

## Differences between the quality of the printed version and online editions of the European reference press

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### **Abstract**

This article deals with a key question for the future of journalism: the repercussion which new technologies are having on news quality. The authors compared digital and printed versions of five major European reference newspapers, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Financial Times*, *Le Monde*, *Corriere della Sera* and *El País* throughout the first three months of 2013. The study provides specific data about the quality indices of each of these versions and confirms that there is a deterioration in news quality online. The average index obtained by the printed version is 6.06 out of 10, against 5.66 for the digital version, a difference of 40 hundredths. Finally, the work compares the 2013 results with those registered in the period 2001-2012 by these newspapers in their printed versions. Printed news quality shows greater stability.

**Key words:** European reference press, news quality, news values, future of journalism, professionalism.

## Introduction

The establishment of new technologies has provoked a number of consequences in the media throughout the world. The rapid sustained development of the Internet has especially affected the printed media. These media, as a general rule, have reinforced their electronic editions, furnishing them with greater content and implementing multimedia resources. As a consequence of all this, the number of readers of the digital press has increased exponentially all over the world, while sales of the printed press have plummeted, especially in the West, home of the so-called reference press or quality press. Any reader can see at first glance the differences which exist between the online and printed versions of the same newspaper. But, and here lies the question on which our research is based: are there substantial differences in the quality of the two versions?

The present article brings together the main results of a comparative study between the electronic and printed editions of the five major European reference newspapers during the first three months of 2013. The work has involved evaluating the quality of 105 news items which appeared in the digital editions of these five papers and comparing them with the versions of the same information which appeared in paper in said newspapers the next day. The study forms part of a wider research which analyses the evolution in news quality of the European reference press between 2001 and 2013<sup>1</sup>. The HGH research team (Media, Society & Education in the Basque language) wanted to observe the evolution of news quality in the European reference press during the first 13 years of the current century, compare their printed and digital versions and determine whether an improvement in quality has any influence on the results.

According to a report by the German consultancy IMH (Internationale Medienhilfe), the five most influential newspapers of the old continent are: *Financial Times* (FT), *Corriere della Sera* (CDS), *Le Monde* (LM), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), and *El País* (EP). They all have decades of experience behind them (the first two have been going for over a century) and they have sales of between 300,000 and 400,000 copies daily, not counting their electronic editions.

## Literature review

The academic literature in relation to journalistic quality is abundant and varied, based on eras, authors and aims. By way of summary, it could be said that whilst trends in the US have a more commercial orientation, Scandinavian ones revolve mainly around the concept of *informativity*, those from Latin America are more centred on journalistic quality (the contribution of Pellegrini et al. 2006 stands out with her Value-Added Journalism method) and the German ones around the term *professionalism*.

The essential connection between journalism and society has generated work which demonstrates that journalistic quality is a *sine qua non* for the effective development of democracy (Gripsrud & Weibull 2010). The existence of a European public arena has been highlighted in different studies (Trenz 2004; Risse 2003; Semetko & Valkenberg 2000). However, the “old Europe” maintains its three journalistic models, linked to the political system and described in detail by Hallin & Mancini (2004): Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralist Model, Democratic Corporatist Model and Liberal Model.

It is worth highlighting those theoretical contributions from the last few years which have tackled aspects relating to journalistic quality from different viewpoints, such as those carried out by Bogart (2004), Picard (2004), Deuze (2005), Medina (2006), Weischenberg (2006), Amado (2007), Gómez Mompert (2009) and Beck (2010) among others.

In the field of applied research, it is worth mentioning the recent contributions from García (2004), Avilés (2004), Lewis (2007), González Gorosarri (2011), Pujadas (2011), Costera (2013), Esser (2013) and lastly, the compilation of research and suggestions edited by Gómez Mompert (2013).

One of the most recent researches, such as that carried out in July 2012 by Penny O'Donnell at the University of Sydney (*Journalism at the speed of bytes. Australian newspapers in the 21st century*), alerts us to the dramatic consequences which the immediacy demanded by new technologies is having on news quality.

### **Aims, hypotheses and research questions**

The fundamental aim of this research is clear: To contrast the quality indices of the digital and printed versions of the five major European quality newspapers during a specific time period (the first trimester of 2013). The idea is also to compare these results with the diachronic analysis carried out by this team for the same five newspapers, but only for their printed versions, from 2001-2012. We believe that the global period covered by both studies (2001-2013) offers sufficient guarantees to allow us to draw certain conclusions with a modicum of rigorousness.

We understand that a piece of news is of quality when it satisfactorily fulfils a series of minimums related as much to the selection (*gatekeeping*) and elaboration processes (*newsmaking*) of the news, as to the social contribution which the reported event makes to society.

In order to achieve said aims, and focussing exclusively on the research of 2013, the work team has used the following hypotheses (H) and Research Questions (RQ) as its starting point:

H1. The digitalisation of the content of the written press, together with the immediacy demanded by electronic editions, provokes an acceleration in the news selection and elaboration processes which may affect news quality.

Research Questions associated to the hypothesis:

RQ1. Are there substantial differences between the quality of the digital and printed versions of the same piece of news?

RQ2. Are there differences between the newspapers analysed?

RQ3. What percentage of digital and printed news satisfactorily passes the quality index?

RQ4. Are the results of the synchronic examination of 2013 coherent with those registered in the diachronic research from 2001-2012?

Second hypothesis of this research:

H2. The preparation process of the news, which among other variables systematically penalises the inaccuracy of journalistic language, seems, a priori, to be the most appropriate to observe the hypothetical differences between the electronic and printed versions of these newspapers.

Research Questions associated with the hypothesis:

RQ5. Are there differences between the elaboration process of the same news item in electronic and printed format?

RQ6. Does the journalistic style vary in the digital and printed versions?

RQ7. What kind of mistakes are the most frequent?

Third hypothesis of this research:

H3. All the analysed newspapers have tried to improve their online version over the last few years in an attempt to make their presence on the web more visible and with a view to increasing their income via digital subscriptions.

Research Questions associated with the hypothesis:

RQ8. Have those efforts been reflected in the quality of their digital versions?

RQ9. Does celerity take precedence over quality in the online editions of these reference newspapers?

RQ10. Is there a direct relationship between the quality of online editions and the digital subscriptions to the same newspaper?

### **Methodology**

The research team responsible for this work has used its own methodology, a pioneer method which draws on the main contributions to this field produced in the last decades, particularly from Germanic and Anglo-Saxon literature (Bucher & Altmeyden 2003, Maurer 2005, Meyer 2004, Trebbe 2008, Vehlow 2006). The method establishes verifiable and quantifiable parameters capable of rigorously determining the quality of a specific news item whether it be in paper format or on the Internet. The technique used stems from the concept of *media performance* developed by Denis McQuail (1992) and allows the use of crossmedia parameters to evaluate news quality. The methodology provides data about both the format quality of the analysed item (technical, aesthetic and functional aspects, among others), and about its quality index, evaluating in a precise way the selection and elaboration processes of the news, and also its degree of social contribution. As a result of all this, it is awarded a value between 0 and 10 which graphically shows the quality of that news item in particular, both in its online and printed versions.

According to the traditional normative theories, evaluating the quality of the news posed serious challenges. However, the concept of media performance introduced by Denis McQuail supplied a very interesting viewpoint (McQuail, 1992: 17)

*The independent assessment of mass media provision according to alternative 'public interest' criteria, by way of objective and systematic methods of research, taking account of other relevant evidence and the normal operating conditions and requirements of the media concerned.*

The concept of media performance took hold especially in western democracies, gradually becoming linked to “social responsibility”. Gonzalez Gorosarri (2011) developed an integrating concept of News Quality inventing a method which could even allow a *crossmedia* analysis, following the German news quality model. Whilst some authors have analysed this question from an organisational perspective: the impact of economic and labour questions on the product (Picard, 2004, Gripsrud & Weibull, 2010; O'Donnell et al, 2012;), news quality has traditionally been analysed through its content. The German model has created a theoretical corpus based on the standard theory of “media performance” proposed by McQuail, from which to derive standards of excellence, as opposed to other authors (Bogart, 2004; Maurer, 2005: 85-88; Meyer, 2004; Vehlow, 2006: 23-24).

The method used in this research to determine news quality was included in a code book where all the doubts expressed during the process prior to data collection were clarified. This code book turned out to be a fundamental tool for the group's work. It was developed following numerous group meetings, took almost nine months to finish and took the form of a 32 page document which served as a vade mecum throughout the whole research.

The following table shows all the variables which make up each level of analysis, both quantitative and qualitative.

<b>Code</b>	
<b>Date</b>	

Sample type	
Headline	
<b>FORMAL QUALITY</b>	
<b>1.) Technical aspects</b>	
Major defects	
Minor defects	
<b>2.) Presentation aspects</b>	
Aesthetical deficiencies	
White spaces in headlines	
White spaces in kickers	
White spaces in the caption	
Orphan lines	
Widow lines	
A fractioned word in the last line of the paragraph	
Operational deficiencies	
Lapsus clavis	
<b>DIVERSITY</b>	
<b>SECTIONS (Topics)</b>	
<b>PROTAGONISTS</b>	
<b>Informational 'deviant' groups</b>	
<b>Gender</b>	
<b>GEOGRAPHICAL DIVERSITY</b>	
<b>NEWS QUALITY INDEX (NQI)</b>	
<b>SELECTION PROCESS</b>	<b>VALUES</b>
<b>Mention of the source</b>	Mentioned (0.5); Indirectly (0.25); Not Mentioned (0)
<b>Nature of the source</b>	Documents (0.5); Experts (0.4); Identified (0.3); Indirectly (0.1); Not mentioned (0)
<b>Factuality of the reported fact</b>	Event (0.5); Statements (0.25); Advertisement (0)
<b>Degree of factualness</b>	Digital: The last two hours (0.5); Digital: "Yesterday", "today", "tomorrow" (0.4); Printed: "Yesterday", "today", "tomorrow" (0.5); 2-7 days (0.25); More than a week (0.1); Without date (0)
<b>Newsworthiness</b>	Social consequences (0.5); Personal consequences (0.25); Pseudo-event (0)
<b>ELABORATION PROCESS</b>	<b>VALUES</b>
<b>Accuracy</b>	Summarises / Advances a news story (1); Highlights just a part/characteristic (0.5); Is ambiguous/deceitful (0)
<b>Depth</b>	7 W (1); 5-6 W (0.5); 4W (0)
<b>Presence of different perspectives within the item</b>	3 perspectives (1); 2 perspectives (0.5); 1 perspective, reasoned (0.25); 1 perspective, without reasoning (0)
<b>Contributions made by other informative elements</b>	
<b>Informational aspects</b>	Very significant (4-5W) (0.5);

	Significant (2-3 W) (0.25); Filling (1 W) (0); Do not coincide (-0.25)
<b>Artistic aspects</b>	Very elaborated (0.5); Quite elaborated (0.25); Simple (0.1); Has no additional elements (0); Minor defects (-0.25); Serious defects (-0.5); Very serious defects (-0.75)
<b>Use of language</b>	
<b>Journalistic register</b>	Clear and concise (1); Cannot be understood from an initial reading (0); Not professional (-0.5); Mediocre (-1)
<b>Orthographical and grammar errors</b>	Errors: headline, introductory heading, subheading (-1); Errors: windows, caption, subhead (-0.5); Errors: text (-0.25)
<b>SOCIAL CONTRIBUTION</b>	<b>VALUES</b>
<b>Power watchdog</b>	Controls power (0.5); Doesn't control power (0); Accepts the discourse of power (-0.5)
<b>Promotion of social debate</b>	Encourages debate (0.5); Does not encourage debate (0); Divides, ruptures (-0.5)
<b>Respect for human dignity</b>	Guarantees dignity (0.5); Does not guarantee dignity (-0.5); Neither one nor the other (0)
<b>Presence of cultural references from other countries</b>	Local or world culture (0.5); With no cultural reference (0); Culture assimilator (-0.5)
<b>The fight against social marginalisation</b>	Fights marginalisation (0.5); Does not fight marginalisation (0); Insults, scorns (-0.5)
<b>Selection (2.5 points)</b>	
<b>Elaboration (5 points)</b>	
<b>Social contribution (2.5 points)</b>	
<b>TOTAL</b>	

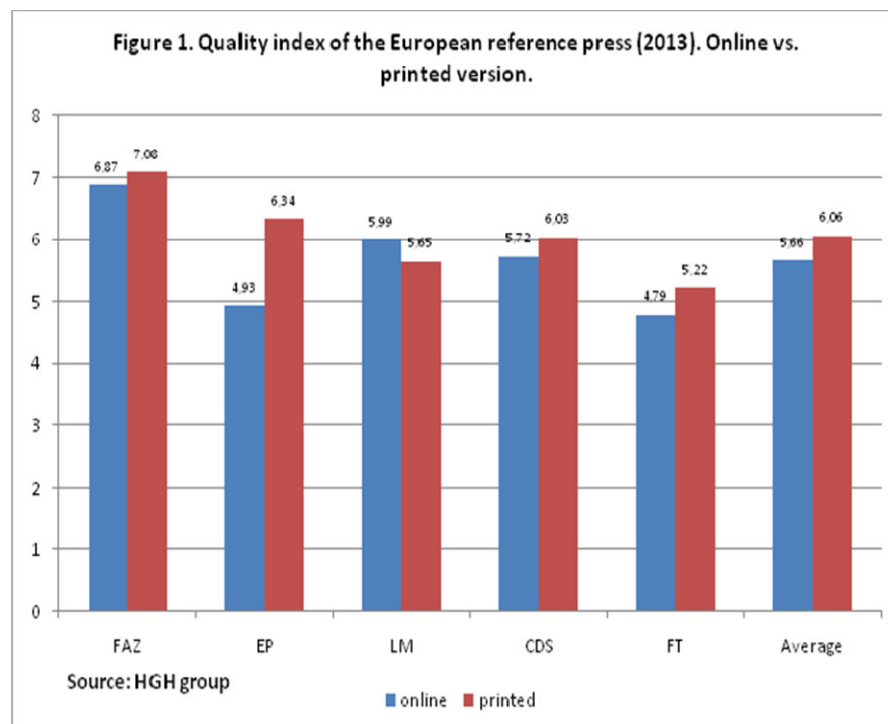
The resulting method combines both qualitative and quantitative aspects<sup>2</sup>. The first section includes questions relating to format quality (technical aspects, aesthetic or functional mistakes, such as the presence of *lapsus clavis*), a section in which appears the profile of the protagonists, their gender and scope of influence. These sections are not scored from 0 to 10. Their presence or absence is simply noted and used to draw final conclusions.

The quantitative aspects reflect the quality index of the news, rated from 0 to 10 and which is divided into three very different segments: Selection process (maximum 2.5), elaboration (5) and the social contribution of the news (2.5). The selection process includes five aspects, each one rated with a maximum of 0.5: mention from the source of the news, the character of the sources, factuality of the reported fact (event or statement), degree of factualness and newsworthiness (the degree of interest in the news item). The elaboration process is the most important and includes five sections, each with a maximum possible score of one point: accuracy (correspondence between the headline and body of the item), depth (presence of the 5 Ws), presence of different perspectives within the item, contributions made by other informative elements (photographs, graphics, infographics, etc.) and correctness of journalistic language (errors in the text). Lastly, the section relative to social contribution (according to the UNESCO Declaration of Principles of Professional Ethics in Journalism of 1983) also includes further five sections, each rated with a maximum of 0.5 points: power watchdog, promotion of social debate, respect for human dignity, presence of cultural references from other countries and the combating of social marginalisation. By adding up the scores from all these variables, a value of 0 to 10 is obtained for each news item.

The sample used as the basis for our research was developed using the widely contrasted and verified constructed week technique (Zabaleta, 1997: 197). Three complete weeks were analysed during the months of January, February and March of 2013. The selected weeks were from the 23<sup>rd</sup> to the 29<sup>th</sup> January, the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> February and the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> March (both dates inclusive in all cases). This sample was made with the five analysed newspapers. The procedure used was the following: during the sample days, a researcher looked at the electronic version of the newspaper in question, always between 12:00 and 16:00 hours. They chose the most outstanding front page news story of that moment (provided that it was news and not some other interpretative genre such as interview, feature or in-depth report), they did a screen capture, *clicked* on the main link related to it, printed it and analysed it in depth following the method used in the research. The following day, they followed the same procedure with the exact same news story published by the newspaper in its printed edition. In a few cases, the most outstanding news story in the digital version did not appear in the paper edition the next day, either because its informative cycle had expired, or for some other reason. 21 days were analysed in total. Taking the five newspapers examined, the resulting sample was of 105 news stories which, multiplied by two (digital and printed versions), gave 210 items to be scrutinised. The results obtained for 2013 were collated with those obtained from the diachronic research (2001-2012), provided that they were elements comparable between each other; in this case large format news stories in printed version.

### General results of the five newspapers

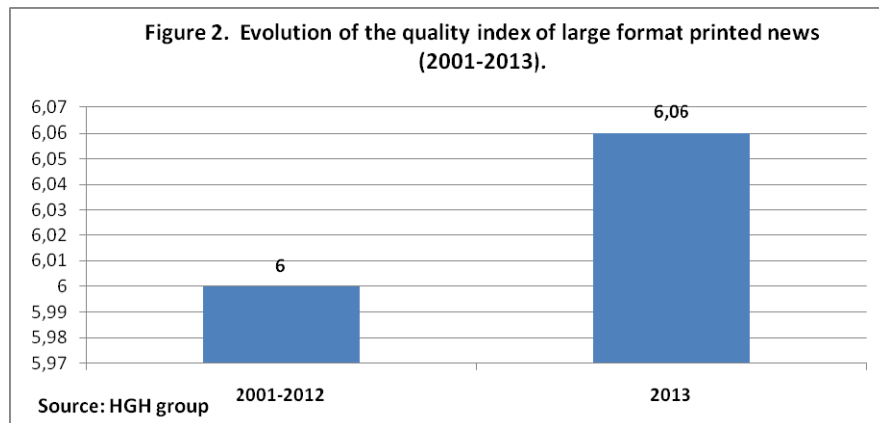
The main information thrown up by this research (figure 1) shows that the quality index of the printed version of the five major European newspapers, 6.06, is slightly higher than that of their digital editions, 5.66. This means an improvement of 40 hundredths, a far from negligible margin if we take into account the parameters of our analysis.



With the exception of LM, all the papers obtain better results for their printed versions, which is, in itself a very significant fact. As with the diachronic research, FAZ continues to be the leading European newspaper in quality, both in its digital and printed versions. The

printed version exceeds the digital one by 21 hundredths, breaking the 7 point barrier (7.08), something not seen previously in this research. As far as EP is concerned, the glaring difference between its printed and digital versions is surprising (1.41 points in favour of the first one). The printed edition of the FT is clearly better than online (43 hundredths), whilst CDS also shows a important difference (31 hundredths). LM is the exception, with their digital version exceeding the printed one by 34 hundredths.

All the news items included in the sample fit within the profile of large format news stories. If we compare the marks obtained by these five newspapers in 2013 (printed version) with those of the same type of news during the period 2001-2012, we can observe a slight improvement (6 hundredths) during the last analysed year (figure 2). This data does not allow us to draw major conclusions, although it does certify the coherence of the previous research.



We can see a high degree of coherence in the results obtained by these five newspapers during the periods 2001-2012 and 2013, even though there do not seem to be great changes in trend.

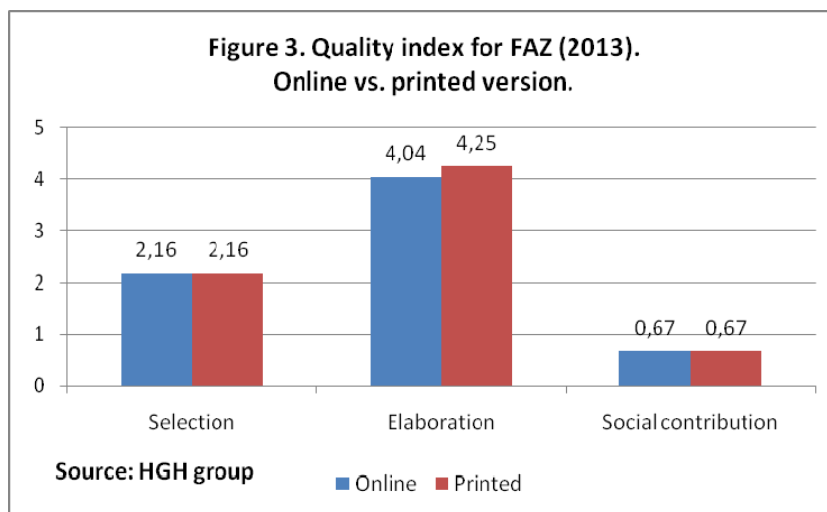
#### *Frankfurter Allegemeine Zeitung FAZ*

Just as in the previous researched period (2001-2012), the newspaper FAZ also obtains the highest score among the European reference newspapers in 2013, both in its printed and digital editions. Its scores are considerably higher than the other papers. The news quality index awards it 6.87 points for the digital edition and 7.08 for the printed one. Therefore, the gap between the two editions is reduced to 0.21.

The German newspaper FAZ is characterised by its own investigative news reports, which are very well prepared journalistically and generally published in the printed edition. From there, the paper later includes them in its digital edition, allowing free access to readers. In fact, 42.85% of the news items covered by the analysis period had been published in the printed version in the previous days. If we only consider the online news prepared originally for that version, the gap between the digital and printed edition grows. The news primarily published on the Internet obtained 6.32 points, making the difference between the two editions 0.76.

This research corroborates the theory that the news produced for the website [www.faz.net](http://www.faz.net) reflects the immediacy of the digital publication. In this sense, the elaboration of that same news in the printed edition is more complete (figure 3).





First, the headlines of the digital news tend to contain statements from the sources whilst the printed news summarises the whole story in one headline<sup>3</sup>. Secondly, online news normally presents two perspectives, whilst the printed version is characterised by up to three perspectives on the reported information. Furthermore, the relevance of said perspectives is greater in the printed edition than in the digital one<sup>4</sup>. Thirdly, the digital edition contains a greater number of spelling and grammatical mistakes than the printed one. Moreover, the online edition does not correct typing errors (apostrophes and commas in the wrong place) contained in the printed version of the news which are later uploaded onto the net. Finally, although both the digital and printed news include the answers to the W questions, the digital news items do not take advantage of the resources of this medium to develop them further. That is, the German newspaper does not create hyperlinks in its digital news, beyond those which refer to older articles in the same paper. However, the digital edition of FAZ stands out against the printed version for the informative and artistic quality of its complementary informative elements (graphics, videos, photos, etc.). The interactive graphics which accompany the digital news deserve a special mention, in which the journalistic work of the German newspaper forms an alliance with the technological resources characteristic of electronic editions. However, the speed of digital information implies that the online edition does not take as much care with journalistic language as the printed one<sup>5</sup>. Similarly, the digital edition contains a higher number of spelling and grammatical mistakes than the printed version. Furthermore, the digital edition contains aesthetic errors which the printed edition never makes, such as orphan and widow lines in paragraphs.

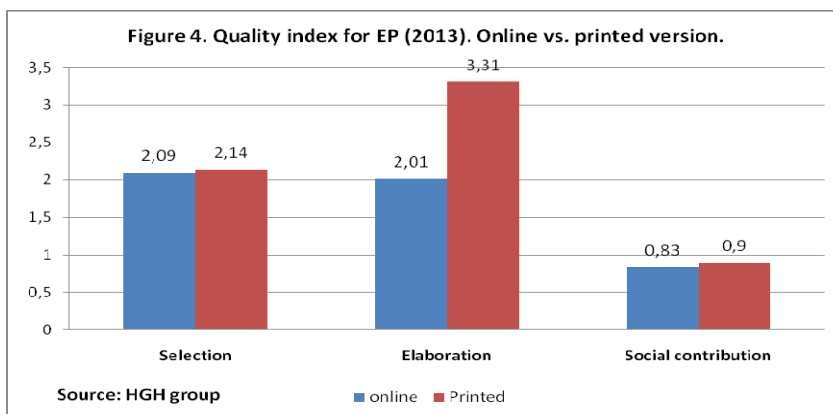
With reference to qualitative aspects of the news, both editions also present different characteristics. On the one hand, the digital version offers a lower number of political news items than the printed edition (26.27% and 29.27%, respectively). However, the digital edition almost doubles the number of economic news items of the printed newspaper (19.51% and 12.20%, respectively). However, the economic news published in the digital edition gets a higher score with respect to its journalistic quality than those in the printed edition (6.68 points against 7.2). Likewise, the digital edition gives priority to the news from Germany: 14.64% of the news published in the online edition refer to the German State, whilst in the printed edition, it is 9.76% of the total information. In this sense, the digital edition informs to a lesser extent on issues relating to the European Union than the printed one (4.88% and 7.32%, respectively).

Finally, it is worth stating the little importance which this newspaper gives to the social contribution of the news, although it is true that a slight improvement can be seen from the period 2001-2012 to 2013 (going from 0.57 to 0.67).

## El País EP

EP is the newspaper which shows the largest imbalance between the quality index of its online version (4.93) and printed one (6.43). No other paper, of the five analysed, comes close to this gap of 1.41 points between the two values, which speaks clearly of the differences in quality which exist between the two formats. The news in its digital version does not achieve a pass mark, getting the second lowest score of the five analysed papers (only the FT is below EP with a score of 4.79).

The causes of this imbalance can clearly be seen in figure 4.



The news which EP publishes in its digital version has serious problems, particularly with regard to the elaboration process. The pressures of immediacy provoke rushed writing, with inaccuracies<sup>6</sup>, repetitions<sup>7</sup>, extremely long sentences<sup>8</sup>, confused ideas<sup>9</sup> and/or unintelligible<sup>10</sup> and frequent mistakes in accentuation, spelling-typing and/or punctuation<sup>11</sup>, mistakes which, in the majority of cases are later corrected in the printed version of these same news items published the next day. In short, bad quality, clumsy elaboration, which is not up to the standard of a European reference newspaper.

On the other hand, the period analysed in this research allowed us to observe one of the most serious mistakes ever made by EP throughout its almost forty years of history. We are referring to the first printed edition published on the 24<sup>th</sup> of January 2013 (a day which is included in our research). EP opened its edition with a large photo of a man in hospital, lying in bed, apparently unconscious and connected to breathing equipment. The person in the photo was supposedly the then president of Venezuela Hugo Chávez. The photo was accompanied by the following headline: *El secreto de la enfermedad de Chávez. (The secret of Chavez's illness)*. It was later discovered that the photo was not, in fact, Hugo Chavez, and the paper publicly recognised its “tremendous mistake”<sup>12</sup>. The false photo hardly left a mark on the digital version, as it was corrected 30 minutes after its publication online. (Figure 5)



Figure 5. Front page of the first printed edition of EP from the 24<sup>th</sup> January 2013 with the false photo of Hugo Chávez.

On realising the mistake, EP withdrew this edition which was already on the news stands and substituted it with a completely different one, which cost the paper 225,000 euros. The corrected edition of the paper arrived to the sale points much later than usual, at around 12:00 mid-day at the earliest. This was a “serious mistake” (included in the format section) which was registered as such in our research. Just a week later, EP managed a scoop which would have international repercussions, the so-called “Barcenas Papers”, in which alleged illegal financing of the Popular Party during the period 1990 to 2008 was revealed. This happened on the 31<sup>st</sup> January 2013, one week after the “big mistake”, which undoubtedly aided in the forgetting of that error.

### *Le Monde LM*

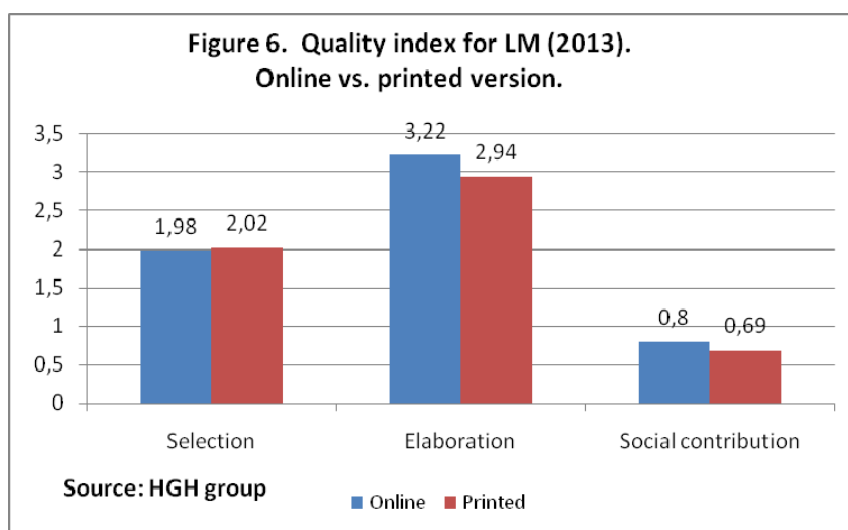
The newspaper LM has noticeably improved its electronic edition over the last few years, as is reflected in the high number of digital subscriptions it achieved. It has 32,000 subscribers (13% of its total paper edition readership) and hopes to attract 200,000 new subscribers over the following years. This rise in subscriptions has allowed it to offset the drop in advertising in the paper version<sup>13</sup>. The first digital version of LM appeared in 2002. The number of subscribers has risen throughout the last decade, but it is in the last year that an exponential increase has occurred (10,000 new ones between 2012 and 2013). This is due largely to a marketing strategy based on affordable pricing: 15 euros per month. In April 2013, LM brought out its fourth digital version, adapted to new formats, be they mobile phones or tablets. This version develops the content of the paper version and offers more analysis, particularly in the International section. 5 of the 60 journalists on the newspaper work exclusively on the digital version. LM is currently the leader of online newspapers in France.

In absolute terms, the LM quality index for its electronic version is of 5.99 (the second best score for the five analysed newspapers) against the 5.65 for the printed version, which is a difference of 34 hundredths. One interpretation applicable to both versions could be the following: during 2013, LM made a considerable effort with both the selection process and the elaboration process of the news, but it neglected the section concerning the social contribution of the reported fact (a tendency which was observed in the previous research).

There are some keys which explain digital LM’s high mark, which are the painstaking design of its website, the numerous hyperlinks (textual and audiovisual) and photos on the front page, in addition to the general accuracy of its journalistic style.

If we analyse the global LM score by segments (figure 6), we can clearly see that it is in the preparation process of the news where the differences can be witnessed (a difference

of 28 hundredths), while they appear to a lesser extent in the social contribution section (11 hundredths in favour of the online version).



If we analyse the data more deeply, we can see that, within the section of news elaboration (3.22 in the online version and 2.94 in the printed one, out of a possible maximum of 5), the digital version exceeds the printed one in all the variables. The digital news shows a higher score of accuracy (correspondence between the headline and the body of the news), more depth (presence of Ws), higher number of different perspectives<sup>14</sup>, higher presence of complementary informative elements (infographics, graphics, photographs, etc.), better artistic contribution (indicative of creativity) and identical level of accuracy in its journalistic language (1 point, the maximum possible). The only proviso in favour of print against Internet, in this section, refers to the errors in the text. The online version scores - 0.06 against - 0.02 for the printed version.

This same trend can be seen in the section about the social contribution of the news. Both the digital version and the printed one score very modest marks (0.8 the former and 0.69 the latter out of a possible 2.5). Neither the digital version nor the printed one have gone to great lengths in this aspect. The only exception is that concerning the section “respect for human dignity”, in which the digital version gets the maximum possible (0.5) against the 0.42 of the printed version. The remaining variables show identically low values in some cases (0.15 out of 0.5 in the section dedicated to power watchdog and 0.0 with regard to the inclusion of cultural references other than its own) or similarly low (promotion of social debate: 0.1 in the online version against 0.08 for the printed one; the combating of marginalisation: 0.05 for the digital against 0.04 for print).

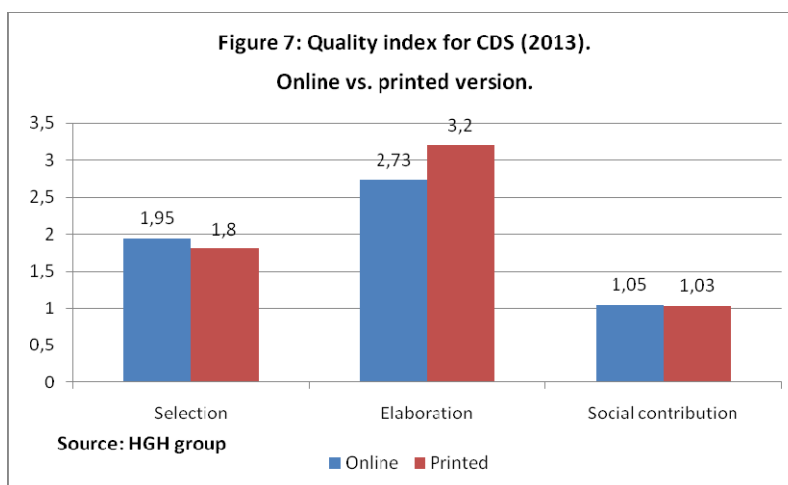
With regard to the selection process of the news item, the registered differences are only 4 hundredths in favour of print, a margin which does not allow us to draw major conclusions.

As a last reflection, we would like to underline two points: one positive and one negative. The first one is the more than acceptable degree of quality in the digital version of LM, 5.99 points, which puts it in second place after FAZ. The second, the confirmation of the decline in the quality of the printed version, already witnessed in the period 2001-2012 and which continued during the first trimester of 2013.

#### *Corriere della Sera* CDS

The digital edition of the Italian newspaper CDS gets a score of 5.72 in the news quality index, notably inferior to the score obtained by those same news items in the printed edition

(6.03)<sup>15</sup>. This variation of 31 hundredths in news quality can be better seen by analysing the score obtained in each one of the segments which make up the total news index. In this case, the preparation process of the news marks the difference in favour of the printed edition (figure 7) exceeding the digital by 47 hundredths.



However, as we can see in the figure, the digital edition of CDS gets better scores for its printed edition in the selection phase of the news and in social contribution of the same, albeit symbolically (15 hundredths in one case and 2 in the other). The score obtained by the digital edition, characterised by speed, during the selection process of the news is higher than that of the printed edition (1.95 and 1.8 respectively). Also, the social contribution of the information is slightly higher in the digital edition (1.05) than the printed one (1.03), due to online news tending to more frequently include references which promote social debate.

Nevertheless, the elaboration phase of the news shows the biggest differences between the two editions. The printed version of CDS gets 3.20 out of 5 in the indicators which measure the process of the news, whilst the digital version only gets 2.73. This is, in fact, the largest gap which exists between the two editions, due to the fact that the complementary informative elements and the journalistic language used in the printed version adapt better to informative necessities. On the one hand, the news in printed format contains illustrations, photos, and graphics of a higher quality than the digital news, (35 per cent and 20 per cent, respectively). In this sense, 27.5 per cent of the complementary informative elements of online news do not add any further information to the news itself. Likewise, the complementary informative elements in the printed news are artistically relevant in 17.5 per cent of the news, whilst in the digital edition they are in no more than 10 per cent of cases. On the other hand, the gap which exists between the printed edition and the digital one in the news elaboration process also points to the language used. Although both editions take care with their journalistic style, the digital edition contains more than double the number of spelling and grammatical mistakes than the printed one: 22.5 per cent of the digital news contains some sort of spelling or grammatical mistake; whilst in the printed version, the ratio was of 10 per cent.

Going beyond the quantitative data, the printed edition tends to diversify the news. The news published online, on the other hand, is brought together in two big sections: politics (47.62%) and economy (23.81%). However, the news in printed format continues to be of a higher quality. The political news in the printed edition got 6.33 in the quality index, whilst online it only achieved 5.82. The news related to economics, furthermore, shows an even wider gap: 6.71 in the printed edition and 5.46 in the digital.

Finally, if we look at aesthetic aspects, the digital edition of the Italian newspaper takes great care with the aesthetics of its news items. The news analysed in this research

shows a higher laxity in aesthetic aspects in the printed version. In fact, nearly half of the news stories from the printed edition contain orphan lines (31.58%) or widow lines (15.79%).

The better preparation in the printed news constitutes one of the main potentials of the Italian newspaper. The depth of the news prevails over the digital edition, which stands out for the speed of its news. In that sense, the weaknesses present in the informative work of CDS affect the essence of journalism. On the one hand, the relaxation in journalistic standards affects to a greater extent the elaboration of the news. On the other hand, the Italian newspaper gives scarce relevance to the indicators of the social contribution of the news. Such an informative strategy will mean that the topicality of the news will prevail over the treatment and social contribution of it, given that the journalistic task will be relegated to the mere transmission of data, under the axiom that the information is neutral.

### *Financial Times FT*

As with the majority of the previous cases, the quality of the printed version of FT (5.22) exceeds that of its online edition (4.79), in this case by 43 hundredths. This research reiterates the trend already apparent in the FT during the period 2001-2012, with this newspaper also getting the lowest results of the five analysed in 2013. Paradoxically, the credibility of this newspaper in financial circles worldwide does not fit with the poor results obtained by its quality index in this research.

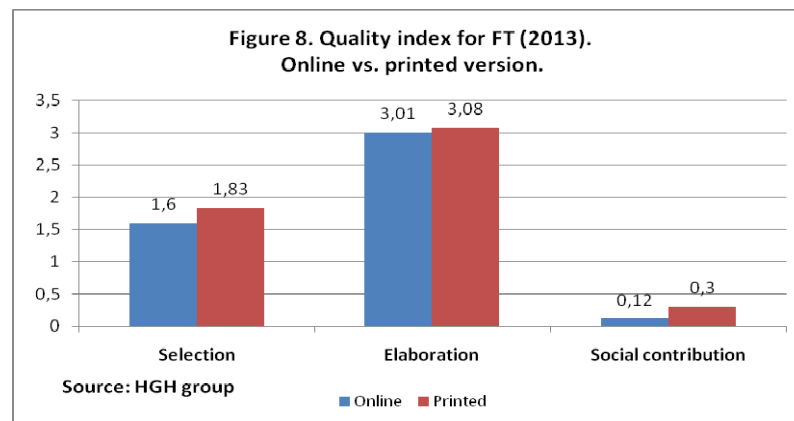
The situation is that the FT owes a large part of its current circulation to the great success achieved by its digital edition in the last few years. The newspaper currently has an estimated readership of 2.2 million around the world<sup>16</sup>. The average circulation of all the printed editions it publishes put together, reached 269,000 copies in February 2013, of which 88,000 correspond to its British edition<sup>17</sup>. In a context of general decline, the total circulation of the newspaper was, in 2012, 28 per cent higher than five years earlier. That increase is due to digital subscription: in July 2012 the newspaper announced that there were more subscriptions to ft.com (313,000) than printed copies, with the total being around 600,000<sup>18</sup>.

Born in May 1995, the website ft.com, is today one of the few successful examples of pay per view in the daily press. Although it began by financing itself through advertising, its subscription service started functioning in 2002, and today works under the premise of allowing free, open access to a determined number of articles before payment being required. Similarly, FT has also adapted its format to be read on *smartphones* and tablets, which is an important route for the consumption of its articles<sup>19</sup>.

The profile of the FT reader is slightly different from the rest of the newspapers analysed in this research. Despite being a general information medium, the majority of its news is connected to the economic-financial world. FT has always boasted about having contacts at the highest level in the financial world, as well as maintaining excellent relationships with its sources, although in many cases, as we can see, these remain confidential. The key to the reliability which the public confers to this newspaper lies in the trust acquired throughout its history. It could be summed up by saying that the readership of the FT continues to traditionally trust the newspaper's sources, even though, in many cases, these are not sufficiently certified<sup>20</sup>. We must suppose that such trust does not mean a blank cheque for the newspaper, but rather the passage of time has demonstrated the veracity of certain news items which at the outset did not appear to be very well contrasted.

The digital version of FT suffers from the same deficiencies which had already appeared in the previously analysed period (2001-2012): lack of attribution to some sources and scarce mention of the origin of the information, among others. In this case (2013), the digital and printed versions appear to complement each other. We rarely find the same texts in both editions, which would indicate specific writing for each medium, which in the digital

version means they are more immediate whilst in the printed one they benefit from more time and the possibility of expanding the information within its context. Normally, the pieces analysed in print are more extensive and get better results. Furthermore, some of the printed news items refer to complementary videos which can be found in the online version. Therefore, they could be considered mediums which are intimately related and which complement each other. Therein lies precisely the fact that the printed version gets a higher score than the electronic one, given that this improvement can be observed in the three segments of the quality index: selection, elaboration and social contribution of the news (figure 8).



### General conclusions

1. In general terms the quality of the printed versions of the European reference press is slightly higher than that of their digital editions. A difference of 40 hundredths (6.06 against 5.66), in such tight parameters as those used in this research, provides sufficient margin to establish some reflections. The haste with which the digital editions are written up provokes all kinds of errors, relaxes quality controls and accelerates the elaboration process of the news. All this has repercussions on the quality of the end product.

2. The news quality index of the European reference press has maintained a uniform tendency during the first thirteen years of this century. In fact, the indices scored by these newspapers during 2013 maintain a high degree of coherence with those obtained during the period 2001-2012. Thus, the quality index of the large format printed news only varied by 6 hundredths going from 6.00 (2001-2012) to 6.06 in the last year.

3. The good or bad quality of the news does not always result in reward or punishment on behalf of the readers. The experience of the FT is enlightening in this sense. The low quality scores obtained in this research contrast with the increase in its digital subscriptions. FT is the newspaper of the European financial elite, a paper with over 125 years of history. Its prestige lies not so much in the detailed and exact certification of the origins of its information, as in the *plus* of credibility which its readers historically appear to have placed on the sources used by this newspaper over the years.

4. What has happened with the FT cannot be elevated to the category of paradigm, nor is it necessarily comparable to the other newspapers. Quality influences readers' trust in the newspaper, although that trust does not always translate into an increase in sales. There are other factors, apart from the quality of the news, involved in the crisis of trust which citizens are increasingly showing towards the media, but these fall outside the remit of this research.

5. FAZ is confirmed as the best European reference newspaper in terms of quality. In the study carried out in 2013, both its digital and printed editions come out in first place with a noticeable advantage over the rest. This corroborates that which was advanced by the previous study (2001-2012) in which it also came outstandingly first. FAZ is characterised

by a professional treatment of information, which leads it to include much of its own investigative news. The result of all this is a quality index in 2013 of 7.08, a score previously unheard of in this research.

6. The speed imposed on digital versions has clear repercussions on the quality of the news in all the newspapers (except LM). The biggest differences in quality between the digital and printed formats are observed in EP. This newspaper gets a bad digital score (4.79) against an acceptable printed one (6.34). The gap of 1.41 between the two editions is the highest of all the newspapers and is based on a deficient news elaboration process in its digital version where, amongst other things, inaccuracies, repetition, confused ideas, extremely long sentences and accentuation errors proliferate.

7. LM gets the second best digital score of the five newspapers analysed (5.99) exceeding its score for the printed version (5.65). The keys to this behaviour can be found in the effort which this newspaper is making to improve its digital edition, with a painstaking design, important presence of hyperlinks and photos on its homepage and an improvement in its journalistic style. In this case, the high quality of its digital version is being rewarded by its readers. Proof of this is the notable increase in digital subscriptions to this newspaper in the last few years.

8. CDS is another newspaper which ratifies the general trend: its printed edition exceeds the digital one by 31 hundredths. This gap lies, as with the rest of the newspapers, in the best score obtained for the elaboration process of the news. Complementary informative elements and the journalistic language used in the printed version exceed the parameters of the digital edition. Likewise, the latter registers more than twice the number of spelling and grammatical mistakes, which shows once again, that the obsession with speed ends up damaging the quality of the news.

9. The future. Everything would lead us to think that the printed editions of newspapers have an increasingly uncertain future, despite their quality being superior to that of their digital versions. In this sense, the generalised eagerness of all newspapers to increase their digital subscriptions must be accompanied by an improvement in their electronic editions.



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## Author biographies

Txema Ramírez de la Piscina worked as a Journalist in different media from 1979 to 1989; took a Degree in Journalism (UPV/EHU, 1982); worked as a Lecturer at the EHU-UPV since 1990; did his PhD in Journalism (1993); worked as a Lecturer of UPV/EHU since 1998; was accredited as Professor by the agency ANECA in 2012 and as Full Professor in 2010 by the Basque agency Unibasq; and worked as Director since 2011 of the Research Team HGH recognised officially by the University of the Basque Country. Since February 2013, he is member of the Board of Directors of EITB (Basque Country's Public Broadcast Service). He is the author or co-author of 12 scientific books. The last one was about Spokesperson trainings and was published in 2011. Another one, *Gabinetes de Comunicación* (1995), is still today used as a text-book at numerous universities. He has participated in a lot of national and international scientific congresses. He is the author or co-author of more than 55 specialised articles in scientific reviews.

Maria González Gorosarri is a PhD in Communication, mention Europeus (2011); is the author of the thesis *Albisteen kalitatea* (Research on Basque Media's News Quality); has a Degree in Law and Journalism; has done a Postdoctoral Fellowship at the University of the Basque Country; is a blogger at 'Albistetan', as well as contributor for *Tas-Tas* and *Bizkaia*, on the quality of news. She has worked as a journalist for the weekly newspaper *Anboto* and *Anboto Radio*, as well as numerous collaborations in media (*Argia*, *Aizu!*, *Euskaldunon Egunkaria* ...). She has also been media officer at *Topagunea Euskara Elkarten Federazioa*, *UEU* and *First Congress on Basque Journalism*.

Alazne Aiestaran obtained her PhD in Communication Studies in 2007 from the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU). She worked for 7 years as head of *Drogeteniturri*, a monthly publication in Basque. She has been a lecturer at the University of the Basque Country for 5 years at the Department of Journalism. She has participated in several projects as a researcher financed by the Spanish Central Government, by the University of the Basque Country and the Basque Autonomous Government. She has been a board member of the *Rikardo Arregi Journalism Award*, 2008–2011. Since January 2011, she is a member of the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Communication Studies ZER*.

Beatriz Zabalondo has a Degree in Communication Sciences from the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU); she obtained the Advanced Studies Diploma through research on the attitudes of Basque-speaking young people to dubbed programmes on Basque public TV. Since 2011, she lectures at the University of the Basque Country. Before that date, she lectured at the University of Mondragon for 7 years and worked as an audiovisual translator for over 25 years. She has also contributed to different Basque media (newspaper, television, ...). She is currently working on her thesis about Basque audiovisual translation and is a Member of the Board of Directors of the *Berria Taldea* (editorial group of the daily *Berria*, the only paper in Basque) since June 2011; she has been president of the Group since June 2013.

Antxoka Agirre has a Degree in Law and in Journalism, both at the UPV/EHU (University of the Basque Country). He worked in the Court of Bergara as a process manager for 2 years. He was a journalist in magazines such as *Baleike*, *Gaztezulo* and *Bertsolari Aldizkaria*. He was in charge of communication for the platform *Itziar Herria Sortzen*

and worked as a community manager in the euskaltegi Legazpi 6. In 2008–2011, he worked as a Lecturer in UPV/EHU, in the Department of Journalism II, and since 2011, he has been working as an Associate Professor. He also is the Director of the magazine Bertsolari and he is working on a PhD about the relationships between creative Basque culture and Spanish cultural community.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This same research group HGH has carried out a diachronic study about the evolution of the quality of the printed edition of these same papers from 2001-2012. The results from this research were presented in the IAMCR Congress, International Association for Media Communication and Research (section JRE Journalism Research and Education) held in Dublin from the 25<sup>th</sup> to the 29<sup>th</sup> June 2013.

<sup>2</sup> It should be underlined that the pieces analysed in this research were always written news, discounting other interpretative genre such as interview, feature, in-depth report, analysis or others directly related to opinion.

<sup>3</sup> While the digital news on the 14<sup>th</sup> March 2013 included the comments off the Bishop of Buenos Aires in the headline (“»Franziskus wird über gewöhnliche Grenzen hinausgehen«”), the printed edition that day included the content of the story in its entirety (“Anerkennung und Lob für Papst Franziskus”).

<sup>4</sup> For example, the main news item in the digital edition on the 14<sup>th</sup> March 2013 gave a privileged position to the comments of the acting Venezuelan Vice-president (Nicolas Maduro), who claimed that the recently deceased President Chavez had intervened “from heaven” so that the new pope would be South American. The printed version of the information omitted these comments, considering them to be irrelevant, but included the reactions of many more leading figures to the election of the new pope.

<sup>5</sup> In the digital news headlined “Merkel-Effekt und Ypsilante-Effekt” of 26<sup>th</sup> January 2013, the two first sentences of the *lead* repeat the same expression: “Die CSU will unbedingt Abstand zur Bundestagswahl. Die CDU in Hessen nicht unbedingt”.

<sup>6</sup> News published by EP in its digital version on the 10<sup>th</sup> February 2013. Sub-heading of the news: *The leader of the PSOE party [Rubalcaba] presents a decalogue of measures to fight corruption*. Text of the news: *The General Secretary of the PSOE party Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba presents today in Bilbao four specific proposals...* Is it possible to have a four point decalogue?

<sup>7</sup> The online version of EP frequently repeats words, even a number of them, in the headlines and sub-headings of its news, something which doesn't happen in the printed version. This occurred in the main digital news published by this paper on 24/01/2013, 11/02/2013, 12/02/2013, 14/03/2013, 14/03/2013 and 19/03/2013.

<sup>8</sup> On 25/01/2012 [captured at 13:13 hours], 08/02/2013 [captured at 15:35 hours] and 09/02/2013 [captured at 12:42 hours] EP opened its digital version with news items in which appeared sentences of 69, 85 and 75 words respectively.

<sup>9</sup> An example of this was the first paragraph of the news published by EP in its digital version on 09/02/2013 [captured at 12:42 hours] News relating to the “Caso Urdangarin”.

<sup>10</sup> Opening news item in the EP online version on the 18<sup>th</sup> March 2013 [captured at 13:04 hours]. News relating to the Cypriot crisis: *Last July, on the verge of the BCE announcing that it was prepared to intervene in the market if the problems worsened, it is an indicator (!?), which conditions both the conditions of the financing of a State and the companies which reside in it (!?), showed its lowest level in decades, exceeding 640 points.*

<sup>11</sup> One example: the homepage news of the digital version of EP on the 27<sup>th</sup> January 2013 [captured at 12:06 hours] reports the tragedy produced in a discothèque in Santa María, in the region of Río Grande do Sul (Brasil), neither the words María, nor Río appeared with accentuation. In the printed version both these mistakes were corrected.

<sup>12</sup> See EP 25/01/2013, p. 35.

<sup>13</sup> Source: *Diffusion de la presse en numérique: des débuts contrastés mais en croissance, France Culture, 01.03.2013*. Available online: <http://www.franceculture.fr/emission-pixel-diffusion-de-la-presse-en-numerique-des-debuts-contrastés-mais-en-croissance-2013-03->

<sup>14</sup> During the period analysed, the journalists of LM showed a clear tendency to contrast their information, especially when dealing with social or international conflicts. In these cases, the journalists used contrasted sources, be they civil, military, governmental or non governmental.

<sup>15</sup> The analysis of the news in CDS was interrupted by the journalists' strike, to show their rejection of the staffing cuts decided by the directors of the Italian newspaper. No news was published in the digital edition during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> March 2013, and the printed edition did not appear on the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> March 2013.

<sup>16</sup> According to the audit carried out by Pricewaterhouse Coopers in November 2011.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.abc.org.uk/Certificates/18234567.pdf>. Data from October 2012.

<sup>18</sup> <http://aboutus.ft.com/2012/07/27/ft-digital-subscriptions-surpass-print-circulation-globally/#axzz2BYSMUlox>. Data from July 2012.

<sup>19</sup> This increase does not automatically run in parallel with the increase in business profits but it does mean, in any case, an attempt to adapt to a different pattern of financing, which relies much more on income from subscriptions than advertising investment. Compared to advertising, which represents 39% of the newspapers income, subscriptions make up over half of the FT Group income (<http://mashable.com/2013/04/02/financial-times-john-ridding-strategy/>).

<sup>20</sup> FT frequently uses a somewhat unorthodox system of attributing information to its sources. They are formulas such as: *according to people*, or *close to...* These types of formulae are not considered rigorous and are penalised in this research.