



# The dark side of journalism: Understanding the phenomenology of conflicts in the newsroom and the mechanisms intended to solve them

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## Abstract

The practice and structural conditions of the journalism craft provide fertile grounds for facilitating the emergence of conflicts in the newsroom. However, extant research on journalism studies have largely neglected the boundary conditions for their emergence and the individual and organizational mechanisms displayed to unravel them. Based on in-depth interviews with 40 Spanish journalists, we conceptualize newsrooms' conflicts as the dark side of journalism and examine the structural and individual factors that nurtures their appearance. We also clarify the main strategies for conflict management, arguing that conflict resolution is typically based on informal mediation strategies, rather than institutionalized plans directly implemented by news organizations.

## Keywords

conflict management, dark side of journalism, journalism practice, journalistic craft, labour conditions, newsrooms conflicts

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## Introduction

Extant research on journalism studies typically approaches journalism as a collective craft, and the space of news production as a collaborative domain where, regardless of individual egos, a familiar atmosphere of mutual respect and camaraderie prevails (Breed, 1955; Dreier, 1978). Accordingly, a litany of scholars has focused on what came to be called the 'good practices' of journalism (Tsfati, Meyers, and Peri, 2006) to shed light on the normative assumptions that underpin journalism practice. Despite the laudatory efforts of this strand of research to understand how journalism and its associated practices unfolds, scant attention has been paid to a pervasive phenomenon across newsrooms: how conflicts flourish. This study seeks to better understand the phenomenology of conflicts in the craft of journalism. Specifically, we aim to explore why and under what conditions conflicts in the newsroom emerge, and how, if possibly, are eventually solved.

Understanding conflicts in the newsroom is important for several reasons. First, in a context of growing precarization of the craft (Deuze and Witschge, 2018; Hesmondhalgh, 2015; Örnebring, 2018; Reinardy, 2011; Waisbord, 2019), conflicts across the newsrooms may spring, affecting the processes of news productions and journalists' associated practices. Second, conflicts, as in any other occupation, are an integral and pervasive phenomenon (Czarniawska, 2012; Paterson and Domingo, 2008; Paulussen, 2016; Ryfe, 2009), and notwithstanding, their empirical problematization has been largely neglected, engendering potential positive bias towards newsrooms' environments and journalists' professional practice. Third, and finally, if conflicts were thus far largely overlooked, the associated mechanisms to unravel them were even less scrutinized, even though previous scholarship has suggested that examining the cooperative mechanisms to address journalists' emotional toll seems essential (Kotisova, 2018; MacDonald et al., 2016).

Drawing upon in-depth interviews with 40 Spanish journalists, our findings showcase how external factors, associated with the structural conditions of the craft, and internal ones, associated with the journalism practice itself, nurtures the advent of conflicts during the process of news production. The development and naturalization of these conflicts is conceptualized throughout the manuscript as *the dark side of journalism*. Specifically, the dark side of journalism represents a metaphor that better captures the (often) challenging social interactions in journalism. This implies the development of conflicts fueled by structural conditions of the craft and traditional conflictive interactions associated with news production (journalism practice). Finally, we also examine the undertheorized mediation mechanisms of conflict resolution and show that intermediation strategies implemented by peers seem to be an overarching mechanism to navigate conflicts. In line with a critical research approach that conceives theory as an instrument for improvement in real practice, our study contributes to shed light on current discussions on newsrooms conflicts, hoping to provide empirically-based evidence that may facilitate the enhancement of journalists' working conditions.

## Journalism as a craft of interpersonal relations

The literature on journalism studies has made laudable efforts to examine journalists' workspace from an ethnographical perspective (Weiss and Domingo, 2010). Not surprisingly, extant research has portrayed newsrooms as spaces modelled by unwritten rules

and tacit procedures (Deuze, 2008; Dreier, 1978), in which the solidarity between peers and a pleasing nature of labour are common features (Breed, 1955). On the other side, it has also been noted that professional interactions between news-workers typically trigger the development of disagreements, most of them germane to how professional norms and conventions restrict journalists' autonomy (Sjøvaag, 2013). Accordingly, previous studies largely ponder the organizational structure of media companies as a highly hierarchized (Paulussen and Ugille, 2008), mostly based on seniority (Deuze, 2008), in which relations of authority do exist and are usually exerted in a heavy-handed manner or even muted (Czarniawska, 2012; Dreier, 1978).

Prior scholarship typically describes disagreements between reporters and their superiors as an intrinsic part of the craft, to the extent that a number of scholars suggest that an editor has the strongest influence over media content (Goyanes and Gentile, 2018). Conflicts between workers in relation to their practices are common and normalized 'as if nothing ever happened' (Czarniawska, 2012). Paulussen (2016) operationalizes these conflicts with the sociological concept of 'normalization' which, applied to the newsroom culture, defines a space where news workers assume that 'the way things are done is the way things ought to be done' (Ryfe, 2012).

If the nature of conflicts has been mainly overlooked, similar research patterns can be found regarding the mechanisms intended to cope with journalists' mental health. On the one hand, some works suggest that journalists lack standardized strategies for navigating negative emotions (Richard and Rees, 2011). On the other hand, a growing number of studies suggest that a common approach to address conflicts and their subsequent emotional toll is the initiation of peer-to-peer discussions (Goyanes and Rodríguez-Gómez, 2018; Kotisova, 2018), typically during after-hours bar talks (Dreier, 1978). This informal practice (Hopper and Huxford, 2015), may lend further support to the friendly atmosphere and camaraderie portrayed in most newsrooms (Thomsen, 2014). However, according to a number of studies, this emotional support is seldom planned by news organizations and the directive staff (Kotisova, 2018).

Beyond mental health issues, the need to cultivate new skills (Örnebring, 2010; Porcu, 2020; Quinn, 2005), typically fosters a gap between traditional and new media workers which can also lead to important disagreements (Paterson and Domingo, 2008; Paulussen, 2016; Paulussen and Ugille, 2008). Although the routinization of practice becomes a crucial strategy in digital news making (Deuze, 2008), as journalists become more skilled digitally, they lose control over the production process and growingly complain about the lack of time to engage in research (Örnebring, 2010; Paulussen, 2012). As stated by Czarniawska (2012), the increasing marketization and speed of news news production are the major consequences of this new work environment. On this backdrop, extant research describe journalism as a craft where there is no right to switch off (Goyanes and Rodríguez-Castro, 2019; Deuze, 2007; García-Avilés et al., 2004; Thomsen, 2014), and where boundaries between leisure and work become fuzzy (Robinson, 2011; Steensen, 2009).

In this turbulent context, Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011), suggests an interesting model to make sense of the current media labour: good and bad work. Good work includes decent pay, a reliable schedule and job security; autonomy; involvement; sociality; esteem and self-esteem; self-realization and work-life balance. Conversely, bad work features include low salaries, an unreliable schedule and job insecurity; powerlessness; boredom; isolation; self-doubt and shame and overwork. Attributes of both logics

naturally coexist over the assumption that the positive features of labour are ultimately understood to be the basis of alienation and self-exploitation that normalize bad work, especially after the 2008 financial crisis.

## **The normalization of bad work**

Current journalism, as a creative craft, follows the labour trends of a neocapitalist system and its inherent precariousness (Armano et al., 2017), understanding the latter as a multidimensional construct that includes low salaries, vulnerability, disempowerment, an increased workload (Campbell and Price, 2016; Julià et al., 2017; Kalinowski, 2019). The traditional connection in journalism between work and life has been blurred, and the periods of work and rest become closely related (Kalinowski, 2019; Pajnik and Hrženjak, 2020). Moreover, the escalating pattern of employment destruction and the weaker role of unions have turned journalism into a growing precarious occupation (Amado and Waisbord, 2018; Deuze and Witschge, 2018; Waisbord, 2019; Goyanes et al., 2020), where both the traditional reluctance to change (Gade, 2004) and the typical lack of contestation to the way things are done (Ryfe, 2012), have been heightened by job insecurity (Ekdale et al., 2015). Accordingly, (self-)exploitation has become a taken for granted assumption in media labour (Hesmondhalgh, 2015), and levels of stress and burnout are skyrocketing (MacDonald et al., 2016), especially among younger workers (Reinardy, 2011).

However, while newsrooms are generally reducing staff, journalists' workloads increase or even double (Reinardy, 2013; O'Donnell, 2017). Paulussen (2012) suggests that doing more with less – more content with fewer staff, more tasks in less time, more flexibility for less salary – has become a normalized pattern, resulting in a growing erosion of solidarity between peers. Regarding the Spanish case, a number of studies have also extensively examined the normalization of bad working conditions, underscoring two fundamental issues: the challenges of digitalization and the 2008 financial crisis (Goyanes and Rodríguez-Gómez, 2018; Soengas-Pérez et al., 2014). According to recent market and scholarly research, journalistic dynamics of news production typically normalize the obsession with speed and the accumulation of tasks (Goyanes and Rodríguez-Gómez, 2018; García-Avilés et al., 2014). In this context, Spanish journalists consider that the conditions for performing their craft have decreased the quality of their work (Gómez-Mompart et al., 2015).

As stated, most previous works on journalism studies have largely focused on the positive side of the craft, typically portraying newsrooms as workspaces of social relations where a friendly environment prevails, thus neglecting a common phenomenon across news organizations: how conflicts emerge. Specifically, there is a surprising lack of context-driven research that empirically unravels how journalists experience conflict while executing their daily craft, what are the main structural and internal factors that trigger their emergence and which are the normalized strategies to potentially solve them. Accordingly, we pose the following two research questions:

RQ1: What are the most important fueling factors that journalists identify as drivers of conflict inside the newsroom?

RQ2: How is conflict resolution managed in the newsroom and how is it assessed by journalists?

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the sample.

Gender	Age	Experience	Newspaper	Position of responsibility
Female 50% (n=20)	20–40 (n=19)	M= 15.90 SD= 10.25	National (n=23) Regional (n=12)	Management team (n=5) Head of section (n=12)
Male 50% (n=20)	40–60 (n=21)		Local (n=5)	Journalist (n=23)

## Methodology

To answer these research questions, we conducted in-depth interviews with 40 Spanish journalists. We rely on in-depth interviews rather than survey questionnaires as this method allows us to obtain in-depth knowledge from a person's own experience and perspective. This technique moves away from the myth of objectivity in social sciences and focuses instead on the respondents' perspectives 'across a whole range of situations and contexts' (Couldry, 2004: 110). The aim of the in-depth interviews is thus to find patterns from the 'thick descriptions' offered by participants.

The interviews took place between January and April 2020, and were conducted face-to-face ( $N=12$ ) and via telephone ( $N=28$ ). The interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. For the selection of potential participants, we rely on two mechanisms: public lists of journalists and snowball sampling. The final sample was diverse and includes a variety of participants depending on their sections, responsibilities, level of experience, ages, gender and newspapers (including local, regional and national ones). At the time of the interview, the respondents worked for different media outlets, including, among others, *El País*, *ABC*, *La Razón*, *InfoLibre*, *eldiario.es*, *El Comercio*, *La Tribuna de Albacete* or *La Nueva España*. All the participants were granted anonymity to reduce any potential harm that the research could cause. Hence, their identities were not revealed throughout the study following the ethical guidelines proposed by DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006): they were informed about the nature of the study and permission was requested before publishing the examples cited. Table 1 provides a brief description of the sample characteristics.

A general set of professional questions were asked prior to the interview, inquiring about the respondents' age, studies (if any), experience, responsibilities and perceptions of the work climate. We structure the interview around two subsections in which the interviewees were specifically requested to answer using as many examples as possible. The first part concerned the participants' labour disputes/conflicts in the newsrooms. This part was oriented to introduce and familiarize participants with the aim of the study. First, interviewees were required to explain about the conflicts they experience in their daily routine. Second, participants were asked about the process, if any, in which these labour conflicts evolve into personal ones. In this section, the conversation was aimed at understanding the reason for the emergence of the conflict and its persistence over time.

The second part of the interview focused on the consequences of conflict. On one hand, participants were asked about their emotional coping mechanisms: what resolution strategies have been deployed, both at an individual and collective level; and how the company, if any, has mediated. On the other hand, they were asked about the effects that these conflicts have on their professional routine.

All interviews were digitally recorded and manually transcribed to implement a thematic analysis. The six-step procedure proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was followed to systematize the empirical evidence: familiarizing with the data, generating codes, searching for themes, reviewing them, defining and naming, and finally, producing the report. This thematic analysis started with the coding of data after a general reading of all the interviews. Subsequently, we construct and discussed the main thematic patterns, that is, the structural and internal factors as drivers of conflicts in the newsroom. Regarding structural conditions, issues such as time management, work overload or salary differences were pervasively introduced, while most responses under the category of internal conflicts revolved around the typical interactions during news production (i.e. journalism practice). Therefore, we identify the dual nature of conflicts (external and internal), and structure our main findings accordingly. The next section discusses the key findings.

## Results

This section is structured as follows. Firstly, we describe in detail the main conflicts described by our respondents during the process of news production, identifying the fueling cause for their emergence and categorizing them in terms of external-internal. Secondly, we empirically outline the main mechanisms for conflict resolution, showcasing the different mediation typologies.

### *Newsroom environment: Camaraderie between coworkers*

Throughout our interviews, there seemed to be a consensus around the fact that most newsrooms have a good working environment, thus endorsing what has been stated in previous literature (Breed, 1955; Dreier, 1978; Thomsen, 2014). As a rule of thumb, most of our interviewees consider their work atmosphere as friendly, familiar or with good camaraderie. Participant 5, for instance, believes that there is a lot of friendship at his national newspaper. He notes that they know each other and even go on trips together, something he considers fostering 'the union between professionals'. Participant 5 goes even further and considers the newspaper staff his 'family'. He reflects upon the evolution of his organization and acknowledges that, despite the tensions and pressures during the launch of the newspaper, he believes the newsroom is a 'clan'. Likewise, Participant 27, a senior manager at a national newspaper, considers that journalists at her news organization enjoy high level of camaraderie and closeness, and provides a conclusive evidence: they often go out and celebrate their birthdays together.

The camaraderie between coworkers primarily appears during the process of news production and when news workers are going through personal problems, mainly associated with health or family issues. For instance, Participant 35 notes that her colleagues provided a great deal of support when she was diagnosed with epilepsy. She acknowledges that during that period she was absent from work – as she had to go through a number of medical tests – while a colleague had to assume her work, noting that 'he never complained about it and always helped me'. Likewise, Participant 19 states that when a colleague has personal or domestic problems, everybody in the newsroom is

**Table 2.** Categorization of conflicts on the dark side of journalism.

Conflict	Explanation	Fueling factor
Structural (external)	Directly linked to the structural conditions of the craft	Employment quality (low salaries, long working hours, anxiety for 'being first' and lack of work-life balance) Clash of cultures (age and technological adaptation)
Internal	Directly linked to journalism practice	Editorial decisions (ideology and media interest) Comparative grievances (favouritism and unequal treatment) Interpersonal relationships (competition, envy and divergent ideologies)

aware and 'we typically comment on that on the intranet, providing support'. Another respondent notes that many colleagues got divorced after many years of being married and suffered emotional toll. However, the newsroom covered their work 'with the knowledge of the company'.

Being this the general pattern, our findings also evidence that, as in life itself, disagreements and conflicts are pervasive elements during the process of news production. Our data provide several examples of the nature of such conflicts, most of them very similar in the different newspapers involved. Even though some of these conflicts are inter-related, we decided to segregate them to better understand our empirical data. An interpretation of the testimonials enables us to distinguish between two categories according to the fueling cause: external and internal (see Table 2). On the one hand, external conflicts are linked to the structural conditions of the craft and include the employment quality and the clash of cultures. On the other hand, internal conflicts are consequences of the daily tensions during news production. These conflicts are related to editorial decisions, comparative grievances and interpersonal relationships. According to our evidence, both types of conflict are equally important. However, the external ones have arguably increased with the financial crisis and the ongoing precariousness of journalists' labour conditions in Spain.

### *Structural (external) conflicts on the dark side of journalism*

First, external conflicts relate to the respondent's sense-making of their labour conditions and is largely influenced by structural conditions external to the craft. These conflicts, on the dark side of journalism, typically include the quality of employment of news workers and the clash of cultures – between both digital/print newspapers and old/new news-workers generations–. Below, we provide some illustrative examples.

Regarding employment quality, 'conflict sources are usually the same for everyone: bad schedules, disorganization, stress and low salaries' (Participant 10). The precarious labour conditions in journalism not only demoralize workers, but also stir up potential conflicts between them. Specifically, in the Spanish context, the implementation of downsized operations has been a pervasive motivation to trigger conflicts among coworkers. Many of our respondents note that during these turbulent episodes and the

subsequent newsroom strikes, many workers engage in verbal violence. Participant 38, from a national newspaper, believes that personal tensions among many workers emerge as a result of those who did not participate in the strikes against the redundancy plans designed by the directive staff. Echoing this perspective, Participant 37 considers that many of the conflicts that exist in the newsroom are consequences of a minority of workers who, 2 years ago, did not engage in the strikes to defend their positions in the newspaper.

Moreover, as journalists typically have long working hours and do the same amount of work with less human resources, the tensions between them blossom. Conflicts can arise from both shift sharing (e.g. 'some journalists do not want to work on weekends') and workload balancing. Participant 11 believes that timetables are always a source of conflict because, he considers, they actually 'do not have one', and journalists spend 'too many hours in the newsroom'. As Participant 3 also introduces, 'I always say that if you are going to work for a newspaper, forget about having a good work-life balance because you will never have a reliable schedule'. This conflict around work-life balance is heightened by parenthood. Many respondents, especially female workers, believe that the craft of journalism prevents them from a real conciliation with their families. Consequently, it seems that the normalization of bad work is a determining element in the emergence of structural conflicts.

Linked to the lack of set working hours, Participant 21 notes that the most relevant conflict in the newsroom is the anxiety generated from trying to produce breaking news (i.e. the pressure for 'being first'). In line with the increasing marketization and obsession with speed (Czarniawska, 2012), participant 7 summarizes: 'the craft has not changed that much (receiving information, selecting it, contextualizing it and writing it), but the time you have for doing that has changed, affecting our quality of life and our output'.

The clash of cultures is another common structural conflict inside newsrooms. This clash is fueled by journalists' age and, more specifically, by the traditional/digital newsroom divide. Participant 3 acknowledges that although all workers are in the same workspace, there is a generational clash between young and senior journalists. She considers that this generational gap fosters conflicts, especially when it comes to working routines, remuneration and attitudes towards new technologies. Many respondents believe they are not well-paid nor have the professional projection they deserve, especially in comparison to their older counterparts, who typically enjoy better work and economic conditions.

'From a salary standpoint, younger journalists feel that it is impossible to reach the salary conditions of the veterans. These inequalities come out whenever there are negotiations of labor agreements, but the older workers seek to perpetuate their privileged conditions. For me that is the most obvious division, and a problem that remains unsolved'. (Participant 6)

Most respondents also acknowledge that the age of the newsroom is a fundamental factor in increasing the level of camaraderie. According to the testimonies, younger newsrooms typically enjoy a better atmosphere. 'In my experience, in those newsrooms in which the average age is lower, the environment is better than in newsrooms where the age is above

50 years. In our case, as we only have 7 years of existence and our workers are mostly in their thirties, the relationship between them is fantastic', Participant 8 clarifies.

### *Internal conflicts on the dark side of journalism*

The second level of conflict, on the dark side of journalism, is innate to the journalism craft and thus revolve around individual, personal factors associated with the practice of journalism. Depending on the fueling cause, we identify three types of drivers: editorial conflicts – most of them understood as hierarchy disputes related to the ideology of the news organization and their commercial interests–, conflicts related to comparative grievances and conflicts associated with interpersonal relationships between coworkers.

Firstly, editorial conflicts refer to struggles on how respondents should perform their craft (i.e. journalism practice) associated with editorial and/or business interferences exerted over them. This dimension is consistent with the conception of newsrooms as hierarchical spaces whose functioning is based on authority (Czarniawska, 2012; Paulussen and Ugille, 2008). Most of the respondents acknowledge that this category of internal conflicts revolves around how journalists and hierarchies (i.e. heads of sections, editors in-chief, managers, etc.) handle news production and the dissonant visions on the *ethos* and practice of journalism. Participant 4 believes that it is common to engage in professional and personal confrontations with heads of section during the process of news production. For instance, he considers that when his head of section unilaterally decides to modify a piece of news, he 'is not changing a manufactured product, but an individual and original creation, with its sources, story, and personal approach'. This example suggests that many journalists may be reluctant to modify their original stories, and when they are asked for that, they typically feel that their autonomy is jeopardized, triggering a potential conflict.

Within internal conflicts, our respondents also refer to tensions associated with the treatment of sources and how to approach news stories, particularly the style of the headlines. According to our testimonies, most respondents believe that heads' of section perspectives typically prevail over news workers' original considerations. Participant 17, for instance, considers that her head of section typically shows uncivil reactions when something is not performed as he expects. Moreover, as stated before, the vast majority of participants reflect upon the hostilities when headlining. In this case, many interviewees believe that on many occasions, their heads of section prioritize 'sensationalistic' (P1) or 'unethical' titles (P8) to enhance the appeal and reach of news (i.e. click-baiting).

Regarding sources, respondents describe significant pressures on the approach to cover news, especially when it comes to 'news about politics or relevant figures of Spanish businessmen', as Participant 23 introduces. Similarly, Participant 3 explains that he usually engages in strong discussions with his head of section on how to approach sensitive content. He provides the illustrative example of La Manada.<sup>1</sup> He states that he and his co-author had durable conflicts with hierarchies for their volition to not reveal the summary nor the images of the case due to the violent nature of such content. However, the head of section decided that such information should be disclosed, jeopardizing the respondent's relation with the victim's family.

Secondly, we identify conflicts associated with comparative grievances. In this regard, one of the most common conflict portrayed by our respondents revolve around favoritism. Many of our respondents believe that some journalists are leading sections or are appointed as foreign correspondents without a strong professional background. Participant 32 considers that Federico (fictitious name) is being compensated beyond their professional performance, something she believes is eroding the overall morale of the newsroom. Similarly, Participant 12 believes that the Asian correspondent in her newspaper is not qualified for such a role and, accordingly, she believes that he/she does not deserve it.

Internal conflict associated with unequal treatment is also brought by some of our respondents. For instance, Participant 17 believes her section is the most precarious in the newsroom, providing an illustrative example: 'I started Monday in Valladolid, on Tuesday I was in Lisbon with Greta Thunberg, and on Wednesday I was covering the Climate Summit in Madrid. It was a nonsense'. The lack of hierarchical dialogue is also seen by some interviewees as a potential source of conflict due to a lack of gratitude. For instance, Participant 22, working at a digital and national organization, considers that when the newspaper was launched, every decision was clearly communicated, reasoned and agreed. However, as times passed, he perceives that a score of instructions were implemented without further ado, breaking the initial drive and engendering many conflicts between the hierarchy and the newsroom.

Moreover, internal conflicts related to interpersonal relationships are largely fueled by competition, emotions (mostly envy) and divergence of ideologies. First, holding a dissident perspective from the general rule – and the extant research–, some respondents approach journalism as a craft with fewer friends and in constant competition. As an editor-in-chief at a national newspaper explains: 'one of the most difficult things to manage in a newsroom is journalists' egos' (Participant 10). In this sense, Participant 34 believes that there is no other industry that resembles news organizations. He considers the news business a quite a 'strange' industry, pervasively immersed in a competitive atmosphere. Accordingly, Participant 13 states that it is common to have conflicts with coworkers, especially when colleagues do not share sources in order to publish scoops. Many other respondents echo this perspective, while Participant 2 states that, despite this overarching competition and the many 'stabs in the back' he suffered, there are some 'honorable exceptions'.

Regarding emotions, envy was considered by many respondents a crucial factor in nurturing internal conflicts. For instance, Participant 39 acknowledges having personal issues with a colleague that evolved beyond the newsroom walls. In this case, she considers that one of her colleagues was envious of her scoops, so he made it clear with his reactions and manners that he disliked her. However, reality is very often whimsical, and it turns out that they were neighbours. Therefore, according to Participant 39's testimony, her colleague decided to change his route to the newspaper to avoid bumping into her.

Finally, ideology is also typically considered a crucial element in fostering conflict at both the professional and the personal level. Participant 25, for example, believes that some journalists are not entirely welcomed in the newsroom due to their political ideology and background (i.e. prior work for other media companies). Indeed, she considers that 'no matter what these journalists do, their performance will always be badly appraised'.

**Table 3.** Mediation strategies during conflict management.

Agents	Level of institutionalization	Mediation strategies
Work council	Low	Intermediation
Direct manager	Medium	Intermediation Work groups/monitoring commissions
Peers	High	Direct confrontation (dialogue) Intermediation Third-party support

Echoing this perspective, Participant 13 notes that he has even witnessed verbal violence and aggressive behavior between coworkers as a result of their political ideology. This example shows that personal conflicts are just as important as professional ones when it comes to triggering conflictive situations.

### *Conflict management in the newsroom*

When conflicts evolve and escalate affecting both the relationship between journalists and their practice, different mediation strategies are typically displayed (see Table 3). According to our findings, none of the news organizations included in our sample implement institutionalized mechanisms for conflict resolution. This finding seems to support prior theorizations on the lack of managerial backing during contentious times. Accordingly, respondents rely on three different agents, typically aiming at mediating between the peers in conflict (both on the external and internal level): the work council, the direct manager (i.e. editor-in-chief or heads of section) and coworkers. The first one is crucial in case of large organizations (national media companies), while smaller newsrooms do not typically have it. For this reason, its level of institutionalization – that is, establish as a part of the culture –, is low. Direct managers as agents of conflict mediation are more institutionalized and thus their role in conflict management is relatively common in most newsrooms. However, the agent that stands out as the most relevant and institutionalized figure are coworkers.

First, many participants working at national news organizations state that the work council, through intermediation strategies between journalists and the company, is a key agent for managing conflicts. In a labour context where conflicts are common and, as stated by some of our participants, may result in some professional reprisals, this body of governance becomes particularly influential. ‘The formal mechanism to resolve conflicts is the work council. It is understood that this body is there to solely attend to work related issues, ultimately, in a newsroom, labor and personal issues are often mixed’, Participant 25 clarifies. Echoing this perspective, Participant 2 believes that their work council plays a fundamental role in solving conflicts, including ‘differences in how to approach a piece of news, but also pertaining to professional positions, and personal disputes’. Most respondents also point out that this body ‘became crucial’ during the negotiation of the already mentioned redundancy plans implemented in Spanish newsrooms after the 2008 financial crisis.

However, as previously stated, not all news organizations have this body of governance, and in such cases (mostly local or regional news organizations), respondents mostly rely on direct managers. The general pattern, as introduced by Participant 9, is that direct managers (i.e. heads of section and editors-in-chief) mediate in all kinds of conflict to find an effective resolution through direct intervention. For instance, Participant 5 notes that ‘managers are concerned when there is a conflict. They directly talk to news workers and try to find a solution’. Particularly crucial is the figure of the editor-in-chief, whose relevance for solving conflicts in the newsroom is emphasized by many interviewees. Participant 15 explains how this intermediation often works: ‘the editor-in-chief typically holds a conversation with the workers involved and warns them that the conflict has to come to an end’. Another respondent, deputy-director of a national newspaper, acknowledges that ‘maintaining dialogue with the newsroom to deal with conflicts is part of my responsibility’ (Participant 16) and suggests that when conflicts are somehow impossible to solve, one of the parties involved may be even fired.

In the same vein, Participant 40 considers that his editor-in-chief plays a crucial role in connecting the ambitions of the directive staff with the demands of the newsroom. According to him, the editor-in-chief solves many problems arising from these tensions, including personal ones, some related to timetable scheduling and maternity leave management. Some respondents also note the creation of work groups or monitoring commissions specifically designed by managers to follow the evolution of pervasively detected conflicts, including, above all, gender issues and female workers’ rights (i.e. meeting the normative in maternity leaves, potential sexism in the newsroom and struggles for a growing representation of female workers in news organizations’ hierarchies). As participant 29 notes, ‘when conflicts become entrenched these commissions become very important’.

However, the most frequent (and effective) strategy for solving internal and external conflicts is the reliance on coworkers. Many of our respondents consider that when personal and professional conflicts between journalists arise, peers in the newsroom play a fundamental role in solving them:

‘What saves us in this craft are good vibes among colleagues. When a peer is angry, another one clowns around. When you are having a bad day, another colleague pulls his/her own weight. It is all about balance and support between partners’. (Participant 2)

We identified three common mediation strategies: the direct dialogue between the peers involved, the external intermediation and the involvement of a third person who act as a support of one of the peers involved. First, most of the respondents believe that the best solution to disentangle conflicts is through direct ‘dialogue’ between the peers involved. For instance, Participant 36 notes that in her newsroom ‘journalists speak clearly and honestly’. According to her testimony, she appreciates this approach ‘because with such direct dialogue journalists are aware of what the problems are and how to solve them’. Echoing this idea, Participant 16 clarifies: ‘if there is dialogue, the chances of finding a solution increase’.

However, our respondents also consider that direct dialogue is not always possible, for instance ‘when the journalists involved hold fervent positions about a particular

issue' (e.g. journalism practice, ideology, management of timetables, etc.) In such cases, they typically rely on a third person. Respondent 6 links this practice to the very nature of the craft and points out that 'we tell each other what's going on because we care about what happens to our colleagues'. Accordingly, Participant 9 acknowledges that in his newsroom, it is extremely common for an external colleague who is not involved in the conflict to investigate the dispute, proposing a potential solution.

Finally, another typical response for coping with conflicts is to set personal deliberations and conversations between uninvolved co-workers. In this case, although the potential solution is managed privately, these confidential conversations deescalate the harm, at least in one of the workers involved. Participant 14 notes that, when she has conflicts with colleagues, she always talks with a more experienced coworker because 'he gives me good advice on how to cope with such problems'. Likewise, Participant 23 acknowledges following a similar strategy, perfectly summarizing many of the respondents' testimonies:

'I think it is very positive, and we all do it, sharing that information with colleagues, who you know have also been through a similar situation. I think that journalists know that yesterday it was a colleague's turn but tomorrow it could be yours'.

Once again, and as mentioned before, newsrooms are typically portrayed as spaces of collaboration where the supportive environment among peers prevails. With 'notable exceptions', news-workers help each other to find potential solutions when conflicts emerge. However, many of the respondents also perceive that there are selfish or individualist workers among them. 'Two or three journalists that I know, who are always the same people, never help and always pass the buck. They are totally indifferent and never take those who are in the war zone out for a drink or a coffee', Participant 34 concludes.

## Discussion and conclusions

This article aimed to explore how conflicts inside newsrooms emerge and the professional and organizational mechanisms intended to manage and eventually solve them. Prior research on news production has primarily focused on the daily routines of the craft and its 'good practices' (Tsfati et al., 2007), extensively examining the normative assumptions that transpire into journalism practice. However, scant attention has been paid to hidden conflicts that additionally permeate the practice of journalism as a human craft. This lack of interest is not entirely surprising given the theoretical tendency of prior scholarship to normalize their implications (Czarniawska, 2012; Paulussen, 2016). Accordingly, the primary contribution of this study is to explicitly portray how conflicts inside the newsroom are a common component of journalism practice, conceptualizing this integral reality as *the dark side of journalism*. Based on in-depth interviews with 40 Spanish news workers from different news organizations throughout the country, we provide two illustrative theoretical contributions to this line of inquiry.

First, we contribute to a better understanding of journalism as a human craft, challenging previously taken for granted assumptions regarding the idealization of peer-to-peer relationships in the newsroom and the romanticism typically attached to news production.

In this regard, our findings reveal that most participants in this study typically enjoy a professional work environment, portraying newsrooms as a domain in which a constructive work climate is prevalent and where personal relationships are regularly built on networks of support and mutual trust. This portrayal of newsrooms as spaces full of camaraderie is consistent with existing research (Breed, 1955; Dreier, 1978; Thomsen, 2014).

However, our evidence also points to a dark side in which conflicts between coworkers emerge as an inherent component of the craft, reproducing the sociology of everyday life. Thus, our findings emphasize an integral reality in which conflicts, on the dark side of journalism, represents a metaphor that better captures newsrooms' environment in its broad sense: a domain in which professional reciprocity and camaraderie harmoniously coexist with tensions, hostilities, disagreements and personal phobias. Elements that, to some extent, has been previously identified, but peripherally (Dreier, 1978; Paulussen and Ugille, 2008; Sjøvaag, 2013). In short, the dark side of journalism metaphor aims to capture the often by-passed and undertheorized conflicts that habitually shape journalists' professional interactions when ideologies, expectations and practices are divergent.

In this regard, our study identifies two categories of conflicts: (1) external conflicts, associated with the structural conditions of the craft, which fundamentally resemble what has been previously theorized as 'bad work' (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011) and (2) internal conflicts, associated with traditional journalism practice. Regarding the first, our findings illustrate the most common fueling factors, including the declining working conditions (low salaries, long working hours, anxiety for 'being first' and lack of work-life balance) and the clash of cultures between journalist (owing to the digitalization and the coexistence of journalists from different generational cohorts). In this category, the growing precariousness of the craft, as a result of the impact of the 2008 financial crisis, and the process of digitization, are also determinant factors.

Regarding the second (i.e. internal conflicts), our findings illustrate how discrepancies at a practical level typically evolve into conflicts amongst news workers and/or hierarchies. In this sense, the main fueling factor is associated with editorial decisions, news headlining in particular, but also on comparative grievances and the erosion of journalists' interpersonal relationships. In short, our findings illustrate how conflicts revolving around competition and envy harmoniously coexist with the camaraderie portrayed by many of our respondents.

Also, our findings are aligned with prior scholarship that has consistently identified editorial interferences as a common trigger of conflict flourishing (Sjøvaag, 2013; Goyanes, Vaz-Álvarez, Démetér, 2020). All in all, internal conflicts, within the dark side of journalism, may jeopardize the very nature of news work as a collaborative labour (Deuze and Witschge, 2018; Waisbord, 2019), in which collective goals remain as central as individual performance. Although extant research has extensively suggested that organizational structures of news organizations are difficult to change and innovate (Gade, 2004), is essential to keep high the levels of communication among journalist, both at the hierarchical level and between peers, in order to successfully manage the daily interactions and, ultimately, guillotine internal conflicts. In the current context of the erosion of personal relationships boosted by the normalization of bad work (Paulussen, 2012), this becomes remarkably critical.

Our second contribution lays in the examination of how conflicts inside the newsroom are managed and eventually solved. Our results first indicate that, as a rule of thumb – and following the informality patterns suggested by prior scholarship (Deuze, 2008; Dreier, 1978)–, there are no institutionalized mechanisms for conflict management and resolution, which may be one of the potential motivations for the paucity of empirical research on this topic. However, at different levels of institutionalization – depending on the newsroom size – our findings illustrate three key agents for conflict resolution: (1) the work council; (2) direct managers and (3) peers.

Regarding the first, the work council is the overarching mechanism in large newsrooms where, acting as a mediator between the company and the workers, plays a crucial role in defending the workers' labour interests. Our findings also underline the central role of managers, specifically editors-in-chief, not only by acting as mediators between the agents involved (at hierarchy level and between peers) but also by creating monitoring commissions to solve entrenched problems.

Finally, regarding peers, our findings illustrate that the reliance on coworkers is the most common mechanism for conflict management and operates throughout three mediation strategies: direct dialogue, intermediation and third-party support. Our findings are again in line with extant research, which suggests that the informal practice of peer-to-peer discussions is crucial when coping with individual anxieties (Hopper and Huxford, 2015; Kotisova, 2018) and it is typically understood as a mechanism of emotional relief. This last finding provides further support for the assumption we advocated throughout the manuscript: the urgent need for developing institutionalized strategies for journalists' care, in which both direct communication and active listening harmoniously coexists.

In conclusion, our empirical findings reveal that the dark side of journalism is an inextricable component of journalism as a human craft. Briefly, the central theoretical implications emanating from the observations made in this article include: (1) the role of external and internal conditions of the craft in triggering conflicts in Spanish newsrooms and their surprising neglect by prior research, (2) the paucity of institutional strategies for conflict management and the emergence of different agents (work councils, direct managers and coworkers) to informally solve them. Taking these theoretical insights together, we argue that ameliorating journalists' labour and working conditions not only calls for the examination of the positive side of the ethnography of newsroom and its associated practices, but also the integration in a holistic narrative of the effects of conflicts within the dark side of journalism. Accordingly, future research may consider further exploring, by means of participant observation, on how the dark side of journalism unfolds from different organizational, personal or generational accounts.

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## Note

1. The case of La Manada refers to the multiple rape suffered by a young woman during the San Fermín festival in Pamplona in 2016. The legal case, initially dealt with in the Regional Court, generated great media and social commotion and was finally sentenced by the Spanish Supreme Court. This case marked a turning point in the public debate on rape in Spain.

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