

# Towards public competition in a pluralist polarized country: Professionals' newsroom discourses on autonomy, public statements and regulation

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*This study explores the interaction between journalists' discourses on values and practices and the regulations affecting them in the shape of public statements, which are considered to be an influential variable in journalistic practice. However, the process of producing such statements requires further attention, in particular the role of newsroom discourses. The case of the Spanish public service broadcaster RTVE illustrates this tendency in relation to the regulations governing it and their impact on newsroom routines and news-making. Over the past fifteen years, RTVE has been subject to contradictory reforms, during which the discourses of TVE journalists have taken the shape of public statements issued by several professional associations calling for a reduction in RTVE's traditional political dependence. Accordingly, the focus is placed here on the evolution of those discourses from 2006 to 2019, as to (1) the way in which they were transformed into public statements in persuasive campaigns with an influence on regulation, particularly*

*as to the election of the executive board and chairperson of RTVE by public competition, and (2) the interaction and influence of core values such as professional independence and diversity on shaping newsroom discourses and public statements.*

*Keywords: TVE, RTVE, public service television, newsroom independence, professional identity, metajournalistic discourse, public media regulation*

## **Introduction**

Journalism has begun to be explored as an intertwined discursive site in what has been called ‘the linguistic turn’ (Gravengaard 2018), which could also be understood as ‘a discursive’ one. Critical discourse analysis (CDA), proposed by Van Dijk (1988) and Fairclough (1995), has been key to this process, for it ‘brings the critical tradition in social analysis into language studies’ while focusing ‘on relations between discourse and other elements such as power, institutions or social identities’ (Fairclough 2013: 178). More recently, this approach has been applied to media analysis, with Carvalho (2008) proposing models for analysing both media texts and contexts in a diachronic manner, and Philo (2007) convincingly advocating for the need to study discursively production, texts and reception. For his part, Carlson has presented a metajournalistic research model, because ‘making sense of this discursive environment requires attention to the conditions of journalism, the actors involved and the interpretive processes at work’ (2016: 359). Thus, journalists’ discourses, identity, core values, practices, institutional dimensions and norms share a discursive nature.

In the area of journalistic practice analysed here, Hanitzsch and Vos (2017: 121) consider journalists’ identity as a discursive repertoire that enables the selective activation of contingent forms of journalistic roles, which are displayed in news media, also understood as political institutions deeply influenced by discourses. Regarding core values, independence and autonomy are widely considered key to journalists’ professional identity (Deuze 2005: 448–49; Singer 2007: 81–82) in both media and academic discourses. In fact, these notions are related to news professionalism, which is understood as providing journalists with an independent power base that can be used against management (Soloski 1989: 226).<sup>1</sup>

Since the 1980s, US public journalism has questioned the notion of autonomy and has pushed for participatory dynamics. Today, there is a certain consensus that the notion of journalistic autonomy, assumed as maintaining an equidistance from all sources in order to guarantee independence, can serve ‘as a way to preclude attempts by individual news people to be more interactive and supportive of community engagement in their work’ (Deuze 2005: 448–49). In the same vein, studies like those performed by De Haan and Bardoel (2012) in the Netherlands and by Hujanen (2016) in Finland – both corporate democratic systems according to the model proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004) – have arrived at similar conclusions.

Much research on news values (see, for instance, O’Neill and Harcup 2019) has highlighted the importance of tacit and shared values among journalists in the news

selection process. In particular, Gravengaard and Rimestad (2012: 465) have shown that the newsroom is a key site in which tacit expert knowledge is displayed in routine practice through highly influential discursive interactions. Such interactions structure a community of practice (Gravengaard and Rimestad 2012: 465) and also an interpretive community (Zelizer 1993), defined as articulated discourses that generate routinely shared journalistic meanings outside the professional sphere, although clearly insufficient to define the complexities of news-making.

On the other hand, comparative media research has clearly demonstrated that regulatory regimes and institutional, political, cultural and media factors shape the news. Hallin and Mancini's model (2004) has been highly relevant in this regard. In their comparative study of the perceived influencing factors in journalism in eighteen countries, Hanitzsch and Mellado (2011: 419) concluded that procedural, professional influences and organizational factors,<sup>2</sup> all present in newsrooms, turned out to be some of the most important cross-national variables, thus suggesting that political and economic factors are often mediated in news organizations.

Therefore, there is a certain degree of consensus that both journalists' discourses on their profession and its core values, as well as norms and regulations, influence professional practice in newsrooms. However, less attention has been paid to their specific influence on the values and practices of their profession and on the regulations governing it.

Moreover, research offering a diachronically comparative approach to the relationship between journalists' discourses and actions and their effects is very thin on the ground. Carvalho has advocated for this sort of approach to media texts:

Understanding the evolution of matters such as war, terrorism or climate change, and the ways they are interdependent in relation to the media, is one of the most important contributions to be made by social researchers. There are hurdles to doing this. Examining the various stages of the public life of such issues requires analysing media(ted) discourses for a relatively long period of time.

(2008: 164)

This study explores the effects of journalists' discourses on values and practices in the newsroom of the Spanish national public service broadcaster (hereinafter PSB) TVE and its influence on the regulations that have affected them for almost fifteen years. Specifically, it focuses on a polarized pluralist media system (Hallin and Mancini 2004), such as that of Spain. This system is characterized by its political parallelism, a high level of state intervention, press circulation figures that are considered to be low and a media market dominated by television, specifically two main private groups (Atresmedia and Mediaset), a context in which the main PSB channel, TVE1, is currently ranked third after the commercial channels Telecinco and Antena 3. Last but not least, the journalistic profession has traditionally been regarded as weak, especially because of the lack of independence of the country's media professionals.

In the discursive space of journalism, the defining trait of the public service kind is that it treats viewers as citizens, and not as consumers or partisans (Harrison 2019; Lamuedra et al. 2020; Lamuedra et al. 2019). This should come as no surprise as public service journalism has been found to be key to democratic health (Neff and Pickard 2021). According to Harrison, it should be orientated towards diversity and represent ‘shared experiences’, so as to foster cohesion in times of fragmentation and polarization, as ‘public service journalism consists of civil expression of information accommodating a multiplicity of voices’ (2019: 1). In this research, diversity encompasses breadth in the selection of news content and sources and in the consideration of the audience’s different political, social or aesthetic sensitivities. Interestingly, this orientation towards diversity, sometimes referred to as social or internal pluralism (Humanes and Fernández 2015), has apparently been related less often to the identity of journalists in the academic literature. For instance, this is the view of Deuze (2005), but not that of Zelizer (1993), Singer (2007) or Hanitzsch and Vos (2017).

Carlson’s theory of metajournalistic discourse (2016) comprises several concepts that are relevant for this study. First of all, following Bourdieu’s (2005) idea that journalism is a field deeply embedded in and intertwined with others, metajournalistic discourse is aimed at defining journalism, establishing its boundaries and legitimating it. Thus, independence and autonomy have been conceptualized as a boundary (Carlson 2016: 360), so when journalists feel that their autonomy is under threat, discursive activity aimed at boundary protection tends to appear. Even when there is a feeling that autonomy has been lost, journalistic discourses can be aimed at ‘paradigm repair’: ‘When application of a journalistic paradigm appears faulty, journalists work to assert the boundaries of acceptable practice’ (Berkowitz and Eko 2007: 782; Bishop 2004), a process that becomes a ritual and tends to be performed by journalists during times of crisis (Couldry 2005).

Secondly, the theory describes two types of metajournalistic public statements issued by journalists: on the one hand, responses to emerging incidents are described as reactive; and, on the other, when such responses successfully incorporate evaluative texts that give rise to debates between journalists and other social actors, they can be considered as generative (Carlson 2016: 358).

However, newsroom discourses are not directly addressed in Carlson’s metajournalistic theory, which only considers public statements, despite the fact that several studies, such as those of Moon (2021) and Brookes (2020), have already used it as a framework for analysing them. Newsroom discourses are also considered here as a meaningful variable that should be taken into account in metajournalism due to its discursive effects, which, in relation to texts, Carvalho (2008: 165) defines as (1) processes that occur outside the text preceding it, (2) which are often dependent on a variety of causes and circumstances and highlight the constraining force of discourse and (3) which imply discursive structures, institutionalization and closure. The discursive effects that should be assessed in this particular case are those of journalists’ discourses, particularly on media policy.

Carvalho (2008: 166) also suggests the study of ‘critical discourse moments’ in which specific developments occur and which may challenge established discursive positions, before recommending the construction of a chronology of events relevant to the object of study as a useful guideline for identifying critical discourse. During the fifteen-year period analysed here, RTVE underwent several reforms: (1) between 2006 and 2012 it was more independent, insofar as the power to appoint its chairperson no longer lay with the government, but was transferred to Parliament; (2) in 2012, there was an almost complete involution in this regard. During these years, the public debate revolved around the key importance of the appointment of the chairperson, leading to the idea of introducing a public competition, consensus on which grew stronger especially as of 2016, before legislation in this respect was finally passed in 2018.

This study explores the influence that TVE newsroom discourses revolving around independence had on the shaping of generative discourses – expressed in public statements such as reports, public declarations or tweets – which developed high consensus-based demands, such as the appropriate way of appointing the executive committee and chairperson of RTVE.

### **Object of study, hypothesis and methodology**

This work intends to contribute to the area of journalism research that explores the processes of understanding – discursively intertwined – journalistic values and practices in relation to the analysis of structural dimensions such as institutional and political power, media economics and broad cultural processes, highly influential in newsrooms (Hanitzsch and Mellado 2011: 419). In particular, it explores the dynamics of interaction between regulation and journalists’ discourses, collected through semi-structured interviews, thus generating data about ‘journalists’ reflection-on-action and their accounts about their routinised practice in the newsrooms’ (Gravengaard 2012: 1067) over a period of almost fifteen years. Therefore, articulated newsroom discourses, and not newsroom talk, are the object of study here. The research objectives are as follows:

- O1: To explore the nature and patterns between newsroom discourses, public statements issued by journalists and regulations.
- O2: To describe the evolution of discourses about autonomy and its relationship with a specific regulatory demand: the system for appointing the executive board and chairperson of RTVE based on a public competition.
- O3: To explore discourses on autonomy as a journalistic boundary and how it interacts with those on other values, particularly the demand for more diverse content.

This article has been written in the framework of the project ‘Relationship Dynamics in the Face of Social Change: Contexts, Content, Producers, the Public and Producers in TVE and YLE News’, based on the existence of relationship

dynamics between (1) the public policies of each country, (2) the discourses of newsmakers and viewers and (3) the news ecosystem. The results of two previous and similar projects in which the authors have taken part are also explored as regards journalists' discourses in relation to public policies while making several additional observations as regards news texts in Spain. Noteworthy public statements made by journalists, especially as of 2018 insofar as it was a particularly intense moment, also form part of the following analysis. Specifically, the discourses of TVE journalists at four significant moments between 2005 and 2019 are examined:

1. From 2005 to 2007, just before and immediately after the enactment of the Audio-Visual Law in 2006. The opinions of TVE journalists were gathered in 22 interviews performed in the framework of the project 'Information, Education or Entertainment? Producers, Viewers and Content on TVE and the BBC: A Comparative Analysis'.<sup>3</sup>
2. From 2008 to 2010, when the changes brought about by the aforementioned law began to be felt. To this end, the testimonies of fourteen professionals, interviewed in the framework of the project 'Autonomy and Pluralism in the New TVE: News Content and Audience Perceptions', are analysed.<sup>4</sup>
3. From 2015 to 2017, three years after the decree allowing a government with an absolute parliamentary majority to appoint the executive board and chairperson of RTVE. These results are based on eighteen in-depth, semi-structured interviews with current and former TVE journalists. These interviews were conducted in the framework of the research project described here and in which researchers participating in the two aforementioned ones are currently involved.
4. From 2018 to 2019, the statements issued by the collective Teledetodos, the Newsroom Committee, the unions, the collectives Mujeres RTVE (Women of RTVE) and RTVE Sin Personal (RTVE without Staff) are examined with the aim of describing the evolution of previous consensuses in newsroom discourses and how they were expressed in public statements, which led to a broad consensus in the journalistic profession.

The interviews were conducted with current and former employees of TVE, following inclusion and exclusion criteria in convenience sampling, using the snowballing technique. All of them had worked for some time – from 10 to 40 years – in TVE's news services, and although the majority had higher education, some had taken a specific course at the Official Institute of Radio and Broadcasting (IORTV). Even though achieving a representative sample of TVE workers was not the intention, it was diverse as regards age and gender and was gathered in Madrid, Barcelona, Seville and La Laguna. The interviewees represented different sections (society, sports, politics, economy, correspondent offices, online services or radio) or internal bodies. Tables 1–3 provide data on the interviewees' professional role and sex.

Most of the interviews lasted about an hour and a half and were recorded for verbatim transcription. The most significant testimonies were ordered thematically

based on the interview script: (1) work routines and news selection, (2) professional values, (3) the audio-visual sector reform and counter-reform at TVE and (4) audiences. The following results are based on a previous thematic analysis (García de Madariaga and Lamuedra 2016), albeit focusing on the research objectives established here and inspired, in turn, by the interpretative repertoire concept, defined as ‘a culturally familiar and habitual line of argument comprised of recognizable themes, common places and tropes’ (Wetherell 1998: 409).

The evolution of the newsroom discourses and public statements of TVE professionals in the normative context of RTVE was affected by two opposing processes of comprehensive reform during the past decades: from 2006 to 2012, the public broadcasting corporation became more independent insofar as the power to appoint its chairperson was transferred from the government to Parliament, while in 2012 there was a serious setback. When in 2018 – at the prompting of TVE journalists’ associations – a public competition was called to appoint RTVE’s executive board and chairperson following professional criteria, by virtue of Royal Decree-Law 4/2018, a new evolutive process seemed to get underway. The aim of this piece of

Table 1: Interviews performed from 2006 to 2007 (project ‘Information, Education or Entertainment: Producers, Viewers and Content on TVE and the BBC: A Comparative Analysis’).

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A1	Producer (female)
A2	Documentalist (female)
A3	Reporter (female)
A4	Editor (male)
A5	Documentalist (male)
A6	News Anchorman
A7	Editor (female)
A8	Editor (female)
A9	Director of RTVE’s news services (male)
A10	Editor (male)
A11	International information manager (male)
A12	Local producer (male)
A13	Editor (male)
A14	News anchorman
A15	Camerawoman
A16	Editor and news programme anchorman
A17	Documentalist (female)
A18	Editor (female)
A19	Head of news production (male)
A20	Producer (female)
A21	Producer (male)
A22	Newscast manager (male)

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Table 2: Interviews performed from 2009 to 2010 (project ‘Autonomy and Pluralism in the New TVE: News Content and Audience Perceptions’).

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B1	Reporter (female)
B2	Camerawoman
B3	Manager of programme (female)
B4	Anchorwoman
B5	Editor (male)
B6	Manager of news programmes (female)
B7	Production manager (male)
B8	Manager of news (male)
B9	Manager of news (male)
B10	Production manager (male)
B11	Producer (male)
B12	Former correspondent (male)
B13	Manager of news (male)
B14	Veteran editor (female) (not retires early)

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Table 3: Interviews performed from 2015 to 2017 (project ‘Relationship Dynamics in the Face of Social Change: Contexts, Content, Producers, the Public, and Producers in TVE and YLE News’).

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C1	Seasoned executive (male)
C2	Producer (male)
C3	Member of Executive Committee (male)
C4	Cameraman
C5	Veteran editor at RTVE’s territorial headquarters in Seville (male)
C6	Young journalist (male)
C7	News editor (female)
C8	Manager of news programmes (male)
C9	News editor (female)
C10	Cultural news editor and member of the Newsroom Committee (male)
C11	Editor and anchorman of TVE’s weekend news programmes (male)
C12	Former director of RTVE’s news services (male)
C13	Editor and anchorman of Antena 3’s news programme (male)
C14	News programme content manager (male)
C15	Head of RTVE.es’s Laboratory for Multimedia Innovation (female)
C16	International coordinator of RTVE’s website (female)
C17	Sports editor (male)
C18	News editor (female)

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legislation, which placed the accent on professionalism, together with the notion of independence, as Soloski (1989: 226) observed, was to allow journalism to fulfil its mission in an advanced democratic society.

What follows is a brief chronological overview of (1) the key regulatory measures at each one of the ‘moments’ studied between 2005 and 2019, (2) the most influential campaigns launched by journalists’ associations based on their public statements, including some relevant precedents, and (3) the main discourses of TVE professionals on independence and other challenges facing public service journalism. A closer look will now be taken at those significant ‘moments’ occurring between 2005 and 2019.

### **Towards the reform of RTVE (2005–07)**

Spanish public media have traditionally been described as spaces conducive to governmental propaganda and political manipulation, a social perception of TVE that was very strong during José María Aznar’s second term in office (2000–04). The AIDEKA reports,<sup>5</sup> drawn up by a TVE journalists’ association and academia, had served as a basis for the complaint lodged by the trade union CCOO against TVE in the National High Court for its coverage of the general strike in 2002. The judicial sentence handed down in 2004, which had a huge media impact, prompted the then presidential candidate José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero (Spanish Workers’ Socialist Party, hereinafter PSOE) to promise to reform RTVE with the aim of ‘depoliticizing’ it. Once he had been elected president, he created a ‘committee of eminent persons’, including two of the founders of AIDEKA as assessors, who were tasked with drawing up a report on which to base the 2006 Audio-Visual Law. Moreover, in March 2003, TVE newsroom staff set up an ‘anti-manipulation committee’, which documented malpractices and which called for the creation of an institutionalized and democratically elected newsroom committee (Lakidain 2012).

The period from 2005 to 2006 was one of transition towards the RTVE corporation and the Audio-Visual Law, a moment when total independence was established as a desired and reachable goal thanks to the regulatory changes that had been announced or which were already being implemented (Lamuedra and Lar 2009). The appointment of Fran Llorente as the director of news services in 2005 was applauded by most of the professionals working in the newsroom, according to the interviewees.

In the interviews conducted between 2005 and 2007, the main discursive themes had to do with fulfilling the mission of public service and its challenges: independence, audience ratings, excessive officialdom<sup>6</sup> and partisanship, the extreme superficiality of news stories as well as diversity. Therefore, at a moment when news professionals at TVE felt less dependent on the government, many concerns and challenges emerged.

As to the discourses on independence, in the newsroom there was widespread condemnation of government manipulation among all the senior professionals linked to RTVE during the different terms in office of centre, left-wing and right-wing

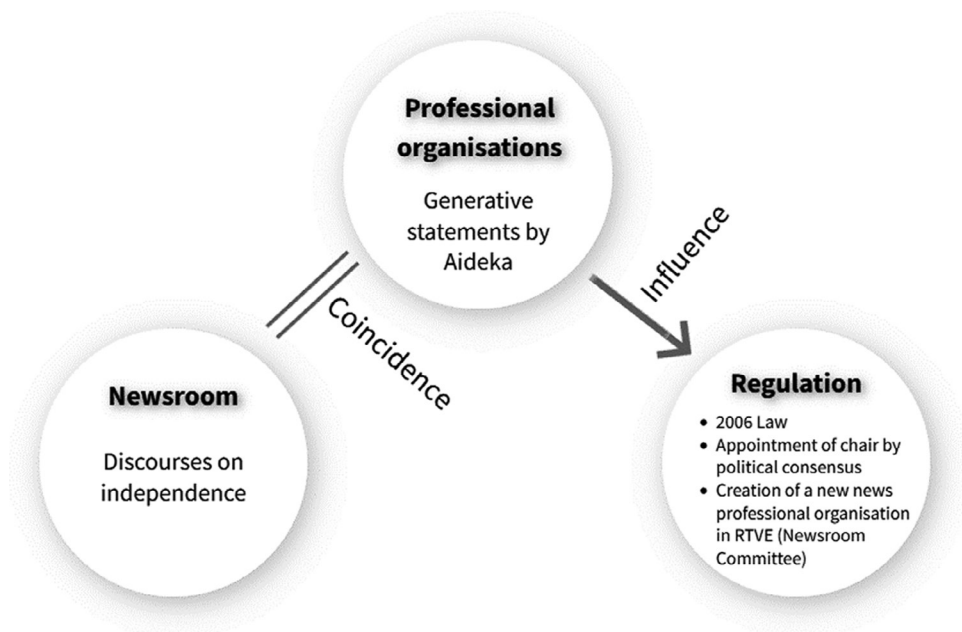


Figure 1 : Dynamics of influence in the 2005–07 period.

parties over the past few decades (Lamuedra and Lara 2009; García de Madariaga et al. 2014). The system for appointing the executive board and chairperson of the corporation that had existed hitherto was singled out as a problem, even in the interviews conducted before the 2006 Audio-Visual Law was enacted: ‘That the government hand-picks the director general of this public body is anti-democratic’ (A19).

And just after the enactment of the new law, there was hope that the new way of appointing the chairperson would lead to the real independence of TVE, thus enhancing its public image:

TVE has always had a direct relationship with different governments [...]. Public television’s always been identified as the transmission belt of a specific government. That image might perhaps change with the new corporation and the new ways of appointing those responsible for it.

(A11)

It can be observed that the public statements issued by AIDEKA, the report of eminent persons and the newsroom discourses followed the same line of thought linking manipulation, the newsroom’s dependence on the government and the appointment of the executive board and chairperson of RTVE. In this case, the sample of newsroom discourses was gathered after AIDEKA had released its generative statements, for which reason a specific pattern of influence between them cannot be determined. However, it is clear that AIDEKA’s efforts contributed to legislative change, as represented in Figure 1.

The professionals' demand for independence in the interviews and AIDEKA's public statements contributed to a far-reaching legislative reform. Moreover, the solution proposed by the panel of eminent persons to overcome the traditional constraints of Spanish PSB as to the appointment of the executive board and chairperson began to be considered as strategic while dovetailing perfectly with the solutions and demands observed in the newsroom discourses.

### **At the peak of the RTVE reform (2008–10)**

The enactment of the Audio-Visual Law in 2006 can be considered as a step forward: the chairperson of RTVE was no longer to be appointed by the government, but by parliamentary consensus, while his or her powers were limited by an executive board characterized by a certain degree of social and political plurality. It also warrants noting that this piece of legislation made it possible to create the newsroom committee, whose members were, and still are, elected democratically from among RTVE staff, and whose task is to ensure that ethical standards are met.

As of 2005, TVE strove to regain its leading position, yet again achieving the highest audience ratings especially for its newscasts. A few years later, the news services received a large number of awards, including that for the 'World's Best News Programme'.<sup>7</sup> Besides, at the beginning of 2012, TVE offered the highest level of diversity on Spanish television (Humanes et al. 2013; Román-Portas et al. 2020: 775–76).

The main themes appearing in the interviews in this 'golden age' included the need to improve public service news for the staff to recover their self-esteem, to enhance news diversity to be more citizen-centric and to distinguish TVE from the country's commercial channels (Román-Portas et al. 2020: 156–70). To these issues should be added the following challenges: self-censorship, the assignment of tasks based on the editor's political affiliation (B14), whether independence had been achieved at the expense of renouncing in-depth political analysis, a superficial journalistic approach too dependent on official sources and press releases (B2) and engaging the general public more (B1).

As to autonomy, the discourses show that the journalists felt more independent from the government than at previous moments, which went a long way to improving the atmosphere in the newsroom. The period was described as 'the happiest moment for us, we're less dependent in everything' (B1) or as 'an oasis' (C8), namely, a moment of independence in 'the last 30 years'. Figure 2 shows that the perception that independence was not under threat coincided with a focus on other concerns and challenges and an absence of public statements and legislative changes. This might imply that the journalists paid more attention to improving professional practice, which was later recognized in the form of awards and higher audience ratings. The newsroom discourses also suggest that pursuing news quality and ratings involved such an effort that it somehow channelled everybody's energies in that direction (C7).

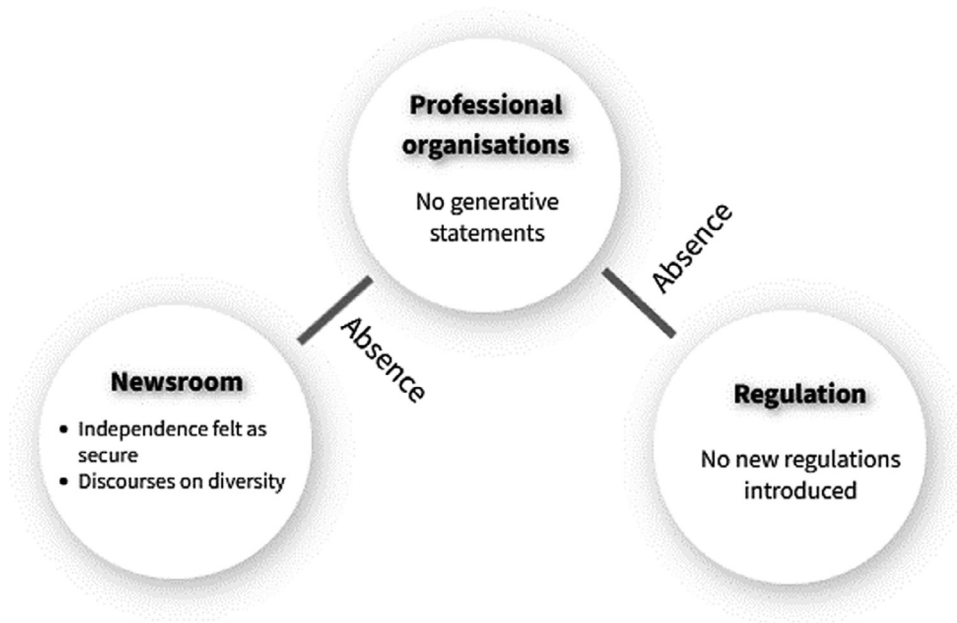


Figure 2 : Dynamics of influence in the 2005–10 period.

### In the midst of the counter-reform (2015–16)

However, with the enactment of Royal Decree 15 in 2012, the system for appointing the chairperson of RTVE was changed yet again, and the powers of its executive board were restricted, which meant that Spain's PSB fell under the *de facto* control of the governing party thanks to its absolute majority in Parliament.

Thenceforth, it was all downhill for RTVE, in relation to not only its news independence and credibility but also to its sustainability, after having its budget slashed. This regression was accompanied by a relentless drop in audience ratings that led RTVE to lose its leading position in February 2013<sup>8</sup> and more than a third of its audience since the People's Party (hereinafter PP) had come to power.<sup>9</sup>

The main discursive themes emerging in the interviews during this period were related to the loss of independence, in which interviewees expressed such a sharp and intense anxiety that it was barely possible to detect other concerns. In their discourses, top management apparently exerted a partisan – and not only governmental – control over news content:

The PP uses public radio and television as propaganda tools and that with the PSOE during Zapatero's terms in office, this was much less the case.

(C4)

This was most acutely felt in the areas of political and economic affairs, with a veil being drawn over the most sensitive social problems like poverty and the evictions

taking place some years after the 2008 financial crisis, which challenged the vision of the country's improving economy promoted by the government. The most iconic example of this trend was the censorship of a short documentary about how a greater number of volunteers were becoming involved in combating poverty (C8), which was never broadcast.

In this new context of involution, the newsroom committee – whose main task is to ensure compliance with the editorial guidelines approved in a referendum held in 2008, one of the demands of TVE professionals – played an active role in decrying this state of affairs. During this period, the idea of a bitter confrontation between practically all of those working in the newsroom – backed by the newsroom committee – and the top management of news services, in which the latter abused their power systematically, predominated in the discourses of interviewees.

Given that the newsroom committee was democratically elected, it was only natural that it should represent newsroom discourses, helping to structure and transform them into public statements aimed at society and different institutions, with a view to decrying manipulative journalistic practices and calling for independence and professionalism. As regards their influence on public statements, the newsroom committee's reports were subsequently echoed by different institutions,<sup>10</sup> including the Council of Europe (CoE) (Resolution 1920)<sup>11</sup> and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which also highlighted the loss of editorial independence at RTVE due to growing political constraints following the 2012 decree. Other international studies such as 'The State of Press Freedom in Spain', released by the International Press Institute in March 2015, pointed in the same direction.<sup>12</sup>

Despite that fact that the power of the newsroom committee was only representative, it was seen as a sort of shield against the meddling of the top management of TVE's news services, owing to the fact that it was a legitimate and influential public voice for different institutions and outlets:

If it weren't for the Newsroom Committee, good God, we'd be completely unprotected.

(C2)

It is also important to stress that the newsroom committee was not free from criticism or conflicts either, those linked to the top management during the previous period being the most critical:

I can't and never will respect a newsroom committee that didn't criticise what was being done before, but does now.

(C14)

It can be argued that the counter-reform of 2012 yet again posed a threat to independence, which led to heated newsroom talk and public statements complaining

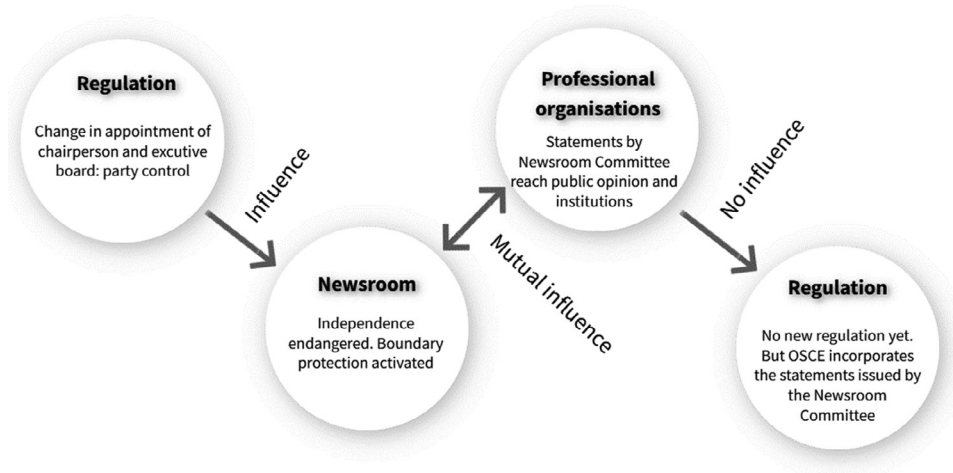


Figure 3: Dynamics of influence in the 2015–16 period.

about the involution that the public broadcasting corporation was experiencing. Albeit of a reactive nature, such discourses helped transmit its loss of independence to different institutions and public opinion, alike. However, they did not have any immediate effect on legislation, as reflected in Figure 3.

Besides, there was a certain degree of consensus that news-making during the period starting in 2012 was of lower quality. The interviewees referred to (1) a sharp drop in the quality of news content and (2) in political and, above all, social diversity.

The exhaustion resulting from the daily struggle for independence and less participation in news agenda-setting might have led to other relevant issues being disregarded and far too much attention being paid to ‘trifles’, a criticism that had also been voiced in previous periods (Lamuedra and Lara 2009: 12). This tendency is confirmed by Humanes and Fernández (2015: 285), who contrasted news plurality prior to the legislative and organizational changes in 2012 with that two years later, drawing attention to the trivialization of news, especially as regards political and economic affairs, which is striking given the country’s dire financial straits during the study period. These views, which were confirmed in 2017 by Soengas et al. (2018), were also clearly expressed in some of the interviews:

Everything’s superficial and very wishy-washy. Well, after all it’s another form of manipulation.

(C8)

Regardless of ideology, they’re filling positions of responsibility with people who’ve no experience in news making.

(C16)

C8 and C16 suggested that news production, from hiring practices to superficial news framing, had been reorganized in order to avoid quality journalism. Besides,

the existence of different sensitivities, sometimes referred to as sides, can be observed in the way discourses were structured. The different assessments of Fran Llorente's term as director of news services illustrate this issue, for many of the professionals interviewed during this period saw him under a very positive light, considering his appointment as a step in the right direction in order to give TVE what it needed to become an authentically independent, plural and quality public service and a benchmark for citizens. On the other hand, there was a marked discrepancy between this vision and the testimonies of those people in charge during the counter-reform who described him as partisan: 'Fran was like a steamroller, he rode roughshod over everything that was related to the previous top management' (C11).

### **The core discourses converging in the idea of public competition**

The focus is now placed on the views of professionals working at RTVE during this last stage of the newsroom's involution, which forms the basis of the journalistic discourse calling for the public competition that was understood as being central to the democratization of TVE newscasts for the following reasons: (1) the importance of appointing a chairperson, (2) the firm editorial control of the newsroom and (3) the enhancement of the identity of TVE journalists in relation to independence and professionalism.

### **The appointment of the chairperson as a key element**

The 2012 decree was the factor to which the interviewees alluded most as the main reason behind their perceived loss of independence. Most of them concurred that it had signified a clear setback in the transformation of the Spanish PSB into a truly independent and plural public service:

First, the chairperson of the corporation was changed, then the executive board was modified so that the PP should have a majority, the news director and subdirectors and the area managers were appointed. (C3)

That cascade effect had managed to reach the newsroom. (C5)

The process of de-politicisation has been turned on its head. (C3)

The widespread condemnation of that regulatory change did not imply ignoring how hard it was to arrive at a political decision on who was sufficiently prestigious to be appointed as the chairperson, for which reason RTVE had been without a chairperson for one year. In fact, despite the evident differences of opinion between the top management and the majority of those working in the newsroom at the time, both



sides apparently agreed that neither had the system based on parliamentary consensus worked in the mid-term, nor was allowing a party to appoint independently the chairperson and executive board of RTVE a defensible system, even among those in management: 'Is it the most ideal solution? Well, certainly not' (C11).

### ***The editorial control of information in a productive organization***

Albeit questioned by a minority sector, there was a certain consensus that whoever controlled appointing the chairperson of RTVE could also manipulate the editorial line in different ways. The interviewees placed a great deal of emphasis on the so-called parallel newsroom as the main way of controlling the news broadcast by TVE from 2012 to 2018. During that period, the top management hired and gradually placed like-minded and trusted people in strategic positions in the newsroom, particularly covering political and economic affairs, where they facilitated the implementation of an editorial line that was overly compliant with government policies. For their part, most of the members of the newsroom frowned upon these newcomers.

Those hired cover all the essential economic issues [...]. This has led to a clash with the newsroom.

(C3)

With ten people you can guarantee that the newscast will be to your liking.

(C10)

It'd be great to watch the news for two weeks and note down the names of the editors signing the pieces. And you'll see what kind plurality there is.

(C15)

The interviewees referred to other ways of intervening in the editorial process, which can be summarized as follows: (1) the director of news services might provide guidelines or instructions regarding the angle or some other element that should appear in the news, although the majority of the news editors claimed that they ignored such instructions; (2) the directors might threaten staff with eliminating their bonuses or changing their work schedule; (3) some or other report or piece might not be broadcast or might be censored; (4) there was a general consensus that decision-making was not agile enough, which led to unnecessary delays, especially at 'delicate' moments, such as the resignation of the Minister of Justice Alberto Ruiz-Gallardón in 2014, when the anti-abortion legislation that he was about to enact was withdrawn by the government due to social protests (C4). Several interviewees did not know whether such delays were down to incompetence, the need to ask for instructions at the highest level or an intentional move to broadcast the news in a low-key fashion; and (5) the excessive use of 'round-ups', namely, a sequence of images commented by the anchor, thus making it possible to dispense with the news approach suggested by the reporter.

More or less veiled threats and coercion led to self-censorship as a mechanism for adapting to the gradual institutional and editorial decline.

I believe your individual liberty's most affected collectively when they attack your labour rights, professional position, wages, job security, and that's now occurring as never before [...]. In 85–90 per cent of the cases, top management indicates what content should be broadcast.

(C5)

There're many forms of censorship. One is to cross you off the list. And another involves not giving you certain news stories.

(C9)

The person who tries to make the news more combative, receives a call.

(C15)

There're editors who continue to work freely and others who practise self-censorship.

(C16)

These newsroom discourses described the situation, but did not offer any solutions, for which reason they can be understood as the reactive kind, while those gathered a few years later, in 2019, by Goyanes et al. (2020) showed the same tendency.

### ***Independence, professionalism and professional identity***

Many interviewees indicated that the progress made in independence between 2005 and 2012 had shaped a new collective identity of sorts undetected in previous research. Through the defence of professionalism, public service journalism was perceived as the ultimate goal, with the BBC as a benchmark, to which should be added those seven years of experience, in which there was still room for improvement.

It's very difficult to turn back the clock because democracy itself also evolves, but it doesn't only evolve in the corporation but also on the streets and in Parliament.

(C3)

I think that in TVE there're many people who believe in and know a lot about public TV. When working for TVE, I believe I'm working for my country.

(C5)

Newsroom discourses on independence as a boundary were structured in such a way that they seemed to sustain what has been defined as a community of practice (Gravengaard 2011) or interpretive community (Zelizer 1993), particularly visible at moments perceived by the newsroom members as overtly manipulative. The

following extracts refer to an incident in which the timing was changed at the last moment:

There have been two absolutely spontaneous and unanimous newsroom rebellions, without any prompting, simply seeing the timing<sup>13</sup> [...]. Suddenly, I saw the entire newsroom begin to pound with the back of their hands, making a tremendous noise, I was completely awed.

(C8)

The newsroom's a sort of body that sometimes functions as one, with one sole brain.

(C2)

C2's remark reflects how the newsroom members as one interpreted the event in the same fashion and reacted spontaneously as if coordinated. Those working at TVE associated their professionalism with the struggle for independence and quality, which is definitely established as a *sine qua non* boundary that contributes to create a common culture, whose tacit codes of interaction foster a similar interpretation of upcoming events.

### **Towards the public competition (2017–19)**

In this context, the system for appointing the executive board and chairperson of RTVE was gradually converted into a strategic mechanism, an analysis of which shows the interplay between several discursive variables: (1) a previous and general consensus among TVE professionals on the appointment of the executive board and chairperson as a strategic aspect, as described above; and (2) the existence of influential generative public discourses and statements on regulation, initiated by the collective Teledetodos and subsequently endorsed by several journalists' associations and unions.

In the spring of 2017, Teledetodos – formed by academia and TVE journalists, many of whom hailed from the extinct AIDEKA – drew up the report titled *A New Model for New Times*, proposing a series of measures for orientating the PSB towards social participation, independence and diversity, which reflected the general consensus among the professionals working at TVE. Following the course already plotted, this necessarily implied disassociating the appointment of the executive board from politics, before going on to suggest that its members be chosen by public competition, whose responsibility it would then be to appoint the chairperson of RTVE.

This issue was debated with representatives of Spain's main political parties and assumed by them as a key strategic step towards meeting future challenges in at least two university encounters held in the spring of 2017: a conference organized at the University of Seville in the framework of the research project in which this article has been written, and another conference at Charles III University (UC3M) organized by Teledetodos in Madrid.

In September 2017, a new law<sup>14</sup> was enacted, by virtue of which the public competition based on criteria of professionalism was established as the method for selecting RTVE's top management, and in March 2018, all of the country's political parties, except for the PP, reached an agreement to develop this procedure. After coming to power in June 2018, the new PSOE government passed an emergency decree (Royal Decree 15/2018) that set the long-awaited procedure in motion. The panel of experts appointed drew up a list of twenty eligible candidates, from which the Senate was expected to choose ten for the executive board, who in turn should elect the chairperson.

During this process, different organizations or sectors of RTVE (Teledetodos, the newsroom committee of RTVE, different unions and the collectives Mujeres RTVE and RTVE Sin Personal) have endorsed the public competition and have brought pressure to bear on political actors, who have often seemed reticent. In February 2018, in light of the delay in drafting the regulations destined to develop the law, Teledetodos issued a statement in this regard. In April 2019, when the candidates had already been evaluated, Teledetodos issued a second statement requesting that the results be respected for the sake of independence and democratic regeneration. This second statement received further support with the adhesion of the Federation of Journalist Trade Unions, EMARTV, the Spanish Network of Community Media, the Public Media Alliance, the academic organizations ULEPICC and RICAPP and different civic associations, including the Association of Communication Users, the Citizenship and Communication Association and the Platform for the Defence of Free Expression. In the winter of 2020, after the forming of a coalition government between the PSOE and Unidas Podemos, Teledetodos yet again urged it to resolve the public competition, this time with the social support of 50 collectives totally unrelated to the journalistic profession or academia.<sup>15</sup>

For its part, the newsroom committee issued three statements in June 2018<sup>16</sup> vindicating the public competition as the only system capable of guaranteeing the PSB's plurality and independence. The country's main trade unions also issued public statements in support of the public competition,<sup>17</sup> while the collective Mujeres RTVE launched an action on 30 April 2018, which demonstrated the degree of discursive consensus achieved: its Twitter campaign #AsíSeManipula<sup>18</sup> called for the removal of the incumbent top management and for the public competition to be held, decrying the ways in which, in light of its experience, the government controlled the news. The tweets were very similar to the aforementioned testimonies and those collected by Goyanes et al. (2020) in 2019, clearly demonstrating that the demand for a public competition was discursively grounded in the lack of independence, partisanism and newsroom control:

My bosses tasked me with a news story about the audio recordings of the minister Jorge Fernández Díaz. I told them that without the recordings I'd neither sign nor read it and, 10 minutes later, they took me off the job[.]

(@Gabirolepev 2018: n.pag.)

When they force you to talk about a topic silencing one of the parties, you refuse, and someone else makes the video.

(@FdezIzaskun 2018: n.pag.)

News about corruption affecting the government is covered in a brief 20” slot in the afternoon and that affecting other political parties is magnified with live broadcasts, news stories and the major deployment of resources.

(@yalvareztv 2018: n.pag.)

The #AsíSeManipula campaign showed that editorial independence was considered as a key boundary that had been overstepped, whereas the appointment of RTVE’s top management was perceived as a boundary repair measure that ought to be defended. A year later, on 30 April 2019, Mujeres RTVE started another thread recalling the campaign and requesting once again the resolution of the public competition. The high degree of discursive consensus in defence of the public competition shows that it has gradually been understood as being tantamount to RTVE’s democratization.

This suggests that the negative effects of the 2012 counter-reform on editorial independence had given rise to reactive discourses among the corporation’s professionals, which were later transformed into reactive public statements. In 2017, the Teledetodos report, which was a sort of generative public statement that was supposed to contribute to boundary repair, gained the support of the profession and contributed to the passing of new legislation in 2018. Generative statements continued to be issued by several journalists’ associations due to the delays and political reluctance to call a public competition for appointing the executive committee, as shown in Figure 4.

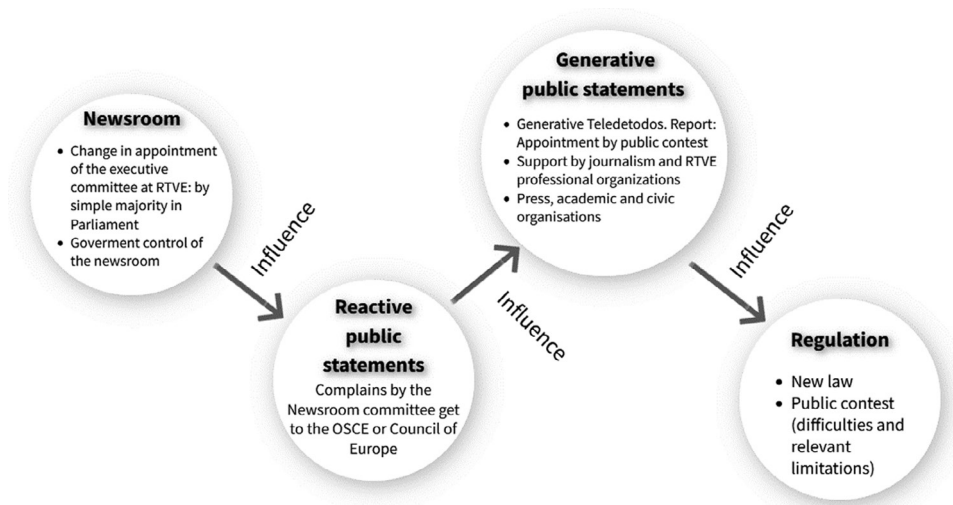


Figure 4 : Dynamics of influence in the 2017–19 period.

It warrants noting that the way in which the public competition was held in February 2021 disappointed all the organizations that had supported it: both the executive board and the chairperson of RTVE were finally chosen by four political parties from among all the candidates, and not only those shortlisted by the panel of experts. As only the chairperson and two executive members (out of nine) had been considered to be eligible, there are still grounds for demanding a genuine public competition.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

First of all, regarding our first research objective, our results point to an interaction between the journalists' newsroom discourses, associations promoting a broader debate with social and institutional actors, public statements and regulation:

1. At the beginning of the study timeframe, the public statements and campaigns of the journalists' association AIDEKA were central to the enactment of the 2006 Audio-Visual Law. Despite the fact that AIDEKA only represented a small proportion of TVE journalists, the newsroom discourses analysed here show that the perception of a lack of autonomy was shared by all.
2. The 2006 Audio-Visual Law also influenced both newsroom discourses and public statements. As TVE journalists began to feel more independent, they ceased to issue public statements for a couple of years. However, the creation of the newsroom committee favoured the subsequent proliferation of the representative public statements of TVE journalists.
3. Royal Decree 15/2012 changed the way in which RTVE's top management was appointed, which was perceived as a step back in the independence gained. At this moment, a common denominator in newsroom discourses was how these management changes had made journalistic routines more dependent on the government while calling for a different way of appointing the top management. The newsroom committee played a relevant role in revealing that renewed dependency on society and institutions throughout the process and in fostering a certain degree of consensus in newsroom discourses. Despite a certain trend towards polarization between those in managerial positions and the rest, all the interviewees called for the amendment of the system for electing the PSB's executive board and chairperson envisaged in Royal Decree 15/2012.
4. In 2017, Teledetodos drew up a report in which all the reactive discourses were transformed into proposals and solutions directly aimed at influencing new regulation. From this moment on, the public statements issued by Teledetodos and other journalists' associations became generative, all calling for a public competition to appoint the top management.

Such results contribute to gain a better understanding of the discursively institutionalized field of journalism: different patterns of influence can be observed:

1. Regulation, such as the creation of the newsroom committee, with its representative legitimacy, can help structure newsroom discourses. The regulation that allowed the chairperson of RTVE to be chosen by the party in power also activated a structured discursive response, but in another fashion: it was perceived as a threat to journalistic values in the shape of a loss of autonomy and, consequently, it activated boundary protection discourses in the newsroom. This newsroom talk, which was initially reactive, became generative in those organizations capable of generating a broader social debate, such as Teledetodos, formed by journalists and academics, as had basically occurred as of 2017, resulting in a movement in which many professional sectors of TVE engaged in protests aimed at ‘paradigm repair’ (Berkowitz and Eko 2007: 782). Such discourses had an effect on future legislative changes.
2. Newsroom discourses and public statements can also have a huge influence on regulation, particularly those on autonomy as a boundary. Therefore, as to the second research objective, our findings show that during the regressive period from 2015 to 2016, newsroom discourses on autonomy, functioning as a ‘protection boundary’, favoured the general consensuses that led to a change in the system of appointing the executive board and chairperson of RTVE by public competition, a process that has encountered so much resistance from the country’s political parties. Therefore, newsroom discourses should also be considered as an influential dimension of metajournalism and, consequently, should receive greater academic attention.

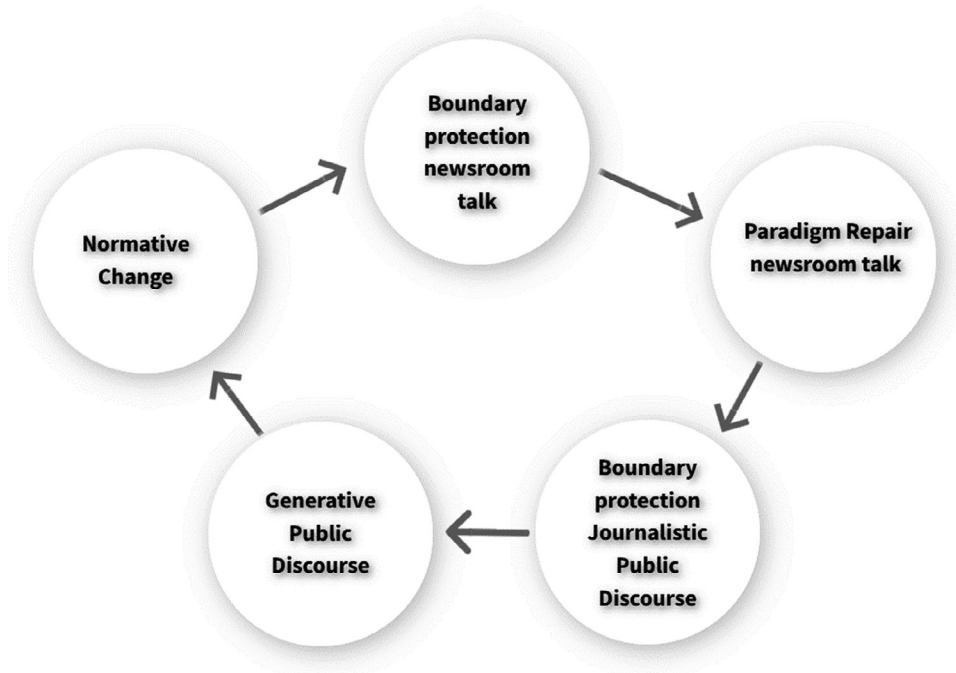


Figure 5: Evolution and dynamic of influence of journalists’ discourses on autonomy and normative change.



Throughout this process, the appointment of the chairperson of RTVE has been progressively understood as key to protecting journalists' autonomy. In 2012, the reform introduced by the PP government allowed the appointment to depend on a qualified parliamentary majority, which was seen as a loss of independence. All this helped structure the discourse that related the government control of top appointments at RTVE to the mechanisms employed to control TVE's newsroom and its news agenda, first in newsroom talk and subsequently in the generative discourses of Teledetodos and #AsiSeManipula of Mujeres RTVE. This led to the widespread demand for a public competition to elect the executive board and chairperson of RTVE.

In sum, these findings suggest that there is a dynamic relationship between the following factors: boundary protection newsroom talk, paradigm repair newsroom talk, boundary protection journalistic public discourses, generative public discourses and normative change, which requires further study in the context of metajournalism theory.

Moving on to the third research question, the data available for the past fifteen years show a certain relationship between discourses on autonomy and those on diversity and other challenges, the former tending to take priority when the latter were absent and vice versa:

1. In 2006, when the Audio-Visual Law was in the process of being enacted or just after it had been enacted, TVE professionals yearned for that independence, together with other aspects of public service. In their daily work, they felt more independent, which allowed them to turn their attention to other concerns, such as avoiding a more commercial TV model and greater social diversity.
2. In 2009, when the perception of professional independence from the government was at its acutest, the aforementioned concerns appeared more often in the discourses of the interviewees.
3. Between 2015 and 2016, the interviewees yet again perceived a new and drastic loss of independence from the government, which was explicitly associated with Royal Decree 15/2012. The newsroom discourses during this period dealt mainly with government or party dependency, while other concerns appeared far less often and, when they did, always had something to do with the corporation's loss of independence. That period was marked by the emergence of a discourse on the mechanisms employed by the government to gain control of the newsroom, which appeared in both the interviews and in the campaign #AsiSeManipula.

Lastly, the discourses of the professionals working at RTVE seem to indicate that autonomy and independence are essential conditions for forging ahead. On the one hand, to build a professional identity is essential for structuring the journalistic profession, traditionally weak in a polarized, pluralist media ecosystem

## Evolution of newsroom discourses and public statements of TVE professionals

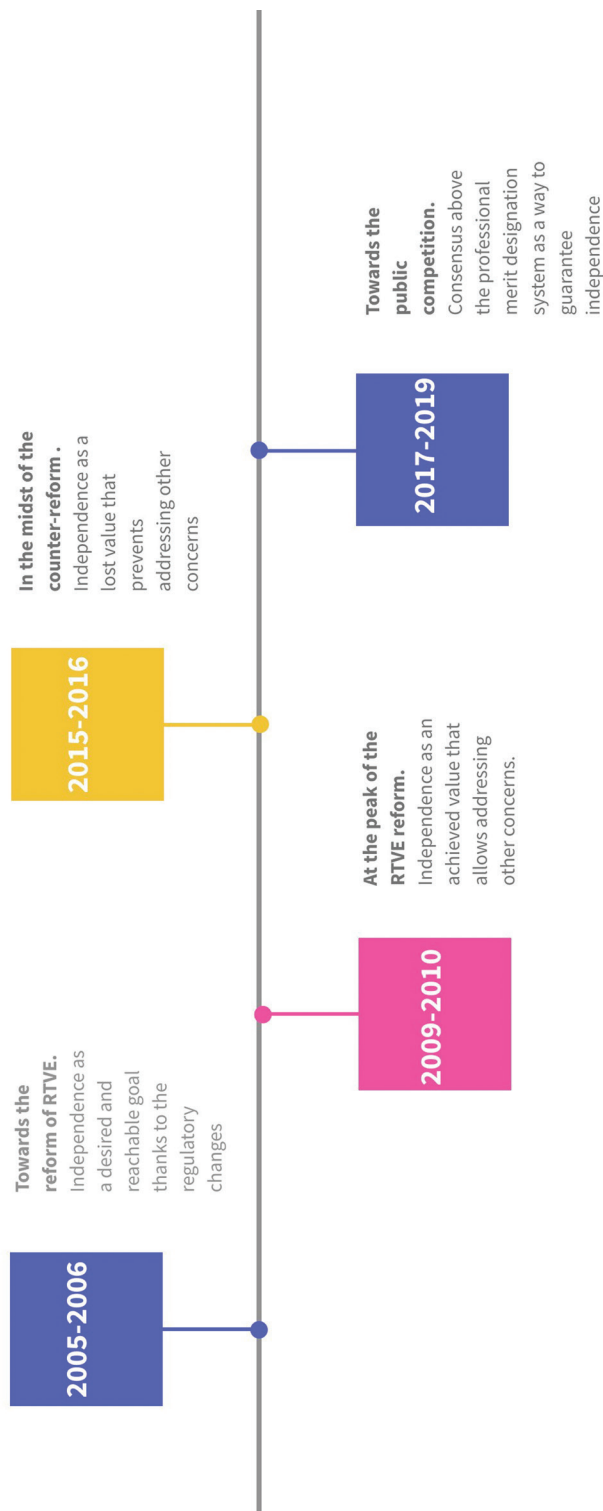


Figure 6: Evolution of newsroom discourses and public statements of TVE professionals.

such as in Spain (Hallin and Mancini 2004). The defence of independence is a discourse that has united most sectors of RTVE and Spanish journalists' associations. On the other hand, it is apparently only possible for journalists with a strong professional identity, who work with a certain degree of independence, to address 'other' fundamental issues like the need for social diversity. In Spain, therefore, the clash between autonomy and participation, which is indeed evinced in corporate democratic countries like Finland (Hujanen 2016) and the Netherlands (De Haan and Bardoel 2012), is not expressed in the same way. Accordingly, a sufficient degree of journalistic autonomy seems to be central to greater social diversity, even though a certain entrenchment in that same autonomy could also be counter-productive.

The aforementioned findings suggest that feeling secure within the boundaries of a professional identity is a prerequisite for constructing the identity of public service journalists, which is essential for the kind of professional practice required for a socially cohesive democracy. Just as independence is understood as a crucial aspect of the identity of journalists, so too should diversity form an essential part of public service journalism. However, assessing the similarities and differences between the identities of public service and commercial journalists calls for further research.

With our diachronic study of newsroom discourses and public statements, we have fleshed out the theoretical framework of metajournalism with several new dimensions and dynamic relationships. Firstly, we have shown that newsroom discourses are a powerful tool for shaping patterns that bring together the interpretive community of journalists and for enhancing their professional identity. Secondly, we have also explored the relevance of journalists' associations, such as Teledetodos, in transforming reactive discourses into generative ones, with a visible impact on media policies. This suggests that the action taken by these associations – in this case supported by academia through the organization of colloquia with politicians on the public competition election system for PSB chairpeople – can be highly influential. Thirdly, despite the fact that we have not focused on the effects of journalists' discourse on news content, we have been able to glimpse a dynamic relationship between the perceived news quality and the boundaries of journalistic independence. The effect of newsroom discourses and public statements on viewers' perceptions has yet to be explored in our ongoing research project.

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Medel. This programme also received supporting funds from European Regional Development Fund (ERDF).

## Notes

1. Soloski also views autonomy as a tool of control in the hands of management.
2. For Hanitzsch and Mellado, news deadlines, procedures and standards and the shortage of resources are procedural factors. The influences of newsroom conventions and media legislation are regarded as professional factors. Organizational factors include ownership, management, supervisors and senior editors.
3. SEJ 2005-02060, led by Agustín García Matilla.
4. URJC-CM-2007-CSH-1683, led by Luis Pablo Francescutti.
5. <http://www.aideka.tv/>. Accessed 3 October 2022.
6. Some interviewees accuse RTVE's news agenda of being excessively attached to the government's official agenda.
7. The Media Tenor Global TV Awards.
8. <https://www.barloventocomunicacion.es/audiencias-anuales/analisis-televisivoi-2013/>. Accessed 3 October 2022.
9. [http://www.eldiario.es/sociedad/tercio-audiencia-gobierna-Partido-Popular\\_0\\_392661395.html](http://www.eldiario.es/sociedad/tercio-audiencia-gobierna-Partido-Popular_0_392661395.html). Accessed 3 October 2022.
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14. <http://www.rtve.es/noticias/20170921/congreso-da-luz-verde-nueva-ley-rtve-acuerdo-psoe-podemos-ciudadanos/1621280.shtml>. Accessed 3 October 2022.
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17. The statements issued by the trade unions can be consulted at: UGT – Un sueño colectivo: <http://www.ugtrtve.net/index.php/comunicados/blogentradas/255-colectivo> (accessed 3 October 2022); CGT – Cambio o Recambio: <http://www.cgtrtve.org/cambio-o-recambio> (accessed 3 October 2022); USO – Mucho por hacer: hagámoslo juntos: <http://usortve.es/index.php/noticias/670-programa-electoral-de-uso> (accessed 3 October 2022); CC.00 – CCOO llama a una jornada de Viernes Negro en TVE para el próximo 8 de noviembre: [http://www2.fsc.ccoo.es/webfscmedios/Secciones\\_sindicales:RTVE:Noticias:1056243--CCOO\\_llama\\_a\\_una\\_jornada\\_de\\_Viernes\\_Negro\\_en\\_RTVE\\_para\\_el\\_proximo\\_8\\_de\\_noviembre](http://www2.fsc.ccoo.es/webfscmedios/Secciones_sindicales:RTVE:Noticias:1056243--CCOO_llama_a_una_jornada_de_Viernes_Negro_en_RTVE_para_el_proximo_8_de_noviembre). Accessed 3 October 2022.
18. Information on the campaign at: <https://www.publico.es/tremending/2018/04/30/asise-manipula-las-mujeres-de-rtve-lanzan-una-campana-para-denunciar-la-manipulacion-en-la-television-publica/> (accessed 3 October 2022) or [http://verte.eldiario.es/noticias/manipula-RTVE-trabajadoras-cuentan-desinformar\\_0\\_2007999190.html?\\_ga=2.143930741.1937220460.1524927459-433059520.1523986671](http://verte.eldiario.es/noticias/manipula-RTVE-trabajadoras-cuentan-desinformar_0_2007999190.html?_ga=2.143930741.1937220460.1524927459-433059520.1523986671) (accessed 3 October 2022).

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