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Journalists' Empowerment Through Protest in the Newsroom and Beyond: How the *Viernes Negros* Movement Reshaped the Independence of the Spanish Public Television

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ABSTRACT

Drawing upon 45 in-depth interviews and heterogeneous focus groups with workers at Spanish public television (TVE), this study explores how journalists and feminist activists jointly have interacted to create and manage a movement (*Viernes Negros*) to preserve their professional independence and demand the transparent appointment of TVE's president through a public process. Specifically, we illustrate the evolution, leadership, and strategies for participation in this mobilization, elaborating on the crucial role of *MujeresRTVE* (*MujeresRTVE* is a movement that emerged in relation to the 2018 Women's Day and promotes the values of independence, quality and gender perspective at RTVE; Rosa María Mateo Isasi is an award-winning journalist and newscast anchorwoman. She was named as a temporary sole administrator of RTVE on July 27, 2018, which means she holds the powers of both the presidency and the management board of RTVE, remaining in charge to this date) in structuring and legitimizing the protest. This study contributes to current discussions on the independence of the public service broadcasting, arguing that newsroom aims might be more effectively implemented when actively led by newswriters.

KEYWORDS

Viernes Negros; journalism; independence; RTVE; social movement; feminist protest

Introduction

In recent years, most public broadcasting services (PBS) in Europe have been challenged by news digital operators (Brevini 2013) that have disrupted their historical audiences and content output (Polonska and Beckett 2019). This novel socio-political situation has also brought new opportunities for them to regulate their governance structure and hence adapt their corporate strategies to the growing public demands of transparency and independence (Hanretty 2011). Prompted by these emergent values (Mermin 2004; Campos-Freire 2013), many media workers have collectively raised their voices against political interferences and news manipulations, challenging the historic instructions and guidelines of political administrators. In this study, we focus on the management, leadership, and effects of one such movement in Spain: the *Viernes Negros*.

This study explores how workers at TVE have responded to the historic lack of independence of this entity and the reticence of Spanish politics to appoint a president of TVE through a public nomination process. Specifically, based on 45 in-depth interviews, we aim to illustrate how newswriters created and managed *Viernes Negros*, problematizing the main challenges, effects, and reprisals that participants faced during their involvement. Our findings first reveal that corporate unions played a subsidiary role in the structuration and management of the mobilization, a fact that significantly contributed to enhance the transversal participation of workers. Secondly, we illustrate the connection between the movement and an emerging group of feminist activists (*MujeresRTVE*), exploring the main strategies and social media tactics implemented to amplify the central demands and to persuade citizens to support their actions. Finally, we show and describe the reactions of TVE directive staff, underscoring the main reprisals that were deployed. We conclude that, although the main goal of the movement was not fully accomplished (i.e., the appointment of TVE's president through a public nomination process), *Viernes Negros* has created an atmosphere that empowers TVE workers to resist, and counter-attack political interferences.

The article is structured as follows: Initially, in order to situate our contribution, we engage with relevant normative debates on journalism studies in general and public television in particular. Then, we provide a contextual background of the historical struggle of political administrators in controlling TVE. This review begins with the first days of Rodríguez Zapatero's presidency, elaborating on the important reforms to regulate and govern the Spanish public television. After this historic review, we situate the *Viernes Negros* mobilization and outline the political context in which it was designed. Finally, we discuss our methodological approach and present and discuss our main findings.

Academic Debates on Political Pressures, The Independence of Journalists and the Role of PSB in Modern Democracies

The twentieth century normative ideal of journalism in general and of PBS in particular has extensively emphasized three fundamental issues: professional autonomy, independence and objectivity (Cullinane 2020; Sorensen 2019). This normative conception considered PBS as a democratic institution that should balance the dividing effects of partisan journalism. According to this normative conception, the politically independent operation of PBS is extremely relevant as it is generally aimed to reach the widest national audience (Cullinane 2020). It is especially true for European democracies given that, as opposed with the United states where PBS play a limited role compared with partisan media, it is one of the main goals of PBS to mitigate the political fragmentation of national audience "due to its universal appeal that seeks to create a sense of community and large, diverse audiences" (Dahlgren 2019, 294).

A cornerstone of the public function of the PBS is the definition and social implications of the independence of these entities (Reich and Hanitzsch 2013; Bennett 2015; Lamuedra, Martín, and Broullón-Lozano 2019). According to Hanretty (2011), independence, as a general concept, should be conceived as a relationship between different agents. Consequently, the word "independent" may have many faces, including "independence from governmental, political or economic control, or from control of materials and infrastructure essential for the production and dissemination of media products and programmes" (Polonska and Beckett 2019, 5). Likewise, Karppinen and Moe's analysis (2016), reflects

upon how different stakeholders (media system, media organizations, journalism, journalists) should be independent from different power structures (state or governments, political parties, interest groups, media corporations). By declaring independence from political pressures or market forces, the PSB seek to bolster its legitimacy and credibility in the eyes of citizens and policy makers (Karppinen and Moe 2016).

Nevertheless, “considerable indirect supervision is retained by governments through control of financial allocations to the state broadcasters and in appointments to their boards of management” (Brown 1996, 5). Thus, media-politics relationship could be considered as a mutual dependency, as “both parts need each other’s resources to meet their own specific goals: politicians seek favorable media coverage and journalists need politicians to provide them with content for their audiences” (Figueiras 2017, 314). A priori, there is a strong consensus among media scholars that the political independence of PSB is very important based on its contribution to modern Western democracies (Benson and Powers 2011). Even on the minimal theories of democracy (Dahl 1971), citizens should have alternative sources of information that allows them to choose between different political alternatives. In fact, as Benson and Powell argues:

government has always and will always influence how our media system functions, from the early newspaper postal subsidies to handing out broadcast licenses and subsidizing broadband deployment. The question is not if government should be involved, but how, and that is a question that demands an in-depth conversation, not a shouting match. (Benson and Powers 2011, 3)

However, the changing media environment has brought to life different scholarly debates on the normative conception of PBS (Cullinane 2020). Media consumers, political and social movements, both on the left and right, and populist-illiberal political regimes, all contest the validity of the normative model (Tumber and Zelizer 2019). This wave of cultural contestation states that the normative conception of PBS became outdated due to the new forms of media consumption and the skyrocketing number of different sources available, especially on the Internet and social media (Cullinane 2020). Yet, advocates of the normative conception of the PSB state that future media studies should problematize audiences’ needs, wants, and values.

For example, Donders (2019) analyzing how different PSBs connect with audiences and how public television use digital platforms for that sake, suggests that one of the main characteristic of the development of PBS to public service media (PSM) is that the latter puts greater emphasis on citizens, reflecting more on their wants and needs. Thus, even within the normative conception, PBS should respond to citizens’ value transformations, especially through the Internet and social media (Donders 2019). We argue that this growing connection between public entities and audiences permeate new forms of collaboration and attention in which newsroom aims and ambitions may be better appraised.

A Brief History of the Spanish Public Television (2000-2018): From Zapatero to Rajoy

The elections of March 14, 2004, led the new Socialist Party leader, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, to the presidency of the government, and the philologist and professor of Audiovisual Communication, Carmen Caffarel, to the general direction of the RTVE; Caffarel assumed the

management of a heavily indebted corporation that was overstaffed and had highly questioned credibility (Bustamante 2005). The sanitation economy resolution and the modification of its governance system, untouched since 1980, were part of the proposals for democratic reforms of the arriving socialist government and were materialized through Law 17/2006 on state radio/television (Azpitarte Sánchez 2007).

As a previous step to the approval of the aforementioned law and the reform of the Spanish Radiotelevision Corporation, the Government commissions, by means of the Royal Decree 744/2004 of April 24, reported on the reform of the media owned by the state (RTVE and the Efe Agency) by a group of experts formed by Emilio Lledó Iñigo, president, and Enrique Bustamante Garrido, Victoria Camps Cervera, Fernando Savater, and Fernando González Urbaneja, the latter replacing the late Fernando Lázaro Carreter. This document, known as the “committee of wise people” report, was generally well received, except in media groups with commercial audio-visual interests competing with the RTVE for the maintenance of advertising as a substantial part of the financing (Rivas Reyes 2005; Varela 2005).

Most of the council proposals for the reform of the state media were conveyed in Law 17/2006, which approved the constitution of a Corporation formed by the two state mercantile companies TVE and RNE (Azpitarte Sánchez 2007). At the same time, the Corporation agreed with the unions on a redundancy process of 4,150 workers between 2006 and 2008, which reduced its total workforce to 6,400 through early retirement for those over 52 years of age and incentivized termination for those under that age (Ruiz de Apodaca 2009).

The two-thirds reinforced quorum system of Law 17/2006 for the election of the president of the new corporation sought consensus by requiring two-thirds of the courts to vote, in theory in a highly commendable way, but in practice leaving the door open to the blockade so that in the following two months, they could be elected by an absolute majority of congress, which in reality always coincides with the majority held by the government; that is, the party and governmental control of the centralized and politicized power vertex of governance was maintained (López-Cepeda, Soengas-Pérez, and Campos-Freire 2019). Law 17/2006, despite being considered positive and advanced (Zallo 2010), was the result of the missing consensus of the alternating bipartisan system, PSOE and PP, which went bankrupt after the 2008 economic crisis and the 2012 elections.

The balance in communication policies of the Zapatero’s legislatures was of reforms and advances in the first part and of counter-reforms in the second, although with the recognition of a 2006–2012 period of higher levels of pluralism and empowerment of RTVE professionals (De Madariaga, Broullón, and Lamuedra 2016; Soengas Pérez and Rodríguez Vázquez 2015; Soengas Pérez, Elías-Pérez, and López-Cepeda 2018). Furthermore, by virtue of Law 17/2006, the *Consejo de Informativos* and the Information Statute of the RTVE were launched in 2008 as participation instruments to ensure the neutrality and objectivity of the informative content; the independence of the management professionals, promoted editorial independence and allowed them to participate in the preparation of stylebooks and report on non-binding information on the executive appointments of the information services.

The PP and the new Government of Mariano Rajoy in 2012 failed to reach consensus with the PSOE to agree on a president for the TVE. To resolve this blockade, the Government used the Royal Decree-Law 15/2012 on April 20, amending the administration regime of the RTVE Corporation. This modification reduced the number of members of

the Board of Directors, the body from which the unions emerge to go to the Advisory Council, to 9, and they were elected by the absolute majority of the courts and lawyer Leopoldo González Echenique as president. He was succeeded by journalist José Antonio Sánchez, who had been the last general director of the RTVE in the legislature of Aznar and who, at the time of the relay in 2014, was also the manager of Autonomous Radiotelevision of Madrid.

The confrontation between the new management of the TVE and the *Consejo de Informativos* emerged in 2012 due to changes produced by the modification of the governance system, the appointment of the new director and team of the Informative Services, and the application of editorial criteria to different programs. In the following two years, various controversies and the dismissals of managers and the parallel hiring of trusted professionals moved to public opinion, as did the resignation in 2014 of the director of the Information Services, who was replaced by another external professional but also received internal rejection from the obligatory non-binding consultation of the *Consejo de Informativos*.

The *Viernes Negros* protest of Spanish-owned radio/television professionals (RTVE) broke out as a public demonstration in the spring of 2018, supported by the *Consejo de Informativos* to demand the unlocking of Law 5/2017 and protests against the manipulation of information to protect the values of pluralism, independence, quality, and stability in the work of journalists and the management structures of the aforementioned State Corporation for Public Radiotelevision. The impact of the protests was related to the dynamic use of digital networks, the symbolism of the action (dressing in black to take advantage of the images), and the link with the emerging feminist movement (@MujeresRTVE), and it influenced the rejection of a consolidated social perception of the governmentalization of public media. On this backdrop, many media scholars and journalists pundits alike have made global calls to examine the potential power of professional movements (like the *Viernes Negros*) in upstirring pro-democratic values to ensure a public, politically free, public service. However, limited empirical research has explored the prospective managerial implications, the main professional ramifications, and the morphology of these movements. We argue that such examination is crucial to understand the growing intersection between media labor and activism in public broadcasters. Based on our main objectives, we aim to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Which were the main strategies employed during the *Viernes Negros* to foster participation and to disseminate newswriters' actions and protests to the wider audience?

RQ2: How was *Viernes Negros* managed and structured?

RQ3: What were the main effects of newswriters' participation in terms of reprisals and/or promotions?

Methodology

For this study, 45 in-depth interviews with TVE workers were conducted. These interviews took place between April and August of 2019. Through the in-depth interviews, we aimed to better understand respondents' perspectives and experiences on the *Viernes Negros* movement. Our main purpose was to find common patterns to allow us to draw an accurate depiction of the collective actions undertaken. In selecting potential participants, we

searched for common hashtags on Twitter used during the *Viernes Negros* and identified the most active workers. Other journalists linked to worker unions and democratic organizations within TVE were also contacted. A snowball sampling method was used in order to obtain information-rich key informants (Noy 2008).

Interviewees for this study were relatively heterogeneous in terms of their expertise, background, responsibilities, and experience. As participants were granted anonymity, we did not include any data that could jeopardize their identities (participants are reported as P1, P2, P3, and so forth). Germane to respondents' demographics, 50% of the interviewees had 20+ years of experience, 2/3 were women, and around 55% currently have or had had managerial responsibilities at TVE.

All of the interviewees were contacted by email. If no answer was received after a week, a second invitation was sent. Some workers refused to be interviewed, typically referring to personal motivations. In three cases, respondents decided to unilaterally cancel the interview when it had already been set. Although all (four) unions of the organization were contacted, only one formally accepted our invitation. In total, around 20% of interview requests sent received a reply, with 80% of these replies being positive.

The interviews were divided into five sections, preceded by a set of general questions about participants' labor situations. These five divisions were: 1) knowledge and origins of the movement, 2) participation, 3) management, 4) achievements, and 5) effects. Before and during the interviews, respondents were asked and reminded to illustrate their perspectives with specific examples. These interviews were complemented by three focus groups (round tables) between participants. To complement the data, we also used publicly available secondary material (company reports, website information, and press releases) in printed and online forms and internal reports provided by participants. The secondary data were used for contextualizing and interpreting the interview data.

All of the interviews and focus groups were recorded and later transcribed verbatim. For the data analysis, we followed the recommendations of Braun and Clarke (2006) on the deployment of thematic analysis. We therefore structured our data analysis in six different phases (familiarization with data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing these themes, defining them, and drafting the study). Once the main codes and themes emerged, we discussed and analyzed these categories with two independent media scholars.

Results

Viernes Negros: Knowledge and Justification

All of our participants knew of the existence of *Viernes Negros*. In fact, the majority of them had participated in the movement, either in its management or leadership. According to our testimonies, the movement formally emerged in Torrespaña, the headquarters of RTVE in Madrid. It was first promoted and designed by the *Consejo de Informativos* and then led by *MujeresRTVE*. Outside Madrid, respondents acknowledged that the vast majority of territorial centers were also involved and thus actively engaged in the collective actions informed from Torrespaña.

Although participants shared a common perspective on the main reasons for the emergence of the *Viernes Negros*, many journalists introduced nuances to justify its amplitude

and *raison d'être*. Most participants typically agree with P3, a senior documentalist, who believes that the movement started because the newsroom demanded that a president and an administrative board should be chosen based on a public process. However, for some other participants, the emergence of *Viernes Negros* was also connected to traditional and historical struggles against political manipulations in TVE. Indeed, for many interviewees, this movement may be considered the most significant reaction to partisan pressures from both sides of the political spectrum. As a result, what initially started as a movement to protest the election of a president of TVE by a public process evolved to a fight for the establishment of a public television free of political interferences, as P5, an experienced reporter illustrates: "I think the movement grew into a protest against manipulation in the newsroom because this was a consequence from our initial claims."

Participation: Forms, Pressures, and Reprisals

Most workers in all departments, including camera operators, reporters, producers, and even make-up artists, actively participated in the protest. Most of them also believe that the nature of the movement itself was crucial to fostering a transversal participation. According to our testimonies, TVE protests and demonstrations were traditionally promoted and led by historic unions (i.e., UGT or CC.OO). However, in the case of *Viernes Negros*, these unions were not the initial promoters. Indeed, unions were not fully aware of the creation and direction of *Viernes Negros* until the second week, taking a subordinate role once its existence was revealed. Many respondents provided illustrative examples of this circumstance.

For instance, P11, a senior director, considered *Viernes Negros* to be a transversal movement because neither unions nor managers were the original promoters of the protest. For most respondents, general skepticism about the role of unions in TVE hinges on the long-standing perception of such social agents as partisan organizations. For instance, P21, a graphic designer, believed that representative unions at TVE have their own agenda on how TVE should operate and, sometimes, these plans are not aligned with the aims and claims of most workers. However, as the movement was created and led by TVE professionals, the impact of unions as elements of mobilization was obscured, enhancing the participation across sections and regional centers.

However, in order for the newsroom to participate in legal protests, unions must be involved somehow. As noted by P22, a senior reporter, the *Viernes Negros* demands require the approval of the organization's committee, which is formed by unions, otherwise the movement is considered illegal. However, as previously stated, the role of unions in all protests and demonstrations were subsidiary to the leadership of the *Consejos de Informativos* and, above all, the *MujeresRTVE* group. Many of our respondents acknowledged the crucial role of this last collective in pushing forward the protests. Participant 13, a senior political journalist, explained the role of unions and *MujeresRTVE* along the actions implemented by *Viernes Negros* in detail as follows:

This was new for unions too, we forced them to choose a side and they didn't have any leeway to exercise any sort of pressure. It was the *MujeresRTVE* group that took on all the strategic parts, refusing any interference from worker unions. (P13)

Interviewees offered a panoply of illustrative examples of participation. The one most often mentioned was wearing black clothes on Fridays, whether in the newsroom, on the set, or

on air. Beyond the “black outfit,” as many respondents ironically described, another sort of involvement was uploading photos onto Twitter or Facebook about the main collective actions. Participant 16, a young video editor, considered the *Viernes Negros* actions to be real performances. He explained that with the assistance of makeup and hairdressing departments they were able to design more than simple selfies, rather very extravagant performances with the workers dressed in old-fashioned black clothing.

As stated, different actions were also carried out on social media, a central domain to spread collective actions and explain the citizens’ civic motivations for dressing in black. According to our testimonies, the main approach to design effective campaigns in social media was to connect Spain’s social reality to the demands and claims of the movement. In doing this, two objectives were met: promoting the protest and establishing a link with trending topics and breaking news. P24, a senior reporter, explained this tactic as follows: “What we did was pick up details from breaking news and apply them to our demands. We played with what was happening in the moment. For example, there was a moment when Montoro¹ answered a question about the quality standards of TVE informative services saying, “if you don’t like it, change the channel,” so the hashtag we used that day was #dontchangechannel (#nocambiesdecanal).” Similarly, P4, a senior reporter, reported how she, and many other participants, started a campaign on social media to describe in first person terms how political information was manipulated in the newsroom to favor the government.

The vast majority of the participants’ testimonies also reported the belief that the role of TV presenters was determinant in the success of the protest. Mobilization among workers was substantial, but the newscast presenters were crucial in enhancing the spread of the movement, as they are generally seen, by citizens and respondents, as the visible faces of the entity. Indeed, according to our interviewees, the involvement of Ana Blanco² was typically considered a milestone. For many respondents, her appearance in black gave the mobilization a strong impulse, as she is typically considered to be one of the most visible faces of the television, presenting the news under different governments. This political flexibility and professional experience turned her involvement into a sign of legitimacy for most respondents.

However, other participants held a divergent perspective. For some interviewees, her engagement in the movement was a consequence of the far-reaching involvement of the newsroom. This massive participation, for many respondents, “pushed” or “forced” Ana Blanco to engage in *Viernes Negros*. P18, a senior reporter, acknowledged that he was surprised when he saw Ana Blanco dressed in black on the last days of the mobilization. For that reason, he assumed that she joined the movement because “the snowball was already very big.” Echoing this perception, P4 believed that Ana Blanco dressed in black because she could not avoid it anymore. For him, “not doing it at that point would have meant she was supporting the opposite side.”

Finally, other crucial allies in disseminating the demands and collective actions of *Viernes Negros* referred to by our respondents include national and international news organizations, celebrities, writers, actors, and musicians. In particular, many respondents reflected upon the role of many workers of different media companies (Cadena Ser³ or LaSexta⁴, in particular) who joined the movement in solidarity of TVE workers, dressing in black on Fridays and posting their pictures and performances on their personal social media. Even relevant figures from culture, like the actor José Sacristán⁵ or songwriter Serrat⁶, sent

messages supporting the newsroom mobilizations. These acts of camaraderie, as many respondents described, were typically appraised as a sign of impulse and legitimacy.

Despite the fact that almost all of our participants directly participated in the protests, many of them noted that some news workers did not formally engage in mobilizations. The three most common perceptions for non-participation were: 1) having temporary contracts and thus fearing reprisals, 2) being hired by the directive staff and thus being involved in the management and treatment of news contents, that is “the parallel newsroom,” or 3) considering that the movement was politicized.

First, some of our respondents perceived that many employees on temporary contracts felt vulnerable, limiting their mobilization. For instance, P12, a senior journalist with a strong professional background in TVE, perceived that many interns or news workers with temporary contracts were scared to participate because they were afraid that their contracts might not be renewed. However, despite the potential consequences perceived by our respondents, many interviewees with temporary contracts decided to participate in the protests, risking their jobs as a result. P7, a young intern journalist, acknowledged that he dressed in black from the first days of the protest. He considered that his participation was motivated by a legitimate ambition, and hence, he was not at all afraid of retaliations.

Second, many of our interviewees pointed to the creation of a “parallel newsroom.” With this metaphor, our respondents make sense of and socially construct a group of workers hired *ex professo* to formally convey the political instructions of the directive staff. P3, an experienced journalist, describes the aim and scope of this “para-journalistic” (P24) entity as follows: “In Torrespaña, there was a parallel newsroom that consisted of two or three colleagues per section who had been brought in from outside of the company to reinforce manipulation actions.” Many respondents also believed that these workers were not formally involved in the collective actions for two main reasons: either because they were aligned with the political ideology of their bosses or simply because they owed them some allegiance.

Reprisals or retaliations toward those who actively participated in the protests were not significant. Some participants described the most common ones, including soft warnings and internal reports about participants in the mobilization. However, many other respondents pointed to veiled threats, replacements, and even firings. Participant 23 provide an illustrative example of a replacement. Specifically, he stated that any time TVE had to do a live stream from the Ministry of Economy instead of sending X, who was part of the *Consejo de Informativos* and one of the “women in black” at *MujeresRTVE*, the chief economy editor sent a worker from the parallel newsroom because she dressed in pink and would appear live wearing pink on Fridays.

Management and Leadership of the Movement

As we previously noted, *Viernes Negros* was originally proposed in one of the multiple meetings organized by the *Consejo de Informativos*. It was at one of those meetings that the group unilaterally decided to take action and protest both the lack of independence of the entity and the selection of TVE's president through a public process. At one of these meeting, following the previous experience from Castilla–La Mancha's public television,⁷ a decision was made to visualize their grievances: inviting all workers to dress in black every Friday during working hours. P24, a historic journalist at the company, explained the origin and roots of the movement as follows:

In March or April, in the different ‘*Consejo de Informativos*’ gatherings, we remembered a *Viernes Negros* movement that had taken place at the public television of Castilla–La Mancha. That’s how we decided we were going to dress in black.

Although the *Consejo de Informativos* was the official body from which the movement emerged, *MujeresRTVE* was the group that formally managed and led the collective actions. Most respondents acknowledged that three central bodies were involved in its governance: *MujeresRTVE*, *Consejo de Informativos*, and, lastly, unions. Despite this apparent horizontality, most of our respondents considered *MujeresRTVE* to be the most relevant group in its planning, management, and leadership. P25, a political journalist, believed that “there wasn’t a defined structure, but it’s true that the *MujeresRTVE* group gave power, legitimacy, and dimension to the movement.” Similarly, P12, a senior graphic reporter, considered that “the *MujeresRTVE* group was the one to carry the bulk of the communications in the protest.” Without this collective, many participants presumed that the movement would not have achieved the same reach nor had the social impact that it ultimately did.

More specifically, inside *MujeresRTVE*, two groups formally structured the movement. The first was the group called “strategy.” For many respondents, this collective directly planned the main tactics and collective actions (protests, hashtags, ideas, etc.). The second group was known as “networks.” This group was entirely formed by a small group of female workers specialized in community management. In this case, our participants believed that their function was to make visible and design the collective actions on social media. According to our evidence, these two groups were in constant contact (as they belonged to the same collective, namely, *MujeresRTVE*), structuring the movement and providing technical and tactical advice for all participants, especially in social media.

As a result of this structuration, many participants believed that the *Viernes Negros* was “horizontal” and “transversal” in its management and “spontaneous” and “improvised” in its collective actions. In this regard, most interviewees stated that *MujeresRTVE* originally created and designed the main guidelines and instructions that the newsroom collectively adopted. The main objective was “to offer certain coherence to the protest and act in a unified manner,” as P3 introduced.

To plan the main collective actions, the movement based their internal communications on WhatsApp groups. These groups were typically managed by *MujeresRTVE*, the *Consejos de Informativos*, or the different autonomous areas, departments, or TV programs that constitute the company. Through WhatsApp groups, initially, and then through Telegram (since the number of participants grew exponentially), participants were aware of the main tactics and collective actions. This internal communication also allowed many participants to share their perspectives on how the movement should evolve and plan the collective actions to be implemented on Fridays. In this regard, according to our testimonies, all the plans for Fridays’ mobilizations were sent on Thursday nights, providing participants with the necessary material to carry out the actions.

Paucity of Achievements and Promotions

As previously described, the *Viernes Negros* movement was fundamentally designed to fight against manipulations at TVE, and—especially—for the election of a president through a public process. All our interviewees, as the facts demonstrated, were aware

that none of their demands were formally achieved. However, most respondents were satisfied with the efforts and implemented actions, as they gave visibility to their grievances. Likewise, many of our interviewees emphasized “the strong impact” (P18) that the movement had in embodying and strengthening the newsroom in a collective fight “for the right to a non-partisan public television” (P26). For most respondents, *Viernes Negros* consolidated employees’ efforts to establish independent television, “creating an atmosphere in society favorable to the independence of public media,” as P25 noted.

Despite failing to “force” (P9) or “lobby” (P22) the government of Mariano Rajoy to hold a public nominations procedure, Pedro Sánchez’s impeachment triggered a crucial change in the management of the organization, electing Rosa María Mateo as the provisional sole administrator of the entity. Prior to the appointment of Rosa María Mateo, the government of Pedro Sánchez tried to renew the board through a public procedure but lacked the necessary support in parliament. Once Rosa María Mateo was appointed, and thanks to the attempts from the new government in meeting the demands of the movement (although none of them were ultimately achieved), participants of *Viernes Negros* democratically decided to end it.

However, the lack of a stable government and the subsequent dissolution of parliament prevented the protests from evolving satisfactorily. As P17 stated: “After a year, the public nominations process was paralyzed, we had no viability, and the political climate brought about a totally unprecedented scenario, so most participants have been saying throughout this year that we shouldn’t have called off the *Viernes Negros*.” Thus, according to some respondents, “the paralysis” (P19) of the movement was a mistake, as none of their demands were officially met and the intentions of the future government are unknown.

Despite the general satisfaction with the evolution of the movement, some respondents disagreed with the compensation that many participants received once the management of the organization was removed and a new director was appointed. Some respondents believe that many participants were promoted and assumed management responsibilities as a result of their involvement in the movement. However, the majority of our interviewees considered those promotions to be a consequence of their experience and professionalism. P10 provided an illustrative insight on how some respondents believe the movement ended:

Let’s say there is a line of interpretation whereby some staff members who participated in *Viernes Negros* have been rewarded with higher positions, I’ll say as an example X, the news-cast’s editor-in-chief. What happened is that those who were so detrimental in the previous period could no longer assume editorial responsibilities. (P10)

Discussion and Conclusions

In this study, we analyzed the *Viernes Negro* movement at RTVE in order to assess its management, evolution, and achievements within the organization and its newswriters, examining how its structure nourished and protected the journalistic independence of the corporation. As any other European public service broadcaster, RTVE is committed in its charter to performing its activities without any commercial or political allegiance (Karppinen and Moe 2016). However, these regulations, norms, and values are frequently challenged by governmental (external) and editorial (internal) pressures, directly affecting the quality of its output. Against this backdrop, *Viernes Negros* was arguably the most

relevant professionally guided movement among RTVE newswriters to establish an independent public service television. This study contributes to the budding literature on the professional reactions of newswriters to political pressures in PSB, providing three inter-related contributions on this line of inquiry.

First, our study offers insightful evidence on the top-down connections between the appointment of directive staff and the journalism practice envisioned and executed by politically oriented professionals (Soengas Pérez, Elías-Pérez, and López-Cepeda 2018). The mechanisms used to elect the presidency and the administrative board has traditionally triggered a challenging political swing in the management of the organization, exerting heavy political pressures on its workers (Bustamante 2005). According to our findings, it seems that there was a long-standing determination by (political) managers to make TVE politically profitable, introducing ideologically sympathetic executive boards aimed at controlling the output of the newsroom, challenging its independence and autonomy as a result.

Our second contribution furthers our understanding on the role of professional movements to structure and manage newswriters' claims beyond traditional unions. Historically, most protests at TVE against manipulations and political pressures have been led by or at least strongly linked to unions at the organization, precluding such movements from gaining horizontality through the inclusion of newswriters from across all the regional centers and ranks.

However, our study shows that in order to establish a transversal movement empowered to counter-attack political interferences, at least in the polarized-pluralist model (Palacio 2012; Soengas Pérez, Elías-Pérez, and López-Cepeda 2018), the focus must be on professional and deontological concerns rather than labor issues, led or at least linked to professional collectives and activists (i.e., *MujeresRTVE*) and not unions. The leading role of *MujeresRTVE* in *Viernes Negros* was the result of the social capital harnessed after its creation following the feminist protest on March 8, 2018. The social network that was created and the sympathy and respect that were accumulated facilitated the communication of the movement's demands and spread awareness throughout the company, giving smaller, more isolated regional centers a cause that reinforced their feeling of belonging. The emphasis on professional concerns (i.e., preservation of their professional independence) rather than labor conditions challenged the traditional role of unions, establishing a new, politically independent movement that quickly gained the trust of workers who found participation under this philosophy more compelling.

This made *Viernes Negros* the biggest independent worker protest in the history of TVE, showcasing the collective empowerment of the newsroom to protect its values without the need for any political or union-based intervention. Through a more-or-less horizontal organization and distribution of tasks, along with a notable amount of creativity and digital know-how, messages about the protest were launched through social media, allowing some prominent figures in Spain's popular culture and social spheres to take part in the conversation. This brought *Viernes Negros* closer to the public, as its message went beyond the Twitter accounts of the workers and *MujeresRTVE* to a bigger stage with further reach.

Our third contribution offers insightful findings on the reasons and motivations for participating (or not) in the protest, also shedding light on the main consequences thereof. Our study first shows that one of the main reasons listed by our respondents for not

participating in the protest was fear. Reprisals for not complying with given guidelines that were not in line with journalistic standards have largely been denounced by the *Consejo de Informativos* in the past, so it comes as no surprise that challenging higher ranks in politically charged situations could result in serious consequences for workers. This was especially marked among those who held temporary contracts. However, for many respondents, even those in a precarious situation, this fear was ultimately unfounded. Therefore, our results suggest that when certain levels of fear and reprisals are reached, such effects may serve as stimulation (and not mitigation) to drive collective normative ideals on desired PSB characteristics. Repressive actions implemented by managers to control the political message may have long-term effects if such manipulations are soft and fluid but may empower the newsroom to counterattack them if they are perceived as blatant and harsh.

Our findings also show that there are at least three ramifications by which TVE should be managed in order to avoid serious resistance and holdouts. First, it should make political involvement transparent to both journalists and the audience (e.g., the degree of state funding, the ways agents in power positions are delegated, and so on). Second, management should carry out its decisions in accordance with the professional standards maintained by both workers and professional entities such as the TVE *Consejo de informativos*. Finally, management should take into account the fact that the wider public is becoming more informed of and presumably more involved in the field of Public Media and, as a consequence, it would support professional movements as long as they serve public rather than political interests.

Besides providing a detailed analysis of the development of the Viernes Negros movement through qualitative interviews, our study also contributes to the wider scholarly debate on the role and optimal operation of PBS. Our paper offers qualitative data gathered from participants of the movement, so it provides conceptions on how PBS should work from the perspective of the media workers. On the one hand, our evidence suggests that, according to professional journalists, PBS should be independent and autonomous, in line with the normative conception of public service media (Reich and Hanitzsch 2013; Lamuedra, Martín, and Broullón-Lozano 2019). This view, however, is not necessarily shared by managers and unions. Our analysis shows that preferred professional norms (Bennett 2015; Polonska and Beckett 2019) could be separated from preferred working conditions, and unions are seemingly deal with the latter, but not necessarily with the former.

On the other hand, germane to the successful management of #MujeresRTVE, our respondents suggest that even the normative conception of PBS should contain a more inclusive attitude towards audiences and professionals, as suggested by some of the public broadcasting media models (Cullinane 2020; Donders 2019). Through digital interaction, especially SNS communication, media workers were able to reach their audiences in a more personal manner, and thus the loosening of the relatively strict barrier between ordinary PBS and the audience might be worth considering. Briefly, our findings suggest that a normative conception of PBS by which public media should be independent, informative and diverse is preferable, but a more open attitude towards digital media is also needed, and this openness could have benefits in terms of both reaching the audience and strengthening the collective identity of PBS workers themselves.

In conclusion, through many collective actions, *Viernes Negros* has significantly strengthened the community of TVE workers, a factor that could be important in the case of future movements. Via social media actions, the protest gave visibility to the views of professionals on independent journalism in front of a broader audience. This made audiences more informed on the internal problems of TVE that were compromising the quality of its output. The collective actions brought TVE workers closer together, enabling them to set up a social structure to avoid political pressures and manipulations. In short, *Viernes Negros* may serve as a foundation for future movements in Spain and beyond that, to progress toward a more democratic, more inclusive, and politically more independent public media system.

Notes

1. Cristóbal Montoro was Minister for Finance Spain from December 22, 2011, until June 1, 2018.
2. Ana Blanco is an award-winning journalist with over 30 years of experience at RTVE. She has been a newscast anchorwoman since 1991, and is a highly respected figure in the corporation.
3. Cadena Ser is a generalist commercial radio station, part of the PRISA Group. It started its publications in 1924 and is currently one of the most relevant radio broadcasters in Spain's media system.
4. LaSexta is a commercial television broadcaster founded in 2005. The corporation fused in 2011 with Antena 3, forming the Atresmedia Group, one of the two main media clusters in Spain.
5. José Sacristán is an award-winning Spanish actor with a broad-ranging career in theater, cinema, and television productions.
6. Joan Manuel Serrat is a Spanish songwriter. He is a Latin Grammy award winner, among other multiple honors. He is considered one of the most influential songwriters of the last 50 years in Spain.
7. Castilla-La Mancha Media is the public service media of the autonomous community of Castilla-La Mancha, in the center-east of Spain. It was founded in the year 2000 and has a yearly budget of around 45 million euros.

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