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Journalism and the political powers

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Abstract

Since its very beginnings, journalism has swung between the servile repetition of biased versions of events and its own distorted versions caused by its lack of knowledge of a hardly glimpsed reality. The powers that threaten the journalistic independence have in fact constantly increased their manipulative ability. Journalism originated as a ‘profession of slaves’ during the Roman Empire, and many current indicators seem to resemble its origins: the large-scale strategic public relations, the rise of the ‘spin doctors’, the shameless extortions that take place in the weakest democracies, and the populism of the social networks, among others. All these elements are being accompanied or promoted by the internal degradation and dismay of the journalistic institutions, which are unable to distance themselves from all these forces. Journalism should neither become an ally or a competitor of the powers that surround it; instead it should cleverly distance itself from these powers in order to be able to move among them without ceasing to perform the watchdog function that citizens still need from the professionals of journalism.

Keywords

Journalism; political power; political communication; journalistic professionalism; journalistic independency.

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“Newspapers are an unpleasant thing that one must read”.
Arcadi Espada (2009)

1. On the dubious independence and sagacity of journalists [1]

In 1975, American critic Jay Epstein explained (1975: 16) that journalists...

“are caught in a dilemma. Either they could serve as faithful messengers to underground interests, or could reassemble the message with their own version of the story, by adding, deleting, or altering part of the material. The first option ensures that the message reaches accurately the intended audience, even if the message may be false or misleading. The second option decreases the control of the source over the message but increases the risk of more profound distortions, since the journalist cannot be aware of the full context and the circumstances surrounding the dissemination.”

According to this recognised and now little-remembered journalist scholar...

“the tension of the dilemma will be relieved if journalists cease to regard themselves as the truth tellers, and start to see themselves [only] as agents for third parties who wish to circulate information. [The latter would imply] clearly identifying the circumstances and interests that are behind the information that they report, in order to enable an intelligent evaluation of this information. In contrast, when they hide the plots and political strategies that accompany any leaks, journalists suppress part of the truth that surrounds each piece of information” (Ibid.: 17).

To ask journalists to offer such an explanation of the backroom is, however, almost impossible, in the perspective of Epstein and anyone who follows journalism with a minimum assiduity, since the good treatment with the sources is considered vital to continue enjoying information supply, and in such conditions –this author further remarks– journalist can only aspire to be a transmitter of the messages, which indicates changes of direction in politics and the public discourse, but can absolutely play the role of investigator of “hidden facts” and the “elusive truths that determine them” (Ibid.: 18).

A long-rooted tradition tells us that, at least in democracies, *the press is the fourth estate*; that the classic political powers are resisted and confronted by a fourth socio-political –although less formalised– institution known as journalism, whose watchful, revelatory and critical activity that have enabled the creation of democracies and prevented their collapse. This tradition also tells us that the independent expression of the press is not only difficult to exercise, but is often hampered, abducted or subjected by the force or bribery of the other powers, which have much more effective

resources. But according to this perspective, the permanent difficulty of such separation would not prevent journalists and their media from maintaining an honourable history of won battles and keeping in the end, in the most mature democracies, its consistent image of tough opponent, endowed with a shield difficult to break.

This is indeed supported by the long history of journalism. But in the current circumstances the question is whether the counter-power of journalistic still conserves some of its strength or has it been diluted completely by the increasingly sophisticated tools of its antagonists. Perhaps, as Epstein pointed out, its own structural limitation condemns journalism to servile dependence, without forgetting its own extreme distortions and propaganda when the object of its attention does not belong to the ruling circles that have dissuasive external threats. The ability of journalism to exercise an incorruptible vigilance is increasingly compromised and is opened to the suspicion that its prestigious social intermediation is returning to the state in which it was born in the Latin ancient times:

“At the time of the Romans –according to Altschull (ed. 1988: 5)– news travelled by foot in the form of letters. The Roman elite that resided in the provinces sent one or more correspondents to the capital, so that they could prepare and issue written reports on all daily events, in particular those relating to commercial and political transactions affecting life in the province. These correspondents were, almost always, intelligent slaves, who soon realised that they could win some extra money by sending the correspondence of other residents of the province; sometimes, the money earned with these journalistic activities helped them to buy their freedom. The journalists (who sent information to the provinces) (...), often extracted from the information sheets posted in the walls of the forum, were personal slaves; [but] later many of them became known as salaried slaves, to mean, captives of the market”.

This is a radical dependency that no contemporary professional journalist will openly admit but in which a growing majority of them can become, unwillingly, immersed into due to a host of factors that facilitate this trend.

2. Persuasion in the open field: strategic communication to get policies approved

Not very long ago, the powerful actors faced, in some societies at least, a quite large media pack that had a sharp sense of smell and was not easy to distract from the perceived traces. Politicians and magnates feared the potential persecution of the pen, the microphones and the cameras. They were afraid of journalists and tried to flatter them to keep them at rest. They hid their shameful actions, spoke in a low voice or said nothing in the presence of the media. They ultimately practiced a defensive strategy with a relative success since, rightly or wrongly, bites in the ankles were abundant and sometimes the hounds brought down politicians, businessmen and even entire institutions.

However, already several decades ago the proactive strategies of the socio-political and economic elites began to accompany and even replace the defensive strategies. And an increasingly large army of press offices, communication advisers and public relations agencies began to occupy the field,

overwhelmingly outnumbering, in social capital and logistical resources, the light infantry - often simple guerrillas- of the hack writers, even though these are now equipped with iPads and the latest digital resources.

The objective was to directly and openly seduce the opposing media and then to conquer, as final prize, the public. The most effective way of doing this combined and still combines two elements: the massive diffusion of the version concerned party through multiple formats and terminals and, secondly, the thorough knowledge of the journalistic logic in order to take advantage of the uncontrollable trends of the profession, so that the information that the external developers sought to place on the public agenda appeared as undisputed news, filled with drama, surprising impact, general interest and human warmth.

A large part of society believes that the “policy makers” cleverly orient the media in favour of their objectives. It is, however, much more difficult to identify their evidence, describing the obvious cases in which the expert hand of “strategic communication” (Manheim, ed. 1994) has gently led the media towards a part of the socio-cultural, political and economic jungle until it turns it into an unavoidable focus of the media in a way that favours the seductive purposes of a group. The documented revelation of such operations is always difficult, even though the companies and offices dedicated to organise and manage the ‘corporate communications’ have very visible offices, staff and income statements. Therefore, the generic allegations of domestication of the media by such ‘public relations’ teams are easily neutralised under the recurring label of ‘conspiracy theories’. This is despite the fact that the premeditated actions of distortion and re-direction of the media agenda are produced on a daily basis and in front of the professionals who are affected by them, but can hardly explain their hidden details. The best campaigns are undoubtedly those which, in addition to achieving the intended influence, occur as the spontaneous becoming of the social interactions and leave no record of the invested ‘intelligence’ outside the secret memo shared by the advisor and its client.

Aware of the low academic value of the personal experience, I want to mention the confidential comments made by an important businessman about the public relations advice for the pharmaceutical and health sectors: “when I read or hear a story about the usefulness of a new drug, or the danger of a syndrome or a health threat, and it is not a message designed by my press office, I immediately think that another team in my sector has done its job very well.” While isolated anecdotes do not constitute solid and sufficient knowledge, they can stimulate systematic research on the reality they refer to. Here it is important to highlight that there is a vast field in the area of journalism is pending academic research, even when the opacity of the subjects of study makes the penetration of social researchers in that unknown territory an arduous task. On the other hand, although we do not have a large repertoire of deep and consistent descriptions of the submission of the media to the planned suggestion of the communication campaigns of governments and institutions, we do have notorious examples of the scope and intensity of such actions.

One of the most detailed descriptions of cases of this kind is provided, after three years of research, by Martin Linsky (1986 and 1994 ed.) on the campaigns to direct the media and public opinion developed by the governments of Nixon, Ford, Carter and Reagan to support successfully the implementation of various policies designed by their senior officials. In particular, in this study

stands out the analysis of the massive, calculated and prolonged intervention at the end of the 1960s of the Richard Nixon administration, directed by the two people responsible for the federal mail system and a renowned marketing expert. The assignment consisted in designing and carrying out the radical reorganisation of postal services around the country. Despite the existing wastage and inefficiency, the initial opposition to the reform by congress members was total since all of them benefitted from the right of direct appointment of the principal officials of the service through a partisan system of supervision and quotas. In addition, there was a lack of interest and knowledge among the public opinion and journalists towards the problem.

After the creation of the ‘Citizens Committee for Postal Reform’ (CCPR), the ideologists of the intended change planned and executed a strategy to turn things upside-down through ‘information saturation’ campaign, which in its first stage aimed to convince journalists and the public opinion of the importance and need for the restructuring of the postal service. This campaign should persuade congress members to depose their privileges in this matter and support the popular clamour. For this purpose the CCPR devised and applied a triple line of action sustained for several months in 1969: on the one hand, they supplied national and local news media a large and persistent repertoire of press releases, sales arguments for editorials, public statements, interviews with senior officials in TV variety shows and institutional paid advertising. The common leitmotif in all of the deployment was to define the situation as being close to collapse and in need of urgent reform. Sources of this material were also presented as scattered, delivered from intermediate administration offices, individual politicians who supported the reform, the technical managers of the plan and the speeches of the President himself. Secondly and simultaneously, the CCPR sent all employees and managers of the postal service detailed reports that highlighted the advantages of the proposed reorganisation, taking advantage, as public results of the crisis, some strikes that occurred in the sector to demand labour improvements. In third place, and also simultaneously, the CCPR stimulated an intense popular or “grassroots” mobilisation to encourage ordinary citizens to send letters to newspapers throughout the country, complaining about the failures of the mail system, and give donations to the Committee to undertake new actions and recruit firms to urge President Nixon about the need for a regulatory change.

According to data provided by Linsky (ed. 1994: 406-407), two months after the campaign had been launched, the team had managed the publication of 194 news stories, 232 editorials, 27 opinion pieces and 39 cartoons on the topic, and a somewhat further balance indicated that 88% of all the published information was favourable to reform, with 9% of the information pieces been undecided and only 3% against it. To encourage demonstrations, the CCPR paid ads in about 400 newspapers and radio and television stations, demanding support for a law to increase the salaries of the Postal service workers, and asking the public to send letters to President Nixon to urge him to support the measure. Moreover, the initiative of the postal service workers distributed 6 million postal cards with a prefixed text and pre-paid to be posted to the White House so that citizens only had to include their data and send them to the President. In fact, Nixon’s office received 3 million letters in support of the wage increase.

As Linsky (ed. 1994: 410) concludes, when the reform was definitively approved and the music stopped, there was a sense that the problems in the Department of the Postal Service were real, that the law approved by Nixon was a positive response to them and that the issue was above partisan

interests”. Linsky adds that the strategic communication was “direct and well executed”, with the full sense of the word “campaign”, as it was not reduced to sporadic efforts of a press conference or isolated leaks. The actions “were well planned, complex, persistent, multifaceted and well executed” (Ibid., 411). The process came to be described by the President of the National Association of Letter Carriers as ‘one of the most refined and massive brainwashing efforts since the glorious days of Joseph Goebels’ (Ibid., 407).

Probably the cause described was noble and in any case the decision of an administration or any entity with public presence to mobilise all the communicative resources at its disposal to try to convince society of the seriousness of a problem or the relevance of its proposals was legitimate. Similarly, no one will deny the obligation of the journalistic profession to address prominently those events and controversies that the most active sectors of society (whether elite or grassroots movements) put in front of them and from which they demand the mirror function that the theory of journalism proposes. However, what puts in question the previous experiences is whether the free observation, evaluation and interpretation associated to independent journalistic counter-power is possible when the orchestrated action unfolds with the force of a tsunami and sweeps aside any critical caution regarding whether the hierarchy of public concerns is being kidnapped by a disguised particular interests.

More recent campaigns, such as the fake news disseminated during the invasion to Kuwait which stated that soldiers were destroying incubators and leaving children in the floor, which served as the sentimental catalyst for the start of the first Iraq war, and the supposed existence of chemical weapons in the hands of Sadam Hussein, which triggered the international mobilisation for war against this tyrant (cf. for example Stauber / Rampton, 1995; Bivens, 2004), clearly show how the “strategic communication” deployed in such cases by commercial companies such as Hill and Knowlton, and even the members of an Administration, can disable on a massive scale the independence of judgment and the counter-power initiative of practically all of the professional journalists in a country, and even a large part of the international media.

3. The hidden and ad hoc seduction of the ‘spin doctors’

The obstructive force deployed against the so-called fourth estate is, however, not limited to the massive and orchestrated interventions such as those previously indicated. If so, the economic resources, tenacity and coordinating intelligence of the communication offices required for these campaigns would be out of the reach of many institutions and even governments. At a much-reduced and granular scale, the contemporary journalistic information faces multiple and everyday short-run overtones that are, nonetheless, no less effective in relation to the treatment of the daily news and the more prolonged monitoring of current topics.

In fact, the professional heritage includes terms such as ‘leaks’, ‘hoax’, ‘rumour’ and ‘trial balloon’, which refer to the well-known practice in which a source close to a party, a ministry or any other economic or socio-political organisation, provides leads to journalists, informally and without the possibility of direct attribution, so that journalists and even the directors of media companies focus

their attention to one aspect of the social activity, give veracity to a revelation or circulate a version that the source wants to propagate without being acknowledged.

Any connoisseur of the relations between politicians and the media will tell us that in this regard everything has been already invented since long ago. Despite this, the current intensity with which these strategies are implemented and the sophistication achieved with their exercise have led to the emergence of a new term that refers to the latest integral hidden seduction technique: the “spin doctoring” and the “spin doctors”, which is a label than some corporate communication advisers pompously use in their presentation cards and even in their companies’ name [2] to tell their potential clients that they are not a simple leakers or designers of sporadic ‘trial balloons’, but have reached –real or figuratively– a higher level of subtle and undetected pressure on the brains of journalists, in their daily task of selecting and ranking news.

Reyes Cala (2013), the author of a doctoral thesis on the subject of “spin doctoring”, explains that this term first appeared in the media vocabulary on 21 October, 1984, in an editorial in *The New York Times* to refer to the activities of Ronald Reagan’s communication team [3]. The term started to be used by journalists when they observed a dozen of ‘seniors advisers’ or trusted advisors walking in the TV studio during an electoral debate between Reagan and Mondale and from that moment these people began to be generically known as “spin doctors”.

But while the expression, from that initial moment, diffusely evokes the “experts” who advise on any type of corporate image or communication strategy, in a more specific sense it refers to the specific ability of ‘inject’ in the minds of journalists certain frames of reference that will favour the interests of the institution or high-position figures that hire the services of these specialists. “Spin doctoring”, as documented by Reyes Cala (2013: 10-11; 71 et seq.), is another term already used in the jargon of journalists and ‘strategic communicators’ to refer to the activity of “giving the right spin to a news story”, i.e., to suggest to journalists that the controversial facts or issues that they will undoubtedly address in the media deserve a particular frame or must be evaluated from a particular perspective, etc. So, although silence or censorship would not be within the reach of the concerned politician or institution, they can at least take advantage of their “best side” with relatively unconscious collaboration of seduced journalists. [4]

This is why, as I already pointed out in an earlier study (Dader, 2008: 152), the image that best explains this mechanism of seduction is that provided by the Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage, whose second meaning of “spin” is: “To make a web from a filament of a viscous fluid that is hardens quickly. Used specifically in the case of spiders or insects”. In essence it is to “make a web”, which in our case is made by strategic communication advisors to catch journalists and implant a particular point of view on a particular subject. The way, in addition to attract journalists to the spider’s web, is the personalised, confidential and supposedly exclusive treatment with which the adviser, a person very close to the leader and sometimes the institutional leader or politician itself, gives to the journalist the deference of a single revelation, as proof of respect and friendship towards him or her. And that journalist, puffed up like a peacock for receiving such a high honour that distinguishes him/her from the rest of his/her colleagues –who have probably been treated similarly in other encounters–, assumes the confidentiality and uses it as guidance in his/her opinion column or account of the facts, and even reproduces it quite literally, attributing it to “well-informed sources”.

In good faith, this journalist may believe that he/she is making a major contribution to the interpretation of the current reality, when in fact he/she is an unsuspecting transmitter of a version injected with care. The journalist would undoubtedly have felt much more distanced from this version and would have analysed it more critically if he/she had obtained it from a statement, an official statement or a public response at a press conference.

Once again this would be an activity that, at first glance, seems legitimate in an open and plural society in which, as the early teachers of rhetoric of classical Greece have already justified, every citizen has the right to use the best arguments they can generate. But while in the abstract form the art of rhetoric is a substantial part of the democratic life, it is darkness, secrecy, trickery and numbness of the critical defences what, at a time of intense and aggressive practice of pressure through “spin doctoring”, have led some responsible politicians such as John Mayor –an executor and victim of these games– to call them “political pornography” (McNair, 2004:326). Because, as Reyes Cala points out (2013: 190), the characteristic feature of the phenomenon is the application of “techniques and tactics intended to show a forcedly favourable version of the events, including even the possibility of distorting reality to benefit the client.”

Undoubtedly, much of those excesses have always existed, as reflected by the aforementioned repertoire of traditional expressions used to refer to some well-known aspects of the journalistic culture. However, what seems to have changed is the sophistication and global or strategic application of their resources, at least in the countries where it has become ‘professionalised’ with greater consistency. In the past a leak or a trial balloon appeared commonly but in a scattered manner. Today everything points to the existence of machinery that is institutionally dedicated to its mass production, and under the most unnoticed and varied costumes. Because, as Cala further points out, “when [old resources] are combined in a global and persistent strategy they are built in a more aggressively way to avoid improvisations and control every moment, every statement, every word of a candidate, party or institution”. The qualitative leap is also completed by the skill with which “the global machinery of subtle seduction” lays down its web, to try to avoid “the evidence of its pressure and therefore it rarely comes to light” (Cala, 2013: 190-191).

The problem for the journalistic counter power is not the fact that such seduction mechanisms infect the everyday environment of the public life, since also the biochemist and the pathologist must co-exist with the viruses they examine, but the fact that they move undetected by their potential victims, forgetting that even the clever Ulysses asked to be attached to a mast to avoid hearing and seeing the mermaids. It is very symptomatic that in the interviews applied by Reyes Cala to prestigious Spanish journalists for her thesis, many of them confess their fascination for their proximity to the powerful, downplaying the risks of ‘intoxication’ that such proximity involves. For example, one of the interviewed journalists stated: “If the information, news or documents that [the journalist] receives are relevant to the reader, I think the journalist has to get rid of the idea that this is an intentional news leak” (Ibid. p. 267); “in general, this people [in the communication offices] act as journalists for us”; and “I wish there were spin doctors who were really effective and intelligent, the problem is that there are none” (ibid. 293).

What these statements reveal is that, by “considering the ‘spin doctor’ as an informative benefit in itself, without measuring the degree of threat that it entails” (Ibid. 293), many journalists

simplistically equate the absence of information with something negative and the existence of information with something positive, without realising that the ‘free’ supply and under advantageous conditions may actually be poisoned candy. Perhaps many journalists feel immune to deception and capable to differentiate useful from contaminated information. But when journalist believe that “the more information they get from the source, the better” (ibid. p. 293), it is difficult for the journalist to be serene enough to through 80% or even all of the received information to the trash bin.

4. The greater effectiveness of the direct unmitigated pressure

Many of the Spanish professionals interviewed in the aforementioned research considered that the level of ‘spin doctoring’ in the Spanish media is years light behind the big teams and the comprehensive strategies that are implemented in the United States, the United Kingdom and other countries which practice very ‘professional’ institutional communication. However, the interviewees consider that this is far from being good news for the “fourth estate”, this reflects the lack of need for sophisticated and subtle pressures in weak democracies and pre-constitutional vices, where the pure and hard pressure of the bribery, extortion and gagging orders through ‘power to power’ negotiations between the authentic political and institutional sovereigns (in chess moves in which the media companies and their editors represent the role of simple pawns) are still effective.

Paradoxically, persuasion through ‘spin doctoring’ can be interpreted as a sign of democratic vitality. Because in a society characterised by open competition and the independence of social powers from other types of power, the authoritarian submission and the rough gagging of the opponents would be banished. In such an environment, the institution or the politician who intends to impose on others manipulated news will need to opt for softer methods of seduction that are as disguised as possible, so that the ‘domesticated’ informer is not aware of the trap in which it falls. However, in authoritarian regimes and weak democracies, the powerful do not need to be so careful and apply severe measures that range from the physical violence and threat of imprisonment of the despotic governments, to the business closures by decree, the subsidies and bribes to the allied media -and the dismissal of the opposing media-, the personal persecutions and the blacklists.

The practices of ‘spin doctoring’ in Spain have been poorly documented, unlike in other consolidated democracies, which can only mean two worrying things: that although these practices exist, they are concealed even after many years because the fear of reprisals is greater than the desire of complaint; or that these practices are uncommon because to discipline a journalist or an editor in Spain it suffices to make threat to the medium through the tax inspectors, the removal of institutional advertising, the circulation of compromising photos, or the phone call to the main shareholder of the media company, which may lead to the firing of the employee in question.

There is neither clear evidence for such ‘suggestions’ because, as noted, self-protection is accompanied by the virtue of prudence. And the penal code can be lethal those making accusations without evidence. It is also true that things in our infant democracy do not reach the level described to me a few years ago by a Guatemalan resigned journalist: “In my country, politicians and strong men eager for media leadership can send you any morning a little article that he has written, along

with a one hundred dollar note, so that you publish it as if it were written by you. You can doubt whether to choose taking the money to solve many of your economic problems or keeping your dignity and ethical duties as a journalist, but if by chance the professional honour subjugates you, you can end up with a bullet on any kerb.”

In Spain, without this dangerous extremism, political and economic clientelism has traditionally hindered the idyllic competition between elites, which in a vigorous democracy allows journalists to move without any tough master among all of the elites. However, while it was already difficult to clear those old conspiracies of power through timid legal reforms, the acute and persistent crisis that currently affects the media makes it still more difficult to prevent the traditional noose from being re-tightened as in the most painful times. And although, as mentioned, the documented allegations about such practices are scarce, there are some that allow us to prove that they are not fictional stories made by conspiracy theorists. The *Papel Mojado* (“Wet paper”) report, published by the Mong group in 2013 and edited by some uncomfortable journalists based on previous texts published by the Mongolia magazine (Rusiñol, 2013), provides many examples of the recent Spanish political life.

The report identifies three groups that operate among the governments of the past decades, the boards of Directors of the major banks and companies listed in the IBEX and the senior executives and directors of our most illustrious journals. The modus operandi that these groups generally share beyond specific data, whose verification should be clearer, is summarised as follows: the government places trusted men in the major energy and credit institutions in the country. These companies in turn are well receptive to such men, since not in vain they involve combining the new illustrious men with those men promoted by the previous governments based on similar pacts. Such symbiotic elites agree on credits, subsidies or other types of direct aids that must be received by each media company. Often the boards of directors of the media groups also have seats on tripartite agreements. And the directors of the newspapers can be sustained or changed according to the systemic docility they demonstrate. From there downwards, each editor in chief, head of section or low-level editors must know which alliances they must pamper and which are the banned groups. Although this submission may seem boring and monotonous, the excitement is produced by the long-standing tendency of our elites to participate in internal battles from time to time. So sooner than later, some members of the family cross street and in the resulting gibberish some seats fly and others change their owner.

La Caixa, *El País*, Aznar, Repsol, Grupo Godo, Telefónica, Roures, *El Mundo*, Abertis, Rajoy, *Abc*, BBVA, Santander, Zapatero and many others appear across the pages of the aforementioned book as in a comedy sketch in which there are many doors and windows that open and close and let people in and out all the time. In this landscape it seems almost a miracle when journalists manage to tell their story in their own terms, with every little detail and guided by the implacable calm of a person who describes something in an accurate and neutral manner; with the only intention of fulfilling the public’s right to information, and regardless of who may fall as a consequence. But even books like the aforementioned must keep up appearances, just like previous academic studies dedicated to show the relations between the multimedia companies and the financial networks that support them. This does not mean that the data of these research works are uncertain but that they are surely limited by the well-verified and structural movements.

On the other hand, if one analyses the bar stories of journalists who revealed to friends what they have said in private and will always refuse to admit in public, the invited observer will hear how certain confidential stories of how the government strongly pressures the shareholders of certain media company to fire the journalists they do not approve of. The stories also would mention how the government demand the media to support it in exchange for the dismissal of certain administrative offences and agreed upon the neutralisation of critical issues that these media companies stir up to a certain extent, as a weapon of negotiation.

But even in a climate in which we cannot expect light and openness about how the powerful adjusts the actions of journalists, in Spain there are especially dense years, like the 2013-14 season, in which the most outstanding cases stand out so much that it is impossible to hide them under the blanket: For instance, many people noted the peculiar coincidence in which three of the governments' newspapers (*El País*, *El Mundo* and *La Vanguardia*) saw their directors abruptly replaced (cf. for example Sanclemente, 2014) in a moment of special political upheaval and reorganisation of the elites. One of those affected, Pedro J. Ramírez, was replaced with so much fuss that it seems difficult to deny that the animosity towards him from top-level political leaders was more decisive than the will of the publishing company. This has been admitted by the victim himself, although without giving too much detail (Ramírez, 2014). The dismissal of the Deputy Director of *La Razón*, Esther Palomera, was also a political act (Vozpopuli, 2014, to). This quick review of the sanctions applied to punish political disobedience also includes those suffered by the editors of *El Mundo*, Eduardo Suárez and María Ramírez -daughter of the fired director- (cf. for example, Vozpopuli, 2014, b), and the resignation request made by the new Director of *El Mundo* to another veteran journalist after she refused to withdraw some allusions to the dangerous liaisons of the previous monarch from one of her columns (Chinchetru and Marbán, 2014).

Is not strange, therefore, that an old journalist like Juan Madrid (2013:23), refugee in heroic marginal sheets, wrote in October 2013, when the preceding episodes had not occurred: “Where are the journalists? Well, not in the newspapers. Many are writing novels, others teaching journalism and most are retired with a crappy pension. Most of them already stood where they had to stand at the foot of power, eating leftovers, maybe writing opinion columns on the subject of the social gatherings. A mockery”.

From an academic perspective, Professor Víctor Sampedro (2014) concludes that the dominant journalism model has been degraded so much that it is actually already dead but continues to walk unaware of its infra-reality, like a zombie. Sampedro considers that “most so-called journalists were, in fact, publicists. They put producers and suppliers –of goods and services, ideologies and party groups– in touch (...)”. In addition, Sampedro remarks, that any newspaper that “becomes a multimedia corporation and trades in the stock market... pays more attention to the financial than the information flows (...) It will support the political parties with the greatest possibility of victory” (Sampedro, 2014: 473 and 478). I do not think, however, that we should accept the hyperbolic part of this quote, since it would be unfair to think that any conventional journalism company or any individual journalist are capable of deviating from this trend. Nonetheless, based on the aforementioned striking cases and the strong structural trends, there is too much evidence of an extremely frequent obedience to the most equipped powers.

And the problem seems to be not only local, or exclusive of less consolidated democracies. At the end, and as proof that such counter-informational consortia also settle in seemingly more mature democracies, we should remember the conclusion of the French expert Alain Minc (quoted by Halimi, ed. 2000:123): “The media system –of those who support them, to be precise–, secretes a concentration of power next to which the ‘primitive accumulation of capital’, so expensive for Marx”, is a child’s play”. The final result, according to the prestigious French journalist and critic Serge Halimi (Ibid.: 145), is that we have “increasingly docile journalists, [and] increasingly mediocre information”.

5. New direct-communication technologies for politicians. The mirage of the direct democracy

The first electronic mass communication technologies immediately aroused the shameful interest of every democratic politician: to avoid journalists without making their silencing seems like a crime. Radio and television could be used to speak directly to the people about their projects and justifications without suffering the annoying hassle of reporters making unwanted questions or revealing data that contradict the apparent accuracy of the official reports. Franklin Roosevelt was the first head of a democratic State that advanced in the new territory with his radio “fireside chats” in the 1930s and 1940s. When television arrived, the President of another Democratic Republic, Charles de Gaulle, did the same thing with the new medium in order “to be closer to the nation”. But under the fallacy that there can be no better democracy than that in which the leader addresses citizens directly often lies the most deadly propaganda, in the absence of antagonists that, at the same level and before the same citizens, can oppose, refute or clarify the authority’s information. As Javier del Rey (1996: 546-547 and 549) comments: “those speeches refer to a situation that is closer to a dictatorship than a democracy” and without the mediation of journalists, “with technologies that allow non-mediated speeches, like those delivered by General De Gaulle (...) we would be helpless, at the mercy of the powerful”.

The abuse of the electronic conversation has made clear the fascist stench that it contains, after the exhaustion of such characters as Hugo Chávez and other populist leaders. But with the advent of the Internet the direct communication of leaders revives in a new environment that can go more unnoticed and ostracise journalists even more. The party’s websites, the blog of the candidate or the famous politician and their Twitter accounts are a new type of tool by which leaders can spread their version of the political issues without any type of mediation and reach the public space without going through the filters and rankings of relevance that journalism professionals used to administer.

Professional mediation deteriorates again when the new technologies are used by the powerful to make a “by-pass” to the flow of public attention. It is true that in the past there were excesses in the opposite direction, when in small circles and under the previously denounced political-economic control, a small group of journalists could decide what and who are news. Certainly the digital channels ‘democratise’ the power to set the public agenda and allow many intermediate groups, minority parties and people unrepresented in the media to express themselves. But it is also less true that the feeling that anyone can find out what they want on the Internet, without having to wait for a

journalist to decide to cover it, is a double-edged weapon that can also be exploited by the elites to increase the informative power gap instead of reducing it.

If each of us could make our own “Daily Me” (Sunstein, ed. 2001), our newspaper à la carte, by selecting from here and there the information that we like the most, what would we need journalists for? Would it matter if all the press companies stopped working, given that as mentioned many of them are nothing more than the spokespersons of the true masters that control and feed them? Those who think this way overlook the fact that, despite all the limitations of that devalued journalistic autonomy, the professional exercise brings something that amateur journalists will only obtain by chance: familiarity with the context to quickly realise where the dialectical traps are what the sensitive facts that many seek to hide are.

In an era of serious reduction of journalist staff and the consequent increase in the workload assigned to the few remaining journalists, the direct and abundant information that politicians and parties distributed profusely from their websites, blogs and tweets becomes an easy way for journalists to provide information with minimal effort and time. Much of the old journalists complain that the new professionals hardly go out to the streets to find raw material, because they can easily obtain tons of material through the internet. What is worse is that the information obtained from the internet is often transferred to the journalistic text without any contrast or combination of alternative sources. Therefore, the ‘direct communications’ that the powerful provide through their digital platforms obscures knowledge of citizens in two ways: first, when citizens only acquire information from the virtual platforms of politicians and their allied institutions, ignoring the comparison with the already unnecessary media; and second, when the professional journalists themselves turn those intentional news leaks in the main guide of their agenda setting. Even in the cases of more honest and endeavoured attitudes, the time dedicated by the journalist to read and listen to everything that politicians and their organisations disseminate through the new technologies becomes a powerful barrier that prevents the consideration of other voices and the investigation of less obvious issues.

6. Are social networks a new more democratic and populist power?

But if the digital information flood of the powerful implies a serious threat for the critical capacity of the journalist, the irruption of popular informants through ‘posts’, Facebook, Twitter and alternative pages incorporates another front that defies journalists’ instinct of independence and efficacy as filters.

Public opinion has always been another fearsome power that journalists had to face. In fact, there are many examples in which the information professionals demonstrate more submission to the dominant stereotypes and trends of fashion than to the political or economic leaders. Decades ago I proposed (Dader, 1992: 170-171) that journalists tend to be restrained by the most important social taboos of each age and seek to avoid the open confrontation with the popular beliefs even when their inconsistencies are obvious, and tend to flatter what is most talked about.

And if at other times it was more diffuse to grasp the populist dominant view, the new technologies have produced a very concrete and digitally ubiquitous version of the so-called people's view: the 'social networks'. The fact that social networks are 'burning' against the statements of a certain character, or are roaring of indignation towards a government action or proposal, has become a criterion of maximum relevance for current journalism, which does not seem to measure the true representativeness of some hundreds of "tweets" or, what is worse, the foundation and rigour of what these comments. Instead, the media tend to echo those electronic *phobias* and phobias and dedicate them much of the always-scarce space destined in theory to issues and opinions of real significance. Few and rare will be the current professionals who will dare to repeat the strong disqualification made by the prestigious social scientist Felix Ovejero (2013): "Twitter, the bar of drunks"; even when very often there should be no consideration of that cyber gibberish involving equally drunk participants, ranging from humble semi-illiterate people with iPads to illustrated people of rancid trajectory that put themselves to the level of the rabble.

"Despite de previous observations, it is important to highlight the importance of the social networks as a source of information, especially in those conflicts in which the institutional channels of communication have been shut down or are brutally manipulated or censored by despotic powers or by the consequences of a war. In the evaluation of this new power faced also by journalism it would be unfair and short-sighted not to recall the invaluable service to open communication and to the facilitation of the work of the journalists made by the news and data disseminated by thousands of citizens from their mobile phones or laptops in the recent popular uprisings in Muslim countries" (cf. for example, Ben Affana, 2012; Bilge, 2012; Dahmen-Jarrin, 2012; Daim-Allah, 2012).

But even in such situations of unquestionable contribution to the objectives and tasks of the best journalism we must not ignore the new risks involved in the so-called "citizen journalism" and "networked journalism" (Jeff Jarvis, 2007):

Firstly, the absence of verification of the content of 'tweets', when in the obsession with immediacy, journalists merely reproduce the catchy statement moved by the mere value of its spectacular nature or the newsworthiness of the poster. This ends with the old prudence of quality journalism, according to which "rumours are not published, but investigated". In the fall of 2013 Judge Vázquez Taín, who became the focus of attention for being responsible for the murder of a girl in Galicia, sarcastically criticised this trend: "Journalism works like this, a tweet is published saying that 'data reveal that Asunta was flying' [and it becomes into] ohhhh well-informed sources close to the investigation assure that Asunta was flying" (20 *Minutos*, 2013; Rodríguez, 2013). The apparent thick stroke of this criticism has triggered in turn the anger of some journalists, more sensitive to the literality of the satire than to the reason behind the criticism.

The crucial question is whether the alleged claims or the data provided by Twitter users can be redistributed without any filter by media professionals and to attribute this information to a journalistic website with more prestige and reputation. As the digital media expert Barb Palser (2012) warns us, it is one thing that journalists and their organisations use Twitter as a tool to disseminate professional news and another that Twitter is in itself a news channel; one thing is that some real facts come first to the knowledge of journalists through messages on Twitter and quite another that the hundreds or thousands of hoaxes circulating on the micro-blogging platform about

the alleged death of Barack Obama, Madonna, Whitney Houston, or Bin Laden, are considered true and reproduced immediately for those considering themselves a journalist.

Palser adds that the first “tweets” that circulated about the actual deaths of these last two characters were indistinguishable from the many others that were disseminated on about celebrities, except for the news that later verified that they were true. But the fact that some hoaxes can end up being true do not exempt journalists of their obligation to check these posts before amplifying their echo. For this reason, Palser (2012) remarks that: “Rather than marginalise the journalistic media, Twitter and other social networks can be reinforcing their value. Based on discredited information and hoaxes, a generation of ‘social media’ users is learning the difference between saying something and reporting it [professionally]. The ways in which people obtains information for the first time may have changed, but the trust in reporters that separate the facts from fiction and provide depth and context to news has not changed.”

Even so, this remark moves in the realm of ideals. The reality is often less positive, as Mathew Ingram (2011) recognises: “It is easy to be confused by the apparent chaos of the process, by how difficult it seems to separate the signal from the noise”. In spite of this, the analyst believes that the more information, the better; and this is based on the trust on certain tools of immediate and collective verification, such as the section created for this purpose by the BBC, which already allow the presence of “curated news”, which filter out certain data from multiple scattered sources and create a coherent perception of what is happening around certain events. An effort to undertake a review of this type requires, however, considerable dedication and teamwork, while it is much more simple and tempting to reproduce the sensationalist message as it has just appeared on the screen of the mobile phone.

The constant flow of minimal news via Twitter produces a social impact that its greatest defenders try to present as valuable for democratic life and the practice of journalism, but that others consider as undermining of one of the principles of journalism and its service to the public’s knowledge. I am referring to the phenomenon identified, among others, by the Danish Ejvin Hansen (2012): the cultivation of an impatient attitude among news consumers, in which people accustomed to the frenetic ‘in real time’ reading of news feel disappointed with the slowness of the “journalism of authority” and its parsimonious rhythm from the moment the news story begins to take shape until the journalistic organisation assesses it, completes it, and decides to publish it.

Supporters of the less interrupted and faster flow of information, like the one cited by Mathew Ingram (2012), turn the problem into a virtue and argue that while compulsive reproduction of a ‘Tweet’ about a politician’s banal comment is expanded across the informational ecosystem without waiting for the big media to ‘digest it’, that same speed shortens the life cycle of the event and makes the denials and responses to last just a few hours, changing the focus of attention from this issue to another. Those who insist on the goodness of the new situation also mention the rupture of the monotonous and uniform practice of the “pack journalism”, which repeated the same comments of few available sources to the point of exhaustion when reporting slow-evolving and hardly-changing events. On the other hand, the variety of details ‘in real time’ helps journalists to obtain an abundance of extra information while waiting (in a war, in a negotiation, in an election night) for something substantial to happen, and helps them to grasp the global nature of the process.

It can be the case that this acceleration and food of the impatient people do satisfy the urge of the increasingly sparsely hyperactive publics to continuously use and discard information. But it does not seem that after the constant consumption of news citizens have the time or sensitivity to assimilate the news reports, analyses and information that, according to the canons of the old journalism, verified, complemented and ended offering a wide, deep and intelligent description of the series of most relevant current events.

Instead, the media follow the trend of Twitter windows. So the audience has to get used to read the little signs that appear and disappear from the ephemeral collaborators. Arcadi Espada (2008:122) despises this practice and points out that: “A new way of writing on the web is becoming popular, and it depends more on the laxity of a continuous succession of private drafts more than on the obligations of the publication. This concept of publication is key, but does not seem to have been understood by some young writers (...); “neither a blog nor as job as a writer in a newspaper can be a mere backup of what is coming”.

Arcadi Espada (Espada, 2007 and Sánchez de la Nieta, 2013) also remarks that periodicity is one of the hallmarks of newspapers, which do not have to be in a printed format, but have to be published every certain time to get citizens used to a periodic review. The extension of the interval is less important than the constancy with which the current events are assessed and published. In the words of the aforementioned journalist (2012), “we will need to cut the succession of events somewhere and say: ‘look, here to here, in this period, this is the most important thing that has happened “.

Within their range, it does not matter whether printed or audiovisual news media make an effort to offer an understandable and hierarchical structure of events, which are otherwise scattered and confusing in the course of the world. The succession without pause of ‘tweets’ and of the constant updating of the digital websites eliminate all significance, like an imperceptible year without stations or the wandering between days without night. Once again, in the words of Espada (2007), information in the digital age has become “like electricity: continuous, is fluid. Information is no longer adjusted to time, as did the newspaper or the radio newscast”.

‘Social networks’ present, however, another modality which we have mentioned here in an indirect way. The contemporary social space has given way to the emergence of new social movements that above the diversity of causes that they claim share the common denominator of claiming the power of communicate and re-elaborate the media magma that was managed so far by journalists – although, as mentioned, not in an independent manner.

Due to the degradation and weakness of the journalistic system, which has been already described, these movements demand the right to alternative information, or rather to break the symbolic differences between the information produced by the major media of the journalistic institution and the opposing descriptions and opinions offered by those radical critical sectors, which had been so far marginalised in mass communication. Such groups, which are equipped with strong self-awareness and are usually very well organised, have little to do with scattered people who sporadically appear in the information flow of the ‘social networks’ motivated by banal, highly-emotional reasons and little-meditated reactions. These are groups that define themselves as an active part of society and reinterpret the ‘class struggle’ as a confrontation to and assault on the ‘power to

communicate', which is supposedly controlled by an oligopoly of the conventional journalistic media that only serve the minority interests of the elites.

Authors such as Víctor Sampedro (2014) summarise the communicative aspiration of these groups in "the possibility of information arising from below, almost without any control", convinced as they are that "the media democracy, marked by the rules of the courtly theatre" only elevates a very restricted and sweetened part of the most far-reaching social realities for civic awareness to the level of public information. The method they promote is "to share in the internet" and, based on examples of informational liberation such as the leaks of Wikileaks and Edward Snowden, they see it as logical that many citizens have abandoned the traditional consumption of news and went to "play more active roles in the internet, where they could consult, contrast and discuss free of charge the information that was no longer worth paying for". This author has further acknowledged "the Fourth Power on the Internet [that] starts processes that destroy power structures" (Ibid. pp. 473, 474 and 476, respectively).

The temporal coincidence between the democratisation of the new communication technologies and the regrettable weakening of the journalistic professionalism, undoubtedly justified the need to reinvent the news-making process and the public debate. Under this premise, I fully agree with Sampedro's idea that "sharing in the internet generate common good" and that the resulting democratic journalism should give more respect to the public, and take into account "the resources and skills of the communities for which they work". However, I do not think I have understood what is the role and benefit provided by the good journalism when Sampedro argues that "this work may be exercised only if the public is recognised, in a joint relationship, as equals. Or even more, if the professional adopts, with the humility that has characterised the greatest journalists, a subsidiary and subordinate position" (Sampedro, 2014: 474 and 481, respectively).

If the proposal of subordination of the news media to the agenda and interpretation of the most active social groups was adopted, there would only be a substitution of a media institution by another. The press will not be more democratic through its subordination to the interests of a different social class, as it has been well demonstrated by all the revolutionary changes operated in the media system of some countries. The peculiarity of the genuine democratic service of journalism is not in choosing the most benevolent master or the master loaded with more reasons, but in remaining distant and independent, by applying their professional standards of accuracy, contrast and relevance guided by the public interest. As Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001) identified with special insight, the key that distinguishes journalism from propaganda or public relations is that its information selection and treatment are only committed with the "disinterested pursuit of truth" (p. 42), as difficult as this may be. This means that the interest of journalism only identifies with a generic, open and plural 'public interest', which is above any group. This interest can temporarily match that of certain sector, but it will wander between all the powers or those who aspire to exercise it without identifying themselves with none. Of course the contributions and reactions of the social movements in their digital platforms must be properly taken into account by the professional journalists and be included in the central journalistic discourse, but without receiving more or less privileges than the rest. And it will be the professional criteria –which need to be institutionally rescued, updated and protected- what will ensure that this intermediation work is the result of a demanding and rigorous work. When accomplished, this service will be 'democratic' based on the way it is exercised; not based on the

sector with which it identifies. In the same way that judges are democratic when they exercise their function with democratic guarantees and criteria, and not based on the fact that their social extraction is more popular or elitist.

7. Ambivalent balance: journalists between power and the recognition of its difficult separation

The powers that currently seem to subjugate and undermine journalism are ultimately multiple and varied: some are as old as its own history; others have been intensified by the new strategies; and new ones have emerged as a result of the most innovative technological revolution. The resilience of ‘the fourth power’ against all those forces is revealed to be even more uncertain than its suffering practitioners had always suspected.

But the recognition of the weakness, even when it seems extreme, is perhaps the only way of reusing its modest capabilities; which as small as they are continue to prove essential for societies that aspire to a minimum of transparency and democratic pluralism. The unreal invocation to a fourth power that never was and was not even expected to be, only leads to confusion and melancholy. But once we accept that real power is exercised and negotiated by other actors and forces of public life, one has to recognise that journalism has the important and healthy capacity of ‘interference’ in the routes that the most powerful would impose if some level of information arbitration did not exist.

In the midst of the pessimism about how the economic crisis and the disinterest of the audiences reduce even more the weight attributed to journalists, this group is still developing new formulas to demand accountability. For example, in the last few decades, “precision” or “data-driven” journalism (Meyer, ed. 1993; Dader, 1997; Gray *et alt.* 2012) has generated some of the clearest and most comprehensive examples of what this profession can clarify about social problems and the false explanations that many institutions present. The work methods of the professionals of this type of journalism show that the statistics and computer tools used by social scientists are not exclusive of this latter group; and in the hands of rigorous journalists can provide ordinary citizens plots of knowledge that were previously only accessible to technocratic minorities. Without processing massive data sets, ‘fact checking’ journalism (Müller, 2013) on the statements or promises made by leaders and institutions has also proven to be more demanding than the conventional journalism to call out those who exaggerate, distort or lie about the social reality and the vicissitudes of politics. In the midst of the reduction of information staff, the closure of media companies and the banal homogeneity of those who remain, multiple small groups of journalists in many countries try to use the internet to recover the classical journalism of complex synthesis, brilliant narrative and far-reaching vision. The digital platforms, previously criticised by their diversion of the neuralgic issues of civic interest, also offer unparalleled potential for information transparency and democratic deliberation, like the websites of ‘open governments’, and the popular coordination and reporting of social movements. The journalistic reports of such enclaves are another contribution that a part of our journalism also provides.

It maybe that all these efforts are limited to scattered sparkles of very minority reach, and it is still necessary to analyse the institutional channels and the social support groups that could bring back

this type of informative mediation to the centre of the public space. The genuine journalism, which is not biased towards any particular inclination (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001), cannot -and surely should not- aspire to compete with a more or less large group of powers. By staying below these powers, this type of journalism will often suffer the impositions or pressures of each of these powerful groups, but as long as it is aware of its secondary status it will be able to take advantage of its own marginality.

Journalism will not be part of the powers but will move among them, not even as an invited witness, but rather as a distant and estranged traveller, irrelevant and distracted in appearance, but always attentive; an intermediary demon (in the original sense of the term) that observes and tells what it manages to see. It will act as the catcher in the rye as Salinger imagined; it sees the real powers and the citizens the former try to control as children running crazy near a cliff. As Holden Caulfield suggests in the aforementioned story, journalism can only aspire to a certain instinct of protection of those who are about to roll down the slope. Like him, journalists will want to “catch” citizens when they are about to fall to prevent the worst; but it usually will only be able to tell what is happening and perhaps to anticipate and warn about the dangers of an event that it is unable to stop, transform as it wishes.

“... I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody's around - nobody big, I mean - except me. And I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff - I mean if they're running and they don't look where they're going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. That's all I do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all.” [5]

The problem is that the journalists with no power but committed to their warning vocation need some social protection to prevent their disappearance from the field, from the powerful institutions and their conspiracies against them, because without that minimal institutional and economic protection journalists cannot survive. And as a result the running and clueless citizens would fall into the abyss.

We need more extensive and imaginative studies to design a plan to preserve journalism as ‘protected species’. But at the moment we will have to recognise that, moving among the powers and dodging them simultaneously or subsequently, the clarifying task of journalism is still essential in the midst of the immense and ductile rows of grass, be they informative terabytes or rye fields.

8. Notes

[1] A preliminary and reduced version of this essay was presented at the *Jornadas sobre Comunicación y Poder* (“Conference on communication and power”), held at the University of Valladolid from 12 to 14 November 2013.

[2] In Italy, for example, there is a political consulting and marketing firm called “Spindoctoring. “Comunicazione pubblica e politica” (www.spindoctoring.it). In Spain there is another firm called

“Brave Spin Doctors”, which in the description of its services mentions: “Optimization of relations with the media. Challenges and opportunities in the relation with journalists. The relation with the media is essential for any company, but it should be treated as a collective that must be taken care of every day, and not only in adverse situations. We must be open and proactive, generating confidence every day and reinforcing our message with every word and every gesture we make. Enrich and strengthen your relationship with the media to generate an honest and transparent relationship” (cf. <http://bravespindoctors.com>).

[3] The Spanish researcher includes data collected by Erik Louw (2005:156 and 297) and Bill Patterson (1997).

[4] In the words of Reyes Cala (2013: 10), the ‘spin doctoring’ consists of “that informal, often unwitnessed, contact activity performed by those responsible for strategic political figures and even by the leaders themselves with the journalists who cover the political sphere, through which any news or information relating to the political or institutional environment is impregnated with a favourable interpretation or approach.”

[5] Salinger (ed.), 1991, p. 173.

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