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Power-Interactional Expertise: Negotiating Journalistic Autonomy during the Catalan Crisis at *El País*

Zoltán Dujisin^{a,b}

^aInstitute of Social and Political Sciences, Corvinus University of Budapest, Budapest, Hungary; ^bFNRS (National Fund for Scientific Research), Université Catholique de Louvain, Ottignies-Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

ABSTRACT

During Catalonia's independentist challenge in 2017, the prestigious center-left daily *El País* adopted an unexpectedly uncompromising stance widely seen as reflecting encroachment by the Spanish conservative field of power. Drawing on in-depth interviews with *El País* journalists, this article demonstrates how these pressures led not to conformism but to the widespread destabilization of journalistic habitus and newsroom cohesion. To account for this reaction, the study reconceptualizes autonomy as a distributed regime of professional expertise. It introduces the notion of *power-interactional expertise*: the ensemble of practices through which journalists collaboratively manage dependencies on political and economic power while aiming to publicly project autonomy. The breakdown of this regime, rather than censorship per se, accounts for the sense of professional habitus destabilization reported by *El País* journalists. By highlighting the tension between autonomy and dependency, the article reframes autonomy as an internal aspect of journalistic habitus and situates its transformation within the broader polycrisis affecting liberal democracies.

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Introduction

El País, the Spanish-speaking world's most prestigious and largest legacy newspaper, took a firm editorial stance against the illegal Catalan independence referendum of October 1st, 2017. While its defense of the constitutional order was predictable, many expected the center-left daily to assume a conciliatory tone, given its traditionally pro-autonomy stance. Instead, *El País* showed signs its coverage was conditioned by a conservative framing of the *raison d'État*. Two contributors left amid censorship claims, and commentator and writer John Carlin's 20-year collaboration ended after criticizing the government's and monarchy's handling of the independence process (*procés*). *El País* brushed off censorship accusations, with its managing editor claiming a "private company" does not "explain why it ended a relationship with a contract employee." Despite its private

CONTACT Zoltán Dujisin  zoltan.dujisin@gmail.com

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ownership, the editor in the same article describes *El País* as “an institution that is fundamental for Spanish democracy” and connects Spain’s challenges to the West’s polycrisis: “We do not take the stance [that there is] a right to self-determination ... This is the exact same situation as the New York Times under Trump, the UK press under Brexit” (Herman 2017).

Journalism contains a fundamental contradiction. While journalists view full autonomy as unattainable (Ananny 2018; Örnebring and Karlsson 2019; Waisbord 2013), its violation can be professionally destabilizing, as autonomy remains central to journalism’s public legitimacy (Sjøvaag 2013). Though most journalism in liberal democracies is autonomous, the newsroom control literature shows how external and internal constraints are subtly negotiated and internalized within newsroom hierarchies. Pressures are thus often coated in technical language and enforced through socialization processes (Breed 1955; Chomsky 2006; Goyanes and Rodríguez-Castro 2019; Lee and Chan 2009; Mortensen and Svendsen 1980). The key question, then, is not whether autonomy is curtailed, but under what conditions such curtailment destabilizes professional habitus—whether expressed through resistance, rejection, or disorientation.

By leveraging in-depth interviews with *El País* journalists, this article explores those circumstances. What makes the period of the Catalan *procés* instructive? There are two key reasons to treat it as an “exceptional case” (Ermakoff 2014, 235)—a heuristic that reveals social relations and forces less visible in ordinary circumstances. Firstly, violations of journalistic autonomy are a taboo subject in liberal democracies, particularly in prestigious legacy media that pride themselves on independence. Admitting them entails a risk of workplace retaliation and an implicit acknowledgment of having failed to uphold autonomy—an admission that can be deeply destabilizing to professional habitus. Willingness to discuss autonomy violations in legacy media, therefore, offers a rare opportunity to observe often-concealed social dynamics.

Secondly, the literature on journalism during major foreign or existential crises tends to portray journalists as supportive of, or at least resigned to, governmental invocations of *raison d’État* (Hallin 1989; Thorbjørnsrud and Figenschou 2018; Zaller and Chiu 1996). This article complicates this view, suggesting that crises can also expose the limits of such compliance. Crises subvert newsroom routines by revealing the delicate boundary between the journalistic field and the field of power, generating friction. They offer a glimpse into how journalists grapple with constraints on their autonomy, constraints normally managed through internalized, tacit expertise.

This article reconsiders journalistic autonomy from the vantage point of field theory, responding to calls to theorize autonomy as relational and relative (Ananny 2018; Örnebring and Karlsson 2022), and embraces the networked turn in the sociology of expertise. This approach reframes autonomy as a form of expertise co-produced through a complex web of social relations. These relations extend beyond the newsroom into adjacent fields, and the expertise they generate lie at the core of journalistic habitus. By implication, its breakdown should be professionally destabilizing.

This power-interactional expertise reconciles objective structures—the relations between the field of power and the journalistic field—with journalists’ subjective practices and perceptions (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 127; Martin 2003, 25). It is expressed in a panoply of skills, experiences, and dispositions that enable journalists to navigate a fundamental, yet irresolvable, contradiction at the core of their professional habitus. On one hand, they must negotiate and translate objective dependencies originating in the

field of power; on the other, they must cultivate subjective practices of autonomy preservation essential to journalism's public legitimacy and internal procedures.

In light of the ongoing polycrisis affecting Western democratic institutions and the media (Newman et al. 2021), it is timely to reexamine how journalistic autonomy is being transformed. The struggles over autonomy at *El País* during the Catalan crisis offer an opportunity to reframe journalistic autonomy as the expression of a co-produced, expert professional habitus. Through this perspective, this study asks (RQ) *when and why violations of autonomy lead to habitus destabilization and the extent to which this process occurred at El País*. It suggests that the handful of censorship incidents referenced in the opening paragraph signal more than principled reactions to a violated ideal. Rather, they may reflect a deeper breakdown in the regime of power-interactional expertise, one that systematically curtails journalists' ability not only to *be* autonomous, but crucially, to *project* autonomy.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Autonomy has historically been a central ideal of journalistic professionalism and a key pillar or democratic legitimacy (Waisbord 2013). In recent decades, scholars have shifted from idealized notions of full autonomy to viewing journalism as dependent on its environment, including the state, markets, technologies, and dominant cultural values (Ananny 2018; Christin 2018; Örnebring and Karlsson 2022). Potential sources of pressure, such as states, are also pivotal in enabling journalism, namely via laws and regulations guaranteeing autonomy (Örnebring and Karlsson 2019; Reich and Hanitzsch 2013, 151).

Periods of existential crises—from foreign policy crises to terrorist attacks—see journalists' identities as citizens or patriots clash with their professional identities, threatening autonomy (Gans 2004; Nossek 2008; Thorbjørnsrud and Figenschou 2018; Zaller and Chiu 1996; Zandberg and Neiger 2005). Hallin describes this internalization of the *raison d'État* as a trade-off, temporarily sacrificing autonomy to privilege official sources and narratives for sanctioning as a responsible "fourth branch of government" (1989, 8).

Pressures on journalistic autonomy occur at various levels (Hanitzsch et al. 2010; Mellado and Humanes 2012; Nygren 2012; Örnebring and Karlsson 2019; Reich and Hanitzsch 2013; Shoemaker and Reese 1996; Sjøvaag 2013). Typically, scholars distinguish four levels: (a) individual: socio-economic variables (e.g., race, gender, class), professional experience, role in the newsroom hierarchy, or values like commitment to autonomy; (b) procedural: routines, time constraints, workflows, audience metrics, and other institutional practices; (c) organizational: ownership structures, editorial policies, professional hierarchies, workplace culture, economic goals, editorial goals, and political alignment; (d) systemic/societal influences: the broader political and social structure, including political influences (e.g., legal frameworks, censorship), economic influences (e.g., media consolidation, declining revenues), or larger ideological influences.

The key challenge with such efforts at taxonomy, which facilitate small and large-N comparisons, is that these levels are difficult to disentangle. Namely, Hamilton (2011) shows how advertisement pressures translate into organizational routines and are subsequently taken for granted by individual journalists via ratings or circulation goals. Uscinski (2014; 3) argues economic factors shape organizational pressures such as

norms and news routines in ways oblivious to journalists. Bunce (2019) demonstrates editors use audience metrics to monitor journalists, strategically sharing or withholding data to influence story priorities. Gans (2004), Maurer and Beiler (2018), and Vos (2016) argue political pressures, like rewarding or punishing journalists with scoops, shape coverage routines based on politicians' and sources' preferences.

The entanglement of individual, procedural, organizational, and systemic influences highlights the limitations of measuring journalistic autonomy because reporters experience organizational factors as more immediate than systemic ones—pressures are “filtered, negotiated, and redistributed” (Hanitzsch et al. 2010). Although political and economic contexts drive cross-national variation, journalists often perceive these as organizational or professional constraints (Hanitzsch and Mellado 2011). Örnebring and Karlsson (2019) likewise argue that news organizations mediate and legitimize external pressures, making subjective autonomy an unreliable proxy for its objective condition.

Secondly, the prevalence of newsroom control mechanisms—like promotions/demotions, and hiring/firing practices (Breed 1955; Ceron et al. 2019; Lee and Chan 2009)—means a newsroom's perception of autonomy provides only a partial view of its objective state. Therefore, the term autonomy expresses a concern with journalism as a societal institution (Örnebring and Karlsson 2019). As Sjoavaag (2013, 158) claims, journalism reflects “an institutional context, and it is at this level that we find efforts to establish where and how journalistic autonomy is actually exercised.”

But subjective accounts can't be merely exchanged with objective measurements, i.e., measurable data points. Subjective accounts reflect relevant perceptions of autonomy, but also illuminate journalists' strategies for interpreting and navigating objectively existing structural constraints in the field, revealing them in the process.

The above concerns prefigure a “new geography” in journalism studies, one less tied to taxonomies and suggestive of “a more networked quality of journalism, captured by spatial metaphors such as networks, fields or spheres” (Reese 2016). Fields are spaces of mutual recognition where similarly oriented actors compete for power (Bourdieu 1996). Individual action, shaped by unconscious dispositions (*habitus*) and field structures (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 127), is analyzed through field theory's blend of objective and subjective perspectives (Martin 2003, 25). This approach has also gained prominence in journalism studies (Benson 1999, 479, 481; Vos 2016, 8; Christin 2018).

The journalistic field's objective position is shaped by struggles within the field of power, a meta-field where political, economic, and cultural actors compete for influence and legitimacy. The field of power subordinates all other fields, imposing pressures and constrains on them (Bourdieu 1996). Hence, the journalistic field is structured by two conflicting orders of legitimacy: the autonomous pole, rooted in journalistic autonomy and fundamental to its public legitimacy, and the heteronomous pole, tied to responsibilities toward the field of power (e.g., *raison d'État*).

Field theory, more explicitly than taxonomic models, treats the journalistic field as a space shaped by political, economic, and state power, where external influences are filtered through internal logics before being perceived by journalists (Martin 2003). It therefore examines both objective forces shaping autonomy and the subjective forces forming *habitus*.

Habitus can be revealed through subjective accounts that highlight journalists' discursive strategies when legitimizing their profession (Anderson 2008). Without traditional

professional markers like licensing, journalism has historically invested on its public legitimation (Zelizer 1992), creating a habitus marked by tensions. Journalists engage in boundary work to separate normative ideals from actual practices (Cheng and Avieson 2024; Cheng and Tandoc 2022) and reconcile role conceptions with role enactment (Mellado and Van Dalen 2014; Tandoc, Hellmueller, and Vos 2013). They also develop interactional expertise, translating complex fields into accessible terms for the public (Collins and Evans 2007; Hallin and Mancini 2004, 35; Reich 2012, 348).

This article proposes that journalists' relationship to autonomy is shaped by an interactional form of expertise integral to their professional habitus: power-interactional expertise. This expertise helps journalists navigate a core contradiction rooted in their position relative to the field of power. On one hand, their public credibility depends on discursively projecting autonomy (Schudson 2000, 5; Kaplan 2006, 182); on the other, they must strike alliances with governmental officials, make painful compromises with editors, and anticipate public responses. In essence, sustaining a stable journalistic habitus requires balancing the projection of autonomy with autonomy's objective limitation via negotiating dependencies, routines, and boundaries with the field of power.

The concept of power-interactional expertise builds on the newsroom control literature. Breed (1955), Mortensen and Svendsen (1980), Chomsky (2006), and Lee and Chan (2009) show how editors reframe pressures as technical or routine issues to preserve journalists' sense of autonomy. Habitus socialization into autonomy limits also occurs through observing hiring practices, reassignments, promotions, and newsroom discussions. This enables strategies such as "anticipatory avoidance," where journalists eschew controversial topics by invoking objectivity (Gans 2004), withholding bylines (Goyanes and Rodríguez-Castro 2019), or ironic subversion of editorial positions (Reese and Ballinger 2001).

These strategies bear two key hallmarks of expertise. First, they show autonomy is not just an ideal taught in journalism schools, but a practical expression of habitus—shaped by tacit, intuitive, and often unconscious dispositions that characterize high expertise (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 2005). Second, they show expertise is not just a manifestation of individual skills, credentials and knowledge, but rather a set of practices distributed, negotiated and legitimated across a social space (Eyal 2019, 42; Medvetz 2012, 90). The concept of power-interactional expertise builds on the translation, negotiation, resistance, and adaptation strategies described in the newsroom control literature, but makes these strategies explicitly integral to a professional habitus. It posits the interplay between objective power structures—the autonomy equilibrium between the field of power and the journalistic field—and journalists' subjective grappling with their role and its public legitimation, as pivotal in habitus socialization. Therefore, power-interactional expertise reframes autonomy as neither an ideal, a subjective perception or an objective reality, but as internal to a professional habitus whose stability is essential to journalism's legitimacy.

El País and Spain's Journalistic Field

Power-interactional expertise is elaborated in the context of *El País'* newsroom during the 2017–18 Spanish constitutional crisis. Spain's polycrisis has roots in its political system—a parliamentary monarchy with an asymmetric federal structure that recognizes autonomous communities but affirms Spain as the sole political nation. The post-1975 democratic order has faced growing challenges from anti-systemic and secessionist

movements, exacerbated by the 2008 financial crisis and scandals involving the monarchy and the conservative Popular Party (PP). The 2017 Catalan referendum, defying Spain's Constitutional Court, marked a peak in this polycrisis, eroding the legitimacy of both the Spanish state and its media (Rusiñol 2013, 14).

Catalonia is one of Spain's wealthiest autonomous regions with a well-defined linguistic and cultural identity. It has historically sought greater self-government within Spain via empowerment of the *Generalitat*, an institutional system comprising the Parliament, the President, and the Executive Council. Under Franco's dictatorship (1939–1975), Catalonia's autonomy was abolished and its language and symbols suppressed; the 1978 Constitution restored democracy, and the 1979 and 2006 Statutes of Autonomy expanded Catalan self-rule until the PP's constitutional challenge led the Court in 2010 to annul key provisions. The judicial reversal led to louder demands for outright independence in Catalan society, supported by mass mobilizations and increasingly strong pro-independence parties, which ultimately culminated in a unilateral referendum on October 1st 2017.

The histories of Spanish democracy and *El País* are closely intertwined. Launched in 1976 as Spain's first quality daily with a European, liberal, and progressive stance, *El País* became central to the pro-democratic reformist establishment during the transition. Aligned with the socialist PSOE, its pro-autonomous stance clashed with the centralist conservative forces that had previously dominated the field of power. Since its inception, *El País* has recognized Catalonia's historical specificity and its legitimate ambition to autonomy. While its editorial line consistently opposed independence as unrealistic and historically regressive, the newspaper recognized the right of parties to pursue independence within a democratic framework (Cruz Seoane and Sueiro 2004, 170).

The newspaper championed *bicapitalismo*, maintaining influential newsrooms in Madrid and Barcelona. The Catalan newsroom, with 38 journalists and editors with equal standing with Madrid, launched a Catalan edition in 1982, including Spain's first Catalan-language cultural supplement (Cruz Seoane and Sueiro 2004, 165–173). In this way, *El País* mirrored Spain's post-transitional field of power and the decentralization process that began following Franco's death.

Spain's post-transitional media system fits the Polarized Pluralist model (Hallin and Mancini 2004), marked by strong media-party integration and ideologically aligned readerships, objectively limiting autonomy. More recently, political parallelism has evolved into ideological rather than party alignment (Nygren 2012). Hanitzsch et al. (2010) and Hanitzsch and Mellado (2011) show higher perceived political and economic influences in Spain compared to Western Europe—but lower compared to post-communist countries -, a subjective pattern they link to weaker institutional protections for autonomy.

El País offers a partial exception, reflecting internal distinctions within Spain's journalistic field. Unlike public broadcasters, legacy private media have historically enjoyed greater autonomy (Casero-Ripollés, Izquierdo-Castillo, and Doménech-Fabregat 2014; Goyanes and Demeter 2020), and *El País*' is specifically known for disseminating Anglo-Saxon paradigms equating professionalization to objectivity and neutrality (Hallin and Mancini 2004, 38). These are enshrined in the newspaper's style book, which defines itself as "an ethical contract with readers" and part of a "system of guarantees" that

ensures “independence, insofar as such information is not conditioned by any external pressure” (El País 1980).

The 2008 financial crisis marked a turning point, leaving all major Spanish media groups without liquidity and thus intensifying field of power encroachment and ownership concentration. Encroachment is tied to the “agreements” (*los acuerdos*) between media conglomerates and broader political and economic interests dominating the field of power (Jiménez 2019; Rusiñol 2013). Brokered by then-PP deputy prime minister Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría, the agreements made Spanish banks—Santander and BBVA—and companies like Telefonica and *El Corte Inglés* shareholders in major media groups in exchange for favorable coverage of the government. Banks sought to influence media coverage of contentious issues, particularly after state bailouts for banks led to welfare and pension cuts that coincided with banks’ management of private pension funds. The new autonomy equilibrium allowed them to exert pressure not only through institutional advertising and credits but also via direct ownership (Rusiñol 2013, 12).

The agreements illustrated interdependency between economic and political pressures emanating from the field of power. This is reflected in the journalistic field by mass layoffs that heightened sector precarity and weakened autonomy by disproportionately affecting senior, independent journalists (Goyanes and Demeter 2020; Goyanes and Rodríguez-Castro 2019). In the 2000s, PRISA—Spain’s largest media conglomerate, with *El País* as its flagship—pursued an aggressive expansion across TV, radio, and digital media, escalating competition (Cabrera 2018). Until 2008, *El País* ranked among the world’s most profitable newspapers, earning over €100 million annually, but its turnover dropped from €409 million (2009) to €159 million (2015) (Mongolia 2019). Though still profitable, in 2012 the paper enacted a redundancy plan eliminating 129 jobs—30% of its staff. PRISA’s CEO, *El País* co-founder and former editor-in-chief Juan Luis Cebrián, received a €12 million bonus for implementing the layoffs—a figure large enough to hire 500 journalists and unusually high for media executives. The Catalan newsroom was hit hardest: Its staff fell from 100 to 30 staffers, while its exclusive output was slashed from 16 to 4 pages, reversing a long-standing decentralization policy (Rusiñol 2013, 24–27).

Case Selection and Methods

Unlike positivist approaches, field theory derives general principles from in-depth case studies (Martin 2003, 35). *El País*’ empirical relevance must be assessed in relation to Spain’s journalistic field, which falls under the above-mentioned Polarized Pluralist model. As of 2024, the World Press Freedom Index (Reporters without Borders 2024) ranks Spain 17th out of 43 European countries, behind France but ahead of Belgium, Italy, and Greece. While Spanish media face stronger political and economic pressures than many European democracies, private legacy outlets like *El País* have historically been less affected. Thus, while *El País* is embedded in the Spanish journalistic field, it is not representative of Spanish media overall. As one of Europe’s most influential and the world’s most widely read Spanish-language legacy outlets (El Español 2022), *El País* is rather paradigmatic of influential legacy media confronting autonomy challenges under liberal democracy’s global polycrisis.

While offering an in-depth examination of autonomy struggles at *El País*, this article aims to produce theoretical contributions located in the wider spatial and temporal context of the newsroom control literature. With 400 journalists, *El País*' complex editorial hierarchies enable intricate autonomy-limitation mechanisms that coat external pressures as editorial preferences (Casero-Ripollés, Izquierdo-Castillo, and Doménech-Fabregat 2014; Goyanes and Demeter 2020). Accordingly, the methodology follows the tradition of the newsroom control literature, examining tacit, expert practices regulating autonomy.

The study draws on 22 in-depth, semi-structured narrative interviews lasting 1–2 h. To ensure ideological, hierarchical, and geographic diversity, participants were selected via snowball sampling initiated from multiple seeds, producing highly convergent accounts. Nine interviews were conducted in Madrid, 12 in Barcelona, and one via Skype. Three participants were members of the editorial board during the Catalan crisis. Four interviews took place in *El País*' Madrid newsroom and two in Barcelona, where anonymity concerns were greater and participants preferred private settings. The sample included 4 female journalists—likely reflecting both the newsroom's male dominance (European Journalism Observatory 2018) and possibly male journalists' greater comfort with a male researcher. Fourteen interviewees were current staff members, of whom only one was not a full-time employee, and eight were former employees with longstanding ties to the newspaper. Fourteen had experience in the Barcelona newsroom. Most had worked across sections including politics, foreign affairs, technology, society, and culture; political reporting was common to all.

The interviews, conducted and transcribed in Spanish (the author's native language), followed a mediated ethnographic approach. This format encouraged open conversations tailored to journalists' experiences, expertise and field/newsroom positions, in line with field theory's relational approach. This approach privileges understanding subjective experience in relation to field position and habitus. Part of a larger research project, the interview guide covered journalistic autonomy, expertise, and disinformation, but autonomy emerged as the most sensitive topic. Interviewees often spoke in hushed tones about key events and individuals, requiring context-sensitive questioning and gradual trust-building. This intuitive process helped address professionally sensitive issues without derailing discussion and gave participants space to speak on their own terms. This enhances reliability by reducing the possibility the researcher can lead interviewees towards desired answers.

The transcribed material was coded in Atlas.ti using thematic analysis and interpreted for both latent and explicit meanings to generate narrative knowledge (Ahuvia 2001; Drisko and Maschi 2016). Core themes such as professional expertise, editorial management, and relations to sources were pre-identified, while others—story negotiations, reactions of Catalan society, relations to the editorial board—emerged inductively. To enhance reliability, interview accounts were cross-checked with each other and with media and secondary sources. Interviewees were also repeatedly asked to provide illustrative examples, adding an element of mediated ethnography.

Analysis

The analysis unfolds in four thematic subsections. The first examines journalists' accounts of the post-2008 relationship between the journalistic field and the field of power,

revealing a structural divide between insiders and outsiders to the editorial board, rooted in incompatible notions of power-interactive expertise. This provides context for the remaining subsections, which explore subjective newsroom dynamics, particularly in the lead-up to the *procés*. While interviewees broadly considered external pressures as inherent to the profession, many felt Caño's team undermined their ability to preserve and project autonomy—pointing to a rupture in the regime of power-interactive expertise. These dynamics were transversal to both the Madrid and Barcelona newsrooms, though tensions in the latter became particularly visible and thus more empirically accessible. Taken together, the following subsections reconcile objective analysis and subjective perceptions to offer a fresh, expertise-centered perspective of journalistic autonomy.

From Institutional Autonomy to Raison d'État: The Reconfiguration of El País

The 2008 economic crisis is almost unanimously described as a turning point that enabled encroachment by the field of power. This process culminated in a restructuring of the editorial board aligned with the political and economic interests of those who ensured PRISA's rescue. As an MEB admits:

El País was in a troubling financial condition ... so it gives itself up, without any conditions, to the government's political line. It's never that mechanic, never 100%, but deep down, this is what happened. (E02)

Cebrián justified the restructuring as an effort to distance *El País* from its socialist leanings, appointing then-Washington correspondent Antonio Caño as editor-in-chief in 2014. The decision, however, was highly unpopular and signaled weakened newsroom influence—a move toward heteronomy. Caño had supported redundancy schemes and opposed the newspaper's trade union. The layoffs had targeted influential, well-paid left-wing voices and key figures of *bicapitalismo* with credibility, autonomy, and the capacity to protest perceived injustices (J04, J16, J17, J19). Unsurprisingly, in a consultative vote that traditionally followed such nominations, Caño received only 43% approval—the lowest in the paper's history (Soteras 2014). The result was ignored, and the editorial board's composition remained unchanged, causing dismay in the newsroom (J10, J14, J18, J19).

The shift towards heteronomy had its logical extension to a new editorial line, which many journalists saw as endangering the newspapers' long-standing brand, readership, and viability (J14, J15):

You already have *La Razón*, *ABC*, *El Mundo* [right-of-center newspapers], so there was no reason for *El País* to shift to occupy that space, but that's what happened. It didn't make economic sense, and it may be a cliché, but between the original and the photocopy you'll always want the original. *El País* wasn't original, it was a photocopy. (J15)

The break with the past is best illustrated by the 2017 Socialist primaries, when *El País* published harsh editorials against Pedro Sánchez, then the progressive candidate challenging centrist-liberal Susana Díaz. Díaz, open to right-leaning alliances, was favored by the editorial board, mainly concerned with a rising anti-systemic left, with which Sánchez appeared willing to cooperate. An editorial labeling Sánchez an "unscrupulous fool" (*El País* 2016) antagonized the newsroom (J01, J11, E02) and reportedly hindered reporters' access to key PSOE sources cultivated over decades (J03).

This incident epitomized the widening tension between the newsroom and editorial board over managing relations to the field of power. Journalists saw the board's ideological shift as destabilizing to their habitus and professional credibility, whereas MEBs framed it as a demonstration of superior expertise. While denying an ideological shift, an MEB confirms the newspaper chose to alienate a substantial part of its newsroom, readership and economic self-interest to align itself with a principled *raison d'État*:

The newspaper didn't move, it's the Spanish left, like in the rest of Europe, that broke in two [liberal and populist] ... so it's logical that a leftist newspaper breaks as well. ... And in this left-wing rupture the newspaper maintained its position. The whole debate was, shall we shift left to capture the voters and readers we lost? or do we wait for the defeat of the far-left and its populist propositions? ... We decided to hold on to that [liberal] position ... the newsroom was more in favor of a compromise. (E03)

The MEB thus invokes principles rooted in the heteronomous pole—the fight against populism—instead of invoking branding, economic, or journalistic criteria to justify the editorial line of a “broken” newspaper. This appeal to a higher interest exemplifies how editors perform several balancing acts, some of which go beyond official duties but are essential features of power-interactive expertise. This expertise allows editors to translate field of power imperatives into journalistic practices, projecting institutional autonomy both internally and publicly. Therefore, editorial authority is partly grounded in an ability to mediate between the field of power and the journalistic field. One MEB frames this role as fundamental, arguing journalists have a democratic responsibility to limit their autonomy to

be a very honest broker between power and society, between what you see and your readers. That's very difficult ... You have a privilege the rest of the citizens don't have: access to places and situations others don't see ... This special responsibility implies self-limitation in your right to express yourself, and many journalists don't understand that. (E03)

The quote underscores the importance of power-interactive expertise not only for editors but for journalists more broadly, while implicitly criticizing those in the profession who lack it. From this perspective, editorial authority is legitimized by command of this expertise and the responsibility it entails.

In the post-2008 context of encroachment by the field of power, editors-in-chief were reminded of their responsibilities through communications from politicians and corporate leaders requesting meetings (Jiménez 2019: Chapters I, IV). In exchange for brokering agreements, government officials expected compromises. PP ministers told editors “the country was in a critical moment and the irruption of populism threatened not just economic recovery, but also national integrity and the constitutional order ...”, adding that “the country is facing dangerous enemies. These are not times for neutrality”. Editors-in-chief were thus expected to ensure newsroom compliance in the higher interest of the Spanish *raison d'État* (Jiménez 2019: Chapter 4, 8), demonstrating mastery of power-interactive expertise.

Therefore, at the root of unresolved tensions between *El País'* newsroom and its editorial board we do not merely find an objective loss of autonomy. At stake is the board's ability to arbitrate between *raison d'État* and journalistic autonomy in ways that preserve journalists' sense of professionalism—a clash between competing notions

of expertise that became starkest during the Catalan referendum. Given *El País'* longstanding support for a quasi-Federalist Spain, its Catalan newsroom emerged as a friction point between journalistic habitus socialized by the autonomous pole and an editorial board embodying the shift to the heteronomous pole. The following subsections examine the destabilization of journalists' professional habitus, highlighting their struggles to retain and project autonomy internally and externally. This analysis thus highlights the shared and distributed nature of power-interactional expertise as a cornerstone of newsroom cohesion and professional legitimacy.

Autonomy within the Newsroom

Previous literature on newsroom control shows that objective limitations to autonomy do not necessarily destabilize habitus, provided journalists are subtly socialized into compliance (Breed 1955; Chomsky 2006; Lee and Chan 2009). Several *El País* journalists describe such control mechanisms as internal to their habitus, implying a normalization compatible with notions of professionalism:

At the end of the day you know what newspaper you are in because they sent you signals 5, 6, 7 times ... who is on the front page, the adjectives used in an editorial ... that will affect you as much as you want it to affect you ... if you find crap on the [wrong] party you are not going to be rewarded with a front page ... that's why they change journalists from their posts, and everything is done subtly, in a way you understand, because we are intelligent, everyone understands the direction the boat moves. (J12)

If you want to do something different you are free to do it, but the logical thing is you are going to be replaced, in a newsroom people are constantly nominated and removed without need for much explanation, so it's normal to keep an eye on the opinions from above. (J04)

By contrast, Caño's tenure is portrayed as breaking sharply from these subtle conventions. Journalists overwhelmingly depict practices at odds with their professional habitus—two even calling it a “terror regime” (J03, J04)—reflecting a profound mismatch between the newsroom's and editorial board's power-interactional expertise:

When members of the editorial team walked by people were in some kind of tension because there were very toxic approaches, bosses who demanded do this because I tell you so, and yes, it's very hard to manage a newsroom, but if you expect a good journalist to be adversarial, to be skeptical of what he is told, to question power for its own sake, then when you can't run a newsroom telling him this is like this because I say so. You have to convince him, and that's difficult ... If he has a trajectory, and tells you, listen, this is not how you do it, because of this and that, you give him credit because you know he experienced it in his own flesh, while when the one doing it is inexperienced ... he cannot have any credibility. So [one MEB's] way of imposing himself was to refer to the editor-in-chief. And if you have to mention the boss to have authority, you start badly and you end badly. At the end of the day, people experienced it like a dictatorship (J08).

The quote encapsulates the perceived collapse of a distributed framework of power-interactional expertise and its role in regulating newsroom autonomy: References to crude authority (“because I tell you”), inexperience, and disregard for journalists' adversarial ethos convey the absence of a shared regime of expertise and its destabilizing impact on journalistic habitus.

The Catalan newsroom during the referendum offers the most poignant examples of how habitus destabilization hindered journalists from projecting autonomy within the newsroom. As violent clashes between independentists and police dominated news, several MEBs traveled to Barcelona. While such trips can be justified by exceptional circumstances, the approach of one MEB—previously in conflict with the local team—was perceived as an “intervention” (E02) that bypassed the mediating function of the Barcelona newsroom, a role central *El País*’ autonomous brand:

Madrid sent editors to cover things Barcelona editors could have covered perfectly well. I think this happened because they didn’t want to narrate what happened in Barcelona through a Catalan narrator’s eyes. (J09)

A big part of my daily job is to try to convince Madrid that what they see as 100% is actually a 60% or a 40%, it’s always an attempt to negotiate between the Madrid vision and the one we have here to reach an agreement. But with [the aforementioned MEB] those mediation attempts didn’t work, because if he is here then he’s seen it with his eyes. Even if what he saw was the inside of his office ... (J03)

Journalists saw the MEB’s overt appeals to authority as rooted in the heteronomous pole of the journalistic field, revealing a fractured regime of power-interactional expertise.

[He] had preconceived ideas influenced by government officials, I don’t know at what level but I think there was a direct connection, it was very clear, and that meant what we saw here as journalists could not even be put forth and discussed according to newsroom conventions (J13)

This quote illustrates how shared expert conventions allegedly collapsed under heteronomous influence. Another journalist described similar frustration with an editor pressuring him to include unverified information:

[I wrote] knowing that if I said the situation is at this point, he would ask you to go further, always to exaggerate or use adjectives and sentences out of context in the headline, that is, there was a certain pressure to clash more with the *Generalitat* ... [Other times he said] I’ve been told this, put it in the article. I’d ask, what’s your source? He would simply reply, put it, put it. I didn’t know if this was coming from the intelligence services or somewhere else. (J03)

Perceptions of the board’s heteronomous approach were reinforced by an *El País* article scrutinizing the Catalan government’s report of 893 police-violence injuries, noting the count included panic attacks and nausea (El País 2017a). The claim mirrored governmental narratives and editors reportedly advocated it coarsely, violating journalists’ sense of autonomy in a demonstration of inexpertise:

[The MEB] comes out of his office to tell us the [*Generalitat*’s] medical numbers are fake, that is, he is speaking directly to the whole newsroom, telling us what he thinks about it, but also showing you he wanted to be there to control what’s going on in the newsroom first hand ... (J03)

Autonomy vis-à-vis the Public

A recurrent theme in journalists’ accounts of the *procés* period is public hostility linked to their inability to project autonomy beyond the newsroom. *El País* has historically branded itself as the only Madrid-based paper with a plural vision of Spain, earning respect from

Catalan nationalist sectors. Most informants shared this vision, which entailed a conciliatory approach to the *procés*: giving space to differing voices while maintaining an editorial stance in favor of Spanish unity.

However, under Caño, a monolithic editorial line led much of Catalan society to view the newspaper as an instrument of the Spanish state. The concept of power-interactive expertise again helps explain why the editorial board was seen as unprofessional. It was not the board's pro-unity stance that proved destabilizing, but its clumsy, inept intolerance of dissent:

Caño didn't publish one fucking opinion article or an interview with an independentist leader or a remotely federalist historian, or a report to say: the newspaper is against Catalan independence and for Spanish unity, but approximately half of Catalonia wants independence, let's explain why ... you would read about independentists in interviews and reports in Europe, hell, with Brexit *El País* published opinions of those in favor of it, and we don't publish those of Catalan independentists? Have we gone mad? (J14)

It was an exceptional moment, *El País* acted in the interests of the state. This is very counter-productive because while *El País* was always an enemy of independentism, it was way more sophisticated, maybe it manipulated even more because it was higher quality, it had credibility, and knew how to do it, you'll allow various opinions and debates but in the end, your editorial line will be brutal ... but when manipulation is coarse and pathetic, when there is no dissent it comes across as monolithic and the newspaper loses credibility (J04)

The second quote explicitly targets the *manner* of the editorial board's alignment with Spain's *raison d'État*, not the alignment itself, portraying it as evidence of power-interactive ineptitude. This "coarse and pathetic" form of "manipulation" is contrasted with normalized, "sophisticated" forms, suggesting a preference for subtler influence strategies internal to the informant's journalistic habitus.

The breakdown of a shared regime of power-interactive expertise exposed reporters to harsh criticism from Catalan media, friends, and the public, intensifying habitus destabilization (J03, J08, J16). Unconsulted editorial interventions, especially headline changes, were the primary cause. One incident (J02) involved two reporters filing a story headlined "Independentism mobilizes 200,000 in Brussels." The headline was changed without consultation to "Separatism parades its hatred of Spain in Brussels" and placed on the front page (Sánchez and Segura 2017). Alongside it, an editorial claimed "the Brussels March Seals Separatism's rupture with democracy and Europe," accusing separatists of aiming solely to "destroy Spain's image" (*El País* 2017b). The ensuing controversy led to attacks and threats against the authors, who felt their professional integrity was publicly compromised. *El País'* Ombudsman (Galán 2017) published an article citing readers condemning the headline's conflation of information and opinion, and included a response from a MEB, not the journalists, implicitly acknowledging editorial responsibility. Such editorial interventions, perceived as inept, fueled despair and alienation, hallmarks of habitus destabilization.

"[Journalists] arrived in the morning and saw what had been done to their articles, they wanted to throw themselves in the river, they made them say things they didn't say, it was savage". (J19)

"[It was] like a Greek tragedy, like destiny, a dead-end situation in which you can't find a way out, it starts dragging you until you don't recognize yourself, until you ask yourself, how am I saying these things?" (E02)

These disruptions reportedly eroded journalists' capacity for collective resistance. The failure of collaborative forms of autonomy management was evident in the aforementioned failure to alter the composition of Caño's editorial board following a negative consultative vote. Later, the professional committee, an internal body composed of newsroom representatives, reportedly handled several complaints regarding the "highly subjective and ideological adjectivizing" of editorials, but Caño avoided meeting with the committee for extended periods and refused to soften his editorial line (J16). Ultimately, these collective action failures compelled journalists to adopt informal or individualized expert strategies of autonomy management.

For example, unconsulted headline changes made journalists stay "in the newsroom from 7 to 11 pm waiting to see what they did to their headlines, then began something like negotiations over a UN resolution on nuclear disarmament to see if they could soften the headline" (J02). Instead of directly engaging Madrid, negotiations were allegedly mediated by Barcelona editors sympathetic to their newsroom, highlighting the gap between the editorial board's and newsroom's notions of power-interactive expertise.

Another adaptation strategy involved withholding bylines (J10, J15, J16), enabling journalists to maintain a sense of autonomy through institutional distancing but causing public embarrassment for the newspaper. This strategy, which mirrors both the distributed nature of, and the fracture in, the regime of power-interactive expertise, was risky and hinged on reporters' field positions: those with job security risked reassignments seen as demotions, while precarious reporters risked losing their jobs.

you can only use this trick once, twice, anyone who does this repeatedly ends up on the editor-in-chief's radar, and if you are a contributor, a freelancer ... you don't have that tool, withholding your byline was shooting yourself in the foot. (J10)

Another such practice of institutional distancing involves subtle deception, facilitated by sympathetic editors and time constraints limiting the editorial board's ability to fully vet texts. One veteran reporter succinctly describes this manifestation of power-interactive expertise:

I write that it is dark and rainy. There is an interest [by the editorial board] in headlining and constructing a story saying it's sunny without going out to the street, but based on intuition, prejudices and wishful thinking ... [But I] could play with the text so that it read like what they wanted to see, while actually telling a different story ... you can turn it around ... in the text, from the byline below you may find many examples that the sun isn't shining [even if it shines in the headline]. (J15)

This strategy is less risky than withholding bylines but demands high power-interactive expertise: the journalist performs a delicate balancing act between complicity with attentive readers, who attribute only the portion of the article below the byline to the author, and subtly diverging from the editorial line so the article's subversion remains unnoticed at higher editorial levels. Ultimately, such deceptive forms of distancing underscore the regime's breakdown and the depth of professional habitus destabilization.

Autonomy vis-à-vis Sources

Another significant factor in habitus destabilization stemmed from *El País* journalists' growing difficulty convincing sources of their work's autonomy. In Catalonia, the

newspaper's coverage fostered a widespread perception that its narratives contributed to imprisoning prominent independentists, according to informants. In particular, its framing of the referendum as a "tumult" was seen by some as encouraging legal interpretations of the event as a "tumultuous uprising," a notion later used to justify sedition charges against 9 of the 12 Catalan politicians accused of organizing the referendum (J03)

Strategies of institutional distancing again offered journalists a lifeline to project autonomy. One reporter (J16) recounts being confined in an electoral college with independentists who locked themselves in to protect ballot boxes from police seizure:

Independentist: "Jesus Christ, your newspaper ..."

Journalist: "Listen, that's the editorial line, but we have to keep informing and that's why I'm here, I'm not going to make anything up"

Independentist: "You won't write about what you witnessed here, will you?"

Journalist: "Actually I will, why don't you bother to check what I publish under my name?"

In the conversation, the journalist contrasts his/her professional habitus, which forbids "making anything up", to an implicitly unprofessional editorial board. This moment illustrates a new, adaptive form of power-interactive expertise emerging amid a disrupted regime of autonomy.

Another reporter describes similar distancing practices when dealing with high-ranking independentist sources, ironically implying that the newspaper, not the journalist, is manipulative:

I own it with considerable irony, I come up to [representatives of an independentist party] and introduce myself: Spanish manipulative press! With that, you disarm them on the spot. That's it. No big deal. You need to know the difficulties inherent to your job, but this is nothing new, at best we are testing limits. (J06)

This quote conveys two theoretical insights: first, power-interactive expertise allows journalists to project autonomy, even ironically, within constraints perceived as "inherent" to their work; second, the breakdown of the old regime is simultaneously "testing limits" and fostering resocialization into a new, adaptive configuration of expertise:

I was caught between two stools, on the one hand, the editorial board wants to produce a discourse that for me is too anchored in *La Moncloa* [Spanish government], and on the other, the Catalan government was not giving much room for maneuver to non-independentist media, so I had an enormously difficult time accessing sources. It ended up exhausting me. I had the feeling I wasn't explaining what's really going on, but transmitting what others want to transmit (J09)

Toward a New Regime of Power-Interactive Expertise?

In June 2018, *El País* fired Caño and his team in dramatic fashion, with one MEB physically removed (J07, J16) after "barricading himself" (J11) in his office. The dismissals followed shareholder criticisms of the company's poor performance. In her first editorial meeting, newly appointed editor-in-chief Soledad Gallego announced a return to a "professional, Europeanist and progressive" (J14) line and published an interview with Pere Aragonés, the independentist vice-president of the *Generalitat*, breaking with Caño's monolithic editorial line.

Interviewees broadly claimed the editorial change enabled habitus re-stabilization (E02, J07, J08, J15). As one veteran states: “It’s easier to say I’m from *El País*, not just I work at *El País*. For a while, it was difficult to say I am from *El País*” (J14). Yet given that Caño’s fall occurred a week after socialist Sánchez became prime-minister, habitus re-stabilization may mask a lingering, objective encroachment by the field of power.

Hence, habitus destabilization may prompt journalists to internalize new conventions of journalistic autonomy, gradually transforming the regime of power-interactional expertise. The reporter (J06) who claimed to be “testing limits” and normalizing “difficulties inherent to your job” offers one example, but not the only one:

journalism is not a science, it’s not black or white it has shades of grey, there are moments when they went too far, in others I felt pressured because I had been pressured before ... it was a bad period, yes, it was really bad, terrible, in all aspects, the work environment was bad, but that, with hindsight, we probably perceived as more serious than it really was. When you remember it now, you give it more epic proportions. (J08)

This retrospective minimization of previously condemned practices shows how a modified habitus takes root—one attuned to a new regime of power-interactional expertise forged through the Caño era’s destabilizing experiences.

Discussion

The present article explored whether reframing autonomy as a matter of expertise can illuminate when and how its violation destabilizes journalistic habitus, and the extent to which habitus destabilization occurred at *El País*. It answered this question by operationalizing the concept of power-interactional expertise, which refers to the practices by which journalists navigate the multiple objective dependencies that shape their subjective accounts of autonomy, as well as their strategies for its preservation. By situating its findings within two strands of scholarship—the newsroom-control literature and research on journalism in crisis situations—the article clarifies how its contribution both builds on and departs from existing work.

The newsroom-control tradition (Breed 1955; Chomsky 2006; Lee and Chan 2009; Mortensen and Svendsen 1980) emphasizes the normalization and internalization of constraints that preserve journalists’ sense of autonomy, offering ample evidence of pressures being reframed as technical advice or routine matters. However, the *El País* case reveals the limits of such normalization. Here, the editorial board’s inexpert handling of pressures, described by a journalist as a “coarse and pathetic” alignment with the government, disrupted the tacit mediation through which constraints are usually translated into legitimate professional routines. This triggered *hysteresis*, a systematic destabilization of *habitus* that are “torn by contradiction and internal division” (Bourdieu 2000, 160), as the environment individuals “encounter is too different from the one to which they are objectively adjusted” (Bourdieu 2018, 41). In other words, *El País*’ newsroom experienced a mismatch between the power-interactional expertise into which journalists were socialized and the power-interactional expertise required to navigate an increasingly heterogeneous journalistic field.

In contrast to the crisis-era journalism literature (Hallin 1989; Thorbjørnsrud and Fjensschou 2018; Zaller and Chiu 1996), which portrays journalists as accepting temporary curtailment of autonomy during patriotic or existential crises, the *El País* newsroom

resisted such accommodation precisely because the board failed to perform the expert balancing acts that would otherwise sustain the projection of autonomy and prevent hysteresis. Together, these findings underscore how the stability of journalistic habitus depends on the co-produced and distributed expert management of constraints across the newsroom hierarchy.

The concept of power-interactional expertise, therefore, allows us to reconceptualize autonomy in novel, relational terms. It encourages us to trace the grid of relations and dependencies through which journalists construct autonomy and professionalism within regimes of power-interactional expertise. A key novelty of this article lies in demonstrating that journalists may regard pressures from the field of power as legitimate—but only when the regime of expertise enables them to project autonomy. In other words, a stable professional habitus depends not merely on objective constraints to autonomy, but crucially on the expert, distributed management of those constraints. The primary theoretical implication is that journalistic autonomy is best understood as internal to, and contingent on, the manner in which larger social forces shape professional habitus.

The article also suggests that some journalists who previously experienced habitus destabilization have internalized a new regime of power-interactional expertise—one more aligned with the heteronomous shift within the journalistic field. This trend runs parallel to the troubling public discrediting of journalistic professionalism. Since autonomy is crucial for journalism's credibility, this development raises important questions about the profession's degree of transparency (Plaisance and Deppa 2009, 379) that merit further investigation. As one *El País* reporter emphasizes: "We have explained far too little and quite poorly what the work of journalism is. Usually, this is our fault, because of how we are connected to power, for explaining poorly how information is produced and obtained" (J03). In an industry facing mounting credibility and financial crises, such calls deserve greater attention in efforts to safeguard journalism's legitimacy.

As with any case study, the findings have limited generalizability. As liberal democracies confront a polycrisis, this condition inevitably generates distinct national manifestations and specific configurations between social fields. Although snowball sampling was initiated from multiple seeds to enhance diversity, its reliance on referrals introduces potential bias in some accounts. Future research should investigate whether the polycrisis is reshaping journalistic autonomy beyond polarized pluralist media systems, and whether these transformations similarly hinge on the imperative to protect the democratic order.

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