A FOLLOWER-CENTRIC APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP IN THE NEWSROOM
The case of *El País*

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This article analyses leadership in the newsroom of the Spanish newspaper El País *as well as its impact on the craft of journalism more generally. Through 23 in-depth interviews, we try to elucidate how the newsroom constructs its leaders (in the newsroom, what does it mean to be a leader?), paying particular attention to the main skills considered to be necessary. According to our newsroom findings, not all heads of section or editors-in-chief are leaders, a fact that questions formal authority relations and proclaims expertise and know-how as discriminatory skills. This study emphasizes that the collective recognition of a leader is not an ultimate disposition, but can vary over time: consequently leaders who do not achieve the professional requirements of the newsroom can be denied the status, despite their expertise and experience. Our findings indicate that leaders at* El País *are those journalists (no matter what their positions) with strong capacities and skills (fundamentally experience, expertise and creativity) to manage form (relationships) and substance (contents) in the daily work of the newsroom. In short, journalists seen as leaders combine reiterated and strong qualities and merit, graphically reflected in the texts they have published for years in the newspaper.*

KEYWORDS followership; leader; leadership; journalism; news organization; social constructivism

Introduction

As a result of profound technological and industrial changes, news organizations are experiencing a period of exploration and testing of new business models (Picard 2000), organizational structures (García-Avilés and Carvajal 2008) and multi-platform strategies (Schlesinger and Doyle 2015), in order to adapt to the new environment while remaining profitable. In a context where competition grows tougher and economic considerations become increasingly central, change management (Järventie-Thesleff, Moisander, and Villi 2014) and prompt adaptation and response to market needs (Goyanes and Dürrember 2014) call for business competence within news organizations (Andersson and Wiik 2013). In this dynamic news environment, the nature of leaders, that is, their recognition and legitimation, becomes a key challenge for new organizations.

In recent times, basic tensions are challenging newsroom managers. Fundamental changes in newsroom structures, the emergence of new professional profiles (multimedia, analytics, social media, data journalism, etc.) and recent turbulence in news values challenge their daily practice. As key agents in managing newsroom change, innovation and budgets, many managers are driven by financial constraints to embrace cross-media strategies and increasingly demand multi-skilled journalism in order to reduce staff numbers

and cut production overheads (Goyanes 2015). Thus, many leadership issues arise in the process of integrating print and online operations into one newsroom and one structure, able to create content for a digital platform that can be accessed through a computer, a tablet or a mobile phone, and which every 24 hours produces a print edition. In this way, functional shifts might occur in key management duties as well as the transitional skills that newsroom managers will need to develop (Sylvie and Gade 2009). More importantly, a solid review of these professional tensions which are common in newspaper newsrooms today sets the stage for examining new roles and attitudes that newsroom managers/leaders and their organizations will find strategically essential.

In this study, we set out to contribute to a better understanding of leadership in the context of news organizations. While the ongoing economic, technological and cultural transformations of newspapers have attracted considerable scholarly attention in the field of media management (Boczkowski 2005; Küng 2007; Aitamurto and Lewis 2013), or ethnography of newsrooms (Domingo 2008; Anderson 2013; Usher 2014), empirical research on the social construction of leadership continues to be scarce. In particular, we know very little about how the newsroom constructs its leaders and the reasons behind its individualization, that is, what is so special about some journalists? In this paper, we set out to fill this gap.

Drawing on the literature on critical theories of leadership, most specifically the follower-centric approach (Hollander 1992; Meindl 1995; Kellerman 2008), and based on an empirical case analysis of one of the most important Spanish newspapers (*El País*), our study is interesting because it allows us to explore creative social interactions in which organizational structures (hierarchies and organization charts) are not as formal as in traditional leadership research (e.g. armed forces, high technology, financial services, health care, etc). In fact, leadership inside the newsroom of *El País* may be described as "informal" and "horizontal", based on daily relationships within the group. These configurations are not generally promoted by the organization but co-operate to achieve the company's goals. Studying leadership in a news organization, therefore, allows us to explore how control and flexibility are shaped in a context where social interactions are more personal rather than based on status. Leadership is exercised, but not in terms of formal authority, and rules are unwritten or tacit and can be found in terms of customs and beliefs.

In the particular case that we analyse, the recognition of a leader is established through personal relations of formality and informality where the leader works to and for the group. Some journalists are considered leaders due to their reputation, experience and expertise as good journalists, as well as their involvement in fostering collaboration and a dynamic work environment. Editorial managers (heads of section or editors-in-chief) may or may not be recognized as leaders, a fact that automatically questions formal relations of authority. Therefore, in the newsroom, many of those in management positions are not *de facto* leaders, reflecting their limited expertise and/or experience. On the other hand, leadership in *El País* is a dynamic social construction: the position of every leader can be denied if the group or section that had nominated them as such decides so (in the event of limited participation or selfishness). Good professional performance (individual or collective), we argue, demands an inclusive work context, in which every professional feels able to achieve good results and share them, with the leader's collaboration and assurance, and from a constant creative relationship with the colleagues of an area or section.

Our study contributes to the literature on media management by elaborating on a theoretical, follower-centric approach on the leadership construction of contemporary

newsrooms. Based on an empirical analysis that draws on this perspective, we illustrate the complexities involved and suggest that success in managing the daily news production calls for leaders that enhance participation and involvement in the group. In other words, news organizations need maximum involvement from their staff through a horizontal and diffuse leadership, where collaboration, concentration and creativity are strategic lines of action.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we introduce the follower-centric approach to leadership that informs our study. Then, after briefly discussing our research method, we present the results of our empirical analysis, paying special attention to how the newsroom constructs its leaders and the main skills necessary to be considered such. Finally, we reflect on the importance of communication and participation in fostering synergies between hierarchies and the main implications for those exercising leadership functions. To conclude, we discuss the contribution and implications of our study, focusing on the leadership challenges that the craft of journalism brings about for media management in news organizations' newsrooms.

Follower-centric Approach to Leadership

In a context of continuous change, as is the media environment, the nature and construction of leadership is a key resource for the strategic development of organizations. In the literature on management studies, leadership is an intriguing concept that has been extensively studied and theorized from a number of different perspectives (Alvesson and Jonsson 2016). In this paper, we draw from critical leadership theories, specifically, the so-called follower-centric approach (Carsten et al. 2010; Bligh 2011), in order to conceptualize leadership as a socially constructed phenomenon. This approach to leadership sees the leader–follower relationship as mutually understood: both are co-participants and co-protagonists in the formulation and development of leadership processes (DeRue and Ashford 2010; Uhl-Bien et al. 2014).

Empirical research into followership is still in its infancy but recent studies arguably show significant contributions to present leadership theory and provide direction in terms of implications for practice (Crossman and Crossman 2011). We argue that the follower-centric approach offers a useful analytical perspective for exploring the practical complexities of leadership in news organizations, because it shifts the attention to leaders as major agents in leadership processes, and offers a theoretical space for framing perceptions and views of "non-leaders" in its construction and implementation. This theoretical approach allows us to emphasize the constructions of leadership not only taking leaders into account, but also followers' perspectives as well as their particular thought systems as followers (Collinson 2005). Using this perspective, we aim to understand how the newsroom constructs its leaders, that is, what the newsroom understands by the concept of "leader", paying special attention to why some journalists are more important than others and, as a consequence, are followed by the group.

The follower-centric approach suggests that followers are an active party in the leader–follower relationship (Baker 2007), and have an active role in keeping the leader in control of a situation (Follett 1996). Follower theorists eschew a leader-centric approach in which the leader's personality, style and/or behaviour are the primary determining influences on followers' thoughts and actions. They argue that in the contemporary context of greater teamwork, "empowered knowledge-workers" and "distributed" leadership, "good

followership" has become crucial (Collinson 2005). In this sense, we agree with Fairhurst and Grant (2010, 2) when they claim: "Leadership [as well as followership] is co-constructed, a product of sociohistorical and collective meaning making, and negotiated on an ongoing basis through a complex interplay among leadership actors, be they designated or emergent leaders, managers, and/or followers".

From this perspective, although leaders are usually directors of activity, all initiatives need not come from the leader (Bedeian and Huint 2006). Followers have also the potential to make significant contributions to successful leadership (Hollander 1992) and to make sense of and evaluate their organizational experiences (Meindl 1995). Leader–follower relations are not simply prescribed or determined by formal hierarchical positions but are dynamically claimed/granted (DeRue and Ashford 2010; Blom and Alvesson 2014). Consequently, such processes should be described as interdependent rather than either/or (Hollander and Webb 1955), a two-way influence dynamic, reciprocal and complex (Burns 1978), endorsed and reinforced within a broader organizational context over time (DeRue and Ashford 2010).

In the contemporary media industry, leadership has certain unique characteristics. In general terms, employees are not used to accepting the guidelines suggested or imposed by management bodies without reservations (Soloski 1989; McManus 1997). Journalists try to keep their editorial independence with regard to external influences that, generally, come from the owners themselves or the administrative bodies. Tensions between different perspectives challenge the leader and lead him or her to search for consensus. In communication companies, pacts are almost always more suitable than orders (Powers 1991). Leadership demands making possible something that appears to be a contradiction: on the one hand, management is not anarchic and unstable; but at the same time, strategy and decisions on content are not imposed without dialogue and previous agreement (Pérez-Latre and Sánchez-Tabernero 2003).

In this paper, we contend that for a better understanding of the complexities and meaning of leadership inside the newsroom, analytical attention needs to be focused on the views and perceptions of "non-leaders" and their particular thought systems. From this perspective, we set out to explore empirically how the newsroom constructs its leaders and what are the essential skills for someone to be followed. Based on a single case study of one of the most important Spanish newspapers, our aim is also to articulate how leaders exercise leadership and its impact on the craft of journalism. Therefore, our research question is:

> **RQ1:** How does the newsroom construct its leaders and why are some journalists considered leaders? In other words, according to the newsroom perceptions and experience, what is understood by the concept of leader/leadership and what differentiates leaders from the rest of journalists?

Methodology

Research Design

Our paper takes an interpretative approach to the study of leadership, based on constructionist theory. Through the analysis of *El País*, we draw on a case study methodology (Stake 2000) and interviews for empirical material to interpret our research question. From this perspective, qualitative analysis is based on an "emergent research design", which is

continually worked on and revised as the researcher learns more about the empirical phenomenon under study (Moisander and Valtonen 2006). For such analysis, it is important to obtain a rich set of empirical materials that allow the researchers to gain insights into the particular meanings and practices through which people make sense of the world around them and achieve social order in the particular socio-material context at hand (Moisander and Stenfors 2009). This approach was chosen because what constitutes a leader inside the newsroom is currently poorly understood, and a better understanding of the phenomenon calls for interpretive, data-driven analysis (Stake 2000).

To understand how the newsroom constructs its leaders, we need to consider different units of analysis (that is, leaders' and followers' perspectives).[1] To fulfil this aim, we need to focus our analysis on a particular case to obtain a combination of depth and richness of empirical evidence. We reflect on why some journalists are acknowledged as leaders and, therefore, explore how they exercise leadership and how it is understood by their followers. Our aim is not to say anything about how typical these questions are within news organizations in general. Rather, in the context of research on media management, we seek to offer some clarifications and raise critical questions about the complexity of the concepts of leader and leadership in news organizations' newsrooms. Our study will provide practitioners with useful knowledge and new perspectives for critically examining leaders through which new views are developed and teams managed in their own organizations.

Procedure

The purpose of the case analysis is to gain a better understanding of how the newsroom constructs its leaders, paying special attention to the main skills to be considered as such. *El País* was chosen as the case organization for various reasons. First of all, because it is the most important newspaper in Spain: it is the most visited and most read newspaper in Spain (both paper and digital), as well as the first digital Spanish newspaper in the world, according to data certificated by ComScore. *El País* is a newspaper with a history of 40 years of print publishing and is part of a large corporation, PRISA, which owns several newspapers, radio stations, editorials and television channels in Spain and Latin America. It has a background in highly successful print business, although, recently, it has been trying to establish itself as an *online first* newspaper (*El País* 2016). Regarding the recent history of the PRISA Group, the holding recorded in 2011 the greatest losses in its history, €451 million. The economic crisis, coupled with a change in the pattern of news consumption, has caused a fall in readership and downsizing in the newsroom, with sizeable job losses and redundancies both in 2012 and 2015. These changes led to a substantive deterioration in the working conditions of the professional journalist, particularly due to an increase in average working hours. In 2016, *El País* turned 40 years. It changed its newsroom design as well as its internal organization and workflow.

The field study was based on 23 interviews: 7 of them involving managers (editors-in-chief and heads of sections) and 16 journalists from different sections of the newspaper. All the interviews were conducted in the headquarters of the organization in Madrid throughout the month of May 2014. The sample represented a broad range of demographics and job profiles. Journalists' ages ranged from 24 to 57 years, although the majority were in their 30s and 50s; 56.5 per cent ($N = 13$) of our interviewees were male, while 43.5 per cent ($N = 10$) were female journalists.

The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and they were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim (about 150 pages). Our empirical evidence represents the heterogeneity of the newspaper sections, covering more than half of them (e.g. culture, science, politics, economics, print newspaper, etc.). Given our interest in meanings (leader/leadership), we primarily based our case study on interviews. These interviews were complemented with some observations of meetings/interactions where leadership could be expected to be exercised. We do not directly refer to our observations in this text, since these broadly confirmed the impressions from the interviews. Often observations display rather few clear examples of leadership: people in interactions discuss issues around (journalistic) content and it is seldom clear who, if anyone, is the "leader" (e.g. Luhrmann and Eberl 2007). To complement the data, we also used publicly available documentary material (company reports, website, press releases) in printed and online forms. The documentary data were used primarily for contextualizing the primary, interview data.

In these semi-structured interviews, participants were encouraged to discuss what they understand by the concept of leader according to their own perceptions and experiences inside the newsroom and, therefore, how they perceive leadership is exercised in their daily work (by those acknowledged as leaders). This structure is clearly reflected in the design of the interview scheme. We deliberately kept the definition of "leaders" and "leadership" open to interpretation. It was up to the interviewees to fill these labels with meaning and specific examples, synonyms or metaphors. Interviews were conducted with critical curiosity and conscious attention to how participants constructed the terms that they brought into their own narratives (experiences) regarding leadership aspects.

Analysis Strategy

When analysing the data, the methods and basic methodological procedures developed in the field of cultural analysis were used. As a first step, we transcribed all interviews. Transcribed texts were then targeted for close readings and we categorized the accounts in terms of our two broad *a priori* themes (what is a leader for the newsroom and the main skills for being considered as such). In addition to this, we created new empirically driven sub-themes related to "leadership", most of them explicitly referred to by the interviewees (but also, of course, partly coloured by our own interpretative repertoire and pre-understanding of the phenomenon). Examples of such themes included "formality/informality", "expertise", "participation", "horizontal leadership" and "shared leadership". We did not engage in detailed codifications, often giving a misleading impression of precision and hiding the ambiguities and context-dependent nature of material that are domesticated by codification (Potter and Wetherell 1987). Instead, we were eager to get a good feeling for context and relations. We looked for patterns as well as deviations and were surprised by the fairly high level of common views on leadership issues expressed. The few but significant variations identified in the accounts were taken seriously and further explored as potential themes (e.g. "leadership in different sections"), rather than methodological problems or inconsistencies. After this procedure, we then shared and compared our themes (including meanings, significance, underlying assumptions, context, etc.), in order to generate, contrast and evaluate different lines of interpretation.

The purpose with this interpretative analytical process was to get a deeper sense of the meaning of the phenomenon, in our case what the newsroom understands by the concept of leader and leadership and therefore how leaders exercise leadership. In the

process one tries to get close to those studied and their ways of making sense of and developing meanings around self and relations, but also "to critically bear in mind that expressed understandings may reflect limited overview, want to give a good impression, a self-understanding exaggerating agency and autonomy and downplay or deny dependencies and conformism" (Blom and Alvesson 2014, 348).

Findings

Leaders Between Formality and Informality

Overall, our interviewees understand leadership in a traditional sense: the leader is identified as the person who stands out among the rest of the group, exercising influence over others as they seek improved performance. At the same time, the interviewees who define themselves as leaders admit that their influence is exercised not via organizational authority but through the good work that they do within their formal role, as the following quotation suggests:

> I do not have last-minute decision-making capacity because that's what managers are for, to make decisions about what should be published … but I do have the capacity to ask collaborators for topics, to suggest these topics to the managers and to do it myself, back them up and, well, manage that day-to-day routine. (Cultural journalist)

Working in the newsroom of an influential newspaper such as *El País* is difficult. Those doing this work identify proven reputation and experience as marks of success. This tacit recognition of skill is what preserves the leader's position as such. It is crucial to maintaining quality and the operation of the newspaper, and it is therefore respected, valued and counted as leadership.

For the recognition of the role of leader to function, personal relations of informality and formality are mixed in a continuous creative process organized among members of one section. Editorial managers (editors-in-chief and heads of section) constantly supervise day-to-day activity, although in a discreet manner during this process. Editors decide content, while chief editors are always up-to-date about all the contingencies of the work of every section (either breakthroughs or problems) and they give the "green light" to the way the final product should be undertaken, according to the editorial line of the company and the ideals established by the management team. One of the interviewees illustrates this dynamic as follows:

> The team usually makes decisions too when deciding the headlines and choosing the pictures. I present two options for the cover of the supplements, and the subdirector, whom I report to, selects one. So, let's say there is a hierarchical structure that works pretty well. The graphic editor shows me possible photographs, and I choose them. Although I want her to give her opinion, I also need her to have her own judgement and to play her part. The point here is that every professional chooses and feels fulfilled with their work. I try to co-ordinate the talent of others and make it worthwhile. (Editor-in-chief of "Planeta Futuro" supplement)

Not all the heads of section or editors-in-chief become leaders. This means their hierarchical position is not always a formal reference for the rest of the staff. In fact, if they lack the recognition from their work group; that is to say, if their critical, organizational and professional abilities are not effectively demonstrated or corroborated, they are "merely"

managers of the organizational structure. They have some influence in the work process (management), but with little or no intervention in the content. According to our interviewees, the lack of leadership in a manager is mainly the result of the manager submitting without opposition to the criteria dictated by the higher levels of the hierarchy. The lack of confrontation and even the mere defence of the approaches or criteria established by the journalists that the manager leads give rise to a serious challenge to their role, not as a manager, but as a leader. An interviewee exemplifies this in the following way:

> The tasks of a manager are those of executing, making everything happen properly and not having problems with the editors-in-chief. Thus, working on the digital front page we have to decide on the topics that will appear on the front page or the ones that won't. Sometimes the editors-in-chief tell us: "not that headline, this other one with this approach, take that item off because it's not right", and you know it's right, you believe it should be like that, that the approach is right, that we have to interpret reality as we are doing through a commitment to the reader. But the intermediate editor, if he decides that we have to take notice of it, and doesn't even try to defend his post or stand up for his team, for me he is being a manager, if we want to call it that, but not a leader. There are a lot of managers, but leaders … (Political journalist)

For their part, leaders can be managers as well, from the point of view of the followers, as long as the merit and abilities that combine the form and content of the journalistic product get recognized. This characteristic can be seen as a guarantee or "room for manoeuvre" that the management staff (director and sub-director) promotes and the middle hierarchical structures respect. The objective is to let the creative work flow according to the judgement and professional criteria of the leader, as well as the followers who recognize them as such. Thus, a horizontal leadership, where the journalistic work is more effective and its quality is the result of the shared work, is configured. One interviewee shows this dynamic as follows:

> A newspaper is an intellectual project in which all journalists that contribute to its development have the same level of influence and hierarchy and also need to have the same parameters of rigour. From the journalist who creates the crossword to the journalist who creates news in the research section. (Head of "El Viajero" supplement)

This horizontality is a constant factor in the day-to-day structure of the news organization and for the development of the intellectual project that the company embodies. Specifically, this horizontal approach has a double function: to plan and to co-ordinate the day-to-day operational functioning (thus giving stability and continuity to the company); and to detect, assess and select the existing talent among all the members of the organization, regardless of their age or their professional career.

Expertise as a Distinctive Merit of Action and Management

Talent is also one of the most important elements in personalizing a leader, especially if it is accompanied by corroborated and objective expertise. In fact, leaders count on the individual recognition of their colleagues because of their vocational and personal commitments. Over time, and as a result of the above, leaders gain a professional respect that goes beyond functional hierarchies in a newspaper and shows itself to the readers. It is not about a personal characteristic (although it is obviously needed), but rather a positive

characteristic closely connected to the merit earned in the journalist's job, as the following extract illustrates:

> You get that professional respect [leadership] by working and publishing good stuff. (Science journalist)

Necessarily, this assessment is related to the respect that the group shows and externalizes to those who have a wide and well-proven experience and reputation. Those characteristics are thereby raised as a source of legitimacy that the leader receives from their work team as well as from the formal hierarchy of the company, and, in the end, from the readers of *El País*. Besides, the course and the experience in different areas of the newspaper reaffirm the leader as not only a well-prepared professional, but also as a reference for their colleagues due to their extended editorial professionalism, as the following quotation illustrates:

> Experience is work accumulation in different sections of the newspaper in a way that they enrich you and help you, your personality or your performance at work become more creative. (Head of Special Projects)

Experience in this organization is a guarantee and the veteran's consecration is the proof that years have been, time and again, witness of how the intellectual and professional references have been consolidated in their area of responsibility, encouraging the novices' eagerness and co-ordinating their colleagues' skills. Hence, the perception of leadership in *El País* is a group of professional qualities combined as reiterated and strong merits that are shown in texts published for years in the newspaper.

Also, when people state a leader as a "reference" to their work, we observe that the work context is maintained to be more integrated and inclusive, in which every professional is able to achieve good results and share them, with the assurance of the leader's collaboration and on the basis of a creative relationship with colleagues in the same area or section. From a professional point of view, it is an enjoyable dynamic, because they feel oriented to the achievement of concrete results and because they enjoy doing it and sharing it.

> Firstly, I want everything I invent or try to get off the ground to be good stuff. Secondly, I want to have the best staff. Thirdly, I want them to be excited, that is to say, that they like it. Fourthly, I want them to participate as much as they can. (Head of Special Projects)

The vision of our interviewees with regard to "journalistic merit" is fundamentally based on the ability to develop original, creative and innovative intellectual work, and to create a stimulating and dynamic work environment. To that end, vocation, dedication and collaboration are key factors in its attainment. Individual experience, personal effort (as the work developed "in the first place" and "for many years" has demonstrated) and group dedication (in the group and for the group) are repeated elements in the testimonies collected to justify the formal and informal recognition of a leader.

Also, our interviewees recognize a leader as the person who is available to others and is able to handle the tensions arising from a very intense (intellectually and physically speaking) work environment, such as in the journalist's job. Accuracy in this job is fundamental, as well as an indicator of professionalism: everyone in the newsroom has to concentrate and be focused to assume responsibility for what is being written and how it is delivered to the audience.

> If we are not 100 per cent sure about something, we don't publish it … Therefore, I think you have to be very careful and take into account that you are in a very beautiful profession, but also a profession that you have to pursue with extreme responsibility because you can ruin someone's life. (International Affairs journalist)

The different work groups into which the newsroom is divided see the leader as a highly skilled person (because of their experience, attitudes and aptitudes) to manage the stress and tensions of the heavy workload, the rigidity of the deadlines and the narrative rigour that any editorial product must have every day of the year. The position of leaders who are too busy, distracted or selfish automatically declines and they are not leaders anymore, despite their accumulated expertise and their indubitable professionalism. Leaders' participation and sensitivity are, then, essential in the relation with the group or section that recognizes them as leader and also for the legitimate maintenance of the work structure.

The editorial managers get to be leaders when they meet, individually, members of their sections or groups and when they get to know what is the best thing for each person, they place them according to their respective strengths and they give them confidence to fulfil the assigned tasks, to enrich their creativity, to recognize obstacles and avoid them together, and to handle tensions to improve their own performance. All these functions combined are the best way to achieve the final quality of the product, increase its intellectual value and maintain the highest level of prestige in the organization.

According to our interviewees, there are several circumstances which can cause leadership to be exercised by the editors-in-chief or heads of section. The most persistent refer to defending the approaches of editors before newspaper management, assessment and criteria for editing the texts produced, and the aims themselves of their section. Some examples are shown below:

> A leader defends his editors. One thing that seems to me essential for leadership is that the person is capable of accepting her team's errors as her own too. Because that is also her responsibility. So, if tomorrow I were the editor-in-chief, and an editor of mine makes a mistake, I would accept it too as my own. (Cultural journalist)

> I perceive that leadership is being exercised at work when I am given advice about things. There are a lot of things I don't know, then I ask about them. In journalism, although you may not have the answers, you know how to get them because you know someone who can provide you with them, in the case of sources, for example. Maybe I don't have a source but I do ask my boss or a colleague for help so that they can give me a clue about tackling a report. (Economics journalist)

> I finish an article, for example and I give it to Pablo to read [his head of section]. Pablo reads it and says: "hell! I think there is information missing from this and I also believe that the ending isn't right … " and he's always right! Why? First because I consider him to be clever, second because on the topics you work on, you're involved, and you're not objective. So, when Pablo sees it and points out possible improvements he's almost always right. There are times when you don't agree but you do it anyway. Well, if you deeply disagree, you don't do it. But he is almost always right. And that's where you notice that Pablo is not imposing anything, but exercising leadership. He points it out and you recognize it. (Special Projects journalist)

I exercise leadership, for example, in the decision about front pages, in the decision about content, in the choice of graphic material, in the approach to topics that seem to me very important. (Editor-in-chief of the print newspaper)

I believe I exercise leadership when setting the criteria for what the content in "El Viajero" should be. For example, a lot of writers contribute to "El Viajero". But often I try to notice young writers, call them up to write a piece … The other day a writer from Majorca wrote an article; he was a very young writer who had never contributed to our paper and he chose his 10 most charming bars in Palma de Mallorca. So, it's giving someone an opportunity and we also encourage new generations. In this sense, I think that the criterion, my criterion can help when looking for new talent, new sources. (Head of "El Viajero")

I think I exercise leadership from the moment when I set the agenda for the product. In our section, we all travel a lot and using Google Drive we organize the whole agenda. We interact with each other around this agenda, putting our notes into it, I have to do this, you the other, etc. Then what I do every morning is to go into the document and from there I give instructions about what needs to be done each day. Then I manage from that very moment. But also from the existence itself of the Drive, because in it is all the programming for the whole month, everything that has to be done, everything. And it is very smart because it is in different colours. That is, my notes about "this, that and the other have to be done". These notes are in one colour. Pink. (Editor-in-chief of "Planeta Futuro" supplement)

In Search of Synergies: Within and Between Layers

The leader's role, its formal and informal recognition in the organization, as well as its relations with the group and with the structured managers is essential to increase the performance, professionalism and competitiveness of the staff. Additionally, everything is based on gears that help the proper functioning and success of the organization, as long as the co-operation among the different steps that the organization is composed of is harmonic and stable.

As we have seen before, the collected testimonies highlight journalistic creativity as an important, intense and responsible effort that the members of a work group share within a relationship of reciprocity and horizontality. The leader is an essential gear in this machine because he or she guides, gives advice, counsels, accompanies and stimulates, in a framework structured by the superior hierarchical levels, but which is not invasive or coercive in any case. The leader becomes a manager (to manage or command) when his or her talent is recognized in every step of the organization as a functional value for further development, training, motivation and orientation of the group, but also when his or her contribution favours good co-operation in the same work group and/or among the different functional areas the organization is made up of.

Similarly, in the hierarchical structure of *El País*, every group or specialization section (economy, society, politics, etc.) is a sub-area in which these work dynamics, both for work and leadership, are almost identically replicated. However, we also observe that this aspect has important nuances in its logic of practice. Depending on the reference section, work dynamics can fluctuate enormously. Although all sections have group work constants, such as pressure, stress and rapid decision-making (since the periods of creation and

delivery are very precise), their participation and strategic discretion vary in intensity depending on the importance of the section in the whole newspaper. As a consequence, the needs and performance of leaderships may vary.

Heads of section (different from editors-in-chief) provide themes, state their priority and the approaches to be followed, but they stay out of the merit of the content. They control the process; in other words, they monitor the process and take action in each edition to check the details and to control the coherence of the discourses. Editors-in-chief, for their part, weave the threads (formal, structured and institutionalized) that hold the vertical management of the company. Meanwhile, the work groups of each section hold a looser dynamic, less hierarchical, with a shared leadership where everyone is the co-protagonist in defining the final product. This product (report, piece of news, column, breaking news, etc.) is the result of the group's work led and co-ordinated by the head of section (seen as a leader in many cases), but supervised and co-ordinated, at a more general level (concerning all the company), by a formal authority (generally the editor-in-chief or the sub-directors).

This means that leaders have to report back, in the same way other members of the working group have to, to higher positions in the newspaper. This dynamic leads to reflection on the importance of communication in work groups, between groups and management and, in particular, among leaders and the management staff. The possibility that the management of groups is not invasive on the part of the heads of section, and that communication is fluent, bidirectional, consensual and uninterrupted among all the hierarchical levels, makes the work environment harmonic and makes the relationship among different levels of responsibility favour the development of the professional activity of every individual, according to their competences and the assigned tasks. As one of the interviewees puts it:

> I don't provide leadership because, basically, it is not for me to do so. But I do think there is bi-directional communication. There is feedback. They admit any suggestion to be made as well as any applicable corrections. A relationship … I am not saying on an equal level because, of course, it is not like that, hierarchically speaking, but I consider it to be a flowing relationship. I appreciate that relationship favourably. A good atmosphere. To the possible extent, mutual understanding relationships are established, I mean, everyone knows the role they are performing hierarchically. (Opinion journalist)

It is assumed, then, that the relation among different hierarchical levels generates a creative and work-creator environment, with a diffuse leadership, individual implication and commitment to the editorial line of the newspaper, in a context of constant collaboration, concentration and creation.

Discussion

In this study, our aim has been to advance knowledge on the social construction of leaders in news organizations' newsrooms. By extending the follower-centric approach to leadership to the domain of media management our aim has been to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of what it means to be a leader in the newsroom, paying particular attention to the main skills to be considered as such. By doing so, we also show the tensions, strengths and weaknesses of the processes and practices of leadership through which leaders manage daily news production (Sylvie and Weiss 2012; Järventie-Thesleff, Moisander, and Villi 2014).

Our study suggests that leadership in the newsroom is a social construct, as a result of the daily interactions in a group of journalists. From this perspective, leaders are not the only ones involved in its development and implementation (Gronn 2002). The followers, in this sense, are also an active part and initiators of activities (Collinson 2005; Bligh 2011; Crossman and Crossman 2011). Our empirical evidence shows that, for a journalist to perform well, the group should feel co-protagonist and co-participant in the leadership processes (decision-making and ability to initiate) as well as in the development and daily management of news production. In a context of constant collaboration and participation, news organizations should implement and build a horizontal and diffuse leadership in which leaders and followers are an active and transformative part of the professional practices. The leader is one of the essential parts, but always under the supervision of the management staff and in constant communication with his or her group or section. The development of successful leadership, we suggest, requires the group of professionals to be responsible for their work, to be committed and to agree with the editorial line of the organization.

One of the main insights that we offer is that the management of the daily production of the news in a constantly changing environment such as the media industry demands leaders with exclusive dedication to the group and for the group, exploring and making use of their abilities and skills for the good development of their work. In this sense, leaders are those journalists with a well-proven expertise, reputation and experience not only in writing good work, but also in managing relationships, tensions and the stress of the newsroom. However, the practical development of these skills in a continuous-base is a challenge to many journalists (who are considered leaders). In this regard, on many occasions, leaders can neglect the professional requirements of their group or section (limited participation, selfishness or distraction), a fact that has a negative effect on professional performance. As previous research has pointed out in other kinds of organizations, leaders can evolve over time (see DeRue and Ashford 2010). Thus, leaders' positions can be questioned, regardless of their expertise and their editorial good work. This demands that the news organizations maintain an effective control over the emerging processes of creation of new leaders and make sure that leaders from the past keep being leaders in the present (or in the future). In cases where mismatches are detected (retirement of former leaders, their value called into question and the emergence of new ones), the management staff should promote those profiles where formal and informal recognition in the newsroom is proven, either through salary increases, rising in the hierarchy or professional recognition.

As previous empirical research has suggested (Bedeian and Huint 2006; Alvesson 2013), many managers are not recognized as leaders, which automatically questions formal relations of authority (Bono and Judge 2003). In this sense those managers, non-leaders (since their critical, professional and intellectual abilities, and their experience as journalists are not objectively confirmed), are seen as "bureaucrats": specialized professionals to manage the day-to-day and maintain the hierarchical structure of the organization, but with limited editorial influence. These circumstances tend to damage the work environment of the group, since they result in personal and professional de-legitimizations, poor rates of participation and collaboration and, as a consequence of the above, loss of editorial quality. Hence, we suggest that successful management of the newsroom requires managers who have gained professional experience, people whose expertise and experience as a journalist are collectively recognized in addition to their merits as good managers.

Our study contributes primarily to the literature on media management by elaborating on the socially constructed perceptions that present challenges to recognize and individualize leaders in news organizations' newsrooms. Firstly, the follower-centric approach has allowed us to shift attention to leaders as major agents in the exercise of leadership and focus on followers' perceptions and views on leaders and leadership. Secondly, this theoretical perspective has allowed us to illustrate the ambiguities and complexities of exercising leadership and its impact on the craft of journalism. Thirdly, our study shows that survival and success in the contemporary news business is not only a matter of creating "great leaders", it also calls for the empowerment of followers, where horizontality and participation of all journalists are distinctive features.

To conclude, we therefore argue that news organizations would benefit from a better understanding of what it means to be a leader inside the newsroom and the main implications of the perceptions of the group (that is, leaders and followers). As a key contribution in our study, we have offered insights into these constructions, shedding light on the strategic challenges that they entail for the craft of journalism and, therefore, for the survival of news organizations.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

NOTE

1. See Appendix A.

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Appendix A

General Questions to All Professionals

–   Please make an assessment of your career to date: your career has been positive, coherent, deviant, etc.
–   How important is your group or section within *El País*?
–   Please describe the major tasks and responsibilities within your group or section.

Specific Question to Heads of Sections and Editors-in-Chief (Leaders)

–   Please explain in detail the main responsibilities and tasks that your position entails.
–   How would you evaluate the development of your position within the organization?
–   Do you consider yourself a reference for other journalists of *El País*? Why?
–   When do you think you are exercising "leadership" roles? How do you exercise "leadership"?
–   Are there reference journalists within your group or section? Who they are? Why are they different?

Specific Questions to Journalists

–   Who (if anyone) is leading your work? Why?
–   Do you have more than one leader?
–   When do you feel someone is exercising "leadership" on you and your work?
–   Describe how "leadership" is exercised on you and your work.
–   Do you think your manager is your leader? Why yes/no?
–   And finally … Can you consider yourself as a "leader" for any other member of your group or section?