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# ETHICAL-JOURNALISTIC TREATMENT OF TRUE CRIME IN THE SPANISH PRESS: THE *GUARDIA URBANA* AND *NEMO* CASES

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** This study analyzes the ethical handling of news coverage in the Spanish general-interest press regarding two homicides that occurred in Spain – both linked to true-crime productions and television infotainment: the *Guardia Urbana* and *Nemo* cases. The objective is to determine whether 140 newspaper articles comply with Spanish and European journalistic codes of ethics and whether they avoid the sensationalist tendencies particularly evident in television coverage. **Methodology:** A content analysis was conducted using 13 variables and a nominal measurement system, enabling a comparative analysis of the two cases. **Results:** Overall, the newspaper articles adhere to professional ethics, although sensationalism – manifested through catchy headlines – is present in some instances. **Discussion and Conclusions:** The true-crime approach to news coverage, which leans toward sensationalism and spectacularization, alters the story's news value and distorts perceptions of both the victim and the perpetrator, thereby undermining investigative and ethical rigor. There is a clear need to reinforce ethical boundaries in true-crime reporting to protect victims and their families, who are repeatedly exposed and revictimized.

**Keywords:** communication ethics, journalistic ethics, true crime, press, infotainment, sensationalism.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Media outlets have been reporting on criminal events for centuries. Crime reporting is the branch of journalism dedicated to covering events that share a common denominator: the presence of one or more victims (Rodríguez Cárcela, 2015). Over the last decade, crimes have served as the starting point for productions across various media – combining entertainment and information – known as "true crime" (Nichols, 2017), while also capturing the interest of television programs through the lens of infotainment. True crime narratives are constructed around real, traumatic crimes or acts of violence (Phillips, 2017) using a documentary approach; these stories "have had a significant social impact due to the complexity and multifaceted investigative angles of the cases covered" (López Delacruz, 2022, p. 57). According to Boorsma (2017), these productions seek to understand the "monster" and their motives, focusing on questionable outcomes.

There is a consensus regarding the sensationalist – or lurid – treatment of crime-related information (Carroto, 2019; Jiménez Sánchez & Angulo Egea, 2017; Masip et al., 2019; Ross et al., 2022; Wong & Harraway, 2020). Ludec (2016) defines sensationalism as "a journalistic tendency to seek out extraordinary and scandalous events in order to highlight them" (p. 497). For Rodríguez Cárcela (2011, 2015), sensationalism is driven by the very nature of the negative subject matter involved. Furthermore, it is highly profitable for media outlets, even though it sometimes infringes upon the rights of victims and those around them. Olivar de Julián and Díaz-Campo (2020) add the immediacy of the news and the fact that the sources consulted are far removed from journalism.

As the hyper-mediatization of true crime grows, so do the ethical dilemmas it raises (Wright, 2020). At times, content derived from criminal events fails to consider the pain experienced by victims' families and loved ones as they relive the events and face intense media pressure (González Vega, 2024; Molla Pagán, 2024; Nichol, 2024; Serrano, 2024). It also gives rise to a legal controversy regarding which fundamental rights should prevail: the protection of the victim's honor, privacy, and image, or the citizens' right to information, which conflicts with the former. However, it is also important to consider the sense of responsibility held by journalists and, by extension, media outlets, as noted by Suárez Villegas (2009).

This study focuses on analyzing the ethical treatment by the Spanish general-interest press regarding two criminal cases that have garnered significant media attention. This notoriety stems, in part, from the rise of true-crime productions—such as podcasts, series, and documentaries—centered on these cases. One of them, known as the *Guardia Urbana* case, has already been the subject of multiple audiovisual adaptations; the other, the *Nemo* case, has been the subject of negotiations for adaptation on on-demand content platforms. The study analyzes the impact these productions have on the press's coverage following the release or announcement of said adaptations.

In this study, ethical journalistic treatment is understood as the set of practices, criteria, and decisions applied in the practice of journalism to ensure that information is disseminated responsibly, truthfully, and with respect for individuals' rights (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Ward, 2009). This topic has been extensively addressed in academia (Christians, 2019; Ludec, 2016; Olivar de Julián & Díaz-Campo, 2020; Redondo, 2016; Rodríguez Cárcela, 2011; Suárez Villegas, 2009). This work offers a novel approach by examining the phenomenon through two cases that served as the basis for true crime productions and television infotainment; it focuses on a meta-journalistic analysis, as it examines how the press treats true crime rather than the original cases themselves. This issue has been addressed very little, and mainly in a tangential way. Dueñas Mohedas et al. (2023) highlight the narrative role of journalists specializing in this field and outline the challenges involved in media coverage of true crime in Spain. Jewkes (2015) studies how the genre influences public perception of crime. Authors such as Patton (2022) discuss the impact and effects of true crime on audiences, warning that if media outlets prioritize sensationalism, they may perpetuate stereotypes—though they can also have a positive effect by portraying stories respectfully. Holmes and Hines (2025) employ an ethical perspective to analyze how women interact with the true crime genre.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1. The Impact of True Crime on Victims and Their Social Circles**

The infotainment industry is showing growing interest in recreating true-crime events (Golob, 2018) through the production of podcasts and television documentaries, mostly in serialized formats. The latter blend the journalistic genre with cinematic storytelling, which “starts from a recreation of an event that made the

news" (Grijelmo, 2008, p. 66). For Sánchez-Esparza et al. (2023), true crime is a phenomenon that is "entirely novel in contemporary storytelling – a successful genre that everyone is rushing to imitate" (p. 1) – all within the context of media convergence, a concept discussed by Jenkins (2006). These productions garner high audience ratings (Romero Domínguez, 2020) and fuel speculative, morbid discussions across traditional media and social networks (Vidal & Corbillón, 2023). Consequently, authors such as Malcolm (1990) question the objectivity of journalism and criticize the public's credulity. Among the most recent Spanish productions exemplifying this trend, notable examples include documentaries about the crimes committed by Miguel Ricart and Antonio Anglés (The "Alcàsser" Case, León Siminiani, 2019), Miguel Carcaño ("Where Is Marta?", Nacho Abad, 2021), José Bretón ("Bretón, the Devil's Gaze," José Ángel Bohollo, 2023), César Román (The King of the Cachopo, Román Parrado, 2024), Rosario Porto and Alfonso Bastera ("What the Truth Hides: The *Asunta* Case," León Siminiani, 2017), Rosa Peral ("*Rosa Peral's Tapes*," Manuel Pérez & Carles Vidal, 2023), and Daniel Sancho ("The *Sancho* Case," Marga Luis, 2024), among others.

Criminal events possess a remarkable ability to capture the public's attention and stimulate their imagination (Romero Domínguez, 2020). According to Seltzer (2004), human beings are drawn to traumatic experiences – a phenomenon the author terms "wound culture." Punnett (2018) notes the interest in graphic images of violent crime scenes, driven simply by the impact they create. For Redmon (2017), this fascination has intensified significantly with the millennial generation – heavy users of social media – and the advent of audio and video distribution platforms.

Television is the medium where sensationalism is most evident (de-Casas et al., 2020). The Pamela Smart case – the first trial broadcast live on US television in 1991 – spurred the creation of "infotainment" programs (termed *infotáculos* by Cebrián Herreros, 1998), a blend of news and entertainment focused on "soft" content (Brants, 1998). In Spain, the first case to dominate media attention was the 1992 murder of the three girls from Alcàsser (Enguix, 2017; Rodríguez Cárcela, 2015). One of the most heavily criticized programs was *De tú a tú* (Antena 3), which broadcast live from Alcàsser on the day the victims' bodies were found; it was condemned for "wallowing in the grief of the deceased girls' families and loved ones, and for refusing to forgo commercial breaks that came across as deeply jarring" (Fabelo, 2019, para. 3).

This research focuses on the impact within the Spanish press. On one hand, Rosa Peral – convicted of murdering a *Guardia Urbana* officer (the *Guardia Urbana* case) – unsuccessfully attempted to block the broadcast of the fictional series *Burning Body* (Torregrossa & Mañá, 2024), arguing that it violated her right to honor and that of her daughters. On the other, the mother of the minor Gabriel Cruz (Operation *Nemo*) succeeded in halting the production of a Netflix true-crime documentary about her son's murder by Ana Julia Quezada (Esteban, 2024; San Narciso, 2024). She had previously denounced the cruel use of her son's image on social media (Sánchez, 2021). The case received extensive media coverage, garnering high viewership ratings

on programs such as *Sálvame* (Tele 5), which devoted hours to discussing the boy's murder—analyzing details of the crime and the perpetrator's profile—thereby sparking an intense public debate regarding ethical standards in coverage (La Vanguardia, 2018).

The hyper-mediatization of true crime not only leads to the revictimization of the victims themselves but also has repercussions for their families and loved ones—the "other victims" (Lundström, 2016). This situation raises ethical questions about the appropriateness of dramatizing such tragedies so soon after the events occurred (Serrano, 2024). Carroto (2019) views the excessive media coverage of true crime as a true reflection of contemporary society, highlighting a growing distrust of media outlets as they struggle to attract audiences.

## **2.2. Deontological Ethics in the Treatment of True Crime in the Print Media**

In the current digital context, characterized by "fake news," the credibility of media outlets and journalists has declined (Guanipa, 2019): 40% of Spaniards distrust the press (Newman et al., 2023). Ettema and Glasser (1998) emphasize the importance of ethical values in journalistic practice, and Rahman (2023) explores this journalistic ethics in the digital age, defining the profession as "clickbait journalism." García González et al. (2023) note that "the journalist also seems to have lost their place as a reliable source of information" (p. 411). According to Arroyo Cabello (2011), the fundamental role of the journalist lies in deciphering social reality and shaping it into solid narratives, grounded in the ethical and deontological principles governing the profession. Their work as a guarantor of veracity entails verifying, cross-checking, contextualizing, and constructing facts in accordance with journalistic standards, across both traditional and online media. Molyneux and Coddington (2020) explore how the use of sensationalist headlines affects public perception of journalistic credibility. This situation has highlighted the need for journalists to commit to the discipline's foundational principles. Escobar and Jaramillo (2021) identify, among others, a commitment to ethics and truth, responsibility toward the audience and content, and the procedures for obtaining and cross-checking information.

In Spain, the code of ethics of the Federation of Associations of Journalists of Spain (FAPE) establishes the general principles that every journalist must uphold in the practice of their profession; these principles are underpinned by the civil liberties enshrined in the Constitution: the free flow of information and the expression of ideas within a democratic state.

According to Hermoso (2018), despite the existence of codes aimed at protecting victims' rights, one can still find lurid and sensationalist headlines regarding crime-related news in the press. These headlines rely on the relevance theory proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1986), which posits that the information contained in an utterance—combined with real-world knowledge and sensory input—is used to comprehend meaning. An utterance is considered relevant if it yields significant cognitive benefits while requiring minimal mental effort to process. Consequently, the greater the cognitive benefit and the lower the mental effort required, the more

relevant the utterance is. Hermoso (2018) advocates for objective crime reporting. This entails avoiding "clickbait"—a practice based on crafting catchy headlines that appeal to readers' emotions and curiosity to drive clicks. This phenomenon "compromises the quality of information by saturating the content disseminated by media outlets on social networks with trivial, exaggerated news and expressive devices designed to act as hooks" (Bazaco et al., 2019, p. 112).

In light of the foregoing, this research proposes a systematic analysis to examine—from a rigorous methodological perspective—the media coverage of the two aforementioned cases. By assessing the extent to which Spanish and European codes of journalistic ethics are upheld, the study aims to offer a critical reflection that contributes to strengthening adherence to the profession's ethical standards.

### 3. OBJECTIVES

- O1. To determine whether the informational content generated around "true crime" events complies with the ethical codes of Spanish and European journalism.
- O2. To determine whether such content tends toward sensationalism or, conversely, adopts a narrative approach that upholds the right to information without compromising the dignity of victims or journalistic rigor.

### 4. METHODOLOGY

The research begins with a content analysis (Berelson, 1952; Holsti, 1969; Krippendorff, 2004). The independent cross-referencing of data—based on systematization and quantification (frequency, occurrence, repetition, etc.)—enables the drawing of inferences through the systematic identification of specific characteristics (Holsti, 1969) and the acquisition of empirical data. Qualitative analysis also seeks to uncover the meaning of the message based on the analysis and indirect interpretation of documentary sources. Drawing on Piñuel's (2002) definition, research involving content analysis—based on "measurement techniques that are sometimes quantitative (statistics based on unit counts) and sometimes qualitative (logic based on the combination of categories)" (p. 2)—allows for the benefits of both qualitative and quantitative methods to be harnessed in the collection, processing, triangulation, and interpretation of data.

A case study approach is also applied; this is an empirical process that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context—particularly when the boundaries between the two are unclear (Yin, 1994) or controversial (Cebreiro & Fernández, 2004)—and allows an in-depth examination of a specific research unit (Stake, 1994). In a case study, the researcher selects the unit or units of analysis to construct a comprehensive narrative using partial accounts (Álvarez Álvarez & San Fabián Maroto, 2012). Unlike content analysis, the case study method does not allow for statistical generalization, though it does permit analytical generalization (Jiménez & Comet, 2016; Yin, 1994); it thus complements content analysis by enabling direct observation of the object of study in descriptive terms (Cebreiro & Fernández, 2004).

The research focuses on the most widely read general-interest newspapers in Spain: *El País*, *El Mundo*, *La Voz de Galicia*, *La Vanguardia*, *ABC*, *El Periódico*, and *La Razón* (Asociación para la Investigación de Medios de Comunicación, 2024). This medium was selected due to its fundamental role in fostering critical thinking.

The *Guardia Urbana* and *Nemo* cases are analyzed, allowing for a comparative examination of the ethical and journalistic approaches taken. Both cases exemplify violent crimes that garnered significant media attention and impact, highlighting the dilemma media outlets face: how to report rigorously without infringing upon fundamental rights or sensationalizing the events:

- *Guardia Urbana* Case: In 2017, Albert López—the romantic partner of Guardia Urbana officer Rosa Peral—murdered Pedro Rodríguez, who was also involved with Peral and served in the same police force. This case became one of the most high-profile murder stories in recent years due to the love triangle dynamic involving three police officers. The case has spawned podcast episodes, the true-crime documentary *Rosa Peral's Tapes* (Pérez & Vidal, 2023), and the fictional series *Burning Body* (Torregrossa & Mañá, 2024); both productions are available on Netflix.
- *Nemo* Case (or the Gabriel Case, alias "El Pescaito"): In 2018, the body of an eight-year-old boy was discovered twelve days after he went missing, following a confession by Ana Julia Quezada—the partner of the boy's father and the perpetrator of the murder. The case received extensive media coverage, particularly through infotainment programs on national television networks. Notably, the boy's mother succeeded in halting the production of a true-crime documentary on Netflix.

The general-purpose search engine Google was selected for identifying the study units because it is the most widely used (90.06%)—far ahead of competitors such as Bing (4.31%), Yandex (1.84%), and Yahoo (1.45%) (Statcounter Global Stats, n.d.)—and because it democratizes access to information sources, unlike tools such as LexisNexis. Keywords related to the cases under analysis—the *Guardia Urbana* case, the *Nemo* case, Rosa Peral, and Gabriel Cruz—are entered into the search tool.

Regarding the *Guardia Urbana* case, the search is limited to the period between August 2023 and June 2024, coinciding with the release of the docuseries *Rosa Peral's Tapes* and the drama series *Burning Body*, both of which premiered on September 8, 2023. For the *Nemo* case, the search period spans from May 7, 2024, to June 30, 2024, covering the time from the announcement of a potential docuseries about the case until the story lost its prominence in newspaper news cycles. The differing timeframes for the two cases are justified by their coverage during periods of peak media exposure, as these are the moments when the cases resurface in the public agenda.

To assess whether news reports adhere to ethical standards, the study draws on an adaptation of key normative benchmarks in journalistic ethics—specifically, the Code of Ethics of the Federation of Associations of Journalists of Spain (FAPE), approved

in 1993 and updated in 2017, and the European Code of Journalism Ethics, approved by the Council of Europe in 1993. This selection is justified by their institutional legitimacy and widespread application within the journalism profession across Spain and Europe. Both texts are considered to establish clear criteria regarding truthfulness, independence, the protection of minors, respect for privacy, and so forth, making them highly valuable for evaluating the ethical journalistic treatment of the cases under study.

A total of 140 news items (N=140) were analyzed: 103 concerning the *Guardia Urbana* case (n1=103) and 37 concerning the *Nemo* case (n2=37). The texts comprise news reports and feature stories, as these are the most common journalistic genres. The analysis, conducted manually, provides a comprehensive overview of how ethical journalistic principles were applied in both case studies. Items that did not deal directly with the cases—but rather addressed them tangentially, particularly those linked to television programming related to the cases—were excluded.

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Regarding the selection of variables, those directly related to the practice of the profession were chosen, based on the aforementioned codes of ethics. In total, 13 variables were identified (Figure 1), including: respect for the truth; the freedom to investigate and disseminate information, as well as the freedom to comment and critique; the right to privacy and image rights; the presumption of innocence; the impact on minors; respect for the rights of the vulnerable; impartiality in presentation; the acquisition of information through legal and ethical means; and the rectification of false or erroneous information at the request of the affected parties. the right of reply; avoiding sensationalism; avoiding the glorification of violence; or avoiding clickbait headlines.

Data coding is carried out using an analysis template based on a nominal



measurement scale—a useful method for non-numerical variables (Coronado Padilla, 2007)—where a value of 1 is assigned if the element is observed (explicitly or implicitly), 0 if it is not observed, 2 if it cannot be identified, and 3 if it is not applicable. Analysis reliability is ensured through double review: each author independently examined the data for both case studies prior to reaching a consensus. Krippendorff's (2013) alpha coefficient was applied, yielding  $\alpha \approx 0.83$ , which indicates a high degree of reliability.

**Figure 1**

*Study Variables*

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>VI.</b> Regarding truthfulness (source contrast).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>V2.</b> Freedom to investigate and to disseminate information and freedom of comment and criticism.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <b>V3.</b> Right to privacy and to one's image.<br><b>V3.1.</b> Without prior consent or for public interest.<br><b>V3.2.</b> Avoid expressions, images or testimonies that are offensive, voyeuristic or harmful.<br><b>V3.3.</b> Avoid speculation.<br><b>V3.4.</b> Respect the privacy of children and young people.<br><b>V3.5.</b> Take special care when dealing with people admitted to hospitals or similar institutions. |
| <b>V4.</b> Presumption of innocence unless proven otherwise.<br><b>V4.1.</b> Avoid naming relatives and friends of persons accused or convicted of a crime.<br><b>V4.2.</b> Avoid naming victims of the crime.<br><b>V4.3.</b> Exclusion of parallel trials.                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>V5.</b> Protection of minors.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>V6.</b> Respect for the rights of the most vulnerable and non-discrimination or content that may incite violence or degradation.<br><b>V6.1.</b> Avoid alluding, in a derogatory way or with prejudice, to race, color or religion, social origin or sex or to physical or mental disabilities.<br><b>V6.2.</b> Avoid publishing such data, unless they are directly related to the information published.                     |
| <b>V7.</b> Impartiality in reporting, not opinion.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <b>V8.</b> Obtaining information through legal and ethical means.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>V9.</b> Right to rectification of persons affected by false or erroneous information.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <b>V10.</b> Right of reply.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <b>V11.</b> Do not confuse the conflictive or speculate on the important from the informative point of view.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>V12.</b> Avoid sensationalism of violence, sex and consumption and use of deliberately inappropriate language.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>V13.</b> Avoid headlines that promote <i>clickbait</i> .                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |

**Source:** Elaborated by the authors based on the Code of Ethics of the Federation of Spanish Journalists' Associations (FAPE) and the European Code of Ethics for Journalism (CEDP).

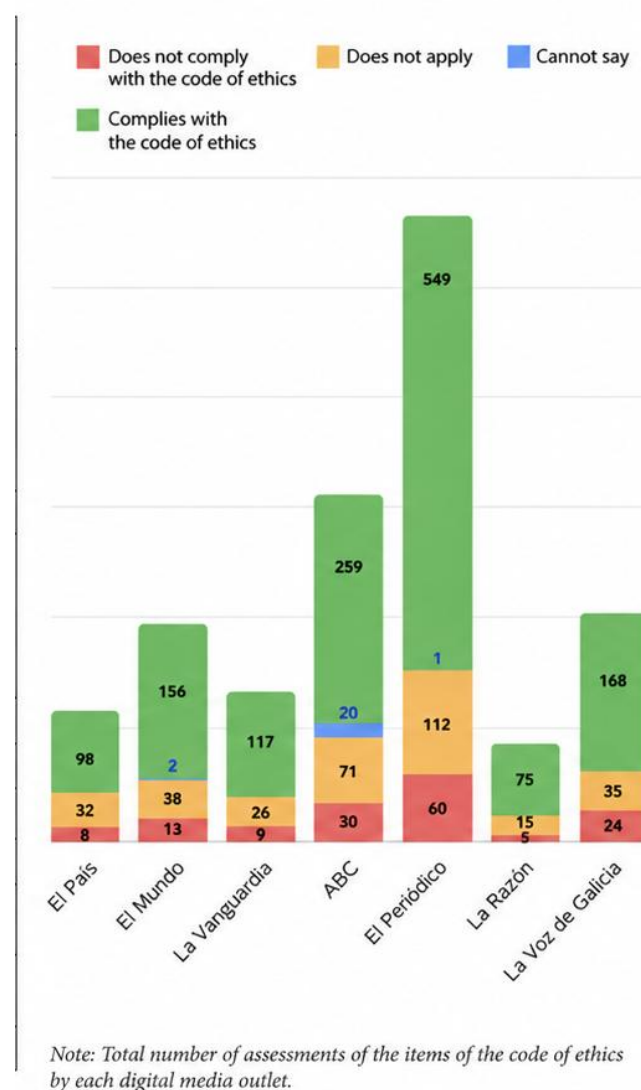
## 5. RESULTS

### 5.1. *Guardia Urbana* Case

*La Razón* is the newspaper that best adheres to ethical and professional standards, followed by *La Vanguardia* and *El Periódico* (Figure 2). Non-compliance with ethical standards is present in all the newspapers, albeit at significantly lower rates. Specifically, *La Voz de Galicia* shows a non-compliance rate of 10%, followed by *El Periódico* at 7.9%, *El Mundo* at 5.9%, *La Vanguardia* at 5.6%, *El País* at 5.5%, and *La Razón* at 5%.

**Figure 2**

*Ethics Compliance Results: The “Guardia Urbana” Case*



**Source:** Elaborated by the authors.

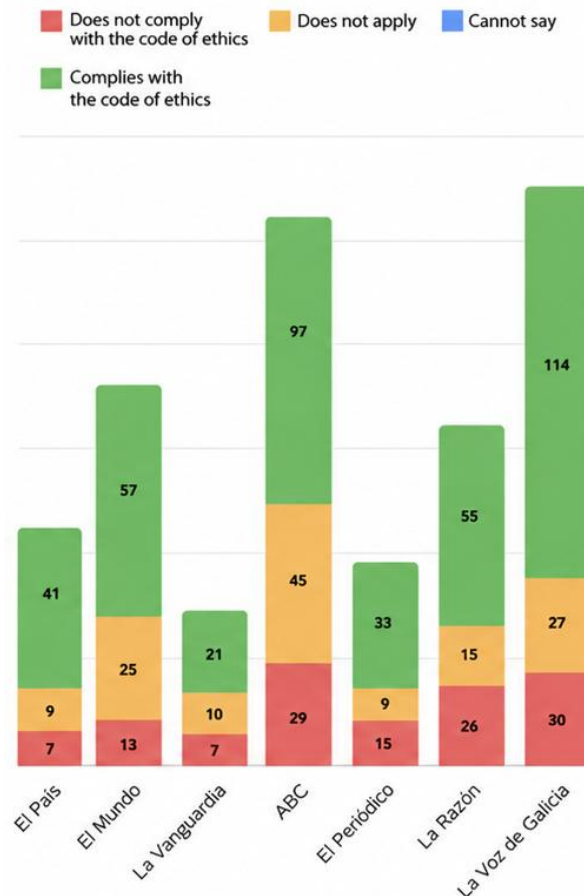
Regarding non-compliance, it is noteworthy that 63.10% of the news stories (38.5% of the total) do not avoid clickbait headlines (V13). Examples of these include the headlines: “Messages Albert López Sent to Rosa Peral Before and After the City Police Crime Revealed: ‘You’re a Traitorous Rat’” (El Mundo, 2023), “Who Is Rosa Peral’s New Partner: A Prisoner, a Colombian, and a Weekly Vis-à-Vis” (Albert, 2024), “Rosa Peral’s intimate reflection from prison: ‘I don’t think I’ll make it out of prison alive’” (La Vanguardia, 2023), or “How much money will Rosa Peral earn after winning her battle against Netflix?” (Costa, 2024). On the other hand, 50.5% of the cases (33.3% of the total) name the victim (V9.2), while the rest refer to the victim as their “partner” or “significant other,” or list the victim’s first name and the initial of their last name (Pedro R.). Finally, 16.5% of the cases (20.5% of the total) do not identify or verify the sources from which the information was obtained (V1). Beyond the criminal facts, the journalistic narrative often goes beyond the events themselves to delve into the convicted woman’s private life. Personal aspects such as her romantic relationship with an inmate and a possible pregnancy are mentioned. In these instances, 3.9% (6.7% of the total) of the analyzed pieces conflate conflict or sensationalism with newsworthiness (V11). Finally, in 1.9% of cases (5.1% of the total), bias is observed in the presentation of facts (V7), evidenced by the opinions of participants in the narrative—such as interviews with actors portraying characters from the series *Burning Body* or with investigative journalists covering the case.

## 5.2. *Nemo* Case

*El País* and *La Voz de Galicia* are the outlets that best adhere to the code of ethics (68.3%), followed by *La Razón*, *El Mundo*, and—in last place—*La Vanguardia* (52.5%) (Figure 3). Although more than half of the publications in all cases respect deontological standards, *La Razón* and *El Periódico* show the lowest level of compliance, specifically in 20% of the analyzed publications.

**Figure 3**

*Ethics Compliance Results: The “Nemo” Case*



*Note: Total number of assessments of the sub-items (e.g., V3.1, V3.2) of the code of ethics by each digital media outlet.*

**Source:** Elaborated by the authors.

Regarding non-compliance, the least respected ethical criteria are, firstly, the “right to privacy and image: respect for the privacy of childhood and youth / minors” (V3.4), violated in 100% of the cases (33.3% of the total). Secondly, there is the principle of “innocent until proven guilty: avoiding naming crime victims” (V9.2), violated in 97.30% of the cases (32.4% of the total). The majority of news reports name the crime victim—either by full name or nickname—thereby breaching both criteria. The same applies to Gabriel Cruz’s mother, Patricia Ramírez. However, she is named because she is spearheading the fight for her privacy, having legally requested the suspension of a true-crime series about the case, whereas the victim's father is rarely mentioned. Thirdly, the criterion of “not confusing the controversial or sensational with what is newsworthy” (V16) is disregarded in 37.8% of the cases (12.6% of the total). Finally, clickbait (V18) is not avoided in the same percentage of cases. Headlines seeking

sensationalism include: “Gabriel’s mother: ‘There are people trying to profit from his death’” (Fernández, 2024) and “Patricia Ramírez, Gabriel Cruz’s mother: ‘It tore my life in two, and since then, it threatens to do so again’” (Pérez, 2024).

## 5.2. Comparative Analysis

A total of 140 informative texts were collected: 103 regarding the *Guardia Urbana* case and 37 regarding the *Nemo* case. Each piece was evaluated based on the 13 proposed variables; 67.7% adhered to the ethical code, 0.8% were indeterminate, 22.1% were not applicable, and 9.4% failed to respect the ethical code (Table 1).

In general terms, the newspapers adhere to the principles of journalistic ethics. Compliance is higher in the *Guardia Urbana* case (68%) compared to the *Nemo* case (60.4%). Conversely, ethical criteria were not met in 6.5% of instances in the *Guardia Urbana* case and 15.1% in the *Nemo* case. This indicates that, despite the fact that the *Nemo* case involved the murder of a minor, the publications were less rigorous in their coverage. It is worth noting the high number of instances where the criterion could not be evaluated because it was not applicable to the case under investigation: this figure stands at 23% for the *Guardia Urbana* case and 24.4% for the *Nemo* case. There were fewer instances where compliance could not be determined.

**Tabla 1**

*Comparativa del cumplimiento ético deontológico en la prensa por caso*

| PUBLICATION           | RESPECTED  |              | NOT RESPECTED |              | CANNOT BE DETERMINED |           | NOT APPLICABLE |              |
|-----------------------|------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|----------------------|-----------|----------------|--------------|
| <i>El País</i>        | 47.6%      | 19.9%        | 3.9%          | 3.4%         | 0%                   | 0%        | 19.4%          | 5.8%         |
| <i>El Mundo</i>       | 48.8%      | 17.8%        | 4.1%          | 4.1%         | 0.5%                 | 0%        | 15.3%          | 9.4%         |
| <i>La Vanguardia</i>  | 58.5%      | 10.5%        | 4.5%          | 3.5%         | 0%                   | 0%        | 17%            | 6%           |
| <i>ABC</i>            | 44.7%      | 16.7%        | 5.2%          | 5%           | 3.4%                 | 0%        | 15.7%          | 9.3%         |
| <i>El Periódico</i>   | 67%        | 4.4%         | 7.3%          | 1.5%         | 0.1%                 | 0%        | 18.3%          | 1.5%         |
| <i>La Razón</i>       | 37.5%      | 30%          | 2.5%          | 10%          | 0%                   | 0%        | 10%            | 10%          |
| <i>La Voz Galicia</i> | 40.1%      | 29.4%        | 5.7%          | 5%           | 0%                   | 0%        | 11.2%          | 8.6%         |
| <b>TOTAL</b>          | <b>68%</b> | <b>60.4%</b> | <b>6.5%</b>   | <b>15.1%</b> | <b>2.49%</b>         | <b>0%</b> | <b>23%</b>     | <b>24.4%</b> |

Note: % *Guardia Urbana* Case - % *Nemo* Case

**Source:** Elaborated by the authors.

If the specific cases in which the code of ethics is followed or violated are examined more closely, it can be seen that the variables most frequently violated are V3.4 (100%) and V4.2 (97.3%) in the *Nemo* case; whereas in the case of *Guardia Urbana*, the most frequently violated variables are V13 (63.1%) and V4.2 (50.5%) (Table 2). Variable V4.3 is the one most frequently complied with by newspapers in both cases analyzed, at 100%.

**Table 2**

*Comparison of Compliance with Ethical Standards Based on Variables*

| VARIABLE | RESPECTED      |       | NOT RESPECTED  |       | CANNOT BE DETERMINED |    | NOT APPLICABLE |       |
|----------|----------------|-------|----------------|-------|----------------------|----|----------------|-------|
| V1       | 83.5%          | 100%  | 16.5%          | 0%    | 0%                   | 0% | 0%             | 0%    |
| V2       | 99%            | 100%  | 1%             | 0%    | 0%                   | 0% | 0%             | 0%    |
| V3.1     | 99%            | 100%  | 1%             | 0%    |                      | 0% | 0%             | 0%    |
| V3.2     | 99%            | 86.5% | 1%             | 13.5% |                      | 0% | 0%             | 0%    |
| V3.3     | 99%            | 100%  | 1%             | 0%    | 0%                   | 0% | 0%             | 0%    |
| V3.4     | 68%            | 0%    | 0%             | 100%  | 0%                   | 0% | 32%            | 0%    |
| V3.5     | 0%             | 0%    | 0%             | 0%    | 0%                   | 0% | 100%           | 0%    |
| V4.1     | 95.1%          | 100%  | 4.9%           | 0%    | 0%                   | 0% | 0%             | 0%    |
| V4.2     | 49.5%          | 2.7%  | 50.5%          | 97.3% | 0%                   | 0% | 0%             | 0%    |
| V4.3     | 100%           | 100%  | 0%             | 0%    | 0%                   | 0% | 0%             | 0%    |
| V5       | 0%             | 0%    | 0%             | 0%    | 0%                   | 0% | 100%           | 100%  |
| V6.1     | 100%           | 56.8% | 0%             | 0%    | 0%                   | 0% | 0%             | 43.2% |
| V6.2     | 99%            | 56.8% | 1%             | 0%    | 0%                   | 0% | 0%             | 43.2% |
| V7       | 98.1%          | 91.9% | 1.9%           | 8.1%  | 0%                   | 0% | 0%             | 0%    |
| V8       | 76.7%          | 100%  | 0%             | 0%    | 23.3%                | 0% | 0%             | 0%    |
| V9       | 3.9%           | 0%    | 0%             | 0%    | 0%                   | 0% | 96.1%          | 100%  |
| V10      | 5.8%           | 0%    | 0%             | 0%    | 0%                   | 0% | 94.2%          | 100%  |
| V11      | 96.1%          | 62.2% | 3.9%           | 37.8% | 0%                   | 0% | 0%             | 0%    |
| V12      | 99%            | 94.6% | 1%             | 5.4%  | 0%                   | 0% | 0%             | 0%    |
| V13      | 35.9%          | 62.2% | 63.1%          | 37.8% | 0%                   | 0% | 0%             | 0%    |
|          | More Respected |       | Less Respected |       | Cannot be Determined |    | Not Applicable |       |

**Source:** Elaborated by the authors.

## 6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The true crime genre has gained popularity in Spain in recent years, raising a series of ethical questions relevant to the practice of journalism. Among the challenges facing media outlets is the need to adhere to ethical codes to preserve their credibility and avoid sensationalism when covering incidents, crimes, or other offenses. The starting point of this research is the return to the media agenda of the *Guardia Urbana* case and the *Nemo* case, which occurred in 2017 and 2018, respectively. The reason for this renewed media coverage is, in the case of the *Guardia Urbana*, the 2023 Netflix release of the docuseries *Burning Body* and the true crime documentary Rosa Peral's Tapes; meanwhile, regarding the *Nemo* case, the victim's mother, Patricia Ramírez, warned in May 2024 of the possibility that a streaming platform might consider filming a docuseries about her son's murder—a plan that has, for the moment, been ruled out.

Regarding the first objective, the research highlights widespread adherence to the code of ethics among the Spanish general-interest newspapers with the highest print and digital readership: 68% of articles regarding the *Guardia Urbana* case and 60.40%

regarding the *Nemo* case complied with the code. However, these newspapers treat the cases unevenly. Regarding sources (V1), they are cited in 83.5% of articles on the *Guardia Urbana* case and in 100% of articles on the *Nemo* case. In the *Nemo* case, the privacy of children, young people, and minors is not respected (V.3.4), nor is the practice of withholding the victim's name (V4.2)—even though the victim is a minor. These results could contradict the notion of a progressive loss of trust in journalists as legitimate news providers (García González et al., 2023; Guanipa, 2019), given that sources are cited in the majority of the pieces; consequently, the information disseminated can be considered reliable and truthful, regardless of whether or not the content veers into sensationalism.

Addressing the second objective—regarding whether the news reports on these cases avoid the sensationalist trends often found in true-crime coverage—it was found that headlines tend to adopt a sensationalist tone. Consistent with findings by Rahman (2023), Molyneux and Coddington (2020), and Bazaco et al. (2019), even traditionally serious media outlets employ this strategy to capture reader interest, using emotional and attention-grabbing elements to drive clicks. Rather than providing objective information, the headlines aim to spark curiosity and strong emotions through clickbait, running counter to Hermoso's (2018) emphasis on the importance of crime reporting that prioritizes objectivity. In this regard, and in line with López Talavera (2002), it is crucial for journalists to assess whether the information they intend to share holds significant public interest. However, in some instances, this assessment has not been adequately performed, resulting in the publication of content that—while catchy—lacks genuine informational value.

The conclusion is that, in both cases, although the majority of news reports adhere to relevant ethical codes, sensationalist practices persist. Victims and their loved ones have been exposed and repeatedly revictimized: during the initial press coverage of the events; through television productions (or the prospect thereof); and via subsequent media treatment. Consequently, the observations made by Serrano (2024) are particularly relevant; Serrano warns of the need to reflect on how media outlets reenact events, given the potential impact on the victims' families and immediate circles.

True crime is understood to have emerged as an opportunity for media outlets to bring specific cases back into the public conversation. Transforming tragedies, catastrophes, or adversities into entertainment—or depicting crimes with details that trivialize human suffering—is considered unethical, as it fails to respect or consider the privacy of victims and their loved ones. Authors such as Seltzer (2004) have defined this fascination with such events as "wound culture," while Punnett (2018) discusses the "pornographic" interest—driven by shock value—that these publications elicit. Although these stories certainly attract an audience, Vidal and Corbillón (2023) note that they often incorporate morbid details bearing little relation to genuine news value or the public interest; instead, they allow the public to satisfy a voyeuristic impulse (Romero Domínguez, 2020; Nabi et al., 2009), thereby raising ethical dilemmas (Dockterman, 2023). Precisely because of this sensationalist

element—which can lead to revictimization (Lundström, 2016; Nichol, 2024; Molla Pagán, 2024)—journalists are reminded of their social responsibility to the public. Emphasis is placed on the need to look beyond merely attracting readers through attention-grabbing strategies; journalists must also consider the relevance, accuracy, and social impact of the information they disseminate, thereby upholding a commitment to professional ethics—echoing Suárez Villegas's (2009) reminder that a journalist does not simply transmit information but also assumes the responsibility inherent in the act of reporting. Thus, it is paradoxical that these very publications call journalistic practice into question. For instance, regarding the *Nemo* case, they highlight the boundaries of the true crime genre: "The (legal) red lines of true crime: can little Gabriel's mother block the documentary about her son?" (Esteban, 2024).

It is worth noting, then, that the importance of professional regulation and self-regulation lies in the need to ensure the veracity of the account, transparency, privacy protection, and the prevention of sensationalism, among other aspects that help maintain the credibility of professionals and media outlets. In the practice of their profession, journalists must demonstrate adaptability, autonomy, and independence (Escobar & Jaramillo, 2021), especially in a context of constant transformation.

This study highlights the need to reinforce ethical boundaries regarding true crime reporting in the print media. Assessing adherence to the code of ethics is complex and nuanced, given the role of subjective interpretations, as well as the intentions and context surrounding the publication of specific information. This approach fosters debate on the importance of upholding ethical standards—particularly regarding high-profile criminal or court cases that have captured public interest, and specifically those involving minors or cases at risk of becoming true crime narratives. Given the scale of this phenomenon, future research could explore how unethical media practices impact the lives of both the perpetrators of crimes and the victims' families. Additionally, the subject could be examined from the perspective of the journalists who produce these reports—specifically how they interpret the code of ethics—through in-depth interviews, an aspect that represents a limitation of the current study. Finally, the research could be expanded to a transnational level by comparing ethical journalistic practices across different countries.



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