MEDIA, PLURALISM AND DEMOCRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY

Political and media polarization: consequences of the lack of pluralism in the media system

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In September 2020, the European Commission published the First Report on the Rule of Law of its 27 memberships of the European Union. The independence of the judiciary, corruption, and media pluralism –with an emphasis on the fundamental rights to freedom of information and expression– are the axes of this examination of the democratic quality of the States. In the case of Spain, shadows appear in these areas. To address the issue of news pluralism, the European Commission report takes into account the Media Pluralism Monitor (MPM) produced by the Center for Media Pluralism and Freedom (CMPF) of the European University Institute with funding from the European Union. The MPM consists of a questionnaire with 200 indicators that examine this pluralism in areas such as the protection of fundamental rights, the media market, political independence and social inclusion. The authors of this contribution are part of the team that has been preparing the Media Pluralism Monitor corresponding to the Spanish State for four years. The purpose of this article is to analyze the main problems that erode pluralism in our media system, focusing on political and media polarization.

In 2004, Hallin and Mancini [1] characterized the Spanish media system as one of "polarized pluralism", and subsequent studies have confirmed that it continues to fall into that category [2] [3]. A key element when defining media systems is "political parallelism", defined as the link between the media and political parties [4]. In countries with a system of polarized pluralism, political parallelism coexists with the political instrumentalization of the media, and carries, as an associated risk, polarization, so that people only trust a source of information related to their political positions without looking for other points of view [5]. Díaz Nosty (2011) considers that political polarization has transferred tensions and partisan practices to the core of the media that alter their normative role, take away their credibility and separate them from their mission of offering truthful information. In a media system such as the Spanish one, marked by the importance of sub-state level media, the trend towards polarization also appears in the regional media, where "indirect forms of intervention arise, beyond government control of public televisions" [6]. As a result, relations of convenience between media groups and public authorities have been reproduced on this scale through the granting of licenses and the allocation of institutional advertising, among other mechanisms.

Mobilize audiences

The polarized pluralism model of the Spanish media system is characterized by journalism that is ideologically aligned with the main political parties, in which opinion is geared towards ideologically mobilizing audiences [7]. According to these authors, the Spanish media exhibit the highest level of political parallelism due to a late democratization, a low level of journalistic professionalization and a moderate development of the media market. With regard to strictly political journalism, "it is clearly highly politicized and based on ideological alignments" [8]. For these authors, the reasons that explain this situation are, on the one hand, the tensions generated between the media and the parties due to the granting of radio licenses since the 1990s, as well as an amount of aid to the press, either with institutional advertising or subsidies. Secondly, by the consolidation of an opinion-oriented journalism, fundamentally in the form of talk shows on radio and television, journalists act as representatives of ideological positions that coincide with those of political parties. In this way, the polarization of the press contributes to the polarization of society. In this regard, Spain is the most polarized country in Europe, and 2019 was the most polarized year of the democratic stage, thus continuing a progressive increase so far this century [9].

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The press is immersed in this polarization, as stated by Alfonso Armada, president of

Reporters Without Borders Spain: “The extreme polarization that affects politics has been transferred to the media and from the media, to civil society”. The political conflict in Catalonia and the growth of the far-right Vox party have contributed to this, which has practiced a communication strategy, developed by other populist parties at a global level, which is characterized by “attacks on media and watchdog institutions, the role of social media in the success of populism, the implications of populist hype, and the disintermediation of populist communication” [10]. In addition, Vox has used social networks for their strategy without depending on traditional media.

The irruption of digital media

Polarization translates, from the point of view of information consumption, into selective exposure and the formation of echo-chambers. However, some studies suggest that the digital press and the spread of news on social networks can expand pluralism and reduce polarization [11] [12]. The irruption of digital media raises questions about its position in the model of polarized pluralism. A study which analyzed 434 opinion articles in 18 native digital newspapers concluded that the digital media sector is politically polarized in a similar way to that of the print press, with a predominance of conservative positions [13]. However, the citizen’s perception of digital media is different from that of traditional media: they consider that they have fewer commercial ties and that they explain their financial situation in a more transparent way [14]. Some authors consider that some digital newspapers (*InfoLibre*, *Eldiario.es*, *El Confidencial*) try to enhance their watchdog function, and incorporate research and control of politics as a strategy to attract the public and connect with the interests of the population [15]. As many cyber-media outlets were promoted by journalists who suffered unemployment or precarious employment after the 2008 crisis, some studies consider that they have a different relationship with the political class [16].

In addition to the problems of political polarization, commercial pressures on newsrooms are so frequent and so normalized that they become a *de facto* journalistic norm, prevailing even over the norms and values of journalism [17]. The technological transformation of newspapers and the search for a business model for their digital existence, together with the economic crisis of 2008 and the pandemic of 2020, have caused financial problems for many media outlets, and have increased the bargaining power of advertisers in influencing the autonomy of the media. In this context of crisis, the main media groups have faced decapitalization by selling assets and bringing in new partners from financial sectors such as investment funds [18].

One of the paradoxes of the Spanish press is that, being in charge of acting as a counterweight to the other powers and demanding their transparency, it fails in its own transparency, according the *Front page 2019. Transparency and good governance report on independence and editorial credibility of communication groups*. None of the 20 media groups analyzed in that study was rated as transparent when reporting on their transparency policies aimed at protecting their independence and editorial credibility.

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The groups listed on the stock exchange (Atresmedia, Mediaset, Prisa, RCS Media Group and Vocento) have the legal requirement to report on the owners of the property and the operation of their governing bodies, unlike the non-listed groups, in which that disclosure of such information is voluntary. However, the greater transparency of these listed groups "does not translate into greater efficiency when it comes to managing the risks that may affect their credibility and editorial independence". In many cases the threats come from the owners of the property and from the members of its governing bodies "who use their position of dominance to try to influence the editorial line or prioritize financial objectives over editorials", according to the report. These authors highlight the extreme opacity of unlisted groups.

No independence

The journalists themselves, according to the annual report of the Journalistic Profession prepared by the Press Association of Madrid (APM), consider that the first two problems that affect their profession are related to working conditions, while the following two are: "the lack of rigor and neutrality in professional practices" and "the lack of political and economic independence of the media in which he works", a complaint that is repeated year after year. Out of the journalists who have an employment contract with the media outlet for which they work, only 24% state that they have never received pressure on their independence, and the rest have received it on some occasion (44%), on several occasions (20%) or on many occasions (12%). And these pressures come mainly from the directors of the media itself and from politicians. Only 27% affirm that they can cope with pressure, while 59% oppose it, but end up giving in. In this context, an undesirable response is self-censorship, which 57% of journalists recognize as applyings.

Regarding working conditions, the APM report indicates that journalists consider that the main problems are: a low remuneration for work, and the increase in unemployment and job insecurity. The crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic has worsened the bad situation that had been dragging on since the 2008 financial crisis: in July 2020, the Economy Active Population Survey (EAPS) published by the INE showed that between April and June of that year 11,400 communicators or journalists had lost their jobs, and in April 2020 the number of journalists affected by a temporary employment regulation file (RTER) was 24,107 people.

> Journalists consider that the main problems affecting their

> profession are related to low remunerations, the increase in unemployment, the lack of neutrality in professional practices and the lack of political independence of the media

Faced with this precarious situation, the various professional associations of journalists show a fragmented representativeness, aggravated by the fact that they do not know the number of journalists who practice the profession, since, unlike other countries, there is no census or registry of journalists in Spain. A 2020 study [19] situate that figure at 25,000 journalism professionals. The concept of fragmentation and dispersion of the profession support, according to the authors of this study, “the idea that journalists feel, above all, responsible to their conscience” and “suggests a solitary conception of the profession, in which dialogue ethics is raised and resolved individually”.

Hate speech, Penal Code, and freedom of expression

Political polarization translates into an increase in hate speech on social networks. According to the *Evolution of hate crimes in Spain 2019 report*, a total of 1,706 hate crimes and incidents were recorded during that year, 6.8% more than in the previous year, 2018. In the field of internet and social networks, the increase accounted for 22.9%.

The European Commission, in its report on the rule of law in Spain, denounces the existence of disproportionate criminal types in cases of, for example, insults to the Crown. Also, it criticizes the Organic Law for the Protection of Citizen Security (OLPCS) for its restrictions on freedom of expression. However, the Spanish Government has ignored the requirements in this regard, both from the European Commission and from international organizations and civil society institutions. In January 2020, the Platform in Defense of Freedom of Information and various civil society organizations participated in the third UN Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Spain, and among its conclusions there are recommendations to improve freedom of expression and information, including the need to reform the Criminal Code, the OLPCS and Royal Decree Law 14/2019. Under these internationally questioned laws, Spanish courts have imposed sentences that limit freedom of expression.

Conclusions

A context of lack of pluralism and polarization is eroding Spanish democracy, as it affects the two essential pillars to sustain it. On the one hand, mutual tolerance. Our adversaries, as long as they respect the constitutional framework, have the same right as us to exist, to compete for power and to govern. On the other hand, institutional containment, in the sense of avoiding actions that comply with the written law, but violate its spirit [20]. According to a recent study [21], Spanish citizens do not consider as journalism, but as disinformation, those media that they identify with ideological positions very different from their own. Citizens, therefore, perfectly identify and perceive the political and media

polarization, which affects their overall perception of the media system, as well as their trust in journalism and the media.

Political and media polarization is not a new phenomenon in Spain, as Hallin and Mancini correctly described at the beginning of the 21st century: 42 years after the recovery of democracy, the Spanish media system has not evolved towards higher levels of pluralism and remains stuck in the system of polarized pluralism. Contrary to what is generally assumed, social networks have not led to greater polarization, nor do they act as echo chambers that favor the selective exposure of citizens. On the contrary, the proliferation of digital media and the greater relevance of social networks and platforms such as WhatsApp favor accidental exposure regarding information content that citizens do not often have in their usual media diet. Digital media and networks can have a positive influence on improving the current situation of lack of pluralism and polarization, but we must wait to have perspective and take into account that there are other factors to consider.

The credibility of the normative function of counter power of the media must be based on transparency when reporting the structure regarding its ownership. Thus, making the reader aware of its links with economic power. Other mechanisms that require a thorough review are the granting of subsidies and institutional publicity, to avoid political patronage of the media. Finally, the working conditions of journalists are directly related to their independence and, therefore, improving these conditions would contribute to a more dignified professional exercise. The fragmentation of associations and unions weakens a profession that is essential for democracy and, therefore, they should dialogue to carry out joint actions in defense of the values of journalism. The entire profession should reflect on the fact that the media, as we have seen, currently contribute to social polarization, to strain democracy, far from what is expected of journalism in a democratic society.

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