Theory and Practice of Corruption: Methodological Triangulation on Journalists' Opinions About Scandals and Their Actual Coverage

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ᴱᴺᴳ **Abstract:** This article aims to discern whether the perception that Spanish journalists have regarding how corruption scandals are reported aligns with the actual coverage of these scandals in national media. To achieve this, a triangulation of two research techniques was conducted: a survey of 391 journalists and a content analysis of 334 journalistic pieces from five different media outlets concerning a paradigmatic case of corruption scandal involving Spain's former king, Juan Carlos I. The results show that the journalists' perception of corruption coverage in general and the actual coverage in the specific case analyzed coincide only in two of the measured aspects: the polarization and the individualization of scandals around the main accused. In contrast, discrepancies are noted between the two techniques regarding the degree of contextualization of the scandals, sensationalism, and interest in the accused's private life. Thus, it can be observed that the perception Spanish journalists have of how scandals are covered significantly differs from what is actually published in national media. Finally, no significant differences appear between print and digital media regarding the image of scandal coverage or how this phenomenon is actually reported.
Keywords: corruption, scandals, polarization, personalization, sensationalism.

ᴱˢTeoría y práctica de la corrupción: triangulación metodológica sobre la opinión de los periodistas acerca de los escándalos y su cobertura real

Resumen: El presente artículo trata de discernir si la percepción que tienen los periodistas españoles sobre cómo se recogen los escándalos de corrupción coincide con la forma en que estos son cubiertos realmente en los medios de comunicación nacionales. Para ello, se ha realizado una triangulación de dos técnicas de investigación: así, se llevó a cabo una encuesta a 391 periodistas, además de un análisis de contenido de 334 piezas periodísticas en cinco medios distintos de un caso paradigmático de escándalo de corrupción, el del rey emérito de España, Juan Carlos I. Los resultados muestran que la percepción de los periodistas sobre la cobertura de la corrupción en general y la cobertura que realmente se hizo en dicho caso específico coinciden únicamente en dos de los aspectos medidos: la polarización que existe en torno al caso y la individualización del escándalo en la figura del principal acusado, sobre el cual se puso gran atención como responsable de los hechos. Por el contrario, sí se aprecian discrepancias entre ambas técnicas en el grado de contextualización de los escándalos, el sensacionalismo, así como en el interés por la vida privada del acusado. De este modo, se puede observar que la percepción que tienen los periodistas españoles de la manera en que se cubren los escándalos difiere notablemente de la que en realidad se publica en los medios nacionales. Por último, no aparecen diferencias significativas entre medios en papel y digitales ni en cuanto a la imagen que se tiene entre los profesionales de la cobertura del escándalo ni en cómo se cubre realmente este fenómeno.
Palabras clave: Corrupción, escándalos, polarización, personalización, sensacionalismo.

1. Introduction

Corruption is a topic of enduring public, political, and media interest, pervasive across all societies and political systems. Spain is no exception to this rule; in March 2024, Spaniards ranked it as the sixth most pressing national problem, with 12.4% of respondents identifying it as a significant concern. This represents a notable shift from the period of the coronavirus pandemic, when less than 5% of the population identified it as a noteworthy issue. However, prior to the advent of the COVID-19, levels of public concern reached considerable heights, with percentages as high as 45% (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2017, 2021, 2024). This variability may be attributed to the pre-eminence and frequency of media coverage of corruption cases, as well as the manner in which these events are covered, which may influence how citizens frame corruption, in accordance with agenda setting and framing theory (Entman, 1993; McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

A plethora of academic publications exist which examine this phenomenon and the manner in which the media report upon it. In particular, numerous studies have addressed the coverage of these scandals from the perspective of framing or focus (see, for example, Maier *et al.*, 2019; Zamora & Marín Albaladejo, 2010). Other approaches attempt to identify the use of metaphors in the coverage of corruption, as exemplified by Berti's (2018) study in Italy and New Zealand, or to analyze the use of labels or specific words subsequently associated with a scandal (Motsaathebe, 2020). Furthermore, research on the role of the media in the diffusion of corruption has been conducted in other regions, including Africa (Motsaathebe, 2020), Latin America (di Tella & Franceschelli, 2011) and Asia (Chen & Zhang, 2016). Similarly, an extensive academic literature exists in Spain on this topic (see, for example, Canel & Sanders, 2005; Cunha *et al.*, 2015; Ortiz-González & Berganza, 2022, 2023; Sola-Morales & Zurbano-Berenguer, 2019; Zamora & Marín-Albaladejo, 2010).

Based on the conclusions of these studies, it could be argued that the information the public receives about corruption is linked to the work of journalists. Therefore, knowing the opinions of these professionals on corruption can explain certain aspects of media coverage of this phenomenon. However, in contrast to the coverage of corruption, there is no extensive literature on journalists' perceptions of corruption. In fact, there are hardly any academic studies that have analyzed, through representative surveys, their perception of how corruption is reported or how widespread it is in Spain. However, as we have seen, there is data on the public's perception of corruption. Examples are the Special Eurobarometer 534 (European Commission, 2023) or the aforementioned barometers of the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS).

Nevertheless, academic research on journalism has often used quantitative surveys, some on a large scale, to understand different aspects of the journalism profession. The Worlds of Journalism Study project stands out, with more than 60 countries participating and whose results allow a global comparison of different aspects of journalistic work, such as job security or journalistic roles (for the results of the second wave, see Hanitzsch *et al.*, 2019). In Spain, there are also numerous recent studies that have questioned different aspects of the profession through surveys of journalists, such as the rise of fake news (Blanco-Herrero & Arcila-Calderón, 2019), journalists' ethics towards governments and politicians (Mauri-Ríos *et al.*, 2020) or the quality of journalistic work (Gómez-Mompart *et al.*, 2015). In addition, there are periodic studies, such as the *Informe Anual de la Profesión Periodística*, published annually by the Madrid Press Association (Asociación de la Prensa de Madrid).

Notwithstanding the extensive use of surveys of journalists, however, a discrepancy remains with regard to how they perceive corruption. This underscores the academic need to address this aspect through further research. The present article seeks to contrast the outcomes of a quantitative-qualitative content analysis of the coverage of a corruption scandal associated with the emeritus king of Spain, Juan Carlos I (2020-2021), with the findings of a representative survey of Spanish journalists conducted between March and July 2023. This study thus aims to ascertain whether there is a congruence between the perceptions of reporters on the coverage of corruption and its actual practice, or whether, conversely, differences emerge indicating a disparity between how corruption is conceptualized in practice and as reported.

2. Corruption and its coverage in the media

Corruption, as a pervasive phenomenon, enables the attainment of benefits that would otherwise necessitate greater effort through a series of irregular actions (Malem Seña, 2014, pp. 170-172). It could be defined as follows:

> The breaking of legal or formal rules, or of the ethical principles on which the political system or a type of civic morality is based, relating to what constitutes an abuse of the public function in order to obtain a direct or indirect, material or immaterial private benefit, thus affecting the general interest or the proper functioning of the system in question. (Zamora & Marín Albaladejo, 2010, p. 5)

By its very nature, corruption tends to be hidden or at least discreet (Malem Seña, 2014, p. 172). The media therefore have a fundamental role to play in making corruption widely known to citizens. It is only when this happens that the so-called corruption scandal occurs. A scandal is thus constituted when there is public communication about behavior that is widely condemned by citizens (Esser & Hartung, 2004, p. 1041).

Political scandals can be caused by corruption, but also by other causes. Thompson (2000) states that it is possible to classify scandals into financial, power and sexual scandals: financial scandals are characterized by the misuse of economic resources; power scandals involve the abuse of power in a political office; and sexual scandals occur when the scandal is due to a breach of moral standards in matters of love or sex. The greater prevalence of one type of scandal or another is linked to its context, since the same type of scandal may have a large

following in one country, while it is barely relevant in another (Kepplinger, 2001, pp. 54-61). For example, sex scandals are more frequent in countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, but hardly relevant in Spain, Italy, or France (Cervi, 2019, p. 162).

This study is an analysis of the different features of political and media communication linked to the coverage of corruption scandals. One such feature is personalization (Tumber & Waisbord, 2004, p. 1036). As posited by Rebolledo (2017, p. 184), this phenomenon can be defined as "a dynamic process that develops in the context of media democracy and is reflected through three aspects: greater visibility of the political leader with respect to his party; the use of the most personal traits of his personality; and the presence of aspects of his private life with respect to political issues". The concept of personalization can be divided into two distinct dimensions. The initial dimension is individualization, which entails directing attention toward individuals as opposed to the institutions of which they are a part. The second dimension is privatization, which refers to the focus on the politician's private life and different aspects of their personality (Van Aelst *et al.*, 2012, pp. 206-208). The practice of personalization involves singling out specific individuals as the primary actors responsible for a corruption scandal. This approach shifts the focus of the debate from the broader institutional context to the actions of a few individuals, often referred to as "a few bad apples" (Just & Crigler, 2019, p. 37). This strategy avoids placing the blame on the institution to which these individuals belong, while discrediting only those who bear ultimate responsibility for the facts at hand. In Spain, Ortiz-González & Berganza (2023) demonstrate that the media employ personalization in their coverage of corruption scandals. Sola-Morales and Zurbano-Berenguer (2019, p. 14) confirm that the focus of political corruption coverage is on the individuals responsible for corruption cases, who are presented as "villains", while the endemic problems of corruption are overlooked.

Another area of focus is the absence of contextualization in news reporting on corruption. Park (2012) demonstrates that despite the prevalence of such cases in local media outlets in Illinois (United States), there is a tendency to avoid delving into debates about corruption. As a result, public discourse is trivialized, thereby constraining the presentation of proposals aimed at curbing the proliferation of the phenomenon. Similarly, research demonstrates that there is episodic coverage of corruption cases (Iyengar, 1996), which illustrates the issues exclusively through isolated incidents. This approach to coverage is at odds with thematic coverage, which "places a problem in a general context and generally takes the form of an in-depth analysis" (Park, 2012, p. 4). Sola-Morales and Rivera Gallardo (2017) identify a similar pattern in Spain and Chile, where they observe a tendency for media outlets to contextualize scandals in a way that does not fully elucidate the underlying causes of corruption.

Similarly, the researchers highlight the prevalence of sensationalism in the coverage of corruption, which is evident in the use of dramatic techniques designed to capture the reader's attention. This can be translated into the construction of a narrative similar to traditional stories, with a triggering event that can be described as immoral, and where "good guys" and "bad guys" emerge, and whose development is structured through the classic acts of approach, knot, and denouement (Canel & Sanders, 2005, p. 166). Cunha *et al.* (2015, p. 42) additionally assert that, in the pursuit of audience engagement, the scandals are often sensationalized, with those involved being portrayed as "characters within a star system". In this regard, Sola-Morales & Zurbano-Berenguer (2019, p. 6) emphasize that, whereas the corrupt are typically depicted as perpetrators and villains, the originators of these practices are often omitted from such portrayals.

In addition to the aforementioned characteristics, it is imperative to consider the role of political partisanship and the polarization of news coverage surrounding corruption. The latter phenomenon can be defined as "a process in which the normal multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly aligns along a single dimension and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of "Us" versus "Them"" (McCoy *et al.*, 2018, pp. 34-35). While there are various types of polarization, this article employs the term "ideological polarization" to signify the divergence between the political left and right (Fiorina, 2014).

In Spain, there is a consensus among researchers that the Spanish political system is undergoing a process of polarization. This can be attributed to the dissolution of the two-party system and the emergence of new political parties, including Ciudadanos, Podemos, and Vox, into the political landscape (see, for instance, Casal-Bertoa, 2019; Rodríguez-Virgili *et al.*, 2022). In the realm of media discourse, numerous scholars have also identified the phenomenon of political parallelism and polarization (see, for instance, Casero-Ripollés, 2012).

Specifically in terms of media system, Spain is a country classified as polarized pluralist by Hallin and Mancini (2004). Years after their influential work, Mancini (2019) proposed a typology of scandals, each more frequent in a given media system. In polarized pluralist countries, politically oriented scandals would predominate, with a high degree of ideological polarization because private interests drive them. Moreover, these scandals would be instrumentalized in order to position themselves in favor of certain political positions in an environment where the media are not independent and show a high degree of partisanship.

In Spain, the literature on scandals shows some of these characteristics. For example, Sola-Morales & Zurbano Berenguer (2019) found that *El País* did not extensively cover scandals related to the PSOE in November and December 2016, which they attributed to its editorial line. Similarly, Valdeón (2023) found that *El Mundo* and *ABC*, which traditionally have a right-wing ideological bias (Guerrero-Solé, 2022), covered a corruption case involving the Podemos party, which was part of the left-wing coalition government at the time, as well as another case of nepotism linked to the government environment. Meanwhile, *El País*, which is center-left (Guerrero-Solé, 2022), gave little space to either. Finally, Ortiz-González & Berganza (2022) found a high degree of political parallelism in some media, while others reached polarization when covering corruption scandals. Thus, considering our

objective and what has been revealed so far, the first research question is posed:

> RQ1. Do journalists' perceptions of the coverage of corruption scandals agree with the results of the content analysis in terms of personalization, level of contextualization, sensationalism, and polarization?

On the other hand, although not on issues related to corruption, but on issues related to journalism, different investigations have examined whether there are differences in perceptions among journalists depending on the type of media in which they work. In Spain, Berganza, Arcila-Calderón, & Herrero-Jiménez (2016) found that, except for reference groups, journalists from traditional and digital media had the same perception of risk factors and threats to professional autonomy. However, Berganza, Herrero-Jiménez & Carratalá (2016) found significant differences between journalists from print and online media in terms of the trust they placed in different institutions. Thus, given that the type of media has been established in the literature as a factor of variability in journalistic culture, it is interesting to know whether this variable (specifically focusing on digital or print natives, as collected in the content analysis) affects both the perception of how journalists cover corruption and how it is actually reflected in the media. This leads to the second research question:

> RQ2. Does digital or print media affiliation influence perceptions of corruption coverage and how the media covers it?

3. Methodology

The article was prepared by means of a methodological triangulation: on the one hand, content analysis and, on the other hand, surveys.

3.1. Content analysis

The content analysis focused on the corruption scandals of the emeritus King of Spain, Juan Carlos I. The coverage of this issue by *El País*, *El Mundo*, *ABC* (print media), *El Español*, and *elDiario.es* (digital media) was analyzed. The selection of these media was based on their audience reach, with *El País*, *El Mundo*, and *ABC* identified as the three national media with the highest circulation according to the General Media Study (EGM, *Estudio General de Medios* in Spanish). Additionally, *elDiario.es* and *El Español* were identified as the digital media with the highest number of visits according to OJD Interactiva. Moreover, these media outlets have distinct editorial orientations (Guerrero-Solé, 2022). The case study was selected due to the copious amount of information generated and the significance of the protagonist, a former head of state.

The selection of news items was conducted randomly, with 15 days' worth of information on the case study chosen from the period between March 1, 2020, and the same day in 2021, a period characterized by high levels of news activity. The 15 days selected for analysis were: in 2020, March 6 and 16; June 9 and 16; July 8 and 12; August 4 and 18; November 2 and 7; and December 7, 11, and 20, and in 2021, the dates of January 14 and February 26 were

subjected to analysis. In the case of digital media, the previous day was used, as it was not necessary to await the subsequent day of its printed publication. The final sample consisted of 334 items, comprising both news and opinion pieces. Except for *elDiario.es*, the remaining newspapers exhibit a strikingly similar number of selected pieces. From *El Mundo*, 45 pieces were selected, as were 51 from *El Español*. In addition, the number of pieces selected from *ABC* and *El País* was identical: 48. In the case of *elDiario.es*, this figure is higher (142) due to the publication of a considerable number of agency news items. However, these were also included in the sample as they were deemed appropriate for consideration by the media outlet in question.

The content analysis employed a mixed method approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative techniques and encompassing a vast array of variables. The attribution of the scandal was employed as a means of measuring the individualization dimension of personalization. The variable was coded in a manner that indicated whether the scandal was explicitly and solely attributed to the accused, but not to the institution. In such instances, the variable was considered to reflect individualization. In contrast, references to the defendant's private life were employed to gauge the privatization aspect of personalization (Van Aelst *et al.,* 2012). This entailed identifying whether such references were present or absent in the content analysis. Concerning contextualization, the variable of thematic or episodic frames was employed, as postulated by Iyengar (1996, p. 62). Iyengar defines the episodic frame as one that addresses issues through specific examples, whereas the thematic frame is associated with the representation of informative issues in a more general and abstract manner, situating them within a broader context.

The degree of sensationalism in the news was gauged by assessing the emotional tone of the news articles, taking into account both the content –based on an analysis of the dramatic or non-dramatic presentation of news events– and the use of affective, superlative or marked language with explicit expressions of emotion. Ultimately, distinct variables were employed to assess polarization and political partisanship. The first was the classification of the transgression based on the typology proposed by Thompson (2000), which distinguished between economic, power, and love transgressions. Secondly, the attribution of the scandal was again considered, that is, to whom responsibility for the scandal was attributed and thus where the problem originated (Iyengar, 1996). The final stage of the analysis was the examination of the strategic frame, as evidenced in journalistic pieces that are "centered around interpretations of candidates' or parties' motives for actions and positions; their strategies and tactics for achieving political or policy goals" (Aalberg *et al.,* 2012, p. 172). The aforementioned three variables permitted the identification of significant discrepancies between the coverage conducted by the various media outlets. Subsequently, the strategic frame was subjected to qualitative analysis, with particular attention paid to the discourses present in the media under examination.

3.2. Surveys

The second component of the methodology employed in this study is a representative survey of Spanish journalists conducted through a multistage sampling process (initially by clusters and subsequently by stratification) in accordance with the methodology of the international project, *Worlds of Journalism Study* (http://www.worldsofjournalism.org).

A total of 391 Spanish journalists were surveyed between March and June 2023, yielding a response rate of 65.71%. In the absence of an updated official register of journalists working in the media in Spain, the universe was estimated using data from Díaz Nosti (2011) and the Madrid Press Association (2011, 2021). This yielded an approximate result of between 18,000 and 20,000. The number of journalists to be interviewed was obtained with a confidence level of 95% and an estimated error of ±5%.

The sample selection was made by considering the media outlets as aggregated sampling units. To identify the available media, the *Infoperiodistas* media guide was consulted, which, as of November 11, 2022, listed 2,627 general information media outlets. Following the elimination of non-active media outlets and the delegations of major radio stations, the final sample consisted of 624 media entities. These were classified according to their geographical location, type (press, television, radio, magazines, magazine agencies, and digital media), and size, defined as either large (five journalists to be surveyed) or small (three, if any), based on their audience size as determined by the General Media Study (EGM) and the Spanish Office for the Justification of Dissemination (OJD, *Oficina para la Justificación de la Difusión* in Spanish).

The final selection of media was made via stratified random sampling. The number of media in each stratum was adopted in proportion to the population size, with the exception of digital media, for which the population was multiplied by 0.6 to obtain the sample size. This operation was conducted due to the discovery, during the exploratory phase, that a considerable number of the digital media listed had fewer than three journalists employed by them.

The selection of journalists within each media outlet was random, taking into account the need to include journalists of different ranks. Journalists who declined to participate were replaced by others from the same media outlet with similar characteristics. If the entire media outlet declined to participate, the newly selected media outlet was matched in terms of type, size, geographical coverage and reach. The journalists interviewed answered several questions about how corruption is reported in Spain.

In order to statistically compare these results with those of the content analysis, some survey variables that were originally measured on a Likert scale from 1 to 5 (from lowest to highest degree of agreement) were recoded. Depending on the content analysis variable to which they corresponded, they were coded as binary 0/1 –with the intermediate value of neither agreeing nor disagreeing being assumed to be missing– or as three-category variables.

4. Results

The initial step is to contrast the findings of the survey with those of the content analysis concerning the two dimensions of personalization. In the case of individualization, both methodologies demonstrate comparable percentages. The content analysis revealed that 83.3 % of the items exhibited individualization, while the journalists themselves perceived that the coverage displayed features of this dimension of personalization in 82.7 % of cases. The chi-square test indicates that there are no statistically significant differences between the results of the two methodologies ($\chi^2 = 0.067$, $p = 0.796$). With regard to the privatization feature, it was identified in 42.8 % of the information analyzed, whereas only 15.6% of the journalists considered that it existed. In this case, the chi-square test demonstrated that there were significant differences between the two methodologies ($\chi^2 = 57.128$, $p < 0.001$) (see Table 1).

Table 1. Two dimensions of personalization in the content analysis and the survey.

	Individualization		Privatization	
	Content Analysis.	**Survey**	**Content Analysis.**	**Survey**
No individualization/ privatization	16.7 % (54)	17.3 % (45)	57.2 % (191)	84.4 % (271)
There is individualization/ privatization	83.3 % (280)	82.7 % (215)	42.8 % (143)	15.6 % (50)

Source: Own elaboration.

In terms of contextualization, the content analysis revealed that 68 % of the pieces adopt an episodic frame, with minimal or no contextualization. Conversely, 24.2 % of the pieces are primarily thematic in focus. The remaining 7.8 % of the pieces exhibit a combination of both frames. In contrast, the results of the survey demonstrate a more balanced distribution between the three options. A slight majority (35.2 %) of journalists concur that there is a paucity of contextualization of news on corruption, which may be attributed to an episodic frame. Conversely, 24.8 % of respondents indicated that there is sufficient contextualization, a view that is associated with the thematic frame. Nevertheless, the prevailing view is that contextualization is not lacking, but that it is also not widespread (40 %) (see Table 2). The chi-square test yielded significant results, indicating notable differences between the two methodologies ($\chi^2 = 112.892$, $p < 0.001$).

In terms of sensationalism, the content analysis revealed that there were only two predominantly emotional texts (0.6 %) and one mixed text (0.3 %),

while the majority of texts were predominantly non-emotional (99.1 %). Conversely, the responses from journalists exhibit greater diversity. The proportion of those who perceive the coverage of corruption as sensationalist (38.6 %) is almost equal to those who view it as neither sensationalist nor absent (38.4 %). A mere 23 % of respondents indicated that the coverage of corruption is not sensationalist. The chi-square test indicates that there are notable discrepancies between the two methodologies (χ^2 = 428.26, p < 0.001).

Table 2. Presence of thematic frame and emotional tone in the survey and content analysis.

Thematic frame			Emotional tone/sensationalism		
	Content analysis	Survey		Content analysis	Survey
Episodic frame	68 % (227)	35.2 % (137)	Predominantly emotional/ sensationalist	0.6 % (2)	38.6 % (151)
Balanced	7.8 % (26)	40 % (156)	Mixed	0.3 % (1)	38.4 % (150)
Thematic frame	24.2 % (81)	24.8 % (97)	Predominantly non-emotional/non-sensationalist	99.1 % (331)	23 % (90)

Source: Own elaboration.

This study finally addresses the issue of political partisanship and polarization in the information on corruption. The varying coverage across media outlets is observed through the lens of distinct content analysis variables. With regard to the type of transgression in question, the most frequently occurring was economic in nature, featuring in 81.1 % of the sampled articles. The results of the analysis indicated that the newspaper *ABC*, which has a monarchist orientation (de Pablos Coello & Ardévol, 2009), had the lowest probability of focusing on this type of transgression. Indeed, in all the other media under consideration, this figure exceeded 80 %. However, in *ABC* it reached only 60.4 %. The existence of transgressions of power (2.1 %) and love (20.4 %) was also analyzed, but the chi-square test found no significant differences between media.

With regard to the question of responsibility for the scandal, the majority of respondents (89.5 %) attributed it to the accused. However, the chi-square test revealed significant differences between media outlets in this regard. The lowest tendency to attribute responsibility to Juan Carlos I is demonstrated by *ABC* (|-4.6|>2.58). In this newspaper, the emeritus king was attributed responsibility in 70.8 % of cases, while in the remainder of the cases the figure exceeded 90 %. As for the attribution to the institution (5.7 %), the discrepancy between media outlets was marginal and not statistically significant (p = 0.051). It is notable that both *El País* and *El Mundo* never attribute responsibility to the institution, whereas *ABC* does so on two occasions (4.2 %), albeit through statements by members of Unidas Podemos, which is at odds with the newspaper's editorial line. The medium with the highest probability of attributing responsibility to the institution tendentiously is *elDiario.es* (|1.9|>1.65), where this occurs on twelve occasions (8.5 %). Lastly, *El Español* is the medium where this attribution is most prevalent in percentage terms, with 9.8 % (five times).

Conversely, the chi-square test indicates disparities between media outlets with regard to the prevalence of strategic focus. The residuals reveal that this frame is more prevalent in *ABC* (|4.9|>2.58), where it is employed in 41.7 % of instances. In contrast, *El País* occupies the opposite position on the spectrum (|-2.6|>2.58), as this frame is absent. With regard to the remaining newspapers, *elDiario.es* is the publication in which such a frame is most frequently observed (30.5 %), followed by *El Mundo* (22.2 %). The evidence suggests that this frame is employed to a very limited extent in *El Español* (5.6 %).

The qualitative analysis demonstrates that the narratives presented by the media, when they adopt a strategic frame, serve to indicate the editorial positions they espouse. *ABC* presents a discourse that is in opposition to the stances held by the left and the republican parties. Thus, it states that the parties belonging to this ideological spectrum are attempting to exploit the monarch's scandal in order to advance the establishment of a republic. Similarly, *El Mundo* presents a comparable critique of a strategy targeting the monarchy, albeit with a lower frequency. This observation aligns with the findings of the quantitative analysis on the prevalence of the strategic frame. Meanwhile, *elDiario.es*, which has previously adopted a critical stance towards the monarchy (López García & Valera Ordaz, 2013), demonstrates a contrasting position in relation to the former monarch. It is highlighted that Juan Carlos I relocated to the United Arab Emirates in order to avoid any potential negative impact on the monarchy as a result of the scandals that he was embroiled in. Moreover, the same media outlet indicates that the government is pursuing a strategy of maintaining the focus on the former monarch and preventing Felipe VI from being associated with his father's issues.

The results of the survey of Spanish journalists indicate a significant level of consensus with the proposition that "the prevailing political polarization in Spain fosters a tendency among media outlets

to pursue scandals involving parties with opposing ideologies (n = 391)". The mean score for agreement is 3.8 on a scale of 1 (indicating minimal agreement) to 5 (indicating maximal agreement) (SD: 1.034). Approximately two-thirds of respondents (66.9 %) indicate agreement or total agreement with this idea, representing a higher proportion than that observed among those who express total or partial disagreement (11 %), and those who show neither agreement nor disagreement (22.1 %).

Additionally, there is a substantial consensus regarding the assertion that "the coverage of a political corruption scandal is influenced by the editorial line and ideology of the media." This is evidenced by an average rating of 4.06 on a response scale of 1 to 5. Consequently, 76.2 % of journalists express partial or complete support for this notion, while 5.9 % adopt an opposing stance and 17.9 % indicate a lack of inclination towards any position.

In order to respond to RQ2, a multilevel logistic regression was conducted. To this end, the 133 records pertaining to surveys of digital and print journalists were extracted from the survey data set, which encompasses the two media types included in the content analysis. The complete sample was included in this extraction. As the variables employed are nominal, dummy variables were constructed. In order to perform the regression, the source variable (content analysis/survey) was taken as the dependent variable and the type of media (digital/paper) as the grouping variable. This variable is included as a random effect, which provides information on whether there is variability in the constant between the different types of media. The results indicate that the variance value is practically zero (1.414e-15), which suggests that the media type has no significant random effect on the source variable. In other words, the medium in which journalists work (digital or paper) has no influence on their perception of how news about corruption is written, nor does it affect the way in which corruption is covered. Conversely, the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) is 180, which indicates that the model exhibits a favorable relationship fit with the data set and the variables under consideration (see Table 3).

Table 3. Random effects and fixed effects of the Multilevel Logistic Regression analysis.

Groups	Name	Variance	Standard Deviation	
Type of medium	(Constant)	1.414E-15	3.761E-08	
	Standard estimate	Error	z-value	Pr(>|z|)
(Constant)	-0.196	0.478	-0.410	0.682
Individualization	-0.613	0.501	-1.224	0.221
Privatization	-2.721	0.577	-4.714	<0.001***
EmotionalToneI1	7.029	0.992	7.083	<0.001***
EmotionalTone2	7.768	1.199	6.476	<0.001***
ThematicFrame1	-2.846	0.556	-5.117	<0.001***
ThematicFrame2	0.803	0.509	1.576	0.115

***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05
Source: Own elaboration

5. Discussion and conclusions

The first research question seeks to ascertain whether there are discrepancies between the perceptions of journalists regarding the coverage of corruption and the actual content published. The initial step is to analyze personalization in its two dimensions: individualization and privatization. The results of the content analysis demonstrate that there is a notable degree of individualization evident in the case (Van Aelst *et al*., 2012), with the scandal predominantly attributed to the individual allegedly responsible, rather than to the institution. This trait, as perceived and similarly recognized by Spanish journalists, is related to the "bad apple" strategy (Just & Crigler, 2019), whereby the focus is placed on the individual person, with the assumption that once punished, it is not necessary to implement changes within the institution to which they belong. Conversely, there is a relatively constant presence of references to the defendant's private life, representing over 40 % (42.8 %) of mentions. These are linked to the privatization dimension of personalization (Van Aelst *et al*., 2012), and are not perceived to be as significant by Spanish journalists (only 15.6 % do so).

As Tumber & Waisbord (2004) have observed, personalization is a prominent feature of the coverage of scandals. In any case, the number of mentions of the defendant's private life is noteworthy, with the majority of references pertaining to the relationship with his extramarital former partner, Corinna Larsen. This result is surprising given that, as Cervi (2019, p. 162) notes, interest in the sexual life of politicians is common in Anglo-Saxon countries but typically absent in Spain. It is evident that the case under examination represents a distinct instance of scandal, given the involvement of the emeritus king's extramarital

former partner, Corinna Larsen. However, in numerous instances where her name was mentioned, the nature of their relationship was emphasized, despite its lack of relevance to the narrative.

In terms of the contextualization of information on corruption, the content analysis yields results that are consistent with those reported by Park (2012). Specifically, slightly more than two-thirds (68 %) of the articles on corruption adopt an episodic frame without sufficient contextualization. Conversely, the findings of the content analysis are not aligned with the perceptions of journalists, who exhibit a considerable range of perspectives. The most frequent response is that there is no lack of contextualization, but that it is not generalized either (40 %), while just over a third believe that there is little contextualization.

With regard to sensationalism, the content analysis evaluated the presence of an emotional tone, and less than 1% of the pieces were considered to be predominantly emotional or of mixed tone. Accordingly, the occurrence of sensationalism, as defined herein, is not pervasive in this instance. Once more, the question proved contentious among journalists, with a tie between those who concurred that sensationalism was present and those who neither agreed nor disagreed. Once more, discrepancies emerge between the journalists' perceptions and the findings of the content analysis. However, in this case, the discrepancies have a different meaning than in the remainder of the study. In all other cases, the content analysis revealed a greater presence of the measured fact than that observed by the journalists. The opposite is, in fact, the case.

In order to gain insight into the phenomenon of polarization, we undertook a detailed examination of the manner in which different media outlets, distinguished by their disparate ideological stances, respond to a set of pivotal variables. These include the attribution of the scandal, the mention of the specific type of scandal, and the strategic focus. The findings demonstrated notable discrepancies between the various media outlets with regard to the variables employed. Therefore, with regard to both the attribution of the scandal and the mention of the type of scandal, it can be observed that *ABC*, with monarchist tendencies, points less frequently than the rest of the media to Juan Carlos I as the person responsible for the scandal. Furthermore, the type of scandal is less frequently characterized as economic.

Similarly, in regard to strategic orientation, there are contrasts between the media in question, which, when subjected to qualitative analysis, manifest opposing and conflicting stances. Such differences are clearly observable in the case of *ABC* and *elDiario.es*. The former maintains that a strategy is in place that aims to exploit the scandals involving Juan Carlos I to discredit the monarchy. In contrast, *elDiario.es*, which has previously expressed criticism of the monarchy (López García & Valera Ordaz, 2013), suggests that a political strategy is being employed to create a firewall between King Felipe VI and his father, Juan Carlos I, with the aim of protecting both the current king and the institution from any potential negative consequences. Therefore, the aforementioned media outlets exemplify the characteristics of politically oriented scandals as postulated by Mancini (2019), including instrumentalization for the purpose of

defending specific positions, a high degree of partisanship, and polarization. This polarization observed in these two media outlets is consistent with the findings reported in the academic literature on this phenomenon in Spain. These include studies in the political field (Casal-Bertoa, 2019; Rodríguez-Virgili *et al.,* 2022) and in the media (Teruel Rodríguez, 2016).

With respect to journalists, the surveys indicate that these professionals tend to concur with the two statements pertaining to this issue: that instances of corruption involving parties with opposing ideologies are accorded greater prominence, and that their coverage is shaped by the editorial stance of the media in question.

Therefore, the response to the initial research question is that there is a convergence between the journalists' perception of how corruption is covered and the actual coverage in the individualization dimension of personalization, as well as in polarization. However, this convergence is not observed in privatization, sensationalism, and contextualization.

Regarding RQ2, the regression model shows that the type of media (digital or print) is not a relevant factor in how journalists perceive corruption coverage or how it is actually covered. Thus, if a journalist belongs to a print media, his, or her perception is statistically equal to that of a colleague working in a digital native publication. The same is true for the actual coverage in the media, which does not differ according to whether the medium is paper or digital, at least for the variables analyzed.

In conclusion, after comparing the results of the content analysis of a case study of a corruption scandal and the opinions of journalists through a survey, it can be seen that in more than half of the issues analyzed, journalists' perceptions of how corruption is reported do not correspond to how it is actually reported. This is the case for privatization, contextualization, and sensationalism. On the other hand, journalists' perceptions do match the way the media actually cover this phenomenon, in terms of polarization and individualization. Thus, although journalists are aware of certain aspects of the situation, they need to work on becoming aware of others in order to orient their practice towards higher quality journalism.

This work also has limitations. Journalists were asked about the coverage of corruption in general, not about a specific case. On the other hand, the content analysis case study has a number of particularities that may not appear in other corruption scandals, such as the involvement of an extramarital partner in the case, or the position of the accused, a former head of state but not an elected official. In the future, similar studies replicating this research could concretely link several case studies with different characteristics to the survey questions, so that results can be obtained that link the two methodologies to the same corrupt context.

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7. Author contributions

Conceptualization	Ideas; formulation or development of overall research goals and objectives.	Author 1
Data curation	Administrative activities to annotate (create metadata), clean, and maintain research data (including software code where necessary to interpret the data itself) for initial use and subsequent reuse.	Author 2
Formal analysis	Application of statistical, mathematical, computational or other formal techniques to analyze or synthesize study data.	Authors 2 and 3
Acquisition of funds	Obtaining financial support for the project that led to this publication.	Author 1
Research	Conducting an investigation and research process, in particular conducting experiments or collecting data/evidence.	Authors 2 and 3
Methodology	Developing or designing methodologies; creating models.	Author 2
Project management	Leadership and coordination of the planning and execution of the research activity.	Author 1
Resources	Providing study materials, reagents, materials, patients, laboratory specimens, animals, instruments, computer resources or other analytical tools.	–
Software	Programming, software development; design of computer programs; implementation of computer code and supporting algorithms; testing of existing code components.	–
Supervision	Supervision and leadership of the planning and execution of research activities, including mentoring outside the core team.	Author 1
Validation	Verifying, either as part of the activity or separately, the overall reproducibility/replicability of results/experiments and other research products.	Author 1
Visualization	Preparation, production and/or presentation of published work, in particular data visualization/presentation.	Author 3
Writing / Original draft	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work, in particular writing the first draft (including substantive translation).	Authors 1, 2 and 3
Writing / Proofreading and editing	Organization, production and/or presentation of published work by members of the original research group, in particular critical review, commentary or revision, including pre- and post-publication stages.	Authors 1, 2 and 3

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