

Spain's main parties attempt to re-introduce censorship of public broadcasting

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On September 22, the administrative board of the state-run Spanish Radio and Television Corporation (Corporación Radiotelevisión Española, RTVE) agreed a plan to give themselves access to the corporation's iNews system.

iNews is used by journalists and editors to select the daily topics and develop the main news. Access to the system would have given board members the opportunity to change or delete content such as headlines, videos, interviews and even real-time television and radio news reports. It would also enable the directors to warn their political allies of impending detrimental news stories.

Since reform of RTVE in 2006 by Jose Luis Zapatero's Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government, the corporation has been run by a board of 12 individuals appointed on the basis of "outstanding qualifications and professional experience" for a six-year term. Eight of the members are appointed by Congress in proportion to the strength of the parties, four by the Senate and two by the majority union within RTVE. The RTVE president is chosen by Congress from among the 12 board members.

Zapatero claimed his reforms would do away with the notorious reputation state broadcasting had for political interference—as a direct propaganda tool under the Francoist dictatorship and, after the transition to democracy, when the director general was a political appointment of newly elected governments. His aim was to create a "Spanish BBC".

However, the BBC is no different in essence from any other state broadcaster. Founded in 1926, it acts as a major asset of British imperialism from the standpoint of disseminating propaganda and shaping international opinion. To fill this role, it is not enough to simply parrot the line of the government of the day. A degree of distance and an element of criticism on certain issues are sometimes essential if the corporation is to maintain an appearance of impartiality and independence.

Achieving this appearance of independence was the main objective of Zapatero. Now, both major parties agree that any adverse comment or serious examination of the harsh austerity measures, social conditions and corruption scandals gripping Spain are potentially dangerous for the ruling elite. It is necessary, therefore, to re-convert RTVE into an open instrument of the government, as it was before.

Even before the recent attempt to censor the news, the board had

been acting outside of its remit. The former president of the board, Albert Oliart, resigned last July due to a scandal relating to the award of a contract to his son. A new president should have been appointed, but instead the board members took it in turns. Half of the members should have been renewed more than a year and a half ago. A consideration for those clinging to office beyond their term is the lucrative reward they receive—an average salary of €120,000, the use of a car, a chauffeur, an advisor and a secretary. But there are clearly even greater opportunities for both exerting influence and influence peddling.

The censorship measure was proposed by the right-wing Popular Party (PP) representative Rosario López Miralles. It was not the first time the PP has attempted to gain access to iNews. Last March, López asked Oliart for the iNews password in order to access the system, but he refused, stating that only those who participated directly in preparing the news were allowed.

The September 22 decision was taken by the 11 board members remaining after Oliart's resignation. Five representatives—from the PP and the right-wing Catalan nationalist CiU—voted in favour and four—from the PSOE, the Catalan Republican Left (ERC) and the Communist Party-aligned CC.OO trade union—abstained, allowing the measure to pass. Only two voted against—the representative of the United Left and the PSOE-aligned UGT trade union. The only reason the UGT representative voted against was because the board ignored his request to postpone the decision for a week in order to examine how the system worked.

In less than 24 hours, the board was forced to reverse its decision after facing outrage from journalists' associations who accused the board of wanting to control editorial policy.

The News Council, comprising top editors, published a statement declaring that "this decision is a direct attack on the freedom and independence of journalists since it allows for the control of the content of newscasts while they are being prepared."

The Spanish Federation of Journalist Associations considered that the proposal amounted to "censorship that we thought was banished" and had a clear objective "to establish a Big Brother in the making of television news."

Reporters Without Borders said it was "scandalised" by the measure and the Spanish consumer association CEACCU described the

measure as “a serious attack on the right to information.”

Director and presenter of the daily radio programme “On Days Like Today”, Juan Ramón Lucas, started his programme with the news tune played during the Francoist era as a way of protest.

On September 23, RTVE workers held assemblies in the headquarters in Madrid and Barcelona, and called for the resignation of the nine board members who did not vote against the decision.

In less than 48 hours, the RTVE board called an emergency meeting and reversed their decision unanimously. All appointees changed their votes and those who had abstained voted against.

The board later published a statement declaring that “it was never the intention of board members who voted for the measure or those who allowed its approval by abstaining to interfere with the news staff’s work nor, even less, affect their professional independence.”

Following the criticism of the attempts at censorship, the political parties and the unions attempted to distance themselves from the decision and portray it as an individual action by board members. The trade union CC.OO representative, Hector Maravall, who had abstained, declared that he did not think of the measure as being an “element of control”, but recognised that it “could give place to abuse [of the editorial system] or a sensation of interference with the free independence [of journalists and editors].” He later resigned.

The CC.OO issued a statement saying Maravall “regretted” his decision and that his resignation was made “as an example to those responsible for what happened.” Maravall had been appointed designate RTVE president by his fellow board members for the month of September.

Mariano Rajoy, president of the PP, admitted that the measure was only rescinded because of “the opposition and outrage” from journalists. His party has continuously attacked the public radio and television, claiming that are biased towards the PSOE. A target of its complaints is Ana Pastor, who anchors the morning programme “TVE Breakfast”, for an “aggressive” interview conducted with PP General Secretary Maria Dolores de Cospedal.

Although the PP complains about bias in national media, many of Spain’s regional television networks, mostly in hands of the regional PP governments, function as its propaganda machines—including TeleMadrid, which publicly supports regional PP President Esperanza Aguirre.

This attempt to censor the news is another example of the collusion between the PSOE and PP in the run-up to November’s elections. At the beginning of September, the PP abstained to allow an unprecedented change to the Spanish constitution—the imposition of a ceiling on public spending deficits for all future governments—to go through in the space of just two weeks. Two weeks ago the PP abstained on a labour reform law that attacks working conditions, wages and permanent employment.

Curtailling press freedom is not unique to Spain. Throughout Europe governments are imposing the burden of the international economic crisis onto the backs of the working class through drastic austerity

measures at home, whilst waging imperialist neo-colonial wars of aggression abroad. This cannot be carried out through democratic means. Basic democratic rights such as freedom of press and free speech are under attack everywhere.

Last year, the ruling Fidesz government in Hungary passed a media law creating a five-member Media Council with powers to impose tough sanctions against any media outlet whose reporting is not “balanced” and to decide whether a news story is “balanced”. Journalists who write on “national security” must disclose their sources and the news output for all public broadcasters will be produced by a central government agency.

Last March, the main public broadcaster CT (CzechTelevision) in the Czech Republic was raided during its primetime news broadcast by armed commandos searching for declassified documents relating to the case of Miroslav Krecjik, a former military intelligence head.

In Italy, Prime Minister Berlusconi enjoys direct and indirect control of 90 percent of the Italian national media. And in the UK, the main television broadcasters were forced to hand over hundreds of hours of un-transmitted video footage from the riots in London in August to the Metropolitan Police, paving the way for arrests of thousands of more young people.

In France, Minister Claude Guéant admitted in September to domestic intelligence spying on telephone conversations of a *Le Monde* reporter who was investigating L’Oréal billionaire Liliane Bettencourt’s connections with President Nicolas Sarkozy. The reporter revealed that Bettencourt illegally funded Sarkozy’s 2007 election campaign and helped find a high-paying job for the wife of then-Finance Minister Eric Woerth.

In a more recent move, a Senator of Sarkozy’s UMP, Jaques Legendre, proposed a law that would reorganize the board of the French Press Agency (AFP) and cut state funding, which currently stands at 40 percent of its budget, making it more open to political influences.

At an international level, the campaign against WikiLeaks and its founder Julian Assange marks the high point of the attack on press freedom. The US government and its accomplices have attempted to cripple WikiLeaks and create the conditions to imprison Assange, whilst psychologically torturing the alleged “whistleblower” Private Bradley Manning.



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