

UNDERLYING EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONCEPTIONS IN JOURNALISM

The case of three leading Spanish newspapers' stylebooks

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Most of the main epistemological principles and notions which govern the professional practice of journalism are not explicitly stated but implicitly presupposed. Stylebooks are a paradigmatic case of how these ideas are subtly, but firmly, embedded in the newsmaking process. Although these works appear to be “merely” grammar and stylistic handbooks, they actually are much more than that: they bear on issues related to professional judgement, that is to say, on underlying criteria which are the basis of journalistic work. Among these criteria, those related to knowledge and truth are key to understanding the view of journalism fostered by the media and practised by them. The purpose of this research is to offer a contribution to the study of the epistemological principles and notions upon which media work, inasmuch as they are held—generally in an implicit manner—in the stylebooks of the three Spanish leading newspapers nowadays: El País, El Mundo and ABC. More specifically, this study argues (1) that, in spite of minor differences among them, all three stylebooks agree on the major premises of the objectivist tradition of journalism, which remain firmly entrenched in norms for newswriting, and (2) that their shortcomings and inconsistencies show the urgent need to rethink some of the core concepts related to truth and knowledge involved in the professional practice of journalism.

KEYWORDS fact–value dichotomy; impersonal style; knowledge; news–opinion dichotomy; objectivity; professional routines; stylebooks; truth criteria

Introduction

One need not be a shrewd scholar to notice how media constantly presuppose and use a great deal of concepts and principles related to human knowledge. Just being an experienced newspaper reader suffices to make one aware of a number of terms related to these sorts of concepts (which, hereinafter, I will call “epistemological”).¹ I am referring to words commonly used such as “truth”, “falsehood”, “opinion”, “objectivity”, “certainty” and also to others like “to demonstrate”, “to judge”, “to assert”, etc. There is nothing strange about this, since media provide a *peculiar type of knowledge*, usually called “information”. It is natural then that if one of the main roles played by the media is, simply put, to broaden, or even supplement artificially, the individual’s capacity for knowledge, their role entails a continuous recourse to these epistemological notions. However, until now academic literature has not given this issue the attention it deserves.

The purpose of this piece of research is to offer a contribution to the study of the key epistemological principles and notions upon which media work, inasmuch as they are held—generally in an implicit manner—in the stylebooks of today’s three leading Spanish

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newspapers: *El País*, *El Mundo* and *ABC*. The selection of these three stylebooks is more than justified since the prominence of these newspapers makes their manuals especially influential throughout the media industry in Spain. Of course these handbooks are not statistically representative of the whole, but are highly paradigmatic: they are good indicators of the predominant assumptions in current Spanish journalism and, to a certain degree, a reflection of the professional practice of journalism in other Western countries, as well. Furthermore, they are an excellent indicator of how Anglo-Saxon journalism has historically influenced their counterparts in other Western countries such as Spain.

Before coming to the core of this study, a word must be said about the method used in the analysis and about its structure. In order to understand the underlying epistemological tenets of journalism embedded in the stylebooks, the usual content analysis methodology could have been a possible choice. Now, among the several charges against this methodology (e.g. Hackett, 1984), the most telling objection against using it in this case is that content analysis can only deal with *manifest* content, with explicit denotative signifiers. It wrongly assumes that denotation is unproblematic and universal, and that its meaning can be assessed regardless of connotation, context and assumptions. In sum, I think that quantitative methods cannot render fruitful results, when complex, nuanced texts are under scrutiny. A different approach was, therefore, required.

I decided to turn to a school of thought which gives high importance to the implicit aspects of a text, namely the hermeneutic school, and particularly to one of its outstanding figures, Paul Ricoeur. Although the philosophical foundations of the hermeneutic school are not, naturally, free from criticism (discussing them is beyond the scope of this article), I think its view of textual analysis is more suitable than others—specially than quantitative methods—for the undertaking of bringing to the surface the underlying notions embedded in a text. It also broadens the narrow scientific rationality provided by positivism and allows a deeper and more thorough understanding of the complexity of text interpretation.

When dealing with the stages of his theory of interpretation—distanciation, appropriation, explanation and understanding—Ricoeur makes a distinction between understanding and interpretation, according to which grasping the deep meaning of a text entails taking into account both the expressed and the implied. “Interpreting a text means moving beyond understanding what it says to understanding what it talks about” (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 88). Embodied in this quote are two major concepts: (1) explanation, or what the text literally says, and (2) understanding, or what the text talks about, both explicitly and in an implied manner. Explanation is mainly directed toward analysis of the internal relations of the text parts, while understanding springs from relating the parts to the whole.

Ricoeur (1974) says that an interpretive construction relies on clues scattered throughout the text. These clues allow an interpretation because they make sense, or inhibit it because they do not fit. In this way, one interpretation will account better for the qualitative convergence between the clues collected and for the relationship between the parts and the whole. Nonetheless, the interpreter is obliged to make choices about competing interpretations without having the chance to rely on an empirical way to assess irrefutably the validity of his choice, subject to further discussion. However, the interpreter can show how he has arrived at certain interpretations by supporting them with excerpts from the text, so that readers will decide whether to accept, modify or reject an interpreter’s construction.

The method employed in this research is, by and large, based upon Ricoeur's theory of interpretation. Briefly described, the procedure used is as follows. First, meaningful pieces of information from each stylebook were identified to generate themes or categories. These themes or categories disclosed findings that reflect the basic structure of the object under study. Then, the passages containing these clues were analysed first individually and, in a second stage, all together, to establish connections among them and to assess their relationship to the whole text. In a final stage, the findings from each particular stylebook were compared with those from the other stylebooks. Following the requirements of the hermeneutic school, I quote a fair amount of excerpts—even at the expense of making this paper more complex and lengthy—so that the reader can assess, as much as possible, the validity of my own interpretation, which, of course, remains open to further discussion.

The paper is divided into two parts. The first attempts to present in a both detailed and succinct way the research findings corresponding to each particular stylebooks' view of knowledge and truth and how their media try to operate in accord with them. The second offers a comprehensive account of the problem by establishing similarities among the three works and by trying to analyse them critically, pointing out some of their deficiencies and inconsistencies and showing how much a more solid theory of truth is needed in the media field.

Finally, an additional point should be made to avoid raising misleading expectations in the reader. Although these handbooks are mainly written for linguistic and stylistic purposes, they also deal with profound issues concerning general approaches to text-building and with the set of principles and criteria—more or less clearly defined—that journalists should abide by in the carrying out of their duties. This means that, despite their name,² they are much more than just mere grammar handbooks or catalogues of stylistic recipes. Having said that, it is also true that, being professional works, stylebooks are written with pragmatic aims in mind, that is to say, in order to provide guidance to journalists in the performance of their jobs. Therefore, the reader should not reasonably expect to find solid, scholarly arguments or probing conceptual debates in their pages. While references to epistemological concepts are usually implicit, this does not deprive them of value. Quite the contrary, that makes the task of analysing them much more valuable, although also more difficult.

Brief Analysis of the Principles and Criteria Regarding Knowledge in the Stylebooks

El País' Stylebook

This is the oldest stylebook of the three examined here, and currently one of the oldest in use in Spain.³ It was first published in 1980 (following a 1977 draft for internal use), and, since then, a new edition and 14 reprints have been published.

From the very beginning, this stylebook makes it clear that it only deals with "methodological aspects that standardize journalistic writings *from a formal standpoint*" (p. 13).⁴ However, in spite of this cautious warning, the book quotes three content-related criteria, termed "behaviour requirements" which supposedly govern journalist activity as a whole: (1) "rumours are not news"; (2) "in case of conflict, both parts should be listened to"; and (3) "the honest use of sources and the strict separation of news, opinion and

advertising" (p. 13). These three criteria are expressed in a categorical way, without further gloss or comment.

In the section entitled "Handbook", one can find three main principles that guide the newspaper's editorial policy:⁵ (1) the commitment "to offer veracious news daily" (§ 1.2);⁶ (2) the independence from any pressure group, political, economic, religious or ideological, and "not to manipulate the news" (§ 1.3); and (3) the separation of news and opinion, which "will be clearly differentiated" (§ 1.3). Once more, these principles are stated without further gloss or explanation, as if they were three unquestionable axioms. Only the section "News Writing" outlines some requisites which must be met in the writing of news, with the finality that the news abide by the principles stated above: the obligation of checking data; the ban on including personal opinions in the news; the avoidance of rumours or expressions that may imply rumour or uncertainty; the need to listen to both parties involved in a conflict; the obligation of quoting sources, except in cases where they explicitly request anonymity, etc.

As to the concept of truth, there is only one explicit reference to it at the beginning, where it is said that the newspaper "makes an effort to offer daily *veracious* news" (§ 1.2). Further along, on several occasions, the concept of truth is referred to, but only in an implicit way. For instance, when contrasted with news (§ 1.13), rumours—understood as "non-checked facts"⁷—are tacitly considered through the context, as not corresponding to reality. Hence, journalists are warned that rumours can be used as dangerous weapons and they are asked to denounce "this cunning trick" without reproducing its content. Another implicit reference to truth can be found when demanding that journalists be rigorous, though only in formal ways: there is a call to accuracy. This is understood as the avoidance of vague "expressions such as 'several', 'a group', 'some', 'a number of' . . . , which should be replaced by specific data" (§ 2.11). And further on it is said: "the precision of data is key in news" (§ 2.11).

Interestingly, the controversial term "objectivity" is mentioned only once in the entire work. However, one can assert that this notion is somehow present and embedded in the objectivist rules and requirements that this newspaper's journalists are expected to comply with. Although the issue of objectivity will be partly discussed in the second part of this article, it can be germane now to define the way in which I take it here, as a twofold claim: (1) facts can be separated from values or opinions and journalists, as detached observers, must act as neutral transmitters who pass along only the facts to the audience; and (2) journalists must be impartial when reporting on different opinions and viewpoints, presenting all of them with fairness. Key to this concept of objectivity is the idea of self-exclusion of the journalist, which pervades—as we will see soon—the key criteria and rules for newswriting.

Resuming our analysis of *El País'* stylebook, it is precisely the obligation to separate facts from opinions which is explicitly enforced in several passages of this stylebook (e.g. § 1.3). Also, when dealing with the writing of the body of a news story, the manual instructs journalists to keep their articles free of their own opinions or value judgements. This imperative to preclude any subjective contribution by the journalist is specified through a number of stylistic rules aimed at the production of impersonal texts. Hence the prohibition of the use of the first-person singular or plural, "save in exceptional cases authorized by the editor-in-chief" (§ 2.16).

Something similar can be said about the way quotes should be employed: "One must never write that someone has insinuated something unless the literal expression of

the statement is reproduced, so that the reader can corroborate the journalist's interpretation or dissent from it" (§ 2.20). Setting aside that complying with this rule can sometimes result in a tedious accumulation of too many direct speech quotes, the reference to the "journalist's interpretation" seems to be contradictory with the journalist's neutral role and posits some questions. Should not journalists leave themselves out of the story, without expressing their opinions or judging, according to what is indicated above? Is it, perhaps, the case that the interpretation here referred to is "objective" and, therefore, different from opinions and value judgements? In the case that it was "objective", what would be the point of giving the reader the chance of dissenting from it? But if, on the other hand, we do admit that it is subjective, then why is this subjective contribution acceptable, whereas opinion and value judgements are not? What are the differences between interpretation and assessment? As I will discuss further on, what is really forbidden, when dealing with value judgements and opinions, is that they be explicit.

As to the use of sources, we have already said that the orthodox objectivist tradition demands that the *fairness doctrine* be respected. On this issue, *El País* lacks—in my view—clearly defined criteria or, at least, they are not stated with sufficient clarity. On the one hand, its book says that "in case of conflict two contending parties should be *listened to* or *paid attention to*" (§ 1.23). However, it does not say that journalists are obliged to publish any statement made by them (though the context could lead us to presuppose that they should). Nevertheless, the text goes on to say that if the newspaper "does not define its stance in the body of the news" in favour of one of the parties, "the title will not be granted to one of the two contending accounts at the expense of the other" (§ 1.24). Thus, it can be inferred, *a sensu contrario*, that the newspaper can opt for one of the contending parties. I can also detect some distance from the traditional doctrine according to which a journalist's testimony should not be included in the news: for instance, it is stated that "a source will always be quoted whenever the journalist has not witnessed the reported action" (§ 1.14). Hence it seems that one can infer that if the journalist does witness the action, he is exempt from quoting others and can provide his own testimony. This, however, can hardly be reconciled with the ban on using the first-person pronoun.

Finally, two other objectivist criteria are touched on: the avoidance of adjectives in the news and the use of the inverted pyramid. As to the latter, the use of the inverted pyramid, which is a narrative device traditionally considered the golden rule of objectivist journalism, *El País'* stylebook says that it is "advisable, but not compulsory" (§ 2.31). With respect to the use of adjectives, this stylebook makes a sharp distinction between genres considered "purely informative", like hard news, from other genres "not so informative", like articles and interviews. In the news stories, the use of adjectives must be restricted, because this is a genre "in which objectivity prevails" (§ 12.6). Thus, "only adjectives conveying information will be allowed", and, when possible, they should be replaced by data (e.g. instead of the adjective "young", it is preferable to say the age). Conversely, in genres like articles and interviews, adjectives "can be enriching" (§ 12.6). Therefore, only "informative" adjectives (not value ones) are acceptable to this newspaper. Now, one wonders on which ground is made this assumption about two clearly distinguishable types of adjectives.

As a sort of quick assessment of the principles and criteria dealt with so far, the following consideration should be taken into account. Since this stylebook is written in the form of a legal text with articles—like a kind of legal code—the criteria and instructions furnished in it are not accompanied by any supporting arguments whatsoever

(with the exception of some laconic explanations). Thus, it is not easy to draw out the theoretical tenets underlying each specific norm or instruction.

Nonetheless, I think that some statements and, above all, the omissions and presuppositions of the texts are very meaningful, as we will discuss in the second part of this article. It is also very significant that some petty details of good professional behaviour are dealt with, but, at the same time, other more important issues are avoided. For instance, how news should be separated from opinion, what is understood by “manipulation of news” (§ 1.3),⁸ which social values should be protected—even at the expense of not publishing certain news—or how errors made by the newspaper should be acknowledged “as soon as possible, publicly and without roundabout statements”. There is room to speculate that these omissions are not due to considerations of space,⁹ or effort (since those required for the preparation of the Dictionary and the Appendixes was huge). They most probably are related to the stylebook’s approach and its aim: to make a pragmatic book, focused on formal issues (as is clearly stated in the prologue) and to leave theoretical questions to the “personal” judgement of each journalist or the editor-in-chief.

Regarding the epistemological principles implicit in this stylebook, as a conclusion to this section I hold that *El País* follows, by and large, the postulates of objectivism, although it does not profess them explicitly, nor abide by them in a rigidly orthodox manner, at least with all their implications (for instance, it establishes a distance from the use of the inverted pyramid and it is not very assertive with respect to the *fairness doctrine*).

El Mundo’s Stylebook

El Mundo’s stylebook was published in 1996. In its conception and structure, it differs from the other two. In contrast to them, this handbook is not conceived of as a mere guide of stylistic criteria, but also deals with issues related to text-building and “practice and ethics of journalism”.¹⁰ In fact, the prologue introduces the work in a somewhat pompous way—though, in my view, quite rightly—as the Constitution, the Civil Law and the Criminal Code governing the newspaper (p. 14). Regardless of whether this comparison is right or wrong, *El Mundo* tries to set its stylebook apart from the other two, which are closer to be a grammar and stylistic *vademecum*.

The structure of this work is different from that of *El País*, which takes the form of a legal text with articles, or that of *ABC*, which is divided into small sections. Instead, its outline is more similar to a scholarly work. Throughout its pages one finds quotes by scholars and senior journalists, along with a number of bibliographic references and, above all, arguments in favour of the criteria held therein. This more open and flexible structure allows the stylebook’s authors to offer short explanations, here and there, on the principles and rules they establish. Because of this, the reading of the text is, in my opinion, far more fruitful and interesting than in the other two cases (although it also makes a more complex, nuanced text for the analysis). Nonetheless, *El Mundo’s* stylebook being more explanatory than the other two, the basic epistemological principles according to which journalistic work should be performed are not expressed—according to my judgement—in a sufficiently explicit and detailed way. However, I think that they can be easily inferred from the plentiful remarks on journalistic genres, forms and instructions.

Coming to the core of the analysis, I believe it advisable to start with what is implied or taken for granted. When referring to the social function of the newspaper and to its

more characteristic traits, the concept of truth is avoided and replaced by the ideas of accuracy or precision. Thus, in the chapter devoted to genres, we read: “the aim of news is to reflect the reality to which journalist has had access *with the greatest possible accuracy*” (p. 25); and, when the “five basic principles” of news writing are enunciated, accuracy and objectivity are indeed mentioned (p. 44), but not truth, or even truthfulness.

Focusing our attention now on the issue of objectivity, this stylebook clearly chooses typically objectivist criteria—as we will see soon—although some remarks could lead one to think otherwise. For instance, “Absolute neutrality does not exist”, followed immediately by “however, a piece of news is objective when its author does not insert his opinions or feelings into it, and provides only data which can be checked” (p. 44). Likewise, while some remarks seem to be a rejection of objectivist rules, they actually are only a way of showing disapproval for the stylistic disadvantages of the “stenographic” way of writing, which is considered “dull and boring” (p. 20).

Therefore, there is no room for doubt as to whether *El Mundo* accepts the main tenets of the objectivist conception of journalism. The paper fully endorses the self-exclusion principle that any author should respect when writing journalistic texts and the sharp separation of news from opinion. As a small indicator, these two short passages: “Although the selection and placement of elements in news necessarily entail a subjective election, opinions or value judgements should never be included” (p. 23). Finally, when opinion features are dealt with, it is affirmed that it “will have to be clearly identifiable by the typographic format” (p. 27), so that the reader can distinguish opinion from news.

The definition of “news analysis” is probably where the objectivist postulates appear most explicitly. At the start of the discussion, the stylebook holds that it “is apparently somewhere between news and opinion” (p. 25), and immediately afterwards says that “it should actually be reckoned as belonging to the first of the two categories” (p. 25), since news analysis furnishes additional data aimed at the reader’s making up his own mind. When explaining what this genre is all about, the stylebook says:

News analysis is neither an opinion feature in which its author expresses his opinions, nor an editorial feature through which the paper conveys its own. Of course, there is intention in the selection and presentation of data. But news analysis must only allow the reader to understand the background, the meaning and the perspective of news. Thus, the journalist will refrain from expressing value judgements and will take special care with the use of adjectives. (p. 25)

Therefore, interpretation or analysis are rejected in opinion features and equated with news in *El Mundo*’s stylebook. For instance, when discussing the several types of lead, the text advises: “Whenever possible, *El Mundo* prefers a lead containing an element of interpretation (but not of opinion)” (p. 52).

Just in case there might still be some room for doubt, this section ends with a somewhat solemn tone: “In *El Mundo*, which preaches the separation of news and opinion, journalists will be especially careful in avoiding intermingling them” (i.e. news analysis and opinion). Curiously enough, despite this emphatic statement, only a few pages earlier, one can read how “the necessary coexistence of news and opinion in sports reporting, which makes them different from the other journalistic genres”, is fully accepted. There are no reasoning or justification whatsoever for this kind of striking concession, or its alleged “necessary” character.

Keeping in mind what has been noticed, in my view, one can trace the objectivist conception in this stylebook, not so much in remarks like the ones previously mentioned—that explicitly foster the basic postulates of the doctrine—as in the rules and criteria that journalists have to abide by. The rules deal with both the judgement-making task prior to the writing of news (criteria on newsworthiness of an event, for instance) and the text-building process itself. Both types of norms are continuously intermingled, as one could not expect otherwise, since they are closely connected. Indeed, the content of a news story is partly determined by the form of expression (by the limitations and traits of language), and, at the same time, the form is chosen or shaped in accordance with the content that has to be conveyed.

Let us now examine, in a succinct way, some other criteria and rules of text-building in which objectivist postulates are embedded. The use of an omniscient and impersonal narrator stands out. In this regard, the use of first-person singular is “proscribed” in all news stories (except in those entitled *Direct Witness*) (p. 25). And, further on, the stylebook says:

news texts in *El Mundo* must be written in an impersonal way, avoiding the use of the first-person singular, save for the quotes between inverted commas. With the authorization of the editor in chief, exceptions can be made in some cases (reports from journalists who have witnessed very special and serious events like accidents, terrorist attacks or *coups d'état* . . .). (p. 70)

Although the previous paragraph appears to stress an exclusively stylistic issue, an implicit reference to what is usually called “attribution” should not be overlooked. As journalists are not justified in using the first-person singular pronoun (except when they are witnesses), their testimony should, therefore, be set aside and replaced by quotes from people not belonging to the newspaper. Any possible doubt related to this is completely cleared up, when one reads the explanation about attribution. “The less directly a journalist has witnessed the facts told in a story, the greater the precision needed to attribute each meaningful datum, that is to say, to identify the source from which data are obtained . . . It is a journalist’s duty to reduce to a minimum the amount of unattributed data included in the story” (p. 44).

I find nothing objectionable—quite the contrary—in the obligation to quote a person making a statement. What I do consider mistaken is the underlying tenet of this rule to meticulously attribute each datum or opinion to a specific source. This principle is usually interpreted as if journalists could not be held accountable for their work, as though they would only “limit” themselves (Tuchman, 1972, p. 668) to record what others say—like a sort of stenographer—regardless of its truthfulness or its justice.¹¹ However, it is easy to recall many occasions in which journalists have caused irreparable damage to people or institutions when they—cloaking themselves in the shield of attribution—have “limited” themselves to repeating false statements made by public figures.¹²

Other criteria, also seemingly stylistic, are the use of the inverted pyramid and of adjectives. Regarding the use of the inverted pyramid, *El Mundo* seems to be moderately in favour of it: its use is recommended without too much emphasis in the case of “complex” news, but it is not imposed as a norm (pp. 47–8). However, as to adjectives—the other element considered “pollutant” of subjectivism—the stylebook recommends using them cautiously, especially in genres like “analysis”. It also remarks on the abuse of adjectives in news stories: “In the news the use of non descriptive adjectives must be

reduced to a minimum. Value-adjectives must be used only to describe facts or people, but not to express value judgements, something which is limited to opinion and editorial pages. (Sports and bullfighting features are obvious [?] exceptions to this rule, since their content involves assessment)" (p. 55). In my interpretation of this passage, this newspaper takes for granted that there are two clearly distinguishable types of adjectives: descriptive and value adjectives. And, as in the case of *El País*, this stylebook finds only the first one acceptable. Now, I think that there is no solid ground to make this distinction: all adjectives convey non-objective information, either in an explicit and colourful manner, or in an implicit and apparently neutral one. Let us consider, for example, some peculiar nouns which can be used as adjectives, or adjectives which reach far beyond description (for instance, "cretin" or "bastard").

As a summary, one can say that *El Mundo's* epistemological postulates are implicit or meagrely outlined, as is also the case in *El País'* stylebook. However, it is clearly noticeable that this newspaper follows the orthodox objectivist premises quite faithfully. In this sense, it advocates separating information and opinion, accepts the faulty distinction between interpretation and opinion, and assigns interpretation to the category of news texts. Also, it requires journalists to follow the *fairness doctrine* and to write in an impersonal style. It recommends using the inverted pyramid and utilizing adjectives with great restraint. Finally, when in a few passages there seems to be some sort of deviance from objectivist criteria, this is justified only for stylistic reasons: as a means of avoiding a weightiness that could make the writing dry, dull and boring.

ABC's Stylebook

First published in 1993,¹³ the content of this work matches its title much more than the other two: that is to say, it largely deals with formal issues, related to spelling, grammar, vocabulary and style. In its Introduction it states: "This stylebook does not try either to be a grammar book or a handbook of newswriting . . . It rather aspires to be a memorandum both of the basic norms of the Spanish grammar and those of the journalistic style—which are often neglected due to deadline pressures—and of *ABC's* typical norms . . ." (p. 11). Despite this statement, this work actually touches also on rules regarding many aspects of professional practice, journalistic genres, ethics, legal issues and so on.¹⁴

The key epistemological principle proposed in this stylebook is, without doubt, that of objectivity (the concept of truth is not mentioned at all, not even as a trait of news texts). However, what has to be understood under the term "objectivity" is tacit, with the exception of some observations directly related to it. For instance, in a five-line paragraph titled "news vs. opinion" it is ruled that both should be "scrupulously" separated (p. 49). It is nevertheless shocking that this token of professional zeal is not followed by any clue or suggestion on how this zeal should be used to achieve this high level of carefulness. I do not find it easy to understand either why "some dose of the author's personal opinion" is allowed in the reports. Apparently, the stylebook recognizes "his capacity as an exceptional observer of the facts which he recounts" (p. 49). One wonders what happens when the genre in question is not news reporting: does the reporter cease to be an "exceptional observer" and, therefore, loses the right to give his opinion?

Later on, the same criteria are categorically repeated: "the journalist will refrain from inserting his opinions when they are not deduced from the facts which he reports. It will

be strictly compulsory to attribute the authorship of opinions, value judgements, theories and other's explanations . . ." (p. 64). Now, if facts are different from opinions and, hence, must be separated from them, how can we explain that there can be opinions *deduced* from facts? How can one *objectively* discern which opinions are derived from facts and thus are acceptable, and which ones should be excluded because they belong to the journalist?

More evidence of the endorsement of the objectivist tenets is provided in the section entitled "Checking". In accordance with these, the stylebook's authors seem to be concerned only with checking facts,¹⁵ but not with contrasting opinions or critically analysing them. Thus, they seem to agree implicitly with the empiricist thesis that only facts can be true, but not opinions. Furthermore, the way the obligation to check facts is expressed—as if this task were trouble-free—is naïve. Indeed, the very wording of the criteria for checking is, in my judgement, anything but trouble-free: "particularly sensitive or controversial aspects of an issue will be subject to contrasting more than one source before accepting their verisimilitude" (p. 66).¹⁶ I wonder if this means that, when an issue is not "particularly sensitive or controversial", this obligation can be neglected.

Finally, the text insists on the separation of facts from opinions when saying: "Only facts, quotes or details will be submitted for verification to each source used" (p. 66). Does this mean that reporters should ask their sources to separate facts from value judgements? Should they disregard interpretations and assessments made by sources, because they are subjective and, therefore, irrelevant? How can one make this factual criterion compatible with the duty—previously quoted—of "attributing the authorship of opinions, value judgements, theories and explanations" to the sources? If the only thing that matters is the verification of facts by the sources, then, what is the point of including in the news pieces opinions and assessments made by those sources? How can one discriminate between the cases in which opinions and interpretations by the sources must be included, and those in which only empirical data must?

In sum, just a few assertions, which appear to be naïve, are enough to show the full endorsement of some of the main postulates of the objectivist conception of journalism: first, omitting any element of knowledge other than factual ones seems to foster the idea that truth is only derived from facts; second, the verification of facts is viewed as trouble-free, although the criterion for checking them is far from sufficient; and, finally, the stylebook claims that sources should corroborate only factual data, disregarding their value judgements or the general meaning of their accounts.

The issue of objectivity can also be found in other places and connected to other standpoints, like impersonal style. Thus, under the section "news", it is affirmed that news "will be written with the greatest objectivity and correctness and in an impersonal and enjoyable fashion" (p. 51). Later on, under the title "reports and articles", the problem of objectivity arises briefly again: "reports and articles—the stylebook says—are *more* personal genres than pure news. Both *allow a greater degree of author prominence*, inasmuch as the author researches, selects, offers and enriches the facts which he witnesses; he links and interprets them, along with their background and their foreseeable consequences" (p. 52).¹⁷ After having read this, one cannot refrain from wondering if a "greater" degree of prominence means that "some" of it spills over into the so-called "pure news". If this is a correct interpretation, then it raises the question of what degree of prominence would be acceptable in the genre of hard news and how it should be assessed. However, the text does not provide any clue to help us solve this problem.

It does not either furnish with any hint to understand why a greater degree of subjectivity should be tolerated in the genres of reports and articles, but not in the “hard news”. One wonders: do not factual stories, written in an impersonal fashion, also entail the same process of research and selection by their authors? Are these texts perhaps written not by real flesh and blood human beings, but by impersonal facts that speak for themselves?

Taking into account the norms and advice given for this way of writing, it is not very bold to say that this stylebook’s authors equate objectivity with an impersonal style of writing. In fact, most of the specific remarks on objectivity have a bearing on impersonal-style rules. And just in case there is still some doubt in our minds, a reading of these two passages clears it up: journalists “must write in an impersonal fashion, avoiding the use of the first-person singular pronoun. Every news story will be written in the third-person singular” (p. 49); “the greater prominence of the authors of reports and articles is not at odds with a depersonalized way of reporting. Hence, the use of the first-person singular pronoun should be avoided, save in exceptional circumstances” (p. 52). One wonders what the authors of this stylebook understand by the journalist’s “prominence”, since they assert that this is not in conflict with an impersonal style. How can both be compatible?

Finally, objectivist thought, which—as we have just seen—pervades the main criteria and norms related to text-building, also shows up when touching on the use of the inverted pyramid, deemed to be a “golden rule” and ruled as mandatory for “straight” news: “news will be written according to the decreasing interest structure called the inverted pyramid. This golden rule of written journalism never must be forgotten: the most outstanding data ought to be told at the beginning” (p. 51).

After what has been said so far, I think that it is quite clear that this stylebook very rigidly observes the typical postulates of the most orthodox objectivist school, both in the criteria related to text-building (separation between news and opinion, use of the impersonal style, use of the inverted pyramid), and in the general principles ruling journalists’ practice (verification criteria, relationship with sources, remarks on libel).

A Critical Account of the Underlying Epistemological Tenets in the Stylebooks

Having analysed succinctly each of the stylebooks, it is now time to try to draw some general conclusions on their stance on knowledge and truth and on how media should operate in accordance with them. To achieve an overall picture based on points made—whether explicit or implicitly—by all three stylebooks, references to specific passages that would identify which book they came from, will be omitted. This new task will not only attempt to furnish an overall view of the tenets shared by these works, but it will also try to go a step further by analysing critically the philosophical underpinnings embedded in them.

Omission of the Concept of Truth

As one could expect from professional handbooks, the concept of truth is not discussed at all in the stylebooks. However, surprisingly, any explicit reference whatsoever to the concept of truth is avoided. Likewise, these works do not endorse any specific philosophical school as a way of skipping the problem, and, at the same time, seem to be unaware of their own empiricist perspective.

Now, it seems clear that determining what is truth in news contents is a very tough and thorny task, since—among other reasons—it presupposes the very concept of truth, which is undoubtedly one of the biggest problems of the history of philosophy. Perhaps the authors of the books, being acquainted with how difficult this issue is, have chosen to avoid it entirely. Indeed, a professional *vademecum* is not the appropriate place to deal with these sorts of profound and difficult topics. However, I think that such an important problem cannot be ignored—much less solved—by choosing not to discuss it explicitly and pretending that it is none of our business. Quite the contrary, I think that the concept of truth is unavoidably presupposed, in one way or another, in activities directly related to knowledge and, of course, in the definition of knowledge itself.

I think that this is also the case with the stylebooks. As we have already seen, accuracy, precision, rigour and the duty to check data are repeatedly mentioned in all of them. The raw concept underlying these notions is that of truth. For instance, both accuracy and precision refer to the checking of empirical data for “verification”, which, etymologically speaking, means “to make true” (“*verum facere*”, in Latin). Hence, without having an implicit concept of truth—even a very rudimentary one—concepts such as precision, accuracy or objectivity would not even be understandable. The meaning of these concepts derives from their relationship with the raw concept of truth, on which they ultimately rely.

Thus, in my opinion, these stylebooks can be criticized because of their excessive pragmatism: they do not even mention that the concept of truth—taken as correspondence with reality¹⁸—is a very fundamental, non-adjectival concept, without which media’s role could not be understood. Likewise, I find inexcusable the lack of any mention or caveat warning that truth is not the unavoidable result of applying some stylistic or narrative procedures, or following some deep-rooted professional routines. The silence on these two points, along with the insistence on stylistic and modal issues, leads us to think the opposite: namely that truth is irrelevant or that it can be guaranteed by merely complying with formal rules.¹⁹ This is the only way of explaining the importance—excessive in my judgement—placed on dozens of petty formal details, dealt with throughout an overwhelming number of pages. I think that the tremendous effort to unify criteria is skewed in a disproportionate degree towards these sorts of formal issues, in detriment of others related to professional judgement about what deserves to be published and how stories should be told from the perspective of the sense they convey. Does anybody really think that, by sharing the same formal criteria, consistency between texts and reality is guaranteed? Perhaps, this is a good example of how worrying about relevant but minor issues can sometimes lead to neglecting the most fundamental matters.

Something similar to what we have just seen with the concept of truth can also be affirmed about other central epistemological notions, such as certainty, opinion, doubt, evidence, etc. Despite their close connection to knowledge, they are hardly mentioned. When criticizing this omission, I bear in mind that a professional handbook is not, of course, a scholarly work of epistemology. However, one would expect some sort of mention—even a concise one—of crucial matters like these and, above all, some awareness of the problematic character of the tenets underlying many concepts and professional rules, along with their philosophical premises.

The Substitution of the Concept of Truth by Those of Precision and Accuracy

The three stylebooks analysed coincide in emphasizing that journalists must pursue the maximum levels of exactitude, precision and rigour in the writing of journalistic texts. Though inherently beyond reproach, this guideline should not, however, take the place of what we might call the “principle of truth”. By omitting the latter and constantly repeating the first, this replacement actually occurs. Now, the substitution of the concept of truth by those of precision and exactitude begs the question why is it preferable to resort to operative or instrumental notions, instead of basing oneself on more sound concepts, such as truth. Certainly, this is not problem-free, but it has a much higher theoretical value. Obviously, we cannot answer these questions on the basis of textual signs, nor can we suppose non-revealed intentions.

However, a number of conversations held with a lot of Spanish journalists throughout many years, along with some of the people involved in the preparation of the stylebooks, allow me to assert that, by and large, the stylebooks’ authors coincide in thinking that truth is a very vague, elusive concept, about which there is little room—if any—for certainty. Thus, they decide to confine themselves to what humans can grasp more obviously: the accuracy of data or the exact quotation of the words uttered by a source. On the other hand, the same thesis (that truth is unattainable by human beings) has led Spanish journalists and scholars alike to the conclusion that the concept of truth must be replaced by ethical categories like veracity or honesty (e.g. Catalán González, 1997; Vázquez, 1986). This is not peculiar to Spanish journalism, however. The same approach can also be found both in American journalism and among scholars studying it (Durham, 1998; Hackett, 1984; Reese, 1990; Rosen, 1993). “In recent years”, Reese writes, “journalists have found it increasingly hard to maintain that they are wholly ‘objective’ and have fallen back on more defensible standards, like ‘accuracy,’ ‘balance,’ and ‘fairness’” (Reese, 1990, p. 393).

Now, the thesis that truth is a vague and elusive concept, unattainable by human beings makes, at least, three mistakes, which I will try to sketch briefly. First, when uttering that “truth is unattainable”, one presupposes *eo ipso* that this very assertion is itself true, that is to say, that it fully accounts for the human capacity for knowledge. Hence no one can affirm that truth does not exist without deeming this very statement true. In the same way, the stance that truth is unattainable, because of its allegedly vague, elusive character, is necessarily based on an implicit concept of truth, unconsciously accepted. Otherwise, it would be meaningless.

Secondly, this idea of truth presupposes a non-human, divine concept, unaware of human limitations. I think that it stems from a false dilemma regarding knowledge: either human beings are capable of understanding reality in a full, absolute, error-free way, or their knowledge does not deserve to be called true. This dilemma is false because it distorts human capacity for knowledge, which certainly is partial, limited, subject to error, but not non-existent. Indeed, from the fact that human beings are not able to reach an absolute, perfect knowledge of reality does not follow they cannot know it at all, that is to say, that their knowledge cannot achieve some truth (like being short-sighted does not amount to being blind). The human being’s aspiration to total truth can be, in my judgement, as wrong and harmful as its opposite, namely that which denies any chance of reaching the truth. In fact, thinking of truth as something vague, elusive or divine eventually can have consequences similar to those derived from the opposite view

(i.e. that which openly denies any possibility of truth for man). In both cases, in one because of excess, in the other by lack, man's capacity for knowing "with truth" is denied. In the end, the excessive emphasis on the concept of truth, to the point of making it sacred, can amount, paradoxically, to assuming a sceptical stance.

Thirdly, the empiricist error of reducing truth to accuracy or precision. While knowing something entails a certain level of precision or accuracy, from this does not follow that the concept of truth can be reduced to those concepts (an example of this logical error would be holding that there are only big fishes in a river just because the holes of our net are too wide to catch small ones). As is well known, the empiricist claim that the only source for truth is experience cannot be proved empirically and is self-refuting. One need not be a philosopher to realize that precision and accuracy, while necessary conditions of truth, are not, *per se*, sufficient ones. Someone with an outstanding love for rigour such as Philip Meyer, father of precision journalism, puts it in a very cogent way: "Raw data alone can never be enough. To be useful, to be understood, data have to be processed, abstracted, fit into some kind of structure. You have to put the material into a mental framework that aids in interpretation and understanding" (Meyer, 2002 [1991], p. 7). Moreover, sometimes precision and accuracy can work against truth: indeed, the truth of an action or event can be severely obscured by giving very precise and impeccably checked data²⁰ (for instance, a war correspondent's reports might contain tons of exact data about the conflict and, at the same time, be misleading with respect to what, by and large, is happening). In other words, overall truth can be concealed by means of providing precise data, inasmuch as a lie is more persuasive when intermingled with exact data. If accuracy is not subordinated to the general sense of the action told and its overall truth, then giving lots of accurate data can be misleading.²¹ Although accuracy is undoubtedly a value to pursue as a necessary condition for truth, it is erroneous to overvalue it—by taking it as a sufficient condition—and to reduce truth to it. When this happens, empiricism opens the way to relativism, as well-known philosopher Hillary Putnam has compellingly argued (1981, p. 143). This paradoxical effect is pointed out in a wise quotation, worth keeping in mind, attributed to Goethe: "If we would not want to know everything with such a great exactitude, may be we would be able to know things better".

The Substitution of the Concept of Truth by That of Objectivity

If there is an omnipresent concept in the stylebooks analysed, that is, beyond doubt, the concept of objectivity, whether explicitly mentioned or not. I think that one could not expect to be otherwise, since objectivity has been rightly described as "the emblem" and "keystone" (Mindich, 1998; Schudson, 1978) of American journalism and it has heavily influenced Spanish journalism throughout time. Now, in spite of many frequent statements by scholars (e.g. Glasser, 1992; Hackett, 1984; Rosen, 1993, 1994) and journalists (e.g. Bell, 1998),²² who have been arguing for decades that the paradigm of objectivity is exhausted, when it comes to setting up professional criteria to be defended in public—as is the case with a stylebook—this concept inevitably appears, once and again, as we have already seen in the first part of this article.

All three stylebooks, those of *El País*, *El Mundo* and *ABC*, coincide in holding that objectivity is the most fundamental principle that journalists must abide by in their work, with *ABC* being the most openly objectivist. This agreement is, however, shown in

different ways and with several degrees of emphasis. Thus, *El País* avoids mentioning “objectivity” by name, but the related concept is presupposed in various criteria of professional behaviour and, more specifically, in several norms related to text-building. In *El Mundo*, objectivity is proclaimed as a principle and the rules related to text-building comply with the basic postulates of the objectivity doctrine. Finally, *ABC*’s stylebook mentions objectivity on very few occasions, but it is the one which sticks most faithfully to this doctrine, both in its view of the general role of journalists and in the rigid way of enforcing the rules related to text-building.

As might be expected, objectivity is not defined in any of the three stylebooks, nor is the issue referenced to scholarly works where definition problems are discussed. However, as we have just seen, all of them presuppose in different explicit ways the general criteria that characterize objectivist Anglo-Saxon journalism, namely the separation of facts from opinion, the self-exclusion of the author in the quoting of the sources, the impartial reporting of contending opinions, the avoidance of “evaluative” adjectives, the use of the inverted pyramid, the ban of first-person singular pronoun, etc. They are not, therefore, texts which explicitly argue in favour of objectivity, but they assume, quite uncritically, all the criteria based on this doctrine.

In the final pages of this article, the focus of our concern will be the critical analysis of principles and criteria related to objectivity, as they are presented in the stylebooks. The aim is not to make a general review of the overall problem of objectivity, on which there already are some very solid contributions (e.g. Durham, 1998; Ryan, 2001; Ward, 2005), but to discover how the objectivity problem is addressed in the stylebooks studied.

On the dichotomy between news and opinion. As we have seen before, the three stylebooks coincide in categorically proclaiming the obligation of separating news from opinion. However, none of them pay the slightest attention to explaining the rationale behind this principle, why it should be respected and, above all, how it should be implemented in daily work. All these matters are taken for granted. I suggest that this shocking silence on a principle considered crucial for practitioners is due to one of the following two reasons: either (1) this matter is so obvious that it does not need any explanation at all (as if it were like separating the wheat from the chaff); or, on the contrary, (2) this separation is so problematic that the issue is avoided, leaving it—as in other cases—entirely to the discretion of each journalist. I think that the second explanation is far more probable than the first one: if news were easily separated from opinion, there would be no need to insist so much on separating them to avoid confusing the readers. Besides, if this separation were possible, then it would not be too difficult to establish clear, well-defined criteria, in order to distinguish where news turns into opinion and vice versa.

On the other hand, the duty to separate facts and opinions (conveyed in slogans disguised as principles, such as “facts are sacred; opinions are free”), presupposes that news must offer “just the facts”, unpolluted by any subjectivity and, since facts speak for themselves (Tuchman, 1972, p. 667ff.), there is no room for interpretation. Were this possible, then how can one explain that several media often provide essentially contending accounts of the same events? (for an empirical example, Canel, 1999, pp. 199–217). For the previous assertions to be true, all media ought necessarily to agree on news and differ only in the opinion pieces, something which obviously does not happen. Pushing the argument to its limit, it would then suffice that only one particular

media group would provide an objective account of “the facts”, whereas the other media would be devoted to offering opinions and assessments of the facts. Obviously, this situation is unimaginable and absurd.

From my point of view, it is impossible to separate news and opinions, if by news we understand a mere compilation of data and factual judgements, and by opinion, an accumulation of value judgements,²³ as I argued at length in other works (Muñoz-Torres, 1995, 2002). Naturally, this is not the place to repeat those arguments. However, it might perhaps be useful to summarize some of the conclusions of the articles just mentioned:

1. Establishing that something is a fact necessarily demands a previous concept of fact, that is to say, it presupposes a set of previous ideas without which the very notion of fact could not even be understood; thus, the concept of fact is not factual, but pre-factual.
2. The selection and description of a fact is always performed by someone. Hence, it is done from a specific viewpoint, respecting some values and in view of some aims: without values and aims, all facts would be equal and, in the end, irrelevant; therefore, selection necessarily entails values and assessment.
3. The assertion that something deserves to be called a fact also requires the subjective assessment of evidence and empirical data up to the point of achieving certainty on its factual character; but we cannot forget that certainty is a subjective state of mind, i.e. a personal persuasion, either grounded or not, and therefore not, *per se*, valid.
4. The act of knowing, as an act performed by a subject, is unavoidably subjective. Now, subjective does not amount to false, just as objective is not equivalent to true. *The notions of “objective” and “subjective” are very inadequate to think and talk about truth.*
5. The assertion of subjectivist relativism as valid does not follow from the refutation of objectivism; it is necessary to re-think the concept of truth, freeing it both from the binds of positivism and of relativism.

If the points just made are true, then it is obvious that separating facts from values is impossible. Therefore, the same is true for separating journalistic texts regarded as factual (hard news) from those texts considered opinionated. According to the reasons given, even the apparently factual texts are always hiding behind some implicit values, which make them meaningful. When the media decide to publish a piece of news, they do so by selecting—from one perspective or another—those actions or events which for some reason they consider worthy of the public’s attention. Therefore, subjective assessment is always embedded in the very core of the journalistic work as a previous condition to the task of building texts. This basic idea does not seem to be borne in mind by any of the three stylebooks analysed.

On the distinction between analysis and opinion. If the separation of facts from opinions can only be done by using dichotomies which distort the nature of human knowledge, something similar can be said on the distinction between “analysis” and “opinion”. As an initial approach to the subject, one might think of analysis as an “objective” interpretation of reality, whereas opinion is a “subjective” one. This is clearly the point made by *El Mundo* and *ABC*’s stylebooks and, to a lesser degree, by that of *El País*. However, a more deliberate examination of the issue easily reveals that a sharp frontier between both types of text cannot be established. In other words, both interpretations and opinions are necessarily subjective (although not necessarily of equal validity). The difference is that the former *seems* to be much less subjective than the latter.

Let us examine this issue briefly. The meaning of an event depends on the relationship established with other events, circumstances and data. Now, the setting up of a relationship is necessarily subjective (whether grounded or not), since the human intellect is the one responsible for establishing links of meaning among different issues. This is also true of the meaning emanating from the connections made by an analyst. This meaning is not a given, but emerges from the relationship established—based on assessment, of course—between data, actions and circumstances. Thus, good analysts provide high added value to allegedly “mere” facts on the basis of clever connections among ideas, values and all sorts of data, which allow others to understand the deeper sense of what is going on.

It is obvious that an opinion is the expression of a judgement resulting from an assessment and, naturally, is subjective. However, there is no reason to assume that subjective is a synonym for false. It is true that some opinions are the expression of feelings or likes and dislikes that are impossible for another person to verify, but the logical conclusion is not the empiricist principle that opinion, by definition, is completely alien to truth (e.g. Hempel, 1965). As we all know, there are some crazy, arbitrary opinions, not grounded on sound evidence or sensible reasoning, and there are also solid opinions, based on cogent reasoning or on irrefutable experience. I think the problem lies in deceptive appearances. Opinions are usually expressed in more “personal”, colourful language, which tend to mix thoughts, attitudes and feelings. However, they can be truer than analyses presented in a direct, impersonal manner, but based on false data or on arbitrary connections.

Furthermore, it is quite clear that neither all analysts provide the same additional benefits, nor do all opinions deserve to be granted the same credit. The key difference among them is how grounded they are, that is to say, their correspondence with reality. That is why all of us know how to distinguish between crazy, absurd opinions and sound ones. This can also be said of analyses and interpretations. *A fortiori*, if all opinions and interpretations were equally valid, it would be irrelevant to argue about them: what would be the point if all of them were equally alien to truth, unable to account for reality?

Bearing these reasons in mind, we can fully understand the hesitation of scholars and journalists alike, when it comes to explaining what the defining traits of the genre called “analysis”, the differences between an “objective” and a “subjective” interpretation, or between analysis and opinion are. In this respect, Tuchman brilliantly pointed out in the 1970s that the invocation of news analysis to suggest objectivity was rife with problems. As an example, she writes:

The question “How is objective reporting different from news analysis?” turned out to be the most difficult for respondents to answer during two years of research [as a participant observer at a daily metropolitan newspaper in the United States]. One editor had this to say after he had rambled for ten minutes without being able to focus on the subject: “News analysis implies value judgment. Straight news has no value judgment whatsoever . . . You can’t eliminate the label ‘news analysis’ and say anything . . . the key point is the number and degree of value judgments undocumented at the time”. (Tuchman, 1972, pp. 671–2)

In our present situation, things have not changed much. The stylebook that most clearly defines its position on this problem is *El Mundo’s*. After acknowledging the problematic character of the genre “analysis”, the stylebook ends up including it in the

news genres and orders journalists to refrain from including any value judgement in their analyses (as if selection of actions and data could be carried out without any *implicit judgement*).

This last adjective, “implicit”, can give us a clue as to why analysis seems to be, at least at first sight, less subjective than opinion. In my view, both analyses and opinions are subjective, if by “subjective” we understand “related to a subject”. It is very obvious that both hard news, allegedly “straight and pure”, and texts devoted to analyses and opinions are written by someone, who—willingly or not—leaves his personal, subjective stamp on the process, in one way or another. Another thing altogether is that this stamp shows up in a clear, explicit manner (as is the case with opinion articles). Conversely, it can be hidden under a cold, detached appearance (pretending to be a text written by itself or by some kind of omniscient mind). Undoubtedly, appearances in either case—fashioned through narrative and stylistic devices—are decisive in making an impression on the reader. But this should not mislead us to the point of making us think that there are indeed “objective” texts and others which are not.

On the confusion of objectivity with impersonal style. My judgement is that the three stylebooks analysed coincide in wrongly equating objectivity with impersonal style. All three accept as a principle that objectivity is achieved by using certain narrative techniques, like the use of the third person, either singular or plural, the omniscient narrator, the abundance of direct speech quotes, and a severe restriction of explicit value expressions such as adjectives, etc.

Now, the truth or falsehood of a news text mainly depends on the correspondence of the story’s general sense with reality. But this general sense, being a result of the way in which journalists know and judge, is previous to, and somewhat independent of, the manner in which the story is told. Hence, the true knowledge necessary to construct a good news story is not, by any means, guaranteed by using a narrative and stylistic mode that gives it the impression of being true. Truth and verisimilitude are not by definition the same, since being and appearing do not coincide necessarily either.

Therefore, amounting objectivity to impersonal style entails confusing two different levels of discourse: knowledge and its expression. Of course, we can be untruthful in the way we talk or tell a story, but it is also true that truth does not depend mainly on expression but on the judgement previous to it. Otherwise, truthfulness would not be a trait of knowledge (of an assertion), but only of its expression. “Incorrect knowledge”, or more precisely, a lack of knowledge cannot produce a true expression, that is, one that corresponds with the object known. Although the difference between knowledge and expression is very clear—like that between truth and verisimilitude—many journalists often confuse both issues. It is then no wonder that this confusion is reproduced as an axiomatic principle in the stylebooks. However, in other academic fields, like for instance that of classic rhetoric, this point was very clear since its beginning: any mode of enunciation, any sort of discourse, necessarily involves argumentation and persuasion (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1958, pp. 232–40). Apparently, this idea is gaining entrance, little by little, in the scholarly study of media, where now it is often coming across warnings on the fallacy of equating truth and mode (e.g. Núñez Ladevéze, 1987, p. 257).

Conclusions

Throughout this article, many important issues have been suggested or sketched which cannot be dealt with more fully here. At this point, it is time to conclude this paper with a summary of the most relevant conclusions we have drawn from the research undertaken. These conclusions are the result of taking from the specific criteria and rules of each stylebook what they share in common. They constitute an overall account of the main tenets held in the three texts, without losing sight, of course, of their peculiarities.

1. The three stylebooks studied are a compilation of several formal criteria (grammatical, lexical, stylistic, narrative and typographic), allegedly aimed at providing a basic homogeneity to the news texts. Nonetheless, as we have seen, by selectively setting up some criteria and norms, these stylebooks go far beyond a mere description of professional techniques or formal attributes of news stories: they hold many underlying epistemological principles which pervade the way in which journalists carry out their work.
2. The dominant epistemological conception in these works is traditional American objectivism, rooted in the philosophical doctrine of positivism (derived from English empiricism). Although this is not explicitly mentioned, it is implicitly present in a great deal of norms and rules, like the following ones:
 - a. Separation of news stories from opinion texts, based on the premise that facts must be separated from values (even typographically); the point of view of the narrator must be always excluded; and any opinion given in a text must be attributed to a source.
 - b. The *fairness doctrine*: when reporting about contending opinions or viewpoints, all must be equally treated, that is to say, the journalist will maintain the same distance from all of them.
 - c. Separation between news analysis and opinion; the first is regarded as belonging to news genres, the second is not; therefore, there must be some typographic difference between.
 - d. Obligation of using an impersonal style: first-person singular is prohibited, save authorized cases; limitation to the maximum of the use of adjectives (since they impose value judgements).
 - e. The use of the inverted pyramid, at least in "straight" news, is recommended or required.
3. In none of the three stylebooks is there any mention of an explicit concept of truth, nor of other crucial epistemological notions (certainty, opinion, doubt, verification, etc.), nor is there any reference to different philosophical schools regarding these issues.
4. All of them tend very strongly to equate truth with accuracy or precision, on the one hand; and objectivity with an impersonal style, on the other.

If these three stylebooks can be considered a good indicator of the dominant conception of journalism in Spain—and in other Western countries—then it is urgent, in my view, to undertake a deep, critical revision of the epistemological paradigm which has been ruling media's work for decades and is intellectually exhausted. I think that if journalists really want to serve people, instead of making use of the audience for their own sake, they should change altogether their professional routines with respect to principles and criteria governing knowledge of reality and its communication to the public. Only by means of a sound reflection can we free many of those routines from the binds of false

premises to which they have been linked for too long. Pointing out the fallacies, contradictions and errors embedded in these assumptions—as I have tried to do in this paper—is, therefore, a means to make journalists engaged in critical thinking on their work and to become aware of the need it has for more solid theoretical foundations. This is, obviously, much easier than developing a whole new paradigm, but, at the same time, a huge step in the good direction. To me, this is such a challenging task that almost any effort to accomplish it is praiseworthy.

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NOTES

1. The use of the adjective “epistemological” can be misleading: depending on the context, it can mean either the study of the general principles related to human knowledge and the truth criteria, or, more specifically, the study of scientific knowledge. Due to this polysemy, I am not entirely happy with the use of this term. In this paper, it will be used in the first sense. There is another adjective, “gnoseological” (related to knowledge), which is not so polysemous. However, the disadvantage of using it is twofold: first, it is barely used nowadays; second, it has some esoteric connotations. Thus, for lack of a better word, I have resigned myself to using the above-mentioned term.
2. The curious term “stylebooks” deserves a quick comment. If these works are more than grammar handbooks or catalogues of stylistic recipes, one wonders why, then, they are called “stylebooks”. Here I sketch some plausible reasons. It might be for lack of a better name. Perhaps, this is a way of avoiding a more precise—but also more pompous—title. The possible mimetic effect of their English predecessors, in which the word “style” is central, cannot be overlooked either. Finally, their emphasis on formal features could be mainly the result of an overcautious attitude constructed to refute possible accusations about the weaknesses of the criteria and rules governing the professional practice of journalism. Thus, in case of criticism, the stylebook’s authors could claim that the purpose of their work was “only” to unify formal criteria, without crossing the line into sensitive issues like professional judgement, which are left to the discretion of each journalist. When dealing with each of the three stylebooks, it will be indicated how they present themselves, i.e. what their stated aims are.
3. According to Fernández Beaumont, the first compilation of norms related to newswriting dates from 1940 and was made by Pedro Gómez Aparicio for the Efe news agency. The first handbook, also for the same agency, was first published in 1976 (Fernández Beaumont, 1987, pp. 105, 112).
4. I quote the 1996 edition. The italics are mine (hereinafter, the use of italics in any quoted text will be mine, unless otherwise indicated). As to issues of professional ethics, the stylebook refers to “Newsroom Statute”, published as an annex, that is a short text with articles, which, after the usual declaration of principles, deals exclusively with the conscience clause, the professional secret, the election of the editor and the smooth

running of the Newsroom Committee. Despite the undoubted importance of these matters, I do not think that one can argue that the Newsroom Statute is a compilation of criteria on professional practice, given its very narrow scope and its legal approach.

5. These three principles are literally repeated in article 3—§§ 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3—of the Newsroom Statute, approved in 1980 by the appropriate boards governing the publishing company and the newsroom.
6. I have translated “veraz” as “veracious” (despite being an obsolete term), instead of as “truthful”, because these words are not synonyms, as it might seem. “Veracious” conveys the meaning of having the intention of telling the truth, which does not actually entail telling it (in a similar way as saying something false does not necessarily mean lying or being “mendacious”). Thus, strictly speaking, “veracious” should be applied to journalists’ attitude; but not to news, which are “truthful” or “false”.
7. It is shocking to me the use of the expression “non-checked facts” in the empiricist context prevailing among media members nowadays. If what makes something a fact is its empirical character and it can only be called a fact insofar as there is empirical evidence about it, then “non-checked facts” is a sort of contradiction in the terms, by the very definition of fact. Hence, to be rigorous and consistent, one should differentiate between facts and “alleged facts”.
8. Further on, the text insists on prohibiting “any manipulation of photos, other than the strictly technical one” (§ 1.32). One can wonder if there is any sort of manipulation of a photograph which could be actually made without the help of some kind of technique and, hence, if there is a way of distinguishing between permissible technical manipulation and illegitimate one.
9. This work is 661 pages long in its 13th edition. Only 10 of them are devoted to the chapter entitled “Principles” and 28 to the one entitled “Journalistic Genres”, most of which deal with formal issues.
10. This stylebook is divided into four sections: “General Rules of Style”, “Editing Rules”, “Norms of Professional Practice and Ethics of Journalism” (which includes “Newsroom Statute” and “Founding Principles”) and “Lexicon and Annexes”.
11. Concerning this issue, it can be germane to recall the comparison made by García-Noblejas when he criticizes the view of the journalists’ role as an unaccountable one: their work “would be equivalent to that of an stage actor or to that of an erudite scholar who only quotes others, because in both cases their utterance lack the illocutive force characteristic of an assertion. Thus, *the journalist would be like a sort of telltale or a mere messenger who cannot be held accountable*—as if he were an innocent pigeon—for what he *does* when saying what he says . . .” (García-Noblejas, 1986, p. 132; emphasis added).
12. Let us recall just one famous case of the well-known “witch hunt” promoted by senator McCarthy in 1950, when he said in a press conference that 205 Communists had infiltrated the State Department and that he had a list with their names. Although the charge was false, the main media published it with great accuracy, playing along with his interests. A severe damage was inflicted to the truth, but that never minded: the objectivity principle was carefully respected.
13. I quote the 1993 edition, because it is closer in time to those of the other two style books (both published in 1996). The second one appeared in 2001 and has minor changes concerning the object of this study.

14. Throughout the pages of this stylebook, one can find a peculiar miscellany of stylistic remarks sharing space with some laconic observations on journalistic genres and on other issues like professional secret, privacy protection, the way of quoting sources, or the duty of checking facts and data; all deployed in an anarchic manner. An example of this lack of order: in a single chapter, there are included issues so heterogeneous like the following: "Measures and Conversion Tables", "Professional Secret", "Short Sentences", "The Art of Entitling", "The Interview", "Spanish Toponyms" or "Respect for Privacy". I think that it would have been much better to choose between one of these two options: either omitting any reference to criteria related to professional judgement and the use of journalistic genres, or devoting a whole section to them and elaborating on "writing norms" in a separate section. In my opinion, mixing stylistic issues with brief remarks on criteria as to how texts should be written or how journalists should behave, undermines the importance given to the latter, and at the same time it greatly hinders the order of ideas and the clarity of the exposition.
15. The passage literally says: "all the facts which are the object of an investigation, either our own, or received from others without due guarantee, will have to be checked before publishing them" (p. 66).
16. I think that the term "verisimilitude" should have been replaced for "truth", since the checking of sources is not aimed at achieving the apparent truth (which is what "verisimilitude" means), but the real truth (i.e. the correspondence of texts with reality). It is obvious that there is not always a correspondence between being and appearing. Hence, journalists should not be happy with mere verisimilitude. Instead, they must make every possible effort to achieve the greatest degree of truth attainable by them. Changing truth for verisimilitude would be very bad business. That is why I am willing to accept that this is just a mistake of expression, a "*lapsus calami*".
17. The use of the verb "to tolerate" evokes the objectivist cliché of banning any hint of subjectivity in the text-building tasks, with the exception of reports and articles, where there is more room for "tolerance".
18. Let us recall that the concept of truth as correspondence to reality has its origin in Aristotle and was developed along the Aristotelian tradition (to which I adhere).
19. Kevin Stoker tells a very well-known case which illustrates, interestingly enough, how complying with the formal procedures of objectivity in journalism resulted in a deformation of truth, up to the extreme of almost completely forging it. Briefly, Carol Stuart, an 8-month-pregnant white woman, was killed by her husband, Charles, who claimed a black man shot her. He made the police believe that he was innocent, since he had also been injured by the robber in the attack. A *Boston Herald's* journalist, Michelle Caruso, discovered some suspicious pieces of circumstantial evidence against Carol's husband, but she was not allowed to publish the story, because her newspaper editors demanded of her the testimony of, at least, one official source. As the police had fully believed the cunning account by the husband, Caruso was not able to provide her editors with any quote to back up her suspicions. Some months later, the murderous husband committed suicide, the suspect arrested by the police was discharged, and the truth was revealed (Stoker, 1995).
20. Catalán González rightly recalls this idea in a categorical way: "Telling a string of facts can be the most persuasive way of concealing an outrage" (Catalán González, 1997). And he makes a distinction between basic knowledge of an event and the true understanding of its meaning, which does not often derive from basic knowledge.

21. It is obvious that popular wisdom does not equate truth and precision. Thus, for instance, when someone is charged with a crime which he has not committed, the defensive statement is expressed—often in an emphatic way—in terms of “falsehood”, but not of “inaccuracy” or “imprecision”.
22. Among many journalists, it has become a sort of set phrase the expression “objectivity, whatever that means”.
23. González Gaitano puts it in a very clear and sound manner: “the underlying conviction is that fact judgements can be the cause of a perfect communication, since they are based on ‘objective facts’. Being factual statements, that is to say, able to be verified and checked, they can have intersubjective validity in the way assertions made by experimental sciences have; however, ‘value judgement’ are expressions of preference, expressions of attitude, which are not verifiable. In Journalism, the latter are equated with opinions” (González Gaitano, 1989, p. 33).

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