Analysis of professional perceptions relating to the effectiveness of codes of ethics for journalists in Spain

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Abstract

Purpose – Codes of ethics are important instruments in journalism, as they promote transparency and self-regulation of media, in addition to monitoring the quality of information. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the perceptions that Spanish journalists have of the effectiveness of codes of ethics and to evaluate the different personal and professional variables which condition this vision.

Design/methodology/approach – The methodology used in the present study is based on quantitative content analysis using the survey technique. This technique makes it possible to obtain empirical data on various key aspects of the profession that are determining factors in ascertaining Spanish journalists' views of one of the instruments of accountability that is external to the media: general ethical codes.

Findings – The results show that Spanish journalists are largely confident in the effectiveness of ethical codes in their profession. Likewise, it was seen that variables such as age, professional experience or the media with which they work influence the perceptions that professionals have of such instruments.

Originality/value – If understanding journalism as a profession whose mission is to guarantee the citizens their right to information, then it is essential to be familiar with the tools provided by the profession itself to be accountable to the public regarding this professional mission. Hence the importance of instruments of accountability and the perceptions of the professionals themselves regarding their effectiveness.

Keywords Spain, Journalism, Codes of ethics, Media ethics, Journalists' perceptions

Paper type Research paper

Professional responsibility and journalists' perceptions

The task of a journalist or communicator is to ensure that citizens' rights of information and of expression are met, while balancing this against fulfilment of a series of professional responsibilities (Rodríguez-Martínez *et al.*, 2017a). The media, as principal agents in configuring agenda-setting and public opinion, has a responsibility for the transmission of

values to society (Hardy, 2008) and to inform with the classic criteria of veracity, selection, hierarchy, interpretation and contextualization (Diezhandino, 2012). They are also required to guarantee rights to information and expression according to the principles of professional responsibility and, moreover, to facilitate the participation of citizens in democratic public debate (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2018).

Traditionally, journalism has been closely related with professional and civic responsibility. To fulfil its unique democratic role, the media needs to be monitored for quality (McQuail, 1992). The recent arrival of the internet within journalism has posed problems related to quality control and the veracity of information and, hence, a further obstacle to ensuring credibility and ethics within the profession (Cabrera, 2005; Moretzsohn, 2006). However, the digital era may allow for new ways to monitor media output in relation to democratic roles (Esser and Neuberger, 2019).

According to the literature on journalists' perceptions of ethical standards in journalism, attention has been paid to several aspects such as editorial autonomy in the newsroom (Hamada *et al.*, 2019; Hanusch *et al.*, 2019) or journalists' awareness of pressures on their work (Hanitzsch *et al.*, 2019). In this sense, the Worlds of Journalism Study (WJS) project is an unavoidable reference: since its inception in 2007, the researchers who are part of the project have produced analysis that assess the professional understanding of journalists at a national and international level (WJS, 2019).

Based on responses from journalists working in 67 countries, Standaert *et al.* (2019) maintain that the normative core of journalism around the world is still invariably built on the news media's contribution to political processes and conversations, while other areas, such as the management of self and everyday life, remain marginalised.

Nevertheless, differences have been observed between countries and regions, especially if we consider the west-east axis. Rollwagen *et al.* (2019), for instance, when analysing Canadian journalists' self-perception noted that their "credo" is focussed on neutral reporting and oriented towards perceived public interest rather than business or audience interests.

In the same line, Ahva *et al.* (2017) remark that Nordic journalists see themselves as detached watchdogs and renounce the role of opportunist facilitator. Moreover, Väliverronen (2018, p. 62), maintains that Finnish political journalists show strong support for their role as detached analytical watchdogs and base their decisions on the industry code of conduct, "which further highlights their independence".

Digital journalists from three other European countries (Belgium, Spain and Italy) argue that the ethical exercise of journalism depends on external factors of a commercial, economic, political and technological nature. They place an emphasis on personal and professional values of journalists (Suárez-Villegas, 2015).

However, as we move east, journalists' perceptions change. Köylü (2006), for example, has highlighted that codes of ethics and standards are not being followed in the Turkish media because of commercial constraints underlined by an emerging monopoly in the media.

In China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, journalists themselves are receptive to freebies in the form of small gifts, meals and trips, although they almost unanimously agree that monetary benefits from news sources are unacceptable (Lo *et al.*, 2005; Lo and Wei, 2008). According to Motlagh *et al.* (2013), the majority of Malaysian journalists think they can use any method or technique to obtain news if it is of paramount importance to the public, including unethical methods such as hidden camera and hidden voice recorder.

In view of this changing landscape, authors such as Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001, p. 181) suggest that all journalists need a professional ethics framework within which to work for

the public interest and to provide information in a true, accurate and honest way. Such professional ethics form the basis for communication based on excellence and quality information (Mauri-Ríos and Ramon-Vegas, 2015). Professional ethics should be firmly based on principles which allow for compliance with correct professional practice.

It should also be taken into account that professional culture plays an important role in influencing journalists' ethical decision-making, as Lee and Coleman (2018, p. 12) state:

> The fact that journalists' perceptions of the ethical climate are influenced by FPP [first-person perception; according to it, individuals perceive a greater effect for self than others] and TPP [third-person perception; according to it, people tend to perceive that mass media messages have a greater effect on others than on themselves] is evidence of the importance of this culture and suggests that emphasizing an ethical organizational culture may help journalists resist occasional peer pressure to behave unethically.

Media accountability is an important ally when dealing with these pressures. As Alsius (2010) explain, it is a concept that refers to the willingness of the media to be transparent with society in the activity they carry out. Media accountability instruments (MAI) are key indicators of pluralism and transparency of the media in a democratic state (Bertrand, 2000, 2003). This is so to the extent that its essential function is to monitor, control, criticize and examine the evolution and quality of journalistic information and more in a context of sector crisis and media concentration (Eberwein, 2010).

Therefore, to implement MAI in the media "is usually linked to accepting certain responsibilities, tasks or objectives" (Christians *et al.*, 2010, p. 132). Real Rodríguez (2018) points out that there are three main tasks in media accountability. First, the media must publicly disclose the ethical and deontological norms behind journalists' activity. Second, that journalists must be able to apply these norms in their daily work and social life without conditioning or retaliation. Finally, journalists should reflect on their work and ensure that, in those cases where there has been failure, they should be accountable to the public so as to prevent re-occurrence. Thus, if media complies with these three conditions, it can be considered that it exercises accountability *vis-à-vis* its audience and general public (Puppis, 2009; Díaz-Campo and Segado-Boj, 2014).

In recent years, with the development of digital environments, new forms of transparency and quality control for information have emerged (Mauri-Ríos and Ramon-Vegas, 2015). Traditional instruments for accountability (deontological codes, style books, internal codes of practice, etc.) continue to have a strong presence in journalism (Ramón-Vegas and Mauri-Ríos, 2020, p. 72) although they need stronger presence. In the next section, we will focus on the ethical and deontological codes, which are the main object of study in this article.

Codes of ethics and journalism: an overview

The codes of ethics are one of the most widely used accountability instruments in journalism. Eberwein *et al.* (2018, p. 287) consider that "on the professional level [. . .] codes of ethics are crucial". However, its definition is complex because there are a variety of models, each of them focussed on certain aspects of journalism and adapted to the different media where they operate (Aznar, 2005). In general, a code of journalistic ethics (or a code of professional conduct) should be understood as an instrument of social responsibility that establishes an implicit contract between informants and citizens, an essential element to promote the quality of the information and, therefore, increase the democratic texture of a society (Mauri-Ríos, 2015). In other words, they are a resource through which the most

substantial and fundamental aspects of professional practice may be addressed and, specifically, in relation to its ethical dimension.

The professional codes refer to a set of principles intended to guide the daily conduct of the informants, or so-called professional routines, and to reveal, preserve and defend the core values of journalism as manifested in a series of responsibilities of concern to professionals, to companies and executives, to directors and to other institutions involved (Mauri-Ríos, 2015). As Himelboim and Limor explain, "codes of ethics are valuable for understanding journalistic roles at the organizational level and provide a means of comparing" (2010, p. 76). Although they have traditionally been in the media, codes of ethics are still present today. As Porlezza and Splendore (2016) point out, they are not only found in traditional media but also incorporated into more recent digital native media, as a formula for transparency towards the public.

It is worth noting that codes of ethics have always been considered as an internal character, both in their functioning and in their elaboration, as they served as a self-regulatory mechanism to guarantee the social right to receive information. However, the most widespread origin of these ethical codes lies in the efforts of journalists' organisations, Official Associations of Journalists, or journalists' trade unions to ensure media responsibility for society (Soria, 1984, p. 87). These organizations focus their work on controlling communication professionals and offering them recommendations to carry out their work responsibly and guaranteeing the fundamental rights of citizens. In other words, these are external instruments to control the work and functions of professionals and the media, which seek to raise awareness among journalists of their ethical responsibility according to the moral values of the profession (Aznar, 1999).

In spite of having a long tradition, ignorance of these tools by the profession can be a problem. In the research carried out by Herscovitz (2004, 2005) in Brazil, respondents who did not know the code of ethics or who knew it but did not employ it totalled 70% of the sample. Zalbidea *et al.* (2011) also pointed to an important ignorance of the codes of ethics by journalists in the Basque Autonomous Community.

The attitude of journalists towards codes also vary by region and country. According to Pratt (1990) and Pratt and McLaughlin (1989), in the beginning, countries in the Middle East, Latin America and Asia showed positive attitudes towards in-country codes of ethics, whereas other countries opposed such codes.

In Spain, where this study takes place, there are two ethical codes of reference, the content of which is developed and complemented by other instruments of professional self-regulation. The earliest of the two appeared within the *Col·legi de Periodistes de Catalunya* (Official College of Journalist of Catalonia) in 1992 and constitutes the first effort to democratize the profession. A year later, in November 1993, the Federation of Spanish Press Associations published its own code. However, this accountability instrument has been a core factor in the regulation of the profession.

It has been adopted by a multitude of established associations and international unions such as the Union of Journalists of Portugal (Code of Ethics), the Society of Professional Journalists of United States (SPJ Code of Ethics) or the American Society of Newspaper Publishers and the Poynter Institute (Asne/Poynter Ethics Tool), among others (Micó *et al.*, 2008).

This has led to a multitude of studies focussed on the analysis of the role of ethical codes within the media, both in Spain (Aznar, 1999; Alsius, 2010; Pérez-Fuentes, 2004) and other countries in Europe, America or Asia (Nordenstreng and Hannikainen, 1984; Weaver and Wilhoit, 1991; Bertrand, 2000; Hafez, 2002; Fengler and Ruß-Mohl, 2008; Himelboim and Limor, 2010). The general objective of these studies has been to

ascertain the main values comprised within the ethical codes and to compare different aspects of their content.

In relation to this, Alsius (1999, 2010) analysed more than 100 Spanish and international codes to establish a classification of their content. This research suggests that the principles of journalistic ethics, including the main Spanish and international codes, can be classified into four sections (principles of truth, justice, responsibility and freedom). Himelboim and Limor (2010) analysed 242 ethical codes from 94 countries around the world and identified a number of different roles: dissemination of information; commitment to the public interest; commitment to the public's right to know; promotion of pluralism in media; promotion of public trust in media; promotion of social values; and active participation in building society, amongst others. The media also has a role in seeking/pursuing truth, being free in a democratic society, serving as media watchdog and protecting public rights, amongst other priorities. Other recent studies in this field are those of Ikonen *et al.* (2017), where 40 codes from the USA and Finland are analysed to verify to what extent the separation between editorial and commercial content is highlighted. Yang *et al.* (2016) study 66 journalistic and public relations codes from 33 countries to analyse the ethical values they contain and to reach the conclusion that shared values exist.

However, one aspect that these studies do not address is the perception that journalists have of these instruments. Studies that focus on this perspective are still scarce (Herrera Damas *et al.*, 2018; Real Rodríguez, 2018). Considering the importance, timeliness and relevance of values in journalistic ethics and, by extension, the codes that reflect these values, there is a need to study the presence and impact of ethical codes in journalism alongside the views of journalists directly involved.

The main objective of this study is to understand Spanish journalists' perception of the efficiency of codes of ethics as a tool to develop a more ethical behaviour in journalistic media. In particular, it is keen to explore the perception of these instruments by journalists on the basis of two research questions.

RQ1. What are the personal variables that most affect the perception that journalists have of general ethical codes?

RQ2. What are the professional variables that most influence the perception that journalists have of the general ethical codes?

Methodology

The methodology used in the present study is based on quantitative content analysis using the survey technique. This technique makes it possible to obtain empirical data on various key aspects of the profession that are determining factors in ascertaining journalists' views of one of the instruments of accountability that is external to the media: general ethical codes.

In order that we might carry out an in-depth analysis of the issues that shape journalists' perceptions, our questionnaire was based on a total of 29 questions, which reviewed general aspects about instruments of accountability. Of these questions, those focussed on determine perceptions of the effectiveness of mechanisms imposed by organisations and institutions outside the media, such as journalists' associations or official schools, were selected. Specifically, this investigation starts with a classification of 13 external instruments divided into 2 groups: on the one hand, those who have a recognized tradition in the journalistic profession and, on the other hand, those who have been incorporated

recently as tools of self-regulation in the media thanks to the emergence and application of the internet in the journalistic field (Table 1).

The list of external instruments to the media on which the present study was based was established according to a classification devised by Mauri-Ríos (2015) for traditional instruments (those in existence before the emergence of the internet and social networks), such as general or specific ethical codes, media watchdog groups or professional clubs, amongst others. In relation to innovative instruments, it was based on another classification by Mauri-Ríos and Ramon-Vegas (2015), which focusses on those instruments that appeared during the internet era, such as blogs on media, or criticism of the media in blogs or on social networks.

At the same time, to delve deeper into the aspects that most influence journalists' perceptions of general ethical codes, the present research presents an analysis of two types of variables, personal variables and professional variables, which are divided into five categories (Table 2). Although (under personal variables) data do exist on the territorial distribution in Spain of the surveyed journalists, no significant differences were found among different territories, and this variable was therefore discarded.

Regarding the number of people who are professional journalists, in contrast to other countries such as France, Germany, Finland and Switzerland, in Spain there are neither official data on the demography of journalism professionals nor any group directory or census (Rodríguez-Martínez et al., 2017b; Fengler et al., 2015). Owing to this structural limitation, and within the framework of the European project *Media Accountability and Transparency in Europe* (MediaAcT, EU SSH-2009–5.1.1), it was decided to carry out a classification based on three criteria:

Traditional instruments	Innovative instruments
General ethical codes	Criticism of journalism by journalist bloggers
Specific and thematic ethical codes	Blogs about the media written by citizens and academics
Laws regulating the media	Criticism on social networks (for example, Facebook, Twitter, etc.)
Press clubs	
Professional unions	
Media watchdog groups	
Media/audiovisual councils	Others
Audience associations	
Sector journals on the profession of journalism	
Academic analysis of journalism	

Table 1.
Instruments of accountability external to the media

Personal variables	Professional variables
Age	Years of experience working as a journalist
Level of education	Type of medium in which the journalist works
	Present position in the communications company
	Years of experience working as a journalist

Table 2.
Demographic and professional variables examined in the present analysis

(1) the number of journalists who are members of professional associations;

(2) the different types of media; and

(3) the approximate number of journalists per region, given an estimated total population of 25,000 professional journalists in Spain.

In the project mentioned above, it was decided that, to guarantee a representative sample of Spanish journalists, any sub-sample should include a minimum of 100 participants (Eberwein *et al.*, 2014).

With regard to the profile of those surveyed, Weischenberg, *et al.* (2006, p. 227) suggest three basic characteristics as follows:

(1) working for a journalistic medium (thus excluding professionals who carry out public relations tasks);

(2) conducting journalism (thus excluding those who carry out technical or organizational tasks within the media industry); and

(3) having full-time employment or, at the minimum, receiving 50% or more of one's income from being a journalist.

It is worth noting that journalists who work freelance are also included in the third category, provided that 50% or more of their income comes from journalism.

Following these criteria, the final sample for the purposes of the present research consisted of 228 journalists, a total that constitutes a significant sample with data from professionals throughout Spain. Of these, 228, 52.2% ($n = 119$) were women and 47.8% ($n = 109$) were men. Additionally, 71.1% of those surveyed had university-level training in journalism. Finally, 53.1% stated that they belonged to a journalists' association or professional club.

Results

An analysis of the data obtained in the present study demonstrates that general ethical codes are considered by journalists to be the most highly valued instruments of accountability external to the media. These codes, characterized by guaranteeing that professionals do their work responsibly and with basic rights, scored 5.69 out of 10 from the 228 journalists surveyed for being the most effective tool for controlling the profession of journalism (Table 3).

These data are complemented by others that point to specialized ethical codes as the second most valued external instrument of accountability among journalists, who rated them at 5.66 out of 10 (Table 3). Specialized ethical codes concur with general ethical codes in guaranteeing journalism that is both responsible and in line with basic rights. Nevertheless, their use in newsrooms is primarily for defence and protection of certain roles or social issues, such as minors, gender violence or immigration.

Laws regulating the media show similar results (5.57), as do media/audiovisual councils (5.40). Both are considered by journalists to be the third and fourth most effective instruments, respectively (Table 3). These data are especially significant for two basic reasons. First, the present legislation that regulates journalism in Spain is the 1966 Press Law, which has been in effect for more than 50 years. Additionally, in Spain there are no specific territorial norms regarding freedom of the press, and the few that do exist in the autonomous regions regulate the duties and responsibilities of public media (Rodriguez-Martínez *et al.*, 2017a). Second, Spain currently has no media council or audiovisual council at state level. There are only two audiovisual councils with an established record, the

Audiovisual Councils of Catalonia and the Audiovisual Council of Andalusia, whose spheres of influence are limited to their own territories. In the remaining autonomous communities, on the one hand the creation of such institutions and the approval of legislation to regulate them are still in their initial stages or; on the other, they have similar institutions of which the sole function is to guide and advise journalism, but which lack disciplinary power. Thus, although the two instruments under consideration are evaluated positively by journalists, they have a limited effect on journalism in Spain.

Perceptions of the effectiveness of general ethical codes according to the personal variables of the journalists
In response to *RQ1*, the results of the present study reveal that personal variables such as the age of journalists are determining factors in the perception they have of general ethical codes. Thus, the older the professional in question, the greater his or her confidence in the effectiveness of these instruments of accountability. In fact, all journalists aged 45 or over agree in regarding this instrument as the most effective in applying accountability to media companies, over and above the twelve external instruments considered in the present study.

In contrast, the younger age groups, between 19 and 44 years of age, do not consider general ethical codes to be the most effective instrument of accountability, as in all cases they place it below other instruments examined in the present study (Table 4). It is relevant that it is the younger journalists, those between 19 and 24 years of age, who have a more negative perception of general ethical codes, given that they place them as the 5th most effective tool of accountability, below other tools such as Media watchdog groups (mean of 6.56), criticism on social networks (6.44), media councils or audiovisual council (5.78), academic analysis of journalism (5.78) and laws regulating the media (4.89) (Table 4).

Regarding the second personal variable considered in the present study, the level of training in journalism of those surveyed, the results reveal a distinct tendency in data referring to age. In this case, the lower the level of education, the greater the level of confidence in general ethical codes. Thus, those surveyed who have no formal education in journalism, those who have completed an internship within a single area of media and those who have been apprenticed in journalism are those who rate the effectiveness of this instrument most highly (Table 5). Among journalists with little or no training in journalism, it is only professionals who have no official qualifications who are most opposed to this

	Valid	Missing	Mean
Laws regulating the media	228	0	5.57
General ethical codes	228	0	5.69
Specific ethical codes	228	0	5.66
Press clubs	228	0	4.92
Professional unions	228	0	4.81
Media/audiovisual councils	228	0	5.40
Audience associations	227	1	4.51
Sector journals on the profession of journalism	228	0	3.73
Media watchdog groups	227	1	4.59
Criticism of journalism by journalist bloggers	228	0	4.47
Blogs about the media written by citizens	228	0	4.16
Criticism on social social media	228	0	5.08
Academic analysis of journalism	227	1	4.85
Other	22	206	2.73

Table 3.
Journalists' perceptions of the effectiveness of accountability instruments external to the media

instrument, ranking it behind other traditional ones such as Press Clubs (6.25) and Professional Unions (6.00) and behind innovative ones like Criticism on social networks (6.00) (Table 5).

With respect to professionals who have done official studies in journalism or communication, only those who hold a university degree in journalism (bachelor's fegree) consider general professional ethical codes to be the most effective instrument. Nevertheless, their level of confidence in the effectiveness of this instrument is lower than those of the other groups mentioned above (Table 5). Professionals who hold a master's or other postgraduate degree and, especially, those who have completed their doctoral dissertation on journalism have a lower opinion of the effectiveness of ethical codes compared to other groups (Table 5). Those who hold a doctoral degree in Journalism/Communication rate it as the seventh most effective instrument, after other classical instruments such as Academic analysis of journalism (mean of 6.63) and Laws regulating the media (6.00), as well as after emerging ones such as Blogs about the media written by citizens or academics (5.75), among others (Table 5).

Perceptions of the effectiveness of general ethical codes according to the professional variables of the journalists
In response to *RQ2*, work experience is one of the professional variables that has the greatest effect among the journalists surveyed on perceptions about the effectiveness of ethical codes. Specifically, professionals who have more than 20 years of experience are the only ones who consider this instrument to be the most valid when applying accountability to a medium (Table 6). Similar results were found among professionals who have between 1 and 5 years of experience and those who have worked for a journalistic company for 11–20 years. In this case, both groups believe that general ethical codes are the third most effective instrument for controlling and guaranteeing that the media fulfil their function in society (Table 6). In contrast, journalists who have less than a year of experience and those with 6 to 10 years of experience have the least confidence in general ethical codes compared to the effectiveness of other instruments, rating them as the 6th and 7th most useful instrument, respectively, when applying accountability to journalistic compositions (Table 6).

	19–24 Mean	25–34 Mean	35–44 Mean	45–54 Mean	55–64 Mean	65+ Mean
Laws regulating the media	4.89	5.60	5.81	4.98	6.03	7*
General ethical codes	4.78	5.53	5.54	5.81	6.24	7.5*
Specific ethical codes	4.44	5.53	5.58	5.83	6.03	7*
Press clubs	4.44	4.78	5.24	4.77	4.76	6.5*
Professional unions	4.67	4.88	5.10	4.51	4.47	7*
Media/audiovisual councils	5.78	5.62	5.36	5.06	5.50	6.5*
Audience associations	4.11	4.59	4.56	4.75	3.97	5*
Sector journals on the profession of journalism	3.00	3.48	3.96	3.98	3.32	6*
Media watchdog groups	6.56	4.57	4.92	4.36	3.71	6*
Criticism of journalism by journalist bloggers	4.33	4.45	4.57	4.57	4.24	3.5*
Blogs about the media written by citizens	4.00	3.91	4.42	4.32	3.88	3*
Criticism on social media	6.44	5.79	4.92	4.70	4.50	4.5*
Academic analysis of journalism	5.78	4.56	5.04	5.08	4.21	6.5*
Other	0*	3.14	1.57	5.40	0*	0*

Table 4.
Journalists'
perceptions
according to age

	No formal education Mean	Practicum in one medium Mean	Unofficial studies Mean	Journalism school Mean	University degree in journalism Mean	Master's degree in journalism or communication Mean	Doctoral dissertation in journalism or communication Mean
Laws regulating the media	5.80	5.67	4.50	6.57	5.49	5.69	6.00
General ethical codes	7.80	8.17	5.25	7.57	5.54	5.53	5.00
Specific ethical codes	6.80	7.50	6.00	7.43	5.51	5.58	5.25
Press clubs	7.80	5.67	6.25	6.14	4.72	4.97	4.75
Professional unions	7.40	5.83	6.00	5.00	4.69	4.67	4.75
Media/audiovisual councils	7.00	6.33	5.00	6.14	5.28	5.53	5.25
Audience associations	6.20	5.17	4.25	6.14	4.35	4.69	4.00
Sector journals on the profession of journalism	4.60	4.83	3.75	4.71	3.55	3.72	5.13
Media watchdog groups	6.00	5.83	3.75	6.14	4.29	5.28	4.88
Criticism of journalism by journalist bloggers	5.60	6.33	4.75	6.00	4.15	4.69	6.38
Blogs about the media written by citizens	3.20	6.17	3.75	5.43	3.96	4.31	5.75
Criticism on social media	4.60	6.33	6.00	5.14	4.98	5.42	4.63
Academic analysis of journalism	6.20	5.67	4.00	6.29	4.65	4.81	6.63
Other	2.5*				2.36	3.67	

Table 5.
Journalists' perceptions according to level of education

At the same time, data reveal two significant tendencies in groups that do not have more than 20 years of experience. First, groups with less work experience (from less than one year to 5 years) have the most confidence in innovative instruments of accountability. Thus, both of these groups believe that criticism through social networks is an optimal and effective tool for controlling the media. And second, professionals who fall into the groups with 6–20 years of work experience grant their most positive rating to tools with a longer tradition in accountability, such as media councils or audiovisual councils or legislation charged with regulating the media (Table 6).

Another of the professional categories that have the most influence on journalists' perceptions of general ethical codes is the one regarding the type of medium in which the journalist works. Thus, professionals who work for private companies are the most likely to evaluate general ethical codes within the journalistic company positively. These include, for example, professionals who work on weekly publications, on magazines and in private radio and television (Table 7). On the other hand, although journalists who work in public radio and television evaluate the effectiveness of this instrument positively, they place it after other instruments, such as laws regulating the media and media councils and audiovisual councils (Table 7). In this instance, it is workers in news agencies who have the worst perception of the functions exercised by general ethical codes on the profession of journalism, since they place them in seventh position, after other traditional instruments such as media councils and audiovisual councils and media watchdog groups, as well as after other innovative ones such as Criticism on social networks (Table 7).

Finally, it is important to note that, in the case of professional variables such as the position held by the journalist within the journalistic company, the present results reveal that journalists working in practically all jobs consider general ethical codes to be of great assistance in accountability. In fact, it is noteworthy that journalists holding positions that have greater responsibility, such as director or media representative (6.64) or head of news or news editor (5.73), are precisely those that have the greatest confidence in these instruments (Table 8). At the same time, section heads were found to rate general ethical

	Less than 1 year Mean	1–5 years Mean	6–10 years Mean	11–15 years Mean	16–20 years Mean	More than 20 years Mean
Laws regulating the media	5.80	5.67	4.50	6.57	5.49	5.69
General ethical codes	7.80	8.17	5.25	7.57	5.54	5.53
Specific ethical codes	6.80	7.50	6.00	7.43	5.51	5.58
Press clubs	7.80	5.67	6.25	6.14	4.72	4.97
Professional unions	7.40	5.83	6.00	5.00	4.69	4.67
Media/audiovisual councils	7.00	6.33	5.00	6.14	5.28	5.53
Audience associations	6.20	5.17	4.25	6.14	4.35	4.69
Sector journals on the profession of journalism	4.60	4.83	3.75	4.71	3.55	3.72
Media watchdog groups	6.00	5.83	3.75	6.14	4.29	5.28
Criticism of journalism by journalist bloggers	5.60	6.33	4.75	6.00	4.15	4.69
Blogs about the media written by citizens	3.20	6.17	3.75	5.43	3.96	4.31
Criticism on social media	4.60	6.33	6.00	5.14	4.98	5.42
Academic analysis of journalism	6.20	5.67	4.00	6.29	4.65	4.81
Other	2.5*				2.36	3.67

Table 6.
Journalists' perceptions according to years of work experience

	Daily Mean	Weekly Mean	Magazine Mean	Public radio Mean	Private radio Mean	Public TV Mean	Private TV Mean	Digital daily Mean	News agency Mean	Freelance Mean
Laws regulating the media	5.10	6.20	4.38	6.44	5.12	6.16	5.67	4.81	5.29	5.61
General ethical codes	5.33	7.00	5.50	6.24	5.76	5.89	6.44	4.81	5.43	5.44
Specific ethical codes	5.50	7.00	5.13	6.32	5.40	5.76	5.89	5.00	5.57	5.33
Press clubs	4.60	6.00	4.50	5.07	4.44	5.58	4.44	3.67	5.52	5.50
Professional unions	4.12	4.60	4.25	5.34	4.64	5.34	3.56	4.67	5.05	5.11
Media/audiovisual councils	4.67	6.20	3.50	5.80	4.40	6.18	6.22	5.57	6.05	5.22
Audience associations	4.27	4.60	3.75	5.05	3.84	4.61	4.89	3.81	4.95	5.00
Sector journals on the profession of journalism	3.79	6.00	2.75	4.34	3.16	3.84	3.33	2.57	3.95	3.83
Media watchdog groups	4.24	6.00	3.25	4.80	3.60	5.08	4.56	4.24	5.60	4.78
Criticism of journalism by journalist bloggers	4.07	4.60	2.88	5.15	4.24	5.08	4.11	4.05	4.52	4.17
Blogs about the media written by citizens	3.71	5.80	2.50	5.02	4.08	4.50	3.56	3.57	3.95	4.11
Criticism on social media	5.07	5.40	4.00	5.00	5.28	5.42	4.00	4.95	5.86	4.50
Academic analysis of journalism	4.83	6.80	4.00	4.98	5.16	5.05	4.00	3.67	5.48	4.61
Other	1.57	7*			2.5*	0.25	7.5*		3.67	3.33

Table 7.
Journalists' perceptions according to the medium in which they work

codes as the second most effective instrument (5.26), following only specialized ethical codes (5.53), a result that demonstrates that journalists with this professional profile also assign special relevance to the functions of self-regulation and control exercised by ethical codes in the profession (Table 8).

Freelance workers and writers have a similar perception and place only media councils and audiovisual councils (5.67) above general ethical codes (5.20). The only exception is found in the case of interns, who place the effectiveness of instruments such as criticism on social networks, information/audiovisual councils, and professional clubs and unions, among others, ahead of general ethical codes (Table 8).

Discussion

If we understand journalism as a profession whose mission is to guarantee the citizenship their right to information, it is essential to be familiar with the tools provided by the profession itself to be accountable to the public regarding this professional mission. Hence the importance of instruments of accountability and the perceptions of the professionals themselves regarding their effectiveness.

When analysing the perceptions of journalists, we should not ignore the effect of first-person and third-person perceptions. Regarding Lee and Coleman (2018), for example, US journalists believe that colleagues in their same organisation act unethically significantly less often and act ethically significantly more often than those at other organisations and in related industries.

In times of profound change in the journalistic profession, such as following a severe economic crisis entailing the closure of media and the proposal of new business models that are very different from those traditionally introduced in the area of communication, it becomes especially relevant to verify that professionals continue to have confidence in ethical codes as the most effective instruments of accountability external to the media. These data are consistent with results reported in the previous literature, in which it was

	Other (specify) Mean	Editor in chief/ Head of news/ News editor Mean	Section head Mean	Director/ Community media representative Mean	News writer Mean	Intern Mean	Freelance Mean
Laws regulating the media	5.54	4.85	5.37	6.21	5.78	8*	5.07
General ethical codes	5.73	5.73	5.26	6.64	5.68	7*	5.20
Specific ethical codes	5.69	5.45	5.53	6.64	5.69	7*	5.00
Press clubs	5.62	4.52	4.32	5.57	4.88	8*	4.93
Professional unions	5.31	3.85	4.56	4.86	4.93	8*	5.13
Media/audiovisual councils	5.85	4.97	4.68	5.36	5.48	9*	5.67
Audience associations	4.54	4.24	3.58	4.79	4.65	7*	4.73
Sector journals on the profession of journalism	4.31	2.91	3.16	4.43	3.81	5*	3.87
Media watchdog groups	4.69	4.39	3.67	4.50	4.68	8*	5.13
Criticism of journalism by journalist bloggers	4.58	4.15	3.53	5.79	4.50	7*	4.53
Blogs about the media written by citizens	4.12	4.03	3.68	4.86	4.18	6*	4.20
Criticism on social media	5.19	5.67	4.63	4.93	5.07	9*	4.20
Academic analysis of journalism	4.62	5.03	5.16	5.57	4.76	7*	4.33
Other	5.00		1.83	7*	2.45		0*

Table 8.
Journalists'
perceptions
according to the
position they hold in
their company

noted that the academics, and especially professionals in journalism, consider deontological codes to be a basic tool in the self-regulatory media system (Real Rodríguez, 2018).

Although thanks to new technologies, recent years have seen the appearance of new instruments that take advantage of the potentialities of the internet to apply accountability, professionals continue to have confidence in an instrument that has more than a century of tradition as the most effective in dealing with the public. In contrast to results reported by Herrera Damas *et al.* (2018), the present study demonstrates that Spanish journalists continue to support the effectiveness of traditional instruments, such as codes of ethics, above other innovative instruments of accountability that are the fruit of the emergence of the internet. The fact that this tool, which could be defined as a guide to help journalists resolve the deontological issues that can arise in the profession, is the most highly valued is an indication of the importance that professionals grant to essential ethical principles (McQuail, 1992; Alsius, 2010).

Nevertheless, Grynko (2012, p. 261) points to a possible shortcoming when he mentions that the codes may also represent "serious difficulties" in inculcating substantial ethical values in individual journalists and in the profession as a whole. Following Grynko, these difficulties may cause "a gap" between "moralistic" codes, which imply "general precepts" and "specific practices occurring in reality". This is also reflected in the study by Motlagh *et al.* (2013) according to which more than half of the respondents believe that journalism codes of ethics do not decrease the journalists' mistakes effectively, and cannot be formulated in a canon or set of principles.

Together with this result, the present study intended to demonstration how personal variables (age, level of education) and professional variables (years of work experience, type of medium in which the journalist works, present position in the communications company) influence the assignment of more or less impact on deontological codes as an instrument of accountability. This research demonstrates that there are three categories that are especially influential on the positive perception of the effectiveness of general ethical codes. First, with respect to personal variables, the age of the journalist was found to be a determining factor in the regard that he or she has for ethical codes (*RQ1*). Specifically, the older the professionals, the greater their confidence in ethical codes in accountability. Second, the present study demonstrates that work experience and the type of medium in which the journalist works are the professional variables that have the greatest impact on journalists' perceptions of this instrument (*RQ2*). Specifically, the longer the professional career of those surveyed, the greater their confidence in ethical codes. This result coincides with that indicated by the study by Motlagh *et al.* (2013) according to which there is a significant correlation between journalists' ethical perception and their work experience; the more experience they have, the more favourable perception they have regarding journalism codes of ethics. Likewise, coinciding with studies such as Suárez-Villegas (2015), it is observed that the ethical exercise of journalism depends especially on personal and professional values of journalists.

Additionally, those who work in private media rate the effectiveness of ethical codes above that of other instruments. Furthermore, although the youngest journalists and those who have worked the fewest years have a high opinion of ethical codes, they have greater confidence in other more innovative instruments.

Finally, another significant finding must be kept in mind. When codes of ethics are not rated as the most effective instrument, the surveyed journalists tended to favour Media Councils and Audiovisual Councils. Given this result, it is interesting to note how two entities with very little influence in Spain (if we compare them with the solvency of Media Councils such as the Independent Press Standards Organization in the UK, the Ordini dei Giornalisti in Italy or the Julkisen sanan neuvosto in Finland; or with Audiovisual Councils

such as the French Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel, or British OFCOM, for example) are viewed as very effective, which would suggest that Spanish journalists favour these entities having a greater presence in Spain.

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