

## RESEARCH

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# PROFESSIONAL ROLES AND FUNCTIONS OF JOURNALISM: EXPECTATIONS AND TRUST OF SPANIARDS

## Roles profesionales y funciones del periodismo: expectativas y confianza de los españoles

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## ABSTRACT

The idea that journalistic work is crucial to the proper functioning of society is deeply rooted in academic and professional circles. However, the profound changes brought about by the digitalization of the public sphere lead us to question whether this relevance is still present in the daily lives of citizens. For this reason, this research analyses Spaniards' perceptions of the importance of journalism, their trust in news, and their assessment of how journalism fulfills its functions. It also examines whether there are differences in these issues between users whose main sources of information are traditional media (print, radio, and television) and those who get their information from digital sources (digital media and social networks). The study is based on surveys conducted by YouGov for the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (DNR) in 2019, 2020, and 2021 among a panel of around 2,000 Spanish digital users. Participants are adult internet users who have consumed news in the last month and are representative of the online population in terms of socio-demographic and geographic criteria. The results show that Spanish users whose main sources of information are traditional media tend to value the fulfillment of journalistic roles (disseminating information, interpreting it, and monitoring power) and trust the news more than those who get their information from digital sources. However, these "digitalists" attach more

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importance to journalism than "traditionalists" (70.6% consider it extremely or very important compared to 59% of those who get their information from traditional media). Part of the distrust expressed by digital users is due to the degree to which it fulfills the functions traditionally attributed to journalism. As they feel that they are less well fulfilled, digital journalists have less confidence in a task that they consider important. Finally, Spaniards believe that the media should report with plurality (76%), neutrality (70%), and fairness (62%), although there are no clear patterns between the two types of users.

**Keywords:** trust, functions of journalism, perceptions, media consumption, Spain.

## RESUMEN

En el ámbito académico y profesional está arraigada la idea de que la labor periodística es de máxima importancia para el buen funcionamiento de la sociedad. Sin embargo, los profundos cambios que ha traído la digitalización de la esfera pública llevan a cuestionar si esta relevancia sigue también presente en la vida cotidiana de los ciudadanos. Por ello, esta investigación analiza la percepción de los españoles sobre la importancia del periodismo, la confianza en las noticias y su valoración del cumplimiento de las funciones del periodismo. Examina, además, si hay diferencias en estas cuestiones entre los usuarios cuyas fuentes de información son principalmente los medios de comunicación tradicionales (prensa en papel, radio y televisión) y aquellos que se informan a través de fuentes digitales (medios digitales y redes sociales). El estudio se basa en las encuestas realizadas en 2019, 2020 y 2021 por YouGov para el Reuters Institute Digital News Report (DNR) a un panel de unos 2000 usuarios digitales españoles. Los participantes son internautas adultos, que han consumido noticias en el último mes, representativos de la población *online* según criterios sociodemográficos y geográficos. Los resultados muestran que los usuarios españoles cuyas fuentes de información son principalmente los medios de comunicación tradicionales tienden a valorar mejor el cumplimiento de los roles del periodismo (difundir información, interpretarla, vigilar al poder) y a confiar más en las noticias que aquellos que se informan a través de fuentes digitales. Sin embargo, estos usuarios «digitalistas» otorgan mayor relevancia al periodismo que los usuarios «tradicionalistas» (70,6% lo consideran extremadamente o muy relevante frente al 59% de los que se informan por medios tradicionales). Parte de la desconfianza manifestada por los digitalistas se debe al grado de cumplimiento de las funciones que tradicionalmente se ha otorgado al periodismo. Al sentir que su cumplimiento es menor, los digitalistas confían menos en una labor que consideran importante. Por último, los españoles consideran que los medios deben informar con pluralidad (76%), neutralidad (70%) y ecuanimidad (62%), sin que puedan establecerse patrones claros entre ambos tipos de usuarios.

**Palabras clave:** confianza; funciones del periodismo; percepciones; consumo de medios, España

## PAPÉIS E FUNÇÕES PROFISSIONAIS DO JORNALISMO: EXPECTATIVAS E CONFIANÇA DOS ESPANHÓIS

### RESUMO

No âmbito académico e profissional, está profundamente enraizada a ideia de que o trabalho jornalístico é de extrema importância para o bom funcionamento da sociedade. No entanto, as profundas mudanças provocadas pela digitalização da esfera pública levam-nos a questionar se esta relevância ainda está presente no quotidiano dos cidadãos. Por esta razão, esta investigação analisa a percepção dos espanhóis sobre a importância do jornalismo, a sua confiança nas notícias e a sua avaliação do cumprimento das funções do jornalismo. Também examina se existem diferenças nestas questões entre os utilizadores cujas fontes de informação são principalmente os meios de comunicação tradicionais (imprensa escrita, rádio e televisão) e aqueles que obtêm as suas informações a partir de fontes digitais (meios digitais e redes sociais). O estudo baseia-se em inquéritos realizados em 2019, 2020 e 2021 pela YouGov para o Reuters Institute Digital News Report (DNR) a um painel de cerca de 2.000 utilizadores digitais espanhóis. Os participantes são utilizadores adultos da Internet, que consumiram notícias no último mês, representativos da população em linha de acordo com critérios sociodemográficos e geográficos. Os resultados mostram que os utilizadores espanhóis cujas fontes de informação são principalmente os meios de comunicação tradicionais tendem a valorizar mais o cumprimento das funções do jornalismo (divulgar informação, interpretá-la, controlar o poder) e a confiar mais nas notícias do que aqueles que obtêm a sua informação a partir de fontes digitais. No entanto, estes utilizadores "digitalistas" dão mais importância ao jornalismo do que os utilizadores "tradicionalistas" (70,6% consideram-no extremamente ou muito relevante, contra 59% dos que se informam através dos meios tradicionais). Parte da desconfiança manifestada pelos utilizadores digitais deve-se ao grau de cumprimento das funções tradicionalmente atribuídas ao jornalismo. Ao sentirem que estão menos bem preenchidas, os jornalistas digitais têm menos confiança numa tarefa que consideram importante. Por último, os espanhóis consideram que os meios de comunicação social devem informar com pluralidade (76%), neutralidade (70%) e imparcialidade (62%), embora não se possam estabelecer padrões claros entre os dois tipos de utilizadores.

**Palavras chave:** confiança; funções do jornalismo; percepções; consumo dos media, Espanha.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The media has been a key agent in the development of democracy, given its responsibility to inform society with rigor in order to generate an educated and informed citizenry. In other words, the paths of journalism and democracy are closely linked (McNair, 2008), since from a normative perspective, democracy requires informed citizens who make rational decisions with freedom (Chambers and Costain, 2001). However, changes introduced by digital technology in the way information is produced, distributed, and consumed, along with the emergence of other actors in the public sphere, question whether this paradigm is still commonly accepted by

Spaniards, especially those who consume digital information.

In the field of public communication, trust has been studied as one of the elements that shape the relationship between citizens and the media (Coleman et al., 2009). Trust influences people's relationship with news and, therefore, affects their information consumption (Garusi and Splendore, 2023; Fletcher and Park, 2017; Tsfati and Ariely, 2014). In turn, expectations determine citizens' satisfaction with public services and institutions (James, 2011, Luoma-aho et al., 2019). Consequently, met expectations increase reputation and generate trust, while unmet, unrealistic, or non-existent expectations can lead to distrust. And if expectations are a fundamental variable associated with trust, which in turn is a central element in citizens' relationship with the media, it seems logical to ask about the perceptions and expectations that Spaniards currently have regarding journalism.

### **1.1. The social function of journalism**

Citizens' perception of the social role and public relevance of journalism influences their relationship with the media. According to Lasswell (1948), the press must fulfill three functions with respect to the social system: (1) surveillance of the environment; (2) correlation of the parts of society to respond to the environment; and (3) transmission of the social heritage from one generation to another. Although all three are important, the first refers more directly to journalistic activity and focuses on the task of discovering and reporting relevant information about current events, personalities, trends, or risks for a democratic society. In the words of Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001), "the purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and capable of governing themselves" (p. 18). These include the obligation of truth (linked to the discipline of verification), loyalty to citizens, independence from those it reports on, providing understandable and proportionate news, and serving "as an independent check on power" (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001, p. 155).

Consequently, the first function of journalism is to disseminate verified information clearly and quickly. Since its inception, the press assumes the social function of disseminating knowledge, especially of those areas and topics to which readers did not have immediate access. To this first function, a second one was soon added, that of monitoring power.

The function of journalism as a watchdog of power, popularly known as the "watchdog function," arises from the classical liberal conception of the power relationship between government and society, as a mechanism to reinforce accountability in democratic governance (Norris, 2014; Waisbord, 2000). This adversarial function of journalism is based on three premises: "First, that the media are essentially autonomous; second, that journalism acts in the public interest, watching out for the welfare of the public at large and not for the benefit of dominant groups in society; and third, that the power of the media is such that they are capable of influencing dominant social groups for the benefit of the public" (Franklin et al., 2005, p. 274).

This idea has been widely accepted within the journalism profession. Among journalists, the watchdog role is perceived as a central function, as demonstrated by

the academic literature on professional roles (Canel et al. 2000; Donsbach and Patterson, 2009; Hanitzsch et al. 2011; Weaver and Willnat 2012). However, given that journalism is a social practice that involves sociopolitical, cultural, and organizational contexts, this normative journalistic standard is influenced in daily practice by multiple factors. There is a gap between how journalists understand their role and how they behave (Roses and Humanes, 2019), due to both external and internal constraints (Mellado et al., 2020).

Along with purely informative and watchdog tasks, journalism has traditionally been considered "the main sense-making practice of modernity" (Hartley, 1996, p. 12). Its institutional status is linked to the social function of meeting citizens' need to understand current events. A function more focused on analyzing and explaining the why of the facts, the causes, and possible consequences of ideas or events that occur in daily life.

Technological advances and changes in the way information is produced, distributed, and consumed as a result of digitization have led to a rethinking of the validity of this paradigm (Peters and Broersma, 2013, 2017). Digital platforms are changing the information process, creating a new hybrid environment in which the two logics, those associated with digital media on one hand and those associated with traditional media on the other, sometimes coexist harmoniously, generating cooperation and synergies, and at other times clash, causing conflicts and tensions (Chadwick, 2017). Journalists are forced to incorporate new techniques and work dynamics not only in the production and distribution of information but also in managing their relationship with the audience (González-Tosat and Sádaba-Chalezquer, 2021). Furthermore, the digital environment fosters the proliferation of new actors that go beyond the borders and traditional subjects of the media (Hallin et al., 2023; Karlsson et al., 2023). Among them are new digital opinion leaders or influencers, who are able to accumulate a high symbolic capital that allows them to influence the flow of information (Casero-Ripollés, 2018).

The idea that journalistic work is of utmost importance for a healthy democracy is widely accepted among academics (McNair, 2012; Schudson, 2008). However, with all these changes, the question arises as to whether this relevance is also present in the daily lives of citizens (Carlson et al., 2021; Hameleers et al., 2022). Therefore, the first research question is the following:

RQ1: What is the perception of Spaniards regarding the relevance of journalism for the proper functioning of society?

The exercise of journalistic functions is influenced by the professional roles of journalists, which do not merely belong to a guild but also impact society. The idea of the journalist's role is not static, as it is sensitive to both the professional and technological contexts of journalism (Mellado and Ovando, 2021; Novoa-Jaso et al., 2019). Thus, it is understandable that if the roles attributed to and exercised by journalists from different times and places are compared, some ideas about journalistic work may change. Various concepts influence the conception of these roles, ranging from the assumption of certain functions by journalists themselves to the limitations

of the context, to the perception that the public has of them (Mellado et al., 2017).

However, although adaptable over time and context, there is a common ideal that adheres to the understanding of journalists' roles. As Weaver and Wilhoit (1996) point out, the identification of journalists as providers of information (diffuser role), understanding of current events (interpreter role), and controllers of authorities (adversary role) remained practically unchanged in the 1980s and 1990s, which constitutes a sign of stability. Bearing this in mind, and with the purpose of examining the influence that technology has on the perceptions of digital users in Spain regarding journalism, it is worth asking:

RQ2: How do Spaniards assess the fulfillment of some of the main functions of journalism?

### **1.2. Confidence in the news**

Trust is one of the fundamental pillars of community life. It is a "basic fact" (Luhmann, 1996), whose presence brings together members of society, preventing it from disintegrating (Simmel, 1986). Trust in the news has been a relevant issue in academic research on journalism in recent decades (Jakobsson and Stiernstedt, 2023; Kohring and Matthes, 2007; Meyer, 1988; Strömbäck et al., 2020). The accuracy of information disseminated, impartiality, media independence from external agents, and their commitment to defending the audience's interests are some of the variables associated with media credibility that make them deserving of trust (Lee, 2010).

Trust is an attitudinal issue resulting from a cognitive process in which individuals subjectively evaluate the qualities of an information source (whether it be a media outlet or a journalist) or the content of their messages (Serrano-Puche, 2017). Therefore, it is important to consider the political and cultural context in which this relationship develops, as well as the expectations that citizens have of the media, as these factors can influence their perceptions and attitudes towards the media system. As Arroyo (2014) summarizes, satisfaction is the result of subtracting expectations from reality.

Technological development provides citizens with more possibilities for choice in an unprecedented offer of information. Professional and technological changes also occur with new audience consumption at a time when media publish user-generated content, which makes them "prosumers" as they perform informative tasks while consuming (Berrocal et al., 2014; Scolari, 2015). Given all of the above, it seems pertinent to ask:

RQ3: How does the evaluation of the functions of journalism affect the confidence of Spaniards in the news?

### **1.3. Neutrality, plurality, and impartiality**

Traditionally, both in the collective imagination and in the professional culture itself, the "paradigm of objectivity" has prevailed (Maras, 2013; Mindich, 2020). As Reese explains: "to make sense of the world, journalists, like scientists, rely on a paradigm, which remains valuable as long as it provides them with a useful practical guide and they share its underlying assumptions" (1990, p. 391).

From a journalistic perspective, the implementation of this paradigm involves the commitment of professional competencies around the concept of impartiality, that is, the attempt to consider different ideas, opinions, interests, or individuals with detachment (Cox, 2007). It is assumed that impartiality is one of the fundamental principles of the media that seek professional quality that generates trust in the audience (Medina et al., 2023; Sambrook, 2012; Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2017).

This paradigm is present in the discursive practice and organizational routines of journalists. As such, it is transferred to the audience and governs as a professional norm, marking what the audience usually expects, but which does not always correspond to the actual consumption of the media (Rodríguez-Virgili et al., 2022a). Already in classic communication studies, hypotheses such as selective exposure (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948; Mutz and Young, 2011) are found, but the dynamics of the digital environment create new patterns of information consumption, such as incidental exposure (Fletcher and Kleis-Nielsen, 2017; Schäfer, 2023; Serrano-Puche et al., 2018).

Indeed, perhaps the most influential changes in the perception of journalism are related to new forms of consuming information. Access to information is brief and uninterrupted and occurs at any time and place (Boczkowski et al., 2018). Thus, an endless cycle is created in the consumption of information where periodicity has been overcome (Martín-Algarra et al., 2010). In addition, the feeling that "information is out there" has imposed itself in the digital environment (Toff and Nielsen, 2018). In a context of informational abundance, social media introduces the perception that "news will find me" (Gil-de-Zúñiga and Zicheng, 2021) and therefore proactive search for them loses weight.

It is also worth noting that the Spanish media system is framed within a polarized pluralistic model (Hallin and Mancini, 2004 and 2017), with a strong parallelism between the discourse of the media and that of the affiliated politicians (Humanes, 2014), highly polarized and where there are few media outlets that citizens place in the center or that are recognized as impartial (Masip et al., 2020).

All of this raises questions within the framework of the perceptions and expectations of Spanish digital media users regarding journalism, which are formulated in the following research question:

RQ4: What is the point of view of Spaniards on the neutrality, plurality, and fairness of information coming from journalistic media?

## **2. OBJECTIVES**

The main objective of this research is to analyze the perceptions and expectations of Spaniards regarding three issues:

- a) The contribution of journalism to society and its fulfillment of three main functions: disseminating information, interpreting it, and monitoring power.
- b) their trust in the news coming from the media

- c) and their assessment of attitudes related to journalistic coverage such as neutrality, plurality, and fairness of the media.

As a secondary objective, it is intended to determine whether there are differences in these issues among users whose primary sources of information are traditional media (print press, radio, and television) and those who obtain information through digital sources (online news and social media).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study is based on the survey conducted by YouGov for the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (DNR). Like in over 40 other countries where the survey is carried out, YouGov selected around 2,000 Spanish adult digital users who have consumed news in the last month, representative of the online population according to sociodemographic and geographic criteria. For this research, the surveys from 2019, 2020, and 2021 were consulted to cover all the questions related to the object of study, as the questionnaire has some variations from year to year. The fieldwork was conducted between late January and early February of each of these years.

The online questionnaire of the Digital News Report includes different questions that analyze the information consumption of the interviewed users. Subsequently, users are classified into three categories based on the answers they have provided. Thus, those who consume information mainly through electronic media are classified as "digitalists", while those who do so through traditional media (such as newspapers, radio, or television) are classified as "traditionalists". Users who use both traditional and digital media to access information are included in the "mixed" category. In this way, the three categories are mutually exclusive and it is impossible for a user to be in two categories at the same time.

According to the preliminary descriptive analysis carried out, the data shows significant variations in the number of users belonging to each group. As can be seen in Table 1, the largest group is that of users classified as "half and half", composed of users who easily switch between traditional and digital media. Despite the higher volume of these types of users, in this research, we have decided to focus on digitalist and traditionalist users. We believe that the results that their study may offer will provide greater contrasts as they are the categories furthest apart from each other.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive analysis of users based on their news consumption.*

	2019	2020	2021
Digital users <sup>a</sup>	24,6%	23,9%	24,8%
Traditionalists <sup>b</sup>	25,4%	23,5%	24,1%
Half and half <sup>c</sup>	49,9%	52,6%	51%

<sup>a</sup> Users who access news mainly through electronic media (smartphones, tablets, or computers).  
<sup>b</sup> Users who access news through traditional media (newspapers, radio, and television).  
<sup>c</sup> Users who use both ways to access the news indistinctly.

**Source:** Adapted from the Digital News Report (2019, 2020, and 2021).



The DNR covers a wide range of questions, so some variables were selected to limit the responses to the specificity of this research. First, various Spearman correlations were performed to check the interrelationship between belonging to the traditionalist and digitalist categories and the different selected variables. To ensure that the underlying assumptions of the Spearman correlation were met, outliers were excluded and the normality of the variables was examined. A significance level of 0.05 or lower was also used to determine the statistical significance of each correlation. Second, a multinomial logistic regression was performed to determine the influence of different independent variables on trust in news.

The selected DNR questions were:

- [DNR 2020] How important, if at all, is independent journalism for the proper functioning of society?
- [DNR 2019] Now we're going to ask you whether you think the media in your country are doing a good job or not. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:
  - o The media keep a watchful eye on powerful people and companies.
  - o The media keep me up to date on what's going on.
  - o The media help me understand the news of the day.
- [DNR 2020] I believe that most news can be trusted most of the time.
- [DNR 2021] Think about the news in general in your country, when the media covers social and political issues. Which of the following statements best describes your point of view?
  - o There are some issues where it doesn't make sense for the media to try to take a neutral stance.
  - o The media should try to take a neutral stance on all issues.
  - o I don't know.
- [DNR 2021] Think about the news in general in your country, when the media covers social and political issues. Which of the following statements best describes your point of view?
  - o The media should reflect various different stances and let people decide for themselves.
  - o The media should advocate for stances they consider more appropriate.
  - o I don't know.
- [DNR 2021] Think about the news in general in your country, when the media covers social and political issues. Which of the following statements best describes your point of view?

- o The media should give less time to stances they consider to have weaker arguments.
- o The media should give the same amount of time to all stances.
- o I don't know.

On the other hand, the three functions attributed to journalism were recategorized to match those described by Weaver and Wilhoit (1996). Specifically, the adversarial function (scrutiny of the powerful), the disseminator function (immediacy), and the interpretative function (understanding). The responses were subjected to the McNemar test and the chi-square test, and the relationships between the different variables were checked with the Spearman correlation.

Finally, different regressions were performed to calculate the explanatory value of some variables. Since the question about trust appeared in the 2019 and 2020 surveys, it was included in the analysis of both years to study its influence on both the relevance of journalism and its functions.

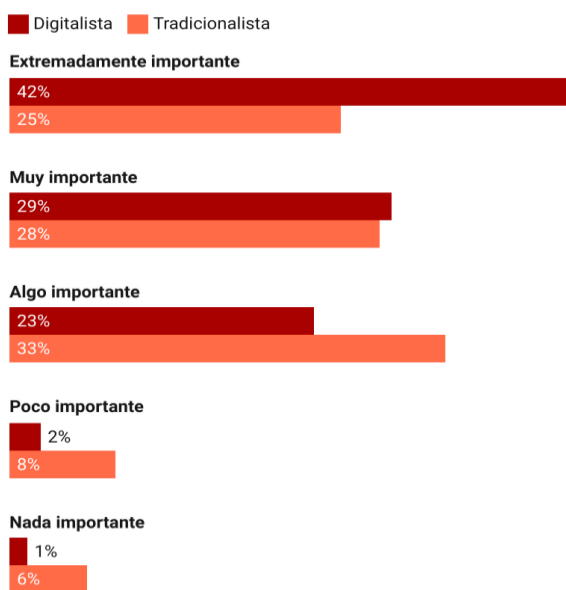
## **4. RESULTS**

### **4.1. Relevance of journalism and evaluation of the functions of journalism**

When analyzing the relevance of journalism, different patterns are detected. Among digitalist users, those who prefer to consume information through online media, journalism is considered more relevant than among traditionalists (70.6% consider it extremely or very relevant compared to 59% of traditionalists). In this regard, the analysis of the correlation between group membership and the relevance attributed to journalism seems to indicate the same direction. The p-value of the Spearman correlation shows differences in the correlation depending on the group to which the respondents belong. Thus, while among digitalists the correlation with the relevance of journalism is positive (0.12\*\*), among traditionalists it is negative (-0.67\*).

**Figure 1**

*Relevance of journalism.*



**Source:** Adapted from the 2019 Reuters Institute DNR survey.

As shown in Table 2, of the three functions asked by the DNR, the one with the least support is the adversarial function, with 9.2% compared to 25.5% for the disseminator function and 13.1% for the interpretative function. However, all three functions receive similar levels of rejection, with values ranging from 3.7% (disseminator) to 5.8% (adversarial).

**Table 2**

*Evaluation of the fulfillment of some functions of journalism.*

	Adversarial	Disseminator	Interpretative
Very much in disagreement	5,8%	3,7%	4%
Quite in disagreement	10,8%	6,3%	9,3%
Neither agree nor disagree	42,9%	22,8%	33,4%
Quite in agreement	31,2%	41,7%	40,2%
Very much in agreement	9,2%	25,5%	13,1%

**Source:** Adapted from the Reuters Institute's 2019 Digital News Report survey.

#### 4.2. Trust and evaluation of journalism functions

Similar to the relevance of journalism, there are different patterns in the level of trust that respondents have in the media, with some nuances, between traditionalists and digitalists (Table 3). Data from the DNR reflects that, although the loss of trust affects

all channels, those who declare that they get informed through traditional media (television, radio, or print newspapers) trust the news more (45%) than those who opt for digital editions of newspapers (39%), native digital media (29%), or social networks (25%) (Negredo et al., 2020). Among digital users, there is a statistically significant correlation between being a digitalist and distrust towards news, both in general and in their own consumption, but this is not the case among traditionalists, among whom there seems to be greater diversity in responses and no statistical significance.

**Table 3**

*Confidence in the news and the respondent's profile.*

	Digitalist	Pa	Tradicionalist	Pa
Confidence in all news	-0,11**	0,000	0,02	0,415
Confidence in their news	-0,05*	0,031	-0,03	0,300
Confidence in news from social media.	-0,08**	0,001	0,02	0,492

<sup>a</sup> p-value of Spearman's correlation

\*\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (bilateral)

\* The correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (bilateral)

**Source:** Adapted from the 2019 Reuters Institute DNR survey.

Table 3 shows how being a digital user is relevant in cases of distrust. In other words, users who primarily consume information from digital media tend to distrust news more than traditionalists. To further analyze these data, a multinomial logistic regression was performed to investigate whether the correlations found in the descriptive analysis were truly explanatory of the responses given by the respondents to the question about trust in the news.

Given the relevance of trust in the perception of the functions of journalism, we chose to explore the correlation between belonging to a profile (digitalist/traditionalist) and the degree of satisfaction with journalistic functions among those who trusted news in general. Exploratory data analysis shows that there is a correlation between the evaluation of the degree of fulfillment of journalistic functions and trust in news in general. This correlation is statistically significant among both digitalists and traditionalists. Therefore, a regression was performed. Since the analyzed variable has three categories (agree, disagree, and neither agree nor disagree), a multinomial logistic regression was chosen to explore the data in greater depth and discover possible causalities.

**Table 4**

*Correlation between journalism functions and trust in news in general (by user profile).*

	Confidence in the news in general.			
	Digitalist	P <sup>a</sup>	Traditionalist	P <sup>a</sup>
Adversarial	0,14**	0,003	0,2**	<0,001
Disseminator	0,3**	<0,001	0,35**	<0,001
Interpretative	0,38**	<0,001	0,4**	<0,001

<sup>a</sup>p-value of Spearman's correlation  
 \*\*The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (bilateral)

**Source:** Adapted from the Reuters Institute's 2019 Digital News Report survey.

The results in Table 5 have been simplified to focus on the predictive ability of the journalism functions. Originally, more variables were included as controls, but they did not have explanatory power. As can be seen, responses to questions about journalism functions explain respondents' trust in the media. Of the three functions analyzed, we highlight two: the adversarial function and the interpretative function. All cases of the adversarial function are significant for those who distrust the news, but not for those who trust it. Secondly, the behavior of the interpretative function is particularly interesting, as those who believe that the media do not help them interpret reality tend to distrust them in general. On the contrary, those who feel that the media help them interpret reality trust them more.

**Table 5**

*Multinomial logistic regression to predict confidence in the news.*

	Dependent variable: Trust in the news			
	In disagreement <sup>a</sup>		In Agreement <sup>a</sup>	
	Coef. (95% CI) <sup>b</sup>	P	Coef. (95% CI) <sup>b</sup>	P
Age <sup>c</sup> (cont.)	-0.01 (-0.02 to 0.00)	0.230	0.01 (0.00 to 0.02)	0.005
Adversarial <sup>d</sup>				
Strongly disagree	1.73 (0.97 to 2.48)	<0.001	1.31 (0.54 to 2.09)	0.001
Somewhat disagree	0.86 (0.44 to 1.29)	<0.001	0.18 (-0.26 to 0.63)	0.425
Somewhat Agree	0.59 (0.26 to 0.91)	<0.001	0.54 (0.24 to 0.84)	<0.001
Strongly Agree	1.04 (0.47 to 1.62)	<0.001	0.68 (0.14 to 1.22)	0.014

Disseminator <sup>d</sup>				
Strongly disagree	1.19 (0.26 to 2.12)	0.012	1.31 (0.54 to 2.09)	0.077
Somewhat disagree	1.19 (0.61 to 1.77)	<0.001	0.63 (-0.07 to 1.33)	0.079
Somewhat Agree	0.50 (0.16 to 0.84)	0.004	0.89 (0.55 to 1.24)	<0.001
Strongly Agree	0.38 (-0.09 to 0.86)	0.113	0.68 (0.14 to 1.22)	<0.001
Interpretative <sup>d</sup>				
Strongly disagree	0.84 (0.03 to 1.64)	0.042	-0.11 (-1.05 to 0.83)	0.821
Somewhat disagree	0.96 (0.49 to 1.43)	<0.001	0.16 (-0.40 to 0.72)	0.580
Somewhat Agree	-0.19 (-0.51 to 0.14)	0.266	0.57 (0.26 to 0.88)	<0.001
Strongly Agree	-0.08 (-0.69 to 0.54)	0.803	0.99 (0.46 to 1.52)	<0.001
User profile <sup>e</sup>				
Digitalist	0.31 (-0.01 to 0.64)	0.06	0.00 (-0.32 to 0.32)	0.981
Traditionalist	-0.23 (-0.55 to 0.10)	0.173	-0.08 (-0.38 to 0.22)	0.605

<sup>a</sup> Base result: Neither agree nor disagree  
<sup>b</sup> Coefficient (and 95% confidence interval)  
<sup>c</sup> Continuous variable  
<sup>d</sup> Reference category: Neither agree nor disagree  
<sup>e</sup> Reference Category: Half and Half

**Source:** Adapted from the Reuters Institute's 2019 Digital News Report survey.

### 4.3. Evaluations of the neutrality, plurality, and equanimity of the Spanish media

Despite the increase in political and informational polarization (Masip et al., 2020; Rodríguez-Virgili et al., 2022b), the majority of respondents believe that the media should report with plurality (76%), neutrality (70%), and fairness (62%). That is, they should offer different points of view and let people decide; try to be neutral and give equal time and space to all voices on an issue. However, when analyzing the relationship between these characteristics and the user profile (Table 6), the correlations are mixed. Only in the case of partiality does there appear to be some statistical unanimity, as the correlation is statistically significant in both groups. We also find a slight variation in fairness, with the correlation between fairness and traditionalist profile being statistically significant. The clearest difference is found in neutrality, where the profiles of respondents appear to have a clear influence.

**Table 6**

*Impartiality, neutrality, and fairness by user profile.*

	Digitalists	P	Traditionalists	P
Not impartial	-0,05*	0,02	0,71**	<0,001
Impartial	-0,08**	<,001	0,08**	<0,001
Not neutral	-0,02	0,47	0,08**	<0,001
Neutral	0,04	0,06	-0,09**	<0,001
Fair	-0,01	0,94	-0,05*	0,05
Not Fair	0,03	0,23	0,03	0,25

<sup>a</sup>p-value of Spearman's correlation

<sup>\*\*</sup>Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (bilateral)

<sup>\*</sup> The correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (bilateral).

**Source:** Adapted from the Reuters Institute's 2021 Digital News Report survey.

As can be seen in Table 7, a more detailed analysis of some of the variables that influence the opinion about neutrality demonstrates that the traditionalist profile has predictive power over it. However, when we analyze by age groups, we see that it is not related to age. It is not that older people are more traditionalist. In fact, when we look at the regression, we see that being over 45 years old (senior users) is not statistically significant. What explains the position on impartiality is being traditionalist regardless of age, that is, what explains it is that they get informed by traditional media, even if they may be young.

**Table 7**

*Multinomial logistic regression to predict stance on neutrality.*

	Dependent variable: Do you think the media should be neutral?			
	Not neutral <sup>a</sup>		Neutral <sup>a</sup>	
	Coef. (95% CI) <sup>b</sup>	P	Coef. (95% CI) <sup>b</sup>	P
Age <sup>c</sup>	0.00 (-0.04 to 0.04)	0.948	0.03 (-0.01 to 0.07)	0.147
Gender <sup>d</sup>				
Female	-0.13 (-0.63 to 0.38)	0.627	-0.05 (-0.53 to 0.43)	0.836
Age group 1 <sup>e</sup>				
Under 35	0.26 (-0.64 to 1.16)	0.577	0.46 (-0.39 to 1.31)	0.286

Age group 2 <sup>f</sup>				
Over 45	0.05 (-0.89 to 0.99)	0.913	0.03 (-0.86 to 0.91)	0.954
Household incomes <sup>g</sup>				
Low	-0.32 (-0.85 to 0.22)	0.249	-0.41 (-0.91 to 0.09)	0.105
High	0.90 (-0.01 to 1.82)	0.053	0.84 (-0.04 to 1.73)	0.062
Profile <sup>h</sup>				
Digitalist	0.28 (-0.41 to 0.97)	0.429	0.34 (-0.32 to 0.99)	0.311
Traditionalist	0.01 (-0.56 to 0.58)	0.986	-0.55 (-1.08 to -0.01)	0.046

<sup>a</sup> Base result: I don't know

<sup>b</sup> Coefficient (and 95% confidence interval)

<sup>c</sup> Continuous variable

<sup>d</sup> Reference category: Man

<sup>e</sup> Reference category: More than 35

<sup>f</sup> Reference category: Less than 45

<sup>g</sup> Reference category: Medium

<sup>h</sup> Reference Category: Half and Half

**Source:** Adapted from the Reuters Institute's 2021 Digital News Report survey.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The results lead to interesting conclusions. Statistically significant correlations are observed between the relevance of journalism, the opinion on the functions of journalism, and the trust in the media, with nuances according to the user's profile.

Regarding RQ1, which asked about the perception of Spaniards regarding the relevance of journalism for the proper functioning of society, it is observed that digitalist users give more importance to journalism than traditionalists. Thus, and in line with what was stated in the introduction of this article, journalism would fulfill its social function according to digitalist respondents. Traditionalists have more trust in journalism than digitalists, but paradoxically, they give less relevance to journalistic work. Part of the mistrust expressed by digitalists is due to the degree of fulfillment of the functions traditionally assigned to journalism. Feeling that their fulfillment is lower, digitalists distrust a task they consider important.

Spanish traditionalist users tend to agree more with the fulfillment of the roles of journalism referred to in RQ2 and to trust general news more than digitalist users. This is consistent with previous research such as that of Vara-Miguel (2018), who argued that those who get their information from traditional channels show greater trust in news and media than those who get their information through social media or native digital media.

In response to RQ3, it is noted that in Spain, the effect of this correlation is more clearly appreciated when analyzing the watchdog role, as the difference in the significance of the effect is greater among traditionalists (.217\*\*) than among digitalists (.148\*\*).



Likewise, there are nuances in the confidence shown by users depending on the explanatory capacity they attribute to journalism. Respondents who believe that journalism fulfills its explanatory function and helps them better understand reality show higher levels of trust. Conversely, a lower explanatory capacity of journalism coincides with greater distrust of journalistic work. Therefore, we find a strong predictive capacity in this function: the greater the satisfaction of citizens with the explanatory capacity of the media, the more they will trust them. In other words, if the media are able to help audiences interpret reality, to understand the environment around them, they will generate or inspire more trust in citizens.

Finally, regarding RQ4, Spaniards consider that the media should inform with plurality (76%), neutrality (70%), and fairness (62%), without clear patterns being established between digitalists and traditionalists. Consequently, it is not difficult to assume that more polarized, less plural and independent media will fail to meet citizens' expectations and generate distrust, as seen in the theoretical framework.

However, there are at least two limitations to this study, as indicated by the data from the DNR used in this research. As noted in the methodology section, to cover all questions related to the object of study, surveys from 2019, 2020, and 2021 were consulted, as the questionnaire has some variations from year to year. Working with surveys from three different years reduces comparative capacity and weakens the conclusions reached, which will need to be corroborated in future research. Additionally, the YouGov survey conducted for the DNR selects around 2,000 Spanish adult digital users. Therefore, as an online questionnaire, although some of the respondents may primarily consume traditional media (print press, radio, and television), the DNR does not include citizens who can be considered "pure" traditionalists, i.e., users who "only" get their information through radio, television, or print press without online consumption and without the possibility of responding to the YouGov survey.

The conclusions reached in this study need to be verified in future research and it would be interesting to complement them with more qualitative studies, such as focus groups, to delve deeper into these perceptions and their motivations.

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