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RECEIVED 13 September 2024

ACCEPTED 24 September 2024

PUBLISHED 09 October 2024

## CITATION

Aznar H, Mercado-Sáez MT and  
Álvarez-Villa À (2024) Verifying a new  
historical stage in the ethics of  
communication: second generation ethics  
codes.

*Front. Commun.* 9:1495897.

doi: 10.3389/fcomm.2024.1495897

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# Verifying a new historical stage in the ethics of communication: second generation ethics codes

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Throughout the 20th century, most of the world's countries and international journalistic organizations adopted codes of journalistic ethics with general principles governing the profession. In the 21st century, a significant number of proposals have emerged offering new ethics recommendations relating to the treatment of issues such as gender violence, disability, the environment and climate change, among other matters. The aim of this research is to confirm that we are faced with a second generation of ethics codes or guidelines for social communication. This study, based on the content analysis of 53 guides published in Spain on the three subject areas mentioned, shows the emergence of these codes from 1999 onwards, the existence of common features in relation to their endorsement, their structure, their dissemination and monitoring, and the widespread participation of individuals, experts and groups not professionally related to the field of communication in their promotion or implementation, which is evidence of what we call the social self-regulation of communication and represents the main novelty in this new stage of communication ethics.

## KEYWORDS

codes of media ethics, media self-regulation mechanisms, social self-regulation, gender violence, disability, environmental and climate change

## 1 Introduction

So far this century we have witnessed an extraordinary growth in interest in the ethics of social communication, as will be seen from the data and references provided in what follows. On the one hand, we are witnessing an exponential increase in social interest in the traditional codes of journalism and the need to reinforce compliance with ethical obligations in the face of the recent increase in phenomena such as disinformation, fake-news, hate speech, and so on, and their effects on momentous decisions—such as Brexit in the United Kingdom—and elections—like Donald Trump's victory in the United States in 2016 (Bennett and Livingston, 2018)—in leading countries in the West's democratic history that for this very reason seemed oblivious to these risks. This has revitalized the debate on media accountability, which is essential in established democracies, where in recent years trust in the media has been drastically eroded, along with trust in politics and institutions (Fengler et al., 2024). Accountability is also part of the normative concept of co-regulation or regulated self-regulation (Puppis, 2007), together with professional self-regulation, always subject to how it is implemented effectively (Aznar and Mercado, 2023; Fengler et al., 2015). The term self-regulation designates those practices promoted by communication professionals (media,

associations or groups of journalists) for implementing guidelines for responsible journalistic production practices.

As [Fengler et al. \(2024\)](#) explains, fundamental changes in relation to media usage patterns and the structure of media and revenue markets have made media and journalism more exposed to self-interested criticism and more vulnerable to attempts to influence them for the strategic interests of national and international players. Power is exercised by those who create, harness and direct information flows in ways that modify, enable and disable the action of others in and across a variety of old and new media environments ([Chadwick, 2017](#)). Faced with such a situation, the European Union has launched an unprecedented number and scope of regulatory initiatives aimed at guaranteeing the independence of journalists, media transparency, protection for whistleblowers, and a more responsible use of social media and artificial intelligence. One of the areas in which European activity has been most prolific in terms of communication policies is that of disinformation. In addition to binding regulations, over the last 10 years the European Union has approved more than 30 recommendations, communications, reports, resolutions and legislative proposals, among other things, aimed at curbing disinformation, confirming how concerned European bodies are about this now systemic problem ([Fernández and Cea, 2023](#)).

The scope, dimension and relevance of these initiatives represent a milestone in the history of communication ethics. Although it is true that the fundamental normative content of these codes—the core obligations that must accompany the honest, truthful and independent practice of journalism—was already included, to a large extent, in the traditional codes of journalistic ethics and is not novel in itself, the measures that are now being taken to reinforce it are.

However, despite the significance of these facts, they are not the only new development that has taken place over the last two and a half decades in the field of communication ethics. As journalists continue to act as the gatekeepers and creators of meaning, serving their audiences by selecting and explaining the news that is required for active participation in social life ([Vos and Heinderyckx, 2015](#)), we have witnessed the emergence of a significant number of proposals with new ethics recommendations concerning the informational treatment of a large number of topics: gender violence, the environment, disability, children and young people, immigration, addictive behaviors, eating disorders and behaviors, the image of women, and so forth.

These initiatives have taken shape in guides or codes of ethics which, this time around, represent a new set of ethics recommendations that are unprecedented in the history of communication ethics and represent a novelty worthy of attention and study. The general objective of this research is, therefore, to verify that we are really facing a second generation of ethics codes or recommendations in social communication. The specific objectives are, firstly, to quantify and comparatively date these new codes, guides or recommendations for the media's correct handling of certain thematic areas. Secondly, to characterize them in relation to the type of participants, endorsement, structure, type of admonitions, dissemination and follow-up. Thirdly and finally, to determine the regulatory or self-regulatory mechanism that predominates in these codes based on their observed nature.

Thus, our main hypothesis is the effective existence of a second generation of Ethics Codes for Social Communication, which will be validated by means of the following sub-hypotheses.

*Sub-hypothesis 1:* A second generation of ethics codes or recommendations has been approved in the last 25 years, with the turn of the century being taken as a reference point.

*Sub-hypothesis 2:* They share certain common features in relation to type of participants, endorsement, structure, type of admonitions, dissemination and follow-up.

*Sub-hypothesis 3:* There is widespread involvement of entities, experts and civil society groups not professionally related to the field of communication in their promotion or implementation, which determines their social self-regulation.

Since it is beyond the scope of this research to cover all the areas in which ethics recommendations have arisen, we have selected the initiatives produced, on the one hand, in three thematic areas of special relevance and social scope, namely, the treatment of gender violence, the environment and disability. On the other hand, we look specifically at those produced in Spain ([Seijas Costa et al., 2024](#)), with the expectation that this study, its objective, hypotheses and method can be transferred and applied to other countries.

## 2 Background

The first stage in the history of communication ethics, together with the first generation of ethics codes it produced, began— isolated precedents aside—around the second decade of the 20th century and most notably in the United States. The first two decades of the new century marked the culmination of a series of transformations that had been taking place in the Western world since the end of the 19th century and that would end up shaping the society, politics, consumer economy and world characteristic of the new 20th century. Thus:

- a Political democratization, which had been gaining weight throughout the 19th century with the expansion of the census, including—in the 1920s—women's suffrage; giving increasing prominence to mass parties and electoral processes. With the importance of these, the political weight of journalism and propaganda expanded, as did the prominence of public opinion ([Lippmann, 2003](#); [Pulitzer, 2011](#)).
- b The success and socio-political impact of the industrial press, whose circulation at the turn of the century would reach several hundred thousand copies. Its owners acquired enormous power to influence political and socio-cultural life, even in the most significant political decisions, such as war. In addition to the English press *barons*, Pulitzer and Hearst in the United States were particularly prominent. In its quest for mass circulation and influence, this press lacked journalistic ethics, and is

what has become known as *yellow* or tabloid journalism (Campbell, 2001).<sup>1</sup>

- c In this context, two global events took place that would transform the world: World War I and the Soviet Revolution. Both highlighted the problem of propaganda, manipulation and the difficulty of being well informed and forming adequate opinions on distant phenomena, which depended on somewhat lax journalistic information, and journalists who, with a few exceptions, lacked the necessary training and ethics to cover events of this type (Axelrod, 2009; Creel, 2011; Lasswell, 1938; Lippmann, 2011; Lippmann and Merz, 1920).
- d Finally, in a less perceptible but more pervasive way, the establishment of what Graham Wallas along with Lippmann called the *Great Society* was also taking place: an increasingly developed and complex world, where large corporations, the emerging public administration, globalization and other new powers and phenomena of singular scope were giving rise to a society very different from the local world that had prevailed up to that point. In this new society, individuals no longer depended on their own personal experience, instead they were at the mercy of what was transmitted to them by journalism, advertising and propaganda (Bernays, 1928; Dewey 1976; Lippmann, 2003, 2011).

The result of all this was the questioning of the predominant Enlightenment liberalism tradition and its naïve view of public opinion and the role of information and journalism (Aznar, 2020) by, among others, two of the most prominent and influential authors of the time: Lippmann (2011), Lippmann (2003) and Dewey (1976), well acquainted both with these novel developments, as well as with the newly emerging world and the gap that mainstream journalism was exhibiting in relation to them.

The emerging society and particularly democracy needed reliable and suitable information to address collective problems—both domestic and increasingly international—and to make appropriate decisions (Schudson, 2001). This made it necessary to rethink the activity of journalism so that it could respond to the new challenges of the emerging society and world (Lippmann, 2011; Mason, 2017; McChesney, 2013).

Faced with the naïve notion of public opinion inherited from the Enlightenment liberalism tradition; faced with growing publicity, public relations and propaganda; faced with ideological manipulation and the instrumentalization of the media by the editors and owners of the newspapers; and in the face of the habitual routines and simple ignorance and lack of preparation and rigor of journalists—aspects denounced in Lippmann's works of that decade—a series of essential measures and corrections of journalism were required, which were to form the fundamental nucleus of the incipient journalistic ethics: (1) to define the criteria of truth and objectivity, and the methods for achieving them, that would validate and ensure the rigor of journalistic information so that it could be useful, such as attributing and verifying

information, contrasting sources, linguistic rigor, and so on; (2) to improve the preparation and professional selection of journalists, increasing their training, professional rigor and ethics, in addition to their responsibility in the preparation of information, starting by signing articles as a minimum commitment to quality; and (3) to increase the social demand for the responsibility of media owners, as far as possible.

This led to the truth, objectivity and rigor of information being placed at the center of journalism as the fundamental key to the training and professionalization of journalists; a criterion—that had been proposed since the end of the 19th century and that would now come to define professional journalism throughout the new century (Schiller, 1981; Schudson, 1978, 2001).

## 2.1 The first generation of codes of journalistic ethics

In this way, the demands of the principle of truth were formulated, which would come to form the fundamental core of the emerging journalistic ethics: the demands of veracity or objectivity; of verification, substantiation and attribution of information; of identifying the journalist and the use of honorable methods; and so forth. As a whole, these were to form the inescapable nucleus required of journalism. Therefore, both because of their constitutive nature—without their being fulfilled, there would be no journalism—and their ethical and historical prevalence, we can speak of these requirements as the *first stage of journalistic ethics*; and the codes that began to include them as the *first generation of ethics codes* would become the key contributing factor in this field for the whole of the 20th century.

With some isolated precedents,<sup>2</sup> such as the code of the Kansas Publishers Association, approved in 1910, or the “Creed of the Industrial Press” of the Federation of Trade Press Associations in the United States, approved in 1913, it was in the 1920s when there was the first generalization of ethics codes. For example, the Missouri and Oregon publishers' associations approved their codes in 1921 and 1922, respectively. Very important for their scope and representativeness was the 1923 approval of the “Canons of Journalism” by the powerful ASNE (American Society of Newspaper Editors, United States), formed just a year earlier.<sup>3</sup>

Journalists' organizations also approved their first codes. Thus, in 1918, the “Charte des devoirs professionnels des journalistes français” (Charter of professional duties of journalists) was adopted by the French National Union of Journalists. And in 1926, the “Code of Ethics” was approved by the American brotherhood of professional journalists Sigma, Delta, Chi (which in 1988 would change to its current name, the Society of Professional Journalists), an organization set up in

<sup>1</sup> The colorful denomination comes from a comic strip in Hearst's New York newspaper that was used to attract the public, *The yellow kid*.

<sup>2</sup> For what follows, see Aznar (2005a): 32 et seq. and the bibliography therein.

<sup>3</sup> As a result of some articles strongly criticizing the journalistic conduct of the media published in *The Atlantic Monthly* (Boston) in January 1922. In 1919, Upton Sinclair's *The Brass Check* was published, in which he revealed the unethical and lax practices of some media, agencies and magazines in the United States, a work that would be widely distributed and which the author always considered to be his most critical work.

1909 with the aim, among other things, of improving journalistic practices. Concern for the ethical standards of journalists began to become more common in the 1920s with the appearance of the first university schools of journalism in the United States, following the pioneering initiative of the school promoted by Pulitzer at Columbia University in 1912. In Europe, the first codes were also enacted, including those of Sweden in 1923 and Finland in 1924. And the first radio code was adopted by the US National Association of Broadcasters in 1928.

Although at this early stage the codes remained a minority phenomenon—due to their limited number and dissemination, they had already established the basic obligations underpinning journalistic ethics, thus laying their fundamental foundations, as evidenced by the fact that many of them—with the appropriate updates—are still in force today.

This marked the birth of the first generation of codes of journalistic ethics, and all that remained was for them to expand globally throughout the 20th century. Consequently, after the Second World War, a new wave of codes was approved by a considerable number of countries. With the process of decolonization, from the 1960s and 1970s onwards, many more codes were added by newly independent countries.

During this period, the concern for journalistic ethics was also transferred to international journalism organizations, with, for example, the approval of the IFJ code of ethics in 1954 and the 1983 approval, mediated by UNESCO, of the “International Principles of Professional Ethics in Journalism.” Finally, although they were actually already in place, the Fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 prompted a final wave of new codes of journalistic ethics in the countries freed from Soviet domination.

By the end of the 20th century, most of the world’s countries and international journalism organizations had codes of journalistic ethics, thus completing the first stage in the history of journalistic ethics. The ethical obligations of journalism were thus clearly established and shared internationally by journalists. Studies carried out since then have demonstrated the common content of this first generation of codes, such as the comparative study of European codes by Laitila (1995); the establishment of a structured thesaurus of this set of ethical obligations by the team led by Alsius (2010); and the more recent comparative studies of their level of acceptance and monitoring by journalists in Europe (Fengler et al., 2015) and the rest of the world (Fengler et al., 2024).

The 1993 adoption by the Council of Europe of its *Resolution 1,003 on journalistic ethics*—sometimes referred to as the *European Code of Ethics for Journalists*—can probably be considered a transitional document between the first and second generation codes. Thus, it reflects the traditional obligations of journalistic ethics, as they were set out in the first generation of codes. However, it also raises new ethical questions regarding the influence and power of the media in today’s society; the effects of its business structure on its content and on journalistic activity; and a commitment to the mechanisms of journalistic self-regulation. Finally, it addresses the responsibility of the media and its professionals in relation to a number of new social and political issues that were not common in the documents of the previous generation, such as responsibility for children, the image of women, immigration, terrorism,

intercultural conflicts, and so on. It is, therefore, a document of unique historical value. Firstly, because it reflects the Council of Europe’s own focus on the issue of journalistic ethics, which made a significant contribution to the reopening of the debate on journalistic ethics in Europe. But also because of the novelty of some of its approaches, which helped to bring to the forefront certain specific issues related to journalistic ethics that would become part of the debate on communication ethics at the beginning of the new century, thus contributing to triggering a second stage or generation of initiatives and recommendations on journalistic ethics.<sup>4</sup>

### 3 Methodological design

To provide responses to the hypotheses and objectives posed, a content analysis was performed, the quintessential technique for research into communication, according to Wimmer and Dominick (1996). Content analysis is, in a broad sense, a set of interpretative procedures and hypothesis testing, and verification techniques applied to communicative products (messages, texts or speeches) or to communicative interactions that, previously recorded, constitute a document, with the aim of extracting and processing relevant data (Gaitán and Piñuel, 1998). Through a systematic reading it is possible to make deductions after a process of data reduction and interpretation. According to Neuendor (2002), content analysis makes it possible to obtain descriptions of messages of very varied natures, and all kinds of variables or indicators can be identified in these: manifest versus latent and formal features versus content attributes.

Once the research objectives have been defined and the hypotheses formulated, the first step in the application of content analysis is to determine the universe of analysis, in other words, the total number of documents that can be analyzed. In our case, it would be all the guides with recommendations on how to report an undetermined number of issues of social interest; therefore, in view of the need to limit the study (Krippendorff, 1990), we have analyzed the guides produced in Spain in three thematic areas that guarantee sufficient information. The key words for document searches on the Internet were combinations of the following terms in Spanish: “recomendaciones y/o códigos y/o guías y/o códigos y/o decálogos para informar y/o comunicar sobre discapacidad o violencia de género o medio ambiente y/o cambio climático” (recommendations and/or codes and/or guidelines and/or codes and/or 10-point guidelines for reporting on and/or communicating disability or gender-based violence or environment and/or climate change). The documents were located using Google. In relation to the study objectives, an analysis period of 25 years was covered, from 1999 to June 2024, determined by the emergence of these initiatives. A review of the search results yielded 53 documents with

<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, this initiative was not followed up by the Council of Europe or the European Union until the 2020s, when the *quasi* emergency situation surrounding disinformation phenomena led the EU to propose a number of initiatives related to social communication, as we mentioned at the beginning of this article.

recommendations for reporting on the three selected thematic areas, which became the units of analysis used to apply the categories and variables proposed in the analysis sheet:

Category	Variables
Identification and origin of the code	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Name, date and place of approval.</li> <li>2. Responsible or promoting entity(ies)</li> <li>3. Scope</li> <li>4. Type of participants: communication or thematic expert</li> <li>5. Trigger for the initiative</li> </ol>
Type of mechanism	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. Professional self-regulation, social self-regulation, co-regulation or regulation</li> </ol>
Content endorsement	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. Implementation of a prior study or research or activity</li> <li>8. Reference to background information, other sources or documents</li> <li>9. Experts consulted in addition to those involved in the preparation of the document</li> <li>10. Discussion of content</li> </ol>
Structure and normative burden	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>11. The context is provided in the Introduction or Preamble</li> <li>12. The causes or reasons for the code are set out</li> <li>13. Contains notions and/or terminology related to the subject</li> <li>14. Predominant normative burden: imperatives or admonitions (positive or negative)</li> </ol>
Dissemination of the code	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>15. Public presentation of the Code</li> <li>16. Publication.</li> <li>17. Type of dissemination: among professionals, civil society groups or associations and the general public.</li> </ol>
Code follow-up / enforcement	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>18. Planned monitoring mechanisms</li> <li>19. Planned content review</li> <li>20. Provision for sanctions or warnings in case of non-compliance. If so, what type and by whom.</li> </ol>

The “type of mechanism” variable is determined according to the entities that promote the codes or guidelines. When it is the public institutions at any level (national, regional or local), in line with what we find in Spain, we are dealing with regulatory mechanisms. When it is the media itself or professional organizations of journalists such as associations, colleges or unions, we speak of media or professional self-regulation. Co-regulation occurs when the administration collaborates with, on the one hand, the professional organizations of journalists or the media; and on the other hand, when initiatives are shared with civil society organizations such as NGOs, foundations, stakeholder associations or associations of independent experts, social researchers from the university (academia). What we refer to as social self-regulation is that where civil society itself takes the initiative to elaborate codes or recommendations for communicators.

## 4 Results

The application of the search requirements yielded 53 documents to be analyzed published since 1999, the year in which the “Decálogo

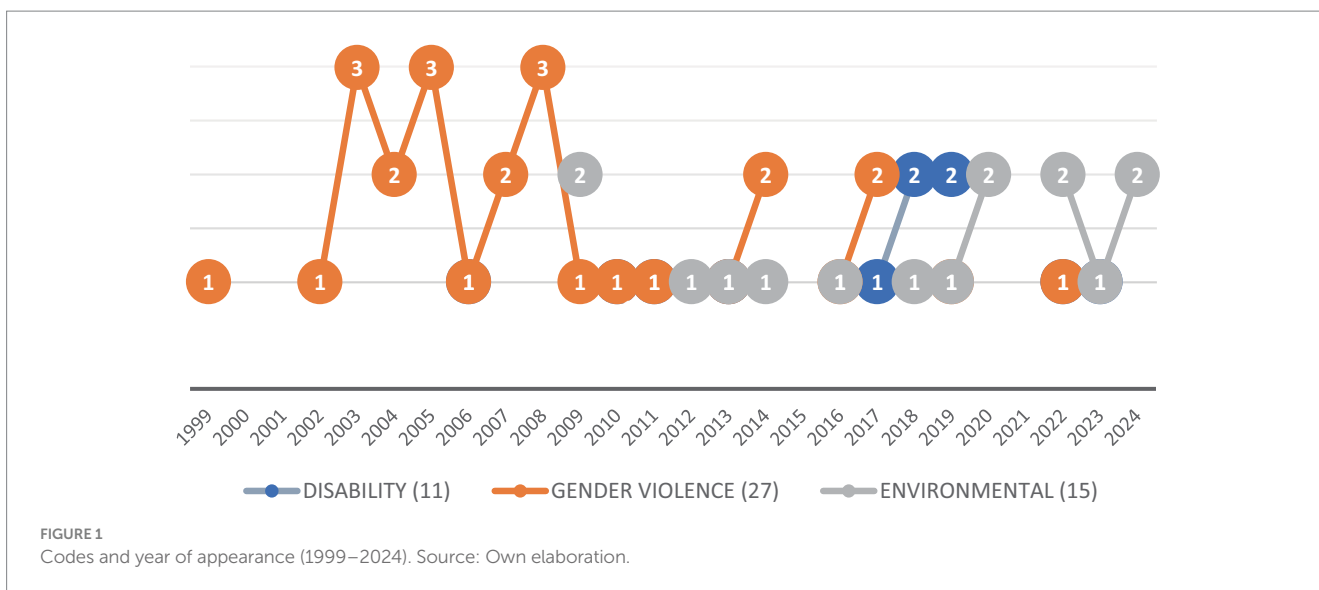
de recomendaciones a los medios de comunicación para el tratamiento de la violencia contra las mujeres” (10 recommendations for the media in dealing with violence against women) of the Andalusian Regional Government was published.<sup>5</sup> The number of guides varies across the three selected thematic areas. For instance, the informative treatment of gender-based violence is the area with the most recommendations (27), almost twice as many as that dedicated to coverage of the environment and climate change (15). Eleven documents focus on the issue of disability in the media.

As shown in Figure 1, attention to gender-based violence was particularly prominent in the first decade of the 21st century: more than half of the documents analyzed on the subject emerged between 1999 and 2009 (63%). The early appearance of codes on this topic in Spain was triggered by the so-called ‘Ana Orantes case’, a catalyst for the reporting of violence against women that also affected how this is treated in the media. On December 4, 1997, Ana Orantes told a program on Andalusian public television (Canal Sur) about the mistreatment she had received during the 40 years of her marriage and criticized the fact that the judicial decision taken after filing a report against her husband forced her to share a house with him, just on different floors. Thirteen days later, her husband and abuser murdered her by burning her alive in the home they shared. After the murder, women’s and feminist associations mobilized and, in turn, unleashed political backlash and responses. This case not only raised public awareness of this reality, which until then had been relegated to the privacy of the home, but also opened up new spaces for debate and reflection, starting with the inability of the system to provide protection for victims of this violence (Edo, 2022) and the inadequate coverage in the media.

In the field of disability, in 2006, Spain’s Royal Board on Disability published the “Guía de estilo sobre discapacidad para profesionales de los medios de comunicación” (Style guide on disability for media professionals) as a tool for generating a responsible image of disability, respectful of diversity, which favors awareness and the social inclusion of these people. This document was updated in 2019 with the support of the Spanish Ministry of Social Affairs. Meanwhile, it was in 2009 when the first two guides focused on environmental issues appeared: the “Guía para periodistas sobre cambio climático y negociación internacional” (Guide for journalists to climate change and international negotiation) from the Spanish Government and the EFE Verde agency and the “Guía del periodismo ambiental” (Guide to environmental journalism) promoted by the local government in the Toledo province. In this case, eight of the 15 guides or 10-point plans under study have been published over the last 5 years, from 2019 to 2024.

In recent years, the appearance of new recommendations on environmental issues stands out due to the significance that climate change is acquiring in social and media terms. In 2020, there was an unprecedented increase in the frequency of extreme weather events, as predicted by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports. In Spain, that year was “extremely warm” and 2021 saw abnormally high temperatures in the winter months together with the most intense heat wave since 1975, during which the absolute

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.juntadeandalucia.es/servicios/publicaciones/detalle/44096.html>



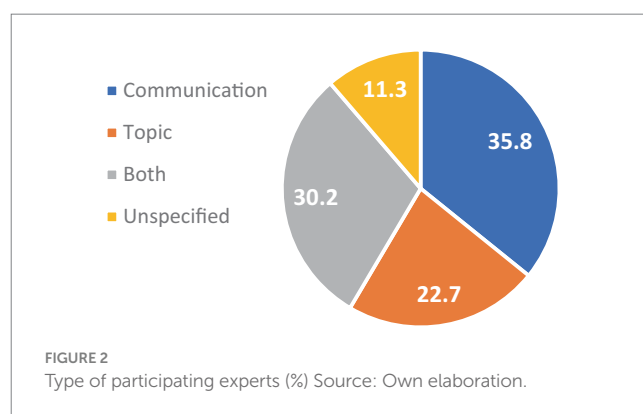
maximum temperature record was broken, with 47°C being recorded in Alcantarilla (Murcia). In the Spanish context, interest in climate change increased with the holding of the Climate Summit in Madrid in 2020, under the presidency of Chile, where it was originally due to be held. In short, experience of climate change impacts and the COP25 international negotiations highlighted the urgent need for better communication on climate change and environmental issues, which may explain the creation of more guides in 2022.

The results, in percentage terms, of the analysis of variables 3 to 20 are detailed below:

**Scope:** the majority of the recommendation guides are addressed to professional communicators, the media and journalists (85 percent of the total). In one case in the area of gender violence, the guidelines concern only one newspaper, Público, the same one that approves them. In the environmental field, all the documents analyzed are aimed at communicators, while in the area of disability there is a higher proportion of guidelines aimed at society as a whole (37.3 percent). For example, the Spanish Confederation of People with Physical and Organic Disabilities (COCEMFE) publishes the “Manual de Lenguaje Inclusivo” (Inclusive Language Manual) to offer society guidelines on how to use correct, respectful and consensual language to refer to people with physical and organic disabilities and communicate in a non-sexist manner.<sup>6</sup>

**Participants:** in the development of the guides, 35.8 percent involved communications experts or professionals, while 22.7 percent relied on experts in the specific subject matter. In 30.2 percent, both communications and industry experts collaborated in the creation of the guides (Figure 2).

**Trigger:** the majority, 67.9 percent of the 53 documents analyzed, do not expressly indicate a specific fact that motivated their development beyond the general situation, which, as we will see below, is included in the statement of context and reasons in the section on the structure of the codes.



Promoting entities and type of regulatory mechanism (Figure 3): different types of mechanisms coexist in the 53 guides analyzed. A total of 26.4 percent of the guidelines involve administrative regulations, that is, they are recommendations established by governmental entities or competent authorities. Professional self-regulation is promoted in 7.5% of the guidelines, i.e., professional organizations and associations play the main role in the creation and application of their own rules. In 37.7% of the guides, co-regulation is the predominant mechanism, which implies, on most occasions, professional organizations or social entities collaborating with the Administration, which is responsible for financing or implementing the initiative. The proposals from the various civil society entities, mainly NGOs, foundations or universities, either directly or in collaboration with professional organizations, are included in what we have called social self-regulation. This mechanism means that organizations not belonging to the communications sector or to the Administration, specialized in different topics of social interest, feel the need to provide citizens with recommendations on how to improve the professional practice of communication and journalism (28.4%).

Due to the particularities of each thematic area addressed, certain differences can be observed related to the predominant mechanisms of regulation or self-regulation.

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.cocemfe.es/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/20181010\\_COCEMFE\\_Lenguaje\\_inclusivo.pdf](https://www.cocemfe.es/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/20181010_COCEMFE_Lenguaje_inclusivo.pdf)

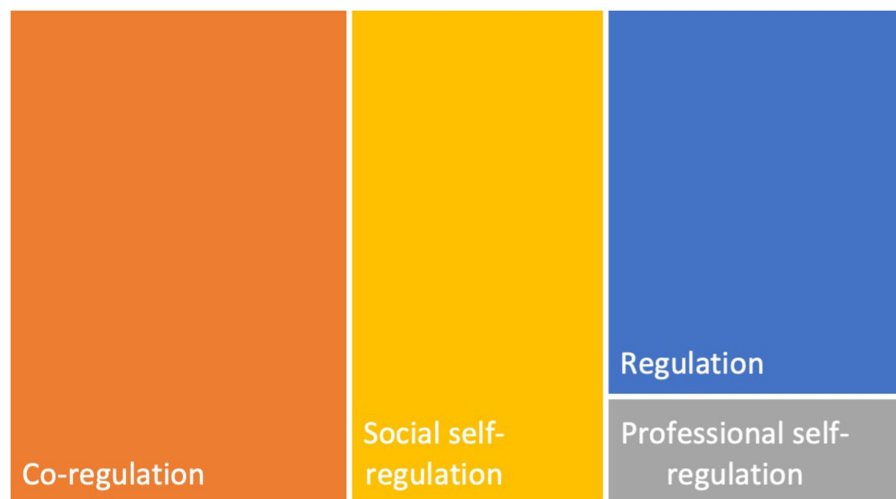


FIGURE 3  
Type of mechanisms (%). Source: Own elaboration.

In terms of improving coverage of gender-based violence, there is an equal proportion of administrative regulation and co-regulation (i.e., promoted by the media with funding from public entities, with 37 percent of the documents belonging to each type of mechanism). Journalistic organizations only act without the support of the Administration in 11.1 percent of the initiatives. Within co-regulation, it should be noted that there are proposals from the audiovisual councils of both Catalonia and Andalusia. Although these councils are co-regulation mechanisms by their very nature, the document from the Andalusian Audiovisual Council (CCA) explicitly mentions the working team that drew up the recommendations, comprising experts from civil society in a range of disciplines: a lawyer, a professor of history at Pablo de Olavide University, professors of Communication and trade unionists, as well as representatives of professional associations and journalists, responsible for the CCA, the president of the Andalusian Institute of Women, the general director of gender violence in Andalusia, the delegated prosecutor for Violence against Women, the spokeswomen of the Equality Commission from different political parties, and representatives of public media (RTVE-Andalusia, CSRTV and Multimedia) and private media (Vocento).

The collaboration of society is also noteworthy in other proposals prepared jointly by the Administration and journalistic organizations. For example, in the last document analyzed, the “Protocolo para el Tratamiento Informativo de la Violencia de Género” (Protocol for the Informative Treatment of Gender Violence) prepared by the La Rioja Press Association on behalf of the Directorate General of Justice and the Interior of the Government of La Rioja (2022), it is explained that during its preparation interviews were held with representatives of different sectors: social agents, members of the judiciary, prosecutors, psychosocial teams, lawyers, social workers, health workers, forensic experts, teachers, women’s and feminist organizations.

In the field of disability, the involvement of civil society organizations related to the topic stands out, with nearly half of the documents analyzed (45.5%) being social self-regulation, by far the highest percentage in the three areas analyzed,

demonstrating the importance of associations for people with disabilities. These include the documents “Diez consejos para informar de una forma adecuada sobre la discapacidad en los medios de comunicación” (10 tips for appropriate reporting on disability in the media) and the “Decálogo para un uso apropiado de la imagen social de las personas con discapacidad” (10 guidelines for appropriately portraying the social image of people with disabilities). The first was created by FEPROAMI, a non-profit organization, declared of public utility, made up of a total of 22 associations within the associative movement Plena Inclusión España. The second is from the Spanish Committee of Representatives of People with Disabilities (CERMI), the platform for representation, defense and action of Spanish citizens with disabilities.

Social self-regulation also stands out in environmental issues (40%), although in this case it is lower than co-regulation. As in the area of gender violence, the Administration finances numerous initiatives that are then published by specialized journalistic entities such as the environmental section of the EFE agency, EFE Verde, and the Journalists’ Associations for Environmental Information (APIA). There is no exclusively journalistic proposal without the financial backing of the Administration or of social entities such as the European Climate Foundation, which commissioned APIA to carry out the ‘Interview Guide on Climate Change’ (2024).<sup>7</sup> As an example of social self-regulation, the Ecology and Development Foundation (ECODES) supported the development of the “Decálogo de la Declaración de los medios de comunicación frente al cambio climático” (10 Guidelines of the Media Declaration on Climate Change), the most advanced project of this type of self-regulation from civil society that incorporates the Communication Sciences research perspective thanks to the Complutense University of Madrid (UCM). In September 2024, 76

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.apiaweb.org/guia-de-cambio-climatico/>



professional organizations (media, agencies, and journalists' associations) signed the Declaration.<sup>8</sup>

**Content endorsement:** with respect to a study conducted prior to the approval or drafting of the recommendations, 60.6 percent of the documents do not indicate that such a study was carried out. However, more than half (54.7%) refer to sources consulted and nearly 70 % refer to expert advice (69.8%), beyond those involved in the drafting process. Finally, the discussion of the topics dealt with in the documents is explicit in the documents in 20 % of the cases. A paradigmatic case with respect to scientific endorsement is the aforementioned “Decálogo de recomendaciones para informar sobre el cambio climático” (10 recommendations for reporting on climate change) which arose at the initiative of the Ecology and Development Foundation (ECODES) with the collaboration of the Dialectical Mediation of Social Communication Research Group (MDCS) at the UCM after launching the Observatory of Climate Change Communication (OBCCC), comprising expert researchers on the subject who facilitated the meetings and debate necessary to bring the guidelines to life (Figure 4).

**Structure and type of normative burden:** a large majority of the guides analyzed, 73.6 percent, provide adequate context for the recommendations presented. Even higher is the percentage of documents that clearly state in the presentation or preamble the reasons (81.1%), associated with the social concern for these issues and the crucial role social communication plays in them. As they were largely prepared by those affected or experts in the thematic areas considered, more than half of the guides (64.2%) include specific concepts and terminology, generally in the form of a glossary. As an example, in the field of disability, the glossary of the most common terms in the “Guía de estilo sobre discapacidad para profesionales de

los medios de comunicación” (Style Guide on Disability for Media Professionals) of the Royal Board on Disability (2019) stands out. With more than 100 entries, the list is “not exhaustive, but tailored to the most frequent concepts, allowing the user to become familiar with the semantic field related to both disability and disease or dependence,” to help communications professionals and the general public avoid abstractions and lack of clarity.<sup>9</sup>

**Positive admonitions:** all, without exception, include recommendations that involve positive admonitions, i.e., constructive guidelines for action or improvement in relation to the informative treatment of the three thematic areas addressed, unlike traditional codes whose normative content was mostly limited to establishing basic actions and imposing negative obligations for actions that should not be carried out.

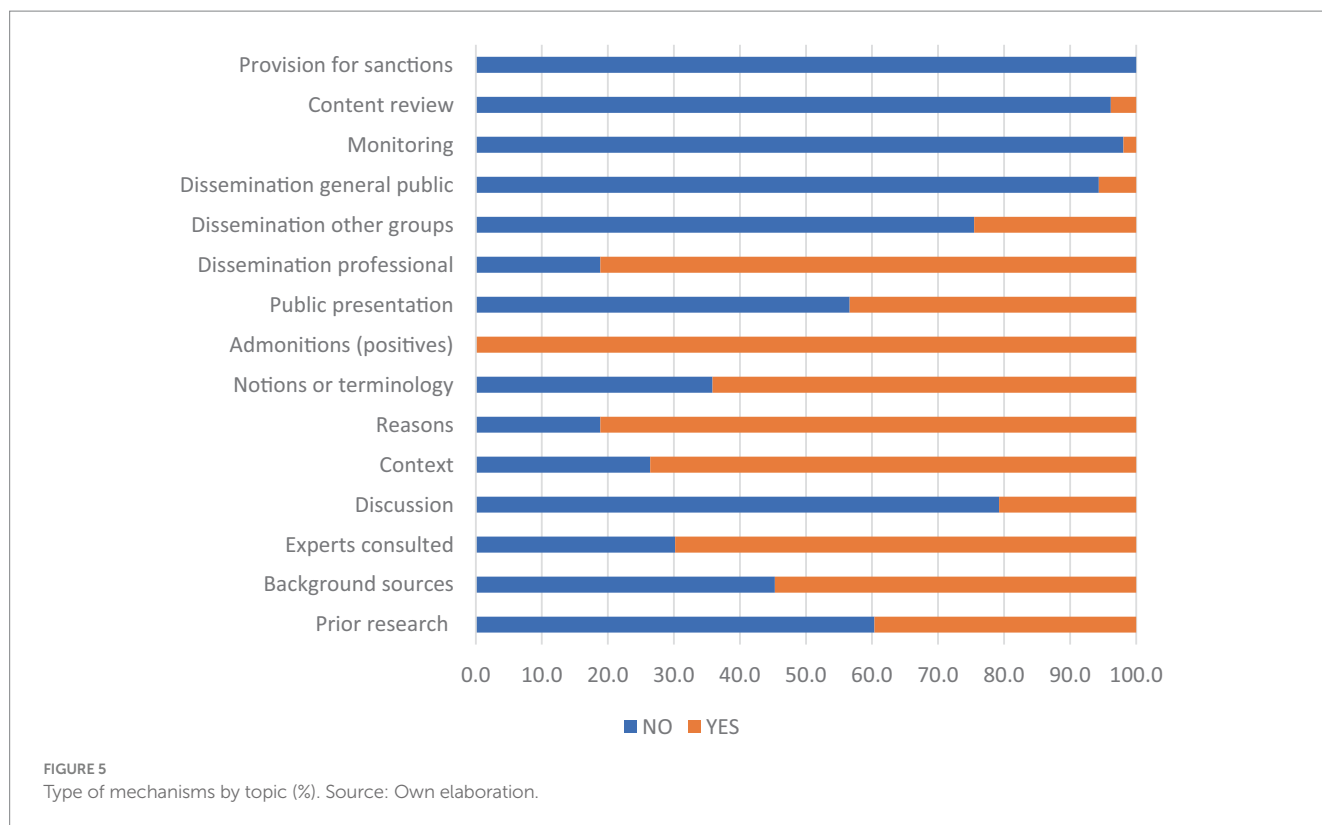
**Dissemination:** almost half (43.4%) of the guidelines were presented, especially when government entities were involved in financing the initiative. The guidelines were predominantly disseminated in the professional communications field (81.1%), while the number of occasions on which they were disseminated to other groups was significantly fewer (24.5%). Dissemination to the general public is quite limited: 94.3 percent of the documents are not widely disseminated beyond public access through the respective websites of the entities. All the documents are available on the Internet.

**Follow-up:** since these are not deontological or mandatory documents adopted by professional organizations or editors (although they may have participated in their gestation and given their approval), 98.1 percent of the recommendations do not include mechanisms for their follow-up or implementation. Only one initiative, the 10 guidelines of the “Media Declaration on Climate Change,” promoted by ECODES and the Dialectical Measurement of Social Communication Research Group (MDCS) at the UCM,

<sup>8</sup> <https://ecodes.org/hacemos/cambio-climatico/movilizacion/medios-de-comunicacion-y-cambio-climatico>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.sis.net/documentos/ficha/544014.pdf>





annually monitors compliance with the guidelines through a report that analyzes the coverage of the issue (Teso et al., 2024). In its 2022 update, the OBCCC ran focus groups, online questionnaires and a meeting involving a Phillips 66 debate in which 49 professionals and experts participated in person, together with the research team. Lastly, none of the guidelines establish penalties for non-compliance (Figure 5).<sup>10</sup>

## 5 Discussion and conclusion

The results of the study make it possible to verify the general hypothesis of this research and thereby be able to speak of an authentic *second stage in the history of communication ethics* and, in the case of these new codes or recommendations, of a *second generation of communication ethics codes*, insofar as the latter represent a novelty in the normative field of communication ethics, besides the isolated precedents that may always have existed.

The analysis shows the emergence of these codes since 1999 (sub-hypothesis 1), the existence of certain common features related to their endorsement, structure, dissemination and monitoring (sub-hypothesis 2) and the participation to a large extent in their promotion or implementation of individuals, experts and groups not professionally related to the field of communication, which determines a social type of self-regulation (sub-hypothesis 3).

It can be affirmed, therefore, that since the end of the last century and particularly in this one, we have witnessed the

emergence of a new development in communication ethics. If the first generation of ethics codes set out the basic requirements with the principle of truth being the fundamental basis for journalistic activity, the new generation complements these basic duties—often minimal, i.e., obligations of abstention—with a series of new ethics guidelines. With the first codes that appeared at the beginning of the 21st century, the foundations on which they were based were already discernible: the recognition of the current importance of the media, the awareness of the enormous negative impact that can result from inappropriate media practices, the appeal to the ideal of the media's social responsibility, compatibility with the freedom of expression of both the media and journalists, the understanding of the demanding and complex context of current media work, the criticism of the ideal of journalistic neutrality, the reinforcement of the ideal of the journalist's ethical commitment, and the promotion of a journalism of solutions, mobilization and service (Aznar, 2005b).

This new generation of codes has certain distinctive features, but its common axis is the development of conduct guidelines—in this case positive, like the duty to act—associated with the principle of justice or responsibility being an additional principle of communication, and more specifically because of its priority focus on vulnerability: both of certain individuals and groups, as well as of certain common goods and issues (Aznar, 2020; Aznar et al., 2024). This common denominator, together with the large number of initiatives of this type, allows us to affirm that we are dealing with a *second generation of communication ethics codes*.

The wide variety of issues on which ethical recommendations are emerging with respect to their treatment in the media that could not be analyzed constitutes the first limitation of this study, as does the fact that it is limited to a single country. However, this is a first approach

<sup>10</sup> <https://observatoriocomunicacc.es/decalogo/#origen>

that we intend to extend, in the first instance, to the Hispanic-American environment. The results of this work add another perspective to previous research in the field of information ethics in terms of gender violence (Zurbano-Berenguer and Martínez-Fábreas, 2011; Zurbano-Berenguer and García-Gordillo, 2017; Edo, 2017; Edo and Zurbano-Berenguer, 2019; Edo, 2022; Sánchez-Ramos et al., 2024), disability (Álvarez-Villa et al., 2024; Álvarez-Villa and Mercado-Sáez, 2015) and the environment (Mercado-Sáez and Monedero-Morales, 2024; Monedero-Morales and Mercado-Sáez, 2024).

The reason this second generation of codes of communication ethics has emerged is related to the evolution of the power and influence of social-mediated communication at the turn of the century. In this respect, a striking parallel can be drawn between what happened at the turn of the 19th century and the change from the 20th to the 21st century. At the turn of the previous century there was, as we have noted above, a qualitative leap in the importance and influence of the media—mainly the press, but also soon radio, cinema and magazines, and through them advertising and propaganda—contributing to the debate that gave rise to the first generation of journalistic ethics and its codes. In the final decades of the 20th century and throughout this one to date, we have witnessed a new qualitative change in the role and importance of social communication, this time due to the appearance and tremendous influence of the Internet and social media, without forgetting the previous contribution of television. This change prompted people to speak of the information and communication society, thus emphasizing the central role acquired by social communication (Castells, 2001).

And just as in the early years of the last century and especially in the 1920s the traditional Enlightenment-liberal view of the role of journalism and public opinion was in crisis, promoting debate and the first ethical initiatives, in recent years we have also seen the deterioration of the promises of the information society until it has become more common to speak of the society of digitalization, post-truth and disinformation (Iranzo-Cabrera et al., 2022), this change being, in turn, one of the reasons to call for new advances in communication ethics. As Bennett and Livingston (2018) point out, the more recent volatile mix of institutional corrosion and abundance of alternative media has allowed counterpolitics to assume corrosive and anti-democratic forms in many societies where countercultural narratives circulate that challenge the very principles of democratic freedom and tolerance and undermine the norms of reason and evidence on which rational public debate in democracies depends.

In this way, social communication has definitively come to occupy the central position in our mediatized societies (Krotz, 2009; Strömbäck and Esser, 2014; Hjarvard, 2016). Thus, from being just another voice in the public sphere, social-mediated communication is now definitively shaping the *new virtual public arena* of our societies, which is to a large extent global. This new media environment is therefore key to the configuration of identity, self-image and self-understanding of the individuals and groups that comprise it, as well as a large part of their daily activity; and also to the different subsystems of our complex societies and the collective challenges we face as advanced societies. In Spain, the General Law on Audiovisual Communication passed in 2022

expressly includes the promotion of self-regulation and co-regulation through the voluntary adoption of codes of conduct drawn up by audiovisual media services providers, in cooperation, if necessary, with other stakeholders such as industry, commerce or professional, or user associations or organizations in the three areas—in a broad sense—under study in this research, people with disabilities, the dignity of women, and the environment and climate change, as well as others such as public health, the protection of minors, and racial or ethnic minorities (Ovejero, 2023).

This new step forward means that social-mediated communication, from being just another relevant social agent or power in our societies—something that was already important—now shapes the very environment in which the other agents appear and manifest themselves, substantially affecting their performance. Its mediation activity turns its different mediums into relevant and even determining agents in practically all matters of collective interest, substantially affecting the patterns of action of both individuals and the rest of the social subsystem, not only politics, but also the economy, culture, daily life patterns and lifestyles, the education of children, science, art, and so on.

This activity often not only powerfully influences the functioning of the other subsystems, affecting the way they perceive their concerns, their operating patterns, their challenges and the way they confront these. It also frequently produces distortions by extrapolating the mechanisms, routines and operating criteria of the media—and now also those of social media—to these other subsystems, damaging their activity by colonizing them in this way; something that had already been highlighted at the end of the 20th century in relation to television, but which has now been extended to the power of social media.

It is this central role of social-mediated communication that has provoked renewed interest in communication ethics, although this time it has emerged as a concern for each of the different spheres affected by this communication. For this very reason, a large part of these initiatives arose from the affected sectors themselves, i.e., from civil society not directly linked to the work of the media, which, as affected stakeholders, have tried to define new ethics guidelines for this communication activity. Fengler et al. (2024) also highlighted the action of civil society as one of the five groups of professional, organizational, social, political and international players involved in media accountability, especially with respect to the work of NGOs, as well as that of journalism institutes and mass communication academics.

On the other hand, aware of the importance of social communication and particularly of the work of the media in relation to them, these guidelines seek to go beyond the ethical minimums of the first generation of codes to establish positive guidelines based on greater responsibility in relation to the issues and those affected by their activity. It is these initiatives and the resulting texts that make up this *second generation of ethics codes*, as we have shown through the study of three thematic areas and the documents produced in them. In short, these initiatives launched by civil society, by groups of people affected or stakeholders in the thematic areas considered, reflect the historical reason for their emergence as outlined in the presentation of this new historical stage of communication ethics.

## Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

## Author contributions

HA: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. MM-S: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AA-V: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

## Funding

The author(s) declare that financial support was received for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. This research is part of the R+D+I Project “Ethics and Self-regulation of Social Communication: Content analysis of 2nd Generation Ethical Codes and

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