

Transparency mechanisms in the media: analysis of Spain and Portugal

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Abstract

Transparency in the media has become a fundamental pillar within all democratic societies, as a mechanism for reinforcing government regulation (Anderson, 2009) and citizen trust in institutions (Vos and Craft, 2016). Journalism, which has traditionally acted as a watchdog and a check on power, is now in the midst of a credibility crisis, compounded by polarization and the rise of disinformation. For this reason, various studies advocate that media outlets, just like institutions and governments, should use transparency mechanisms that allow them to respond directly or indirectly to society regarding the content they publish, as an exercise of responsibility. This research aims to evaluate media transparency in the Spanish–Portuguese landscape by means of an index that includes variables studied in the theoretical framework and that come from legislative, academic, and professional sources. These variables have been used to measure corporate and financial transparency, transparency in content production, openness to public participation, and the self-regulation mechanisms of ten media outlets in Spain and Portugal. This study concluded that, with only 43% adherence to the transparency variables analyzed, promoting accountability is still a work in progress for media outlets, and it must be stepped up at both the academic and professional levels.

Keywords

Transparency; Accountability; Media opening; Media; Access to information; Transparency mechanisms; Media credibility; Journalistic innovation; Open journalism.

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1. Introduction

Transparency has become a fundamental pillar within democratic societies to ensure the accountability of institutions, which is currently a key element in ensuring good governance (Cifuentes-Faura, 2021). Citizens are increasingly aware of the importance of transparency, which they see as one check on government action as well as a way to promote the prevention of and the fight against corruption (Anderson, 2009; Bertot; Jaeger; Grimes, 2012; Attard *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, its implementation is a mechanism that helps restore citizens' trust in institutions (Cook *et al.*, 2010; Kim; Lee, 2012; Slattery, 2016; Vos; Craft, 2016), as it increases understanding about the process by which public affairs are created (Heald, 2005). Although there is no universal definition that encompasses the concept of transparency, the majority of definitions concern greater access and availability of information (Cifuentes-Faura, 2021), which facilitates citizens' review and analysis of public information, as well as the imposition of sanctions if irregularities are detected (Ugalde, 2002; Bovens, 2005).

This last aspect of transparency is closely related to the checking function exercised by the media, which were already named as the "Fourth Estate" (Galán-Gamero, 2014), owing to their role as watchdogs and as shapers of public opinion. This is a role that they were already playing in the eighteenth century in the bourgeois revolutions, when the media's function was tied to the need to establish mechanisms for mediation between the public and its representatives (Boix; López, 2005), which has remained a part of the historical process up to the present day, situating the media as a source of power, counter-power, and social change (Castells, 2008).

However, authors such as Blesa (2006) point out that, since the 1980s, the media have been in the midst of a crisis and have undergone a transformation into the "media of power" [*"medios del poder"*]. This crisis is manifested in a lack of public trust (Nielsen; Graves, 2017; Nigro, 2018), further heightened by political elites' consistent accusations (Mourão *et al.* 2018; Van-Duyn; Collier 2019) toward the media, which they label as disinformers, thereby damaging public perception of media credibility (Masullo *et al.*, 2021).

2. Media transparency in the context of disinformation

Although transparency is important in the fight against disinformation, the problem runs much deeper because a significant part of the population cannot distinguish truthful information from false information (Nielsen; Graves, 2017). Therefore, some studies (Canavilhas; Jorge, 2022) point out that, in addition to the regulation of transparency, which is the subject of this study, fact-checking and education are fundamental to counter disinformation processes.

The problem is that the issue of disinformation is still growing (Amazeen, 2020) owing to the cyclical crises being experienced by journalism and the process of adapting the industry to the digital scene (Vázquez-Herrero; Vizoso; López-García, 2019). This is not a new problem, but its pattern of spread within society is now much more deeply entrenched and more complex, as is its consequence of eroding public confidence in the media, institutions, and politicians. This leads to a breaking down of political debate, a threat to electoral processes, an increase in polarization, and ultimately, a growing threat to the functioning of democratic societies (Steensen, 2019).

We find ourselves in a time when the concept of post-truth is predominant (Corner, 2017; Fowks, 2018; Farkas; Schou, 2019; Peters; McLaren; Jandrić, 2020), and in which the mass dissemination of false and misleading content prevails, usually highly emotionally charged and through technological channels (Rubio-Núñez, 2018). This situation is far from being a fringe issue and is linked to political elites, think-tanks, the media, citizen movements, and parties (Bennett; Livingston, 2018), which tends to further break the trust that citizens have in the media (Aguaded; Romero-Rodríguez, 2015).

Disinformation—in particular, that which is created intentionally to distort reality and contribute false information to the collective discourse (Coromina, 2019)—conflicts with journalism that is rooted in fact-checking procedures (Vu; Saldaña, 2021); however, there is also misinformation, which originates with the media, owing to journalists' lack of fact-checking skills (Lecheler; Kruike-meier, 2016).

For these reasons, in recent years the widespread use of verification and fact-checking platforms has increased (Herrero; Herrera-Damas, 2021); they guarantee that journalistic texts are checked against reliable sources, official documents, and credible research results (Ufarte-Ruiz; Peralta-García; Murcia-Verdú, 2018). Although verification has always been a crucial process in the journalistic field, the upsurge in disinformation has led to the emergence of independent media agencies specialized in fact-checking, as well as the formation of specific departments in media outlets with a long track record (Cherubini; Graves, 2016).

Notable characteristics that define the work of news verification agencies include being able to adapt to changes, especially technological changes; grounding their work in the concept of objectivity; involving citizens in verification processes (Vizoso; Vázquez-Herrero, 2019); and making transparency one of the primary keys within their work method (Lotero-Echeverri *et al.*, 2018).

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Governments also play an increasingly important role in the fight against disinformation, which in democratic countries has come to be seen as a matter of national security; thus, in addition to the emergence of self-regulation models from media outlets, there are also proposals for legislation and institutional intervention by the state (De-Basio; Selva, 2021).

Numerous authors have pointed to media transparency as a fundamental resource that the media should promote both for the fight against disinformation and as a means to regain public credibility (Bardoel; D'Haenens, 2012; Groenhardt; Bardoel, 2012; Karlsson; Clerwall; Nord, 2014; Curry; Stroud, 2012; Lin; Zhang, 2021; Vu; Saldaña, 2021). In fact, transparency in relation to journalism is neither a new nor an unexplored concept. Appelgren and Salaverría (2018) point out that, for decades, classical theories of journalism have advised that one of the guiding principles of reliability in news be providing citizens with as much information as possible.

Due to journalism's social responsibility to society (Lee; Riffe, 2017), the media should be able to directly or indirectly answer for the quality of the content that they publish as well as for its consequences (McQuail, 2003), and moreover, they must do so as an exercise in responsibility (Moeller et al., 2006). More transparent journalism, which discloses how it is financed, how it builds its agenda, how it is connected to its sources, and how its production routines work, helps the public be prepared to counter disinformation (Alisson, 2022).

3. Analysis of the Spanish-Portuguese landscape

Over the years, there have been different initiatives in the media landscape in Spain and Portugal to foster transparency in the media. In Portugal, many of these mechanisms are galvanized by legislation that regulates their activity and requires specific accountability criteria, especially financial and legislative transparency; however, such legislation has not yet been put into practice in Spain. Good practices of self-regulation and initiatives promoted by the media themselves, for example, specialized news verification agencies, have also been observed. At the academic level, different indices have been implemented to measure the level of media transparency, a field that has been researched more in Spanish studies but is still underexplored in Portugal, where studies have focused more on regulation of the sector.

3.1. Media transparency in Spain

In Spain, a significant legislative gap regarding media transparency has existed for years (López-Cepeda; Manfredi, 2013). At the legislative level, the *General Law on Audiovisual Communication (Ley 7/2010)* was adopted in 2010; Article 6 of this law states the right to transparent audiovisual communication. This regulation pertains to transparency regarding the identity of the service provider and companies that are its shareholders, transparency regarding content programming, differentiation between marketing communication and other content, and accessibility and media literacy. However, it does not include any regulation regarding transparency in terms of a media outlet's financing or the production of news content. Subsequently, *Law 19/2013 on transparency, access to public information, and good governance* was passed. Although this regulation is regarded as insufficient (La-Rosa; Sandoval-Martín, 2016; Sierra-Rodríguez, 2020), it represents a step forward in the provision of public information to both citizens and journalists, who can access public data to cross-check and improve the quality of their own information (Díez-Garrido; Campos-Domínguez, 2018).

However, *Law 19/2013* does not include specific transparency or accountability regulations applicable to the media, with the exception of publicly owned media. It also covers private entities benefiting from public aid or subsidies of more than 100,000 euros or at least 40% of their total annual income, as well as private entities awarded contracts with the public sector. However, these criteria do not cover the majority of privately owned media outlets, which are not legally bound to be accountable to the public.

In the academic field, different studies have analyzed media transparency in the Spanish landscape, some of which have focused on the websites of the major media outlets (Redondo-García; Campos-Domínguez, 2016) or specifically on the audiovisual media outlets (Rodríguez-Martínez et al., 2022). These studies highlight the use of classic self-regulation mechanisms and interactive tools that engage users as opposed to tools that promote corporate, financial, and content production transparency in the Spanish media landscape. In addition, various methodological proposals for measurement have been developed (Campos-Domínguez; Redondo-García, 2015; Suárez-Villegas et al., 2017; Mauri-Ríos et al., 2022), which include indicators related to economic and editorial transparency, interactivity, or citizen participation as well as classic self-regulation mechanisms, such as style guides, the reader's ombudsman, press councils, or other internal codes.

More transparent journalism, which discloses how it is financed, how it builds its agenda, how it is connected to its sources, and how its production routines work, helps the public be prepared to counter disinformation

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At the professional level, some media outlets have gone beyond legislative norms and traditional resources for the self-regulation of transparency to implement their own mechanisms aimed at enhancing their accountability, in terms of both financing and content production: these include news verification agencies or tools such as the *Transparency Map* [*Mapa da Transparência*] offered by the newspaper *Público* (Amorós-García, 2019). This type of mechanism has not been addressed in most of the academic indices implemented to measure media transparency, and its inclusion could prove to be enriching, as it provides new forms of accountability related to the current state of disinformation.

The *Transparent Journalism Tool* (*TJ Tool*), launched by the newspaper *Público* with funding from the *Google News Initiative*, is one such example. It serves as a tool to fight disinformation. This undertaking, which has already been analyzed by various authors in studies on the media accountability (Terol-Bolinches; Alonso-López, 2020; Jurado; Delgado; Ortigosa, 2020), provides eight editorial transparency indicators (sources, support documents, context, date and place where a piece was written, author, editorial line, and transparency policy) which are used to assign a percentage value according to compliance to these indicators. Moreover, the tool has been developed open source so that it can be used by other media outlets. Information about the tool is available through the website www.periodismotransparente.es and on the website of the Spanish media outlet *Público* through a logo located at the top of each article.

Another example is the news verification agencies affiliated with the *International Fact-checking Network* (IFCN) –in Spain, these are *Newtral*, *Maldita*, and *EFE Verifica*. This network, which brings together verification projects from all over the world, obliges its members to comply with transparency criteria (Rodríguez-Pérez, 2020), both in the sources used for verification and in the working methodology, as well as in terms of the financing, organization, and constitution of the media agencies.

3.2. Media transparency in Portugal

In Portugal, media freedom has been included in the constitution since the 1976 version, the first after the Carnation Revolution, in which art. 38 guarantees freedom of the press (Carvalho; Cardoso; Figueiredo, 2003). Years later, in the constitutional revision of 1982, concerns about independent journalism took the form of an entity, the *Conselho de Comunicação Social* (CCS), whose operation would be regulated by Law 23/83 of September 6 of that year. However, the 1989 constitutional revision later created an independent agency called the *Alta Autoridade para a Comunicação Social* (AACS), whose regulation was published in Law 15/90 of June 30 of that year. This more autonomous and independent entity saw its powers strengthened, in a model very similar to that of the entity that succeeded it, the *Entidade Reguladora para a Comunicação Social* (ERC), created by Law 43/98 of August 6, 1998.

<https://www.erc.pt>

This legislation was amended twice (Law 18-A/22 of July 18 and Law 33/2003 of August 22), and its fourth version, Law 53/2005 of November 8, is currently in force.

The ERC is a legal entity under public law, responsible for the regulation of the media sector. This independent entity is accountable only to the Portuguese Parliament, the second most important sovereign body in the country. Its mission is to supervise the entire media sector, including newspapers, magazines, radio and television, online information, and news agencies. This includes the registration of all media outlets; the evaluation of complaints from institutions, companies, and citizens; and the verification of compliance with legislation or other regulations in force in the media sector.

Within this legislation, point 1 of Article 3 (Transparency of ownership and management) of the *Law on transparency of ownership, management, and financing of media* (Law 78/2015 of July 29) refers to the obligation of media outlets to communicate to the ERC who the holding entities/companies are, the composition of their governing bodies, and the names of those responsible for the editorial direction and supervision of the content. This information must be updated whenever there are changes. Article 5 (Transparency of the principal means of financing) obliges the media to disclose the principal financial flows using organized accounting. The Law (Article 6) also establishes that this information provided by the media must be public.

There are two other entities on the field of competition:

- The *Autoridade da Concorrência* (AdC): which seeks to ensure the functioning of the market economy and, in this respect, intervenes in the media landscape, its positive opinion being necessary when purchasing of media groups
<https://www.concorrenca.pt>
- The *Autoridade Nacional de Comunicações* (ICP-Anacom): which regulates, supervises, and monitors the communications market so that it functions properly. Its connection with the media sector is indirect, since its activities include the management of radio frequencies and computer networks.
<https://www.anacom.pt>

For all of these reasons, it can be said that Portuguese legislation on transparency is abundant and very elaborate in terms of media ownership, financial flows, the identification of each media outlet, those responsible for the content, and the editorial line followed.

In academic terms, scientific production on media transparency in Portugal is relatively scarce, focusing on issues related to the regulation of the sector (Costa-e-Silva; Fidalgo; Sousa, 2011; Camponez, 2011; Cádima; Martins; Silva, 2016). It is

in these works where indirect references to transparency appear, specifically when talking about self-regulation and co-regulation, analyzing the ethics and deontology of journalism but also some mechanisms provided for in the legislation, such as the statutes governing the news-room (Fidalgo, 2009; Miranda; Camponez, 2022).

The main objective of this research is to evaluate the level of media transparency in the Spanish–Portuguese landscape

At the professional level, some Portuguese media outlets have sought to bolster compliance with transparency standards with two mechanisms of their own:

- One is style guides because “transparency obligations begin with the establishment and disclosure of the rules by which we are governed” [*as nossas obrigações de transparência começam pelo estabelecimento e divulgação das regras por que nos regemos*] (Público, 2005, p. 8).
- The other mechanism is the reader’s ombudsman, which seeks to answer questions related to content, journalists’ performance, or the organization, contributing to a more transparent and participatory dynamic (Gomes, 2019), whether the media outlets are public or private.

4. Objectives and hypotheses

The main objective of this research is to evaluate the level of media transparency in the Spanish–Portuguese landscape. To carry out an in-depth evaluation, the following specific objectives are proposed:

- O1: To analyze media transparency initiatives in Spain and Portugal at the professional, legislative, and academic levels.
- O2: To create an index that includes the variables studied for its implementation.
- O3: To apply the proposed transparency index to the major media outlets in Spain and Portugal to make a first approach to their media transparency.

Regarding the application of media transparency, the research sets forth two primary hypotheses:

- H1: The media, especially privately owned media, do not tend to apply transparency mechanisms unless required to do so by external legislation (legislative or professional).
- H2: In general, the media only share basic resources that offer users and readers data on their ownership, financing, or content methodology but do not go deeper through mechanisms that provide more sophisticated levels of transparency.

5. Methodology

The Spanish-Portuguese landscape was the object of study, since both countries fall within the polarized pluralism model proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004). They are also countries whose historical and political features converge, especially since the 1970s, with the end of their totalitarian regimes, since both are part of the third democratic wave. It is also interesting to analyze their geographical characteristics and their place within the circle of democratic countries in Mediterranean Europe, alongside Italy and Greece. The analysis and comparison of these two countries is also interesting because, despite their geographic and cultural proximity, they exhibit differences in media regulation and legislation. Their analysis will also serve as a starting point for further study and comparison with other countries with different models and media landscapes.

Table 1. Media outlets analyzed

Media outlet	Country	Type	Web
Antena 3	Spain	Television	https://www.antena3.com
Cadena SER	Spain	Radio	https://cadenaser.com
El Español	Spain	Digital native	https://www.elespanol.com
Observador	Portugal	Digital native	https://observador.pt
El País	Spain	Printed newspaper	https://elpais.com
Público	Portugal	Printed newspaper	https://www.publico.pt
RTP	Portugal	Public media outlet	https://www.rtp.pt
RTVE	Spain	Public media outlet	https://www.rtve.es
SIC	Portugal	Television	https://sic.pt
TSF	Portugal	Radio	https://www.tsf.pt

To measure the level of media transparency in these two countries, their major media outlets were selected. The sample included one media outlet of each type (radio, printed press, native digital press, television, and publicly owned media), with the aim of identifying possible differences in transparency depending on the type of media. The selection was made on the basis of audience data from the major media measurement companies in both countries:

- the *Asociación para la Investigación de Medios de Comunicación* (<https://www.aimc.es>) and *OJD Interactiva* (<https://www.ojdinteractiva.es>) in Spain; and
- the *Comissão de Análise de Estudos de Meios* (<https://www.caem.pt>) and the
- *Associação Portuguesa para o Controlo de Tiragem e Circulação* in Portugal (<https://www.apct.pt>).

The analysis and tracking of the indicators were carried out using the public websites of the following media outlets, opening subscriptions with the media outlet where required.

To develop the transparency indicators applied to the above sample, various relevant professional and academic studies were considered (Bardoel; D’Haenens, 2004; Groenhart; Bardoel, 2012; López-Cepeda; Manfredi, 2013; Campos-Domínguez; Redondo-García, 2015; Martín-Cavanna; Herrero-Beaumont, 2019; Mauri-Ríos *et al.*, 2022; Christofoletti, 2022). Most of these proposals concurred in including transparency mechanisms related to four categories: corporate and financial transparency, transparency in content production, openness to public participation, and a media outlet’s self-regulation. Therefore, this research made an updated selection of variables corresponding to each of these four areas.

In addition, these indicators were supplemented by mechanisms registered in the legislative media regulation of Spain (*General Law 7/2010 of Audio-visual Communication*) and Portugal, referring to transparency in media ownership (*Regulation No. 835/2020, Circular No. 5988/2020 of April 9, 2020, Law No. 78/2015 of July 29, and Regulation No. 348/2016*).

Also, indicators collected from invaluable professional experience in the Spanish-Portuguese landscape were included, such as the *Transparency Map* from the newspaper *Público* (Alonso-López; Terlo-Bolinches, 2021) or the regulations of the *International Fact Checking Network (IFCN)*, which governs the news verification agencies in Spain and Portugal and defines transparency as one of the major key points within its working method (Lotero-Echeverri *et al.*, 2018).

With these baselines, the sample was coded, analyzing the presence or absence of the indicators presented in Table 2. The inclusion of these professional and legislative indicators is considered to represent a revision of the previously proposed media transparency indices, allowing them to be updated to the current context of media crisis and disinformation.

Coding was performed by two coders during May 2022, and a joint review was performed during June to ensure reliability.

As seen in Table 2, for some of the items, an intermediate score was attributed depending on whether the information was presented in full or in part or whether the mechanisms were available to the entire public or only to subscribers of the media, since it was believed that access to information was not equal in all cases. In total, a maximum score of 32 points could be achieved in the transparency indices.

6. Results

The results obtained show that, overall, the media analyzed did not meet the transparency indicators applied to them, with a total score of less than 44.06% compliance. Although it is true that four of them had at least 50% of the indicators, only one surpassed the 65% mark, so the degree of transparency, even of those that exceeded the average score, was still far below an ideal level of openness to the public.

Table 2: Transparency variables analyzed

Variable type	Coding applied
Corporate and financial transparency:	
Corporate information	(0 no; 1 yes)
Identification of the legal form of the media outlet	(0 no; 1 yes)
Publication of holders and beneficiaries of the media outlet’s capital	(0 no; 1 yes)
Identification of editorial managers	(0 no; 1 yes)
Publication of financing sources	(0 no; 1 partial; 2 yes)
Organizational structure of the media outlet	(0 no; 1 yes)
Personal biographies of the main editorial managers	(0 no; 1 yes)
Openness to public participation	
Simple contact	(0 no; 1 yes)
Comments	(0 no; 1 subscribers only; 2 yes)
Evaluation of content	(0 no; 1 subscribers only; 2 yes)
Correction of news	(0 no; 1 subscribers only; 2 yes)
Delivery of content	(0 no; 1 subscribers only; 2 yes)
Social networks	(0 no; 1 yes)
Other	(0 no; 1 yes)
Transparency in content production	
News source	(0 no; 1 yes)
Support documents	(0 no; 1 yes)
Context	(0 no; 1 yes)
Place where a piece was written	(0 no; 1 yes)
Date of publication	(0 no; 1 yes)
Content corrections or modifications	(0 no; 1 yes)
Editorial line	(0 no; 1 yes)
Other	(0 no; 1 yes)
Self-regulation mechanisms	
Reader or audience advocate	(0 no; 1 yes)
Style guide	(0 no; 1 yes)
Journalists’ blogs	(0 no; 1 yes)
Other	(0 no; 1 yes)

Source: Authors’ own creation based on the cited literature



Figure 1. Financial section of RTVE's transparency portal.

Source: <https://www.rtve.es>

In regard to the types of indicators, the media outlets' corporate and financial transparency was the category in which the second most variables were observed (55%), only below the category of transparency in content production. The publication of information regarding the legal form of the media outlet was the only variable observed for all the media outlets analyzed. This was followed by the variable for the publication of the media outlet's structure, which was public for all the websites analyzed except those of the Spanish media outlets *Antena 3* and *Cadena Ser*, and then the variable regarding publication of the media outlet's editorial managers, which was absent only in *El País*, *Antena 3*, and *Cadena Ser*.

It is worth noting that only four of the ten media outlets analyzed had a corporate information page, which provides data "About us" or about the history of the media outlet. *El Español* and *RTVE* in Spain and *Público* and *RTP* in Portugal were the only two media outlets in each country to disclose this information.

In addition, not all of the media outlets have accountability mechanisms related to their sources of financing. Considerable inconsistencies were observed, with media outlets that did not publish any data at all regarding their financing (*El País*, *Antena 3*, *Cadena Ser*, *El Español*, *TFS*, and *Observador*); others that shared their accounts but only partially (only the main advertisers), such as *Público* or *SIC*; and others that did so in a comprehensive and detailed manner. *RTVE* (Figure 1) and *RTP*, the two publicly owned media outlets analyzed in Spain and Portugal, respectively, fall into the third group. Both media outlets had specific transparency portals on which they not only shared detailed and complete information about their financing but also included public procurement data and related announcements, corporate information, budgets, and suppliers.

Finally, the publication of the biographies of the editorial team was the corporate and financial transparency variable observed the least. Only *RTVE* in Spain and *Público* and *RTP* in Portugal make the biographical data of the main members of the editorial team public, which may help the public understand their role at the media outlet or identify possible conflicts of interest.

As mentioned above, transparency in content production was the category observed most in the analyzed media (56.25%), although there was great deal of inconsistency with respect to the variables analyzed in this category. Some, such as transparency in news sources, the inclusion of supporting documents, or the date of publication of the news item, were present in all media outlets. Context, such as links to other related content or documents, through which additional information related to a news item could be sought, was also observed in all the media outlets except *RTP*, whose news items, published mainly in audiovisual format, included hardly any textual information in which links to other related content or documents could be provided.

However, the rest of the variables analyzed in this category were absent in all or most of the media outlets analyzed. For example, only two media outlets, *El País* and *Cadena SER*, which belong to the same publishing group, disclosed on their websites the place where the news item was written.

In regard to corrections, *Público* was the only media outlet that offered mechanisms to show the reader what modifications had been made to some content since its publication. Some media outlets, such as *RTVE*, did show a date of revision on the news item, but since no further information was included, it was decided that this information did not provide sufficient



Figure 2. Corrections policy of *Observador*.

Source: <https://www.observador.pt>

data regarding the possible content changes that could have been made to the news item. It was also observed that none of the media outlets specified the editorial line regarding the publication of their content.

When analyzing other mechanisms related to transparency in content production, three media outlets offered resources that were not covered in the previous variables.

Whenever the newspaper *Público* publishes news concerning the *Sonae* (*Sociedade Nacional de Estratificados*) group, in the content it mentions the fact that the company owns *Público*, thus showing corporate transparency within the editorial content itself.

El País has a section called Erratum [*"Fe de Errores"*], in which it publishes content errors related to false or inaccurate information, misspelled names, erroneous figures, or incorrect graphical information, such as captions with incorrect data. In addition, in news stories related to Covid-19 produced during the pandemic, this same media outlet occasionally included references to the methodology used to create the content, especially that which related to data.

Finally, *Observador* has a specific Error Correction Policy [*Política de Correção de Errores*] section (Figure 2), which describes its rules regarding data correction, the clarification of information, updates, or the deletion of content. It also reports corrections and updates through its social networks, and it includes a contact so that readers can send their own news corrections to the media outlet.

The section of content analysis relating to the media outlets' openness to the public was one of the least complied with (35.54%); moreover, depending on the variable, this compliance was very inconsistent, with some having very high compliance and others very low. Thus, all the media outlets analyzed made it easy for users to contact them and also had social networks available.

However, there was not the same level of uniformity when it came to other aspects of user participation. Five media outlets did allow comments (*El País*, *Cadena SER*, *El Español*, *Público*, *TFS*, and *Observador*), and it was observed that *Público* had different levels of comments according to participation and the rules they offer through their website. On the other hand, only the Portuguese radio station *TFS* offered this option to all users, whereas the rest only permitted subscribers (*El País* and *El Español*) or registered users (*Cadena SER*, *Público*, and *Observador*) to comment. With respect to the evaluation of content, none of the media outlets provided the option.

This content analysis also measured potential contributions from the users to the media outlets, in terms of both possible corrections and the sending of various content. Both issues were of little interest to the media outlets, and only two Portuguese media outlets offered any error correction mechanism. The first, *Público*, offers users the option to "Suggest an edit" [*"Sugerir correção"*] (Figure 3) at the end of each news item, which sometimes leads to changes that indicate the time of revision and, sometimes, the content modified. The second, *Observador*, included in each news item a contact to whom corrections or "a hint" [*"Proporha uma correção, sugira uma pista"*] could be sent, which was considered a sufficient way for users to send both error corrections and various content that could be of interest to the media outlet.

Some media outlets have gone beyond legislative norms and traditional resources for the self-regulation of transparency to implement their own mechanisms aimed at enhancing their accountability



Figure 3. *Público*'s option to suggest edits to content.

Source: <https://www.publico.pt>

The analyzed media also had other tools for participation that were considered of interest to this research. The newspapers *El País* and *Público* has a letter to the editor service, to which users can send letters of different kinds that, after being reviewed, may be published in the newspaper.

RTVE stands out with its *The Great Consultation* [*La gran consulta*] tool, a campaign to find out the opinion of the Spanish public regarding public radio and television. First, a team traveled throughout Spain to gather the evaluation of the public. Second, there were several sections of the website (Figure 4) with surveys on content covering different topics, such as sports, music, or equality.

In turn, *El Español* has a blog section open to subscribers, as well as a space for participation which has various debates on current affairs that users can comment on. For example, on May 23, 2022, *El Español* opened a debate on whether the King Emeritus should explain himself as requested by the Spanish Government during his visit to Spain:

https://www.elespanol.com/participacion/20220523/debate-cree-rey-emerito-deberia-explicaciones-gobierno/674682604_0.html

The Portuguese newspaper *Público* had an instant messaging section called "Chat with *Público*" ["*Conversar com Público*"]. *Observador* also had an interesting chat function. In addition, the latter has "Community Standards" ["*Normas comunitárias*"] in which respect, civility, and the media outlet's specific rules of participation were mentioned, which they considered necessary for it to be a "transparent" ["*transparente*"] space.

The last section of the content analysis was self-regulation, in which compliance was the lowest (35%). In this regard, only four media outlets (*El País*, RTVE, *Público*, and RTP), two of which are public, had a reader or audience ombudsman system.



Figure 4. Surveys from RTVE's *The Great Consultation*.

Source: <https://www.rtve.es>

RTP had one for the viewer and one for the listener.

Only two long-established Spanish media outlets, *RTVE* and *El País*, and the Portuguese media outlet *Público* made a style guide available to the public. Likewise, only *El País* had a section just for talking about the media outlet itself, called *El País, that we do* [*El País que hacemos*].

In regard to other aspects related to self-regulation, *El País* has a code of ethics, *RTVE* has a self-regulation code, and the Portuguese media outlets *Público*, *RTP*, *SIC*, and *Observador* published an editorial statute, which is mandatory under Portuguese law. In the case of *TSF*, this page exists (<https://www.tsf.pt/estatuto-editorial.html>), but it has no content.

It is worth mentioning the Portuguese public media company *RTP*, which also made several regulatory documents available, such as a corruption risk prevention plan, a code of ethics, a sustainability report, a gender equality report, and bylaws, among others.

In short, only two of the four categories analyzed in the variables meet the mark when it comes to their compliance (corporate and financial transparency and transparency in content production), and this with percentages of compliance very close to half. Both openness to the public and self-regulation are below 50%, with very similar percentages.

Regarding the individual compliance of the different media outlets, only four of the ten media outlets analyzed exceeded 50% compliance with the variables (*RTVE* and *El País* in Spain and *Público* and *Observador* in Portugal). In addition, only *Público* exceeded 60% (with 65.63% compliance), making it the media outlet with the highest score, followed by the publicly owned Spanish media outlet *RTVE* (56.3%). *Antena 3* is the media outlet with the lowest percentage (21.9%).

7. Conclusions and discussion

This research, whose objective was to evaluate media transparency in the Spanish-Portuguese landscape through an index that included variables applied at the legislative, academic, and professional levels, has allowed us to determine that transparency is still a work in progress for journalism and the media.

Regarding O1, which analyzed media transparency initiatives in Spain and Portugal, it was found that the latter country stands out for having more legislation that addresses the regulation of media activity with respect to transparency, especially financial and legislative transparency, compared with Spain, where there is hardly any legislative regulation in this regard. However, at the academic level, the Spanish system has developed a greater number of studies proposing indices to measure the level of media transparency than has the Portuguese, which is more focused on studying the regulation of the sector in general.

Studying the transparency initiatives allowed us to achieve O2 of the research –to create a new index that included new professional and legislative variables– thus performing a revision of other indices proposed at the academic level (Bardoel; D’Haenens, 2004; Groenhart; Bardoel, 2012; López-Cepeda; Manfredi, 2013; Campos-Domínguez; Redondo-García, 2015; Martín-Cavanna; Herrero-Beaumont, 2019; Mauri-Ríos *et al.*, 2022), which did not consider these types of variables.

With respect to O3, which was aimed at applying the proposed index in an exploratory analysis of Spanish and Portuguese media outlets, in general, no significant differences were detected between Spanish and Portuguese media outlets, despite the fact that Portugal has broader legislation regarding media transparency and accountability and that, in Spain, the current model of legislation is insufficient (López-Cepeda; Manfredi, 2013). However, it is true that, in the case of corporate and financial transparency, to which the Portuguese legislation makes most reference, the Portuguese media outlets score slightly higher than the Spanish ones.

Overall, no notable differences between the different types of media outlets (the press, radio, television, and digital) were observed. However, it could be concluded that corporate and financial transparency was slightly higher for publicly owned media, in both Spain and

Table 3. Percentage of compliance for the analyzed variables

Type of indicators	Percentage of compliance
Content production	56.25%
Corporate and financial transparency	55.00%
Public openness	35.54%
Self-regulation	35.00%
Total average	44.06%

Table 4: Percentage of compliance by media outlet

Media outlet	Country	Percentage of total compliance
<i>Público</i>	Portugal	65,63%
<i>RTVE</i>	España	56,30%
<i>Observador</i>	Portugal	56,30%
<i>El País</i>	España	50,00%
<i>RTP</i>	Portugal	46,90%
<i>SIC</i>	Portugal	40,60%
<i>El Español</i>	España	37,50%
<i>TFS</i>	Portugal	37,50%
<i>Cadena SER</i>	España	28,10%
<i>Antena 3</i>	España	21,90%

“The degree of transparency, even of those that exceeded the average score, was still far below an ideal level of openness to the public”

Portugal, than the rest of the media –something that was predicted in the study by **Campos-Domínguez** and **Redondo-García** (2015) and that of **López-Cepeda** and **Manfredi** (2013); this shows that the trend continues to be the same. These public media had their own transparency portals and mechanisms that were much more comprehensive, in addition to other types of regulatory documents that the rest of the media analyzed did not have. This serves to reinforce H1, in which it was stated that the media outlets, especially privately owned ones, do not tend to apply transparency mechanisms unless there is a regulation that requires them to do so.

It is worth noting that only four of the ten media outlets analyzed had a corporate information page

Corporate and financial transparency was the category that had the highest percentage of compliance, whereas self-regulation was the opposite, despite the fact that these mechanisms are more traditional and mentioned the most in academic studies on accountability for journalists and the fact that they are very widespread in professional associations, especially in the Spanish landscape (**Rodríguez-Martínez et al.**, 2022).

In addition, H2 stated that media outlets, in general, only share basic resources when it comes to transparency. This was confirmed by the fact that the more complex indicators (such as publishing the team's biography; showing corrections to the news; disclosing the place where a piece was written; allowing the evaluation, correction, or submission of content; or the use of other resources not included in the index) were observed in hardly any of the media outlets. The Portuguese media outlet *Público* turned out to be the most comprehensive and came closest to the ideal model of transparency.

This study is presented as an exploratory study of the Spanish-Portuguese landscape, which provides transversal mechanisms (legislative, professional, and academic) to measure media transparency, but it also presents challenges and lines of research to be studied.

It should be noted that, among the limitations of this study, there is the possibility that some mechanisms were not recorded because they were not identified by the coders. However, we believe that, if the mechanism is so well hidden that it could not be located through an in-depth analysis of the website and search engine crawling, it is not sufficiently accessible to be considered an optimal transparency tool.

Among the challenges ahead, it is worth highlighting the extension of the study to more media outlets, as well as the application of the research to other media landscapes that may be more advanced in terms of media transparency. In addition, we recommend a revision of the transparency index by weighting the different variables, studying which are more important in the context of the media crisis and the disinformation we are experiencing. It would also be interesting to evaluate the effectiveness of external regulations, such as legislative regulations or those of other agencies, in making media outlets more transparent, since, even beyond this study, it has been found that self-regulatory mechanisms are the least used. A deeper dive into the relationship between media ownership and media transparency would also be of interest. In this study, we have been able to determine that public media outlets are more open, especially when it comes to corporate and financial transparency, and it would be interesting to extend the study by making a comparison with other countries. Finally, it would be relevant to study the public's use of these transparency mechanisms to verify whether their application has an impact on aspects such as increasing public confidence in the media or fighting disinformation.

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