any case, even if it means not getting the story		100	83.0
	M		4.15
	SD		1.12
There are situations in which harm is justifiable if it results in a story that produces a greater good		100	63.6
	M		3.18
	SD		1.28
What is ethical in journalism varies from one situation to another		100	65.2
	M		3.26
	SD		1.41
Ethical dilemmas in news coverage are often so complex that journalists should be allowed to formulate their own individual codes of conduct		100	53.0
	M		2.65
	SD		1.37
Reporting and publishing a story that can potentially harm others is always wrong, irrespective of the benefits to be gained		100	69.2
	M		3.46
	SD		1.03

SOURCE: Dates compiled from the results of *Woj*.

Centered mean scores: values indicate the importance of the item in relation to the Spain mean all items belonging to the same domain of journalism culture (institutional roles). Original scores ranges between 5=“extremely important”/“strongly agree” and 1=“not important at all”/“strongly disagree”. Are represented the number of the sample, mean, arithmetic mean and standard deviation.

M: mean

N: number of the sample

SD: standard desviation

\bar{x} : arithmetic mean

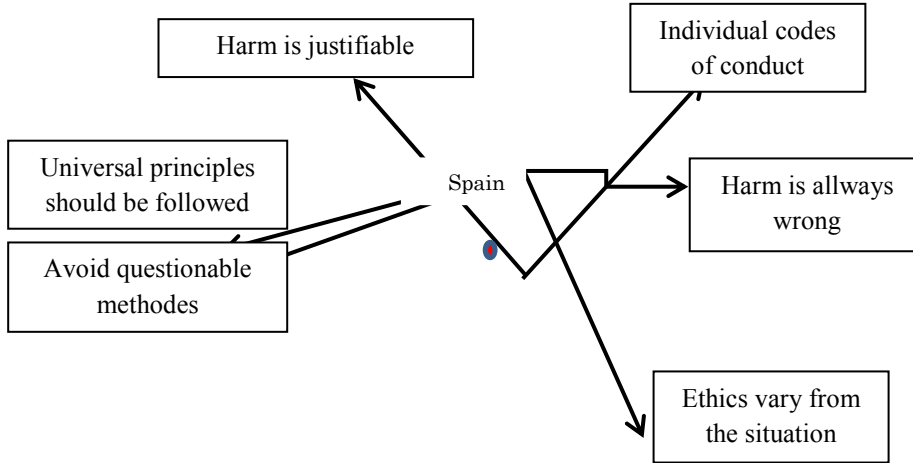
These results regarding the dimension of *relativism* reveal that the journalists based their individual moral philosophy on universal ethical rules, even though news coverage is often complex and journalists should be able to formulate their personal codes of conduct.

Regarding the dimension of *idealism*, journalists in Spain also believe that professionals should avoid “questionable methods”, although this Could mean that they cannot present their story (83%). Therefore, they believe that the information that they want to reach must always be obtained through “correct” ways. However, journalists ethics can vary from one situation to another (65.2%).



Figure 1 allows us to visualize a two-dimensional spatial representation of the idea that Spanish journalists have about ethical.

FIGURE 1: Position of Spain regarding ethical values, *CoPlot*, coefficient of alienation= 0.118, average of correlations= 0,856.



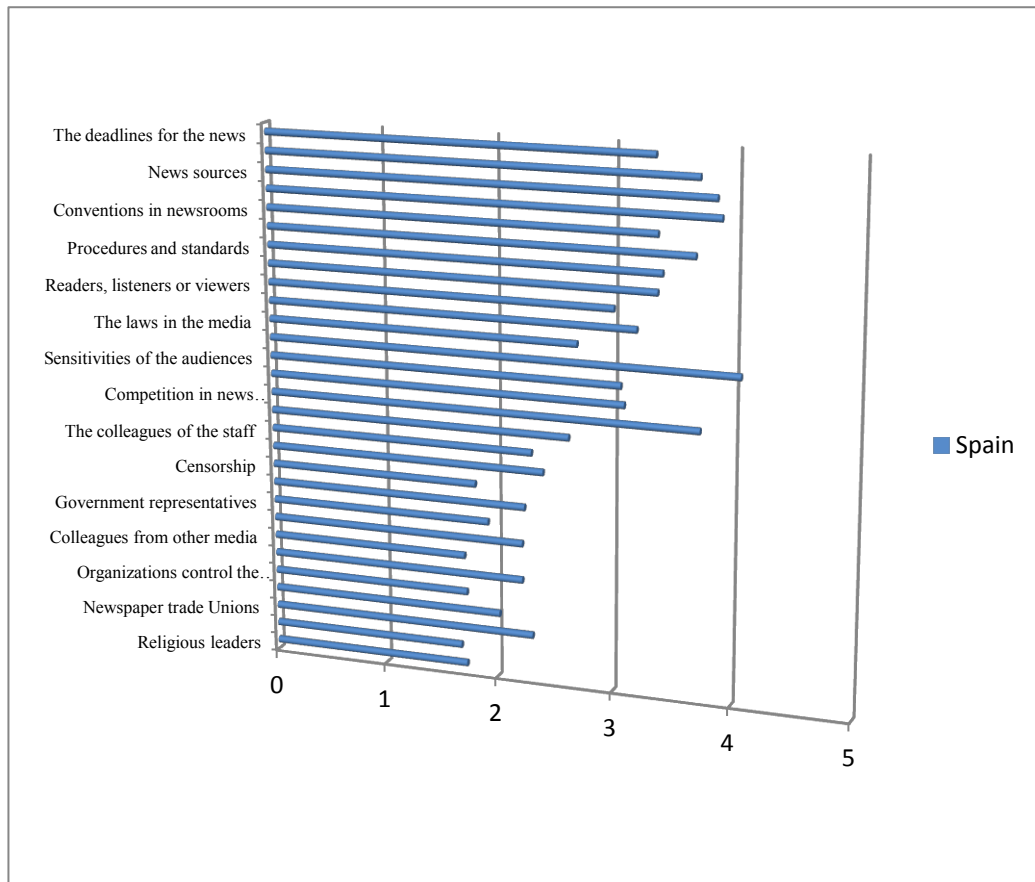
SOURCE: Compiled from WoJ results.

From the relative position of the vectors can be seen that Spain is situated on a point that could be defined by its “abstract structure”. The vertical axis in this composition is represented by individual and situational ethical ideas. The horizontal axis represents the focus of the media and of the consequences of this information. Spain is positioned at the bottom of Figure 1 in an intermediate point. We should note that the right side of this figure represents the journalistic cultures in which they tend to follow universal ethical standards; and the left side represents the journalistic cultures where there is some skepticism about these universal ethical values. The position occupied by Spanish journalistic culture in this figure would be a symptom of its evolution to adapt to the “Western journalistic culture”. Spain, as other countries, as affirm by Hanitzsch et al. (2011:19) and Forsyth (1980:176), is in the middle point, and this shows a tendency to follow the universal rules of ethics, but with a practical viewpoint that is open to exceptions.

With an analysis of the influences that journalists perceive we can define certain mutualities within the journalistic Spanish culture. Figure 2 shows the statistical data obtained from the survey responses:



FIGURE 2: Journalistic culture in Spain: influences that journalists perceive.



SOURCE: Compiled from WoJ results. Original scores ranges between 5=“extremely important”/“strongly agree” and 1=“not important at all”/“strongly disagree”.

Conclusions:

Within the Spanish journalism culture the journalists accept of universal ethical codes in their daily professional decisions. In a second plane are the individual ethical codes. At this point, we find some inconsistency regarding the allegations of journalists surveyed. Because the results show that it appears to be quite accepted, that ethical values can vary from one situation to another.

We can establish that these philosophical issues are presented to journalists as a diffuse and difficult situation to understand. Because the concept of journalistic culture is inclusive enough to integrate diverse discourses on concepts such as professionalism, objectivity, professional perceptions of roles journalistic or ethical standards (Hanitzsch et al., 2010: 274-275; Oller and Meier, 2012: 10).

Despite the complexity involved in this issue, journalists choose to reject the information that harm a person or a group, irrespective of the benefits to be gained.

We must emphasize the difficulty to find results that can be placed at one extreme or the other in actual journalism practice. The main conclusions obtained are:

a. Spanish journalists share the common values of Western journalism based on universal ethical principles.

b. When discussing the ethical ideology of journalists in Spain we entered a complex and diffuse issue. The results do not show anything conclusive, except that the opinion of journalists are in some cases inconsistent. Still, it is clear that most



journalists believe in universal ethical values and they think that they must be maintained. In general, Spanish journalists fit the standard in journalism understood as “profession”.

c. Journalists believe that they have a high level of autonomy. Although the survey responses show how the influences of the audiences, editorial decisions and economic reasons reduced the individual freedom of journalists. We note, as said Hanitzsch (2011), the low perceptions in economic needs by journalists. Less than you might expect. This aspect can explain for the filter action conducted by the media. Anyway, we deduce that journalists are not aware of the real influence of the external factors in their daily lives. Although they speak about internal pressures within the media (closing time news, bosses, owners, lack of resources, media standards and rules, etc.) and their influence in their professional and ethical concepts.

d. The main influences are perceived by journalists in the middle and inner levels closest to them. These are the professional elements, organization and procedures, which interfere with their daily routine of journalists. The current crisis is reflected in the lack of resources that professionals have in their work. External influences with higher rates of impact on journalists are strong competition between media, a factor indicative of the economic influence in the media market, and the relationship with their sources.

Bibliography

- Forsyth, D. R. (1980). A Taxonomy of Ethical Ideologies. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 30(1), 175 -184.
- Hanitzsch, T. & Mellado, C. (2011). What Shapes the News around the World? How journalists in 18 countries perceive influences on their work. *International Journal of Press/Politics*, 16, 404-426.
- Hanitzsch, T., Hanusch, F., Mellado, C., Anikina, M., Berganza, R., Cangoz, I., Coman, M., Hamada, B., Hernandez, M. E., Karadjov, C. D., Moreira, S. V., Mwesige, P. G., Plaisance, P. L., Reich, Z., Seethaler, J., Skewes, E. A., Vardiansyah Noor, D., & Yuen, K. W. (2011). Mapping Journalism Cultures across Nations: A Comparative Study of 18 Countries. *Journalism Studies*, 12, 273-293.
- Hanitzsch, Thomas, Maria Anikina, Rosa Berganza, Incilay Cangoz, Mihai Coman, Basyouni Hamada, Folker Hanusch, Christopher D. Karadjov, Claudia Mellado, Sonia Virginia Moreira, Peter G. Mwesige, Patrick Lee Plaisance, Zvi Reich, Josef Seethaler, Elizabeth A. Skewes, Dani Vardiansyah Noor & Kee Wang Yuen (2010): Modeling Perceived Influences on Journalism: Evidence from a Cross-National Survey of Journalists. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 87(1): 7-24.
- Hanitzsch, T. (2007). Deconstructing Journalism Culture: Towards a universal theory. *Communication Theory*, 17, 367-385.
- Mills et al. (2006). Sharing ideas and research in social sciences learning and teaching. *The Higher Education Academy*, accessed November 14, 2012 at http://www.c-sap.bham.ac.uk/resources/project_reports/ShowOverview.asp?id=4.
- Oller Alonso, M. y Meier, K. (2012). *La cultura periodística de España y Suiza*. Madrid: Editorial Fragua.
- Plaisance, P. L. (2005). *An assessment of media ethics education: Course content and the values and ethical ideologies of media ethics students*. 55th Annual Conference on the international communication Association, New York.



About the author: Ph.D. in Journalism from the University of Rey Juan Carlos of Madrid (2012). Master in Advanced Studies in Communication from the University of Murcia (2009). Bachelor of Journalism (2008) and in Advertising and Public Relations (2011) from the University of Murcia. Involved in two projects (NEPOCS and WJS) based on international comparative analysis of political journalism. He lives in Zürich (Switzerland), a country that continues with his research.