

# Journalists' Perception of the Threats and Risks of Corruption in Institutions and the Media

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## Abstract

Corruption scandals have been constantly present in the Spanish media in recent years. The public stays informed about these events through the media, so the way in which journalists cover them, as well as their perception of this problem –which threatens and endangers society– as regards the institutions and the media themselves, is of great importance. This article addresses this issue using a representative survey, conducted between March and July 2023, of 391 Spanish journalists belonging to media outlets of different sizes and platforms from across the country. Journalists were asked about the perceived level of corruption in different public institutions, their level of institutional trust, and their degree of agreement with a variety of statements about corruption and the media. After performing a descriptive and inferential statistical analysis of the data collected, the results showed that journalists see corruption as one of the main problems in Spain, with a definitively higher incidence in political institutions compared with other public institutions. In addition, it was found that, the greater the perception of an institution's corruption, the greater the journalists' distrust of that institution, thus confirming the dysfunctional thesis of political scandals. Finally, it was revealed that, for journalists, the watchdog role is theoretically essential, but it is not carried out in practice owing to the commercial logic that has been embraced by the Spanish media.

## Keywords

Perception of Corruption, Coverage, Institutional Trust, Survey, Journalists, Journalistic Roles, Watchdog, Political Institutions, Media, Political Scandals, Dysfunctional Theory of Political Scandals.

## 1. Introduction

Corruption is high on the media, political, and public agenda in a large number of countries around the world, and this is also the case in Spain. The media routinely report numerous corruption cases, sometimes releasing them as scoops as a result of investigative journalism. These issues enter the political arena, where in some contexts they are used as a weapon flung back and forth between politicians themselves, as well as in the public arena, where they become



matters of interest –as the agenda-setting theory points out– to citizens.

Although corruption is a common problem, not without risk, in all societies, its frequency and extent vary. Spain ranks 35th on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI; with 60 points –tied with Cape Verde, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Botswana– on a scale where 0 is the highest possible corruption), which measures the level of corruption in each country's public sector, based on the perceptions of experts and businesspeople. Since 2012 –previous data were not comparable due to a change in methodology– Spain's CPI score has ranged from 57 (2017) to 65 points (2012), with a one-point drop in each of the last two years (2021 and 2022). In Western Europe, in order of lowest to highest level of perceived corruption, the Netherlands, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, Austria, and Portugal (the last of these with 62 points and in 33rd position) are ahead of Spain. The only country that ranks behind it is Italy (56 points and in position 41; **Transparency International** (2022)).

Ordinary Spanish citizens' perception of corruption also draws attention to the threat that this problem poses to society. Until the Covid-19 pandemic hit, corruption was one of the issues that citizens were most concerned about. In 2017, 45% of Spaniards saw it as one of the three most pressing problems (**Sociological Research Center**, 2017). However, between 2020 and 2023 (**Sociological Research Center**, 2020; 2023), the number of people who thought this dropped to 5%. However, taking the 2023 Eurobarometer data on corruption into account, there is no doubt that this issue remains important in the national public sphere. Accordingly, 89% of Spaniards consider corruption in Spain to be very widespread (42%) or relatively widespread (47%). In addition, 52% think that, in the last 3 years, the level of corruption has increased, whereas only 6% believe that it has decreased somewhat. Specifically, Spaniards believe that political parties and politicians are the ones who most frequently give and receive bribes and abuse their power for personal gain (85% and 72%, respectively), more so than the police (34%), the courts (26%), or officials who grant construction permits (46%, the highest percentage among the civil servants studied; **European Commission** (2023)).

Considering that the European Commission specifically asks about bribery and abuse of power, the definition of corruption that is most widely used in the scientific literature and that is based on the one developed by **Transparency International** (2009) is used here. Corruption would thus be any unlawful exchange of resources that results from the abuse of a person's power for private gain (**Asomah**, 2020; **Berti**, 2018; **Bratu; Kažoka**, 2018; **Mancini et al.**, 2017; **Park**, 2012; **Zamora; Albaladejo**, 2010). It should be emphasized that, for corruption to occur, rules –whether ethical or legal– must be broken (**Fadaïro; Fadaïro; Aminu**, 2014; **Fell**, 2005; **Thompson**, 2001).

Moreover, corruption's secretive nature gives it specific characteristics: an additional complexity when it comes to objectively determining its scale and extent, as well as the actual level of corruption not being proportional to its perception (**Grigorescu**, 2006). This is because corruption, at least in Spain, is rarely experienced firsthand. According to Eurobarometer data (**European Commission**, 2023), only 11% of Spanish citizens know someone who has received bribes. At the same time, when respondents were asked whether the staff from 15 different types of institutions –including politicians, police, and bankers– would ask them for a gift, a favor, or extra money for their services, for only 3 of these institutions (the health system, inspectors of different ranks, and private companies) did 1% of respondents answer in the affirmative. With respect to the rest of the institutions, no one (0%) had personally experienced such a situation. Given this gap between firsthand experience with and opinion on the extent of corruption, and as **Charron and Annoni** (2021) affirm, understanding what determines perceptions of corruption is hugely important for both scientists and policy-makers.

Corruption, therefore, is understood as a hidden issue, made accessible to public opinion mainly through news published by the media (**Berganza et al.**, 2021). The media become key players in the social construction of corruption (**Stanig**, 2015) because, as the media are mediators of reality, the way the public perceives it greatly depends, first –as noted in agenda building theory– on its becoming one of those few topics included in the media agenda (**Barkemeyer et al.**, 2020) and then on how journalists frame, and therefore portray, these issues (**Allern; Pollack**, 2012).

Journalists, therefore, seem to play a key role in the construction of the public perception of corruption. As discussed, numerous institutions are devoted to understanding citizens' perceptions of corruption<sup>1</sup> using surveys as a methodological tool, as well as the many studies on the media's coverage of news about corruption (for an overview, see **Berganza et al.** (2021)) or on the perceived effects that such news has on citizens (see, for example, **Maier** (2011)); however, the academic literature has shown little or no interest in the perception of corruption by those who are, effectively and ultimately, in charge of producing the news about this issue. The aim of this research is to fill this gap so as to understand how journalists view the problem of corruption and what they perceive the extent of corruption in various institutions to be, as well as to gauge their opinion about the work that the media themselves carry out to inform the public about this issue that, as will be seen, is crucial for democracy.

## 2. The Media and Corruption

Before we proceed to clarify its ramifications as a discursive problem, corruption is an issue with real-world consequences that can be described as a risk and a threat to development and democracy (**Martín-Llaguno; Navarro-Beltrá; Berganza**,

<sup>1</sup> There are other institutions in addition to those mentioned, such as the Anti-Fraud Office of Catalonia or the Valencian Anti-Fraud Agency.

2022). From an economic perspective, corruption is linked to low levels of investment, lower economic growth and GDP, and reduced public spending on education, as well as low administrative efficiency, increased income inequality, and lower foreign investment, among other consequences (Larrú, 2009; Ko; Samajdar, 2010; Mauro, 1998; 1995). However, as a social and moral problem, it also has social and psychological effects (Judge; McNatt; Xu, 2011). It should be noted here that, while the media does not need to be involved for some of the economic consequences to occur, they are required for the social and psychological effects, as these are based on public knowledge of the corruption. Therefore, without the media, there are no political scandals (Tumber; Waisbord, 2004) –the discursive space in which corruption scandals occur.

When studying the effects of corruption on individuals and societies, two opposing theories are observed in the scientific literature: the functional and the dysfunctional. The latter, supported by a majority of researchers, concludes that political scandals have a negative impact on public opinion, as they undermine democracy (Maier, 2011). This dysfunctional theory postulates that public knowledge of corruption can decrease individual intrinsic honesty and electoral participation (Gächter; Schulz, 2016), discourage people from working for the common good, and lead to frustration and general apathy (Fadairo *et al.*, 2014), in addition to reducing public trust in institutions (Matkevičienė, 2017; Sorribas-Navarro, 2021), causing political disaffection, and, ultimately, undermining support for the system and its institutions (Maier, 2011), thereby weakening civil society (Fadairo *et al.*, 2014).

The functional theory, less popular among academics, postulates that negative effects are not always produced by political scandals; rather, their diffusion purifies democracy (Maier, 2011). Some studies report that public knowledge of corruption and the appropriate institutions' fight against it increase support for the political system and satisfaction with democracy (Dunham; Mauss, 1976; Sniderman *et al.*, 1975). Likewise, news about the corrupt activities of politicians can mobilize citizens against this problem (Asomah, 2020), which can modify electoral behaviors as a form of sanction (Stapenhurst, 2000). Thus, media exposure of corruption can become established as a means to improve democratic systems' social accountability (Chen; Zhang, 2016) and thus reduce levels of corruption.

This functional theory, linked to the media, is related to the watchdog role (Asomah, 2020). According to gatekeeping theory, a journalist who adopts this role "keeps watch so as to curb abuses of power by guaranteeing citizens' right to be informed" [*“vela por controlar los abusos del poder garantizando el derecho de los ciudadanos a ser informados”*] (Durántez-Stolle; Martínez-Sanz, 2019). Within this role, the media answer to democratic morality and stand as a fourth power (Asomah, 2020; Kramer, 2013). To fulfill this role, it is necessary for them to be independent and free from governmental interference, so that oversight takes place independent of powerful interests, and with the objective of protecting public resources (Asomah, 2020). Numerous studies have found negative correlations between levels of corruption and press freedom in a country (Lindstedt; Naurin, 2010; Treisman, 2000; McClean, 2015).

According to various studies, journalism's role as a watchdog is shared across the globe, so much so that it ranks as the second (Standaert; Hanitzsch; Dedonder, 2021) or the first most prevalent (Hanitzsch *et al.*, 2019). In Spain specifically, it ranks third (Berganza; Lavín; Piñeiro-Naval, 2017) with an average of 4 points on a 5-point scale (Hanitzsch *et al.*, 2019). In addition, other studies indicate that gender, level of education, ownership of the media outlet, and trust in politicians are variables that affect the adoption of such a role (Ahrend, 2002; Berganza *et al.*, 2017; Besley; Prat, 2006; Djankov *et al.*, 2003; Francken; Minten; Swinnen, 2005; Just; Crigler, 2019). Other analyses, however, maintain that the roles do not depend on the journalists' individual characteristics but rather on the socialization that takes place in the newsroom, which in turn depends on the type of media outlet and its standards (Canel; Sánchez-Aranda, 1999).

Specifically, as a watchdog, the journalist in corruption cases must investigate, scrutinize, and reveal information to catalyze citizen responses (Asomah, 2020; Sola-Morales; Rivera Gallardo, 2017). They stand as an agent of accountability (Mainwaring; Welna, 2003) through the attention they pay and the approach they adopt (Martín-Llaguno *et al.*, 2022). In this sense, the watchdog style of reporting is used because the journalist turns away from the episodic approach (Park, 2012) to address the causes and consequences of, and remedies to tackle, corruption (Chen; Zhang, 2016).

However, media coverage of corruption, as numerous studies show, is not always done this way, but usually, given that the characteristics of news about corruption fit the news values –shocking, out of the ordinary, and sensational in the strict sense of the term, and extremely market-oriented (Davis; Neufeld, 2007; Ekström; Johansson, 2019) – the media's ultimate goal is not so much linked to democratic morals as it is to attracting high ratings at a low cost. This is a commercial logic, which is reflected in coverage in which spectacularization (Sola-Morales; Rivera Gallardo, 2017), the trivialization of corruption, and the search for entertainment (Berganza *et al.*, 2021) are typical. This commercial approach to corruption means that the journalist uses episodic approaches (in which they do not address causes, origins, and possible reforms), human interest approaches (through personalization, mainly of the corrupt person and thus ignoring the victims), or dramatization (Sola-Morales; Zurbano-Berenguer, 2019; Semetko; Valkenburg, 2000).

### 3. Hypothesis

Corruption, as has been argued, is a public issue that threatens society and puts it at risk, but at the same time, it is an issue that only extends to the public arena via the intermediation of the media. Journalists are, ultimately, the ones who

report the news, so it is hugely important to understand their perception of corruption, of the perceived extent of corruption in the Spanish institutions that they usually deal with during their work, and of the way in which the media carry out their work with respect to this issue. Considering the above, the hypotheses of this research are presented below.

Taking into account the data on Spanish citizens' perception of corruption provided by the CIS Barometer (**Sociological Research Center**, 2023) and the Eurobarometer (**European Commission**, 2023) and the fact that journalists are both senders and receivers of media messages, we put forward the following hypothesis:

- H1. Although Spanish journalists do not consider corruption to be one of Spain's major problems, they feel that corruption is in fact widespread among politicians and that political institutions are the most corrupt  
Given that the dysfunctional theory –the most popular one among researchers– indicates that there is a decrease in trust in political institutions as a consequence of the perception of corruption (**Maier**, 2011), we postulate that:
- H2. There is a negative correlation between the perception of the extent of corruption in institutions and journalists' trust in those institutions.
- H3. Journalists believe that coverage of corruption produces more negative than positive effects on democratic health.

In addition, taking into account the importance that Spaniards give to corruption (**European Commission**, 2023) and the preeminent place that the watchdog role occupies in Spain (**Berganza et al.**, 2017; **Hanitzsch et al.**, 2019), but also the studies that claim that coverage of corruption follows a commercial logic (**Ekström; Johansson**, 2019; **Sola-Morales; Rivera Gallardo**, 2017), the following is postulated:

- H4. Spanish journalists see the media's job with respect to corruption as part of the basic duties of journalism, which provides a service to the public.
- H5. Journalists believe that the coverage of corruption in Spain is moving away from the watchdog role toward one related to a commercial logic.

## 4. Method

### 4.1. Sample

This study is part of the project "Covid-19, Occupational Risks and New Technologies: Spanish Journalists' Perception in a Comparative Context" ["COVID-19, Riesgos Laborales y Nuevas Tecnologías: La Percepción de los Periodistas Españoles en un Contexto Comparativo"] (internal reference F922-A86911, funded by the Rey Juan Carlos University's own Research and Development [R&D] Projects program, 01/01/2023–31/12/2023) as well as the project "The effects of political news on the perceptions and implicit attitudes of citizens and journalists toward corruption" ["Los efectos de la información política sobre las percepciones y las actitudes implícitas de la ciudadanía y los/as periodistas ante la corrupción"] (project PID-2019-105285GB-I00, funded by the Spanish Research Agency (01/06/2020–29/02/2024).

To test the hypotheses and answer the research questions of this study, a representative survey was conducted, using multistage sampling, first by clusters and then stratified, following the methodology used and validated in the international project *Worlds of Journalism Study* (<http://www.worldsofjournalism.org>). The data collection period was between March and July 2023. Telephone interviews were conducted with 391 journalists throughout Spain by a team of previously trained interviewers, with a response rate of 65.71%. Given that there is neither a database nor any updated figure for the number of active journalists working in the media in Spain in journalism (this being the target population of this research), a universe of between 18,000 and 20,000 journalists was estimated, based on data from **Díaz-Noci** (2010) as well as the publications that the **Madrid Press Association** (2011-2021) produce each year, where it mentions the launching and shutting down of media outlets. The sample of 391 surveys allows us to assume a confidence level of 95% and an estimated error of +/-5.

To choose the journalists that we surveyed, multistage sampling in which media outlets were identified as aggregate sampling units was first conducted. A list of the media outlets existing in Spain was then drawn up, based on the *Infoperiodistas* media guide, a digital database in which, as of November 11, 2022, more than 6,800 Spanish media outlets were listed, of which 2,627 were categorized as providing general news. After filtering, which included, among other actions, the elimination of inactive media outlets and the branches of the large Spanish radio stations, 624 media outlets remained on the list. These were classified as large or small on the basis of their audience according to the General Media Study (EGM) and the Office for the Justification of Diffusion (OJD), as well as by type of media (press, television, radio, magazines, news agencies, or digital media).

Once the population of media outlets was obtained, the final sample was chosen. This selection was made using stratified random sampling, taking into consideration the variables of size, type of media, and geographic location. The number of media outlets assigned to each stratum was proportional to the population of each stratum, except for digital media, whose population was multiplied by 0.6 to calculate its sample size. This was done because, in an exploratory phase, it became apparent that there were a considerable number of small digital media outlets listed where less than three journalists were working, which is the number of respondents predetermined by the *Worlds of Journalism Study* project for this type of small media outlet, provided there are any. For the large media outlets, five journalists were selected.

To obtain the sample within each media outlet, a random selection was made, taking into account the need to survey journalists of different professional ranks. Upon contacting these journalists, in case they refused, they were replaced by another journalist with similar characteristics from their own media outlet. If the media outlet as a whole withdrew their participation, it was replaced by one of the same type, size, geographic scope, and reach (local, regional, national, or international).

#### 4.2. Measures

The survey contained a wide and diverse range of questions. In addition to those of a demographic nature, the following were used in this study:

- Perceived level of corruption: journalists were asked to indicate on a scale from 1 (minimum) to 5 (maximum) the level of corruption they see in a series of institutions.
- Level of institutional confidence: this involved indicating the level of confidence in a series of institutions, again on a scale from 1 (no confidence) to 5 (maximum confidence).
- Degree of agreement with a variety of statements about corruption and the media: journalists indicated their degree of agreement from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree).

#### 5. Analysis and Results

The surveys were anonymized, transcribed, and coded in the software IBM-SPSS (version 22), where a descriptive and inferential analysis was performed –using chi-square, Student’s *t*-test, and Spearman’s correlation coefficient– to verify or refute the hypotheses, as well as to answer the research questions.

The results showed that journalists’ average degree of agreement ( $n = 391$ ) with the statement “one of Spain’s major problems is its high level of corruption” [*uno de los principales problemas de España es su alto nivel de corrupción*] (H1), on a scale of 1–5 (where 1 is “completely disagree” and 5 is “completely agree”), was 3.44 (standard deviation [SD] = 1.125). The answers that journalists gave to this question showed that 49.3% agreed (28.5% simply agreed whereas 20.8% fully agreed). Of the journalists, 21.3% were of the opposite opinion (of which only 4.3% completely disagreed).

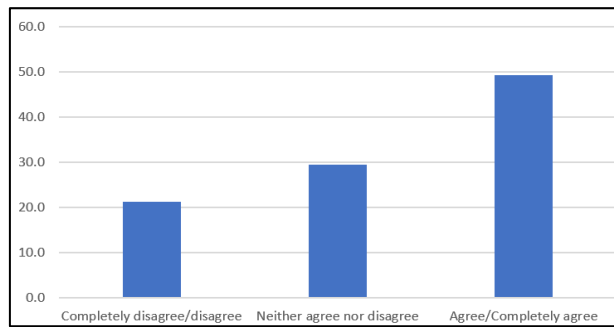


Figure 1: Journalists’ Perception of Corruption (%) as One of the Major Problems in Spain.  
Source: Authors’ own creation

The results also confirmed that journalists considered corruption to be widespread among the political class (H1), as the mean of the resulting responses ( $n = 391$ ) was 3.29 (SD = 1.198). When the frequencies of responses were studied, it was observed that 43.5% of journalists agreed (of which 20.2% completely agreed). Meanwhile, 28.9% of journalists did not identify with this expression (6.1% completely disagreed and 22.8% disagreed).

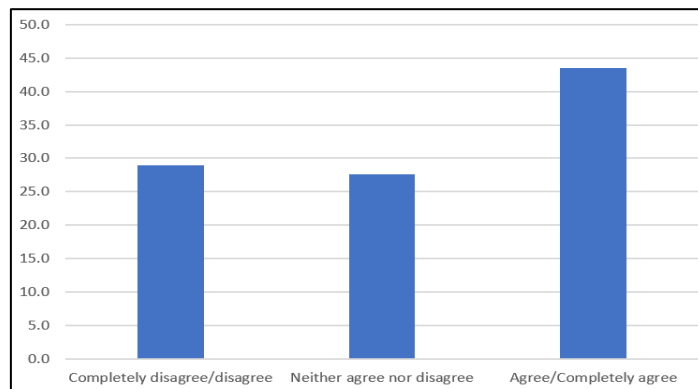


Figure 2: Journalists’ Perception of Corruption (%) as a General Problem among the Political Class.  
Source: Authors’ own creation

The journalists' perception of the extent of corruption in the 29 institutions studied (Table 1) received a mean score of 2.94 (SD = 0.64) on a scale of 1–5 (with 5 being the highest level of perceived corruption). Considering only political institutions (H1) –also called representative in that they are responsible for democratic representation and political decision-making (Van Dalen, 2019) – this score rose (M = 3.22; SD = 0.70). Upon analyzing the administrative-official institutions, those associated with public administration, the mean decreased slightly with respect to the general indicator of corruption (M = 2.76; SD = 0.93), and dropped considerably more upon studying other institutions, among which were the police, the judicial system, and the army –the so-called regulatory ones, insofar as they implement the decisions of the representative ones (Van Dalen, 2019) – religious leaders, trade unions, and human rights organizations (M = 2.50; SD = 0.70). When analyzing perceived corruption in the media, the indicator remained at average levels of perceived corruption in the institutions as a whole (M = 2.90; SD = 0.67).

To test whether there were statistically significant differences in the perception of the extent of corruption among the types of institutions studied, we carried out a repeated measures Student's *t*-test. The test revealed that there were statistically significant differences in the mean perception of its extent between political institutions and other institutions [ $t(372) = 24.391$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ], as well as between political institutions and the General State Administration [ $t(378) = 12.99$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ], and between political institutions and the media [ $t(377) = 5.605$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ].

The most corrupt political institutions in the eyes of journalists were political parties (M = 3.69; SD = 0.96) –and, within these, the worst offenders were the Partido Popular (PP; M = 3.83; SD = 0.95) and Vox (M = 3.51; SD = 1.14)– politicians in general (M = 3.51, SD = 0.96), and, as an individual person, the king emeritus (M = 4.39; SD = 0.84). Those perceived as least corrupt were the Parliament (M = 2.68; SD = 0.98), parliamentary groups (M = 2.81; SD = 0.99), the Government of Spain (M = 2.82; SD = 1.13), and, as an individual person, Felipe VI (M = 2.44; SD = 1.18). With respect to the rest of the institutions, only trade unions (M = 2.95; SD = 1.08) and, almost tied, religious leaders (M = 2.93; SD = 1.16) were above the mean of the general indicator. The institutions perceived as least corrupt were human rights organizations (M = 1.99; SD = 0.93).

Journalists' perception of corruption in the media deserves special mention. They indicated that, of the traditional media, television was the one they considered most corrupt (M = 2.80; SD = 1.04), whereas radio was seen as the least corrupt (M = 2.32; SD = 0.94). With regard to new media, the perception of corruption in digital media (M = 2.82; SD = 1.05) was on a par with that of television, whereas that of social networks (M = 3.22; SD = 1.26) surpassed even the mean of the indicator for all institutions.

Table 1: Average (scale 1–5) of Journalists' Perception of the Extent of Corruption in Institutions.

Institution	Political institutions	Civil servants from public administration	Other institutions	The media
Politicians in general	3.51			
Political parties	3.69			
PSOE	3.39			
PP	3.83			
Vox	3.51			
Unidas Podemos	3.01			
Ciudadanos	2.91			
Government of Spain	2.82			
Autonomous governments	3.14			
Local governments	3.05			
Parliament	2.68			
Parliamentary groups	2.81			
Juan Carlos I	4.39			
Felipe VI	2.44			
The monarchy	3.25			
<b>Political institutions index (15 indicators)</b>	<b>3.22</b>			
State General Administration		2.64		
Regional administrations		2.82		
Local government		2.82		
<b>Administration index (3 indicators)</b>		<b>2.76</b>		
Police			2.34	
Judicial system			2.50	
Army			2.25	
Religious leaders			2.93	
Unions			2.95	
Human rights organizations			1.99	
<b>Index for other institutions (6 indicators)</b>			<b>2.50</b>	
Press				2.52
Television				2.80
Radio				2.37
Digital media				2.82
Social networks				3.22
<b>Media index (5 indicators)</b>				<b>2.90</b>
<b>Institution index (29 indicators)</b>	<b>2.94</b>			
<b>Notes:</b> PSOE, Partido Socialista Obrero Español; PP, Partido Popular				
<b>Source:</b> Authors' own creation				

Spearman's rho statistic was used to study the association between Spanish journalists' perception of the extent of corruption and their degree of trust in political institutions (H2; also measured on a scale of 1–5, where 1 represents the lowest possible level of trust). The results showed an unequivocal correlation ( $p = 0.000$ ) between the perception of corruption in an institution and trust in it, always with a negative value: the higher the perception of corruption, the lower the level of trust (or vice versa; Table 2). The strength of the correlation, however, does vary depending on the institution. The strongest was for the Monarchy ( $r_{(s)} = -0.697$ ), the current King Felipe VI ( $r_{(s)} = -0.647$ ), and the king emeritus ( $r_{(s)} = -0.613$ ). In addition, we found correlations of medium strength for political parties as a whole ( $r_{(s)} = -0.411$ ), PSOE (Partido Socialista Obrero Español;  $r_{(s)} = -0.399$ ), the Parliament ( $r_{(s)} = -0.399$ ), the Government ( $r_{(s)} = -0.397$ ), and the PP (Partido Popular,  $r_{(s)} = -0.385$ ). Those that were less strong were for VOX ( $r_{(s)} = -0.238$ ) and Ciudadanos ( $r_{(s)} = -0.204$ ).

Table 2: Degree of Association between Spanish Journalists' Perception of Corruption and their Trust in Political Institutions.

Perception of corruption/confidence in:	$r_{(s)}$
Politicians	-0.291***
Political parties	-0.411***
PSOE	-0.399***
PP	-0.385***
Vox	-0.238***
Unidas Podemos	-0.352***
Ciudadanos	-0.204***
The Government	-0.397***
Parliament	-0.399***
Parliamentary groups	-0.327***
The monarchy	-0.697***
Juan Carlos I	-0.613***
Felipe VI	-0.647***

\*\*\* $p = 0.000$

Notes: PSOE, Partido Socialista Obrero Español; PP, Partido Popular

Source: Authors' own creation

Furthermore, when journalists were asked about their degree of agreement with the statement "media coverage of corruption influences the problem of citizens' growing political disaffection" [*la cobertura de la corrupción por parte de los medios influye en el fenómeno de la creciente desafección política por parte de la ciudadanía*] (H3), they were inclined to think that this was indeed the case ( $M = 3.91$ ;  $SD = 1.02$ ; on a scale of 1 "totally disagree" to 5 "totally agree"). Of journalism professionals, 70.1% said they agreed (37.1%) or strongly agreed (33%) with this idea, whereas 9% of respondents disagreed (strongly disagreed 3.1% and disagreed 5.9%). See Figure 3.

Likewise, when analyzing the degree of agreement or disagreement with the statement "publishing information related to corruption in the media results in an improvement in democratic health" [*la publicación en medios de informaciones relacionadas con la corrupción influye en una mejora de la salud democrática*] (H3), we found a fairly homogeneous perspective among journalists ( $M = 4.23$ ;  $SD = 0.97$ ). In all, 82.5% agreed (32.8%) or completely agreed (49.7%), whereas only 7.7% disagreed (5.9%) or completely disagreed (1.8%).

On the contrary, the results showed a greater discrepancy between journalists' perceptions when asked for their degree of agreement with the statement "political parties or people directly involved in corruption are negatively affected by corruption scandals in elections" [*los partidos políticos o las personas directamente implicadas en la corrupción se ven afectados negativamente en las elecciones por los escándalos de corrupción*] ( $M = 3.2$ ;  $SD = 1.13$ ; H3). Specifically (Figure 4), 39.3% of the respondents agreed with this statement (24.0% agreed; 15.3% totally agreed), whereas 28.9% of them partially (23.5%) or totally (3.1%) disagreed with this statement.

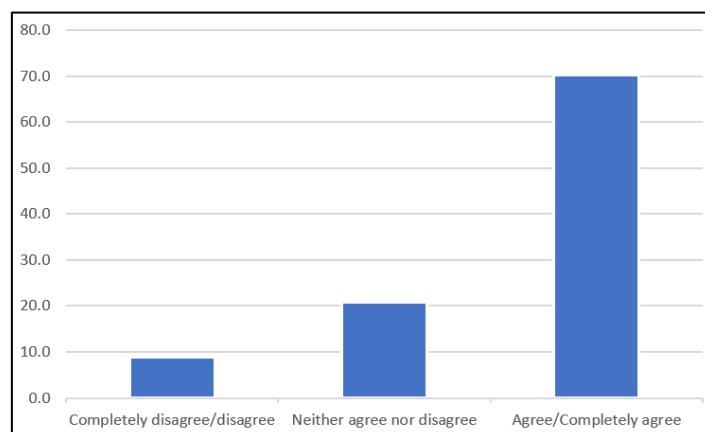


Figure 3: Journalists' Perception (%) that Coverage of Political Scandals Results in Political Disaffection among the Public.

Source: Authors' own creation

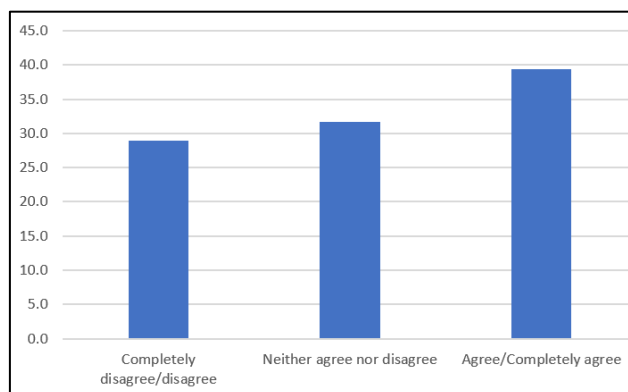


Figure 4: Journalists' Perception (%) that Political Parties or Individuals Implicated in Corruption are Penalized in Elections.  
Source: Authors' Own Creation

When journalists were asked about their role as watchdogs with respect to corruption, the results were again clearly homogeneous (H4). Thus, in response to the statement “uncovering cases of political corruption is one of journalism’s basic functions as the fourth estate” [*“destapar casos de corrupción política es una de las funciones básicas del periodismo en su condición de cuarto poder”*], the mean of the responses (on a scale of 1–5, where 5 is the highest level of agreement) was 4.24 (SD = 0.904). Of the journalists, 82.3% agreed (34.5%) or strongly agreed (47.8%) with this statement, whereas only 5.1% disagreed (3.8%) or strongly disagreed (1.3%).

In addition, in regard to the statement “coverage of corruption is a public service” [*“la cobertura de la corrupción es un servicio público”*] (H4), journalists agreed to a high degree (M = 4.26; SD = 0.906). The results showed that only 5.9% disagreed (3.8%) or completely disagreed (1.3%), whereas 83.6% agreed (32.8%) or completely agreed (49.7%).

In the analyses related to whether there were significant differences in agreement about the importance of the watchdog role when it comes to news coverage about corruption, depending on different variables (H4), we found the following: First, when studying the differences by gender, the chi-square test showed significant differences between men and women regarding the statement “uncovering cases of political corruption is one of journalism’s basic functions as the fourth estate” [*“destapar casos de corrupción política es una de las funciones básicas del periodismo en su condición de cuarto poder”*] [ $\chi^2(4, N = 391) = 13,854; p < 0.01$ ]. The adjusted residuals showed that women were more likely to disagree (2.8 > 2.58), whereas men were more likely to strongly agree (2.2 > 1.96). The phi estimate indicated that the strength of the relationship was weak ( $|\vartheta| = 0.188$ ). In contrast, the gender variable did not show significant differences in response to the phrase “coverage of corruption is a public service” [*“la cobertura de la corrupción es un servicio público”*] [ $\chi^2(4, N = 391) = 6,632; p > 0.05$ ].

In addition, there were significant differences among journalists depending on the ownership of the media outlet to which they belonged (private, public, or state-owned) with respect to their degree of agreement with the phrase “coverage of corruption is a public service” [*“La cobertura de la corrupción es un servicio público”*] [ $\chi^2(8, N = 391) = 18,689; p < 0.05$ ]. The adjusted residuals showed that those in private media outlets are the ones who are more likely to agree with this idea (2.4 > 1.96). Journalists from public media outlets more frequently responded that they neither disagreed nor agreed (18.6%, 2.2 > 1.96) or disagreed (2.1 > 1.96), whereas those from state media outlets were more likely to completely disagree with that idea (2.3 > 1.96). The phi estimate indicated that the strength of this relationship was weak ( $|\vartheta| = 0.219$ ). In contrast, media ownership did not show significant differences when it came to the statement that “uncovering cases of political corruption is one of journalism’s basic functions as the fourth estate” [*“destapar casos de corrupción política es una de las funciones básicas del periodismo en su condición de cuarto poder”*] [ $\chi^2(8, N = 391) = 10,881; p > 0.05$ ].

Spearman’s rho statistic showed that there were no significant differences based on the journalist’s level of education when it came to agreement regarding journalism’s work as a watchdog, neither regarding the idea that uncovering cases of political corruption was one of the basic functions of journalism as the fourth estate ( $r_{(s)} = -0.015; p > 0.05$ ), nor for the statement that “coverage of corruption is a public service” [*“la cobertura de la corrupción es un servicio público”*] ( $r_{(s)} = -0.040; p > 0.05$ ); in addition, this indicator did not show significant correlations between the degree of journalists’ trust in politicians or the variables related to the watchdog role ( $[r_{(s)} = -0.015]$  and  $[r_{(s)} = -0.000]$ , respectively, for the idea that uncovering corruption cases is a basic function of journalism and for the idea that coverage of corruption is a public service; both  $p < 0.05$ ).

Regarding the perception of the coverage of corruption that truly takes place in Spain (H5), the analyses showed the following: In response to the statement that the coverage “focuses on a few people and ignores the extent of the events within the institution, as well as possible reforms to avoid these dynamics” [*“se centra en unas pocas personas e ignora la extensión de los hechos dentro de la institución, así como posibles reformas para evitar esas dinámicas”*], the results showed a degree of homogeneity (M = 3.55; SD = 0.74). Specifically, 55% of journalists agreed with this idea (40.7%



agreed, 14.3% strongly agreed), whereas only 11.5% disagreed (strongly disagreed, 2.8%; disagreed, 8.7%).

Likewise, regarding whether “the media give preference to publishing scandals, boosting their dissemination, regardless of the seriousness of the events” [*“los medios privilegian la publicación de escándalos, amplificando su difusión, sin importar la gravedad de los hechos”*], again the opinions of most journalists were clustered on the same side of the spectrum of responses ( $M = 3.39$ ;  $SD = 1.04$ ). Thus, 46.8% agreed with this idea (32.5% agreed, whereas 14.3% completely agreed), while only 17.2% of journalists opposed this statement (11.8% disagreed, and 5.4% completely disagreed).

Finally, when faced with the statement that “news about corruption is very juicy content for a media outlet, since it can increase its audience” [*“las informaciones sobre la corrupción son un contenido muy jugoso para un medio, puesto que puede aumentar su audiencia”*], journalists again had relatively homogeneously opinions ( $M = 3.31$ ;  $SD = 1.17$ ). In all, 49.8% agreed with this view (35% agreed, and 14.8% strongly agreed), whereas 25.7% disagreed (17% or strongly disagreed (8.7%).

## 6. Discussion and Conclusions

Half of Spanish journalists saw corruption as one of the major problems in Spain, whereas only one in five journalists opposed this idea. This figure does not correspond to Spanish citizens' opinion, according to the Barometer of the **Sociological Research Center** (2023), which indicates a significant gap in the perception of corruption between the public sphere and those responsible for creating the media agenda. However, the way in which the question was posed to respondents may have led to this difference since the survey conducted in this study asks outright whether corruption is a major problem in Spain, whereas the Barometer asks respondents to voluntarily point out the major problems.

In all, 43.5% of journalists believed that corruption was widespread among the political class, whereas 28.9% believed the opposite. However, Spanish citizens' perception of the political class's level of corruption is much greater (85% and 72% for political parties and politicians, respectively; **European Commission** (2023)). There was agreement in the opinion that political institutions were the most corrupt ( $M = 3.22$ ), surpassing public administrations ( $M = 2.76$ ); other institutions, including regulatory institutions such as the police; and the courts ( $M = 2.50$ ) and the media ( $M = 2.90$ ). Thus, hypothesis 1, which stated that “although Spanish journalists do not consider corruption to be one of Spain's major problems, they feel that corruption is in fact widespread among politicians and that political institutions are the most corrupt” [*“a pesar de que la corrupción no es considerada por los periodistas españoles como uno de los principales problemas de España, estos perciben que la corrupción sí está generalizada entre los políticos y que son las instituciones políticas las más corruptas”*], was partially verified.

It is worth highlighting the difference in the perception of corruption between the king emeritus, Juan Carlos I, and the current king, Felipe VI, which is in line with previous studies on the coverage of corruption within the monarchy, in which the report of corruption was limited only to Juan Carlos I (**Berganza; Martín-Llaguno; Ortiz-González**, 2023). The perception of corruption in the media, in contrast, is similar to that of regulatory institutions, but it should be noted that a perception of corruption in social networks in particular is equal to that of political institutions.

Moreover, the fact that right-wing parties (PP and VOX; Ciudadanos was in the process of being eliminated when the surveys were conducted, so the responses could have been influenced by this fact) came out worse in terms of perceived corruption was perhaps due to the fact that the political leaning of the Spanish journalists was center-left (**Berganza; Herrero-Jiménez; Montero**, 2018); hence, future research should analyze whether Spanish journalists are ideologically polarized, such that, the further to the left they are on the political spectrum, the more corruption they see in right-wing parties, and vice versa.

The results also show that journalists' perception of corruption was unequivocally linked to their trust in political institutions. There was a particularly strong relationship in the case of the monarchy, the current king, and the king emeritus, as well as political parties in general, the Parliament, and the Government, and in the PSOE and PP in particular, so the second hypothesis was confirmed. The more corruption journalists perceive, the less trust they have in institutions, which enables the confirmation of one of the effects postulated by the dysfunctional theory of political scandals, according to which corruption is said to have the effect of reducing citizens' trust in politicians and the political system (**Ekström; Johansson**, 2019). The fact that this also happens to journalists could give a new perspective to the theory of the spiral of cynicism by **Cappella and Jamieson** (1997).

In addition to verifying this phenomenon in journalists, it was confirmed that they themselves observe this in the public, since 70.1% believed that coverage of corruption causes political disaffection. In contrast, the majority of journalists (82.5%) did believe that publishing news about corruption improves democratic health, although only 39.3% believed that such coverage improved political responsibility through electoral penalization. We therefore conclude that, although journalists do in fact accept part of the functional theory, the dysfunctional theory has more influence on their opinions—something that aligns with most scientific studies, which support the dysfunctional thesis on the effects of corruption (**Maier**, 2011), so hypothesis 3 was verified.

In contrast, journalists almost homogeneously confirmed the watchdog role as a key function of journalism in the coverage of corruption, in line with previous studies where the importance of this role for Spanish journalists was pointed out (**Berganza et al.**, 2017; **Hanitzsch et al.**, 2019). However, hypothesis 4, which stated, in addition to this, that there were significant

differences depending on gender, media ownership, level of education, and journalists' trust in politics, should be partially rejected, as only gender and media ownership showed significant differences –and only in one of the two variables that measured attachment to the role. The rest of the variables (level of education or degree of trust in politicians) did not correlate. Thus, men –as a previous studies (**Berganza et al.**, 2017) contradicts– and journalists from private media were the ones who were the most supportive of the watchdog role, whereas those in public and state media were less so, perhaps because of governmental interference in these media outlets within a polarized pluralistic media system such as the Spanish one (**Mancini**, 2019). Future research may ask about the media system's influence on corruption as perceived by journalists.

Finally, hypothesis 5, which postulated that “journalists believe that the coverage of corruption in Spain is moving away from the watchdog role toward one related to commercial logic” [*“los periodistas consideran que la cobertura de la corrupción en España se aleja de la propia del rol de perro guardián y se acerca a la relacionada con la lógica mercantilista”*], was confirmed. In journalists' eyes, the media's reporting on corruption focuses on a few individuals and ignores the extent of the events within the institution and possible reforms to avoid such dynamics. This view is related to episodic and accountability-focused coverage of a few bad apples (**Berti**, 2018), which is a departure from watchdog-type coverage, which should address the causes, consequences, and remedies to alleviate corruption (**Chen; Zhang**, 2016). In addition, most journalists believed that the media boost the dissemination of events regardless of their seriousness and that news about corruption is juicy content that should always be published, as it can increase the media outlet's audience. This perspective corresponds not as much to a logic of control tied to the powers of the watchdog role but rather to a commercial logic (**Sola-Morales; Rivera Gallardo**, 2017) – something that can affect the public perception of corruption, a problem that, as seen here, can threaten and jeopardize democratic effectiveness (**Manoli; Bandura; Downward**, 2020).

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that a mismatch is perceived in two aspects addressed in this research. The first is the difference between the perceptions that journalists and citizens have regarding the extent of corruption, which –bearing in mind that corruption is a hidden issue and that citizens obtain news almost exclusively through the media– indicates a potential problem, as per agenda-setting theory, with the coverage of corruption, which is more focused on sales than on exercising control over institutions. This relates to the second perceived gap: the one that separates journalists' theoretical attachment to the watchdog role from its practice, where watchdog functions are displaced by the journalistic logic and routines implemented by commoditization. It would seem plausible that the role effectively taken on by journalists when it comes to the coverage of corruption is more linked to socialization in the newsroom – depending on the conditions of the media outlet (**Canel; Sánchez-Aranda**, 1999) – than to their own principles and beliefs. Future research should analyze this apparent dichotomy between what journalists are and what they want to be with respect to corruption-related news.

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