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Defining Journalistic Autonomy in the Wake of Disinformation in Spain

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Abstract

This article analyses the escalating tensions between political actors and the media in Spain, focusing on how structural weaknesses in the journalistic field facilitate the internalisation of disinformation and political polarisation. Using field theory and qualitative data from interviews with journalists, regulators, and media professionals, the study explores how Spain's deregulated, economically precarious, and structurally fragmented media environment undermines journalistic autonomy. Recent challenges to media legitimacy illustrate declining professional standards, insufficient self-regulation, and the blurred boundaries of journalistic identity. The analysis challenges the view that the prevalence of disinformation is mainly a byproduct of political polarisation, arguing instead that low institutional autonomy has made Spanish journalism structurally vulnerable to post-truth dynamics. The article concludes that Spain's regulatory model, while formally protecting press freedom, lacks the internal governance mechanisms needed to uphold professional ethics and ultimately professional authority. As the European Media Freedom Act promises regulatory change, the article calls for renewed public and professional debate on journalistic standards, legitimacy, and the democratic role of the press in the face of mounting epistemic and institutional crises.

Keywords

disinformation; journalism; journalistic autonomy; journalism regulation; media independence; post-truth; Spain

1. Introduction

A 2023 report for the EU DisinfoLab points out that "Spain is very permeable to disinformation" and that "the Spanish disinformation landscape stands out for its acute political and media polarisation" (Romero Vicente, 2023, p. 3). The report suggests that "political and media polarisation" is an old phenomenon and that Spain's vulnerabilities have to do with entrenched partisanship and distrust of the media. While it is true that Spain's polarisation is entrenched in a left–right cleavage that has become more acute on the side of political actors, this article argues that it is rooted in deeper structural transformations in the journalistic field: This article explores the question of how the low autonomy of the Spanish journalistic field contributes to the internalisation of post-truth phenomena such as polarization, disinformation, and fragmentation.

Tensions between political forces and the media in Spain have intensified in recent years, revealing recurring patterns of conflict, delegitimisation, and disputes over control of public narratives. As noted in the latest digital news report by the Reuters Institute, the media landscape in Spain has been shaped by political pressure, legal disputes, and ongoing controversies surrounding public broadcasting (Sierra et al., 2025). Recent elections to the European Parliament and regional assemblies have further heightened these tensions with both the government and the opposition employing accusations of disinformation as a political strategy (Sierra et al., 2025).

Within this context, various political parties have adopted increasingly confrontational approaches towards the press (Haapala & Roch, 2025) while partisan media outlets have likewise employed antagonistic strategies against political spokespersons.

In 2019, the far-right party Vox restricted access of the PRISA Group radio broadcaster Cadena SER and the newspaper *El País* to its press conferences. Shortly thereafter, Spain's Central Electoral Board (Junta Electoral Central) ruled that the far-right party could not discriminate against, veto, or deny access to journalists from those media at events of an electoral nature (Casqueiro, 2019). Recently, there have been instances of accredited individuals in the Spanish Congress of Deputies disrupting political press conferences, such as in May 2025 during a press conference held by Verónica Barbero, spokesperson for the political party Sumar. In response to the breakdown of order and the inability to ask questions, present journalists from all other media outlets walked out of the room (Chouza & Casqueiro, 2025). As *elDiario.es* ("Patxi López responde," 2025) reported, shortly after the incident—and when pressed—the Partido Socialista Obrero Español spokesperson in Congress addressed the so-called "agitators" with the following remark:

> If you were one of the normal, reasonable journalists, asking the most uncomfortable questions you wanted, I would have no problem answering to you. The problem is that, once you leave this room, you do quite the opposite—you act as far-right activists—and I simply refuse to accept that. ("Patxi López responde," 2025)

These incidents are not isolated but rather symptomatic of a broader process in which mutual distrust between political actors and media institutions has produced increasingly hostile dynamics.

Another, distinct yet particularly illustrative example occurred in May 2016, when the digital outlet *OK Diario* published a story about an alleged corruption scandal involving Pablo Iglesias, then Secretary General of

Podemos. The report claimed that Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro had transferred over $270,000 to Iglesias via a bank account in the Grenadines (Mercado, 2016). This so-called exclusive was amplified across various media channels, including on national television during an interview on the programme *Al Rojo Vivo*. Iglesias appeared on the same programme to publicly refute the allegations. However, it was soon revealed by another digital news outlet, *elDiario.es*, that the information was false and that the alleged document used as evidence had been copied from YouTube ("El documento exclusivo," 2016).

The controversy resurfaced in 2022 when further audio published by *Crónica Libre* revealed that decisions to disseminate the false report had been made despite internal doubts, prompting a new wave of criticism from political figures and renewed debate about media ethics and complicity. In the aftermath, leading figures from Podemos framed the episode not simply as a journalistic failure but as part of a broader pattern of political–media collusion aimed at the left. These claims extend beyond individual journalists to include wider critiques of mainstream media culture and the role of professional associations, such as the Madrid Press Association, which, according to Podemos' criticisms, failed to condemn the incident or hold those involved accountable.

The significance of this case becomes particularly clear in light of prior research (Reguero-Sanz et al., 2023), which examined the "Ferreras-gate" scandal from the perspective of social media users. Their analysis showed that the controversy gave rise to widespread calls for more truthful and objective journalism, prioritised over infotainment, alongside demands for stronger adherence to ethical standards, professional conduct, and rigorous source verification. Additionally, the incident reignited broader public concerns regarding media independence, the dissemination of misinformation, and declining professional standards in journalistic practice. This episode, among others, underscores how disputes over truth, credibility, and authority in the Spanish media sphere have become central to broader struggles for political and ideological influence. In this context, institutional responses have begun to emerge.

The Spanish government announced an Action Plan on Democracy in 2024, adopting language and introducing measures that echo initiatives developed at the EU level since 2018. Yet, while formally framed around the defence of democratic values, the plan was launched in direct response to mounting political pressure on the government by what the prime minister himself has described as "pseudo-media and far-right hoaxes," thereby embedding himself within the very dynamics of polarisation he seeks to address. Interestingly, the attention on pseudo-media has been repeated by left-leaning online newspapers (Rivas, 2024; Sáenz de Ugarte, 2024), confirming on the one hand that political alignment applies to new media and also that the critical framing of small and easy to create outlets as part of disinformation campaigns is not limited to the political delegitimisation of critics but has become a stake in the broader journalistic field.

Thus, rather than viewing these controversies simply as cases of media misconduct, political polarisation, government delegitimization, or political manipulation, we use them as a sociological lens on the reconfiguration of political and journalistic authority under conditions of polarisation and post-truth. It allows us to trace how systemic transformations—technological, professional, and epistemological—converge to reshape the role of journalism in the Spanish public sphere. Rather than viewing these challenges as external threats to journalism, the article analyses how the weak autonomy of the field—including politicised media institutions, limited self-regulation, and fragmented professional identities—has made them constitutive features of the field itself. By situating the analysis within field theory, the article studies how Spain's journalism both shapes and is shaped by the very crises it is presumed to resist.

This article proposes a political sociology of the ongoing tensions related to post-truth politics in the media field in Spain. It does not intend to assess the effects of polarisation and fragmentation on public attitudes to information or news consumption. Instead, it is interested in the disruptive effects of polarisation and fragmentation on a form of political mediation traditionally characterised by a degree of proximity (Casero-Ripollés & López-Rabadán, 2016): media–politics relations. The approach is based on a critical review of the state of the art regarding the evolution of the regulation of the journalistic profession and standards (a), an in-depth analysis of interviews and media articles focusing on transformations in the political and journalistic field (all literal quotes have been translated from Spanish by the authors, unless otherwise stated) (b), and a series of interviews with key actors within the said field (c).

2. Media Regulation and Vulnerability to Disinformation

2.1. The Pluralistic Polarised Model

Hallin and Mancini's (2004) comparative framework is pivotal for understanding how media systems influence journalistic practices and political mediation and remains highly relevant despite the test of time (Büchel et al., 2016; Labio-Bernal et al., 2024). They identify four main criteria for comparison: the development of the media market, the extent of political-party affiliation, the level of journalistic professionalisation, and the nature of state intervention.

The polarised pluralist model, typical of Southern Europe—including Spain—is characterised by a small but influential press, delayed institutionalisation of press freedom, and a slow consolidation of ethical norms (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). In this model, the state plays a prominent role as owner, regulator, or funder, resulting in strong political and corporate influence. This fosters high levels of partisan journalism and a tradition of opinion-based reporting, where coverage often mirrors ideological divisions (Patterson et al., 2016). Such partisanship hampers the growth of a professional media culture committed to democratic values (Hallin & Papathanassopoulos, 2002; Mancini, 2000).

Financial fragility is another feature, with many outlets relying on external support, reinforcing their dependency on political and business interests (Patterson et al., 2016), only made worse by the ongoing business model crisis (Labio-Bernal et al., 2024, p. 2). Spain's media environment aligns closely with this model, where both media and political institutions are highly politicised. The tight connections between journalism and party politics create a context in which the press often acts as a platform for competing ideologies rather than adhering to professional norms (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 298). Consequently, political loyalty may override journalistic integrity, undermining the commitment to the public good.

Though direct affiliations with political parties have declined, many outlets still maintain clear ideological leanings that shape their editorial stance. These patterns, rooted in Southern Europe's relatively young democracies, have cultivated a media system where press freedom coexists with weak ethical standards. Hallin and Mancini (2004, p. 58) argue that in such systems, "the commitment to particular interests is stronger and the notion of the 'common good' weaker," reflecting the press's role in political mobilisation rather than impartial reporting. In contrast to countries like the United States or Sweden—where professional norms aim to serve the public interest—Southern European journalism remains embedded in political conflict (Patterson et al., 2016, p. 10).

Despite ongoing challenges, Patterson et al. (2016, p. 13) identify some improvements, particularly among investigative journalists and public broadcasters striving for independence. Yet, the competitive, clientelist structure of the media within the polarised pluralist model, and the economic vulnerability of journalists continue to obstruct professionalisation and democratic responsibility. The Spanish media has gradually moved towards a more market-driven approach, with pockets of growing independence. Still, the broader system remains shaped by political loyalties and ideological agendas, often at the expense of professional ethics (Patterson et al., 2016).

Although some progress is visible, the future of journalism in these democracies remains uncertain. The profession stands at a crossroads—caught between aspirations for greater independence and the enduring influence of partisan interests.

2.2. Spanish Media Regulation Challenges in the Context of Southern Europe's Polarised Pluralism

The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2025 (Sierra et al., 2025, p.108) highlights mounting concerns over press freedom in Spain, noting that political interference has become a central point of contention. Both the government and the opposition have been accused of exerting pressure on journalists and attempting to shape media narratives. The administration is reported to distinguish between established outlets, which it tends to support, and so-called "pseudo-media," which it accuses of promoting far-right agendas. According to critics, this labelling is used to delegitimise dissenting voices, particularly those within digital platforms and segments of the traditional press that report on sensitive judicial proceedings involving the prime minister's family and close associates. The report further underscores that recent regulatory changes and government interventions have raised additional concerns, not only about press freedom but also about the independence and long-term financial viability of media organisations (Sierra et al., 2025).

In addition, the local and general elections held in 2023 further exacerbated political, media, and social polarisation, with news organisations operating in a context marked by declining public trust in the media and waning interest in politics and current affairs (Vara-Miguel et al., 2024). Within this landscape, three structural issues stand out as particularly influential in shaping Spain's media environment: (a) weak regulation and professional standards; (b) media concentration and political alignment; and (c) economic precarity and vulnerability.

In regard to weak regulation and professional standards (a), Spain lacks strong mechanisms for enforcing journalistic accountability. While the Constitution protects press freedom and source confidentiality, this has, paradoxically, led to leniency towards disinformation. Journalists rarely face consequences for disseminating falsehoods if they cite sources in good faith. There is no mandatory accreditation, and therefore the unqualified exercise of the profession is widespread.

Concerning media concentration and political alignment (b), a few major conglomerates (Prisa, Planeta, Vocento) dominate the market, fostering editorial dependence on political and economic elites and limiting pluralism. Public broadcasters, despite formal independence, are frequently subject to political control.

As for economic precarity and vulnerability (c), journalism in Spain is underpaid and precarious. Since the 2008 crisis, outlets have become increasingly dependent on public subsidies and advertising contracts, which discourages critical reporting and deepens susceptibility to political and financial pressure.

These structural weaknesses create fertile ground for post-truth practices enabled not only by algorithms and social media but also by institutionalised disinformation within the mainstream. Constitutional protections, designed to shield journalists from political persecution, exist but often make accountability difficult unless indisputable contrarian evidence (like leaked recordings). At the same time, self-regulation lacks the authority to challenge influential figures within the profession. The crisis in Spanish journalism is therefore not only ideological or technological, it is systemic. It emerges at the intersection of professional decline, political manoeuvring, and regulatory obsolescence.

Spanish constitutional jurisprudence has consistently upheld the broad protection of journalistic freedoms under Article 20 of the Constitution. The constitutional protection for journalists and their sources is a historical issue, related to the relative youth of democracy and of the Spanish Constitution, and to the extensive interpretation of press freedom by the Constitutional Court, which developed case law inclined to favour the development of the press (Interviewee 15). The Constitutional Court has ruled, for example, in STC 6/1981 (Constitutional Court of Spain, 1981), that freedom of expression and freedom of the press are foundational to democratic society and enjoy reinforced legal safeguards. In STC 171/1990 (Constitutional Court of Spain, 1990), the Court affirmed journalists' right to protect their sources, recognising professional secrecy as a necessary element for the functioning of free media.

Furthermore, in STC 159/1986 (Constitutional Court of Spain, 1986), the Court established that journalists are not required to guarantee the absolute truth of the information they publish; instead, they are held to a standard of trustworthiness (*veracidad* in Spanish), meaning that information must be truthful in context and the result of reasonable professional diligence. These rulings reinforce a model that prioritises freedom of information—even when errors occur—over other conflicting rights such as honour or reputation, especially in matters of public interest (Patterson et al., 2016). That is why there are hardly any rulings against journalists who disseminate misinformation. This also covers, in a more than notable percentage of occasions, the non-disclosure of sources by the journalists themselves. Such a system provides fertile ground for questionable professional practices and the spread of self-interested disinformation—especially in a paradoxical version of the polarised pluralist model, where partisan media dominate.

The Spanish model has been characterised by a high degree of precariousness and/or vulnerability. Media companies have become accustomed to a model of low salaries and state aid to maximise their profits. This has created a dependency with harmful consequences for the quality of news. In fact, the widespread use of clickbait strategies within Spanish digital media has contributed to the erosion of public trust, as sensationalist content frequently supersedes rigorous, evidence-based journalism (Flores-Vivar & Zaharía, 2022).

On the one hand, the clear link between public aid and the ideological bias of the media contributes to the polarisation of the media and of society itself. Indeed, according to the Standard Eurobarometer 102 (October 2024), 58% of Spanish citizens believe that national media outlets provide information that is subject to political or commercial pressures (European Commission, 2024). On the other hand, the low salaries and the low social recognition of the profession (it is one of the least reputed in the country) make professional news much more vulnerable to the successful capture by political or economic interests, further eroding journalism's role as a guardian of democratic accountability and public deliberation. Aggravating this scenario is the proliferation of pseudo-media: Platforms that replicate the aesthetics and formats of traditional news outlets to disseminate ideologically charged content while disregarding journalistic

standards of quality and professional ethics. These actors represent a central component of the information disorder currently affecting the Spanish context (Palau-Sampio & Carratalá, 2022).

3. Analytical Framework: A Dispute to Define What Journalism Is in Spain

The current focus on post-truth politics often implies a nostalgic contrast with a supposed golden age of rational public discourse (Velasco-Arias, 2023). Post-truth should thus not be seen as a full collapse of rationality but a transformation in the "symbolic authority of the truth" within public discourse (S. Newman, 2019, p. 93). Bennett and Pfetsch (2018) argue that today's disruptions stem not from the volume of misinformation alone, but from a broader dislocation of institutional authority—a breakdown in the traditional systems that once determined what counts as valid knowledge. The rise of algorithmic logic, digital disintermediation, and networked forms of communication has radically altered the terrain on which political facts are produced, circulated, and contested. Therefore, journalism has become a field of contested truth mediation (Michailidou & Trenz, 2021, pp. 1341–1342): "Journalists…are rather embedded in a professional field of journalism practices that help to establish the value of information in a trusted way that becomes acceptable and convincing for the majority."

For a long time, the Spanish media system has been characterised by its belonging to the Mediterranean or polarized pluralist model of Hallin and Mancini, with the particularity of a low regulation of journalistic practices and professions.

One of the consequences of the co-occurrence of strong polarisation and weak regulation is a weak autonomy of the field regarding its ability to regulate itself. In field theory, self-regulation is usually identified with what Fligstein and McAdam (2012, p. 205) call internal governance units: "Typically founded during moments of field settlement or resettlement, internal governance units—such as credential committees, certifying agencies, and lobbying groups—are established to help institutionalise and stabilise field practices and shared understandings." Unlike other systems that develop clear, enforceable, and legitimate self-regulation bodies as a response to the lack of external regulation, the representation of the Spanish journalistic field is fragmented, with different organisations emphasising different models of journalism and political sympathies. The result is that there is no external definition of the profession and no collective enforcement of its standards, with self-regulation acting within media organisations rather than across them.

This article argues that the low autonomy of the Spanish journalistic field—marked by weak self-regulation, politicised institutions, and fragmented professional identities—is not just a background condition, but a structuring factor in how the journalistic profession is exposed to the post-truth related phenomena of polarisation and disinformation. Rather than treating these phenomena as external challenges journalism must respond to, the Spanish case shows how they become internal features of the field itself, shaped and amplified by its institutional weaknesses.

In field theory, autonomy refers to the distinction of the field dynamics (rules of the game, issues at stake, and relevant capitals) from other spheres in society (Bourdieu, 2005; Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). It usually manifests itself as the capacity of the field to define and enforce its own internal norms, values, and boundaries, relatively independent from external forces such as politics, the market, or the state:

> In the daily practice of journalism, autonomy is a prize that honest reporters and editors seek. They do not want to be overwhelmed by pressure from government officials, on the one hand, or from economic pressures from media owners or advertisers or market competition on the other. They want to be able to proceed according to their own best lights and in the service of their own best "news judgements." (Schudson, 2005, p. 218)

Political polarisation is usually understood as an affirmation of extreme positions on policy or political spheres together with the hollowing out of intermediary or indifferent attitudes (de Wilde et al., 2016; Klein, 2021). The political alignment of Spanish media demonstrates its weak autonomy. Journalists are often perceived (and frequently act) not as neutral mediators but as participants in political struggles. Media outlets align with parties or ideologies, and journalistic discourse is routinely interpreted through a partisan lens. As a result, Spain has reduced trust in journalism as a neutral intermediary, further polarising audiences who now consume media aligned with their own ideological positions. For instance, Spain has experienced the strongest decline in attention to the news in a comparative context (N. Newman et al., 2023, p. 21).

Another effect of the low autonomy of the field is that disinformation, understood as verifiably false information that is intentionally created for economic gain or to harm public interests (European Commission, 2018), is not treated as a deviation from collectively held epistemic standards since no unified professional body can uphold them. In this context, the Constitutional Court's doctrine of "veracity" prevails (i.e., truthfulness understood procedurally rather than ontologically), and the dissemination of false information is evaluated against a checklist of technical-legal criteria. In this context, the field lacks the capacity to mount a collective defence against disinformation. The absence of a unified professional identity, combined with a fragmented media landscape, turns disinformation from a professional crisis of knowledge into a politicised contest over legitimacy. We deliberately refer to misinformation when the issue of intentionality is not central, but the article's focus is on disinformation.

In this article, rather than focusing on fragmentation as a result of affective polarisation—meaning a dilution of "shared communicative space…into a multitude of semi-public forums (or echo chambers) of the like-minded" (Conrad, 2025, p. 10)—we conceive it as a result of the fragmentation of journalism itself. In the past, media organisations were relatively large and complex, therefore acting as internal enforcers of journalistic standards. During all this period, being a journalist and doing journalism were functional equivalents of being employed by one of these large organisations. The polarisation of the Spanish journalistic field was concentrated around a relatively small number of large actors.

However, economic crisis and technological change have transformed the landscape: The combination of massive layoffs of journalists during the decade following the 2008 financial crisis and the significant drop in the fixed costs of entering the market—with digital media not requiring traditional prints, distribution networks, or even office space—has resulted in a more fragmented landscape of polarisation, while the regulatory landscape has not significantly changed. Therefore, audiences no longer recognise a shared normative foundation for what journalism is or does.

What does this mean for the Spanish media field's adaptation to post-truth? Spanish journalism is facing post-truth in a deep crisis of institutional authority. Virtually any organisation can establish a news site and benefit from the constitutional protection for journalists, while adhering only to internal rules and, of course,

external enforcement by the courts of the limited regulations. Moreover, new actors, including partisan platforms and hybrid media-politics professionals, now compete for legitimacy in an environment where journalistic identity is fluid and institutional boundaries are porous. The emergence of party-aligned media, the proliferation of low-cost outlets, and the weakened capacity for professional self-regulation all contribute to a crisis of mediation.

Therefore, the field is undergoing a struggle to redefine and establish journalistic standards as a reaction to post-truth. It can be argued that the struggle has always existed, as evidenced by the lack of agreement on self-regulation. Indeed, instability and constant "jockeying for position" are the very substance of field theory. However, it is the combination of political polarisation, economic, and technological transformation, and the emergence of new external rules in the form of the European Media Freedom Act, that are driving a more intense transformation than witnessed in almost any other period.

To explore these dynamics in detail, this article studies qualitative evidence to carry out an interpretative analysis of the perceptions and justifications of media professionals and regulators about the challenges of post-truth in the Spanish journalistic field. A combination of data collection techniques has been employed. The study combines documentary analysis—including media coverage, institutional reports, and public statements—with 20 semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with key stakeholders such as journalists, media regulators, and scholars. The questionnaire covered the origin and prevalence of disinformation in Spain, the interviewee's organisation's response to this phenomenon, professional implications and stakes, policy responses, and regulatory implications. This empirical material is further contextualised through extracts from a series of press articles addressing the three controversies under scrutiny, situating the findings within broader journalistic debates. For data analysis, qualitative content analysis was conducted using an inductive coding strategy to identify recurring themes across the interview transcripts and documentary sources. This triangulated methodology enhances the rigour and depth of the study.

Interview participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in institutional affiliation and ideological orientation. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and translated by the authors from Spanish, and anonymised to safeguard confidentiality.

Transcripts were analysed using NVivo 14 software. Open coding was first applied to identify emergent concepts, which were subsequently organised into broader thematic categories. Key dimensions included perceptions of journalistic authority, regulatory shortcomings, media–politics interactions, and professional responses to disinformation. This structure is used to present the results in the following section. This systematic and transparent process ensured both analytical consistency and sensitivity to individual nuance. The summary of interviews—including the interview identification number, the date on which the interview was conducted, and the sector—may be consulted in the Supplementary File, Annex 1.

4. The Struggles of Spanish Journalism: Contemporary Challenges and Debates

The interviews reveal a media field undergoing profound transformation due to technological change, weakening the value of raw information and increasing the pressure on traditional journalism. This shift occurs amid declining advertising revenue, intensified fragmentation, and growing political polarisation,

making the pursuit of quality journalism more difficult. The post-truth era presents a paradox: It reinforces the need for professional standards while simultaneously undermining journalistic credibility and unity. Journalists face a collective action dilemma between loyalty, voice, or exit. With only 5.9% of Spaniards relying on traditional media for political opinion (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2024), journalists are however still seen as powerful political actors.

In Spain, the challenge becomes particularly acute when false information originates from within the media system itself and the professional field appears ill-equipped to address it. Existing regulation, conceived to protect journalists from political prosecution, makes it relatively difficult to challenge such cases in court under normal circumstances and the existing professional self-regulation standards (field governance units, in the terms of Fligstein & McAdam, 2012, p. 205) are not sufficient to challenge actors in dominant positions.

4.1. Eroding Journalistic Authority and the Rise of Disinformation in the Digital Media Ecosystem

The controversies outlined in the introduction of this article exemplify the way in which legacy media are being challenged in their role as trusted gatekeepers of information, as both political actors and digital platforms increasingly compete for epistemic dominance in the public sphere. Today, traditional media no longer hold exclusive authority over the selection and framing of information. In a digitalised communicative environment, any social actor can access platforms, disseminate content, and become a source of information (Casero-Ripollés & García-Gordillo, 2020). This shift has coincided with a marked decline in public trust in legacy media (N. Newman et al., 2022). In Spain, 31% of respondents now express distrust in the news (Sierra et al., 2025). This dynamic is especially visible among younger audiences: 42% of 16–30-year-olds primarily rely on social media for political and social news (European Parliament, 2025).

As newspapers compete for attention in this new ecosystem, they face dwindling advertising revenues and increased pressure to replicate platform-native dynamics such as clickbait, emotional framing, and sensationalism. These pressures have reshaped journalistic routines. Interviewee 9 argues that the rise of the internet has shifted the media paradigm, prioritising speed and the race to publish news first. At the same time, it has increased precarity in the industry, pushing even the most reputable outlets toward sensationalism and, often unconsciously, towards reflecting their audience's biases.

Although digital media have enabled a broader "democratisation of information," they have also eroded traditional epistemic structures. The decentralisation of content creation has blurred distinctions between journalism and opinion, professional and amateur content, and truth and spin (Alonso González, 2021). This has contributed to a wider "information disorder" (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2018).

As van Dijck (2009) notes, journalists now share agenda-setting power with ordinary users, while Aruguete (2017) underscores how social media actors increasingly shape public discourse. This erosion of institutional gatekeeping has enabled deeper political polarisation, further fuelling disinformation. In this regard, the "Ferreras-gate" scandal is symptomatic of broader transformations in Spanish journalism: the blurring of lines between information and opinion, the erosion of editorial independence, and the increasing entanglement of journalistic practices with political strategy.

4.2. To Be or not To Be: Who Can be a Journalist in Spain?

These controversies must also be read in light of broader uncertainties around journalistic authority in Spain—particularly the blurred boundaries regarding what constitutes journalism and who is entitled to claim the role of journalist in a fragmented and evolving media ecosystem.

Since Ferreras' programme *Al Rojo Vivo* style and content competes directly for airtime with traditional gossip and entertainment shows, its distinctive style has contributed to the erosion of clear genre distinctions. By incorporating elements of infotainment—including dramatic background music, live-event coverage techniques drawn from sports journalism, and the thematic blending of politics, crime, and spectacle—Ferreras has helped create a hybrid format that combines entertainment and conventional news (Mercado-Sáez & Monedero-Morales, 2017). In particular, La Sexta—the channel on which *Al Rojo Vivo* is broadcast—is by far the Spanish channel featuring the highest volume of infotainment content, according to Berrocal Gonzalo et al. (2014).

While effective in capturing public attention, this approach contributes to a broader climate in which audiences find it increasingly difficult to distinguish between journalistic content and non-journalistic material. This blurring of boundaries is further exacerbated by the entertainment-oriented logic underpinning many broadcast formats. As Interviewee 4 puts it, television's primary role is no longer information but entertainment.

In this context, the question arises: How can citizens distinguish between formats that are purely informative and those shaped by an entertainment logic? For audiences lacking familiarity with the inner workings of the media, this distinction is often blurred, if not imperceptible. Additionally, the rise of pseudo-media and partisan outlets, often able to obtain press accreditation and attend press conferences alongside professional journalists—sometimes to disrupt journalistic work—raises a fundamental question: Who holds the authority to determine who qualifies as a journalist, or whether one is entitled to practise as such?

While membership in the Federation of Associations of Journalists of Spain requires a formal university degree in journalism or related fields (Federación de Asociaciones de Periodistas de España, 2010), this accreditation is not legally required to practise journalism in Spain. Unlike regulated professions such as medicine or law, journalism lacks mandatory professional licensing. As former *El País* editor Javier Moreno argues in an article published in *El País* (Ceberio Belaza, 2024), any attempt to formalise accreditation risks undermining freedom of expression:

> What would it contribute? Who decides whether your press card should be revoked if you do not do things properly? How would such a professional body be formed? Who would elect it? How can we ensure that it would not become politicised? Any such measure runs counter to freedom of expression.

Most interviewees echo this concern and instead highlight journalism as a practice learned through experience. As Interviewee 5 explains, journalism is a method, and many people—not only professional journalists—can engage in it. However, the expert explains that the boundaries are increasingly blurred, so there are individuals who seek only to spread disinformation sharing the same space as those who carry out their work with honesty and integrity (Interviewee 5). In this sense, Interviewee 1 emphasises the

importance of distinguishing legitimate media outlets from pseudo-media and argues that they detect a serious problem with pseudo-media or actors that imitate journalism, so they have to identify and differentiate them, possibly using models from other countries.

In the view of Interviewee 2, the erosion of journalistic standards contributes to the spread of disinformation: "Many people mistake journalism with things that are not." As Varela (2024) argues, the consequence is clear: "Since there are no rules to determine who qualifies as a journalist and who does not, there are likewise no mechanisms to sanction those who breach the ethical standards and professional codes on which journalistic practice should be based."

In response to recent incidents during press conferences held in the Spanish Congress of Deputies, the Parliamentary Journalists' Association issued a statement, endorsed by the Madrid Press Association, strongly condemning "the behaviour of certain accredited individuals in Congress, who continue to disrupt or obstruct the normal conduct of press conferences held by spokespersons from the various parliamentary groups, thereby undermining the right to gather and transmit accurate information" (Asociación de la Prensa de Madrid, 2025). The statement also emphasised the urgent need for the Bureaus of Congress and the Senate to expedite the processing of the proposed reform that outlines measures to prevent disruptive conduct in the practice of journalism, "without in any way limiting, restricting, or undermining the media's right to obtain and disseminate truthful information to the public" (Asociación de la Prensa de Madrid, 2025).

4.3. Regulating What Can't Be Regulated? Debates on Journalism, Self-Governance, and Professional Boundaries in Spain

The "Ferreras-gate" scandal must be understood within the broader context of Spain's legal framework surrounding journalistic conduct, particularly in relation to the constitutional right to truthful information guaranteed under Article 20.1(d) of the Spanish Constitution. This right ensures the freedom to communicate and receive truthful information by any means of dissemination, with truthfulness (*veracidad*; Ruiz-Alonso, 2024) being crucial for constitutional protection. This constitutional protection reaches its highest level when these freedoms are exercised by professional journalists through the media (Constitutional Court of Spain, 2009, Legal Ground 4), particularly when the subject of reporting is a public figure (European Court of Human Rights, 2004).

However, although press freedom is indeed protected by law, journalism in Spain remains a self-regulated profession. Media organisations are themselves responsible for defining the frameworks of their journalistic practices through internally developed ethical codes. This absence of a unified regulatory structure has given rise to ongoing debates surrounding professional accountability, the boundaries of legitimate journalism, and the overall effectiveness of self-regulation in safeguarding the integrity and credibility of the media sector.

Ferreras has defended his actions by claiming adherence to journalistic standards. In response to criticism over the truthfulness of his reporting, Ferreras emphasised that:

> We have nothing to hide….We have never knowingly published false information. Not that one, nor any other—about Podemos or anyone else. We are talking about audio recordings made after the report was broadcast….Of course, we thought it was strange and even crude, and we said so. The police claimed

> to have that document. That is why we reported it citing the original outlet, describing the account as "alleged" and "supposed." That is also why we contacted Iglesias immediately. ("Ferreras cierra Al Rojo Vivo," 2022)

This underscores his claim to have followed journalistic standards, including verifying sources and providing a clear disclaimer about the information's authenticity.

In the absence of a clearer regulatory framework, the "Ferreras-gate" scandal, therefore, reflects a broader dispute over the rules of journalistic practice, was widely covered by Spanish media, and has been openly challenged.

This scandal has produced different types of opposition. Firstly, between political actors and the media. Both the radical right (Vox) and the radical left (Podemos) leveraged polarising rhetoric to frame the media as complicit in elite conspiracies but with different emphases: Vox portraying the media as controlled by leftist political elites distorting the truth, and Podemos emphasising the influence of economic elites and private ownership in shaping public discourse (Haapala & Roch, 2025). Since founding the digital media Canal Red, Pablo Iglesias has criticised Ferreras' and *La Sexta* coverage of Podemos, accusing them of manipulation and bias. Iglesias extended this critique to journalists participating as guests on Ferreras' show and to successful journalists not making this a central issue in their reporting, tagging them as "state journalists" (Iglesias, 2022).

Furthermore, this has been interpreted in left-wing media commentary as an example of collusion between state and media corporate power: Whereas *La Sexta* purports to report from a left-wing angle, its corporate interests are seen as deeply connected to conservative factions within the state (Sánchez Cedillo, 2022) or the political elite (Sánchez-Cuenca, 2022), and therefore eager to damage Mr Iglesias' party. This suggests a second and relevant professional within journalism itself, as evidenced in the reactions to the "Ferreras-gate." In 2022, the Federation of Journalists' Unions (Federación de Sindicatos de Periodistas, 2022) issued a statement asserting that "disseminating information while knowingly aware that it is a 'blatantly crude' fabrication, with the aim of harming a political party and its leader, constitutes poor professional practice that undermines not only journalism, but democracy itself." Likewise, Cadena SER presenter Àngels Barceló commented on the scandal, publicly expressing her opinion on the matter:

> It is our duty to remain faithful to the truth, to hold power to account—regardless of its political colour—to question, to ask; it is our duty to be uncomfortable. What is not our duty—in fact, what which goes against the ethical principles of this profession—is to take part in the murky underworld, to act as mouthpieces for political forces, to seek to intervene in the course of events….Certain practices—such as knowingly publishing false information—ultimately harm democracy itself. (Barceló, 2022)

The Madrid Press Association has, however, refrained from commenting on this specific case and focused on the political attacks on journalists, including accusations of corruption by Podemos MPs, calling such remarks "intolerable" and warning that they undermine constitutional freedoms (Asociación de la Prensa de Madrid, 2024).

Nevertheless, it is important to note that, while the "Ferreras-gate" case may be seen as symptomatic of Spain's polarised pluralist media system, offering a lens through which to examine its internal dynamics and

the relationship between media and politics, it should not be conflated with the activities of pseudo-media, whose objectives are fundamentally different. Pseudo-media operate as a deliberately orchestrated apparatus designed specifically to generate noise and undermine the role and function of professional news organisations.

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that divisions have also emerged within journalistic organisations regarding how best to defend the profession. Interviewee 3 advocates for dual regulation: protecting journalists while ensuring the public receives truthful information. They propose a mixed regulatory body that includes professional associations, unions, state representatives, and media experts.

Nevertheless, some caution that "it is never advisable to allow politicians to define the work of journalists. They cannot be impartial and tend to have an iron fist and a glass jaw" (Sáenz de Ugarte, 2024). Interviewee 4 argues that journalism should remain unregulated, likening statutory regulation to political interference in professions such as law or medicine. The expert also dismisses self-regulation as ineffective, citing bias and precarity within journalists' associations and the broader discrediting of the press.

For their part, Interviewee 2 agrees that media ethics must align with Article 20 but notes the lack of a unified code. They promote collective responsibility among media owners, professionals, and institutions. While they cannot enforce rules, they aim to raise awareness: "We can't impose anything legally, but we can promote awareness among professionals and the public."

As Varela (2024) observes in *infoLibre*:

> For decades, the media have resolved this debate with a maxim characteristic of Anglo-Saxon liberalism: "The best press law is the one that does not exist." Now, in view of the increasing manipulation of information ecosystems through digital tools governed by opaque algorithms, and the unchecked proliferation of disinformation, even the European Union has adopted its own [in reference to the European Media Freedom Act].

4.4. Crossing the Line: Internal Disinformation and the Crisis of Credibility in the Spanish Media

According to journalist and Cadena SER contributor Nieves Concostrina, speaking at an event commemorating the station's centenary, "There are some media outlets that try to do honest journalistic work," she noted, "and others that lie and spread falsehoods—but I don't even think they're worth mentioning" (Guerrero Baena, 2024).

Precisely due to the absence of formal regulation within the profession, unethical journalistic practices may also permeate both traditional and digital media outlets, ultimately undermining the credibility and public image of the media itself. Some of the interviewees have reflected on the professional journalistic context in Spain as an environment in which disinformation may emerge.

As Interviewee 5 notes, one of the greatest sources of disinformation continues to be the traditional media, further asserting that "there is not a particularly healthy ecosystem" within them. In this vein, according to Interviewee 4, digital newspapers are the primary source of disinformation emanating from Spanish media:

"They're used to publishing whatever they want without oversight….It is as if they feed off one another. If one outlet spreads a hoax tomorrow, I already know which media will pick it up and who will sign it." Furthermore, Interviewee 5 points to the excessive protection afforded to journalists, to the extent that one is practically covered for distorting reality simply by attempting to demonstrate that an effort was made to verify it.

For their part, Interviewee 1 highlights the complex set of debates that may emerge in those situations:

> If it is proven that a practice entirely contrary to journalism has been carried out by a media outlet, it opens up another debate: Does that invalidate all the work of that outlet? Does it nullify the entire professional career of that individual? Does it cast doubt on their output? But, is it definitive? Within the range of possible scenarios, a multitude of highly interesting and complex debates could emerge.

In this vein, Interviewee 2 additionally advocates for public denunciation of disinformation cases. They argue that the media entities employing journalists should bear responsibility for taking appropriate action. They further contend that excluding someone from the journalistic profession is ultimately ineffective, given that current technology allows individuals to create a blog or social media profile and continue engaging in malpractice regardless.

Additionally, Interviewee 3 underscores the need to implement more explicit protocols to ensure adherence to a journalistic code of ethics. They assert that "there must be some form of sanction for professionals who lie." This ethical code, they argue, should be grounded in the right to report truthfully on matters that have been sufficiently verified with respect to the sourcing of investigative material.

5. Conclusion

Although traditional left–right polarisation remains a central force shaping Spain's media system, particularly on the side of political actors, this article argues that it is increasingly being eroded by deeper structural transformations. Since the early 2010s, shifts in the political and media ecosystems have introduced new tensions that polarisation alone cannot explain, challenging the legitimacy of the established model.

The controversies discussed exemplify this shift. They illustrate how the once broadly consensual definition of journalistic professionalism has fractured, both within the media industry and in the public sphere. Internally, the emergence of new practices—such as freelance journalism, fact-checking initiatives, and the growing role of alternative platforms—has contributed to a diversification of professional norms, and at times, their fragmentation. Externally, the increasing delegitimisation of journalism in a highly polarised political environment has undermined public trust and blurred the boundaries between objective reporting and political advocacy.

Moreover, the article underscores the risks posed by the strategic use of legal frameworks. Regulations originally designed to uphold press freedom can, in certain contexts, be exploited by skilled actors to disseminate misinformation under the cover of constitutionally protected journalistic speech. This highlights the urgent need to revisit and refine these legal protections to ensure they cannot be weaponised in ways that erode the integrity of democratic discourse.

The forthcoming implementation of the European Media Freedom Act is expected to significantly alter the Spanish media landscape by challenging existing oligopolistic structures and enhancing regulatory oversight through new functions assigned to the Comisión Nacional de los Mercados y la Competencia. While these developments may increase institutional scrutiny, they also present an opportunity to re-engage with long-standing debates on the professional regulation of journalism in Spain. In this context, it is imperative to open a broader public conversation with all relevant parties about the ethical and institutional foundations of the profession. Further research is needed to assess the implications of these regulatory shifts and to explore viable models for restoring both professional accountability and public trust in democratic media systems.

Finally, from a political perspective, it is important to note that despite the background of precarity and shifting power between the traditional press and other forms of reporting, all interviewees agree on: Journalistic conduct still matters a great deal for the possibility of a democratic public sphere in Spain.

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