

THE BOOM OF INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM BOOKS IN THE 1990S:

the case of *Espejo de la Argentina* by
planeta



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ABSTRACT – During the 1990s, in Argentina, investigative journalism books became a publishing phenomenon. These best-sellers occupied an increasingly prominent place within the genre of political books. The pioneering collection of the genre was *Espejo de la Argentina* by Editorial Planeta. For its analysis, we first consider its connection with the strategies of international companies entering the local publishing market. Then, we explore the affinities between this project and certain journalistic spaces. Finally, we address how becoming a brand-author involves a symbolic rupture in terms of status and public authority for journalists. The work is based on a corpus composed of a database of journalistic books, press archives, and semi-structured interviews with editors and authors.

Key words: Best-sellers. Political-journalistic book. Journalism sociology.

O BOOM DOS LIVROS DE INVESTIGAÇÃO JORNALÍSTICA DURANTE A DÉCADA DE 1990: o caso de “Espejo de la Argentina” da Planeta

RESUMO – Durante a década de 1990, na Argentina, os livros de investigação jornalística tornaram-se um fenômeno editorial. Esses best-sellers ocuparam um lugar cada vez mais destacado dentro do gênero do livro político. A coleção pioneira do gênero foi *Espejo de la Argentina* da Editorial Planeta. Para sua análise, em primeiro lugar, consideramos sua ligação com as estratégias de entrada de empresas internacionais no mercado editorial local. Depois, investigamos as afinidades entre este projeto e certos espaços jornalísticos. Por fim, abordamos como se tornar um autor-marca envolve uma ruptura simbólica em termos de status e autoridade pública dos jornalistas. O trabalho é baseado em um corpus composto por um banco de dados de livros jornalísticos, arquivos de imprensa e entrevistas semiestruturadas com editores e autores.

Palavras-chave: Best-sellers. Livro político-jornalístico. Sociologia do Jornalismo.

EL BOOM DE LOS LIBROS DE INVESTIGACIÓN PERIODÍSTICA DURANTE LA DÉCADA DE 1990: el caso de Espejo de la Argentina de Planeta

RESUMEN – Durante la década de 1990, en la Argentina los libros de investigación periodística devinieron un fenómeno editorial. Estos best-sellers ocuparon un lugar cada vez más destacado dentro del género del libro político. La colección pionera del género fue *Espejo de la Argentina* de la Editorial Planeta. Para su análisis, en primer lugar, consideramos su vínculo con las estrategias de arribo de empresas internacionales al mercado editorial local. Luego, indagamos en las afinidades entre este proyecto y ciertos espacios periodísticos. Por último, nos ocupamos de la manera en que devenir un autor-marca involucra una ruptura simbólica en términos de estatus y de autoridad pública de los periodistas. El trabajo se asienta en un corpus compuesto por una base de datos sobre libros periodísticos, de archivos de prensa y de entrevistas semiestructuradas a editores y autores.

Palabras clave: Best-sellers. Libro político-periodístico. Sociología del periodismo.

1 Introduction

Since the 1930s, with the rise and incipient professionalization of these cultural industries (De Diego, 2006; Saítta, 1998), print media and journalists have participated in the world of books, mainly through narrative and essay writing. However, it was not until the 1980s that political-journalistic non-fiction books experienced sustained development, becoming an editorial phenomenon in the 1990s (Ulanovsky, 1997). As in other national cases¹, works written by journalists increasingly occupied a prominent place within the political book genre, which also includes intellectuals, political leaders, and other political commentators (Saferstein, 2021).

The concept of “political book”, however, is not self-evident; it is shaped by processes of politicization through which authors, editors, or critics define and redefine a work as political through presentation strategies or references to its attributes (Le Bart, 2005). These

politicization processes delineate boundaries between forms that are presented as legitimate for thinking, speaking, and acting politically and those that are not (Offerlé, 2011). These forms of social classification find one of their main crystallizations in editorial collections and reveal the challenges and disputes of the actors involved in their production (Olivera, 2002). In this sense, following the trajectory of the main collection of political-journalistic books and journalist authors allows us to observe how power relations in the cultural field were structured and rearticulated and how hierarchized and legitimized positions in this space have translated into forms of public authority.

Following this perspective, we focus on the *Espejo de la Argentina* (hereafter *Espejo*) collection by Editorial Planeta and how the boom of “investigative journalism” books represents one of the exponents of the reconfiguration of the political journalism field and its legitimacy criteria. First, we address the emergence of this collection and its connection to the strategies of international companies entering the local publishing market. Second, we study how the affinities between this editorial project and certain journalistic spaces are based on a cultural framework that links the worlds of journalism, literature, and the publishing field. Finally, we address how the conversion of journalists into authors involves a symbolic rupture in terms of status, the singularization of their names, and autonomy from the media they participate in (Leroux et al., 2014). Indeed, in the context of increasing professional competition, the publication of a “successful” work operates as an instrument of professional and social consecration, enabling the accumulation of symbolic resources – recognition from peers or the construction of their own audience – as well as economic ones.

Our working hypotheses are, first, that between the late 1980s and early 1990s, the decline of cultural spheres linked to the world of the left and the “withdrawal” of their main intellectual figures from the public space left vacant positions for the constitution of “new” cultural authorities (Baldoni, 2022). Second, the transformations in the ownership structure of the publishing market, due to concentration and foreignization processes, opened new possibilities for journalists who wanted to intervene in this field, which increasingly tended to be oriented by commercial logics. Third, the development of investigative journalism and the proliferation of corruption scandals during the two Carlos Menem’s administrations (1989-1999) contributed to the sales success of denunciation books, which became one of the main market niches for large publishing

houses. In this context, books, which were previously reserved for journalistic sectors closer to the intellectual pole, became a relatively accessible platform for other sectors of the field closer to the commercial pole. Particularly, after their books became bestsellers, a series of journalists performed intellectual functions in the public space that were previously embodied by other figures.

The analysis is based on a methodological strategy that combines different research techniques and source corpora; namely: the configuration of a data matrix of 514 journalistic books defined by the author's profession from 1983 to 2001²; semi-structured interviews with editors, journalist authors, and high-ranking public officials; review and coding of press archives; and the reconstruction of the professional trajectories of journalist authors.

2 The reconfiguration of the cultural and journalistic field: the boom of “Denunciation and Investigation” Books

During the 1990s, journalistic books achieved unprecedented success, leading the sales rankings of non-fiction publications. The consolidation of the genre in the early decade was framed by the editorial policies of major publishing houses (see graph I). Based on the titles that became best-sellers, these publishing houses increasingly oriented themselves towards so-called “denunciation and investigation” books.

Graph I:



Source: Own elaboration based on ISBN records, catalogs, copies, and press archives.

The publication of a book became more accessible for journalists without literary or political credentials. Until then, the relationships between the journalistic and editorial fields had been mediated by the political-intellectual and literary spheres; from those years on, this mediation decreased as the media and publishing industries oriented themselves toward commercial logics.

The constitution of the journalistic book as a genre in its own right coincided with the mutations of the publishing market, the political-intellectual sphere, and the journalistic field. As analyzed in a previous article (Baldoni, 2022), from 1983 onwards, political-journalistic books played a relevant role in the reconstitution of democratic culture. These publications were part of the political-intellectual stakes of small and medium-sized intellectual publishers³ linked to leftist or progressive journalistic projects. Therefore, these works sustained a vocation for political-pedagogical intervention that accompanied the process of democratic reconstruction. They also incipiently promoted the development of investigative journalism oriented mainly towards denouncing crimes against humanity perpetrated by the military dictatorship, the events that took place during the Falklands War, and later, the threat posed by the so-called “military question” to the democratic regime as of the mid-1980s. However, after its brief boom, this form of public intervention declined towards the late 1980s due to various factors.

First, the worsening economic crisis, which led to the emergence of a hyperinflationary process in 1989, affected the publishing industry and particularly hit small and medium-sized houses, many of which were forced to close down. In this scenario, large international firms positioned themselves in the national sphere by occupying market niches. The national currency convertibility policy, implemented in 1991, deepened the comparative advantages of these houses and promoted the internationalization of the local publishing market as of the mid-1990s (De Diego, 2006; Botto, 2006; Páez, 2018; Szpilbarg, 2015).

Second, the decline of intellectual publishing houses occurred within the framework of a crisis of leftist political ideals both internationally and locally, which undermined the continuity of political-intellectual spaces (Ribadero, 2018). This was compounded by the erosion of the idea of politics as a tool for societal transformation, which had dominated the scene in the first half of the 1980s (Landi, 1991; Pucciarelli, 2011; Rinesi & Vommaro, 2007).

Moreover, a series of disputes in the intellectual and literary spheres revealed a redefinition of the role of intellectuals in terms of their distancing logics regarding politics, which turned interventions based on ideological or partisan ideals obsolete (Bonacci, 2019; Botto, 2006; De Diego, 2006). Many leading intellectual figures retreated, either towards academia, the arts, or literature. Two intellectual leaders expressed this retreat in a cultural magazine:

The pragmatic nature of these times does not need concepts (...). The dominant discourse tends towards the privatization of people's lives, and intellectuals participate in that retreat (Portantiero, in *La Maga*, 1992, p. 31).

In politics, the functionality of dirty hands applies, and the intellectual must be the guardian of ethics (...). In power, the freedom that the intellectual needs in order to criticize is destroyed; it is preferable for them to stay away (Feinmann, in *La Maga*, 1992, p. 31).

Accompanied by a generational renewal, this process of depoliticization deepened throughout the 1990s.

Third, the privatization of the audiovisual spectrum encouraged commercial logics and the pursuit of mass audiences. The media system concentrated through the formation of large national multimedia groups, which became dominant actors in the production and distribution of journalistic content (Becerra & Mastrini, 2009; Waisbord, 2000; Vommaro, 2008). While the print press maintained a prominent place in the market – both in terms of copies sold and revenue – the expansion and coverage of television posed new challenges. Among them, its ability to set the political agenda was then disputed by the diffusion and visual impact of newscasts and cable news channels. This competitive relationship fostered the development of strategies by the press to compensate for the power they had lost.

In this scenario, the personalization of journalistic speech in the press deepened with the introduction of bylines and the increased prominence of columnists. According to management, this responded to the demands for greater visibility of journalists and the need to retain the public who began to identify with them. Newspapers, which until then had maintained a collective and institutional voice, extended the authority to issue judgments in their own name to columnists (Baldoni, 2024). In this transition from anonymous journalism to byline journalism, journalistic books also played a significant role. Columnists

with bylines found in the book a platform to make a qualitative leap in their careers, allowing them to increase their visibility and reach audiovisual media. Particularly, this was an opportunity for those who began to direct their careers towards investigative journalism, which had gained momentum with the corruption denunciations of *Página/12* from the early 1990s, which later spread to the entire press and audiovisual media. Thus, becoming an author came to be a strategy of personal distinction and professional growth, which in the case of best-sellers led to the configuration of a new elite of journalist authors, endorsed by their own notoriety.

2.1 Planeta's arrival in the local market

Journalistic books did not occupy a prominent place in major publishing houses in the 1980s. However, some titles published in those years constitute antecedents of the genre. This was related to the arrival of the Spanish publishing group Planeta in the local industry.

Between 1983 and 1989, Planeta established a partnership with Editorial Sudamericana, which made it possible for the foreign house to enter the local market (Páez, 2018). Without yet having a clear editorial orientation, some political current affairs titles under the “Sudamericana-Planeta” label became commercial successes.

The main example was *Malvinas. La trama secreta*, published in 1983, and written by three political columnists from Clarín: Oscar Raúl Cardozo, Ricardo Kirschbaum, and Eduardo Van der Kooy. From a retrospective point of view, this book is considered by the editorial and journalistic fields as the archetype of the investigative and denunciation genre. Indeed, this work condenses several elements that characterize the genre.

First, it dealt with a current affairs topic linked to the political and media agenda: the military conflict that preceded the collapse of the military regime. Second, the book was inscribed with the logic of revealing the decisions, alliances, and negotiations made by the powers of the government behind the scenes. Third, this “secret plot” was revealed through a narrative style that contributed to its dissemination. Fourth, the value of this author profile constituted by journalists resided in their access to unpublished sources: circles of political and economic elites and, in this case, also the military.

In the Alfonsín era, a great book was *Malvinas. La trama secreta* by Van der Kooy, Cardoso, and Kirschbaum. At that time, it was an overwhelming success, which no one expected. It reached 75,000 copies (...). What mattered was the text, which was excellent because of the investigation itself and its use of narrative journalism to describe a straightforward reality. The great success was the theme and how it was narrated. It read like a thriller. (Sabanes, 2019, former Planeta editor, personal interview).

The book also revealed the incipient advertising strategies. For *Malvinas...*, the strategy focused on its release at a key moment in the socio-political context, just a month before the October 1983 presidential elections that marked the effective institutional restoration of democracy. This was complemented by a book presentation tour with the authors in major cities across the country and a print media advertising campaign.

However, besides these innovations, retrospectively read as antecedents of the marketing formulas established later, the success of the book, whose idea and initiative came from the journalists themselves, surprised the editors. Another element to consider is that, at the time, the prevailing contracting process was that the authors had to finance their research and writing time, which reveals how journalists saw book publication as an investment with cultural, rather than economic, returns. Van der Kooy recalls:

We were very naïve about entering the publishing world (...). The truth is, we had very little rigor in negotiating (...) They didn't even give us an advance. We paid the costs ourselves. Later, with successive editions, yes, 'give me an advance', we added it. But back then, we were very inexperienced.

It must be one of our greatest satisfactions, a book that has become and is even today, a reference for foreign universities (...). *I think the book strengthens prestige more than visibility.* Because we didn't make a sensationalist book, we made a book that was quite rigorous in journalistic investigation focused on politics and diplomacy (Van Der Kooy, 2017, personal interview, added italics).

With this title, the imprint initiated the *Espejo* collection. However, under this label, only two titles were published, and the collection was relaunched only in 1990. The name was taken from the *Espejo de España* collection of the parent company. During the Spanish transition, that collection promoted historical investigation books, allowing the publisher to update to democratic times and counteract its image historically associated with the Franco regime (De Diego, 2008).

3 Planeta, a mirror of the Argentine journalistic field

With the relaunch of the *Espejo* collection in 1990, the editorial landscape for journalists changed. The collection was part of the reorientation of Planeta, whose directors, now separated from the Sudamericana imprint, sought to position it in the local market. Its main editor, Ricardo Sabanes, had extensive experience in the publishing house. In 1990, his goal was to identify market niches opening up as a consequence of the crisis the industry was going through. With an aggressive policy that included acquiring publishing houses and co-opting authors, he set out to develop three collections, including *Espejo*, specifically aimed at political books⁴. The bet was to take the place then occupied by other publishing groups through the production of current affairs best-sellers.

Initially, *Espejo* was conceived as a collection that would portray Argentine politics through different genres. However, the success of its journalistic titles led them to focus on these types of works. During the analyzed period (1990-2001), the collection published 79 political non-fiction titles. Of this set, 75% were written by journalists (59) and the rest by authors who came from social sciences and humanities (14), the military (4), and law (2). The presence of social sciences and humanities authors was part of a repositioning strategy of the publisher, which was seeking to attract the cultured public from the progressive spectrum that saw Planeta as a right-wing imprint, thus giving *Espejo* a better reputation in those cultural circles⁵.

Several transformations in the journalistic field operated as conditions for the collection's emergence. Among them was the relevance acquired by the newspaper *Página|12*, launched in 1987, as a reference in the press for the renewal of journalism and an exponent of its intellectual pole. The newspaper gathered a large part of the political-cultural spectrum that had participated in publishing projects promoting journalistic books during the 1980s (Baldoni, 2022). One symptom of its influence is the preeminence of *Página|12* as the source medium for the collection's authors: half of the *Espejo* journalistic titles were written by professionals who worked for this medium (29 out of 58), followed by those from the newspapers *Sur* (10) and *Clarín* (9), and to a lesser extent, *La Nación* (2). To recruit this set of "available" authors, Planeta's editor designed strategies to co-opt the most recognized ones and offered professional development

opportunities to the younger ones. This was complemented by a policy of reissuing successful works from the 1980s.

The transformations in the political field also contributed to the development of this genre. Indeed, the neoliberal policies and state restructuring undertaken by Carlos Menem's administrations, primarily through public treasury privatization, were subject to increasing corruption scandal denunciations (Pereyra, 2013). *Página/12* played a leading role in these, due to the media repercussion of the cases, which became part of the agenda of other mass reference newspapers, such as *Clarín* and *La Nación*, and political and informative television and radio programs.

It should be noted that the link between *Espejo* and *Página|12* was not organic, nor was it based on a common political-cultural project. In this case, it was more an elective affinity, in the political and cultural circumstances just described, which broadened the newspaper's innovations through the circulation of actors who were a bridge between both spaces. In this, writer, journalist and editor Juan Forn played a central role.

Forn was the collection's director between 1990 and 1995 and later the founder and director of the "Radar Libros" cultural supplement of *Página|12*. Born in 1959, he belonged to a generation of young writers formed in the 1970s and 1980s in a literary environment still closely linked to intellectual sectors of journalism. The committed writers of the 1960s and 1970s – such as Rogelio García Lupo, Juan Gelman, Tomás Eloy Martínez, Osvaldo Soriano, and Rodolfo Walsh – were their main references. Their readings were nourished by "new journalism" magazines, both Anglo-Saxon and local, among which were the Argentine transition magazines, such as *Humor*, *El Porteño*, and *El Periodista de Buenos Aires*. With common cultural circuits, this generational framework was sustained by friendships, with shared artistic tastes (Benzecry, 1999). In the late 1980s, this young generation obtained in *Página|12*, with its rhetoric of irreverence, a space of belonging and of shared aesthetic-cultural identity. Forn first joined as a collaborator:

All that group, we've been fanatics of magazines (...) and idolized all the guys who were journalists and good writers (...). We worked with similar imagery (...) a lot of eagerness to deal with humor both with Peronism and anti-Peronism, both with the misfortune of being Argentine [laughs] and the glory of being Argentine. So we had affinity; we all wanted to be fast. It was the era of irony: a bit frivolous, very creative.

And what did Página's appearance mean for you in this atmosphere?

"(...) I would say that, if the newspaper came out in '87, by '88 I already felt it was my newspaper (...). I put on the *Página* jersey almost instantly: 'this speaks about me' or 'this has to do with me'. It was the attitude! The cover, the front-page highlight (...). The idea of the back cover as a showcase for writing. In *Página*... it was their way of headlining and cunning (...). Clarín and La Nación had this thing of saying 'the deceased', and 'the day before had happened', and suddenly *Página* called things by their name: of calling a spade a spade. And with that, Argentine journalism changed" (Forn, 2020, personal interview).

Unlike the preceding generation, they had not participated in militant activities. Their generational stance was closer to a sort of "political asceticism". The break with their references rested on a concern for seeking aesthetic "purity" and a "postmodern" vision that, based on a supposed erosion of cultural hierarchies, proposed the crossing of "high" with "low", of "erudite" with "lay".

We were not from the '70s; we hadn't been there (...). The spirit of the '70s was collective; ours was individualistic (...). I belong to a rather apolitical generation (...). Those were the beginnings or the peak of postmodernity, where the high crossed with the low, the modern with the old. There was a lot of dialogue between supposed opposites. That was, for me, the most attractive characteristic of that time. The negative characteristic was frivolity. (Forn, 2020, personal interview).

This generation's rather ascetic stance towards political dilemmas also allowed them to occupy spaces that were not open to intellectual actors from previous generations, due to their proximity to commercial circuits. Among them are international publishing houses and major media outlets. In this context, Forn joined Planeta as editor of *Espejo* and *Biblioteca del Sur*, a narrative collection. Forn acted as a link between the *Página*|12 world and Planeta. His imprint is noticeable in *Espejo*, particularly in the quest for originality in the published works. On the one hand, his project was to create a product that stood out, by its innovation and style, from what was published in the press. These were not compilations of articles but unpublished works, whose profile could vary – current affairs books or in-depth books⁶ – but whose common feature was that they presented novel information with a narrative tone, involving the construction of a plot and the staging of intrigue. These works utilized literary tools typical of the new journalism tradition.

Non-fiction books in Argentina often did not consider the great appeal that can be achieved with staging, with intrigue. So that more literary approach was proposed, supported by data and a critical perspective, but using a certain narrative texture (...).

The appeal of these types of books, besides the importance of first-hand information, is the journalist's extremely cold, almost surgical perspective, which separates the data for the reader to form an opinion. We don't want the narrative tone to be confused with a mocking agenda. (Forn, 1992, p. 4).

On the other hand, the journalistic book ceased to be conceived as a political book and became a book about politics⁷. In line with global transformations in political coverage, tending to privilege cynical frames or strategic analyses (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996; Neveu, 1993; Saïtta, 2008; Schudson, 1999), these books promoted a elucidative journalism that reduced politics to a game, in which participants developed strategies to gain power (Kaciaz, 2013). From this perspective, the political field is conceived as a space that closes in on itself and whose main objective is its own reproduction, in a pragmatic turn towards seeking power positions over grand ideologies. Thus, the added value of journalistic work began to reside in the ability to decipher the underlying strategies of politicians' actions and speeches, which escaped the public's view. The narrative and irreverent style towards power promoted by *Página|12*, which had impacted the press as a whole, formed the basis of the rhetoric and the critical and distanced position that journalists assumed towards politics. With the *Espejo* collection, the journalistic book distanced itself from the literary field as well as from the political field.

Among journalists who chose to build an investigative profile, the leitmotif shifted to revealing that opaque world of "secret plots". From an omniscient position, journalists narrated, based on information provided by their sources, as if they had been witnesses, the backstage scenes and reproduced the actors' dialogues using direct style. Alongside this, there was a shift in journalistic concerns, centered on political issues, towards a personalized perspective, oriented towards characters, through a reading that positioned itself above the political scene. Furthermore, investigative books contributed to establishing corruption as a public problem and mobilized new criteria for evaluating political activity centered on the morality of government actions (Pereyra, 2013).

3.1 Best-selling journalists or the configuration of a new elite

The formation of an opinion elite in the press also contributed to configuring the authority of journalist authors. The publishing house took advantage of the reputation of these bylines and, through its promotional policies, helped strengthen and expand it. Through marketing strategies that began to conceive authors as brands (Saferstein, 2021), the book launches included standardized actions for media visibility of both the work and the journalist authors. These actions were coordinated by the press departments of major publishers, marking a professionalizing process in the relationships between publishers and the media. These actions included delivering copies to newsrooms before the book's release, publishing previews in magazines, and particularly, author interviews in various newspapers and magazines, and participation in television programs. This was later complemented with paid advertising in public spaces, as well as in print and audiovisual media.

This novel articulation between publishers and media also reconfigured the press, especially supplements and magazines, which began dedicating space to these types of works. The cultural magazine *La Maga*, founded in 1990, had a section dedicated to books. In 1991, *Página12* inaugurated a cultural supplement called "Primer Plano", in honor of the *Primera Plana* weekly. Directed by Tomás Eloy Martínez, the supplement gave a significant boost to journalistic books and promoted their hierarchization through best-seller lists. Political magazines and society magazines also inaugurated sections presenting previews of the works or interviews with the authors. In this case, what Bourdieu (2008 [1996]) calls the "information circle" functioned as a great advertising machinery, where journalists promoted their colleagues. Particularly, those authors whose titles led the rankings enjoyed amplified and unusual media exposure for these types of figures.

The publisher reinforced this hierarchization criterion around sales success with the expansion of the Planeta Prize. Until then, like its Spanish version, it was an honorary award for an unpublished literary work, selected by a notable jury composed of critics and writers. To this event, they added awards for best-selling books, emulating the silver, gold, and platinum records of the recording industry. The established figure for the gold award was 100.000

copies, which became the symbolic number of the best-seller⁸.

In the journalistic field, this number also became a symbol of success and notoriety, operating as a criterion of professional excellence. Publishing a book with a major publisher implied a career and reputation rise compared to peers and media owners. Additionally, becoming a best-selling author represented a qualitative leap: the consolidation of their “own” mass audience of readers, who identified with them.

I always sold many books, but not like this. I was a guy who would sell 40.000, 50.000, 60.000 books (...). But there's something that happens after 100,000 books, you completely lose the market logic. I mean, a book after 100.000 is popular. The maid reads it, the lottery shop assistant reads it... who would never read you otherwise. People talk to you about the book on the street, that's very strange, compared to what happens in other media. (Lanata, 2015, personal interview).

The authors' prominence was also evident in the stylistic innovation of the *Espejo* collection with the addition of flaps. They presented a photo of the author, increasingly stylized, followed by a brief overview of their professional trajectory, which also became a reputational badge (see images 1 and 2).

Image 1

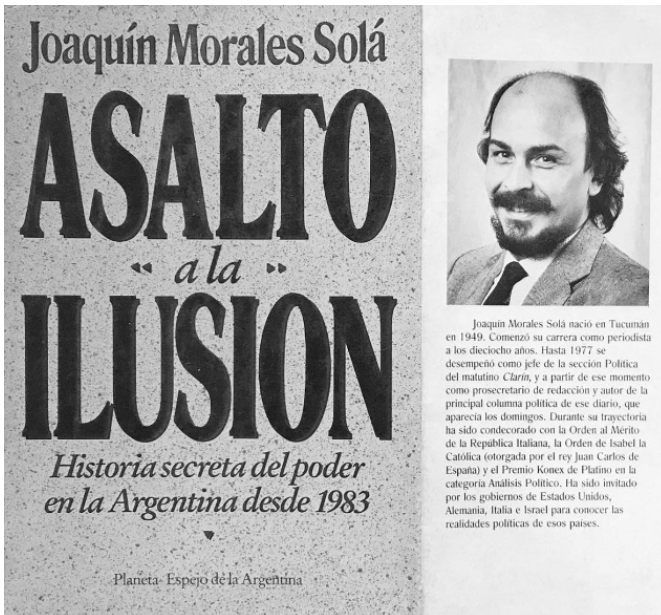


Image 2



The book launching the collection, *Asalto a la ilusión: Historia secreta del poder en Argentina desde 1983*, by Joaquín Morales Solá, marked the beginning of this formula of consecrating press bylines through best-sellers, and its success oriented the publisher towards seeking these types of works. Morales Solá had been Clarín's main columnist during the 1980s. In 1990, as the newspaper transitioned into a multimedia company, after his resignation, he projected to reorient his career by writing a book. The book was published by Planeta. Editor Sabanes recalls the criteria with which they valued the journalist's figure:

Morales Solá had been Clarín's opinion journalist for a long time. And due to Clarín's corporate reorganization issues, he left and was left in the middle of nowhere. And we got the information that he wanted to publish... We were looking for how to start the series of investigative journalism books. (...) And we reached a financial agreement, with an advance. So suddenly, Planeta, coming from nothing, from the dissolution of Sudamericana-Planeta... and we came out with *Asalto a la ilusión*, which was the first major impactful journalistic book, our baptism of fire. And with *Asalto...*, we started using these novel marketing campaigns for the book world. The communication was designed as a marketing plan. And, between its release and the summer, it sold 50.000 copies.

And what was special about it? You were telling me about the 'Malvinas' book, that its success was due to the theme, the narrative...

Well, there it was the name; we resorted to Joaquín Morales Solá's figure. And to a chronicle of the Alfonsinist period, the rise and fall of Alfonsín. The hopes placed in Alfonsín and what happened for his fall to take place". (Sabanés, 2019, personal interview, added italics).

As the quote shows, the byline had become a form of symbolic capital condensation. The opinion elite of the press in the 1980s now found in the publishing field the possibility of endorsing their names through the journalistic genre. To this was added a second element: addressing a "new" audience, measured by marketing studies and surveys, consisting of a sector identified with the middle class, informed and interested in politics but who, after the failure of the government of the Radical party and given the first moves of the Peronist government of the time, were increasingly showing signs of discontent. Oriented toward current affairs, the book addressed this audience who had seen their "illusion" "assaulted" by the main political forces and who, as Torre (2003) points out, during the decade contributed to forming an "independent" electorate detached from stable political affiliations. This is condensed in the book's back cover:

*Raúl Alfonsín's rise to power in 1983 materialized the illusions of the majority of Argentine society. People confidently expected the president to fulfill his attractive electoral promises. After the failure of the Austral Plan and the radical collapse in the 1989 elections, Carlos Menem's arrival generated similar expectations of change, progress, and well-being among the people. Only eighteen months after that moment, *society feels disappointed again*, not only by the political class but by all power sectors, who seem to live detached from a country overwhelmed by crisis and failure. (Morales Solá, 1990, added italics).*

Horacio Verbitsky's book *Robo para la corona: los frutos prohibidos de la corrupción*, published in 1991 in the *Espejo* collection, became the first major best-seller. According to figures from various journalistic notes, it sold 110.000 copies in its first two months, eventually reaching 250.000. From its success, it became a reference for the investigative books boom, creating a favorable context for its development. Thus, several journalistic

works increased their reach, and old productions were revalidated. Among them, Morales Solá's book gained new momentum, and *Malvinas...* was reissued with an expanded version.

They were Menem years, the issue of success and media and economic repercussions were very connected (...). We didn't have much control over what was happening; it was beyond us. For example, when Verbitsky's book came out, so many copies were printed and reprinted that booksellers would go in their own cars to pick up orders because losing half a day of sales might mean 100 copies not sold. There was a kind of fever. (Forn, 2020, personal interview).

In Verbitsky's professional trajectory, *Robo para la corona* marked a turning point in terms of notoriety. Until its publication, he was a recognized author in the cultural and political sphere by a relatively restricted, intellectual, and cultured audience. This recognition was linked to his journalistic books published by small left-wing intellectual publishers during the 1980s and his participation as a political columnist for *Página|12*. With the publication of *Robo para la corona*, Verbitsky reached the general public and his work set the agenda of the media. Besides the sales figures, what stands out is the multiplication of interviews in political and society magazines, whose number and duration in time far exceeded those planned by the publisher. The work also had significant public repercussions: besides references in print media, it was the focus of debates on political television programs and statements by the main political officials mentioned in the book, including the nation's president.

His arrival at the publishing house and the book's ideation and production were mediated by Forn's intervention. Since then, Verbitsky maintained a relationship with Planeta throughout the 1990s and became one of the main authors of the *Espejo* collection. With these publications, Verbitsky established himself within the journalistic field and in the public arena as the reference for investigative journalism. Faced with the increasing individualization of his name, he built a public profile attached to those spaces that retained greater cultural legitimacy: the world of print journalism and books. Thus, while *Página|12* represented his collective work platform, books became a personalized bet where his byline gained more autonomy.

If, as Bourdieu (2002 [1966]) asserts, the value of a work is primarily constituted by the intersection of multiple judgments, the recognition of the author within cultural and intellectual spaces is also observed here in the reviews the book received. In one of these critiques, it was defined as an “Argentine I accuse” (*La Nación*, 29/12/1991), in allusion to Emile Zola’s “J’accuse” about the Dreyfus affair, which became the consecration milestone of modern forms of intellectual intervention in the public scene (Coser, 1973). Moreover, while most journalistic books were usually reviewed by other journalists, in this case, intellectuals also joined the critique, “compelled” to take a position regarding the work.

In summary, considering the different processes presented by investigative journalism during these years, it is possible to affirm that Verbitsky oscillates between a professional and a political bet. With prior capital, the journalist enters the business logic promoted by major publishers with a greater margin of maneuver that allows him to maintain his style. He manages to combine in his figure two models that at the time appeared as opposites: he assumes the values of objectivity and independence typical of the critical and distanced journalism model while striving to frame his interventions within a political responsibility, which in this case translates into a denunciation of the political and social model upheld by the government of the day.

As can be observed in the analyzed cases, in terms of gender, male predominance set the standard for this opinion elite and the authors of journalistic books. Of the total books published by the *Espejo* collection, 83% (66) correspond to male journalists and only 17% (13) to female journalists. However, some of the best-sellers of those years were written by women, indicating a more open profile to feminization in the publishing market than in the press world. For instance, political opinion columns in reference newspapers like Clarín and La Nación remained in the hands of male journalists until the 2000s, despite the incipient feminization of the political section (Baldoni, 2024). In this sense, the book allowed the rise to notoriety of some women in political journalism, which the reference press had denied.

4 Cycle closure: the saturation of the investigative genre

As investigative and denunciation journalism books gained momentum, other major publishers included them in their catalogs. Particularly, those highly successful titles, like *Robo para la corona*, presented “revelations” that, under the scoop format, were reproduced and generated repercussions in various media. Thus, it is possible to argue that the book became a sort of last bastion of the written press in the face of competition from audiovisual media in shaping the agenda of the media.

However, several factors contributed to a relative decline or a reconversion of the genre towards the end of the decade. As Pereyra (2013) points out, throughout the 1990s, investigative journalism expanded from newspapers to radio and television, becoming a continuous production of denunciations. With this appropriation and trivialization by audiovisual media, books lost their impact capacity, and the genre began to show signs of saturation.

Moreover, facing increased competition and the international economic impact of the so-called “Tequila effect” from the Mexican crisis of 1995, major publishing groups deepened commercial logics to increase profitability. In the case of Planeta, editors from the parent company applied financial cuts, reconfigured work teams, and encouraged the increase of best-seller publications. The *Espejo* collection was affected by the decline in book quality, prioritizing “current affairs” works over “in-depth” ones, and by the dissolution of part of the editorial team.

Finally, the increasing legitimacy of journalists’ voices in the public space coincided with growing distrust towards political actors, who began to be perceived as a caste or class separate from society. Furthermore, between the mid and late 1990s, the neoliberal-oriented accumulation model and the convertibility monetary policy showed signs of exhaustion, leading to a deep economic and social crisis. Along with this, the discrediting of the political leadership and their inability to oppose corporate business and financial interests opened a scenario of political uncertainty (Castellani & Pucciarelli, 2014). The power gained by journalists in terms of public authority directed them towards developing intellectual functions that condensed into the proliferation of opinion journalism. In this context, they oriented their productions towards other genres. Besides biographical books on political figures, they

turned to essay and historical revisionism traditions (Semán, 2006) as a way to offer interpretative keys to the increasingly pressing crisis the country was facing.

5 Conclusions

The development of journalistic books during the 1990s evidenced a series of reconfigurations both in publishing processes and in the changing logic of the relationships between the journalistic field, the cultural field, and the political field. Throughout the period, first, journalistic books underwent a process of increasing emancipation from the literary field, becoming a genre in its own right. Second, the journalistic genre assumed a distanced position regarding politics. Related to these processes, various personalized forms of public intervention by journalists were delineated, while the meanings attributed to publication and authorship were redefined.

In small and medium-sized publishers, during the 1980s, book publication had been conceived as an extension of the profession and a political-intellectual bet for press bylines (Baldoni, 2022). In contrast, during the 1990s, with the involvement of major publishing houses, the genre's commercialization widened the entrance to the publishing field, allowing access to journalists who did not necessarily have literary credentials. Furthermore, with the boom and best-sellerization of investigative and denunciation books, journalists became brand authors and reached mass audiences. Success in the book world thus became a fruitful tool for personalizing and autonomizing from press organizations, contributing to the configuration of new professional ascent models. This did not imply the loss of prestige and power of reference press, but journalists who gained personal notoriety became a voice that complemented or competed with those institutions. In this sense, the roles and rhetoric they mobilized helped to reconfigure the contours of the journalistic field as a whole.

Indeed, with the transition from political book to book about politics, journalists legitimized their interventions, not in the treatment of grand public matters, but in the ideal of critical journalism whose value lay, according to this view,

in its ability to unveil the “hidden plots” of power. Journalists mobilized personalized and moralizing readings of politics and its logics of connivance with economic powers, through which they addressed while shaping, that sector of the public interested in politics but increasingly disenchanted with traditional representative institutions. They thus helped legitimize a model of critical journalism distanced from politics, which, even in line with international processes, came to mobilize a cynical rhetoric about politics.

Despite the genre of investigation and denunciation losing the interest of the reading public towards the end of the 1990s, this did not mean the decline of journalistic books. Turning to other genres, such as historical or current affairs essays, journalists managed to maintain the place they had conquered in the political book segment after the retreat of classical intellectual figures. With different profiles, closer to the intellectual or commercial pole, depending on the case, they established themselves as public figures who tended to position themselves above political disputes and to occupy the role of power watchdogs.

NOTES

- 1 This phenomenon did not only apply to Argentina; a similar process took place in other countries, such as Brazil and France, among others. See Catalão, 2010; Charbit & Olivera (2008); Bastin & Ringoot (2014); Leroux, Le Bart & Ringoot (2014); Neveu (1992); Olivera (2002).
- 2 Carried out in collaboration with Wenceslao Gómez Rodríguez and Gabriel Monteleone in the context of the collective research project coordinated by Micaela Baldoni.
- 3 We continue here the categorization that Bonacci makes of “intellectual publishers”, which are distinguished from big publishing companies and academic publishing houses in terms of their close ties with intellectual fractions and their will to intervene in the political debate through their main collections.
- 4 *Espejo* was complemented by the launching of a collection of new Argentine narrative, Biblioteca del Sur, and one of historical essays,

Mujeres argentinas. Thus, Planeta succeeded in setting aside the three main publishing houses of the time, Sudamericana, Emecé and Vergara y Vergara, and becoming the leader of the segment by the end of the decade (Botto, 2006: 212).

- 5 This happened after the incorporation as co-director of the collection of Alejandro Horowicz, who had worked as journalist for political-cultural magazines of the 60s and 70s as a young man and had oriented his career towards academic activity in the Sociology School of the University of Buenos Aires.
- 6 With this categories, editors marked the difference between “current affairs” books, which deal with a current event from a wide point of view, from In-depth books” which deal with more general issues and to which the author devotes more many years of work. About these differences, see Saferstein (2016).
- 7 We take this concept from Leroux, Le Bart y Ringoot (2014).
- 8 Towards the beginnings of the 1990s, according to publishers, a best seller was a book that sold 50,000 copies. As books which sold above that appeared, the mark of 100,000 copies was set as a symbol of mass sales, even though just a few non-fiction books reached this mark.

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