Commercial pressures in Spanish newsrooms: Between love, struggle and resistance

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Abstract

The crisis affecting news organisations, along with their struggle to find a sustainable online business model, have challenged journalists' professional autonomy, as economic and commercial pressures find their way into journalists' daily practice. This research explores the perceived influence of commercial pressures on Spanish newsrooms, paying special attention to how journalists resolve and manage those conflicts within the limits of the media organisation. Through 50 in-depth, semi- structured interviews with Spanish journalists and editors, the findings emphasise the usual, while normalised prevalence of commercial pressures. The study argues that the newspaper crisis has weakened news organisations' independence from advertisers, as big corporations that concen- trate most of the market share have very significant structural influence. The article identifies the most common typologies of commercial pressures according to the producing source (internal or external), and addresses their main effects for journalism practice, specifically for journalists' autonomy and newspapers agenda setting. It concludes that in order to decrease advertisers' bar- gaining power, a more diverse organisational news media landscape needs to be enhanced and therefore, policymakers should accommodate shifts towards subscription and ensure a viable future for entrepreneurial journalism start-ups.

Keywords: advertisers; commercial pressures; market-driven journalism; professional autonomy; quality; agenda setting; journalism practice

During the past decades, news organisations have struggled to stop the deep finan- cial bleeding they are experiencing, which is due to the fall in sales in print operations as well as their general inability to find a sustainable online business model (Holcomb 2011; Siles and Boczkowski 2012; Hunter 2015). Many newspapers were forced to shut down or to implement budget cutbacks, resulting in a reduced number of journalists working with fewer resources (Ekdale et al. 2015; Goyanes and Rodríguez-Gómez 2018). The crisis of offline advertising, along with the online markets' incapability to counterbalance the losses, have led to tense commercial competition and increasing commercialisation of news (Campos-Freire 2010). In this context, there is growing concern about the potential effect of commercial pressures on newspapers and their impact on journalists' autonomy (McManus 1994; Berkowitz and Limor 2003; Fisher 2015). The prevalence, responses and mechanism through which these pressures influence journalism are the focus of this study.

The article examines how journalists respond to commercial pressures in Spain. Through 50 in-depth interviews with journalists from different national and regional news- papers, we try to elucidate on how news workers receive, perceive and resolve pressure from newspapers' advertisers. Our findings reveal the high, but normally accepted, level of commercial pressures in Spanish newsrooms and describe the morphology of the different types: external, (1) direct: advertiser–journalists and (2) indirect: advertiser-chain of command-journalist; and internal, (1) self-censorship and (2) through consultations with superiors. Our research shows that commercial pressures have a negative impact on jour- nalists' autonomy/practice and might pose a challenge for setting the agenda under strictly journalistic or informative standards. This study contributes to a growing body of scholar- ship on the effects of advertisers' pressures (Sjovaag 2013; Fisher 2015), considering the negotiation of its impact at the organisational level, and its resolution at the level of practice.

Literature Review

In order to analyse how Spanish journalists perceive and manage commercial press- ures in a landscape of increasing reliance on advertisement revenues, it is important to first understand how the commercialisation of journalism affects content decisions. We first return to early studies on the commercialisation thesis and then examine the specific case of Spain. From there, we turn to the different influences journalism is subjected to, specifically focusing on commercial pressures. Finally, we look at how the mechanics of commercial pressures work and the main effects they can have on journalists' autonomy.

The Commercialization of Journalism

According to recent scholarship on the "free to fee" transition (Goyanes 2014), many news organisations around the world are adjusting their online business models in order to respond to digital transformation while remaining profitable (Hunter 2015). The increasing pressure to find sustainable revenue models online that halt their economic haemorrhage is leading many organisations to implement paid content strategies and charge readers for news access and consumption (Holcomb 2011). At the same time, digital advertising reven- ues are shrinking and the online price is significantly lower than in print operations (Picard 2004), a fact that

directly affects the balance sheets of most media companies. In this regard, there is scholarly agreement that the traditional economic structure of journalism is being challenged, affecting the independence and trust in the media (Siles and Bocz- kowski 2012).

In this context, journalism as a profession, and journalist content as the output of this craft, is responding to these economic challenges by entering a process of commercialisa- tion, understood as the shift of priorities where boosting profit becomes more relevant than the public interest (McManus 2009). In an environment in which economic pressures are shaping the management (and thus the existence) of the news industry, many observers suggest that news organisations are being economically pushed to produce homogeneous, commercialised news, designed to "appeal to broad audiences, to entertain, to be cost effective and to maintain readers whose attention can be sold to advertisers" (Picard 2004, 61).

The "commercialization thesis" (Bolin 2014, 337) asserts that market demands are shaping the forms of radio and television, increasing the role of entertainment in all sorts of areas. The process of commodification of a commercialised workplace, along with the many market pressures that media organisations are currently experiencing, are increasingly dominating content decisions (McChesney 2003; Hanusch, Hanitzsch, and Lauerer 2017; Von Rimscha, 2015). One of the most insidious effects of the commercialisa- tion of news is the prevalence of profit-making over the traditional *ethos* of journalism (McManus 2009). As a result, media outlets that base their income on advertising revenues can prioritise the creation of an advantageous space for advertisers instead of the public interest for the audience (Baker 2002).

With the increasing dependence of media outlets on advertising revenues (Picard 2004), the influence that advertisers may wish to exercise on journalistic content also becomes a more relevant issue. This means that journalists might have to deal with commercial pressures on their work routines, and their strategies to deal with those pressures might differ according to both professional and organisational criteria. For instance, Nygren (2012, 79) states that "market-driven journalism can be a powerful constraint on internal autonomy when the wall between the newsroom and marketing department is broken". The growing influence of the advertising department can also impact the content that journalist must work with. The effects of news commercialisation become even more evident in the case of new digital media, where the limits between journalistic content and advertisement are more blurred than in print media (Howe and Teufel 2014) and where native advertisement redefines the notion of independence (Carlson 2015).

Several research reports have highlighted some of the current risks experienced by media systems, caused in part by the commercialisation of the news production business. The results of the 2016 Media Pluralism Monitor — MPM2016, a comparative study carried out at the European level — reveal that commercial and owner influence over editorial content is a very significant risk for media pluralism. Twelve out of 30 countries had a high-risk score for this indicator, while the national context for our research, that of Spain, was included at the medium risk level. The results of the MPM2016 also show that when it comes to assessing whether there is a systematic influence or there are systematic attempts to influence editorial decisions and content output, 40% of the countries under examination had a high-risk score. Practices like the appointment of like-minded editors or the promotion of a culture of self-censorship to avoid inconvenient content for the com- mercial interests of the organisations are listed among the most common ones (Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom 2017).

Commercial Pressures and their Effects on Journalism

Previous research on the mechanics of journalism pressures has identified the main typologies and effects on journalists' autonomy. According to Reich and Hanitzsch (2013), there is first a divide between the acknowledged pressures that journalist perceives and those subtler or indirect ones that may impact on their autonomy, without necessarily matching their

perceptions. Hanitzsch et al. (2010) classified perceived influences into six categories: political, economic, organisational, procedural, professional and reference groups. Örnebring et al. (2016) have worked with another dimension, workplace autonomy, which is related to the aforementioned procedural and professional categories.

Even though commercial pressures could be considered one of the main typologies affecting journalists' autonomy, Reich and Hanitzsch showed it was not so related to journalists' levels of perceived professional autonomy (Reich and Hanitzsch 2013). They argue that advertisement pressures were mediated through the media organisation and its editorial hierarchy, with journalists therefore not feeling directly affected. Another explanation could be what Örnebring et al. (2016) called the "third-person effect", the tendency for jour- nalists to acknowledge the existence of pressures on their autonomy while denying that they themselves experience them.

However, some of the main characteristics upon which the commercialisation of the news industry is consolidating, such as a deregulated labour market, short-term jobs and the drop in qualifications, have led to a decline of journalists' commitment to the profession's values, including professional autonomy (Örnebring 2010). According to recent studies (see McChesney 2004; Donsbach 2012), the growing economic pressures of news- papers have accentuated journalists' concern about their professional autonomy. This chal- lenge is particularly worrisome because it affects the decades-long struggle of journalism to attain consideration as a profession (Örnebring 2013; Meyers and Davidson 2016).

When it comes to breaking down the dimensions of professional autonomy, there is not a consensus. Considering the origin of the pressures, a distinction can be made between pressures coming from outsiders, that is, external agents trying to influence journalistic content, and by insiders, including both pressures flowing through the chain ofcommand and those established by journalists themselves. According to Reich and Hanitzsch (2013), professional autonomy can be, on the one hand, political autonomy, referring to journalists' protection from external coercive forces coming from the political context. On the other hand, autonomy also relates to how the decision-making process should be free from any pressure from the news environment — including commercial factors. This conceptualization is similar to the one defended by Nygren, Dobek-Ostrowska, and Anikina (2015), who state that professional autonomy consists of two dimensions: external, when it comes to the relation between the profession as a group and the powers in society; and internal, related to the position of the journalist within the media company. Both typologies are very close to the approach that Reich and Hanitzsch (2013) developed based on the notion of latitude that Weaver et al. had used for their 2007 study on the American journalist in the twenty-first century (Weaver et al. 2007). According to these authors, latitude could be understood both as the freedom available within the operational routines of journalism as well as the extent to which journalists can influence and be part of the decisions taken within the editorial hierarchy (Reich and Hanitzsch 2013).

Autonomy is continuously being negotiated and it may vary according to several factors. The position of the journalist within the hierarchy of the enterprise has an influence on their level of autonomy: the higher the position, the greater the autonomy (Sjovaag 2013), as subverting unofficial newsroom policy tends to be restricted to the most senior reporters with a professional reputation (Berkowitz and Limor 2003). The type of media outlet also plays a role in professional autonomy: journalists working in free from commer- cial and corporate media (e.g. public media) usually experience a higher degree of auton- omy (Sjovaag 2013). All these factors point to how professional autonomy should always be considered within the limits of the organisational context.

However, journalists can develop strategies when dealing with both internal and external pressures, which may be understood from matters regarding professional autonomy, such as self-censorship or objections against those pressures, to others influencing the agenda-setting processes. According to Borden (2009), journalists either may try to subvert organisational

goals through protests and sabotage while others would apply more diplo- matic strategies that allow for some balance between organisational goals and ethical ideals. Another strategy would imply some kind of self-censorship. When journalists wish to maintain their professional integrity while not upsetting the advertisers, they may opt for avoiding negative reporting about the product by not writing about it at all Hanusch, Hanitzsch, and Lauerer 2017). Among the main ways journalists try to avoid these commercial influences, the authors highlight the fact that self-censorship is also related to the socialization processes that take place within the news company, which would imply that journalists internalise the values, goals and structures of the organisation, even if they do not agree with them, in order to avoid open conflict and negative consequences (Skovsgaard 2014).

Despite the importance of understanding how commercial pressures are resolved and how the internal socialisation processes work, there has been little evidence that sheds light on these matters (Weaver et al. 2007; McManus 2009; Boczkowski 2010). And while there are several factors that influence the autonomy of journalists, this study focuses on one of the streams that Reich and Hanitzsch found to be "not significantly related to journalists' professional autonomy" (Reich and Hanitzsch 2013, 147). Thus, the present study focuses on the prevalence, responses and mechanisms through which com- mercial pressures influence journalism within a context of increasing commercialisation of news. Consequently, we posed the following research questions:

> RQ1. What is the prevalence and phenomenology of commercial pressures in Spanish newsrooms, according to their main sources, agents involved (interactions) and management?
>
> RQ2. How are commercial pressures solved and how do they affect journalists' daily practice and professional autonomy?

Method

We conducted in-depth interviews with 50 Spanish journalists and editors. The semi-structured interviews were carried out between March and September 2017. We conducted these types of interviews as this method allowed us to obtain in-depth knowledge from a person's "lived experience" and "perspective" (Johnson and Rowlands 2012, 100). From an analytical point of view, the purpose of semi-structured interviews is to find patterns from the "thick descriptions" offered by participants (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006, 119).

Sample and Procedure

We used purposive sampling, specifically maximum variety sampling. Following Patton (2002), participants were chosen in order to reflect a large diversity in information-rich cases relevant to our research interest: different news organisations, sections of newspapers and professional autonomy. As a consequence, our interviewees represent a great heterogeneity in their profiles, both in the sections they belong to (politics, international, sports, culture, etc.), the geographical level covered (national and regional), demography (men and women of different ages and experience) and autonomy (respondents included editors, deputy editors, head of sections, reporters, columnists and reporters on internships). The confidentially of interviewees was guaranteed, so whenever their identities could be jeopardised, we decided not to include their affiliations when reporting data (seven cases in total).

Thirty of our interviewees belong to the major national newspapers (El País, El Mundo, ABC,

La Razón, El Diario.es and El Confidencial) and 20 to newspapers at a regional level (La Voz de Galicia, Faro de Vigo, La Vanguardia and El Periódico de Catalunya). The interviews were transcribed and eventually codified and analysed by the first author. The final sample represented a wide range of demographic data and work profiles. To obtain saturation of ideas, we intentionally sought out both very young journalists and highly experienced journalists. Fifty-five per cent of our final sample were men, while 45% were women. The age of journalists ranged from 24 to 64, although most were between 30 and 40 years old.

Interview Guide

The interview guide addressed three topic areas. The first part concerned journalists' perception of commercial pressures in the Spanish media system and in their respective news organisations. The questions addressed journalists' knowledge and prevalence of commercial pressures, how these pressures differ depending on the nature and organisational structure of their newspapers and the most influential actors. The second part concerned the description of the main commercial pressures typologies: the questions addressed how journalists experience commercial pressures, who the main producing sources are and the crucial agents involved in those interactions. This second section is addressed according to two dichotomies of commercial pressures: external/internal and direct/indirect. The third part focused on how commercial pressures are managed and solved and how this response affects journalists' autonomy and daily practice according to their own experience.

Coding and Analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim following transcription rules proposed by Dresing and Schmieder (2013). We conducted a thematic analysis, which posits "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun and Clarke 2006, 79). Braun and Clarke (2006) propose an analytic procedure that comprises six phases that allow for systematization and transparency of the coding and analysis process, which we followed. Codes and thematic maps were discussed with two independent researchers, who then reported on refinement of themes, their definition and naming. The thematic analysis enabled us to identify shared patterns across the statements of various interviewees centred around our three research interests, while maintaining flexibility to identify other emerging themes. Next, we will discuss the key findings.

Results

Level of Commercial Pressures and Main Actors

All our interviewees had experienced commercial pressures at some point in their professional careers. The form, typology and most of all their effects on professional autonomy allow for nuances, according to their testimonials. Evidence gathered points to a common perspective, summarised in the following quote: "There has always been commercial pressures. Achieving the desired effect of these pressures is quite another thing" (Journalist from La Vanguardia). Most of the interviewees also point to a severe limitation on their journalistic freedom resulting from the lack of financial solvency in their organisations

stemming from the grave crisis today in journalism. This translates into a greater vulnerability.

> When the economic soundness of the company is weak, the advertiser, shareholder or a bank granting a loan has more power than when its financial conditions are favourable. (Journalist from ABC)

> At a time when media outlets are facing such a deep crisis of resources, and when there are so many journalists losing their jobs, we are increasingly vulnerable to commercial pressures. (Journalist from La Vanguardia)

All our interviewees interpret commercial pressures as an intrinsic element of journal- ism. "Commercial pressures are common in newspapers. It is inherent to journalism. We, and all the media outlets, have them" (Journalist from La Razón.) While most of our inter- viewees assume that the effects of commercial pressures have a strong impact on pro- fessional freedom and autonomy, they are also "aware", they "logically understand" and "realise" that news organisations have their own economic interests and, thus, offer "something in exchange" to major advertisers.

> I would love to have a 100% free leadership, but it does not exist and all the media outlets, to a greater or lesser extent, have their interests, as they have owners, and I understand that they do not invest in newspapers so those newspapers attack their owners and stakeholders. (Journalist from ABC)

> We work for a private newspaper and thus I understand that there might be something offered in exchange, such as pampering advertising companies. (Journalist from El Mundo)

> I fully understand that ABC does not explicitly exercise critics on a self-interest. (Journalist from ABC)

All our interviewees from local newspapers acknowledge that the crisis in journalism and the loss of newspaper readership has triggered a change in the business paradigm: traditionally, companies with the power to influence were large holdings. In recent years, though, given the increasing need for capital, news outlets are increasingly being pressured by small and medium-sized enterprises.

> Things that only used to happen with El Corte Inglés, now happen with anybody. (Journalist from La Voz de Galicia)

> Pressures used to come from a very limited group of companies with heavy advertisement investments in newspapers. Today, any local organisation can exert direct pressure. (Journalist from Faro de Vigo)

According to testimonials gathered, this paradigm change is more accentuated in local organisations due to their need to build up and maintain a network of relations with small and medium-sized companies in their area of influence.

> A newspaper like ours, a local one, requires a network of partners at a local level. Therefore, we also need to nurture small and medium-sized companies. The crisis, of course, has increased their bargaining power. (Journalist from Faro de Vigo)

The testimonials gathered do not allow for a differentiation between the level and effects of commercial pressures according to the nature of the newspaper (traditional printed media vs. digital natives). As stated earlier, most of our interviewees embrace the perspective suggested at the beginning of this section. However, the complexity/simplicity of the organisational structure and the newspaper's revenue system are key factors determining their effects. A journalist from Eldiario.es and another from 20Minutos reflect upon these two perspectives as follows:

> The good thing about the Eldiario.es financing system is that it does not only depend on advertisers, but on subscribers as well, who represent around one-third of the total financing. This therefore allows us to benefit from greater autonomy. Losing an advertiser is painful for any media outlet, but it is milder in our case. This loss does not result in the project being less feasible. (Journalist from Eldiario.es)

> We are relatively young and solvent as a company. Maintaining our newsroom is not expensive in comparison with other newspapers. This allows us greater flexibility and therefore greater bargaining power with our advertisers. (Journalist from 20Minutos)

The influential companies most referred to are big corporations that make large advertisement investments in Spanish newspapers. The testimonials gathered are in reference mostly to banks like Santander and BBVA, La Caixa in Catalonia, large telecommunication companies such as Telefónica, energy companies such as Endesa, Inditex from the textile sector and, above all, a retailer such as *El Corte Inglés*. This last company is referred to by most of our interviewees.

> Usually, it's the bosses who tell us journalists, verbally, not to write a negative headline about *El Corte Inglés* or about certain Catalan bank groups.

> We don't speak badly about *El Corte Inglés* because if a company like that wasn't happy with us and decided to withdraw its advertisement, well, that would greatly harm us, not only at a group level, but also at an individual level, because that could translate into dismissals.

> I would never tell one of my journalists "hey, do some research, let's see what you find on *El Corte Inglés*". I don't see myself saying that sentence because it doesn't suit neither me or my group, because of the advertisement coming through.

Typologies of Commercial Pressures

An interpretation of the testimonials from our interviewees enables us to distinguish between two types of commercial pressures, according to the producing source: external and internal. Depending on the agents involved, external pressures may be direct (advertiser–journalist) or indirect (advertiser-chain of command-journalist). Internal pressures are those produced at an individual level (dependent on the journalists' experience/discretion but also on the newsroom climate), or at an organisational level (through consultations). According to our evidence, the most frequent pressures are the internal ones at the individual level and the external-indirect ones, while the external-direct ones are more "occasional", "exceptional" and "specific" Table 1.

Table 1. Typologies of commercial pressures

Source	Types and agents involved	Implementation	Level of decision	Process	Motivations
	Direct:	Conversations	Individual (journalist)	Post hoc	Complaining, criticizing,

External (outsiders)	advertiser – journalist				explaining, correcting
	Indirect: advertiser – chain of command – journalist	Explicitly: conversations and orders	Organizational (hierarchies)	Post hoc and A priori	Complaining Preventing
		Implicitly: guidelines, indications and recommendations			
Internal (insiders)	Ideological / Editorial, dependent on journalists and newsroom climate	Self-censorship	Individual (journalist) and collective (newsroom)	A priori	Preventing
	Ideological / Editorial, dependent on management	Consultations and censorship	Organizational (hierarchies)	A priori	Corporative sense
					Professional-preventive sense
					Practical sense

First of all, external-indirect pressures are those produced by advertisers and received by journalists through the newspaper's chain of command with the aim of conditioning their professional autonomy: explicitly via conversations ("Yesterday so-and-so has called to complain … be careful" or "César Alierta [former Telefónica CEO] has called and is seriously annoyed"), or implicitly through "guidelines", "indications" and "recommendations" not specifying concrete pressure, but referring to the general editorial treatment of major advertisers. Journalists from ABC, La Vanguardia and El Mundo offer a perfect example of how these pressures are frequently produced:

> It is more likely that pressures are not addressed to journalists, but to their immediate superiors. What companies usually do, in a subtle and sibylline way, is to pressure the news organization itself, which in turn exercises pressure on journalists. Let's say that it is not direct pressure on news workers, but pressure from the news organization in order for journalists to themselves be conditioned by indications from a superior, from their own organisation. (Journalist from ABC)
>
> There are indications, coming whether from the editorial direction, the corporate direction or the business direction, that guide you or tell you "we need to try to be a bit more dip- lomatic, because it can go against our interests". It is true that editorially those lines tend to be crossed and there is where frictions appear, in the shape of calls from directors, direct complaints to journalists, etc. (Journalist from ABC)
>
> Commercial pressures tend to be much more indirect, as the company complains to a superior, and the superior presents the complaint to you. (Journalist from La Vanguardia)
>
> Most of the time pressures do not come to me, the newsmaker, but to superiors, in order to stop you or give you clear guidelines. (Journalist from El Mundo)

According to our findings, the impact of external-indirect pressures is managed at an organisational level, that is, the different hierarchical levels (and not newsmakers themselves), are those who know and determine how those pressures may affect the newsroom's autonomy. A journalist from La Vanguardia and El País explain it as follows:

> Editors receive calls and, depending on their criteria, decide whether that call should be heeded or ignored. (Journalist from La Vanguardia)

> It is the management who decides how to approach certain pressures depending on who the producer is. (Journalist from El País)

The management process tends to be post hoc, with the aim of "passing the adver- tiser's complaint on to journalists once the news story is published" (Journalist from El Mundo), although it may be done a priori, that is to say, "taking preventive measures when an advertiser knows you are investigating something" (Journalist from ABC). According to the testimonials gathered, the chain of command may transfer those pressures to journalists through direct conversations and guidelines, although it is also true that many journalists are completely unaware:

> Pressures I know were never delivered to reporters, but there were meetings among businessmen/women and the newspaper managers. (Journalist from El Mundo)

> Usually when a decision is taken, I don't know, about the review of certain information or the attempt to stop it, I do not see it, because those things are discussed and managed during newsroom meetings with chief editors, and I am not present. In our daily routine, my interlocutor is my chief editor, who is the one who will eventually deal with those pressures. (Journalist from El Mundo)

However, hierarchy not transferring pressures does not mean that newsrooms are not "aware" and "informed" of the existence of external-indirect pressures. After all, "we all know what we do and how this works" (Journalist from 20Minutos). Thus, the fact that most of the interviewees are "aware", "keep up with" and "know" that these external pressures may occur, leads to these pressures being effective even without being exercised, as journalists "assume", "understand" and "take for granted" that they are going to be pressured and, hence, stop researching or "galvanize" the story. Various journalists make reference to this process:

> Many times pressures are effective without these even being exercised by big advertisers, as the one who knows that is going to be pressured, stops the story before or nuances it. (Journalist from La Vanguardia)

> For obvious reasons, there are some pressures I know they will occur before they actually do. If certain information affects a shareholder of the publishing group to which I belong, or a bank with a person on the executive board, you previously know that those pressures will arise. (Journalist from ABC)

> You are aware, and you more or less know who your advertisers are and you don't try to sell certain issues, because you know that your managers are not going to buy them. (Journalist from Faro de Vigo)

To refer to this kind of non-accomplished pressures and, thus, ones that are self- imposed and taken for granted, journalists talk about "self-censorship", "self-pressure", "self-control" and "self-regulation", which we conceptualise as internal pressures, depending on the journalist and the newsroom climate (editorial and ideological). According to our respondents, it is a standardised process within newsrooms and, therefore, something "common in the profession" (Journalist from El Confidencial). Unlike external-indirect and direct pressures (which shall be described below), self-censorship is an a priori process, preventive and thus exercised before the material is published. Likewise, self-censorship responds to journalists' individual criteria, as they themselves limit their own professional autonomy, according to the "newsroom climate", "the newspaper's interests", the "guidelines specified or taken for granted", the "latent pressure" and their "own experience in the newsroom".

There is a latent pressure in which reporters know more or less where the red lines are. The editorial guidelines are clear, as ABC is a Catholic newspaper, economically liberal and socially conservative, and it supports Real Madrid. You know the framework within which you work and thus you must adapt your work to those guidelines. (Journalist from ABC)

Self-control does exist, one knows where the limits are. (Journalist from La Vanguardia)

Many times, we ourselves soften contents as default without the need to receive any order. (Journalist from El País)

The entire newsroom has companies in its mind, which are advertised in all the media outlets, and you know that some lines should not be crossed, lines that most likely have not been pointed out to you, because you just assume them, through your daily practice, through the media agenda that all newspapers share, I mean, you know before-hand, there is no need for anyone to tell you. (Journalist from El Mundo)

Most of the respondents complement self-censorship with consultations with man- agers in case some information generates doubts or is problematic for the newspaper's interest (internal pressures dependent on management). The aim of these consultations is threefold: a corporative sense by "determining or agreeing on the pertinence, tone and perspective of the content" (journalist from El Mundo); in a professional-preventive sense by "informing about the process of news production" (journalist from El País); and lastly, in a highly practical sense, that is to say, to "not do the work twice" (journalist from La Voz de Galicia). Individual pressure, hence, is complemented in many cases by a hierarchical filter. The management process of consultations made to higher-ups is clearly exemplified by a reporter from El País:

> What I do is to show the story to my chief editor. That makes things easier, as I sit with him and tell him: "That is what we have and it will lead to problems". (Journalist from El País)
>
> When I am facing controversial information, what I do is to go straight to my director's office and tell him: "look, we have this news story", and then he is the one who decides if we go ahead depending on the relevance of the information. Personally, I wouldn't even think about taking the decision of publishing this kind of news without previous consultation with the director. (Journalist from Faro de Vigo)
>
> When this type of problem arises, I try to do what I consider ethical and appropriate, and before publishing I get the last word from the leading manager. (Journalist from 20Minutos)
>
> I think that there are certain advertisers and companies with which you know that regard- less of the media outlet you are working with, you need to be careful, and those are topics that obviously you consult on before, you consult with your superiors, and that your superiors consult with their superiors. (Journalist from La Voz de Galicia)
>
> You are not going to write something that will not come to light. (Journalist from La Vanguardia)

Direct external pressures are those exercised by newspapers' advertisers on reporters. According to our respondents, these kinds of pressures are much less frequent than indirect ones and require, in the majority of cases, a fluent relationship between journalists and advertisers, in such a way that the organisation contacts the media worker directly.

> On many occasions, the fact of having a good relationship with the company concerned means that they call you directly. (Journalist from El Mundo)

> Direct pressures exist, but they depend on the relationship they [advertisers] have with you. There are organizations which deal more with the reporter, so they try to influence you. (Journalist from La Voz de Galicia)

The goal of these types of pressures, most of them post hoc, is analogue to the others, which means that "they call you directly asking you for explanations, complaining, correcting you and criticizing you" (journalist from El Mundo). However, according to the testimonials gathered, these direct external pressures are mostly exerted by press officers, who try to defend the interests of advertising companies when faced with controversial information.

> Sometimes you receive a call, maybe you are corrected for information that you have pub- lished, and then it is your task as a reporter to know whether this information that is being pointed out is actually giving further information or qualifying something, or it is just pressure for you not to publish something. (Journalist from 20Minutos)

According to our findings, there is a wide spectrum of circumstances that trigger the implementation of commercial pressures. From a theoretical point of view, these reasons may be more or less serious, but all of them somehow undermine the reputation and image of advertisers, according to their point of view. Our testimonials encompass their range: disclosing data that were hidden, comparisons between companies, misunderstand- ings, real but negative information and journalistic malpractice as well. Below an example regarding real but negative news is reflected:

> The only case I experienced was a headline on Nocilla. It was a case in which, I think, certain European cities had lodged a complaint about Nocilla to the European Commission, arguing that the quality of the product sold in their cities did not correspond to the one expected. So, I titled the news story according to this information. After a few hours, I saw my headline replaced by another. But the news itself, the text, had not been modified at all. And I asked my chief editor what had happened, and he told me that someone had called and told him we'd better change that headline. I was perplexed. We had a heated discussion and all I was able to achieve was upsetting my boss.

Effects of Commercial Pressures

According to our findings, commercial pressures affect journalistic practice. Our testimonials provide several examples of the pressures' morphology, most of them very similar in the different newspapers interviewed, thereby suggesting relatively widespread commercial influence patterns in the Spanish media system. The most frequent effects of commercial pressures refer both to the professional autonomy of journalists and to agenda setting Table 2.

In terms of professional autonomy, the most important effects refer to the perspective, extension and rigour/excess of zeal regarding content and, more dangerously, total censorship (all of them a priori), modification of content and unpublishing (both post hoc). Regarding perspective, when dealing with content that affects major advertisers directly, most of our interviewees try "not to strengthen the wording", to "be nice", to "temper" or to "control themselves" in order to, as far as possible, offer valuable insights while not generating a negative image of advertisers. Various journalists make reference to this process:

> Maybe we might not strengthen the wording too much on someone with a close

relationship with someone from the newspaper. (Journalist from ABC)

What we sometimes do is to smooth over the content. (Journalist from Faro de Vigo)

The content is softened or the name of the brand does not explicitly appear. If there was the case of an extreme pressure, the name of the company might not appear in the headline, or the picture of the company's headquarters might not be included. (Journalist from La Vanguardia)

If we know we are dealing with information that may affect an advertiser, without anyone telling us anything, we treat it with more affection and care than the rest of information that does not concern advertisers. (Journalist from 20Minutos)

Table 2. Effects of commercial pressures.

Effect	Type	Explanation
Professional autonomy	Perspective	Avoid offering a negative image of advertisers
	Extension	Limit the extension of challenging information
	Excess of zeal	Be more careful about meeting the norms of journalism in sensitive cases where advertisers might react *post hoc*. The pressure actually results in better and more careful journalism
	Total censorship	Exceptional cases. Prohibit the publication of news about certain brands
	Modification of content	Changing contents *post hoc*
	Un-publishing	Remove information from the web *post hoc*
Agenda setting	Positive-exposition	Excessive positive coverage of advertisers

Limiting the length of the content that affects one of the newspaper's advertisers is also referred to by our respondents:

For instance, if we have information about a bank that has a close relationship with us, instead of publishing the content in two pages we publish it in one. (Journalist from La Vanguardia)

When dealing with problematic issues, if appropriate I may be told to shorten the information. (Journalist from La Voz de Galicia)

There are things that, instead of taking up a big space, are published in a reduced version. (Journalist from Faro de Vigo)

Our respondents agree that the most striking effect of commercial pressures is the one regarding the accuracy of the news production process. Specifically, our evidence suggests a polishing or excess of zeal in the news treatment when the focus deals with major advertisers. The rigour regarding the norms and values of journalism is strengthened, whilst the affected organisations usually have their say.

If there is information concerning a major advertiser, then the chief editor will ask us to close up all the loopholes. (Journalist from El Mundo)

> When we talk about a company, even an institution that advertises with us, well, there is double care. We read it carefully. (Journalist from Eldiario.es)

> You must beware of not publishing, first, anything that had not been checked and, second, also provide the company's version, in case it is information affecting it negatively. (Journalist from 20Minutos)

> Things are usually published, but rigorously so and verifying all the sources without being sensationalist in the headlines. (Journalist from La Vanguardia)

Testimonials gathered on total censorship over information affecting negatively an advertiser point to scarce and exceptional cases. According to our interviewees, when faced with information that negatively affects one of the advertisers, the newspaper usually publishes the information (with the aforementioned difficulties and clarifications).

> Negative information, when you have it, is really hard to stop, it is really hard, and even more so if it is high-profile news. (Journalist from El Mundo)

> If it is very important, of course, you have to publish it. (Journalist from Faro de Vigo)

> Bad news cannot be hidden, because it is impossible and it goes against your credibility as a newspaper. (Journalist from El País)

However, we have also gathered testimonials in which the newspaper management offers clear guidelines on the treatment of negative news about certain advertisers (ideo- logical/editorial, dependent on management):

> A brand is accused of having copied, of having appropriated the work of other designers, well, the course of action imposed by the direction is not to publish certain things, not to go against the brand, against certain brands, but to avoid them. There are things that are overlooked and not published.

Changing contents once they have been published and un-publishing are practices referred to by our respondents. In those cases, the chain of command (organisational structure) is in charge of the decision-making. The following examples illustrate this situation:

> One time the newspaper modified the news story to support the interests of a bank, while I had written much more lukewarm information. It reflected the bank's position, but also other views, and so I ensured balance, which was the story. But it was modified and some information I could not verify, because I strongly think that it was not actually true, was included, but it was included as true for the benefit of certain banks. And I found it intolerable.

> We did a news story in which a client protested because of the sizing used by Zara. So I published it, it was posted in social media, and I automatically received calls [from superiors]. I was told: "Remove that information from social media, from the web and un-publish it". And more than once we unpublished issues that were not commercially pertinent.

In the event of lack of agreement in an organisation vs. journalist conflict regarding the tone, perspective and veracity/relevance of a negative information of an advertiser, the withdrawal of the signature is the most common tool for journalists to protect their professional autonomy. The following testimonies illustrate how journalists decide to withdraw their signature when experiencing incidents that challenge their autonomy:

> If you [editor] want that story [a story not supported by real facts], do not worry, I will

> write it for you and embellish it, but not under my signature. I only sign what I subscribe to. (Journalist from *ABC*)

> If you don't want to publish it, you don't publish it [true but negative information for an advertiser], you are the boss [editor] and you are the one making the decision. If you want me to change the headline or content, then I withdraw my signature, period! That is the only thing you have left when you work in this craft, to sign or not to sign. (Journalist from *Faro de Vigo*)

> We eventually change headlines due to these pressures and of course I withdraw my signature from the interview. That is a journalist's weapon, isn't it? Their signature. (Journalist from La Vanguardia)

Finally, according to our interviewees, commercial pressures regarding the link between the interests of an advertiser and the agenda-setting (positive exposure) are pro- duced through "nice stories" or "positive news" (Journalist from Faro de Vigo). The space allocated for this kind of content (promotional events from the presentation of results to the launching of products or the development of sponsorship actions) overlaps the journal- istic criterion itself. Many testimonials exemplify this:

> The Mobile World Congress is important for La Vanguardia. It is true that it is an important event, but it got a front page presence that was beyond the one received by other journalistic issues that could have been more relevant. So that forces you to cover information even beyond journalistic criterion, because there were issues that we wouldn't have published, or that we wouldn't have covered for so long. (Journalist from La Vanguardia)

> We sometimes get information that has been defined at higher levels that usually would not be published, and if it is, it is just because it benefits some of our advertisers. (Journalist from 20Minutos)

> I think that more than not acting and not producing negative news, it is more a matter of blowing the positive ones out of proportion, and not only that, but also of giving space to news that would not have room if it wasn't for some kind of commercial interest. (Journal- ist from La Voz de Galicia)

> There are cases where some information must be published because it is about an advertising company, which in different circumstances you wouldn't cover; and some other likely newsworthy issue, well, you don't cover it. (Journalist from El País)

> There is pressure coming from the advertisement department for us to cover companies that place a lot of advertisements. (Journalist from La Voz de Galicia)

Discussion and Conclusions

In this study, our aim has been to advance knowledge on the perception, typology and effects of commercial pressures on journalists' autonomy. Drawing on the literature on commercial pressures in journalism and carrying out 50 interviews of journalists from different Spanish newspapers, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the reception, perception and resolution of pressures from newspapers' advertisers, con- sidering the negotiation of its impact at the organisational level, and its resolution at the level of practice.

Our study demonstrates that commercial pressures are normal, naturalised and normalised by

Spanish journalists. As many studies in other settings have shown (Fisher 2015; Hanusch, Hanitzsch, and Lauerer 2017; Hunter 2015), and according to our evidence, pressures from advertisers are frequent in Spanish newsrooms, which suggests they may constitute the de facto journalistic norm. From a professional point of view, it is reasonable to think that journalists understand advertisers' demands "logically", since they belong to newspapers with goals, values, structures, stakeholders and economic interests they know and internalise (Preston 2009, 79). They might disagree or not, as well as possibly try to adapt to them without internalising an open conflict with them (Breed 1955). However, what advertisers' pressures could achieve at the organisational level is that their influence (at the level of practice) might prevail over the norms and values of journalism.

The study also casts light on the effects of the newspaper crisis on news organis- ations' autonomy. The financial constraints of many newspapers, the need for profits, and the need to foster commercial loyalty (Campos-Freire 2010), increase the bargaining power of advertisers and thus their capacity to challenge news organisations' autonomy. In addition, the economic situation also extends this bargaining power to small and medium-size companies traditionally neglected in these negotiations. According to our evi- dence, resisting and managing commercial pressures is increasingly more complex for news organisations, while more effective for many advertisers. In this context, we argue that in order to decrease advertisers' bargaining power, a more diverse organisational news media landscape needs to be enhanced. Therefore, policymakers should accommo- date shifts towards subscription (implementing, for instance, policies of direct and indirect public aid as were developed by France, Portugal and the Nordic countries) and ensure a viable future for entrepreneurial journalism start-ups.

Our findings not only reveal the existence of commercials pressures but also the main actors, typologies and effects at the level of practice. According to our findings, there are certain dominant big stars within the news market (such El Corte Inglés, Banco Santander and Telefónica among others) which represent the main advertising market share, and are thus fundamental to almost all news organisations. Therefore, their power to exert pressure increases in such a way that it becomes systemic: their potential influence is structural because without them the market would collapse. Therefore, when faced with unfavourable information on systemic advertisers, news organisations have more to lose than to gain and unless they have rigorously tested sources and critical news, its publication is frequently challenged.

One of the main insights we offer is the description of the typologies of commercial pressures, which illustrates the different mechanisms advertisers employ to challenge jour- nalists' autonomy. We have outlined the two most frequent ones and argue that both of them challenge journalists' independence and practice: from external pressure (indirect and direct) to internal pressure (self-censorship and through consultations). The external- direct pressures are less frequent, which suggest their impact on journalists' practice is limited and therefore other mechanisms are required to condition them. In this regard, the external indirect and internal pressures (self-censorship) are the most frequent ones in Spanish newsrooms, placing news organisations on the one hand, and journalists on the other, as the principal agents in their management and resolution.

First, the indirect external pressures represent the sibylline tactics of advertisers, placing news organisations in a serious dilemma: the economic interest or the respect for the journalism ethos. These tactics challenge news organisations functions, mediating the relation between advertisers' intentions and journalists' practice. These "indirect effects" are generally negotiated at the level of management and solved at the level of practice through general editorial guidelines or direct orders by managers. Although this mediation process has a clear intention, its hierarchical management obscures its knowl- edge and purpose for newsmakers. However, through internal processes of socialisation, journalists are aware of their existence and potential effects. Therefore, although adverti- sers try to condition journalists' practice indirectly, newsmakers are able to recognise who is challenging their craft and where newspapers' stand on

these issues.

All of these indirect pressures and all the internal processes that are triggered for its management and resolution, generate an organisational climate that leads journalists to internalise the goals and values of news organisations with respect to certain issues. We argue that the main consequence is the generation and reproduction of individual prac- tices that makes journalists work in accordance with newspapers' interests, although they might be in disagreement with them. In this context, self-censorship is one of the main and most likely responses to the many challenges posed by advertisers and to the increasing workload in journalism: it basically reflects journalists' adaptation to meet news organisations guidelines and thus avoid doing their craft twice.

Finally, our study illustrates the effects of commercial pressures at the level of practice. Surprisingly, despite the great variability, many participants of different news organis- ations provide similar responses, which suggest a process of democratisation of certain techniques to "solve" advertisers' demands. In particular, the study highlights those which affect the professional autonomy of journalists themselves (perspective, extension and rigorousness of news, total censorship, modification of contents and un-publishing) and related to the agenda setting (positive-exposure). Both effects have several implications for journalism practice.

On the one hand, the different effects related to the erosion of journalists' pro- fessional autonomy have different degrees of impact: from little (such as limiting the exten- sion of the report and excess zeal when reporting negative news of certain companies and not of others), to medium (friendly news, domestication of reality, playing with titles, main actors and photographs, half-truths, etc.) to high (such as manipulations, total censorship and un-publishing). Although we can classify them in terms of the theoretical low or high effects they might cause, all these responses mean "giving love and affection" to certain advertisers, which generally implies breaking (to a greater or lesser extent), the jour- nalism ethos. However, at the same time, our study highlights the determination of most news organisations to publish negative information (if it is important enough) on important advertisers, regardless of the risk of repercussions. Therefore, we argue that perhaps the real effect of commercial pressures coming from advertisers able to exercise real influence is that they get excessive positive coverage (positive exposure) more than being able to stop critical information.

In this regard, advertisers' pressures related to agenda setting are mainly in relation to these positive-exposures. With this term, we refer to the disposition of news organisations to establish part of their agenda (and space) based on advertisers' interests. In other words, positive-exposure imply the publication of positive or friendly news of advertisers in order to "boost" or "sell" something: products, services, image, reputation, etc. However, from a strictly journalistic criterion, they should not be covered/published: whether because it is non-relevant or insipid news, whether because it is pseudo-news, that is, content covered and reported as news, but with characteristics of branded content. As a result, positive-exposure might challenge both journalist autonomy and the agenda setting of news- papers when, for instance, covering certain (critical or not) news that temporarily co-exists with positive-exposures.

In conclusion, this study has shown the mechanics of commercial pressures and the main typologies of their effects. The processes of socialisation that take place inside the newsrooms spiral into journalists internalising the goals and values of the organisation they work for. The structural power that advertisers have on media outlets that rely on advertising revenues constitutes an increasing challenge for journalist and news organis- ations. Therefore, we suggest that in order to decrease advertisers' bargaining power a more diverse organisational news media landscape needs to be enhanced. In this way, the autonomy of journalists and news organisations could be more guaranteed.

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