

Studies in Big Data 140

María-Cruz Negreira-Rey  
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# Blurring Boundaries of Journalism in Digital Media

New Actors, Models and Practices

 Springer

# **Studies in Big Data**

Volume 140

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Editors

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# An Introduction to the Study of Journalism and Its Boundaries



María-Cruz Negreira-Rey , Jorge Vázquez-Herrero ,  
José Sixto-García , and Xosé López-García 

**Abstract** We introduce the book's scope, based on the concept of the blurring boundaries of journalism. The chapters are presented following the structure of the book. The contributions offer an overview of the limits that define journalism—its actors, models and practices—in today's hybrid communication system. Their contributions are framed in the discussion of the principles of journalism, the strategies and models for sustainability in the digital environment, the relationship with old and new actors, the evolution of formats and narratives in digital journalism, the adaptation to mobile and social platforms for news use, and the challenge for journalism posed by artificial intelligence.

**Keywords** Journalistic boundaries · Journalism · Digital journalism · Digital media

## 1 Background

The metamorphic process that journalism has undergone in the last two decades (Vázquez-Herrero et al. 2020) cannot leave anyone indifferent, least of all the researchers in the field of communication. The different stages of digitalization, the impact of high technology, the emergence of new actors that feed technologically mediated communication, the rise of social networks, the platforming of society, the

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growth of new channels and formats, as well as changes in usage and news consumption have challenged the fundamental journalistic precepts, routines and practices, questioning many of its norms.

The last twenty years have marked a turning point in the development of journalism, in its practice and in the research conducted from the field of communication and from other scientific areas. Journalism, which has enjoyed a rich and relatively stable history of professionalization, with a wide variety of scholars from different disciplines theorizing that history (Deuze and Witschge 2018), now exists in a social scenario that has radically changed, along with the network society and the evolution of global geopolitics. The changes in digital journalism—which involve much more than technology (Zelizer 2019)—have fueled the role of new entrants into the field and have required legacy media journalists and digital natives in dominant positions to reconsider their definition of journalism, as well as their practices (Perreault and Ferrucci 2020).

The emergence of new actors—bloggers, influencers, web developers, amateur journalists, news app designers, active audiences—and their relationship with journalism has left no one indifferent in the field of communication and journalism studies. The limits, the boundaries, the central actors in the field, and the peripheral actors have brought back into focus some of the usual debates in journalism. The theorizations and definitions of the past are subject to revision because of renewed difficulties in drawing clear boundaries between what is journalism and what is not. The journalistic field sees opportunities for digital journalism and for maintaining a central role in the democratic and pluralistic societies of the future, but also many threats. Disinformation, which has become a key problem for contemporary democratic societies, and which must be fought with media literacy (Sádaba and Salaverría 2023), and native advertising, which raises ethical concerns due to its misleading dimension for the audience (Beckert 2022), have become two of the major risks.

The frequency and depth of changes in journalism, together with poor practices, have contributed to the erosion of trust and credibility of journalistic products. The importance of having reliable information in such a difficult context as the COVID-19 pandemic has drawn attention to the consequences for citizens' trust in the media (Adam et al. 2023). In this context, discussions have multiplied on the need to establish sustainable models for quality journalism and to establish mechanisms to support its role in the democratic and pluralistic societies of the third millennium. Trust and honesty, fundamental values of journalism, have once again shown their importance and the relevance of the media nurturing these values and of citizens trusting the news (Myllylahti and Treadwell 2022). This restoration of trust demands more transparency from the media and journalists, even if, on some occasions, this transparency reduces the perceived quality of the brand (Prochazka and Obermaier 2022).

In this changing and transformational context in society and in the field of communication, with innovation—a diverse and thriving field (García-Avilés 2021)—in journalism as one of the driving forces of these transformations, the conceptualization of the field's limits and theorization are essential to respond to the challenges. The existence of a large group of researchers who analyze the different perspectives at the international level, with relevant projects and suggestive results, offers a certain

confidence in the capacity to offer answers to successfully face the most immediate challenges. But the challenge is there, and we know we need scientific evidence for the theorization of a journalism in transformation. All steps forward in this direction will be very encouraging.

## 2 Journalism and Its Blurring Boundaries

Blurring boundaries have been used for some years now to explain journalism in change in the digital age (see Banjac and Hanusch 2022; Carlson and Lewis 2015; Koch et al. 2023; Lewis 2012; Maares and Hanusch 2020; Meier 2018; Nørgaard Kristensen and From 2012; Scott et al. 2019). In the state of flux in which journalism finds itself (Spyridou et al. 2013) under scrutiny, with progressive drops in citizens' trust in the media (Newman et al. 2023), observing the evolution of journalism's boundaries helps to understand the phenomena and to anticipate challenges and opportunities. Indeed, although journalism may be in a moment of crisis (Pickard 2020), the interest in its evolution and, specifically, concerns about what happens at its boundaries indicates that it is still relevant (Loosen 2015). Such boundaries are not static, and their evolution is affected in the multiple perspectives that shape journalism studies, so it is relevant to consider how the most recent changes influence the definition of those boundaries.

When it will be 30 years since the first digital media outlet, the prominence of digital-native media (Salaverría and Martínez-Costa 2021) and a determining influence of platforms (Nieborg and Poell 2018) are confirmed. Technology, in its widest sense, has provided journalism with new ways of producing, distributing and receiving information; innovation in formats and narratives has become increasingly common and it does not cease in the search for better solutions to explain what is happening in a complex world. We thus arrive at a 'Total Journalism' (Vázquez-Herrero et al. 2022) that deploys all available techniques, from the essential elements of journalism to the most advanced technologies, including artificial intelligence and automation, 5G, blockchain, immersive technologies, or Web3.

Journalism has also been affected by changes in social context. Informational needs have driven modalities such as fact-checking (García-Marín 2020) in a scenario of global disinformation. The emergence of new peripheral actors (Tandoc 2019), influencers, alternative media and counter-media demand the redefinition of the boundaries of journalism. At the same time, it requires a redefinition of the role of journalism and the journalist in our society.

Along with the widespread globalization of our time, digital development fosters proximity media and enhances the foundations of journalism in local and hyperlocal communities (Gulyas and Baines 2020). Another changing and challenging aspect is the shift towards the audience (Swart et al. 2022), with renewed conceptions of who the audience is, the promotion of communities and initiatives that involve the public in the discussion and decision making; these are sometimes linked to new business

models, with memberships and subscriptions being increasingly implemented by major newspapers.

The blurred boundaries of journalism include innovative and disruptive proposals. In this area of exchange and confluence with other fields and disciplines, both threats and opportunities for the future can emerge. Therefore, in a global post-pandemic context, we consider it necessary to address in this book the different perspectives emerging in the redefinition of the boundaries of journalism.

## ***2.1 Principles of Journalism Under Discussion***

Today's journalism is developing in a hybrid communication ecosystem in which the boundaries of journalism are necessarily being redefined. The authors López-García and Gutiérrez-Caneda (2023) argue that the response cannot be characterized by indifference to the consequences of the profound transformations that have taken place. They point out that it is necessary to address the open challenges, among which stand out the search for sustainability, the influence of hi-tech and ephemeral journalism, or the actors that impact the journalistic field and its periphery with their actions on the network.

As a profession in crisis, journalism faces the challenge of profitability, loss of quality, and connection with increasingly fragmented audiences in a context in which information consumption through social media leads to immediacy, superficiality and decontextualization (Larrondo Ureta et al. 2023). The authors explain how the theorization, practice and research of the journalistic profession are moving towards technological and epistemological paths. Beyond the technological innovation in the hybrid news media system, journalism continues to struggle for its significance and social function, although its boundaries are becoming increasingly blurred.

Solito and Sorrentino (2023) also argue that journalism is more necessary than ever. Journalism continues to maintain its identity, even if its processes are transformed and a greater number and type of actors are involved in its interweaving of influences. In the digital context, journalism and its functions are being redefined, but its mission and influence remain the same.

## ***2.2 Strategies for Sustainability in the Digital Environment***

While the fundamental principles of journalism and its role in society are being discussed, new media models are emerging or becoming normalized in the current digital context. Authors Vara-Miguel and Sánchez-Blanco (2023) address how digital innovation is also modifying the traditional business models of news organizations. They explore the new sources of revenue and business models implemented by digital media companies. They also analyze the threats and challenges that new sources of financing such as payment for content, e-commerce or native advertising involve for



the media industry, the development of the social role that journalism should play in modern democracies, and access to news content.

The boundaries of journalism are also redefined in relation to local media, exploring the limits of geographical boundaries and the relationship of news media and journalists with the citizenry. Negreira-Rey and colleagues (2023) analyze the conceptualization and blurring boundaries in the study of hyperlocal media in Spain and the Netherlands, also proposing elements that improve the methodology for research on hyperlocal media. They diagnose a significant growth of hyperlocal news outlets with political and cultural factors determining the models in both countries. However, these authors point out the lack of economic resources for the development of viable journalistic projects.

The process of platformization also imposes new challenges for the media and the maintenance of their independence. Pöyhtäry and Sirkkunen (2023) study the Finnish media context based on interviews with chief editors and media experts. The authors expose the strategies through which the organizations defend the boundaries of the news media business, in a country with a high level of public trust in the media. They emphasize that professional values are based on ethics and a strong system of self-regulation. Likewise, representatives and experts maintain a positive view on the ability of news media to defend their boundaries and survive in the digital environment.

### ***2.3 Tensions Between Old and New Actors in Journalism***

At the borders of journalism there are also the so-called pseudo-media, which Palau-Sampio (2023) analyzes based on a mixed-methods study. In this analysis, the author assesses whether pseudo-media adopt the six journalistic role performances of traditional media and finds that they mainly imitate them and their watchdog role. Furthermore, she warns that most of the pseudo-media items analyzed show polarization and clickbait traits, omitting essential journalism ethics.

The relationship between political power, the citizenry and the news media has also been transformed in the digital environment. Casero-Ripollés and Ribeiro (2023) present a study in which they analyze how social media have changed the role and influence of citizens in the public debate. The authors focus on the limits of political journalism through social network analysis over a big data sample of tweets related to negotiations for the formation of the Government of Spain. They argue that the influence of journalists and politicians is greater than that of citizens. Overall, the fact that citizens can become connective influencers and condition the digital political conversation ends up having effects on political journalism.

Canavilhas and colleagues (2023) provide a contemporary approach to the study of the relationship between journalism, politics and risk communication. They do so by reviewing how research on political journalism has evolved and the issues that set the agenda in the current context, determined by the political discussion in the digital public sphere and the blurred boundaries between journalistic and political actors.

The authors also revise the political positioning of the main Spanish and Portuguese media and the legal framework for press freedom and the exercise of the journalistic profession. Finally, they address the role of political and journalistic actors in risk communication based on the case of radon gas.

## ***2.4 Evolving Formats and Narratives in Digital Journalism***

The development of digital media and journalism has made it possible to exploit the dimensions of hypertextuality, multimodality and interactivity in the production and dissemination of journalistic content. After almost three decades of digital journalism, Vázquez-Herrero and Van der Nat (2023) study how innovations in digital storytelling techniques have introduced new journalistic and audience practices. The authors analyze the production and reception of interactive and immersive digital storytelling and present several significant cases that blur and redefine the boundaries of journalism from the perspective of design, production, or audiences, opening several debates for reflection. Lovato and colleagues (2023) also study interactive narratives, focusing on nonfiction products in Latin America. Through numerous relevant projects from this region, the authors highlight journalistic and documentary production that challenges classic narrative models and takes advantage of the potential of the digital ecosystem.

Innovation in journalistic narrative through new formats is addressed by García-Ortega and García-Avilés (2023), who study the ephemeral content of Instagram Stories, viral journalism on TikTok and the adaptation of comics for reportage. The application of these formats and the adaptation to the language and logic of social platforms impacts professionals and journalistic practices, challenging the boundaries of traditional journalism. New possibilities are opened up for news coverage, there is a greater hybridization between information, entertainment and fiction storytelling techniques, and narratives with a greater emotional impact on the audience are exploited.

## ***2.5 Adaptation to Mobile and Social Platforms for News Use***

The evolution of digital journalism has been marked by the adaptation of media and journalists to new platforms and formats of content consumption, necessary to make their news content accessible to audiences. One of the major transformations, which is still ongoing, is the adaptation to mobile technology and devices, which Silva-Rodríguez and colleagues (2023) study. The authors review the evolution of mobile journalism, which has moved in step with technological advances, and which has opened up new possibilities for the production, distribution and consumption of news content, also giving rise to new professional profiles. Mobile journalism expands the borders of journalism by integrating with traditional media, building new spaces and

forms of participation with the audience, and challenging innovation in the face of new devices and platforms.

Together with the content consumption on mobile devices, in recent years we have also witnessed the rise of audio formats, which Martínez-Graña and colleagues (2023) study. The authors analyze the daily podcast as a new format that challenges the routines of traditional journalistic media and allows for innovation in language and journalistic narrative. Based on the analysis of the daily podcasts of five leading news media in Spain, both legacy and digital natives, the authors identify characteristic features in their subject matter, structure and language. They find common characteristics in deep-dive podcasts and newscasts. Daily podcasts bring editorial prestige and a new way to reach audiences, especially younger ones. However, they raise doubts about the hybridization of informative and editorial or opinion content identified in the analyzed pieces.

The adaptive evolution of journalism to different types of media has given rise to successive waves of journalism—from print, broadcast and digital to social media journalism—, which are studied by Hendrickx (2023). The author analyzes each of these phases, discussing the main features from four distinguished actors: media practitioners, media users, media regulators, and media researchers. A fourth wave begins to be visible, with an effect on how news is produced, disseminated and consumed. Media strategies try to achieve brand awareness on the new channels and follow the trends set by the audience in terms of information consumption, especially among the youngest, to the point of challenging some of the boundaries of journalism when they land on platforms where entertainment predominates, for example.

Regarding social media as platforms for the diffusion and consumption of news content, Zago (2023) analyzes the phases of news recirculation in the digital environment and social media, as well as their implications for journalism. Digital platforms expand the channels of dissemination and interaction with news, which affects its promotion, debate and interpretations, raising awareness of news events, creating and shaping news events. This recirculation expands the boundaries of journalism and poses challenges for media and professionals, such as the control over the spread of their own content and its uncontrolled use by consumers, which can have disinformative effects.

## ***2.6 Tackling the Challenge of Artificial Intelligence in Journalism***

In recent years, automation has entered newsrooms and begun to change journalistic routines, raising questions about the need and role of journalists and opening ethical debates. Recently, artificial intelligence has become a major part of the debate on journalism and its limits. Pérez-Seijo and colleagues (2023) study automation, robotization and the application of AI in newsrooms through an analysis of the Spanish,

Portuguese and Brazilian cases. This work reveals that the rise of AI is still emerging, which also implies the need to be aware of the challenges of algorithmic journalism.

On the other hand, Beckett and colleagues (2023) analyze the impact of intelligent journalism, another way of producing news that is blurring the traditional boundaries of journalism. Recent initiatives of generative artificial intelligence, such as Dall-E or ChatGPT, reveal new ways of producing content. For this reason, the authors also provide a thought-provoking decalogue for the creation of intelligent content.

### 3 An Open-Ended Conclusion

This book aims to be a contribution to the contemporary complex panorama of journalism and the central debates that occupy its study by academia. In recent years, the transformation of the communicative and media ecosystem, the technological evolution and platformization, and the change of roles and behaviors of audiences have contributed to broadening and diversifying the actors, models and practices of journalism. Its boundaries have become blurred, and questions have emerged to define, or redefine, what is and what is not news media or what is and what is not journalism.

The authors of this book contribute to the discussion of the principles and fundamentals of journalism in today's hybrid media system, its survival in the current technological and professional context and its capacity to influence. They also analyze strategies and models for the sustainability of digital media, one of the great challenges facing journalism. Journalism must find the formula to continue fulfilling its role in democratic societies, even when relations with other actors in the public sphere, such as political power or citizenship, are transformed and strained.

The evolution of technology and the digital environment continue to expand journalistic production practices and their limits. Innovation in content involves increasingly multimedia, interactive and immersive formats and narratives, which seek new forms of connection and consumption experience for audiences. Journalism is also expanding its boundaries in its adaptation to an ever-increasing diversity of platforms, characterized by ubiquity and its social dimension.

Recently, advances in artificial intelligence and the popularization of generative AI tools have renewed the debate on their integration into journalistic routines and news media. So-called intelligent journalism challenges the limits of what we conceive of as the role or tasks of journalists and introduces new factors for study and discussion, such as the ethical implications or the biases inherent to algorithmic mediation.

There is no doubt that the boundaries that define journalism—its actors, models and practices—are flexible and will keep expanding as technology continues to advance and the communication ecosystem evolves. Journalism must continue to adapt to the changing context in order to fulfill its role as an informative service to society. The challenge remains to reach citizens and connect with audiences, at a time when trust in journalism is under threat, concern about misinformation is growing and part of the public avoids or is not interested in news. Beyond any boundaries

and innovation process, journalism must defend its principles in order to become recognizable and reliable for citizens.

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# **Principles of Journalism Under Discussion**

# Hybrid Media Communication Ecosystems: Redefining the Boundaries of Journalism



Xosé López-García  and Beatriz Gutiérrez-Caneda 

**Abstract** The third decade of the third millennium will probably go down in history, among many other things, for the consolidation of the hybrid media communication ecosystem. This concept refers to the combination of two or more media of different types. New media and new technologies are taking place in a context of profound transformations not only in the uses and consumption of information, but also in the very conception of media and journalism. This context of hybridization and metamorphosis has prompted old and new debates on the limits of journalism. At the same time, many peripheral actors have forcefully entered the field to occupy relevant positions in the shaping of the journalistic space. The dispute has gained momentum and will likely remain prominent for quite some time.

**Keywords** Communication ecosystem · Hybrid media · Digital journalism · New media

## 1 Introduction

The initial stage of the third decade of the third millennium was marked by the strong impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. It boosted digitization and fuelled the multiplication of hybrid systems in different fields, including education, social activities, and technologically mediated communication. Since the late 1990s, mass media has experienced a process of transformation that has involved the convergence of legacy media and emerging media. However, the pandemic's advent further accelerated the implementation of years of experimentation in this field, leading to proposals for the establishment of renewed media.

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The so-called new media—alternative media ecosystems compared to the traditional ones—used renewed narrative formats and had a new relationship with the audience (Cabrera-Méndez et al. 2019). They found a suitable culture to establish their innovative product models, designed for communication and information in the network society.

Digital native media have appeared on the web in recent years. They have inherited media structures and models, but they were born and designed for the Internet, with structures and techniques naturally adapted to the digital environment (Salaverría and Martínez-Costa 2021). These digital media have already made progress in the construction of models which, within a framework of diversity and depending always on the objectives and interests of the promoters, have explored formulas to better reach younger users and to make their dreams of innovation come true, especially in terms of dissemination, management, organizational culture, professional profiles, business models, genres-content and technological tools—these have been some of the most researched areas in recent years (García-Avilés 2021; Vázquez-Herrero et al. 2023).

After more than twenty years of initiatives, most digital native media are still active and with very diverse trajectories; the result has been an ever-changing hybrid media communication ecosystem. In addition to the approaches of developers and dominant models in the digital society, this transformation has been influenced by social networks (Safari 2018; Broersma and Eldridge II 2019) and the trend towards the platformization of society through connective structures that offer personalized services and contribute to innovation and economic growth (van Dijck et al. 2018). Nowadays, this context of native journalistic initiatives, social media and platforms feeds the new hybrid communication ecosystem where journalism struggles to maintain its space and adapt it to the new scenario.

## 2 The Legacy of the First Digital Stage

If we take as a starting point the year of the first media migrations to the Internet at the beginning of the last decade of the twentieth century (Díaz Noci and Meso Ayerdi 1998), the first thirty years of digital journalism have shown, in different stages, the birth and consolidation of digital media or cybermedia and the consolidation of renewed journalistic practices on the web.

Digitalization's impact on journalism has been very significant, sparking many debates and provoking many uncertainties, with an increase in citizens' distrust of political institutions and the media (Kim and Buzzelli 2022). This fact has also unleashed processes of metamorphosis in the field of information (Vázquez-Herrero et al. 2020) hitherto unknown in the evolution of journalism from its origins until the last decades of the last century.

This new specialty has been integrated with its own subjects and specialized master's degrees at different training centres. A good example is the Spanish case, where at the beginning of the current decade more than a hundred specific subjects

were taught in the curricula of Spanish universities (Masip et al. 2022), in addition to the integration of much content in a transversal way in the educational offer. From the beginning, not only did very few professionals doubt that the emergence of digital journalism was a modality that was entering the journalistic field with the will to remain, but there was a favourable trend towards experimentation and exploration of the new territories that were opened for journalism.

Today, some doubts have been dispelled. It has become clear that digital journalism is much more than technology because it is journalism that gives technology purpose, form, perspective and meaning, not the other way around (Zelizer 2019). Furthermore, digital journalism studies are concerned with much more than journalism produced, distributed and consumed with the help of digital technologies (Steensen and Westlund 2020). However, there are many open questions and challenges to making good digital journalism possible, especially in terms of business models and product sustainability (Castells-Fos et al. 2022).

Given the vital importance of journalism for the proper functioning of democratic systems, experts and citizen groups believe that the time has come to create the conditions for journalism to be maintained and to advance in a sustainable way (Kasem et al. 2015). This is the main challenge not only for journalists and the communication sector, but for today's societies as a whole: the search for sustainable ways for journalism in the present and in the future. Judging by industry reports, the current digital era has left many experiences of journalism in a context of interactivity and more user participation, but also with many challenges. The digitalization stage in the first two decades of the 2000s has left a legacy that the digital journalism of the future will inherit, and in this legacy, there are strengths but also threats.

### 3 New Players Communicating and Opening Debates

Nowadays, the world is on the threshold of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Schwab 2016), built on the Digital Revolution, and when it is being announced a fusion of technologies that will blur the lines between the physical, digital and biological spheres. In today's societies communication exists from many to many and there are more and more players not only communicating, but also intensifying their communication management actions in a ubiquitous mediation scenario (Aguado 2020).

In our societies, especially in the journalism field, we talk about the impact of AI, about AR initiatives, about the mobile communication influence and about VR contents. But we also talk about the noise and strong impact of disinformation strategies and fake news. Communication processes with artificial intelligence and artificial journalism are a phenomenon that have developed rapidly in a very short time (Parratt-Fernández et al. 2021). This tendency is increasingly present in newspapers, which has led to renewed debates on ethical, labour and social issues (Túñez-López et al. 2019). At the same time, these processes have contributed to a radical change in the characteristics of the news pieces.

Hi-tech journalism is now a reality, and it defines much of the debate on innovation in the journalistic field. Ephemeral journalism has entered the game hand-in-hand with social media; platforms are more and more integrated into daily media routines in the form of channels to access, verify and disseminate information (Vázquez-Herrero et al. 2019). The other side of this process, also an established reality in many of the sector's congresses, is found in the ethical issues around hi-tech journalism: these debates subject the ethics of immersive journalism to scrutiny (Pérez-Seijo and López-García 2019), speak of the advantages of artificial intelligence and high technologies, but also alert us to ethical problems, especially the need for control and supervision of the processes carried out by artificial intelligence (Noain-Sánchez 2022).

We must place in this context the role of the new actors in the network society who communicate outside the field of journalism in the network society. On many occasions, these new players show little interest in professional debates on precepts and the application of deontological principles to professional practice. The emergence of the Internet has shaken Habermas' traditional concept of the public sphere and fragmented it (Masip et al. 2019). Active audiences have brought a liveliness to the news story, while at the same time opening renewed debates on their management and co-participation in the production of news texts (Sixto-García et al. 2020). In this context we must place the proposals to study journalism from the audience's perspective (Swart et al. 2022), and the effects of disinformation or journalistic abilities to verify facts (Himma-Kadakas and Ojamets 2022), among other topics.

In today's societies, organizations, entities, associations and corporations produce messages that are disseminated through multiple channels. These messages often provide information, but many others introduce noise and misinformation. There is no doubt that the communication scenario is complex, and current social communication revolves around social networks. These platforms, working as virtual streets, feed the exchange of messages, self-communication and the dissemination of truthful information. Nowadays, very few communication strategies can be conceived without considering digital intermediaries, from search engines to social networks, and their contribution to change in the media environment (Kleis Nielsen and Ganter 2018).

Perhaps this is the reason why in today's journalism we have yet to better understand the changing nature of human actors, non-human technological actants and the diverse representations of audiences, and the activities of news production, distribution and interpretation through which actors, actants and audiences interact (Lewis and Westlund 2015).

Today's digital journalists work in an increasingly interconnected context, in a complex society with a growing tendency towards polarization, with different intensities depending on the context, and there are more and more new actors communicating. It is neither good nor bad, but these are the signs of the current digital times, and it is the context in which we must analyse all communicative processes and, of course, journalistic ones. It is not about journalism always doing the right thing or about the strengths and weaknesses of other communication techniques. What is on

the table is a sketch of one part of the debate on some central questions of communicative processes and the many challenges that we see in both the present and the near future.

## 4 Looking at Borders

Today's digital communication is a complex and ever-changing ecosystem. This situation is due to the changes brought about by the irruption of the Internet, with the web as its emblem, the consequences of digitalization and the technologies that are being applied, as well as those new technologies that are knocking at the door. This complexity makes it necessary to review the very boundaries of journalism. It is advisable to reflect on what has been inherited, the blurred spaces and the challenges that are on the horizon. The actors involved in the field have multiplied, which makes the scenario more diversified. Many professional practices have undergone important transformations and new professional profiles have been incorporated. In addition, audiences have been placed at the centre of production processes; new financing channels have emerged to ensure sustainability, and digital native media have come to the forefront. In many cases, these new media are looking for differentiated models to better move into the digital scenario.

Journalism experienced a rich and relatively stable stage of professionalization during the twentieth century. In the last two decades it has been radically transformed and it is necessary to go beyond how it has been traditionally conceptualized and practiced (Deuze and Witschge 2017). According to the existing debates in the academic field, it seems that the theorization of journalism after the digital transition of the last two decades has begun. The different contributions come from the journalistic field but also from other scientific fields, regardless of how we understand the concept of field popularized by Pierre Bourdieu (Maares and Hanusch 2022). Many of these contributions come from studies on the use of current technologies in the search for, processing, dissemination and management of information. These studies come from research on the new profiles of journalism, from successive studies on the characteristics of the products and the relations/tensions with social networks and platforms that characterize the functioning of today's societies.

Since the beginning of the 2000s, there has been special interest in understanding and analysing the impact of technology on journalism: how journalists do their work, its influence on content, the consequences on the organization of newsrooms and the effects on the relationship with audiences (Pavlik 2000). This has now translated into a focus on media ecosystems with hybrid logics and features, involving an increasing interdependence between actors, media and communication formats (Delmastro and Splendore 2021) and resulting in hybrid journalism (Splendore and Brambilla 2021). Heuristic systems have been developed to understand in depth these hybrid media systems as well as hybridizations in journalism. These models allow us to understand whether and to what extent the transformations brought about by information and communication technologies in the media and in the political arena also contribute to

reshaping national media systems (Mattoni and Ceccobelli 2018). No one disputes that in recent years technologies have promoted hybrid models of television, digital media, formats or products, for example, and hybrid business models, which have begun to settle in the communication ecosystem and to have various effects. The term hybrid is sometimes misused in referring to processes in which several pathways are combined and to models that bring together several pathways of complex processes. However, all the data seem to indicate that current communicative processes are mostly characterized by the intersection of characteristics of a different nature, almost always coming from technological companies and social initiatives and applications.

Since the emergence of the social web, the impact of social networks on communication processes, and participatory trends, many journalistic initiatives have explored the combination of journalistic precepts and the opening of avenues for user participation. The result for journalism has been a hybrid between the ideals of dialogue and objectivity (Ruotsalainen and Villi 2018). Different formulas have been successfully sketched out that bring value to journalistic work, without compromising veracity and rigour. Despite the consequences of technological disruptions, research on citizen participation and journalistic practices has multiplied. These investigations have involved experiences in different cultural contexts (Tshabangu 2021) and in different types of media, especially in hyperlocal media, which from proximity try out old and new forms of participation (Negreira-Rey et al. 2020), to learn lessons for the future.

In addition to these consequences of the major change in the communication and media landscape, there are several other elements to consider. Some examples are the emergence of citizens doing amateur journalism and promoting media, the arrival of fact-checkers, the emergence of audience editors or the creation of interdisciplinary teams for data journalism and visualization. Again, we find new actors doing journalistic work. In many cases these actors appeared on the periphery and are now at the centre of the journalistic field. Their contributions and the added value they bring to journalistic practices cannot be turned back, so we must integrate their role and the consequences for journalism into our reflections and reformulations on journalistic frontiers.

Today's digital journalism must apply democratic, transparent, participatory, responsible and accountable models to society, as well as incorporating new professional profiles to adapt to the new environment of the network society (Marta-Lazo et al. 2020). This implies that journalists must carry out new tasks and have an impact on the production of journalistic pieces. Nor can we forget that the digital shift in the news industry has emboldened new entrants to the field and required legacy journalists to reconsider their definition of journalism as well as their practices (Perreault and Ferrucci 2020).

It can be deduced from current journalistic practice that digital journalism seeks to redefine its role in the communicative ecosystem of the network society in the 2020s. It does so through processes of innovation, ranging from narratives to formats, through greater user involvement and advanced dissemination strategies (Sixto-García et al. 2022). Many of these transformations have been driven by actors on the periphery of journalism, who have acted as agents of change in journalistic culture and practice in recent years (Holton et al. 2019).

Many of the peripheral actors have not only successfully challenged the authority of the mainstream legacy media but have also carved out a niche on the map of information storytellers of our time (Schapals 2022). The growing influence of actors who may not fit traditional definitions of journalists, but who participate in processes that produce journalism, are part of the field (Tandoc Jr. 2019). This calls for deep reflection and conceptual redefinition as well as a revision of boundaries in a hybrid environment. Moreover, many actors who were born peripheral in the production and circulation of news are recognized and benefit from the changes that are occurring in the media landscape (Hermida and Young 2019). At the same time, in some cases they have already moved into integral and central positions in the journalistic field.

The boundaries of the field, always blurred, and the result of conventions and acknowledgements need to be reviewed in the context of a theoretical reformulation of the field of digital journalism and the starting point of the new stage of challenges it faces in the 2020s, in a fourth digital wave.

## 5 To Conclude

Today's digital journalism is the result of the heritage of journalism, cultivated during more than a century of rich experiences, and the incorporation of important changes and transformations in journalism practices during the last two decades. The transformations are irreversible and the combination of old and new experiences, in very different communicative contexts and with changes in all processes, have given birth to a different journalism, adapted to the digital scenario, which presents multiple challenges.

The communicative ecosystem of hybrid media that feeds the current communication scenario drives the redefinition of the limits of journalism and requires renewed research to provide proposals for a good conceptual definition and to prepare for the new stage of digitization that will be faced in the shadow of artificial intelligence, 5G and next-generation technologies.

The redefinition of the boundaries entails complexity, but the response cannot be characterized by indifference to the consequences of the profound transformations that have taken place. The responsibility of academics in the field, in collaboration with professionals and the main actors who communicate, is the search for proposals that promote the central role of journalism in twenty-first century societies, its sustainability and the involvement of society in the search for answers to the multiple questions. If the glimpses of ongoing trends are to be believed, the digital journalism of 2030 will be both more digital and more social.

It is no longer enough for journalism to seek transparency, truthfulness and social responsibility; it must innovate, adapt better to the environment defined by digital communication processes and anticipate the future. Digital journalism only has a chance of permanence if it can compete with sustainable proposals that respond to the needs of citizens. If the first word can stand alone, the second word should be capitalized.



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# Repositioning Journalism Within the Current Technological Context: Approaches from the Practice and Epistemology of the Profession



Ainara Larrondo Ureta , Simón Peña Fernández , and Helle Sjøvaag 

**Abstract** News consumption via screens and social media seems to push the profession towards immediacy, superficiality and decontextualization. At an editorial and management level, technology-related changes represent the main axis of the current debate, focused on decisive issues such as profitability, loss of quality and of influence among multi-platform fragmented audiences. In the newsroom, this debate is accompanied by the constant search for innovative models based on hi-tech immersive narratives and social media narratives, such as transmedia. Within this context, this chapter deals with how the practice, research and theorization of the journalist profession are being redirected towards positions that are both technologist and epistemological; while at the same time trying to recuperate the significance of journalism and its social function, together with the social corporate responsibility of media companies. These stances might generate a valuable fusion for repositioning the profession and its *raison d'être* in a hybrid news media system.

**Keywords** Journalism · Practice · Technology · Epistemology

## 1 Introduction

As a social activity, journalism is carried out by and for people, with the expectation of obtaining benefits that go beyond the mere economic market value of its news products. In terms of a service, the news media provides information, education and entertainment for the general public; a feature of journalism that has remained

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steadfast, regardless of the technology and tools available at each moment in time. These developments force the news media to adapt its methods of production and transmission, how it is consumed and how it relates to the public; a process which inevitably implies not only structural changes, but also other perhaps less obvious ones within the very epistemology of the profession. Therefore, whether it be as a science and discipline, or as an economic activity in itself, journalism is familiar with constant adaptations in which technology ultimately tends to reveal itself as a mere driving force.

In this sense, the truly disruptive aspect of successive technological adaptations in journalism is to be found essentially—in the medium to long term—in those changes relating to how the profession is understood by those who practice it, along with the public to whom this profession attempts to provide a service (Deuze 2019).

The main adaptations provoked by convergent technology were first examined over a decade ago under the conceptual and empirical umbrella of so-called ‘journalistic convergence’ (Erdal 2009) and from case studies all over the world (Salaverría and Negrodo 2008) about national and regional news media (Larrondo et al. 2016). Similarly, the results from different studies carried out into journalistic innovation have more recently lent fundamental theoretical and methodological support to promoting analysis of the structural impact of technology on news media companies.

Of all these adaptations, we will highlight here those processes related to the creative exploitation of technology, which generally leads to the creation of innovation departments and laboratories (García-Avilés 2018). In general, terms, innovation has become a kind of mantra and has gone through a clear process of institutionalization in the area of the main legacy media. Along similar lines, innovations have also been developed in other fields that go beyond the micro level and are linked to diversity and inclusion outside the range of editorial aspects.

Throughout Europe and Latin America, News Labs—in both private companies and state-owned news media (RTVE Lab, BBC News Labs, etc.)—became a reference for the exploitation of advanced or so-called hi-tech applications. These applications use drones, Artificial Intelligence (AI), smartphones or immersive techniques developed from omnidirectional or 360° video equipment, Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality and, increasingly, extended reality, as a hybrid form of all the previous computer-generated realities and other advances such as the Web 3.0 (Aitamurto et al. 2020).

These hi-tech immersive technologies generate narratives with a journalistic aim and a dissemination that is useful for the development of a slow journalism akin to specialization and going deeper into social and human issues (Ball 2016; Dowling 2015; Drok and Hermans 2016; Rosique-Cedillo and Barranquero-Carretero 2015). Journalism professionals use these technologies to elaborate functions such as news-gathering, the production of informative pieces and communication with active audiences (Newman et al. 2022).

Over the last decade, particular, comparative case studies have given rise to a great deal of academic literature that describes the new uses and reinventions that current technology is bringing to all the processes linked to news production, whether they be creative, distributive or educational. In fact, in this second decade of the

century, whilst it may be true that journalism is facing important challenges derived from technology, it appears that this same technology also provides opportunities for recuperating the balance and values of the profession.

Using this reflection as a general starting point, this chapter examines the main structural changes that technology has provoked at the heart of news companies, along with the impact these changes have had on the current epistemology of the profession. For the newsroom, indeed, this paradigm of innovation and adaptation also brings with it important reflections and actions in terms of training, modelling professional cultures, professional interrelationship and, in general, of a new mentality that is highly motivating and encouraging for some, whilst for others it is an important source of disaffection towards a profession with increasingly blurred limits. Together with the industrial or technology related aspect, this reflection considers in parallel how the active role of audiences and phenomena such as the so-called citizen journalism have come challenging media professionals' work up to date.

What appears to be a widespread or common idea in professional and academic environments is that journalism has internalised a sensation of accelerated change and constant adaptation. Precisely, everything points to a true adaptation lying in learning and recognizing that journalism is facing—and will continue to do so—successive adaptations (Deuze 2009; Witschge et al. 2016) produced with increasingly reduced time margins, which could complicate its epistemology in some respects.

## **2 Technological Transformation and the Nature of the Journalistic Profession**

These enthusiastic initial approaches on the future of media and news production, driven many times by healthy doses of idealism and a certain technological determinism, defended that these innovations would inevitably, and automatically, cause a social change. However, they tended to partially confuse technical and economic potentials with social realities (Quandt 2018), ignoring the fact that the nature of the innovations is not exclusively technical, but rather requires appropriation by the users (Bruns 2014).

The supposed potential of a shared task of construction of reality through interactive and connective production soon faced its first problems. At the same time that the media showed that they were ill predisposed to cede control of the editorial process, journalists were also sceptical and even doubted that audiences could create valuable content (Singer et al. 2011). It did not help that initial citizen journalism approaches scarcely valued the profession, and even in some cases considered themselves opposed concepts (Quandt 2018).

In an age of technological shift, were economic and credibility issues also raised (Deuze et al. 2007), journalists circled wagons in defence of their profession (Quandt 2018) and three major themes emerged that, far from questioning corporate

culture, reaffirmed the perception of the need for information professionals in the technological context.

The first professional trait was motivation, or the ability to feed the relentless stream of demand for news. Audiences have displayed a limited desire to participate in the process, and their silence in creating news contents has been deafening (Hermans et al. 2014; Masip 2015). Although their contributions to sporadic events with huge media impact or from the heart of great social mobilisations have proven especially valuable and show that they can conduct “acts of journalism” (Holt and Karlsson 2014), most journalists consider that they are not in a position to replace the work of professional news media.

Secondly, a stable journalistic activity over time requires not only professional exercise, but also an institutional structure and appropriate resources. For example, news created by audiences show a more limited access to sources, with whom they tend to establish ad hoc instead of long-term relationships, which encourages a much higher number of information pieces with only one source (Reich 2008). In addition, the high dependency on a small number of people willing to create news outside media outlets creates fragility as far as the plurality of information is concerned (Wiard and Simonson 2019).

In third place, studies on citizen journalist training indicate that most of them have not received any sort of journalist training, although a portion of them aspire to work in a news outlet (Kus et al. 2017). The results is distrust of the quality of the content they create (Krajewski and Ekdale 2017) and a perception that professional routines are erroneously reproduced. For journalists, citizens can certainly be a news source of interest, but they understand that their contributions must be filtered following the ethical and professional principles to avoid manipulation or bias (Örnebring 2013; Suárez-Villegas 2017).

Given this lack of specific motivation, resources, training to draw up information, it soon became clear that citizen journalists were a complement to the media’s news work, and not a substitute (Neuberger and Nuernbergk 2010; Lacy et al. 2010). However, as the years went by, it is clear that there is greater acknowledgement of the news work that these peripheral actors carry out (Chua and Duffy 2019), although journalists continue to see their contribution as something differentiated and complementary to their own work (Vos and Ferrucci 2018). In general, they deny that citizen journalism can be considered journalism, but do not deny its usefulness to prepare news pieces (Suárez-Villegas 2017).

For newsroom professionals, the essence of journalism work has not changed in the digital era. Journalists perceive themselves to be an autonomous, self-regulating group (Andersson and Wiik 2013) that belongs to organisations with shared purposes (Örnebring 2013). They see their task as preparing primary news (Vos and Ferrucci 2018), and highlight that truthfulness, crosschecking and having a plurality of sources, and the distinction between facts and opinions, are some of the distinctive aspects (Suárez-Villegas 2017). Audience contributions within the accountability system of the media generally held in low consideration by professionals. Although journalists are willing to correct formal errors or data, they do not want interference

in their editorial decisions, which legitimises their role and protects their autonomy (Pérez-Díaz et al. 2020).

In short, the resistance to giving up editorial control, and the gradual limitation of participation spaces in the news media due to the problematic management of user opinions, naturally moved social debate to social media that arose as an unstoppable force (Masip et al. 2019). Thanks to social media, the news media could stop worrying about user-generated content and focus on distributing content for users (Westlund 2013).

For all these reasons, paradoxically, the presence of active audiences has increased journalists' sense of professional identity (Carlsson and Nilsson 2016), an aspect that audiences do not question either (Heise et al. 2014).

### 3 Changes at the Structural Level

To reposition journalism within the current technological context, we need to understand the changes affecting the profession and its practice at a structural level. For our purposes, we consider the economic, organisational, technological, and vocational contexts as particularly relevant for the development of the profession. Importantly, most of these contexts affect journalism in co-dependent and intertwined ways.

The space in which news media compete has massively expanded over the last 30 years (Perreault and Ferrucci 2020; Westlund et al. 2021). Not only has the revenue from advertising declined (Braun and Eklund 2019), lost in large part to Google and Facebook (Newman et al. 2022), but audience attention has also receded in favour of a host of more or less substitute activities, including social media, gaming, and streaming (cf. Nelson 2021; Peters and Christian Schröder 2018; Zamith 2018).

To that end, the economic and technological contexts of journalism are intrinsically interlinked. For one thing, the platform economy that utilises the network effect—the act of linking audiences with advertisers, that news media used to perform in the past—is built on the algorithmic curation of the accumulated and aggregated data that match supply with demand on these platforms (Beaulieu and Leonelli 2022; Gillespie 2018). As platforms are agnostic about content (Bell et al. 2017), journalism becomes just one of many contents that users can be matched with in that universe.

This essentially challenges the public value of professional, ethical journalism as content on such platforms (Kleis and Ganter 2018; Nieborg and Poell 2018; Peterson and Diakopoulos 2020; Russell 2019). Moreover, advertisers' demands for user data means that journalistic organisations have had to seriously upscale their analytical capacities. Not only does this mean soliciting more data from their users, it also means producing more data on the performance of editorial content. While such data prowess has become important for how news media compete, strategize, and attract programmatic advertising; it has also increased the need for technological competence within news organisations (Olsen et al. 2021). For smaller news media, such technological upscaling can be difficult to handle without the backing of either collaborative partners or a corporate owner (Sjøvaag and Owren 2021), the result of



which is a consolidation of industry management and a concentration of ownership power across regions (Sjøvaag 2022).

The search for new business models has also led many news organisations to pursue novel revenue streams and to try new ways of organising news production. The attraction of content marketing or native advertising to provide additional income (cf. Beckert 2022; Feng and Ots 2018) has led to debates about the extent to which branded content damages journalism as an institution (Ferrer Conill 2021; Hardy 2021), not least because audiences sometimes find it difficult to differentiate between advertising and editorial content (Iversen and Knudsen 2019).

The news media's attempts to find new sources of revenue have also induced widespread concerns about the many forms of capture that journalism can be subject to (cf. Murschetz 2020). The data readiness that platforms possess threatens journalism with infrastructure capture (Nechushtai 2018), making it impossible for journalism to operate without platform services. Becoming more reliant on state funding—through direct subsidies or state sponsored advertising for example—makes journalism more subject to soft censorship (Dragomir 2018; Milosavljević and Poler 2018; Scott et al. 2017).

Most research thus highlights the importance of multiple revenue streams in order to ensure independent journalism (Cook 2021; Evens et al. 2017). While the road to a diversified revenue model often lies in the capacity of news organisations to innovate (Prenger and Deuze 2017), the industry has also been undergoing more or less constant innovation for the past 30 years (Posetti 2018). To that end, the capacity to innovate also depends on financial and organisational resources (García-Avilés et al. 2018).

In terms of organisation, journalism has moved through various stages of convergence and divergence, trying to find optimal managerial models to enable efficiency, leanness and innovation within the organisational culture. This includes the centralisation of product and process development (Lehtisaari et al. 2018), orientation towards dynamic capabilities (Ekberg 2020), adaptive start-up cultures in the newsroom (Kosterich and Weber 2018), continuous transformational change (Kosterich 2020) and a turn towards value-oriented media management (Altmeppen et al. 2017).

In a rapidly changing landscape, many news media have therefore abandoned strategy altogether in favour of tactical moves in order to adjust to developing situations (Küng 2007). The challenge facing news media is that multiple processes are taking place at once, making it hard to see the landscape in which strategies can be formed. Most news companies are also not funded in a way that allows for the kind of failures that are built into innovation processes. As news media companies adjust their businesses to the platform economy, this inevitably impacts their organisational strategies.

Many of these strategies have led to an increasing precariousness within the journalistic profession, not just in actual job security, but also in the increasingly volatile interaction with the public that many journalists struggle with on a daily basis—personal attacks, threats, etc.—(Cohen et al. 2019); something news organisations have generally been slow to respond to at a managerial level (Dworznik-Hoak 2020).

## 4 Towards a New Epistemology in a Hi-Tech Setting

Following decades of development in the news media that stemmed from mono-media thought patterns, the Internet of the 1990s revealed for the first time just how a technological utilisation of production and distribution of content could affect the epistemology of the profession, starting from changes generated in the work and daily consumption of both professionals and readership respectively.

The changes relating to technology have forced journalism to live through its most uncertain times; in close connection with other issues such as business or profitability problems, along with competitiveness. Despite these difficulties, journalism is still a valuable profession and the need for it in society means that it is recovering its identity. As a form of knowledge and as a social activity, journalism can be considered one of the most influential knowledge producing institutions of modern society, associated with the high standards of providing daily, relevant, public knowledge that is accurate and verified (Ekström et al. 2020: 1).

Digital technologies have contributed to the public of today being hyper connected and multi-platform, with what appears to be an increased array of choices at their fingertips. At the same time, however, this public's attention is disperse and shared across different media content providers. It is also an empowered public, thanks to social media and largely due to the legacy media; although it is also an apparently more vulnerable audience: on the one hand, this audience has abandoned its active role in the search for information and has experienced a loss of criteria in terms of distinguishing quality news from that which is not. But while the so-called 'quality news media' have ceased to have dominion over the news and must increase their levels of quality and credibility, at the same time these entities continue to be a reference for a considerable portion of the population when it comes to obtaining service information (Steenen and Westlund 2021). On the other hand, disinformation phenomena demand a greater capacity or level of media literacy from the audience.

For their part, the economic and profitability crisis, together with the arrival of new actors in the information panorama—technological giants, alternative native digital news media, etc.—, have driven some of these legacy media to adopt news values aimed more towards marketing than service journalism. They have also promoted specific strategies based on marketing rather than journalistic principles, such as 'clickbait'.

The metaphor of 'fast journalism'—and all its symbolism regarding the commercialisation of journalism—has meant that editors and writers see news content as a product capable of getting the highest number of clicks, whilst for the audience news stories are a product for rapid, superficial consumption, generally transmitted in a format that is brief and visual. In contrast, the metaphor of 'slow journalism' contains a symbolism inherent in journalism as a service to society, concerned with the value of its content for the general public's sake, over and beyond its economic or profit value.

These two visions are not incompatible, but they force the reorganisation and operationalisation of content production in terms of the possibilities granted by current

hi-tech technology for the generation of sensorial or spatial narratives or “live streaming”, on mobile devices, among others (Canavilhas 2021: 3). Furthermore, progressive technological advances are already allowing some aspects of the journalistic activity to be developed through algorithmic processes or Artificial Intelligence (AI).

From a procedural and ethical perspective, there is currently a certain effervescence concerning studies about AI in journalism. As a concept, AI is proving to have significant momentum and influence in all scientific and social fields, even though it is sometimes excessively open in terms of the ability of computer systems to carry out tasks that normally require human intelligence (Deuze and Beckett 2022; Crawford 2021).

These debates are taking place within a context in which journalism has experienced a quantitative turnaround (Coddington 2015). As with other technologies developed in the past, certain AI actions will lose their influence or consideration in the future (Deuze 2017; Gunkel 2020). However, in common with other preceding technologies—such as digital technology—AI has already begun to introduce new options. These mainly relate to the generation of news flow, the initial tasks of news-gathering, subsequent tasks of content distribution and, in general, in the adaptation of the epistemology of the profession due to the influence of this technology on its professionals’ activity. In the socio-technical discourses surrounding AI, the proposal is to favour those tasks that will require the participation of these professionals (Broussard 2019). The teaching of journalism and the training of professionals plays a crucial role in all these aspects, to the extent that it represents in itself a resource for renewing the profession (Drok 2019). In the last few years, there appears to be a consensus that mobile journalism is largely behind many of these epistemological changes (Canavilhas 2021).

## 5 Final Remarks

Since the initial turn-of-the-century years, the incorporation of new actors into the online news ecosystem has sparked debate on the reasons why and to which effect they do so, and how they transform the profession’s traditional values (Belair-Gagnon et al. 2019). Legacy media’s attempt to maintain control over the defining aspects of journalistic practice has been constantly challenged by the emergence of new technologies and tools. The dilution of their once dominant voice has provoked a heated debate concerning certain basic tenets that have traditionally underpinned news sector activity (Peña-Fernández and Meso-Ayerdi 2020).

The trend of so-called ‘hi-tech journalism’ (López-García and Vizoso 2021) would contribute to this repositioning via the maximum exploitation of computer technology and advances such as Virtual Reality (VR), Artificial Intelligence (AI), drones, etc. to generate messages, formats and narratives that could mean a more complete, deeper and richer informative experience for citizens. These fusions also demand placing issues such as the affective turn of the profession and journalists’ emotional skills

(Pantti and Wahl 2021), or the appearance of new hybrid professional profiles at the centre of the debate.

Consequently, the epistemology of the profession finds itself at a crucial point in terms of reflecting on aspects such as the opportunities for the ideal of objectivity in the story, which is seen as a fact whose verification requires no intermediation. Similarly, it is also a good time—in line with tendencies of the so-called affective turn—for designing editorial processes that know how to make the most of the story, giving it human value and a real sense as a useful social product without diminishing its objective attributes.

As a profession in crisis, Journalism has a tendency to display a certain degree of hope regarding the continuous opportunities for improvement offered by technological innovation for connecting with audiences and their needs; whilst at the same time remaining on high alert and concerned about different challenges and complexities.

It is a continuing debate that follows in the wake of previous debates about the challenge to traditional journalism posed at the time by various changes. In this regard, some of the most decisive ones were the appearance of new information actors, such as the user-consumers themselves—citizen journalism—(Hermida and Thurman 2008), and the effects on the profession resulting from the presence of technological giants such as Google, through actions such as Google News Lab Initiative.

Recent contributions regarding highly technological journalism functions online (Serrano Tellería 2019) and within the context of journalistic apps (Canavilhas 2021) recognise that we are being presented with a fertile ground for research, thanks to the multiplicity of focuses and methodologies being used. Special attention should be paid here to areas such as Sociology and Psychology, whose presence is on the rise, in conjunction with Data Science and Artificial Intelligence.

Data Science is encouraging empirical research in journalism to focus on Social Media Analytics (SMA), while Psychology enables us to pay attention to the more affective and emotional processes that intervene in communication, especially when these occur because of, or thanks to, the intervention of apparently cold elements, such as technology.

The joint research work and daily practice carried out among sociologists, journalists and computer technicians gives rise to a more elaborate content that satisfies the most rigorous empirical needs, along with a greater rigour in the practice of the profession through data journalism, for example, or the design of products aimed at specific users. It is here that journalism displays a logic and rigour typical of scientific knowledge (Canavilhas 2021: 14). For this reason, there are diverse avenues of research, although more meta-research is still required, along with new theories.

This chapter has attempted to focus on some basic or specific aspects that we consider should form part of this debate and of the design of new research, teaching programmes or newsroom editorial strategies. At the same time, it has put attention on some issues of a more critical nature, since the transformation of the media landscape was not a simple technological shift, but rather a new social phenomenon that was going to transform traditional news spaces, in a setting whose borders were growing increasingly vague (Lewis 2012).

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# An Interweaving of Influences: How the Digital Environment Redefines Journalism



Laura Solito  and Carlo Sorrentino 

**Abstract** The digital environment makes the communicative space more and more dense due to the multiplication of social actors and communication channels. As a result, the hierarchy of influences—which establishes what is news—is strongly modified. There is a greater complexity of these influences due to the more interactive negotiation allowed by the digital environment. It defines a progressive enlargement of the second level gatekeepers, which illuminate or obscure specific information. The construction of the agenda no longer has a linear trend. Now everyone lives in a composite and increasingly interrelated arena, highly stratified and diversified. We analyze how this game of continuous references between the different social actors lead to a construction of the agenda in which each actor must identify the right resources to obtain an adequate positioning within the communicative field. An interweaving of influences is established rather than a clear hierarchy, which modifies the relationship between sources and journalists, and also redesigns relations with the public.

**Keywords** Journalism · Hierarchy of influences · COVID-19 · Meaning

## 1 Introduction

Not until the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic had there been a polyphonic story to involve and upset the entire world to this extent. The picture that emerged immediately appeared highly articulated; but, above all, we experienced first-hand what Journalism Studies literature has long been affirming: that the synchronicity in which both sources and journalists manage to reach the public, makes part of the production process. The traditional triangle of journalistic negotiation, with sources producing

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facts, the journalistic system then transforming some of these facts into news, and the public, the last negotiation link, benefiting from such news, is not altered. Instead, it becomes instantaneous; the whole process now happening simultaneously. It could indeed be argued that this happened decades ago, with the consolidation of the news media system itself, when the various sources started organizing actions in order to transform them into news. They were, nevertheless, obliged to enter the news media distribution circuit in the first place, when now this circuit has been completely redefined within the digital world and according to the wishes of the main platforms of information distribution. It is precisely this disconnect of processes which had been going on for many decades that led to the crisis, if not the death of journalism (Zelizer 2015).

What we are witnessing is a deep transformation of journalism. It would even be wise to speak of a ‘journalism overflow’, by which we would mean the progressive widening of the group of people acquiring techniques and professional journalistic skills. We refer, of course, to the exponential rise that has been observed in recent years in press offices, public relations services and, in essence, all the bridge figures between sources and the media system. We must then add the work of re-mediation carried out by each of us, who receive information and put it back into circulation, if need be commenting on it, editing it, or forwarding it to its target audience from within our contacts. Not to mention the rise in forms of open source journalism that sees third parties actually carry out research, selection and verification of information on the topics of their interest, collaborating with or sometimes competing against the mainstream journalistic system. In short, places where people think journalistically have grown. Newsmaking becomes a procedure carried out by anyone who wants to impose themselves on the public, as the increase in events, themes and subjects potentially covered by journalism makes the scope of the newsworthy much wider. To make oneself visible in this density one must know the criteria of newsworthiness. News-values become a widespread competence.

At the same time, the work of gatekeeping, that is, “the process of culling and crafting countless bits of information into the limited number of messages that reach people each day, and it is the center of the media’s role in modern public life” (Shoemaker and Vos 2009: 1), traditionally performed by information professionals—i.e. journalists—now becomes a widespread process, in which a large number of subjects take part, so as for it to be redefined as second-level gatekeeping (Singer 2014), and as such, to be considered a peculiarity of digital journalism. It would be better then to talk about the entire digital context, where practically each of us activates gatekeeping skills to sort out the truly interesting information from the less useful, the credible and verified from what is distributed aimlessly and without wishing to inform.

Defining processes, techniques and organizational procedures aimed at gathering information, and then filtering it on the basis of a set of criteria, the news values, hierarchize and publish information; something which until recently was a task for journalists alone, it’s now within everyone’s reach. We thus constantly move within a crowded journalistic area, where we are forced to activate procedures that allow us to function within the sector. In other words, the journalistic work of assemblage

(Reese 2016) is at this point carried out haphazardly, consciously or unconsciously, by each and every one of us.

Therefore, when we talk about the previous and imbalanced boundaries of journalism (Carlson and Lewis 2012) we should not only think about the countless changes within the journalistic work field, which must now meet the needs of distribution as well as be ready to be applied on vastly diverse platforms and satisfy the need for ready information any time of the day, but also to what we would call a disparaging of journalistic activity, not understood so much as its progressive irrelevance, but as the incessant and forced making of it daily. If I could allow myself to use a metaphor here—over the decades the attention to first aid has visibly increased, health and safety has become ever more relevant, to the point of forcing all organizations to train their employees accordingly; however, this process has by no means eliminated medical and health professions, which on the contrary have acquired increasing relevance and importance, also through higher specialization and an increase in professionals. Similarly, rather than thinking about the imbalance of the journalistic boundaries as a loss of professional identity, it should rather be seen as a progressive power of journalistic skill, which is unsurprisingly spreading with geometric progression. Not to mention that when we talk about digital literacy, we also refer to the need for a range of knowledge that was previously solely reserved for specific professions, to be widely disseminated. Besides, this is what happened with literacy in the past; it caused several intellectual professions which until then were based on conveying and translating information to those who could not read, to totally reinvent themselves.

It would be incorrect, therefore, to think that the aforementioned advancements in the way information is presented produce a crisis and lead to journalism becoming progressively irrelevant. However, it is necessary to reflect upon how the different assemblages force us to rethink the function performed by what we traditionally call journalism. Rethinking journalism, as Peters and Broesma (2013, 2017) have been urging us to do for about a decade, means reflecting on what new space is occupied by who have traditionally engaged in information mediation, in this strongly redefined journalistic field.

This chapter will focus on precisely this progressive shift of the journalistic function. Our hypothesis is that one of the functions of journalism—spreading information—has greatly expanded and is now in the hands of many more subjects—i.e. the overflow we mentioned earlier; but the other function of journalism—and in our opinion the more relevant one—has not been lost at all—i.e. providing such information with meaning. Indeed, it is precisely this universality of the newsworthy and the rise in subjects conveying information that make this need for meaning even more relevant. The argument that we will develop rests on the most recent journalism studies literature, as well as empirical research carried out by us in recent years (Solito et al. 2020; Sorrentino et al. 2020, 2022).

## 2 The Hierarchy of Influences to the Test of the Digital Context

Rather than the demise of the gatekeeper (Williams and Delli Carpini 2000), that is, of who professionally mediates between sources and the public, a progressive evolution of gatekeeping has been observed, with an increase in professionals and a diversification in the subjects asked to illuminate complex journalistic topics through underlining, linking and assembling. It is no coincidence that a few years ago Reese and Shoemaker (2016) highlighted how technological progress meant a change in what they called a hierarchy of influences. With this phrase the two scholars summarized a vast literature that emerged during the second half of the twentieth century, and which explained that gatekeeping, designed to filter the information that was worth sharing with the public, as well as to assess its truthfulness and quality, is built through relational dimensions not only with other journalists—what Zelizer (1993) brilliantly called the interpretive community—but also with organizational and production needs, as well as with no less relevant exogenous variables. More specifically, the two authors identify a typology composed of five distinct factors of influence: individual factors, organizations, production routines, social institutions and social systems.

We can see how the digital context affects these factors when we refer to Reese (2016), who—in another work—underlines how gatekeeping constitutes a stratified process, which progressively includes an increasing number of subjects not professionally in charge of journalistic work, in this way reducing our ability to control, and altering the traditional framework inherent to journalistic mediation (Meraz and Papacharissi 2016). However, newsrooms continue to occupy a central position in this mediation (Shoemaker and Vos 2009) and to distrust the openness of such participatory logics (Hermida 2014; Lasorsa et al. 2012; Singer et al. 2011).

Starting from the micro dimension of individual factors, today every single journalist has to consider the reformulated relational dynamics. First of all, the possibility of knowing the level of news circulation and approval in real time has greatly increased. In this context, the previously described process of re-mediation by the public, as well as a greater possibility of interacting with the news, become fundamental indications as to whether to insist on a certain piece of news and from what angle (Belair-Gagnon 2019; Cherubini and Nielsen 2015; Moyo et al. 2019; Pantic 2018; Tandoc 2014). The possibility of web analytics to aggregate big data has clearly made the journalist abandon the search for an improvised feedback from a friend or acquaintance and it has become a widespread and constant practice. Newsrooms constantly use software that provide us with such data in real time, so as to talk about ‘networked gatekeeping’ (Meraz and Papacharissi 2016). Some even go further and speak of gatewatching—a real collective of news events constructed through individual actions of internet users (Bruns 2018)—since, as Couldry (2012) puts it, any online comment could potentially go viral. Thorson and Wells (2016) talk about a *social curation*, in which exchanges between friends and acquaintances enter the process by which news flows are structured: “by publishing, endorsing or

by recontextualizing already-published news items, individuals become gatekeepers” (Wallace 2018:279).

If we think of phenomena that have spread with great relevance in recent years such as #OccupyWallStreet (Gleason 2013), or #BlackLivesMatter (Garza 2014) we can better understand how the public, establishing shared narratives, has forced the mainstream media to pay attention to issues once excluded from newsmaking, so as to talk about production curation (Davis 2017).

It is obvious that for the most part this attention responds to marketing needs, since reaching the public has always been among the criteria of relevance of newsmaking, but it has much more immediate and articulated connotations as far as information production goes, helping to direct production towards what the public likes, or what outrages and angers it, favouring an emotional turning point).

Similarly, the level of mutual influence between journalists also increases (de Torres and Hermida 2017). Of course, this aspect was already central in the aforementioned definition of interpretative community used by Zelizer, but now the circuit is dramatically widening and even faster; just think of the mutual control of social profiles by journalists who follow the same event. The complete redefinition of distribution processes, due to the platforms through which we now tend to receive news (Newman et al. 2019; Nielsen and Schröder 2014), defined as algorithmification of gatekeeping (Heinderyckx 2015), highlights how institutions initially not related to the journalistic field are progressively occupying an increasingly evident relevance (Napoli 2015). Computer scientists who define algorithms on the basis of browsing routes, but also on individual user consumption, have access to gatekeeping, thus accentuating datafication and commodification in the construction of newsworthiness (Ananny 2016).

The devices through which we receive news also affect gatekeeping, because they shape the way we read or see it (Powers 2012). First of all, they change the approach to the news, which previously required a voluntary act of exposure—it required one to go to the newsstand or turn on the radio or TV and tune into an information program. Whereas now news reaches us individually at any time of day or night, thanks to the continuous connectivity that characterizes our *online* lives (Floridi 2017), determining a pervasive, persistent and perpetual information environment, but also a process of news atomization, often assumed randomly and fortuitously (Bruns 2018), filling all the waiting spaces of our day, from the bar to the bus stop (Meijer and Kormelink 2015). Adding to this, an ongoing dialogue through the various mobile devices (Newman et al 2019), often carried out in shared contexts, such as the bus or train on the way to work, leads news producers to make short videos without audio, so as not to disturb neighbors (Allan and Thorsen 2009), or with subtitles, as well as short summaries.

The combined arrangement of smart speakers to acquire information and the aforementioned algorithmization of newsworthiness, with platforms that offer information based on previous interests shown by users, could in the coming years transform Alexa or Siri into the Walter Cronkite of the third millennium, as Hermida (2020) sarcastically predicts, further strengthening the role of Amazon and Google as intermediaries (Kischinhevsky and Lopez 2019).

Therefore, the hierarchy of influences is notably redefined by the technological revolution, which has produced a saturation of the times and spaces in which news is consumed and has allowed for a continuous interaction between subjects that perform different roles and functions in the journalistic field, and social institutions (e.g. platforms), technological devices (e.g. smartphones and smart speakers) that give rise to journalistic newsrooms, as well as individual journalists on their social profiles, to reshape production strategies (Hermida 2020). A similar consideration can be made about all the other social actors who interact within the information universe—from the sources wanting coverage suited to their needs, and the user public being able to intervene creatively and participate in the construction and re-mediation of information at various levels, to the increasingly numerous information activists committed to encouraging and/or assisting the journalistic system in delivering greater and better coverage of the issues and events that interest them the most.

### 3 An Interweaving of Influences

The considerations elaborated thus far have led us to slightly modify Reese and Shoemaker's (2016) naming of a hierarchy of influences to an 'intertwining of influences'. As previously explained, the digital environment accentuates the density and intensity that characterize the journalistic field. By density, we mean the exponential increase in the number of individual and collective subjects that enter the negotiating game to have their voice heard and to impose their views. By intensity, on the other hand, an even more accentuated disintermediation and speeding up is meant, which is favored by the digital environment. To put it better, the markedly relational character of the web offers the illusion of disintermediation, because in reality what is happening is the definition of new forms of intermediation, progressively more and more concentrated in the hands of a small group of actors (Van Dijck et al. 2018; Zuboff 2019; Couldry and Mejias 2019).

However, every single social actor can intervene in the constant dialogue about any issue in real time, producing a whirlwind of communicative acts, which allows any fact to be followed within a few minutes by a series of statements, opinions and interpretations, which completely redefine it. The brief description of two empirical cases we have studied in recent years helps us to better understand how this interweaving of influences works but, above all, it allows us to develop our hypotheses regarding a different dynamic in the game of influences, which also affects journalistic work. Although both placed within the Italian context, we believe that they have a more generally illustrative scope.

The first case is connected to the Italian Republic President election held in early 2022. The facts to which we will refer are strongly limited in time—8 h—and it seems emblematic to describe how the speeding up of information exchanges made it possible for the digital environment to produce a very peculiar information assembly, which determined the outcome of the activated process.

The second case has to do with the COVID-19 pandemic, which has long succeeded in focusing media attention worldwide on a single event. We monitored for two different quarters the Facebook profiles of 14 social actors: technical, scientific and political institutions responsible for monitoring and making decisions on the pandemic; virologist experts, called to explain to the public—ever more frequently—the origins, possible developments and necessary solutions connected to the infection; two newspapers and two journalists who at that time had the largest following on social media.

Going back to the first case: on the evening of the 28th of January 2022, in the midst of the convulsive negotiations between political parties to identify the new President of the Italian Republic, from a summit of political leaders—Letta, of the Democratic Party, Conte, of the 5 Star Movement, and Salvini, of the League—the proposition to elect a woman emerges. Salvini reveals this to the press, causing immediate noise on social media, which then goes on to identify Elisabetta Belloni, director general of the Department of Security Information—the Italian secret services—as the chosen one. The news is immediately relaunched on TV and simultaneously elaborated upon by politicians and commentators interviewed live—as it tends to happen with information coverage of broadcasters and websites of the main newspapers. At the same time, accompanying information, semi-confirmed rumours, opinions and statements are inevitably unleashed on all social networks. In just over half an hour we are no longer speaking of a woman at the Quirinal Hill, but of Elisabetta Belloni.

A research we conducted among some of the journalists who followed the presidential elections allowed us to reconstruct a timeline of information interweaving between the various actors involved—politicians, journalists, stakeholders, ordinary citizens—from which we can grasp the progressive consolidation of what we have called ‘social construction’ of incompatibility. An incompatibility which is both substantial and linked to how newsworthiness has developed. As far as the former goes, those who opposed Belloni for the Presidency of the Republic emphasize the inappropriateness of the head of the Secret Services (a depository of confidential information, also regarding the main political personalities) to go on to hold the highest institutional position in the country. But the incompatibility is also determined by the changed media logic. Behind such an important political event there have been secret negotiations going months back, with pauses for reflection and sudden accelerations when the right time to act has been established—a proper chess game made of moves and countermoves. In the current media context, the consistent speeding up of communication processes and the move of negotiations and agreements over to the public scene—as the increase in actors involved and the pervasiveness of information exchanges make it more difficult to maintain anonymity and keep secrets—require less defensive and more aggressive strategies. It is as though we were facing a new level of that going public which for decades now, and following the advent of electronic media, has played a central role in communication strategies of political actors. We could perhaps talk about a going with public, meaning the need to maintain control of a situation no longer through secrecy, but by trying to impose, through the various channels available, a personal definition of the situation, favoring statements and positions—especially through social media—of a wide



variety of subjects, involving other actors who take sides and support their own definition of the situation. In this case, that of incompatibility.

Ironically, it could be said that the dance of which Gans (1979) spoke to describe the dense interweaving of relationships between sources and journalists when composing the newsworthiness of an event, in which every ‘step’ plays a fundamental role, becomes a sort of rave party, a gathering of thousands of people dancing and listening to music at very high volume, in which the plot becomes much more composite and inextricable, and the positioning of the actors in the field is extremely varied (Sorrentino et al. 2020).

What would have happened in the pre-social media era if the names of candidates had circulated only covertly, in limited environments, possibly with very few informed journalists worried about being quickly denied? Would there have also been the short circuit that led to the candidate being struck out within a few minutes, as well as the proposition of a female candidate at the Quirinal? Or would the dynamics of opinion formation have followed different paths?

Moving on to the role played by distinct social actors who inhabited the journalistic field during the COVID-19 pandemic, it seems to us that we can identify certain specific functions carried out by each of them, confirming what we have described as an intertwining of influences. In fact, the study carried out on the different social actors, during the long and tormented journey of the pandemic, confirms that the large number of circulating information, the speed with which individual events and themes took place, and the ease of access for each user to every quite interesting information source, are undoubtedly the main causes of the information overload that has made people speak of ‘infodemia’.

The information disorder produced by this Babel of voices, opinions, judgments and positions attenuates the gatekeeping function of those who are professionally in charge—i.e. journalists—extending it to those who per institutional competence or knowledge of the subject have taken over the public discussion. Taking note of this faster and more fluid interactivity, we propose a typology, which will obviously need to be tested through a more substantial amount of data and subjects analyzed, and which identifies three distinct functions performed by the different actors: information function, performative function and contrapuntal function.

Among the profiles analyzed, and as predicted, the information function is mainly carried out by the institutions—though differences are naturally noted between the more technical or scientific institutions, such as the Civil Protection and the Istituto Superiore di Sanità (National Institute of Health), and the political foundations (Presidency of the Council, Lombardy Region and Veneto Region). These tend to be profiles that limit themselves to offering first-hand information on contagion data, rather than on what has been decided by ministerial decrees and the different regions.

By performative function we mean profile use aimed at highlighting one’s actions and the objectives connected to them. This function is carried out both by using links to events—press conferences, television interventions, participation in demonstrations, and so on—and by highlighting political decisions taken. This is mainly used by political leaders. Their performances must obviously also be linked to the different periods; during the first lockdown they seem to be distinguished by a strong call to

collective responsibility and the spirit of solidarity. In a channel aimed at enhancing personalization, such as Facebook, different nuances and accentuations attributable to the distinct way in which someone behaves politically are clearly identifiable.

Finally, we have the contrapuntal function. Counterpoint is primarily a musical term, but there is an extensive use of it in contemporary literary criticism, to emphasize the way of conducting a narrative on contrasting themes, motifs or tones albeit complementary to others that precede or accompany such a narrative. Therefore, it seemed to us an appropriate term to indicate both the work on social media carried out by the newspapers, and that of the individual journalists and virologists monitored. In the first case, two different modes of counterpoint can be identified—posts that take up the information provided by the authorities, specifying the medical and political choices made, remaining—especially in the first period—in the wake of a collaborative role, aimed at strengthening a sense of responsibility and solidarity; in the second case, posts that comment or interpret this information, underlining with increasing intensity the contrasts and controversies presented in the various phases of the pandemic. A much more decisive tone, however, can be found among the signed contributions with a greater social following, which do not spare accusations for decisions considered wrong or for the inaction of those who should have acted. Finally, there are the experts, whose ‘counterpoints’ are aimed both at providing more precise medical explanations, but also at disputing decisions and viewpoints seen as contrasting to the scientific evidence. They also provide us with heated discussion registers, often induced by a need for synthesis typical of social media communication.

## 4 Rethinking the Boundaries of Journalism

Journalism is seen as an institution aimed at providing the most important and/or interesting information on the basis of what is considered to be of public interest (McQuail 2013), of immediacy or involvement of the public for two distinct reasons. First, due to greater segmentation of audiences, it is much more difficult to define the concept of public interest. Secondly, information is now part of the environment in which citizens live. The aforementioned space–time revolution that marks the relationship between citizens and information in the digital environment, making it a commodity ever within reach, produces an ambivalent consequence—on the one hand, of irreplaceability, as though information became a component of the air we breathe in the information landscape that is everyday life. On the other hand, this continuity and ease of access belittles it, as can be seen by the widespread belief that it is a good to be received freely.

Without dwelling on the complex concept of public interest, for the purposes of our reasoning it may be enough to recall how in contemporary journalism the subjects able to impose themes and priorities on the agenda have multiplied. Over the years, the process of mass individualization has progressively eroded the accepted social centrality of a few ‘primary definitors’, who were considered exclusive holders of

ownership in “making news”, making what seemed to be indispensable choices in the selection of news, increasingly appear as mere solid conventions (Glasser 1992; Waisbord 2013). The progressive decimating of the forms of information production that we spoke of previously, defining it as overflowing, as well as the consequent increase in distribution processes and modes of fruition, have exacerbated the fragmentation of the entire journalistic field. The linear verticality traditionally defined by events produced by sources and brought to the attention of public opinion by journalistic mediation, changes into a horizontality of relationships that defines a continuous interaction, in which the roles of broadcasters, mediators and recipients overlap and sometimes confuse. The most part of voices, needs and interests signifies an inescapable competitive tension in order to acquire importance in the public agenda construction. The perception of what can be classified as news becomes more tenuous; while the agenda construction of issues to be brought to the public attention is based on agreements continuously *in progress*, in which the public also plays a decisive role (Brants and Van Praag 2017).

An information ecosystem is thus shaped (Sorrentino 2008; Anderson 2010, 2016; Sorrentino and Bianda 2013), could be compared to the social worlds theorised by Strauss (1978) as the “universes of mutual regularized responses” in which the activities, needs and limits of those within it are interconnected. For Strauss, the importance held within the distinct worlds and social subworlds depends on the skill with which each actor develops coherent logics. Since consistency is a highly valued resource, communication strategies must be based on the ability to maintain such consistency even when you are forced to interact on different topics and with heterogeneous interlocutors.

The increasingly evident organization of the journalistic field in several intersecting social worlds explains the emphasis of many authors on the sectoralization, fragmentation and consequent dispersion and disturbance of the public sphere; it is no coincidence that it is often used in plural—the public spheres (Dahlgren 2005; Prior 2007; Benett and Pfetsch 2018; Pfetsch 2018). More appropriately, in our opinion, we should speak of an interrelated public sphere, defined by an agenda resulting from numerous textual and reading plans, which includes both the individual and the aggregate dimension, which constitutes the current expression of information convergence in contemporary society (Bentivegna and Boccia Artieri 2020).

All this affects the already uncertain status of reality. As Nabokov effectively points out—‘reality’ is the only word that means nothing without quotation marks. The continuous juxtaposition of attention cycles on various themes, which are then quickly replaced, makes the reconstructive character of journalism evident. The nature of journalism as ‘a delimitation of facts’ is clear, since the order of priority of what makes the news is closely connected to the negotiations between different social actors and to the intrinsic power of each of them to impose their own vision of the facts. The generalisation of ‘truth agencies’—an effective term with which Lorusso (2018) refers to the multiplicity of the possible versions of each fact—calls into question the ‘official versions’ and multiplies the possible narratives. The intense interaction that is brought forward by each event, and by each question, shows a

powerful reshaping of the “universe of tacit assumptions” (Benson and Neveu 2005) on which the journalistic story has traditionally rested.

The journalism overflow, therefore, redefines its function. The ecosystem becomes more open and competitive, social actors with different purposes can search for information within it, select it, modify it, comment on it and share it, based on their legitimate interests—just like the distribution process is deconstructed as well as conditioned by each user’s previous information experiences.

Hence, journalistic techniques become shared capital—or at least capital potentially shared and indeed diversely distributed and consolidated among the different layers of the public; so much as to talk about the journalists’ progressive loss of control of the information process (Carlson 2017). And yet, this loss, which remains relative, does not exhaust the journalistic function; journalism remains a process of assembling information, but above all, a procedure involving information consolidation, interpretation and evaluation—what we have called contrapuntal function. In short, it is as though we were defining a highly dense information news base circulating in an environment saturated with information, and a further level at which journalism is responsible for verifying not only the truthfulness, but also the consistency of a piece of news, as well as the existence of connections with other parties—what we have called consolidation work.

In other words, there is interpretative work involved as well. If one is to accept the constructionist paradigm within journalism epistemology as prevalent, the consequence then is that journalism is elevated to a negotiation and discursive process in which one does not limit oneself to providing information, but also takes on the task of framing it. The ‘shaping of information’, already so well described by Schudson (2008), becomes even more a capacity and a need to build meaning. Thus, journalism retains its core function, but goes beyond stating the facts, extending its purpose to building meaning, those forms of social ties that are created through interaction and that allow us to understand the surrounding world (Spillman 2020). It is certainly not the only institution to do so, but it remains among the main ones.

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# **Strategies for Sustainability in the Digital Environment**



# The Impact of Market-Driven Revenues on the Boundaries of Journalism



Alfonso Vara-Miguel and Cristina Sánchez-Blanco

**Abstract** Digital innovations have revolutionized the business model of news organizations, which previously relied heavily on advertising. Digital media companies have adopted various revenue streams such as branded or sponsored content, subscriptions or memberships, direct public subsidies or private grants, and electronic commerce to ensure the sustainability of digital outlets. However, these different types of funding have also impacted the boundaries of journalism. A more market-driven approach to news may undermine the crucial social role that journalism plays in modern democracies, as market dynamics may displace journalistic criteria. Additionally, the paywall model, which charges for exclusive and high-quality content, may exacerbate the gap between those who can afford it and the majority who cannot access it.

**Keywords** Revenues · Business models · Branded content · Paywalls

## 1 Introduction

The emergence of digitization and the internet has revolutionized the funding model for online news organizations, which formerly relied mainly on advertising revenue. Digital advertising revenues are shrinking and the income generated by users through digital means is significantly lower compared to that of print editions. In response, media companies have implemented alternative revenue streams, emphasizing models that enable users to pay for digital news and editorial content (Picard 2017). This new landscape has led to a surge in the supply of editorial content from news publishers to readers and users. The market has shifted from one of

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scarcity to abundance, resulting in a scenario where most news stories become low-value commodities in economic terms (Goyanes and Vara-Miguel 2017), and many consumers are satisfied with free news available online from broadcast and cable brands, or other digital sources (Himma-Kadakas and Kōuts 2015). Furthermore, new platforms such as social media have surfaced as alternatives to traditional digital publishing and broadcasting, diverting monetization options from media companies and exposing them to new intermediaries.

Given the widespread consensus that the presence of an independent and viable press is essential for the proper functioning of democracy (Gentzkow et al. 2006; Peters and Broersma 2017), the survival of news organizations is critical from both democratic and social perspectives. The relationship between quality journalism and good resources has been extensively studied by researchers. Short-term measures such as cuts to newsroom budgets have been found to have a detrimental impact on the quality of information, resulting in reduced reader satisfaction and a consequent progressive loss of revenue (Lacy et al. 2004). Conversely, several empirical studies have shown that increasing investment in newsroom resources is closely linked to increased circulation and revenue (Chen et al. 2005; Cho et al. 2004; Mantrala et al. 2007; Li and Thorson 2015).

Consequently, finding new methods for sustaining these firms is of utmost importance, not only for scholars but also, and especially, for professionals. Therefore, it is imperative to seek out innovative methods that can support the longevity of these firms. Thus, Bekh (2020) notes that a revenue model serves as a structure that delineates how a company generates income and is considered a component of the broader business model. Within digital media, some of the most prevalent revenue models include paying for news, subscriptions and memberships, standard advertising and sponsored content, affiliate marketing and e-commerce (Vara-Miguel et al. 2021).

According to the 2019 State of Technology in Global Newsrooms report by the International Center for Journalists (Owen 2019), professionals emphasized the increasing clarity of the need for diversification of funding sources, with digital display advertising (44%) and sponsored content (37%) being the primary sources. Additionally, subscription services are predicted to grow, with a projected increase of 27%. Furthermore, data journalism is noted as an important source of revenue, with 40% of news managers believing that it can increase news revenue. Social media (58%), digital video and audio content (56%), and interactives/visuals (53%) are also seen as helpful in raising revenue (2019: 59).

The findings closely align with those of the report *Journalism, Media and Technology Trends and Predictions 2023*, conducted by Nic Newman of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Of the publishers surveyed, 80% predicted that subscriptions would be the most significant source of revenue in 2023, followed by display advertising (75%), native advertising (58%), events (38%), content licensing (33%), e-commerce (26%), consumer donations (20%) and support from philanthropic foundations (18%) (Newman 2022).

However, the transition from a revenue model based solely on advertising to one founded upon a diverse portfolio of income streams has posed a significant challenge to the conventional norms of journalism. The revenue model of media significantly influences their journalistic performance, contents (Shoemaker and Reese 2013; Lischka 2014), and journalistic role (Beam et al. 2009; Mellado and Van Dalen 2017). Consequently, economic objectives related to revenue models may create a structural bias in content (Lischka 2014), and a market-oriented approach may weaken the public and social function of news as a public service (Lee and Chyi 2014; Voltmer 2008; Weaver and Willnat 2012).

In this chapter, we will analyze the potential threats and challenges that new sources of funding in the media industry may pose to the nature of journalism. Specifically, we will focus on the payment for content, including subscriptions and memberships, native advertising, and e-commerce. The examination of these topics will provide insights into the impact of these funding models on journalistic independence and the potential for conflicts of interest.

## 2 Effects of Paywall and Memberships on Professional Journalism

Less than a decade ago, the majority of newspapers received 80% of their revenue from advertising (Benson 2019). Since then, publishers have widely implemented direct payment models for online access to news and editorial content, such as subscription-based paywalls, not only in America but also in Western Europe, where readers historically have borne a greater proportion of media revenues (Arrese 2015; Vara-Miguel et al. 2014). News organizations have developed different forms of audience revenues. The most common are soft paywalls, like the freemium model, in which the most valuable news is behind a paywall and the rest is free; and the metered model, in which the audience can access a maximum number of news stories before being required to pay. Along with these, there are hard paywalls, which limit access to all digital news. Memberships are another direct payment option, where individuals support a media brand that shares their political, social views, or interests. In memberships, the concept of paying for content is more diluted than in paywalls, because there is a strong sense of community or identity behind the payment.

Most of the research on payment for news has predominantly focused on the factors that influence payment, especially for digital news (O'Brien et al. 2020; Groot Kormelink 2022). There are numerous studies on the variables that help editors attract and retain readers and reduce churn rates by presenting their value proposition attractively (Nechushtai and Zalmanson 2019; Vara-Miguel et al. 2014; Wadbring and Bergström 2021). Thus, research indicates that users are more willing to subscribe when media organizations provide useful and valuable content (American Press Institute 2018; Chen and Thorson 2021; Fletcher and Nielsen 2017).

However, the main barrier that news editors have encountered is the strong resistance of audiences to pay for content. According to the *Digital News Report 2022* (Newman et al. 2022), only 17% of respondents in 20 developed countries paid for digital news in 2021, although there are significant differences between Nordic European countries such as Norway (41%) and Sweden (33%) and others such as the UK (9%), Japan (10%), and France, Italy, Spain, and Portugal (12%). Among the factors that explain the public's resistance to paying for digital news is the perceived quality and payment for news relationship: digital news is generally perceived as less valuable than print news (Chen and Thorson 2021), more superficial, commodified and lacking something extra (Himma-Kadakas and Kõuts 2015; Kammer et al. 2015) and pricing (Groot Komerlink 2022).

Also, the so-called 'culture of free' is negatively correlated with payment for news. Goyanes and colleagues (2022) identified four dimensions of this culture: digital news is a public good (non-excludable and non-rivalrous), the habit of consuming free news, the abundance of free competitors, and the lack of interest in news that explain the reluctance of most users to not pay. Cook and Attari (2012) found that the type of arguments used by news organizations to obtain subscriptions influences payment: the intention to pay increases when subscriptions are presented as necessary for the financial survival of the medium. Finally, NiemanLab (2021) discovered that the main reasons for not renewing a subscription to a media outlet were price (31%), the ideology or politics of the outlet (30%), poor quality of content (13%), or having little time to read (12%).

## 2.1 *More Concentration, Less Plurality*

The progressive implementation of the pay-for-news model has generated some concerns related to the plurality of the news providers, the increasing of digital knowledge gap, the commodification of news and the widespread economic devaluation of news. In this section, we will address each of these issues.

From the side of supply, the success of paywalls in sustaining journalism organizations financially has been limited by factors such as the cost of implementation, limitations on audience reach, and fragmentation of the media landscape. Paywalls require significant investments in technology, marketing, and customer service to implement and maintain, which only media firms with significant human, financial, and technological resources can afford. As a consequence, the shift towards a more audience-focused revenue model may reinforce the dominant position of large media corporations, as opposed to the more fragile position of new digital native news organizations, which do not have such strong resources (Medina-Laverón et al. 2021).

There are few studies that have analyzed the relationship between the type of company and its revenue streams. For instance, Vara-Miguel and colleagues (2023) classified the Spanish news market into three payment models for news. The first type, legacy media, benefits from their large brands and greater resources to seek

new financing avenues. The second model consists of established digital native media characterized by organic growth and exclusive content that is impossible to imitate by their competitors. Finally, the third model is composed of small news companies with low costs that attempt to survive by expanding their revenue streams to include payment for news and other sources. Vara-Miguel and co-authors (2023) demonstrated that 72.2% of digital natives with paywalls or memberships were published by organizations, associations, or foundations not linked to traditional Spanish news publishing groups, and were neither national nor regional. Most of these companies were highly-focused with low costs. They were typically niche outlets that had significantly reduced production, distribution, and marketing costs. Furthermore, they were audience-oriented and sought to cover relevant issues that were not available elsewhere. These advantages allowed them to compete with large legacy groups and leading native firms.

## ***2.2 Digital Knowledge Gap: Paywalls and Inequalities***

Secondly, the implementation of a pay-for-news model could create a knowledge gap between those who have sufficient funds to access news content and those who do not. On the one hand, the paywall model is based on the premise that readers will only pay for content that is worth it, unique, and of high quality. On the other hand, paywalls may limit the accessibility of news for certain segments of the population, particularly those who cannot afford to pay for access or who are less likely to subscribe to news content, leading to a gap between high-income, highly-educated elites and the rest of the population.

Some authors, such as Benson (2019: 147), warn that “putting more and more of the highest quality media behind paywalls will likely further widen this knowledge gap”. According to the American Press Institute (2018), news subscribers tend to be suburban and urban, high or middle income, highly educated, and white. As a result, low-income individuals and marginalized communities are often disproportionately affected by the implementation of paywalls, as they may not have the financial means to pay for access to news content. Consequently, certain segments of the population reduce their exposure to diverse perspectives and high-quality journalism. For Tóth and colleagues (2022), individuals with lower incomes have a higher chance of being uninformed about relevant issues. Conversely, people with higher incomes may have a better chance of obtaining information about public affairs. “If news services implemented paid content strategies, online journalism cannot function as a watchdog or as a gate-opener power” (Tóth et al. 2022: 175).

Furthermore, the authors argue that paywalls will cause people who are reluctant to pay for news content to shift their consumption of news to other alternative sources of information such as free social media, where misinformation and rumors spread more rapidly. Evidence suggests that legacy media outlets are generally perceived as more reliable and trustworthy than alternative digital media. The lack of trust in news media is linked to reduced usage of traditional sources and greater reliance on

non-mainstream information. According to the majority of studies, there is a positive correlation between trust and consumption of traditional media. Those who trust the media tend to opt for traditional sources for information, while alternative media serve as a refuge for citizens dissatisfied with mainstream news channels (Fletcher and Park 2017; Jakob 2012; Kalogeropoulos et al. 2019; Prochazka and Schweiger 2019; Tsfati and Ariely 2014).

Moreover, Fletcher and Park (2017) demonstrated that in 11 countries, a preference for non-mainstream news sources (digital-born outlets, blogs, or social media) was associated with low levels of trust in news. Elvestad and colleagues (2018), comparing young audiences in Israel, Norway, and the United Kingdom, discovered that students in all three countries had higher trust in traditional news media than in social media. On the contrary, exposure to digital news was negatively correlated with trust in news media, highlighting the positive association between media distrust and preference for alternative sources, particularly social media (Henke et al. 2020; Kalogeropoulos et al. 2019). While alternative media may be perceived as having lower quality and objectivity than traditional media, they are often chosen by readers for their cost-effectiveness. If the perceived quality and objectivity of alternative media is inferior to that of traditional media, the main reason they are chosen by readers is their free availability. Therefore, paid content strategies could potentially erode democracy, as access to quality information required for making informed decisions would be influenced by income level (Picone and Vandenplas 2022).

### ***2.3 Emergence of Free Culture and Marginal Economic Value of Journalism***

The implementation of paywalls has shown that the majority of citizens prefer not to pay for digital news, and only a very small minority indicate that they might pay in the future (Newman et al. 2021). These data suggest that the customer-perceived value of news may not be as evident to audiences as assumed by professionals (Chen and Thorson 2021; Swart et al. 2022). In other words, the perceived benefits of getting news are lower for the audiences than the perceived costs. First, this might be true because what audiences perceive as valuable, relevant, and important journalism does not necessarily coincide with what professional journalists perceive as such (Costera Meijer 2022). As Lee and Chyi (2014) suggest, the effectiveness of audiences in news placements is tenuous at best and indicates a lingering disconnection between what journalists find newsworthy and what audiences deem noteworthy (Lee and Chyi 2014). Thus, while increased news consumption might benefit news producers, it may not always be in the interest of news audiences or society (Swart et al. 2022: 11).

Second, consumers tend to undervalue digital content due to its immateriality, which makes it easily downloadable and shareable without paying for it (Goyanes et al. 2022). Even if audiences perceive paid news as higher quality, most believe they

can access it for free or by using the limited number of free news that the medium offers in a paywall system (Groot Komerlink 2022). Specifically, the scarcity of information has been replaced by an abundance of news available to users at a zero price. As Lee and Chyi (2014) concluded, with about two-thirds of the news deemed unnoteworthy by the audiences, it is hardly a surprise that most news users are disinterested in most, if not all, paywall models. If most people are not willing to pay for digital news, it may be because they assign little private and social value to it. This is supported by the findings of Chen and Thorson's study (2021), which demonstrate that the perceived journalistic and societal value of news does not necessarily lead to people paying for it. In fact, there is no significant relationship between perceiving the press as an important component of a functioning democracy and paying for news (Chen and Thorson 2021: 1311). So, if information is not perceived as valuable by audiences and is not consumed, where does the value of journalism and its social function lie? The problem is no longer that people do not want to pay but that most people are not attracted by the news.

Consequently, the issue of reluctance to pay for digital news cannot be resolved solely through the implementation of paywalls, as it is not just a financial concern. This is because the perceived value of news by customers is a significant factor that directly influences their purchasing decisions, and is closely linked to their overall satisfaction with the news (Homburg et al. 2005). The culture of free news reflects an editorial problem that has a direct impact on the nature of journalism and the social value attributed to it by citizens and audiences. This is a societal issue because news is not simply a private commodity, but rather a public good. In other words, the informative product is not just content that meets the needs of audiences, but rather a public good that plays a critical role in society by providing news and information, safeguarding public rights and interests, scrutinizing governments as a watchdog, and offering a public sphere for open debate of ideas (Chen and Thorson 2021).

### **3 Branded Content and the Blurring Wall**

Due to the high consumption of content on mobile devices and the vast amount of exposure that users receive, rejection towards more intrusive forms of advertising such as display ads has increased. Furthermore, as Chan-Olmsted and Shay (2015: 12) note, "the increasing fragmentation of the audience, the proliferation of distribution channels, and the advancement of technology that allows for time and platform shifting according to the immediate needs of the audience" have all contributed to this trend. As a result, brands are demanding editorial products that allow them to integrate naturally into conversations with their audience. They seek products that embody a philosophy that emphasizes value creation rather than interruption, achieved through the creation of relevant content (Hardy 2021a; Zomeño and Blay-Arráez 2021).

Branded content is a marketing technique in which content is created or financed by marketers. This practice encompasses all forms of brand participation in the creation and consumption of communication content and experiences (Hardy 2021b:

869). Branded content is also referred to as “sponsored content” and is defined as the integration of brands or branded messages into editorial media content in exchange for compensation by a sponsor (Van Reijmersdal et al. 2009). The International Advertising Bureau (IAB) provided a definition in 2019 that still stands today. It defines branded/native content as “paid content from a brand that is published in the same format as full editorial on a publisher’s site, generally in conjunction with the publisher’s content teams themselves. This content requires disclosure to the consumer that it is paid for/an ad. The content itself, therefore, should be considered as a native ad type” (IAB 2019: 7).

Branded content encompasses various forms, including brand placements, advergames, advertorials in magazines and newspapers, and mentions of brands and products in all types of media (Eisend et al. 2020). Hardy identifies three types of branded content. The first type is the creation of entertainment or informational content controlled by brand owners (i.e., ‘owned media’). The second one comprises branded communications appearing in ‘third-party’ publications, channels, platforms, and social media spaces that are independently owned and controlled by parties other than the brands. Finally, the third type includes publisher-hosted or publisher-produced material, including media and magazine advertorials and sponsored posts on social media.

The term ‘native advertising’ is frequently used for both the second and third types of branded content (Hardy 2021a: 4). It includes various content formats, such as paid articles on news websites, paid search units, in-feed ads on social media and publishing websites, recommendations widgets (ads under a heading like “you may also like...”), promoted listings on shopping websites, in-ad with native element units, or ads that resemble standard display ads but contain contextually relevant content (Dens and Poels 2023: 142). Many practices refer to advertisements that are seamlessly integrated into editorial content to be more effective than invasive digital advertising and to avoid ad blockers (Palau-Sampio 2021: 910). “Native advertising on news websites resembles editorial content not only in terms of design, but also in length and probably journalistic storytelling techniques” (Wang and Li 2017: 917). It must be so cohesive with the page content, assimilated into the design, and consistent with the platform behavior and is based on the adoption of the look-and-feel, the visual design, the usability, and the ergonomics of the publisher’s website (Matteo and Dal Zotto 2015: 177).

Consequently, the utilization of branded content has led to the emergence of new professional roles within the media industry. In fact, in recent decades, media newsrooms have undergone a structural transformation to accommodate these roles and meet the increasing demand for such services (Hardy 2021b: 866). The emergence of these professional profiles has been essential to produce and distribute quality content effectively. These roles include experts in search engine optimization (SEO) and search engine marketing (SEM), digital analysts, data scientists, customer intelligence and customer relationship management (CRM) analysts, social media managers, and community managers (Zomeño and Blay-Arráziz 2021).

The success of branded content is closely linked to the benefits it offers to both advertisers and publishers. For advertisers, it represents a less intrusive way to reach



their target audiences and to associate their brand with a set of values. For publishers, it is a significant source of revenue and seemingly newsworthy content that is expected to add value to the audience. Consequently, marketers can use this strategy to communicate relevant and valuable messages, encourage customer engagement, increase brand awareness, and generate excitement (Hardy 2021a: 22, Palau-Sampio 2021: 909). At the same time, publishers can utilize branded content as a means to distinguish their advertising offerings in the highly competitive online advertising market, finance media operations, and monetize their audiences (Hardy 2021a: 27; Harms et al. 2017: 80).

However, this type of content poses a challenge to professional journalism. Traditionally, the wall between news and ads has been the paramount boundary in journalism, on which the rest of the boundaries, such as media independence from political and economic powers, have been based (Coddington 2015). As mentioned earlier, in market-driven journalism, the ultimate goal shifts from providing citizens with necessary news for their participation in democracy to offering them content that satisfies their needs as consumers and thus increases the financial income of media firms.

The boundary between journalism and business has been eroding in recent decades as media companies' revenues have declined and newsrooms have been cut. The need to obtain new sources of income facilitated the opening up to new sources of non-conventional advertising, such as branded content. As Coddington states, "journalists have made the case that economic hardships in media industries necessitate increased permeability of the boundary simply to ensure continued survival" (2015: 74). In fact, defenders of branded content argue that it is attractive content for readers, and if it is not valuable to audiences, it is definitely not branded content (Sonderman and Tran 2013). Moreover, journalists may view sponsored content as a "necessary evil" to sustain advertising revenue, which is essential to keep the business afloat (Maniou 2022: 18).

On the contrary, critics express concern that blurring the line between news and branded content erodes journalistic standards, damages the reputation of informative organizations, and makes journalistic brands less credible and valuable even to their advertisers (Matteo and Dal Zotto 2015: 182). As branded content may compromise journalistic autonomy (Palau-Sampio 2021), transparent disclosure is crucial (Dens and Poels 2023; Eisend et al. 2020; Wojdyski and Evans 2016; Ferrer-Conill et al. 2021).

## 4 Electronic Commerce and Affiliate Marketing

The idea that integrating content and business benefits brands, media and consumers is widely spread. The term 'commerce media' covers various forms of interactive shopping, such as shoppable ads, live commerce or shoppable TV. The growth of e-commerce during the COVID-19 pandemic prompted media and brands to rethink their strategies (McKinsey 2022).

Media publishers can monetize their value creation activities by adopting two main distinct revenue generation methods. The first approach is through directed revenue models, which involve payments made by content users such as subscriptions, usage-related fees, and content syndication. The second approach is through indirect revenue models, which include advertising and affiliate marketing. In this method, third parties finance advertised content and pay for access to recipients and readers of news media. The news media provider is compensated based on the actions taken by the recipient after being directed to a merchant's website or e-store via an affiliate link (Berger 2018).

The International News Media Association provides accurate definitions for the key concepts relevant to the potential of e-commerce for media. The first concept, affiliate marketing, involves directing customers to external links and earning a percentage of the revenue for the media company. The second concept, attribution marketing, involves tracking touchpoints from the customer to purchase and assigning a value to the consumer's journey from point A to point B. Finally, direct e-commerce allows the media organization to offer products directly on its website, fostering a closer collaboration as the media company owns the product. This typically results in higher revenue streams and conversions (International News Media Association 2020).

The integration of e-commerce platforms by media companies has led to an increase in revenue, as well as audience engagement, brand loyalty, and audience base (Forrester Consulting 2012). This model is particularly attractive to specialized-content media publishers (e.g. fashion, travel, or motoring), as such content is consumed prior to the purchase decision and provides an engaging setting to place product offers (Berger 2018).

In the realm of affiliate marketing, the efficacy of an affiliate-advertiser partnership is contingent upon a mutually beneficial outcome for both parties involved. For media publishers, the potential to generate a new revenue stream is within reach without the need for investment in content infrastructure. The primary asset required is the ability to design attractive websites that captivate a sufficient number of referrals with a keen interest in the products promoted by the media advertisers, thereby possibly evolving into customers themselves through affiliate links (Duffy 2005). Conversely, marketers and advertisers can take advantage of a commission-based sales force and operate with a fixed marketing cost. Furthermore, affiliate marketing drives relevant leads to a merchant's website, tracks and evaluates marketing performance, promotes brand recognition and reputation, and stimulates the possibility for repeat sales (Grigoreva 2021).

The benefits of affiliate marketing as an e-commerce strategy are amply demonstrated by data obtained from *The State of Affiliate Marketing: Benchmark Report 2022*. The report indicates that affiliate marketing contributed approximately 16% of global e-commerce sales in 2021. Additionally, it revealed a 9% allocation of the marketing budget towards affiliate marketing in 2021.

## 5 Conclusion: The New Boundaries of a More Market Oriented Journalism

Professional journalism is founded on the assurance that it will remain objective and independent, and not be swayed by media owners' interests in maximizing profits (Nerone 2013). Hallin and Mancini (2004) specified these ideals through three measures of journalistic professionalism: the independence of journalists from external factors such as political or economic influences, as well as internal ones such as media owners; the adherence of journalistic work to ethical norms and principles; and the concept of journalism as a public service, aimed at the common good, whose objective is to inform the public and encourage public discourse.

Technology has drastically altered the manner in which news is generated and consumed, blurring the boundaries of traditional journalism and also challenging the values of journalistic professionalism. Previously, journalists were recognized as gatekeepers who operated on journalistic criteria. However, they have become less independent in their news judgment and more reliant on audience metrics, generating increasingly market-driven content that conflicts with professional norms and principles (Møller 2022). Additionally, the market-oriented news tends to position audiences in a more active role. Historically, audiences have been viewed as passive recipients of content produced by experts, i.e., journalists who possess the professional expertise to determine journalistic content. By placing audiences at the heart of decision-making, journalists' ability to maintain control over the production and distribution of news weakens in favor of audiences, particularly on social media (Fincham 2021).

Finally, the need to obtain additional revenues has led media outlets to implement new models of income from advertising, affiliation and e-commerce that have weakened the 'sacred' wall between news and business. News are offered with the goal of acquiring the largest number of readers, their highest degree of attention, and their time reading. As a result, journalism runs the risk of succumbing to the temptation of providing what the audience desires at the cost of what the public truly needs, by utilizing analytics to tailor content to audience preferences (Tandoc and Thomas 2015). The aforementioned autonomy to decide what is newsworthy and what is not has been challenged when asked to optimize content to conform to market logic, seeking shareability and trending topics rather than public value. The erosion of the wall is not necessarily nefarious, because new sources of income undoubtedly contribute to media sustainability. But it should not weaken their fundamental role serving democratic aims rather than commercial ones.

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# Boundaries of Hyperlocal Journalism: Geographical Borders, Roles and Relationships with the Audience in Spain and the Netherlands



María-Cruz Negreira-Rey , Yael de Haan , and Rijk van den Broek

**Abstract** The growth of so-called hyperlocal media has created new challenges for research, blurring some of the classic boundaries of local journalism and traditional media. In this chapter we try to understand the role hyperlocal media have in the local media ecosystem by focusing on two European countries: Spain and the Netherlands. We present the methodology applied for the study of hyperlocal media in both cases, adapted to their geographical, social and media context. We identify the main characteristics of hyperlocal media in both countries, observing their distribution in the territory, organizational and productive structures, news content and citizen participation. Finally, we propose some keys for the comparative study of hyperlocal media.

**Keywords** Hyperlocal journalism · Local journalism · Spain · The Netherlands

## 1 Introduction

The media ecosystem is in a constant state of transformation. In recent decades, journalism and the traditional media model have undergone major changes, accelerated by their adaptation to the Internet, new devices and platforms. The changing tendencies are not only visible in the international and national mainstream media, but also in the closest space to citizens, which is that of local and hyperlocal journalism.

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The crisis of traditional local media (Franklin 2006) and the new possibilities of the network have favored the growth of new digital media models of local and hyper-local scope. This phenomenon, observed in different countries and media contexts, has been studied over the last few years (Harte et al. 2018; Negreira-Rey and López-García 2021). The growth of so-called hyperlocal media has created new challenges for research, blurring some of the classic boundaries of local journalism and traditional media. In this chapter we try to understand the role hyperlocal media have in the local media ecosystem by focusing on two European countries: Spain and the Netherlands.

## ***1.1 Characteristics of Hyperlocal Media***

Hyperlocal refers to location and to the smallest and closest geographic space. Location has multiple meanings for journalism: it is a generator of information about the community, provides truthfulness about what happens in it and encourages social engagement of citizens; it is an organizational factor for filtering, prioritizing or synthesizing news; and it is a communicative challenge when integrating the technological possibilities of local media into local news production (Schmitz Weiss 2020).

Hyperlocal media have been considered a subculture because of their ‘excessively local’ character, which differentiates them from the journalistic culture of traditional local media and presents them as alternative news actors (Hess and Waller 2016a). Although in the context of the network society the flow of local news occurs in a global geographical and social reality (Hess and Waller 2016b), hyperlocal journalism is understood as an activity rooted in a place (Rodgers 2018). The physical distance of the journalist from the coverage area is key to building the news agenda and getting a sense of community from neighbors (Freeman 2020).

From a political-economic perspective, hyperlocal media can also be considered as a subculture, with specific power relations in the local media ecosystem (Arnold and Blackman 2021). This argument is based on the power differences between mainstream operators and small independent operators, and on the alternative and independent character of hyperlocal media. Generally, their presence in the community is associated with the idea of greater plurality and better democratic functioning of the public sphere.

The term ‘hyperlocal journalism’ began to be associated with the production of local news online in the 2000s (Williams and Harte 2016). Since then, researchers studying hyperlocal media have made proposals for its definition and discussing the concept. However, the diversity in terms of the type of publications classified as hyperlocal, the different content they produce and the divergence in the size of the geographical and social area in which they operate makes it difficult to reach a common definition that works for all (Barnett and Townend 2015).

Metzgar and colleagues (2011: 774) proposed a definition that has been used as a reference for most studies to date. They defined hyperlocal media as “geographically-based, community-oriented, original-news reporting organizations indigenous to the web and intended to fill perceived gaps in coverage of an issue or region and to promote civic engagement”. The delimitation of their geographic scope is key to differentiate them from other media of proximity, so Radcliffe (2012: 6) proposed defining hyperlocals as “online news or content services pertaining to a town, village, single postcode or other small, geographically defined community”. This definition leaves open the possibility of adapting ‘small geographically defined communities’ to the territorial and administrative organization of different contexts.

The community orientation and civic engagement of hyperlocal media is a common aspect in characterizing this informative model (Williams and Harte 2016). It is difficult to determine whether their presence in the community fills the gap left by traditional local media with a broader scope (Van Kerkhoven and Bakker 2014) or whether they enhance the democratic functioning of communities (Nygren et al. 2018). It has been generally observed that the growth of hyperlocals occurred during the last decade following the closure of local and regional newspapers, many of them promoted by entrepreneurial journalists who previously worked in traditional media (Wahl-Jorgensen 2022). Their status as small businesses and the characteristics of their promotional teams allow them to be characterized as ‘community journalism start-ups’ (Wahl-Jorgensen 2021). Hyperlocal media journalists must combine their journalistic work with the economic management of their projects (Chadha 2016), although they often prioritize their informative mission over the search for economic profitability (Harte et al. 2016). Among hyperlocal media we find both for-profit and non-profit initiatives (Tenor 2018).

Most authors agree to the condition that hyperlocal media should be producers of original content, rejecting news aggregation sites or websites that only redistribute third-party content (Hujanen et al. 2019). The news agenda of hyperlocal media prioritizes topics that are of greater interest and usefulness to the neighbors of the community, integrating local politics, social issues, culture and entertainment, sports, economics or urbanism (D’Heer and Paulussen 2013; Van Kerkhoven and Bakker 2014; Leckner et al. 2019; Radcliffe 2015; Thurman et al. 2012). The characteristics of their organizations and their informative and social purpose in the community make hyperlocal media stand out as independent from mainstream media and in opposition to them (Arnold and Blackman 2021; Barnett and Townend 2015). Several authors agree on the idea of independence: Turner (2015: 48) states that hyperlocals are “largely independent” from legacy media; Leckner and colleagues (2019: 6) establish as a condition that they are “media operations not related, attached or sponsored by any established news media organization”; Halvorsen and Bjerke (2019: 118) characterize them as “independents of legacy media groups”; and Jangdal (2022: 20) defines them as “operated independently of other media groups”.

Hyperlocal media have been defined as digital natives by Metzgar and colleagues (2011). This is a characteristic common to many of them since their growth has occurred mainly on the Internet due to its low barriers to entry (Radcliffe 2012) and the accessibility of the technology infrastructure (Jati 2022). However, authors such

as D’Heer and Paulussen (2013) claim that this condition excludes other hyperlocal media that employ a print or audiovisual matrix. Nygren and colleagues (2018) apply a broader criteria to hyperlocal media platforms, including digital media, subscription and free newspapers, community radio and television stations.

Their community orientation favors them maintaining openness to citizen participation. Community members can participate in hyperlocal media as producers, contributors, sources or participants (Firmstone and Coleman 2014). In addition, these media often have a regular network of collaborators (Zamenopoulos et al. 2016). In some cases, the boundary between professional journalism and the creation of informative content by citizens can become blurred. Hyperlocal media do not always meet journalistic standards (Turner 2015), as the profiles of content producers are diverse, including journalists, workers without journalistic training or experience, readers, audience members, local organizations, and official local government communicators (Nygren et al. 2018). Some authors recognize that beyond hyperlocal journalistic media, there are other spaces with hyperlocal information, such as sites for community participation, aggregating news sites, local portals or politically-driven sites (Tenor 2017), as well as collaborative groups or spaces on social networks such as Facebook (De Meulenaere et al. 2020).

## 1.2 *Hyperlocal Media Maps*

The debate about the definition and characterization of hyperlocal media is still open, because there is no single prototype for these media (Cook et al. 2016). Hyperlocal media and their models have been studied in different countries, with different criteria applied to their mapping and categorization. Geographical and social context, the territorial, administrative and political organization of the area, the media ecosystem and its evolution all determine some of the characteristics that researchers apply to hyperlocal media in their case studies.

To date, hyperlocal media have been mapped in the United States (Horning 2012), the United Kingdom (Harte 2013), Sweden (Jangdal 2019; Nygren et al. 2018), Finland (Hujanen et al. 2019), Norway (Halvorsen and Bjerke 2019), Russia (Dovbysh 2021), and Australia and New Zealand (Downman and Murray 2017). Hyperlocal media have also been mapped in Spain and the Netherlands, cases that will be presented in detail in the following sections of the chapter. In Table 1 we summarize some of the criteria that authors have put forward in their research to identify and categorize hyperlocal media.

As can be seen, the criteria applied for categorizing hyperlocal media are not homogeneous across previous research and respond to the particularities of each media context and the objectives of each study. In general, we see that the municipality is the geographic area associated with the space of coverage and operation of hyperlocal media. There is divergence when it comes to limiting hyperlocals to digital native media or integrating print, radio, and television platforms. Hyperlocals

**Table 1** Criteria for the identification and categorization of hyperlocal media used in previous research. Own elaboration

Geographic area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Councils in the United Kingdom (Harte 2013)</li> <li>– Municipalities (metropolitan, urban, countryside, rural) in Sweden (Jangdal 2019; Nygren et al. 2018)</li> <li>– Municipalities in Finland (Hujanen et al. 2019)</li> <li>– Municipalities in Norway (Halvorsen and Bjerke 2019)</li> </ul>
Platform and type of media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Digital natives (Horning 2012; Halvorsen and Bjerke 2019)</li> <li>– Subscription newspapers, free newspapers, online news sites, community radio and TV (cable) (Nygren et al. 2018)</li> <li>– Radio, web, tv, print (Hujanen et al. 2019)</li> <li>– Classification: professional journalist for-profit publication; professional journalist non-profit publication; publication by amateurs; publication published by a legacy media; enterprise for-profit publication; enterprise non-profit publication; community media; trained citizen journalist publication; part of a chain of hyperlocal publications (Hujanen et al. 2019)</li> <li>– Owned by people in their communities (Harte 2013)</li> <li>– For profit and non-profit (Harte 2013)</li> <li>– Owned by large media companies and small independent ones (Nygren et al. 2018)</li> </ul>
News content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Original content (Horning 2012; Harte 2013)</li> <li>– Exclusive content with identified author (Harte 2013)</li> <li>– Local and community information (Horning 2012)</li> <li>– General local news (Nygren et al. 2018; Hujanen et al. 2019)</li> <li>– Publication targeted at local residents or people with ties to the location (Hujanen et al. 2019)</li> </ul>
Media activity over time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Active media, publishing in the last five months (Harte 2013)</li> <li>– Publishing at least once a month (Nygren et al. 2018; Hujanen et al. 2019)</li> <li>– Publishing at least once a week and lasted for six months (Halvorsen and Bjerke 2019)</li> </ul>
Exclusion criteria (which media are not considered hyperlocals)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Sites behind a paywall; pure listings sites (Harte 2013)</li> <li>– More locally produced and distributed than legacy media (Nygren et al. 2018). Legacy media as organizations developed from traditional daily newspapers, and regional news in public service media</li> <li>– Independent from legacy media groups (Halvorsen and Bjerke 2019)</li> <li>– Excluded announcement sheets, established media-like local newspapers, free sheets and local radio stations (Hujanen et al. 2019)</li> </ul>

are identified as both for-profit and non-profit media, with different levels of professionalization and citizen participation, and owned by local actors, either large or small companies. It is established that they must produce original, exclusive content of recognized authorship, that they must have a generalist content and that they must be targeted to the neighbors of the community. Since hyperlocal media are often unstable in their activity, some authors propose criteria to ensure that they are current projects that publish frequently. As exclusion criteria that other authors have previously applied to discard the categorization of hyperlocal media, it is determined that they must be independent of legacy media groups, produced and distributed more

locally, and information resources that are not considered hyperlocal media—such as listing sites, announcement sheets or free sheets, for example—are identified.

## 2 Hyperlocal Media in Spain

### 2.1 *The Spanish Media Context*

The current development of hyperlocal media in Spain requires an understanding of its context. Spain was categorized by Hallin and Mancini (2004) as a polarized pluralism media system, like other Mediterranean countries. In fact, the evolution of the traditional media system and the political and administrative characteristics of the State determine the media models observed today.

The present-day Spanish media ecosystem began to take shape with the democratic transition that began in 1975. In its political and territorial dimension, the State was formed with a central government and 17 autonomous communities with their own regional administrations, in addition to other government bodies in their provinces—a total of 50 plus two autonomous cities—and municipalities—8,131 of them. This territorial and administrative organization reflects the cultural diversity in Spain, which has five co-official languages in addition to Spanish. On a social level, the country currently has more than 47 million inhabitants, although with a very unequal demographic distribution due to the concentration of population in the capitals with greater economic activity.

Regarding the media, the reestablishment of democracy and the new territorial and political organization favored the growth of the local press. Regional and local press publishing groups dominated the market in the 1980s and 1990s. These coexisted with national newspapers, public radio broadcasting services—at national and regional levels—private radio and television channels—also of national and local scope—and community media. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, legacy media had to adapt to the new digital scenario, while digital native media were growing. The economic crisis suffered in Spain since 2008 led to the closure of local media and delegations and generated high unemployment in the journalistic sector.

In response to this crisis, new media projects promoted by entrepreneurial journalists proliferated on the Internet, many of them with a local and hyperlocal scope. From 2008 and 2009 the first hyperlocal digital media appeared in Spain (Flores Vivar 2014). This type of journalistic initiative has grown and renewed the ecosystem of media of proximity in Spain. They provide news coverage to areas that are not covered by the media of greater reach and satisfy citizens' need for local information.

## 2.2 *Methods for Mapping Hyperlocals*

Studying the development of hyperlocal media in Spain requires, firstly, a mapping for the identification of these media. Given this research objective, the first question that arises is what is hyperlocal media and what differentiates it from local media. In the Spanish context, we turn to a previous definition of communication spaces adapted to the current organization of the Nation-State (López-García 2004). According to this classification, the local space corresponds to municipalities and counties—or the sum of several municipalities or several counties. Prioritizing the geographical criterion, we determine that hyperlocal media are those that cover an area smaller than the local space of the municipality, which would correspond to the area of the neighborhood, the parish or the district—or the sum of several.

For mapping hyperlocal media, we applied other criteria complementary to the geographical one (Negreira-Rey et al. 2020). We identified media with a journalistic purpose—excluding those that do not have an informative goal, such as corporate or propagandistic media—with a generalist theme and that produce original informative content. In terms of platforms, we include digital native and non-native media, which can combine their digital edition with print, radio or television. We include media of different periodicity and publication volume, understanding that those that have published some content in the last five months are active.

In our research we prioritize geographic delimitation to categorize hyperlocal media because it is a structural element—of the territory, of the governing bodies and of the social organization—and objective—it is possible to ‘measure’ it according to the territorial division of the State—which we can know from the location of the media outlets and the areas they cover at an informative level. This is also consistent with the research on local media carried out in Spain in recent decades, which was based on the territorial organization of the State (Macià Mercadé 1993), and which defined the spaces of communication and their levels of proximity (López-García 2004).

Although this definition establishes a consistent limit at a geographic level to categorize which media are hyperlocal and which are not, it is not homogeneous if we consider the reach they may have in terms of audience—at a population level, a neighborhood in the city of Madrid is not comparable with a neighborhood in the capitals of other provinces, for example.

## 2.3 *Results*

A map of hyperlocal media in Spain and their characterization has been presented in previous works (Negreira-Rey et al. 2020; Negreira-Rey 2022). In 2018, 62 active hyperlocal media—with neighborhood or district coverage areas—were identified in Spain. The mapping was reviewed in December 2021, in a post-pandemic context,



**Fig. 1** Geographical distribution of hyperlocal digital media in Spain. Own elaboration

and it was observed that six media had ceased their activity, while four new initiatives had been launched.

The 60 hyperlocal media that remain active in the country are distributed unevenly throughout the territory, being concentrated to a greater extent in the capitals of Madrid and Barcelona, as can be seen in the map in Fig. 1 (Negreira-Rey 2022). In the Spanish context, hyperlocal media have developed more in the surroundings of large cities—areas with the highest population density and economic activity. These capitals also concentrate a greater number of media companies, most of them with a national scope, which also contributes to the fact that these legacy media do not provide local or hyperlocal news coverage.

In general, the promoters of hyperlocal media have a strong vocation to provide information services to the community and seek to cover information that does not appear in other media. They have, therefore, a certain alternative character that brings visibility and informative presence to the neighborhood, also promoting social cohesion and citizen participation.

**Ownership and Structure of Hyperlocal Organizations.** At the organizational level, these media are usually legally constituted as small companies (32.3%), self-employed projects (29.0%) or as associations or cooperatives (38.7%)—uncommon forms in traditional media (Negreira-Rey 2022). It is also common to find non-profit initiatives (41.0%). All mapped media outlets maintain totally free access to content. In general, they are small professional teams—84% of them have only five or fewer regular workers—which in many cases combine their work in the media with another professional job—84% of workers are only employed by their media on a part-time basis (Negreira-Rey 2022). Therefore, they usually count on collaborators to produce content. Achieving long-term profitability and economic stability is a challenge for



hyperlocal media, which explore strategies for economic scalability, such as the creation of media networks or partnerships with national media.

**Content Production.** In relation to news production, hyperlocal media prioritize in their agenda those topics that are of greatest interest and usefulness to the community's neighbors—social issues, culture and entertainment, education, environment, politics, lifestyle and leisure, health, sports, disasters and accidents, among others—and seek to give a voice to citizens and social entities. Although limited economic and human resources make it difficult to maintain the pace and volume of news production, 28% publish news daily and 56% update content on a weekly basis (Negreira-Rey 2022). Even so, the lack of resources makes it difficult for them to experiment with long-form or innovative formats.

**Citizen Participation.** Hyperlocal media are also characterized by their openness to citizen participation in content development, with 69% of the media inviting citizens to collaborate in the preparation of news content (Negreira-Rey 2022). However, this is usually done in a controlled manner by the journalists and professional editors of the team. The informative content generated by users is usually on topics pre-set by the editors of the media—generally soft news, social demands or opinion—and is always reviewed before being published. Some media maintain specific sections for citizen-generated content. Community members usually maintain a close relationship with journalists, both in the physical spaces of the neighborhood and through e-mail or social networks. Citizens often act as information sources, but also provide audiovisual resources about neighborhood events, or propose topics for inclusion in the agenda.

**The State of Hyperlocals in Spain.** In the Spanish context, hyperlocal news media already constitute a model typical of proximity media ecosystems, although the number of identified initiatives is still not very high. Despite the complex market conditions that hinder the sustainability of hyperlocal media in the medium term, several hyperlocal information projects (digital natives and non-natives) have been active since 2008. They are established as news media with a clear vocation of service to the community, seeking to tell their daily lives, offering useful and reliable information to citizens and favoring social encounters and cohesion. This is reflected in their informative agenda and also in their openness to citizen participation.

### 3 Hyperlocal Media in the Netherlands

#### 3.1 *The Dutch Context*

Hallin and Mancini (2004) classified the Netherlands, like other northern European countries, as part of the Democratic Corporatist Model. Countries with an early development of press freedom, high state intervention, political parallelism, and professionalism in journalism characterize this model. Additionally, their newspaper and

magazine industries have very high circulations. However, just as in many European countries, print circulation of newspaper and magazine has dropped significantly in the past ten years (Bakker 2019).

**Pillarized Media System.** The present media system in the Netherlands has its roots in the twentieth century pillarized system whereby Protestant, Catholic, socialist and liberal communities developed their own educational, cultural, social, and political institutions (Hallin and Mancini 2004). This system broke down in the 1970s, together with the development of individualization and secularization (Nieuwenhuis 1992). Newspapers, radio and television broadcasters that previously operated in a Dutch pillar focused from the 1970s onward on a broader and more secularized audience (Van der Eijk 2000a, b).

Despite de-pillarization, the twenty-first century still has a pillared media ecosystem in which the Dutch government usually avoids direct interference (Bakker 2017). The Dutch media market offers a diverse public broadcasting system in which member-funded independent broadcasters receive airtime on public channels. In addition, commercial broadcasts by national and foreign companies have been allowed since 1989 (Bardeel and Wijfjes 2019). The rise of the Internet has drastically altered the Dutch media landscape (Bakker 2017).

**Local Journalism in the Netherlands.** There has also been a shift in local journalism in the Netherlands in recent decades. The Netherlands has two local levels of government in addition to the national: regional-level provinces (12 in total) and local-level municipalities (355 in total). The number of Dutch municipalities has decreased in recent decades due to mergers between different municipalities. Since 1975 the number of municipalities has decreased from 630 to 355 in 2020 (Centraal Bureau voor de Statiek 2022).

On a local level, the news system is organized around the local and regional broadcasters, local and regional newspapers, and local weeklies. There are a total of 13 regional public broadcasters, and in almost every municipality, one local public broadcaster holds a license for local cable television and radio.

Since the beginning of this century, the reach and coverage of regional and local media have decreased, due to merging and closing of publishing houses as audiences and advertisers moved online. The circulation of regional daily newspapers declined by 50% between 2000 and 2017 (Van Kerkhoven and Bakker 2014; Bakker and Kik 2018). Additionally, there is severe press concentration, whereby two Belgium publishing houses control almost all local and regional newspapers. Also, regional public broadcasters have been receiving fewer subsidies and revenue, and, as a result, their staffing decreased by 20% between 2007 and 2017 (Bakker and Kik 2018).

### ***3.2 Methods for Mapping Hyperlocals***

While the reach and coverage of regional and local media declined, the number of online providers of local news has increased (Bakker et al. 2011). Since its first

variants in the late 1990s, the growth of hyperlocal digital media has been explosive in subsequent decades: in 2017, half of the municipalities had at least one hyperlocal (Bakker and Kik 2018). However, Van Kerkhoven and Bakker (2014) showed that Dutch hyperlocal media sites differ significantly in management, editorial and economic objectives. In addition, hyperlocals struggle with organization and revenue; maintaining a site is more complex than launching one. This questions how these hyperlocals have developed over time and which role they play in the local community. This section provides an overview of hyperlocals in the Netherlands since 2014. In the Dutch context, hyperlocals are defined as online media that cover the news of a specific municipality. They are stand-alone websites, not linked to local newspapers or local broadcasters.

To analyze the current state of hyperlocals in the Netherlands, we made use of three datasets. First, we made use of two datasets from 2014 and 2018 (Van Kerkhoven and Bakker 2014; Bakker and Kik 2018). These studies identified hyperlocals by checking the first thirty Google search results with the keywords ‘news’ and the municipality’s name. Following this, in 2020 we revisited all sites from the previous studies to check whether they were still active and if so whether they still had the same owner. Also, through the same keywords we did an additional search to find out whether new hyperlocals had started up since 2018.<sup>1</sup>

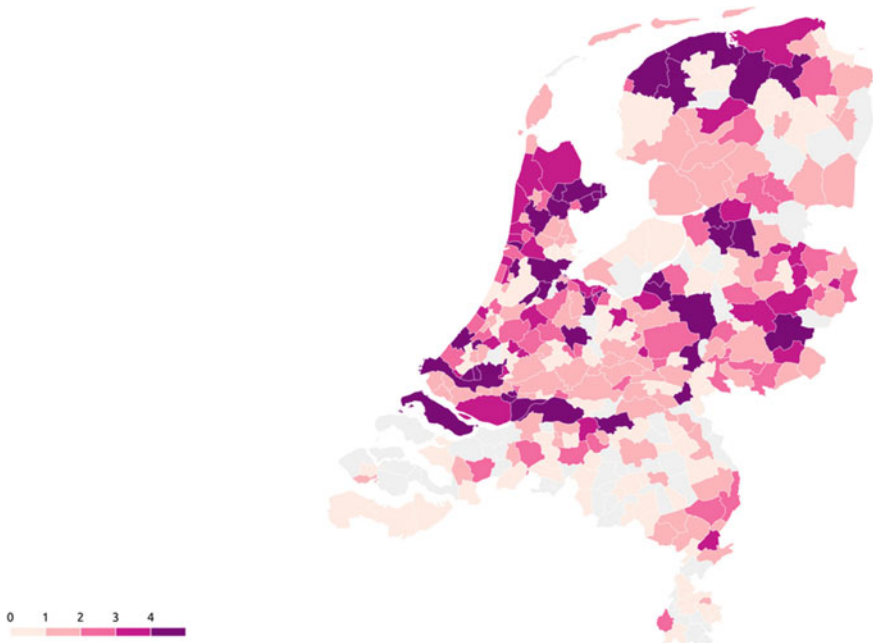
To map the hyperlocals, we looked at their distribution area and the population on provincial and municipality levels. Furthermore, we identified who owns the hyperlocals by investigating the provided information on their websites. When the information on the website was insufficient, we contacted the owners to discover how they operated. Ownership was reported as unknown if the owner could not be determined. Finally, we analyzed the level of user participation of several hyperlocals. To retrieve this information, we looked at their websites to see if readers could get in touch with the newsroom, leave tips or suggestions, or add content themselves.

### 3.3 Results

In total, 593 active hyperlocal media sites were identified in the Netherlands in 2020, with an average of 1.7 hyperlocals per Dutch municipality. Hyperlocals are unevenly distributed across the Netherlands, which becomes evident at the provincial level (Fig. 2). When we look at the number of hyperlocals in relation to the municipalities, we see that the province of North Holland leads with an average of 2.8 hyperlocals per municipality. Following that, two provinces in the east and north have, on average, the most hyperlocals per municipality: Overijssel (2.7) and Groningen (2.3). These

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<sup>1</sup> With this method, each title is counted separately for every municipality. For example, if a hyperlocal contains news for two municipalities, the hyperlocal is listed twice in our data. In addition, this study excludes aggregation websites that contain news scraped from other sites by robots. The so-called 911 sites, with mainly emergency news, are also excluded from this study because they are mostly aggregation sites.



**Fig. 2** Geographical distribution of hyperlocal digital media in the Netherlands (number of media outlets per municipality). Own elaboration

numbers differ significantly from other provinces, such as Flevoland, which has the fewest hyperlocals on average: 0.7 per municipality.

The variation in the average number of hyperlocals by province shows that it is difficult to say anything about Dutch hyperlocals in general. For this reason, it is crucial to look closely at the population per municipality. We took a closer look at provinces with the most hyperlocals and their population: the average number of hyperlocals increases in municipalities when the population increases: up to 50,000 inhabitants (2.5 hyperlocals per municipality), between 50,000 and 100,000 inhabitants (3.1 per municipality) and over 100,000 inhabitants (4.3 per municipality). Our analysis shows that hyperlocals operate mainly in places with more inhabitants, but that does not necessarily mean urban areas. This becomes evident if we focus on the average number of hyperlocals per municipality of each capital city of the provinces: North Holland with Haarlem (3), Overijssel with Zwolle (5), and Groningen with similarly named Groningen (9). Although these places are the major cities in these provinces, Haarlem and Zwolle are not the leaders of the provinces, when looking at hyperlocals. Particularly, in the province of North Holland, there are considerably smaller municipalities with many hyperlocals.

**Ownership of the Hyperlocals.** We also looked at the owners of the hyperlocals. The proportion of individual ownership is the highest: more than half (53%) of the 593 hyperlocals are stand-alone sites unconnected to another local news medium. Around

36% of the Dutch hyperlocals are operated by an owner with more than one local site, a so-called chain. Belgian publisher DPG, for example, owns 38 hyperlocals in addition to several national and regional newspapers. For 11% of the hyperlocals, we could not find the owner because the hyperlocals did not provide this information.

**Content of the Hyperlocals.** In relation to the content of the hyperlocals, we draw on a study conducted by the Dutch Journalism Fund, which analyzed 87 hyperlocals and the news they published in a week during the summer of 2022. On average, these hyperlocals posted 2.6 news items per day, which says nothing about the distribution of posts throughout the week; in some cases, hyperlocals published all their articles only once per week. Therefore, the study looked at how many websites posted at least one news item each weekday: a quarter (25%) did so.

The data also included a case study of whether the published news items contained so-called ‘own-produced local news’ or news copied from, for example, other media or press releases from companies. Of the total, 19 hyperlocals (22%) have a percentage of between 0 and 25% of news items consisting of their own-produced local news. Twenty hyperlocals (23%) fell into the 25–50% category. The number of sites with news items between 50 and 75% own news totaled 12 (14%) and 16 (18%) in the category 75 and 100%. Several sites did not publish any news items in the researched period (11%), and the same proportion did not publish any own-produced local news articles (11%).

**The Possibility to Participate.** We also reviewed the public participation opportunities of the previously mentioned provinces with relatively high numbers of hyperlocals: North Holland, Overijssel, and Groningen. An analysis of almost all hyperlocals in these provinces (211 out of 222) shows that a large proportion (82%) have a so-called colophon page on their website with information about the editorial board. This is significantly greater than the number of websites listing the editor-in-chief’s (6%) or other journalists’ (5%) contact information. Thus, many readers can find a page with information about the newsroom but cannot get in touch with it.

We also analysed the possible reasons listed on the websites for getting in touch with the newsroom—top of the list was news tips, with 66% of hyperlocals offering this as an option. Sending in photos (44%) or asking a question (64%) are also relatively frequently offered options. In contrast, hyperlocals are less likely to ask people to send in press releases (38%) or write an opinion piece (14%).

**The State of Hyperlocals in the Netherlands.** Hyperlocals in the Netherlands play an important role in the Dutch local media eco-system. While the number of hyperlocals is not evenly spread across the country, every municipality has a hyperlocal that covers news for that town. The larger the municipality, the more active the hyperlocals are. However, this does not mean the capital of Amsterdam or other large cities have an abundant number of hyperlocals. It seems that middle-large towns are most attractive for hyperlocals. While many hyperlocals try to provide original news content and have the intention to interact with their audiences, it seems that they are struggling to do so.

## 4 Conclusion

In this chapter we have responded to a twofold objective: Firstly, to understand the concept of hyperlocals in journalism and how it has developed over time. We therefore investigated two European countries, which differ in size, political and media systems and have different historical contexts. This chapter helps to understand commonalities in relation to the state of hyperlocals in Europe. Secondly, this chapter unravels the difficulties of conceptualizing hyperlocals and subsequently the methodological constraints on studying it.

As in other European countries, Spain and the Netherlands have both seen a growth in hyperlocal media in recent years, identifying up to 60 and 593 news outlets in each country, respectively. We can interpret these data as positive, as they evidence a renewal of proximity media ecosystems and are key to the democratic development of societies. Hyperlocal news media emerge as a possible solution to the local press crisis, with renewed models characteristic of digital native media—although not all are natives—or with uncommon forms among legacy media, finding non-profit initiatives or those constituted as associations or cooperatives. While there is much debate about the crisis of local media in the dissemination of news deserts, it seems that hyperlocals are filling or at least trying to fill this gap.

We also found shared challenges: hyperlocal media generally survive with scarce economic resources and find difficulties in developing sustainable business models; the lack of resources is transferred to the team, with a lack of professionals to improve news production; they also present, in some contexts, difficulties to strengthening participation with the audience or integrating it as a central element of their activity. While the idea of hyperlocals was to be closer to the public, to exploit the possibilities of online, it seems difficult to find a sustainable model of journalism and participation, even at a local level.

The current reality shows that it is important to pursue the study of hyperlocal media and their evolution. However, this is not without methodological difficulties. Research on hyperlocal media has taken important steps in recent years: definitions have been proposed, hyperlocals have been mapped in several countries and case studies have been carried out. However, there are still open debates regarding the study of hyperlocals. Different criteria are observed to identify and categorize hyperlocal media, as noted in the introduction and as we can observe in the Spanish and Dutch cases. We find different criteria for defining hyperlocal media platforms, ownership and business structure or geographical scope.

Nevertheless, we propose some common factors that can help in the methodological design for the study of hyperlocal media. As a first factor, it would be advisable to start researching hyperlocal media from an understanding of the context of each country. The territorial and political organization and the social and cultural context determine the media models of each country, as well as the media ecosystem of proximity: weight of local media, evolution of traditional local media, adaptation of these media to the Internet and the emergence of digital natives, organizational and

business structure, etc. In each context, it is possible to identify the characteristics of hyperlocal media as models that differ from traditional local media.

The second factor would be to assume the basic fundamentals that define hyperlocal media and that are common to the studies carried out so far: coverage of defined geographical areas of reduced size, smaller than the spaces of local media (they may vary according to the territorial organization of each country and differences in the quantitative audience—in relation to the inhabitants—could be assumed); an informative mission with a marked orientation towards the community (reinforcement of local identity, social cohesion, citizen participation); or their journalistic and production of original news content.

Future research on hyperlocal media will contribute to further refining the methodology for their study. Future studies could also compare more countries with different media systems in relation to what the level of local means and how the local public participates in them.

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# How Finnish News Media Defend Their Boundaries in the Age of Digital Platforms



Reeta Pöyhtäri  and Esa Sirkkunen 

**Abstract** This chapter discusses the strategies that Finnish professional news media have used in recent years to defend their boundaries both as businesses and societal institutions in the age of digital platforms. Based on interviews with chief editors and media experts, we distinguish five central strategies for business survival. Furthermore, we discuss how the Finnish news media have responded to the pressures caused by the digital information environment.

**Keywords** News media business · Journalism · Platforms · Digital information environment

## 1 Introduction

The process of platformization entails the penetration of infrastructures, economic processes, and governmental frameworks by digital platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life (Poell et al. 2019). This chapter focuses on the effects and dependencies that globally operating, large platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Google, Twitter, and TikTok, have caused among Finnish journalistic media.

First, in Finland and elsewhere, digital platforms have negatively affected the advertising revenues of the news media, which has forced the latter to rethink and recreate their business models and journalistic products. Second, the news media need to compete for consumer attention with the platforms and the players that operate on them. Third, the news media depend on platform technologies for studying consumers' behaviors through user analytics. The digital and hybrid media environment, with its competing content producers, has also undermined the news media's position as dominant and reliable sources of information. This is the case even in Finland, where the public still highly trusts the news media.

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In this chapter, we will discuss the effects of digital platforms and the hybrid media system on Finnish news media and the coping mechanisms that the media have adopted in the past years. What are the news media doing to maintain and defend their boundaries both as businesses and as societal institutions? We will try to answer this question based on the findings of interviews conducted with Finnish news media editors and other media experts as well as current research.

## 2 The Finnish Media System and the Research Setting

Comparative studies have found that the Finnish media system is part of the Nordic media welfare states (Syvertsen et al. 2014), which are characterized by both a democratic corporatist media system (Hallin and Mancini 2004) and a social-democratic welfare state ideology (Esping-Andersen 1990). This Nordic media welfare model includes strong state support for universally available and accessible communication systems (linked to subsidies to both public-service and private operators), institutionalized editorial freedom, and self-regulation of the sector. The public-service media have been at the forefront of serving the needs of different groups in society (Syvertsen et al. 2014). In international comparisons, Finland has been constantly found to be a model country for high media freedom and high societal trust (e.g., OECD 2021; RSF 2023).

However, in the present era dominated by digital media and global influences, it is unclear how well the Nordic media model still correlates with Nordic media realities. Finland has been rapidly moving toward liberalization and competition-based funding models. Furthermore, the state's direct media subsidies to private news media have not been as generous as in other Nordic nations. According to some scholars (Ala-Fossi 2020; Ala-Fossi et al. 2023), competitiveness in Finland has been prioritized over democratic media policies.

The Finnish news media field includes the public-service broadcaster *Yleisradio* (*Yle*), which serves both nationally and locally; *Yle* also offers online and on-demand news and video services. In terms of commercial news media outlets, there are national channels (*MTV News*); national, regional, and local newspapers; news magazines; and the news broadcast by commercial radio stations. In this study, the term "national news media" refers in particular to the largest outlets: *Yle*, *MTV*, the newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*, and two national tabloids, *Ilta-Sanomat* and *Ilta-lehti*. In Finland, regional news media include provincial and small-town newspapers as well as the local newsrooms of the national media. Most news media in the country are historically either regional or local (Hellman 2022). Altogether, approximately 250 newspapers are published in Finland (Uutismedian liitto 2023). There are also digital-native news outlets, but they are still few in number and targeted mainly at specific audiences.

As was the case elsewhere, in the 2010s, the initial phase of digitalization caused the Finnish news media to start struggling. The revenues from advertising and subscriptions started decreasing. The country's news media lost about 35% of their

market share in digital advertising between 2010 and 2020, whereas in 2019 Google's and Facebook's share of the money spent on digital advertising was already 54% (Ala-Fossi et al. 2020.) At the same time, some 1,000 jobs were cut in journalism (Honkonen 2019).

As part of this study, we interviewed chief editors of national and regional news media (N = 11) as well as other media experts (N = 14).<sup>1</sup> The semi-structured interviews were conducted online in the late autumn of 2021 and the winter of 2022. The questions concerned journalism's role in society and its current challenges, the changed information environment and news media's role in it, the economic aspects and difficulties of news media businesses in the era of platformization, and media policy. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 min. The conversations were audio-recorded, transcribed by an external company following a confidentiality agreement, and coded using the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti. The initial round of coding was done thematically based on the themes of the interview and then developed iteratively during the coding process. In the second round of coding and reading, the focus was on the most prominent codes and their content. In this chapter, we concentrate on the themes that highlight what measures have helped Finnish news media to sustain their businesses and journalistic products in the age of digital platforms, how they reflect on their relationships with competing content producers and audiences, and how they maintain and defend the boundaries of journalism.

### 3 Defending the Boundaries of the News Media Business

Based on the interviews with the chief editors, we were able to distinguish five prominent strategies adopted for maintaining profitable news businesses and succeeding in the competition for audiences and consumer attention. The five strategies are as follows:

1. Investing in digital news media products to attract new subscriptions.
2. Seeking growth in digital advertising.
3. Minimizing the costs of printed media products (especially printing and distribution).
4. Saving on production costs by merging with other media businesses (takeovers) and through consolidation.
5. Creating shared efforts among news media to confront the platforms.

These strategies are not used equally by all the outlets. Bigger companies are better able to create long-term strategies, whereas smaller ones are typically more reliant on general developments or external changes in the media business landscape (Lindén et al. 2022). National media are possibly large enough to survive on their

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<sup>1</sup> We conducted interviews with the chief editors of *Helsingin Sanomat*, *Iltalehti*, *MTV News*, *Yle*, *Long Play*, *Hämeen Sanomat*, *Kainuun Sanomat*, *Kaleva*, *Karjalainen*, *Keskisuomalainen*, and *Lapin Kansa*. The media experts were from different government ministries and advocacy organizations operating in the field of media and journalism.

own, while the only option for a regional or sub-regional outlet might be to merge with a bigger company. Internationally, the largest news media might even be able to negotiate with digital platforms on terms of use and compensation for news content. These negotiations are not feasible in Finland as the market for Finnish-language media is limited. In our discussion, we concentrate on national and regional media, which somewhat limits our conclusions because local media are also facing major challenges due to their heavy dependence on printed products. We will also not discuss Finland's digital-native news outlets.

### ***3.1 Investing in the Duality of Digital News Media Products and Digital Advertising***

In Finland, the main challenge in news media product development has been how to attract consumers who are generally interested in the news but are not very willing to pay for it. Only a fifth of consumers pay for digital news content, and most of those who engage only with free content are not willing to pay for it in the future (Reunanen 2021: 24–25).

The established options for news media operating online are to either offer free content funded by digital advertising income or seek growth in digital subscriptions. This duality is not surprising as news journalism has always been based on the double market of selling news and advertising space (Picard 1993).

In our interviews, the representatives of the national media told us that income from digital advertising is growing and that they saw great potential in it. Currently, national media outlets are getting the biggest share of digital news media advertising (Arola 2020). They have also heavily invested in the development of their own digital news products.

All the national news media have news apps in addition to news websites. The content of *Yle* and *MTV* is free of charge. The content of the tabloids is mostly free, but some news items are accessible only by paying (*Iltalehti*) or signing in as a user for free (*Ilta-Sanomat*). *Helsingin Sanomat*'s content is partly free and partly behind a paywall for users with a digital subscription. Furthermore, the national media are constantly developing paywall strategies and finding ways to customize content to appeal to new digital subscribers. For example, the “diamond stories” of *Helsingin Sanomat* or the “plus content” of *Iltalehti* (both are usually in-depth feature stories or news analyses) are only accessible if one has a digital subscription, including a trial one. Magazine content from the media group that owns the newspaper or the tabloid is also sometimes offered to subscribers for free.

Finland's regional news media also adopt the dual strategy of increasing digital subscriptions and developing digital advertising. Although the national media take the biggest share of advertising, regional media outlets are still competitive when it comes to regionally targeted ads. These outlets have also invested in the development of digital news content, apps, and user analytics. All of them have a hard paywall;

almost no news items can be read without an active subscription. This possibly irritates potential readers and directs them to free content—for instance, the local news of the public broadcaster *Yle*. However, there are few other options, as paying customers are vital for the continued existence of regional news media. ‘Paywall’ was criticized as an excessively negative concept by our interviewees, as readers have always had to pay for subscriptions.

Competition with free content was also taken as a positive challenge. In a nutshell, the news content produced needs to be of such quality that the reader is willing to pay for it and subscribe to the newspaper. If the content is not good, there is no point in producing it. Regionality and locality are the core elements that help the regional media to succeed in the market. The goal is to get close to the readers, and this is achieved with the help of user analytics. The interviewees believed that the need to develop local content also protects the regional media from becoming too one-sided or monotonous as a result of media concentration. Readers are simply uninterested in reading content that is not uniquely local. It is also still possible to make a profit with advertising that focuses on regional and local markets. Locality is a dimension where digital platforms do not enjoy a great competitive advantage as they do not have the capability to produce local news content.

User analytics are widely used by all types of news media to optimize both digital advertising and the attractiveness of content. They were usually mentioned in the interviews as being the most beneficial development of the digital platform era. Thanks to these analytics, journalists no longer need to guess what the public likes; they can obtain data on actual news use—who is interested in what, how much time is spent on each item, and what other content is consumed. Despite this optimism, the interviewees also said that one should not trust user analytics blindly; instead, one should always inspect them carefully. For example, a news link opened numerous times that is only browsed through is not necessarily influential or good content. In this matter, the interviewees held the same view that is often depicted in research: purely counting readers or page visits is not a guarantee for quality journalism. The uncritical use of analytics results in clickbait—quick, superficial, and entertainment-oriented journalism that is optimized for maximizing readership and thus advertisement income (e.g., Fürst 2020). Most of our interviewees stated that they prefer measuring, for example, the time spent reading a news item. However, for example in the tabloids, clicks are still used as a strong indicator of user interest.

The public broadcaster *Yle* is funded by citizens’ taxes.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it is not dependent on other forms of income, such as subscriptions and adverts. However, *Yle* still depends on user analytics in the competition for people’s time and attention. The broadcaster has been one of the most proactive Finnish news media in terms of using analytics as well as seeking out new audiences on social media. *Yle* is also criticized for this by its commercial rivals. Some of our interviewees, for instance, stated that a public news media organization should not create free content for the platform giants. Instead, *Yle* believes that as a public broadcaster with the responsibility to serve all audiences, it needs to reach out to the younger individuals there where they already

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<sup>2</sup> Since 2013, all adult residents and registered businesses in Finland pay an income-based Yle-tax.

are active, such as on YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook. Therefore, *Yle* has created a special multimedia portfolio for its young-adult users that publishes content on various channels, including social media accounts or as *Yle* calls them, channels, that are built around popular young hosts. A large share of this content is published on that specific channel only and not on *Yle*'s own channels. Recently, *Helsingin Sanomat* also launched a TikTok channel.

### 3.2 *Minimizing Costs by Cutting and Merging*

Finland's regional news media (and, to an extent, the national media) are greatly challenged by the fact that the largest share of their subscriptions and advertising income still comes from print. Despite diminishing demand for printed products, production costs have remained proportionally the same for years or have even grown due to the increased prices of materials, the printing process, and distribution (Virtanen 2021). As the costs will keep growing, there is a need to make cuts. There is also a fear that digital content will not be able to receive sufficient investment if the cost of printed products remains so high. The subscribers of regional newspapers are mostly elderly or aging people; therefore, it is unrealistic to expect that they will become subscribers of digital products only any time soon. The printed news needs to be maintained even though it is becoming relatively more expensive.

A recent answer to growing costs in the regional news media has been concentrating ownership. There have been several takeovers or new ownership arrangements of late, and a few media corporations have expanded intensely. The level of concentration in the Finnish media landscape is exceptionally high—the two largest media companies control about 60% of the market, and the largest eight companies have a market share of 80%. There are fears that this situation is starting to negatively affect the originality and diversity of news content. The risk of 'news deserts'—regions without a dedicated news outlet—has been identified also in Finland (Hellman 2021, 2022). However, compared to other countries (Newman 2022: 33), Finland has thus far not created a system of direct public subsidies for commercial media in order to avoid this risk.

Our interviewees did mostly not acknowledge the threat of actual or potential news deserts. According to the editors, the concentration of news media is not the cause of such deserts but an attempt to secure the existence of regional and local media. For them, concentration brings the benefits of scale. For example, it helps to pool digital know-how and offer the same digital solutions to several news outlets, which can save costs compared to a situation where each outlet creates its digital solutions and apps (see also Hellman 2022). As an additional rationalization measure, some regional outlets have removed certain overlapping functions during the consolidation processes, and journalists have been moved from peripheral areas to the regional centers. The interviewees thought that this centralization may have reduced content focused on peripheral areas, but not significantly. User analytics have also been



employed to allocate resources to those types of content and functions that are most requested. In this context, locality is still what matters.

Investments in digital news have also been made in the hope of achieving cost savings. The long-term goal is to familiarize readers with digital content and gain new subscribers. Typically, the regular print subscription also contains a digital subscription. For some regional news outlets, the shift from print to digital is more or less forced because, in the remotest areas, daily newspaper distribution is no longer possible due to cuts in postal services. Therefore, a daily printed newspaper is not offered as an option. The only possibility to read the news on a daily basis is to do so digitally.

### ***3.3 Joint Efforts to Confront the Power of Platforms***

Finland's news media are actively trying to find ways to minimize the power of digital platforms by being very selective and conscious about their online activities. When it comes to news for the general public, they restrict the material shared through the platforms and mainly publish it on their news websites. Popular social media are used to advertise their content and attract new readers, but to read the news one needs to visit the news website or the app. As part of this strategy, news media organizations invest in strong and recognizable brands that attract readers without the use of intermediaries. This seems to be working. Compared to many other countries, in Finland, most people go directly to the news media's websites or apps instead of searching for news items on social media or other platforms (Reunanen 2022a: 18–19). However, younger users prefer social media to stay up-to-date with current events, and the news media have already had to adjust their tactics somewhat to reach these users.

News media outlets are also trying to make readers access the news via media-specific accounts instead of the accounts created for social media platforms. Paywalls and compulsory registration have become very common on news media websites. Registered accounts help the news media to keep traffic and user data in their own hands. The largest organizations have invested in their own analytics and algorithms to be less dependent on those offered by the platforms and to circumvent some of the transparency and black-box issues that platform analytics entail. A new initiative in this field is the so-called media account, which some commercial media have been developing (Virranta 2022). The idea is that in the future, the reader could access several different news media with a single account and even buy individual news items without needing to have a full subscription for each outlet. This account could also be used to safely access other kinds of services that in Finland are currently typically accessed through online-banking identification. Similar services are being developed elsewhere too as a tool to control user analytics without platform interference (Newman 2022: 7). Our interviewees believed that well-developed and well-managed analytics could also create new income streams for the news media. However, user data should be managed in an open and transparent manner; for example, as required

by the EU's Digital Service Act, which would avoid the black-box effect linked to very large platforms.

The news media representatives we interviewed did not consider direct negotiations with the platforms a realistic solution for regulatory issues or compensation agreements on content. Their realism is based on the small size of Finland and its media market (Sirkkunen et al. 2021). Any negotiations would need to be carried out at the EU level, as has been the case until now. The new Directive on Copyright in the Digital Single Market (DSM, EU 2019/790) makes it possible for news media organizations to receive compensation for and better control the use of news content online. The directive has not yet been fully implemented in Finland. Our interviewees had different opinions on content compensation, as many of them saw the benefits of sharing news content on platforms. Better regulating the platforms and having them pay taxes at the country level were given priority over content compensation.

Indirect subsidies were seen as vital for commercial media. There was strong support for the reduced rate of VAT (10%), which is now applied, and for the implementation of 0% VAT in the near future, as it is now allowed by the EU (Haapalainen 2021). Continued state compensation for distribution costs was also seen as necessary. Direct subsidies were much less popular because they raised the question of who or what institution would choose the recipients and the criteria for granting the funds (see also Grundström 2020; Piirainen et al. 2022).

Overall, at the time of interviewing, the news editors' stance toward the challenges brought about by digitalization and platformization was quite positive. Digitalization has increased the understanding of journalism and created possibilities for growth. A special emphasis was placed on the quality of journalism, without which there is no product to sell, be it content to users or advertising space. Digitalization has contributed much-needed tools to better comprehend what quality journalism is. In recent years, Finnish news media have experienced a period of growth after a long downward trend, and organizations have hired new staff. There is even a lack of or competition for the most-skilled professionals (Arola 2022). It seems that this positive attitude toward digital growth is internationally shared. Other reports have also found that investing in quality news products and targeting new subscribers offer the best chances of success (Newman 2022: 6–10). The COVID-19 pandemic has mostly meant an increased interest in the news, as people have recognized the need for high quality, verified information. Now the news media need to find the tools to maintain that interest.

## **4 Defending the Boundaries of News Media as Societal Institution**

In Western societies, news media have traditionally been seen as having a central role in democracy as providers of information, enablers of public discussion and participation, and controllers of those in power. During the time of traditional mass

media, news organizations had an agenda-setting power to filter and steer the daily topics of discussion and influence who got to participate in debates (e.g., Habermas 2006, 2022). The new era of digital communication and social media has changed this. Now, practically anyone can be an information provider or author with the potential power to set the agenda, and the same is true of taking part in public discussions online.

In Finland, as elsewhere in the world, the new digital era has created a competitive and hybrid communication environment where the news media have become just one of the players fighting for consumer attention among other professional, nonprofessional, commercial, and non-profit information providers (e.g., Carlson 2015; Chadwick 2013; Downey and Fenton 2003). The traditional media logic of ‘one to many’ has been supplemented by the new logic of ‘many to many’ in online networks, in which information is spread and discussed without any central control or prior filters. As some of our interviewees noted, digitalization means that news organizations compete not only against other news media and information providers but also against everything else that captures people’s attention in life. In this sense, consuming news is just one way to spend one’s time and not an obvious choice.

The increased diversity of the information environment was greeted positively by our interviewees. The wealth of information was welcomed because it ensures in principle that everyone can access the content they want and need. The competition with other information providers was not seen as a problem but as a reason for journalists to do their work well and to remain interesting and relevant. What was less appreciated was the inevitable growth of “noise” in the information system, meaning information that is inaccurate or somehow misleading or manipulative.

As mentioned above, the best tool to learn what consumers view as important was user analytics. There was criticism of the news media’s prior attitude of thinking they knew best what their audiences wanted or needed. Our interviewees agreed that analytics have changed this. However, they also said that their outlets still offer news that is not necessarily popular or widely read. This is because it discusses very important topics that need to be covered for public-interest reasons or for attracting new groups of readers. Among our participants, there seemed to be a genuine interest in serving audiences broadly and deeply and in maintaining national coherence through offering content that is believed to unite people under shared public interests. This is in accordance with the democratic principles of the media (Habermas 2006, 2022), which the interviewees also reflected on.

The Finnish media editors and experts also spoke about the public delegitimization of the media’s position in society. In Finland, as in other countries (e.g., Carlson 2015; Newman and Fletcher 2017; Waisbord 2018), radically populist voices and their media outlets have actively challenged the news media in recent years, claiming that they are biased and unreliable as an institution. This distrust has been openly expressed especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, but it was also present before; for instance, regarding issues such as migration, minorities, gender and equality, and politics (Noppari et al. 2019; Tolonen 2020). The most recent example has been the war in Ukraine (Tuomola 2023).

Lately, a number of surveys have shown that about half of Finnish journalists have experienced public scorn, devaluing, insults, and other forms of harassment in their work, especially online (e.g., Hiltunen et al. 2022; Väliverronen et al. 2023). The chief editors told us that during the pandemic, their newsrooms had been approached by COVID-19 deniers and related groups who had accused them of bias. Also, during the so-called refugee crisis of 2015, radical right-wing groups accused journalists of spreading disinformation and hiding the truth (Ojala and Pöyhtäri 2018). These direct contacts, public discrediting, and harassment reveal the changed relationship between audiences and the news media. The latter are now present online and expected to connect with people; therefore, they are easy to approach, which might weaken their authority (Ross Arguedas et al. 2022; Schapals and Bruns 2022; Toff et al. 2021). The news media are by no means seen as the only institution holding the truth; people can seek and find their own truths through their online networks (Carlson 2015; Waisbord 2018). As a result, the news media are constantly challenged.

The editors were well aware of the radical and mainly right-wing groups that actively produce their alternative views on current events and the world in their online media ecosystem. However, the general understanding among the interviewees was that these voices represent only a small, albeit loud, minority in Finland. Still, their existence should not be ignored as it causes concern and creates a need to follow the developments with such groups carefully. In the end, though, these groups are not the ones that most news media organizations aim to serve. The participants believed that it was more important to serve the needs of the general public, which still trusts the news, instead of trying to convince a minority that has already been lost as a target group. The interviewees also questioned whether this group had actually been lost as its attacks against the news media showed that these institutions are still very relevant and followed carefully, even by those who do not share their worldviews. The editors were also still thinking of ways to include minority and atypical views in the news given that the democratic objectives of news media organizations require that they cover all opinions in society. The challenge was doing so in a way that respects the rights of others and does not give room to arguments that endanger human rights and equality or violate the ethics of journalism.

All the interviewees believed that the news media still hold agenda-setting power as it is often their content that is being discussed online and elsewhere in society. Furthermore, professional news organizations are the only providers of daily general information in Finland. This is what still differentiates them from other information providers, which all somehow represent niche interests. The media representatives in this study had good reasons to be optimistic as the news in Finland is followed by 90% of the population. Trust in the news is higher than in most other countries, with 65% of the public trusting most news items and up to 73% trusting the news media they follow (see Reunanen 2022a: 36, 46). The number of people who generally distrust the news is low, but there is clear discontent toward news media outlets concerning their ability to serve the public instead of their own interests as well as the power that the public has over the news or its agenda, with 68% of the surveyed public expressing partial dissatisfaction with the lack of such power. Higher discontent correlates with age—older groups are more dissatisfied—, living outside the capital, lower education, and

political affiliation—those voting for the populist right-wing party *Perussuomalaiset* or the traditionally agrarian Central Party are the least satisfied—(Matikainen et al. 2020: 52–54). According to another study (Reunanen 2022b), there is a group of news media skeptics—about 7% of the public—who distrust all the news. However, a recent survey found that despite sometimes expressing discontent, 94% of Finns very much value the free media’s role in sustaining democracy; they also think it is important that diverse, domestic media content is being provided (Medialiitto 2023).

Even though it is present, public trust in the news media cannot be taken for granted. The interviewees stated that the best way to maintain this trust is to do the basic job well. It is also important to explain why society needs journalism and make the journalistic practices more comprehensible and transparent. By doing so, audiences can understand journalistic choices regarding topics, views, the selection of sources, or other restrictions. In general, journalists seem to have significant trust in journalistic values and practices, which are used to justify their role in society. When facing challenges, the news media are seen as capable of becoming stronger if they maintain their professional values and show this to their audiences in a transparent manner (e.g., Ross Arguedas et al. 2022; Schapals and Bruns 2022). In the Finnish context, these professional values relate especially to journalism’s ethics and the strong system of self-regulation that the news media sustain (see Julkisen sanan neuvosto JSN, 2013/2011). The interviewees noted that, unlike many other players in the current information environment, professional media organizations are dedicated to upholding high ethical standards and generally abide by them (Väliveronon et al. 2023). On the basis of this, in 2018, Finnish news media launched the campaign “Responsible Journalism” (Julkisen sanan neuvosto JSN 2018). Media organizations that adhere to the guidelines of journalistic self-regulation can use the campaign’s logo on their news products. A website explains to the public what the ethical principles of professional journalism are. Most of the media representatives in our study greeted this initiative as an important way to distinguish professional news media from other information providers; they thus used the logo. However, some of them expressed criticism and doubts about its efficacy.

## **5 News Media in Finland: What Needs to Be Done to Stay Relevant?**

In the past two decades, the digitalization and platformization of the mediascape have profoundly shaken the industry all over the world. In this study, representatives from Finland’s national and regional news media, as well as sector experts, shared their relatively positive views concerning the news media’s chances to defend their boundaries and survive in the new digital environment. The primary tools for survival seem to be the smart employment of user analytics, high-quality journalism, and digital news products based on the latter two elements. Increasing digital advertising, a restricted presence and content sharing on digital platforms, and business

consolidation are other measures to keep operations running and under the control of news media organizations.

It seems that the hardest years of ‘learning to be digital’ are now over and that there are signs of business renewal—at least for the major brands. This has come at a cost. The adaptation process has been long and painful, with cost reductions, layoffs, and, above all, the closure of small local publications that have been consolidated into larger ones, which has impoverished the media landscape. The concentration of media outlets in Finland is reaching a high level and is considered a potential risk for media plurality by the European Media Pluralism Monitor (2022).

Finnish news media have good reasons to be satisfied—they are popular with the public, which generally trusts and appreciates them. Still, there are signals that this trust is decreasing in the hybrid media environment, and sections of the public are actively delegitimizing the news media’s societal importance. Furthermore, the younger generations need to be approached with different business models compared to the past.

However, it should be noted that the views we collected with our interviews in early 2022 could be temporary. The news media’s ‘crisis talk’ tends to fluctuate, and it strengthens from time to time (Koljonen 2013). In late 2022 and 2023, inflation, and the ever-increasing distribution and production costs have created new problems for many of the top regional newspapers in northern and central Finland. As a result, they have reduced the publication of a printed version from seven to six, or even less days per week. Also *MTV News* is downsizing its news supply. Expected cuts in state budget could also mean significant cuts in the support for both public and private media. The news organizations can by no means relax and think that everything will remain on the right track. As concluded by a recent report (Lindén et al. 2022), to continue to exist in a world of digital giants, the news media will constantly need to renew their business models, strengthen their relationships with audiences, actively respond to the challenges of the platforms, and now increasingly also AI technology, and successfully implement eventual new regulations.

The news media’s position in Finnish society has been comparatively strong, and the industry has been able to function independently. As our interviewees noted, however, this position needs to be actively maintained. Currently, Finland lacks an overarching media policy, and both media representatives and researchers (e.g., Piirainen et al. 2022) are calling for a national debate on the role and importance of the free media as well as for a comprehensive media policy. This policy would make Finland better prepared to confront the incremental legislation coming from the EU that aims to regulate the functioning of the free media, such as the European Media Freedom Act that is now being prepared (European Commission 2022). Some fear that if poorly implemented, these sorts of laws could lead to increased control of the Finnish media, which until now have mainly regulated themselves.

Support for the professional news media is important not only for their survival as businesses but also, more broadly, for the safeguarding of core social values, such as democracy, pluralism, and public deliberation. The accelerating battle on the digital platforms and in the hybrid media system for information production and the truth exposes the whole of society and its central players to external influences. In this

environment, the professional news media still have an important role to play in creating societal stability. In Finland, work needs to be done to keep independent, critical, and plural journalism alive in the future.

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# **Tensions Between Old and New Actors in Journalism**

# Muddying the Media Ecosystem: Roles and Performance of the Pseudo-Media



Dolors Palau-Sampio 

**Abstract** This chapter analyzes how pseudo-media allegedly present themselves as information providers, by adopting visual traits and imitating the six journalistic role performance dimensions identified in conventional media. The results of a qualitative and quantitative analysis show that the most mimicked is the watchdog role. However, pseudo-media distort the essence of it by focusing their critical task in disrupting progressive policies, while offering the loyal-facilitator role to far-right representatives. This trend is also observed in the civic role performance, aimed at giving a voice to anti-abortion groups, or opposed to measures against COVID-19 and, to a lesser degree, imitating the service role to promote their activities. Although polarization and clickbait reinforce all roles, they are particularly notable in intervention and infotainment. This latter one, the second most imitated, particularly exacerbates sensationalism and violence.

**Keywords** Disinformation · Pseudo-media · Polarization · Clickbait

## 1 Introduction

The primary aim of disinformation is to deceive and manipulate people for either political or economic purposes (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; European Commission 2018) using different mechanisms. This involves a chameleonic capacity to trigger multiple resources to reach the goals proposed, including changes to context, phoney or impostor-like content and misleading connections (Wardle and Derakhshan 2018).

Alternative facts and misleading information have been part of the public sphere for centuries (Cooke 2017; Sunstein and Vermeule 2009; Tandoc et al. 2018). However, in recent years, the complex and hybrid media ecosystem (Chadwick 2017) has favored the rise of actors able to offer this information in new affordable ways, taking advantage of both the technology that allows fast dissemination and a social and political context minded to polarization and populist tendencies.

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This environment has stimulated the emergence of digital pseudo-media that benefit from the credibility crisis of traditional media and institutions for decades (Freelon and Wells 2020; Müller and Schulz 2021; Palau-Sampio and López-García 2022). In fact, they present themselves as alternatives to mainstream platforms and loudspeakers of censored ideologies, particularly conservative ones (Walther and McCoy 2021). However, in doing so, pseudo-media adopt strategies that, on one hand, imitate the mainstream display to appear recognizable as communicative actors (Palau-Sampio 2021; Rathnayake 2018) and, on the other hand, overturn their professional and ethical rules (Del-Fresno-García 2019). The aim of this chapter is to deepen into the mimicry strategies of those outlets that not only mock journalistic conventions (Palau-Sampio 2022) but also the journalistic role performance (Mellado 2015).

## 2 Theoretical Context

The concept of disinformation embraces a wide range of content linked to a variety of media genres, which can include not only manipulated or fabricated content but also genuine content displayed out of context (Freelon and Wells 2020; Wardle and Derakhshan 2018). The configuration of a hybrid media ecosystem (Chadwick 2017), which allows reliable and non-curated content has hampered citizens' ability to identify the trustworthy. As a result, an amazing constellation of content involving different levels of falseness has exacerbated the risks associated with 'information disorder' (Wardle and Derakhshan 2018) and the potential challenges in terms of social and political harmony.

Episodes such as the 2021 US Congress assault or the Brazilian equivalent in 2023, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic and its 'infodemic' implications (Bechmann 2020) have seen disinformation as a potential threat to democracy (Bennet and Livingston 2018; Esser and Pfetsch 2020; Waisbord 2018).

Among the hybrid media context in which disinformation has grown strong (Lee 2019), this research focuses on a set of digital outlets that challenge mainstream media by mixing "journalism and activism" (Mayerhöffer and Heft 2021: 2) by ambiguously presenting themselves as legitimate information providers while relying on conspiracy theories and misleading versions of the social reality (Palau-Sampio 2022). Research has focused on this phenomenon identifying the outlets involved as 'alternative', 'far-right' or 'hyper-partisan' (Atton 2006; Benkler et al. 2017; Haller and Holt 2019), mostly following the path of *Breitbart News* and its influential role during the 2016 US Presidential Election (Benkler et al. 2017).

In recent years, a combination of social, political, and technological factors has influenced the rise of disinformation at the same time as the presence and significant audience of alternative outlets (Hameleers et al. 2022; Palau-Sampio 2022). News consumption via social media (Newman et al. 2021) and distrust in traditional media (Müller and Schulz 2021) have shifted audiences toward direct exposure of partisan and likeminded information sources (Garrett et al. 2014; Lu and Lee 2019; Stroud

2010) as well as false or malicious information (Papadopoulos et al. 2016). Meanwhile, the mediatization role exerted by traditional media for decades has lost ground (Couldry and Hepp 2017) and contributed to an even more fragmented public sphere (Schlesinger 2020).

In a highly polarized political scenario (Davis 2019), ‘alternative facts’ prevail over factual evidence (Barrera et al. 2020). This implies a distrust toward traditional media expressed not as a rational criticism but as a style of communication that appeals to emotions (Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2019) and relies on attitudes supporting a populist agenda (Fawzi 2019; Schulz et al. 2018; Wirz 2018). In fact, the nature of disinformation and its manifestation through pseudo-media can only be understood in combination with sensationalism and partisanship to provide anti-establishment narratives (Mourão and Robertson 2019).

Although not exclusively (Mayerhöffer and Heft 2021), some authors have stressed a higher prevalence of digital disinformation among the radical right media sphere and the voters of this ideological spectrum (Benkler et al. 2017; Michailidou and Trenz 2021; Yang 2020; Woolley and Howard 2018). The proliferation of these extremist websites offering disinformation and conspiracy theories (Van Prooijen et al. 2015) evidence the current polarization and fragmentation of political discourse (Haller and Holt 2019).

## 2.1 *Role Performance*

The discussion on the professional roles of journalism has been present in the academic field for decades (Mellado, Hellmueller and Donsbach 2016), mostly linked to the normative standards of the profession (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001) and the social and political roles news professionals consider they must fulfill in society (Mellado and Van Dalen 2014). However, research has only recently started to focus on the materialization of journalistic roles at a performative level, assuming the gap between theoretical assumptions and their practical correlates (Hanitzsch 2007; Mellado and Van Dalen 2014).

Role performance involves one of the four dimensions relating to professional roles, which entail conception and perception but also their behavior and the “collective outcome of the concrete newsroom decisions and the style of journalistic reporting” (Mellado et al. 2016: 7). Content and discourse analysis allow us to assess the performance of the media and to classify them according to at least three different perspectives: the presence of the journalistic voice in the news story, the relationship that journalism has with those in power, and the way journalism approaches the audience (Mellado 2015). These three approaches, inspired by the previous literature (Donsbach 2008; Eide and Knight 1999; Hanitzsch 2007) led Mellado to identify six dimensions of journalistic role performance based on the practical manifestations in news content: intervention, watchdog, loyal-facilitator, service, infotainment and civic (2015).

## 2.2 *Perverting the Practice of Journalism*

Pseudo-media mimics and mocks traditional media in several ways (Palau-Sampio 2022). They imitate not only visual aspects—in order to appear to be informative outlets—but also journalistic conventions. These include a variety of options that invoke the main professional norms, linked to sources, contextualization and ethics.

Firstly, pseudo-media rely on sources with scarce representation or biased ones presented as experts, while inadequately quoting social networks and presenting them as the voice of society. Moreover, they plagiarize content from conventional media without identifying them and modifying the original headline for clickbait purposes (Palau-Sampio 2016). Secondly, they employ a deceptive use of hyperlinks, by linking to “official sources inconsistent with headline or presenting other information; placebo links (inaccessible languages or unnecessary); enchainned links without reaching original sources” (Palau-Sampio 2022: 11). Thirdly, audiovisual resources lack the minimal standards required, from the identification of images to the source providing them or the context to properly understand the facts. Likewise, the content published by pseudo-media also reproduces these problems when offering a mix of events to provide a forced conclusion or to reframe a topic approach by giving misleading connections. Finally, they tease sensitive norms while mocking the most basic ethical rules, i.e., linking crime with immigration (Palau-Sampio 2022).

Given that pseudo-media challenge professional journalism while denaturing the informative purpose (Mayerhöffer and Heft 2021), this research wants to better understand the extent to which they also try to present their performance under the disguise of a particular journalistic role, i.e., adopting an alleged watchdog or civic approach that distorts the honest basis of this commitment.

Considering the above, the following questions have been posed:

RQ1. What is the alleged role performance of the content published by the pseudo-media?

RQ2. To which expressive resources linked to polarization and populism are their roles related?

## 3 Methodology

To analyze the chameleonic expressions and functions undertaken by the pseudo-media, this research takes the six journalistic roles identified by Mellado (2015) as a reference, as shown in Table 1, to compare the extent to which pseudo-media try to be perceived as legitimate providers of information when they impersonate media performance.

Following quantitative and qualitative methods, this chapter analyzes a sample (N = 300) gathered from April to December 2021 from six Spanish pseudo-media belonging to the far-right wing ecosystem and involved in disinformation practices (Ramos 2021): *Altavoz de Sucesos* (AS), *El Diestro* (ED), *Alerta Nacional* (AN),

**Table 1** Journalistic role performance. *Source* Mellado (2015)

Dimension	Characteristics
Intervention	Taking sides, interpretation, proposals/demands, adjectives, first person
Watchdog	Questioning, critiques, denouncing, conflict, coverage of trials and processed, investigative reporting, external research
Loyal-facilitator	Support institutional activities, promote national or regional policies, positive image political elite, positive image economic elite, highlight country's progress, comparison of the country/region with the rest, highlight national triumphs, promotion of the country, patriotism
Service	Impact everyday life, tips and advice (grievances), tips and advice (individual risks), consumer advice
Infotainment	Personalization, private life, sensationalism, scandal, emotion
Civic	Citizen perspective, citizen demand, citizen questions, credibility of citizen movements, educating on duties and rights, background information, information on citizen activities, local impact

*Mediterráneo Digital* (MD), *Contando Estrelas* (CE) and *Actual* (AC). They jointly achieved 3,617,900 unique users in December 2021 (Similarweb 2022). Fifty items from each site were selected in reverse order from December 31, 2021 from a previous sample of significant topics regarding public policies, health or human rights (Palau-Sampio 2022). By carefully reading the pseudo-information included in the sample, the qualitative analysis has been carried out in two steps. Firstly, to identify the role performance defined by Mellado (2015), and secondly, to establish the link between the roles identified and expressive resources invested in the headlines.

## 4 Results

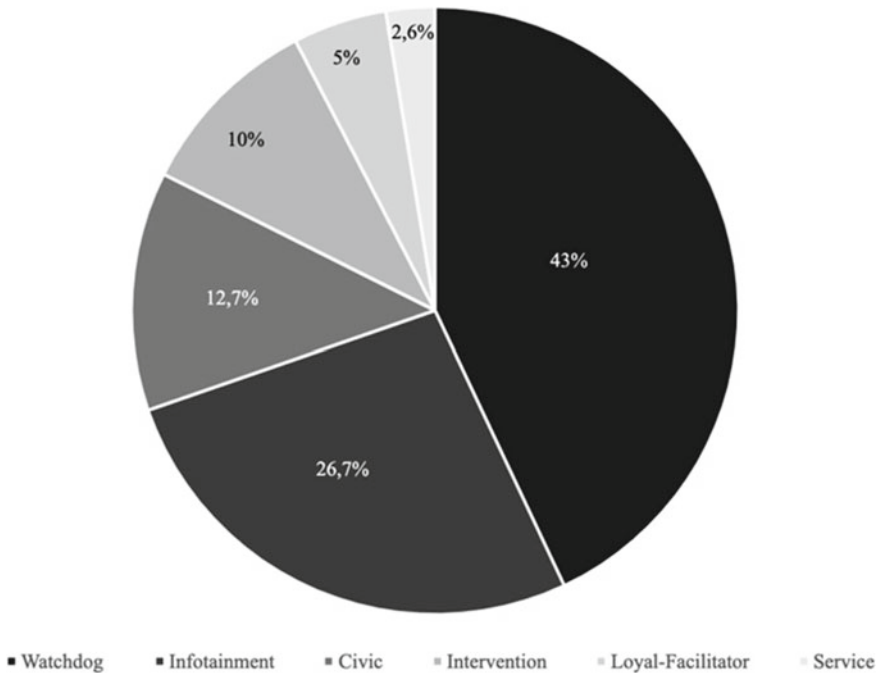
### 4.1 Imitation of the Journalistic Role Performance

The analysis of the sample shows that the main role performance simulated by the pseudo-media is the watchdog (Fig. 1). Four out of ten items (43.0%) follow this pattern, by focusing on critics, questioning or inquiring different actors. This is followed by infotainment—slightly more than a quarter of the sample—and civic role performance (12.7%). The intervention role is present in about a tenth, while the loyal-facilitator or service roles have a residual weight.

Together with the quantitative results, this research aims to delve deeper into the characteristics of the alleged performance in each pseudo-media by means of qualitative research dealing with the issues and actors involved, as detailed in the following subsections.

**Selective Watchdog Scrutiny.** The pseudo-media analyzed emulate the watchdog role by decrying those actions or projects far from their ideology and employing





**Fig. 1** Percentage of journalistic role performance in pseudo-media. Own elaboration

campaigns to condemn them. This involves selective scrutiny of the actors and facts to point to apparent abuses where the legitimate dimension of the journalistic role is misappropriated. This occurs in the main subjects analyzed in the sample, following three main patterns.

Firstly, by demonizing representatives of the opponent political parties and blaming them for any kind of conflict or problem, particularly those linked to the coalition in power formed by PSOE and Unidas Podemos. However, this watchdog role lacks the basics to be properly developed, as it does not involve any kind of investigative reporting to support it. The following headline, “The PSOE leads the working class to ruin: inflation soars to all-time highs” (AS301221<sup>1</sup>), stylistically adapts the characteristics of the watchdog role, by focusing on the apparent incorrect action of the party in power and the perverse effects on the working classes, while avoiding the contextual explanation of the economic situation. To further this line, pseudo-media rely on far-right wing actors as references to inspire and support their campaigns, as happened with “The Communist Government of Pedro Sánchez strives to ruin Spain, in all its sectors: VOX denounces in Europe the extreme situation of the Spanish countryside: ‘Every day three cattle farms are abandoned in Spain’” (AN101221).

<sup>1</sup> This type of code refers to pseudo-media identity: title initials or the two initial letters when a single name, day, month, year of publishing.

The alleged watchdog role is performed by pseudo-media in association with polarization practices, induced by means of war expressions that portrays the public sphere as a kind of battlefield. While establishing a hierarchy, pseudo-media rely on manichaeistic distinctions to present far-right wing politicians or representatives as role models, who intervene to denounce ‘criminal’ practices by means of a moral (and violent) intervention: “Macarena Olona thrashes Marlaska: “She will go down in history as the traitor she is” (AS261221) or “VOX demolishes the ‘union mafia’ CCOO and UGT for demonstrating against 25% of Spanish people: ‘They are enemies of the people’” (AS14122).

Likewise, as in conventional media (Mellado 2015), critiques and accusations of wrongdoing are often channeled by other voices in the pseudo-media studied, even if the complainant is a former judge condemned for malfeasance (Infantes 2022)—“ACODAP accuses the Defense Minister of removing more than 6 million euros from Spain and demands his immediate arrest” (AN101121)—or a well-known actor of the political disinformation sphere: “ALVISE PÉREZ EXCLUSIVE ON TWITTER! Marlaska ‘smeared’ several prison directors to ‘stimulate’ the Third Degree concessions. The death of the Lardero child cost 2000 euros” (AN011121). Most of the accusations are made by barely representative sources and concern COVID-19: “A leading Covid scientist criticizes Sánchez for his insistence on masks” (CE231221), “A psychiatrist assures that lockdowns and the continued use of masks will cause children to have a lower IQ” (ED261221) or “A confidential report from the boss of AstraZeneca predicts what the next pandemic will look like” (MD081221).

Secondly, pseudo-media mock the watchdog task by first ridiculing public investment in gender equality policies, and later accusing political representatives of financial malpractice. This is the case with “The communist Garzón’s ministry spends more than 82,000 euros on a ‘toy strike’” (CE091221), “Irene Montero spends 12,000 euros to study whether fires and hurricanes ‘are macho’” (MD271221), “More beach bars: Irene Montero creates the new ‘Femicide Observatory’ funded with public money” (MD291221) or “The Government of Pedro Sánchez finances a guide aimed at homosexuals that teaches how to get high during sex: Enjoy the vote!” (AN091221). In the same vein, investments in preserving co-official languages are criticized as unnecessary wastes of money: “Spend 1.6 million on regional languages: the nationalist proposal that the PP has supported” (CE221221).

Thirdly, as human rights embody a main priority in the traditional journalistic role, pseudo-media reinterpreted this function in light of their own values and not according to the international conventions, in terms of social rights issues: “Europe commits suicide: approves abortion as a right” (AC240621) or “Saving babies is a crime for the bureaucrats of the European Union (AC061021). Moreover, to reinforce this watchdog role, they present some ideologies and groups as victims of prosecution: “Report: Hate Crimes Against Christians In Europe Up 70% In One Year” (AN151221) or “Europe wants to censor right-wing humor” (AC310721). Children are used as means to focus on ideologically opposed issues, by relying on content published by other pseudo-media, in the case of transgender issues—“A therapist sues a university for not allowing him to conduct research on young transgender people who regret the change and want to reverse their operation” (ED150221) or

“ANOTHER TWIST: UK NHS believes girls who don’t like dolls should be transgender” (AN261121)—or the linguistic conflict—“Sánchez tolerates the harassment of a five-year-old boy as the price for continuing in La Moncloa” (CE081221). However, they use minors in a completely different sense when referring non-accompanied immigrant children and the actions to help them, presenting public spending as wasteful and excessive: “The Government waters the communities with 4.7 million public euros so that they welcome more Menas” (MD271221).

**Infotainment: Stressing Violence.** The trend to the unusual, the spectacular, or the unexpected as well as the hyperbolic approach or the focus on scandal and sensationalism are dominant in 26.7% of the items analyzed. Although the infotainment role is present in all pseudo-media, *Mediterráneo Digital* accounts for 37.5% of the items published. Violence, particularly against women and minors, with a sexual component or involving immigrants are recurrent, as shown in examples such as “ALL FOREIGNERS: The murderers of Isaac, the young man with Asperger’s stabbed in July in Madrid and the girl who was run over, have been arrested” (AN261121), “The Moroccan arrested for raping a woman tells the Civil Guard that ‘he was looking for a girlfriend’” (MD111121) or “This is how an illegal tourist, one of those who comes ‘totally free’, attacks a woman in the Canary Islands, don’t expect the government or Irene Montero to say anything” (ED250121).

Sensitive questions such as suicide are mocked in headlines like “A feminist comedian is admitted to a psychiatric hospital after attempting suicide” (MD081221) or “Passed! The first machine to commit suicide is already legal” (MD091221). Likewise, content related to gender identity is sensationalized and distorted, as in the case of “An American pedophile who declared himself a woman was held in a women’s prison and raped a cellmate” (AN251121), “The Hobby Bingham case: this is how gender ideology helps rapists” (CE271121) or “THIS is what the transgender and LGBTI ‘lobby’ is looking for: Normalize pedophilia: Transgender teacher asks to ‘destigmatize’ it” (AN131121).

Although a pattern of clickbait strategies can be seen in infotainment content, the results of the headlines associated with them (67%) do not evidence a particular abuse of it. However, the items analyzed stress morbid aspects and brutality in crime and constantly appeal to emotions: “A Moroccan immigrant bleeds to death after cutting his leg in the house he entered to rob” (MD151121), “A 36-year-old woman was arrested for brutally beating her four-year-old son, including biting her” (ED160321) or “The woman who *killed a man with a hammer* defined herself as a ‘feminist’, ‘communist’ and a voter for Podemos” (MD231221).

**Civic Dimension through Radical Voices and the Intervention Role.** Almost a quarter of the sample analyzed is linked to the civic (12.7%) and intervention (10%) dimensions. Pseudo-media perform the first journalistic role in quite a restricted manner, as they limit the citizen perspective, demands and questions to ultra-conservative voices and detractors of COVID-19 measures. Half the items identified as civic were from the pseudo-media *Actual*, that acts as a loudspeaker of different ultra-catholic entities, particularly HazteOir.org, a far-right wing association belonging to the lobby group CitizenGo. The items published by it combine

the dissemination of activities along its ideological spectrum—“This Saturday 19, 15th March for Life in Colombia” (AC170621) or “This Saturday, a demonstration in Ferraz against the criminalization of pro-life” (AC110621)—with the promotion of new entities—“Dignity for Life is born in support of the vulnerable elderly” (AC280621) or “The Freedom and Alternative Forum Foundation is born” (AC090921).

The civic dimension is woven with the voices of a radical opposition to progressive policies, mainly related to gender and LGBTI rights and abortion. In this vein, these outlets offer a voice to several entities and to the far-right party VOX, supporting “citizens” when they are critical of the restrictions against COVID-19—i.e., “The Eleuteria Association announces that it will file a criminal complaint against the President of the Government, Mr. Pedro Sánchez, in the event that he ends up imposing the use of masks outdoors” (ED231221) or “VOX encourages Spaniards to demonstrate against the Covid passport: ‘It is a control tool’” (AS191221). Moreover, they also use unidentified sources as representatives of the Spanish society, as in the case of attacks on the government “Spaniards criticize Pedro Sánchez for his appearance: ‘You have not said anything. Unpresentable’” (AS191221) or “Spaniards explode against the Government of Sánchez for not defending the Canet child: ‘He is sold to separatism’” (AS101221) and non-contrasted ones to support their arguments: “‘We need help not to abort,’ says a mother rescued by AmbulanciaVida.com” (AC140621).

Although the intervention role performance is secondarily present in many of the items analyzed, it is prevalent in at least one in ten of them, mainly related to the clickbait headline pattern. Authors not only take a side on those issues addressed by means of a clear assessment—“YOU CANNOT FALL LOWER: The PP votes in favor of an anti-Spanish nationalist proposal for Compromis, and the BILDUTarras thank them” (AN291221) or “Don Juan Carlos I and a clear sign that Spain is giving in to despotism” (CE181221), but also by means of qualifying adjectives—“The pathetic announcement of the British government comparing inoculation with mobile batteries” (ED251221) or “The miserable attitude of the left in the face of the brutal attack on the son of a UPN deputy” (CE301221)—as well as the use of the first person—“Hermann Tertsch’s tweet that reflects what many of us think about Nazism and communism” (CE201121).

**Loyalty to Some Interests and Promotion Instead of Service.** Even if the loyal-facilitator role can seem to be the antipode of pseudo-media, they have the ability to select and promote particular political and ideological interests. In this sense, VOX and their representatives are portrayed as de facto powers, whose activities and mindsets involve the clearest path to follow, such as the case of “Abascal announces that he will not wear a mask outdoors: ‘With enough distance I’m not going to wear it’” (AS221221) and “The resounding review of Santiago Abascal to Pedro Sánchez for violating the Constitution” (CE101121). Likewise, international representatives of the European far-right wing ideology are shown as examples to follow: “SPAIN WITH POLAND! Morawiecki encourages the military defending the Polish border: ‘You look after the safety of the Poles. Thanks!’” (AN091121) or “Orbán:

‘Hungary will be the first country in Europe to stop aggressive LGBT propaganda’” (AN241021).

The service role is barely seen in the pseudo-media analyzed and, when it occurs, it is to serve specific interests, more closely linked to the promotion of certain entities than to the genuine aim to impact everyday life, as in “Navas & Cusi warn of bad practices due to the end of the Libor” (AC220921) or “Preico Jurídicos launches a fantastic initiative to help hoteliers who stand up to the government” (ED301221). Similarly, the alleged social advice is mediated by ideological interests: “Interview with the lawyer specializing in sex-based violence Víctor Meño: ‘I recommend that men record discussions when there are serious relationship problems’” (ED180321) or “Believe an application whose objective is to offer tools to be able to fight against the health dictatorship” (ED301221).

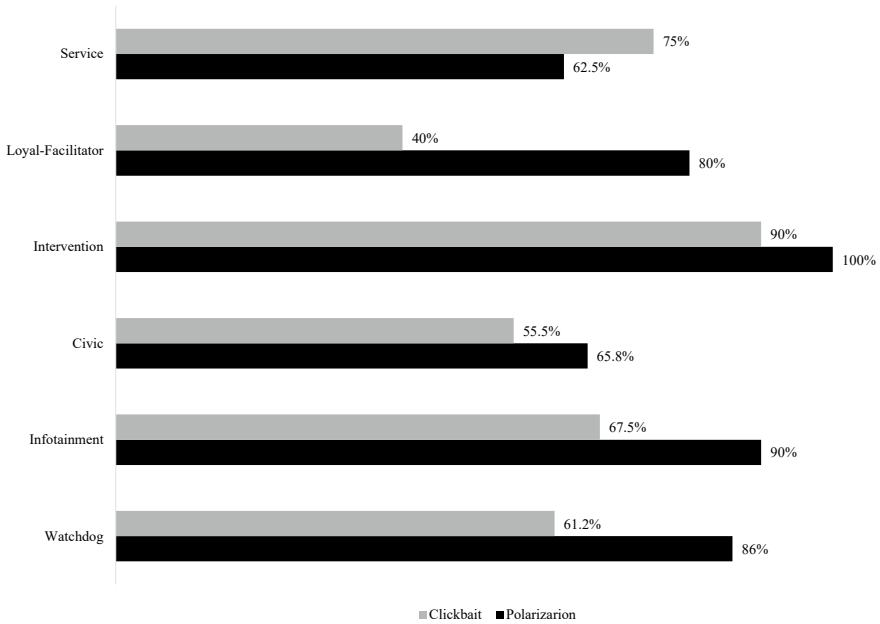
## 4.2 Polarization and Clickbait

Results of the analysis show that the intervention role is where the main percentage of polarization and clickbait options lie (Fig. 2). In both cases, *Mediterráneo Digital* and *El Diestro* are the most representative pseudo-media. Polarization values have greater weight than clickbait. Between 80 and 90% of the infotainment, watchdog and loyal-facilitator journalistic role performance headlines foster the division into opposing factions mostly by means of the weaponization of terms and the forced contrast of non-related ideas. Although civic and service role performance are less related to polarization values, almost two thirds of them present some specific traits.

The clickbait characteristics have a major role in connection with the service, infotainment, and the watchdog role performance. In them, pseudo-media reinforce the headlines by using expressive resources to attract readers’ attention. However, it is a misleading strategy given that the data promised is not properly developed. The civic and loyal journalistic roles are present in less than half and 40% of the headlines, respectively.

## 5 Conclusion

The blurred boundaries established by the hybrid media system (Chadwick 2017) in the journalistic field has been reflected in the emergence of the pseudo-media (Palau-Sampio 2021). These websites take advantage of the confusing limits allowed by the digital sphere not only to imitate the conventional media display but to impersonate their role performance. In fact, Mimicry is at the core of the pseudo-media outlets at different levels. This research furthers the characteristics of six digital outlets geared toward the far right-wing spectrum (Ramos 2021), that offer free content and receive several million unique readers. This chapter brings to light the strategies used by pseudo-media to challenge the journalistic role performance.



**Fig. 2** Percentage of polarization and clickbait related to the journalistic role performance in pseudo-media. Own elaboration

The watchdog role performance is the most emulated. However, pseudo-media distort their main commitment to investigative reporting as a tool to question and denounce *de facto* powers. By contrast, they first perform a selective scrutiny, focusing only on progressive policies, qualifying them as criminal based on the headline without supporting this with data in the text. The watchdog role misappropriation is even more twisted, when pseudo-media ridicule investment in social policies as a waste of money, without providing any evidence. Although the watchdog role performance is carried out in traditional media using neutral language, most of the pseudo-media items show polarization and clickbait traits.

Even though infotainment characteristics are linked with disinformation (Mourão and Robertson 2019) and central in pseudo-media (Palau-Sampio 2022), this role performance is stressed—in addition to the polarization and clickbait options—in a quarter of the items analyzed by focusing on violence, particularly with a gender or childhood component, criminalizing immigration and mocking the most essential journalism ethics. By contrast, the intervention journalistic role performance is the most related to clickbait and polarization. In fact, these resources are used when taking sides or explicitly interpreting or adjectivizing some proposals.

As in the previous journalistic role performance, the civic dimension is distorted by only giving a voice to some ultra-catholic entities and stressing those opposing the measures against COVID-19. Although the loyal-facilitator and the service role

performance have a minor presence in the sample, the items are also related to the aim of highlighting the far-right ecosystem and promoting their activities.

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# Blurring Boundaries in Political Journalism? The Digital Authority of Citizens in the Public Debate on Twitter



Andreu Casero-Ripollés  and Vasco Ribeiro 

**Abstract** In the era of mass communication, citizens had a marginal role in terms of their influence in conditioning public debate. The consolidation of social media has introduced new parameters to redefine their influence in terms of digital empowerment. Our objective is to analyze whether Twitter is supporting a redefinition of the influence of citizens in political journalism that questions its traditional borders, making them more blurred and hybrid. We have carried out research based on the methodology of social network analysis with a big data sample of 127.3 million tweets related to the negotiations for the formation of the Government in Spain. The results reveal that journalists and politicians continue to dominate the discussion on Twitter and citizens are the group with the least influence. In addition, we identify the factors that encourage citizens to become connective influencers. Finally, we discuss the future of political journalism considering our findings.

**Keywords** Political journalism · Influencers · Citizens · Social media

## 1 Introduction

In the era of mass communication, citizens had a marginal role in terms of their influence in conditioning public debate. The set up was arranged for citizens to operate as spectators of the interactions carried out by journalists and political actors who defined the public agenda and the frame of its main issues. However, the consolidation of social media has introduced new parameters in the communicative scenario. These digital platforms promote mass self-communication, which implies that any user can become an autonomous producer and disseminator of content. This opens up new opportunities for citizens to redefine their influence in a dynamic of digital

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empowerment. Furthermore, this may involve a blurring of the traditional boundaries of political journalism.

The digital environment is transforming not only the professional routines of political journalism but also its capacity to exercise symbolic power in our society (Castells 2013). The emergence of political influencers, new actors capable of concentrating great authority with the capacity to condition public debate on digital platforms, questions the monopoly of the media over information. Its prominence is now threatened in a highly changing environment. This may have consequences on key aspects that have defined the identity of political journalism in recent decades. Two central elements can be affected: the establishment of the agenda and its role in forming public opinion. These characteristics have given an essential role to political journalism in the articulation of the public sphere and have endowed it with high relevance in social terms. However, do citizens manage to be influential in the political conversation on Twitter and, thus, condition the construction of the agenda and public opinion by competing against political journalism or do they continue to occupy a marginal position? Is a redefinition of power taking place within the field of political journalism in the digital landscape that upsets the established balances?

This chapter aims to find out to what extent Twitter is supporting a redefinition of the influence of citizens in political journalism that questions its traditional borders, making them more blurred and hybrid. For this, we have carried out a study based on the methodology of social network analysis with a big data sample of 127.3 million tweets. Our objective is to know the incidence of citizenship when it comes to conditioning the digital political conversation on Twitter and its implications for political journalism. The data, studied through social network analysis, allows us to identify the eigenvector centrality, or digital authority, of citizens in three network communities, corresponding to Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia, during the negotiations for the formation of the Government in Spain in 2016. The digital authority determines the capacity to condition public debate on digital platforms. In addition, it is associated with the possibility of influencing both the articulation of the public agenda and the framing processes of public issues.

## **2 The Role of Citizenship in Political Communication**

Traditionally, the citizenry has occupied a secondary role in the classic scenario of political communication. In this context, it was the media, especially television, and politicians who dominated this field. This made these actors central and indispensable when articulating the public sphere (Habermas 2006). The result of their leading role was that citizens were relegated to a passive and marginal position, with very limited autonomy bestowed upon them (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999). Their ability to condition public debate was very limited and, usually, when forming their opinion, they followed the guidelines and parameters disseminated by political and journalistic elites (Zaller 1992). Citizens positioned themselves as spectators of the interactions between journalists and politicians that shaped political communication

outside of the former (Wolton 1990). In this framework, citizens were conceived as consumers of the news arising from the relationship between the media and politicians (Scammell 2000). For this reason, they were understood as audiences, endowed with little room for maneuver to contribute to the articulation of the public agenda and debate (Mazzoleni 2004). The agency of the citizenry to intervene and act politically in the public sphere was very limited. Their role was confined to participating in the elections through their vote and being a subject susceptible to being persuaded and influenced by the media and politicians.

This model was hegemonic during the era of mass communication dominated by television. However, with the advent of digital media and, especially, social media, a whole series of changes have originated that are transforming it. In this context, digital platforms are introducing new parameters and conditions for public debate. Some of them affect the role of citizens in political communication, opening a scenario for redefining their role in the digital environment (Casero-Ripollés and Moret-Soler 2022). Unlike conventional mass media, digital platforms offer any user facilities to produce and disseminate their messages and opinions that can potentially reach a massive audience. This causes the emergence of a new form of communication called mass self-communication (Castells 2013), in which anyone is the sender and receiver of messages and not only the traditional media. In this way, the thresholds of access to public debate for any citizen are reduced and the diversification of the participants in the public discussion is allowed and the number of actors involved in it is increased (Ruiz et al. 2011). As a consequence, the public sphere is potentially more diverse and is no longer monopolized exclusively by journalists and politicians (Chadwick 2017; Casero-Ripollés 2020). The digital environment expands to new players, becoming a more open and competitive scenario (Feenstra et al. 2017). The incursion into this space of new social movements and political activists is especially significant (Lievrouw 2011; Sampedro and Avidad 2018). Thus, the possibility opens for new voices to be heard in digital political communication (Coleman 2017). With this, plurality is expanded, and public debate is potentially stimulated with more arguments in circulation, favoring the freedom of expression of citizens (Shirky 2011). This can generate a polyphony of voices that represents a significant shift towards a more democratic public sphere (Benkler 2006).

Another transformation introduced by the digital environment is the emergence of networked publics (Ito 2008). These platforms allow citizens to find and connect with other people with whom they share interests or tastes (Tufekci 2017). This means that the public sphere begins to have a distributed discursive architecture (Benkler 2006) and that connectivity within it increases (Van Dijck 2013).

In this context, the debate on the role played by citizens in the digital political communication scenario emerges. In previous investigations, two major positions are detected. In the first place, an important part of the literature defends that, due to its communicative characteristics and its horizontality, social media generate a more distributed power (Castells 2013). As a consequence, citizens are in a position to decisively condition public debate (Zuckerman 2014). This means the decline of a model of an obedient citizen dependent on the media and politicians (Bennett 2008). Thus, an empowered citizenry emerges, endowed with a new political agency

thanks to digital technology (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Gerbaudo 2012; Heimans and Timms 2018). The cases of the Arab springs (Howard and Hussain 2013), 15M (Micó and Casero-Ripollés 2014) and the Occupy movement (Kavada 2020; Fuchs 2014) provide a variety of evidence in this regard. This approach places us before a scenario marked by the minimal effects of the media on political communication (Bennett and Iyengar 2008).

At the other extreme, other more recent research maintains that we are witnessing a regression in terms of the contribution of social media to creating a citizenry with greater political autonomy and with a greater capacity to condition the digital public debate (Navarria 2019). This is based, on the one hand, on the irruption of recentralization dynamics (De Ugarte 2014) as a fruit of which, power, despite operating in a more open scenario, remains in the hands of the media and politicians. In other words, the elites that have dominated classical political communication now extend their preponderance to the digital environment. This causes the political agency of citizens to be limited in social media. On the other hand, despite their democratic potential, digital platforms are becoming a tool for surveillance (Zuboff 2019) and for the political manipulation of citizens, generating risks for democracy (Couldry and Mejias 2019; Vaidhyanathan 2018). Cases such as that of Cambridge Analytica demonstrate how through sophisticated digital campaigns of computerized propaganda (Woolley and Howard 2018) disinformation can be generalized among citizens in the digital context, even altering their political and electoral behaviour.

Despite the importance of the consequences of this debate, we still know relatively little about the role of citizens in the new digital scenario of political communication. Although the positive impact of social networks on their political participation has been demonstrated through surveys (Lorenz-Spreen et al. 2022), we have little empirical evidence on the real political agency of citizens within these platforms. Previous research has paid more attention to the interactions and digital strategies of other actors such as politicians and journalists. However, citizenship, despite its relevance to democracy, has been little studied (Navarria 2019). Previous works have shown that citizens use social networks to criticize and show their discontent with politics (Marcos-García et al. 2017) and that there are dissonances between the agenda built by politicians and the interests of digital platform users (Alonso-Muñoz and Casero-Ripollés 2018). Other findings indicate that citizens use these tools to obtain information before the rest of the population and act as speakers to express their opinions and even to try to influence political actors (Gainous and Wagner 2014). In addition, in the specific case of young people, politics occupies a secondary place since their digital interests are oriented towards entertainment while celebrities, especially from the world of music, are their foremost figures of reference (Micó-Sanz et al. 2020). Given the scarcity of previous studies, we wonder what the capacity of citizens is to condition the public debate in the digital environment. Are social media capable of strengthening citizens' capacity for action in the political conversation on Twitter?

### 3 Political Influencers

Digital media are transforming the exercise of social influence. This notably affects the political conversation that takes place on digital platforms. The disruptive nature that the public sphere is assuming in the digital environment is causing changes in the conditions and content of public debate (Bennett and Pfetsch 2018). In this context, the emergence of political influencers is being positioned. These are social actors that, operating with digital media, condition the thoughts, attitudes, interactions and behaviors of other users (Casero-Ripollés 2022). Therefore, they are subjects capable of directing and dominating the digital public debate, accumulating a great capacity for influence and authority over the third party.

Previous research has offered two ways to define influencers. The first conceives them as political social media influencers. These are users who have become known on social media and, as self-created personal brands, regularly distribute self-produced political content that reaches, and potentially influences, a diverse audience (Bause 2021). They are new actors who are not part of the political or journalistic elites. The second focuses on the ability to connect digitally with other people and defines them as connective influencers (Casero-Ripollés 2022). These are users who manage to occupy a position of centrality in the digital network due to their ability to establish relationships and interactions with third parties. In this way, they increase an expanding digital authority and manage to condition the digital conversation, influencing other people. Within this modality, any type of actor can be included, including journalists and politicians.

Research on connective influencers is still recent. However, it highlights its capacity to define the public agenda and the frame of its main issues and to blur the traditional limits of political journalism. The first results indicate that a minority concentrates most of the connections (González-Bailón and Wang 2016). Consequently, influence is concentrated in a few hands, responding to a power law distribution of the digital users. On the other hand, despite the opportunities offered by the digital environment, the findings suggest that political actors and journalists continue to dominate the exercise of influence in social media (Casero-Ripollés 2021; Dagoula 2019).

In the case of the media and journalists, despite the fact that they continue to retain a relevant part of digital authority to condition the digital conversation, new competitors have appeared that question their social influence (Casero-Ripollés 2020). The media continue to have a strong agenda-setting and frame-setting influence, but now these processes are open to other social actors. Previous results show that, in the digital public debate, the national media, those leaning left, new agencies and the pure players are the ones who manage to amass more digital authority (Casero-Ripollés 2020). On the other hand, the television networks, the right-wing media, the local media and the legacy media have fewer possibilities of conditioning the digital political conversation. This suggests that social media is generating a process of rearranging the influences within political journalism that is altering its boundaries and traditional dynamics.

In relation to political actors, earlier research suggests the potential of these subjects when it comes to garnering political influence on social media. The case of former US President Donald Trump is paradigmatic in this sense (Pérez-Curiel and Limón-Naharro 2019). The first findings on connective influencers of a political nature show that there are several factors that condition the digital authority of these actors (Casero-Ripollés et al. 2022). Political initiatives and political careers are two variables that determine whether a leader or party has more influence in the digital public debate. In addition, ideology plays a fundamental role in this, since left-wing politicians are more likely to become connective influencers than others (Casero-Ripollés et al. 2022). However, other factors such as the number of followers on social media, or digital popularity, and the votes obtained in the elections do not condition the digital authority of political actors.

Despite these early findings, we still know little about the ability of citizens to influence the digital political conversation and their ability to challenge the conventions and authority of traditional political journalism. To fill this gap, we ask ourselves, what is the role of citizens as connective influencers in the public debate generated on Twitter on the process of forming government in Spain?

## 4 Method

The applied methodology is based on the social network analysis that allows the exploration of the interactions between the participants in the digital political conversation on Twitter and to identify those who have a greater centrality. For this, a specific measure is used: the eigenvector centrality (EC) (Bonacich 2007). This indicator makes it possible to quantify, on a scale between 0 and 1, the level of influence of an actor within a social network. Actors with high EC values are highly connected to other users, occupy a central position in the network and, therefore, have more facilities to disseminate information, conditioning the digital public debate. It is, therefore, a measure of prestige that we can equate to the digital authority. Those actors with higher values will be connective influencers and will have greater possibilities of influencing the construction of the agenda and the framing of the political conversation on Twitter, hence influencing the third party.

The sample of our study is based on the analysis of the Twitter generated public debate about the negotiation process for the formation of the Government in Spain developed in 2016. In total, a period of 133 days is analyzed. To apply the social network analysis, three networks represented by three Spanish cities have been used: Madrid (capital of the country and center of public institutions and political and media life), Barcelona (capital of a historical nationality, immersed in an independence process to create its own State) and Valencia (a city that has a peripheral position with respect to the centers of political and media power). Initially, 145 Twitter accounts of politicians and journalists in the three cities were selected. Followers linked to these accounts were then selected. After focusing on the most influential accounts according to Pagerank, 24,389 Twitter profiles were included. The sample

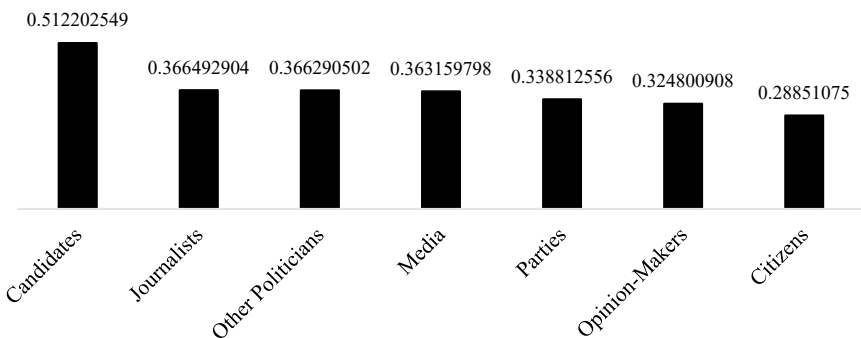
of tweets, published during the period studied, was 127.3 million messages. Our analysis focuses, first of all, on the 250 profiles with the highest EC, distinguishing between 7 types of actors: candidates, parties, other politicians, media, journalists, opinion-makers and citizens. On the other hand, in the case of citizens, the study focuses on the 50 profiles with the highest EC.

## 5 Results

The analysis of digital authority for each of the groups of actors reveals that citizens occupy the last place in terms of network centrality (Fig. 1). The Twitter profiles of the citizens obtain an  $EC = 0.28851075$ . This means that they are the group with the least ability to influence the political conversation about Government formation on this digital platform.

The first positions are occupied by political and media actors. Thus, the candidates ( $EC = 0.512202549$ ) are the ones who obtain the greatest digital authority in the analysed digital discussions (Fig. 1). Their high degree of political initiative, being the protagonists of the government formation negotiations is one of the factors that can explain their high network centrality (Casero-Ripollés et al. 2022). Next are journalists ( $EC = 0.366492904$ ), followed by other politicians ( $EC = 0.366290502$ ) and the media ( $EC = 0.363159798$ ).

A detailed analysis of the EC values allows us to observe that, despite occupying the last position, the digital authority obtained by citizens is not far removed from the rest of the groups of actors (Fig. 1). Only the candidates are at a significant distance. The rest range between very close values (from  $EC = 0.366492904$  to  $EC = 0.28851075$ ). This reveals that the influence over the political conversation has been significantly fragmented since no group of actors achieves a clear hegemony over the rest. In the digital environment, competition to condition public discussion has increased. Despite the fact that politicians and journalists continue to lead the



**Fig. 1** Digital authority by type of actor. Own elaboration

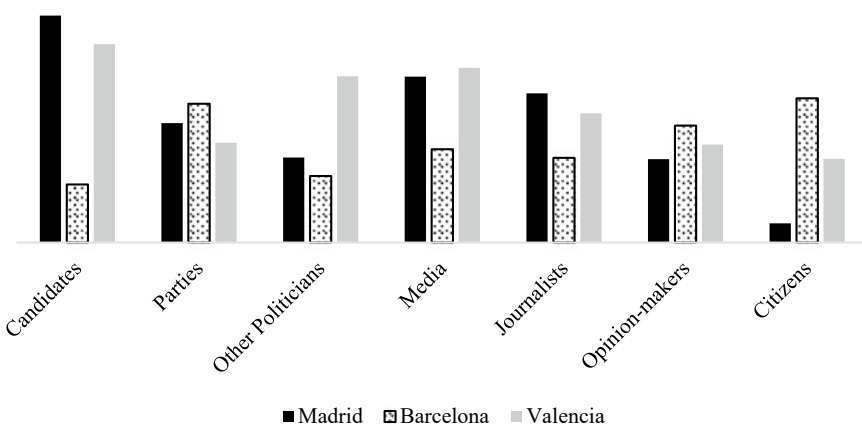


process, their role in articulating the public sphere is beginning to be questioned in a more open context where more actors can be connective influencers.

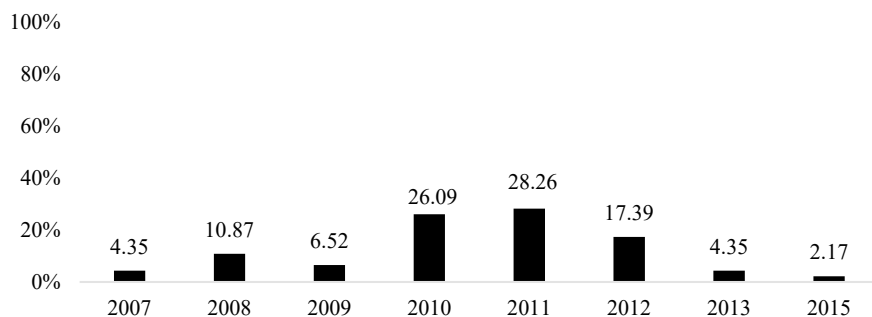
The analysis of digital authority for each of the researched networks (corresponding to the three cities studied) reveals that citizens are the group with the greatest digital authority in the public debate on the negotiating process for the formation of Government in the network of Barcelona (Fig. 2). In addition, in this city, the candidates, who obtain the first position in the general level, go to the last place. For the analysis of these data, its political context must be taken into account. Barcelona is the capital of Catalonia which, in the period analysed, was in a political process of petitioning for independence in order to create its own State. The heightened political mobilization of the citizenry played a key role in this case. This explains why the citizens in Barcelona obtained the highest EC, going on to display a high political influence in this network. In addition, this process prompted a major affective polarization that divided society into two antagonistic pro-independence and anti-independence supporting blocs (Balcells and Kuo 2022), which accentuated citizen mobilization and involvement in digital discussion.

On the other hand, in the Madrid network, the Spanish State capital and seat of the main political institutions, citizens occupy the final position, and their EC is less than 0.1 (Fig. 2). In this network, only seven citizens manage to be among the 250 most influential users and only three of them obtain an EC greater than 0.5. These data reveal that the nearer the network is to the centers of power, the lesser the digital authority of citizens is. In these cases, the central actors of the public sphere (journalists and politicians) clearly prevail as connective influencers in the political conversation on Twitter.

The analysis of the year in which the Twitter activity began, taking the fifty profiles of the most influential citizens in the digital conversation about the negotiations on Government formation, allows us to observe that the majority created their digital platform profile in 2011 and 2010, respectively (Fig. 3). Together, these two years



**Fig. 2** Digital authority by type of actor and city. Own elaboration

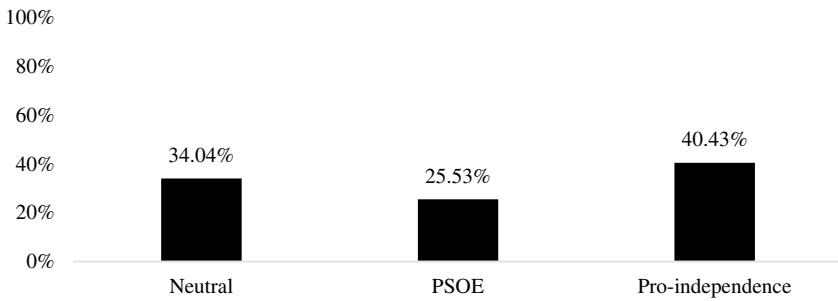


**Fig. 3** Starting year for Twitter activity of the most influential citizens (%). Own elaboration

register 54.35% of these profiles. Twitter was founded in March 2006. The profiles closest to this date (2007, 2008 and 2009) represent 21.74% of the total. These data show that a longer history in this social media is not associated with greater digital authority and, therefore, neither with a greater track record of influence on the digital public debate. Something similar happens with the creation of ad hoc profiles to influence a specific event. Thus, only 2.17% of the total number of the most influential citizens correspond to profiles created in 2015, the year in which our case study began. The nearer an event is in time to the creation of a profile offers no advantage in exerting greater influence on the digital conversation either.

Finally, in relation to the political position, expressed in their Twitter profile, of the most influential citizens in the digital conversation in our case study, the results reveal that 40.43% are pro-independence Catalan separatist (Fig. 4). In addition, 25.53% sympathize with the PSOE, the party leading the negotiations for the Government's formation, and 34.04% are neutral, that is, there is no explicit expression of their political position in their profile. These data allow us to extract two pieces of evidence. First, that digital authority is related to political mobilization. The Catalan pro-independence movement and the people related to the PSOE, both mobilized for a political cause (the creation of a new State, in the first case, and access to the Government, in the second), are the majority among the most influential citizens in the digital conversation in Twitter. In addition, in the case of the pro-independence supporters, together with the mobilization, we must add a context characterized by high social polarization, since Catalan society was divided into two antagonistic blocs for and against this political process that reached its peak in 2017 (Balsells and Kuo 2022).

The second piece of evidence shows that interest in politics is a factor linked to influence in the digital conversation on Twitter. Only 34.04% of the most influential citizens in the case studied are neutral (Fig. 4). On the other hand, 65.96% explicitly defend a political position. In addition, the analysis of the main theme of the messages studied from the profile of the most influential citizens in the formation of Government negotiation process reveals that politics is the predominant topic in 68.08% of the total. These data show that the interest and political involvement of citizens



**Fig. 4** Political position of the most influential citizens on their Twitter profile (%). Own elaboration

in the digital public debate is more frequently associated with digital authority than neutrality or interest in other topics, such as culture or sport.

## 6 Conclusions

Our findings reveal original and significant evidence on the role of citizens as connective influencers in the political conversation on Twitter. First, our data shows that journalists and politicians, central actors in the classical public sphere (Habermas 2006), continue to lead the public debate, now on Twitter. Citizens are positioned as the group with the least digital authority when it comes to conditioning the discussion on this digital platform. However, our research reveals that the influence on the digital political conversation has been remarkably fragmented, since no group of actors is hegemonic. The competition between the different social actors has increased and the predominance of the media and politicians is now more questioned.

Despite occupying a secondary position, citizens can become connective influencers and, in this way, influence the digital public debate. Our data allow us to identify some factors that determine an increase in digital authority, and influence, of citizens in the political conversation on Twitter. Interest in politics, and in getting involved and expressing oneself by showing one's political affinity, is more frequently linked to digital authority than neutrality or attraction to other social issues. On the other hand, the existence of a high level of social mobilization among citizens to defend a political cause encourages more citizens to be connective influencers. Likewise, in cases where there is a strong affective polarization, it is more likely for more citizens to have higher levels of digital influence. On the other hand, the length of the history of a Twitter profile is not associated with its ability to influence the digital discussion. Finally, the digital authority of the citizenry is reduced due to the proximity to the centers of power, since, in these cases, it is the journalists and politicians who attain the greatest role. These factors that condition the digital authority of citizens and their chances of becoming connective influencers represent a novel and

relevant finding in the study of the ability to influence citizens in the field of digital political communication.

The fact that citizens, amongst other social actors, can become connective influencers and condition the digital political conversation has effects on political journalism. This affects both their ability to impose issues and frames in political events (Vliegthart et al. 2016) and their capacity to influence the third party (Zaller 1992). Political journalism, given the rise of connective influencers, is losing its monopoly on these aspects (Chadwick 2017). Its authority in the digital environment is being questioned in a more open context, with more intense competition for attention and social influence. This makes the traditional borders of political journalism more blurred and hybrid. Although the media continue to have a pre-eminent position, their supremacy is beginning to be disputed by other actors that are emerging as connective influencers, including some citizens. This suggests that social media opens a scenario for redefining the exercise of social influence by political journalism (Casero-Ripollés 2020). In this new digital environment offered by Twitter, both its power to build the public agenda and to determine public opinion may be limited and reduced. A process that can erode the public relevance and social contribution of political journalism and put its future at risk.

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# Journalism, Crisis and Politics: A Communications Approach in Times of Change



João Canavilhas , Eva Campos Domínguez , and Berta García Orosa 

**Abstract** The public sphere has been going through information chaos, where traditional intermediaries such as the media have seen their primary function of ordering and organizing information transmission and acting as watchdogs of political activity disrupted. In this context, political journalism and its integral social function in democratic societies becomes crucial, operating as an interdependent yet unofficial political institution, undergoing constant development and transformation due to its close relationship with politics and social changes and intimately tied to the dynamics of how democratic regimes function. This chapter reviews the issues that determine the study of political journalism in the current context, also exploring the interrelation of political and journalistic actors in Portugal and Spain. Finally, the role of politicians and the media in risk communication is discussed based on the case of radon gas.

**Keywords** Political journalism · Political communication · Risk communication · Journalism

## 1 International Political Journalism and Political Communication

One of the most notable issues in the scientific literature is that political journalism cannot be understood separate from its context; that is, the conditions under which politicians, journalists, the media system, and citizens interact influence the type of contribution that political journalism can make to the democratic process (Albaek et al. 2014). Political journalists do not live in a social vacuum; rather they operate

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within a network of interdependencies (Kuhn and Neveu 2002). Among these, the most analyzed have been the relationships between journalists and politicians. The forms this relationship can take encompass a wide range of possibilities, from the polarized pluralist model to the liberal or corporatist democratic model (Hallin and Mancini 2004). However, the relationships, or interdependencies—in the words of Kuhn and Neveu (2002)—in political journalism also include the relationships between journalists themselves and media outlets, conditioned, for example, when politicians control or own media outlets, or when public media are under de facto political influence as one of the ramifications of the tentacles of power. This highlights the need to consider the commercial pressures of business and media groups to maximize audience and profits, on the one hand, and the political pressures exerted by interest groups, on the other.

In defining political journalism, Van Dalen (2016) discussed the influences both inside and outside the media that made sense of and allowed reporting on power institutions and the people who attempted to exercise, or exercised, power. Part of the scientific literature has focused on analyzing what these professional routines were like and the relationships these journalists had with their political sources. In their work, they highlighted the closeness and similarity of political journalists to the political elite and their distance from the average citizen.

Within these studies, other authors have attempted to understand the political preferences of journalists specializing in these topics (Donsbach and Patterson 2004), ultimately pointing out that, regardless of each journalist's political choices, newsroom socialization, media control, and professional routines limit the influence and subjectivity of journalists in news content (Van Dalen 2016).

In this interrelation with other journalists (Kuhn and Neveu 2002), they end up collaborating with journalists from other media outlets who share work covering political news, or 'competitor-colleagues' (Tunstall 1970). In this way, political journalists end up conditioning one another, resulting in a consensus in news coverage, where journalists working for different media outlets use the same sources to cover the same stories from the same angle. That is, journalists from different news organizations follow similar organizational routines and unwritten rules (Ryfe 2006).

Furthermore, political journalists move within the network of official announcements and statements in such a way that contacts between journalists and politicians are close (Van Dalen 2016), to the point that some parliamentary journalists have an office within government headquarters and end up working more hours there than in the newsroom. Here arises a delicate coexistence between the journalist and the politician, with the intermediation of spin-doctors.

Albaek et al. (2014) highlighted Spain as a noteworthy EU case: Spanish political journalists are the ones who show, most systematically, greater political biases in news and media, and who appear more partisan. Interestingly, in that study, the authors also pointed out that Spanish journalists are the most skeptical and disillusioned with the pressures applied on them by communication advisors and politicians. They also compared the Spanish media situation with the Greek one: the media generally belong to larger companies, and the owners of these media exploit their influence to receive political favors that benefit their companies (Papathanassopoulos 2001).



All of this makes contemporary electoral news coverage tend—in the words of Falasca (2014)—to frame politics as a strategic game rather than focusing on political issues or strengthening the role of journalists as analysts of public affairs. These patterns in electoral news coverage indicate increased mediatization (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999; Strömbäck 2008) of political journalism, where media logic, rather than political logic, governs news coverage and political journalism.

In this sense, in addition to the relationships and roles of political journalists, one of the most analyzed topics in the scientific literature is the message, with great emphasis on infotainment (Brants 1998) as a characteristic, “tabloidization” or “Americanization of information”, populism, and, more recently, disinformation (Van Dalen 2016). In this regard, components such as personalization in framing news play a decisive role.

In the same vein, the impact of this political coverage on citizens has been studied (Albaek et al. 2014). These studies assume that political knowledge is an indispensable requirement for democracy and one of the most important tasks entrusted to the media: providing access to political information. In this regard, citizen dissatisfaction with the media has been highlighted. For example, Cook (1998) argue that the unpopularity of the media is now considered so obvious that it hardly warrants discussion. And, similarly, Albaek et al. (2014) again point out that when citizens perceive that journalists are fulfilling their watchdog function, they are more satisfied with the media’s performance and the role of the media as a political institution (Albaek et al. 2014).

Despite this, they note that although the decline and bias in political information is a frequent criticism of the media, there has never been so much news and political information available (Aalberg et al. 2010). The mass adaptation of the internet plays a key role here, posing new challenges for the professional practice of journalism and the characteristics of the message itself in the political context.

Various authors have observed in this era a change in the organizational structure itself, which “erodes the institutional monopoly of large-scale coordination” (Shirky 2011: 143) and opens a new communications scenario of “organization without organizations” and decentralized communication. The significance of this transformation seems to necessitate abandoning the perspective adopted thus far in research on political journalism, such that the key element ceases to be media, citizen, or party communication and moves to the common communications space: the digital public sphere, where each of the actors is influenced by the agendas and discourses of others and establishes their own strategic mechanisms to try to influence the rest.

The literature has shown the complexity of a communications ecosystem with intertwining intersections and media configurations resulting largely from the digitalization process. The theoretical discussion, in this context, generally revolves around the issue of agenda-setting by the media or social construction of the agenda (McCombs 2006). In contrast, the current political-media landscape lays bare considerable changes to traditional theoretical perspectives, which are in the process of adaptation and, in many cases, profound revision, as befits a paradigm shift (Castells 2010). The media and communications spaces have multiplied and changed their structure. The nature of the message has become blurred, and it is associated with

multiple formats that essentially coincide in the same digitally encoded content adapted for various devices. Technology and its connection with communication, as McLuhan (1996) once observed, have become omnipresent. Access to content, therefore, appears much simpler and faster, which in turn generates changes in the nature of information itself: faster, less elaborate, more fragmented, as it must be disseminated immediately and through channels that seek to condense relevant information in very little space (López García 2015).

Fragmentation affects not only the message but also the public's information menu. The digital communication user, precisely because of virtually endless options, which are also much more refined and specific than in the past, is increasingly distancing themselves from the conventional media-consuming public.

Internet audiences and digital communication are, therefore, much more fragmented: there are more media outlets available; there are also many spaces that are not necessarily media outlets in the traditional sense of the term, and that also form part of the information selection for most users. Moreover, it is much easier (and more common) for the public to select what specifically interests them (a specific news item) and discard the other content offered (Boczkowski and Mitchelstein 2015). All of this raises new and changing relationships between the political journalist and the reader (Bruns and Nuernbergk 2019).

In the face of an ever-increasing supply, it becomes more difficult for the media on the whole to maintain control of the information agenda without anything escaping their attention or becoming public without their intention. This is, in part, a matter of competition among the media. But it also stems from greater pluralism in the positions from which these media outlets originate. And, above all, it is an issue that arises as a result of establishing a new relationship with the audience.

## 2 Politics and Ideology in the Spanish and Portuguese Media

Interdependencies between journalism and politics (Kuhn and Neveu 2002) are among the most studied topics in academia, as previously mentioned. Portugal presents a curious case study for two specific aspects: the revolving doors between journalism and politics, and ideological ambiguity in the media, with almost all media presenting themselves as independent.

In the first case, the existence of a certain porousness between politics and journalism has led to journalism careers functioning as a springboard for some professionals to become politicians. Obviously, this is not unique to Portugal: Boris Johnson was a journalist for the *Times* and *Daily Telegraph* before becoming Mayor of London and later the British Prime Minister. In Spain, Máxim Huerta, a journalist from *Radio 5* and *Telecinco*, became the Minister of Culture and Sports in 2018, though only for a short time—exactly seven days—due to a tax scandal.

In Portugal, examples abound: Paulo Portas, a journalist for several publications and deputy director of the newspaper *O Independente*, later became the leader of the Partido Popular (CDS/PP) twice, a member of parliament, a minister, and even a deputy prime minister in a coalition government with the Partido Social Democrata (PSD). His brother, Miguel Portas, was also a journalist for *Expresso* and director of the weekly *Já*, joining the political party Bloco de Esquerda (BE) and being elected to the European Parliament. Francisco Pinto Balsemão, who began his career at *Diário Popular*, later founded the *Expresso*, which would be the origin of the media group Impresa (*SIC*, *Visão*, etc.), of which he is a co-owner. He was also involved in politics, having been elected Prime Minister and later serving as both a minister and prime minister of Portugal. There are many examples, including the most recent case, the current President of the Republic, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, who was also the director of the newspapers *Expresso* and *Semanário*, a television and radio commentator, and ran as an independent for the presidency of the Republic, eventually being elected and re-elected for a second term.

The transition from journalism to a political career may result from professional trajectories in the realm of relationships with sources (Van Dalen 2016), with journalists being invited by politicians to become their advisors or even public office holders. In other cases, such as the current President of the Republic of Portugal, there is a connection between media exposure and electoral success (Lopes 2017), as his presence in the media, combined with his recognized communication skills, managed to blur the ideological contexts of his candidacy, confirming an increasing personalization of politics (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999). In this case, his television appearances on the program *As Escolhas de Marcelo* went far beyond political commentary, covering other areas such as culture and sports. Although television has a stronger impact than print media, it is worth noting that the public channel where the program was broadcast was far from leading the ratings.

The second peculiarity of the Portuguese context is related to the absence of ideological references in the editorial lines of Portuguese newspapers. Taking the case of Spain as an example: when asking citizens if they know the political tendencies of the newspapers, they can easily associate *El País* and *Público* with the left wing and *El Mundo* with the right. Many might even go further, associating some of these newspapers with a more specific ideology or even a political party. Performing this same exercise in Portugal would result in a myriad of answers, and it is not uncommon for the same newspaper to be associated with both the right and the left wing. Indeed, it is sufficient to follow readers' letters or read the papers' online comments section to understand this ambiguity.

To a certain extent, this situation may have been caused by Portugal's recent history, which experienced 48 years under a dictatorship. The censorship system in place strongly conditioned journalistic activity. Consequently, after the fall of the dictatorship special attention was given to press freedom, which was immediately enshrined as a fundamental pillar of the Portuguese legal structure: its Constitution, which guarantees freedom of the press in Article 38.

As a result of this experience and the tumultuous post-revolutionary period, the country has been developing a complex legislative system aimed at creating all the

conditions for maintaining a free and transparent media system, and today there are entities and framework laws that ensure the system's operation.

In the scope of this work, we highlight the necessary parts to contextualize the relationship between journalism and politics. The Portuguese Press Law (1999), in Article 13, distinguishes between doctrinal and informative publications, which is essential within the framework of what is published. To force clarification of newspaper positions, Article 17 of the same law states that “informative periodical publications must adopt an editorial statute that clearly defines their orientation and objectives” (Lei da Imprensa 1999, par. 1), but apparently, there is nothing to clarify.

*Público*, one of Portugal's leading newspapers, states in its editorial statute that it is “a daily newspaper of extensive information, guided by criteria of editorial rigor and creativity, without any dependence on ideological, political, or economic order” (1990a: 16). At another point, it adds that it “focuses on diversified information, covering a wide range of fields of activity and catering to the motivations and interests of a pluralistic public” (Público 1990a: 16). The guiding principles are independence and plurality. In its first issue, alongside the editorial statute, a text titled *The Público pact* (Público 1990b: 16) is published, making it clear that although owned by SONAE, this economic group, one of the largest in Portugal, “does not confuse its strategic interest in this area with the fatal misconception of viewing the ‘media’ as instruments of propaganda for other activities or interests of the group”, subsequently emphasizing independence from the project's financiers. In other words, in addition to distancing itself ideologically from any ideological current, the newspaper also asserts its economic independence from its owner, underscoring the lack of any type of pressure.

In this context, it is worth noting that Portugal has the so-called Transparency Law (Law 78/2015, July 29), whose main objective is to clarify who the media owners are and how these editorial projects are financed, thus seeking to frame the possible positions adopted by the newspaper in each socioeconomic context.

The weekly newspaper *Expresso*, Portugal's best-selling publication, also asserts its independence in its editorial statute by stating that it is “a newspaper with convictions but independent from all powers” (Expresso 2020, par. 1) because it believes that informative publications should be independent. The paper has manifested this independence over the years, specifically when it was critical of governments that Pinto Balsemão, the newspaper's owner, was a part of. However, it should be mentioned that the Partido Social Democrata (PPD/PSD) was born within the newspaper itself (Machado 2017), in discussions between the owners and columnists.

This proximity between politics and journalism would be more difficult today, as the Journalists Statute in section e) of Article 3, prohibits certain actions against journalists. Article 12 reinforces the independence of these professionals by establishing in point 1 that “journalists cannot be compelled to express or subscribe to opinions or to abstain from doing so” (Estatuto do Jornalista 1999, par. 1).

In the case of *Diário de Notícias* (n.d.), another leader of the Portuguese daily press, the editorial statute states that it “prioritizes its news according to journalistic criteria (...) and not according to ideological assumptions” (par. 9). The newspaper guarantees “the possibility of expression and confrontation of the various currents

of opinion existing in the country” (par. 5), but within a framework of information with “truth, rigor, and information” (par. 1). It also states that it may have “its own opinion, through editorials signed by the management” (par. 8), but this opinion is clearly distinguished from the news, a fundamental rule of journalism and present in the first point of the Code of Ethics for Portuguese Journalists when it says that “the distinction between news and opinion must be made clear to the public” (par. 7).

In the abovementioned cases, the newspapers’ concern for independence is evident, something common in any country, but while Portuguese newspapers speak only of the defense of democracy, without any hint of ideological alignments, in other countries the situation is different.

In Spain, independence is also present in the newspapers’ editorial statutes, but there are indications that allow for some kind of ideological alignment. This situation is confirmed by the frames used in the news (Canel-Crespo 1999), but also by the editorials published at key times. Take the case of *El País*, whose strong ties between Jesús Polanco, owner of Prisa, and Felipe González helped the latter become prime minister. Editorials like “a reflection before the polls”, of October 27, 1982, are a good example of how this link between the newspaper and socialist left was built.

In fact, the editorial statutes of Spanish newspapers include small nuances that reveal a glimpse of their ideological alignment, though they all claim to be independent. *El País* (1980), for example, defines itself in its statute as an independent newspaper, but adds that it has “a clear European vocation, defender of pluralistic democracy according to liberal and social principles” (par. 4), which already defines some of its ideological positioning. In the case of *El Mundo* (n.d.), the editorial statute states that it is “a progressive newspaper, committed to the defense of the current democratic system, public freedoms, and human rights” (par. 2), which is also an ideological statement. In the case of *Público.es* (2018), among its “ten flags”, it highlights its commitment “to the weakest” (par. 1), the defense of the “fundamental role of women” (par. 2), a commitment to the “concept of Historical Memory that involves the need to recognize the rights of those who suffered persecution or violence during the Spanish Civil War and the subsequent Franco dictatorship” (par. 11), and a newspaper attentive to situations “related to energy poverty and evictions” (par. 12). Most of its 10 flags are an ideological statement.

This situation shows that, in addition to defending independence, Spanish newspapers embrace other causes that allow one to glean their ideological positioning, something that does not happen with Portuguese newspapers, which advocate for more diffuse causes. *Expresso* (2020) speaks of defending “causes common to citizenship” (par. 3), *Diário de Notícias* (n.d., par. 2) aspires to play “a moderating role in conflicts that manifest in Portuguese society”, and *Público* (1990a) only mentions values inherent to journalism, such as independence and rigor.

The exception to this absence of ideological connections is the online native newspaper *Observador* (2014), which in its editorial statute proclaims itself “independent and free” (par. 1), but then follows the line of Spanish newspapers and claims to assume “the founding principles of Western Civilization, derived from Greco-Roman antiquity, Christianity, and the Enlightenment” (par. 4), defending “an open society, with institutions that respect the law and individual rights” (par. 7). Although subtly,

the newspaper assumes a certain ideological position, which is in fact one of the few publicly recognized by newspaper readers in Portugal.

Interestingly, this politically sterilized journalism is a recent phenomenon. In the nineteenth century, Portuguese newspapers were mainly opinion-based, so the press was political or literary, incidentally reporting daily events (Serrão 1983). The political positions of the newspapers were clear, and often they were founded to defend ideas or people, a trend that persisted until 1926, with periods of freedom interspersed with others of repression. With the military dictatorship and the Estado Novo (New State), the press believed it had regained some freedom, but the 1933 Constitution, which guaranteed freedom of the press, also included other mechanisms that allowed for censorship until 1974 (Sousa 2008).

After the *Revolução dos Cravos* (Carnation Revolution), democracy allowed the recovery of the ideological matrix of the newspapers, and some that appeared in the 1980s clearly marked their ideological profile. A good example is *O Independente* (1988: 8), whose editorial statute states the paper does not believe in neutrality: “Politically, it is democratic and conservative”, said the leaders. They added that *O Independente* “believes in the strength of elites, respects tradition, and authority” (*O Independente* 1988: 8) and added that they understood the market “as the principle of economic life”, insisting that it was necessary “to return to private initiative the rights denied by the Portuguese State”. This newspaper, like others of the time, thus clearly set forth its ideological framework.

This type of definition seems to have disappeared from the Portuguese media landscape, so that today only *Observador* (2014) is commonly identified with an ideological alignment and, even so, rather faintly. The result is a series of controversies involving politicians, readers, and journalists, with accusations of persecution and poor journalism linked to supposed political positions that are neither in the editorial statutes nor held unanimously by public opinion.

### **3 Political Journalism and Risk Communication: The Case of Radon Gas**

At present, there are many challenges for journalism and political journalism that sometimes reach the very redefinition of the profession (López-García et al. 2023). Most of these questions, innovations, and even setbacks in journalism are linked to technological transformations. However, drone journalism (Havard et al. 2020), new formats and narratives in journalism (Vázquez Herrero et al. 2022), and, above all, the influence of artificial intelligence on the work of communication professionals (García-Orosa et al. 2023) and their sources is complex. The public legitimacy of journalism needs to be reimagined, especially in the political sphere. The fact that the media are at the center of social processes, as well as political institutions and citizenship (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999), leads them to occupy a central place in the flows of information even as they compete with other actors coming into play. The

relationship between journalists and politicians, close and sometimes uncomfortable (Blumler and Gurevitch 1981), persists with the constant presence of conflicts and dangerous alliances, in a context where many politicians need the media for political success (Aalberg and Strömbäck 2011).

The future is uncertain as continuous innovation affects everything from the arrival of digital natives to the very definition of journalism. In addition to being influenced from its political and social context, as we have seen in the second part of this chapter, journalism is also heavily influenced by the work environment, where multiple factors come into play. In the third part of this chapter, we will focus on one of them, the communication of risk, sadly apropos due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic. To address the relationship between journalism and risk communication, we have chosen to exclude specific crisis situations in which elements and actors may be altered and opted instead to study a risk across time: radon gas.

Radon is a significant health risk that is little known in the broad political arena, understood as public affairs. From a historical perspective, the study of radon exposure risk began with the coordinated action of the International Commission on Radiological Protection (ICRP) in the late 1950s in uranium mining communities. In 1958, the ICRP developed several recommendations related to whole body and extremity exposure to radon gas between 1928 and 1934 (Lopes et al. 2021).

Although its link to disease was not known in the first half of the twentieth century, the WHO's International Agency for Research on Cancer has recognized it as a carcinogenic gas since 1988 and has classified it as the leading cause of lung cancer among non-smokers. In fact, in several regions, radon is the main cause of lung cancer after tobacco. It is estimated that the proportion of radon-associated lung cancer cases ranges from 3 to 14% depending on the average radon concentration in the country and the calculation method used.

The primary source of exposure to ionizing radiation for the population is natural radon and its decay products. As a tasteless, odorless, invisible, and naturally occurring gas, radon is undetectable without testing. Buildings built on rock beds or soils rich in uranium can develop high concentrations of radon in indoor air, posing a significant health threat (Ryan et al. 2015).

The issue is more and more prominent in politics, as the WHO and the EU have begun to indicate the importance of communication about radon and have prompted the enactment of various regulations thereof.

We believe that this issue could be symptomatic of the relationship between the media, that is, between journalism and politics understood in a broad sense. Its importance lies in the fact that it is a long-standing risk, with severe health effects demonstrated for nearly 40 years and little public awareness despite the seriousness of the risk (Khan and Chreim 2019). We understand risk as the possibility that individual or society-wide events harm some essential aspect of things that people value (Rasmussen and Ihlen 2017). Risk has been defined as the "things, forces, or circumstances that pose a danger to people or what they value" (Stern and Fineberg 1996: 215) and is often described in terms of the probability of loss. Moreover, risk includes risk perception as shared cognitive schemas that are refined through mediated communication and interpersonal interaction (Young et al. 2021).

Risk perception can be defined as people's beliefs, attitudes, judgments, and feelings, as well as the broader social or cultural values and dispositions that people adopt, towards hazards and their benefits (Hevey 2017).

The main factors influencing whether a phenomenon is perceived as risky have been analyzed in recent decades. The functional risk relationships are described in terms of five sets of variables involved in the amplification process: physical consequences, the amount of press coverage, laypersons' individual perceptions, public responses, and socioeconomic and political repercussions.

Therefore, the role of the media remains central in agenda-setting, particularly in risk communication. Despite the changing role and the supposed loss of centrality in public debate (García-Orosa 2022), the media continues to play a significant role (Zhao et al. 2019). If there is an increase in public debate or media coverage about a particular risk, the likelihood of an individual perceiving that risk may increase (Rowe et al. 2000). At present, the centrality of the media, the role of technology and, above all, politicians as sources have all been called into question.

Neither studies on risk communication nor those on politicians as sources of information tend to discuss radon. In risk communication, studies highlight the relevance of media exposure for increasing risk perception and even as predictors of risk (Morton and Duck 2001), indicating that newspaper information on skin cancer was an essential predictor of the disease's risk perception. Additionally, Hong et al. (2019) showed that as news coverage of an issue increases, so does the public's perceived risk of that issue.

In this sense, Prados-Bo (2022) recently compiled research and indicated how previous studies have shown that major newspapers played a crucial role in disseminating information and shaping perceptions about the human genome, personalized medicine, graphene, and emerging biotechnologies.

In the field of communication and politics, Perko and Turcanu (2020) recently stressed the need for local and national authorities to invest in more attractive websites and evaluate their impact after completing a study on websites providing information on radon and the results thereof.

The media is still central to risk communication (Mazur 2006), although coverage remains superficial (Post 1986) due to three factors: (1) the orientation of articles towards events; (2) the limited number of sources cited in scientific news; (3) the lack of scientific training of local reporters and editors.

However, the literature on radon insists, as we have indicated in general risk communication, on the importance of prior knowledge of public risk perception before planning any action (Mora-Rodríguez and Melero-López 2021). Recently, (Dryhurst et al. 2020) analyzed risk perception in COVID-19 and correlated good risk knowledge with the adaptation of health behaviors in 10 countries.

Interesting studies have been conducted at the local and hyperlocal level, particularly relevant for the case of radon. In this framework, local information for prevention stands out, as does the scarce presence despite the severity of the risk and the origin and prominence of expert sources compared to other issues covered by journalism. The presence of radon gas linked to health tourism, as occurs in other latitudes (Negreira-Rey and Vázquez-Herrero 2022), is not notable. This public health risk,



information on health risks as an essential component of public health activities, and research on risk communication in the health field can be seen as a fundamental element of prevention (Strekalova and Krieger 2017).

As we mentioned at the beginning, this case study is particularly relevant due to the importance of the internet as an information source for individuals seeking to reduce their uncertainty about various risks—e.g., in their healthcare—(Gainous and Wagner 2014). People are more likely to adopt protective measures when they are aware of the risk and are health-conscious (Khan et al. 2019). When it comes to the internet, although further research is needed (Vereen et al. 2021), social networks have long been considered a determining factor in health, with three areas where their use is essential to public health: (1) disease and risk detection; (2) prevention and intervention in diseases; (3) change in health-related behavior (Zhang and Fu 2021). Although science communication on YouTube is becoming increasingly professional, professional media corporations cannot surpass the subscriptions and views of user-generated channels, despite publishing many more videos (Welbourne and Grant 2016).

In this case, journalists and politicians are losing the battle. A paradigmatic example is YouTube, where politicians and even expert sources do not have a significant presence. Furthermore, while YouTube is an excellent platform for educating citizens, the literature shows important risks related to misinformation (Donzelli et al. 2018). That is, videos made by official and professional sources seem to be less popular than those created by anonymous users, as other studies have pointed out (Basch et al. 2019).

This situation demonstrates the challenges faced by professionals and authorities in the field of risk communication. With the rise of user-generated content and the public's preference for such content, it becomes increasingly difficult for credible information to reach and impact the audience. It is essential to find new strategies and ways to engage the public and ensure that accurate information about risks and health issues is disseminated and accessible. This could involve collaborations between professional media, experts, and popular content creators or innovative ways of presenting information that can compete with user-generated content in terms of popularity and engagement.

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# **Evolving Formats and Narratives in Digital Journalism**

# Blurring and Redefining Boundaries of Journalism in the Production and Reception of Interactive Digital Storytelling



Jorge Vázquez-Herrero  and Renée van der Nat 

**Abstract** Innovations in digital storytelling techniques have spurred on the development of new journalistic and audience practices. The production processes of interactive and immersive journalistic narratives are highly technological and require specialist knowledge of both journalism and design, and require producers to consider how audience engagement and user activity both fit into their story. The resulting narratives redefine the boundaries of what is considered a journalistic production, often requiring users to act within the story, thereby challenging the existing author-user relationship. In this chapter we discuss how the boundaries of journalism are redefined or blurred during both the production and reception processes of interactive, immersive journalism.

**Keywords** Digital storytelling · Interactive narratives · Immersive journalism · Journalism

## 1 Introduction

Innovations in digital storytelling techniques have spurred on the development of new journalistic and audience practices. During the 30-year history of the World Wide Web, we have witnessed the birth of digital, multimedia and interactive forms of expression. Technological developments predating the definitive breakthrough of the Internet in the late nineties already allowed for developments in innovative digital storytelling that combine interactive and multimedia affordances. But particularly with the advent of Web 2.0, we witnessed convergence (Jenkins 2006), and a new step towards audience participation. Digital storytelling advances the user's ability to become an active user and to have an impact on the story (Miller 2014). The concept

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of interactive storytelling explicitly introduces the idea of control and intentional influence over the narrative or take on the role (Green and Jenkins 2014; Roth 2015; van der Nat et al. 2021a, b). One step further and we arrive at immersive, extended or expanded narratives, where the story is transmitted through technologies that allow creators to design experiences in which we are transported to a place, making us feel at the center of the scene and protagonists; immersive journalism is the name given to practices of this type (De la Peña et al. 2010; Sirkkunen et al. 2020). The successive transformations in the ways in which stories are told—some with greater success and endurance over time than others—make us think about one of the blurred boundaries discussed in this book: genres and, by extension, forms of expression and the consequence for the production and reception process of these works of journalism.

With the evolution of the media, hybridization has also had an impact on the genres, styles and methods of journalism (Gutiérrez et al. 2018; Vázquez-Herrero and de Haan 2022). Traditional journalistic genres are being remediated and adapted to the characteristics of new media, as part of an evolving model (McNair 2009). Film genres are also being reformulated, such as the documentary, which is being transformed by the confluence with interactive medium, giving rise to multiple formats (Vázquez-Herrero and Gifreu-Castells 2019). There are even more novel/unique combinations, such as newsgaming (Bogost et al. 2012). These forms of expression and the range of labels used to refer to interactive journalistic formats (webdoc, i-doc, newsgame, VRgame, and interactive app, among others) indicate a high degree of experimentation. This lack of consolidation in forms and denominations invites us to think of broader and more inclusive concepts—such as interactive non-fiction (Choi 2009; Gifreu-Castells 2014; Vázquez-Herrero and López-García 2019), interactive digital narratives (Koenitz 2015; Roth and Koenitz 2016), or digital longform journalism (Dowling 2019; Dowling and Vogan 2015)—in order to encompass a diverse set of interrelated forms. Therefore, an analytical examination of this blurred border should not only assess each of the territories, but also observe the region with a wider perspective.

Interactive forms of journalism open up a number of debates and blur what used to be some very clear lines. Most notably, interactivity challenges us to reconsider the author-text-user relationship. Interactivity as a concept is based on two-way communication (Gershon 2016), inspired by face-to-face communication. In the context of journalism, different authors have referred to it as a unique feature of the digital medium and classified it into several levels (see Deuze 2003 and Rost 2006). We distinguish two meanings: interactivity with the journalistic text, through selecting and controlling information presented on the user's screen; and interactivity through the text, allowing for participation and collaboration. In narrative terms, the first meaning of interactivity results in stories in which the user can choose their own path, make decisions or manage the order and pace of progress; on the other hand, participatory interactivity allows the user to submit content, to co-author and expand the story.



Both types of interactivity are associated with the experience of ‘agency’, a concept used to describe the extent to which users feel their choices and contributions to the story are meaningful as a result of the procedural and participatory properties of the system (Murray 1997). We would speak of a willingness to act, or action with significant consequences in the narrative. Consequently, this opening up of the process to the audience raises critical questions about the role of journalism and the journalist when the user can choose what they see, from what point of view, and can even collaborate in its creation. Thus, another blurred boundary is identified between who is the sender and who is the receiver, as well as around the authority of journalism.

The production processes of interactive and immersive journalistic narrative are highly technological and require specialized knowledge of both journalism and design; they also require producers to consider how audience engagement and user activity both fit into their story. We have already mentioned the significant shift in the role of the audience, which becomes necessarily active, and requires renewed approaches in terms of design and creation. The frontiers are blurred when we try to define the figure of the creator, be it a designer, an author or rather the architect who establishes the scenario and the rules, leaving the audience free. The rupture of unidirectionality has been recognized by various authors as the most notable consequence of the author-text-user relationship (Gifreu 2013; Jenkins 2004; Favero 2013). More specifically, it requires creators to think in terms of procedural narratives as interaction makes the narrative process between author, text and users explicit (Koenitz 2015; van der Nat et al. 2021a, b).

Finally, we come to the perspective of reception. Although research on new narratives in journalism has some relevance, less attention has been paid to reception. Several questions arise around it, but fundamentally it is about validating the use of interactive resources in the narrative. To this end, studies have presented methods and measurement systems (Szilas and Ilea 2014; Roth and Koenitz 2016) and analyzed specific aspects such as continuation desire as an indicator of engagement (Schoenau-Fog 2011) and user-centered design (Gantier and Labour 2017). Another group of researchers has tested the effects of interactive narratives on prosocial behavior (Steinemann et al. 2017) and their application in formats such as interactive documentary (Nash et al. 2014; Nash 2014; Vázquez-Herrero 2021) and immersive journalism (Kelling et al. 2019; Shin and Biocca 2018; Van Damme et al. 2019). However, this is only the beginning of a whole field of research to be developed in the coming years. Here the blurred boundaries go beyond production and extend to the users, who through their experience will determine whether their role remains that of receiver/consumer or whether we can speak of a further actor in interactive narratives.

In this chapter we discuss how the boundaries of journalism are redefined or blurred during both the production and reception processes of interactive, immersive journalism. We will describe through multiple cases the blurred boundaries of interactive narratives applied to journalism from the perspective of design, production and audiences.

## 2 Creators and Design

Creating journalistic narratives for audience engagement and interactivity requires producers to reconsider their relationship with the audience. No longer is the audience a mass of passive receivers of information but rather a collection of active participants who are invited to construct meaning through interaction. The idea that audience members are in fact actively involved in the construction of meaning is far from new, even though it may be a fairly recent development in journalism. Since user testing and other forms of audience evaluation are rather rare in the production processes of interactive and immersive narrative, we wonder how the idea of ‘the active user’ relates to the interdisciplinary work associated with innovative digital journalism. Introducing new disciplines into a field inevitably challenges the boundaries of that field as new industry trade stories merge and collide with existing ones.

In this section, we focus on the creators of interactive and immersive non-fiction narratives. In the wake of *Snow Fall*, which was published by the *New York Times* in 2012, media companies around the world started to create their own interactive longform journalistic stories (Dowling 2019; Hiippala 2017; Jacobson et al. 2016). Later, when commercial VR-headsets such as the Oculus Rift became affordable for the general public, the focus shifted to immersive journalism spearheaded by the *Guardian* with VR-experiences like *6 × 9* (Sirkkunen et al. 2020). Although the focus shifted, the production context remained very similar and can be characterized as an off-center interdisciplinary production process that takes place in the borderlands of journalism and design. Moreover, the reason to produce these highly technological and expensive narratives is surprisingly similar across (Western) countries, namely audience engagement (Dowling 2019; Uricchio et al. 2016).

We discuss how the practices associated with interactive and immersive journalism redefine the relationship with news audiences, or indeed news users. We position this shift firstly as part of a larger transition in journalism—this explains why both individual creators and media companies alike are interested in investing their resources in the production of digital longform journalism, with all its variations. Secondly, we consider how the day-to-day context of creating these narratives alongside new disciplines affects how producers talk about audiences and users, or how new industry trade stories collide and merge with existing ones (Caldwell 2008). At this level, the shift in the journalist-audience relationship is expressed by producers in a desire for a type of news user who is actively involved in the construction of meaning through interactivity and immersion—this idea is heavily influenced by trade stories from interaction and game design, as well as narrative and documentary journalism. Interestingly, despite journalism’s overall goal to somehow contribute to informed and engaged citizens, audience engagement is almost exclusively considered a relationship with the journalistic story. In other words, the producers of interactive and immersive non-fictions are mainly concerned with how they wish their users to engage with their story—not with what their story does for the users.

Lewis and Westlund (2015) argue that journalism is currently undergoing a transition from a production-centered to an audience-centered profession. Both interactive

and immersive journalism should be considered part of this transition: our data show that producers of interactive and immersive journalism are aiming to craft an experience that elicits a sense of engagement with their users. We see this focus on audience engagement reflected in both the commercial and editorial practices associated with interactive and immersive journalism.

‘Audience engagement’ as part of commercial strategies is often considered audience from a technological and behavioral perspective (Costera Meijer 2020; Nelson 2019; Steensen et al. 2020). This is a commercial and rational conceptualization of audience engagement and typically reduces engagement to what can be measured using audience metrics such as reach and retention, which are then translated to concepts such as revenue and customer conversion (Steensen et al. 2020). We see this reflected in the commercial and editorial strategies of news companies, and digital longform journalism fits into this perspective as follows. Famously, *Snow Fall* was proposed by the advertising department of the *New York Times* as a way to entice people to subscribe digitally to the ‘Grey Lady’ (Dowling 2019). In our own research we also found that most interactive and immersive journalistic productions are in fact available for free—hoping to form a lasting bond with audience members that will pay off in the long term.

However, to achieve this elusive commercial goal for this genre of journalism, producers take on a slightly different perspective of audience engagement and focus on the experiential aspects of the concept. While metrics play a vital role in the production of news, with journalists often being very familiar with the online performance of their pieces, producers of interactive and immersive non-fiction are less concerned with the commercial aspects, and focus on crafting interactive and immersive experiences that users are willing to invest their time, attention and emotion in (Lehmann et al. 2012). The producers hope to entice users by immersing them in the narrative world, and by giving them agency in the construction of the story. This includes an experiential dimension to the concept of audience engagement—producers seem to desire a particular behavioral and emotional response to their narrative. In short, they desire an active and involved user.

This desire for active and involved users is an expression of the changing, shifting relationship between journalists and their audiences. Interestingly, so far it seems that the perspective of actual users remains unaddressed. In the remainder of this section we discuss this in more detail in terms of interdisciplinary work and how this slowly shifts industry trade stories—in this case the trade story of ‘the audience’. Caldwell (2008) introduces industry trade stories as an analytical concept to unravel professional belief systems. We use it in a similar manner in order to understand how this idea of the active user takes shape in the production practices of interactive and immersive nonfiction. These practices are very peculiar—at least for journalism. Typically, these stories are considered projects which are developed over a long period of time—months, sometime even years. Moreover, the project typically resides alongside producers’ regular work—making the production of interactive and immersive narratives something extraordinary that producers pursue because they are interested in it. Consequently, these genres of journalism hinge on the people who

take up the day-to-day work, and attention will fade should they move on to other projects. In other words, these types of projects are not structurally part of newsrooms.

Because of the highly technological nature of these narratives, designers and programmers are needed to actually make them, and research has shown that this kind of interdisciplinary work poses challenges (Smit et al. 2014). Such designers and programmers bring with them their own trade stories about user interaction—this includes best practices and ideas about what is and is not considered ‘good design’ and ‘appropriate user interaction’. This can get very complicated when different experts in their field take part in a production process—resulting in competing trade stories from multiple professional fields. Overall, journalistic trade stories are shifting and merging with the new ones, together shaping the practices of interactive and immersive non-fiction.

### 3 Production

The affordances of digital media, and particularly the convergence of interactive and audiovisual affordances following Web 2.0, invite creators of interactive and immersive narratives to explore the boundaries of journalistic genres. As we have seen in the previous section, the highly technological nature of this type of journalism requires an interdisciplinary and project-based production process. Because the process often takes place in the periphery of news production, creators are able to experiment with novel storytelling formats and even develop their own as they explore the potential of interactive and immersive narratives. Consequently, in the past decades the boundary of what is and is not considered a journalistic media text has shifted, and continues to do so (Dowling 2020; Meier 2018). The resulting media texts range from bearing a close resemblance to familiar journalistic genres, such as feature journalism and documentaries, to new genres that are sometimes hard to recognize as journalism, such as VR or theater experiences and news games (Dowling 2019; van der Nat et al. 2021a, b; de Bruin et al. 2022).

The variety of formats that arose as interactive and immersive journalism gained traction in journalism practice poses challenges to the naming and classification of interactive and immersive journalism. Consequently, as we have experienced in our research, it is hard to collect these stories. Firstly, the wide variety in media modalities and combinations of those modalities makes it hard to define the genre. Secondly, interactives typically require an extensive investment of time (they are often in-depth journalistic productions). Thirdly, the story formats are not always recognized as journalism, do not stand out and are not native to social media timelines, therefore they remain invisible to audiences. The last two issues pose a serious challenge for news organizations and creators wanting to deepen audience engagement through these interactive forms. Ultimately it is hard to distribute these narratives because we have no shared language to communicate as researchers, creators and users.

To understand how boundaries surrounding journalistic genres are shifting for interactive and immersive journalism, and to suggest a shared language to talk about

this genre, we propose two continuums. The first focuses on interactivity and classifies journalistic productions on a continuum of closed and open interactive architectures as proposed by Van der Nat et al. (2021a, b). The second focuses on immersion and the level of technology needed, ranging from narrative journalism (where no technology is needed) to full VR experiences using headsets such as the Oculus Rift. Notably, both continuums feature not so much a change in the stories being told, but in the roles users can assume in these stories. We briefly introduce each continuum and discuss some examples explaining the range below.

### 3.1 From Closed to Open Interactive Architectures

Obviously, having more interactive options expressed in open interactive architectures invites users to take on more active roles in the construction of their experience by actively choosing their own paths through the story space (Van der Nat et al. 2021a, b). Conceptualizing interactive narratives through spatial metaphors allows us to grasp how users can express agency even if a narrative offers few interactive options. From the perspective of the user, the experience is linear because it occurs in real-time, but a spatial perspective allows for consideration of the scope of options users have when engaging with a journalistic narrative.

- **Linear narratives.** They present the story information in one structured experience, enriched by interactive elements. Journalist John Branch and designer Graham Roberts developed *Snow Fall, The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek* (*The New York Times* 2012) as a linear narrative that takes users through an avalanche. User storytelling techniques from narrative journalism in combination with first-person video footage shot with GoPros during the event allowed Branch and his team to reconstruct the experience of being caught in an avalanche. The narrative is divided into chapters and the written text is enriched with videos and data visualizations.
- **Branching story.** *I am Mosul* is an interactive by Laurens Samsom and Frederick Mansell that uses a classic branching story structure as the basis of its approach. Each choice users make is a branch in the story and leads to new choices. In this way users take individual paths through the story space. Inspired by games, the creators wanted users to be able to experience their city being invaded by Islamic State. The interactive is designed to place users in the shoes of someone needing to react to the invasion: stay or flee? If you flee, what do you take with you? Do you survive the invasion?
- **Multi-linear storylines.** Interactivity is sometimes expressed as a choice between multiple linear narratives that exist alongside each other in the story space. This is the case of *Hollow*, an interactive documentary by Elaine McMillion Sheldon that portrays in several episodes the transition of McDowell County in West Virginia (United States) from industrial peak to depression, and its subsequent progressive recovery through the good work of the community. Each of its episodes, which can be accessed non-sequentially, presents a linear story, with several spaces where the

user can expand information through audiovisual and interactive content. This is all presented in a fluid way through the scroll, which animates the successive layers in one of the most outstanding examples of HTML5 and parallax in journalistic narratives.

- **Non-linear.** Narratives that are considered non-linear have no, or very limited, pre-structured pathways through the story space. Each user is therefore able to construct a unique path. As in different collaborative projects such as the crowd-sourced documentary *18 Days in Egypt* or the database-driven narratives of Korsakow, we refer to more disruptive proposals in terms of structure. This is the case of *Quipu Project*, a transmedia documentary about forced sterilizations in Peru in the 1990s. The central piece is a webdoc that collects the testimonies of the victims recorded on a telephone, which can be navigated through an interface that represents a ‘quipu’ (an Inca instrument for storing information through knotted strings). There is no pre-established order in this navigation, which allows multiple jumps between testimonies, in addition to collecting responses from users who collectively contribute to this narrative.

### 3.2 *From Textual to Technological Immersion*

Immersive technologies literally (and narratively) change the users’ perspective on the story space—so with text-based immersive techniques, such as narrative journalism, users are able to ‘feel along’ with the characters in the story, but technologies that fully engage visual and auditory senses, and close the user off from the rest of world, invite experiences from a first-person perspective (de Bruin et al. 2022).

- **Narrative journalism.** A means to achieve immersion without the need for advanced technological solutions. Using storytelling techniques from fiction, narrative journalism aims to transport the user into the narrative world. The written component of *Snow Fall* is a prime example of this, using perspective to allow readers to take on the role of a character in the text. Moreover, *Snow Fall* follows a classical narrative tension arch, resulting in a climax. Beside textual storytelling techniques, dynamic multimedia—notably, a technique called parallax scroll—is used to enhance the immersive quality of the narrative.
- **360° journalism.** Three-dimensional spaces, photography and 360-degree video are the protagonists of many immersive projects. During the wave of immersive journalism that began in 2015, the 360-degree video format was especially popular due to the accessibility of media to capture devices and the adaptation of audiovisual platforms to reproduce this content. We refer to pieces where the user feels surrounded by a moving image scene and has the ability to choose their visual framing. Just as the narrative conventions of journalism move to this format, so do the blurred boundaries between genres—one of the key issues is the presence and mediating role played by the journalist. In 360° journalism, media initiatives such as the *New York Times*’ Daily 360 or *Euronews*’ coverage, among others, stand out.

- **Virtual reality.** We refer to a CGI-based (computer-generated imagery) creation, which beyond being a virtual scene with the user in the center, can allow six degrees of freedom by incorporating the user's three-axis displacement. This requires compatible devices, such as the Oculus Quest. Out of only three levels of freedom, we place most journalistic creations in virtual reality at a lower level. Examples include pieces by the *Guardian*, such as *6 × 9*, where the user is locked in an individual prison cell for 9 min to represent confinement and its consequences through the recreation of space and different effects. It is worth mentioning that *6 × 9* has real sound, being a fundamental dimension for the immersive experience.
- **Installation.** Due to the demanding requirements of needing a space specifically dedicated to the experience, there are few examples of this development. One of the most outstanding cases worldwide is the *Carne y Arena* experience, directed by Alejandro G. Iñárritu. Built from research and direct work with migrants from the southern border of the United States, it represents in a series of spaces the moment of the capture of a group of displaced people. The fact that it is a physical installation allows for immersive resources such as wind effects, an earthy soil on which to walk barefoot, ambient temperature control to generate cold spaces, and freedom of movement on a stage that can be accessed with a headset. The director's own definition of this work as 'semi-fictionalized ethnography' places this experience in a diffuse space between documentary and fiction.

## 4 Audience

The key motivation for news organizations to invest in interactive and immersive forms of journalism is the idea that these innovative story formats are beneficial for audience engagement. However, the consumption of these narratives typically requires a serious investment of time and emotion on the part of the user. Moreover, especially for immersive forms, the consumption requires certain technologies. We also know very little about the basic assumption that the form itself increases audience engagement.

As researchers, we have approached three instances that could shed some light. As a main limitation, we must say that these are studies carried out with specific projects and, therefore, there are factors in the story itself that could interfere with the results. As well as the size of the sample, as it is difficult to achieve representativeness in these resource-consuming studies.

An experimental approach to interactive documentary reception (Vázquez-Herrero 2021), through non-linearity and multimedia-interactive attributes, has shown that these features facilitate positive effects on engagement and immersion. The model proposes a feedback relationship involving interactivity (product attribute), engagement (user experience attribute) and immersion (user experience result), such that interactivity facilitates engagement and engagement can lead to greater immersion, which in turn feeds back into interactivity. In the scales used to

measure perception, there were numerous variables with superior results (with statistically significant differences) for the non-linear multimedia-interactive story. This means that aspects such as the perception of control over the story, novelty, desire to continue, empathy or enjoyment, among others, show results favored by the non-linear and multimedia-interactive format. In addition, a series of mediating variables were identified that reinforce the effects and function as predictors, making them key characteristics for the design of interactive experiences. The study demonstrates, within its limitations, that the use of interactive storytelling can be convenient and reinforce its meaning, from the audience's point of view. Contrasting these results in focus groups, the participants in the experiment considered that interactive narratives are convenient, especially for representing complex realities.

In the field of immersive journalism, we compared an online article and a 360° video through a narrative textual analysis and an experiment (Vázquez-Herrero and Sirkkunen 2022). This research started with a detailed study of the elements that build immersion in the text, and then showed users the product and assessed the effects of the immersive format compared to the online article. The results found that there was a significant effect by 360-degree video on interest and ability to influence opinion on topics closely related to the story. In addition, statistically significant differences were detected in the effects of presence, realism and involvement, especially in terms of sense of presence and empathy. However, both formats form a continuum in which information and emotion are complementary. The study shows that the immersive format can be a good way to deal with some topics, as it places the user at the center of the scene, breaking with the distance perceived in other media. During the post-experiment reflection phase, participants highlighted the suitability of 360-degree video when the space is the protagonist and has a specific value (uniqueness), for stories with emotional impact or that seek to move the user, and when the visual nature and power of the images reinforce the meaning of the story.

One of the challenges for studying the reception of interactive non-fiction is that producers aim to provide users with 'an experience'. In doing so, as discussed above, producers assume interactivity contributes to this experience and they view this as a form of audience engagement. Studying an 'experience' poses several methodological challenges, as discussed by Groot Kormelink (2020). The fleeting nature of feelings makes it hard for researchers to grasp and study them in detail. Van der Nat (2022) uses concurrent think aloud protocols to evaluate the user experience holistically. In this study, seventeen young adults were asked to verbalize their thoughts and feelings while going through an interactive narrative. Participants' immediate emotional and active responses to the interactive and narrative cues presented on their screens were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. The responses captured in the think-aloud sessions were supplemented by structured interviews immediately following the session to substantiate our interpretation of the user's emotional response. This method proposes to capture the user experience holistically by analyzing: (1) verbalized thoughts and feelings, (2) corresponding body language and facial expressions, and (3) user activity and navigation. The findings indicate that interactivity has the potential to contribute to users' sense of involvement, but when designed poorly can also lead to early drop-off. More importantly,



the think-aloud sessions made clear that feeling involved with a journalistic story is not a constant feeling for users, rather engagement is fleeting and mostly dependent to the extent to which users are able to recognize themselves and their life in a story. This means that it does not matter how the interactivity is designed, or if a narrative is interactive at all. Far more important is how interactivity grants users access to narrative information they can somehow link to their own experiences of the world.

## 5 Conclusion

In this chapter we addressed the redefining or blurring boundaries of journalism from the perspective of creators, production and reception in interactive digital storytelling. It is an open and constantly evolving debate, subject to changes in journalism, technologies and the uses we make of both. With an increasingly diverse, dislocated and platformized offer, challenges emerge and demand reflection. As Ryan and Staton (2022) say about interactive documentary, it “eludes concise definitions or boundaries”.

Regarding genres and forms of expression, it is not only challenging to classify and name them, but also to understand their principles. Sometimes, the hybridization of formats can generate doubts in the contract with the audience; for example, affecting the perception of a story as objective and neutral, the effects of interaction on the user’s point of view, and the entertainment character when certain strategies are used. New principles have also been introduced in journalism that challenge routines and conventions.

The redefinition of the sender-receiver relationship and the role of the user also affects the boundaries of journalism in interactive digital storytelling. The transfer of control from the creator to the user can generate spaces of participation where a superior framework must establish the discourse and keep the verification principle of journalism, without losing the authority of journalism. On the other hand, we benefit from the possibilities of interactive and immersive narratives for long-form, slow, contextual and investigative journalism. As a consequence, narrative becomes a process in which the story is reconstructed through interaction.

The experience, as a result of reception, challenges producers and researchers to capture and study a real experiential outcome. In interactive digital narratives, more traditional metrics are not enough, as the impact of both interaction and immersion requires more complex approaches than the quantitative indicators that apply to websites and social media platforms in general. Interdisciplinary production processes, which require experts from different fields, introduce new trade stories to journalism that merge and sometimes compete with the existing ones. How interactive and immersive journalistic narratives are meant to be consumed is a new way of consuming journalism, and we do not know with certainty how this fits with existing patterns of news use.

The analysis and discussion of the blurred boundaries of journalism in interactive digital storytelling opens up several debates and challenges:

- Is it acceptable for the user to access a place and sources without the mediation of a journalist guiding the story? Is it acceptable for journalists to present immersive nonfiction as an ‘unmediated’ view of the world?
- Is it permissible to place the user in a supposed scenario, as if there were no mediation, when in fact the design of the scenario has been determined by someone else?
- Is the user a mere spectator or do they assume a role? What are the consequences for the users’ journalistic experience?
- What degree of engagement are users (and journalists) willing to undertake? Is the ultimate goal of this engagement commercial or social? What role do these in-depth journalistic narratives play in people’s lives?
- How can innovative reporting formats that do not fit the social media mold be distributed? If users are unfamiliar with the format, for whom do creators design their stories?

We have sought to reflect in a non-systematized way on the blurred boundaries of journalism through the design, production and reception implications of interactive immersive journalism. This reflection lays the groundwork for future research that must address the questions raised in order to consolidate the burgeoning field of digital narratives.

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# Towards the Expansion of Narrative Boundaries in Latin American Non-fiction: Immersive Narratives, Territoriality and Participation



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**Abstract** The chapter addresses the transformation and co-evolution of Latin American non-fiction narratives, focusing on three of its most outstanding characteristics: its ability to narrate from the territories and incorporate territoriality as a narrative platform; its experimentation with immersive technologies, developing 360° content that places the user at the center of the scene; its condition of collective stories, often based on participatory, interactive and co-creative production strategies. The review of projects from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Peru, Colombia, and Mexico reveals a significant volume of works that show both the potential of new Latin American narratives and the need to rethink, redefine, and relocate non-fiction's boundaries in the digital ecosystem.

**Keywords** Transmedia documentary · Non-fiction · Immersive narratives · Expanded journalism

## 1 Introduction

Non-fiction narratives in Latin America have not been alien to the transformations of the cultural media ecosystem in recent decades. In line with technological advances, the development of the digital communications infrastructure, connectivity, mobility, and changes in user consumption practices, the discourses of reality have gradually adopted interactive, immersive and transmedia forms, mixing analog and digital languages, proposing participatory strategies and expanding their stories on multiple platforms and supports (Lovato and Irigaray 2021).

In the field of journalism, although marked by multiformity (Mellado-Ruiz 2009), Latin America exhibits strong roots sustained in the pen of its great chroniclers. The

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chronicle, of old lineage, has the extraordinary gift of always seeming newly invented, exploring to the maximum the techniques and resources of writing to describe events and characters as if the world were perpetually new (Correa-Soto 2016).

The social, political, economic, and cultural history of Latin America has been characterized, to a large extent, by the constant institutional ruptures of its national political systems (Mellado-Ruiz 2009). In this territory, the journalistic exercise, in addition to documenting reality, has also been linked to emancipatory processes, developing denunciation narratives in a tradition that encompasses both macrosocial processes and minimal stories (Lovato and Irigaray 2021). In various supports, the journalism of mestizo America produces border texts that testify to Latin American restlessness (Reguillo 2000).

In the documentary field, since the 1960s, beyond the forms and themes, Latin America has generally maintained a line that deals with inequality and political and social injustices and makes the excluded visible (Lovato and Irigaray 2021). This identity trace can also be found in interactive formats—sometimes referred to as webdocs, i-docs, or interactive multimedia documentaries—and even in transmedia projects, which expand their narrative universe in multiple media and platforms, often combining analog and digital proposals.

The current cartography of Latin American non-fiction also shows other singular characteristics. Outside of media corporations, many of the region's innovative and experimental productions are developed in media labs and small digital native production units, sometimes forming co-production networks. In this sense, the Latin American case shows an important involvement of universities in developing interactive and transmedia journalistic and documentary narratives (Gois-Falandes and Porto-Renó 2021). In these developments, a relevant focus on the territory, nearby communities, and social denunciation is also recognized (Vázquez-Herrero et al. 2021).

Although countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico have traditionally been very active poles of media production with global influence, today specialized international festivals such as International Festival of New Non-Fiction Narratives (FINNOF), organized by the National University of Rosario (Argentina), include among their finalist and award-winning projects productions from Guatemala, Costa Rica, Chile, and Ecuador in categories such as interactive documentary, web series, transmedia narrative, podcast, and virtual reality.

In this context, this chapter seeks to account for this transformation and co-evolution in Latin American non-fiction narratives, focusing on three of its most outstanding characteristics: its ability to narrate from the territories and incorporate territoriality as a narrative platform; its experimentation with immersive technologies, developing immersive content that places the user at the center of the scene; its condition of collective stories, often based on participatory, interactive and co-creative production strategies.

## 2 Narrating in (and with) the Territory: From Locative Media to Expanded Territoriality

The approach of narrating in and with the territory implies considering the city as a container of multiple stories that make up narrative universes, crossing different products on different screens, media and territorial actions and attracting audiences and users. This first approach to the concept of expanded territoriality transmutes the city as an organic hypertext, from a playful perspective of searching and discovering urban stories. Urban space is empowered as a transversal narrative platform (Irigaray 2015) in which multiple devices, genres, languages and media coexist, articulating a multi-layered ecosystem of convergent narratives.

According to Di Felice (2012) the fundamental characteristic of the historical moment we are currently experiencing is the reconfiguration of the experience of inhabiting the city in an atopic way. A new kind of hybridized, transient and fluid ecosystem of bodies, technologies and spaces, which is neither organic nor inorganic, neither static nor delimitate, but informational and immaterial. It is an informative (Lemos 2009) and interactive territory where a set of informative interfaces and networks are activated and promoted as a *sine qua non*-condition for inhabiting it.

This crossroads of interactions and dynamic information flows makeup postterritoriality, a form of digitalization that “seems to widen and extend urban spaces virtually” (Di Felice 2012: 264). Digital space is no longer perceived as a simulacrum but as an expansion or extension of real space. Symbiotic practices and transformative interactions are generated between the technological interfaces. In this metageography (Di Felice 2012) the coexistence of the digital layer and the physical world gives rise to an emerging territory (García-García and Roig-Segovia 2018) where inhabitants-users interact by exchanging data in ephemeral connections.

The emergence of the so-called locative media highlighted the generation of this hybrid space (De Souza and Silva 2006), inhabited by citizens who, in their translation, carry with them a mobile device that connects them to the network and interconnects them with other users. According to Lemos (2009), locative media generate “post mass media functions”, creating a new territorialization where the media are interpreted as a type of interactive art within an amalgam of diverse location-based technologies and services. Amid contested landscapes, the narratives and spatial interventions that unfold over a territory through locative media are place-making practices that connect signifiers to community stories.

To establish links between physical and digital layers, these heterotopic spaces (Foucault 1984, 2008) have as their gateway a tracker or urban markup (McCullough 2008) which can be volumetric (such as an object, a monument, a statue or a simple plaque) or flat (such as a graffiti, a poster, a projection or any print or screen), both outdoors and indoors.



The locative capacity of smartphones has transformed mobile devices into an interface that, through augmented reality (AR), can enhance the co-present physical environment. Locative media can give rise to the development of spatial narratives (Boj and Díaz 2013) or location-based storytelling, defined as those narrative experiences in which a story is developed from its actual links to physical space.

In Latin America, where there is a significant production of non-fiction transmedia narratives that seek to expand their stories across multiple media and platforms, citizen intervention actions can be great allies in thickening the stories. In these projects, the serendipity of the search and discovery of content on the urban narrative board is fundamental for the participation of users in the narrative plot.

Street projection experiences are a clear example of this. Unlike a video mapping projection, where extremely precise measurements are established in the relationship of the developed model on the projected building, the power of street projections lies in the simplicity and impact of their form. By using the street as a narrative canvas, the possibilities are endless. It is a *guerrilla* communication, on the fly, in an ultra-fast sequence of assembling, projecting and disassembling. The 21st-century version of the Lightning Act of the 1970s in Argentina, a surprise and fleeting demonstration during the dictatorship.

*Tras los pasos de El Hombre Bestia* [Following The Footsteps of the Beast Man] (2013), recounts the historical development of Argentina's first fantastic film lost in the 1960s. This is a pioneering transmedia documentary project in Latin America, conceived from a narrative expansion on the territory. Among other platforms, urban interventions were carried out, in which audiovisual microformats were taken to the physical spaces of the city, the streets and emblematic buildings, to introduce the mystery of the original film—*El Hombre Bestia* [The Beast Man] (1934) by Camilo Zaccaría Soprani—and of the characters that rescued and opened new knots to that initial text. These actions were designed for occasional passers-by who were not familiar with the project (Irigaray et al. 2014) in which people took photographs and uploaded them to their networks, generating a recursive loop.

The place-based narrative involves more intensely those who inhabit that narrative, holders of rights or attributions such as those acting and deciding freely, creating cultural goods and participating fully in the entire communicative process, fostering interactions related to public space and the city from a more plural perspective.

In this sense, projects such as *Canción de la ciudad* [Song of the City] (2015) highlight this process of appropriation of space and creation of participatory cultural experiences. Scenarios of crossings and interactions where all the stories of a constantly expanding narrative universe converge, through the approach of human stories behind the melodies that intertwine through Rosario's central pedestrian streets.

From the perspective of expanded territoriality, the city is transformed into an interactive board (Irigaray 2014) offering multiple views beyond its epidermal memory, turning social, political and cultural memory, inaccessible to the vast majority, into something intelligible and participatory.

The notions of transmedia territories (Ardini and Caminos 2018) and expanded territoriality (Irigaray 2016) relate the concepts of narrative, territory and locative media, in a cross between non-fiction and the so-called spatial narratives (Boj and

Díaz 2013; Cooley2014; Farman 2015; Ruston 2010), terratives (Epstein 2009), territorial navigation (Renó 2014) or hybrid narrative (Ryan et al. 2016). Inhabiting those narratives requires a citizen who responds to the stimuli by projecting their desires and tracing their becoming in them.

Such conditions are visible in productions such as *4 Ríos* [4 Rivers] (2014), which tells stories of the armed conflict in Colombia through different platforms, media and technologies in an attempt to generate processes of reflection on the consequences of violence in the country. The interactive exhibition platform is an example of expanded territoriality, mixing material elements such as models and AR. The proposal displays superimposed information by detecting certain established areas of the model.

Also in *Mujeres en venta: trata de personas con fines de explotación sexual en Argentina* [Women for Sale: Human Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation in Argentina] (2015) it can be seen that among its platforms it has street posters with markers for augmented reality, where passers-by could discover a message on their mobile devices, complementing the two layers of information, the physical and the digital audiovisual. This platform generated an enriched experience to involve citizens in denouncing and disseminating information on the fight against trafficking.

In the same perspective, *De barrio somos. Historias de clubes en 360°* [Born in Our Community. Clubs Inside Stories in 360°] (2018) maintains points in common in the interrelation of analogue and digital platforms, both in a board game and in an album of figurines with AR markers, where, based on the shields of each club, it triggers a short episode with the history of the institution. As in *Tras los pasos de El Hombre Bestia* [In the Footsteps of the Beast Man] (2013), where the closing of the experience had a postterritorial presentation, in that case, a transmedia kermesse was held, where games of yesteryear coexisted with digital practices of this time, to reconstruct the lived history of the club in its context with the neighborhood it inhabits.

Spatial narratives can be seen as a three-dimensional, urban expression of hyper-textual structures. In them, territorial arrangements, social attributes and cultural references can intersect with the technical-communicational arrangements of the expanded production of transmedia narratives.

The Latin American projects mentioned here recognize the territory as a web of collective narratives. These expanded narratives incorporate actions in the urban space while using, exhibiting, reusing, updating and (re)contextualizing the content produced for virtual environments where participants interact. In this way, a territorial interaction is added to digital interaction that manages to involve participants in innovative environments whose potentialities require specific reflections.

### **3 Narrating in (and with) Virtual Environments: Immersive Narratives, 360° Experiences and Virtual Reality**

In the search for innovative formats, Latin American media and content producers have also begun to explore the potential of immersive narratives, developing content that can be consumed through virtual reality headsets or HMDs (Head Mounted Displays) available in the market. These include headsets that incorporate mobile devices, that are connected to a PC, or that integrate a processor (standalone).

Immersive productions seek to generate realistic effects of presence in the virtual world by replacing the sensory perception of the user to position him in the middle of a 360° sphere. These projects can offer varying degrees of freedom for users to explore virtual environments by leveraging, among other things, stereoscopic, ambisonic, head-tracking, and motion-tracking technologies to respond to their movements in real-time.

With the incorporation of these technologies, the media seek to achieve the maximum degree of immersion in their audiences: the possibility of being and acting in the story (Domínguez 2015). Dolan and Parets (2016) propose the variables of presence and influence in the story to typify the forms of participation that users can assume in this type of narrative. In the Latin American cases, we can find both commitments to a passive observer, mainly in productions based on 360° video, and projects that aim at an active participant who influences the narrated world by executing actions in the virtual world.

The narrative design of these immersive productions presents particular challenges. While they can be considered post-screen narratives (Cizek 2016), VR productions will be consumed by visiting viewers of a spatial narrative. More than telling a story to viewers, it is about placing them within it (Soler-Adillon and Sora 2018).

Since the pioneering experiments of Nonny de la Peña and her Emblematic Group, journalistic productions behaved as early adopters of immersive technologies, coining the so-called immersive journalism. With VR and 360° productions of varying complexity, the world's media hastened to achieve that "old dream of journalism" announced by Biocca and Levy (1995) at the end of the twentieth century: to conquer time and space and to produce for the public the feeling of being present in distant places and events. In the same sense, Sirkkunen and Uskali (2019) underline that VR journalism provides an exceptionally different level of understanding and experimentation with the news than reading printed articles or viewing television reports. For Baía-Reis and Vasconcelos-Cunha-Castro-Coelho (2018), just as the transition from analog to digital transmission generated a digital revolution, comparable in scale to Gutenberg's press revolution, today's virtual reality could be unleashing a post-digital or meta-digital media revolution.

Currently, immersive media are in the phase of creative experimentation and expansion to the general public (Marín 2021). In the Latin American region, in the last decade, there have been projects that stand out for their narrative innovation

and, fundamentally, for their approach to themes close to the social demands of the territories, the struggles for social transformation, the violation of the rights of communities and the memory of peoples (Irisarri and Lovato 2022).

Among the possible immersive formats, many content developments with omnidirectional or 360° videos can be mapped—also called cinematic VR (CVR) or VR cinema (MacQuarrie and Steed 2017; Nielsen et al. 2016; Pillai and Verma 2019). A study carried out by Cantero-de-Julián et al. (2018) reports on 25 Latin American media that have included, at some point, formats with immersive capacity within their newsrooms. Among them, *Clarín* (Argentina) and *Folha de São Paulo* (Brazil) developed virtual reality apps to distribute their immersive content.

Beyond media corporations, projects based on 360° video that pursue social impact objectives stand out on the Latin American map. For example, the Ecuadorian project *Cruzar* [Crossing] (2020), produced by Imán Transmedia and directed by Juan Pablo Urgilés, was awarded and screened at multiple international festivals. It addresses the problem of Venezuelan displacement and human mobility through the story of Agny, a Venezuelan citizen who crosses several cities in Ecuador to work and raise money to regroup her family in that country. For its production, *Cruzar* uses the omnidirectional video recording technique, capturing 360° spherical images. The immersive piece is part of an expanded transmedia proposal that includes journalistic chronicles, collaborative spaces, and physical and virtual exhibitions.

Another notable production in the 360° video line is *Volver a casa VR* [Back to Home VR] (2018). This project was created from a documentary film and virtual reality workshop developed in prisons in Chile. Starting with 360° productions, it allows prisoners to revisit their home, their neighborhood, and their family. Along the same lines, the Argentine project *Un lugar en el mundo* [A Place in the World] (2022), developed in a Rosario Penitentiary Unit within the framework of the creative narratives workshop, proposes that prisoners travel to the places where they were happy, accompanied by their loved ones. It seeks to reconstruct, through 360° video records, those desired environments, using technology to tear down the walls of prisons.

For its part, the *Caminos de Colombia* [Pathways Colombia] (2022) project narrates the Colombian reality five years after the signing of the Final Peace Agreement in 2016. The country faces persistent security challenges, as well as continuous acts of resilience by all those committed to achieving lasting peace in the country. Through the stories of ex-combatants, social leaders, and victims of the conflict, this 360° series from the production company Gusano Films explores the opportunities and challenges of implementing the peace process in Colombia.

Environmental issues constitute a strong thematic line in immersive projects in Brazil. In this sense, the outstanding projects include *Rio de Lama: A Maior Tragédia Ambiental do Brasil* [Rio de Lama: Brazil's Greatest Environmental Tragedy] (2016), *Fogo na Floresta* [Fire in the Forest] (2017), and *Amazônia Adentro* [Into the Amazon] (2017), a co-production between Brazil, Ecuador, and Suriname (Vázquez-Herrero et al. 2022). Also in Chile, the *Cultura Oceánica* [Oceanic Culture] (2022) project stands out, an immersive documentary miniseries produced by the University

of Valparaíso that seeks to raise awareness about the importance of protecting the ocean and marine biodiversity.

Regarding interactive virtual reality projects, designed for headsets with three or six degrees of freedom, it is worth mentioning the Colombian series *Entre luces y sombras* [Between Lights and Shadows] (2020), directed by Nazly López Díaz. The project recalls the story of Félix Joaquín Rodríguez, one of the pioneers of Colombian silent cinema, and author of the film *Alma Provinciana* (1926). According to its director, the series tells the story of an old medium (cinema) through a new medium (virtual reality).

The visual technique that *Entre luces y sombras* uses to create the 360° environment is the animation of two-dimensional illustrations. It is an interactive proposal where the user assumes the role of the protagonist of the story developing actions in the virtual world to advance the story. Following Hardee and McMahan (2017), it is a virtual reality project for mobile devices based in computer-generated images (CG-Based Mobile VR). As part of a transmedia experience, a webcomic is added to the VR series, which acts as a platform for narrative expansion.

The VR *Prison X* videogame, created by Bolivian director Violeta Ayala, emerges as one of the most creative and interesting Latin American bets. The game universe, also known as the VR *cholaverse*, reconstructs the worldview of the Quechua and Aymara communities. The project is inspired by a real Bolivian jail and develops an Andean-themed magical world that can be explored with a playful perspective.

Immersive technologies also show a presence in Latin American museums. In the case of the San Lorenzo Museum Complex, in Argentina, the #DCMteam of the National University of Rosario used Oculus Rift technology to reconstruct two historical moments of the San Lorenzo combat, a fundamental event for the independence of the southern cone countries. In the first station, users can spy on the landing of the royalist troops and attend the harangue of the then Colonel San Martín organizing his grenadiers. Next, the second station relives key moments of the confrontation: the pincer attack, the actions of the San Martín troops and the remains of the combat on the battlefield. The visual environments were created with 3D animation techniques and can be traversed in 360°. Binaural or ambisonic sound was used for the sound montage, in order to generate an enveloping sound proposal that reacts and adapts to the user's listening position.

*Hypha* (2021), from the Chilean production company Nanai Studio, is a virtual reality experience that takes the user on a journey to purify the Earth of human-caused disasters, experiencing the life cycle of a fungus to understand the importance of the Fungi Kingdom as the main agent of bioremediation. The innovative experience is designed to be explored within a physical installation that houses it, comprised of biomaterials, with HTC Vive, Oculus Rift, and Oculus Quest 2 devices.

The cartography of emergencies, mutations, hybridizations, and media adaptations also shows the development of large-scale immersive installations, based on projections on large screens, rooms, or domes, using surround sound. The Kirchner Cultural Center, in Argentina, opened an immersive room in 2022, presenting a retrospective of the life and work of Astor Piazzolla. It is the first space of its kind located in a cultural institution in the country and is equipped with fourteen projectors, a

twenty-four-speaker sound system, and an acoustic coating specially designed for surround sound.

A great motor and incentive for new immersive productions in the region are the festivals that include proposals for workshops and creative laboratories. In its latest edition, the *Mediamorfosis* event, a great international benchmark, focused on the latest trends in the XR industry and the evolution of media. In addition, within the framework of his XR Lab, it promoted and selected projects to travel to exhibitions in Paris, Amsterdam, and Taiwan. In 2018, the *Mostra Bug Festival* was held in Rio de Janeiro, an event designed to bring the country closer to new narratives and ways of telling stories, with international conferences and workshops and a large exhibition of works that included 30 interactive projects and 20 immersive experiences. In Colombia, the *Narrar el Futuro Festival* has also become an accelerator for projects. In addition to the *The Future Is Now* exhibition, in 2022 it included a VR 360 hackathon among its activities.

#### **4 Narrating in (and with) the Community: Interactive, Participatory and Co-Creative Processes in the Production of Digital Stories**

During the last decade, Latin American interactive documentaries, understood in a broad sense, have demonstrated a great capacity to explore the different possibilities that the medium facilitates (Lovato and Irigaray 2021; Vázquez-Herrero et al. 2021). As we have seen, technological experimentation and rootedness to the territory play an important role in the works. As a third axis, we find works that stand out for the specific role assigned to audiences.

Assuming interactivity as a defining element of the digital story presupposes considering the digital ecosystem as a system of interfaces in which different actors come into relation through hybrid devices, channels and formats. Content, systems, media and actors establish communication processes which, as the system evolves, make it possible to understand both the singularity and specificity of the medium and the breadth of possibilities it offers. For a good number of authors, one of the frontiers that the digital documentary is making it possible to cross is precisely that of participation and co-creation, made possible by assuming the bidirectionality of the networks. Indeed, networks have allowed the emergence of documentary projects in which authors, informed communities, audiences, and media redefine their roles and functions, in which not only content is shared but the projects themselves evolve together with and through their audiences.

The maturity and volume of Latin American production allows us to observe nuances and singularities of the works depending on how the content is characterized, the type of audience to be reached and the collaborative process to be established (Piñeiro-Naval and Crespo-Vila 2022; Vázquez-Herrero and Moreno 2017). If we focus the observation of these works on this specific axis, we can observe three

different scenarios in which collaborative documentary projects are inscribed. Firstly, projects marked by unpredictability and the lack of prior content. Secondly, projects that require a specific community with whom and for whom the documentary process will be carried out. And thirdly, projects that work with different categories of users: active participants, sphere of influence and general public. In all three scenarios, there can be strategies or forms of both co-creation (Alberich-Pascual and Gómez-Pérez, 2016; Miller and Allor 2016) and co-design (Green et al. 2017) or both at the same time (Jenkins and Carpentier 2013; Nash 2014; Rose 2011).

The COVID-19 scenario has provided a broad overview of numerous co-creation and citizen participation projects created in the network in order to document the unique experiences of citizens and thus create memorials to preserve collective memory (Freixa et al. 2021; Gaudenzi et al. 2021). These projects are imagined as resources to provide historical perspective on how society deals with and resolves conflict situations (UNESCO 2020). This is not a new category. Prior to the pandemic, we found in Mexico the transmedia platform *Reconstrucciones* [Reconstructions] (2019) launched on the occasion of the earthquakes that affected several Mexican states, which falls into the category of commemorative projects developed to facilitate the creation of collective narratives about the tragedy.

The authors seek to “pay homage to the collective effort of Mexicans to rebuild and reconstruct after the earthquakes that shook Mexico in September 2017” (Burkhard and García-Corona 2019). The piece is nourished by the materials that the participants in the project *Levantemos México* [Raise Up Mexico] produced, which were collected, edited and archived following the guidelines set by *Reconstrucciones* in order to create the archive. In these projects, the communicational importance is based almost exclusively on the communal significance of the contents and their political, public dimension, as enablers of media dialogues in the community (Rojas et al. 2005).

The second scenario contemplates works that consider the documentary as a space for self-affirmation and empowerment. Interactive collaborative processes of co-creation enable what Kate Nash defines as participation “through media”, the possibility “to consider the extent to which participants have the potential to express themselves in a discursive space of documentary through various social networks and the ability of users to connect with others and have their social ‘voice’ acknowledged” (2014: 387), as opposed to ‘in media’ participation, in which authors audio-visually record the testimony of the observed community.

Often the practice of workshops serves as a basis for the development of projects based on dialogue between participants as a way of turning the recording of experiences into a process of communal documentation. This is the case of the works *Volver a casa* (2020) and *Somos San Juan de Ocotán* [We Are San Juan de Ocotán] (2021).

Surely one of the most attractive and disruptive works of recent years, as we have seen in the previous section, is the long-running project *Volver a casa*, a project with several ramifications created by Catalina Alarcón in Chile. Although its final format, once the experience is over, takes the form of an immersive audiovisual documentary,

it began as a participatory workshop. Virtual reality was incorporated as a dialogue interface during the creation process.

Initiated in 2017, the project was presented at Mediamorphosis in 2018 and IDFA in 2019 as a VR short film. *Volver a casa* is defined as a collaborative virtual reality experience devised to allow inmates of the Valparaíso prison the opportunity to connect with their places and family members.

Documenting places and people invisible to society has been my authorial goal (...) I do documentary film workshops in prisons, and in these workshops, we realized that there was a great need for connection with the outside world and that is when the virtual reality experience was born (Infobae 2018).

*Somos San Juan de Ocotán*, a Mexican web documentary, also began as a participatory workshop with the aim of becoming a vital reference for the participating community. In this case, it is a group of young people who decided to participate in the project to show themselves and document their existence. As the authors-promoters state:

The relevant and fertile aspect of the project is to accompany a group of young people to position themselves in the center of the process of creation and communication in order to question themselves about what they want to say and what they want to propose to whoever looks at their productions (Mejía-Lara and Zavala-Scherer 2021: 153).

The process led some of the participants in the project to form the multimedia production company Documachete (2021).

The final phase of the project, making itself known, can take the form of an audiovisual documentary, a website or a transmedia documentary. Although the core of the project lies in the process of creation and execution of the collective experience, these projects need a public presentation that allows them to fulfill two fundamental functions: to exist in the media in order to vindicate themselves.

Thirdly, there is a category of interactive documentaries in which the authors need to design processes involving different typologies of users, all of whom are indispensable. This is the case, for example, of the multi-awarded interactive documentary *Proyecto Quipu* [The Quipu Project] made by Rosemarie Lerner and María-Ignacia Court and launched in public in 2015. The project began much earlier, in 2011, when the authors began investigating the forced sterilizations carried out in Peru in the late 1990s as part of President Fujimori's family planning program (El Desconcierto 2017).

*Proyecto Quipu* contemplates two differentiated participation scenarios: in the dialogue with the testimonies and the audience. The first takes place in the territory, in the locations of those affected, in small rural towns scattered throughout the Andes mountains. The second is global and takes place online (Freixa 2018; Freixa et al. 2022). As in the previous category, dialogue with the people involved is at the heart of the project: "We developed the Quipu Project in collaboration with the people who were sterilized in Peru. They are our partners, in a project created with them, not for them. It is this approach that has generated a unique project structure" (Court and Lerner 2015). With the audience, participation is pursued through



concrete actions proposed by the authors: financial donations, personal testimony and political actions (Vázquez-Herrero and Moreno 2017).

These three examples show how the expansion of interactive documentary in Latin America contemplates a broadening of the scenarios according to the co-production and co-creation strategies being pursued. On the fringes of conventional media, independent productions are experimenting, revising and redefining the forms and meaning of social documentary in the digital media ecosystem.

## 5 Final Considerations

The rise of interactive non-fiction productions in Latin America in recent years has revealed the existence of common characteristics that allow affirming the existence of an identity of its own. As has been stated in this chapter, the expansion of Latin American interactive documentary can be located in three main axes: in the experimentation of formats and narratives—with an important boom of the immersive—, in the exploration of the territory—understood as an interface—, and in the participatory and co-creation dynamics—as elements of social transformation.

A good number of the works on display are simultaneously related to several of these axes. Certainly, technological and narrative innovation, territoriality and active participation of communities are elements shared by a large number of authors beyond Latin America and are part of the questions that the interactive documentary has been raising since its beginnings. However, we note that in the Latin American scenario these issues have had a fundamental centrality.

On the fringes of media corporations, small studios, university laboratories and social organizations have produced a significant volume of works that show both the potential of the medium and the need to rethink, redefine and relocate non-fiction in the digital ecosystem. These productions expand the conventional territories and formats of journalism and non-fiction, advancing even at the intersection and integration with other fields of communication and the arts, blurring their borders and increasing the creative and participatory capacity of their narratives.

It remains to be seen, in the coming years, whether Latin American non-fiction production can stabilize a sufficiently solid network of creators, circuits, innovation centers, production companies, festivals, distribution and, above all, audiences, to enable its consolidation and leadership.

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# Innovation in Narrative Formats Redefines the Boundaries of Journalistic Storytelling: Instagram Stories, TikTok and Comic Journalism



Alba García-Ortega  and José Alberto García-Avilés 

**Abstract** Journalism is immersed in an ever-changing environment where professional journalistic standards and practices are being constantly redefined. In this context, new forms of news storytelling emerge to engage younger audiences and implement new distribution strategies. These forms of storytelling often overlap with other areas and grey zones, such as entertainment or opinion, challenging traditional journalistic boundaries and values. In this chapter we explore the implications of storytelling innovation in journalism, focusing on three formats that have gained prominence in recent years: (1) ephemeral content in Instagram Stories; (2) viral journalism in TikTok; and (3) comic journalism. We analyze different case studies to examine whether these new forms of storytelling adhere to journalistic standards and practices or instead they redefine them.

**Keywords** Journalism innovation · News storytelling · Instagram · TikTok

## 1 Introduction

The rise of social platforms has sparked changes in journalistic practices, in the dissemination of news and in how users engage with them (García-Orosa et al. 2020) as the journalistic profession redefines its boundaries. Patterns of news consumption have also changed radically as audiences for traditional media outlets are declining (Kulkarni et al. 2022). Social media have enabled the reinvention and adaptation of journalism to new narrative formats, such as storytelling, which respond to the audience's interests and news consumption habits (Marcos-García et al. 2021). In this context of continuous transformation of journalistic practices, new forms of journalistic storytelling emerge.

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These narratives, often mixing information and entertainment, have proven to be successful to attract younger audiences (Azurmendi 2018; Peña-Fernández et al. 2022), and to implement alternative distribution strategies (Sixto-García et al. 2022). However, the hybrid nature of these narrative formats challenges the traditional boundaries and values of journalism, as scholars have not yet reached a consensus about their most relevant features (Lopezosa et al. 2023: 835).

In the last decade, journalism is immersed in a technology-driven media environment where professional journalistic norms and practices are being redefined (Vázquez-Herrero et al. 2019). Users are no longer limited to selecting and interpreting content (Hermida 2012), but actively participate in its production. Traditional mass media logic has been replaced by social media logic (Van Dijck and Poell 2013), in which platforms such as TikTok or Instagram are gaining prominence. While television and print media are facing constant audience losses (Newman, 2022), the number of active users on social platforms keeps growing steadily (We are social 2022). Their popularity has skyrocketed across all age groups, especially among younger audiences, where nearly 60% already use social media as one of the main sources to access information (IAB Spain 2022).

The search for innovative languages and the experimentation with narratives is a constant in the profession, in its eagerness to connect with all types of users and to innovate in storytelling techniques (García-Avilés and Herrera 2020). Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality, 360 video and newsgames, for example, are transforming how journalists elaborate stories and report current events (García-Avilés et al. 2022), by processing a large volume of data and translating it into news visualization, or by incorporating Artificial Intelligence tools that allow text or images to be generated from a previous dataset.

Research has explored innovative forms of storytelling, examining the style and presentation of news, maximizing the interactive, hypertextual and immersive possibilities of digital journalism in a disruptive environment (García-Avilés 2020). This includes, for example, the increasing crossover between news and comedy/satire genres that attempt to inform, explain, and entertain (Kilby 2018). Indeed, comic forms of narrative could be more effective than traditional news in communicating information because, as Kulkarni et al. (2022) argue, “the way in which the news content is presented often determines its impact”.

In this chapter we discuss some theoretical considerations of narrative innovation in journalism, focusing on three formats of visual storytelling that have captivated news organizations: (1) ephemeral content in Instagram Stories; (2) Viral journalism in TikTok; and (3) comic journalism. We analyze several case studies to explore whether these new forms of storytelling abide by the traditional practices of journalism or, on the contrary, redefine them.

## 2 Ephemeral Journalism: From Snapchat to Instagram Stories

The way users interact with social media content is very different from traditional media. In general, it is a fleeting and ephemeral consumption (Wirfs-Brock and Queh 2019), where users' attention is brief, partial, and fragmented (Boczkowski et al. 2017). In recent years, social networks have experienced an explosion of ephemeral "short-form" (Grainge 2011: 3) and "short-lived" (Pesce 2016) contents. This 'ephemerality' refers not only to pieces that can be consumed in a few minutes, but also to content that is available for a limited period, conceptualized as "journalism which creates ephemeral contents to distribute them through ephemeral platforms and tools with the aim of satisfying the consumption habits of ephemeral users" (Vázquez-Herrero et al. 2019: 3).

This form of storytelling breaks with the common practice of preserving and saving content to guarantee its permanence over time (Karlsson and Sjøvaag 2016). Instead, the message is only available for a short time, so its limited availability and fugacity become its "core value" (Vázquez-Herrero et al. 2019). Currently, ephemeral content has reached its highest exponent in Instagram Stories. Inspired by Snapchat, Stories allow users to share all the moments of their day, including those they do not want to keep on their profile (Instagram 2016). This type of content often presents a documentary, narrative, and ordinary style that "enables users to combine the various modes of communication of the platform (pictures, videos, texts, emoji and stickers, audio) into a single digital object" (Bainotti et al. 2021). Although some news outlets were early adopters (*Buzzfeed*, *Vice*...), the use of Instagram Stories for journalistic purposes is a recent phenomenon.

Vázquez-Herrero et al. (2019) analyzed 17 media outlets that use Instagram Stories on a regular basis. The authors identified two different models. On the one hand, outlets that only post one story on days they publish and, on the other hand, those that post more than one story per day. In both cases, the complexity of the publication was relevant. Those who publish a single story usually display a more complex production, including different elements and formats (photography, video, hashtags, icons, mentions, URLs...). In contrast, those who publish multiple stories a day focus on a single element. The most common resources include images, text, video, and hypertextual elements.

From a content point of view, most stories are simple introductory publications made up of "a headline that rarely provides much information and that seeks for the user to click the native link to access the news from the webpage" (Vázquez-Herrero et al. 2019: 7). This strategy is common in most legacy media, such as the *Washington Post*, *Le Monde*, *El Mundo*, or *El País*. To a lesser extent, stories are used as a summary—with different items that synthesize the most relevant news—or to report a story—several audiovisual elements that go deeper into a specific topic.

A less common journalistic use of Instagram Stories is media coverage, a practice widely used by *Vice News*. Through its featured stories, this outlet provides on-the-scene coverage of current events. Like a TV connection, journalists report from



the ground, do interviews, and produce breaking news live video. Some of *Vice News* coverage on Instagram includes US protests for the war in Ukraine, New York marches against a recent abortion law or statements from senators after recent Texas shootings.

## 2.1 Case Study: *Freeda*

*Freeda Media* is an Italian start-up and media brand founded in 2016. In only four months, it reached 570,000 fans, 90% of which were women between 18 and 34 years old. After their success in the Italian market, in 2018 they launched a Spanish edition, achieving instant success. Currently, they have 1.4 million followers on Instagram, 560,000 on TikTok, and over 15 million likes. In its webpage, *Freeda* defines itself as “a digital community born with the mission of giving a voice to the most powerful generation of women that has ever existed, GenZ and Millennial”. Their philosophy is based on making visible all the stories that do not find a place in traditional media, focusing on values such as diversity, inclusion, and empathy. Their aim is to offer a “safe space” where women can be informed, have fun, learn, and be inspired.

Their Instagram Stories fit into four main groups: (1) informative videos based on current events, (2) evergreen content, (3) playful stories, and (4) digests, summaries, and teasers. The informative content is mainly composed of reports, interviews, and short videos where experts explain a news issue. In general, these are informative blocks made up of several short stories. Along with the edited video, they often use interactive elements that promote user engagement, such as questions, surveys, or polls.

Evergreen content includes timeless playful-informative sections. Although some of the stories are related to current events, they can be consumed anytime. Some evergreen sections are Sex education—which deals with topics related to sexual health—or Good to know. For example, the origin of March 8 Women’s Day, the meaning of endometriosis or the difference between homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia.

Regarding playful content, they often include challenges and mini-games that boost the engagement and interaction with their followers. One of the most popular mini-games is “Find Tati”, a series of stories where users have to find the face of a little dog hidden in a large image. As the stories advance, the image is progressively enlarged until Tati’s face is easy to spot. This gives the user different levels of difficulty. Other challenges include Guess the movie and Who am I?, where *Freeda*’s team asks the user to guess a movie and a character by following a series of clues. Finally, the digests, summaries and teasers are clips of news content published by *Freeda*. They often provide previews of longer reports, interviews or documentaries posted in the feed or the reels of the account. The most relevant content is saved in the featured stories, so followers can view it again after 24 h.

The balance between news and entertainment is one of the most interesting things about *Freeda*’s editorial strategy. On the one hand, they focus on news formats with

interviews and expert participation; on the other hand, they offer entertainment-focused content, through soft news and playful formats aimed at user participation. In order to distinguish information from entertainment, they often rely on covers, bumpers and labels to identify the type of content. There are also differences in the way videos are recorded and edited. Interviews and debates tend to be set-based, with fixed shots of the participants looking at the camera. On the contrary, playful videos generally include short shots, hand-held or moving camera and combine video with GIFs, sound effects and other resources such as fast motion or time lapses.

### 3 Viral Journalism: The Key to Success in TikTok

Virality is one of the main functional logics of social media (Klinger 2013). Considered as the ability to spread online “in much faster and wider manner than other news stories” (Al-Rawi 2019: 67), virality has become the cornerstone of current social media research. Understanding what factors determine a publication’s ‘shareability’ is key to establishing an effective content strategy. Hornecker et al. (2007) argue that the probability of news being shared depends on the content itself, the characteristics of the platform where it is consumed, the interface access points, and the fluidity of sharing. The presence of a strong visual component and the creation of content that evokes positive emotions -an area where TikTok has proven to be highly effective- have also been shown to be key elements (Harcup and O’Neil 2017).

TikTok is the fastest-growing short video application worldwide (Negreira-Rey et al. 2022). Its fast and playful content is aligned with the preferences of the new generations. However, if there is one thing that differentiates TikTok from other similar networks, it is the way it displays its content. Unlike most platforms, which prioritize content published by the user’s contacts, TikTok’s whole experience is based on an algorithm that recommends videos based on the user’s interests and previous behavior. As a result, any video, regardless of the number of followers of its creator, can be included on the For You Page (Vázquez-Herrero et al. 2022). This consumption model provides “a continuous, never-ending succession of videos” (Negreira-Rey et al. 2022: 148). Although the functioning of the algorithm has always been one of the greatest secrets of the platform, some factors appear to influence the visibility and virality of the content. The use of trending sounds and hashtags, the time spent playing a video, and interactions—likes, comments, and shares—are key elements (Klug et al. 2021).

At first, many media outlets were skeptical about the journalistic possibilities of a social network based on the creation of lip-syncs, music videos, and viral challenges. However, the need to bring its content closer to younger audiences has forced them to rethink their decision. According to the Reuters Institute Report, 49% of top news publishers are currently regularly publishing content on TikTok (Newman 2022). Many of them have joined in the past year. In addition to the need to reach younger audiences, some news managers have been encouraged by the recent changes on the

platform, such as the promotion of live streaming, longer video lengths, and new features that make it more conducive for news publishers.

Two main communication strategies have been used by news outlets in TikTok. On the one hand, the outlets that bet on a ‘creator-first strategy’ focused on a team of young specialists who are native to the platform. This strategy adopts the relaxed tone and language associated with TikTok and takes advantage of the possibilities of young communicators who are used to this kind of audiovisual production. This strategy has been adopted by the early adopters of the platform, such as the *Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times*. On the other hand, those who prefer a ‘newsroom-led approach’ focus on the potential of the story and the journalistic team that makes up the newsroom. In this case, TikTok becomes a simple distribution channel. It is a common strategy for established news providers, especially those with a strong audiovisual background, such as *Vice World News*, *The Economist*, or *Sky News*.

### 3.1 Case Study: *El Mundo*

Spanish newspaper *El Mundo* launched its TikTok account in May 2021. The project, promoted by Guacimara Castrillo, head of social media, and journalist Elena González, began as an experiment to strengthen its brand, test other forms of storytelling, and reach younger audiences. Like *Freeda*, their success was immediate. In just four months they reached 50,000 followers and over 780,000 by January 2023. In 2022, *El Mundo*’s team was nominated in the category of Educational Partner in the For You Fest Awards, a contest organized by TikTok to reward the best creators on the platform.

Like other publishers and journalists (Negreira-Rey et al. 2022; Vázquez-Herrero et al. 2022), *El Mundo* initially used viral trends and challenges to boost its range and number of views in TikTok. In 2022, however, the profile shifted towards more informative content. While they maintain the balance between news and entertainment, they have incorporated formats focused on the analysis of current events. Their content can be classified into three main groups: (1) short news stories; (2) news analysis or explanations; and (3) viral videos. Short stories are 30-s videos that explain a news or current event. Unlike other formats, which include the presence of a journalist on camera, short news does not use voice-overs or images of journalists. Instead, they rely on a very simple production, based on archival images, labels, and background music.

Explanatory and analytical videos usually begin with a question or headline that introduces the subject and provides a starting point. The videos are presented by Elena González, a young journalist who does the voiceover and leads the explanation using labels, images, and visual resources such as illustrations, GIFs, and icons. Despite their short length—around one minute—this is a more restful narrative, where a current event is explained from different points of view. The topics covered are diverse, from those linked to the newspaper’s agenda, to pieces close to infotainment.

In these cases, the editing is slightly different, including a dramatization, sound effects, and TikTok's musical trends.

The viral pieces show clips of popular social media videos with their original audio. Here, the explanation is limited to the use of informative captions, tags, and descriptions on the profile. Even though there are some news examples, these videos are mostly linked to entertainment. Besides the most common formats, the account includes interviews with experts, *El Mundo*'s journalists and celebrities, and branded content pieces.

The videos use two main strategies for presenting the information. On the one hand, a more traditional approach where a journalist narrates the news and guides the user through the content. On the other hand, videos with background music where the news is presented exclusively by titles and captions. In both cases, the videos introduce certain particularities inherent to current consumption trends. They are vertical short videos, edited in an agile way, which include playful elements such as GIFs, memes, or sound effects. In addition, the chroma key technique allows to superimpose the journalist's image on the video base. This technique is very popular in TikTok and is increasingly used by news outlets.

## 4 Comic Journalism: Cartoons Tell the Story

The revitalization of graphic novels and comics for adults has encouraged the media to use comics as a tool to cover social issues, conflicts, or investigations. Bernal and Chillón (1985) coined the term "creative news journalism". Melero (2012: 542) defines comic journalism as "a creative formula" of reporting whose aim is "to inform on real events ensuring truthfulness in the narrative". The format relies on the comic, a "medium that turns the cartoon into the basic unit of the narrative syntax around which the story is articulated" (Castillo-Vidal 2004: 253) with educational and disseminating value (Albor-Chadid 2019).

Some authors place the turning point of comic journalism in the awarding of the Pulitzer Prize to cartoonist Art Spiegelman for his work *Maus* in 1992. His documentation process was based on the interview, one of the essential journalistic methodologies, in this case with his father, a Jewish survivor of the Nazi concentration camps. Despite his creative freedom through the animal portrait of the characters, Spiegelman documented facts with testimonial sources such as his own father, or the photographs combined with illustrations, endowing the story with authenticity and honesty (Bettaglio 2021).

Among the outstanding works of comic journalism is Didier Lefèvre's *The Photographer*, which combines drawing and photography (López-Hidalgo and López-Redondo 2021). The French photojournalist took part in a mission in Afghanistan during the 1985 Soviet invasion with the aim of documenting the work of Médecins Sans Frontières. Also of note is the contribution of journalist Joe Sacco, author of *Palestine*, *Footnotes from Gaza*, and *Reports*. Between 1993 and 1995, Sacco published the Palestine series, the result of his trip to Gaza and Israel during

the first Palestinian Intifada to document the conflict and explain the key issues. Over the course of nine volumes, Sacco shares what he sees, hears, and feels, contextualizing the historical origins of the conflict. The novelty of Sacco's work lies not only in his research, but also in the construction of the graphic story based on journalistic codes (Melero 2012).

In 2015 Jorge Carrión and Sagar published *Los vagabundos de la chatarra*, which shows a dark side of brilliant Barcelona, the life of those who live on and from the street; *Camino a Auschwitz* by Julián Gorodischer and Marcos Vergara, is a bid to refresh the memory of the Jewish Holocaust; *Vivos se los llevaron*, published by *Pictoline*, deals with the disappearance of the 43 students from Iguala on 26 September 2014. In 2016 Carlos Spottorno, photojournalist, and Guillermo Abril, reporter, published *La grieta*, a comic book that documents life in the hottest places in the European Union to understand the multiple conflicts, from the Melilla fence to the Arctic border between Finland and Russia, through the Balkans and the Turkish border, a work that combines photography, drawing and storytelling (López-Hidalgo and López-Redondo 2021).

Several prestigious media—*Le Temps*, the *New York Times*, *Le Monde*, the *Guardian*—have experimented with the format, although newspapers have not been concerned with its promotion. Comic journalism requires certain standards, such as capturing information using reliable methods and incorporating criteria of truthfulness and transparency. Creative works must be informative, combining a referential function and an aesthetic that confers narrative quality and amenity.

Some instances of comic journalism have become a benchmark. In 2013, Brazilian cartoonist Alexandre De Maio collaborated with Andrea Dip, a reporter for Agência Pública, in *Meninas em Jogo* (Girls at Play), a comic book investigation into child trafficking networks in Fortaleza, Brazil, in the context of the Confederations Cup held that year. In May 2016, the *New York Times* used comic journalism in *Inside Death Row*, a five-episode series by Patrick Chappate and Anne Widman on the death penalty in the United States. It tells the story of two Syrian brothers and families who, two years after fleeing their war-torn country, received visas to immigrate to North America. The series was published in the *Sunday Review* and won the Pulitzer Prize for Editorial Cartooning in 2018. In December 2016, the Peruvian digital native *Ojo Público* published *La guerra por el agua* (The water war), an interactive comic about the dispute over the water resource in Peru through 42 scenes and more than 120 drawings. Cartoonist Jesús Cossio, journalist Nelly Luna and programmer Jason Martínez traveled to the region and interviewed local leaders and farmers. All the scenes and dialogue are the product of reporting in the area, interviews with authorities and research into the mine company's finances, according to Luna.

Comic journalism has a strong storytelling potential that breaks creative boundaries. Authors can move beyond the structures of the vignettes and the limits of the frames, design the drawing, decide which graphic elements predominate, use photographs and collages, highlight some details and omit others, or even eliminate the text in favor of the image. These innovations hybridize or dilute traditional journalistic genres and make it possible to connect with new readers in an entertaining way.

#### 4.1 Case Study: *El Hábito de la Mordaza (El País)*

The Fundación para el Nuevo Periodismo Iberoamericano (FNPI) awarded the Gabriel García Márquez Prize for Innovation to the story in the form of a comic strip by illustrator and reporter Germán Andino (2016) that narrates the life of gang members in Honduras. Published in the Spanish newspaper *El País*, *El hábito de la mordaza* (*The habit of the gag*) tells the story of violence in the country through “a genre that has been underrated but is very powerful”, according to Andino (Connectas Lab 2020). This journalistic project addresses the reality of gangs in Tegucigalpa through personal stories brought to life through image and audio, and it experiments with innovative ways of reading and narrative control, using a comic strip almost 100 m long. Andino spent two years documenting himself: he visited troubled neighborhoods and interviewed dozens of gang members. His drawings show characters who candidly recount their suffering and that of their victims.

The experience of listening to the testimonies of Isaac, a tattoo artist for the Maras, through different audios, connects the images that move in a horizontal black and white sequence. The slow pace allows the user to understand the story by listening and observing in first person what is happening. It handles silence masterfully and does not saturate. As the story progresses, the user is drawn into the existence of gangs, without judgment, witnessing their experiences. Drawing articulates the whole story, and it becomes the only salvation for Isaac, who transforms himself and moves from one place to another in the story, and in turn, Andino draws what he narrates in the middle of the conversation.

The language of comic reportage is a hybrid between image and text, and the author decides which of the two predominates at any given moment. *El hábito de la mordaza* uses image and text in an independent and cohesive way, generating different types of sequential narrative with a fresh rhetoric, far from the stereotyped language of conventional journalism. Its fragmented structure develops a common thread about multiple events whose interpretation requires less effort by the reader.

“With this format, I tried to control the flow of the story. I had to draw some very long things to be able to follow that linear sense of the story, which is also very good because it works like that, like a timeline,” says Andino (Connectas Lab 2020).

It’s not the same to take a photograph of a gang member as it is to sit for an hour and draw a portrait of him. This allows you to establish a very different link with the reader from the journalist who takes notes or photographs. The gang members almost ask you to ‘do me a portrait’. I tell them ‘Well, but while I’m doing it, let’s talk a bit’. They say ‘yes, take it easy’. And it flows better (Connectas Lab 2020).

Andino chooses the rhythm, the structure, and semantics, through different languages, styles, and structures, and participates in the story as a narrator-protagonist or as a testimonial narrator. The author is an active witness: his visible presence through the self-portrait in the vignettes testifies that the events he narrates are true because he was there, lived them and tells them as they appear in his notes, photographs, and recordings. Composition plays a key role in the narrative, as it

directs attention to the key aspects of the story. The vignettes, which at certain moments take up the entire screen, are powerful and thought-provoking.

*El hábito de la mordaza* incorporates narrative, descriptive, and argumentative elements in an innovative way. Its expressive resources include the use of different points of view through the compilation of documentary sources and eyewitnesses' accounts, the tendency to 'show' with graphic exposition of information, the reconstruction of scenarios through sketches and visual references, and the portrait of the characters and the transcription of dialogues. The author's understanding of the multidimensionality of digital publishing allows for enriching narrative experiences, while helping to engage with readers with different sensibilities.

## 5 Conclusions

The media's ability to innovate in narrative formats is related to their capacity to overcome traditional production routines and experiment with different languages. These formats usually imply a collective authorship of multidisciplinary teams made up of data journalists, designers, video and audio editors, graphic artists, and reporters, among others. Their main goal is to reach new audiences in the channels and platforms where young people consume content, such as Instagram or TikTok, incorporating a visual and emotional language based on video, pictures, and comics. At the same time, the aim is to combine speed in news coverage and the ability to innovate with journalistic quality and the brand's own standards.

The use of Instagram Stories, TikTok video and comic journalism opens new storytelling possibilities for news organizations. These hybrid formats combine a wide variety of narrative resources to recreate environments, show the protagonists and their points of view, and recreate events. Users can participate with elements such as images, texts, or comments that enrich the story, as most pieces encourage the audience to get involved or participate in specific actions.

Most of the analyzed cases preserve the essence of the medium they come from and introduce new elements adapted to each social network. As for Instagram Stories, consumption is ephemeral and immediate, so the content tends to be brief and with little editing. Even so, two different strategies can be observed depending on their durability. Those videos that are going to be saved in the featured stories are more carefully edited than those that disappear after 24 h. TikTok videos combine a traditional structure with the platform's typical editing elements (music trends, chroma key, transition effects...). For its part, comics are a hybrid format where the information adheres to journalistic standards, but the way in which the facts are presented—the balance between illustration, dialogue, opinion, and descriptions—depends on each author.

Change might have an impact on three main areas of journalism around which boundary work occurs: professionalism, participants, and practices (Carlson 2016). Thus, journalistic storytelling narratives redefine how news professionals approach the reporting of current events as the fuzzy edges of journalism are rapidly

evolving and often overlap over other domains and ‘grey areas’ (entertainment vs. news, subjective storytelling vs. objective reporting, dramatic narrative vs. factual coverage...).

These storytelling formats challenge the existing journalistic boundaries in several ways. On the one hand, they provide new possibilities in the coverage of news events more closely linked to evergreen and everlasting content, with very diverse approaches and techniques. On the other, there is a growing hybridization with entertainment and even fiction storytelling techniques (climax, rhythm, characters, conflicts, plot twists...). In addition, many of these narratives emotionally connect with the users and try to involve them in the events being told, often taking a stance on public issues that goes beyond traditional journalistic objectivity. However, they do not completely break with traditional standards. These storytelling formats usually adhere to audiovisual production techniques and include resources adapted to current consumption trends, combining traditional methods with innovative resources to show news content in a fresh, playful, and engaging way.

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**Adaptation to Mobile and Social Platforms  
for News Use**

# Models for Mobile Communication and Effects on the Boundaries of Journalism



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**Abstract** Smartphones play a significant role in the set of disruptive innovations that have emerged in recent years. The consumption of information from smartphones has become the common way of accessing news and the media is betting heavily on this sector. The popularization of social media has been key, which has caused a mutation in the type of journalistic content, increasingly accessible, ubiquitous, personalized, and identified with the user and/or with the environment. This chapter addresses the challenges of mobile journalism from the point of view of content production. The text has the aim of detecting the professionals technological skills and the state of implementation of mobile journalism in the current media context. It is analyzed how digital media integrate mobile technologies in their journalistic routines and it is offered a categorization of emerging formats and narratives in this context.

**Keywords** Mobile journalism · Narratives · Platforms · Media

## 1 The Challenges Faced by Mobile Journalism

Currently, journalism and mobile phones are an inseparable pairing that is blurring the boundaries of journalism both in the production, distribution, and consumption of news. In fact, the integration and proliferation of mobile technologies within the production and consumption of information (Bui and Moran 2020) has made mobile journalism one of the growing areas of the media industry (Hill and Bradshaw 2019; Perreault and Stanfield 2019). This forces journalists not only to be aware of the latest technological innovations, but also to develop a true *mojo* mindset (Salzmann et al.

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2021a, b). As early as 2016, Blankenship (2016) verified that mobile journalism, as in the type of journalism in which a single reporter has written, filmed and edited his/her own news, was a growing trend in local television stations both in the United States and in the rest of the world. Blankenship (2016) also found that the practice of mobile journalism gave journalists greater autonomy within a social context where smartphone technology had become more prevalent and affordable (Mills et al. 2012).

Mobile phones have become an essential part of digital journalism (Goggin 2020) because they respond more effectively to consumer expectations. This is especially true in regards to the demands of the youngest consumers (Canavilhas 2021). The relevance of mobile phones also comes from the individual empowerment that they bestow (Chib et al. 2021). Although journalists' mobility has always been a key component of the job, and as such, a necessary component for democracies (Örnebring and Weiss 2021), technological convergence has reshaped news production and distribution practices (Jamil 2020). This has occurred to such an extent that mobile journalism is now associated with better productivity, faster distribution, greater public participation and journalistic access to areas where the recording of images or sounds was previously impossible due to technological limitations (Gambarato and Alzamora 2018; Struckmann and Karnowski 2016). This fosters the growth of solo journalism (Blankenship and Riffe 2021). "Solo journalists are news professionals who are expected to gather information, write stories, record the audio and video elements necessary for those stories, and edit everything together by themselves" (Blankenship 2016: 1). With the evolution of mobile media, increased ubiquity has produced a kind of hybrid space where digital information is superimposed on physical space, revealing what was previously unknown about a given place (Frizzera 2015).

Observing and initiating, initiation approved, mobilizing MoJo, knowledge-building, coordinating explicit knowledge, performing the live moment, and boosting are the seven critical moments of coordination that must be solved by the actors participating in the news production process when they work collaboratively (Westlund and Ekström 2021) at a time when both news and audiences are increasingly mobile (Duffy et al. 2020). Ubiquitous access to information from mobile devices is associated to higher levels of news consumption (Ohme 2020). The development of push notifications that appear on users' screens and alert them to breaking news has the same effect (Stroud et al. 2020). Indeed, some applications even allow audiences not only to share stories, but also to act as a fundamental part of the story to help verify facts and sources, which is another weapon in the fight against disinformation (Becker 2021). There is already some research that suggests that mobile journalism is also facilitating a more consolidated phase of data journalism (Pybus and Coté 2022).

In many cases, the dissemination of mobile content is linked to the ephemerality that characterises social networks, especially when it comes to self-destructive content (Sixto-García et al. 2021). This has consequences for our long-term collective memory, in such a way one of the challenges must find new ways to archive the millions of ephemeral videos that are disseminated daily through different social platforms (Richardson 2020). Picone et al. (2015) pointed out that participation,

transversality and mobility are the key characteristics that define news that is everywhere and, as such, make up the challenges that mobile journalism must face. Some areas of journalistic specialization such as travel journalism are well equipped and can capitalize on the versatility of mobile practices (Duffy 2018). On the other hand, those within sports journalism have to think of themselves as a community of practice to make use of the established synergies between mobile and digital technologies, journalistic routines and institutional relations (Hutchins and Boyl 2017).

Editorial technologists have also made their mark on mobile journalism. As the journalistic engineers of the future, they are committed to overcoming inert processes, hegemonic structures, and the restrictive culture within journalism, seeing technology as a way to increase the audience's estimation of journalistic output (Lischka et al. 2022). The use of algorithms and other complex technologies has shaped the way news is produced, which inexcusably has repercussions on the way news is produced on mobile devices (Ogbebor and Carter 2021) and in settings far from conventional newsrooms. Digital journalism is characterized by practices and network scenarios that expand opportunities and spaces for news (Waisbord 2019). However, this highly technological approach sometimes causes the scientific community to forget to interpret digital journalism as a meaning creation system (Steensen et al. 2019), attaching more relevance to technical components than to content.

Some media are aiming to not solely rely on a team of journalists, preferring instead to educate and train some members of the newsrooms in mobile technologies (Kumar and Haneef 2018). For their part, the academy and journalism study centers are also aware of these practical evolutions within journalism (or are at least within one strain of journalism) and are adapting their study plans to models that are conducive to a more mobile, open, flexible, highly collaborative learning process, attaching great importance to audiovisual content (Diao and Hedberg 2020). If companies have implemented mobile shoppable videos, journalistic companies must also do something similar to sell their news (Williams et al. 2021). Furthermore, faculties must train professionals whose roles require greater social involvement (Bui and Moran 2020) to create products that satisfy the needs (and also the demands) of increasingly fragmented (and ever more demanding) audiences.

## 2 Professional Skills for a Mobile Journalism

In this context, the digital transition has brought about the current communication ecosystem that journalism and journalists find themselves in, which demands renewed competencies and skills for the practice of the profession (López 2021). Thus, the need to adapt journalists' professional skill set to the mediascape is made apparent. And not only that of junior journalists in their training period, but also that of experienced professionals with a career in media that must face new challenges every day. This exercise entails getting rid of any possible hint of digital divide among media professionals. The answer to these needs in university classrooms is expected to be provided by degrees, master's degrees, postgraduate degrees and continuous

training courses, as these educational offerings must connect regulated education with professional requirements. However, this challenge must be addressed from a dual path (López et al. 2017) that can help establishing the foundations and the identity that digital journalism must stand on, and is also capable of training professionals to be increasingly versatile and open to the technological advancements that are incorporated into the production of information.

The challenge of implementing and evaluating the meta-competences, competencies, and abilities that journalism professionals must have in the digital context implies integrating platforms, technologies and the relationship with the audience within the overall approach in regard to present and future practices. The reason for this is that university studies on digital journalism or cyberjournalism are much more than the study of journalism produced, distributed, and consumed with the help of digital technologies (López 2021; Steensen and Westlund 2021). Information overload in the new digital scenario makes it increasingly necessary to rely on quality as a distinctive feature for the survival and success of the journalistic profession. It is essential to apply a broad research capacity and critical thinking, not only for professionals, but for society in general: journalists must responsibly and judiciously face the screening process of determining what is really important when analyzing and evaluating information. For their part, audiences must be able to appreciate that professional commitment, so that it is possible for them to consume quality information.

Studies on information consumption in recent years (Newman et al., 2022) show an alarming disaffection towards the news, especially among young people, who are moving away from traditional media. Furthermore, it appears that they would rather get information through social networks such as TikTok, Instagram or YouTube. The news on these platforms is conveyed in a more informal, personalized, diverse style, with live videos to be consumed, preferably, via mobile phones. In light of this new trend, some newspapers have already reacted by creating, for example, multidisciplinary teams to test new prototypes of mobile applications or formats for social networks, in which audiences are also directly involved. This is the case of the Next Generation project promoted by the *Washington Post* (WashPost PR Blog, 2021); the product Noted, from the *Wall Street Journal* (Carr-Harris 2020); the youth lab of the Swiss new outlet *Tages-Anzeiger*, in which 30 young people discuss different issues over twelve nights; the Taster platform, the News Lab and the R&D of the BBC for the development and testing of 12 new video formats and informative articles in which 26 young people from 18 to 26 years old in the UK were involved.

In order to find the balance between new ways of telling the news that are attractive to the public, and keeping the essence of quality journalism that encourages healthy and uninfocated societies, certain lines of work are prioritized. Thus, the recodification of twenty-first century journalism and the formalization of certain essential normative dimensions for the media related to aesthetics, automation, distribution, commitment, identity and proximity (Karlsson et al. 2023) are promoted. The digital journalist must be familiar with these ethical codes as the foundation of the most traditional aspects upon which the journalistic profession stands. Moreover, at the same time, these must be updated at the technological level for professionals to develop

the skills and competencies they need to exercise their informative role within a fast-paced digital ecosystem.

The transversality of digital competences, essential in today's society, means that they must be progressively introduced in all formative stages: from basic education to university and post-university. This reinforcement of ICT training allows progress towards specific tools in journalism education, with the objective of complementing the technological dimension of professional practice. Whereas technology fed and defined some of the current professional profiles in media newsrooms (data journalists, audience and engagement editors, etc.), the current challenge is to attune the foundations of journalism with the technological aspects, creating interdisciplinary teams. Preparing journalists for unpredictable environments that define media newsrooms is an ongoing challenge in universities. Regardless of the specific tools, journalists must be trained in accordance to the solid fundamentals that underly the ideology of journalism. Simultaneously, continuous and permanent training in the technological field must be provided, including the wide range of tools that day-to-day needs will determine. The technological sphere will not disappear, but rather will be embedded in an increasingly technological society. In this context, mobile journalism will require professionals to be equipped with a strong humanistic and communication education, on top of technologically up-to-date training. To do this, universities must advocate for 'a dual path' (López et al. 2017) in which the basic elements of journalism remain (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001) and are combined with quality technological training. This must address the demands for multipurpose skills and abilities, especially around devices for searching, preparing and disseminating content, together with the use and management of social networks, the construction of renewed storytelling, the management of software, spreadsheets, databases or statistics, mobile communication and the dialogue with audiences (Scolari et al. 2008; Hamilton 2016; Jensen 2016; Paulussen 2016; López et al. 2019).

We may understand that journalism is like energy that is neither created nor destroyed, but rather transformed. If we see things this way, university studies would be expected to delve into everything that is new and everything that continues to be essential, so that the professionals' development and the very elements that define the identity of journalism as an ideology survive and remain relevant to people's lives (Deuze 2019; López 2021). The greatest dilemma in training journalists is using technologies and tools to improve their professional skills and competencies. Therefore, developing a professional profile that takes full advantage of the opportunities brought about by the computational model, while at the same time staying true to journalistic values, is crucial (López et al. 2017).

### 3 Implementation Status of Mobile Journalism

By 2011, the main social transformations that would emerge as a result of the rise of mobile communications were already being predicted. These were the transformation of time and space, the logic of always on (always communicated), the desire



for what is close and local, and personalization (Telefónica 2011). The notion that mobile devices (specifically smartphones) reflect our personalities and identities would reinforce the idea of a journalism that is increasingly adapted to the interests of the user. From 2008 to 2010 Westlund (2011) studied how publishers made sense of and developed journalism in an age of mobile media, including editorial editing of content as well technological developments and digital design. Simultaneous, geolocated, personalized and instant narration would become trends in the media landscape.

Fifteen years after the global launch of iPhones and Android in 2008, a connected and mobile digital society is now evident (Telefónica 2022; Canavilhas 2021) in which the media compete to reach the audience's attention. In this sense, mobile technologies are an excellent channel to maintain the interest of users (Wheatley and Ferrer-Conill 2020). Instant messaging platforms also facilitate the achievement of this objective thanks to the dissemination of immediate, private and multimedia content (Barros 2020). The rise of the mobile ecosystem was a major turning point for the media. Coinciding with the presentation of Steve Jobs' iPhone and with improvements of the network, native applications became popular, setting a precedent in terms of creating specific content for mobile support. Previously, before what was commonly known as the pre-app era (Lisboa-Empinotti 2018), formats such as informative alerts, summaries provided through messaging services and WAP portals in which they were replicated, dominated the contents of the web without any type of personalization. Each stage was determined by its corresponding technological evolution (Silva-Rodríguez et al. 2022). During this period the mobile platforms were still defined by the eminently practical nature for which they had been conceived. In this way, service information predominated. Typical notifications were those about traffic or weather. It was still useful technology.

The advances of digital platforms transformed social and cultural practices (Bazzara 2021) and content creators found themselves forced to depend on platforms, with all that this implies in relation to their changing and unpredictable nature (Duffy et al. 2021). The media industry has been submerged in this continuous whirlwind of changes for two decades, trying to figure out which strategies are the most appropriate to compete for the economy of attention in the ubiquitous society (Aguado 2020) in a tug of war type scenario with technological platforms (Steensen and Westlund 2021).

When analyzing the state of the implementation of mobile journalism at present, an important duality must be recognized. That mobile journalism or 'mojo journalism' is that which makes it possible to broadcast, edit and publish content from any mobile platform, must be understood (Salzmann et al. 2021a, b). This means the device should be thought of not only as a useful and efficient technology for the transmission of information, but also as a medium. That is to say, as an integral tool to inform, it constitutes a medium in itself (Perreault and Stanfield 2019). The transition to mobile journalism has not been easy. New skills are required of professionals and the adoption of the so-called mojo mentality (Salzmann et al. 2021a, b) implies a change of approach that radically affects content production. Scholars point out that in 2007 the media industry began to experiment with mobile technologies as they

began covering events entirely from their phones. This is the case of the Reuters agency. In collaboration with Nokia, its journalists covered New York Fashion Week and the Edinburgh Television Festival (Lavín and Silva 2015). Al Jazeera (Maccise and Marai 2017), together with the Thomson Foundation and the *BBC* (Salzmann et al. 2021a, b) were the first to put *mojo* journalism into practice by training their workers with equipment and using it in their own broadcasts.

Despite the fact that mobile journalism has become more widely popular throughout Europe, the work of American journalist Mike Castellucci is also worth mentioning (Scott 2019). Winner of 24 Emmy Awards, he has produced six half-hour television specials shot entirely on an iPhone. His first television special shot entirely with an iPhone, *Phoning It In*, aired on WFAA in Dallas in 2015. That same year, the French network *Léman Bleu* decided to reinforce its digital transformation process through a project based on mobile journalism that was carried out in parallel to its dissemination activities. This led to the production of its star daily news report, *Le Journal*, that was one hundred percent made using iPhones (Favre 2015).

In Spain, there are several media outlets that have integrated mobile technologies into their routines, although this process started late and is not, as of yet, completely entrenched (Barros 2020). The conflicts emanated from professionals in the audiovisual sector, as well as the union organizations' rejection of the consolidation of the *mojo* approach that they argue could be detrimental to the quality of information and the labour rights of journalists, explain the delay in its implementation. Despite this, there are several examples of Spanish professionals and media that have adopted the mobile mentality in recent years. The Spanish journalist Carmela Ríos demonstrated the value of mobile journalism via the effective use of Twitter, for three months, during the 15 M movement in Madrid's Plaza del Sol. She was recognized in 2012 with the Ortega y Gasset award for digital journalism for her story *Cómo el #15 M cambió la información* (How #15 M changed information) (Ríos 2015). RTVE carried out a pilot experience in 2016 when they covered the Barcelona Manga Hall event using exclusively mobile technology (Martín-Pascual et al. 2017). Leonor Suárez, a video journalist for *Radiotelevisión Pública de Asturias* (RTPA), is one of the pioneers of mobile journalism in Spain (Batista-Díaz, 2020). She has several international awards for reports recorded completely using his mobile device. *Time to revenge* is a fifty-minute documentary, recorded with an iPhone 6S and edited with an iPad, which tells the story of Jesús Vázquez, a soldier who managed to escape execution days after the end of the Civil War in Asturias.

Within the field of photojournalism, professional projects carried out for and from mobile phones are also located. An example is the report made by the Brazilian journalist Luissa Dörr for *Time* magazine. With her iPhone 7 Plus, she portrayed the 46 most relevant American women in the country (Martín 2017).

In regard to radio, a change can be seen in the product, which tends to be increasingly timeless, in the use of pre-recording. The visual broadcast of radio programs became popular following the success of *Oh My Lol* from *Cadena Ser*. Formats such as audiograms, audio files presented in a video player and accompanied by a small frame describing their main content, have also increased in popularity.

With the advent of social networks and improvements in connectivity, information consumption of a purely visual nature has become popular, with microformats in which narration prevails through moving images accompanied by audio. Traditional media are beginning to offer more and more content adapted to the concept of mobility, such as instant updates, notifications (de Sola Pueyo 2023), live broadcasts, personalized formats (like newsletters and podcasts), and geo-located information. Operators, media outlets and social media platforms have been supporting this type of consumption for years. Video, as one of the most in demand formats (Westlund 2015), assumes a more vertical and short-lived structure. In the traditional media landscape, the *Wall Street Journal's* commitment to this format stands out. *The Short Answer* is a section of short, social, conversational and viral videos designed to translate the most popular informative question and answer style across to YouTube. The *BBC* also has a section with videos of less than a minute in which the information of the day is explained using visual language.

In the last five years, different media have explored the adaptation of content to suit emerging technologies such as smart watches and the Internet of Things (Silva et al. 2017), virtual reality applications (Vázquez-Herrero and López-García 2017), automation (Thurman et al. 2019) and immersive podcasting (Dowling and Miller 2019), among others. Media outlets such as the *Washington Post* have specialized teams dedicated to testing and experimenting with the latest technological innovations. At the end of 2020, they presented Lede Lab, a laboratory made up of six professionals with the aim of exploring the use of new technologies such as 5G to develop innovative narratives. Among the formats they launched was an immersive timeline with 149 videos that reconstruct the first seven days of protests in Minneapolis after the death of George Floyd (Silva Rodríguez and López-García 2021). The *New York Times*, which was already reinventing itself by adapting to the mobile era in 2017 (Nafría 2017), has also collaborated with Verizon since 2019 to invest in 5G technology. The result of this collaboration is the 5G Journalism Lab, a laboratory in which innovative narratives are tested out. Among these is environmental photogrammetry, in which thousands of still photographs are taken and integrated into a large 3D model that gives readers the ability to navigate in an immersive way within the photographed space. Added to this are technical improvements that will help improve efficiency in the news production process.

## 4 Conclusions: Challenges for the Redefinition of Mobile Journalism

As a result of all the above, and to conclude this chapter on the challenges of mobile journalism in a context where the boundaries of journalism in digital media are being blurred, a decalogue with the most pressing current issues for mobile journalism is presented:

1. A double pack: Mobile TV. Today the main experiences of mobile journalism are related to audiovisual media. The next challenge will be to adopt the mojo mindset in legacy media as newspapers.
2. Mojo mindset. Journalists must develop a mobile mindset for the practice of digital journalism, as technological, business, and content convergence has established new journalistic practices.
3. Changing consumption patterns: Mobile journalism is enabling the faster distribution of products, which affects consumption patterns and increases public participation.
4. Audiences aid verification. The empowerment of the public is not only evident in the ways news are being consumed, but also in their involvement in data and fact-checking. The streets are now filled with videographers and photographers.
5. Solo journalism. Now, one single person is capable of covering an event, writing the story, recording the video and the audio, and editing the audiovisual piece. Sometimes, they do all of the above with just a mobile phone.
6. New competencies for journalistic practice. The practice of the profession requires new skills to meet the needs of increasingly mobile audiences who are used to consuming short-lived audiovisual formats. Training is not only for the most junior professionals, but it is necessary to establish effective upskilling policies for senior professionals.
7. Challenges for universities. The syllabus is faced with the challenge of incorporating subjects and updating contents to serve the new demands of the professional market. It is also meant to promote the acquisition of skills more closely linked to personal and social development, such as teamwork or problem solving.
8. More mobile equals less legacy media. The consumption of conventional media, especially traditional newspapers, is falling sharply year by year, while consumption via internet and mobile phones is increasing. Journalism must adapt to the new media and continue to work on suggestive stories, especially for younger audiences.
9. Use of instant messaging apps. They are also becoming an excellent channel for the distribution of news content. Nonetheless, it is essential to continue considering the legal requirements that different countries establish for their use.
10. Continue experimenting. Innovation labs are more necessary than ever to continue exploring the use of emerging technologies that are applicable to communication. The main purpose is to adjust to information consumption patterns and offer products that not only meet, but exceed the expectations of an increasingly digital native audience.

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# Daily Podcasts: The Challenge of Producing Journalistic Audio Content Beyond the Radio



Paula Martínez-Graña , Carlos Elías , and Xosé Soengas-Pérez 

**Abstract** The daily podcast has become a relevant news product in the Spanish media ecosystem beyond radio stations. In this chapter, daily podcasts from legacy and digital native media without radio broadcasting are addressed. This format is analysed using three variables: subject, structure and language; to determine if this product represents a challenge for the creation of journalistic content. The results show that subjects vary greatly and that content tends to be self-published and informal. Daily podcasts approach to a ‘slow journalism’ style and open up opportunities to connect with new audiences and reinforce their brand. Regarding challenges for journalism, research anticipates implications for emotional perception.

**Keywords** Daily podcast · Digital audio · Journalism · Digital media

## 1 The Concept of the Daily News Podcast and Its Origins

Technology has had a decisive influence on journalism and communication, modifying the organizational structure and production schemes of the media, and has favoured the emergence of new formats, which enable new ways of getting information since the modalities of access and consumption of information also evolve. One of the great advantages is that audiovisual information is no longer subject to the instant disappearance of the message. The daily podcast is an audio news product, linked to a prestigious journalistic brand and published daily, Monday through Friday. Martínez-Costa Pérez and Lus Gárate (2019: 320) defined the concept of the ‘daily news podcast’:

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The *daily news* podcast as a type of regular podcast created for on-demand multiplatform distribution by a prestigious news brand, whose purpose is to outline and explain topical daily news in a brief format, lasting between 3 to 25 min. Having emerged as a way of giving a roundup of the previous day's news in light of the deluge of news sources and channels, they aim to offer useful content that stands out and complements other media services, making use of the production resources of the entire group.

The origin of the daily podcast in the press dates back to 2005, when the *Daily Telegraph* newspaper, published in the United Kingdom, launched its first daily podcast (Bonini 2015). A few months later, in 2006, the *Guardian* published *Newsdesk* with a roundup of the most outstanding daily news. The commitment to this audio format was, at first, anecdotal, but later the main newspapers in the world began to publish their own daily podcast to attract new readers. The first examples were found in 2011, with *Repubblica Radio*, linked to one of the newspapers with the largest circulation in Italy; or in 2017, with *The Daily*, the podcast produced by the *New York Times*. Other well-known podcasts are *Post Reports* (the *Washington Post*), *Café da Manhã* (*Folha do São Paulo*), *El Primer Café* (*El Tiempo de Colombia*), *Today in focus* (the *Guardian*) or *News Briefing* (*Financial Times*).

In the third decade of the twenty-first century, the daily news podcast has become an emerging product in Spain (Martínez-Costa et al. 2022). The turning point was in 2020, a year in which audio platforms such as Spotify and iVoox saw an exponential increase in the supply and consumption of podcasts (iVoox 2021; Spotify 2021). This growth did not go unnoticed in the journalistic content industry, the media incorporated voice and audio strategies into their business plans and the main newspapers in Spain launched their own daily audio projects. Thus, audio becomes an element that transcends radio and becomes part of all journalistic mediums.

In June 2021, *El Mundo* presented the podcast *El Mundo al día* with the aim of following other major European and world media outlets such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Il Corriere della Sera* or the *Guardian*, as it announced in its press release (El Mundo 2021). *ABC* also followed the lead of international media outlets, such as the *New York Times* or the *BBC*, and produced *Las Noticias de ABC*, a daily podcast where it projected its journalistic weight through these new formats and voice distribution channels (ABC 2018). In 2022 *Hoy en El País* was launched, a podcast that narrates the news in a slow, explanatory and amiable tone (Cadenas 2022).

Among the digital newspapers, *Un tema al día* stands out, this podcast was launched by *elDiario.es* in 2021 to explain current affairs, with the collaboration of journalists from the newsroom specialized in each topic (elDiario.es 2021). Also in 2021, the digital newspaper *El Debate* launched *Hoy en El Debate*, a podcast that tackled the issues of the day voiced by journalists from the newspaper (El Debate 2021). This is a characteristic that defines this format, debates and discussions by journalists (Lundell 2010) to showcase the ins and outs of the newsroom (Carvajal et al. 2022) and turn these podcasts into the voice of the press (Martínez-Costa et al. 2021).

## 2 Analysis of Daily Spanish News Media Podcasts

In order to be able to study the offer of daily news podcasts in Spanish news media, we selected ten media outlets, five of which have a print edition (*El País*, *El Mundo*, *La Vanguardia*, *ABC* and *La Razón*) and the other five being online-only news portals (*elDiario.es*, *El Confidencial*, *El Español*, *El Debate* and *InfoLibre*).

The study was conducted in October, November and December 2022. Specifically, we studied the episodes that dropped on the first Tuesday of October (04/10/2022), the second Tuesday of November (08/11/2022) and the third Tuesday of December (20/12/2022). Thus, the three selected dates cover an extended period of time, coinciding with working days and thus avoiding holidays, particularly the Christmas holidays of December. Half of the news outlets being studied have an active daily podcast on current news of the day.

The research focuses on three variables that we consider that determine the analysis of the characteristics of products such as podcasts, which revolutionized the possibilities of audio when transmitting journalistic content. These three variables are the subject, the structure and the language (Table 1).

### 2.1 Subjects

Daily news podcasts can be divided into two different types, in-depth analysis on a specific topic and summaries of different news similar to radio news roundups (Carvajal et al. 2022), although the former makes up the majority of podcasts in the study. *Las Noticias de ABC* it is the only podcast that includes three subjects per episode. However, the remaining podcast is taken up by in-depth discussion of one topic.

On the first day studied, 4 October, the issues that were part of the day's news included, the elimination of the need to request voting ballots (*El País*) and the protests in Iran (*elDiario.es*). In addition, other less time-specific subjects were tackled, such as a report on organ transplants (*El Mundo*) or the analysis of Latino gangs (*El Debate*). *ABC* selected three topics: the 2023 General State Budget, the unemployment data in September and the processing of the Trans Law. There are three news stories that made the front pages of Spanish newspapers that day and were also included on radio and television news.

On the second day under study, 8th November, *El Mundo* and *El Debate* both cover the political spat between the former leader of Unidas Podemos, Pablo Iglesias, and the second deputy prime minister of the Spanish government, Yolanda Díaz. Other topics of the day are the cost-of-living crisis (*elDiario.es*) and the mid-term elections in the United States (*El País*). As happened on the previous date, *ABC* discussed three current issues: the Melilla fence tragedy, the truck driver's strike and the position of Elon Musk, the new owner of Twitter, in the United States elections.

**Table 1** Selection of podcast (5) and episodes (15) being studied. Own elaboration

Daily podcasts	Episodes studied (15)
<i>Hoy en El País (El País)</i>	Se acabó rogar: mi voto es mío (04/10/2022) Viaje por la América que partió Trump (08/11/2022) Guía para no perderse en la bronca del Tribunal Constitucional' (20/12/2022)
<i>El Mundo al día (El Mundo)</i>	Historias de trasplantes: regalar vida tras perder un hijo (04/10/2022) Iglesias versus Yolanda Díaz: claves de una guerra (08/11/2022) Las razones del TC para frenar los planes del Gobierno (20/12/2022)
<i>Las Noticias de ABC (ABC)</i>	Los Presupuestos Generales de 2023, la subida del paro en septiembre y el malestar con la Ley Trans (04/10/2022) Las imágenes del asalto a la valla de Melilla, la huelga de transportistas y el nuevo Twitter de Elon Musk (08/11/2022) La reacción de Sánchez al varapalo del Constitucional, el respaldo europeo al recurso y el pacto de estado que propone Feijóo (20/12/2022)
<i>Un tema al día (elDiario.es)</i>	¿Qué está pasando en Irán? (04/10/2022) El invierno tendrá un precio: de las hipotecas a la cesta de la compra (08/11/2022) Leche y aceite: tormenta perfecta en tu bolsillo (20/12/2022)
<i>Hoy en El Debate (El Debate)</i>	Cómo salir de una banda latina, los expertos responden (04/10/2022) Iglesias, de colocar a Yolanda Díaz a dedo a cuestionarla (08/11/2022) El último ataque de Belarra a las Familias Numerosas (20/12/2022)

On the third day under study, 20th December, the controversy over the renewal of the Constitutional Court eclipsed the rest of the news of the day. Three of the five podcasts under study focussed on this news. *El País*, *El Mundo* and *ABC* addressed the same issue from three points of view: the response of the Spanish prime minister, the reaction of the leader of the opposition and the position of the European Union. In addition, as usual in a newscast, *Las Noticias de ABC* ended with a roundup of headlines of other outstanding news of the day. The inflationary crisis (*elDiario.es*) and the new Family Law (*El Debate*) were also discussed in the daily news podcasts.

Research published by Carvajal et al. (2022) shows that the two types of podcast show different value propositions and cover different news needs.

The daily news podcasts, or newscasts, such as *Las Noticias de ABC* focus on breaking news roundups. The listener looks for a quick summary that gives the major news of the day. The *ABC* podcast includes three different topics, such as economics, politics or even sports, and the episodes last less than ten minutes. The format, the layout and the script are remarkably similar to conventional radio newscasts. Whereas daily 'deep dive' podcasts take an in-depth look at a topic. In this case, there is no summary of the news events of the day, as is the case with the previous ones, but rather

a topic is selected and context is provided, with prior research and the participation of expert voices on the topic (Carvajal et al. 2022). Examples of this model are *Hoy en El País*, *El Mundo al día*, *Un tema al día* and *Hoy en El Debate*. All episodes last approximately less than twenty minutes.

In addition, daily news podcasts present a wide variety of topics, favoured by the format's freedom since they do not have to include breaking news. Thus, the in-depth treatment of the topics makes it possible to select a news event and, later, offer a context and explain the causes and consequences. The podcast has the capacity to transform information into knowledge, which contrasts with the frenetic pace of current news (Leoz-Aizpuru and Pedrero-Esteban 2022), which is an intrinsic characteristic of media such as radio, television and the digital press.

## 2.2 The Structure of Deep-Dive Podcasts

Deep dive podcasts are narrated reports. These podcasts analyse a topic in depth and provide information from different points of view to see the news from different perspectives. The researchers Martínez-Costa Pérez and Lus Gárate (2019) show that this product explores a new journalistic narrative, positions audio as a source of information, and reinforces the prestige of large news outlets.

**Structure of *Hoy en El País*.** The podcast begins with an introduction to the topic of the day by the main presenters, Ana Fuentes and Íñigo Domínguez. Each episode is put together by a team of seven people including sound design, editing, direction, production and presentation. In the first episode under study (10/4/22) Ana Fuentes introduces the journalist responsible for the report, Marta Curiel, whose content has three sources, one of them the journalist from *El País* Xosé Hermida. The podcast narrates, through interviews with the protagonists, the reaction of Spanish expats on the elimination of the need to request ballots in order to vote. In addition, there is a roundup of different legislative changes in recent years to outline the struggle of Spaniards abroad to exercise their right to vote in a simpler way and put an end to the 2011 legislation.

In the second episode of *Hoy en El País* (08/11/2022) the main presenter, Íñigo Domínguez, interviews the correspondent of *El País* in Washington for a look at the context of the mid-term elections in the United States. The correspondent, Iker Seisdedos, gives a news update from the different key states to explain the atmosphere that prevails in the United States. The correspondent visited four states (Georgia, Michigan, Virginia and Pennsylvania) and from each place speaks about a concern of Americans: political and religious polarization, the abortion law, education and health and strength of democracy.

In the third episode of *Hoy en El País* (20/12/2022) the presenter Íñigo Domínguez together with the deputy editor of *El País* explain the keys to the controversy that exists in the Constitutional Court and reminds listeners how the renewal of this body works, the importance of the laws that are at stake and the positions of the different

political actors. This way they outline and discuss the causes of this institutional conflict and its possible consequences.

**Structure of *Hoy en El Mundo*.** The first episode of the podcast studied (04/10/2022) is part of a special series presented by the journalist Pedro Simón for *El Mundo*. The podcast begins with an initial presentation of the topic by Javier Attard, who discovers the story behind a transplant thanks to his writing partner Pedro Simón. The episode hears from three sources: the mother of a donor, the parents of a recipient and a paediatric surgeon, and the episode outlines the transplant process and each link that is part of this chain, through the voices of the people involved.

In the second episode of *El Mundo al día* (08/11/2022) the journalist from *El Mundo* Álvaro Carvajal breaks down the key aspects of the confrontation between the former leader of Unidas Podemos, Pablo Iglesias, and the second deputy prime minister, Yolanda Díaz. The main presenter Javier Attard conducts an in-depth interview with the journalist from *El Mundo* to clarify the root of the problem and the future of Podemos in the upcoming elections.

In the third episode of *El Mundo al día* (20/12/2022) covers the controversy generated by the renewal of the judges of the Constitutional Court. The podcast features three expert sources to give context: Joaquín Manso, editor of *El Mundo*; Ángela Martialay, head of the judicial section; and Jorge Bustos, deputy editor of the newspaper. The three experts discuss the ins and outs of the Constitutional Court and the legal issues that explain the current situation. And they also talk about the reaction of the political parties, the reasons behind this crisis and its consequences. This podcast represents the newspaper's editorial line on the topic and offers its opinion on the subject.

**Structure of *Un tema al día*.** The podcast begins with a presentation of the topic by Juanlu Sánchez. Each episode is put together by a team of five people including production, editing and presentation. The first episode (04/10/2022) gives an overview of the historical context and the origin of the protests in Iran through two testimonies: Maryam Esmailpour, a Tehran-born woman, and Leila Nachawati, professor of communications at the Carlos III University of Madrid, a specialist in the Middle East and a contributor to *elDiario.es*. With the help of the testimonies of these two women, the episode reconstructs the history of Iran to understand why these protests are different from previous ones and what the influencing factors are.

The second episode of *Un tema al día* (11/08/2022) discusses the economy at a time of extremely high inflation. Daniel Yebra, economics editor for *elDiario.es*, explains to listeners the reasons why mortgage interest rates are rising and the risk that this rise entails. Through interviews, the presenter Juanlu Sánchez raises questions about the government's decisions to alleviate the effects of inflation and asks the expert for his assessment of the measures that are in force, and also a forecast of the economic situation in the medium to long term.

The third episode studied from *Un tema al día* (20/12/2022) also focuses on rising prices, but from a different angle. In this case, the episode focusses on the dairy and cooking oil food sectors that are in permacrisis but are being less affected by the war in Ukraine. The episode features two journalists who explain the reality of these two

sectors: Gonzalo Cortizo, director of *elDiario.es* in Galicia, who travels to a Galician farm to listen to farmers, and Alfonso Alba, director of Cordópolis, who explains the situation of olive growers in the Andalusian countryside. Finally, the episodes of *Un tema al día* analyse current events with the help of expert journalists from the newsroom, but they also listen to the opinions of people close to the news stories.

**Structure of *Hoy en El Debate*.** This podcast also falls into the deep dive category. As in the episodes observed so far, *Hoy en El Debate* begins its episodes with a general introduction, which is the basis of what will be explained below. In the first episode under study (04/10/2022), the presenter Belén Montes uses three sources to explain the phenomenon of Latino gangs: Katia Núñez, anthropologist expert in Latin gangs; Diego López, managing director of the Madrid Regional Agency for Re-education and Reinsertion of Underage Offenders, and Guillermo Fouce, president of the association Psicología sin fronteras, social psychologist and professor at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid. In this case, unlike other podcasts, the presenters are not editors or collaborators of the newspaper itself, but rather experts on a specific topic. The interviews with experts generate content that details the origin of the Latino gangs, the profile of the minors who join them, and the keys to ending the violence associated with these groups.

The second episode of *Hoy en El Debate* (08/11/2022) tackles the disagreement between the former leader of Unidas Podemos, Pablo Iglesias, and the second deputy prime minister, Yolanda Díaz. Ana Martín, political correspondent for *El Debate*, discusses and explains the differences of these two political actors. The expert describes the position of Pablo Iglesias and gives her opinion on Yolanda Díaz's possibilities in the upcoming 2023 general elections.

The third episode of *Hoy en El Debate* (20/12/2022) focuses on the new Family Law. To assess the legislative changes, the episode includes an interview with two sources: Carmen Fernández de la Cigoña, director of the Instituto de Estudios de la Familia CEU and professor at the Universidad CEU San Pablo, and José Manuel Trigo, president of the Federación de Familias Numerosas. In this case, the two interviewees share the same position on the subject, both are against the new law, a circumstance that calls into question the plurality of the approach and the way the content is tackled.

**Results for the deep dive podcast format.** The structure of daily news podcasts generally begins with a presentation of the topic, equivalent to the headline and the news lead. This section offers the most relevant information to attract the listener and ensure that they remain engaged throughout the episode. Afterwards, the subject is outlined combining the news reports and interviews. In all episodes, the host or main announcer/anchor contacts various sources, who help explain the topic to listeners. In most cases they are colleagues from the newsroom specialized in the subject matter, editors or positions of responsibility in the newspaper, and also correspondents who know the reality of the countries where they work. The podcast is presented by journalists from the media outlets and closely follow its editorial line (Leoz-Aizpuru and Pedrero Esteban 2022; Martínez Costa et al. 2021). This is a crucial point because listeners are listening to the opinion of a journalist who follows the editorial line of

the media outlet that they work for and their position can affect the plurality and contrast of ideas. The risk of this formula is that listeners may find editorial content that has the appearance of a news report.

### 2.3 *The Newscast Structure*

The second category of daily podcast is that of the newscast, which summarizes the main news in the form of bite-sized news roundups (Ballesteros López and Martínez Matías 2019). An example of this formula is *Las Noticias de ABC*. Media outlets such as El País also began in the audio universe with newscast projects, but, in recent years, they have evolved towards in-depth content analysis, such as those mentioned in the previous section, following the models established by the English-speaking media (Carvajal et al. 2022).

**Structure of *Las Noticias de ABC*.** The podcast begins with the presentation of three topics in the form of headlines. To separate the news, short bursts of news are used under the heading *más noticias* or *la última de ABC*. The first episode of *Las Noticias de ABC* (04/10/2022) is a hybrid format because it has the key features of a newscast but incorporates a voice from the media outlet (a technique used in deep dive podcasts) when interviewing Gonzalo Díaz Velarde, editor of the Economy section from *ABC*. The economics expert interprets the data from the 2023 General State Budget, which is one of the prominent topics in headlines.

The second episode of *Las Noticias de ABC* (08/11/2022) has characteristics of a newscast, with three outstanding news subjects in the headlines and a fourth one to end. The episode only includes two voices during the eight minutes that the story lasts: that of the Minister of the Interior of the Government of Spain and the response of the Partido Popular to the images of the tragedy on the Melilla fence.

The third episode *Las Noticias de ABC* (20/12/2022) is similar to the previous one, covering three news headlines and another topic to finish. But, in this case, the story is more dynamic than the previous one because there are more sound bites. The sound bites feature the Spanish prime minister, the minister of the presidency, the leader of the Partido Popular and the spokesperson for Justice of the European Commission.

### 2.4 *Language*

Daily news podcasts use emotion as a narrative technique to create a relationship of trust between the presenter and the listener (Lindgren 2021). A characteristic of this formula is its ability to create an ambience of empathy where the final product offers facts, but also emotions (Mead 2017). The amiable and engaging language that is used seeks to connect with new audiences, especially with younger ones who



do not consume the content offered by traditional media (Martínez-Costa Pérez and Lus Gárate 2019).

**Language used in *Hoy en El País*.** The podcast uses an informal narrative style and incorporates elements such as the greeting at the beginning of a conversation and the sound of the preparations for a video conference with an interviewee. In addition, colloquial expressions are used to end an interview. The content includes anecdotes, references to personal issues of the interviewees and comments that introduce emotion into the story, such as when they are invited to share the celebration of Spaniards abroad for the repeal of the requested vote (episode dated 04/10/2022).

Interpretive language is another feature of this podcast. In the episode that analyses the renewal of the Constitutional Court (20/12/2022) there is a single voice, the deputy editor of *El País*, who considers the reforms implemented by the government very radical and the current situation a sign of degradation of political life. His opinion is accompanied by expressions such as “I believe” or “I am convinced of”. This style gives the content an editorial character.

**Language used in *El Mundo al día*.** The narrative style at the beginning of the first episode (04/10/2022) is informal and colloquial: “So, tell me a little about...”, says the journalist Pedro Simón during the first seconds of recording. In addition, this episode builds the story of a transplant story based on emotion. Therefore, it incorporates expressions that directly appeal to listeners, such as “to save the life of any child that we know” or “when you see your child laid out in a hospital bed and you have to make that decision, it must be very difficult.” The story speaks about death as the starting place for transplants because “it almost always begins in a hospital, with the death of a person.” And it also includes the sound of a heart stopping, to simulate death, and the siren of an ambulance. Another characteristic of the episode is the reference to personal experience, since the paediatric surgeon talks about his son and the journalist from *El País* mentions the empathy he feels, as a father, in these cases of transplants. The emotional nature of the podcast can be seen in questions such as “When you see kids of your son’s age, do you see him in any way?”, a question that the journalist asks the mother of a child donor. At the same time, a message of hope is conveyed by commenting that the mother of the deceased minor is expecting her second child. At that moment, the journalist says that “stories always give you a second chance, even if obviously no one is going to return their son.” These narrative elements show that the episode has a high emotional charge to generate empathy in the listener, in order to raise awareness in society about the importance of donating organs.

In another episode under study (08/11/2022), the analysis of the disagreements between the former leader of Unidas Podemos and the second deputy prime minister is presented following the media’s editorial line. The journalist from *El Mundo* analyses the situation of Unidas Podemos and deduces that it could be the preparation of a rupture with an eye toward a future negotiation with the deputy prime minister Yolanda Díaz for the 2023 elections. This is an interpretation made by the media outlet based on certain events and facts. In addition, Pablo Iglesias putting his foot down is mentioned to describe the character of Yolanda Díaz: “The floor shakes from

his foot, but she doesn't." These are narrative resources that facilitate understanding for the listener.

Interpretive language also predominates in the third episode of *El Mundo al día* (20/12/2022). A clear example of this style is when the main presenter asks the deputy editorial director of *El Mundo* what is, in his opinion, behind the institutional crisis that has been created by the renewal of the Constitutional Court judges. And when he asks about the consequences of these 'dark days,' the deputy editorial director calls the situation a dark moment of populist creep. It is, therefore, a content that is based on a personal opinion.

**Language used in *Las Noticias de ABC*.** The podcast is in a newscast format, but with an interpretive style. The first episode (04/10/2022) features an editor from the *ABC* Economy section. His analysis of the 2023 General State Budget contains evaluative expressions such as when he says that it is an unprecedented and exorbitant figure. The host of the podcast also expresses their opinion when formulating their questions, for example, when questioning how these unprecedented amounts are going to be paid. And the three featured news items in the headlines are critical of the Spanish government (PGE of 2023, rise in unemployment and reaction to the Trans Law). In the second episode (08/11/2022) the opening news item is critical of the Spanish government. The podcast includes the following statements: "Minister Marlaska insists that no, that there was no tragedy on Spanish soil on 24 June in the assault on the Melilla fence, but there was, and the videos demonstrate it." *ABC*'s conservative editorial line dominates most of the podcast news.

**Language used in *Un tema al día*.** The podcast presents two different episodes on the same subject, the cost-of-living crisis. The first (08/11/2022) studies the current economic situation and a forecast for the future, and the second (20/12/2022) talks about the sectors least affected by the war in Ukraine. Both episodes include people who work for the media outlet, which reinforce the editorial position, and offer few testimonies from the protagonists, for example, the voice of a Galician dairy farmer, but not as the main testimony of the story, but through the director of *elDiario.es* from Galicia.

**Language used in *Hoy en El Debate*.** The language of this podcast is also interpretive, like those previously analysed. One of the episodes (08/11/2022) features the participation of the political correspondent of *El Debate* who is asked about the political options of the deputy prime minister Yolanda Díaz in the upcoming general elections, the expert assures that she does not remember any candidate who has achieved anything important in an election without having had a party behind them. This personal assessment made by the newspaper expert accentuates the editorial line of the media outlet in the construction of the story. Another example is the words with which she defines the former leader of Unidas Podemos, Pablo Iglesias, when she says that he seems to her like a film character who comes back from the shadows, to take revenge on everyone and everything because he has too much resentment.

In another of the episodes (20/12/2022) the new Family Law is analysed. In this case, two sources outside the newsroom are included: the director of the CEU Family

Studies Institute and the president of the Federation of Large Families. But they do not provide more plurality or contrasting ideas, because the two interviewees share the same point of view, something is already suggested in the title of the episode, the wording of which constitutes a declaration of intent: “*El último ataque de Belarra a las Familias Numerosas*” (Belarra’s latest attack on large families). In addition, this podcast uses more cordial language than the previous ones, especially in the farewell.

### 3 Conclusions

Daily news podcasts are a content format that offer a wide variety of topics using a ‘slow journalism’ style with room for interpretation (Martínez-Costa Pérez and Lus Gárate 2019). The media outlet takes a position on a topical issue, according to its editorial line, and incorporates a voice that corroborates or reinforces that criterion. From an editorial point of view, the commitment to the daily podcast is a key decision in the business strategy because it gives the media outlet identity and gives it more prestige, also among young audiences. But it is also worth asking to what extent listeners are aware that they are listening to content of an editorial nature that is more an opinion piece than to strictly reporting on the news.

From a journalistic point of view, recent research (Masip et al. 2020) shows that Spaniards are critical when they perceive that the editorial line influences the treatment of a topic or when they detect sensationalist elements. The episodes under study include elements such as personalization, emotional arguments or the overuse of anecdotal evidence. They are traits associated with sensationalism (Montagut and Carrillo 2017; Segado-Boj et al. 2022). Neuroscience studies show that the stimulus in the brain is greater when emotion is appealed to rather than reason (Crespo-Pereira and Legerén-Lago 2017), a discovery that raises another important question: To what extent and in what context can emotion be used to generate empathy in the listener and attract their attention?

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# From Newspapers to TikTok: Social Media Journalism as the Fourth Wave of News Production, Diffusion and Consumption



Jonathan Hendrickx 

**Abstract** News outlets increasingly create and disseminate news content specifically for social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. Academia has thus far not given this trend the attention it deserves, with empirical and mostly conceptual contributions lacking. This chapter fills the established gap in scholarship by proposing an analytical framework that identifies social media journalism as the production, diffusion, and consumption of social media platform-bound news content. It is to be seen as the successor of print, broadcast, and digital journalism, although the chapter also argues that all four waves are occurring simultaneously rather than consecutively. In turn, this poses issues for four distinguished actors: media practitioners, media users, media regulators and media researchers.

**Keywords** Social media · Journalism · News production · News diffusion

## 1 Four Waves of Journalism and Four Distinct Actors

The 2021 edition of the Digital News Report was the first of its kind to conclude that social media platforms have become the main way of coming across news online, surpassing direct traffic to news outlet's own platforms or access through search engines. Interestingly, the prevalence for social media was much more pronounced among respondents under 35 years old (Newman et al. 2021: 25). This trend can signal permanent shifts in how particularly younger audiences, which constitute crucial target demographics for public and private news outlets alike, encounter and engage with news. Several leading (inter)national news outlets have active presence on Instagram or TikTok, where they increasingly offer designated news content tailor-made for the specifications of the given platforms (Vázquez-Herrero et al. 2019, 2022). This ties in with the continued search for viable business models and ways to maintain brand awareness amidst highly fragmented media consumption patterns

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(Chen and Pain 2021). Considering that producing news content for privately owned social media platforms is unlikely to be financially viable, maintaining brand diversity emerges to the forefront of traditional media corporation's strategy to thwart obsolescence (Hendrickx et al. 2020). Journalism practice and scholarship have in recent years increasingly devoted attention to the progressively more active role of audiences (Temmerman and Mast 2021). More than at any point in history before, the heterogeneity in types of output and platforms served by news outlets is both pushed and pulled by wider changes in citizens' media consumption patterns and agency (Ytre-Arne and Das 2020).

This chapter presents an analytical framework of four waves of journalism: print, broadcast, digital and social journalism. It builds on distinctions between the three first types previously established in scholarship (see for instance Herbert 2000; Scott 2005) and propagates that social media journalism, defined as "the news offering of designated social media channels intended to inform (young) audiences on a daily basis" (Hendrickx 2021: 2), constitutes a fourth wave that is now becoming apparent. All four waves are to be understood to currently occur simultaneously rather than consecutively, as they are all combined in present-day converged and integrated newsrooms. This evolution renders regulating and studying all providers, platforms and persons facilitating current ways of news production and diffusion rather convoluted, with profound changes for four specific types of media actors: practitioners, users, regulators, and researchers (Sehl et al. 2019). Each of the above-mentioned media actors is compounded with two additional dimensions (Table 1). Through the lens of four waves of journalism, four media actors and eight dimensions in total, this chapter wants to contribute to scholarship a framework that contextualizes the interwoven trends in the array of ways news content is currently produced, diffused, and consumed.

**Table 1** Waves of journalism and different media actors. Own elaboration

Journalism type	Print	Broadcast	Digital	Social media
<i>Media practitioners</i>				
Platform power	Very strong	Strong	Weak	Very weak
Gatekeeping power	Very strong	Strong	Weak	Very weak
<i>Media users</i>				
Consumption patterns	Mostly linear	Mostly linear	Fragmented	Very fragmented
Agency	Passive	Passive	Active	Very active
<i>Media regulators</i>				
Regulatory strength	Loose	Tight	Loose	Loose
Regulatory area(s)	National	(Supra)national	(Supra)national	Global
<i>Media researchers</i>				
Research methods	Quantitative	More quantitative	Mixed	Mixed
Data management	Very easy	Difficult	Easier	Difficult

The next sections of this chapter discuss each of the four established waves separately, each time looking more specifically at the four media actors and their two dimensions. They do not pretend to offer a complete overview of a few centuries' worth of journalism innovation and evolutions. Rather, the sections summarize some of the focal points relevant for the evolution towards social journalism as the fourth and current wave.

## 2 Print Journalism

### 2.1 *Media Practitioners*

**Platform Power.** Primarily founded in private enterprise, newspapers have always been filled almost entirely to the behest of media practitioners such as editors-in-chief and journalists. They still enjoy their own platform for news content diffusion, with obvious caveats including dependencies on printing presses, paper and ink, the presence of advertisements, classifieds, and other items such as columns and letters to the editor (Beam 2003). Print newspapers globally have seen decreasing circulation figures in recent decades, but this also continues to affect the volume or number of pages and articles published negatively, narrowing the physical space for journalism (Hendriks 1999). For instance, a longitudinal content analysis of one week's worth of publishing of nine Belgian newspapers between 1983 and 2013 found that the number of articles over time decreased from 6,319 to 3,001—a 53% drop in total output (Beckers et al. 2017). Despite this, the platform power for media practitioners remains very strong; the size and scope of print newspapers as a news diffusion platform may have decreased, but to large extents they remain tightly controlled content-wise by media practitioners.

**Gatekeeping Power.** It is no surprise that the spearheading publication on the gatekeeping model resulted from an ethnographic study at a newspaper (White 1950). Just as with platform power, the gatekeeping power for media practitioners in print journalism is labelled as very strong; at least in democratic societies they still fully can decide what is (not) published.

### 2.2 *Media Users*

**Consumption Patterns.** Newspapers emerged as a mass product for wide portions of the citizenry around the turn of the twentieth century. At that time, they had emerged as the most dynamic and profitable printing press product and were firmly embedded as “an essential reference point in the daily lives of millions of people” (Jones 2016: 3). Through the success of newspaper subscriptions and the convenience of having them delivered to one's doorstep, reading newspapers at fixed points in



time became an integral part in the daily routine of many (Steensen and Westlund 2020). Even recently appeared studies among news consumers continue to conclude that the strength of routines and rituals remains a valid explanation as to why print readership remains attractive for sections of societies (Boczkowski et al. 2020). Despite its decreasing popularity as a daily fixture for news consumption, particularly among younger audiences (Newman et al. 2021), the consumption patterns of print journalism remain mostly linear due to the consistent daily publishing of newspapers.

**Agency.** As the first mass medium intended to inform audiences consumed (nearly) daily by citizens, newspapers gave very them little agency, or power to interpret and interact with media content. The only ways in which print journalism facilitates public participation is via letters to the editor, although only few of them end up published in practice (Wahl-Jorgensen 2002). Only by choosing to not pay (anymore) for newspapers can citizens indicate their disapproval or indifference towards a given printed title. Practitioners typically only have a vague understanding of their audiences and their thoughts and motives, and therefore construct substitutes through imaginary interlocutors (Sumpter 2000). They produce content for their imagined audience, which in practice has only passive agency in print journalism.

### 2.3 *Media Regulators*

**Regulatory Strength.** From the nineteenth century onwards, the independence of the press, and thereby quintessentially print journalism, was enshrined in several emerging nations' laws and constitutions. Until this day, the newspaper sector remains loosely regulated by governments, with rather a longstanding tradition of self-regulation through press councils, empowered to impose sanctions on news titles or individual journalists when sets of normative and ethical guidelines are breached (Frost 2016).

**Regulatory Area(s).** Because of the lack of robust government policy, print journalism regulation is mostly active at the *national* level of a country, occasionally with smaller, regional organizations underneath them.

### 2.4 *Media Researchers*

**Research Methods.** The first quantitative content analysis of newspapers was carried out by a civil engineer writing for the American magazine *Forum* and appeared in 1893 (Sumpter 2001). At that time, 'new journalism' emerged that wished to distinguish itself from what was then already known as 'yellow journalism'. Journalism studies, as a subfield of communication studies, evolved along with the professionalization of the journalistic profession around the turn of the twentieth century, although the coinage of its own denomination is more recent (Conboy 2019). Audiences were

frequently considered as passive readers who could be manipulated by the media, whereas the notion of quantitative content analysis rapidly emerged as the first and primary research method in the new academic subfield (Sumpter 2001).

**Data Management.** In their book on using quantitative content analysis, Riffe and colleagues (2008: 50) note that “text has been the primary way mass-produced content has been preserved” as collecting, analyzing, and storing printed products such as newspapers and magazines is *very easy*. This explains why until this day, newspapers are still “disproportionately” (ibid) represented in content analyses, as was also proven by a structured analysis of peer-reviewed news content analyses published between 2001 and 2020 by Hendrickx and Pakvis (2022).

### 3 Broadcast Journalism

#### 3.1 Media Practitioners

**Platform Power.** The Second World War signaled the breakthrough of radio journalism due to its “sensation of immediacy” (Starkey and Crisell 2009: 6) that accelerated the speed at which journalists could inform audiences. From the onset, however, news broadcasts took a secondary position in stations’ schedules (White 1946). This marks a big difference with newspapers, whose main purpose is to inform audiences through reporting, while radio and television channels typically aired a few brief broadcasts per day; this constitutes a first of many examples of a gradual weakening in the power of news and journalism on platforms. Nonetheless, until this day, media practitioners maintain strong platform power for broadcast journalism as they are still nearly fully in control of what is broadcasted what, when and where, in most cases using in-house technology to a wide audience. The first signs of media convergence emerged, with television news combining video, audio and text and image overlays in broadcasts as technology continued to evolve (Huang et al. 1999).

**Gatekeeping Power.** The gatekeeping power of media practitioners for broadcast journalism remains strong yet slightly weakens when compared to print. In most cases, they still have control of what information is diffused to audiences, although here this practice includes cutting (parts of) quotes of respondents such as politicians or experts. News broadcasts are by default transmitted live and frequently feature guests being interviewed on the spot, with less leeway to prohibit the broadcast of statements which are untrue or possibly hazardous for (parts of) society (Berkowitz 1990).

### 3.2 *Media Users*

**Consumption Patterns.** Radio and television news broadcasts quickly joined newspapers as parts of daily media consumption habits, particularly due to their fixed broadcast timeslots and easily recognizable structure (Rosenstein and Grant 1997). Unlike newspapers, which could be saved to be read later, transmitted broadcasts initially had to be consumed live or else were missed without any chance of retrieving them. Today, broadcasters have their own free streaming services where all its programs, including news broadcasts, are available to watch and listen to at one's leisure. Ratings for live broadcasts remain high in various countries around the world, confirming the mostly linear trend of consumption.

**Agency.** Citizens were typically still grouped as passive audiences unable to exert influence in how broadcast journalism was produced and diffused. A notable exception is the use of interviews with 'ordinary people' as witnesses in particularly television news broadcasts, where depersonalization and "a void of agency" have also been noted (Joye 2009: 52) The lack of scientific attention and in many countries rather late starts for viewership rating measurements meant that broadcast journalists, like their print counterparts, mainly imagined their audiences and their needs and desires. Hence, media users' agency remains passive.

### 3.3 *Media Regulators*

**Regulatory Strength.** Whereas print journalism has always predominantly been left to the devices of private enterprise, mainly European broadcast journalism was from its inception tightly controlled by governments and policy makers. Radio and later television broadcasting were in many cases nationalized with a monopoly for a government-funded public service broadcaster, e.g., the British *BBC*. Large parts of the continent only started to condone private television from the 1980s onwards following the deregulation waves in media and other policy fields (Iosifides 1999). Public broadcasters remain dependent on governments for sizeable portions of their funding, with the latter regularly requiring the former to prove their remit and added value to media markets and ecosystems. This is often compounded with lists of objectives and key performance indicators to be attained by public service media, blurring the distinctions with commercial media (Steemers 2003; Van den Bulck and Moe 2018).

**Regulatory Area(s).** Broadcasting was in first instance a national matter due to broadcast monopolies, meaning that media regulation in different countries evolved organically along with the own characteristics and constraints of individual media markets and thus countries (or regions). Within the European continent, media policy gradually started to partially shift to the European level, with influential and far-reaching Directives such as the Audiovisual Media Services Directive or AVMSD

that directly affects regulation in all EU member states (Kostovska and Broughton Micova 2021). Hence, the regulatory areas for broadcast journalism are national and supranational.

### 3.4 *Media Practitioners*

**Research Methods.** The advent of audio-visual media, and chiefly television, signaled a wider shift in scholarly thought on the position and role of citizens and their exposure to engagement with (news) media (Rosenstein and Grant 1997; Webster and Newton 1988). Nonetheless, citizens were still grouped as audiences and mainly ascribed passive roles (Carpentier 2011; Hendrickx 2022). Academic attention also shifted to the production of news content, also from a radio and television angle and initially mainly in influential American newsroom studies (Gans 1980; Tuchman 1978). Gradually, quantitative, and qualitative content analyses of broadcasted news bulletins also started to emerge, although never to the same extent to and often compared with print journalism and with a more outspoken *quantitative* outlook (Fields 1988; Pride and Clarke 1973).

**Data Management.** Research methods of broadcast journalism became more diverse due to first instances of interdisciplinarity in the progressively wider field of media studies, ranging from content analysis to ethnographic field study data and audience studies. This confronted media scholars with ethical questions on how to process and store data correctly (Miller 1995). As broadcasts were for a long time mostly unavailable to researchers unless watched and analyzed live, this renders data management difficult, although this has become easier since the launch of recorders and later (free) streaming services where broadcasts can be rewatched later.

## 4 Digital Journalism

### 4.1 *Media Practitioners*

**Platform Power.** Legacy news outlets struggled with the Internet from its inception. After experimenting with paywalls, they mostly offered news content from newspapers verbatim online free of charge, before returning to paywalls following the economic crisis of the late 2000s (Myllylahti 2017). They gradually incorporated and combined different media types such as audio and video, enjoying the absence of constraints posed by fixed newspaper pages or broadcast time. Currently, digital journalism faces competition from various other website types and platforms without practitioners having any way of securing consumption, unlike with newspapers or the fixed schedules of broadcasters.

**Gatekeeping Power.** As practitioners had to suddenly share a platform with every citizen able to launch a blog (see Media Users below), this also affected their information diffusion monopoly and their gatekeeping power. Classic gatekeeping theory was no longer adequate in describing contemporary news selection processes online and substitutes tailor-made for the online news sphere emerged. These relegated journalists to ‘gatebouncers’ (Vos 2019) or positioned them at the same level as individuals, professionals, and algorithms (Wallace 2018). Gatekeeping is consistently more ascribed to algorithmic machines, closely linked with the advent of audience metrics and analytics in newsrooms (Blanchett Neheli 2018; Nechushtai and Lewis 2019). Just as was the case with platform power, gatekeeping power too became much weaker in the digital journalism era.

## 4.2 *Media Users*

**Consumption Patterns.** The launch of the internet and digital journalism beckoned the most dramatic and far-reaching disruption in the way citizens engaged with media thus far. After being predominantly passive users or consumers for centuries, they suddenly had the practical and technical means to launch their own media platform, effectively ‘competing’ with platforms of established media outlets. This shift led to such theories as ‘news produsage’ in which citizens not only use but are also able to easily produce and diffuse news and other types of media content (Bruns 2011). The later emergence of video websites and social media platforms, each with their own beacon of production and consumption options, meant that the time devoted to traditional print and broadcast media started to falter rapidly (Webster and Ksiazek 2012). As a logical consequence, users’ consumption patterns became more fragmented overnight.

**Agency.** Audience’s view of the world could be shaped much easier by the audience itself with amateur video footage being acknowledged as veritable news sources (Kristensen and Mortensen 2013). The internet allows citizens to directly communicate with journalists, to express (dis)approval via social media platforms, and to share news between platforms and apps. All this online behavior is now meticulously tracked using audience analytics, indicating high attention for audience engagement (Hendrickx et al. 2021). Case studies reveal, however, that the effect on news decisions have thus far been limited in daily practice (Corzo and Salaverría 2021; Lamot et al. 2021). Nonetheless, media users enjoy active agency under digital journalism.

### 4.3 *Media Regulators*

**Regulatory Strength.** As Brousseau and colleagues (2012) write in the preface of their book *Governance, Regulation and Powers on the Internet*, digital technologies such as the internet called for new outlooks on regulation and governance as it impacts a host of fields, from individual rights, property rights, market regulation, security to the sovereignty of states. Media policy makers and researchers alike have in recent years devoted resources and attention to combating ‘fake news’ or disinformation, rampant on the internet in general and social media platforms in particular, which has caused waves in Western, Middle Eastern and African nations alike (Jang and Kim 2018; Mutsvairo and Bebawi 2019). As Baade (2018: 1375) holds the view, “while false news could be regulated in a sensible manner, the prospects of finding its source—let alone, attribution to a state—will in practice often be low. Inversely, the source of distorted news is often easier to identify but is, in substance, harder to regulate.” The regulatory strength for digital journalism is hence labelled as looser than for print and broadcast journalism, precisely because of its hybridity and integration.

**Regulatory Area(s).** Scholarship and regulators agree that national laws are insufficient to combat the shared struggles of increasingly digitized and globalized media markets. A particularly worrying trend is that mostly undemocratic governments are using the ‘fake news’ concept to constrict of key societal liberties such as the right to freedom of expression (Anansaringkarn and Neo 2021). Just as it remains the case for broadcast journalism, digital media policy is increasingly stemming from the European regulatory level (Marsden et al. 2020), though it has also been argued that it requires “a multi-stakeholder effort from (supra-)national and local governments, companies, civil society organizations, and citizens” (van Dijck 2020: 4). Logically, the regulatory areas for digital journalism are also recognized as (supra)national.

### 4.4 *Media Practitioners*

**Research Methods.** As content production, diffusion and consumption became started to shift to the internet, media researchers followed suit. Far-reaching media convergence culminated in a triangulation of research methods and a normalization of interdisciplinary collaborations with researchers from other fields such as computer sciences (Loeberbach et al. 2020). Computational methods surfaced as a viable means to automatically collect and assess vast data sets of online news (Hendrickx and Van Remoortere 2021; Vogler et al. 2020). Academic attention shifted towards audiences and their engagement with online news content, following the notion of an audience turn in journalism (studies) (Costera Meijer 2020; Temmerman and Mast 2021) and increased interest in citizens’ agency in not only consuming news, but also setting the news agenda via social media platforms (Steensen and Westlund 2020). As a result of this, methods became much more mixed than with print or broadcast journalism.

**Data Management.** Managing vast amounts of data became easier as a direct consequence of the rapidly adopted and accepted interdisciplinarity and transferability of study designs, for instance through automated content analysis techniques (Boumans and Trilling 2016). Collecting and storing online news articles is a task less arduous still than television or radio news segments, although the focus predominantly still lies on text and less on other aspects that enrich a contemporary online news article such as pictures, videos, and social media posts. In similar vein, Karlsson and Sjøvaag (2016: 189) find that “digital news objects cannot be studied in the form that they appear but must be broken down to enable quantification—to again be aggregated to allow for analysis” and discuss the merits of human coding as it is “able to move closer to the material” as opposed to big data analysis.

## 5 Social Media Journalism

Following the newspaper and the magazine, the radio and television broadcast and the website and app, news content specifically created for, disseminated, and consumed via social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and Facebook are rapidly entering a crowded content market. The rise of social journalism can signal the advent of an entirely new form of journalism that breaks with previous (tacit) rules and conventions in terms of production values, style, topics, ways of engagement and consumption.

Scholarship has already adopted the term social journalism in three divergent ways all related to news production. The first strand of literature uses social journalism to indicate the need for more participatory journalism that engages more and better with citizens, populations, and cultures with an emphasis on relationships and collaborations (Hall 2007; Hess and Waller 2014; Sweet et al. 2017). Second, social journalism can indicate citizen journalism directly produced for and disseminated via platforms such as Facebook rather than by professional journalists for designated news outlets (Elsayed 2013; Hirst 2018). Third, the term has been used to describe the trend of using social media platforms as news sources and diffusion platforms, by posting links of news outlets’ websites on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Hermida 2012). Social journalism in the aforementioned definition “the news offering of designated social media channels intended to inform (young) audiences on a daily basis” (Hendrickx 2021: 2) entails legacy news outlets trying to safeguard their brand awareness by producing and diffusing platform-based content for Facebook, Instagram or TikTok (Chen and Pain 2021), which inevitably narrows the proximity and blurs the boundaries between creators and consumers and thus more direct engagement with users as it relies on the same platforms.

## 5.1 *Media Practitioners*

**Platform Power.** By fully embracing, or rather succumbing to, third-party platforms for their content production and diffusion, media practitioners enjoy very weak platform power under social journalism. As Steensen and Westlund (2020: 8) write in their book *What Is Digital Journalism Studies?*, journalism is just “one among these sources that both build on each other and are increasingly difficult to separate from one another for the end-user”. Each platform, from videos on TikTok to podcasts on Spotify, has its own key characteristics and constraints that poses additional challenges for content creators. Social journalism requires different angles and approaches for every individual platform, which creates additional workloads and burdens on journalists which are progressively expected to be present on all content carriers at the same time. This is rapidly and profoundly altering traditional journalistic norms and values, including more personal forms of news content such as podcasts, where journalists themselves become part of the news (Nee and Santana 2021). The first studies on social journalism even go as far as indicating a move away from news all together: a content analysis of posts from 234 international news and television program TikTok accounts only labelled 41.3% as news content, with “funny and silly things” constituting 24.5% of the research sample (Vázquez-Herrero et al. 2022). This again ties in with the previously discussed separation of news from journalism proposed by (Steensen and Westlund 2020) and corresponds with the finding of (Larsson 2018) that social media users prefer lighter news topics and modes of interaction.

**Gatekeeping Power.** Social media platforms have reduced the gatekeeping power of traditional news media (Gilardi et al. 2021; Welbers and Opgenhaffen 2018). Under social journalism, professional journalists daily vie for attention both with and from ordinary citizens and their media content, while also having to win the favor of black box algorithms typical for social media (Reviglio and Agosti 2020). Traditional news brands have lost all control over the way audiences engage with their content across platforms. As a result, their gatekeeping power is very weak.

## 5.2 *Media Users*

**Consumption Patterns.** The popularity of mobile media consumption and social media platforms continues to scatter everyday media engagement, rendering average consumption patterns very fragmented. Mainly young audiences have become disenfranchised from traditional print, radio and television (news) content in lieu of following content creators on YouTube and TikTok (Vandendriessche et al. 2021).

**Agency.** Whereas there still were noticeable differences between a professional news website and a blog, in most cases people and institutions have the same possibilities and restrictions for their social media accounts. This means that one individual



and a respected news title have the same power and possibilities of attracting wide audiences with their content. Citizens thus enjoy very active agency under social journalism.

### 5.3 *Media Regulators*

**Regulatory Strength.** Regulating social media platforms has been a popular topic for political and scholarly debate in recent years, with studies highlighting the importance of regulating them for misinformation and fake news including privacy, and echo chambers of information (Niklewicz 2017; Quinn 2016). Yet, the same authors recognize social media platforms as global content providers that are difficult to regulate properly, particularly from a news and information angle. As such, the regulatory strength for social journalism at the time of writing is labelled as loose.

**Regulatory Area(s).** Just as with broadcasting and digital journalism, the European level again has thus far proven somewhat efficient for regulating social journalism, for instance through the much-discussed EU directive on copyright and the internet, impacting the way social media can integrate content from news media (Moreno and Sepúlveda 2021). However, as van Dijck (2020: 3) notes, “European countries need to realize the limitations and possibilities of these competing networked infrastructures and articulate their position in the wake of emerging online superpowers (such as China, India, and of course the US) which ideologies and value systems are substantially different.” Thus, the regulatory area for social journalism is destined to be superseding the supranational level and expanding towards the global one.

### 5.4 *Media Practitioners*

**Research Methods.** Media researchers and practitioners share high dependency on social media platforms, the former group mainly to collect and analyze data. Automated collection tools and platforms such as Meta-owned CrowdTangle exist and have become widely used in scholarship, although scholars have voiced concerns about the validity and reliability of data they have been allowed access to (Jordan 2018). In the very limited body of research on social journalism available at the time of writing, traditional human-led content analysis has been most recurrent (Larsson 2018; Vázquez-Herrero et al. 2019, 2022). Research methods for social media-based research are rapidly diversifying thanks to a heightened focus on interdisciplinarity, with online toolkits that can automatically capture data from a host of social media platforms and that are bound to be expanded and professionalized in the coming years (Peeters and Hagen 2021). As a result, methods are projected to become much more mixed with additional foci on qualitative research to answer questions about the added value of news on social media for practitioners and users alike.

**Data Management.** Scholarship has argued that managing and processing the quality and value of (real-time) big data poses a new kind of challenge for researchers wishing to work with social media data (Immonen et al. 2015; Shah et al. 2018). In a systematic review of social big data analytic approaches used in peer-reviewed publications between 2013 and 2020, Bazzaz Abkenar and colleagues (2021: 34) find that working with multiple data sources is among the most unresolved challenges and that “the most widely considered evaluation parameters were accuracy (20%), time (16%), and scalability (12%), but privacy, reliability, and security measures were somewhat neglected”. As successful comprehensive social journalism studies will ideally combine data and insights from various platforms, which again each have their own characteristics and constraints, standardizing research methods and data management will prove to be key challenges. As of yet, the data management is hence classified as difficult.

## 6 Concluding Remarks

This chapter presented an analytical framework to systematically conceptualize social journalism as the fourth wave of news production, diffusion, and consumption. It both succeeds and compounds print, broadcast and digital journalism and distinguishes itself by completely relying on third-party platforms such as social media (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok) for the creation, dissemination, and use of its content. Maintaining brand awareness is the prime motive for engaging in social journalism, though profitability is bound to emerge as its Achilles’ heel soon. However, as long as users continue to turn to said platforms for their everyday media consumption, practitioners have to follow suit and increasingly provide tailor-made news content for notably younger audiences that corresponds to the (tacit) visual rules of other content published on the same platforms. Media regulators and researchers are trailing behind and have thus far not devoted sufficient attention to this entirely new way of journalism. This chapter wishes to contribute to a rapidly evolving and expanding body of relevant literature on what is bound to emerge as a key dimension in our engagement towards and relationship with news media and their content.

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# Everyone is Talking About It: Challenges and Implications of News Recirculation on Social Media



Gabriela Zago 

**Abstract** In a context of blurring boundaries of journalism, this chapter discusses the ways in which news recirculation on social media affects journalism. As we will discuss through literature review and the use of illustrative examples, some of the implications include promoting news, discussing news, raising awareness of news events, creating news events, and shaping news events. News recirculation on social media also poses some challenges for journalism, in terms of tracking circulation, spreading misinformation, and redirecting audience.

**Keywords** Journalism · Social media · News recirculation · Participation

## 1 Introduction

Every new medium brings new challenges for journalism. Social media brought its new set of challenges as newsrooms need to adapt to different formats and features in an ever-changing scenario where the key players and formats are always evolving. Newspapers also must deal with an increasingly active audience on social media, that not only reads but also likes, shares, and reacts to news.

While scrolling social media, people can bump into news even when not actively looking for them. This incidental news consumption (Tewksbury et al. 2001) also brings challenges for journalism since it requires the production of social media news pieces that are self-sufficient to understand the news event. It is also relatively easy to mimic a news piece format and use it to spread disinformation.

The active participation of the audience in social media extends the news circulation process, which recirculates and reverberates beyond the news outlet channels. In the process, news reaches more people and gets appropriated and repurposed in different ways. In a context of blurring boundaries of journalism, this chapter discusses the ways in which the news recirculation on social media affects journalism.

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As we will discuss through literature review and the use of illustrative examples, some of the implications include promoting news, discussing news, raising awareness of news events, creating news events, and shaping news events. When people share or comment about news events on social media, they are actually expanding the reach of the news event to their own social circles, helping promote, discuss, and raise awareness of news events. The intense recirculation on social media can even become a new news event in itself, that attests the intense circulation of the reaction to a previous news event.

News recirculation on social media also poses some challenges for journalism, in terms of tracking circulation, spreading misinformation, and redirecting audience. Newspapers are faced with the challenge of keeping up with what is said on social media. The uncontrolled nature of what the audience shares about news can potentially lead to the spread of misinformation. And news outlets face a reduction in terms of access and digital subscriptions as people, especially younger audiences, tend to consume news (or snapshots of news) directly on social media.

This chapter is organized as follows: first, we will discuss the news cycle in the context of social media and how it affects news circulation and recirculation. Next, we will talk about the active participation of the audience on social media and how it can stretch the boundaries of journalism. We will then proceed to list and discuss the challenges and implications of news recirculation on social media.

## 2 From Event to News

This section discusses the news cycle in the context of social media, looking specifically at how social media affects news circulation and recirculation of news.

Journalism can be understood as a process of transforming events into news. This process has several steps, that go from news gathering to news consumption. While in a more traditional setting this process might be more straightforward, with news gathering that includes reaching out to sources and fact-checking, followed by writing and revising the news piece, followed by adding it to the newspaper page, followed by printing it and distributing so people can read about it on the paper, digital media, and especially social media, creates disruptions in this process.

Sometimes something that is said on social media platform can become news. The news gathering process can start from a tweet or a TikTok video. Additionally, social media has changed how news gets delivered (or ‘found’). With the addition of human and nonhuman actors (Primo and Zago 2015) to the news circulation process, people can now accidentally bump into news (Mitchelstein et al. 2020) while casually browsing social media platforms.

In general terms, the news cycle can be understood as a process comprised of different steps that take place sequentially and simultaneously. According to Machado and Palacios (2007), there are four steps: news gathering, news production, news circulation and news consumption. We understand news recirculation here as a sub-step in this process, situated between circulation and consumption, which

expands circulation (Zago 2014) beyond the reach of the newspaper at the same time that it also expands the consumption so that it can happen outside the newspaper boundaries. Recirculation takes place when users comment and share news on social media and other digital spaces, with or without adding their own interpretations of the news. By sharing a link to a piece of news, users are contributing to the news circulation, helping to promote the news. Other people can access this content and be alerted that something happened, thus, this recirculation also helps giving awareness that news events took place, while it contributes to the visibility of news. The repercussion of a news event on social media is so important that it becomes one of the core news values to determine if something should become news—the more it is shared, the more newsworthiness it holds. The news values can also change from platform to platform, and what is relevant in one may not be so much in another. For example, a study on news values on Instagram (Al-Rawi et al. 2021) found that Instagram audiences prefer to consume stories that are mainly positive—general news, human-interest stories—which impacts what the newspapers should focus when creating content crafted specifically for this platform. In a similar perspective, our study regarding news sharing on Twitter and Facebook (Zago and Bastos 2013) identified that while hard news tends to get more visibility on Twitter, it is the soft news that will attract more likes on Facebook.

Every step of the news cycle can be affected by changes brought by social media platforms. News gathering practices are affected both by the possibility of using what is shared on social media directly as a source for news event and also by the fact that journalists can reach out directly to their sources on these platforms (Hermida 2012).

In terms of news production, each platform brings its own set of microformats, that need to be considered when creating content for those places. Creating content for social media goes beyond just shoveling the same content to different channels (Messner et al. 2012) and it involves considering different microformats, languages, and algorithms, in an ever-changing landscape for content creation.

News circulation processes are affected by the active audience (Hermida 2012; Zago and Bastos 2013) that not only consumes the news but also engage with it in multiple ways. This participative circulation comes with changes on news consumption as well. News on social media comes from different sources (newspapers, news agencies, organizations and people directly involved with the event, firsthand witnesses, friends, family), and it can appear on the user's feed even when they are not actively looking for news (Mitchelstein et al. 2020). News is also consumed more and more directly into the platform, without the need to go elsewhere to be able to access the news (Boczkowski et al. 2018). Those changes, combined, lead to the emergence of the news recirculation on social media.

News recirculation is not necessarily something new. Hermida (2011) shows that participation practices in the circulation process took place as early as the seventeenth century when the print newspapers had a fourth blank page, where the reader could place their own comments, that would be seen by other readers that would read from that same copy of the newspaper. Even on digital media the news sharing practices can take place in other platforms including email and on the newspaper website.

Social media expands existing practices of news engagement “rather than radically replacing them” (Barchas-Lichtenstein 2022: 155).

The difference, with internet in general and social media in particular, is the scalability and potential reach of such recirculation. If before, it would depend on physically handing the copy of the newspaper to other people, thanks to social media, today, sharing a piece of news with personal comments is a faster and instantaneous activity. Another difference lies in the fact that news can circulate independently from other contents (Carlson 2020), as opposed to the predigital era, where news was consumed as part of a package (the newspaper, the broadcast, etc.). “News stories unbundled from a larger news product can be isolated or reassembled, with or without commentary, and passed along to others” (Carlson 2020: 238).

There are some similar concepts that should be mentioned. Hermida (2011) talks about the participation of users in the interpretation of news—an activity that would be analogous to what we are referring as news recirculation. Singer (2014) and Vu (2014) use the expression secondary gatekeeping to refer to a similar practice. According to Singer (2014), as passive receivers of news, users read what newspapers first selected (primary gatekeeping) and then give visibility and value to what interest them (secondary gatekeeping). Through this practice, users are secondary gatekeepers of contents previously selected by newspapers. We use the word recirculation to encompass those activities of both sharing or adding commentaries with their own interpretation of the news.

News recirculation takes place in a context of an active audience on social media, that not only consumes but also interacts with the content being seen.

### 3 Active Audience and Social Media

This section discusses the active participation of audience on social media and how it can stretch the boundaries of journalism.

Social media is a broad term used to refer to platforms that provide social interaction among its users. They usually provide a common area for interactions (the feed), and a place for the user to express its individuality (the profile). Each profile interacts with one another through feeds, creating social networks. Even though websites dedicated for interaction were available from early on, the beginning of social media the way we recognize it took place around 2006 when Twitter and Facebook became publicly available (Lewis and Molyneux 2019). Since then, several other platforms entered the scenario, with different purposes and providing space for different media contents—from text-based interactions on Twitter and Facebook, to photo sharing on Instagram and Snapchat, and video interactions on YouTube, TikTok, and beyond.

Each platform brings its own sets of languages, microformats, and best practices, which brings a challenge for journalism in the sense that it needs to constantly adapt to ever changing formats (Vázquez-Herrero et al. 2022). Since everyone can interact on these platforms, journalism also needs to learn how to deal with active audiences that react to the content that is shared (Rodríguez-Vázquez et al. 2002).

The most used social media platforms for news differs among journalists and consumers. While the majority of journalists use Twitter, the users' most used platform is Facebook (Jurkowitz and Gottfried 2022). Among teenagers, there's a decline in use of Facebook in favor of TikTok, the most used platform (Vogels et al. 2022), so newspapers that want to reach a younger audience might have to look at those image and video platforms that are popular among teenagers (TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat are the top three). Nearly half of the US adults say they get news from social media at least sometimes (Walker and Matsa 2021), with Twitter users getting the larger proportion of news.

Social media increases the likelihood of incidental news consumption due to its scalability and social nature (Yamamoto and Morey 2019), since news that are shared by friends can show up on the feed, as well as news that received many likes and shares can get visibility through the platforms' algorithms.

News sharing, defined as the practice of giving access to a news content, is not a new activity (Kümpel et al. 2015), but it ends up getting traction with social media since as it becomes an easy and achievable activity. Postal mail, email, voice calls, and in person conversations are also part of news sharing (Barchas-Lichtenstein 2022). Social media offers a different place to do so, with specific affordances and opportunities for doing it.

The active participation of users on social media is particularly relevant for journalism when sharing and discussing news. Even the act of just hitting a share or retweet button when reading news posted from newspapers can contribute to expand the reach of a news piece to other users that might not follow that original account. But the user participation goes beyond that, and also include text comments, jokes, image and video remixes, among other creative responses to news events. All those creations are considered part of the "news recirculation" process, in the sense that they expand the reach of a particular news event beyond the frontiers of a particular news outlet. In doing so, the active participation of users on social media also helps blur the boundaries of journalism. It is not so clear anymore where it ends and where it begins, especially when talking about something that originally emerged on social media and everyone is talking about it.

## **4 Challenges and Implications of News Recirculation on Social Media**

This section discusses the challenges and implications of news recirculation on social media. While it can bring benefits and democratize the access to information, news recirculation can also have negative effects.

The discussion draws from previous research by the author (mostly related to the Brazilian context and to Twitter), and other examples that help illustrate the challenges and implications of news recirculation on social media.

## 4.1 Implications

The widespread practice of news recirculation on social media brings some of implications for journalism, which include promoting news, discussing news, raising awareness of news events, creating news events, and shaping news events. When people share or comment about news events on social media, they are expanding the reach of the news event to their own social circles, helping promote, discuss, and raise awareness of news events. The intense recirculation on social media can even become a new news event, that attests the intense circulation of the reaction to a previous news event.

News promotion takes place when people share links to news, retweet updates from news outlets, or even recount, on their own words, something that just happened. This is the most basic effect of news recirculation, and it take place whenever someone shares news on social media. The active participation of the audience on social media combined with how the algorithms work help with news promotion, increasing the visibility of the news event within the social media where it is being promoted. One can share something directly from the platform or from social media buttons available on the news website. Some platforms will be more open to sharing (like the retweet button on Twitter or the share button on Facebook), while others will make it less obvious (for example, even though it is doable, it requires a little bit more effort to share an Instagram post, as the user will probably have to screenshot the image, crop it, and then create a new post with the same content mentioning the source that originally posted it; sharing it as a story would be easier since it requires just the push of a button).

In the other side of the news recirculation, there is the public that will consume this filtered content. By reading a comment, link or other news-related post, a user can learn that a certain news event took place, and thus go looking for more information about it. Therefore, one of the implications of news recirculation for journalism is raising awareness of news events. This is also the other side of the effect of promoting news. By reading what their followers shared, people can learn that something happened. While most of the readership is silent (Bernstein et al. 2013), there are some visible clues that help know that a message is being read, like number of views, likes, shares, or even replies.

News discussion takes place when users comment about news, adding their opinion in public social spaces such as social network sites. In these cases, those users commenting on the news engage in a public debate about a certain topic related to a news event. In our research, this appears mostly on controversial topics, that most of the time leads up to polarized political conversations. Sometimes the discussion can be shared out of context—when the user comments on something that happened without adding a link or explaining that it is connected to a news event. Thus, news discussion can lead to a fragmented consumption of news and fuel misinformation narratives. We identified a polarized scenario when analyzing the circulation on Twitter of links pro and against the use of hydroxychloroquine as a treatment for COVID-19 (Recuero et al. 2021). Our research identified more activity

in the dissemination of pro hydroxychloroquine links combined with an increased use of hyperpartisan media as sources, which led to more disinformation among those sharing links defending the use of hydroxychloroquine as a treatment for COVID-19. The group against hydroxychloroquine, on the other hand, shared more traditional media sources, and had less disinformation overall, which could be an indication that the type of sources is also relevant in the context of news recirculation.

The recirculation of an event can also lead to the creation of a new event. The creation of news events happens when a lot of people talk about something, in the sense that the fact that a lot of people talked about it ends up becoming news. In this case, the ‘news’ is that a lot of people are talking about a particular thing on social media. This is a curious effect of news recirculation, by which the fact that the news is being intensively shared and commented on the internet becomes a new news event by itself, that is, it also becomes news. In our research regarding the FIFA 2014 World Cup (Zago 2014) we identified multiple news events that emerged from people talking about something in social media, ranging from very niche topics (like when the dance of the Cup mascot, Fuleco, ended up being from the rival team from the host city) to things that deserved more mainstream attention originally but didn’t (a lot of people engaged in a conversation on Twitter trying to figure out why the exoskeleton in the opening ceremony barely appeared—in this case, the Twitter discussion shaped the direction of the news event, and something that was initially silenced became more prominent as news outlets had to find out and offer coverage regarding what happened). Thus, recirculation can not only create an entire new news event, but also contribute to building or shaping existing news events. This happens when topics that were already news develop in such a way that its recirculation help shaping how the news is being told and what is being shared about it.

## **4.2 Challenges**

While news recirculation can help journalism in reaching a wider audience, it also poses some challenges for journalism, especially in terms of tracking circulation, spreading misinformation, and redirecting audience. Newspapers are faced with the challenge of keeping up with what is said on social media. The uncontrolled nature of what the audience shares about news can potentially lead to the spread of misinformation. And news outlets face a reduction in terms of access and digital subscriptions as people, especially younger audiences, tend to consume news (or snapshots of news) directly on social media.

With recirculation on social media, a new journalistic activity emerges: keeping up with what is said on social media. Different platforms and content formats can be used by the audience to comment and add to the news. Keeping track of this might be a challenge. Additionally, new platforms or even new microformats within existing platforms are emerging all the time, which means other ways to track what is being said on social media. Not always the news is shared with a link, a mention, or a hashtag, which makes keeping track of the conversation even harder.

The challenge of addressing multiple microformats and keeping up with the conversation that emerges from the news creates additional workflows for journalists that sometimes end up in the creation of new job titles. We see an influx of new job titles such as engagement specialists, content moderators, or viral meme editors. *BBC News*, for example, has a reality check editor (Fipp 2019), dedicated to fact-checking content to identify potential misinformation.

The uncontrolled nature of what the audience shares about news on social media can potentially lead to the spread of misinformation. Since news can circulate without its context, people can read just the headline and assume wrong things about a news event or share incomplete information that can further fuel misinformation narratives. Fact-checking initiatives become more prominent the more people share news on social media.

Disinformation narratives use the same format of news—with fake sources and quotes—to appear legitimate. It can also happen that something that was shared by a newspaper can eventually become disinformation at some point along the chain of shares and comments users make, when someone intentionally or not shares something that is exaggerated or not true. When sharing, people often recontextualize the news stories (Barchas-Lichtenstein 2022), which can lead to disinformation.

Misinformation appeared in different ways in a research about a train derailment that took place in Washington state in the United States at the end of 2017 (Zago 2018), especially on the day the breaking news event happened (and thus new information was still emerging)—from tweets stating that more people died than the actual number of victims, to messages stating that it was a terrorist act, several false narratives tried to fill in the gap regarding what was still unknown (if there were any casualties, or the cause of the accident). This type of misinformation happens often with breaking news event, when the story is still unfolding and susceptible to the emergence of narratives trying to explain what happened.

In terms of misinformation, things can also get really complicated with generative artificial intelligence language models like ChatGPT entering the scenario, since they can generate news pieces (Stokel-Walker 2022) and other types of AI generated content that can be shared on social media along with the news content and the user participation.

Another potential challenge that recirculation poses to journalism is the fact that news outlets can face a reduction in terms of access to their websites and digital subscriptions as people, especially younger audiences (Vázquez-Herrero et al. 2022), tend to consume news (or snapshots of news) directly on social media. This leads to the search of other methods of revenue for journalism, like ads, sponsored content, or even subscriptions on platforms. Facebook News, a tab on Facebook dedicated to news launched in 2019, paid publishers to be able to use their content in their curated selection, but ultimately decided to rely on AI for curation and stopped paying for the content in 2022 (Lawler 2022)—a possible indicator that there is still a lot to rethink in terms of social media revenue for journalism.

Online news typically relies on website traffic and article views as a measure of success (Kümpel et al. 2015). Text based social media can drive people to the website via links, but some platforms like Instagram and TikTok are less dependent on links

and require content that is self-sufficient for comprehending the news. It also forces newspapers to be creative in finding ways to attract viewers and subscribers.

In previous research (Zago and Migowski 2014), we asked Twitter and Facebook users if they ever retweeted or shared something without clicking the link or reading anything beyond what was available on the social media post. Nearly 80% of the respondents said that they did that on Twitter, while only 20% did so on Facebook. When asked to explain the reasons, most of the time they said that they were confident that they knew what it was being talked about before sharing. These results help illustrate how the recirculation can take place within the social media platforms, sometimes without even involving the need to leave the platform.

## 5 Conclusion

This chapter discussed news recirculation on social media in a context of an active audience and blurring boundaries of journalism. We identified and discussed some of the potential implications and challenges that emerge from this process.

The implications are opportunities for journalism, where the news sharing practices that take place in the context of recirculation end up benefiting journalism and increasing the access to news. When more actors are sharing news, the information can potentially reach more people.

The challenges can be seen as opportunities where journalism can be creative and find innovative solutions. That can be achieved through creative ways to generate revenue, investment in fact-checking to fight fake news, and incorporating new routines to keep track of the conversation and the buzz around news.

Every new stretch of the boundaries of journalism brings new challenges. When social media was first introduced, learning how to incorporate it into journalism practices was a challenge in itself. And just keeping up with everything that happens in social media is yet another challenge of its own.

There is no way to stop recirculation from taking place. But newspaper can and should try to embrace the audience participation and find novel ways to repurpose that content. When everyone is talking about something, journalism should also step in and be part of that conversation.

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# **Tackling the Challenge of Artificial Intelligence in Journalism**

# Artificial Intelligence in Journalism: Case Study of the Spanish, Portuguese and Brazilian News Media Systems



Sara Pérez-Seijo , Suzana Barbosa , and Paulo Nuno Vicente 

**Abstract** Since the 2010s, the introduction of automation and robotization in newsrooms has led to a significant transformation in digital journalism. The so-called algorithmic journalism arises as a novel discipline that impacts different tasks and functions that previously required a journalist’s intervention. Its use in the news outlets offers new opportunities for the collection, treatment, production or even distribution of content. Its reach is global and its impact acquires a transversal character. This chapter conducts a descriptive study of the implementation of artificial intelligence in journalism across three distinct media contexts: Spain, Portugal, and Brazil. Through a case study approach, the authors examine various successful initiatives that reflect the impact of these technologies on media and their role in redefining the boundaries of journalism.

**Keywords** Artificial intelligence · Algorithmic journalism · Automation · Robotization

## 1 Introduction

Since its beginnings, digital journalism has faced multiple transformations. A “metamorphosis” (Vázquez-Herrero et al. 2020) that has resulted in a new communication scenario where both opportunities and challenges emerge and converge around journalism and its practice. Technology has played a central role in many of the changes that the media ecosystem has undergone, setting the pace of change and guiding the

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mass of media towards a convergent, mobile and now, also ubiquitous and intelligent environment (Salaverría and De-Lima-Santos 2020).

One of the main transformations since the 2010s has been the automation and robotization of journalistic phases and processes. Since *Los Angeles Times* published a front-page story in March 2014 about an earthquake written entirely without human intervention, many media outlets have sought to introduce artificial intelligence (AI) into their newsrooms.

At the stage we are at, algorithm is considered the core of AI, as it is the foundation that makes any system work. It materializes the so-called smart media (Zhang 2023), while data are the key pieces that stand out in the ecosystem of high-tech journalism (López-García and Vizoso 2021), whose arc expands more and more due to innovative digital resources, devices, and technologies ranging from drones, 360-degree video, immersive audio (binaural), virtual reality, augmented and extended reality, news-games, holograms and 3D printers (Pavlik 2019; Silva 2022; Lima and Barbosa 2022) to machine learning, Natural Language Processing (NLP), Natural Language Generation (NLG), which extend automation to the processes of production, reporting, editing, publishing, distribution, and consumption of journalistic content.

The introduction of AI in the media has led to the emergence of algorithmic journalism, defined as:

The (semi)-automated process of natural language generation by the selection of electronic data from private or public databases (input), the assignment of relevance of pre-selected or nonselected data characteristics, the processing and structuring of the relevant data sets to a semantic structure (throughput), and the publishing of the final text on an online or offline platform with a certain reach (output) (Dörr 2016: 412).

Behind the adoption of AI in journalism are reasons such as the need to increase the volume of news published, to reduce costs, to relieve the journalist of routine and repetitive work and to attract audiences (Diakopoulos 2019; Graefe 2016; LeCompte 2015). This AI-supported journalism arises as a new discipline that impacts tasks and functions that previously required human intervention (Bodó 2019). Thus, tools and systems have been developed that allow the automated elaboration of textual pieces, the personalized distribution of content, the search for newsworthy elements, news verification or data analysis (Diakopoulos 2019; Manfredi and Ufarte 2020; Newman 2022). Yet, the use and implementation of this technology also introduces significant professional and ethical challenges (Dörr and Hollnbuchner 2017; Miroshnichenko 2018).

Considering the forecasts (Kunova and Granger 2022; Newman 2023), the trend for this and the coming years is of exponential growth and consolidation of the use of resources, tools and technologies based on AI by news organizations, whether they are legacy media, digital natives or news agencies.

Taking this context into account, in this chapter we conduct an exploratory and descriptive analysis of the use of AI in three different media contexts: Spain, Portugal and Brazil. Using the technique known as case study (Yin 2003), we review different successful initiatives that reflect the impact of these technologies on news outlets and their effect on the redefinition of the boundaries of journalism. The combination

of the scientific literature review and the case study will allow us to address the question on which this qualitative research is based: After the hype of the trends and forecasts about the use of high technology in journalism (Pérez-Seijo et al. 2020), what does reality show about the use of AI by news organizations in Spain, Portugal, and Brazil?

## 2 Early Automation in the Spanish News Media Ecosystem

Spanish digital media are facing the third decade of the twenty-first century with the challenge of adapting to the specificities introduced by the use of AI in newsrooms. Its implementation in the media is driven by the imperative of innovation, but also by the search for productive efficiency (López-García and Vizoso 2021).

The Spanish media system has not remained on the sidelines of the journalistic automation and robotization, a phenomenon of global impact and transversal character that shapes what has been called the seventh stage of digital journalism (Salaverría 2021). However, scientific production on algorithmic journalism in Spain is recent and still incipient (e.g.: Aramburú et al. 2023; Calvo-Rubio and Ufarte Ruiz 2020; Rojas and Toural 2019; Túñez López et al. 2019, 2021; Ufarte Ruiz et al. 2020; Ufarte Ruiz and Manfredi Sánchez 2019).

It is worth mentioning the study by Ufarte Ruiz et al. (2020), which shows that the educational offer related to the robotization and automation of content in Spanish public universities is practically non-existent, which evidences the lack of adaptation to the changes in the journalism industry. On the other hand, research by Calvo-Rubio and Ufarte Ruiz (2020) on the perception of the use of AI in journalism concludes that neither media professionals nor Spanish academics consider that the technology will have a negative impact on the journalistic labor market.

An exploration of the national media landscape reveals a gradual commitment to AI technology (Ufarte Ruiz et al. 2020). In this still initial phase, most media outlets are using it for the algorithmic creation of news pieces, content personalization, and information verification, similar to what is happening at the international level (De Lara et al. 2022).

In Spain, we find initiatives based on AI in both legacy and digital native media. For example, in 2016, the newspaper *El País* launched a bot on Facebook Messenger—El País bot—which automatically sent news updates to its followers whenever new information was published on the website (Southern 2017). That same year also saw the appearance of Politibot, created on Telegram to provide political information during the general elections in Spain.

In 2017, the media group Vocento presented Medusa, a project for the automated reuse of data developed through its Media Lab. It consists of two experimental products whose objective is to automatically report service information on the state of beaches in the summer—infoPlayas—and ski resorts in Spain, Andorra and the French Pyrenees in the winter—infoEsquí—(Vocento Media Lab 2017). That same year, the digital native *El Confidencial* also launches, through its journalistic

innovation lab, Ana Futbot, a bot for writing soccer chronicles (Rojas and Toural 2019).

Already in December 2018, the aforementioned newspaper *El País* starts using Perspective for the moderation of digital readers' comments. It is a machine learning and algorithmic curation tool developed by Google Jigsaw capable of detecting toxic comments that breach the principles and rules of participation of *El País* (Delgado 2019).

## 2.1 Partnerships and News Verification Initiatives as Key

Beyond the cases mentioned above, it is important to note some groundbreaking initiatives that have significantly impacted the development and implementation of algorithmic journalism in Spain: the establishment of the first company specializing in natural language generation and the commitment of the Spanish public broadcaster to AI.

In 2015, Narrativa was founded as the first company in Spain to focus on automated content production. The startup, in collaboration with the University of Alcalá de Henares, developed GabrieleAI, a software that can generate short texts in real-time from data sets for distribution to different media outlets. Some of its clients include RTVE, *El Periódico*, *El Independiente*, and *20 Minutos*.

It should be noted that in 2019, the news agency EFE and Narrativa signed an agreement to launch an automated content offering based on data and produced using AI and machine learning technologies. This alliance makes EFE a distributor and marketer for Narrativa's products, adding related pieces on sports, weather, finance, statistics, polls, or election results to its offering for customers. Similar to what international agencies such as Associated Press and Reuters have already done.

On the other hand, the Spanish public service broadcaster RTVE maintains a strong commitment to introducing AI in different areas of the corporation. Led by the Technology Strategy area as an innovation challenge, RTVE is working on various projects: the development of tools for automatic subtitling in collaboration with the applied research center Vicomtech; the automatic metadata for the documentary funds; or the intelligent single-camera production among other lines of work.

In 2020, RTVE hired the news agency EFE through a public competition to develop a new automated news writing and publishing service for sports information not covered by the broadcaster's journalists. The Spanish public service broadcaster also leads, in collaboration with the Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona and the participation of other public and private institutions and companies, the IVERES project. It is funded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation of the Spanish Government and its main objective is the development of an information verification system in Spanish that helps in the protection of the democratic state and the safeguarding of accurate information. Ahead of the municipal elections in Spain planned for 2023, RTVE is working with the company Narrativa on a pilot project for automated news

generation related to electoral information of municipalities with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants.

### **3 Digitization and Innovation in the Portuguese News Media**

The second decade of the 2000s brought the emergence of a new sociocommunicational context for the Portuguese media, progressively giving way to a convergent journalism (Ribeiro and Resende 2017). This changing environment is largely characterized by technological, economic, social, and cultural transformations resulting from digitization, with nascent business models, the emergence of editorial projects originally designed for an evolving digital environment, new ways of organizing newsrooms, hybrid journalistic formats, and new forms of interaction with audiences, particularly arising from the generalization of social networking platforms.

Among the main implications of digitization in Portuguese journalism is the displacement of the news universe to the amalgamation of content production, the primacy of metrics over news production, the orientation of news production to gains in visibility and online social engagement, the emergence of the multi-skilled journalist in content production, and the permanent monitoring of social networks (Garcia et al. 2018).

At a micro level of analysis (individual), inquired about future scenarios, the Portuguese journalists consider that the profession tends to a process of individualization and, with it, new opportunities, such as creating their own brand, greater autonomy, or working for non-profit institutions. On the other hand, they also foresee a more stressful work scenario, without set schedules, more dependent on the journalist's own initiative and pro-activity (Crespo et al. 2017). It is in this broader context that the journalistic startups' scene in Portugal has been gaining presence, with new small organizations independent of the major media groups seeking to fit into a niche and not competing with legacy media, while searching for alternative financing sources (Crespo et al. 2020).

A fragile financial structure of Portuguese news organizations has conditioned the emergence of robust innovation projects, while emphasizing the role of occasional partnerships with technology and telecom companies, as well as with higher education institutions, devoted to research and development, leading to a growing though shy role of media innovation laboratories (Nunes 2020) and the adoption of external funding, notably that of Google's Digital News Innovation Fund (Crespo et al. 2018; Nunes and Canavilhas 2020).



### 3.1 *The Googlization of the Portuguese News Media Innovation*

The Portuguese context of media organizations has not so far been marked by a project that can be identified as a pioneering milestone in the adoption of algorithmic journalism at a national level. Experimentation and prototyping with technologies associated with AI has been, on the other hand, one of the characteristics of different digital native projects funded by Google's Digital News Innovation Fund (DNI Fund). Between 2015 and 2019, 32 journalism projects in Portugal were supported, with a total of €7.8 M invested. Of the amount allocated to Portugal, 49% went to exploit new digital technologies, 24% to combat misinformation, 15% to boost the dissemination of local stories and 12% to improve digital revenues (Google News Initiative 2020).

DNI fund covered projects from the main national media economic groups (Público—Comunicação Social, Observador Ontime, Impresa, Cofina, Media Capital, Global Notícias, Lusa—Agência de Notícias de Portugal), but also from regional media organisations (e.g. *Região de Leiria*, Açormedia, *Diário de Notícias da Madeira*), from higher education institutions dedicated to research and development activities (e.g. INESC-TEC), generated applications from institutional consortia (e.g. Plataforma de Media Privados) and individuals. The following are two of those projects.

The Stop PropagHate project (2017) was developed by the Instituto de Engenharia de Sistemas e Computadores, Tecnologia e Ciência (INESC-TEC) of the University of Porto to provide a service to media companies in the automatic identification of hate speech in comments to their news published on websites and social platforms. Supported by machine learning techniques, the application enables news organizations to automatically identify hate speech in comments, but also to predict the probability of a news piece generating such comments in the first place. Thus, computationally, it becomes possible for news workers to anticipate those news pieces likely to be toxicity-generating and understand which features contributed for the prediction. The researchers found, for example, that articles whose titles contained keywords relating to highly debated social issues such as 'racist', 'gay', and 'nazi' in conjunction with lexical entities such as 'Trump' contributed to the identification of new entities generating toxicity and incivility.

Also developed by the Instituto de Engenharia de Sistemas e Computadores, Tecnologia e Ciência (INESC-TEC) of the University of Porto, the Algorithmic Science News (ASN) platform, funded in 2018 by Google's Digital News Innovation Fund, sought to strengthen the public role of science news. The platform aimed to facilitate the work of journalists working in the coverage of scientific topics, automating the analysis of scientific articles and documents available in open access repositories, extracting immediately useful information from them. ASN aggregates a set of functionalities that allows the identification of experts and work related to the topic being investigated, the production of summaries and explanations about

technical terms used in it, as well as the suggestion of terms and expressions as the journalist writes the news piece.

## 4 Brazilian Context Points to Expressiveness and Constraints

Recent work has pointed out that news organizations adoption of AI is unequal (Lima and Ceron 2022; Simon 2022), as it is still expensive and requires high investments, limiting its use, mainly, by those located in the Global South.

That is the case of Brazil, where studies indicate that the employment of AI by national news organizations is still sporadic (Carreira 2017; Araújo 2018; Essenfelder and Sant’Anna 2022). However, there are significant cases as related in previous studies (Pase and Pellanda 2019; Essenfelder et al. 2019; DalBen 2020, 2022; Santos 2020; Pase et al. 2022) and verified by us in empirical research for this chapter. On the other hand, concerning academic research on this subject in journalism, the literature review carried out by Ioscote (2021) covering the period from 2010 to 2020 shows that the focus of the products published in Brazilian journals are essentially related to tools and applied research with emphasis on data and news. While in the papers published in conference proceedings, the discussion about the algorithm and its implications for the journalist’s work prevails.

Although AI experimentation initiatives have become more evident from 2017 onwards, when we consider the history of almost three decades of development of digital journalism in Brazil, we verify the existence of automated content on mainstream news sites since the first decade of the 2000s.

The sections with dynamic statistics or News Recommender Systems (NRS) to display the news rankings “most read”, “most commented”, “most shared”, “most sent”, “most viewed” perhaps are the format that marked the initial process publication of automated content in news sites such as *Folha Online* (*Folha de S. Paulo*) around 2006, a year after Google News was launched in the country (Barbosa 2007; Barbosa and Torres 2013). Other sections published content generated automatically from information contained in databases, as did the portal *Terra* and the blog *Deus no Jornal* (already inactive), by *Transparência Brasil*.

The expressiveness of national examples with AI uses is observed in initiatives led either by legacy media news organizations or by digital natives of various types, by specific AI projects, etc. More punctual developed for significant journalistic coverage as recorded in the elections of 2018, 2020, and 2022.

The types of AI found covering its distinct research subfields (Lima and Ceron 2022) predominate the algorithms of scraping, bots, structuring and visualization of data, chatbots, dashboards, statistical algorithms, curation algorithms, Natural Language Processing (NLP), Natural Language Generation (NLG), computer Speech and computer Vision. We also found algorithms models combined with statistical

methodologies and visualization techniques to support the automation of data collection on electoral surveys for the president of the Republic based on the Superior Electoral Court (TSE) to shape the Research Aggregators that were made available forcefully in the 2022 elections.

#### ***4.1 Innovative AI Initiatives in Brazil's News Media Ecosystem***

Among the mapped cases, portal *GI* is one of the highlights of using AI. In the 2022 general elections, it published for the first-time texts and journalistic videos in an automated way with the consolidated voting numbers for the positions of president, governor, senator, federal and state deputies of all 5,568 Brazilian municipalities. Before publication, the journalists reviewed the content. With the support of an AI system and data provided in real-time by the Superior Electoral Court (TSE in Portuguese), the *GI* had two teams of professionals: one group was responsible for capturing the TSE data. Another one was formed by engineers and data scientists supported by the MediaTechLab Globo, in addition to integration with the area in charge of the portal's publishing system so that the texts were inserted and accessed by journalists.

The system was improved from the portal employed in the municipal elections of 2020. Earlier, in the 2018 general election, *GI* provided a mobile voice assistant to answer questions from voters about presidential candidates. Such experiments reflect investments that *Globo* has been making as a MediaTechLab and, for that, has established some strategic partnerships: with Google Cloud (Monteiro 2021) to have it as a provider of cloud solutions, be its catalyst for innovation, accelerating digital transformation for its products; and with the Pi Center (Center for Projects and Innovation), of the Institute of Pure and Applied Mathematics (IMPA) for processes of automatic extraction and enrichment of metadata from AI models to improve their recommendation systems.

In the 2018 elections, *Estadão* and *Folha de S. Paulo* made available products developed with AI. While *Estadão* employed a Microsoft computer vision to detect the faces of presidential nominees on TV debate to find out what feeling each of them displayed second to second, the Intelligence Center of *Folha* elaborated the Electoral GPS based on computer speech: a system of analysis of what the presidential candidates disclosed in their government plans, speeches, social network (Facebook and Twitter) and electoral programs on TV.

*Estadão* also uses NLG for automation and visualization (*Estadão Broadcast* and *Basômetro*) and, in the 2022 elections, employed algorithms models, statistical methodologies, and visualization techniques to automate data collection on election polls for president in their Survey Aggregator. This was, in fact, one of the formats adopted by a varied set of news media outlets: *UOL*, *Poder 360°*, *Nexo Jornal*, *Jota*, *Veja*, *Sistema Jornal do Commercio*, *O Povo*.

In turn, independent digital native media and fact-checking agencies have invested in developing robots. Among the cases highlighted are three, created between 2017 and 2018, to work on Twitter, Facebook, Telegram, and WhatsApp: Rosie (@RosieDaSerenata, from *Operação Serenata de Amor*, serenata.ai) warning about suspicious expenses made by federal deputies with the Quota for the Exercise of Parliamentary Activity and works connected to the Jarbas database<sup>1</sup>; Rui Barbot (@ruibarbot, from *Jota.info*, updated until 2020 with the monitoring of the processes in progress in the Brazil's Supreme Court); and Fátima (@fatimabot, robot from the fact-checking agency *Aos Fatos*)—an NLP application developed with financial support from the Facebook Journalism Project to provide verified information and help news consumers with safe browsing.

*Aos Fatos* makes other applications available on its site, such as Radar, which works from an algorithm improved daily to calculate the misinformative potential of low-quality information circulating on WhatsApp, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram. There is also the bot *Elas no Congresso*,<sup>2</sup> launched in 2020 by *AzMina Magazine* and funded with resources from the Google News Initiative in Latin America, which allows monitoring the processing of proposals that deal with women's rights in Congress. Its site<sup>3</sup> provides ranking according to the performance of Brazilian parliamentarians in gender issues in 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022, as well as databases and source codes.

As adaptability to use new technologies and digital resources requires constant financial investments, not all Brazilian news organizations, even the largest ones, achieve sustainability to ensure the balance between technological innovation and management processes, which explains the slower adoption of technologies associated with AI. The decapitalization aggravated by cyclical economic crises points to a probable dependence on funding allocated through projects and partnerships with large platform companies (primarily Google and Meta) to continue innovating, as has already occurred in several countries. While platform companies dominate the field of AI as providers of services, tools, and infrastructures, journalistic organizations need more resources and rely on big techs to carry out research and development actions (Simon 2022).

## 5 Conclusions: A Critical Look at the Near Future

Today's journalism is facing the challenge of integrating automation and robotization into newsrooms. The appearance of AI technologies and their adoption by media outlets have opened a major transformation in digital journalism. In fact, the impact of this high technology on the processes of news content production, distribution, and even consumption has influenced the boundaries of journalism. This has resulted in

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<sup>1</sup> <https://jarbas.serenata.ai/dashboard>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://twitter.com/elasnocongresso>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.elasnocongresso.com.br/methodology>.

novel blurred zones in journalistic practice, where renewed possibilities and threats have been identified, as discussed throughout this chapter.

The emergence of AI in the media industry is a natural response to the constant changes boosted by hi-tech and the novel social and technological scenarios. However, the penetration of AI in the Spanish, Portuguese and Brazilian media industries is still at an early and incipient stage. Despite this, and based on the cases explored, it is inferred that there are some urgent and common challenges that algorithmic journalism poses for news organizations regardless of the country.

First, there is an increasing dependence on the infrastructure and systems of tech companies, as was already the case with other high technologies such as virtual reality and 360-degree video. Financial difficulties in making the required investments to introduce the latest technologies and remain innovative lead many media outlets to advocate for collaboration with platform companies in order to secure access to resources and funding for projects.

On the other hand, ethical issues arise regarding the use of algorithms in journalism and point to the negative impact they sometimes have on fundamental ethical principles and quality standards. In general terms, the introduction of these technologies in different journalistic phases and processes has put on the table challenges regarding the safeguarding of traditional values, such as plurality, accuracy, accountability, or transparency. The interdisciplinarity inherent in AI processes amplifies these issues. At the same time, it emphasizes the need for constant human editorial supervision of any automated tasks to ensure that reliability standards are met.

The development of advanced natural language processing tools such as ChatGPT, developed by OpenAI, further reinforces concerns about the automated production of journalism. These systems raise questions about the role of journalists and their degree of imitation of human writing. Additionally, there are implications for transparency of authorship and verification of information.

Finally, a third challenge lies in the training and qualification of journalists with the necessary skills to perform in this high-tech ecosystem (Barbosa et al. 2022). Thus, the so-called AI literacy for Journalism (Deuze and Beckett 2022) becomes essential for the acquisition of knowledge about technology or discerning when its use is actually useful.

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# New Frontiers of the Intelligent Journalism



Charlie Beckett , Pablo Sanguinetti , and Bella Palomo 

**Abstract** The integration of artificial intelligence in newsrooms has progressed from being a possibility to become a revolutionary reality. This chapter reflects on the opportunities that are already being exploited in the journalism industry, stressing the active role of the JournalismAI project in promoting diverse initiatives. The move towards an improved and advanced journalism requires renewed commitments. For this reason, the chapter also contributes a constructive, prudent and responsible view of the phenomenon, inviting prior reflection before producing content by means of a decalogue containing recommendations for tackling the AI phenomenon.

**Keywords** Artificial intelligence · Literacy · Responsibility · Trends

## 1 Introduction

In 2022, the *New York Times* published 550 news items related to artificial intelligence (AI), and a similar number appeared in newspapers like the *Times* or *El Mundo*. This global tendency signifies a historic, thematic saturation of the media agenda, and in turn reflects a normalization of the relationship, acceptance and integration of a disruptive innovation that is affecting all areas of society.

This intense rate of production has also been seen in academia, where the Web of Science Core Collection database registered a record number of scientific articles on AI in the same year: 18,810. The ramifications of this knowledge are extensive, and although 50% of the publications appear under the imprint of MDPI, Elsevier and Springer Nature, and the areas of Engineering and Computer Science are the most active, there are also contributions from 145 other fields. Only a quarter of this

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output proceeds from the Humanities and the Social Sciences, where the volume of contributions from Psychology stands out.

In this race to disseminate the possibilities and limits of AI, the media have acquired a leading role in cognitive transformation, raising society's understanding and awareness of the advances and dangers of its application. In parallel, there is a reactive movement and some media are toying with its internal use. In this context it is worrying that instead of forging a new generation intelligent journalism, the sector is advancing towards the configuration of a dual scenario marked by a new digital divide, in which profound ignorance of the direct influence of AI on professional activity coexists with relevant strategic initiatives (Túñez et al. 2018).

The *Washington Post* was one of the pioneers in building its own technology, Heliograf, to automatize short reports and alerts on the Rio Olympics and the 2016 election (Moses 2017). There have been dozens of initiatives in this respect, but they have not always been successful and require suitable supervision; haste and overconfidence in AI engines has made it necessary to recognize the mistakes made (Guglielmo 2023). This commitment to non-proprietary applications can increase risks, although in 2023 media like BuzzFeed have announced the use of ChatGPT technology to improve quizzes, participate in processes of brainstorming, and personalize content adapted to the audience. This type of dynamics is also affecting staff, since some media consider that the complexity and intensity of the phenomenon makes it necessary to contract expert profiles, journalists specializing in this technology, its creative potential, its regulation and the economic, social and ethical challenges it generates (Palomo et al. 2022). In this respect, the post of AI editor has already been introduced in media like *The Financial Times* and Bloomberg.

The academic view of the relationship between artificial intelligence and journalism is essentially descriptive and complex due to the difficulties in delimiting the field (Calvo and Ufarte 2021), but a critical current can also be detected. This warns that the informative frenzy might limit the autonomy of the medium and increase dependency on platform companies (Simon 2022), and about the existence of tensions between the industry and the profession (Moran and Shaikh 2022).

In the following pages we delve into the case of the Journalism AI Project as a facilitator and promoter of media initiatives, and our analysis is supplemented by a constructive and responsible vision of the phenomenon inspired by the concept of AI literacy (Deuze and Beckett 2022).

## 2 Exploring AI in Journalism

Journalism is already adapting many Artificial Intelligence technologies in a wide range of use-cases. Recent international surveys indicate that adoption of AI has progressed from an emergent to an established and growing field (Newman 2023). Use cases range from personalization of content for users to large-scale investigative journalism. This plurality is related partly to the diversity of the science itself. Artificial Intelligence is an umbrella term that covers many different tools and processes.

That diversity also reflects the increasing range of journalism organizations. It is vital for news media to understand AI if they are to report on its expanding role in society. But it is also essential because as an information industry, AI will be pervasive in the future operations of the news media themselves.

Since 2018 the LSE JournalismAI project, run by the LSE's international journalism think-tank, Polis, has been tracking the rapid emergence of AI in the news media around the world. It surveyed the extent and nature of AI's global impact in the report, *New Powers, New Responsibilities* (Beckett 2019). That research showed significant adoption of AI technologies, especially by larger, western news organizations. However, it also highlighted a large knowledge deficit about AI, a skills shortage and a lack of resources and strategies to explore AI. Respondents to the survey demonstrated a general enthusiasm to use AI for efficiency and to augment the work of journalists, but they had significant doubts about their ability to exploit it effectively.

Recent developments in 'generative AI' such as the Dall-E image and ChatGPT releases have shown how the development of these technologies is continually advancing. The wider debate about 'sentient' AI or 'general' AI is for the future. But right now, the more 'narrow' versions of AI are progressing rapidly. Machine learning, automation, data discovery, and natural language processing are all improving in efficiency and capability at a rate that makes it difficult to keep up in practical applications.

## ***2.1 JournalismAI: A Future Trends Incubator***

In response to this knowledge gap within the industry, the JournalismAI project developed a range of online and remote training programmes to help bridge the industry's knowledge gap (JournalismAI 2023a). It also engaged with a wide range of people from different news organizations in collaborative deliberation and innovation programmes. The JournalismAI project has partnered with universities, technology companies and NGOs as part of that process. This section reflects the lessons drawn from that engagement with these people at the cutting edge of AI adoption (JournalismAI 2023b).

Since the JournalismAI project started, substantial use of AI in newsrooms has gone from a minority to a majority. Generally, its use in the news media is for relatively simple, repetitive tasks that humans could do, but the software operates at vastly greater speed and scale. AI is deployed at all stages of news gathering, content creation, marketing and distribution, and revenue-gathering. Many of its uses are specific, such as transcription tools. However, because of its systemic impact overall, it has a structural effect on news production that demands a strategic response from management in terms of recruitment, production flows, resource allocation, product design and business modeling. The JournalismAI project has gathered a selection of current use case studies in an information hub that illustrate this adoption of AI (JournalismAI 2023c).

But perhaps as interesting is the JournalismAI Collab Fellowship innovation projects where journalists and technologists have worked collaboratively with other news organizations—often from different countries or even continents—to explore new applications. They have chosen their own challenges and then researched, prototyped and reported on their experiments, many of which now have practical uses or have resulted in guides and codes. This process has produced reports that can help others to accelerate their own adoption of AI. But the problems they have addressed also give us a good indication of future trends in the developing, enhanced or new use cases.

One team sought to use AI to support journalists working on a story by providing them with automatic suggestions for archive material (JournalismAI 2023d). They came up with a range of useful tools, but also identified practical problems around ‘data hygiene’ and working in different languages. Another team sought to use AI to create a tool to help counter gender bias in the newsroom and to foster deliberation amongst journalists.<sup>1</sup> They also came up with practical problems around the limits of image recognition: gender is not always so visible to the software. However, they did create an interactive tool that allowed journalists to explore issues of bias around sourcing and image selection.

Other teams were more audience-focused such as one that looked at using AI in various ways, including gamification, to build loyalty and engagement (JournalismAI 2023e). That team came up with a highly detailed set of steps to use AI to reduce churn and improve conversion of readers to subscribers. But they also warned that “There is no silver bullet or magical algorithm that will solve churn or increase retention without hard work, testing and iteration. Each publisher’s customer base is unique and every organisation has different goals”.

AI technologies can also be used by bad actors to spread false or disinformation and propaganda. So not surprisingly, many teams have focused on using AI for fact-checking, verification and countering ‘fake news’ (JournalismAI 2023f). One team created an NLP tool they called Parrot that can “help journalists identify and measure the spread of manipulated narratives from state-controlled media... an early warning system that clusters and classifies state media generated text”.<sup>2</sup>

Other teams have explored using AI to help journalism to adapt to the changing media ecology, for example, tracking the role of ‘influencers’.<sup>3</sup> The initial target of this tool was to identify those influencers who were bending the rules on commercial transparency but it has a wider potential for tracking content or users on Instagram more generally.

The development of these initiatives has in itself been valuable, creating a substantial body of research reports and manuals to help other news organizations pursue similar challenges. It reflects the diversity of potential use cases for AI in journalism. However, the wider lessons from the process have also been significant. It has made it clear that AI demands new skills and different ways of working. Collaboration

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ajjoproject.com>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://parrot.report>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://tracking-influencers.com>.

within the teams drawn from different organisations allowed them to indulge in ‘blue skies’ thinking and fertilize their imagination with other people’s experience and perspectives. They had support from external experts from partner universities and technology companies that all enabled them to accelerate development.

The lesson they took away was that AI adoption within a newsroom requires expertise but also the integration of all parties including editorial, marketing and leadership. As with any product development it requires a strategy of planning, iteration and review. AI does not always provide a solution to a specific problem. Or the investment of resources may not be worth the returns. As these are developing technologies the newsroom has to become AI literate and its understanding must be up to date. That is clearly a challenge for news organizations under all sorts of other pressures.

## ***2.2 The Evolution of the Concerns***

During the JournalismAI project we have seen a shift in the concerns of journalists about AI. In the past there were abstract worries about machines taking over the world, or more self-interested fears of “robots taking our jobs”. This has changed to a better-informed concern about standards and ethics of these technologies in a news context. With experience also come more practical concerns about its utility and the ability of news organizations to exploit its affordances. The trajectory of this debate is somewhat familiar. This is the third wave of profound technological transformation for the news media in recent decades. First, news went online, transferring traditional print and broadcast processes onto websites. The first newspaper actually went online in 1980 but it was not until 1997 that BBC News went fully online. Then about 15 years ago social media made journalism interactive and multi-format with a multitude of sources and platforms. That was far more disruptive to both the news media industry as a whole and journalistic practice. It presented new opportunities for connection and creativity but it also increased competition and the demands upon individual journalists and newsrooms.

Now this third wave of AI technologies promises to take over much of current journalism labor. Much of news journalism is ‘formulaic’, converting ‘data’ into articles, updates, graphics, video or audio. It has to be formulaic to some degree to deliver accessible information to the public in a timely way. But AI can increasingly copy those formulae. AI has opened up the potential for far more synthetic journalism production where machines—supervised by humans—will do the bulk of routine journalism. In addition, AI offers the opportunities to develop new platforms, channels and devices such as Augmented Reality, audio or video on demand, and hyper-personalization. Ever-improving transcription and translation offers opportunities to reach new publics across old boundaries.

As AI reshapes news organizations, so new roles, recruitment and skills will be needed. But it is also influencing trends in the wider news media industry, albeit in different ways, internationally and regionally. One consequence may be to enhance

inequalities as larger organizations reap greater benefits partly thanks to their scale and greater R&D resources. AI might accelerate the trend towards consolidation and the dominance of fewer, larger market leaders. However, there is evidence that nimble, smaller digital native news start-ups can also benefit from specific tools to help them manage subscriptions, personalize newsletters, or drive their data investigations.

This is a critical aspect of AI's impact on the future of a healthy global news ecology. With journalism under so much economic, political and legal pressure we should be skeptical of any technological 'solution'. AI presents ethical problems related to bias within data sets and algorithms and the opacity of much AI—as well as the practical problems of complexity and cost of its adoption. However, if the news media does not exploit the benefits of AI, then the danger is that other players will then occupy the information sphere without the public service values of independence and critical reporting that journalism is supposed to uphold.

In recent years news organizations (along with the rest of society) have become more aware of the limits and downsides of reliance on technology platforms and networks that are largely unaccountable and with no innate interest in supporting their work or the public interest. There is clearly also a danger of dependency on technology companies that are driving the development of AI. The news media may have political importance but they are a relatively tiny industry globally and news content itself is of limited interest for many platforms and technology companies. It is vital that the news media make their voice heard and attempt to influence and inform the agenda of the AI researchers and developers.

One interesting potential consequence that is already emerging from the adoption of AI is the focus on the human element in journalism. If the more general, commodity journalism can be done by machines, what is the point of a news organization or a particular journalist? One answer is that it becomes adept at using AI to supplement its journalists' work to make them more expert, better informed and more able to create the kind of content that is relevant to their users' needs. News organizations can use audience data plus AI to counter the danger of news avoidance by calibrating the offer of content to the particular behavior and circumstances of the user. AI is key to optimizing personalization.

But another related consequence might be that newsrooms also seek to develop their 'human' values that the software will struggle to emulate such as judgement, expertise, empathy, morality and emotion. In an ideal world, efficiency gains from using AI will be directed towards allowing journalists to get out into the world, meet people, be creative and seek to investigate more thoroughly and to understand more deeply. That will be the added value for news organizations in the ultra-competitive future of information and debate. At a local level, newsrooms will use AI to understand the data about their locale, but it will be human journalists who should forge a real relationship with that community. In the future, community is the business model for news, be it a global brand funded by subscribers, a public service media company supported by a licence fee, or a specialist foundation or crowd-funded mission-driven newsroom. For all of these, AI will be increasingly used to create and communicate news content, but ultimately the human—both public and journalist—must always be 'in the loop'.

### 3 Style Guidelines for an Ethical Narrative

One key aspect that has hardly been addressed is the way in which the media report on artificial intelligence. That is, the imaginary that they are contributing to shape around this technology together with the ethical and social impact of such narratives.

Media coverage decisively influences public perception of new scientific advances (Chuan et al. 2019). This happens especially in the case of AI, a complex technology that is still undergoing development and is surrounded by often exaggerated hopes and fears. Journalism faces the challenge of building an accurate narrative on the true nature of AI that would help to avoid distorted images and misguided debates in society, and thus have a positive impact on its investigation, funding and regulation (The Royal Society 2018).

The ‘narrative’ on AI is sufficiently important for one to be able to speak of “narrative responsibility” (Coeckelbergh 2021), as one more form of ethical responsibility in the development of this technology, together with others such as transparency, representativeness, privacy and explicability.

However, many works on ethics and AI have systematically neglected the narrative aspect. Romele (2022) notes that in the 881 pages of the New Oxford Handbook of Ethics of AI there is not one mention of the role of communication. This absence is repeated in an extensive report of the Google subsidiary DeepMind on the ethical risks of Large Language Models (LLM, the technology behind advances such as GPT-3, LaMDA or ChatGPT). The study (Weidinger et al. 2021) proposes different strategies to mitigate those risks, but none of these includes the need of better explaining the LLM, their limitations or their dangers.

An ‘ethical narrative’ on AI should fulfil four possible approaches: In the first place, it should transmit a precise image of its current state, without hiding its limitations, and reject the esoteric idea of an autonomous AI that is all-powerful or quasi-human. Second, it should promote reflection on the ethical and social impact of AI, emphasizing the human responsibility behind its development and use, placing people at the center of the coverage. In the third place, the discourse of companies and developers should be filtered through a critical and skeptical gaze. And, finally, the technology should not be anthropomorphized, its difference from humans should be underscored.

One way of ensuring that these principles do not remain a mere declaration of intent, and making them into a practical tool is to embody them in concrete guidelines for newswriting, with the final aim of creating a ‘style book’ for an ethical coverage of AI. In the following pages we synthesize these recommendations into a decalogue.



### 3.1 *Narrow AI Versus AGI: Make the Difference Between Reality and Science Fiction Clear*

The border between reality and fiction can become confusing when one speaks of AI, a technology that appears ambiguous at both the social level and for policy makers (Hudson et al. 2021). Since its origin AI has been accompanied by mythical representations (Natale and Ballatore 2017) and a terminology in many cases interwoven with myth, science fiction or even religion (Musa Giuliano 2020).

A frequent way of slipping from a real news story onto fictional ground is to confuse narrow AI (100% of present-day AI systems, designed to perform a single task very well) with Artificial General Intelligence or AGI (multiple systems of intelligence on a level with or higher than human intelligence, something that neither exists nor seems attainable in the short term).

When an article starts talking about the challenge posed by autonomous weapons and ends up speculating with Killer Robots that build themselves to conquer or enslave humanity (“*Künstliche Intelligenz im Ukrainekrieg: Wenn Roboter eigenständig töten*” [AI in the Ukraine war: When robots kill autonomously]), *Der Tagesspiegel*, 08/01/2023), it blurs the border between reality and fiction, rather than helping to make it clearly perceptible. In the case of AI, this leap is rather more than journalistic inaccuracy: it has an ethical and social dimension. Not only because it banalizes real problems by presenting them as science fiction, but also because it conceals that these systems continue to depend on human beings, who are the ones that must bear responsibility for their use (Russell 2019).

### 3.2 *AI Agency: Don’t Use ‘AI’ as the Subject of Human Verbs*

In a more subtle form, perhaps the most common mistake in many press articles consists in stating or suggesting that AI has agency (Leufer 2020). That is, that a system can act independently from humans, following its own will or its own wishes. The reality is that, beyond the philosophical and legal problems that this would pose, AI continues to be a tool. Phrases placing it in the role of an active subject usually exaggerate its power and eclipse the merit or responsibility of the humans who operate it.

One particular case occurs with verbs that express some of the most important actions of our species: discover, decide, learn, decipher, create, invent. The headline “AI model discovers drugs 1,000-times faster than current methods” (*The Independent*, 13/07/2022) prevents seeing that it is scientists who have made these achievements, and that they have taken the decision to rely on an AI system. It is not surprising that the first word in the body of the text is ‘researchers’, the true subject of the news item.

At times the misleading idea of an independent AI is presented tacitly, as occurred in numerous ‘interviews’ with the popular chatbot ChatGPT that have been published since its appearance in late 2022, or with the opinion piece “written” by the GPT-3 language model in the *Guardian* (“A robot wrote this entire article. Are you scared yet, human?”, 08/09/2020).

Another subgenre of those headlines that show AI acting independently are those where the AI rebels, kills or conspires. The false story of Facebook disconnecting two chatbots because they had started to speak in a language of their own provides one of the most viral examples (“Facebook AI creates its own language in creepy preview of our potential future”, *Forbes*, 31/07/2017). Another case that also triumphed on the Net was the following story published by *Newsweek*: “Man recreates childhood friend with AI, then it tries to ‘murder’ him” (*Newsweek*, 26/04/22).

### ***3.3 The Problem with the Term ‘Artificial Intelligence’: Be as Precise as Possible***

Together with the tendency to attribute agency to new technologies, another factor contributes to exaggerating the position of AI as a subject: the term itself. Kaplan (2017) considers that misunderstandings could be avoided if the technology had a less ‘provocative’ name, such as ‘anthropic computing’. Moreover, the term AI covers a host of techniques of different types. That is why the AI Myths project includes the statement that “AI has a clear meaning” among other misunderstandings concerning this technology, and suggests using alternatives like ‘computational statistics’, ‘cognitive automation’, ‘applied optimization’ or ‘automated decision (-making/-support) systems’. In practice it can be difficult to avoid the term AI, but it is worth reflecting on the use of the description ‘intelligent’ for systems that are causing concern because they can discriminate, condemn or kill by mistake.

The solution for journalists must be to seek the greatest possible precision in the wording used. To say that a system of natural language processing designed by a specific company has been programmed to generate convincing text might be longer and less striking than saying “an AI has learned to speak and reason”. But it is also more exact and lends itself less to the erroneous idea that there is consciousness, understanding, feelings or an independent being behind such success.

### ***3.4 Think More About Software Than About Robots***

As a general rule, journalists should simply picture these systems as software, not as a robot or an android. The revolution we are experiencing is based on processing strength, volume of data and programming architecture, not on robots and even less on humanoid robots.

In 2022, when an engineer at Google attributed consciousness to the LaMDA language system, an LLM trained to hold conversations, Gary Marcus, a leading authority in the fight against hype around AI, branded that effect as “nonsense” and “just an illusion”. In an entry on his blog, Marcus (2022) described LaMDA as “a spreadsheet for words”. Imagining AI as a very advanced spreadsheet is less out of touch with reality than thinking of it as a Terminator.

### ***3.5 Images: Avoid Anthropomorphism***

The same erroneous perspective is reflected in the images usually used to illustrate AI subjects in the press. Simply writing ‘artificial intelligence’ in the search engine unleashes a storm of android faces and hands, chip-shaped brains and small smiling robots.

Such images are striking and easy to find, but they give rise to an erroneous representation of AI by exaggerating its autonomy and not making its human creator visible. The Better images of AI initiative warns against “abstract, futuristic or science-fiction-inspired images of AI”, because they “hinder the understanding of the technology’s already significant societal and environmental impacts”. On its website it provides alternative images for free use: people interacting with computers, photos of chips or silicon, or diagrams of AI architecture.

### ***3.6 Language: It’s Better to Use Terminology in One’s Own Language***

A foreign language creates an additional and at times unnecessary distance that can hinder audience understanding. Many terms in the AI field (artificial intelligence, machine learning, deep learning, hype, explicability, neural network, computer vision, natural language processing...) have well-established versions in other languages. No effort is required to find them, nor is a campaign needed to introduce them. But the non-Anglophone world will be condemned to realizing both tasks if it continues to favor using terms in English, while the psychological distance from AI continues to increase and is combined with its perception through the alien veil of another language. In Spain, the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language has launched the project *Lengua Española e Inteligencia Artificial* (LEIA) [Spanish Language and Artificial Intelligence]. Any initiative that helps to make the AI field multilingual is a step in the right direction.

### ***3.7 Technical Terms: Avoid Terminology that is Incomprehensible or Not Self-explanatory***

It might seem obvious, but it is easy to find cases where the journalist has not had the time to study or enough space to explain a complex concept that, nonetheless, she has included in her story. A clear example is that of the number of ‘parameters’ that show the power of large language models like GPT. The term, which often appears in articles on the subject, adds an extra layer of mysticism to the technology if it is not accompanied by a clear definition.

### ***3.8 Metaphors: Be Careful with Human Comparisons***

“When one reads in the media that such-and-such AI technique ‘works just like the human brain’, one may suspect it’s either just someone’s guess or plain fiction”, warns Russell (2019). When one reads headlines like “AI may be as effective as medical specialists at diagnosing disease” (CNN, 25/09/2019) or “*La inteligencia artificial de Google es capaz de aprender como un bebé*” [Google’s artificial intelligence is able to learn like a baby] (*El País*, 11/07/2022), one can expect to find a refutation at some point in the text. In these two specific cases, one reads further on: “But it’s important to note that AI did not substantially out-perform human diagnosis” (in the first) and “That does not mean that the computational model works exactly like the mind” (in the second).

### ***3.9 Sources: Be Careful When Choosing Who to Cite***

Mentioning the company that makes an advance in AI has the positive effect of recognizing human responsibility behind that achievement. However, many of the narrative errors in this section originate in a common problem: acritically adopting the terminology and storytelling of the companies, their spokespersons and their press statements (Brennen et al. 2020). Their language has a goal (selling more) that is different from what a journalist’s should be (explaining better), and the two are often incompatible.

### ***3.10 Human Focus: Avoid ‘Technochauvinism’ and ‘Sociotechnical Blindness’***

By adopting a critical distance facing the companies’ discourse, journalists can focus on the human dimension of AI, a crucial aspect in a technology with so many

transversal applications, and thus avoid two common problems detected in different analyses on the media coverage of AI.

The first is “sociotechnical blindness” (Johnson and Verdicchio 2017), that is, “blindness to all of the human actors involved and all of the decisions necessary to make AI systems”, the idea that these systems act without human intervention. The second consists in suggesting that AI can be applied in any field, thus giving rise to the false expectation of a “pseudo Artificial General Intelligence” (Brennen et al. 2020) and omitting reflection on the challenges involved in replacing humans with AI, the difficulties posed in its implementation or possible alternative solutions. Broussard (2018) calls this bias “technochauvinism”, which she defines as “the belief that tech is always the solution”.

A common example occurs when an article takes it for granted that a new technology due to its mere existence will end up imposing itself and replacing humans, which is usually accompanied by an effort to exaggerate its capabilities and minimize its limitations. Following the headline “*Esta IA de Apple ya habla como un humano y puede llevar al paro a miles de profesionales*” [This Apple AI already speaks like a human and can make thousands of professionals redundant] (*El Confidencial*, 09/01/2023), the article states that: “For the time being, it is still not the same as a human voice, but that is only a question of time”. Similar predictions were circulating in 2018 with the presentation of Google Duplex, a virtual assistant that makes telephone calls while passing itself off as a human. Five years later, however, it continues to be treated as a residual product.

This decalogue could pose a challenge to journalists, who are already under significant pressures of time, training and seeking an audience. But the advance of AI and the ethical challenges involved make it necessary to report on this technology in a prudent and sensitive way. Specific style guidelines like the ten proposed here can facilitate this task, while the attentive gaze of the university research can ensure a rigorous and critical analysis of the actions to be implemented.

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