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Protecting the independence of journalists in public media: the case of Spain's regional public broadcasters

Abstract

The lack of confidence with which a large segment of the public views the neutrality of regional public broadcasters makes it necessary to deploy internal measures of professional control aimed at promoting objectivity, balance and veracity of news content. Achieving these objectives requires professional bodies that defend the independence of journalists from pressures from within their own organization as well as from external political and economic powers. Editorial charters are well suited to furthering these objectives, because they recognize the rights and obligations of journalists and the news media companies they work for. By signing these charters, both parties pledge to uphold these rights and obligations. These charters call for the creation of newsroom councils, which can be effective at monitoring compliance. The present study examines newsroom councils at three Spanish regional public broadcasters that have adopted editorial charters (TV3, EITB and Canal Sur). Detailed interviews were conducted with members of those councils, leading to some proposals for reinforcing their role of supporting journalists' autonomy and news quality.

Keywords

Professional autonomy, journalists, editorial charter, newsroom councils, news media organizations

1. Introduction

The lack of confidence shown by a significant sector of the public towards the neutrality of information disseminated by public television in general, and by regional public broadcasters in particular (CIS, 2010), reflects external criticism not only from other media and analysts but also, on occasion, internal criticism from journalists and other information professionals working for those broadcasters. Journalistic objectivity and veracity depend on good-faith efforts by journalists to research topics thoroughly; choose sources that are relevant, balanced and valid; contrast information from different sources; choose an appropriate focus; and create a news story. The autonomy with which

journalists carry out these activities within a media corporation in the face of interests that are not strictly informational determines, to a large degree, how effectively public television can fulfill its duties to society rather than to partisan or ideological interests. Protecting the independence of journalists requires internal systems of checks and balances to ensure that the corporation does not exert undue pressures on journalists, as well as to prevent journalists from pursuing interests that are not strictly informational.

One mechanism for protecting journalistic integrity is editorial charters, which structure professional relationships of journalists with owners and editors in a media organization. These charters call for the creation of newsroom councils, which are professional representation groups that monitor and enforce compliance with the charters. In Spain, only three public television broadcasters have adopted editorial charters. The present study analyzes the activities of the corresponding newsroom councils operating within these public organizations.

2. Editorial charters in Spain

In 1980 the Grupo Prisa corporation and the daily newspaper *El País* approved the first editorial charter in the history of Spanish journalism, marking the first time that the journalists in a newsroom entered into a binding, public agreement with media owners and managers to protect and guarantee journalists' independence. As Hugo Aznar (2005: 175) points out, an editorial charter is a "voluntary agreement between journalists and their media corporation designed to create channels of communication and participation between newsroom councils and corporate management, as well as recognize a series of rights and obligations for journalists and their corporation, which both parties undertake to protect and respect". Since the late 1980s, this instrument, already implemented in other countries, has slowly taken root in Spanish media.

Today, various corporations have adopted editorial charters to safeguard the professional rights and autonomy of journalists (Fuente, 2008), in accordance with the recommendations of the Council of Europe's European Code of Journalism Ethics (Encabo, 1995), which calls on media corporations to develop charters that "structure professional relationships of journalists with the owners and editors of media outlets" (1993: 32). Media corporations understand that charters are an effective tool for improving the quality of information they offer to the public, providing a channel through which the newsroom staff can communicate efficiently with other parts of the corporation and thereby help guide decision-making (Aznar, 2005: 179). Although private media corporations were the first to sign these kinds of agreements (e.g. *El Mundo*, *La Voz de Galicia*, *El Periódico de Catalunya*), in September 1996 Radiotelevisión Valenciana [Radiotelevision of Valencia] became the first public broadcaster – and the first regional television station – to implement an editorial charter to defend the rights and independence of its journalists. Several public broadcasters followed suit: in July 2002, the Corporación Catalana de Radio y Televisión [Catalan Radio and Television Corporation] (now the Corporación de Medios Audiovisuales de Cataluña [Audiovisual Corporation of Catalonia]); in January 2005, Radiotelevisión Andaluza (RTVA) [Radiotelevision of Andalusia]; in May 2006, the EFE Agency; in April 2008, Radiotelevisión Española (RTVE) [Radiotelevision of Spain]; and most recently, in October 2012, Euskal Irrati Telebista (EITB) [Public Radio and Television of the Basque Country].

These editorial charters call on journalists to uphold a series of professional and deontological norms related to how they obtain, produce and distribute news content. The charters also recognize several professional rights (Fuente, 2008: 47 ff.), including the right to a conscience clause, the right to professional secrecy, the right to create, copyright in accord with relevant intellectual property laws, the right to withdraw a byline, and the right to correct information.

While many media outlets have formalized editorial charters, their implementation and effectiveness vary. For some media, the charters have turned out to be a powerful tool for defending professional autonomy; for others, they have quickly been reduced to a dead letter, a document of lofty intentions with little concrete influence on the journalistic process (Sánchez de la Nieta, 2015). For example, the publishers of the daily newspapers *El Mundo* and *La Voz de Galicia* signed editorial charters but have not formed newsroom councils as required by those charters, meaning that no mechanism exists to monitor and enforce compliance with the charter in day-to-day operations. In these cases, defending the journalistic principles enshrined in the charters has taken a backseat to corporate priorities in the current financial crisis in the media industry, which has left many journalists vulnerable to downsizing and pressures from management.

In other media companies, however, newsroom councils formed in accordance with the corresponding charters have gradually managed to become respected voices for the defense of journalists' professional independence. This is particularly true in public media, where newsroom councils are enjoying a kind of resurgence, as we will see below in the case of regional television broadcasters.

Editorial charters are an effective instrument for guaranteeing autonomy to journalists and a high standard of journalistic service to the public, making them particularly important in this period of financial instability in the media industry, which has led to economic pressures in many corporations, culminating in some cases in downsizing or closures (APM, 2014: 46). In this climate of labor insecurity, corporate journalists may choose to substitute independent information with information "subsidized" by the political or economic powers that finance the media corporation in one way or another, such as through debt forgiveness, licensing concessions, and advertising. Such external interference from those extending a helping hand to vulnerable media corporations can pose an obstacle to the disinterested search for the truth that journalists owe to the public. After all, we should not forget that while the journalist is an employee of the media corporation, he or she is, first and foremost, the custodian of society's right to information (Azurmendi, 2005). The members of a pluralistic society assume that those who provide them with information are not hampered in their investigation of the truth, and they consider such autonomy necessary to ensure that information is not biased by special interests (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2003: 73).

In this state of affairs, editorial charters represent the engagement of media corporations – private or public – to respect the independence of their journalists and to reject any pressure by individuals, governments, political parties or financial entities that may prevent journalists from preparing and disseminating impartial, well-founded and rigorously checked information. As stated in the editorial charter at the daily *El País*, the first charter adopted in Spain, "this independence and the non-manipulation of news are a guarantee of the rights of readers, and protecting these rights is the ultimate reason for news editing processes.

3. Newsroom councils in Spain

Together with recognizing certain rights for journalists and holding them responsible for certain duties, editorial charters establish participatory mechanisms in the form of professional committees or councils elected by the newsroom staff. The primary function of these councils is to monitor compliance with the editorial charter, as well as present positions to corporate management in the event of professional conflicts. Newsroom councils also propose measures related to news content, coverage and programming; they seek to minimize possible manipulation and other bad practices; and they monitor and promote respect of, and compliance with, deontological practices.

How newsroom councils are formed and how they function is stipulated in the editorial charter. In media corporations, usually a different newsroom council is set up for each media outlet belonging to the group, with the same regulations governing each of the independent council elections. CRTVE, for example, has a news council for TVE (national television), RNE (national radio) and Interactivos (web-based broadcasting). The Basque EITB, the Catalanian CCMA and the Andalusian RTVA have a similar set-up. The charter stipulates how many members sit on newsroom councils. In practice, this varies from five, such as on councils at EITB, *El País*, EFE and *La Vanguardia*, to 13 on the council at RTVE. The charter also stipulates tenure length of elected council members and eligibility criteria for candidates to the council and for voters in the election. Councils usually have a simple structure comprising a president, normally the person who receives the most votes in the election; and a secretary, who is appointed by the elected council members from among themselves. The remaining members of the council are considered simple members with no formal differences in roles or functions among them.

The frequency with which newsroom councils meet varies among different types of media. In some cases, the frequency is dictated by regulations adopted by the council. Councils tend to meet at least once a month, with additional meetings called in response to exceptional circumstances. Informal ad hoc meetings may also be called occasionally. Meetings of the newsroom council with news management occur monthly or trimestrally and usually take place at corporate headquarters. Some editorial charters stipulate that the newsroom council meet periodically with corporate management.

The council adopts decisions based on unanimity or majority voting, which is why they have an uneven number of members. These decisions are then made public via intranet to employees, or they are emailed to editorial staff. Decisions are published externally only under particular circumstances. Among the media corporations analyzed in the present study, members of newsroom councils are never allowed to use qualified voting, but they are always permitted to publish dissenting votes.

All editorial charters guarantee that members of the newsroom council cannot be sanctioned or fired for their activities as newsroom representatives. This guarantee is important because, like it or not, council members can be a thorn in the side of editorial management as critics of their professionalism. Journalists might be less assiduous in their council tasks were it not for this guarantee.

Editorial charters also stipulate a number of hours per month for which council members can be compensated for their activities as part of their normal salary. Most corporations also pay travel allowances for members who must travel to a different city to attend meetings, although some members at media corporations complain of practical difficulties in getting such expenses reimbursed.

Interviews with members of newsroom councils reveal differences in the topics handled by councils in print media or television (Table 1). Councils at television broadcasters have worked primarily to support colleagues attacked while exercising their duties or pressured unfairly by political parties, demonstrate their rejection of press conferences where journalists are barred from asking questions, improve the quality of political news during electoral campaigns and defend the public service model of television broadcasting. Other topics covered by councils at television broadcasters are less day-to-day, such as recommendations for covering specific types of news stories (e.g. minors, gender violence), strategies for dealing with professional burnout, and strategies for aligning news with the needs of the public.

In contrast to these topics handled in the television sector, newsroom councils at print media corporations have dealt more with issues of staff reorganization due to the suspension or elimination of jobs sought by corporate management within the administrative-legal framework of “expedientes de regulación de empleo” (ERE), as well as

with issues of how to cover certain complex news topics¹, and how to distinguish between news and advertising (sometimes packaged as “promotional news”) and between news and opinion.

Table 1. Principal topics covered during meetings of newsroom councils at television or print media corporations (based on interviews with council members in June-October 2014)

TOPIC	TELEVISION				PRINT MEDIA		
	NATIONAL	REGIONAL			<i>El País</i>	<i>La Vanguardia</i>	<i>El Periódico</i>
	RTVE	RTVA	EiTB	TV3			
Need to reduce length of news programs			X				
Support colleagues attacked while exercising their professional duties	X	X	X	X			X
Rejection of press conferences with no questions from journalists	X	X	X				
Professional burnout		X					
Recommendations for covering complex news topics ²		X					
Defending the public service model	X	X	X	X			
Quality of political news reporting on controversial topics	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Newsroom reorganization as a result of firings				X	X		X
Distinguishing news and advertising				X		X	
Distinguishing news and opinion	X					X	

Source: own elaboration

4. Newsroom councils at Spanish regional television broadcasters

Following the closure of Radiotelevisión valenciana (Channel 9) in November 2013 and unsuccessful attempts by the regional independent television broadcaster Telemadrid to adopt an editorial charter, the only regional television broadcasters with editorial charters and newsroom councils are Canal Sur in Andalusia, TV3 in Catalonia and ETB in the Basque Country.

¹ Based on interviews with council members, these have included news related to succession in the Spanish Royal Family, debate over evictions, the situation in Gaza, the assassination of the President of the Provincial Council of León, and various corruption cases.

² This includes gender violence, suicides, and minors.

All news media have an inherently social function. This is true regardless of whether they are private or publicly funded, although the source of funding can affect how that function is fulfilled. In the mid-20th century, Henry Luce, president of *Time* magazine, convened a study group that, with the support of University of Chicago Dean Robert Hutchins, analyzed the role of journalism in a media landscape that was changing radically with the arrival of audiovisual media (Martín Algarra, 2008). The final report of the so-called Hutchins Commission (1947) remains a relevant model for the journalistic profession. It specifies the main criteria for responsible journalism. News media should offer to the public “a truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day’s events in a context which gives them meaning”. In order to accomplish this, media should be truthful, accurate, just, objective and relevant; they should serve as a “forum for the exchange of comment and criticism”; and they should be “a mean projecting the opinion and attitudes of the groups in the society to one another (...), presenting and clarifying the goals and values of society” (Hutchins, 1947: 20–21). This formulation of responsibility from nearly seven decades ago connects with broader, more actual concepts such as social value (Picard, 2012), which implies that news media are responsible not only for fulfilling their social function, but also for justifying their activities to society.

The responsibility of mass media to society by virtue of its potential to influence public opinion falls heavily on public media. In Spain, this responsibility for public radio and television is enshrined in Law 17/2006 regulating CRTVE, which states that public media are “an essential service for the community and for the cohesion of democratic societies” and that their goal is “producing, editing and broadcasting a set of radio and television channels with diverse and balanced programming targeting all types of audiences, covering all genres, and aimed at satisfying the informational, cultural, educational and entertainment needs of Spanish society”. The Law goes on to say that the functions of public media include “disseminating cultural identity and diversity; promoting pluralism, participation and the other constitutional values; and guaranteeing accessibility of media content to important social and political groups” (BOE no. 134, 6 June 2006, p. 3).

Therefore public television pursues a series of public service goals, including ensuring high quality of programming in general and of news programming in particular. Achieving high quality requires “independence from all types of powers, especially government, as a prerequisite and, in a sense, as a goal, since it can always be strengthened” (Miguel et al., 2012: 23). Obviously, if a regional television broadcaster serves at the beck and call of regional government, there is no reason to expect that the broadcaster’s interests will coincide with the public’s, yet it is to the public that journalism owes its loyalty (Kovach & Rosenstiel 2003: 18). Such “governmentalization” of the media corresponds to what Hallin and Mancini call the “Mediterranean model” of the media organization (2004: 87 ff.). This model involves tight government or parliamentary control of radio and television, leading to instrumentalization of the media.

Given that the ownership of public media rests with the citizens of a pluralistic society and not with the ruling party in the regional government, the journalist must strive to maintain his or her independence from the subjects of his or her news stories. Here is where newsroom councils exert a powerful influence since they are created to defend the journalistic rights enshrined in the editorial charter and to protest relentlessly against infractions of those rights. In a country in which political parties rise and fall with each election, leading to several management changes at regional radio and television broadcasters, editorial charters serve a particularly important role in ensuring continuity in the professional independence of journalists and news objectivity .

4.1. Objectives and methodology

So far, newsroom councils have not been studied in Spain on the basis of the analysis of the discourse of the professionals who serve on them. If the literature on editorial activities and processes is scarce, research on the activities of newsroom councils is nearly non-existent in the fields of journalism ethics, newsroom organization or professional routines.

The present study aimed to collect and analyze discourse by professionals about their activities on newsroom councils. In-depth interviews were conducted with council members working at three regional public media organizations: CRTVA, TV3 and EITB. The methodology of in-depth interviews was chosen because it can provide insights beyond simple observation (Valles, 1997; Sierra, 1998). Interviews were conducted between June and October 2014 using a structured questionnaire comprising six content blocks. Two members of the Professional Council (*Consejo profesional*) at TV3, five members of the Newsroom Council (*Consejo de redacción*) at EITB and two members of the Professional Committee (*Comité profesional*) at CRTVA were interviewed.

Discourse analysis was carried out to provide responses to the following questions:

- To what extent are newsroom councils a functioning reality within editorial departments?
- What are the main problems of newsroom council organization and function?
- What is on the agenda of newsroom councils and what topics are handled?
- How do newsroom councils perceive their own role?
- How do newsroom councils see their own future?

Responses are presented in separate sections below.

4.2. Newsroom councils at Radio Televisión Andalucía (RTVA)

Section 4 of the editorial charter at RTVA spells out the formation and functioning of newsroom councils (*consejos profesionales*) for the corporation's media services, one for the radio station Canal Sur Radio and another for the television stations Canal Sur Televisión and Canal 2 Andalucía. The first part of Section 4 regulates the creation and composition of the councils, each of which comprises seven members. Two representatives from each of these councils also form a separate standing committee (*comisión permanente*). The second part of Section 4 details the election process, term length (two years) and reasons why members may step down (e.g. resignation or incompatibility with new work duties). The remainder of Section 4 establishes guidelines for the organization and functioning of the councils.

4.2.1. Problems associated with council composition and member elections

The charter stipulates that the electoral process begins with a census of electors. Interviewees mentioned controversy surrounding the election of two news section heads (*jefes de área*) in May 2014. Article 11.8 of the charter excludes directors, chief editors, and news editors from being elected, but it does not mention area managers. In the end, the two area managers took up seats on the council. Interviewees mentioned that, in addition to the possible question of staff eligibility for council membership, some in the corporation have proposed that cameramen and news producers be allowed to vote in council elections.

Interviewees indicated high voter participation in council elections in May 2014: of 170 editors and producers invited to vote, 63.93% voted at Canal Sur Radio and 70.88% at Canal Sur Televisión.

4.2.2. *Functioning and organization*

The newsroom councils at RTVA meet monthly, and each meets once every three months with news directors. Interviewees indicated that ad hoc informal meetings also occur occasionally. The minutes of formal meetings are sent to the news management, who approve them, after which they are forwarded to the rest of the editorial staff. The journalists interviewed indicated that the councils strive to make decisions based on unanimity but that this sometimes proves impossible. Some proposals are voted upon and decided by simple majority. Interviewees indicated that very occasionally dissenting votes have been published, and they stated their opinion that such dissension weakens the councils and therefore that members generally seek a solid consensus.

4.2.3. *Agenda of topics*

The topics discussed at council meetings include various issues related to defending what public media should be. Topics also include defense of editors at RTVA and elsewhere who have suffered personal attacks – including from other broadcasters – for stories covered on Canal Sur. As an example, interviewees mentioned the council's response to accusations of news manipulation during coverage of the eviction of the Corrala Utopía de Sevilla³ and subsequent government crisis. The council determined that no manipulation had occurred, although they did cite excessive institutional influence on the information disseminated to audiences, which centered more on politicians than on the public. The two councils usually act on petitions for assistance from journalists, though occasionally they have also acted ex officio.

4.2.4. *Councils' perceptions of their own role*

Interviewees stated that one of their major current concerns is flagging interest among newsroom staff to defend journalistic values. One stated that “what journalists worry about is continuity ... for many news editors, defending professional values is like talking about Ferrero Rocher when people have nothing to eat”. In this interviewee's opinion, such an attitude dissuades journalists from approaching the council with their concerns, and it clouds how the editorial staff perceive the council. Interviewees stated that to restore newsroom members' interest in protecting journalists' rights, they have petitioned management to give news editors a larger role in determining the programming schedule, and they have criticized information broadcast by RTVA media as being too institutional and bureaucratic. They have also criticized the undue influence of political parties in setting news agendas and excessive use of “press conference journalism” in which a few declarations from one or two sources serve as the basis of an entire news story. Interviewees stated that they believe these problems to be major causes of flagging interest among editors to protect journalists' rights. They indicated that they have said as much to news management, but that their comments have had little effect.

Despite these problems, interviewees praised some achievements of the councils, such as a change in how editors report stories on gender violence – for which the council prepared a document available on the Internet⁴ – as well as stories involving minors and suicides.

³ Police forcibly evicted poor families illegally occupying empty houses in a popular Seville neighborhood.

⁴ http://www.canalsur.es/resources/archivos/2012/1/31/1328025062927CODIGO_CONTRA_LA_VIOLENCIA_MACHIS TA2_.pdf

4.2.5. *Future of newsroom councils*

When asked about the future of newsroom councils at RTVA, interviewees stated that even though the councils may occasionally be nothing more than metaphorical shoulders to cry on, they are still “journalists talking about journalism” and therefore necessary, even if only as a kind of “Jiminy Cricket” whose voice keeps the candle of journalistic quality burning. One interviewee remarked that the organization views the newsroom council as a “young child who doesn’t cost money”, yet council members strive to get their journalist colleagues to view councils as useful since management counts on their input when planning news strategies.

Finally, interviewees highlighted the importance of creating a closer relationship between their newsroom councils and those of other media, particularly in defense of common challenges at times when professional independence is exceptionally vulnerable, such as during elections.

4.3. *Newsroom councils at EITB*

The editorial charter at EITB, which also governs its affiliate companies, mentions newsroom councils (*consejos de redacción*) in Articles 5-7. Various references are made to the integration of the councils within the overall corporate structure, but it is only in Articles 73-92 that council functions and resources are spelled out. An annex to the charter, titled “Composition of Newsroom Councils”, lays out electoral rules in detail.

EITB comprises the media outlets Radio Euskadi, Euskadi Irratia, Radio Vitoria, EITBnet (digital) and ETB (television in the Basque and Spanish languages). The newsroom councils at each of these outlets contain three members each, while the council at ETB has five members. The presidents of each of these newsroom councils, corresponding to those who received the largest numbers of votes in the elections, make up a corporate-wide newsroom council at EITB.

Eligible employees volunteer to stand for election to these newsroom councils; eligible employees are professionals dealing with news content production who have maintained a formal relationship with the EITB for at least six months. Voters include editors, editorial assistants, producers, production assistants, television and ENG operators and cameramen. Of 180 eligible voters, 72% participated in the most recent elections.

Article 86 of the charter defines the functions of newsroom councils; their principle function is to monitor compliance with the charter. Other functions include to advise and support journalists about their rights and obligations, mediate in cases of conflict, transmit journalist concerns to management, respond to criticisms from the public, and participate in preparation of the stylebook.

4.3.1. *Functioning and organization*

Each newsroom council meets monthly with news management within the media outlet, and at least once every four months with the newsroom councils of all the other media outlets. Council members interviewed in June 2014 indicated that councils have also met under exceptional circumstances to respond to specific events, such as attacks on journalists or criticism from political parties. In a few cases, councils have also met with the work council and unions. Although the corporate-wide newsroom council is meant to meet once every three months with the governing board of EITB, interviewees indicated that such meetings had not taken place in recent months. The minutes from all these meetings record decisions decided by unanimity or, when this is impossible, by voting. To avoid deadlocks, all councils have an odd number of members, and qualified voting is not permitted.

The council president calls and presides over meetings as well as acts as spokesman to management; the secretary prepares minutes. Interviewees indicated that in practice, any of these functions may be performed by any of the council members.

The charter limits to 14 the number of working hours per month that members can dedicate to council activities for which members can be remunerated for their council involvement. Interviewees stated that council members “have never come close to reaching that maximum”. In principle, the corporation covers infrastructure and material costs related to council functioning, which are minimal according to interviewees, as well as the costs of finding work replacements for members on council business, which rarely occurs according to interviewees.

4.3.2. *Agenda of topics*

When asked what topics are covered most often by the councils, one interviewee responded, “we have brought up, for example, the need to go deeper in different news areas and in job specialization, excessive length of news programs, and so on. We have also requested that editorial staff be given the option of applying to become foreign correspondents. We have also defended colleagues attacked in the line of duty, and others pressured unfairly by political parties. At certain times we have voiced our rejection of press conferences without questions and announcements of political events to which journalists were denied access; we think that these things violate freedom of information”.

Interviewees indicated that journalists from within the media outlet generally suggest topics that their newsroom council should consider, while occasionally topics are proposed by council members themselves or by news management.

4.3.3. *Councils' perceptions of their own role*

When asked about the effectiveness of council activities, interviewees confirmed that “so far some of our proposals have been taken on board. For example, newsroom councils did not participate in the stylebook project and it remains in limbo”. Another interviewee referred to effective defense of the right to conscience clause: “we activated the clause when a worker refused to edit a text concerning statements made about firings that affected him”. That editor felt that the statements did not reflect reality and that he could not edit the text as it was. While interviewees felt that their input was “occasionally taken into account”, they felt that this happens “less often than we would like”. They also indicated that “our relationship is more fluid with news management than with corporate management”. None of the newsroom councils has sanctioning power.

4.3.4. *Future of newsroom councils*

Interviewees felt that the councils are useful for defending journalistic quality because they “allow one of the active participants in the process, namely journalists, to make their voice heard by corporate management”. In this way, interviewees felt that councils served as “a body that stands up for professional ethics to avoid leaving everything to the whims of business, politics, and audiences”.

Newsroom councils at EITB are the youngest in the Spanish media industry. Conscious of this, interviewees indicated that their goal is to consolidate the role and activities of the councils in order to “create a work dynamic that makes [councils] valuable and guarantees their permanence in the future”. Interviewees felt that achieving this objective will require that journalists become aware of their own importance, although they acknowledged that this is “more difficult today because, in the current climate, budget cuts and labor disputes are overshadowing other problems that are also important”. At the same time, interviewees felt that those very labor conditions “strongly affect the profession, and here is where the

newsroom councils and corporate boards can work together, without mistrust or suspicions”.

4.4. The newsroom council at TV3

The newsroom council at TV3 is regulated by an editorial charter (*Estatut professional dels mitjans de comunicació de la corporació catalana de ràdio i televisió*), Section 4 of which specifies how the council is to be created and composed, how the nine members are to be elected, how long their terms last (three years), what functions they have, and how the council should be organized and operate.

When we interviewed members of the council in June 2014, who had been elected in July 2012, they indicated that they had voluntarily resigned in February 2014 in protest at information released by the corporation regarding the labor dispute between TV3 employees and management over the collective agreement. Although no new council had formed in the intervening four months, our interviewees consented to be interviewed about council structure and functioning.

The editorial charter at TV3 defines eligible voters as all journalists working in news services at the time of the election. The interviewees clarified that in fact, this does not include those working on news programs or cameramen working on set, whereas it does include cameramen working in the field.

4.4.1. Functioning and organization

The council structure is very simple: the most-voted member is president, and the members together name a secretary. Members-elect draft operating rules that must be approved by absolute majority of the council. In principle, the council meets monthly, but interviewees commented that meetings have been much more frequent in practice. Following formal meetings, a communiqué is prepared and sent to the rest of the editorial staff as well as, under exceptional circumstances, to other media organizations. One of the interviewees admitted, “we had to resign in order to get people talking about us”. Interviewees acknowledged disagreements during meetings but noted that they usually obtain consensus. They indicated that not all members attend council meetings – “we’ve never even seen some members” – but that usually at least five are present.

Interviewees indicated that they spend up to 20 hours per month on council activities, and that the corporation usually respects this commitment. In principle, the corporation covers costs associated with council activities, although interviewees said that such costs are rare and usually amount to “some parking fee or the use of a television truck”.

4.4.2. Agenda of topics

Among the topics discussed most often by the council is its rejection of the requirement to dedicate a prespecified amount of time to each political party (electoral blocs), which, interviewees indicated, clearly interferes with their duty to inform. More recently the council has dealt with complaints from editorial staff about coverage of certain topics on news programs, such as coverage of minors, and about the relative proportions of coverage of controversial political topics. The council has also criticized the content of programs such as “Bestiari”, which was taken off the air in response to controversy around the depiction of shooting at targets in the form of King Juan Carlos, other public personalities and journalists. Most topics on the council’s agenda are proposed by council members themselves based on criticism of TV3 by other media organizations, suggestions from editorial staff or controversial events being discussed in the hallways of the editorial department.

When asked about the importance of the council, one of the interviewees said that it was akin to Chinese water torture: while it may not have an immediate effect, it does exert influence in the longer term. He commented, “we meet a lot with news managers, and they are paying more attention to us. They listen to our arguments and that at least generates debate”. Nevertheless, the interviewees commented that they are going through a strange period because of labor complications, firings and other factors, which has led them to focus on defending a television service model that remains closely aligned with the public.

4.4.3. *Future of the newsroom council*

Interviewees felt that the council must continue relentlessly to defend journalistic independence and keep journalists free from external pressures. In this mission, they said that they value joint actions by their council with newsroom councils at other media organizations against common threats, such as the condemnation of electoral bloc policies. They highlighted the fact that according to the charter, if at least one quarter of council members wish, the council can decide to propose to corporate management that the charter be amended.

5. Conclusions

Despite their youth, newsroom councils in Spain are managing to make themselves heard as a qualified advocate of journalistic independence and professionalism, both within media organizations and externally by the public. This is occurring at a time of tremendous difficulties for the profession (APM, 2014), when an economic crisis has called into question the traditional business model of news media, and the digital revolution has challenged the very identity of news reporting. These difficulties imply that newsroom councils have an increasingly relevant and important role to play.

The council members interviewed for this study point to greater engagement of media organizations with their newsroom councils, leading management to pay attention to council demands. Our discussions with interviewees suggest that corporations should continue to lean on, and empower, these councils, which in the final analysis exist only to defend news objectivity and veracity, which is also in the best interests of corporate management. This can be an effective way for media corporations to help define their corporate identity (Sánchez de la Nieta, 2015). The singular role of media organizations in society (Fuente, 2008: 34) and the importance of credibility for fulfilling that role effectively (Morales, 2012) argue for owners and managers to reinforce their commitment to editorial charters and give greater visibility to the charters and the activities of newsroom councils (Monfort, 2015).

Finally, the journalists interviewed in this study recognized the need to establish lines of communication among the newsroom councils at private and public media organizations that have adopted editorial charters. Despite the particularities of each type of media, all councils are united by an interest in defending journalistic independence from political and economic pressures. This defense would doubtless be more effective with the unanimous support of newsroom councils from diverse types of media.

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