

LOCAL NEWS AND THE EUROPEAN UNION: AN ANALYSIS OF THE MANAGEMENT OF MEDIA AND EU INSTITUTIONS

Información local y Unión Europea:
Análisis de la gestión comunicativa de medios e instituciones

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RESUMEN

La rendición de cuentas periodística de la Unión Europea (UE) es un asunto espinoso ampliamente abordado por la literatura, ya que a ese sistema político se le atribuye una excesiva lejanía con la ciudadanía. Este problema se ha visto agudizado por un reciente auge del euroescepticismo, que disminuye la confianza en las noticias sobre la UE. Frente a la crisis de la información internacional, los medios locales experimentan una revitalización en la era digital, que procede de la necesidad de conocer lo que sucede en las comunidades más cercanas. En este contexto, el presente estudio pretende analizar la gestión informativa de la UE en entornos locales. Para dicho fin, se emplean entrevistas semiestructuradas y en profundidad (n=14), dirigidas no solo a conocer la percepción de periodistas de proximidad involucrados

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en esta materia en tres países europeos (Alemania, España y Reino Unido), sino también la opinión de funcionarios comunitarios dedicados a tareas comunicativas. Como resultados, se observa que la consideración de la información europea a nivel local es distinta por países, lo que imbrica con la pervivencia de sistemas mediáticos nacionales en Europa. La reflexividad de los periodistas sobre su trabajo es limitada, a la vez que critican la labor comunicativa de las instituciones. Esto contrasta con un cierto optimismo de los funcionarios europeos, que señalan un progresivo cambio en los ecosistemas locales hacia una menor intermediación periodística.

Palabras clave: periodismo de proximidad, medios locales, medios digitales, información europea, comunicación pública, entrevistas semiestructuradas, Unión Europea.

ABSTRACT

The journalistic accountability of the European Union (EU) is a complex issue widely addressed by the literature since this political system is attributed to an excessive distance from citizens. This problem has been exacerbated by a recent rise in Euroscepticism, which reduces confidence in EU news. In contrast to the crisis of international information, local media are increasing their importance in the digital age, which comes from the need to know what is happening in the closest communities. In this context, this study aims to analyze the journalistic management of the EU in local areas. Drawing upon semi-structured and in-depth interviews (n = 14), this research examines not only the perception of the journalists involved in this matter in three European countries (Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom) but also the opinion of European officials devoted to communicative tasks. The results show that the EU news stories are differently considered by countries, which is related to the national character of media systems in Europe. Among the journalists, the degree of self-awareness about the work carried out is low, while they criticize the communicative work of the EU institutions. This opposes a certain optimism of European officials, who point to a progressive shift in local ecosystems towards less journalistic intermediation.

Keywords: local journalism, local media, digital media, EU news, public communication, semistructured interviews, European Union.

Informação local e a união europeia: Análise da gestão comunicativa da mídia e instituições

RESUMO

A responsabilização jornalística da União Europeia (UE) é uma questão difícil e amplamente abordada na literatura, uma vez que a esse sistema político é atribuído um distanciamento excessivo da cidadania. Este problema foi agravado por um recente aumento do eurocepticismo, que diminuiu a confiança nas notícias sobre a UE. Diante da crise da informação internacional, a mídia local vive uma revitalização na era digital, que vem da necessidade de saber o que está acontecendo nas comunidades mais próximas. Nesse contexto, este estudo tem como objetivo analisar

a gestão da informação da UE em ambientes locais. Para tal, são utilizadas entrevistas semiestruturadas e em profundidade (n=14), que procuram não só conhecer a percepção dos jornalistas locais envolvidos nesta matéria em três países europeus (Alemanha, Espanha e Reino Unido), mas também a opinião de funcionários comunitários dedicados a tarefas comunicativas. Como resultados, observa-se que a consideração da informação europeia no nível local é diferente por país, o que se sobrepõe à sobrevivência dos sistemas midiáticos nacionais na Europa. A reflexividade dos jornalistas sobre seu trabalho é limitada, ao mesmo tempo em que criticam o trabalho comunicativo das instituições. Isso contrasta com certo otimismo dos funcionários europeus, que apontam para uma mudança progressiva nos ecossistemas locais para uma menor intermediação jornalística.

Palavras-chave: Jornalismo de Proximidade, Mídia Local, Mídia Digital, Informação Europeia, Comunicação Pública, Entrevistas Semiestruturadas, União Européia.

1. INTRODUCTION

Democratic political systems, including those with a more international dimension such as the European Union (EU), need journalistic accountability for their survival (Bruns, 2018). Information professionals are key in shaping this specialized news, determining which actions of community institutions reach citizens, although the emergence of digital technologies opens the door to more direct dialogue and a reduction of the media monopoly in the gatekeeping function that filters content (Vesnic-Alejuvic, 2016).

The uniqueness of the European sphere means that information not only plays a relevant role in the development of political participation based on discursive criteria (Gil de Zúñiga, 2015) but also defines the value of what is news beyond national borders (Mendez et al., 2020). However, the information treatment of the EU has been characterized as bureaucratic and of little interest to the public (Baisnée, 2014). Added to this are other turbulences suffered by the European project, such as Brexit (Krzyżanowski, 2019) or the rise of misinformation and Eurosceptic movements (Tuñón Navarro et al., 2019), which have complicated this informative process, subjected now to high doses of distrust (Brosius et al., 2020).

The communicative deficit of the European project is not a new finding (Sarikakis & Kolokytha, 2019), but it is the backbone of criticism of the disconnection between the EU and its citizens and, therefore, of the absence of a feeling of belonging to it (Salvatti, 2021). The media, but also the various European institutions, are considered responsible for the predominance of national approaches, without providing sufficient information to understand the democratic functioning of the EU (Lloyd & Marconi, 2014). From the point of view of mediation, the deficit situation could be alleviated with broader news coverage and better public communication from European institutions.

The most recent literature indicates that exposure to political media content about the EU diminishes the link with the European project (Goldberg et al., 2021; Méndez et al., 2020), due to the prioritization of negative frames, such as those referring to the

concept of “crisis”, be it economic, health, or social. Against this, there is research that emphasizes the role that local media can play in raising awareness about the EU (Rivas-de-Roca et al., 2020; Scharkow & Vogelgesang, 2010), thanks to the high degree of dynamism of proximity publications in the digital sphere (Caldevilla Domínguez & Visa Barbosa, 2013).

The local press can generate communities of citizens, who feel part of a common space. These media are in charge of what happens closely, in geographical and emotional terms (Jerónimo et al., 2020). However, they must also contextualize how national and transnational events affect the population of a given territory, within a global context (Hess & Waller, 2017), which would include the European project. It should be noted that local publications usually present differentiated consumption patterns, which makes them an interesting object of study that sometimes applies more social formulas of business organization (Caro-González et al., 2019).

Given the above, this study explores the information management of the EU by local media in different countries of the continent, as well as the vision of it that European institutions have. The objective is to understand the approaches of the two sides of this information flow: local journalists and community institutions. The article is divided into the first part of theoretical contextualization, which places these apparently distant elements in a broader debate on transnational communication. This section also raises research questions. Subsequently, the methodological approach is detailed and the results are reported, exposing discursive examples to understand the opinion of the actors involved in European information at the local level.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1. The international implications of local journalism.

In the context of communicative hybridization in Europe, in which the conventional media system coexists with new digital media (Casero-Ripollés, 2018; Chadwick, 2017), initiatives related to local journalism are experiencing a boom (Thorson et al., 2020). Local media have established themselves as nodes for the circulation of issues close to citizens (Jerónimo, 2015). Knowledge of what is happening in the closest area has become a public response to the communicative standardization of globalization.

One of the main functions of local journalism is the construction of communities, weaving identity and cultural ties that favor that the population of a geographic space feel part of a common whole (Nielsen, 2015). These proximity media also act as a loudspeaker for citizens in a context of glocalization, allowing their demands to gain visibility (Rivas-de-Roca et al., 2020). Precisely, proximity to the public is a factor that facilitates the introduction of more innovative business models based on digital technologies (Jerónimo, 2015).

Local media direct their content to topics that are of interest to the inhabitants of a geographic area. This implies prioritizing the news to prioritize these issues of proximity, excluding other issues that are assumed to have a lower degree of

relevance in the configuration of the sphere of proximity (Jerónimo et al., 2020). For its part, the language of local journalism is characterized by a concise and direct style, accompanied by abundant expressive modalities, which are aimed at providing public service information (Leupold et al., 2018).

Precisely, there is research focused on the opinion of local journalists that exhaustively reveals how these professionals prioritize information of public interest (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2020), maintaining a connection with the audience that other specializations lack. However, recipients also need local content that includes an international perspective, given that numerous news events overlap with global phenomena (Scharrow & Vogelgesang, 2010).

A current problem for the development of a quality local press is the transformation of business models, which has substantially modified the profession towards less professional parameters (Deuze & Witschge, 2020). Many local media outlets have been forced to close, while others experienced a significant loss of income, higher than their national counterparts. There is a devaluation of the social cohesion of the territories, a concept of popular inclusion in decision-making that some authors link to local journalism (Leupold et al., 2018).

Despite the economic difficulties, the surveillance function of the power of local information (Camponez, 2002) is still valid in recent initiatives such as hyperlocal media, which take advantage of the potential of the Internet to search for new journalistic business models (Negreira-Rey et al., 2018). In this sense, the literature reflects ambivalent opinions. Some authors emphasize that local media are experiencing a stage of enormous dynamism on the Internet, both in terms of formats and business models (Carson et al., 2016). For others, the digital transformation has meant the loss of a vigorous local press (Hayes & Lawless, 2021), capable of acting as a democratic guarantor.

Therefore, the value of the local information is in a process of reformulation. In the field of content, there is an interest in combining the traditional mission of this press, which consists of generating geographical communities of belonging, with the ability to promote international knowledge from a local scale. This seems relevant for the construction of a European Public Sphere (EPS), extensively debated in the literature (Gil de Zúñiga, 2015; Rivas-de-Roca & García-Gordillo, 2021), and which would consist of the articulation of a citizenry formed to make decisions based on the axis of European politics. The fact that the dimension of local journalism has not been previously considered in the EPS, constitutes a gap that our research aims to solve.

2.2. Conditions in the informative treatment of European affairs.

Journalistic coverage of European issues, including that carried out by local media, is affected by the emergence of digital technologies and social networks. The ubiquitous consumption of political information has transformed communication parameters (Casero-Ripollés, 2018). Thus, incidental exposure to news of not always journalistic origin appears, which is also experienced by EU affairs. In fact, the conjunction of classic media with digital technologies supposes a greater

communicative impact of European policies (Vesnic-Alejuvic, 2016), which could have favorable consequences in the genesis of an EPS (Valera-Ordaz & Sørensen, 2019).

Although digitization is a global phenomenon, there are still differences in the information treatment of the EU, the result of a diversity of media models determined by geographical spaces. This gives rise to a disparate relationship between the political sphere and the media, generating media systems according to the categorization of Hallin and Mancini (2004). These authors apply four variables to define a media system: volume of the communication industry, political parallelism, professional autonomy, and function of the press. Following this proposal, three systems are distinguished in the Western world: corporate democratic, polarized pluralist, and liberal.

The well-known idea of media systems is a theoretical construct, but it provides an interesting reflection on practices by country, in correspondence with other recent contributions such as journalistic cultures (Hanusch & Hanitzsch, 2017). This proposal implies that the professional attitudes of journalists are explained by the eminently national social and cultural tradition that surrounds them, developing different ways of understanding the profession. Some of the factors pointed out by Hanusch and Hanitzsch (2017) are the interventionism in the news event or the degree of distance towards the political class.

In the EU as a whole and the United Kingdom due to its membership between 1973 and 2020, informative action is not only conditioned by media systems and journalistic cultures but also by European legislation on communication (Rodríguez-Castro et al., 2020). It must be considered that part of the local information in Europe is carried out by public media, while private media are also affected by this regulation. All this influences the type of journalistic content that is produced around the EU.

Likewise, European information is often categorized within the framework of international journalism. This entails some characteristics of complexity and distance from the public that affect the perception of the news (Aalberg et al., 2013). In crises, such as Covid-19, this communication suffers numerous frictions (Tuñón & Bouza, 2021). In fact, international content is considered to receive the first staff adjustments when a newsroom experiences financial difficulties (Odriozola Chené, 2012).

In recent years, the European project has been the subject of various disinformation campaigns, which used false content on social networks to spur a negative view of the Union (Tuñón Navarro et al., 2019). Faced with this, community institutions develop a more active communication policy, which is based on the possibilities offered by social networks (Barisione & Michailidou, 2017). The direct interaction they allow is used to reinforce the legitimacy of the EU, something that is also affected by the appearance of opinion leaders in social networks, who act as influencers in the European sphere (Luca, 2020).

The rise of a new, more dynamic, and digital European institutional communication (Aiello, 2012), occurs at a time of growing politicization of the community project (de Wilde et al., 2016; Hooghe & Marks, 2018). The relevance of the EU is increasing, with influence in many areas of everyday life, which connects with the mission of local journalism. In response to the greater dissent that this politicization brings with it, the institutions promote personalized coverage (Gattermann, 2018), which focuses on figures of interest to the Union. The question is whether that intention manages to permeate the informative treatment of proximity publications.

The exposed antecedents indicate that the journalistic coverage of European affairs presents ample room for improvement because it is historically linked to national issues, while a strong dynamism is observed in the field of local information. Given that there is little empirical evidence on the treatment of the EU in local media, this study defines three research questions to understand the information management of the Union by local newspapers in different parts of Europe:

RQ1. What are the different roles attributed to European information at the local level by country?

RQ2. What assessments do journalists from local media make of their work about the EU?

RQ3. What is the opinion that the officials of the community institutions have about the functioning of the journalistic process around the EU?

3. METHODOLOGY

To achieve the objective of this research, we advocated for semi-structured interviews (Weiss, 1994) since they allow qualitative knowledge of the arguments underlying the informative practice. This approach connects with the exploratory dimension of the present study, which seeks to obtain evidence that can be contrasted in a field that is little addressed, such as local information about the EU. The proposed questionnaire tries to dissect the work of professionals in an ethnographic way. It should be noted that the semi-structured interview, as a qualitative and in-depth method, has been used in communication studies, with notable contributions in the area of local media that follow a similar procedure (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2020).

A snowball sample is chosen (Noy, 2008), applied both to local media from three European countries with different relations with the EU (Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom), as well as to personalities who work in communication matters in European institutions. The selection of countries is made by assessing their extensive tradition of local journalism (Rivas-de-Roca et al., 2020). Furthermore, the United Kingdom has left the EU, while Germany is a founding country of it and Spain joined in 1986, which can trigger different types of perceptions in this regard. In the case of Spain, the absence of local media in the capital of Spain leads us to direct the study to a city like Seville, which does have consolidated publications on the subject.

For its part, the focus at the institutional level has been directed mainly at the European Commission, as it is the European institution that deals most with public communication (Gattermann, 2018). In fact, it is the institution that has the largest number of workers dedicated to these matters. The sample also includes a senior official of the European Parliament due to its democratic dimension. EU workers are obliged to rotate institutions every seven years; hence their answers can be interchangeable, offering an overview of the communicative functioning of the Union.

The objective is to understand the approaches of the two sides of the information flow in the area of proximity: local journalists and European institutions. The interviewees are heterogeneous in terms of experience and responsibility, ranging from freelancers to editors or communication managers. The sample amounts to 14 interviews, reaching a saturation point at which the new informants did not provide relevant data for the study. Table 1 shows the anonymized sample of interviewees:

Table 1: *Labor profile of the informants*

Media outlet/institution	Country where they work	Position
<i>Berliner Zeitung</i>	Germany	Associated Freelancer
<i>Berliner Kurier</i>	Germany	Associated Freelancer
<i>Luhze</i>	Germany	Editor
<i>London Evening Standard</i>	United Kingdom	Associated Freelancer
<i>This is Local London</i>	United Kingdom	Associated Freelancer
Local Media UK	United Kingdom	Writer
<i>Sevilla Actualidad</i>	Spain	Editor
<i>Diario de Sevilla</i>	Spain	Journalist; Management team
Grupo Prisa	Spain	Former community correspondent; local media journalist
European Commission	Belgium	Project manager
European Commission	Spain	Press officer
European Commission	Spain	Chief of unit
European Commission	Germany/Spain	Homologable to General Manager
European Parliament	Belgium	Homologable to General Manager

Source: Own elaboration.

The content of the interviews is subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), to obtain themes and patterns in the information. To complement and interpret the data, secondary material is used, such as reports and web content, concerning the technical file of the European Parliament (2021) on communication. This process was implemented using the qualitative coding software ATLAS.ti version 8, which makes it possible to identify the main themes of the transcripts. The phases for the thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006) were used: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, search and revision of themes, and writing of the research report with the definitive themes.

The fieldwork was carried out between April 2019 and May 2021, which entails considering responses before and after the pandemic, which may have reinforced the EU's newsworthiness due to the management of vaccines and aid funds. In any case, the interest of this research is oriented to its articulation at the local level and not so much to moments of informative relevance. The interviews were carried out face-to-face at the beginning and later by video conference, due to health restrictions, recording the audio for analysis. The sessions were divided into five sections: 1) previous experience, 2) configuration of daily work, 3) vision of the information treatment of the EU, 4) the role of local journalism in the knowledge of Europe, and 5) future challenges of the European public communication.

The sample of participants is presented anonymously, omitting data that allow their identification. This is because some of the informants agreed to participate under that condition. For this reason, confidentiality is also preserved in the selected textual quotes, which seek to illustrate the opinion that the protagonists have of the European communicative process. In any case, table 1 allows us to know the profile of the selected people.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Professional differences in the treatment of the EU.

All the professionals consulted affirm that the EU is an entity of the utmost importance for understanding the political issues that affect society. This is logical from the perspective of officials who work in these institutions but not so much from a journalistic approach, which has usually considered this topic as "boring", distant, and endowed with a heavy bureaucratic burden (Baisnée, 2014). Furthermore, it seems complex to establish informative connections between the international scale of the EU and the local sphere in which the practice of the analyzed media takes place, according to the collected opinions.

Journalists show discrepancies in the informative treatment of the EU. There is no single way of approaching this political subject, although there are similarities in each country. British informants agree in identifying the Union as a topic of national scope, without special interest for their local communities. This fits with the eurosceptic tradition of their public opinion, materialized in Brexit (Krzyżanowski, 2019). The freelancers associated with the *London Evening Standard* and *This is Local*

London point out that European news makes priority use of public administrations as a source. Likewise, they show little interest in the data provided by the community institutions.

On the other hand, the cases observed in Germany show a greater link between proximity and Europe. Its three informants point out that the local media have enormous potential in building a feeling of community, something for which international events with a local scope, among which the EU is framed, are interesting. The attention is directed to issues of relevance to German society, such as the economy or industry while criticizing the public communication policy of the European institutions:

Honestly, I do not think that the media represent the EU like how it is done with federal politics. Normally, the news is presented in a pessimistic tone, describing something negative that has been done there and that affects us, as in industry. I think it is partly the responsibility of Europe because its public relations policy is bad (freelance associated with *Berliner Kurier*).

While in Germany the focus is concentrated on issues of economy and industry, the journalistic concern in Spain is oriented towards European funds, especially in regions that have historically had extensive funding in this area. This is what the journalist from *Diario de Sevilla*, who holds management positions and has an extensive professional career, comments on. The relevance of these funds for Spain is also mentioned by the informants from *Sevilla Actualidad* and *Grupo Prisa*, evidencing their centrality in European information in that country.

For his part, the former *Grupo Prisa* correspondent in Brussels has worked in local media, which explains his interest in the research. This journalist emphasizes that current events set the pace for community information, giving the example that a few years ago such international issues as the fight against jihadist terrorism or the arrival of refugees from Syria could be of interest at the local level. Instead, with the Covid-19 pandemic, everything focused on issues such as vaccines and the possibility of having a self-sufficient pharmaceutical industry, to recently pivot to the war in Ukraine.

The code of the lack of effectiveness of the European communication policy emerges frequently in the sample since it is underlined that their interests are not reflected in the content of the press. In this sense, the editor of *Sevilla Actualidad* insists on the persistence of enormous deficiencies in the framework of the EU when it comes to communicating. According to him, the structure of the institutions does not have the flexibility to attract the attention of the citizen because there are slow and complex deadlines to understand for the majority of the population:

I consider that the European information is relevant, but there is a deficit. First, the training of journalists is deficient. Second, the way of communicating of the Union itself also is (...). I miss training on the role of the European institutions. Furthermore, the European legislative framework was probably

not conceived with the population in mind (editor, *Sevilla Actualidad*).

Therefore, different information concerns seem to be perceived among professionals depending on the country of origin. This connects with attending to the interests of the population, the primary objective of local journalism, which differ depending on their own circumstances. However, a criticism arises of the informative work of the institutions, which has to do with a structural problem of European integration (Rivas-de-Roca & García-Gordillo, 2021; Valera-Ordaz & Sørensen, 2019). Neither the design of the European project itself nor the communicative action developed by the institutions is valued as positive for its newsworthiness at the local level.

4.2. Journalistic self-perception: between the ideal of the EPS and the routinization of newsrooms.

One of the reasons put forward to justify the scarcity of European information in the local media is the heavy workload in the newsrooms, which are subject to routines and the need for high daily production. Consequently, Europe is not part of the usual topics in local newspapers, which is a problem in democratic terms, since citizens do not have enough material to evaluate their political actions. Despite this rare appearance, journalists positively evaluate their work with the EU and believe that it contributes to the recipients' understanding of their role. This contrasts with the negative view of community officials in this regard.

The self-assessments of the information professionals interviewed are detailed below. By country, British journalists have a perspective focused on the surveillance of power, the watchdog function, and the limitation to facts, following the myth of objectivity. Therefore, we must monitor the EU and create news about European events that interest the public. This is suggested by the freelancers of the *London Evening Standard* and *This is Local London*, and the editor belonging to the *Local Media UK* media consortium. All affirm that their coverage of the EU is complete and value positively the practice of British journalism on this political subject.

On the other hand, the interest in the economic dimension of the European project in both Germany and Spain stands out, with some nuances. This is a differential finding compared to the British media, perhaps motivated by the fact that Germany and Spain are actually part of the Union and wish to reap the benefits of this affiliation. From *Diario de Sevilla*, it is commented that a high percentage of the information published about the EU refers to community aid. The news is usually published in the Andalusia section as a form of contextualization, in a practice that seeks to bring the Union closer to citizens through certain pedagogical work. In the same direction, the representative of *Grupo Prisa* says:

In my opinion, a lot of effort goes into translating initiatives that can be too technical. And correspondents face problems such as the many filters that an initiative goes through before becoming a reality: launch by the Commission, discussions in the Council, trialogues, approval by the European Parliament, etc. (former correspondent, *Grupo Prisa*).

German journalists also underline this function of pedagogy to explain European affairs to the local population. According to the journalists in the sample, attached to the *Berliner Zeitung*, *Berliner Kurier*, and *Luhze* newspapers, European issues belong to a distant sphere, so the way to present them as of interest to citizens is through their link with public policies. *Luhze's* editor draws attention to the fact that the proportion of politicians representing the population in the EU is much lower than at the local level, which forces a focus on specific items, such as industrial plans or waste management.

The recurrence of "pedagogy" as a value to implement in the news contrasts with the opinion of the European officials in the sample, who value the media negatively. Most of the interviewees consider that the press does not contribute enough to understanding European news, so the audience does not feel the EU as their own:

It should be informed more in-depth and in a more didactic way. There should also be fewer national optics. In other words, the national/local perspective must always exist, because if not, the information would not be relevant, but the (positive) work of Europe tends to be diluted in the media, and, the negative, enhanced (responsible for press, European Commission).

This official in charge of press tasks focuses on a negativization of European policies, which hampers the achievement of the EPS, while citizens only have negative elements to judge community action. This collides with the good work that was glimpsed in the self-assessment of the journalists. Only the editor of *Sevilla Actualidad* recognizes that Europe's newsworthiness is often associated with negative events. That a public action has been financed by the EU is not reported, but rather that national and local entities take ownership of that success. On the contrary, criticism is directed at the EU when something goes wrong. The aforementioned journalist details that he would love to report more on the Union but that the routines of a newsroom hardly fit in with the outreach work required by such complex institutions.

As a consequence, the local coverage of the EU is closely linked to economic and negative issues, which makes it similar to national politics (Lloyd & Marconi, 2014). From the European Commission, the communicative project manager emphasizes that Brussels is only talked about for "money", forgetting the values of the European project and reinforcing a negative vision in the collective imagination. The representative of the European Parliament expressed himself in the same sense. All this coincides with certain literature (Brosius et al., 2020), which points out that the media treatment of the Union fosters an association with the idea of "crisis", diminishing trust in European institutions.

4.3. Usefulness and limitations of European public communication.

The value of the public communication of the EU institutions seems to be in question since criticism of these communication policies is a constant in the analyzed media. Its strong propaganda component is pointed out, which reduces the credibility of the messages that emanate from the institutions. In any case, there are also discrepancies

by country, with the German and Spanish media being curiously the most critical of its management. For its part, the difficulties encountered by the British press can be summarized as follows:

Public administration in the United Kingdom is becoming less and less accessible to journalists, so it is very difficult to substantiate the information. On the other hand, European institutions are more willing to transmit information. The handicap is that this data is not always what we need (writer, *Local Media UK*).

According to this, the EU does not suffer from an accessibility problem but rather the content it offers is not of interest to the press. A debate is opened on the poor newsworthiness of the EU for the media, which operate on national and local plots. Both in *Berliner Zeitung* and *Berliner Kurier*, their journalists argue that the media prefer to focus on federal politics because they do not fully appreciate its influence on people's lives. Therefore, European issues are not perceived as relevant as other issues, despite the growing politicization of the Union detected by recent studies (Hooghe & Marks, 2018). Furthermore, both informants classify the European communication policy as of poor quality.

Spanish journalists manifest themselves in a similar sense. The former *Grupo Prisa* correspondent who is now dedicated to the local area points out the propagandistic nature of the EU's messages and identifies as a challenge that the media do not become mere spokesmen for the EU. The interviewed officials from the institutions themselves acknowledge that journalistic texts do not usually accommodate European issues, in the proportion of work and effort that communication directorates would like. Covid-19 may have exacerbated this phenomenon:

The main contact we had with the press were events, to which we invited local, regional, and even national media. Now we don't have that way of contact, although it is true that when we locate an event, such as Rare Disease Day, Cancer, etc., we write press releases, distribute them, follow up by phone, etc. (project manager, European Commission).

The notion of "pedagogy" in European politics is also common among officials dedicated to communication. Emphasis is placed on selecting the most important aspect of a fact and adapting the language for informative purposes, practices that are paradoxically journalistic. Although the professionals interviewed mention the press, and in particular the local press, for its ability to transmit the impact of the EU on the ground, a desire to transgress the intermediary function of the conventional media and develop direct communication with citizens is perceived. For this, social networks become the main tool.

The European institutions not only guide the informative process towards journalism but also towards the concept of communication. The word cloud obtained from the officials' statements evidences this finding (figure 1). The vision of the EU transcends journalism, identifying itself with the features of institutional communication, which

Figure 1

[illegible]

As an example of the importance of networks, the Commission and Parliament are betting that the campaign linked to NextGenerationEU (the massive recovery funds after Covid-19) be articulated digitally, opening profiles on youth-targeted social networks such as Instagram, Snapchat, or TikTok. Furthermore, specific filters on the EU and video games on Twitch are developed. This is what the interviewed project manager comments, being confirmed by the two personalities consulted that they are equivalent to the position of general director, the highest administrative rank of the Union's civil service body. The objective of this campaign is Generation Z (Gen Z), that is, people between 16 and 24 years old.

In the sample as a whole, the notion of “quality” appears widely cited as a formula for preparing informative pieces that promote knowledge of the EU (figure 2). The word analysis shows that quality is thus linked to the general concepts of information and communication, with special attention to the local press and the EU. Consequently, there is a certain level of awareness about the problems exposed,

Figure 2

[illegible]

5. CONCLUSIONS

As a first contribution regarding the roles attributed to news about the EU, it can be seen that the consideration of European information at the local level varies by country. There is no homogeneous style of approaching this political subject, in line with the findings of comparative media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) and journalistic cultures (Hanusch & Hanitzsch, 2017). In fact, in the United Kingdom, the surveillance of power and the myth of objectivity, which come from their professional tradition, are perceived as codes. In the cases analyzed in this country, there is little relationship between the local and Europe, while in Germany and Spain, which do belong to the EU, this relationship is greater concerning the economy. However, the attention is directed to different elements, with a preference for industrial issues in the German country that contrasts with European funds in Spain.

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coverage is concentrated on negative issues. Some speak of the high degree of stress or the lack of time in the newsrooms but they do not link these problems with the quality of the information on the European project. On the other hand, negative judgments do emerge from the communicative action of the institutions, which is qualified as inefficient and far from journalistic interests.

As a third and final contribution, journalists and officials from the institutions share that communicating about the EU requires pedagogy, which means assuming the complexity of community affairs. However, European officials have a more optimistic view, which maintains that communicative actions through formats such as social networks would get citizens involved at the local level with the community project. This fits with their preference for the terms impact or campaign, although allusions to quality are also detected in the analysis as a whole. This finding is striking for journalists, given their scant self-criticism towards their informative work with the Union.

Following the above, it can be considered that the optimistic positions of the workers in the European sphere collide with a more negative perception on the part of the journalists, who are pragmatic, in the sense of pointing out that the information from the EU does not have a journalistic impact. Based on the interviews collected, it also seems that the communication directorates of the institutions want to put aside information mediation, opening up to direct interaction with citizens through social networks. It would be worth reflecting here on the future role that the media will have in the information management of local spaces, which is reinforced thanks to digitization (Nielsen, 2015).

The low degree of reflexivity detected among journalists does not invite us to think about changes in news coverage associated with negativity and the concept of crisis, as the interviewees acknowledge in a similar way to previous studies (Goldberg et al., 2021). In this regard, one of the consulted European officials commented that the main contact with the press was events, suppressed by the pandemic. Without this direct interrelation, the notion of communicative hybridization (Chadwick, 2017) is diluted in favor of digitization for institutions. In line with the present study, future research in this area faces the challenge of observing whether such changes are also experienced in local media ecosystems (Thorson et al., 2020) until now characterized by their rigidity.

Our work has several limitations. The sampling is intentional and provides data to compare the news treatment of the EU from a double perspective, but not in a representative way. The material generated by the interviews should be assessed as a case study, which provides illustrative examples of how local media operate in various European countries, and also what are the perceptions of European officials involved in communication tasks. Additional research is required with more in-depth interviews or other methods of collecting opinions such as the survey, which delve into the configuration of the local sphere.

On the other hand, the communicative dimension of the EU not only brings together

journalism or institutional communication but also other realities such as mobile instant messaging services or the numerous organizations that work on European issues. The academy faces the challenge of including them in its research, to understand the communicative functioning of the Union. In any case, the literature collects the potential of local media in the construction of communities (Hess & Waller, 2017), which must be considered insofar as a good part of European decisions have an impact on the level of proximity.

According to the interviews, the selected local media do not promote a public space for European conversation, the so-called EPS, beyond a certain disclosure of national issues. In summary, institutions and media share the need to implement pedagogy on these issues, but disagree on the strategy and forms, and on their assessment of the quality of community information. The management of European funds in the local area may be an opportunity to redirect this situation if both parties recognize themselves as interlocutors of proximity communication.

Journalists and civil servants should be aware of the importance of adequate media coverage to increase the traceability of the European project. The fact that the traditional depoliticization of the EU is coming to an end (de Wilde et al., 2016) requires extensive and precise news coverage, which enables a correct attribution of responsibilities. This would lead to making informed judgments about the Union. Due to its special characteristics, such as its adaptability and link to the territory and the audience, local journalism can be key to a better understanding of European affairs, which in turn would reinforce the quality of the EU's democratic system.

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