

THE POLITICAL ROLE OF THE PRESS IN SPANISH TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY, 1975-1978

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Abstract

This article analyses the behaviour and attitudes of the Spanish press at the beginning of the transition towards democracy (November 1975 – December 1978), during the most significant political and institutional change. The role of the main newspapers is assessed from different perspectives, together with the reasons for the newspapers' consensus on the basic issues that were in the public eye. Through examples from several papers, taken one by one and as a whole, the article explains the exceptional characteristics of the relationship between politics and journalism, as well as some exceptions such as the ultra-right-wing press and the Basque nationalist sector.

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Introduction

Since the mid-1980s, Spain has been a modern, democratic state, with a thriving culture. The late 1990s and the early years of the new millennium have been the longest period of growth in the contemporary history of Spain (Montero and Roig 2005, 460; Serrano 2002, 85-89).

When General Franco died on 20 November 1975, no one could have imagined what Spain would be like today. The political, economic and social conditions of the country were discouraging, and the situation did not augur well for peaceful progress towards democracy. However, it happened thanks to the agreement reached by the political parties, trade unions and other associations in the so-called Moncloa Pacts. A series of basic economic and political agreements between the government and delegates of the most representative political parties allowed for a certain unity to overcome the difficult political situation of the nation.

The role of the daily press was decisive in this consensus. On the one hand, the daily press played the traditional role of mediator between the politicians and the man-in-the-street. On the other, the daily press was involved in and shaped the transition process: the press behaved just like any other actor on the public stage, backing the political parties and taking on the role of driving force for the fundamental democratic principles.

The nerve centres for journalism during this transitory period were in Madrid, Barcelona and the Basque Country: Madrid as the capital of the country, and the other two because of the debate on nationality.

There were 'old' and 'new' newspapers. The former were conservative and from the period of the Franco regime, although they did not always agree with the government. In general, they were in favour of democratic transition, through reform, not rupture, and tended to respect the recent past. The most important of these were *ABC* (Madrid) and *La Vanguardia* (Barcelona). Finally, we should mention the ultra-right *El Alcázar*, which was against the democratic process and the exception among the newspapers since the dictatorship.

The new ones were close to the centre-left and nationalist, and considered a clean break to be better than reform. The foremost were *El País* and *Diario 16* (center-left, Madrid), the nationalist *Egin* and *Deia* in the Basque Country and *Avui* in Barcelona. In brief: the plurality of the newspapers matched the pluralism found in other areas of Spanish society. Let us not forget that in 1977, 80 political parties were created.

With the exception of *El Alcázar*, the newspapers all had the same aim: a democratic regime with political parties (including the Communist Party) and elections. In this area, the Spanish press assisted both the government and the opposition, which agreed on the main issues. The media played down its criticism of the government when the latter had to face up to difficult situations, particularly those caused by its enemies on the right and left who continuously undermined the government's position. This radicalisation was seen to be the greatest danger to the democratic process. When, in January 1977, a wave of kidnappings and murders threatened the transition, the Madrid newspapers jointly published an editorial entitled "All Together". This was a historical milestone for harmony and unity, and was carried out by the press as one. It was even published by *El Alcázar*.¹

7

The press not only backed this process in difficult situations but also systematically introduced the new democratic values to newspapers' pages. The people of Spain were not accustomed to this terminology: civil liberty, amnesty, regional autonomy, elections, coexistence, consensus, reconciliation and harmony (Barrera and Zugasti 2001, 109-138). The newspapers also introduced new actors on the political stage, the parties and trade unions, which had been clandestine until then. But obviously, not all the newspapers behaved in the same way: each followed its own line. This is what we will now see (Barrera and Sánchez Aranda 2000, 271-301).

But first, we must ask why the Spanish press behaved in this way. Evidently, there was no "official" consensus. It would appear that the journalists became aware of their duty, of the important role they had in the transition to democracy, and contributed to the success of this objective together with the government and the opposition. In fact, they had a particularly close relationship with the politicians, which has lasted as one of the characteristics – of the dead weights, many would say – of present-day Spanish journalism.

This political consensus and the backing of the media was the main difference between the Spanish transition and those other political changes towards democracy that happened later in Europe and Latin America. In the Old World, the central and eastern countries that abandoned Communism in the late 1980s showed great interest in the circumstances that made the Spanish political process possible. But, in most cases, these transitions lacked popular support, and they were not backed by an agreement like the Moncloa Pacts (González 1993, 362-380; Huntington 1991). Experts on the subject state that civil society in these nations was weak before their transitions, except in Poland, that it was not responsible for the crises of the Communist regimes, and that it was still disorganised after their fall. So the press did not have a key role to play in these transitions. Recent studies show situations like that of Russia, which, even today, is marked by extreme enmity and distrust between the media and those in power, or Ukraine, where the state still holds the reins of all communication, which may be why democracy has not progressed very far there (Voltmer 2006, 10-11, 76-78). Although the Latin American media began with much greater freedom of the press, it would seem that many Latin American media have willingly abandoned the Western journalistic model of objectivity, and become partisan presses. Journalistic consensus was unthinkable when there was no parallel in the political and economic arenas, an echo of an unshakable ideological split on fundamental issues. In Chile, for example, the press split into two groups (official and opposition), and echoed the agenda of the respective political elite, which did not always reflect the concerns of the public (Filgueira and Nohlen 1994, 163-180). In other countries, such as Argentina, it has been said that the media had no significant role in the process that began in 1982.

If a country makes progress towards what, shifts in journalists' professional attitudes should be apparent. That shifting paradigm might suggest a model that could be helpful for other emerging democracies. When Franco died in 1975, Spanish journalists were already enjoying some degree of press freedom, thanks to the Press Act of 1966. Some journalists were committed to political beliefs and to the need for reforms. As a matter of fact, they tried to maintain a free information flow, using a writing style that allowed readers to read real facts between the

lines, or running lots of stories about elections in foreign democracies in the world news section (Alfárez 1986; Barrera 1997). Nevertheless, those margins became even broader in the following years. The ultimate legal recognition of freedom of information came with the Constitution of 1978.

In the Spain of the 1970s, the State continued to exercise nominal control over access to the profession. But the granting of State recognition to university journalism administrators in 1971 led to the establishment of Schools of Ciencias de la Información at Madrid's Complutense University, the Autonomous University of Barcelona and the University of Navarra, which pioneered university-based journalism education in 1958 (Sanders, Hanna, Berganza, and Sánchez Aranda 2008, 135). This created the conditions for an improvement in the training of journalists.

The relationship between politicians and journalism throughout the period in which contemporary Spanish democracy was created was somewhat unusual. In general terms, there was a high level of mutual understanding and even complicity. They shared common objectives and presented them to society as the most appropriate for the emerging new social order. Certainly, the editors of the main newspapers were invited by the government in 1976 to deal very carefully with news about the king, the military and Spanish unity in order not to destabilise the incipient democratic process (Chuliá 2001, 209). But there was no need to repeat those warnings due to the internal assumption of those premises by the majority of journalists.

The dominant attitude of professional journalists of the transition was one of advocacy, constructive and interpretative journalism, more than one of impartiality, critical and factual news reporting (Canel and Piqué 1998, 229-319). In addition, during the last years of Franco's regime and the first years of the transition to democracy, journalists were allies of the politicians opposing the dictatorship, so they were, and still are, more partisan. Once the government became a democracy, the news media were seen as important tools to indicate the people 'how to be democratic' and to spread respect towards institutions such as the monarchy and the government. But the more prevalent attitude was the "disseminator" role that was considered crucial for spreading information and publicise public problems. Journalists understood that politicians and institutions needed coverage to communicate with citizens with a specific goal: make them more committed to the newborn democracy (Sanchez Aranda 1999).

The New Democratic Press

El País and *Diario 16* are the most influential new newspapers that were founded after the death of Franco. The first issue of *El País* appeared on 4 May 1976 and the first issue of *Diario 16* shortly afterwards, on 18 October. They were emergent publications, with little respect for Spain's recent past, and radical in their approach.

El País clearly stated in its first editorial ("Facing 'Reform'") that it did not trust the government of Carlos Arias or its supposed aspiration to democracy: the government simply wanted to defend group self-interest and privileges and continuity above all else.² Nor, a few months later, did *Diario 16* show confidence, but it was more moderate. By then there was a new cabinet, led by Adolfo Suárez, which appeared to be more committed to ending the old order and to democratic transition. But they still had to prove the sincerity of their proposals.³

From the beginning, *El País* was a serious paper with a formal layout, all text, with many quotes from intellectuals, with no facile concessions to photography and headlines. The newspaper's political line was that of the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) (Cruz 1996; Espantaleón 2002; Seoane 2004), *Diario 16* was, in a way, the opposite: large expressive photos and headlines, and a front page that was an editorial. *Diario 16* was a "loudmouthed" paper, not given to politeness, but less radical in its party political backing and its ideology than *El País*. It backed the centre – the democratic opposition to Francoism in an undefined area that went from Christian Democracy to non-Marxist Social Democracy.⁴

El País was careful not to praise the Suárez government. The paper supported a different candidate-elect for President, the monarchist José María de Areilza. On the contrary, *Diario 16* both praised and criticised President Suárez and his government, usually with great vehemence. On 18 November 1976, the Francoist "Cortes" voted for the *Ley de Reforma Política* (Law for Political Reform), which meant its self-abolition. *El País* had to admit its forecast was wrong, but insisted that the government had managed to ratify a spoiled reform system, in agreement with the Francoist groups.⁵ *Diario 16* praised Suárez's strategy, which appeared to be effective although it did have weak points. And the paper encouraged him to negotiate with the opposition as he had called a referendum without their participation.⁶

This referendum caused a rift among the politicians. Most of the opposition, with the PSOE at its head, called for a so-called active abstention. *El País* promptly defended this stance, while *Diario 16* attacked it as maximalistic. The overwhelming "yes" vote in the referendum (15-XII-76) forced *El País* to justify its opinion: the newspaper believed the extremely high numbers of voters registered were a bad habit left over from the Franco dictatorship; then the newspaper went into banalities about whether the question for referendum had been badly worded: the vote was for reform or continuity, but what would have happened if it had been between continuity and discontinuity? The differing attitudes of many citizens – the paper continued – had not been properly expressed. Apparently, *El País* did not want to admit its defeat and was clinging to a sinking ship. A referendum always asks a clear, simple question; it does not consider the sundry nuances of citizens' opinions. The newspaper pressed the government not to misuse its victory, and urged the government to negotiate the future roadmap for democracy with those who had proposed active abstention, that is, with the PSOE.⁷

Diario 16 was jubilant about the response of the voters and insisted on what was obvious, that is, that even those who had suggested abstention had voted "yes."⁸

A few months later, the first free elections since 1936 were held in Spain. Voter participation was high (almost 80%) and showed the electorate's preference for the moderate positions, UCD and PSOE, rather than the previous Francoist ministers of the AP and the Communist Party. From 15 December 1976 until 15 June 1977, *El País* continued attacking Adolfo Suárez's actions. What incensed the newspaper were the political manoeuvres he used to remain at the centre of middle-ground politics, to be in charge of the operation and continue as leader of the government after the elections. On this subject, a poll on voting intentions was published on 12 June 1977, which showed not only the growth of the left but also the still high number of undecided voters. The newspaper took sides: "If this is confirmed, the growth of the left will not permit President Suárez ... to create a one-party

government, or a coalition with the right, or with the hypothetical remains of the centre-left. All the opinion polls place the PSOE as the main party in Spain, as UCD is simply an electoral coalition."⁹ On 14 June, the day before the elections, having stated that the newspaper would not recommend voting for any particular party (although this was a tradition in the liberal press), *El País* published an "objective" review of all the parties that were standing for election. The newspaper did say who readers should not vote for, that is, the right-wing groups with roots in Francoism, including UCD: "The *Unión de Centro* presents the electorate with a façade which has been deformed by the invasion of its electoral lists by the Authorities, which probably means that half the members elected for UCD will belong to the technocratic or political group that collaborated with Francoism. Their clinging to the tactics of the old regime will complicate their understanding of government in a democracy."¹⁰ *El País* backed the left, but warned against the Communist Party, thus revealing the paper's backing of the PSOE.

At the same time, *Diario 16* often coincided with *El País* in its attacks on the government, for example, on Adolfo Suárez's above-mentioned behaviour. But *Diario 16* did recognise what he had done well: 13 June 1977, on the eve of the elections, the newspaper said that setting up a democracy and leaving the dictatorship behind by peaceful means was not easy, and stated that there were great Spanish politicians in both the government and in the opposition, despite their inexperience and need to improvise.¹¹ On 14 June, when evaluating the different polls, the newspaper referred to the weakness of UCD, but did not make the mistake of betting on a PSOE victory. Neither implicitly nor explicitly did *Diario 16* suggest voting for any particular party. On 16 June, when the electoral results were not yet clear, the newspaper stated the following: "President Suárez has been the great helmsman of the transition and his daring has allowed us to triumph over obstacles where others had failed."¹² UCD was defined as a civilised, dialoging right-wing party such as never before had existed in Spain. *Diario 16* did not even mention the party's Francoist past.

The writing of the Constitution was arduous. It had to be done through political consensus, fundamentally between UCD and PSOE. The Constitution was passed by referendum on 6 December 1978. There was 30% abstention, due in part to the attitude of the Basque nationalists, but only in part. According to *Diario 16*, in its editorial on 7 December, a considerable number of Spaniards, without party-political obedience, were indifferent to the constitutional process. With the usual intensity, the newspaper accused the Spanish politicians of having been so involved in the twists and turns of consensus that the politicians had bored people, and made millions of citizens flee their electoral responsibility. It was vital – according to *Diario 16* – to rescue these Spaniards who were sick and tired of the consensus comedy. So it was fundamental that the parties did so without scheming or wheeling and dealing¹³. *El País*, on the other hand, in its editorial of 7 December, said much the same, but more composedly. This may have been because the UCD government and the PSOE, which the newspaper unofficially backed, were equally to blame: consensus had been a necessary evil to dismantle Francoism.¹⁴

The Conversion of the Old Dailies to Democracy

It was not only the new democratic press that contributed to the restoration of democracy; this was also possible because almost all the dailies that had peacefully coexisted with Franco's dictatorship joined the new ones in pursuit of the same aims. This process, very similar to that of the politicians of the old regime, favoured ample journalistic consensus (Barrera 1997, 7-46). This tacit consensus was striking both among the newsrooms and the newspaper owners.

The crisis was particularly noticeable at the oldest two Spanish newspapers: *ABC* and *La Vanguardia*.

The monarchist *ABC* (1903) went through the worst patch in its history. They were complicated times, full of indecisiveness and inconsistency, when *ABC* gave six of one (fidelity to its independent liberal line) and half a dozen of the other (collaboration with touches of political immobilism) (Alfárez 1986, 26).

The defense of the past and suspicion about almost everything in the future marked the paper's editorial line at the beginning of the transition. But this did not stop the paper from adopting political-informative initiatives for change such as its interview cards "Cien españoles para la democracia" (100 Spaniards for Democracy) and the "Tertulias electorales de ABC" (ABC's Electoral Get-togethers). In the files, the 100 politicians who would have the most influence on the nascent democracy were interviewed. At the get-togethers, the candidates for the first elections answered questions from journalists and guests in the newspaper's library.

The editorial stance on the legalisation of the Communist Party was a perfect example of the behaviour of *ABC* at that time: first opposition, then acceptance and finally support for government reform. *ABC* had alerted the public in a tough editorial that the Communist Party was "the greatest enemy of freedom."¹⁵ When the government legalised the party without warning, the monarchist daily clearly stated that such an action was a "very serious decision and a mistake on the part of our leaders."¹⁶ However, all the papers, except *ABC* and *El Alcázar*, backed the government's decision and published a joint editorial, entitled: "Don't Let Hope Come to Nothing." *ABC* realised it was on its own, and reacted with another editorial: "First objective: détente," in which to a certain extent the paper corrected itself, as it admitted the government decision and gave the government the newspaper's support in the government's pursuit of "political détente and harmony."¹⁷ To prove the paper's positive disposition, *ABC* published the entire text of "Don't Let Hope Come to Nothing."

The internal contradictions of *ABC* appeared during the June 1977 elections. Some members of the family who owned the paper, the Luca de Tena, were standing for the AP, a party made up of important ex-Francoist ministers, while other family members were standing for the UCD. Faced with a clear division, the newspaper published a note to remind people of "the radical independence of the editorial line and point of view of these publications regarding the civil or political activities which are or may be carried out by their employees, producers, journalists or management."¹⁸ After the electoral victory of the centrist party UCD, *ABC* realised the newspaper was in the wrong. It was not by chance that the newspaper's circulation had dropped by a third. Immediately, without giving up the newspaper's conservative character, *ABC* backed the reforms (Pérez Mateos 2002; Olmos 2002, 545).

While the Constitution was being drafted, *ABC* persisted in indicating the omissions and weak points of the text. But when it was endorsed by referendum, the newspaper published the following: “One thing is clear. The Spaniards who voted YES have crushed those who voted NO. The far right who do not want the Constitution, the far left who want revolution, and the separatists who want disintegration, together do not make up a relevant electoral figure” (Guillamet 1996). The paper backed the Constitution mainly due to the integrating role of the monarchy.

On the Catalan market, *La Vanguardia* remained the unquestioned leader during the transition. The newspaper had been considered an institution since the early 20th century and was an inevitable reference point in Catalonia (Gaziel 1994).

La Vanguardia found adapting difficult. The owner of the paper, Carlos Godó, identified with Francoism.¹⁹ However, this did not mean that the personal interests of the owner were more important than those of the newspaper. Within its liberal conservative tradition, *La Vanguardia* backed the movements that wished to construct a democracy through reform, not rupture, of the Francoist legislation. Horacio Sáenz Guerreo, the editor, was a key figure for the evolution of the newspaper and for keeping a balance between the editorial staff and the management.

La Vanguardia adapted to more modern times with its characteristic caution and prudence. Once Don Juan Carlos had been proclaimed king of Spain, the newspaper gave unconditional support to the monarchy.²⁰ *La Vanguardia* did not hide its astonishment at the nomination Adolfo Suárez as president,²¹ but when the government reform went ahead, the paper changed its stance gradually. *La Vanguardia* applauded the Law for Political Reform and interpreted the results of the referendum as “a magnificent lesson in good sense, serenity and civility by the people of Spain.”²²

Faced with the first free elections in Spain, *La Vanguardia* did not recommend voting for any particular party, but did demand common sense and realism, rather than the utopias and demagogy of some political programs. The paper backed the reformers in opposition to those who wanted rupture or continuity.²³ This was why *La Vanguardia* applauded Adolfo Suárez’s victory at the ballot boxes.

The major support obtained by those who defended autonomy for Catalonia brought about a pro-Catalan movement in *La Vanguardia*. Thus, it contrasted the ancient historical roots of Catalonia with the vain attempts to ignore its existence, the latest of which was the Francoist regime. For the first time, the newspaper’s editorials used harsh expressions such as “forty years of concealing the reality of Catalonia”²⁴ and “pernicious and abusive centralist absolutism” or “centralist dictatorship.”²⁵ In an article published in 1979, Carlos Godó wrote – referring to *La Vanguardia* – that it would be difficult to find an editorial line that was more respectful of the historical existence of Catalonia than that of the newspaper, and that had “contributed as much to the knowledge, love and respect for Catalonia as a historical reality, which might some day, therefore, recover its own institutions” (Nogué and Barrera 2006, 356). This was a signal that the newspaper had always followed the directions of the times.

La Vanguardia backed the Constitution and recommended voting “yes” in the referendum on 6 December. For the Catalan daily, “the debatable formula of consensus has allowed us to break with the dichotomy of the two Spains in relentless confrontation.”²⁶ In short, *La Vanguardia* was still a pro-government newspaper, that is, it offered basic, but not unconditional, support to the procedures of the different governments.

The Extreme-right Adversarial Press

In the field of public opinion, there was increasingly strong rejection on the part of those extreme-right groups that controlled a small but combative number of newspapers, such as the dailies *El Alcázar* and *El Imparcial*, and the magazines *Fuerza Nueva* and *Heraldo Español*, the most significant of which was *El Alcázar*. This newspaper experienced a remarkable increase in circulation by taking advantage of the public discontent caused by such important unsolved problems as terrorism, economic crisis and the transfer of power to some regions.

El Alcázar was the information bulletin of the National Confederation of Ex-combatants, who had fought for Franco during the Spanish Civil War. During the first phase of the transition, the daily was the most important extreme-right organisation in Spain. At the time of Franco's death, in November 1975, *El Alcázar* was well known for its harsh articles against any kind of political reform, but the newspaper also had a low circulation (13,000 copies daily).

During the transition, *El Alcázar* attracted those who were nostalgic about the Franco regime and opposed democratic reform, and therefore, experienced a progressive increase in sales. Thus, in November 1978, *El Alcázar* was selling 61,059 copies daily. This journalistic voice, against the process of transition to democracy, acquired special relevance from 1977 onwards, for three main reasons. The first democratic elections, held on 15 June 1977, were a disaster for the ultraconservative forces. The parliamentary marginalisation of the extreme right led to the strengthening of its press, which became the main vehicle of participation in the public sphere. In addition, after the failure of the extreme right in the elections, Antonio Izquierdo, whose editorial style was more dynamic and confrontational, replaced Antonio Gibello as the newspaper's editor.

Therefore, *El Alcázar* became a reference point for the extreme right. The ultra-conservative sector found a vision of the reality consistent with their political ideas in this newspaper. *El Alcázar* supplied arguments and reasons to the people who were unhappy about the transition.

El Alcázar opposed the process of transition to democracy. The newspaper's editor, Izquierdo, stated that *El Alcázar* was "in opposition to the government and in opposition to the Opposition party" (Izquierdo 1981, 86). The newspaper's criticism was aimed at the democratic system as a whole. The newspaper adopted this opposition cause as a real battle and practiced "combative journalism" against liberal democracy, using all available resources: headlines, commentary articles, contributors, selection of articles and news stories, etc.

El Alcázar considered itself the champion of the unity of Spain, loyal to the doctrine of José Antonio Primo de Rivera, founder of Spanish Falange. The newspaper also declared itself the defender of the work and figure of Francisco Franco. Therefore *El Alcázar* attacked the reforms with articles in defense of the Franco period, mainly based on its material achievements, which were greater than those of democracy.

When the Spanish people endorsed the "Political Reform Law" by referendum, the front-page editorial stated: "Today's victory is not the people's victory, but the Pyrrhic victory of partisan speculation." Sovereignty was not being returned to the people: the political parties were stealing the lead role from the people. The

newspaper announced that the newspaper was “going on the offensive at the permanent service of the Unity of Spain.”²⁷

El Alcázar was belligerent with all the political parties, especially with the left wing, but considered the communists to be the most evil. The Marxists had been defeated during the Civil War, and the newspaper considered their return to the public scene to be intolerable. In this way, when the government legalised the Communist Party, the newspaper’s answer was ruthless: the government was guilty, a liar and a traitor. *El Alcázar*, using the language of football, launched its front page with the headline “Goal” and said that this was an own-goal by the government “at the goal line which they sworn was defended and well protected against the Communist menace.”²⁸

During those years, terrorism struck Spain cruelly. *El Alcázar* condemned the brutal terrorist attacks full page with bellicose language. The newspaper contributed to the “pressure strategy” of the extreme right. Thus, for instance, it had an outstanding section titled: “The war report,” in which it gave a “weekly, monthly and yearly terrorist total.”

The newspaper demanded a firm hand against separatist terrorism. On the contrary, the rest of the press tried not to give excess information about the terrorist attacks in order to avoid the destabilisation of the process towards democracy. According to *El Alcázar*, the political parties had agreed to systematically hide the reality of the country. For the newspaper, democracy and government weakness encouraged terrorism.

The daily was against the autonomous process. *El Alcázar* announced the rupture of the unity of Spain. The devolution of powers to certain regions and decentralisation was an attack on the unity of duties and rights of all the Spanish people. As when dealing with other subjects, the newspaper used alarmist and apocalyptic language. For instance, when the Generalitat in Catalonia was reestablished, its full-page headline read: “Crime Against Popular Sovereignty.”²⁹

The newspaper electrified the spirit of the army and was the most-read newspaper in the barracks. *El Alcázar* echoed the deep discontent of the army because of the horrifying terrorist attacks (we must not forget that more than 200 soldiers were murdered between 1976 and 1981); the break-up of the unity of Spain, brought about by the autonomous process of decentralisation; and the loss of the army’s autonomy. Army members, humiliated by the isolation that they were subjected to by the press in general, found a haven in *El Alcázar*.

The newspaper encouraged the idea of a society in permanent conflict – crisis, unemployment and corruption – facing chronic instability if democracy was established. This was another example of the newspaper’s strategy of “exploiting discontent/dissatisfaction”. *El Alcázar* reminded people of that security that Spain had enjoyed during the Franco years. The newspaper encouraged the ghosts of the past and underlined the failure of the II Republic, which ended in the Civil War. *El Alcázar* established a clear parallelism between the political situation of the II Republic and the transition. For many people, this parallelism was in fact an indirect way of inspiring violent military action, a coup d’état.

The process towards democracy culminated institutionally with the Constitution. The referendum campaign was one of the moments of greatest harmony among the Spanish press. But *El Alcázar* acted as the spokesman of the sectors in

opposition to the Constitution, the defenders of a regime doomed to disappear when the Constitution came into effect. *El Alcázar* led a campaign to encourage abstention and the negative vote, appealing to fear as the newspaper's main argument. *El Alcázar* claimed the Constitution was illegal, separatist, Marxist and anti-Christian.

El Alcázar interpretation of the referendum was also noteworthy. The newspaper spoke of "the results of the referendum on rupture," because "half of Spain had endorsed the Constitution against the negative inhibition or the negative frankness of the other half."³⁰ *El Alcázar* included as opposing votes the abstentions (which were the highest proportion), the blanks, the void and the negative votes, which gave a result of 41,05% of the census, against the favorable "yes" votes, which were 58,95%. In this way, the Constitution split Spain into two antagonistic halves.

In summary, *El Alcázar* was the most representative newspaper of the extreme right-wing press: a confrontational press that tried to destabilise the process of transition to democracy.

The Nationalist Exception: the Basque Country

The Basque Country and Catalonia were the regions that most eagerly demanded autonomy during the transition.

The vast majority of the Basque newspapers contributed to the establishment of a democratic system in Spain through their support of the process of change. The nationalist dailies, *Deia* and *Egin*, were the exception, and criticised the limits set by the Spanish Constitution.

After the elections in 1977, the first democratic government established a provisional pre-autonomy for Catalonia and the Basque Country. Soon, this formula spread, and almost all the regions adopted it. This regional pre-autonomy system gave shape to the territorial structure in the Spanish Constitution (Fusi 1996, 446-452).

During the drafting of the Constitution, the issue of autonomy was extremely conflictive. This problem almost broke the consensus shared by the political parties with parliamentary representation (Aja 1999, 51; Clavero Arévalo 1983, 97; Solé Tura 1985, 89). Finally, the right to autonomy for the regions was recognised and guaranteed in the second article of the Constitutional text. This article also included an explicit mention of the indivisibility of the Spanish nation.

In the referendum for the approval of the Constitution, most people voted in support of the Constitution. Nevertheless, there was less support in the Basque Country.

The Basque people obeyed the orders of the region's three strongest parties. The first, the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV), characterised by moderate nationalist ideology, received the most votes in the 1977 elections. The problem was that the nationalist demands exceeded the limits of the constitutional frame, and therefore, agreement was not possible. After the defeat of their demands, the Basque Nationalist Party played the role of victim, moved away from the consensus and recommended abstention in the referendum for the approval of the Constitution.³¹ The second party was the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE). It was called the Basque Socialist Party in the Basque Country because the party was quite decentralised in regional bodies. The party joined the consensus and was in favour

of regional autonomy for the Basque Country within the constitutional frame. The party asked for an affirmative vote in the referendum. And the third party, placed outside the democratic system, was the terrorist group ETA (meaning “Basque Country and Freedom”); there were also political parties without parliamentary representation, several of which were illegal at the time. They shared a radical nationalist left-wing ideology and asked for a “no” vote in the referendum (Bezunartea 1988; Coca and Martínez 1992).

At the beginning of the transition, there was no nationalist press in the Basque Country. However, this situation changed in 1977. The nationalist groups, silenced during the dictatorship, realised the need to create newspapers close to their ideology. Thus, *Deia* was born on 8 June 1977, with the support of the PNV, and *Egin* on 29 September, with links to the radical nationalist left-wing sector and was very close to the terrorist group ETA.

Both newspapers brought to the Basque media scene not only their nationalist ideas but also new working habits, far from those professional routines their competitors had been using for many years. The new dailies had an active attitude: they hunted for news, they liked interpretation better than simple narration of the facts, they were quite independent from the news agencies and they looked for new sources of information with democratic legitimacy. They gave special relevance to information concerning the Basque political arena, and gave voice to the most radical nationalist sector, which had almost been out of the media scene until that moment. Within a few months, *Deia* and *Egin* had high circulation figures and therefore caused a fall in the circulation of the rest of the newspapers. The old dailies had to adapt to the new journalistic situation, and few were successful.

To show the attitude of *Deia* and *Egin* towards the transition and their new journalistic style, we will describe of the first important event reported by the two newspapers: the Constitutional Referendum held on 6 December 1978.

By analysing all the articles published by *Deia*, we can describe two of its principal features. First, its Basque nationalist ideology. The referendum coverage was focused on the Basque area and on the consequences of the results for future regional autonomy. For example, the main headline of the day after the referendum was “... and the Basque Country Abstained.”³² Second, its connections with the Basque Nationalist Party. *Deia* underlined the high level of abstention, the option supported by that party. Moreover, the daily paid remarkable attention to the radical nationalist left-wing parties opposed to the Constitution. This special treatment was for two reasons: the solidarity with those who had been silenced during Francoism and the very nature of these radical nationalist left-wing groups, which were very active with a huge capacity for propaganda and popular mobilisation. Therefore, they used the media to spread their political ideas.

Deia did not have an editorial, so we can only know its position through the reflective pieces written by its contributors. Like the PNV in the constitutional debates, these texts played the victim and had an aggressive tone that became threatening on some occasions. Here are some examples: “The Basque members of Parliament were reduced to silence, and now the Basque people, in a huge way, have joined them in this silence. ... People in furious, hurt, frustrated silence... are dangerous people. ... The Basque people don’t allow themselves be deceived. They know perfectly well what minimum level should be respected before saying ‘yes’

to a Constitution determined to deny their historic rights. ... Basque people forgive, but do not forget."³³

The editorial staff was responsible for all the news articles published about the referendum but one. This latter was sent by a news agency called *Efe* and was replied to by *Deia*. The *Efe* piece stated: "Governmental sources have described as 'extremely serious' certain facts which occurred in the Basque Country, where some polling station presidents exceeded the demand of requirements to vote. ... such facts mean 'a kind of coercion' of the so-called right."³⁴ The consequence of these actions was an increase in abstention. The *Deia* article stated: "Abstention and the 'no' vote have been important in the Basque Country. Certain political groups who have sought a blind vote for the 'yes' vote may find this information difficult to assimilate This is why we wonder if half a dozen anecdotes will not be used as an smoke screen to hide the important reality of abstention and the 'no' vote; we wonder if they are not trivial stories, blown up with the purpose of distracting attention from the moral defeat of the 'yes' vote in the Basque Country."³⁵

Egin was even more critical. Its coverage was very focused on the Basque area and gave priority to the activities of the radical nationalist left-wing groups. The newspaper tended to silence those who supported the Constitution and interpreted the "no" vote in the Basque Country and the abstention in the rest of the State as a triumph. The word "State" was used to avoid others like Spain, country and nation. For example, the main headline of the day after the referendum was: "The Basque Country strongly rejects the Constitution. In the State, abstention, 34%, exceeded the predictions of the Government and the majority parties."³⁶

However, the most important issue for *Egin* was not only the victory of the "no" to the Constitution but also the political consequences of this option for the future of the Basque Country. So, two days after the referendum, *Egin* stated "an improvement in the political perspectives for the Basque Country after the referendum."³⁷ From its point of view, the rejection by the Basque people should have a result: a statute of regional autonomy whose limits went beyond the Constitution that they did not support. That is to say, *Egin* aspired to regional autonomy as a step towards independence.

This newspaper criticised the constitutional consensus because "[i]t has been achieved away from the people," the referendum electoral campaign for the fact that "no" supporters had no access to television broadcasting and because it had "a Francoist-influenced style"³⁸ and the "excessive police vigilance"³⁹ on the referendum day.

Egin used an aggressive tone and colloquial language. The editorial staff wrote the majority of the news articles, and only a few came from agencies. The coverage focused on political issues. This newspaper did not publish any reflective pieces on the referendum, and the newspaper's editorial opinion appeared four days later, 10 December. It was called "Reflection after the rejection." These examples from the editorial illustrate what has been said about *Egin*'s style and content. Of the Basque Country, the editorial stated that it was "Caught in the spider's web of centralism" and that "the region has spent too long without breathing even a puff of the wind of freedom." Of the Constitution, the editorial declared that "It denies the Basque Country as a nation (...) it denies our right to self-determination (that) is, in spite of the smoke screens they insist on creating, the Basque Country's crucial problem

and the heart of the matter”; and, finally, on the future autonomy it stated: “We have to make the effort to find the best ways without being at the expense of the State The result of the referendum has clarified which parties the people support and which they do not. Left-wing radical parties have to confront the future of our people, with reason since the 6 December.”⁴⁰

Conclusion

The press played an outstanding role in the Spanish transition to democracy. As a collective, the press gave decisive assistance to the political authorities in favour of peaceful reform of the system. This support was not the result of an explicit pact. The press as a whole, not including the above-mentioned exceptions, shared a discourse to a greater or lesser extent on the main objective of this political change: a democratic system which would guarantee the exercise of political rights.

As can be seen throughout the article, basic consensus was applied heterogeneously. The different historic traditions of the newspapers were echoed in their articles. The new dailies, which were not burdened by having collaborated with Francoism, were more daring, aggressive and incisive in their demands for democracy. The older ones, such as *ABC* or *La Vanguardia*, were more careful and respectful of the past, and so helped the process not to be unwisely hasty. Both types promoted the most important democratic values, reconciliation and harmony among the people of Spain. Pragmatically, they wished to overthrow the myth of the two antagonistic Spains, and at all costs to avoid repeating the errors of the past.

This consensus was neither straightforward nor unanimous. The ultra-right and Basque nationalism tried to destabilise the transition process and complicate the democratic developments through their press. In spite of this, the Spanish press understood and encouraged the opinion of most citizens who wanted an in-depth, sincere political change without violence or extremism. Thus, the press collective supported and helped the actions of the government and of King Juan Carlos himself in the democratisation of the country.

Notes:

1. In one paragraph, it said: “Whoever started this machinery is the enemy of everyone, the enemy of the Spanish people. Their scheme is clear: try to impede the establishment of civil formulas of open and structured coexistence to which the Spanish have a right. In facing such a challenge, all political and social forces are obligated to join forces, leaving to one side their differences, proclaiming their decision to complete the journey down the road to democracy through free elections” (All newspapers, 29 January 1977).

2. *El País*, 4 May 1976.

3. *Diario 16*, 18 October 1976.

4. There is no specific historical bibliography for *Diario 16*.

5. See *El País*, 19 November 1976.

6. See *Diario 16*, 19 November 1976.

7. See *El País*, 16 December 1976.

8. See *Diario 16*, 17 December 1976.

9. See *El País*, 12 June 1977.

10. See *El País*, 14 June 1977.

11. See *Diario 16*, 13 June 1977.
12. *Diario 16*, 16 June 1977.
13. See *Diario 16*, 7 and 8 December 1978.
14. See *El País*, 7 December 1978.
15. *ABC*, 1 February 1977.
16. *ABC*, 10 April 1977.
17. *ABC*, 17 April 1977.
18. *ABC*, 21 April 1977.
19. For example, the day after the death of Franco, *La Vanguardia* published a photograph of an audience granted by Franco to Carlos Godó, together with an article written by the newspaper owner himself entitled "An extraordinary job which has radically changed Spain". In this article, he simply and sincerely expressed his profound personal gratitude to Franco (see *La Vanguardia*, 21 November 1975).
20. See *La Vanguardia*, 23 November 1975.
21. See *La Vanguardia*, 6 June 1976.
22. *La Vanguardia*, 16 December 1976.
23. *La Vanguardia*, 14 June 1977.
24. *La Vanguardia*, 11 September 1977.
25. *La Vanguardia*, 11 September 1977.
26. *La Vanguardia*, 1 November 1978.
27. *El Alcázar*, 16 December 1976, p. 1.
28. *El Alcázar*, 11 April 1977.
29. *El Alcázar*, 30 November 1977.
30. *El Alcázar*, 7 December 1978.
31. The claims of the PNV can be found in *El Partido Nacionalista Vasco ante la Constitución. Historia y alcance de unas negociaciones* (Zarauz: Itxaropena, 1978).
32. *Deia*, 7 December 1978.
33. *Deia*, 8 December 1978.
34. *Deia*, 7 December 1978.
35. *Deia*, 7 December 1978.
36. *Egin*, 7 December 1978.
37. *Egin*, 8 December 1978.
38. *Egin*, 8 December 1978.
39. *Egin*, 7 December 1978.
40. *Egin*, 10 December 1978.

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