

From Watchdog to Watched Dog: Oversight and Pressures between Journalists and Politicians in the Context of Mediatization¹

Del gos guardià al gos vigilat: fiscalització i pressions entre periodistes i polítics en el context de la mediatització

Andreu Casero-Ripollés, Jéssica Izquierdo-Castillo, Hugo Doménech-Fabregat
Universitat Jaume I de Castelló

Political control is one of the central and conditioning aspects of the relationship between journalists and politicians. Through the perceptions of journalists and politicians, this article analyzes the validity, characteristics, and functioning of one of the principal mechanisms of political control: the journalistic oversight of politics, which is linked to the watchdog theory and political pressures on the media. In addition, the degree of mediatization of politics is measured with regard to media autonomy. The methodology is based on in-depth interviews of 45 participants in Spain. The results indicate the pre-eminence of political pressures that are principally exercised via indirect means (i.e., communications offices and media enterprises). The latter are a vehicle for channeling political control, which reveals the weight of the factors associated with political economy in the relationship between journalists and politicians. Finally, the low incidence of journalistic oversight of politics reveals a reduced level of mediatization in Spain.

El control polític és un dels aspectes centrals que condicionen les relacions entre els periodistes i els polítics. A través de les percepcions dels periodistes i els polítics, aquest article analitza la validesa, les característiques i el funcionament d'un dels principals mecanismes del control polític: la vigilància del periodisme sobre la política, relacionada amb la teoria del gos guardià i les pressions polítiques que pateix l'autonomia dels mitjans de comunicació. La metodologia es basa en quaranta-cinc entrevistes en profunditat fetes a Espanya. Els resultats indiquen la preeminència de les pressions polítiques que bàsicament són exercides a través de mitjans indirectes (des dels gabinets de comunicació i els grups de comunicació); aquests últims representen el vehicle per reconduir el control polític, el qual descobreix el pes dels factors de l'economia política en la relació existent entre els polítics i els periodistes. Per acabar, la baixa incidència de la vigilància periodística sobre la política evidencia que a Espanya el nivell de mediatització és baix.

Key words: journalism, political communication, pressures, control, watchdog.

Paraules clau: periodisme, comunicació política, pressions, control, gos guardià.

On January 30, 2014, Pedro J. Ramírez was dismissed as director of the daily publication *El Mundo* after he had held that position for 25 years. In a speech in middle of the newsroom,² the man who had been director up until that moment, one of the most powerful and influential journalists in Spain, unequivocally linked his fall to the political pressures exerted by the government of Spain, presided over by Mariano Rajoy. Specifically, *El Mundo* had published leaks regarding the alleged illegal financing of the Partido Popular (PP), which was linked to the Bárcenas case, the former treasurer of the party, who was at that time in prison for financial fraud regarding scandals related to the Spanish Royal Family. In his departing article, Ramírez once more blamed the government for his exit: “it is clear that Rajoy is betting on the myth of ‘a government without a press’ [...] and has chosen to transform criticism and denunciations into goods that are increasingly onerous for publishers. It is not surprising that at Unidad Editorial the rope broke around my waist”.³ A few days later in an article in *The New York Times*,⁴ Ramírez reiterated his position, stating that “once in power... [Rajoy] exhibited hostility toward uncomfortable truths and indifference to public opinion” and was fired for “speaking clearly” in his campaign to denounce political corruption.

The case of Pedro J. Ramírez reveals the persistence of political pressures in present-day journalism. The phenomenon of political control is one of the central aspects of the relationship between journalists and politicians. In fact, they constitute one of its principal conditioning factors. Both actors fight to exercise power (symbolic power in the former case, political power in the latter) to shape the actions of the other and therefore dominate their interaction to their own benefit.

The control phenomena that occur around journalistic information can have two directions. The first concerns those that journalists use on politicians to oversee their activity, which are based on the precepts of the watchdog theory of the press. The second concerns politicians’ attempts to shape the news for journalists through various pressure mechanisms.

The relationships between journalists and politicians are current inserted into the paradigm of the mediatization of politics. This paradigm suggests that the media occupy a central place in political life by being the source, actor, and stage

upon which politics are socially represented. Thus, they exert a decisive influence on not only the perceptions of citizens regarding the contents of political debate but also the behavior politicians who adapt themselves to the rules of the game fixed by the logic of the media.

Nevertheless, the media are unable to influence the political system unless they configure themselves as social institutions (i.e., relatively independent social entities), differentiated from others. Autonomy is a prerequisite of the mediatization of politics. In fact, the second of the four dimensions that articulate mediatization refers to the autonomy of the media (Strömbäck, 2010). This dimension measures the degree of political control of the media and the level of independence that the media has with respect to other social institutions. A broad level of professional autonomy is synonymous with strong mediatization. Conversely, subordination of the media to politics involves a low level of autonomy because political logic is imposed on media logic, thereby annulling its ability to influence. Thus, the control phenomena that develop around journalistic information constitute a relevant indicator for measuring the incidence and presence of the mediatization of politics in a particular context. The other three phases noted by Strömbäck (2010) are related to the relevance of the media as source of information (the first phase), with the predominance of media logic of or political logic in the preparation of the news (the third phase), and with the influence of media logic in the activity of politicians (the fourth phase). This article focuses on the second phase that links mediatization with the degree of media autonomy.

Through the perceptions of journalists and politicians, this article analyzes the validity, characteristics, and functioning of the two principal mechanisms of the control of journalistic information: the oversight of politics by journalism (which is linked to the watchdog theory of the press) and the political pressures on the media exercised by the political system. In addition, the degree of political mediatization with regard to the second dimension, which is linked to media autonomy, is measured.

The methodology is based on the in-depth interviews of 45 participants with three profiles: journalists, politicians, and communications directors. The study is specifically based in Spain.

CONTROL AND JOURNALISTIC INFORMATION: BETWEEN OVERSIGHT AND PRESSURES

Journalistic information plays a fundamental role in the political life of modern societies (McCombs, 2011). First, this information is considered as a primary source that shapes the political awareness of citizens, thereby affecting their political participation. Second, it articulates the public agenda, orienting both the content of political debate and the preoccupations and priorities of the citizenry. Finally, it influences the perceptions and opinions of the public.

The media are situated in the center of the political dynamic within this framework, at the same time becoming a principal source of politics for citizens,

an active participant in political life, and the stage upon which politics are socially represented. Thus, they exert considerable political and social influence, and this situation is linked to the mediatization of politics (Mazzoleni and Schutz, 1999; Strömbäck, 2010). For mediatization to occur, it is necessary for the media to act as relatively independent organizations. This endows them with their own practices and criteria (Altheide and Snow, 1979) as well as with a broad degree of professional autonomy in preparing the news. Only then can they influence and cause politicians to depend, to a great extent, upon them and cause them to adapt to their logic (Hjarvard, 2013).

The capacity of journalistic information to influence the public makes the media a key strategic resource for the exercise of power. In this sense, its control becomes one of the axes that governs and defines the relationship between journalism and politics. Through the news, journalists aspire to extend their influence among the citizenry to shape the construction of reality and form public opinion. Politicians want the media to serve as vehicle for their proposals and policies so that they can reach a broad public and generate positive impressions among the citizens.

The phenomenon of news control can take two directions within the framework of the relationship between journalists and politicians. The first concerns the journalistic oversight of political activity. The second establishes the mechanisms from the political system that condition the work of journalists.

THE WATCHDOG IN THE JOURNALISTIC CONTROL OF POLITICS

Journalistic control becomes consolidated in the oversight or monitoring of the political system. The task of the media consists of overseeing political activity, especially that of the government, to detect errors, injustice, and abuses of power. In this way, they hold politicians accountable for their actions and defend the public interest, thereby alerting citizens when something is not working. Thus, journalism plays a watchdog function with respect to the interests of power that includes the critical scrutiny of political and economic elites.

This function, which is linked to the liberal theory of the media (Siebert, Peterson and Schramm, 1956), makes journalism the fourth power (Hampton, 2010): a counterweight charged with watching over the correct functioning of the three remaining powers (legislative, executive, and judicial). Thus, it provides an important service for democracy by protecting its fundamental values. This role is anchored in the moral obligation associated with the social responsibility of the media (Christians *et al.*, 2009).

Following the watchdog parameters, journalistic control of politics leads to a predominance of criticism and aggressiveness in political news. Revealing hidden agendas, bad behaviors, and cases of corruption are the focus of journalistic attention. This produces a tight connection between investigative journalism (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2007) and news analysis (Salgado and Strömbäck, 2012). These effects lead to the establishment of an adversarial model in the re-

lationship between journalists and politicians (Mazzoleni, 2012; Casero-Ripollés, 2008). The former considered antagonists of the latter, and their interactions are marked by conflict, confrontation, and tension (Sintes, 2010).

Acting as watchdog requires ample independence and professional autonomy on the side of journalism. This function has become a highly valued and shared ideal among journalists that allows them to self-affirm and legitimize their task and its contribution to democracy. Thus, journalists frequently use a watchdog strategy to present a positive image of themselves to the audience, thereby defending their independence and their role (Eriksson and Östman, 2013). On occasion, these efforts are a response to the attempts at control that politicians exert on journalists; moreover, these efforts reaffirm their autonomy in the face of political pressures.

With regard to these pressures, research on political journalism in Spain reveals the existence of high levels of political parallelism (Hallin and Mancini, 2004) that stand in the way of the journalistic oversight of politics. The strong politicization of Spanish journalism (Casero-Ripollés, 2012; Humanes, Martínez-Nicolás and Saperas, 2013; Pérez Herrero, 2011) produces a “watchdog” function that is low in intensity. In fact, the impulse of this dynamic pursues the defense of the public interest, and on many particular occasions, activates a strategy that calls for the media to participate in political action (Mazzoleni, 2012). Among Spanish journalists, the role of disseminators of information or “populist popularizers” is more important than that of watchdog because the principal goal is to provide citizens, who are considered consumers, with interesting and meaningful information about politics (Hanitzsch, 2011). This goal leads to the predominance of scandals and corruption in the news, which offers a negative view of politics but does not overlap with commercial and political intent.

PRESSURE AS AN EXPRESSION OF POLITICAL CONTROL OF JOURNALISM

Politicians activate mechanisms of journalistic control for two principal reasons. First, the news has a high strategic value. Second, exerting such control can reduce the risk derived from the high visibility that the media currently introduces into politics. The goal is to achieve access to the news under advantageous conditions (Soengas, 2009). In a context in which the media enjoy relative autonomy, however, this is not easy.

Despite this goal, politicians are able to activate mechanisms of journalistic control. Four modalities can be distinguished (Casero-Ripollés, 2009). First, the adoption of media logic consolidates itself in the artificial construction of events to capture the attention of journalists and the public. The second modality is the alliances between the political system and the communications system. The constant negotiation established between both areas (Casero-Ripollés, 2008) can lead to the establishment of agreements that generate mutual benefit. This collaboration might involve the appearance of forms of political parallelism (Hallin and Mancini, 2004) in which the political system dominates journalism, im-

sing its interests. The third formula of political control concerns the control of the news during campaigns that, in the case of Spain, annuls the professional autonomy of journalists. Finally, the fourth mechanism is the direct appeal to the public, known as “going public”, where politicians avoid any intermediation by the press by directly broadcasting the political message.

The political control of journalistic activity means that pressures appear as a fundamental element in the relationship between journalists and politicians. In this sense, the literature identifies two major routes through which pressures are exerted. The first concerns the role played by the communications offices of political parties and public institutions. These organizations, which stem from the professionalization of political communication, are situated as direct interlocutors with journalists that conduct intense information management (Manning, 2001). Through press releases, press conferences, videos, photos, and other news material, they provide the media with a news subsidy (Gandy, 1982) because they facilitate the reduction of costs in the production of news and maximize economic benefits. Providing or denying access to information is configured as a pressure mechanism applied in this context. This increases the dependency of journalists in political communications offices to shape the relationship between media and politics (Davis, 2002). Thus, journalism loses its independence, and its role as a fourth power is compromised (Lewis, Williams and Franklin, 2008).

The second route through which political pressures are exerted on the media concerns the media company itself. The defense of economic and corporate interests (Soengas, 2009) and the strong tendency of the Spanish media to develop dynamics of political parallelism (e.g., instrumentalization and clientelism; Hallin and Mancini, 2004) are the basis of this phenomenon. Media companies are the primary factor conditioning selection and coverage of news in Spain (Canel, Rodríguez Andrés and Sánchez Aranda, 2000; Hanitzsch and Mellado, 2011). According to the perception of Spanish political journalists, the principal restriction on their professional autonomy is political pressure from within media organizations (Van Dalen, 2012). This vision diverges from that expressed by British, Danish, and German journalists, who place the internal pressures from the owners of the media last and impediments of professional routines (time and space) first. In Spain, the owners use their media as vehicles to negotiate with other principally political elites, thereby affecting political life (Curran, 2002) and shaping the activities of journalists.

These pressures are the expression of the attempts of the political system to impose its logic and dominate the media. Its subordination to politics includes a low degree of mediatization because political logic is imposed on media logic, thereby annulling its capacity to influence the latter. In this sense, like two opposing concepts, the politicization of the media is opposed to mediatization.

The control phenomenon that occurs with regard to journalistic information is configured as a first-order indicator for measuring the degree of mediatization of politics. The existence of strong and systematic pressures on journalists, which are able to shape the news process and originate from the political realm, are a manifestation of politicization and the efforts by politicians to control the news.

Conversely, following the “watchdog” theory of the press, the media’s development of the intense oversight and supervision of the activities of political power is an expression of a high level of political mediatization.

METHODOLOGY

To study the phenomena of control in the relationships between journalists and politicians as well as their effect on the mediatization of politics, a methodology was applied based on in-depth interviews of 45 participants. These participants represented the three principal careers involved in political communication: journalists (JOU), politicians (POL), and communication directors (DIRCOM) for parties and public institutions. Specifically, the sample consisted of 22 journalists from different areas of the media (e.g., radio, television, and newspapers); 16 politicians with positions across various areas and levels (e.g., state, regional, and local), who belonged to the parties affiliated with the government and the opposition; and seven political communication directors, both for parties and public institutions. In-person interviews were conducted in three autonomous communities of Spain (Madrid, Catalonia, and Valencia) between January and May 2012. On average, the interviews lasted 45 minutes.

THE WATCHDOG ROLE OF THE SPANISH MEDIA

The results indicate that the watchdog function is one of the principal functions associated with journalism, and all three participant groups recognized this function. As noted in the interview fragments presented below, the journalists considered this role to be a key element of the successful functioning of state welfare. Professionals associated this function with the responsibility and democratic value of journalistic activity. At the same time, they linked this oversight with the social responsibility acquired with respect to citizens, a moral obligation in defense of the public interest, which they even compared with the political function played by the opposition leading to justify the existence of journalism.

It is one of the keys to the rule of law systems and state welfare. Journalists must relate that which they think is news. (JOU5)

We should exert greater oversight over politics because it is the responsibility that we are delegated by the citizens. (JOU6)

Of course, journalists have this task of oversight, and if they were not to do it, [then] they would be superfluous. (JOU8)

The work of the journalist, together with that of the opposition, is precisely to oversee what the politicians are doing. (JOU13)

Some journalists also clarified the idea of the watchdog that extends throughout the profession, considering that oversight is beyond their role; rather, they limited their work to purely disseminating facts. Thus, these journalists rejected the

identification of journalism of an interpretative nature as a watchdog, and this rejection was associated with evaluations of politics.

Journalists do not conduct a task of supervision and oversight of political activity [...]. This is not the function of journalism. (JOU16)

I believe that our work is to explain what they [the politicians] do and why they do things. We are not the ones (unless there is a crime) who have to decide whether this is good or bad [...]. The journalist does not have a supervisory attitude, but an explanatory one, with a critical spirit. If you oversee or supervise news you do it for contrast, not with the desire to control it. (JOU21)

For their part, the majority of Spanish politicians interviewed naturally assumed that their activity was overseen, and they granted that this oversight had democratic potential. Nevertheless, they noted that journalists should perform this function only when imparting information and never become involved in the political arena. Thus, politicians implicitly accept that journalists play an adversary role but with certain limits. Politicians reject the notion that journalists should become competitors in setting the political agenda and shaping the process of political decision-making.

Oversight is logical. Just as the function of parliaments is to control the actions of the government, it is also logical that the communication media should perform this oversight function. (POL15)

Without opposition and without the press [...], the democratic exercise of government would be impossible. If journalism [...] goes beyond itself and expects to shape that which is the government's responsibility (that is, making decisions, setting the agenda, and jointly directing the country), [then] it is no longer appropriate. (POL12)

The interviews were used to detect a series of aspects that weakened the effectiveness of the watchdog and stand in the way of its operation. These aspects are represented by two phenomena. One finds that the natural resistance of the political class succumbs to constant oversight. In this sense, the professionalization of political communication has led to the appearance and strengthening of press offices and communication directors who manage news as well as the relationship between politicians and the media (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999). These press offices and communication directors manage the news and act as intermediaries to filter, analyze, and produce political information directed at journalists. According to the interviews, one of the principal functions of press offices and communication directors is to neutralize, or at least to mitigate or attenuate, the oversight conducted by the watchdog. The professional activity of these offices affects the freedom of the journalist who copes with various kinds of difficulties, from the obstruction of his or her professional activities to censure in political acts or the denial of information.

If the politician has a positive relationship with the media, [then] they deal directly with him. Normally, however, [the news] goes through the communications office. (DIRCOM3)

You always try to do these things through the communications offices in the interest of good communication, which is what they expect. (POL9)

The party communications offices [...] push a lot, and they exert pressure that is intolerable at times. (JOU5)

The second phenomenon that stands in the way of journalistic oversight of politics concerns the economic crisis. Journalists recognize that the principal impediment for exercising greater oversight is the lack of resources and the delicate financial situation that most of their companies are in today (Casero-Ripollés and Izquierdo-Castillo, 2013). The link of the watchdog role to the exercise of investigative journalism explains this subordination to the economy. Thus, the tasks of oversight of political activity conducted by the media are burdened by a context in which the priority is to reduce costs and personnel. This situation limits resources and therefore the ability of journalism to appropriately oversee political activity.

Investigative journalism, which plays the role of the watchdog, costs money, and the current crisis, both in general and as it affects the media, means that this type of journalism suffers. (PER2)

Journalists can considerably improve the way that they oversee; however, the problem we face in regard to investigating things or trying to get stories using “crumbs” of things that should be reported is a problem of time and access, [and this problem] is getting worse because there are increasingly few of us in the media and more things to do... (PER14)

Politicians are also aware that oversight is not often compatible with the financial crises of current media companies. Thus, communications directors recognize that the resources that journalists can draw on are insufficient, and this situation represents a problem for exercising the watchdog function.

They [journalists] do it [oversight] because they are on top of you and are hanging there. However, it is insufficient because of the lack of resources [...]. The problem is the lack of time to perform more supervision. (DIRCOM3)

Thus, the economic crisis is one of the principal factors that affect the effectiveness of oversight. When the media are cutting costs, the ability to oversee political activity is under threat. Nevertheless, some media have opted to take advantage of the crisis situation to redefine how they provide news, focusing on doing a better job as watchdog. In this way, they seek to attract the public and connect with the interests of the populace. In Spain, new media such as *InfoLibre.es*, *Eldiario.es*, *El Confidencial.com*, and *Información Sensible.com* have appeared. These digital media sources incorporate investigation and the journalistic oversight of politics as a commercial strategy to build market share.

POLITICAL PRESSURES ON JOURNALISTS

The results of the interviews demonstrated that journalists, politicians, and communications directors openly recognize the existence of the political pressures on journalism and note that different ways exist of conducting them in practice.

The pressures that politicians place on journalists are clear. There are many ways to domesticate the media. (POL8)

Pressure always exists, both in the private and public media, because nobody likes having people talking badly about you. (JOU4)

The pressures on journalists can be direct or indirect, and they take place in a thousand different ways. The most shameless might be the denial of information that is in the public interest. (JOU8)

Politicians justify these pressures by relying on the significant strategic value of the news for transmitting their proposals and messages to the populace. In this sense, they see journalistic information as a key resource for political action because it is linked to power and its exercise on the one hand, and the notable ability for social influence on the other.

Political information is power, and power protects itself. For this reason, politics uses the whole range of pressure within its reach. (POL2)

Journalists certainly have the capacity for influence. The perception of the value of politics depends on the information. (POL17)

Through the communication media, society will gain an image of a way of governing or a particular policy. Logically, there are pressures, and many are successful. (JOU4)

These pressures can be considered a logical consequence of the relationship between politicians and journalists. However, each profession interprets them with a different meaning. In a certain way, most politicians legitimize the use of pressure, thereby moving the responsibility to journalists and their employers who, in their opinion, are the ones who give in to the pressure. On the contrary, journalists understand the pressure placed on them by the political system as a significant limitation of their professional autonomy.

The worst thing is not the pressure but the vocation for being pressured [that some journalists have]. (DIRCOM1)

What is relevant is not that there is pressure, but that there are explicit means in the media for dealing with it: professional codes, declarations of corporate social responsibility, etc. (POL2)

There is significant pressure, especially recently, and this affects all the communications media, no matter how independent they are (...). Before writing political news, the journalist must use many filters (JOU13)

The type of interaction between journalists and politicians shapes these pressures and their effectiveness. Thus, the results obtained indicate that the establishment of a personal relationship of friendship or ideological affinity facilitates attempts at political control and improves their effectiveness. It is even the case that, from the perspective of politicians, proximity and closeness to journalists is used to justify and normalize pressures.

There are journalists who maintain personal relationships with politicians, and the latter influence the former; however, I believe that these are normal, good pressures. (POL7)

The parties distribute talking points regarding their ideas to journalists who are close to them, and they use them as they wish. It is a symbiotic relationship. (POL11)

Like in all professions there are contacts and relationships that frame the way that a piece of news will be published. (JOU22)

However, when a friendship or an ideological affinity is not present, pressures are channeled in a more aggressive way, with threats or blackmail directed toward the journalist or his or her company. According to the interviews, the denial of access to information and economic coercion are the most usual mechanisms in these cases.

The most frequently used measure is the threat of no longer supplying information or removing the subsidy. (JOU 18)

The strongest temptation is that of rewarding your friend with scoops and punishing critics, including forbidding his presence. (DIRCOM 2)

The most shameless censure is the denial of information or personal threat. These actions can be crystallized in the blackmail of journalists who have compromising information on politicians. (JOU8)

Often, the pressures are so well hidden that it seems that they do not exist; however, journalists face difficult situations on many occasions. (JOU5)

In general, journalists feel these pressures from the political system in an indirect way. In other words, politicians rarely come into direct contact with journalists. The interviews show that politicians typically transmit pressure through their intermediaries. On the one hand, they use their press offices and communications directors to manage pressure strategies; on the other hand, the media company and its directors become, on many occasions, the link through which the pressures that habitually reach editors and intermediate positions are channeled. The types of pressure that the journalist feels via these two routes differ, as do the consequences that result from not responding to the demands.

In the first case, the professionalization of political communication has strengthened the role of communication directors and their function in managing political information. The communications offices of parties and institutions assume the task of activating the pressure mechanisms, thereby avoiding having the politicians themselves directly confront the journalists. Thus, they act as an offensive weapon for political leaders in intermediating the relationships between politicians and journalists.

Pressures on communication groups, yes, certainly (...); calling a journalist is counterproductive, that, never. (POL11)

Offices of communications are very effective and sometimes exert intolerable pressure. (JOU 5)

One very typical form of pressure is the control of information exerted through the press chiefs of political parties (...). The toughest calls and discussion have been with the press chiefs; this is where the most pressure comes from. (JOU19)

Generally, unless they trust the journalist or the media in question, this supervision does not usually come from the politician but rather the communications office. (DIRCOM3)

It is not the same when I call *La Vanguardia* and tell them, “I don’t like the way you reported this story” as when I call the press office for the President of the *Generalitat*. (POL16)

The management of information in communications offices becomes an effective mechanism for exerting pressure on journalists. The politicians interviewed recognized that disseminating information regarding events or political actors and the denial of access to political events are among the most typical means. According to the interviews, pressure can even include the veto of various journalists.

Disseminating information might be one of the most often used types of control used by political sources. (POL14)

The most shameless [means] are denying information or access to information of interest to the public. Softer forms are discriminating with regard to whom you are disclosing information that should reach everyone equally. (JOU8)

With respect to the mechanisms that they [communications offices] use, recently it has been very popular for them to send us the news ready to report, without calling you or sending you the press notice. (JOU10)

The second way through which politicians exert pressure on journalists indirectly concerns media companies. According to a large proportion of the journalists interviewed, their organizations become the vehicle that channels political pressure. Thus, the owners or managers are those responsible for translating the “suggested” instructions from the politicians to low-level editors, thereby conditioning their work. The defense of the corporate interests of the media, both economic and political, is the motive that explains this company behavior; far from protecting the professional autonomy of journalists, it contributes to reducing it, making it one of the ways in which political control appears. The fact that media companies play this role reveals the strong presence of the aspects linked to political economy in the relationship between politicians and journalists. Far from being contextual factors, these aspects are situated at the center of the interaction between the media and politics, decisively influencing it.

Rarely does the politician say, ‘It’s none of your business.’ It almost never gets to this extreme; however, you do get messages now and then from the directors of your company. (JOU7)

One means of pressure consists of the politician speaking directly to the stockholders or the director of the periodical to try to restrain particular stories. (JOU2)

The mechanism that guarantees the success of the political pressures that are channeled through the media is the possible firing of the journalist who does not attend to them. The results suggest that journalistic professionals recognize this threat as a risk associated with their work and its working conditions. Thus, this circumstance is seen as a conditioning factor that is always present when the news is prepared and as a factor that reduces their professional autonomy. One journalist graphically described the situation as “signing away your freedom”.

Signing with the media is synonymous with signing away your freedom, where the strongest form of pressure on the journalist is to fire them. (JOU 6)

Those journalists who in a reasonable and honorable way maintain a position of independence are risking their jobs. (JOU 3)

Often, going along is confused with ideological affinity, and defending independence presupposes risking your job on too many occasions. (JOU 5)

The connections of this mode of political pressure channeled through the company under a particular political economy are materialized in the appearance of political parallelism phenomena (Hallin and Mancini, 2004) in the relationship between journalists and politicians. Thus, pressures activate three variants according to those interviewed. The first case is the subordination of the media to a politician. This case corresponds with the instrumentalization that affects the public media in Spain, especially television. Those interviewed considered the positions of politicians in the management of public radio and television councils as facilitating control of these media and as the subordination of the news to the government's interests.

The public media are an expression of the government, not an expression of political pluralism and a free society. (POL8)

Politicians have a responsibility in the public media; thus, there is always an inclination. (JOU4)

This television [station] has an administrative council upon which all the parties are represented, as are the courts; this is obviously already a form of control (JOU12)

The second variant is linked to the editorial line of the media, which occasionally has specific ideologies that are consonant with the interests of certain politicians. When this affinity occurs, the professional autonomy of the journalist is reduced, and a cooperative relationship of dependence is established between the media and the politician based on the presence of a policy of alliances as a mechanism of control (Casero-Ripollés, 2009). Thus, the independence of the journalist conflicts with the interests and goals of his or her company, the latter of which prevails.

It is evident that there is always an editorial line and various interests for each company, so it is important to know what team you are playing for. (JOU1)

Every journalist knows where he works, where he is, what that the editorial line of his company is (...). If you are in a company whose ideology you don't share, [then] it's better for you to leave. (JOU4)

The most important pressures are those that come from the editorial lines of the companies. (DIRCOM6)

There are great journalists who report politics and who are independent people in regard to dealing with the news, but there is also the editorial line. (DIRCOM4)

The third variant involves the activation of mechanisms based on clientelism. This mode is a characteristic of the system of media based on the model of

polarized pluralism within which Spain and other southern European countries are included (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Clientelism means that politicians manage various resources that can benefit media companies economically. Principally among these are subventions to the media, broadcast licenses for television and radio, and institutional publicity. However, clientelism can also affect how scoops are filtered or manage preferential treatment for access to information. The results of the interviews indicate that all of these incentives are used in Spain to politically control journalism. Thus, a logic of exchange is imposed.

Economic pressures are very clear (...). The removal of advertising in your media is the principal means to exert pressure. (JOU2)

The journalist who provides information to the journalist establishes a relationship that is based on exchange. (JOU16)

The most frequently used [type of] control is the threat of not providing more information and removing or freezing institutional subvention. (JOU18)

The pressures placed on journalists by politicians are clear (...). Starting with bribery regarding institutional advertising, there are many ways to try to domesticate the media. (POL8)

The politician negotiates with scoops: "If you report this, [then] I will give you a scoop." (POL15)

The current economic crisis has generated serious financial problems for media companies in Spain (Casero-Ripollés and Izquierdo-Castillo, 2013) and has created new scenarios with regard to political pressures based on clientelism. The results of the interviews show that these effects have generated a paradox. The media have intensified their need for resources, and it can be easier for politicians to exert pressure in this way. The economic vulnerability of media companies reduces their ability to defend against attempts at political control.

Certainly there is pressure, both from political and economic sources and more pressure in a moment of crisis. (JOU1)

The serious economic crisis and the need for the media to help, however it might come, makes [journalists] them more vulnerable. (JOU8)

The scarcity of resources due to the financial crisis also affects politicians. They recognize that the clientelistic pressures exerted on current journalists are demonstrably weakened due to the lack of public economic resources within the government. Therefore, the crisis moderates clientelism and restrains political pressures.

Because there is no money, the money that goes to communications media has diminished drastically, so that at this point, in this sense, it is not exercising any type of pressure or control. What might have happened earlier, when there was money, is another matter [...]. To the extent that there are no resources for media, the degree of dependence is very much reduced. (POL9)

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the current analysis indicate the predominance of political pressures on journalists. Their presence was widely admitted, and they are considered to be inextricably associated with the relationship between journalists and politicians. The latter defend themselves by accusing the former of becoming subjected to coercions to justify their existence. This study shows that the defense of the economic or political interests of media companies, on the one hand, and the closeness based on friendships or ideological affinities, on the other hand, are considered elements that facilitate political pressure. According to those interviewed, the former is particularly effective because media corporations and communication groups act as vehicles that channel pressures toward journalists within their organizations. This way is effective at imposing political control and reducing the professional autonomy of the journalists because they risk losing their jobs if they do not yield.

These findings allow for the assertion that aspects related to political economy play a much more relevant role than one would think in the relationship between journalists and politicians. The interaction between these groups is not merely professional or personal; rather, institutional factors play a key role. These factors explain the incidence of political parallelism in the political control of journalism. This control is manifested through three variants in Spain: the instrumentalization that affects the public media, the ideological affinity that activates a policy of alliances based on cooperation, and clientelism that is directed toward the management of economic resources.

The predominance of the political economy means that one can identify a novel factor that has an effect on the political control of journalism. One such factor is the economic crisis, which is tightly linked with both journalistic oversight and political pressures. The financial weaknesses that media corporations experience have caused reductions in costs, which have generated a scarcity of resources, both in general funding and for the personnel who produce the news. This lack of funds in the media reduces the ability and likelihood of journalists to act as watchdogs. Together with the low level of oversight in Spain, this fact means that one can foresee a short-term reduction of this function. In this scenario, however, some digital media have relied on political oversight as their supply of news to attract audiences. We must wait to evaluate its future effects on Spanish political journalism.

The economic crisis also directly affects the political pressures on journalists, in this case, generating a paradox. Journalists perceive that financial problems facilitate political impositions and coercion through media companies. Because they are in a fragile situation, media companies have fewer resources to restrain political attempts at control. For their part, the politicians stated that public administrations have seen their economic resources reduced considerably during this crisis. In their view, this circumstance makes it difficult to set the pressures based on the logic of clientelism in motion. Thus, the economic crisis moderates or slows the clientelism that a proportion of the attempts at political control of the media are based on, thereby reducing their effect and effectiveness.

Another relevant factor with regard to control over journalistic information is the one exercised by communications offices associated with political parties and public institutions. These organizations, which are the product of the professionalization of political communication, meet two control process goals. On the one hand, they act as a protective shield to defend politicians from attempts at oversight by watchdog journalists. On the other hand, they function as a battering ram in exerting pressures on behalf of the politician, thereby avoiding his or her direct involvement. Both goals are principally accomplished through the management of public relations, news releases, and direct conversation with journalists.

Finally, the results indicate a low incidence of journalistic watchdog oversight in Spanish politics. Although the exercise of this function is associated with journalism and considered beneficial for democracy, it more often appears as a declaration of intention or a normative ideal than as a professional practice habitually employed by the Spanish media. The interviews detected the absence of unanimity among journalists themselves in regard to defining this role, the limits that politicians establish with regard to its action, and the presence of aspects that stand in the way of or weaken its application. All of these concerns reduce the ability of journalists to monitor politics in Spain.

The control of journalistic information moderates the mediatization of politics in Spain. The low incidence of watchdog oversight and the solid presence of political pressures within the relationship between journalists and politicians means that political logic is imposed over media logic, thereby reducing its capacity to influence. Thus, politicization predominates, and the second dimension of mediatization (i.e., the professional autonomy of journalists) is low in Spain.

Andreu Casero-Ripollés. Associate professor, Assistant Dean, and Director of the degree program in Journalism at the University Jaume I of Castelló (UJI) as well as co-director of the Official Masters program in New Technologies and Processes of Innovation in Communication at UJI. Dr. Casero-Ripollés has been professor and invited researcher at the Università degli Studi di Milan-Bicocca at the Università Paris 8 and the Universidade Estadual Paulista (UNESP). He is the principal investigator for

various R&D projects. His lines of investigation focus on political communication and the transformation of journalism in the digital environment. He has published in journals such as *Information, Communication & Society*, *American Behavioral Scientist*, *Comunicar*, and *Media International Australia*. Recently, he edited and published the book, *Periodismo político en España: Concepciones, tensiones, y elecciones* [Political Journalism in Spain: Conceptions, Tensions, and Elections]; SLCS, 2012).

Jessica Izquierdo-Castillo. Assistant Professor, Doctor at UJI, and Secretary of the Department of Communications Sciences. She was an invited professor at the University Paris 8 and Université Stendhal, Grenoble 3. She is an investigator for various R&D projects. Her lines of investigation focus on the

structure of the communications system and transformations due to the effect of convergence on the distribution of content. She has published in journals such as the *Journal of Media Business Studies*, *El Profesional de la Información*, and *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*.

Hugo Doménech-Fabregat. Licentiate in Journalism at the Pontifical University of Salamanca (UPSA), and Doctor at UJI. At present, this author is Collaborating Professor in the Department of Communications Sciences at UJI, where he teaches courses for the Journalism and Official Masters degrees in New Technologies and Processes of Innovation in Communi-

cation. He has authored various book chapters and scientific articles related to journalism and photography. His lines of investigation focus on the study of photojournalism from various perspectives and the adaptation of journalistic genres in current digital contexts. He co-directed and co-wrote the documentary feature, "The Shadow of the Iceberg".

Notes

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² <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dTjy9>

y7PsZM>

³ <<http://www.elmundo.es/opinion/2014/02/01/52ed53f122601de37a8b4575.html>>

⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/06/opinion/in-spain-fired-for-speaking-out.html?hp&rref=opinion&_r=1>

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