

# Professional dynamics between journalists and politicians: Professional routines and assessment of trust and credibility generated by Spanish congressional spokespersons in the specialized press (2019-2022)

Antonio Baraybar-Fernández; Sandro Arrufat-Martín; Belén Díaz-Díaz

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**Antonio Baraybar-Fernández**  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5474-5214>

Universidad Rey Juan Carlos  
Camino del Molino, 5  
28942 Fuenlabrada (Madrid), Spain  
[antonio.baraybar@urjc.es](mailto:antonio.baraybar@urjc.es)



**Sandro Arrufat-Martín** ✉  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3104-4765>

Universidad Rey Juan Carlos  
[sandro.arrufat@urjc.es](mailto:sandro.arrufat@urjc.es)  
Universidad Internacional de La Rioja  
[sandro.arrufat@unir.net](mailto:sandro.arrufat@unir.net)



**Belén Díaz-Díaz**  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7421-4085>

Universidad de Cantabria  
Avda. de los Castros, s/n  
39005 Santander, Spain  
[belen.diaz@unican.es](mailto:belen.diaz@unican.es)

## Abstract

This article deals with the interactions between and opinions of parliamentary journalists covering the Spanish *Congress of Deputies* regarding their main source of information –the spokespersons of the parliamentary groups. This quantitative and qualitative study is based on both data obtained through a survey as well as semistructured personal interviews. The results have made it possible, among other aspects, to identify the patterns of behavior and frequency of relationships between media professionals and spokespersons; to recognize which of their skills are most appreciated by reporters; to evaluate the levels of empathy, trust, and credibility generated by the different political representatives in journalists; and finally, to establish a statistical correlation between the empathy–trust and trust–credibility variables to determine the level of effectiveness of the messages issued by parliamentary representatives. The study found that journalists find satisfaction with their work and with the level of recognition of the media they represent; they consider that the information they generate has importance for society, although with a limited social influence; that empathy, clarity, and credibility are the three most valued attributes of the parliamentary spokesperson; and that the perception of parliamentary spokespersons is acceptable. Finally, despite the criticism that the media sometimes receive for their ideological and biased interpretation of the news, no appreciable bias was found in the responses referring to the ideology of the spokesperson and the editorial line of the media to which the journalists surveyed belong, an issue related to their professionalism, independence, and objectivity, which are key to the economic and financial development of a country.



## Keywords

Political communication; Journalists; Politicians; Parliamentary spokespersons; Professional routines; *Congress of Deputies*; Public opinion; Empathy; Trust; Credibility; Journalism.

## 1. Introduction and the current context

The capacity of the media to shape public opinion has generated a broad and controversial field of reflection addressed from different academic disciplines. This is a central issue for the political and communication sciences, from both a normative and an empirical perspective.

Continuing with the tradition of communication research, most current proposals attempt to address the complex process of media influence as the main source of citizen opinion (Wolf, 2020, p. 9) and its relevance in the creation of the public sphere, a concept proposed by Jünger Habermas related to the rise of the press and other spaces of civic exchange that emerged during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Habermas, 1982).

The formation of public opinion is a distinctive feature of any democratic society in which power resides in the populace and political power is publicly accountable and legitimized through debate and deliberation (Habermas, 1998). However, at present, there is no consensus on how the media shape or contribute to shaping public opinion. Individuals make their own decisions regarding their information consumption or routines, and the media try to respond to these changes to maintain audience interest (Foos; Bischof, 2022, p. 19). However, the trust and credibility of the media's sources for their news are determining values for any media, both in the direct relationship with audiences and in the amplification made through their own social network accounts (Baraybar-Fernández; Arrufat-Martín; Rubira-García, 2021, p. 10).

Throughout the last century, the foundations of what we now call political communication were built. Pioneering studies include those by Lippmann (1922), Lasswell (1927), and Lazarfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944). Later, in the 1960s, studies on the concept of agenda-setting emerged, focusing on describing the power of the media's influence and how it constructs social reality. The relationship between the media and the public agenda is explained by McCombs and Shaw (1972), who tried to answer the question of who sets the public agenda and under what conditions (Lotero-Echeverri; Romero-Rodríguez; Pérez-Rodríguez, 2020). Their central hypothesis is that the media have the capacity to make choices as to the issues that the public perceives as important (Santillán-Buelna; Zuart-Garduño, 2021). Consequently, they contribute to establishing not what and how people should think, but those issues around which to think, discuss, and form an opinion. These issues thus become relevant to the public agenda as well as the political agenda in the role of proposals or laws.

“From this perspective, we can then speak of three agendas: media agenda, public agenda and political agenda” [*Desde esta perspectiva, se puede hablar entonces de tres agendas: agenda de medios, agenda pública y agenda política*] (Manfredi; Sánchez-Sierra, 2020, p. 565).

Information professionals play a key role in the development and quality of democratic systems (Curran, 2005; Entman, 2010). Journalism performs, among others, two essential functions: on the one hand, it becomes a platform for public debate and the expression of opinions, which is essential in democratic terms; and on the other hand, it functions as a control over the political system and provides visibility to its activities (Schudson, 2008), a basic political function of intermediation between the points of view of political parties and institutions and public opinion (Martínez-Nicolás; Humanes, 2012, p. 61). In today's societies, both issues acquire a prominent importance as they affect

“key issues such as legitimacy, consensus, power, influence, decision-making and social perception of political reality” [*cuestiones clave como la legitimidad, el consenso, el poder, la influencia, la toma de decisiones y la percepción social de la realidad política*] (Casero-Ripollés; López-Rabadán, 2011, pp. 138-139).

The strong interdependence between the political system and media or information systems affects the ways of doing politics and the ways of presenting information in a way that compromises the proper functioning of the public sphere in contemporary democracies (McCombs, 2020; Schudson, 2020; Siegel, 2022). This can be seen in the adaptation of politics to the logic of spectacle (Swanson; Mancini, 1996), typical of the medium of television and of North American influence, and managed by marketing specialists—so-called spin doctors—or the relevance of emotional aspects that shape messages and, in turn, are the result of partisan polarization, public opinion, and political attitudes (Webster; Alberston, 2022; Cazorla; Montabes; López-López, 2022). The objective of the media is to increase its audience: the more shocking the news, the greater the possibility of being published (Mohammed; McCombs, 2021).

The facilities of creation, distribution, and access to content provided by digital media allow for the multiplication of political and social actors trying to shape the public agenda (Chadwick, 2017). There is no unanimity regarding how they affect traditional relations between political power and the media. Some research shows that they may have weakened their social influence in articulating the political debate (Feenstra et al., 2017; Casero-Ripollés, 2018); on the contrary, other studies suggest that social networks enhance the power of those actors who were already influential outside the digital environment, especially traditional political actors, journalists, and mainstream media that also use these new communication tools efficiently (Dubois; Gaffney, 2014; Dagoula, 2019; Casero-Ripollés, 2021).

The creation of an effective political agenda is a complex task, and among its objectives is to convert those issues considered important in the political agenda into relevant issues for the public agenda. Their interest is usually focused on the exposure of those issues considered more transcendent for the populace and that allow them to improve their positions when compared with the rest of the parties (**Melero-López**, 2019). Consequently, different spokespersons will design different discursive strategies aligned with their political parties depending on whether they are in government or opposition with the aim of shaping relationships with journalists and the media (**Hänggli; Kriessi**, 2012).

Political and media systems are connected in a way that depends on their divergent interests, and their study constitutes one of the main areas of scientific research in journalism owing to its central and strategic character within the information production process. Journalists turn to politicians as sources of information as part of the daily content renewal process that is typical of news routines or news-making. Politicians gain public visibility by possessing information, give legitimacy to the news, and try to achieve control of the public debate by imposing their own approach or point of view. Political deputies also sometimes use the media as sources for their initiatives, as the latter can help parliamentarians to make informed decisions by denouncing and revealing certain situations (**Martín-Llaguno; Navarro-Beltrá; Berganza**, 2022, p. 52).

Several studies point to skepticism as a defining element of these relationships. The journalistic outlook toward political activity is qualified in harsh terms related to manipulation, deceit, and obscurantism in a discourse of distrust and distancing toward politicians. In contrast, the production of good journalism corresponds to exhibiting truth, transparency, and service to public opinion through the surveillance of political power (**Martínez-Nicolás**, 2015). Meanwhile, politicians are quite cynical about the media and journalists, especially when they feel that the media are willing to set the political agenda (**Brants et al.**, 2010). In this sense, in Spain, **Franch** and **Micó** (2021) identified an endogamic relationship between journalists and politicians in social networks, with the two groups sharing information in a self-referential loop.

According to journalists and experts, the issues that significantly shape public opinion are mainly defined by political sources, while political journalists devote much of their professional effort to what one might call the cultivation of sources, as if it were a seedbed to care for and pamper (**García-Orosa; Vázquez-Herrero; López-García**, 2022, p. 56; **Martínez-Nicolás**, 2015). It thus seems interesting, to say the least, to determine how such relationships are produced in the current context that is characterized by the holding of four elections in five years, the arrival of new actors to the Spanish *Congress of Deputies*, the change from an imperfect bipartisanship to a fragmented multiparty system that has forced the implementation of a machinery of pacts and consensus, and consequently in which the figure of the different spokespersons of the parliamentary groups has gained prominence (**Sánchez-Muñoz**, 2017; **Berdón-Prieto et al.**, 2021).

## 2. Objectives and methodology

With the general aim of outlining the professional activity of journalists specialized in political information and their relationships with their sources, this study has the following specific objectives:

- O1: To quantify the degree of satisfaction of journalists with the activity they perform, their perception of the relevance of their work for society, and their assessment of who takes the initiative in the relationship between the reporter and the parliamentary spokesperson, as well as to identify the type and frequency of contacts with them.
- O2: To determine their opinion regarding the skills that a parliamentary spokesperson should have and their assessment of the criteria of disposition-empathy toward their activity, the trust generated, and the credibility of their messages.
- O3: To estimate the effectiveness of spokespersons by establishing a statistical correlation between the empathy-trust, trust-credibility, and credibility-message variables according to opinion of journalists.

To achieve these objectives, a comparative study was designed by means of a 14-item questionnaire divided into two large blocks. The first block of questions aimed to ascertain the opinions of journalists on issues related to their professional activity, being evaluated on a scale from 1 to 10 (including issues such as their degree of satisfaction with their work, the recognition of their work by the media outlet(s) they represent, the degree of relevance of the information they produce for society, and the level of influence their information has on society). Open-ended questions about who they consider to be taking the initiative, the frequency of their relationships with parliamentary spokespersons, the most common way of maintaining relationships with parliamentary spokespersons, the characteristics they would highlight in a parliamentary spokesperson, and the parliamentary spokespersons who have most facilitated their work were also included.

The second block of questions gathered the journalists' assessments of the different spokespersons of the parliamentary groups, evaluating them on a scale from 0 to 5 regarding the levels of empathy, trust, credibility, and political message generated by them.

Spokespersons were chosen when they were considered as political representatives of each parliamentary group most present in the media, a categorization used in previous research (**Campos-Domínguez; Esteve-del-Valle; Renedo-Far-pón**, 2022). The timeframe for contact (submission and receipt of responses) with journalists was from November 7 to 20, 2022.

During the exploratory phase of the research, we identified those parliamentary spokespersons in the Spanish *Congress of Deputies* who performed this function during the XIV legislature from December 3, 2019 to the date of sending the questionnaire, and once the General State Budget was approved, which enabled the conclusion of the legislature before entering a pre-electoral period. As a result, 16 spokespersons were selected, ordered here from highest to lowest according to the parliamentary weight of their respective groups: Patxi López (*PSOE*); Héctor Gómez (*PSOE*); Adriana Lastra (*PSOE*); Cuca Gamarra (*PP*); Cayetana Álvarez de Toledo (*PP*); Iván Espinosa de los Monteros (*Vox*); Pablo Echenique (*Podemos*); Irene Montero (*Podemos*); Gabriel Rufián (*ERC*); Inés Arrimadas (*Ciudadanos*); Edmundo Bal (*Ciudadanos*); Aitor Esteban (*PNV*); Mertxe Aizpurua (*EH Bildu*); Joan Baldoví (*Plural*); Iñigo Errejón (*Plural*) and Laura Borràs (*Plural*).

To obtain the survey responses, a sample of parliamentary journalists from the main news agencies and media outlets with daily activity in the Spanish *Congress of Deputies* were contacted beforehand by telephone and subsequently sent a questionnaire in electronic format. The sample included journalists from news agencies (*EFE*, *Colpisa*, *Servimedia*, and *Europa Press*), print media (*El País*, *El Mundo*, *ABC*, *La Razón*, and *La Vanguardia*), digital media (*El Confidencial*, *El Español*, *Infolibre*, *Público*, *Eldiario.es*, *El Independiente*, and *El Periódico de España*), radio stations (*SER*, *COPE*, *Onda Cero*, and *RNE*), and television stations (*Antena3*, *Telecinco*, *TVE*, and *La Sexta*). Cuatro was not included in the latter group because it did not have a journalist on site at the *Congress of Deputies*. A total of 20 responses were obtained anonymously in an orderly and sequential manner.

To present the results in an orderly manner and to reach statistical conclusions, in the third phase of the research, the responses were ordered individually by categories of questions, calculating the average for each politician. This made it possible to obtain a matrix of averages for four of the variables analyzed (empathy, trust, credibility, and political message) for each of the spokespersons. This matrix was then applied to carry out a two-dimensional statistical analysis of the linear correlation among the following three pairs of variables ( $X$ ,  $Y$ ): “empathy” versus “trust,” “trust” versus “credibility,” and “credibility” versus “political message.” First, Pearson’s linear correlation coefficient ( $r$ ) was calculated for each of the pairs, a statistical measure that quantifies the linear dependence between two variables and takes values between  $-1$  and  $1$ . A value close to  $1$  indicates a positive and perfect linear relationship.

The coefficient of determination ( $r^2$ ) was also calculated to evaluate the percentage of the  $Y$  variable that is explained by the  $X$  variable for each pair. The coefficient of determination reflects the goodness of fit of a model to the variable it is intended to explain. Its value ranges between  $0$  and  $1$ , and the closer it is to  $1$ , the better the fit of the model to the variable one is trying to explain.

Finally, once the information collected in the questionnaire had been analyzed and its statistical analysis completed, the research was complemented with personal interviews, one of the most popular methodological tools for qualitative research in the social sciences (Ulloa-Martínez; Mardones-Barrera, 2017). Qualitative interviews are characterized by their flexibility and open style and tend to focus on the personal experiences of interviewees rather than on general opinions and beliefs (King; Horrocks, 2010). As a qualitative research technique, one of the most significant benefits of in-depth interviews is their contribution to understanding how people construct their realities, including how they see, define, and experience the world (Taylor; Bogdan; DeVault, 2015).

Semistructured interviews were thus used, based on an outline of topics or issues that the interviewer could modify by incorporating additional questions to specify or expand data or information; consequently, not all questions were pre-determined (Hernández-Sampieri; Fernández-Collado; Baptista-Lucio, 2010). The semistructured interview format was chosen because, starting from the initial questions that compile the key research areas, they offer freedom to go deeper into topics that arise and to modify questions according to the answers of each interviewee during the conversation (Baños-González; Baraybar-Fernández; Rajas-Fernández, 2020).

The objective of this part of the research was not to generalize the results obtained but to improve the understanding, using the opinions and reflections of the interviewees, their own professional dynamics, and how they establish their relationships with political spokespersons. Morse (1995) states that, in qualitative research, there are no guidelines for defining the optimal sample size as there are in quantitative research. For the cited author, the key to achieving excellence in a study of this type is to accumulate data until reaching saturation, understood as the moment at which data collection no longer provides new information. One of the four models of saturation in qualitative research, identified by Saunders *et al.* (2018), relates to the identification of redundancy in the content of responses. Another concept considered in the design of this part of the study was Sandelowski’s (1995) “information power” [*“poder de la información”*], according to which, the more information the sample group contains, the fewer the number of subjects needed, as long as it is relevant to the research.

The sample consisted of 12 journalists (5 women and 7 men), from the previous survey. They matched the criteria applied in the original survey in terms of their distribution between news agencies (2 participants), print media (2 participants), digital media (4 participants), radio (2 participants), and television (2 participants). The interviews were conducted individually during the week of December 19-24, 2022, with a scheduled duration of 45 minutes.

The topics covered were structured in three blocks. The first was an introductory section, with two questions about what led them to their current job as a political reporter and what aspects of it are most appealing to them. In the second section, six key questions were addressed, being related to work pressures, their feelings toward and reactions to

attempts at manipulation, the type of relationships they maintain with spokespersons, the initiative in the preparation of information, the behavior and availability of spokespersons in this situation, and their perception of the social repercussions of the information they received. To conclude, they were asked about the issues they consider to be essential in their professional routine and their recommendations for those who are interested in this journalistic specialization.

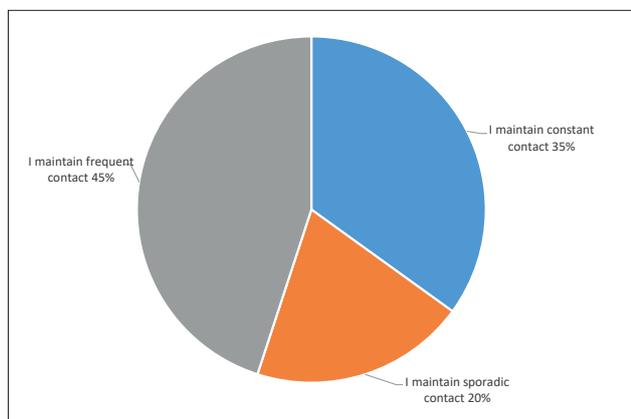
### 3. Results

The results are described in four sections, corresponding to the structure of this study. The first one gathers the data from the questionnaire items related to the degree of satisfaction of journalists with their work, the recognition of their work by the media for which they work and for society in general, and finally, their opinion on the initiative and typology of the meetings between the press and parliamentary spokespersons. The second section contains the answers to the questions related to the journalists' opinions and assessments of generic spokesperson skills and their individual appraisal of the selected sample in terms of disposition-empathy toward their work, the degree of trust generated, and their perceived credibility. In the third section, the linear correlation between the pairs of these three selected variables is analyzed. Finally, analysis and interpretation of the information from the data obtained from the personal interviews are carried out.

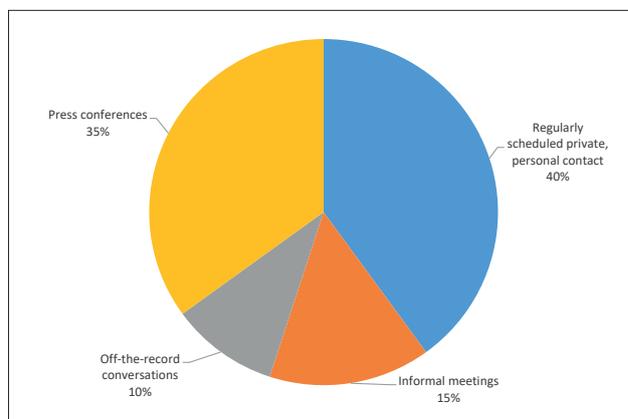
#### 3.1. Journalists' perceptions and evaluations of their activity

The results for the satisfaction of journalists with their professional performance were positive in terms of both personal satisfaction (with an average of 8) and their perception of the recognition of their work by the media they represent (slightly higher at 8.35). They consider that the information they generate is relevant to society (with an average of 7.30); however, the level of social influence was notably lower (with an average of 6.95). Regarding this last issue, the wide dispersion in the assessments of the importance and impact of their publications on public opinion is also relevant, although many of their reports are prominent in the daily media agenda.

Regarding who takes the initiative in the relationships between journalists and politicians, an evident duality was recorded, with 50% believing that politicians do while 50% state that journalists do. The vast majority state that they maintain constant or frequent contact with parliamentary spokespersons (80%), while only 20% do so sporadically (Graph 1). As for the type or form that these meetings take, 40% of the journalists state that they have regularly scheduled private personal contacts, which is the most common type, followed by official scheduled press conferences (35%), informal meetings (15%), and off-the-record conversations (10%). On the basis of these results, it is worth noting that 65% of the meetings between journalists and spokespersons are outside scheduled official appearances (Graph 2).



Graph 1. Frequency of relationships with parliamentary spokespersons



Graph 2. Types of relationships with parliamentary spokespersons

#### 3.2. Journalists' opinions and assessments of parliamentary spokespersons

Journalists value communication skills and public speaking as the fundamental characteristics that a parliamentary spokesperson should have. In addition, characteristics such as empathy, clarity, credibility, truthfulness, and negotiation stand out as complementary factors in the good work of a spokesperson (Graph 3). In their assessment of the three spokespersons who have most facilitated their work during the legislative period analyzed, the spokesperson of the So-



Graph 3. Main characteristics of a parliamentary spokesperson

cialist Parliamentary Group Héctor Gómez is above the average, being mentioned by 17 of the 20 journalists surveyed, followed by Gabriel Rufián of *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (14 out of 20), and Cayetana Álvarez de Toledo (*Grupo Parlamentario Popular*) (7 out of 20).

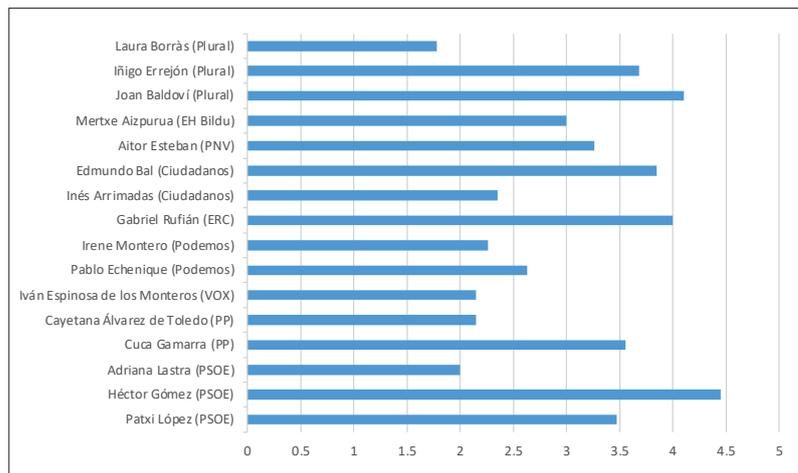
Disposition or empathy was considered to be a key element in the interactions between journalists and politicians. The spokesman of the *Socialist Parliamentary Group*, Héctor Gómez, was the best rated in the study with 4.45 points out of 5, followed by Joan Baldoví of the *Plural Group* (4.1 points), and Gabriel Rufián of *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (4 points). Laura Borràs of *Plural* (1.78 points) and Adriana Lastra of the *PSOE* (2 points) were the worst rated (Graph 4).

Undoubtedly, the variable of trust is transcendental in the relationship between journalists and their sources of information. The data collected once again rated the spokesman Héctor Gómez as the spokesperson generating the greatest confidence (4.05 points), followed by Aitor Esteban of the *Basque Parliamentary Group* (3.65 points) and Gabriel Rufián of *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (3.6 points). Among the worst rated were Laura Borràs of the *Plural Group*, once again in the lowest position (1.35 points), and Cayetana Álvarez de Toledo of the *Popular Parliamentary Group* (2 points).

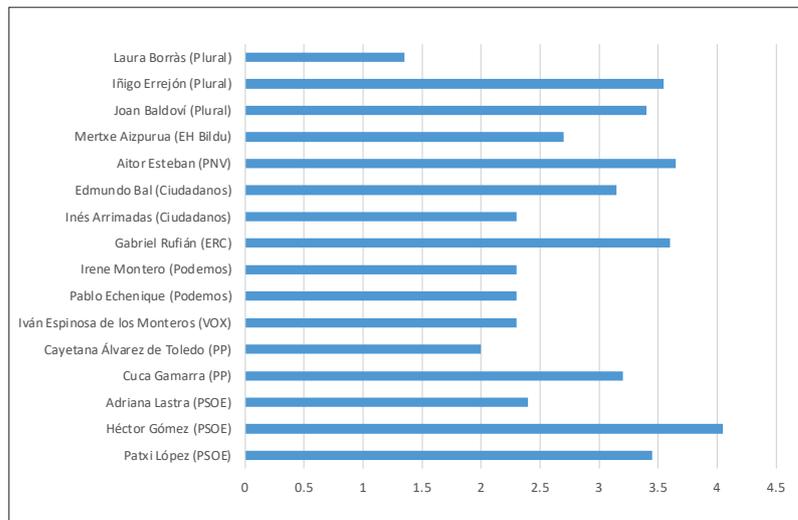
Credibility and communication and public-speaking skills are the main characteristics that journalists considered essential for a parliamentary spokesperson. These two variables were analyzed individually but are represented in a grouped bar chart (Graph 6) to facilitate the joint visualization of the most prominent parliamentarians. Aitor Esteban of the *Basque Parliamentary Group* (4.02) attained the first position, followed by Gabriel Rufián of *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (3.6), and Héctor Gómez of the *Socialist Parliamentary Group* with the same rating (3.6). It is worth mentioning that both Iñigo Errejón, from the *Plural Parliamentary Group*, and Patxi López, from the *Socialist Parliamentary Group*, also received very close ratings. Laura Borràs of *Grupo Plural* (1.5) once again appeared in the last position.

### 3.3. Statistical correlation between the variables of empathy-trust, trust-credibility, and credibility-political message

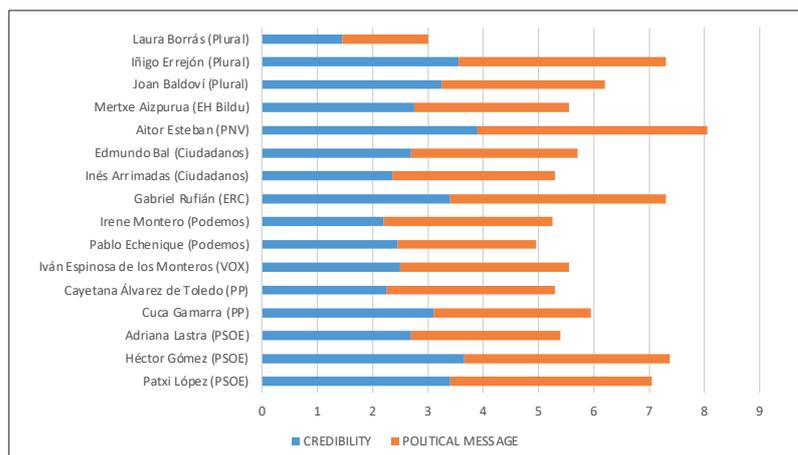
For the study of the linear correlation between the variables of “empathy-trust,” “trust-credibility,” and “credibility-political message,” and to analyze the type and strength of the relationship between them, a matrix of the average results of the variables studied was established for each spokesperson, being obtained as an average of their individual ratings



Graph 4. Willingness or empathy of spokespersons regarding journalistic activity



Graph 5. Confidence generated by parliamentary spokespersons



Graph 6. Collected variables of credibility and political message of the spokespersons

in each category of questionnaire items. In the results matrix (Table 1), the three most highly valued ranks are shown: the first in green, the second in orange, and the third in gray, while red corresponds to the lowest rated spokesperson.

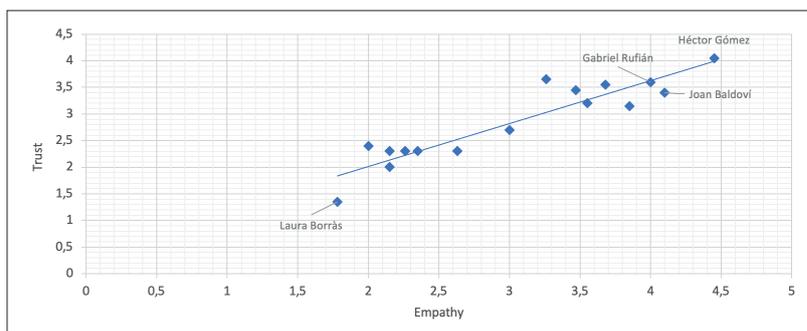
Table 1. Matrix of averages of variable results studied in the spokespersons

Speaker	Empathy	Trust	Credibility	Political message
Patxi López (PSOE)	3.47	3.45	3.4	3.65
Héctor Gómez (PSOE)	4.45	4.05	3.65	3.73
Adriana Lastra (PSOE)	2	2.4	2.7	2.7
Cuca Gamarra (PP)	3.55	3.2	3.1	2.85
Cayetana Álvarez de Toledo (PP)	2.15	2	2.25	3.05
Iván Espinosa de los Monteros (Vox)	2.15	2.3	2.5	3.05
Pablo Echenique (Podemos)	2.63	2.3	2.45	2.5
Irene Montero (Podemos)	2.26	2.3	2.2	3.05
Gabriel Rufián (ERC)	4	3.6	3.4	3.9
Inés Arrimadas (Ciudadanos)	2.35	2.3	2.35	2.95
Edmundo Bal (Ciudadanos)	3.85	3.15	2.7	3
Aitor Esteban (PNV)	3.26	3.65	3.9	4.15
Mertxe Aizpurua (EH Bildu)	3	2.7	2.75	2.8
Joan Baldoví (Plural)	4.1	3.4	3.25	2.95
Iñigo Errejón (Plural)	3.68	3.55	3.55	3.75
Laura Borràs (Plural)	1.78	1.35	1.45	1.55

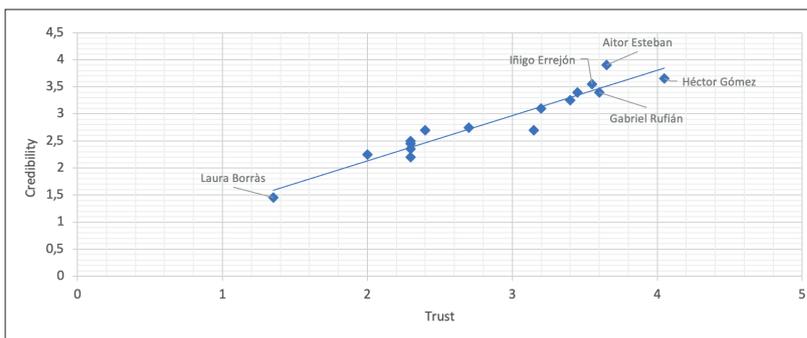
Firstly, the linear correlation coefficient ( $r$ ) was calculated for the three pairs of variables ( $X$ ,  $Y$ ), obtaining values greater than 0.85 in all three cases and thus indicating positive and almost perfect linear relationships among the three pairs of variables. Specifically, the results obtained were as follows: empathy-trust ( $r = 0.925$ ), trust-credibility ( $r = 0.959$ ), and credibility-political message ( $r = 0.864$ ). In addition, to evaluate the percentage of the  $Y$  variable that is explained by the  $X$  variable in each correlation, the coefficient of percentage determination ( $r^2$ ) was calculated, yielding the following percentages: empathy-trust ( $r^2 = 85.62\%$ ), trust-credibility ( $r^2 = 85.78\%$ ), and credibility-political message ( $r^2 = 82.34\%$ ). These high percentages confirm, in all three cases, that more than 80%, or four-fifths, of the variations in variable  $Y$  are explained by variations in variable  $X$ , and that only the remaining 20%, or one-fifth, of the variability is due to other, uncontrolled factors.

The next graph represents the correlation between the variable of empathy-confidence of parliamentary spokespersons. In this representation of the correlations, spokespersons located in the upper right quadrant enjoy greater empathy and trust. This is particularly seen in the case of Héctor Gómez (PSOE), who is located in the upper right zone, leading the correlation with values of 4.45 to 4.05; he is also the spokesperson who generates the most trust and empathy among all of those considered, followed by Gabriel Rufián (4 to 3.6) and Joan Baldoví (4.1 to 3.4). One can thus conclude that, the greater the trust generated in journalists, the more empathy there is between them and the spokespersons, hence trust is the most relevant variable when it comes to increasing the empathy between these two figures. There is thus a positive relationship and a direct cause-effect relation between these two variables.

Another of the correlations analyzed is that of the trust-credibility variable, which reveals two above-average rankings, for Aitor Esteban of the *Basque Parliamentary Group* (3.65-3.9) and Héctor Gómez of the *Socialist Parliamentary Group* (4.05 to 3.65). It is apparent from Graph 8 that these two politicians are notably separated from

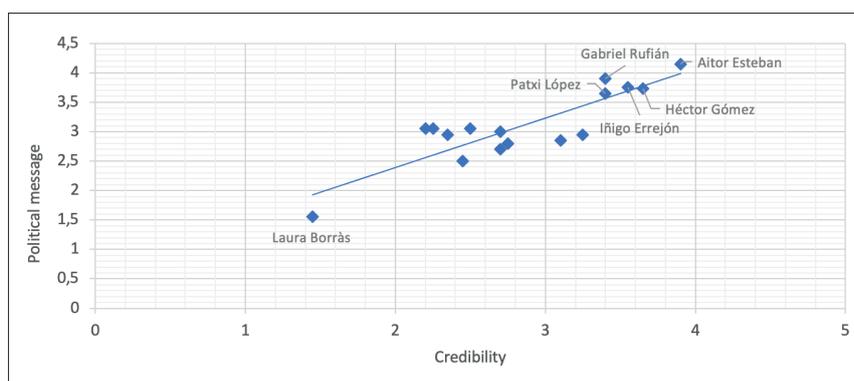


Graph 7. Correlation between empathy-confidence variables



Graph 8. Correlation between trust-credibility variables

the rest of the two large groups of parliamentary spokespersons, the first with notable results and the second with lower results. Among the other spokespersons, Iñigo Errejón and Gabriel Rufián also achieved positive results. In this sense, we once again see a pattern of quadrants in which one can observe a group of parliamentary spokespersons located in the upper right quadrant, in contrast to the rest of the spokespersons framed in the lower left zone, an area with negative connotations regarding the trust-credibility correlation. In this correlation, there is also a positive intervariable relationship between trust and credibility.



Graph 9. Correlation between credibility-political message variables

Finally, we aimed to study the correlation between the variables of credibility and political message (Graph 9). In this correlation, Aitor Esteban, from the *Basque Parliamentary Group*, is located above the other spokespersons and stands out with very positive parameters (3.9-4.15), in the upper right quadrant. In the correlation, we observe four other spokespersons in the upper right quadrant, who also differ notably from the rest of the spokespersons located in the middle of the figure. These four spokespersons are Gabriel Rufián (*ERC*), Héctor Gómez (*PSOE*), Iñigo Errejón (*Plural*), and Patxi López (*PSOE*). Clearly, the effectiveness of a parliamentary spokesperson's political message depends on the degree of credibility they bring to it; that is, the greater the credibility of the spokesperson, the greater the effectiveness of their political message. The variables again exhibit a positive relationship with each other and an evident cause-effect relation.

### 3.4. Results of the personal interviews

The structure of the interview was defined in the methodological section, while this section includes a description of the most relevant issues expressed by the interviewees for each topic. The sample's extensive knowledge of the object of study and its currency allowed for a coherent approach to the participants' perception of the current reality of the phenomenon studied.

To carry out an exhaustive analysis of the material collected, the first step was to transcribe all the interviews before adapting them to the established structure. In this process, the amount of information was reduced, which implies selecting, focusing, abstracting, and grouping the data into "content categories" according to the specific criteria determined (Massot-Lafon; Dorio-Alcaraz; Sabriego-Puig, 2009).

The results of the introductory questions in the personal interviews revealed a high degree of congruence with the results of the previous survey. Most of the interviewees agreed that their arrival at this professional specialization was based on a strong dose of vocation and often luck or chance, that is, "being in the right place at the right time" [*estar en el momento y lugar oportuno*], as one of the more experienced interviewees stated. With regard to the aspects of their work that they find most attractive, there is also a high level of consensus regarding a combination of personal satisfaction and social commitment;

"being able to experience politics from the inside" [*el poder vivir la política desde dentro*],

"following the dizzying political news from a privileged position" [*seguir desde una posición privilegiada la vertiginosa información política*], "being close to top-level sources" [*estar cerca de fuentes de primer nivel*], or

"conveying information with obvious social impact in an understandable way" [*trasladar de una forma comprensible una información con evidente incidencia social*]

are some of the comments recorded that illustrate the collective feeling.

Within the key questions section, the relationship with the spokesperson is considered to be horizontal, not hierarchical, and based on interests.

"Each one has a role; he can tell you what he wants, and I can publish according to my criteria" [*cada uno tiene un rol, él te puede contar lo que quiera y yo publicar según mi criterio*]

or

"we seek to obtain information, while they seek to transmit their point of view" [*nosotros buscamos obtener información y ellos en transmitir su punto de vista*]

are the two opinions that might summarize their views. While all politicians respect the role of the press, there are some interesting details to research regarding their contact on the day of meeting; each spokesperson differs depending on their personality or disposition, the size of their parliamentary group (tending to be more accessible if it is small), and

the experience of the journalist. “Being more confident or not depends on how long you have been in the chamber” [*“depende de cuánto tiempo lleves en la cámara para tener más confianza o no”*], says a journalist from the television media.

“The objective of politicians is to turn issues considered important on the political agenda into relevant ones for the public agenda”

With regard to the pressure felt in the course of their work, three members of the sample stated that they did not feel any type of pressure, although it should be noted that these are people with a long and well-recognized career in the coverage of political information. The rest stated that they feel some kind of political pressure to gather messages that align with the editorial line of the media they represent. Different testimonies reflect the pressure derived from the immediacy and the continuous demand for information:

“We need to inform up to the minute because now we publish information on networks and other channels” [*“necesitamos informar al minuto porque ahora informamos en redes y otros canales”*],

“politicians, aware of the dynamism of digital journalism, know that any information can be nuanced or corrected quickly and pressure us more” [*“los políticos, conscientes del dinamismo del periodismo digital, saben que se puede matizar o corregir cualquier información con rapidez y presionan más”*], and

“editors seek to differentiate themselves from the competition by being the first, but on the other hand, they want news and feel the obligation to get the best information, to give the best context” [*“los editores buscan diferenciarse de la competencia siendo los primeros, pero, por otro lado, quieren novedades y sienten la obligación de sacar la mejor información, de dar el mejor contexto”*].

Most of them have felt deceived or manipulated by a spokesperson, although there have been a couple of comments referring to “omitting information” [*“omitir información”*] or “telling half-truths” [*“contar la verdad a medias”*]. The general reaction is a loss of trust; on a personal level, this produces anger and rejection toward the spokesperson, while in the professional sphere,

“we have no choice but to continue to maintain a relationship with them, although verifying and comparing the information with other sources more than usual” [*“no nos queda otra que seguir manteniendo relación con ellos, aunque verificando y contrastando más de lo habitual la información con otras fuentes”*], explains one interviewee.

They claim to constantly take the initiative regarding news-setting, although politicians and their press officers are also proactive and insistent in getting their messages onto the media agenda. When asked by journalists, they are usually accessible, although their degree of collaboration differs depending on how well the topic of discussion is in tune with their own interests. The conversations on this specific issue identified nuances that clarify their professional reality and the dynamics studied in this work.

An ideological bias was detected in the predisposition on the part of the politician, depending on the editorial line of the media and the ideology of the party to which it belongs; one interviewee commented that

“if the spokesperson interprets that it is a related media, it is easier” [*“si el portavoz interpreta que se trata de un medio afín resulta más sencillo”*].

They also point out that, when they are the ones to take the initiative, the willingness or collaboration of the spokespersons decreases:

“they are usually available, but they do not always give you the information you need” [*“normalmente están disponibles, pero no siempre te dan la información que necesitas”*];

“they are elusive regarding information and are heavily influenced by the line of communication drawn by the party” [*“son esquivos a la información y están muy mediatizados por la línea de comunicación trazada por el partido”*], and

“when a party wants an issue not to be dealt with, you do not get information” [*“cuando un partido quiere que un asunto no sea tratado, no se obtiene información”*].

In addition, the accessibility of the spokesperson is greater when the information is requested by more experienced journalists and according to the apparent social influence of the media they represent.

There is an appreciable discrepancy in the responses received to the last of the key questions, regarding awareness of the social impact of their news. Some do not remember or are not concerned about the influence of their information. However, almost half of the sample are aware and follow the acceptance of and comments on their work, mainly through social networks such as *Twitter* and readership metrics. This is evidenced by some of the opinions collected:

“almost every day, I notice its impact” [*“casi todos los días percibo su repercusión”*];

“our media receives positive comments from our readers on information, especially on the exclusives published” [*“nuestro medio recibe comentarios positivos de nuestros lectores a informaciones, sobre todo ante las exclusivas publicadas”*];

“yes, I notice it in the comments generated on social networks” *“sí, lo noto en los comentarios generados en las redes sociales”*];

“Twitter is the most active social network” *“Twitter es la red social más activa”*]; and

“I like to follow its impact; I have access to the readership metric, and I see when it is read a lot” *“me gusta seguir su repercusión, tengo acceso al medidor de lectores y veo cuando se lee mucho”*].

In synthesis or conclusion, they emphasize access to and relations with the appropriate sources and respecting the codes that allow them to maintain trust as the fundamental aspects of their work. Honesty, rigor, constancy, the effort to “tell things in the simplest possible way” *“contar las cosas de la forma más sencilla posible”*], and “giving a voice to all those who have something to say about the subject matter” *“el dar voz a todos los que tienen algo que decir sobre el tema tratado”*] were recurring responses from all the interviewees. In terms of the last question, regarding the recommendations they would make to those who decide to dedicate themselves to this profession, it is paradoxical that, albeit highly satisfied with their professional activity, many do not recommend dedicating themselves to this profession. The most frequently mentioned reasons are poor working conditions, excessive dedication, and demands: “more than a profession, it is a way of life” *“más que una profesión es una manera de vivir”*].

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

The relationships between the journalistic profession and the political system constitute an object of study of great importance and complexity. It is essential to broaden the knowledge of their dynamics and interactions prior to the construction of a news item, as it can become a factor conditioning the elaboration of the information on the policy, and can determine its content as well as its focus or frame.

In general, the current research allows us to draw significant conclusions that improve knowledge regarding the professional routines of journalists specialized in political information and their opinions about the characteristics they appreciate in Spanish *Congress of Deputies* spokespersons. These assessments, since they focus on those who are responsible for reporting on the daily work of parliament, can be useful for the spokespersons in the performance of their role as transmitters of their parliamentary groups’ political agendas to the public. However, this could also be useful for those responsible for communication in any organization, regarding their relationships with media professionals.

Journalists are satisfied with their work and feel the recognition of the media they work for. One hypothesis that could explain this degree of satisfaction might lie in the feeling of being witnesses, albeit in the background, of the main events of current political affairs, since the *Congress of Deputies* is where an important part of this takes place. Indeed, the former editor of *El País*, Antonio Caño, notes that sometimes

“a journalist feels part of the story they are covering” *“un periodista se siente parte de la historia que está cubriendo”*] (Caño, 2022, p. 152).

Furthermore, a large part of the media agenda in Spain is configured through political information; therefore, it is understandable that the management of media outlets consider the work of these professionals to be important.

However, according to the opinions gathered in the in-depth interviews, they define their profession as demanding, with working conditions that could be improved, and observe that a strong vocation is essential for its performance. During the conversations held, there is a certain mythification of the profession, surrounded by romanticism, which can become a drawback in the definition of an adequate business framework and decent labor relations.

It is worth considering that the majority of the sample is composed of experienced professionals specialized in political information. Unlike what may occur regarding the relations between journalists and politicians in other institutions, in the Spanish *Congress of Deputies* there is a frequent and direct relationship with sources. Two of the comments collected during the interview illustrate this idea:

“the parliament is an open place, and there is a lot of freedom; no other institution has this” *“el parlamento es un sitio abierto y hay mucha libertad, ninguna otra institución la tiene”*] and

“in the Congress there is not such a marked hierarchy; the spokespersons are usually available to talk to you, and there is no power relationship” *“en el Congreso no hay tanta jerarquía marcada, los portavoces suelen estar disponibles para hablar contigo, no hay una relación de poder”*].

They believe that the information they generate is important for society. However, it is noteworthy that their assessment of their level of social influence is decreasing. On this last issue, the wide dispersion observed in the evaluations is also revealing, reflecting a high level of discrepancy as to the importance and impact of their work on public opinion despite their media prominence. Those who are interested in the impact of their news preferably do so through social networks or readership metrics.

They are aware of the intermediary role they play between politics and society, and are concerned about generating honest and truthful content for their audiences. Faced with the more direct and ideological use that

“ On the basis of these results, it is worth noting that 65% of the meetings between journalists and spokespersons are outside scheduled official appearances ”

politicians make of digital platforms, with messages that could increase the polarization of their electorate (**Alonso-Muñoz; Tirado-García; Casero-Ripollés**, 2022, p. 84), the search for diverse sources and the contextualization of information remain among their priorities. Consequently, the existence of serious and rigorous professionals aids in the reduction of partisan or biased information that favors the political radicalization of society. An understanding of reality is necessary and entails the intellectual and reflective effort of journalists, although at present this does not seem to be well recognized by the public, as evidenced by its replacement with messages that seek a more direct and emotional impact.

Access to proprietary sources enables journalists to obtain exclusives and construct unique stories, which is essential to their daily work. According to the results of the interview regarding the dynamics of the contacts between journalists and politicians, there is an evident duality: 50% think that it is the politicians who take the initiative, while 50% believe that it is the journalists. However, during the in-depth interviews, the participants almost unanimously claim to take the initiative on the information they prepare according to their own journalistic interests or those demanded by their media. Most of them acknowledge that they maintain permanent contact through meetings outside scheduled official appearances, although the latter still have considerable prominence.

Comparison of these results with previous international research reveals slight differences or an evolution in this type of interaction. Berganza, Van Dalen, and Chaparro found that less than half of Spanish journalists frequently took the initiative in making contact and gave greater prominence to press conferences, an issue that they contemplate in their conclusions and that

“could translate into the media following the agenda of their sources instead of organizing their own” [*“podría traducirse en que los medios siguen la agenda de sus fuentes en lugar de organizar la suya propia”*] (**Berganza; Van-Dalen; Chaparro**, 2010, p. 20).

Journalists are aware that the interest is in relationships that they consider to be horizontal; spokespersons try to introduce their messages into the media agenda, and though they are free to incorporate them into their news, they do not perceive a situation of power on the part of the politician, nor do they feel that they are setting their agenda.

In terms of the pressures during their daily work, the immediacy of the new digital media stands out. All conventional media have other channels and also disseminate their news through social networks. The possibility of making changes to the information published has altered professional routines, increasing the pressure on spokespersons and their communication teams to modify or qualify their information, and decisively, the demand of their own social media accounts to generate news continuously, which on occasion, impacts the time and reflection necessary to prepare good information.

Empathy, clarity, and credibility are the three attributes of the parliamentary spokesperson most highly valued by the journalists. Empathy is related to the availability and understanding of the spokesperson so that the journalist can fulfill their tasks in accordance with the dynamics and timing of the media agenda. In the current era of convergence, journalists have increased access to information and a variety of sources; however, in line with other studies (**Ibáñez-Cuenca; Baraybar-Fernández**, 2011), it is confirmed that credibility and reliability, arising from mutual trust, continue to be paramount in this type of relationship. They all report feeling deceived and manipulated, as well as not having been told the whole truth or not having had their questions answered. On a personal level, this causes a loss of trust and empathy; however, in the professional sphere, they are aware of their interdependence, and the only solution is to verify the information received from that source with greater rigor.

With regard to the evaluations of the spokespersons, of the 16 in the sample, 10 were rated above average value on the disposition-empathy variable. When it comes to trust, the data decrease slightly, with 9 above average compared with 6 below. Finally, in the estimation of the credibility that they contribute to the political message, only two spokespersons were rated below the average. Consequently, it can be concluded that the perception of the journalists toward most of the spokespersons is not negative, as there is an acceptable perception for the three variables considered herein.

Despite the criticism that the media sometimes receive for their ideological and biased interpretation of the news, and although there is a certain political bias in the selection of the information provided by the different media (**Martín-Llaguno; Berganza**, 2001), it is striking that we did not find any appreciable bias in the responses referring to the ideology of the spokesperson and

“ In his assessment of the spokespersons who have facilitated his work the most during the analyzed period, the spokesman for the *Socialist Parliamentary Group*, Héctor Gómez, stands out, followed by Gabriel Rufián of the *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* and Cuca Gamarra, of the *Popular Parliamentary Group* ”

“ Clearly the effectiveness of the political message of a parliamentary spokesman depends on the degree of credibility that he brings to it, the most prominent being Aitor Esteban, from the *Basque Parliamentary Group* ”

the editorial line of the media professional surveyed. For example, it can be seen how two spokespersons of the same political group achieve divergent results, while the best and worst rated spokespersons have different political affiliations. This assessment can be interpreted as an indicator of the objectivity, independence, and rigor of information professionals, an essential issue in reference to the determining role it has in a society that presents polarization features and in which there is an abundance of styles

Disposition or empathy was considered to be a key element in the interactions between journalists and politicians

“of populist political communication that assumes the position of a truth that does not need dialogue or consensus and, therefore, puts at risk the free debate of ideas” [*de comunicación política populista que asume la posición de una verdad que no necesita dialogar, ni consensuar y, por lo tanto, pone en riesgo el libre debate de ideas*] (Ruiz-Méndez, 2021, p. 47).

The statistical correlation of the variables analyzed has made it possible to outline a model for the creation of an effectiveness index for parliamentary spokespersons in their relationships with media professionals, an aspect to be considered regarding their ability to permeate society with their messages. These issues go beyond the individual reflections and responsibilities of the spokespersons or individual members of each parliamentary group; they are of general interest as they have an influence on the perception of political activity in society.

This study does not intend to have a definitive character; rather, it seeks an approximation in the present case of journalistic activity within an area still little explored, as is the case of parliamentary communication (Campos-Domínguez; Esteve-Del-Valle; Renedo-Farpón, 2022). The methodological proposal of the research raises two aspects open to discussion. The first has to do with the difficulties in analyzing personal factors, such as empathy or friendship, which can decisively determine journalists' assessment of spokespersons. It is inevitable that, during their daily work, bonds of affection will be created and may influence the creation of the news and their opinions about the sources. A second issue refers to the sample and the different length of time the spokespersons have held office. Some have held office for the entire period and others for a reduced part of it; for this reason, it is significant that among the best rated is the socialist spokesperson Héctor Gómez, who has held office for one year.

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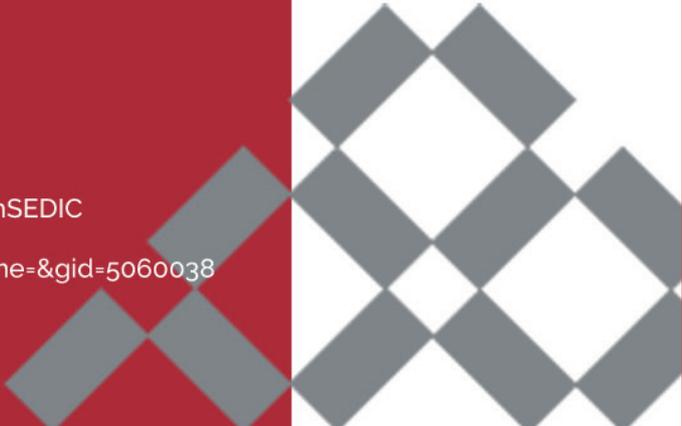
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