



## The possibility of the rural: a new journalism as a socioecological practice in Spain

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**Abstract:** *In Spain, rurality has been narrated in a frame of endemic decline due to complex social factors (such as the demographic challenge) and economic factors (such as the crisis of the primary sector). Nevertheless, this frame has found an alternative narrative that I have named the resituated rural. This new discourse is being significantly generated in the realms of culture (literature, cinema, museums) and the media (local, specialized journalism, social networks). These cultural spheres are triggering new insights into rural opportunities and challenges. The resituated rural opens innovative narrative flows, differing from the stereotyped and victimized accounts of rurality. In the resituated story, countryside dwellers are empowered in what I identify as being an agentic rural. In this contribution I illustrate these concepts—previously discussed—with two cases that exemplify what I call the new journalism of the resituated rural.*

*To do so, I analyze two printed magazines: Salvaje and Arrels. I apply a qualitative text analysis, in-depth reading of materials, and hold two short interviews with their editors-in-chief. The results permit to identify six of the common elements of this new journalism as a socioecological practice: small productive structures; slow-paced journalism; a sociocultural approach to rural realities; pragmatic grounds to knowledge generation; a focus on people; a diaphanous and minimalistic layout with generous images and blank spaces that provide an airiness for reflective reading. The genres they produce—reports, portraits and essays are important—, the tone of the articles—sensitive to ecology, memory, heritage, community—, the format and physical layout—both are printed on paper—, give the reader an experience that is far from the hectic, fast, and saturated style of current cultural consumption. This is not traditional (pre-resituated) agri-food journalism, nor the regular mainstream coverage of the primary sector. I argue that, despite this new journalism of the resituated rural participating in what in the field of ecology or the environment other authors have identified as transformative journalism, these alternative, small-scale magazines go beyond this label. Their production characteristics, the construction of a community of readers supporting their notions, and the abovementioned formats, styles or design, distinguish these projects from the mainstream*

*“green” or environmental journalism that have a transformative purpose. In this paper, I argue that this is a story that could be understood as a socioecological journalistic practice that imagines a “possibility of the rural”, but is highly conscious of the difficulties and the toughness of living and working in the countryside. Hence they overcome the discourse of the rural idyll. This possibility is grounded in both a story on the restoring rural life, and the understanding of journalism as the opportunity to make visible a place (rural and physical but also a symbolic constructed site) that has little space in the mainstream media stories.*

**Keywords:** *Journalism, resituated rural, rural agency, socioecological storytelling, communication*

## 1 Introduction

In Spain, we are faced with a strong and hegemonic discourse about the rural attached to decay and crisis. Such narrative is deeply rooted in cultural and social practices, from literature to film, from popular culture to television. Some of the labels that we recognize as referring to these narratives are *la España profunda* (deepest [Spain]), *negra* (black [Spain]) or, more recently, *vacía* (empty [Spain]). The latter was successfully introduced by the remarkable essay by Sergio del Molino (2016), but rapidly mutated to a more politicized version of *vaciada* (emptied), an expression implicitly claiming that some agent was involved in the depopulation and impoverishment of the countryside. It was since the late 2010s that I annotated the presence of a new discourse that started to renovate social accounts of the rural (Castelló, 2023a, 2023c). I named this the *resituated rural*, a narrative movement that implies a renewed conceptual approach to agriculture, land, and animals. It implies a discursive relocation of rurality beyond the victimization, the stereotyping, and the advocacy for social justice, environmental aware and gender perspectives. One of its characteristics is the empowering of rural communities in a narrative choice that gives greater capacity to the locals, the dwellers of small villages, to transform their realities and to work and live in the rural. I named this storytelling choice the *agentic rural* (Castelló, 2023b), and it is a way of narrating in which individuals are conscious subjects that decide to live and develop in their places.

My aim here is to explore the elements of the *resituated rural* in two relevant publications, as they are the magazines *Salvaje* and *Arrels*. *Salvaje* has received several awards and recognitions, including being a finalist in the European Press Prize (2021). The director is Guillermo López, and the editor-in-chief is Annabel Roda. *Arrels* is a publication that belongs to the group Abacus, which is a cultural cooperative established in Barcelona. The magazine is published in

Catalan and is part of a broader project, including an on-line farmers' market<sup>2</sup>. The main editor is Anna Llacher and the director of the magazine is Josep Sucarrats.

To achieve the goal, I conducted a qualitative textual analysis focusing on the main topics and the coverage of the magazines, specialized in the rural life, a thorough reading of a corpus of items and a reflection on their design. For the qualitative textual analysis, I selected five issues per magazine (issues 2, 7, 8, 13 and 18 for *Salvaje* and 1, 2, 4, 7 and 11 for *Arrels*) and analyzed the layout, the genre of the articles and their topics and conducted a close reading of the pieces. Finally, I resort to two short interviews with their principal editors, Annabel Roda and Josep Sucarrats. They were closed questionnaires done online on February 2024.

This journalism *partially* practices what other authors have identified as *transformative journalism*, which promotes social transformation that fosters sustainability (Brüggemann et al., 2022). However, I stress the use of *partially* because, these small media projects are different from those in bigger companies that moved towards "sustainable journalism" or "green journalism". Differing completely from corporate journalism's "green" models, these smaller projects, which are grounded in subscription and small-scale promoters and advertisers, are an example of a journalistic practice that, I argue, is a socioecological practice.

## 2 A new rural

The socioecological practice of journalism demands going beyond the coverage of topics like eco-agriculture, "green" energies and biodiversity. It takes a critical approach, considering the rural as a value (symbolic and material) under great pressure. In this sense, journalism storytelling is a productive way to generate new conceptions and give voice to those silenced by the mainstream media. This journalism proposes alternative means of production and consumption that challenge the imagination of ultracapitalism to generate a new, affirmative imaginary of the relations between culture, nature and society. Overall, *socioecological journalism practice* is rooted in a new postgrowth narrative (Jackson, 2022). It is, moreover, slow journalism (Le Masurier, 2015), in the sense of productive pace and reflective tone; therefore, the socioecological is not just a matter of the topics covered but also the way these stories are produced. In the following sections I will develop on how *Salvaje* and *Arrels* approach this challenge. The analysis will lead to a short discussion of the elements that characterizes socioecological journalism practice.

## 2.1 *Salvaje*: a counter-hegemonic story

*Salvaje* offers around 11-12 items per issue. Since it is a magazine with few pages dedicated to advertising, it is worth noting the average number of pages that the magazine devotes to each item (between 7.8 and 9.1). It is a remarkable effort and a sign of how the magazine gives space to quality pieces. The longest piece that we found in the analyzed corpus was a long photo report on the making of hand-crafted street decorations (Fernández Ramos and Rua, 2022), that filled 23 pages of pictures and text. One of the salient elements of the publication is the broad range of genres that it cultivates. In the corpus we identified a predominance of reporting (23 items) and essay (10), but also other creative pieces on photo-essay or photo reporting (6), people portraits (3), and literature (3). We are dealing with a cultural magazine in which rural issues are the background on which to expose a diverse range of topics. In our analysis, the category “Life” was predominant. These pieces cover lifestyle stories in the countryside, sometimes under the epigraph “De pueblo” (village life). Although we find topics that are expected in this sort of publications, like “Agriculture”, “Environment”, “Nature”, “Animals”, or “Species”, we also find pieces devoted to “Professions”, “Mythology”, “Astronomy”, “Art” or “Memory”.

In the interview, Annabel Roda mentioned an accurate definition of her magazine’s conception of the rural: “Rurality, for us, encompasses all those stories that occur on the margins of the great poles of power which are located in large cities”. The concept of “periphery” goes beyond the physical here and refers also to the symbolic and the sociocultural. In this sense, Roda states that “rurality is opposite to the *discourse of progress*” [our emphasis]. The editorial criteria are then consistent with searching for “other ways of living and being in the world”. Therefore, the journal explores “the relationship between humans and nature”. Consistently, it seeks stories “far from clichés” and it is especially open to “small stories”, its scope is “from small to big”. This focus on pragmatism, on experience, on materiality, is highly relevant for the magazine. For this to succeed, it is in direct contact with the rural, it is not a journalism produced from the city, or from the office. Although the magazine shows many positive aspects of rural life, Roda clarified that in the countryside there are many “tough elements”: “We are not looking to idealize or romanticize rurality, but to show the many facets of each village, county or province”.

Analyzing the issues in the corpus we see that advertising is scarce although some sponsored items do appear—that were included in the count because they are two reports and one piece about one bird species. The magazine is subscription only and is issued only in hard copy. Roda explained that they take care of the reading experience of their subscribers: “We get our readers to

slow down their day-to-day". Mentioning its subscribers, Roda talked about a "community"; it is not just a commercial relationship, their work is not a product, it is a shared forum.

The magazine has a literary style and is carefully edited. The design is diaphanous, with a great prominence of images. In the corpus analyzed, the photo-essay "Lumens" is remarkable: it offers fifteen pages of photography and a reflection by the author about silence, plants and light (Hernández, 2020). These are not only innovative contents but also connect material beings and reflect on human perception. Roda remarked the "splendid" work of their Art Director. This fanzine-like design offers many moments for reader reflection (for example, with single pictures or quotations on a page, or blank spaces throughout the magazine). Overall, *Salvaje* offers a counter-hegemonic story on the rural adopting a soft style and an easygoing design.

## 2.2 *Arrels*: rooted people and community-making

*Arrels* was launched in 2020 by the cultural cooperative Som, which in 2021 merged with the educational cooperative Abacus, that markets educational material and books. Although this structure is bigger than in the case of *Salvaje*, *Arrels* is also produced by a limited team of journalists and a network of collaborators. The issues have around two-hundred pages, of which between 140 and 160 are of journalistic content. The rest are dedicated to advertising or project self-promotional information. The average item length is between 4.3 and 6.3 pages, with around 31-23 items per issue. Therefore, we are dealing with a different publication in many aspects, but as I explain, one that shares quite a similar journalistic ecosophy.

Another particularity is language: *Arrels* is published in Catalan. It is relevant to note that the socioecological journalistic projects pay attention to linguistic pluralism and are aware of respecting cultural diversity. *Arrels* means "roots" and the subtitle of the magazine is "el món que torna" (the world that (re)turns). However, we are not facing a melancholic view of a rural past, or a lost world; the tone is positive. There is a substantial content dealing with people who live successfully in the countryside, how they farm their orchards, how they manage their small business, how they make a life in the mountains.

Overall, this is a people-oriented project with concern for non-human agents (animals, material and immaterial elements, geology and landscapes, etc.). Each issue is devoted to one topic. The five in the corpus were "The forest", "Orchards", "Mountains", "Night", and "Fire". Some interesting examples are the report "El país de les fagedes" (The country of beech trees), a piece about trees, fungi, birds and how the place historically evolved (Vilaseca and Rodríguez,

2020); or “El pagès a la Lluna” (The peasant on the Moon), exploring biodynamic agriculture and the influence of the Moon explained by a small farmer (Ripoll and Vendrell, 2022).

When inquiring about journalistic genres, we note that people portraits (38) are dominant, even more than reporting (35). There is a thin, interpretative boundary between the two genres, because portraits involve aspects that are close to reporting (in some cases they are reports focusing on people, their job, their way of life). Consistently, I labelled them “portrait” when the piece was clearly focused on people. This is one of the main features of *Arrels*: this magazine pays a great deal of attention to inhabitants developing projects in the rural. The publication has a section entitled “Arrelats” (Rooted) that focuses on how people make a living, and many other reports are also devoted to explaining people’s projects and professions. Among the topics, the most salient are “Culture”, “Professions”, and “Life”. It should be noted that here, “Culture” includes expressions of folklore, festivities or traditions, meanwhile “Life” would be closer to an ethnography of peoples and communities than to the English notion of lifestyle. In this regard it is important to understand the sense of community in this project. This applies not only to the people living and working in the Catalan countryside, but we find reports or interviews explaining experiences in South America, Africa or Asia. Similarly to *Salvaje*, but with a different style, layout design is diaphanous and minimalistic. They give great care to the output and pay attention to detail.

Josep Sucarrats, director of the journal, remarked in the interview that the magazine’s conception of the notion of the rural is a “diverse space where non-urban social, economic and cultural alternatives develop because the urban environment does not favor them, or because cities directly expel them”. This is a definition that we could even identify as somehow Lefebvrian in the sense that the rural is more than a physical place and becomes the mixture of the material and the symbolic place (where these alternatives take place). The journalist noted that *Arrels* is quite centered on “portraits”, “personal stories”, and the “bond that people’s projects generate”. This style and focus are different from other “urban-centric” media. Interestingly, the team reflected on what Sucarrats named “solution journalism” (*periodisme de solucions*). The journalist noted that in the rural there are “communitarian solutions” or “small-scale economic” projects. The idealization is seen as “a risk” of this sort of journalism, but Sucarrats was aware that many of the magazine protagonists are living close to many people who saw their projects fail. *Arrels* has some on-line pages and activities, and a greater presence on the Internet than *Salvaje*. Being in Catalan (a smaller reader community), they rather talk about “members” (*socis*). They try to combine advertising and membership, but Sucarrats stated that they are also open to sponsored content that will not clash with the magazine’s

editorial line. He ended remarking that among its future goals they want to grow their community and to strength alliances with organizations and enterprises that will engage with its quality standards.

### 3 Conclusions

This paper is too short to offer a more in-depth comparison of the case studies analyzed and a grounded reflection of journalism as a socioecological practice. However, I have identified some elements that I summarize below:

- *Core production structures are small*, and they work by activating a network of collaborators and experts. Moreover, they are not corporation oriented; their aim is to cover costs and generate a sustainable product, adding more than economic value.
- They accurately edit the content and produce what is considered an *expression of slow journalism*. The result is an in-depth coverage of each topic which deserves space and time to be delivered.
- The main topics are not about agriculture or farming, as might be expected for a magazine that focuses on the rural; but they have a *sociocultural approach*. The reader experience is the experience of someone who is reading about culture and society.
- There is a consciousness of material and immaterial agents. The elements and landscapes play a role in the stories, in the experience. It is a *pragmatic, experiential storytelling of the rural*.
- There is a *focus on the people* living in the rural and their projects; it is a story about the possibility of the rural. Sometimes there is an ethnographic tone, also in journalistic techniques, in the sense of understanding and giving voice to people and communities.
- *Layout is simple, diaphanous, minimalistic*. This helps for a reflective tone, distancing this alternative media product from the hectic, saturated current digital or audiovisual content.

This journalism has a social and ecological dimension that grounds what I defined as the *resituated rural* (Castelló, 2023a): socioecological narratives (documentary, journalism, cinema, literature) that overcomes the limitations of harmful imaginaries of the unsustainable growth fantasy applied to rural life and work. They are narratives of the possibility of the rural in what Anna Tsing (2015) identified as the ruins of capitalism.

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## 5 Methodological Appendix

This paper focuses on a journalistic case study of two quality magazines on rural issues: *Salvaje* and *Arrels*. I conducted an analysis on the main topics of the journal using a qualitative textual analysis. I did a close reading of a corpus of items (10 issues containing 194 pieces). In parallel, I conducted two short qualitative interviews with the editor-in-chief of each magazine. It is a qualitative approach to test practical applications of the concept of the *resituated rural*—that has been previously proposed and discussed (Castelló, 2023a, 2023c)—and to identify how journalism can become a socioecological practice.

## 6 Biographical note

Enric Castelló is professor of Journalism and Media Analysis in the Department of Communication Studies at Universitat Rovira i Virgili (Tarragona). He has been a guest researcher at Glasgow Caledonian University and Loughborough University. He currently specializes in the study of rural imaginaries, media and culture. He is the principal investigator of the project Ruralim: <https://ruralim.wordpress.com>

## Notes

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2. <https://www.mercatarrels.cat/>, last access 3 Feb 2024.