



Media Control and Emancipation: The Public Sphere in Post-15M Spain

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On July 18, 2015, the Spanish online news site *InfoLibre* revealed an unusual scandal. In April 2012, the regional government of Madrid had signed a \$157,000 contract with a media company to improve the public image of its then president Esperanza Aguirre, a conservative icon who has herself drawn comparisons with the Tea Party in the United States (Calleja, “La Púnica”; Güemes). *InfoLibre* showed that the media company had hired a team of journalists and interns to boost Aguirre’s image. They had set up 60 “zombie” news sites whose sole purpose was to push negative news about Aguirre and other clients to the bottom of

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the Google rankings (Calleja, “Así funcionaba”). The contract would have gone unnoticed had it not been for the fact that it was financed through one of the largest political corruption rings in recent years, involving dozens of elected officials. Ironically, this story about media manipulation by the Partido Popular (PP) broke right when the newly elected progressive government of the city of Madrid was being attacked by that same party over a media initiative. The PP was up in arms over a website, “Madrid Undubbed” (“Madrid Versión Original”), set up by the city to correct the barrage of misinformation from Right-wing media seeking to undermine the new Leftist mayor, Manuela Carmena. Again, it was Esperanza Aguirre—to whom Carmena had handed an embarrassing defeat in the mayoral race that May—who led the media campaign. She loudly accused Carmena of censorship and ‘totalitarian tics,’ referring to the city’s website as ‘*Pravda 2.0*’ (S.L., “Aguirre”).

In fact, Aguirre’s accusation of tyranny more accurately describes the Citizen Security Law, known colloquially in Spain as the *ley mordaza* (“gag law”), which her party pushed through the Spanish parliament without a single vote from any other party. The law, which took effect on July 1, 2015, significantly limits citizens’ right to protest—in person or in writing, in print or online—and effectively makes illegal all media coverage of protests, subjecting publishers to potential fines of tens of thousands of euros (Herman). ‘What makes the *ley mordaza* so shameful is the fact that it especially targets the ability of small media to do front-line reporting,’ the journalist Jacobo Rivero told us. ‘Because they have fewer resources than the traditional media, they are left extremely vulnerable.’ According to the lawyer Gonzalo Boyé, ‘Never has there been such a regression, in such a short time, in matters of civic liberty.’ The following year, in April 2016, the PP, the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) and Ciudadanos voted in favor of a law in the European Parliament that would effectively export that law to the rest of Europe (Mier). Known as the Trade Secrets Law, the bill makes revelations by journalists and whistleblowers, such as the Panama Papers, illegal (RT, “EU Trade”).

InfoLibre, the site that broke the Aguirre story, is one of a growing number of new, independent progressive media outlets in Spain. Over the past five or six years, these outlets have carved out a space for themselves in a public sphere long monopolized by large media conglomerates such as PRISA, which owns *El País*, Spain’s most-read daily and widely considered the country’s paper of record. Their ambitious goal is to build a critical,

rigorous and financially viable Leftist press to serve Spain's newly politicized citizenry, whose loss of confidence in what has in effect been a two-party system has given rise to new political parties such as Ciudadanos, Podemos and broad local and regional platforms associated with the latter.

The Aguirre episode makes clear what the new independent media faces: stiff resistance from the Right, competition from the conglomerates, a political class long used to holding the media's leash and a codependent journalistic culture that hasn't always taken its adversarial job—or its readership—too seriously. That readership, for its part, has returned the favor: according to a recent Reuters Digital News Report, the credibility of the Spanish media is the lowest in Europe and the second lowest in the world (Newman, Levy & Nielsen). Political parties in power subsidize privately owned media directly or indirectly in exchange for political support. 'The political clientelism of some of the private media,' José Sanclemente wrote in *eldiario.es*, another one of the new media outlets, 'is proportional to the amount of financial support injected into them from the public coffers.' 'There are clear grounds to suspect that the national and regional governments play favorites when it comes to advertising contracts, licensing, and subsidies,' added David Cabo from Civio, a non-profit pushing for transparency and open access to public data. Journalist Trinidad Deiros agreed. 'In Spain, journalism has traditionally been a very polarized profession, under the thumb of the powers that be,' she told us in 2015:

The most extreme manifestation of this deplorable situation is the shameful political manipulation of the state-run media. Agencies like EFE or TVE, which should be a neutral public service, have almost always been turned into mouthpieces of the governing party. This has been particularly scandalous under the Partido Popular, but it also happened when the Socialist Party was in power. The Anglo-American conception of journalism, which in the UK, for example, would make it impossible to think of the BBC as an instrument of the government, is alien to Spanish political culture. This point of view has prevailed among media owners with too many spurious connections to the political and economic establishment. In the end, the Spanish media bear a great similarity to the system in which they have flourished since the death of dictator Franco: a democracy with a whiff of authoritarianism, in which citizen participation has been reduced to a bare minimum. Politics and journalism in Spain have been two elitist, unassailable, interconnected towers, while regular Spanish citizens have been a bump on a log. (*convidados de piedra*)

Although Spain boasts more than 80 newspapers and a broad range of television and radio channels, the bulk of these media is controlled by large, transnational corporate conglomerates. The PRISA group includes the newspaper *El País* alongside a slew of magazines, TV and radio networks and production companies (and until 2014 a trans-Atlantic publishing giant, Alfaguara). The second largest group, Vocento, controls the national, Right-wing (royalist and Catholic) newspaper *ABC* plus an additional 13 smaller papers. Planeta is the largest Spanish-language publishing company in the world, but it also deals in television and controls *La Razón*, a relatively small newspaper that owes its high profile to its position on the Far-Right of the political spectrum. Most of these media groups are in turn controlled by transnational corporations and a handful of powerful financial institutions (Gutiérrez).

Since the economic crisis of 2008–2010, which also affected the already deeply indebted conglomerates, this control has manifested itself in increasingly obvious ways. ‘The banks have converted the media’s debt into company shares,’ said veteran journalist Guillem Martínez, who until some years ago wrote for *El País* in Catalonia. ‘They have become the owners and exercise their role in 19th-century style.’ On January 8, 2015, Martínez recalls, Banco Santander suspended trading on the American stock market. ‘That news was simply not reported in the Spanish press,’ he said. ‘Similarly,’ he continued, ‘the big advertisers have always kept a close eye on the media’s reporting. For example, the warehouse chain El Corte Inglés, a major Spanish advertiser, forbids its workers to unionize. A minor detail that has never been reported in a paper.’

‘I have worked for outlets where I’ve been told not to mention anything bad about a certain company or about such and such politician,’ Mar Cabra, who now works from Madrid for the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), which was instrumental in the Panama Papers revelations in April 2016, told us. ‘It was seen as normal. Some companies or some political parties were just taboo because of the outlet’s affinity with them or because they were a big advertiser.’ The increasingly obvious dependence of the mainstream media on corporate and political power has steadily eroded their prestige and credibility among the reading public. ‘If the owners would do a study of their brands, they’d realize how much value they have lost,’ said Boyé, the lawyer, who is also a cofounder of the wildly popular satirical magazine *Mongolia*. ‘Those media are less and less influential and credible, to the point of being hilarious.’ The journalist Berta del Río noted that this, too, was a direct consequence of the

15M: ‘One of the movement’s aspirations was to empower the people and, above all, to have them question the world around them, beginning with the media. Since then, the fact that something was “published” has lost the halo of truthfulness it once had.’

In short, the new initiatives that are attempting to carve out an independent, critical space in this commercialized and politicized landscape have their work cut out for them. In part because they include groups of veteran journalists, they are anything but naïve. In fact, they have themselves taken on a leading role in denouncing less-than-savory journalistic practices and exposing the network of political and economic interests that curb journalistic freedom in Spain. Yet they face important challenges of a practical, financial, legal and cultural kind.

Of the new independent media outlets that have emerged in recent years, *eldiario.es* is no doubt the most successful. It is the brainchild of Ignacio Escolar, who in 2007 was the founding director of *Público*, a print daily that quickly managed to carve out a space to the left of *El País* (Blitzer). *Público* distinguished itself from the latter by daring to break longstanding taboos, including that on critical coverage of the Monarchy. The paper also voiced strong opposition to the 2011 constitutional amendment that privileged paying down the national debt over social spending (López). But *Público* was funded by a corporate owner, the Catalan media magnate Jaume Roures, who in January 2012 decided to shut down its print edition, leaving most of the reporting and editorial staff jobless. (*Público* continues to exist today as a slimmed-down online news site.) Many of the laid-off reporters and editors turned their disillusion and frustration into action and went on to organize startup venues with a renewed commitment to high journalistic standards and, especially, to total and rigorous independence from political and commercial interests.

These new venues operate according to several different models. *InfoLibre* focuses on investigative reporting—often publishing less than half a dozen new stories per day—and opinion. Run by former *Público* editors Manuel Rico and Jesús Maraña, *InfoLibre* has associated itself with Mediapart, a French online outlet for investigative journalism, and, like its French partner, it subsists on subscription fees. ‘We defend the idea that information has a value,’ Rico told us in 2015. ‘And that means one of two things: or the readers pay, or the large corporations do.’ The second option is off the table, Rico said: ‘We strictly reject hidden advertising agreements with large corporations.’

Eldiario.es, by contrast, is more ambitious and sprawling, with a tightly organized newsroom, a broad stable of bloggers and several regional branches. Its highly effective business model relies on both advertising and a membership subscription scheme that is not quite a paywall. The paper's 20,000 members pay five euros per month, in exchange for which they receive early access to the morning edition. (Showing its commitment to transparency, the paper shares a yearly summary of its accounts.) The editors of both *InfoLibre* and *eldiario.es* help raise their papers' public profile through frequent appearances on political talk shows.

Contexto is an online weekly without a paywall that combines long-form reporting with interviews and opinion pieces. The goal of its 14 founding editors—many of them experienced journalists fed up with the mainstream media—is to return to the fundamentals of independent journalism. 'We don't do breaking news, nor do we run rehashed pieces from the agencies,' its editor, Miguel Mora, told us. 'We don't compete to be the first, and we don't mix texts with videos and entertainment. Our focus is minimalist. We intend to respect the basic tenets of classical journalism: we only publish our own stories, written where the news happens.'

Representing yet another model is *La Marea* ("The Tide"), a smaller outfit that combines a freely accessible daily online site with a monthly paper edition that sells for 4.50 euros (or 4 euros in digital format). Initially set up as a reporter-owned, assembly-based cooperative with over a 100 co-owners, *La Marea's* editors took the principled—and expensive—decision to reject politically objectionable advertising. The paper subsists primarily on readers' subscription fees. The paper works with a minimal salaried staff and relies primarily on freelance contributors.

With the exception of *eldiario.es*, few of the new independent venues have, as yet, managed to achieve financial sustainability. Founding editors have sunk their own savings into the projects to pay for an editorial space and web design costs. Moreover, tight budgets mean that the new media pay very little, or nothing at all, to their writers. 'We have 300 contributors and 400,000 readers per month,' Miguel Mora, the director of *Contexto*, explained to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in April 2016, 'yet we only lost 80,000 euros in 2015' (Schoepp). The paper was founded in early 2015; in its first couple of years, it relied on crowdfunding. 'During the first year we all worked for free,' Mora said, 'but we are happy.' 'The great majority of the media survive thanks to the fact that they rely on interns, freelancers and 800-euro per month contracts without a stipulated number of hours,' the journalist Berta del Río said. 'At the traditional papers,

the gap between those who make the most and those who make the least is outrageous.’ ‘Unlike many other new papers, we do pay our contributors,’ Magda Bandera, editor of *La Marea*, told us in 2016. ‘But it is no coincidence that our budget deficit in 2015, a little over 60,000 euros, is equal to what we spent on honoraria.’

The habits and structures these new outlets are seeking to change are embedded in—and sustained by—cultures that don’t change overnight. For one, the Spanish public is not used to, and not often willing to, pay for its news. ‘It’s our biggest challenge,’ *InfoLibre* founder Manuel Rico told us. ‘Spain lacks a culture in which readers are used to pay for information. Mediapart has more than 100,000 subscribers. In France, the culture is different.’ A more challenging problem is posed by practices and perceptions, among both readers and editors, that associate particular media with partisan interests. ‘At *La Marea* that is not the case,’ Bandera said. ‘But we have been accused of being on Podemos’s side one day, and on the opposite side the next; or that we were partisans of the United Left; or that it was suspicious that the Socialist Youth (of the PSOE) gave us a prize last year for being the social actor who most strongly opposed gender violence,’ she continued.

‘True,’ Bandera added,

our editorial line coincides with the position of the main parties on the left. But we are not connected to any specific party. The sheer political diversity of our co-owners prevents that. I think something similar is occurring with the new digital media. Since the two-party system lost its dominance, the editorial lines also seemed to have become more pluralistic, among both progressive and conservative media. The traditional media, however, are having a harder time opening themselves up. Some continue to operate according to the model in which they give unconditional support to a specific party (a specific governing party, that is). This is especially true for media that depend in large part on institutional advertising.

For veteran journalist Alfonso Armada, who has worked for *El País* and *ABC* and has founded the independent weekly *FronteraD*, the Spanish media have themselves contributed to their readers’ loss of confidence. ‘Facts are skewed to fit every outlet’s own ideological prejudices,’ he told us in 2015. ‘Everything that affects those who are like-minded is minimized, while they magnify what hurts the political “enemy.”’ The media have helped spread the idea that there are no hard facts, just partial visions of reality. As a result, what has taken root is the fable that, just like politicians, all the media lie, or they only tell an interest part of the truth. The consequence of

all of this, in my view, is an increasingly cynical society, which mistrusts all institutions and believes they are only used by political parties to hold on to power. And the media have tolerated this state of affairs, using it to their own benefit.⁷

A third problem is the close personal and professional relationships between reporters, editors, newspapers owners and politicians. It has created a culture of mutual favors, Berta del Río explained:

In my experience, power makes people blind, and journalism makes it easy to pretend to have power. Politicians and journalists need each other, but one party actually holds power, while the other only thinks it does. A journalist can never be friends with a politician. Yet they are or pretend to be. The invisible relationships that shape information in this country are shameful. They are antithetical to journalism and to democracy. But they have become completely naturalized and accepted by those who are part of the game. Both politics and journalism are professions moved largely by egos.

Trinidad Deiros, who worked for *Público* and *La Marea* and covers Africa for several outlets, agreed:

The problem is too deeply rooted in our customs to change from one day to the next. Ours is a political culture obsessed with controlling information. This is a legacy of a very opaque Transition to democracy that did not break with the dictatorship and therefore inherited some of its vices. Almost all of us—journalists, politicians, militants from left and right, citizens in general—have grown up in this context. And it has only begun to change very recently. It'll take years before we lose that terrible fear of free and truthful information.

'I believe that some journalists and some politicians are confused about the role each is supposed to play,' *InfoLibre's* Manuel Rico told us. But, he added, 'the relation between the media and the state would be easy to change.' All that is needed, he continued, is for 'each public institution to inform the public through the internet how exactly they spend each euro that goes to the media, and according to what criteria those monies are distributed. Will any of them do it? I hope so but I'm skeptical. The more dangerous relationship for freedom of expression is the one between media and corporations. There, too, a big step forward would be for the media to explain the origin of their income. But in that respect I am skeptical too.'

Deiros shares Rico's skepticism. Journalists will have to rethink seriously the way they operate, she said. 'A lot of work remains to be done, for example, with regard to the press's traditional machismo. And journalists

will have to accustom the politicians to a tougher treatment,’ Deiros said. ‘We journalists have been too docile.’ ‘Accountability is a word that doesn’t exist in Spanish dictionary,’ the ICIJ’s Mar Cabra added. ‘We have four words to define that concept. This fact speaks for itself: Spanish politicians are not used to being held accountable—and Spaniards are not used to holding their politicians to account.’ But Cabra is hopeful, too. ‘The situation has been changing since the 15M and some people have turned that initial anger into real transformation of Spanish society. I am seeing change in the way politicians speak, in how much they disclose to the public and in their relationship with the media,’ she said. ‘And that has mostly to do with the people’s and the media’s pressure.’

Bandera, the editor of *La Marea*, noted that ‘Some of the new media are run by “older” journalists whose push for a renovation is not always real. Some of their executives don’t really understand digital media and new audiences. The only thing that’s really changed are the sources of financing, but even then they continue to seek out conventional advertising, and reaching the same agreements with large corporations as the traditional media.’ She pointed to entrenched ideas in the public conception of the medium as a barrier to some of Spain’s newer journalistic outlets: ‘The internet culture of “everything must be free” drives many of them, just to survive, to sponsored content. This is very dangerous, because the new formats make it harder to see these items for what they are: advertorials.’

But these new outlets have also sometimes erected their own barriers. ‘Where change is also slower than we would like is in the make-up of the newsrooms, which continue to be undemocratic and where the leadership is picked by the shareholders, most of whom are male,’ Bandera said. She also pointed to the relative conservatism of the news content itself. ‘With some exceptions, the new media’s homepages still look like the front pages of the traditional media. In Spain, too much attention is given to the back-and-forth among politicians. And few media set their own agenda. We also have an excess of opinion and reporting based on leaks. There are barely any investigations started at an outlet’s own initiative.’

Although new political parties such as Podemos have called for media independence, Bandera doubts they are ready to accept the consequences. ‘Some parties have been subject to real harassment from the media, and they haven’t always been able to handle that well,’ she explained. ‘They have looked for protection against it from “like-minded” outlets. But by doing that they have tended to reproduce the behavior of the traditional parties, “rewarding” and “punishing” specific outlets according to their

level of criticism of the party. They often use the term “friendly fire,” and they have a hard time understanding that, as the media, it is our mission to be vigilant of anyone who holds a position of power or who aspires to holding one.’

Guillem Martínez, the Catalonia-based journalist, also sees a deeper-seated cultural problem. ‘The Regime of 1978 cannot cohabitate with independent media. In other cultures, big scandals like the ones Spain has seen would have meant the end of the Monarchy, the PP, the PSOE or Convergència, from Catalonia. They would have sparked a political earthquake that has not happened here, nor in the media,’ he said. ‘The media, in other words, forms an important part of the regime, or the system, or whatever you want to call it. And whether it is due to culture, or to local dynamics, I don’t always see the left really wishing for a different type of culture, or a different type of media. Rather, they would like their own direct, vertical access to them, just like everyone else.’ Martínez wants to see the Spanish media embrace a much more critical approach to those in power: ‘I strongly believe that Spain needs one or several media, print media, that swim against the tide of the local culture. But it is not very likely.’

RADIO AND TELEVISION

The tight economic and political control handicapping the written media is even more present in the audiovisual arena. Spain’s state-owned television channels operate at the nation-wide level (Televisión Española) while regional autonomous communities, such as Catalonia, Galicia and Basque Country, have channels that broadcast in their respective languages. Additionally, there exist commercial, conglomerate-owned channels, which command about 80% of the market. It is widely known that the governments exploit the television channels they control to their own benefit, resulting in highly skewed news reporting.

During and following 15M Movement, in the summer of 2011, state-owned television channels largely ignored or belittled citizens’ movements calling for political change. ‘The 15-M perhaps best shows how the media, for years, had had its back turned to a society that was sick and tired, and that demanded its own voice in a political system that had been closed-off to them, with the complicity of the media,’ Trinidad Deiros said. The commercial channels, however, took a surprisingly different approach. A calculated risk led them to feature new faces on their political debate shows

or *tertulias*, including that of a young, unknown adjunct professor of political science named Pablo Iglesias. Once they realized these new faces boosted their ratings, a snowball effect ensued. This helped prepare the ground for the launch and rise of Podemos.

Commercial stations have also provided a platform for investigative journalism. Airing on La Sexta, a network with a marked progressive profile owned by the otherwise conservative conglomerate Atresmedia, *Salvados* (“Saved”) is an intelligent documentary news program hosted by the journalist Jordi Évole. Each week, the feature film-quality show features topics ranging from the Greek political crisis to Spain’s national debt, and even an exposé of sexual abuse in the military. La Sexta is also home to Spain’s version of *The Daily Show*, *El Intermedio*, which combines satirical news coverage with serious interviews and averages 2.3 million viewers per day (“El Intermedio”).

While making room for these progressive shows, commercial channels are nevertheless also subject to political pressure. In the winter of 2015, Jesús Cintora’s morning debate program—on a network owned by Silvio Berlusconi’s conglomerate Mediaset—frequently featured Iglesias and called out the PP’s corruption. Two months before the local and regional elections on May 24, in March, Cintora was suddenly and unexpectedly sacked. Responding to the PP’s massive losses as a result of the elections, Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy remarked: ‘We’ve been hurt by corruption cases and by being constantly hammered on those cases, especially on television’ (Segovia). ‘I had less problems before Podemos appeared on the scene,’ Cintora later said in an interview (“Jesús Cintora”).

If the written media has witnessed a flourishing of startups, the same is true for television and radio. *Contratiempo*, a weekly radio show run by a historians’ collective, arose from ‘the need to address the past from a space outside of the academy,’ said Noelia Adánez, a founding member. Adánez also collaborates on *La Tuerka* and *Fort Apache*, two of a number of online television shows that attracts sizable audiences. Significantly, *La Tuerka* and *Fort Apache* were the brainchild of the group of academics and activists who would later go on to found Podemos. As Pablo Iglesias wrote in the *New Left Review*, they saw these programs as ‘the “parties” through which we would wage our political struggle on the most fundamental terrain of ideological production [in Spain]: television’ (Iglesias). One of the shows, *La Tuerka*, which is featured on the website of *Público*, includes in-depth interviews conducted by Pablo Iglesias and extensive political panel discussions.

Political debates on Spain's commercial channels, not unlike some of their US counterparts, often turn into a kind of superficial theater, with participants adopting predictable positions that end in shouting matches. The appeal of *La Tuerka* and other newer online shows, by contrast, is their emphasis on a sustained, intellectually oriented dialogue that is impatient with sound bites and either-or opinions. 'What these new media have done is almost miraculous,' said Adánez, who as a *tertuliana* ("debater") frequently finds herself adopting positions critical of Podemos. 'They haven't just kept their audience informed, they've accompanied it through a moment in which Spanish "history" itself has broken down,' she said. 'From a very clear and consistent political position, *La Tuerka* and *Fort Apache* have worked hard to offer explanations of what was going on, while pushing their audience to mobilize.' Their efforts have caught the mainstream media's eye: in 2015, Adánez landed a position as a commentator on a national radio show on Onda Cero, perhaps the third most important radio station in Spain behind the Cadena SER and COPE.

INTELLECTUAL DEBATES AND CULTURAL JOURNALISM

The emergence of the new independent media in Spain is closely linked with the critical view of Spain's Transition to democracy in 1978. It's a view that historians, journalists and political parties such as Podemos have ushered into mainstream discourse. Business models aside, what *InfoLibre*, *La Marea* and *eldiario.es* share is the conviction that the political and economic structures produced by the Transition have not allowed for a media landscape that is conducive to a healthy democratic culture in which those in power are held accountable. They point to three factors in particular: corporate concentration of media control; overlapping interests between the major political parties and the large media conglomerates; and, more broadly, a "democratic deficit" reflected in what some have called a culture of *tutelage*: the idea among the country's political, economic and intellectual elites that Spanish citizens cannot be fully trusted with democracy.

This critical view appears sharpest in the areas of opinion, intellectual debate and cultural journalism. The book review sections in national newspapers are a case in point. 'In Spain, the literary supplements negotiate directly with the publishers over how many of their titles they will be reviewing,' said Guillem Martínez, the Catalan journalist. In 2012, he edited *CT o la Cultura de la Transición (CT or the Culture of the Transition)*, a foundational book that provided a critical X-ray of the

constrictions that held—and still hold—Spain’s public sphere in check. ‘They don’t negotiate specific titles, mind you. No, just a number. What *Babelia*,’ the weekly book review section of *El País*, ‘is looking for is not for people to read, but for people to simply buy books,’ he said. When the newspaper and book publisher belong to the same parent conglomerate, the collusion of interests is impossible to avoid. Looking back on the 1990s, the German critic Hans-Jörg Neuschäfer showed how *Babelia* coordinated its reviews in perfect harmony with the publicity of worldwide publishing giant Alfaguara (Neuschäfer). Both were owned by PRISA at the time.

These mechanisms, which mostly operate invisibly, sometimes come to light in moments of crisis. This was the case in 2004, when *Babelia* cut its ties with literary critic Ignacio Echevarría after Echevarría had submitted a highly critical review of one of Alfaguara’s star authors, the Basque novelist Bernardo Atxaga. Atxaga’s new novel *El hijo del acordeonista* was to be featured on the *Babelia*’s cover that week. The supplement ran an edited version of the negative review in the issue, but put Echevarría’s subsequent reviews on hold. After a protest from readers and an open letter from Echevarría, the editor, Lluís Bassets, branded Echevarría’s review as a “personal attack” on Atxaga that had violated the newspaper’s ethos:

I don’t think it is reasonable that in a general-information newspaper, which seeks to serve as many readers as possible, a writer be attacked personally and moreover in such a cruel way. [...] I believe that, in matters of aesthetics, a newspaper like *El País* is eclectic and plural by definition. This does not mean that its critics shouldn’t get to the bottom of things or shouldn’t be free to express their reservations or objections to the entirety of a particular book, regardless of its publisher. [But Echevarría’s] article against Atxaga drove us to wonder about the role played by this critic, and we decided for the moment to put a hold on his contributions. (qtd. in Aznárez Torralvo)

In his open letter to Bassets, Echevarría wrote that what worried him was the fact that *El País* could ‘openly exercise censorship’ and allow its corporate interests to impinge on freedom of expression (Echevarría). More than ten years after the fact, Echevarría’s colleague, Guillem Martínez, who worked at *El País* at the time, recalled the climate of fear in the newsroom. It was difficult to collect signatures for a collective letter in support of Echevarría, he wrote: ‘For those of us who worked at the paper, it was clear that signing the letter would mean one could get fired, while

for those who aspired to work for the paper it would mean an expulsion to the dark outer regions' of the media. Spain, Martínez concluded, has 'a problem with criticism.'

The political scientist Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca confirmed this analysis in his 2016 book, *La desfachatez intelectual* ("Intellectual Chutzpah"). Celebrated literary authors in Spain, he argued, have long mobilized their cultural capital to play the role of public intellectuals who frequently opine on current events. But while those opinions are often unfounded or uninformed, they are practically always left uncontested—and the authors' reputation suffers no harm. This kind of intellectual 'impunity,' Sánchez-Cuenca argued, is detrimental to the quality of public debate in Spain (Sánchez-Cuenca). It is no coincidence that the majority of the intellectuals that Sánchez-Cuenca criticized in the book have been associated with *El País*. Once considered the indisputable paper of record, the reputation of PRISA's flagship outlet—largely sustained by the memory of the role it played in the Transition to democracy during the late 1970s and early 1980s—today hangs by a thread. 'Forced by its debts, the paper has lost its seal of rigor, seriousness and quality,' said Miguel Mora, who left the paper voluntarily to found *Contexto*. 'It still has excellent journalists, but the paper has put itself at the service of the powers that be, and with the worst possible practices: stealth advertising, manipulation, censorship, and propaganda.' And the paper, it appears, has not been willing to embrace self-criticism. In November of 2015, Miguel Ángel Aguilar, a regular columnist for *El País* since 1994, saw his column canceled following the publication of an article in *The New York Times* which quoted him as being critical of the paper's lack of editorial independence from governmental and financial pressure (Minder).

Miguel de Lucas, a former reporter for the Leftist paper *Diagonal*, recalls walking into the paper's headquarters in Madrid. In the lobby, there's a framed, blown-up image of the newspaper's front page for a special evening edition it ran on February 23, 1981. At 6:22 p.m. that day, the Spanish colonel Antonio Tejero attempted what would prove to be a failed coup d'état. At that moment of uncertainty, when many feared that Francoism would rise from its smoldering ashes, *El País* ran a headline in huge bold letters that read: 'El País, With the Constitution' (Gómez & García). 'The story went that people took to the street brandishing that front page to protest the coup,' de Lucas said. 'It's difficult to know up to what point the paper's legendary halo—like the story about the Transition itself—is exaggerated. Seen from 2015, it seems like *El País* has always

been a paper serving the elites.’ Of course, that wasn’t always the case, he notes. But generations have shifted. ‘There must still be some readers out there who carry *El País* under their arm as a status symbol of their supposed progressivism,’ he said. ‘But its role as ideological support has collapsed.’ Martínez, the Catalan-based journalist, noted a crucial shift. ‘The faith of the Spanish reader in the press was absolute until the crisis of 2008,’ he said. ‘Today, it’s dead.’

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