Seeking a Sustainable Business Model in the Digital Environment: An Analysis of the Role of Web Analytics and Social Media in Modern Media Strategies

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DOCTORAL THESIS

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ABSTRACT

Media outlets are reviewing their editorial strategies in search of a sustainable business model in the digital environment. Many of them are exploring models based on audience engagement, such as subscriptions, memberships, or donations, with the aim of forging strong connections with online audiences, cultivating their loyalty to the journalistic brand and encouraging their willingness to pay for digital content. With these business models, media outlets seek to diversify revenue sources and reduce their historical dependence on advertising, while continuing to fulfill their responsibility to serve the public.

This study analyzes how media outlets employ web analytics and social media to achieve these business models, while exploring the impact of these tools in shaping the media agenda. How do web analytics and social media contribute to audience engagement-based business models? What are the current uses and purposes of these tools? Is more attention paid to producing high-quality, value-added content? Do journalists face difficulties in using these tools to develop audience engagement-focused business models? To address these questions, this research employs a triangulation of methods. It combines content analysis with in-depth interviews, which are coded and analyzed separately, and then related using theoretical foundations derived from an in-depth literature review. The in-depth interviews were conducted with 28 professionals from ten influential media outlets in five European countries: France, Italy, Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom. Content analysis was done on 841,786 articles from 30 Italian media outlets and 552 Instagram posts from two Spanish media accounts.

The research results highlight the crucial role of web analytics and social media in media strategies that seek to develop business models based on audience engagement. They indicate that, when making editorial decisions, media outlets try to prioritize the information provided by qualitative metrics, such as page retention and comments, over the information provided by quantitative metrics, such as page views and unique users. This translates into a move away from clickbait and entertainment content, and towards relevant and value-added content. The research also points out that social media play a fundamental role in building and promoting a recognizable journalistic brand in the digital environment. This is done with the aim of encouraging user subscriptions in the future, that is, when they perceive the need to stay informed. Although to a lesser extent, these platforms are also considered important spaces to serve the public with free information. The research also suggests that the inherent characteristics of social media, such as the incidental consumption of information and algorithmic control, instill distrust in certain newsrooms. As a result, they redirect their attention to other digital spaces, such as mobile apps, where they perceive greater control. Finally, this research suggests that, despite media outlets' commitment to these approaches, many still face difficulties in implementing them

because of the continued importance of increasing audience size to achieve higher advertising revenues.

By addressing these issues, this research provides valuable insights into how the media are coping with the complexities of the digital age and allows for an assessment of the role of journalism in today's society.

RESUMEN

Los medios de comunicación están revisando sus estrategias editoriales en busca de un modelo de negocio sostenible en el entorno digital. Muchos de ellos están explorando modelos basados en el *engagement* de la audiencia, es decir, en suscripciones, membresías o donaciones, con el objetivo de forjar conexiones sólidas con la audiencia en línea, cultivar su lealtad hacia la marca periodística y fomentar su disposición a pagar por contenidos digitales. Con estos modelos de negocio los medios buscan diversificar las fuentes de ingresos y reducir su histórica dependencia de la publicidad, al tiempo que continuar cumpliendo con su responsabilidad de servir al público.

Este estudio analiza cómo los medios de comunicación emplean la analítica web y las redes sociales para alcanzar estos modelos de negocio, al tiempo que explora el impacto de estas herramientas en la configuración de la agenda mediática. ¿Cómo contribuyen la analítica web y las redes sociales a los modelos de negocio basados en el *engagement* de la audiencia? ¿Cuáles son los usos y propósitos actuales de estas herramientas? ¿Se presta más atención a la producción de contenidos de alta calidad y valor añadido? ¿Se enfrentan los periodistas a dificultades a la hora de utilizar estas herramientas para desarrollar modelos de negocio enfocados en el *engagement* de la audiencia? Para abordar estas cuestiones, esta investigación emplea una triangulación de métodos. Combina el análisis de contenido con entrevistas en profundidad, que se codifican y analizan por separado, para luego relacionarse utilizando fundamentos teóricos derivados de una revisión bibliográfica en profundidad. Las entrevistas en profundidad se realizaron con 28 profesionales de diez medios de comunicación influyentes de cinco países europeos: Francia, Italia, Alemania, España y Reino Unido. El análisis de contenido se hizo sobre 841.786 artículos de 30 medios de comunicación italianos y 552 publicaciones de Instagram de dos cuentas de medios de comunicación españoles.

Los resultados de la investigación destacan el papel crucial de la analítica web y las redes sociales en las estrategias de los medios de comunicación que buscan desarrollar modelos de negocio basados en el *engagement* de la audiencia. Indican que, a la hora de tomar decisiones editoriales, los medios de comunicación intentan priorizar la información proporcionada por las métricas cualitativas, como la retención de páginas y los comentarios, por sobre la información proporcionada por las métricas cuantitativas, como las páginas vistas y los usuarios únicos. Esto se traduce en un alejamiento de los contenidos *clickbait* y de entretenimiento, y un acercamiento a los contenidos de relevancia y con valor añadido. Los resultados de la investigación también señalan que las redes sociales desempeñan un papel fundamental en la construcción y promoción de una marca periodística reconocible en el entorno digital. Esto se realiza con el objetivo de fomentar las suscripciones de los usuarios en un futuro, es decir, cuando perciban la necesidad de mantenerse informados. Aunque en

menor medida, estas plataformas también son considerados importantes espacios para servir al público con información gratuita. La investigación también sugiere que las características inherentes a los medios sociales, como el consumo incidental de información y el control algorítmico, infunden desconfianza en determinadas redacciones. En consecuencia, redirigen su atención hacia otros espacios digitales, como las aplicaciones móviles, donde perciben un mayor control. Por último, esta investigación sugiere que, a pesar del compromiso de los medios de comunicación con estos enfoques, muchos de ellos aún enfrentan dificultades para implementarlos debido a que continúa siendo importante aumentar el tamaño de la audiencia para lograr mayores ingresos publicitarios.

Al abordar estas cuestiones, esta investigación aporta valiosos datos sobre la forma en que los medios afrontan las complejidades de la era digital y permite evaluar el papel del periodismo en la sociedad actual.

RESUM

Els mitjans de comunicació estan revisant les seves estratègies editorials a la recerca d'un model de negoci sostenible en l'entorn digital. Molts d'ells estan explorant models basats en l'*engagement* de l'audiència, és a dir, en subscripcions, membres o donacions, amb l'objectiu de forjar connexions sòlides amb l'audiència en línia, conrear la seva lleialtat cap a la marca periodística i fomentar la seva disposició a pagar per continguts digitals. Amb aquests models de negoci els mitjans busquen diversificar les fonts d'ingressos i reduir la seva històrica dependència de la publicitat, al mateix temps que continuar complint amb la seva responsabilitat de servir al públic.

Aquest estudi analitza com els mitjans de comunicació empren l'analítica web i les xarxes socials per a aconseguir aquests models de negoci, al mateix temps que explora l'impacte d'aquestes eines en la configuració de l'agenda mediàtica. Com contribueixen l'analítica web i les xarxes socials als models de negoci basats en l'*engagement* de l'audiència? Quins són els usos i propòsits actuals d'aquestes eines? Es presta més atenció a la producció de continguts d'alta qualitat i valor afegit? S'enfronten els periodistes a dificultats a l'hora d'utilitzar aquestes eines per a desenvolupar models de negoci enfocats en l'*engagement* de l'audiència? Per a abordar aquestes qüestions, aquesta recerca empra una triangulació de mètodes. Combina l'anàlisi de contingut amb entrevistes en profunditat, que es codifiquen i analitzen per separat, per a després relacionar-se utilitzant fonaments teòrics derivats d'una revisió bibliogràfica en profunditat. Les entrevistes en profunditat es van realitzar amb 28 professionals de deu mitjans de comunicació influents de cinc països europeus: França, Itàlia, Alemanya, Espanya i el Regne Unit. L'anàlisi de contingut es va fer sobre 841.786 articles de 30 mitjans de comunicació italians i 552 publicacions d'Instagram de dos comptes de mitjans de comunicació espanyols.

Els resultats de la recerca destaquen el paper crucial de l'analítica web i les xarxes socials en les estratègies dels mitjans de comunicació que busquen desenvolupar models de negoci basats en l'*engagement* de l'audiència. Indiquen que, a l'hora de prendre decisions editorials, els mitjans de comunicació intenten prioritzar la informació proporcionada per les mètriques qualitatives, com la retenció de pàgines i els comentaris, per sobre la informació proporcionada per les mètriques quantitatives, com les pàgines vistes i els usuaris únics. Això es tradueix en un allunyament dels continguts *clickbait* i d'entreteniment, i un acostament als continguts de rellevància i amb valor afegit. Els resultats de la recerca també assenyalen que les xarxes socials exerceixen un paper fonamental en la construcció i promoció d'una marca periodística recognoscible en l'entorn digital. Això es realitza amb l'objectiu de fomentar les subscripcions dels usuaris en un futur, és a dir, quan percebin la necessitat de mantenir-se informats. Encara que en menor mesura, aquestes plataformes també són considerats importants espais per a servir al públic amb informació gratuïta. La

recerca també suggereix que les característiques inherents als mitjans socials, com el consum incidental d'informació i el control algorítmic, infonen desconfiança en determinades redaccions. En conseqüència, redirigeixen la seva atenció cap a altres espais digitals, com les aplicacions mòbils, on perceben un major control. Finalment, la recerca suggereix que, malgrat el compromís dels mitjans de comunicació amb aquests enfocaments, molts d'ells encara enfronten dificultats per a implementar-los pel fet que continua sent important augmentar la dimensió de l'audiència per a aconseguir majors ingressos publicitaris.

En abordar aquestes qüestions, aquesta recerca aporta valuoses dades sobre la forma en què els mitjans afronten les complexitats de l'era digital i permet avaluar el paper del periodisme en la societat actual.

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PART 1: INTRODUCTION

Journalism serves essential roles in democratic societies, including facilitating access to information, promoting public service, and empowering citizens in decision-making processes (Dahl, 2012; Justel-Vázquez, 2015; Schudson, 2008). Schudson (2008) notes that journalism has to provide truthful information to help citizens make informed political decisions, investigate, and expose sources of power, provide coherent frameworks for interpreting the world, generate social empathy, serve as a forum for dialogue, and advocate mobilization for democracy. Kovach and Rosenstiel (2012) indicate that journalism's first principle is to provide citizens with the information they need for self-governance.

The institutions through which journalism fulfills these functions are the media, which select and highlight specific topics daily to provide citizens with such information. The media's daily selection and treatment of topics are of utmost importance in the context of a democratic society since, according to the agenda-setting theory, by doing so, they can influence public perception about which issues are important (McCombs, 2006; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In the process of selecting and highlighting specific topics, the media make editorial decisions about what constitutes news, a task with inherent complexities. The high volume of news content arriving in the newsrooms and the numerous definitions available for the term news make it difficult to establish universal parameters for their classification (Grijelmo, 2014; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2012; Randall, 2016). This is the reason why the media undergo a process called media agenda shaping, in which journalistic values play a key role. Van Dijk (1990) explains that these values encompass not only intrinsic journalistic principles but also economic considerations that help sustain the news business, such as audience expansion to attract greater advertising revenue. Using economic criteria to shape the media agenda can generate a problem. According to Sintes i Olivella (2010), this problem is generated when business interests are placed above journalistic principles, prioritizing audience satisfaction and growth over the provision of relevant information for their community life, a concern also expressed by McQuail (1965).

There is evidence that many media outlets gave priority to economic criteria over journalistic ones in shaping the media agenda. This could be attributed to a convergence of economic, technological, and social factors that placed the media in a critical situation in the 21st century (Blumer, 2010; Curran, 2010; Picard, 2001, 2002; Ruis, 2016; Siles & Boczkowski, 2012). Siles and Boczkowski (2012) explain that the economic factors included adopting inadequate business models and decreasing advertising revenue due to the 2008 financial crisis and the emergence of the Internet. Technological developments included the rise of the Internet, which changed how readers consumed information and altered the traditional values and practices of news production.

Media outlets that embraced the digital landscape found themselves in a continuous battle for audience size, a fundamental element in the news business as it enables them to capture the attention of advertisers (Tandoc & Maitra, 2018). To achieve this objective, media companies, like other online entities, turned to web analytics (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016; Tandoc, 2015). Extensive research projects evidenced that media organizations mainly used this tool to expand their audience by creating and sharing informative content that matches their interests (Cohen, 2019; Cornia et al., 2019; Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018; Nelson, 2019). The focus was more on quantity-based metrics like web traffic and clicks, rather than quality-based metrics like time spent on the website. Quantity metrics are effective at monitoring audience exposure to news, a strategy widely used by media outlets to attract larger audiences and generate higher advertising revenue (Magazine Publishers of America, 2006; Napoli, 2011).

Media analysts raised concerns about the impact of exposure-oriented strategies on news selection, placement, and duration on websites (A. M. Lee & Chyi, 2014; Welbers et al., 2016). They also warned that this web analytics approach was leading media outlets to include content that traditionally would not be considered in news selection processes (Túñez-López et al., 2011). By relying on quantitative metrics to inform their editorial decisions, numerous media outlets gave precedence to "soft" or entertainment news, along with anecdotal or sensational content (Justel-Vázquez, 2015; Justel-Vázquez et al., 2016; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2010; Nguyen, 2013). This prioritization came at the expense of crucial information to the proper functioning of a democracy (Nelson, 2019). Moreover, researchers demonstrated instances where quantitative metrics were used to assess journalists' performance (Bunce, 2019; Tandoc, 2015) and boost their productivity (Petre, 2015). Several media analysts noted that these editorial dynamics had an impact on the quality of the agenda and, subsequently, also on the public debate (Nguyen, 2013; Tandoc & Thomas, 2015). They were reshaping traditional journalism values (Hanusch & Tandoc, 2017; Suenzo et al., 2020) while displacing them alongside professional intuition (Anderson, 2011; A. M. Lee et al., 2014; MacGregor, 2007; Tandoc, 2014).

These editorial dynamics were also evident on social media, which media outlets had widely embraced to reach broader audiences and boost web traffic (Domingo, 2019; Hermida et al., 2012; J. Lee, 2016; Sacco & Bossio, 2017; Thurman, 2018). Many researchers have cautioned that the inherent characteristics of these platforms, including the presence of algorithms and the incidental exposure to informative content, were amplifying editorial strategies focused on audience growth and not on content quality (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2018; O'Connor, 2013; Tewksbury et al., 2001; Yadamsuren, 2009). They also warned that indiscriminate media involvement with audience preferences was threatening the reputation of newspaper companies and eroding trust in journalism (Etter et al., 2017; Mishina et al., 2012; Ross Arguedas et al., 2022). These dynamics could

threaten the public service role of journalism (Baker, 2002; Carbonell, 2012; Tandoc & Thomas, 2015) and, consequently, the health of democratic systems (Beam et al., 2009; Ruis, 2016). That is why several scholars advocated for a more strategic approach to the management of web analytics and social media (Lindén et al., 2022; Newman, 2021; Ott & Theunissen, 2015).

Many media outlets are currently re-evaluating their editorial strategies to find a sustainable business model in the digital environment, leading them to reconsider the role of web analytics and the role of social media in editorial decision-making processes. Many news companies are developing business models based on audience engagement, including subscriptions, memberships, or donations (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016; Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018). These models could enhance user loyalty and their willingness to pay for digital content (Broersma, 2019; Lewis et al., 2014; Lischka & Messerli, 2016). They could also enable media outlets to diversify their sources of income, reducing their historical reliance on advertising revenues. As a result, several media analysts have recommended these models as crucial strategies for digital media outlets (Kiesow, 2018; Nelson, 2019b). There are already examples of companies that have successfully applied these business models, such as *The New York Times* (Davies, 2017; Newman et al., 2020; Tracy, 2021). Motivated by these success stories and recent events that highlighted the continued importance of journalism (Aleixandre-Benavent et al., 2020; Casero-Ripollés, 2020; Comscore, 2020; Cowper, 2020; Desai et al., 2021; Newman, 2021; Singh et al., 2020; Villena-Alarcón & Caballero-Galeote, 2020; Zhou et al., 2020), most media outlets have recently developed these business models. The development of these business models has coincided with an unprecedented global event: the COVID-19 pandemic. This event has not only challenged the media (Ratzan et al., 2020), but has also highlighted its vital role in addressing critical issues (Brownstein et al., 2009; Desai et al., 2021; Imai et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2020). These circumstances aroused the student's interest, leading her to focus part of this research on this particular issue.

Changes in journalism over the past four years have led to a reorientation of the initial research approach, resulting in a revision and subsequent reformulation of the original research objectives. The research presented in this paper reflects a close alignment with the original scholarly interests while embracing new areas of exploration and responding to emerging interests in the academic community. Extensive readings and active participation in conferences have played an important role in shaping this research direction. The following research objectives are the result of this journey.

1.1. Research Objectives

General Objective

Analyze the role of web analytics and social media in the editorial strategies of media outlets seeking to establish a sustainable business model in the digital environment. Two specific objectives are derived from this general objective.

Specific Objective 1

Examine how media outlets utilize web analytics and social media to establish a sustainable business model in the digital environment.

Specific Objective 2

Examine whether web analytics and social media influence the shaping of the agenda of media trying to establish a sustainable business model in the digital environment.

1.2. Research Hypothesis

General Hypothesis

Web analytics and social media are essential tools in the editorial strategies of media outlets seeking to establish a sustainable business model in the digital environment. Media rely on web analytics and social media as tools to diversify economic revenue sources, achieve greater editorial independence, and facilitate the fulfillment of their public service function. Two specific hypotheses are derived from this general hypothesis.

Specific Hypothesis 1

Web analytics and social media are key tools to increase user engagement and willingness to pay for digital content. Media are making efforts to consider the information provided by qualitative metrics in their editorial decision-making processes. Social media are considered important tools for cultivating a distinctive journalistic brand among the abundant content circulating on these platforms.

Specific Hypothesis 2

The development of business models based on audience engagement, such as subscriptions, memberships, or donations, reduces the influence of web analytics and social media in shaping the media agenda. The development of these business models diminishes the influence of audience preferences in editorial decision-making, while increasing the impact of traditional journalistic criteria. However, audience preferences continue to have some influence on these processes, as most media outlets must respond to them in order to expand their audience base and attract advertising revenue.

1.3. Main Contribution and Singularity of the Research at Hand

The results of this research are of great importance for both the academic and professional communities. Media analysts will find in this work valuable and updated information on current journalistic practices with web analytics and social media in the search for a sustainable business model in the digital environment, which enriches the ongoing debate on the challenges and opportunities facing journalism in the digital age. This research also provides them with relevant information to critically reflect on the responsibilities of journalism on digital platforms and assess the contemporary challenges of the profession. Meanwhile, media organizations will find valuable information to evaluate their digital practices and develop more informed strategies, helping them think about how to improve reach, encourage audience engagement, and maintain quality and trust. Ultimately, this research aims to provide valuable information to foster the evolution of media strategies as they seek to generate a sustainable business model in the digital environment.

The methodology employed in this research, which incorporates a triangulation approach encompassing a literature review, quantitative and qualitative content analysis, and in-depth interviews, significantly contributes to the field by providing a comprehensive understanding of the research topic. This chosen methodology is particularly valuable due to its capacity to investigate a diverse range of media outlets and its analysis of 28 in-depth interviews conducted with professionals from some of Europe's most renowned media organizations. Such particularities enhance the research by offering a broader and more representative perspective on the prevailing practices and challenges within today's dynamic media landscape.

It is also important to recognize the limitations of this research. The most prominent limitation refers to the dynamic nature of the subject under investigation, that is to say, the digital environment. This is characterized by continuous technological advances and changes. Certain digital platforms and spaces may thrive and become solidly established, while others may suffer rapid decline and eventually become obsolete. Media outlets operate in parallel to these changes, adapting their editorial strategies to respond to emerging developments and maintain a close and continuous connection with their audiences. In this context, where change is constant and the passage of time plays a fundamental role, it becomes unfeasible to comprehensively address every digital space and editorial strategy. This research focuses on a deliberately chosen corpus of media outlets and publications. This limitation prevents us from drawing definitive conclusions. Instead, it enables us to identify prevailing trends that expand our collective knowledge in this evolving field.

Furthermore, it is essential to note that most of the results and conclusions obtained in this study predominantly reflect the perspective of news producers. This research primarily relied on the analysis of media publications and interviews

with working journalists from European media outlets, and as a result, it did not directly investigate the impact of media strategies on news consumption. In future research projects, it would be valuable to incorporate the audience's perspective using methodological techniques that gather the audience's perspective. This approach would be particularly relevant for understanding the impact and effectiveness of media strategies, especially those centered on achieving audience engagement.

It is also worth noting that the content analysis conducted in this study coincides with a period of global emergency that significantly influenced media agendas worldwide (O'Neill & Harcup, 2009; Vasterman & Ruigrok, 2013). The unique circumstances of a global crisis could have had a distinct impact on journalistic practices related to web analytics and social media, and this context-specific influence should be considered when interpreting the findings. Future research projects could enhance the comprehensiveness of the study by incorporating more extensive content analysis from periods that are not marked by exceptional events.

1.4. Methodology

This research consists of a compendium of four academic publications, three of which were published in peer-reviewed journals and one in an indexed publisher. The proposal to present this thesis as a compendium of academic publications was submitted to the Academic Committee of the Doctoral Program at the Blanquerna Faculty of Communication and International Relations, Ramon Llull University. The committee positively accepted the request. More details of the four academic articles can be seen in the Publications section.

This research is framed within qualitative research, which is characterized by using various methods (Brennen, 2022). Unlike quantitative research, which relies on objective data for quantification, qualitative research focuses on meaningful relationships for interpretation (Kvale, 1996). Therefore, qualitative analysis presupposes a researcher who is not an objective or neutral observer outside the research but a researcher within the studied processes (Denzin, 2017). Qualitative researchers use various tools to assess data, including triangulation (Brennen, 2022; Jick, 1979). Triangulation is the application and combination of two or more methodologies —theories, data sources, research methods– in the study of a singular phenomenon (Denzin, 2009, 2015; Morse, 1991). Following this commonly accepted practice in qualitative research, this study uses a triangulation of methods. It combines content analysis with in-depth interviews, which are coded and analyzed separately and then related based on theoretical foundations resulting from an in-depth literature review.

The literature review is essential in defining important research terms (Gómez-Luna et al., 2014; Sautu, 2003) and is reflected in the four academic articles that make up this research. Following the discursive guidelines proposed by researchers specializing in scientific article writing and publication (Cisneros Estupiñán & Olave Arias, 2012), a literature review has been conducted to support and substantiate each publication. Despite their differences, all of the articles focused on media strategies for web analytics and/or social media in an evolving digital environment, which is the main focus of this research. The State of the Art section presents the interconnectedness of the literature reviews conducted for each article.

The in-depth interviews are fundamental to providing valuable insights into the perspectives and experiences of the journalists involved in different media outlets (Brennen, 2022; Kvale, 1996). In-depth interviews are a research method based on everyday conversations but with a structure and purpose defined by the researcher, oriented toward obtaining information about a specific subject (Sierra Caballero, 2019). This method collects information about the interviewee's life, experiences, ideas, values, and symbolic structure in a specific context (Mears, 2012; Siavil et al., 2007; Sierra Caballero, 2019).

This research includes in-depth interviews with 28 professionals from eleven media organizations in five European countries: France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom. These media outlets were chosen because of their influence and historical recognition as newspapers that align their content with each other and are widely read and circulated in their respective societies (ACPM, 2022; AIMC, 2022; Axel Springer, 2022; Ofcom, 2022; Prima Online, 2022; Sintes-Olivella et al., 2022). As is often the case in qualitative research using in-depth interviews (Brennen, 2022), interviews were conducted in different formats: face-to-face (8), video call (19), and email (1) —all of them between March and July 2022. Five face-to-face interviews were possible due to the student's research stay between March and July 2022 at the *Institut Catholique de Paris*. This stay also served to visit the editorial offices of *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro*, gather new documentation related to the field of study, and share the research progress with experienced academics in the area. Interviews were conducted in English, Spanish, and French, depending on the preferred language of each interviewee. Table 1 provides more details on the interviews conducted.

Table 1 Details of the 28 in-depth interviews conducted with workers from 11 European media outlets, addressed in Article 1.

Country	Media	Interviewee's name	Interviewee's position	Date	Format
France	*Le Figaro*	Benjamin Ferran	Deputy editorial director of the website	01/07/2022	Face-to-face
France	*Le Figaro*	Romain Courcier	Head of Social Media department	25/07/2022	Face-to-face
France	*Le Figaro*	Charlotte Paroielle	Director of Digital Creation department	30/06/2022	Face-to-face
France	*Le Monde*	Alexis Delcambre	Deputy editorial director in charge of digital transformation	24/05/2022	Face-to-face
France	*Le Monde*	Olivier Laffargue	Head of Snapchat/Tik Tok service	30/05/2022	Video call

France	*Le Monde*	Gabriel Coutagne	Deputy editor-in-chief in charge of editorial tools and innovations, responsible for Instagram	24/06/ 2022	Face-to-face
Germany	*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*	Donika Lilova	Head of Paywall department	30/07/ 2022	Video call
Germany	*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*	Stefanie Michels	Head of Social Media department	25/05/ 2022	Video call
Germany	*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*	Sonja Wippel	Digital Marketing Manager, Paid Social	20/07/ 2022	Email
Germany	*Süddeutsche Zeitung*	Christoph Heinlein	Head of the Digital Edition	01/07/ 2022	Video call
Germany	*Süddeutsche Zeitung*	Britta Schönhütl	Head of Social Media department	31/08/ 2022	Video call
Italy	*Corriere della Sera*	Daniele Manca	Deputy Editor-in-Chief	22/08/ 2022	Video call
Italy	*Corriere della Sera*	Chiara Severgnini	Journalist in the Social Media department	05/07/ 2022	Video call
Italy	*Corriere della Sera*	Davide Casati	Digital editor in charge of audience acquisition and subscription development	29/07/ 2022	Video call
Italy	*La Repubblica*	Francesco Guerrera	Deputy editor in charge of financial,	15/07/ 2022	Video call

			economic, and business coverage		
Italy	*La Repubblica*	Sara Bertuccioli	Head of the Social Media department	27/09/ 2022	Video call
Italy	*La Repubblica*	Marco Seghini	Head of audience and SEO department	16/09/ 2022	Video call
Spain	*El Mundo*	Guacimara Castrillo	Head of Social Media department	15/09/ 2022	Video call
Spain	*El Mundo*	Elena Mengual	Head of SEO and development	22/09/ 2022	Video call
Spain	*El País*	Mari Luz Peinado	Head of the digital strategy team	15/09/ 2022	Video call
Spain	*El País*	Lucía González	Head of the audience development team	23/08/ 2022	Video call
Spain	*El País*	Álvaro Romero Vacas	Social Media Editor	26/09/ 2022	Video call
Spain	*La Vanguardia*	Joel Albarrán	Deputy director and reader's ombudsman	18/07/ 2022	Face-to-face
Spain	*La Vanguardia*	Pau Rodríguez	Marketing director	20/06/ 2022	Face-to-face
Spain	*La Vanguardia*	Noelia Ruano	Head of Social Media department	14/09/ 2022	Face-to-face
UK	*The Guardian*	Mark Rice-Oxley	Executive Editor for Readers' Revenues	01/07/ 2022	Video call

UK	*The Guardian*	Martin Belam	Snippets & Explainers	15/06/ 2022	Video call
UK	*The Telegraph*	David Knowles	Head of Social Media department	06/07/ 2022	Video call

The in-depth interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, using a pre-designed and flexibly applied questionnaire. The flexibility of the questionnaire allowed for variations in the order of the questions and the inclusion of additional inquiries to delve deeper into specific topics or clarify the responses provided by the interviewees (Brennen, 2022). The questionnaire consists of 18 questions. Some are common to all interviewees, and others are customized according to the interviewee's profile and professional background. The questions were categorized into three thematic areas to address the research interests: business model, audience data, and social media. Table 2 provides details of the questions designed.

The transcription of the interviews was carried out in two stages. In the first stage, the Transkriptor software was used to carry out an automatic transcription. In the second stage, the manual method was used to make the necessary corrections and introduce the missing elements. The transcripts were shared with the participants, who verified their accuracy and consented to be mentioned in this research. The final transcripts can be found in Appendix 2 section.

Table 2 Questionnaire for the semi-structured in-depth interviews addressed in Article 1.

Topics	Designed questions
Business model: Strategy and impact on editorial decisions	How do you assess the results obtained with the current business model of the media outlet where you work?
	Why do you think the media outlet you work for decided on the current business model?
	Do you think the media outlet you work for has achieved the number of followers it needs to maintain quality journalism?
	Have you identified any type of content that will gain you more subscribers?
	What do you see as the challenges for the journalism business (and for your department in particular)?
Audience data: Strategy and	How do you work with audience data and what metrics do you mainly look at?

impact on editorial decisions	Is web traffic still a concern for the media?
	How is audience data information transmitted to the newsroom?
	What impact does audience data have on the selection and treatment of the topics?
	Have you achieved the balance between the need to find information that is successful, that attracts attention, and to produce it well?
	What is quality/public interest information?
	How do you work with breaking news topics?
Social media: Strategy, challenges and impact on the media's image or prestige	What role do social media play in the newspaper's digital strategy?
	How do you apply the journalistic criteria on these platforms?
	What are the challenges of adapting information to social media?
	Do you have any internal strategy for the different social media?
	Has the use of social media weakened the media's image? Has there been an evolution over time?
	How do you work with breaking news on social media?

The content analysis was employed to analyze the transcripts of the in-depth interviews. This empirical approach applies to diverse messages, as it covers all types of discourse, whether oral or written, spontaneous or premeditated (Bardin, 2002). It allows for analyzing any document containing narratives related to the subject of study (Bernete, 2014) to uncover the meaning behind each message (Ramírez, 2000). Content analysis is not reliant on predetermined templates but instead uses base patterns that are challenging to generalize. As a result, unless used for simple applications, this technique needs to be tailored each time to align with the field and the objectives pursued (Bardin, 2002). This validates the distinctive characteristics of the approach employed in this study.

In this research, qualitative and quantitative content analysis were employed. Qualitative content analysis was used to verify the presence of themes, words, or concepts in the material under study (Ramírez, 2000), as evident in articles 1 and 4 of this research. Quantitative content analysis was oriented towards quantifying the data, which made it possible to establish frequencies and compare the identified elements that comprise units of information or meaning (Ramírez, 2000). The main objective was to obtain numerical measures to establish patterns, trends, and relationships in the content. Quantitative content analysis was applied in articles 1 and 3 of this research.

In addition to studying the transcripts, the content analysis was applied to examine a sample of publications from Spanish and Italian media outlets. These two countries were selected because they were among the hardest-hit EU territories during the initial wave of the COVID-19 outbreak, which took place in the first half of 2020 (Reuters, 2022). Regarding Italy, 841,786 publications from a sample of 30 of the most popular media websites with a *.it* domain were studied (Table 3). The data collection was conducted using the search tool of the Buzzsumo application, applying a series of filters to collect content containing the terms COVID-19 or Coronavirus and published between 1 January and 27 April 2020.

A spreadsheet was utilized to quantify the total number of publications that formed the sample data, and categories were proposed for analysis. Initially, the content was examined based on the publication date, the frequency of news items containing the terms Coronavirus and COVID-19, and the level of engagement. Then, the ten news items with the highest reader engagement from ten media outlets were selected. Specific categories were established to analyze the topic of the publications (López-Rabadán & Casero-Ripollés, 2012). These include the categories used by the student in academic article 4, published in an international journal before analyzing Italian publications (Laferrara & Justel-Vázquez, 2020). Categories were also used to study the predominant tone of the headlines (Bardin, 2002; García Ferrando et al., 2016; López Aranguren, 1986; Piñuel & Gaitán, 1995). The publications were mainly analyzed using quantitative content analysis, allowing a systematic, objective, and calculable examination of variables to measure data and accurately represent the content (Wimmer & Dominick, 2010). In this study, qualitative content analysis was used to analyze headlines. More details about this study can be seen in Article 3 of this research.

Table 3 List of Italian websites addressed in Article 3.

Global Nº	Media outlet	Link to the website
1	*TGCOM24*	www.tgcom24.mediaset.it
2	*La Repubblica*	www.repubblica.it

3	*Fan Page*	www.fanpage.it
4	*Corriere della Sera*	www.corriere.it
5	*Il Messaggero*	www.ilmessaggero.it
6	*Il Fatto Quotidiano*	www.ilfattoquotidiano.it
7	*The Post Internazionale*	www.tpi.it
8	*La Stampa*	www.lastampa.it
9	*Il Mattino*	www.ilmattino.it
10	*ANSA*	www.ansa.it
11	*Notizie*	www.notizie.it
12	*Leggo*	www.leggo.it
13	*Sky TG24*	www.tg24.sky.it
14	*La Repubblica Milano*	www.milano.repubblica.it
15	*La Repubblica TV*	www.video.repubblica.it
16	*greenMe*	www.greenme.it
17	*il Giornale.it*	www.ilgiornale.it
18	*Libero Quotidiano*	www.liberoquotidiano.it
19	*Huffington Post Italia*	www.huffingtonpost.it
20	*Vesuvio Live Italia*	www.vesuviolive.it
21	*Lercio*	www.lercio.it
22	*Le Iene*	www.iene.mediaset.it
23	*Milano Today*	www.milanotoday.it
24	*La Repubblica Torino*	www.torino.repubblica.it
25	*LA7*	www.la7.it
26	*il Resto del Carlino*	www.ilrestodelcarlino.it

27	*La Repubblica Bari*	www.bari.repubblica.it
28	*Fan Page Milano*	www.milano.fanpage.it
29	*Business.it*	www.business.it
30	*Today*	www.today.it

Regarding Spain, 552 posts were collected from the Instagram profiles of *El País* (320) and *La Vanguardia* (232), whose websites were the most consulted in the country at the time the research began (AMIC, 2020). Since there is no consensus on collecting a large-scale sample of social network profiles (Lewis et al., 2013), this research followed characteristics of content analysis applied to digital news. Following Widholm (2016), and Karlsson & Sjøvaag (2016), screenshots and screen recordings were taken manually to avoid problems related to the dynamic and ephemeral nature of the object of study: social media and the content circulating on these platforms. These screenshots and recordings were stored to continue or replicate the analysis even when the digital material was unavailable. In addition, the samples were taken continuously and in real-time according to previous planning, allowing us to adequately capture the development of the content published on this digital platform. The data was collected over one month, starting on 14 March 2020, when the Spanish government declared a state of alarm and ordered a quarantine. The sample encompasses content published on the various channels offered by the platform at the time of the study, including posts made on Instagram Feed, Instagram TV, and Instagram Stories. The publications were analyzed using analysis grids that, in addition to quantifying pandemic-related content and thematic areas (Table 12), allowed us to identify whether the content could be considered of public interest. For the latter, a classification used in previous research projects was applied (Justel-Vázquez et al., 2016). This study is found in Article 4 of this research.

1.5. Publications

The publications that make up this compendium have been published in three international journals and one indexed publisher. The set of publications traces the path followed by this research and its evolution.

Article 1

Publication: Laferrara, V., Justel-Vázquez, S. J., & Micó-Sanz, J. L. (2023). Repensando el uso de datos: Los intentos de los medios por abandonar el clickbait y avanzar hacia la fidelización de la audiencia *AdComunica*, (26), 153-174. https://doi.org/10.6035/adcomunica.7187

Abstract: This article studies web analytics and social media data in newsrooms committed to business models based on audience loyalty and pay-for-content. It is based on 28 in-depth interviews with news workers from 11 media outlets in five European countries: Spain, France, Italy, Germany, and the UK. It reveals that the media are committed to prioritizing quality indicators (page views, comments, etc.) over quantity indicators (page views, unique users, etc.). However, they still need to pay attention to the latter due to their historical dependence on advertising as a source of revenue. Social media play an essential role in their audience loyalty strategies, but the lack of transparency of these platforms arouses misgivings in some newsrooms. The commitment to loyalty-based business models does not mean abandoning work with audience data but significantly changing how they are approached. The commitment to guaranteeing the business model's success has significantly changed the work with audience data and social media, leading the media to abandon clickbait content and prioritize quality content.

Quality index: Indexed to DIALNET, DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals), Dulcinea, ERIH PLUS (European Reference Index for the Humanities and Social Sciences), ESCI (Emerging Sources Citation Index, Thomson Reuters), Latindex-Catálogo v2.0 (2018), Latindex-Directorio, MIAR (Matriz de Información para el Análisis de Revistas), REDIB (Red Iberoamericana de Innovación y Conocimiento Científico), DICE (Difusión y Calidad Editorial de las Revistas Españolas de Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales y Jurídicas), RESH (Revistas Españolas de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades), Sello de calidad FECYT (Fundación Española para la Ciencia y Tecnología). It has an h5 index of 11 in Google Scholar Metrics (2017-2021) and a median h5 of 17.

Contributions:

- Conceptualization. Valentina Laferrara.

- Design: Valentina Laferrara, Santiago Justel Vázquez.

- Case collection: Valentina Laferrara.

- Resources: Valentina Laferrara.

- Writing:
  - Original draft: Valentina Laferrara.
  - Writing: Valentina Laferrara.
  - Review: Santiago Justel Vázquez, Josep Lluís Micó Sanz.
  - Editing: Valentina Laferrara, Santiago Justel Vázquez.
- Supervision: Santiago Justel Vázquez, Josep Lluís Micó Sanz.
- Research administration: Valentina Laferrara.

Connection with the objectives: This article contributes to the research's specific objectives 1 and 2 of this research. It aligns with specific objective 1 as an analysis of in-depth interviews with European media workers provides detailed information on how web analytics and social media are being used as part of the strategy to establish a sustainable business model in the digital environment. The publication also contributes to achieving specific objective 2 as, through the same study method, it examines how web analytics, and the logic of social media influence the shaping of the media agenda. It also identifies strategies to mitigate the consequences of this influence on media reputation.

Article 2

Publication: Justel-Vázquez, S., Laferrara, V., De Blasio, E., & Micó-Sanz, J. L. (2022). *Journalism and analytics: The tension between journalistic criteria and data. In Emerging Practices in the Age of Automated Digital Journalism* (pp. 29-42). Routledge. http://hdl.handle.net/2072/535084

Abstract: This chapter is based on an exhaustive literature review of previous research proyects into applying web analytics to journalistic practice and an analysis of the digital media's news agenda. It also offers a review of the current Spanish digital media context and the effort made by newspapers to consolidate a subscription model. The importance of the criteria to be followed in managing data in the framework of the effort to strengthen the online business model of the news media is addressed. A strategy prioritizing growth in subscriber numbers will place more value on indicators related to the quality of the content. In contrast, a strategy based mainly on advertising will focus primarily on indicators related to audience growth.

Quality index: Editorial indexed in the ranking SPI Scholarly Publishers Indicators. Position 3 in the general ranking. Position 1 in the Communication field ranking. ICEE 45.948 in the general ranking and ICEE 1.041 in the Communication field ranking.

Contributions:

- Conceptualization. Santiago Justel Vázquez.
- Design: Santiago Justel Vázquez, Valentina Laferrara.

- Case collection: Valentina Laferrara, Santiago Justel Vázquez.

- Resources: Santiago Justel Vázquez, Valentina Laferrara.

- Writing:

    - Original draft: Valentina Laferrara, Santiago Justel Vázquez.

    - Writing: Valentina Laferrara, Santiago Justel Vázquez.

    - Review: Josep Lluís Micó Sanz.

    - Editing: Valentina Laferrara, Santiago Justel Vázquez.

- Supervision: Josep Lluís Micó Sanz.

- Research administration: Santiago Justel Vázquez.

Connection with the objectives: This chapter contributes to the research's specific objectives 1 and 2 of this research. It is aligned with specific objective 1 as an extensive literature review shows that a subscriber-based growth strategy prioritizes quality metrics over quantity metrics. In contrast, an advertising-based growth strategy prioritizes quantitative metrics over qualitative metrics. To this end, it explores the different approaches adopted by Spanish media in establishing a sustainable business model in the digital environment. The publication also aligns with specific objective 2 as an extensive body of literature demonstrates the long-standing influence of web analytics and social network logic on the media agenda in the digital environment. This publication focuses on how these media practices have contributed to the proliferation of low-quality news content and the media industry's reputational crisis.

Article 3

Publication: Sánchez, J. S., Laferrara, V., & Bosch, M. D. (2021). COVID-19 pandemic in Italian digital media: Media behavior and citizen information consumption during the health crisis. *Media & Jornalismo*, 21(38), 261-276 https://doi.org/10.14195/2183-5462_38_13

Abstract: This article studies media behavior and information consumption during the COVID-19 health crisis using quantitative content analysis of the news published by Italian digital media between January 1 and April 27, 2020 (n = 841,786). The data shows a direct relationship between the number of publications and the capacity for engagement. Furthermore, it indicates a greater reach with classic general media and Facebook.

Quality index: This journal has a factor of 0.12 (2021) in SJR. In SJR, it appears in the fourth quartile (Q4) of the Communication field. It is also indexed in the following databases and catalogs: DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals), Electronic Journals Library, SciELO (Scientific Electronic Library Online), Sherpa Romeo, ERIH PLUS (European Reference Index for the Humanities and Social

Sciences), MIAR (Information Matrix for the Analysis of Journals). It has an h5 index of 9 in Google Scholar Metrics (2015-2019) and a median h5 of 16.

Contributions:

- Conceptualization: Valentina Laferrara, Javier Sierra Sánchez, Míriam Díez Bosch.

- Design: Valentina Laferrara, Míriam Díez Bosch.

- Case collection: Javier Sierra Sánchez.

- Resources: Valentina Laferrara.

- Writing:

  - Original draft: Valentina Laferrara.

  - Writing: Valentina Laferrara.

  - Review: Míriam Díez Bosch.

  - Editing: Valentina Laferrara.

- Supervision: Míriam Díez Bosch.

- Research administration: Javier Sierra Sánchez.

Connection with the objectives: This article contributes to the research's specific objectives 1 and 2. It is aligned with objective 1 as it provides elements to understand better the role of web analytics and social media in the digital strategies of Italian media while shedding light on the impact of these practices on news consumption and audience engagement. It is aligned with specific objective 2 as it provides elements to understand better the role of web analytics and social media in shaping the media agenda.

Article 4

Publication: Laferrara, V., & Justel-Vázquez, S. (2020). The health crisis on Instagram: How the media are building their agenda on the visual social network during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Trípodos*, 1(47), 123-134. https://doi.org/10.51698/tripodos.2020.47p123-134

Abstract: Over the last decade, social media have become vital channels for the media to publish information and communicate with their younger audiences, with Instagram recently becoming the most popular platform. This article investigates news production on this social network in the context of the international crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic using a content analysis of 552 posts published by the two most widely read Spanish newspapers. The results suggest that despite many "soft" content and human-interest stories, as found in previous research projects, Instagram is also used to distribute public interest information about managing the crisis (such as political decisions and health content).

<u>Quality index</u>: This journal has a factor of 0.26 (2022) and 0.23 (2021). In SJR, it appears in the second quartile (Q2) in 2022 and the third quartile (Q3) in 2021, both in the Communication field. It is also indexed in the Web of Science (WoS) - Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI) database. It appears in the second quartile (Q2) of the REDIB 2020 Ranking of Ibero-American Journals. It is ranked 13th in the Communication in Spain category and 7th in the Communication category. It is in category C of the CIRC classification (Integrated Classification of Scientific Journals). It is indexed, among others, in the following databases and catalogs: Ulrich's periodicals directory, EBSCO Publishing, Communication Source, DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals), ERIH PLUS, ISOC, DICE, MIAR, Latindex, Dulcinea, REBID, Library of Congress, British Library, COPAC, SUDOC, ZDB, OCLC World Cat, Dialnet, Carhus Plus+, RACO. It has an h5 index of 10 in Google Scholar Metrics (2015-2019) and a median h5 of 18.

<u>Contributions</u>:

- Conceptualization. Valentina Laferrara.

- Design: Valentina Laferrara, Santiago Javier Justel Vázquez.

- Case collection: Valentina Laferrara.

- Resources: Valentina Laferrara.

- Writing:

  - Original draft: Valentina Laferrara.

  - Writing: Valentina Laferrara.

  - Review: Santiago Justel Vázquez.

  - Editing: Valentina Laferrara.

- Supervision: Santiago Justel Vázquez.

- Research administration: Valentina Laferrara.

<u>Connection with the objectives</u>: This article contributes to achieving specific objectives 1 and 2 of this research. It is aligned with specific objective 1 of this research because it explores how the media use social media in exceptional circumstances, such as the global health emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. To do so, it focuses on the content analysis of the publications made by two Spanish media outlets on Instagram. It is aligned with specific objective 2 of this research, as it contributes to understanding whether web analytics and social media logic affect the quality of the media agenda. Through qualitative content analysis, the publication identifies the presence of public interest in the media agenda and compares its findings with previous research projects in the field.

PART 2. STATE OF THE ART

This research focuses on investigating the role of web analytics and social media in the editorial strategies of media outlets trying to find a sustainable business model in the digital environment. To this end, this research studies how the media use these tools and how they influence the shaping of the digital agenda. To do so, it is essential to establish the following state of the art.

2.1.   The Role of Journalism

Journalism has served different purposes in democratic societies throughout its history. Before discussing them, it is pertinent to briefly consider the meaning of "democracy", which is not a simple task as it can be understood from different points of view. Sartori (2012) argues that democracy can be approached from a prescriptive perspective, which establishes how it should be, and from a descriptive perspective, which analyses how it manifests itself in the real world. Similarly, Dahl (2012) states that it can be understood from its ideal dimension, which presents the expected standards, and from its real dimension, which indicates how it is reflected in practice. The prescriptive perspective or ideal dimension of democracy serves as the basis for assessing its descriptive or real dimension. As Sartori (2012) explains, "what democracy *is* cannot be separated from what democracy *ought to be*" (2012, p. 17), both perspectives or dimensions being necessary to understand the whole meaning of the term democracy. However, as will be developed below, the prescriptive perspective or real dimension of democracy is essential in this research as it helps assess the role of the media in modern democratic societies.

According to the authors, then, the etymological conception of the word – "power" (*kratos*) from "people" (*demos*)– is a shorthand way of referring to a more complex political relationship, which recognizes that power is exercised over someone, and that government involves people being governed. Thus, for Sartori (2012), democracy should be defined as "the power of the people over the people, the governance of the people over themselves" (2012, p. 41). This shows that power is only legitimate when it comes from below, i.e., from the will of the people, and is freely consented to. In modern democratic societies, the people's will is manifested through political selection and representation (Sartori, 2012), shaping what is commonly called a representative democracy.

According to Dahl (2012), representative democracies have multiple advantages for citizens as they help protect essential personal interests, exercise self-determination and moral responsibility, promote human development and peace, foster political equality, and offer greater prosperity. However, according to the author, this requires governments and associations that meet several prerequisites: 1) Effective participation (all members have equal opportunities to express their political views and be heard by others), 2) Equal voting (all members can vote and each vote has the same value), 3) Enlightened understanding (all

members have equal and effective opportunities to inform themselves about different relevant alternative policies and their possible consequences), 4) Control of the agenda (all members have the opportunity to decide how and what issues should be considered on the agenda, ensuring that the democratic process remains open and responsive to changes introduced by the membership), and 5) Inclusion of adults (all adult permanent residents should have full citizenship rights implicit in the above criteria).

The set of criteria proposed by the author belongs to the ideal dimension of democracy since, as he states, no state government or association has ever managed to meet all the criteria of a democratic process fully. Therefore, these criteria serve as a benchmark for assessing the achievements and shortcomings of institutions (i.e., the media) in democratic systems. In other words, they act as guides to "check and adjust particular political arrangements, constitutions, practices and institutions" (Dahl, 2012, p. 49). Enlightened understanding and agenda control, the third and fourth criteria proposed by Dahl (2012), can be seen as the basis for the role of journalism in a modern democratic system (Justel-Vázquez, 2015). The media are expected to provide access to information, encourage public debate, and empower citizens in decision-making.

Multiple scholars support this idea by arguing that there are several principles that a democratic society has the right to expect from journalism. Schudson (2008) summarizes them as follows: providing accurate information to help citizens make informed political decisions, investigating and exposing sources of power, providing coherent frameworks for interpreting the world, generating social empathy, serving as a forum for dialogue, and advocating mobilization for democracy. Kovach and Rosenstiel (2012) note that the first principle of journalism is "to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and able to govern themselves" (2012, p. 24). Journalism must act as a watchdog, preventing citizens from being manipulated and facilitating access to expression for those with no voice in the community. To fulfill this task, the authors argue, journalism must be faithful to the following elements: truth, loyalty to citizens, verification of information, independence from those it reports on, an independent check on power, provision of a public forum for criticism and comment, supply of a suggestive and relevant signifier, provision of comprehensive and proportionate news, and respect for the practitioners' conscience. However, the idea that the media have the power to provide citizens with the necessary information for self-governance, journalism's primary principle, according to the authors, may be somewhat illusory. As they explain, it is possible that the people do not govern themselves. Instead, the government makes decisions, and the people act as witnesses without exercising participation in the government process.

2.2. Agenda-Setting Theory

In the first half of the 20th century, this idea was the subject of a brief debate between the journalist Walter Lippmann and the philosopher John Dewey, which

laid the foundations for what would later become the agenda-setting theory. In the book *Public Opinion*, Lippmann (1998) spoke of the role played by the press in the construction of public opinion and warned of the limits of the human being in interpreting the world. He stated that citizens know the world mainly indirectly, thanks to the images they make of it in their heads. "The real environment is too large, too complex and too fleeting for direct knowledge," the author indicated, while arguing that human beings "are not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations, and combinations" (Lippmann, 1998, p. 17). He pointed out that this turns the media into institutions with a determining role since they open windows onto the external world beyond direct experience and shape the cognitive maps that human beings make of it. Lippmann argued that the problem is that these images are distorted and incomplete, deformed by the inevitable weaknesses of the press. To facilitate understanding of the world, the media tend to reduce reality to stereotypes, that is, to "ordered, more or less consistent images of the world, to which our habits, our tastes, our capacities, our comforts, and our hopes have been adjusted" (Lippmann, 1998, p. 95). Converting reality into these images involves replacing the real world with an alternative world created by the media, which exerts a predictable influence on the public.

> The subtlest and most pervasive of all influences are those that create and maintain the repertory of stereotypes. We are told about the world before we see it. We imagine most things before we experience them. And those preconceptions, unless education has made us acutely aware, govern deeply the whole process of perception. (Lippmann, 1998, pp. 89–90).

Moreover, Lippmann explained that the citizen's ability to understand the truth, even when encountering it, is undermined by arbitrariness, stereotypes, inattention, and ignorance. Human beings' dependence on the media means that social reality ends up being, to a large extent, media reality. In this sense, public opinion does not respond to the natural environment but to the pseudo-environment constructed by the media. He argued that citizens are like theatergoers who enter the play about halfway through the third act and leave before the play ends, staying long enough to form an opinion about who is the hero and who is the villain (Lippmann, 1998).

Lippmann's thought aroused the interest of Dewey, who considered it one of the most forceful criticisms of democracy because it diagnosed one of the leading illnesses affecting the press and the citizenry (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2012). Later, he also claimed that Lippmann's definition of democracy contained a fundamental flaw. According to Dewey, the purpose of democracy did not lie in effective governance but in allowing citizens to develop their full potential (Grube, 2009). Therefore, according to the author, democracy was constituted as the vehicle, and its problems were not solved by renouncing it but by improving the press performance and the citizens' education.

As mentioned, Lippmann's ideas (1998) became the basis for the agenda-setting theory. This theory was developed by McCombs & Shaw (1972) following Cohen's thesis (1963), in which he argued that the media do not tell us how to think but what to think. According to this theory, by the daily selection and display of information, the media directs the public's attention and influences their perception of the most relevant issues. "This ability to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda has come to be called the agenda-setting role of the news media" (McCombs, 2006). Citizens use these signals to organize their agenda and decide which issues are relevant. In this way, over time, the topics highlighted by the media become the most significant for the public. "As a result, the media agenda becomes, to a large extent, the public agenda" (McCombs, 2006, p. 24).

The agenda-setting theory is still relevant today. Its influence and applicability continue to be the subject of study and discussion by various researchers on journalism and communication, especially in the digital age, where the constant and rapid flow of information gives the theory new dimensions and challenges (Justel-Vázquez, 2015). To understand these issues, it is also worth remembering that the media do not determine their news agenda independently of the world around them (McCombs, 2006). Each time a media outlet plans its publications, it makes assumptions about what the reader wants or needs to know (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2012). In addition, the detailed analysis of audience behavior facilitated by web analytics has begun to influence the shaping of the media agenda, as will be discussed below. These issues make it relevant to study how journalists decide what news is relevant and why.

2.3. Criteria for Selecting News

There are multiple definitions and perspectives of what constitutes news. According to Kovach and Rosenstiel (2012), news satisfies a basic human impulse to know what is not limited to direct experience, which provides security, power, and trust, and journalism is the means society has created to provide that information. News and journalism are relevant because they affect people's quality of life, thinking, and culture. According to the authors, news lets people stay informed about current events and the relevant issues and personalities shaping the world (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2012). According to Grijelmo (2014) news comprises the narration of current facts or events. According to Randall (2016) it refers to new, unpublished, and unusual events of general interest.

Given the multiple definitions of what constitutes news and the large amount of content that reaches the media, it is hard to establish unique and universal parameters to determine what is considered news. Hence, media engage in a process through which they select specific events to transform them into news, resulting in what is commonly called the shaping of the media agenda. As Van Dijk explains (1990) journalistic values play a crucial role in this process, serving as principles and criteria that guide the selection of events that deserve to be

recognized as news and to be transmitted to the audience. The author asserts that these values encompass both elements inherent to the journalistic profession and those shaped within a media environment seeking economic viability to uphold their operations. This implies that financial considerations influencing the sustainability of journalistic endeavors impact the media's process of choosing and presenting news.

Sintes i Olivella (2010) points out that the problem arises when business interests prevail over journalistic interests, prioritizing the public's demands and the audience's growth over any other aspect. McQuail (1965) pointed out that the way in which media outlets select and organize their agenda can be easily influenced by the perceived audience, which can directly impact revenue generation. Addressing audience preferences and requirements is fundamental for media success, similar to how demand shapes production within the economic realm and how voters influence politicians within a democratic system (McQuail, 1965). Dependence on external factors like audience preferences or income (Tandoc & Maitra, 2018) poses a significant challenge for the media. An excessive focus on these matters can lead to neglecting the information's integrity and quality, potentially compromising journalism's essential role in serving the public interest (Starr, 2009).

2.4. Newspaper Crisis

Research projects document how, throughout the 20th century, the press solidified a "virtuous binomial" by establishing its thriving business and commitment to serving the public (Ruis, 2016, p. 26). However, in the early years of the 21st century, various economic, technological, and social factors led journalism to a critical situation that resulted in what can be called a "perfect storm" (Ruis, 2016, p. 23). After conducting an extensive literature review, Siles and Boczkowski (2012) explain that the economic factors included adopting inadequate business models and decreasing advertising revenue due to the 2008 financial crisis and the emergence of the Internet. Meanwhile, technological developments included the rise of the Internet, which changed how readers consumed information and altered the traditional values and practices of news production. Finally, among the social factors, they mention the loss of trust in print newspapers and journalism due to greater accessibility of information. As Ruis (2016) explains, the newspaper crisis brought to light problems that the press had been dealing with for a long time. Among them are the loss of credibility due to the lack of counterpower, impotence, and confusion, due to the impact of new technologies, and severe management mistakes.

The newspaper crisis manifested itself in staff reductions, changes in news content, and a decline in readership (Siles & Boczkowski, 2012). The situation resulted in a significant decrease in advertising revenues due to the emergence of classified advertising websites, which provided an alternative platform for individuals and businesses to promote their products or services and led to a

drastic decline in newspaper subscribers (Farias Batlle and Roses Campos, 2009). The situation was aggravated by the rejection of many newsrooms to the digital environment, which delayed the necessary innovation to respond to the new consumption habits of the digital audience (Siles & Boczkowski, 2012). The crisis caused many news companies to go bankrupt or disappear, raising concerns about the loss of an essential source of information in the democratic system (Beam et al., 2009; Justel-Vázquez et al., 2016; Siles & Boczkowski, 2012). Some researchers pointed out that the crisis had weakened journalism's traditional watchdog role and its importance as a vehicle for freedom of expression (Blumer, 2010; Pickard, 2011). They explained that due to financial pressures, many news organizations had neglected their public service function, directly affecting the health of democratic systems (Beam et al., 2009; Ruis, 2016). According to Ruis (2016), journalism failed to respond collectively to the crisis, causing a degradation of the journalist's work and an erosion of the news quality. Public opinion started to perceive that newspapers were abandoning their societal responsibilities in favor of their interests, neglecting their role as guardians of the common welfare. As Kovach and Rosenstiel (2012) pointed out, "news was becoming entertainment and entertainment was becoming news" (2012, p. 15) and many journalists were rewarded according to the company's profits rather than the quality of their work. According to Ruis (2016), along with the economic crisis, the press faced a crisis of trust and credibility, breaking the binomial it had consolidated in the 20th century. There was no longer a transparent business, and both the will to provide public service and the transparency and independence of news editors in editorial decision-making were questioned (Ruis, 2016). The survival of newspapers as fundamental building blocks of a democratic society started thus to be threatened (Barnett, 2009; Blumer, 2010; Curran, 2010; McChesney & Pickard, 2011; Siles & Boczkowski, 2012).

The crisis also increased online news consumption, which led many media outlets to turn to the digital world (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2010) and invest in the Internet (Nelson, 2019). In the digital landscape, media outlets engaged in fierce competition to broaden their audience base, with the aim of attracting higher advertising revenues (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016; Tandoc & Maitra, 2018). With the advent of the Internet, measuring audience size became a crucial task since numerous advertisers began to evaluate the importance of a website according to its number of viewers. The audience thus became the common currency between media and advertisers (P. M. Napoli, 2012; Nelson & Webster, 2016). The significance of measuring audience size in the digital environment prompted news organizations to formalize the utilization of web analytics, a trend that studies in the field have extensively documented (Anderson, 2011; Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016; MacGregor, 2007; Tandoc, 2014, 2015; Vu, 2013).

2.5. Web Analytics

The Web Analytics Association defines web analytics as "the measurement, collection, analysis, and reporting of Internet data to understand and optimize Web use" (Burby et al., 2007). In other words, it is the tool to understand user behavior and improve their browsing experience to achieve their goals, ultimately increasing the percentage of visitors who complete a desired action on the website, e.g., a purchase (Beri & Singh, 2013). Maldonado (2015) explains that web analytics is a discipline that involves a process focused on monitoring, improving, and achieving objectives that underpin a company's online activity. This process consists of measuring or collecting data, analyzing, or researching it, and delivering or logically presenting the results and conclusions to improve online business objectives. Waisberg and Kaushik (2009) believe that web analytics is both a science and an art since it blends statistics, data mining techniques, and methodological processes with the analyst's creativity. This fusion aims to strike a balance between a user-centric design and an emphasis on other essential elements for website monetization, such as advertising. Therefore, according to the authors, web analytics should not be considered a mere reporting technology but a process involving a virtuous circle to optimize the website.

Web analytics systematically analyses quantitative data on online audience behavior (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016). It works by generating metrics, i.e., the creation of quantitative measures of viewing or passive consumption of content by internet users (Krall, 2009, p. 387). While metrics are the instruments that measure, analytics is the process that analyses what is measured (Budea, 2018). There are several metrics for evaluating a website's performance. The following table illustrates those that, according to several authors, are considered the most valuable (Budea, 2018; Maldonado, 2015; Muñoz & Elósegui, 2011).

Table 4 Basic traffic metrics. Source: Budea, 2018; Maldonado, 2015; Muñoz & Elósegui, 2011.

Metric	Description
Page views or page impressions	Indicates how many times a page is downloaded in a session (sequence of pages a user visits on a website). They allow us to know how many pages the user has downloaded in a given period of time and how many downloads a given page has had.
Visit	Indicates the number of website sessions opened during a given period of time.
Unique visitors	Indicates the number of devices connecting to the website. It is related to the time factor and session usage.

Time spent on a website	Indicates the time the user spends on each page of the website. The user arrives on the page, and the time starts running. As soon as they request a new page, the time spent on the page is calculated.
Time spent on a website	Indicates the total time spent by the user on the website, i.e., on the platform.
Bounce rate	Indicates the percentage of visitors who spent a few seconds on the website or only viewed one page compared to the total number of visits to the site. It allows you to measure the primary objective (that visitors stay, study, and buy).
Exit rate	Indicates the number of visits that have exited a given page, regardless of the number of pages they have consumed. This rate will only be similar to the bounce rate when analyzing visits that have been on a single page.

Muñoz and Elósegui (2011) explain that working with web analytics requires setting clear objectives for the website as they form the basis of the digital strategy. The objectives should be determined by what the user is expected to do on the website, e.g., become a customer, respond to a marketing action, buy a product, contract a service, reach a particular site, etc. It is essential to relate the site's objectives to Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), i.e., metrics that provide valuable information on the progress toward achieving a given objective (Maldonado, 2015; Muñoz & Elósegui, 2011). All KPIs are metrics, but not all metrics are KPIs. Domínguez and Muñoz (2010) explained that while metrics measure, KPIs are objectives to be achieved by measuring one of the aspects under SMART criteria, i.e., Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and within a reasonable Timeframe. The most commonly used KPI to measure a website's performance is the conversion rate, i.e., the percentage of visits that complete a goal on the website, such as a purchase, a booking, or a registration (Muñoz & Elósegui, 2011).

Finding the perfect combination of KPIs, adjusted to the online business objectives, is not a simple task (Maldonado, 2015), as a company may have more than one objective, and its web channel may be part of one or several of them (Muñoz & Elósegui, 2011). If the company is a business, the choice of KPIs is more obvious, e.g., to achieve a sale. If the company is an organization that seeks reputation or user loyalty, the choice of KPIs is more complex (Muñoz & Elósegui, 2011). Numerous companies that maintain an online presence have expressed concern regarding their uncertainty about which metrics to focus on for their digital strategies (Royle & Laing, 2014). This has led them to engage in processes

based on experimentation and trial and error (Bernabé-Moreno et al., 2015; Muñoz & Elósegui, 2011).

Furthermore, many commercially oriented companies have chosen to categorize and design two distinct blocks: acquisition and retention. This segregation can hinder the successful attainment of their objectives (Muñoz & Elósegui, 2011). The challenges that many professionals encounter when selecting KPIs for practical online business analysis have garnered the interest of numerous researchers (Muñoz & Elósegui, 2011; Saura et al., 2017) who have made various proposals for different types of companies. Maldonado (2015) proposes the following indicators for a hypothetical publication that seeks to increase website traffic: reader loyalty, audience understanding, an increase in unique visitors, an increase in page views, and an increase in engaged and content-sharing users.

The first discipline to seriously take the role of web analytics in decision-making processes is digital marketing (Budea, 2018; Maldonado, 2015). Web analytics enables digital marketers to gain a deeper understanding of their audience, allowing them to shape strategies and enhance the performance of advertising campaigns, thereby boosting sales and return on investment. Web analytics is crucial in increasing online business success and economic performance. Beri and Singh (2013) argue that paying attention to metrics provided by this tool differentiates a website that generates sales from a simply existing website. Muñoz and Elósegui (2011) state that "web analytics is not so much a technical tool as a business tool" (2011). Therefore, web analytics has become essential for any company seeking to improve its commercial results on the Internet (Duncan, 2010). However, as Tandoc and Thomas (2015) highlighted, web analytics application to journalism is complex because inappropriate use of metrics can lead media outlets to create content that increases online visits but does not contribute to meaningful social debates (a topic we will delve into further below).

It is essential to keep in mind that although web analytics is based on quantitative metrics to identify trends and patterns of user behavior, it is also necessary to measure other factors, such as the quality of traffic, the number of interactions, or the user's feeling towards the brand (Saura et al., 2017). This is possible through qualitative metrics that measure subjective aspects of user behavior, such as their opinions, perceptions, and experiences with the website. So, while quantitative metrics indicate the quantifiable elements of user behavior, qualitative metrics indicate the reasons for that behavior and are extremely useful in improving the perception of brand value and increasing user loyalty to the brand (Muñoz & Elósegui, 2011) Quantitative metrics are web traffic or the number of clicks, while qualitative metrics are time spent on the website or the number of interactions. Other ways to generate qualitative metrics are questionnaires on websites and online surveys. Researchers argue that paying

attention to both metrics allows a company to differentiate itself from its competition (Muñoz & Elósegui, 2011).

2.6. Media Monitoring of Audience Behavior

As entities possessing a strategic online presence and commercial motivations, the media have embraced web analytics (Tandoc & Thomas, 2015). With this tool, they can access precise real-time insights into the audiences' behavior on their websites (Hanusch, 2017; MacGregor, 2007; McKenzie et al., 2011; Tandoc, 2014; Vu, 2013; Weischedel et al., 2005), and also ascertain the consumption patterns of individual users (Anderson, 2011; P. Napoli, 2011). Web analytics enables media to systematically analyze online audiences' characteristics, preferences, and information consumption patterns (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016; Corzo & Salaverría, 2019; Waisberg & Kaushik, 2009). Among other aspects, it provides insights into the entry point to the website, the duration of visits, the navigation flow, and the searches conducted using internal search engines. Moreover, it measures the popularity of informative content by tracking metrics such as the number of comments and the frequency with which users share it in the digital environment (Duffy et al., 2018; Tandoc & Vos, 2016). Web analytics advantages have made it a relevant tool in the media's daily work (N. S. Cohen, 2019; Cornia et al., 2019; Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018; Nelson, 2019b). In this context, the Internet has become an analytical laboratory for predicting the audience's information consumption patterns (Napoli, 2011).

Audience behavior monitoring concerning news products is not a new task for the media. Since their beginnings, newspaper companies have recognized the importance of paying attention to audience behavior (McQuail, 1965; P. Napoli, 2011) as one of their responsibilities is to serve the public (Tandoc & Thomas, 2015). The media have developed multiple methods to measure the audience's response to news content (A. M. Lee et al., 2014; Petre, 2018). Traditionally, journalism obtained audience data through studies based on representative samples of the population and techniques enabling the projection of results to the broader population. However, Internet and web analytics have facilitated a deeper exploration of how audiences relate to news content (P. Napoli, 2011).

However, according to Napoli (2011), to fully track audience behavior with web analytics, media outlets must pay attention to several dimensions that comprise it. According to the author, audience behavior is a process with interrelated dimensions that develop chronologically (Figure 1). The process begins with awareness, that is when an audience member becomes aware that media content is available. If this content appeals to them, interest arises, and sufficient interest can lead to exposure, which historically has been considered a central indicator of relevance in the audience market. Other relevant dimensions of audience behavior are loyalty and attentiveness, which are parallel to exposure because they are usually operationalized in terms of exposure data. Loyalty and attentiveness are frequently used in audience marketing discourse. They are key

components in the unclear development of the concept of engagement. The following dimensions are appreciation and emotion, which reflect the audience's immediate reactions to the content regarding whether they liked it or whether it affected them emotionally. Recall and attitude are placed next to reflect the more profound and more lasting effects that may result from the exposure, which can logically be a consequence of the level of appreciation and emotion and may lead to users' behavioral responses, such as purchasing a product.
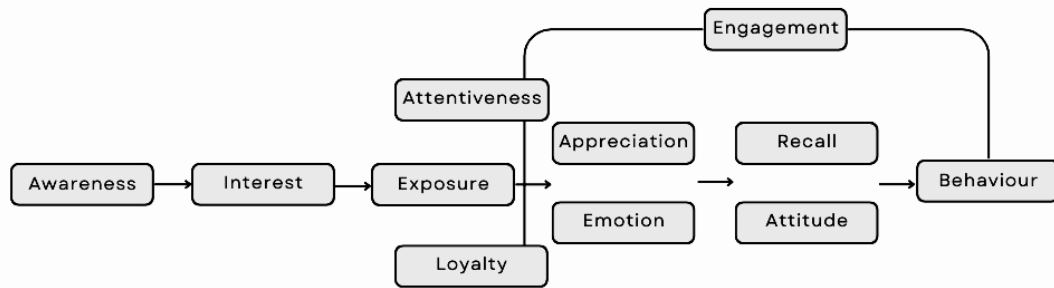
Figure 1 Audience Dimensions. Source: Napoli, 2011, p. 91.

The model proposed by Napoli (2011) on audience behavior establishes several dimensions that virtual information systems, such as web analytics, can capture. Unlike traditional data collection methods, web analytics allows understanding more complex and multifaceted aspects of audience behavior beyond mere exposure. It also provides real-time information and allows for systematic analysis. As mentioned above, these opportunities have been widely adopted by the media.

Web analytics institutionalization has opened a debate on the level of influence users have in the gatekeeping process (Bro & Wallberg, 2015; Salaverría, 2015). That is, "the process of selecting, writing, editing, positioning, scheduling, replaying and otherwise massaging information to become news" (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 73). Most of this research projects indicate that web analytics alone does not drive change in journalism. However, it does play an important role when news organizations use it as a basis for editorial decisions. Some researchers warn that media outlets have focused their decisions on exposure, neglecting the other dimensions of audience behavior (Magazine Publishers of America, 2006). They caution that while exposure is an essential dimension of audience behavior, it is only one part of a broader notion that encompasses how media products are consumed, the reasons behind that consumption, and the possible effects on the audience (P. Napoli, 2011). Therefore, a more comprehensive approach is needed.

Exposure-focused strategies are closely related to the predominant monitoring of quantitative metrics, such as the number of views or clicks, which provide an overview of the number of people exposed to or reached by a piece of media

content. According to Nelson (2019), this approach is common in media outlets seeking to expand their audience to attract advertisers' attention and thus generate higher financial revenues. The media's inclination towards business interests has been observed, especially since the advent of the Internet, when the difficulties posed by traditional business models became apparent. Rowe (2011) agrees that these trends were exacerbated during the economic crisis as the media's dependence on advertising revenue increased. Several studies support this idea, including Vu (2013), who demonstrates that audience data influence editorial decisions due to the perception that increased readership leads to higher financial returns. Also, Phillips' (2015) study shows that in newspapers facing more significant commercial pressure, journalists experience a greater reduction in their autonomy as news selection is often based on the interpretation of audience behavior data.

Equally, in newspapers facing less commercial pressure, the level of professionals' autonomy is higher, resulting in publishing stories with little general appeal when the journalist considers them relevant. Tandoc (2014) showed that news editors perceive the audience as an economic capital that can be maximized to maintain stability in the journalistic field. Reinemann et al. (2012) also noted that these strategies are related to the financial pressures faced by the industry, warning that this leads the media to prioritize eye-catching and sensationalist content over relevant content for a democratic society. Due to economic pressures, newsrooms often turn to quantitative metrics to inform editorial choices and publish news that has no value and does not promote an informed discourse. According to Wang (2018), the audience becomes economic capital, and web analytics becomes a commodity.

Some research projects postulate that the influence of web analytics on editorial decision-making varies based on the nature of the news; it exerts a more pronounced effect on "soft" news compared to "hard" news (Lamot & Van Aelst, 2019). Some other studies suggest that the impact is more direct, influencing news stories' selection, placement, and duration on the media outlet's website (A. M. Lee et al., 2014; Welbers et al., 2016). An example of this is Tandoc's (2014) research, which argues that web analytics can influence the process of "de-selection," i.e., the process in which journalists decide which articles to remove from the homepage and replace them with others. The author shows that many professionals evaluate the success of a story on the website's homepage according to how it performs within 20 minutes of publication. If it does not achieve the expected results, it is immediately replaced. Numerous studies argue that while web analytics does not eliminate relevant news, it does encourage a greater willingness of journalists to produce anecdotal news stories that attract audiences to media websites (Justel-Vázquez et al., 2016). Many of these studies contend that web analytics has prompted the media to allocate space in their agendas for content that historically did not follow the traditional media agenda-

setting process and lacked relevance in a democratic society (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009; Nelson, 2019b; Nguyen, 2013).

Over a decade ago, Sintes i Olivella (2010) argued that the advent of web analytics would encourage the media to focus on merely exciting content rather than essential content. He said this implies basing news selection criteria on generating audience interest and attraction rather than on providing relevant and newsworthy information. Túñez-López et al. (2011) also pointed out that analytics gave space to topics that were not part of traditional news production mechanisms. According to Boczkowski and Peer (2011), there was a consensus among academics on the predominance of "soft" news in the media agenda. That is, content that "caters to the lowest common denominator of all tastes, addressing the most basic, least sophisticated and least sensitive level of lifestyles and attitudes" (Nguyen, 2013, pp. 152–153).

Moreover, according to Nguyen's (2013) research, media outlets use audience measurement tools to maximize the dissemination of these "soft" news stories to generate a larger audience. The author argues that hard news on public affairs, which is necessary for the functioning of a democratic society, does not always capture broad public interest because it requires significant cognitive effort and sustained interest in the public sphere. In contrast, "soft" news possesses a broader appeal, demanding less cognitive action and catering more precisely to the individual interests of the audience. Other studies found that many media outlets use digital marketing approaches to maximize news's impact and popularity. For example, pseudo-informative content in the media agenda is created from attention economy strategies, such as attractive headlines, direct appeal to the reader, and superficial or exaggerated content (Bazaco et al., 2019; Molek-Kozakowska, 2013). It was also documented that media use web analytics to respond to audience preferences by compiling lists of the most viewed or read content (Anderson, 2011; A. M. Lee et al., 2014; MacGregor, 2007).

These publications are often fueled by language that seeks to increase their popularity. Molek-Kozakowska (2013) demonstrated that the language employed in the *Daily Mail*'s "most read" lists is geared towards portraying topics as captivating, exceptional, and worthy of exploration. According to Justel-Vázquez et al. (2016), the tags "Most viewed", "Most shared", and "Most commented" are examples of a news ecosystem where web analytics reigns supreme.

2.7. The Role of Social Media

Journalistic practices comprising the dissemination of anecdotal, viral, and sensationalist content also occur on social media. Research projects have shown that these platforms are mainly used to broaden the media's audience base and foster more intimate interactions with users (Al-Rawi, 2017; Domingo, 2019; Duffy & Knight, 2019). Additionally, these platforms serve as tools to amplify website traffic and collect insights (Hermida et al., 2012; J. Lee, 2016; Sacco & Bossio,

2017; Thurman, 2018). They also play a crucial role in promoting journalistic enterprises and shaping an online identity (Molyneux et al., 2018). Consequently, they are essential for media outlets and are often indispensable components of their digital strategies (Hernández-Pérez & Rodríguez Mateos, 2016).

Various researchers show that media outlets accept these platforms as valid sources of information (Justel-Vázquez et al., 2018; Pedriza, 2018) with Twitter and Facebook being the most popular social media in this regard (Engesser & Humprecht, 2015; Heravi & Harrower, 2016; Pedriza, 2018; Pérez-Soler & Micó-Sanz, 2015; Towner & Muñoz, 2017). Some studies argue that these platforms are mainly used to gather "soft" news about citizens, celebrities, and sportspeople (Paulussen & Harder, 2014). Others document that these platforms are beginning to legitimize themselves as important sources of reference in sections linked to "hard" news, particularly Twitter and in the political sphere (Justel-Vázquez et al., 2018). This makes sense considering the high presence of political information on these platforms. Politicians use social media to disseminate statements, share campaign information and provide details of their proposals (Aparaschivei, 2011; Graham et al., 2014; Sintes-Olivella et al., 2020), as well as to persuade citizens and influence the media agenda (Shapiro & Hemphill, 2017). Researchers have also shown that platforms such as Twitter are also used to retrieve the political messages of historical leaders and disseminate their legacy in the present (Franch & Yeste, 2015).

Research projects also highlight that the general population recognizes social media as credible sources of information (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016; Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018). The most recent Reuters Institute report (Newman et al., 2023) shows that, while Facebook is the most popular social network for news consumption, with 28% of users using it for information, Instagram is gaining relevance in this field. The visual platform initially designed for private interaction (Larsson, 2018) reaches a 14% share of users for news consumption. Research projects highlight that social media became popular platforms for news consumption several years ago, particularly among the Z and Y generations (Newman et al., 2019; Sumida et al., 2019). This attracted the attention of many media outlets seeking to improve their visibility and connect with young audiences.

Researchers have observed that journalists use social media " to enquire what is making the 'buzz' and for what Internet users show an interest in" (Mariau, 2015, p. 31). Many journalists, motivated by the financial opportunities offered by increasing audience size in the digital environment, have been guided by these interests. This has influenced "journalists' choice of which event to cover and how they talk about it" (Mariau, 2015, p. 31). For this reason, within this platform, media tend to publish predominantly apolitical content and focus on "soft" categories such as fashion, travel, food, and beauty (Al Nashmi, 2018). Their emphasis is on sharing visually captivating, impactful, and innovative photos or

videos (Vázquez-Herrero, 2019). This is accompanied by disseminating ephemeral content lacking a clear publication strategy (Rojas-Torrijos & Panal Prior, 2017; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2019). Despite these findings, there is still little research on the media behavior on Instagram, prompting the doctoral candidate to dedicate one publication to exploring this social media platform.

Numerous inherent characteristics of social media magnify the media dynamics discussed above. Among these characteristics is the particular behavior of news. As Bazaco, Redondo, and Sánchez García (2019) explain, within social media, the information is disconnected from the context provided by traditional media by placing it within the printed pages of a newspaper. Consequently, they are detached from the hierarchy applied by traditional media. In this way, news is immersed in direct competition with other information or content that does not always conform to traditional journalistic criteria (Bazaco et al., 2019).

Furthermore, within these platforms, the audience often interacts with the information involuntarily, stumbling upon informative content without a deliberate intention to do so. Scholars have named this phenomenon "incidental exposure" (Ahmadi & Wohn, 2018; Boczkowski et al., 2018; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Tewksbury et al., 2001; Yadamsuren, 2009). In these spaces, users discover news accidentally while engaging in other online activities that may or may not be related to the news (Tewksbury et al., 2001). Access to information is fleeting, fragmented, and partial, and consumption is transient. According to Mitchelstein and Boczkowski (2018), this is both a symptom and a cause of a profound, ongoing, and comprehensive transformation in mediated communication.

Another relevant feature is the wide availability of information on these platforms, making users less likely to search for news actively and limiting their understanding of relevant events (Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018). However, as the research project demonstrates, news activity is still present within these platforms. Some studies argue that through incidental exposure to news, users gain access to and consume useful and valuable information (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018; Yadamsuren, 2009) for their lives in the community. Others show that active interaction with social network content can increase users' participation and engagement with current and emerging issues (Greenhow & Reifman, 2009; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015), as well as their emotional connection to them (Yadamsuren & Heinström, 2011).

In addition, social media involve algorithms that privilege popular content exposure (O'Connor, 2013). According to media analysts, this has a detrimental effect on editorial decisions as it pressures media outlets to publish content that is more likely to be perceived by the audience (Nelson, 2019). Multiple studies support this idea (Carlson, 2018; DeVito, 2017; Paulussen et al., 2018; Tandoc & Maitra, 2018). For instance, Paulussen et al. (2018) provide evidence that Facebook forces the media to adopt various strategies to highlight a specific piece of information amidst the abundant content circulating on the platform. This

process displaces the "editorial logic" with the "algorithmic logic". Hernández-Pérez and Rodríguez-Mateos (2016) also show that news content is now adapted to consider the consumption logic of these digital spaces.

Welbers and Opgenhaffen (2019) found that journalists use subjective and positive status messages to increase publication popularity rather than replicating news headlines. This finding is evidence of how journalists are pressured to meet the expectations and characteristics of these platforms. Bazaco et al. (2019) revealed that in order to capture users' interests, media outlets resort to the clickbait strategy, which consists of using sensationalist headlines to attract clicks and visits. They warned that this has a direct impact on the quality of the news agenda, as it tends to increase trivial and excessively dramatic content, leaving aside relevant content. For many scholars, the indiscriminate involvement with these platforms' logic leads the media to increase the creation and dissemination of content that does not respond to journalistic criteria (Bazaco et al., 2019; Bell et al., 2017; Paulussen et al., 2018; Salaverría, 2014; Shoemaker et al., 2008; Tandoc, 2014). Journalists are also aware of this. In fact, according to a recent study by the Reuters Institute (Newman et al., 2021) journalists' dissatisfaction with these platforms has increased in recent years, mainly because they prioritize quantity over quality and offer incomplete information on content performance.

Researchers have warned that the logic of social media is replacing mass media logic (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013; Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2019). Ross Arguedas et al. (2022) insist that this is detrimental to the media, as it challenges the traditional norms on which trust is based. It also raises growing concerns about its influence on the quality of information (Nguyen, 2013; Tandoc & Thomas, 2015).

2.8. The Impact of Web Analytics on Journalism

While some early researchers, such as Boczkowski (2010), MacGregor (2007), and Domingo (2008), suggested that the media's use of web analytics would not necessarily lead to a decline in professional values, others found that it displaces both professional intuition and traditional values (Anderson, 2011; A. M. Lee et al., 2014; MacGregor, 2007; Tandoc, 2014). Some show that journalists are more likely to use their judgment to make editorial decisions when they lack a clear structure for interpreting audience data or guidance on how to do so (Graves et al., 2010; Usher, 2013). However, when they do, they tend to prioritize audience preferences (Duncan, 2010; Tandoc, 2014; Túñez-López et al., 2011). Hanusch and Tandoc (2017) provide evidence of this by demonstrating that when journalists are exposed to data, they tend to question their values, ideally aligned with promoting the public interest. Justel-Vázquez et al. (2016) document that, although journalists try to distance themselves from this, they do not manage to do so entirely. On many occasions, web analytics is also used to evaluate journalists' performance (Bunce, 2019; Tandoc, 2015) and boost their productivity (Petre, 2015).

There is growing concern about how web analytics impact journalism's role in a democratic society. Some researchers warn that misuse of web analytics can unbalance the profession's historic roles of public service and public forums (Baker, 2002; Carbonell, 2012). Others argue that it can shift the focus from social impact to social interest (Tandoc and Thomas, 2015) and impoverish public debate (Justel-Vázquez, 2015). According to Suenzo et al. (2020), guiding editorial decisions with the values of an era characterized by the demand for immediate information weakens the value of journalism in today's society. For Salaverría (2014), we are facing a paradigm whose objective "is to produce journalism that is transmitted with the ease of a virus" (2014, p. 19) but not to provide a public service to society.

Some scholars argue that satisfying audience wants and needs are mutually exclusive goals and that journalists' autonomy, and judgment must be protected from market forces (Nelson & Tandoc, 2019). Kovach and Rosenstiel (2012) point out that an agenda dominated by irrelevant content quickly captures the audience's interest but also compromises the quality and integrity of the news, alienates the engaged audience, and erodes the authority of journalism. Palau-Sampio (2016) argues that the presence of sensationalist content on the agenda has a "perverse" effect on the media's prestige. Tandoc and Thomas (2015) argue that journalists must respond to their audience and serve a greater purpose: the public interest. Journalism's role is to articulate public debate and promote the functioning of a democratic society. "If journalism simply views itself as the conduit through which transient audience preferences are satisfied, then it is no journalism worth bearing the name" (Tandoc & Thomas, 2015, p. 243).

The academic community does not propose abandoning web analytics to reverse the effect of practices adopted in journalism. Kovach and Rosenstiel (2012) explain that journalism must recognize its reality and the importance of web analytics. According to the authors, the solution lies in strategically using this tool, not to replace journalists' judgment but to improve it. "We need to stop using market research that treats our audience as customers, asking them what products they prefer. We must create journalistic market research that approaches people as citizens and tells us more about their lives" (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2012, p. 219). This means using web analytics not as a replacement for professional judgment but as a tool to broaden the criteria for editorial decisions.

Data-driven technology companies like Facebook have long been aware of this issue. They know that metrics alone never tell the whole story, so qualitative assessments and human judgments are always necessary (Oremus, 2016). Metrics are more effective in quantifying how people relate to information content than in understanding the underlying reasons for such behaviors (Kormelink & Meijer, 2018). For instance, a lack of clicks does not necessarily indicate a lack of interest in the news. Similarly, there are better metrics for building a loyal

audience than the most viewed stories (Neheli, 2018). Media researchers are also aware of this. A Reuters Institute report based on 30 interviews with media executives involved in analytics development revealed that media outlets consider it essential to integrate web analytics into daily editorial work for long-term strategic planning (Cherubini and Nielsen, 2016). Moreover, while aware of the limitations of using quantitative indicators to understand the diverse reality of how and why people engage with journalism, they are committed to developing customized approaches to finding a data culture that supports their editorial and organizational priorities. To achieve this, some researchers suggest developing clear publishing strategies (Ott & Theunissen, 2015), and others suggest focusing on content with a differential value for digital subscribers (Lindén et al., 2022).

Research projects have shown that media outlets are committed to innovating with content formats to attract and retain the loyalty of the younger audience, especially in social media (Newman, 2021; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). For many companies, managing this innovation is complex and frustrating (Newman, 2021) as they must adapt to the aesthetics, language, and type of content that each platform demands (Hermida & Mellado, 2020; Van Dijck & Poell, 2013). However, some recent studies suggest that innovation is not enough to overcome the media's economic and trust crisis, mainly because users are unwilling to abandon these platforms to consume information (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). Therefore, some researchers suggest focusing on the areas where the media can wield more influence (Newman, 2021).

2.9.   Commitment to Audience Engagement

In response to the failure of previous business models, many media are now adopting models focused on audience engagement, such as subscriptions, affiliations, or donations (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016; Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018; Kiesow, 2018; Nelson, 2019b; Newman, 2021). Before looking at the particularities of these models, it is relevant to briefly define the concept of "engagement". The term "engagement" has been the subject of study by various disciplines, which has given rise to multiple theoretical perspectives from which to approach the phenomenon (Hollebeek, 2012; P. Napoli, 2011).

Following Hollebeek (2012), in the field of marketing, this diversity of approaches resulted in a comprehensive conceptual framework that allows the concept to be understood in different contexts and situations. In this field, engagement is understood as the relationship between the subject of engagement (the consumer or customer) and the object of engagement (the brand, the product, the category, or the organization). Moreover, the author states that it is both a momentary state and a process that can be shaped over time, what suggests that it manifests itself temporarily and, at the same time, is susceptible to change. Researchers in the marketing field explain that in the digital environment, the term engagement refers to the metric that allows to evaluate the interaction of users with the content disseminated and with the brand itself (Hollebeek et al., 2014;

Mitchelstein et al., 2018; Raimondo Anselmino et al., 2017). They argue that this interaction is important because of its potential to influence user purchase intent (Medina et al., 2018; Park et al., 2009), as well as to build and manage a brand's identity (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015). Similarly, in the field of journalism, engagement refers to the way of observing the active and intentional orientation of users towards news content (Broersma, 2019). Research projects in this area focus on the development of specific methods to measure engagement. Some of them study the tools and platforms available to increase audience loyalty with news (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016; Nelson & Webster, 2016) and others focus on techniques to make content more attractive or participative (Konieczna & Robinson, 2014; Mersey et al., 2010; Nelson & Webster, 2016).

According to various authors, business models based on audience engagement, such as subscriptions, memberships, or donations (Kiesow, 2018; Nelson, 2019a; Newman, 2021), imply a different use of web analytics metrics because the goal is not only to increase the number of visitors. According to Maldonado (2015), focusing on quantitative metrics (such as unique visitors) is more important for newspapers whose goal is to increase web traffic in order to expand the size of their audience and translate it into revenue. Paying attention to qualitative metrics (such as the ratio of readers sharing content or time spent on the website) is more important for newspapers seeking to cultivate audience loyalty and build a long-term trusted brand. Therefore, as Broersma (2019) explains, betting on a business model based on audience engagement implies paying more attention to performance-based metrics (quality) than to impression-based metrics (quantity). Hence, while at the beginning, newsrooms used web analytics mainly to look at quantitative metrics (N. S. Cohen, 2019; Nelson, 2018), nowadays many media pay more attention to qualitative metrics.

Internationally, there are already examples of success. An outstanding case is that of *The New York Times*, which has surpassed 7.5 million subscribers after ten years of offering digital subscriptions (Tracy, 2021). Other examples are *The Washington Post*, which has accumulated 3 million subscribers, and *The Wall Street Journal*, which has gained 2.5 million subscribers (Newman et al., 2020). Additionally, the British newspaper *The Times*, which shifted its focus in 2016 away from breaking news coverage and towards more in-depth content. Since then, it has updated the website only three times a day. In just one year, the change in strategy managed to generate a 200% increase in subscription sales (Davies, 2017). In addition, a Reuters Institute survey in 2021 found that 76% of global newspaper executives considered the digital subscription model to be the main source of revenue for journalism, even ahead of advertising (Newman, 2021).

While not all media adopted this business model at the same time, there is evidence that most media are moving towards it (Newman et al., 2023). In Spain, for example, *El Mundo* started offering this service in 2019, a year in which 12%

of internet users paid to read digital newspapers in the country (Newman et al., 2021). Other leading newspapers, such as *El Confidencial, ABC, La Vanguardia* and *El País* started with this model in 2020. Journalist Carvajal (2020) documented that in same year the Spanish media market had gained more than 347,000 digital subscribers. Almost a quarter of them corresponded to *El País*, which had managed to add 64,200 subscribers only four months after implementing its paywall. Pay-for-content has not only been successful for traditional media, but also for those digital native media that opted for this strategy from the beginning. According to Carvajal (2020), the latter had also managed to accumulate impressive subscriber figures. For example, in August 2020, *El Confidencial* had more than 15,000 subscribers, *El Español* 12,000, *Infolibre* 12,800 and *Público* 11,000. According to Orús (2021), by June 2021, around 30 Spanish newspapers had some kind of paywall in their digital versions. Thus, over the years, the metrics that allow optimizing a newspaper in terms of audience have given way to others that allow assessing reader engagement.

In addition, with the implementation of audience engagement-based business models, media outlets seem to recognize that the content that generates the most clicks from users is not always the same content they are willing to pay for (Jensen, 2021). This has led many media companies to adopt strategies focused on offering value-added content, such as exclusive content, renowned authors, multimedia reports or newsletters. All this content is no longer freely available to the general public. Furthermore, the media's commitment to business models based on audience engagement has even given rise to new jobs such as "audience editor," "growth editor" or "audience engagement editor" (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016; Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018).

Overall, betting on audience engagement seems to be the key to the success of the profession (Lawrence et al., 2018), as it allows assessing loyalty, trust, confidence (Lewis et al., 2014; Lischka & Messerli, 2016) and users' willingness to pay for digital contents (Broersma, 2019).

2.10. The Ongoing Relevance of Journalism

Commitment to business models based on audience engagement makes even more sense if we consider the growing importance of the digital environment as a source of reliable information (Pedriza, 2018). Also, if we consider that, despite a gradual decline in public trust (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2012; Ruis, 2016), studies highlight the enduring relevance of journalism as a crucial institution for navigating daily life, in particular, in times of unforeseen events or emergencies (Pérez-Soler & Micó-Sanz, 2015). A case in point is the COVID-19 pandemic, an infectious disease caused by SARS-CoV-2 that was first detected in 2019 in the Chinese city of Wuhan and quickly made headlines worldwide. Like any other health emergency, it meets almost all the newsworthiness criteria journalism uses to turn events into news (O'Neill & Harcup, 2009). As explained by Vasterman and Ruigrok (2013) a potential pandemic coincides with values such as:

> Unexpectedness (sudden outbreak) as well as consonance with expectations (a new pandemic was long predicted), intensity increase (growing number of patients and fatalities), negativity (chance of a catastrophe), relevance (actual risks involved), meaningfulness (fear of epidemic, personal risks), unambiguity (flu is well known), continuity (daily updates) and unpredictability (will it be a severe epidemic?). (Vasterman & Ruigrok, 2013, pp. 437–438)

The media have always been important in informing the population about disease status (Brownstein et al., 2009). However, coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic represented a significant challenge for the media (Ratzan et al., 2020) due to the need to provide up-to-date information in a digital environment and to deal with the unpredictable nature of events. During the health emergency, the media have not only collected and provided data, such as summaries of cases and deaths, but have also preserved data and, at times, analysis (Desai et al., 2021). News companies were crucial for understanding the transmission and spread of the virus even before it was recognized as a health emergency with international reach. Indeed, to gather the first data on the disease, researchers relied on media articles, which were also used to conduct risk assessments and forecasts at the political level (Imai et al., 2020). Moreover, as the disease progressed and epidemiological data became insufficient, the media took the initiative to collect and organize data for specific situations involving places where people congregated and to systematically analyze excess death counts (Desai et al., 2021). Some research projects also reveal that the media were able to stop the spread of the disease at an early stage (Zhou et al., 2020).

The crucial role that the media played in the public management of the pandemic was also evident through a significant surge in information consumption (Singh et al., 2020). In Europe, for example, this increase was particularly noticeable when the first governmental measures to contain the spread of the virus were implemented (Comscore, 2020). The exceptionality and severity of the disease made the news a valuable and appreciated resource for coping with the situation (Casero-Ripollés, 2020). Social media also played a crucial role in this regard. Researchers show that, in emergency situations, social media platforms are essential for informing about ongoing government actions, reassuring society, and providing information about next steps (Mariau, 2019). When used responsibly, these platforms allow for the rapid dissemination of relevant information, such as scientific discoveries and diagnostic and treatment protocols (González-Padilla & Tortolero-Blanco, 2020). Moreover, thanks to their innovative functions, they open new horizons and facilitate interaction and collaboration in the medical field, allowing knowledge sharing, access to up-to-date resources, and promoting real-time discussions (Goel & Gupta, 2020). Social media also play an essential role in disseminating pandemic literature, highlighting the success and acceptance of infographics as a communication strategy in these spaces (Chan et al., 2020).

Researchers also showed that much of the information circulating on media websites and social media lacked scientific rigor (Hernández-García & Giménez-Júlvez, 2020). Some pointed out that the media encouraged racial attacks by using terms such as "Chinese virus" or describing the disease as a "Chinese virus pandemonium" (Lyu et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2020). Others revealed that the information was fueled by infodemic terms, queries, hashtags, or phrases such as "coronavirus lab", "ozone coronavirus", "5G coronavirus", "Bill Gates coronavirus" and "tips and cures for COVID-19", the latter being a search related to US President Donald Trump, who had speculated about a "miracle cure" for the disease and an injection of disinfectant to treat the virus (Rovetta & Bhagavathula, 2020). Social media also became a vehicle for transmitting false or non-factual news that endangered people's health (Aleixandre-Benavent et al., 2020). Studies show that during the COVID-19 pandemic, much of the discussion on these platforms revolved around fake news, exaggerated claims, and conspiracy theories, generating a global epidemic of misinformation that poses a severe public health problem (Zarocostas, 2020). Others revealed that content circulating on the internet could affect health communication audiences, leading to misinterpretations, misleading information, and fake news (Cuan-Baltazar et al., 2020).

This scenario was described by the World Health Organization (WHO) as an "infodemic", i.e., an "overabundance of information" capable of "generating confusion and, ultimately, mistrust in governments and the public health response" (Zarocostas, 2020). Referring to social media, the agency called on researchers to collaborate in defining and understanding the scope of high-quality and low-quality information circulating on these platforms. "We are not just fighting an epidemic; we are fighting an infodemic," said WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus (Zarocostas, 2020). The extent of misinformation about the pandemic reflected the importance of the media, which during an emergency, must address public fear, financial sector hysteria, and science-related misunderstandings through simple, truthful, timely, evidence-based information (Villena-Alarcón & Caballero-Galeote, 2020) and without causing panic (Cowper, 2020). Also, correcting misinformation by filtering content and making available to the public resources of proven quality (Aleixandre-Benavent et al., 2020). This situation highlights the importance of the media in shaping the public agenda and citizen participation in social life, emphasizing the need to investigate the role of the media in its different platforms and moments.

PART 3. DISCUSSION

This section presents the four academic articles that comprise the compendium of this research. These articles have been accepted in publications of international scope, being considered the main discussion of this research. This section also establishes the relationships between the results and discussions of each of the publications, which, despite being independent research, make up the research argument of the research. This section presents the pre-prints or Author's Original Manuscript, the first version of the academic articles, before their acceptance and peer review. The only changes made to these pre-prints are the numbers with which the tables and illustrations are referenced to give coherence to the research. Appendix 2 presents the articles published with permission.

- Laferrara, V., Justel-Vázquez, S. J., & Micó-Sanz, J. L. (2023). Repensando el uso de datos: Los intentos de los medios por abandonar el clickbait y avanzar hacia la fidelización de la audiencia *AdComunica*, (26), 153-174. https://doi.org/10.6035/adcomunica.7187

- Justel-Vázquez, S., Laferrara, V., De Blasio, E., & Micó-Sanz, J. L. (2022). Journalism and analytics: The tension between journalistic criteria and data. In *Emerging Practices in the Age of Automated Digital Journalism* (pp. 29-42). Routledge. http://hdl.handle.net/2072/535084

- Sánchez, J. S., Laferrara, V., & Bosch, M. D. (2021). COVID-19 pandemic in Italian digital media: Media behaviour and citizen information consumption during the health crisis. *Media & Jornalismo*, 21(38), 261-276. https://doi.org/10.14195/2183-5462_38_13

- Laferrara, V., & Justel-Vázquez, S. (2020). The health crisis on Instagram: How the media are building their agenda on the visual social network during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Trípodos*, 1(47), 123-134. https://doi.org/10.51698/tripodos.2020.47p123-134

3.1. Rethinking the use of data: Media's attempts to move away from clickbait and towards audience engagement

Resumen

Este artículo estudia el uso de los datos de analítica web y de redes sociales en las redacciones periodísticas que apuestan por modelos de negocio basados en la fidelización de la audiencia y el pago por contenidos. Se basa en 28 entrevistas en profundidad con trabajadores de noticias de 11 medios de comunicación situados en cinco países europeos: España, Francia, Italia, Alemania y Reino Unido. Revela que los medios apuestan por priorizar los indicadores de calidad (permanencia en página, comentarios, etc.) frente a los indicadores de cantidad (páginas vistas, usuarios únicos, etc.), aunque aún no pueden soslayar estos últimos por su histórica dependencia de la publicidad como fuentes de ingresos. Las redes sociales cumplen un rol esencial en sus estrategias de fidelización de la audiencia, pero la falta de transparencia de estas plataformas despierta recelos en algunas redacciones. La apuesta por modelos de negocio basados en la fidelización no significa dejar de lado el trabajo con los datos de audiencia, sino cambiar de manera significativa la forma de abordarlos. La decidida apuesta por garantizar el éxito del modelo de negocio ha cambiado significativamente el trabajo con los datos de audiencia y las redes sociales, conduciendo a los medios a abandonar el contenido clickbait y priorizar el contenido de calidad.

Palabras clave

Periodismo; modelo de negocio; analítica; redes sociales; clickbait; engagement

Introducción

Las industrias de noticias llevan más de dos décadas transitando lo que los estudiosos definen como una crisis que amenaza la supervivencia de los periódicos (Blumer, 2010; Curran, 2010; Siles & Boczkowski, 2012). Según Siles y Boczkowski (2012), una combinación de factores económicos, tecnológicos y sociales condujo a esta dramática situación. Destaca su histórica dependencia de los ingresos por publicidad –que bajaron con la crisis financiera de 2008 y el estallido de Internet– (Picard, 2001, 2002; Siles & Boczkowski, 2012). La crisis se manifestó en la reducción de personal, la transformación de contenidos informativos y la disminución en el número de lectores (Siles & Boczkowski, 2012). También bajaron los ingresos por publicidad y las suscripciones a la prensa. Muchos periódicos quebraron y los que no, comenzaron a invertir en Internet (Nelson, 2019a).

La transición hacia el escenario digital inició una batalla por captar la atención de la audiencia, un elemento fundamental en el negocio de las empresas periodísticas (Tandoc & Maitra, 2018). Para tratar de conseguirlo, los medios, como cualquier otra empresa con presencia en Internet, acudieron a la analítica web (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016; Tandoc, 2015), entendida como el análisis

sistemático de los datos cuantitativos –métricas– sobre el comportamiento de la audiencia en línea (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016). La analítica otorga información relevante respecto de las características, la actuación y los gustos informativos de los usuarios digitales (Corzo & Salaverría, 2019). Entre otras cosas, permite saber el número de visitas que recibe un sitio web, de suma importancia para atraer anunciantes interesados en alcanzar una audiencia lo más amplia posible (Nelson, 2019b). El tamaño de la audiencia se constituyó así en la manera en que los anunciantes evalúan la calidad de un sitio web y, por lo tanto, la moneda común que los medios utilizan para realizar negocios (Napoli, 2012; Nelson & Webster, 2016).

El importante rol de la medición del tamaño de la audiencia en la atracción de ingresos publicitarios condujo a las empresas de noticias a institucionalizar el trabajo con la analítica (Anderson, 2011; MacGregor, 2007; Tandoc, 2014; Vu, 2013). Prestar atención a las preferencias de la audiencia se convirtió en una práctica común del trabajo cotidiano (Cohen, 2019; Cornia et al., 2019; Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018; Nelson, 2019b), impactando directamente en la toma de decisiones editoriales. Los estudiosos que coinciden en que para aumentar el tamaño de las audiencias las empresas de noticias priorizan los indicadores de cantidad, como el tráfico web o los clics, por sobre los indicadores de calidad, como el tiempo de permanencia en el sitio web. Priorizar los indicadores de cantidad impacta directamente en la selección, la ubicación y la duración de las noticias en el sitio web (A. M. Lee et al., 2014; Welbers et al., 2016), al tiempo que otorga espacio a contenidos no considerados en los procesos de selección de noticias tradicionales (Túñez-López et al., 2011). Como consecuencia, prevalecen las noticias blandas (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009; Nguyen, 2013) por sobre las consideradas importantes para el funcionamiento de una democracia (Nelson, 2019b). Además, en algunos casos, los indicadores de cantidad son utilizados para evaluar el desempeño de los periodistas (Bunce, 2019; Tandoc, 2015) y estimular la productividad (Petre, 2015). Así, las métricas cuantitativas representan una mercancía y la audiencia, un capital económico (Wang, 2018).

Diversos académicos manifiestan preocupación respecto de cómo esto incide en la calidad de las noticias (Nguyen, 2013; Tandoc & Thomas, 2015). Afirman que los datos de audiencia ponen en discusión los valores tradicionales del periodismo (Hanusch & Tandoc, 2017; Suenzo et al., 2020), y que tanto éstos como la intuición profesional han sido desplazados (Anderson, 2011; A. M. Lee et al., 2014; MacGregor, 2007; Tandoc, 2014). En este contexto prevalece el impacto social por encima del interés social (Justel Vázquez et al., 2016; Tandoc & Thomas, 2015). Esto se replica en las redes sociales, que permiten alcanzar una mayor audiencia, interactuar con el público en su espacio propio (Domingo, 2019), y aumentar el tráfico web (Hermida et al., 2012; J. Lee, 2016; Sacco & Bossio, 2017; Thurman, 2018). Empeora la situación el hecho de que en estas plataformas el consumo informativo se produce de manera incidental

(Boczkowski et al., 2018; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Tewksbury et al., 2001; Yadamsuren, 2009): El acceso a la información es corto, discontinuo e incompleto, y el consumo de noticias, efímero (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2018). También, porque los algoritmos privilegian la exposición del contenido popular (O'Connor, 2013), presionando a los editores de noticias a publicar contenidos que aumenten las posibilidades de ser percibidos por las audiencias (Nelson, 2019b).

Académicos de campos contiguos al periodismo advierten que involucrarse indiscriminadamente con las preferencias de la audiencia en las redes representa un riesgo para la reputación de las empresas. Es decir, para «la prominencia de una organización en la mente del público» (Etter et al., 2017, p. 3) y las «evaluaciones colectivas sobre sus características de calidad y rendimiento», además de «sus objetivos, preferencias y valores organizativos» (Mishina et al., 2012, p. 460). Mientras algunos estudios provenientes del campo del periodismo muestran que los periodistas confían en las redes para llegar a las audiencias, otros consideran que estas plataformas son perjudiciales para las prácticas periodísticas porque ponen a prueba las normas tradicionales en las que se basa la confianza y alteran los contextos donde circulan los contenidos periodísticos (Ross Arguedas et al., 2022). Trabajadores de noticias han manifestado descontento con estas plataformas, al advertir que ofrecen datos incompletos sobre el rendimiento de los contenidos y los cambios producidos en los productos, al tiempo que priorizan la cantidad por sobre la calidad (Newman, 2021). Para mitigar esta crisis reputacional y de desconfianza, los estudiosos sugieren abordar estas plataformas de manera más estratégica (Ott & Theunissen, 2015). Algunos recomiendan que las empresas de noticias se enfoquen en «poner su propia casa en orden» (Newman, 2021, p. 22) y otros, en elaborar contenidos con valor para los suscriptores digitales (Lindén et al., 2022).

Uno de los caminos más utilizados por las empresas de noticias para intentar salir de la crisis es apostar por el engagement de la audiencia, lo que dio lugar a nuevos puestos como el de «editor de audiencias», «editor de crecimiento» o «editor de compromiso con la audiencia» (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016; Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018). Estudios advierten de la vaguedad que presenta el concepto (Napoli, 2011). Algunas interpretaciones se centran en las herramientas y las plataformas disponibles para aumentar la fidelidad de la audiencia (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016; Nelson & Webster, 2016). Otras, en las técnicas profesionales para hacer los contenidos más atractivos o participativos (Mersey et al., 2010), y en el rol de las noticias en la participación ciudadana (Konieczna & Robinson, 2014). Lo que está claro es que apostar por el engagement implica prestar mayor atención a los indicadores de rendimiento (calidad) que a los indicadores de impresión (Broersma, 2019). Mientras algunos consideran que el concepto es una clave para valorar el éxito del periodismo (Lawrence et al., 2018), otros indican que es más bien una herramienta manipulable a los objetivos y prioridades de la empresa de noticias (Broersma,

2019). Quienes defienden la apuesta por el engagement de la audiencia sostienen que promueve la fidelidad, la confianza (Lewis et al., 2014; Lischka & Messerli, 2016) y la disposición de los usuarios a comprar productos (Broersma, 2019). Sin embargo, para que ocupe un espacio relevante en la producción de noticias primero debe convertirse en una moneda de cambio para la industria publicitaria (Nelson & Webster, 2016).

Un número creciente de investigadores coincide en que reemplazar o complementar el modelo tradicional del periodismo por un modelo de negocios basado en la fidelidad de la audiencia –impulsados por suscripciones, afiliaciones o donaciones– es la clave para sobrepasar la crisis del sector (Kiesow, 2018; Nelson, 2019a). Estudios recientes apuntaron que los periódicos tratan de prestar más atención a los ingresos por suscripción (Justel-Vázquez et al., 2022; Newman, 2021) aunque sin dejar de lado los ingresos por publicidad, que continúan siendo la principal fuente de financiación de muchas de las empresas periodísticas. Por eso, aún ocupan un espacio relevante las métricas de cantidad, como el volumen del tráfico web, que permite medir el alcance y el número de lectores (Jensen, 2021).

La puesta en marcha de modelos de negocio basados en la audiencia ha mostrado a los medios que los contenidos en los que los usuarios hacen clic no son necesariamente los contenidos por los que están dispuestos a pagar (Jensen, 2021). Esto llevó a muchos medios a ensayar nuevas formas de presentar el contenido periodístico. Newman (2021) muestra que crear una cultura más innovadora es una de las principales preocupaciones de los medios digitales. Las redes suponen un desafío para las empresas de noticias ya que deben adaptarse a la lógica que tiene cada plataforma (Hermida & Mellado, 2020; Van Dijck & Poell, 2013), es decir, a su estética, lenguaje y tipo de contenido habitual. Vázquez-Herrero et al. (2022) muestran que los medios están adaptando el formato del contenido informativo a estas plataformas para atraer y fidelizar a la audiencia más joven. Advierten la necesidad de encontrar fuentes de ingresos que no dependan de los clics o de los contenidos ocultos tras los muros de pago ya que los usuarios de estas plataformas no están dispuestos a abandonarlas para consumir noticias. Para muchos medios gestionar la innovación es un proceso difícil y frustrante (Newman, 2021).

Objetivos

Nuestra investigación amplía los estudios sobre el trabajo con la analítica y las redes sociales en la estrategia editorial de las empresas de noticias, y pone especial atención en la apuesta por modelos de negocio basados en el pago por contenidos digitales. Nuestro estudio intenta responder a las siguientes preguntas.

> P1: ¿Cómo trabajan los periodistas con la analítica en el avance hacia un modelo de negocio basado en la fidelización de la audiencia?

H1: Prestan una creciente atención a los indicadores de engagement, aunque aún sienten presión por aumentar el tráfico web ya que éste supone una importante fuente de ingresos económicos para el medio.

P2: ¿Cuál es la percepción de los periodistas respecto del impacto de la analítica en la selección y el tratamiento de los temas?

H2: Perciben que indicadores como el número de visitas o los usuarios únicos tienen un gran peso en la selección y el tratamiento de los temas. Advierten que la popularidad de un contenido favorece su inclusión en la agenda mediática por encima de un contenido periodístico -aun cuando no cumple los criterios de noticiabilidad-.

P3: ¿Cuál es la percepción de los periodistas respecto del impacto del trabajo en redes sociales en reputación de la marca periodística?

H3: Reconocen que el trabajo realizado en las redes sociales durante años –dejándose llevar por las dinámicas propias de estas plataformas (difusión de contenidos virales, por ejemplo)– impactó negativamente en la imagen del medio, contribuyendo a la crisis reputacional y de confianza que atraviesa el sector.

P4: ¿Cómo trabajan los periodistas con las redes sociales en el avance hacia un modelo de negocio basado en la fidelización de la audiencia?

H4: Han ido produciendo un cambio en las estrategias editoriales para aumentar la fidelización de la audiencia y, así, generar un impacto positivo en el modelo de negocio adoptado por el medio.

Metodología

Nuestros datos primarios proceden de 28 entrevistas en profundidad con profesionales en activo de 11 medios de comunicación generalistas de cinco países europeos: España, Francia, Italia, Alemania y Reino Unido. La selección de medios se basa en que son periódicos influyentes y reconocidos históricamente, que se encuentran alineados por el tipo de contenido que publican, y en que están entre los medios con mayor número de lectores y de difusión en sus respectivas sociedades (ACPM, 2022; AIMC, 2022; Axel Springer, 2022; Ofcom, 2022; Prima Online, 2022; Sintes-Olivella et al., 2022). Las entrevistas semiestructuradas se realizaron entre mayo y septiembre de 2022. La siguiente tabla muestra la información sobre las entrevistas realizadas.

Table 5 Lista de países, organizaciones de noticias, nombres y cargos de los entrevistados, y cantidad de entrevistas realizadas para el presente estudio.

País	Medio	Entrevistado 1	Entrevistado 2	Entrevistado 3	Nº de entrevistados
Francia	*Le Monde*	Alexis Delcambre, director	Olivier Laffargue, jefe del	Gabriel Coutagne, redactor jefe	3

		editorial adjunto encargado de la transformación digital.	servicio de Snapchat/Tik Tok.	adjunto encargado de herramientas editoriales y difusión de innovaciones, responsable de Instagram.	
	Le Figaro	Benjamin Ferran, director editorial adjunto del sitio web.	Romain Courcier, jefe del departamento de redes sociales.	Charlotte Paroielle, directora de creación digital	3
Reino Unido	*The Guardian*	Mark Rice-Oxley, editor ejecutivo para el ingreso de los lectores.	Martin Belam, periodista de Snippets & Explainers.	-	2
	The Telegraph	David Knowles, jefe del departamento de redes sociales.	-	-	1
Alemania	*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*	Donika Lilova, jefa del muro de pago.	Stefanie Michels, jefa del departamento de redes sociales.	Sonja Wippel, responsable de marketing digital - paid social.	3
	Süddeutsche Zeitung	Christoph Heinlein, jefe de la edición digital.	Britta Schönhütl, jefa del departamento de redes sociales.	-	2

Italia	*La Repubblica*	Francesco Guerrera, jefe de redacción adjunto encargado de la cobertura financiera, económica y empresarial.	Sara Bertuccioli, jefa del departamento de redes sociales.	Marco Seghini. jefe de audiencia y SEO.	3
	Corriere Della Sera	Daniele Manca, jefe de redacción adjunto.	Chiara Severgnini, periodista del departamento de redes sociales.	Davide Casati, editor digital que desempeña labores de captación de audiencia y desarrollo de suscripciones.	3
España	*El País*	Mari Luz Peinado, periodista del equipo de estrategia digital.	Lucía González, jefa de desarrollo de audiencias.	Álvaro Romero Vacas, editor de redes sociales.	3
	El Mundo	Guacimara Castrillo, jefa del departamento de redes sociales.	Elena Mengual, responsable de SEO y desarrollo de audiencias.	-	2
	La Vanguardia	Joel Albarrán, director adjunto y defensor del lector.	Noelia Ruano, jefa del departamento de redes sociales.	Pau Rodríguez, director de marketing.	3

	Total: 28

Las entrevistas se condujeron de manera presencial y en remoto. Tras su transcripción, codificamos manualmente los temas tratados y analizamos el material en busca de similitudes conceptuales y los temas en los que insistían los entrevistados. Las citas de los entrevistados se atribuyen a las fuentes según los cargos que ocupaban en el momento de realizar la entrevista y la organización para la que trabajaban. La información extraoficial no ha sido transcripta, pero sí ha contribuido al análisis.

Resultados

Las organizaciones de noticias están respondiendo a los grandes cambios de la industria periodística de los últimos años adaptando sus rutinas de trabajo para generar nuevas fuentes de ingresos económicos. En esta sección presentamos nuestros datos empíricos y exploramos las cuatro hipótesis de esta investigación que permiten identificar las estrategias adoptadas por los medios en la apuesta por un modelo de negocio basado en las audiencias.

> Trabajo con la analítica en el avance hacia un modelo de negocio basado en la fidelización de las audiencias (H1).

El total de personas entrevistadas (28) sostuvo que la consulta de los datos de audiencia es una actividad fundamental en las redacciones de los medios. 4 de ellos advirtieron que se trata de un nivel muy alto de medición y análisis de datos: «La gente lo llama lago de datos, pero yo creo que es más bien un océano de datos porque es muy vasto», apuntó Mark Rice-Oxley, editor ejecutivo de ingresos de los lectores de *The Guardian* (1 de julio de 2022).

25 entrevistados hicieron referencia a las dinámicas de trabajo actuales con los datos de audiencia. La mayoría (20) sostuvo que desde la adopción del modelo de negocio basado en el pago por contenidos prestan mayor atención a los indicadores de engagement, aquellos que permiten evaluar el grado de compromiso y el nivel de interacción de la audiencia con los contenidos publicados. Estos indicadores –argumentan– otorgan información relevante para personalizar el contenido y establecer estrategias en favor de nuevas suscripciones.

Quienes se desempeñan en la web pusieron como ejemplo las páginas vistas por usuario, el tiempo de permanencia en el sitio, los comentarios en publicación y el número de suscriptores. Quienes trabajan en redes sociales, los comentarios, los compartidos y los clics en enlace. 3 entrevistados mencionaron los *likes*, que utilizan para interpretar el interés de la audiencia por aquellos temas que consideran vinculados al interés público. Chiara Severgnini, del departamento de redes sociales de *Corriere della Sera*, también dijo que extrae datos de las publicaciones realizadas por otros medios de comunicación, como

The New York Times. Se trata de «espiar a los otros» para «aprender sobre sus errores y buenas prácticas» (5 de julio de 2022).

5 entrevistados reconocieron que es una evolución en las prácticas periodísticas. Tiempo atrás, cuando el foco estaba puesto en aumentar las audiencias, se prestaba mayor atención a las métricas cuantitativas. Ahora, que el objetivo es fidelizar a la audiencia, se presta mayor atención a las métricas de engagement.

Ha habido una evolución. Primero, hace muchos años, mirábamos las páginas vistas, después, navegadores únicos –cuando entramos en una etapa de crecimiento de audiencias–. Y ahora que estamos dentro de un modelo de suscripción, miramos métricas que tienen que ver con suscripciones. (Lucía González, jefa del departamento de Desarrollo de Audiencias de *El País*, 23 de agosto de 2022)

2 entrevistados reconocieron que todavía se encuentran elaborando estrategias de actuación frente a los indicadores de suscripción para no depender exclusivamente de la intuición del periodista.

Creamos dinámicas de trabajo sin títulos oficiales (…) vamos detectando qué noticias tienen más suscriptores y hay un trabajo del momento de decir 'este tema está generando muchos suscriptores, mantengámoslo en portada, por favor' (…) También 'esta noticia está generando mucho interés y la tenemos en abierto, pues la cerremos'. Y así lo vamos jugando. (Joel Albarrán, director adjunto de *La Vanguardia*, 18 de julio de 2022).

19 entrevistados manifestaron que generar tráfico web continúa siendo una preocupación para los medios. Sólo 2 –ambos de *The Guardian*– indicaron que no les representa una preocupación ya que fueron capaces de crear un fuerte núcleo de lectores. 16 se detuvieron en los motivos por los que el tráfico web es relevante: Por un lado, para la captación de suscriptores (11) ya que, a más usuarios alcanzados por el contenido, más posibilidades de que decidan pagar por él; por otro, para la captación de anunciantes (7), que representan una importante fuente de ingresos económicos. 5 señalaron que el tráfico web no siempre está ligado a un contenido viral. Pues, según indicaron, en muchas oportunidades el tráfico web es generado por los contenidos informativos «más elaborados». Un entrevistado apreció que es por un cambio en las expectativas que los usuarios tienen del contenido informativo: Antes esperaban entretenimiento y ahora un valor añadido.

Impacto de la analítica en la selección y el tratamiento de los temas (H2).

De los 28 entrevistados en este estudio, 24 hicieron referencia al impacto que tienen los datos de audiencia en las decisiones editoriales. La mayoría (21) indicó que no inciden de manera directa en la agenda mediática, pero sí otorgan información valiosa para tomar decisiones editoriales con mayor criterio. Para ellos, esto no es peligroso ya que permite elaborar estrategias para llegar mejor al público. «Parece que cuando hablamos de estas cosas hablamos de dictadura

del clic o de la presión por las audiencias», pero los datos no siempre afectan «de mala manera» (Mari Luz Peinado, 15 de septiembre de 2022); contar con esta información permite orientar la producción de contenidos. Pese a ello, los entrevistados fueron tajantes al indicar que los datos no determinan la agenda del medio. Algunos de ellos precisaron que la agenda se encuentra guiada por el interés público y otros, que predomina el «instinto» de los periodistas.

Sólo 2 entrevistados reconocieron que muchas veces se seleccionan los temas y se plantea el tratamiento en función de las preferencias de la audiencia. En este sentido, advirtieron que continúan con la inercia de los últimos años, en los que el volumen era lo más importante. Uno argumentó que dar vuelta esta tendencia requiere de mucho trabajo pedagógico. Otro aceptó que el impacto de los datos es muy alto y que suele trabajar en función de cómo responde la audiencia.

Algunos entrevistados (15) consideraron que el reto está en lograr un balance entre contenidos virales y contenidos de calidad. Este equilibrio –explican– permite informar al lector de que se encuentra frente a un medio de comunicación de confianza. «Si el marco no está equilibrado, el lector entiende inmediatamente que usted está vendiendo otra cosa: está vendiendo publicidad, está vendiendo aplicaciones, está engañando. Y la gente, una cosa que quiere es no ser engañada», explicó Daniele Manca, director adjunto de *Corriere della Sera* (22 de agosto de 2022). 10 entrevistados apreciaron que el medio en el que se desempeñan se encuentra transitando un camino hacia dicho balance. Según explican, la «tentación» –Francesco Guerrera, subdirector de *La Repubblica*, 15 de julio de 2022– es difundir contenidos que generen tráfico, pero son conscientes que esto les perjudica. El desafío es encontrar un equilibrio que les permita difundir información. «Una vez que tienes tu estrella del norte fijada, lo único que hay que hacer es intentar caminar hacia ella. Creo que estamos en un camino significativo y en un gran reto», apuntó Davide Casati, editor digital en *Corriere della Sera* (29 de julio de 2022).

Pese a lo anterior, 5 entrevistados consideraron que el medio en el que se desempeñan ha conseguido adquirir un balance positivo de la agenda mediática. 2 argumentaron que dejaron de difundir contenido viral o sensacionalista, pues ahora la apuesta es realizar contenidos de rigor y calidad.

No hacemos sensacionalismo, no hacemos clickbait y eso puede hacer que lleguemos a menos gente al principio, pero la gente a la que llegamos le gusta lo que encuentra y es adecuado (...) Esa es una forma mucho más saludable y sostenible de construir una audiencia que perseguir el mayor número posible todo el tiempo. (David Knowles, jefe del departamento de Redes Sociales de *The Telegraph*, 6 de julio de 2022)

Un entrevistado argumentó que ya no trabajan en favor de ser los primeros, pues las noticias de última hora ya no son publicadas ni bien llegan a la redacción, sino que requieren de una verificación.

Impacto del uso de redes sociales en la reputación de la marca periodística (H3).

16 entrevistados hicieron relación a cómo impactó el uso de redes sociales en la imagen o el prestigio del medio de comunicación en el que trabajan. La mayoría (12) consideró que el uso de estas plataformas no afectó negativamente la imagen o el prestigio del medio, pues desde un principio trabajaron para reflejar los valores de la marca en los contenidos. Un cuarto de ellos (3) defendió que el impacto de las redes fue más bien positivo para la imagen. Uno de ellos –del periódico *Le Monde*– argumentó que estas plataformas enriquecieron la imagen del periódico porque permitieron demostrar que además de seriedad y rigor, son capaces de hacer contenido para redes. Explicó que además de mostrar las caras y voces de la redacción, las redes sociales permitieron mostrar contenido con humor. En resumen, ayudaron a mostrar a los lectores jóvenes que *Le Monde* «no es tan aburrido» (sic.). Los otros dos –de *The Telegraph* y *Le Figaro*– sostuvieron que estos espacios no degradaron la calidad de sus contenidos porque siempre estuvieron atentos a reflejar la voz y el tono del medio.

Sólo un entrevistado consideró que el uso que se hizo de las redes impactó tanto positiva como negativamente en la imagen del medio. Positivamente en tanto permitieron llegar a un público al que no es posible llegar con las versiones en papel o digital. Reconoció, empero, que los lectores alcanzados no son potenciales suscriptores. «En ese momento, la batalla era la de usuario único mensual y esta estrategia nos permitió ser número 1 en Comscore», argumentó. Sostuvo que esta estrategia un tanto «salvaje» tuvo un impacto negativo en la imagen del medio.

3 entrevistados reconocieron el impacto negativo de las redes sociales en la imagen de los medios. Coincidieron en que, cuando el objetivo era generar tráfico masivo, muchas empresas periodísticas apostaron por el clickbait y afectaron la imagen del conjunto de medios. «Hubo una obsesión por el tráfico (…) Esto fue una cosa muy perversa (…) Yo creo que ahí sí se nos fue un poco de las manos», convino Guacimara Castrillo, jefa del departamento de redes sociales de *El Mundo* (15 de septiembre de 2022). Otros 8 entrevistados hicieron referencia a que hubo una evolución en la manera de trabajar sobre estas plataformas, con argumentos similares a los expresados por los anteriores.

2 entrevistados que se desempeñan en departamentos de redes sociales hicieron referencia a la dificultad que significa trabajar en estos espacios bajo una experimentación permanente. Por ejemplo:

Es muy fácil juzgar desde afuera (…) todos estábamos experimentando con esta nueva plataforma, así que no puedo culpar a los periódicos por no entender inmediatamente lo poderosas que eran estas herramientas y lo importante de tomárselas en serio a la hora de invertir en ellas. (C. Severgnini, periodista del departamento de redes sociales de *Corriere della Sera*, 5 de julio de 2022).

Trabajo con las redes en el avance hacia un modelo basado en la fidelización de la audiencia (H4).

Nuestros resultados muestran que las redes sociales continúan cumpliendo un rol fundamental en la estrategia digital de los medios, pues hemos identificado cinco objetivos -relacionados entre sí- de la presencia en estas plataformas.

Llegar al público joven.

De los 26 entrevistados que hicieron referencia al rol de redes sociales, 21 indicaron que son plataformas fundamentales para alcanzar audiencias que no se dirigen a la página web del periódico de manera voluntaria. Refieren, en particular, a las audiencias jóvenes, a las que consideran el futuro de la industria periodística. La manera de hacerlo –indican– no es difundir contenido viral, sino adaptar contenido de interés público a la lógica de estas plataformas. Esto supone experimentar con nuevos formatos. Aparecieron como ejemplo la secuencia de imágenes con texto o los vídeos con subtítulos, en los que se responde a una pregunta concreta sobre un tema noticioso. Destacan los vídeos con formato de «explainers», donde un conjunto de recursos audiovisuales se proponen explicar un aspecto complejo de un contenido informativo a un usuario confundido por demasiada o muy poca información. O el quiz de noticias «¿Falso o real?», elaborado por el equipo de *The Guardian*, en el que un periodista desafía a la audiencia a indicar la veracidad de una serie de contenidos. También los reportajes breves que elabora *Le Monde* para la red social Instagram mediante una serie de *slides* llamativas. «Tienes que ser más un profesor que un periodista», apreció Castrillo, jefa del departamento de redes sociales de *El Mundo*, respecto de los formatos que suelen trabajar para llegar a las audiencias más jóvenes (15 de septiembre de 2022).

Dar a conocer la marca periodística.

21 entrevistados sostuvieron que son esenciales para presentar el contenido y difundir la marca periodística. Son una portada más del periódico, que, en palabras de Álvaro Romero Vacas, redactor de redes sociales de *El País*, se debe «alimentar» y «cuidar» (26 de septiembre de 2022). Según explican, estos «quioscos digitales» –sic Lucía González (23 de agosto de 2022)– son necesarios para que los medios pongan su contenido a disposición de las nuevas audiencias. Sostienen que esto les permite generar una comunidad capaz de identificar la marca entre los millones de contenidos que circulan en estas plataformas. «La idea es asegurar que estas personas entienden lo que hacemos y entienden por qué lo hacemos», explicó Gabriel Coutagne, redactor jefe adjunto de *Le Monde* (24 de junio de 2022).

Generar nuevas suscripciones.

21 entrevistados sostuvieron que las redes sociales son espacios fundamentales para identificar y generar nuevos suscriptores. Coinciden en que se trata de una apuesta para el futuro, pues consideran que desde estas plataformas el viaje

hacia la suscripción es complejo. Al fin y al cabo, primero, el usuario debe dirigirse a la página web y, luego, decidir suscribirse. Este viaje adquiere aún más complejidad si se tiene presente que muchas plataformas –como Instagram, TikTok y Snapchat– no permiten introducir un enlace en cada publicación. La apuesta, entonces, es fidelizar a los usuarios para que cuando decidan mantenerse informados se suscriban al medio que recuerdan de tiempos anteriores. Se trata de «Estar en contacto con el público para que cuando estas personas se independicen económicamente y quieran pagar por contenidos informativos acudan naturalmente a nosotros», resumió Olivier Laffargue, jefe de servicio de Snapchat/TikTok de *Le Monde* (30 de mayo de 2022).

Recolectar contenido informativo y recibir feedback de la audiencia.

5 entrevistados indicaron que las redes también son utilizadas para encontrar informaciones que ningún otro medio ha cubierto; tendencias informativas. También apuntan que son útiles para recolectar información sobre las preferencias de la audiencia joven. Las redes son como «una ventanilla, donde los usuarios vienen a pedir cosas, a quejarse y a felicitarte», explicó Álvaro Romero Vacas, redactor del departamento de Redes Sociales de *El País* (26 de septiembre de 2022). Se trata de una «labor de escucha». En estos espacios gobernados por terceros, donde no hay recetas ni antecedentes, los datos de audiencia aparecen como una guía para tomar decisiones editoriales.

Ofrecer información gratuita

3 entrevistados concibieron a las redes sociales como espacios en los que aún se puede ofrecer información gratuita y, por lo tanto, donde la información aún adquiere carácter de servicio público. Uno entrevistado indicó que las redes están cambiando los lenguajes y la manera de mantener unida a la sociedad, lo que tiene serias repercusiones en la configuración de la democracia (Daniele Manca, director adjunto de *Corriere della Sera*, 22 de agosto de 2022).

Pese a ello, nuestros resultados también indican que los medios mantienen cierta cautela respecto de elaborar una estrategia periodística dependiente de las redes. 7 entrevistados advirtieron que estas plataformas se encuentran gobernadas por grandes empresas que definen las pautas de publicación y, en muchos casos, exigen inversión para lograr un mayor alcance del contenido. «Las redes son una sala de exposición para tu contenido, pero no es tu sala de exposición. Es como tener un espacio en el departamento de otra persona», apuntó Martin Belam, Snippets & Explainers de *The Guardian* (15 de junio de 2022). Por eso, reconocieron que es más acertado elaborar estrategias mediáticas basadas en plataformas donde tienen mayor control (como el sitio web o las aplicaciones). «Me enseñan la zanahoria y luego me van apartando la zanahoria como con un palo. Por eso, en los medios, tenemos que pensar cómo ser más fuertes nosotros», concluyó Pau Rodríguez, director de Marketing de *La Vanguardia* (20 de junio de 2022).

Discusión y conclusiones

El estudio constata que la creciente apuesta por los modelos de negocio basados en la fidelización de la audiencia (Justel-Vázquez et al., 2022; Newman, 2021) no supone dejar de trabajar con los datos de audiencia que, desde hace muchos años, ocupan un espacio relevante en las redacciones periodísticas (Anderson, 2011; Cohen, 2019; Cornia et al., 2019; Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018; Macgregor, 2007; Nelson, 2019b; Tandoc, 2014; Vu, 2013). Sin embargo, a la luz de los resultados se constata un cambio radical en la manera de trabajar con los datos de audiencia. Con el objetivo de favorecer el modelo de negocio, los medios ahora prestan especial atención al «engagement de la audiencia» –pese a la vaguedad del concepto (Broersma, 2019; Napoli, 2011)–, lo que supone priorizar los indicadores de impresión por sobre los indicadores de rendimiento (Broersma, 2019). Para varios periodistas este cambio supone una «evolución» que promoverá cambios en el producto y favorecerá la fidelización, la confianza y la disposición de los lectores para comprar productos informativos –tal como habían sugerido estudios previos (Broersma, 2019; Lewis et al., 2014; Lischka & Messerli, 2016)–. Esta apuesta no implica dejar de lado las métricas cuantitativas, como el tráfico web, que aún permiten atraer el financiamiento de las industrias publicitarias (Jensen, 2021), sino complementarlos. En *The Guardian* aseguran que el haber avanzado en la consecución de un público fiel en su edición digital les permite liberarse de la presión por aumentar el tamaño de la audiencia. La manera de trabajar con los datos de audiencia podría ser uno de los ingredientes claves para alcanzar esta situación.

Con la presente investigación se evidencian los esfuerzos de los medios por elaborar estrategias de actuación frente al engagement de la audiencia. Sin embargo, en muchas redacciones aún se afirma estar aprendiendo a cómo trabajar con los datos de un modo distinto, lo que obliga a los medios a confiar en la «interpretación» o «intuición» de los trabajadores de noticias en la toma de decisiones editoriales. Definir estrategias claras en este sentido sería un primer paso para atraer suscripciones y convertir las métricas de engagement en una moneda de cambio para la industria publicitaria (Nelson & Webster, 2016) –rol que hasta el momento sólo ha ocupado el tamaño de la audiencia (Napoli, 2012; Nelson & Webster, 2016). Lo anterior es prueba de la apuesta de los medios por superar su crisis estructural a través de la consolidación de un modelo de negocio que combine los ingresos de publicidad con el pago por contenidos – una sugerencia de diversos académicos del ámbito (Kiesow, 2018; Nelson, 2019a)–. Un pago por contenidos que no sea residual, sino creciente y significativo; algo hasta ahora complejo en el escenario digital, en el que por más de una década pocos medios fueron capaces de generar ingresos relevantes a través de la suscripción. Aún resta por averiguar si es esta combinación lo que permitirá a los medios superar la crisis económica y de confianza que atraviesa el sector.

El presente estudio también revela que la mayoría de los trabajadores de noticias no advierten –o, al menos, no abiertamente– el alto impacto negativo de la analítica en la toma de decisiones editoriales y la calidad de la agenda mediática, algo que ha sido ampliamente demostrado por literatura académica (A. M. Lee et al., 2014; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009; Nelson, 2019b; Nguyen, 2013; Tandoc & Thomas, 2015; Túñez-López et al., 2011; Welbers et al., 2016). Sostienen que los datos de audiencia otorgan información valiosa para tomar decisiones editoriales con mayor criterio. No consideran que comporte un peligro, sino que es más bien una oportunidad. Pese a lo anterior, la mayoría de los trabajadores de noticias reconocen que aún se enfrentan al reto de «balancear» la agenda mediática, lo que revela que la analítica continúa teniendo un peso relevante en el proceso de selección y tratamiento de temas. Quienes advierten haber logrado dicho balance lo adjudican a la difusión de «contenido de calidad» y al «valor añadido», conceptos que sería interesante clarificar en futuras investigaciones. En paralelo, los medios obvian el impacto negativo que han tenido las redes sociales en la reputación de la empresa (Etter et al., 2017; Mishina et al., 2012) y la confianza de la audiencia (Ross Arguedas et al., 2022). La mayoría de ellas no advierten –al menos, de manera explícita– que el uso de estas plataformas puede haber contribuido, o amplificado, la distribución de contenidos virales, estrictamente vinculados al interés del público y no al interés público (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Nelson, 2019b; O'Connor, 2013; Tewksbury et al., 2001; Yadamsuren, 2009), lo que pone en cuestión los procesos de autoevaluación de las prácticas editoriales.

Síntoma de ello son las dificultades para definir estrategias en favor del aprovechamiento de redes. Pese al claro espacio que ocupan estas plataformas en el modelo de negocio basado en las audiencias –permiten alcanzar nuevos usuarios que aumentan la probabilidad de suscripciones y captan la atención de los anunciantes–, muchos trabajadores de noticias están en constante experimentación. Coincidiendo con investigaciones previas (Newman, 2021; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022), innovar con los formatos de publicación aparece como la vía más explorada por los medios para conseguir pistas sobre cómo aumentar la visibilidad de los contenidos informativos y fidelizar a las audiencias jóvenes. Nuestro estudio evidencia que esto aumenta la desconfianza de las empresas de noticias hacia las redes sociales. Pues, de manera similar a otros estudios (Newman, 2021), en esta investigación los periodistas advierten la falta de transparencia en el funcionamiento de algoritmos y el posicionamiento de contenidos informativos. Por eso, para muchos medios abordar estas plataformas de manera más estratégica (Ott & Theunissen, 2015) no parece ser una prioridad y los esfuerzos se centran en mejorar los espacios propios (Newman, 2021) y ofrecer valor añadido a los suscriptores (Lindén et al., 2022).

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3.2. Journalism and analytics: The tension between journalistic criteria and data

Abstract

This chapter is based on an exhaustive literature review of previous research into the application of web analytics to journalistic practice and on an analysis of the digital media's news agenda. It also offers a review of the current Spanish digital media context and the effort made by newspapers to consolidate a subscription model. The importance of the criteria to be followed in the management of data in the framework of the effort to strengthen the online business model of the news media is addressed. A strategy prioritizing growth in subscriber numbers will place more value on indicators related to the quality of the content, while a strategy based mainly on advertising will focus primarily on indicators related to audience growth.

Chapter

The rise of web analytics in newsrooms

The discipline of web analytics allows us to measure, collect, analyze, and report on Internet data for the purpose of understanding and optimizing the use of the web (Burby et al., 2007). On paper, web analytics is not a technology to produce reports; it is a process that proposes a virtuous cycle for website optimization (Waisberg & Kaushik, 2009). Its objective is to improve the user experience and increase the revenue of the online business, which is possible due to the information obtained from the study of the behavior of users who browse a website.

Web analytics programs enable website owners to monitor how the online audience behaves through the generation of metrics (Napoli, 2011), that is, of "any quantitative measure of passive viewing or consumption of content by internet users" (Krall, 2009, p. 387).

The field of digital marketing has used web analytics from its inception to drive up customer numbers. Taking metrics into consideration is essential to ensure the survival of the website and the company, since the main difference between a website that sells and one that simply exists are their usability and conversion rate (Beri & Singh, 2013). For this reason, web analytics has become an inescapable and fundamental activity for any company with an internet presence. It is therefore understood that the news media, as organizations with a strategic presence on the web, have not been able to remain oblivious to the phenomenon.

In the field of journalism, web analytics are understood to be a discipline that enables us to learn more about the demographics, consumption habits, and media interests of the audience (Corzo & Salaverría, 2018). Web analytics tools provide news organizations with access to information about users' digital footprints, from where they enter the website, the time spent on the page, how

they navigate, when they leave, when they return, what results they obtain from internal search engines, and what content they participate in or comment on. By means of these indicators, the media can profile and track the behavior of their readership (Hanusch, 2017; Macgregor, 2007; McKenzie et al., 2011; Napoli, 2011; Tandoc, 2014; Vu, 2014; Weischedel et al., 2005). They are also able to use indicators of popularity such as comments or the number of times content is shared on social network sites (Duffy et al., 2018; Tandoc & Vos, 2016). The indicators proposed by Maldonado (2009) for a hypothetical online publication seeking to drive-up the flow of traffic to its website include, the pursuit of reader loyalty, a better understanding of its audience, the number of unique visitors, page views, and the ratio of engaged readers and that of readers who share content.

Thus, web analytics are critical for news organization (Tandoc & Thomas, 2015) seeking better commercial outcomes (Duncan, 2010). However, it is important to note that due to their nature and function, journalism companies cannot take on any other business activity. As Tandoc and Thomas (2015) point out, despite being useful in business, the application of web analytics to journalism is more complex. While in the field of marketing its objectives are clear, in journalism the concept becomes "muddy and contentious" (2015, p. 244), as web analytics are capable of disrupting the balance between the profession's role as a public service and its function as a forum for advertising (Baker, 2002; Carbonell, 2012). The possibility offered by analytics for optimizing website visitor numbers could override the journalistic judgement involved in, for example, the process of deciding whether or not a certain event is newsworthy.

Newsworthiness and web analytics

Randall (2016) states that there are as many definitions of what constitutes news as there are stories, summarizing the consensus reached, as new, unpublished, unusual and of general interest, the latter being the factor behind most daily discussions in newsrooms.

Faced with the infinite number of events that reach journalists and newsrooms, it is impossible to establish unique and universal parameters to define what constitutes news, thus requiring a selection process, from which a certain number of events become news. In this way, the media news agenda is created. The process involves professional criteria and various external constraints coming into play that end up determining what is deemed newsworthy.

Van Dijk (1990) speaks of the journalistic values that provide the cognitive basis for understanding the decisions behind the selection of the news. Among them, along with journalistic values—and the ingredients of the news—he includes the values formulated in economic terms within profit-oriented media organizations. Included in these considerations are the budget for news production, the available space, the editorial line, and the influence of advertisers, in addition to powerful players, and the public. These are factors that are not strictly journalistic but which

condition work in the media. It is here where the business dimension and the journalistic dimension meet.

Sintes Olivella (2010, p. 187) points out that the problem in this "encounter" arises when the business side of the media takes precedence over the journalistic side, "when the balance is tipped too far in favor of giving the public what they want and when increasing reader numbers or audiences takes precedence over any other consideration".

Many digital media platforms have fallen victim to such tensions over the last few decades: a result of the pressures of a competitive market in a context of news saturation and, to an even greater extent, the tipping of the balance in favor of the business side following the difficulties experienced by news media companies with a traditional business model following the emergence of the Internet.

In a scenario of economic hardship, news media companies lose "their ability to subsidize journalism as a public service" (Starr, 2009, p. 132) and, consequently, the democratic values the industry is supposed to safeguard suffer.

The dependence of journalism on external factors, such as web analytics and metrics, is closely linked to its structure, which is based on audiences and funding sources (Tandoc & Maitra, 2018). That is, such dependency increases if the business goes through a bad patch. With the advent of digitalization, the media saw a decline in the sources of income that had previously sustained their business: payment for content and advertising revenues, which were now shared with many other players, along with giants such as Facebook and Google.

In this scenario, web analytics has gained ground over purely journalistic criteria in many newsrooms, as it helps to create a product that optimizes audience growth and increases advertising revenue. In this way, audience preferences—interpreted from data indicating what "works" and goes viral on the web—have become increasingly important in the decision-making process about what is newsworthy. In many cases, the result has translated into more space in the traditional press being given to trivial news and bizarre stories, which coexist on websites with hard and soft news (Justel-Vázquez et al., 2016).

> Web analytics as a strategy to drive up audiences in the quality press: more soft news in digital versions?

The routine incorporation of web analytics into journalism has opened a debate about the increased level of influence that users have on the gatekeeping process (Bro & Wallberg, 2015; Salaverría, 2015), with several studies demonstrating a consequent erosion in the quality of news reporting (i.e., a drift towards characteristic features of the tabloid press).

While much research, for example, Boczkowski (2010), MacGregor (2007), and Domingo (2008), initially argued that, despite the routine incorporation of web analytics into journalism, professional values continued to prevail in digital

decisions, later studies found that analytics encourages journalists to rely less on their intuition: they cannot ignore the interests of users and in digital environments their valuations end up deciding the news. Boczkowski and Peer (2011) speak of a growing consensus among academics and media analysts that the news has become "softer".

Sintes Olivella (2010) predicted that the possibilities offered by analytics would result in the media focusing on what is merely interesting rather than what is important. Túñez-López et al. (2011) also noted that new technologies permitted the channeling of issues that had previously been left out of traditional news production mechanisms.

Nguyen (2013) observed that this resulted in a tendency for the media to use audience metrics tools to maximize the publication of soft news, "that caters to the lowest common denominator of all tastes, addressing the most basic, least sophisticated and least sensitive level of lifestyles and attitudes" (2013, pp. 152–153). According to Nguyen, hard news about public affairs, which the audience needs to consume in order to function in a democratic society, does not always have broad appeal, as it requires, among other things, significant cognitive effort and a sustained interest in public life.

Research into the US online media with the most traffic carried out by Tandoc (2014) found that analytics plays a key role in the "de-selection" process, by which journalists decide which articles to remove from the homepage of their websites, replacing them with others. Some journalists even report the existence of a set time in which to evaluate the success of a story on the homepage: if it does not perform well within 20 minutes of publication, it is replaced.

Other research has documented how, in newspapers most subject to commercial pressure, metrics are widely used to produce lists of the most viewed or most read content (Anderson, 2011; Lee et al., 2014; MacGregor, 2007). Molek-Kozakowska's (2013) research into the headlines of the *Daily Mail*'s "most read" articles showed that language plays a key role in these lists, helping to present a topic that is not of immediate social relevance or of particular interest to the audience as intriguing, extraordinary, and worth exploring. Examples of the logic of web analytics in a news ecosystem that gives space to audience preferences include the labels "Most viewed", "Most shared", and "Most commented-on" (Justel-Vázquez et al., 2016).

Tandoc and Thomas (2015) note that access to such data has resulted in a shift of focus from social impact to social interest. Traffic and visibility have become dominant elements in the context of the reign of web analytics, with the media being conditioned by the need to increase revenue and find ways to monetize their news output. In their research based on interviews with professionals working in two of Spain's leading newspapers, Justel-Vázquez et al. (2016) reflect that while journalists try to distance themselves from this dynamic, they are not fully able to.

In the same vein, research by Hanusch and Tandoc (2019) also found that the use of analytics tools in newsrooms caused journalists to question their own values and norms, ideally linked to building citizenship and promoting the public interest. Suenzo et al. (2021) argue that the crisis in the industry has led to a questioning of the traditional values of journalism, and the news, as a product, is now guided by the values of an era marked by the immediacy of information.

This same logic carries over to social networks, where the media has also been forced to have a presence, one that is sometimes amplified due to these platforms being governed by algorithms. Social media platforms have become important channels for news outlets and journalists both to connect with their audiences (Al-Rawi, 2017; Duffy & Knight, 2019), to distribute information, and mine content for news generation, and attempt to draw traffic to their websites (Hermida et al., 2012; Lee, 2016; Sacco & Bossio, 2017; Thurman, 2018). However, in becoming content publishers, these on-line platforms have left news organizations unsure about their own future (Bell et al., 2017).

Paulussen et al. (2016) observe how social network sites, specifically Facebook, put pressure on news outlets to replace their "editorial logic" with an "algorithmic logic" in news production, which enables them to stand out amidst the flood of content circulating on these platforms. Welbers and Opgenhaffen (2019), showed that journalists were able to increase the success of their posts on social network platforms by using more subjective and positive status messages than the headlines, seemingly without compromising the actual content of the news. This finding demonstrates that status messages are written with a purpose and intention that is in line with the formatting logic demanded by social media.

Bazaco et al. (2019) focus on the practice of posting clickbait headlines, which acquires special relevance on social networks, where the news is divorced from the hierarchy applied by the media and is forced to compete individually with other content that does not always conform to traditional journalistic criteria. After analyzing 2,266 posts on the Facebook and Twitter profiles of the Spanish newspapers *El País* and *El Mundo*, they found that clickbait directly affects the quality of the news agenda, saturating it with banal and excessively dramatic content.

While some academics argue in favor of news organizations prioritizing audience-driven content (Lee & Chyi, 2014), others consider that satisfying audience wants and needs are mutually exclusive objectives, and therefore the autonomy and judgement of journalists should be protected from market forces (Nelson & Tandoc, 2019).

The impact of business decisions on digital strategies

A significant amount of research supports the view that while web analytics alone does not drive change in journalism, it does so in conjunction with the decision taken by news organizations to use the data it provides to create a product that

is targeted to audience preferences. As, in the absence of context, strategy, and guidance, journalists will ignore quantified audience data in favor of their own editorial judgement (Graves et al., 2010; Usher, 2013). Further research supports the theory that audience metrics alone do not override traditional journalistic practices due to their effect varying according to the type of news: having a more significant impact on soft news than on hard news (Lamot & Van Aelst, 2020). In their interviews with journalists from some of the main Spanish newspapers, Justel-Vázquez et al. (2016) explained that web analytics statistics did not remove journalistically relevant news from the agenda, but rather made the journalists' filter more permeable to purely anecdotal news circulating on the web, as this was seen as an opportunity to drive-up traffic.

A few years ago, Anderson (2011) pointed out that the process of deciding what items to include in the news agenda was becoming increasingly influenced by business decisions, which prioritized quantitative audience measurement techniques. Reinemann et al. (2012), indicated that the media's tendency to publish eye-catching and shocking content to attract readers' attention was due to economic pressure. The need for news organizations to attract revenue was forcing journalists to try all sorts of formulas, such as publishing content that is attention-grabbing due to being exciting and sensationalist, despite it having dubious journalistic value. According to Rowe (2011), this trend intensified due to the economic crisis affecting the media's business model.

A significant amount of research supports this position. For example, Vu (2014) demonstrates that the influence of readership data on editorial decisions has been conditioned by the perception that driving up reader numbers attracts higher financial returns. Tandoc (2014) documented that editors considered the audience to be a form of economic capital that could be maximized to preserve stability in the journalistic field and, as a result, many under-resourced newsrooms used metrics in their content creation, publishing news that lacked value and did not promote informed discourse. After analyzing several national UK newspapers, Phillips (2015) presented results indicating that in newspapers subject to greater commercial pressure journalists experience more reduction in autonomy, as news selection is largely based on the interpretation of data related to audience behavior. Conversely, in newspapers with less commercial pressure the level of autonomy is higher, with stories that had little general appeal still getting published if the journalist believed them to be important.

In *The Elements of Journalism*, Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) reflect on the impact of minute-by-minute audience ratings in American television; data that permits the construction of news programs tailored to audience preferences, resulting in sensationalism that captures interest but weakens the product. More important still, if journalism provides citizens only with information they say in advance that they prefer, they will only be informed about that section of the community they are already familiar with. While publishing totally irrelevant or

sensationalist news might prove to be a bad bet in the long run, a more fundamental question, beyond whether it is a good or bad strategy, should be addressed. "Journalists need to be responsive to the public they serve, but they also should serve the higher goal of public interest" (Tandoc & Thomas, 2015, p. 253). The function of journalism, ultimately, is to articulate public debate and promote the functioning of democracy. "If journalism simply views itself as the conduit through which transient audience preferences are satisfied, then it is no journalism worth bearing the name" (Tandoc & Thomas, 2015, p. 253).

Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) assert that in the long-term adopting a strategy of infotainment or the trivialization of content alienates the engaged audience and destroys the authority of the media. In the same vein, research carried out by Palau-Sampio (2016) concludes that the emergence of features characteristic of the tabloid press, in which attention-grabbing headlines, curiosities, and anecdotal news items, a scarcity or absence of sources and an editorial approach that mixes-up content, has a "perverse" effect on the quality of the content and the prestige of the media. It has become common to see the most anecdotal news coexisting with issues of the highest interest (Justel-Vázquez et al., 2016).

Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) raise the question of how to deal with sensationalism while ruling out the option of journalism isolating itself in its own world and ignoring the reality of the market. This is not to belittle the value of market research techniques and data in understanding the audience. But it is most usefully employed in helping journalists refine their judgement, not replacing it. "We need to stop using market research that treats our audience as customers, asking them which products they prefer. We need to create journalistic market research that approaches people as citizens and tells us more about their lives" (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007, p. 219). The key would be to use market research— the term used by Kovach and Rosenstiel— or web analytics—which can be understood to be a marketing technique—not to replace the professional judgement of journalists but to broaden the criteria available when making such judgements.

All newsrooms are faced with the limitations of using quantitative indicators to understand the diverse and messy reality of how and why people engage with journalism (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016). Data-driven technology companies, such as Facebook, know that metrics alone never tell the whole story, so in the end qualitative assessments and human judgements are always needed (Oremus, 2016). Additionally, a unique visitor does not always use the time they spend on the website or its content in the same way as an engaged user does. In fact, there is evidence that metrics are much more useful for capturing elements of what people do with digital news content than for capturing why they use it or what such use means (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016). In this regard, Kormelink and Meijer (2018) point out that metrics do not allow us to measure real audience interest in news content because an absence of clicks does not necessarily measure a lack

of interest in the news. Evidence suggests that the most viewed stories are not the best metric for building up a loyal audience (Neheli, 2018).

Thus, more attention should be paid to those indicators that foster the development of a strategy to pursue a more loyal audience—such as time spent on the page or the frequency of visits by the same user—rather than to indicators that allow us to work towards achieving larger audiences—such as the number of unique users, the number of pages viewed, or the most read news items.

Changes in recent years, towards a subscription model

While from the outset, the primary function of web analytics in many newsrooms was to attract advertisers and increase revenue by driving up readership (Cohen, 2018; Nelson, 2018), many other newsrooms, whose business model was initially less dependent on advertising, have always worked with metrics in the pursuit of reader loyalty.

Over the years and at various rates, the metrics that make it possible to optimize a newspaper in terms of audience have given way to others, at least as far as the quality media are concerned. A report by *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism* based on 30 interviews with news organization executives involved in the development of analytics, found that both emerging US-based digital media outlets, such as *Gawker*, *Huffington Post,* and *BuzzFeed*, and US-based legacy media, such as the *New York Times, Wall Street Journal,* and *National Public Radio*, consider it essential to integrate web analytics into daily editorial work for long-term strategic planning (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016). According to the report, leading UK news outlets and broadcasters, such as *The Guardian, The Financial Times*, and the *BBC*, were equally committed to this goal, as they were to the process of developing customized approaches to finding data culture that support their editorial and organizational priorities. The findings also indicate that market leaders in continental Europe, specifically France, Germany, Italy, and Poland, tend to have more in common with leading US and UK organizations than with their domestic competitors. However, the report says they often see themselves as lagging behind international best practice and therefore continue to look to US and UK strategies for inspiration.

In the Spanish context, newspapers experiencing economic difficulties sought to build a large audience rather than a loyal one in order to try to add advertising revenue at a time when the market did not seem ripe for subscription. One might think, then, that in a more favorable and robust economic context for the media, most newspapers would have approached web analytics differently: with less urgency and with more interest in metrics related to the quality of their news production rather than the quantity of readers.

In the case of Spain, newspapers such as *Eldiario.es* were among the first to opt for a membership model that sought to reduce its financial dependence on advertising and thus achieve a more independent newsroom, and in turn, less

dependence on web analytics metrics. In 2015, the newspaper *El Español* opted firmly for a pay model, with content only available to subscribers. In putting its website behind a paywall this model uses web analytics metrics in a different way, as the objective is not to maximize audience numbers.

In recent years, all national newspapers have opted to evolve towards a payment for content model. By June 2021, 30 Spanish newspapers had some kind of paywall for access to the news published in their digital versions (Orús, 2021). *El Mundo* began offering this service in 2019 and other leading newspapers, such as *El Confidencial*, *ABC* and *La Vanguardia*, did so in 2020. Internationally, in some cases the sector took this direction earlier and those who did not do so are currently adopting paywalls: a survey conducted by the *Reuters Institute* revealed that 76% of international newspaper company executives consider the digital subscription model to be the main way for journalism to raise revenue, ahead even of advertising (Newman, 2021). A move towards this model requires a focus on quality over quantity.

Globally, there are already success stories. One example is *The New York Times* which, ten years after first offering digital subscription, has surpassed 7.5 million subscribers (Tracy, 2021). Other US newsrooms that have managed to accumulate a large number of subscribers are *The Washington Post*—3 million— and *The Wall Street Journal*—2.4 million (Newman et al., 2020). Another example of success is the British newspaper *The Times*, which in 2016 moved away from a round-the-clock breaking news cycle in favor of a strategy giving added value to information. *The Times* began to prioritize content depth and analysis, in addition to updating its website only three times a day, and a year later announced that subscription sales had increased by 200% (Davies, 2017).

According to a report by the *Reuters Institute*, in 2019 12% of Internet users paid to read digital newspapers in Spain (Newman et al., 2021). Journalist Carvajal (2020) further documented that in 2020 the Spanish media market registered more than 347,000 digital subscribers. Almost a quarter of this number corresponded to the newspaper *El País*, which introduced its paywall in March 2020 adding 64,200 subscribers by July of the same year. To this figure, the *Prisa* group newspaper added the 37,923 subscribers to the print edition and the 7,842 subscribers to *Kiosko y Más*, the paper edition in digital format. If we consider that all these subscribers can access all online content, by August 2020 the newspaper *El País* had more than 110,000 subscribers in total.

To attract paying readers, the newspaper *El País* recently launched the campaigns *Suscríbete a los hechos*—"Subscribe to the facts"—and *Porque si somos más la oscuridad es menos*—"Because if there are more of us, there is less darkness". This newspaper illustrates the changing trend well: from taking a risk with the creation of a section like *Verne*, which in an attempt drive-up web traffic discussed Internet trends, memes, and social media stories and offered a

space to comment on digital culture, to closing it recently, in a shift towards the subscription model.

Commitment to a subscription-based business model brings together different editorial strategies focused on building reader loyalty, and designed to offer renewed value including exclusive content, renowned authors, multimedia reports, newsletters, etc. Content that is no longer freely accessible to the public. According to data collected by Carvajal (2020), *El País*, the leading newspaper of the Prisa Group, is followed by the digital native *Eldiario.es* with 56,000 subscribers, data that matches that provided by the newspaper itself. *El Mundo* comes next, breaking through the 50,000-subscriber barrier at the end of August 2020. As Carvajal (2020) documents, the digital natives that opted for a pay-per-content model from the start, have also accumulated impressive subscriber numbers. By August 2020, *El Confidencial* had accumulated more than 15,000 subscribers, *El Español* 12,000, *Infolibre* 12,800, and *Público* 11,000.

This change, that of reducing dependence on metrics such as the number of unique users in favor of other data that enable us to learn more about the reader and potential subscriber, resulted from a commitment to the subscription model and the improvement in profits over the last few years, opening the way for media outlets to use web analytics to develop strategies that build long-term reader engagement and loyalty. Adopting a subscription model requires greater focus on readers who can be persuaded to become loyal, as they will be the users willing to pay for consuming the news content that they consider relevant, and less focus on those users captured by a clickbait headline. This is the only way the media will be able to base their business model—partially or totally—on payment for content and gain economic independence.

This demonstrates the possibility that a different strategy, one that is committed to a business model in which revenue does not come solely from advertising, but also from the readers themselves (i.e., from subscriptions) can be successfully explored. Such a strategy, embarked on recently by the digital press in Spain, requires the use of different web analytics metrics to those required by newspapers whose main objective is to attract greater audience numbers in order to increase advertising revenue. Of the indicators cited by Maldonado (2009), focusing on metrics such as unique visitors, is more important for newspapers whose goal is to drive up traffic to its website, while paying attention to indicators such as the number of pages viewed, the ratio of readers who share content and time spent on the page are a priority for those newspapers who objectives include getting to know their audience better and building reader loyalty.

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3.3. COVID-19 pandemic in Italian digital media: Media behavior and citizen information consumption during the health crisis

Abstract

This article studies media behavior and information consumption during the COVID-19 health crisis using quantitative content analysis of the news published by Italian digital media between January 1 and April 27, 2020 (n = 841,786). The data shows a direct relationship between the number of publications and the capacity for *engagement* and a greater reach with classic, general media and Facebook.

Keywords

Coronavirus; Media; Social networks; Engagement; Italy.

Context

Coronavirus (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a new strain of COVID-19, SARS-CoV-2, which was announced for the first time on December 31, 2019 in the Chinese city of Wuhan (World Health Organization, 2020a). The first people infected with COVID-19 in Europe were detected in France, on January 25, 2020, and in Germany, on January 27, 2020. However, on February 21, 2020 in the Italian region of Lombardy, the first outbreak was reported within the European Union. The number of infected grew rapidly in the country, which led the government to order a state of alarm and a mandatory quarantine on March 10, 2020. The following day, the World Health Organization (World Health Organization, 2020b) recognized the disease as a pandemic and by August 30, 2020 they had reported a total of 24,822,800 confirmed cases and 838,360 deaths worldwide (World Health Organization, 2020c).

The phenomenon quickly became a central topic on mass media agendas around the world because it coincided with nearly all the newsworthy criteria (O'Neill & Harcup, 2009), which were:

> Unexpectedness (sudden outbreak) as well as consonance with expectations (a new pandemic was long predicted), intensity increase (growing number of patients and fatalities), negativity (chance of a catastrophe), relevance (current risks involved), meaningfulness (fear of epidemic, personal risks), unambiguity (flu is well known), continuity (daily updates) and unpredictability (will it be a severe epidemic?) (Vasterman & Ruigrok, 2013, p. 437).

Reporting on a pandemic like COVID-19 is a challenge for the media because they produce news based on unpredictable information that occurs in the moment (Ratzan *et al*., 2020). During times of emergency, its role when facing the fear of the citizens, the hysteria of the financial sector and the unintentional misunderstandings of science is fundamental and simple, truthful, timely and

evidence-based information must be provided (Villena-Alarcón & Caballero-Galeote, 2020). Managing a pandemic requires a balanced approach that conveys what citizens, and the health system can do without causing panic (Cowper, 2020).

There are multiple investigations that have studied the impact of media coverage on the perception of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some have indicated that journalistic companies were able to stop the spread of the disease at an early stage (Zhou *et al.*, 2020). Others noted that the media had a negative influence because they encouraged racial attacks by using terms such as "Chinese virus" or rating the disease as being a "Chinese virus pandemonium" (Lyu *et al.*, 2020; Zheng *et al.*, 2020). These studies show that the media is a powerful tool in setting up the public agenda. By selecting the content to transmit and from what perspective, they influence citizens' perceptions. This demonstrates the need to study how the media covers certain topics using theories such as *agenda setting* and *framing*, whose point of convergence is the structure and content of information published by the media.

The *agenda-setting* theory was posed by McCombs & Shaw (1972) as a result of Cohen's thesis (1963), where he argued that the media does not indicate how to think, but what to think about. According to this theory, the media directs the public's attention and influences their perception of the most important topics with the daily selection and distribution of information. "This ability to influence the relevance of the public repertoire is what has been called agenda setting by the news media" (McCombs, 2006, p. 24). Citizens take these cues and use them to organize their own agenda and decide which issues are most important. Over time, these issues become the most relevant ones to the public. As a result, the media agenda becomes the public agenda (McCombs, 2006; Justel-Vazquez *et al.*, 2016).

The main premise of the *framing theory*, or the *frame*, is that a phenomenon can be seen from a variety of perspectives and interpreted from multiple principles or considerations. The term *frame* first appeared in the field of psychology by Gregory Bateson (Sadaba, 2008) and was later put into the social context by sociologist Erving Goffman (Koziner, 2013). The application of framing in communication research has a solid trajectory that allows one to consider the theory as being key (Vicente-Mariño & López-Rabadán, 2009). From a media point of view, a frame serves to organize everyday realities (Tuchman, 1978) and provide meaning to current events (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Framing involves selecting, emphasizing, and structuring information to set a perspective from which to interpret a particular topic (Fenoll & Rodríguez-Ballesteros, 2017). The news is thus considered to be like a window whose frame determines the reality that one has access to and focuses the attention on a specific item while limiting the perception of other realities (Tuchman, 1978). Therefore, framing can be defined as a process in which some aspects of reality are selected in order to

define the problem, diagnose its causes, suggest moral judgments, and provide behaviors to follow (Entman, 1993).

Some authors argue that framing is the equivalent of the second level of the agenda-setting theory (McCombs *et al.*, 1997) because it uses frames as a characteristic that, because of its complexity, allows us to define a problem, interpret its causes or propose a process (McCombs, 2006).

Concerning health issues, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the media has proven to be a source of relevant information for the majority of the population. Due to the exceptionality and severity of the COVID-19 outbreak, citizens had increased access to information (Singh *et al.*, 2020) and the news became a precious and valuable commodity in handling the situation (Casero-Ripollés, 2020). According to Comscore's analysis (2020), the area with the fastest growing consumption of news during confinement was the Internet, whose peak usage coincided with the first steps taken by different governments to curb the spread of the virus. In Italy, the first European country hit hard by the virus, the peak was recorded between the 2nd and 8th of March. On March 2, the Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte divided the country into four zones according to the severity of the epidemic in order to implement measures to restrict activities (*Corriere della Sera*, 2020). On March 8, he extended the measures to all of Lombardy and 14 northern provinces, putting more than a quarter of the Italian population under quarantine (*Repubblica*, 2020).

The most notable change in citizen information consumption habits was identified in digital, general news media, whose traffic in Italy soared between the 17th and 23rd of February 2020 (Comscore, 2020). This coincided with the knowledge of the first infected people in the Lombardy region. The rise in the number of deaths in Italy, which was recorded between March 6-10, was another key moment in the change in information consumption as 93% of the population claimed to consult news at least once a day by mainly accessing national government websites (66%) and news companies (55%) (Edelman, 2020).

This shows the importance of new technologies (broadband), new devices (computers, mobile phones, tablets) and new areas of interaction (social networks) in the production, dissemination, and consumption of informative content. Using social networks for journalistic writing rose the most as they became important channels for distributing information, extracting ideas, and increasing website traffic (Hermida *et al.*, 2012; Lee, 2016; Sacco & Bossio, 2017; Thurman, 2018). Not only did they become a valid source of information (Pedriza, 2018; Justel-Vázquez *et al.*, 2018), especially in the emergence of unforeseen events (Pérez-Soler & Micó, 2015), but they led the media to adapt information content according to the logic of consumption (Hernández-Pérez & Rodríguez-Mateos, 2016).

On these platforms, the audience's exposure and interaction with the information is particular (Ahmadi & Wohn, 2018) because they encounter news content

without intending to do so (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Yadamsuren & Erdelez, 2010). Internet and social network users accidentally discovered news while engaging in other online activities, both related to and not related to the information content (Tewksbury et al. 2001). This way of accessing information "is brief, interrupted and partial and its consumption is ephemeral", but it is also "both the symptom and the cause of lasting, constant and integral transformation" (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2018, p. 143). Previous research shows that this incidental exposure to news plays an important role in accessing useful, valuable information (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2017) (Yadamsuren, 2009). Due to the possibilities provided by this type of exposure, social media users are becoming less and less likely to search for news, which could limit them in their understanding of current events (Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2017). However, previous research shows that active participation between users and content on social networks may increase their involvement (Greenhow & Reifman, 2009; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015) and emotional relationship (Yadamsuren & Heinström, 2011) to current, emerging issues. This has made social networks a source of information (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016; Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2017) for a growing number of citizens with Facebook being the most widely used social network in Italy according to *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism* (Coppola, 2020b), which attracts many journalistic pieces that seek to communicate and interact with their audiences (Al-Rawi, 2017; Duffy & Knight, 2019).

Including the audience on social networks is important for the survival of the media (Hernández-Pérez & Rodríguez Mateos, 2016) because it is a part of its structure as well as being a source for funding and advertising (Tandoc & Maitra, 2018). In this context, it is essential to measure the consumption and the involvement of users with the information products that are put into circulation. As such, *engagement* is used as a measure that quantifies the interaction of users with the brand and its content, which is disseminated in different digital spaces (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Raimondo Anselmino, 2017). This interaction is relevant because it can affect the user's purchase intent (Park *et to*. 2009; García-Medina *et al*. 2018) and build and manage the identity of the brand (Arvidsson & Caliandro 2015).

Objectives and Method

This article analyzes media behavior and citizens' information consumption in the face of a crisis, such as that created by the COVID-19 pandemic. The article aims to provide a snapshot of the behavior adopted by Italy's main digital media (Coppola, 202 Cazzola, 2020) during the pandemic and user interaction with the content published. To this end, the following specific objectives are proposed:

> O1. Discover the presence of content related to the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy's main digital communication media.

> O2. Understand the timeframe evolution of the production of information related to the health crisis.

O3: Ranking of the ten media outlets with the highest engagement with the terms Coronavirus and COVID-19.

O4: Discover which social network generated greater engagement with citizens who accessed information pertaining to the pandemic.

To carry out this longitudinal research, the quantitative method was primarily used and the qualitative method was used only to identify the tone of predominant headlines. The sample is made up of informative content pertaining to the pandemic published by 30 of Italy's predominant digital media (.it) between January 1 and April 27, 2020. These dates coincide with the beginning of global media interest in COVID-19 and maximum mortality in the country. For data collection, the *Buzzsumo* application search tool was used and the following filters were applied: timeframe (January to April), geographic (Italy) and semantics (COVID-19 and Coronavirus). The total sample is 841,786 news items.

The information was processed using the quantitative content analysis technique, which allowed for the systematic, objective, and calculable study of variables to measure and achieve an accurate representation of the content (Wimmer & Dominick, 2010). The sample was recorded in a spreadsheet where, in addition to quantifying the total news collected, categories were proposed in order to meet the objectives. First, the content was classified according to publication date, number of pieces of information published with the terms most commonly used in reference to the health crisis (Coronavirus and COVID-19) and web analysis to determine their respective engagement. Then, a list of ten different media outlets and their ten major news stories with the most engagement among readers was recorded. Based on this list and previous research, categories of analysis were established to study the subject (López-Rabadán & Casero-Ripollés, 2012; Laferrara & Justel-Vázquez, 2020) and the predominant tone (positive, neutral or negative) of the headlines (Bardin, 1986; García Ferrando *et al.*, 1986; López Aranguren, 1989; Piñuel & Gaitán, 1995).

Results

The data collected for this investigation indicates that the contents relating to the COVID-19 pandemic were a substantial aspect of Italy's media agenda between January 1 and April 27, 2020. During this period, the media analyzed totaled 841,786 pandemic-linked publications, of which 759,316 contained the term Coronavirus and 82,470 had the term COVID-19. Coronavirus thus became the concept most used by Italian digital media to publicize information on the health crisis, which was reflected in the engagement data collected.

Table 6 Number of publications in Italian digital media using the terms Coronavirus and COVID-19 between January 1 and April 27, 2020, along with their engagement totals and engagement ratio.

Term	Total articles	*Engagement* Total	*Engagement* Ratio
Coronavirus	759,316	565,679,075	744

COVID-19.	82,470	31,211,433	378

According to the data collected, the Italian media began to show interest in COVID-19 on January 21, 2020 (Figure 2). This coincided with the detection of the first person infected outside of Asia, in the United States. There was a slight increase in information production on February 2, 2020, when Italian Minister of Health, Roberto Speranza, reported that COVID-19 had been isolated in a hospital in Rome in order to study it, understand it and attempt to stop its spread. The news came two days after the contagion of two Chinese tourists were detected in that same city. The explosion of information production occurred on February 20, the day before the authorities of ten northern Italian locations ordered the closure of all public places due to the detection of 17 infected people, 2 of whom were from Veneto and 15 were from Lombardy. From that moment on, information activity was high in all of the major Italian media analyzed. The date with the highest production of news about the pandemic was March 9 when Italy became a "protected zone", and all human movement was prohibited. Information activity began to fall on March 17, even though the pandemic continued to have an important place in the media agendas that were analyzed.

Figure 2 Number of media publications analysed that used the terms Coronavirus and COVID-19 between January 1 and April 27, 2020.
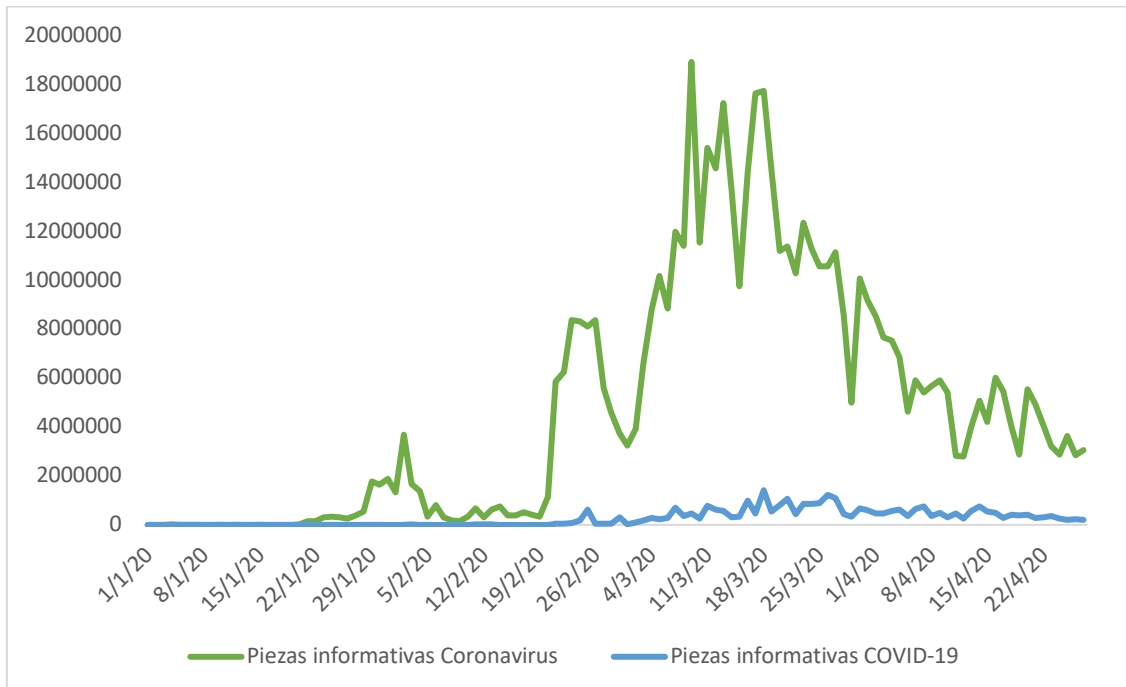
To meet the third objective of this study, the ranking of ten media outlets with the greatest engagement with the two specialized terms of information was developed (Table 7). The ranking for the Coronavirus concept consists of eight

general-interest newspapers (*Repubblica*, *Fanpage*, *Corriere della Sera*, *Il Messaggero*, *_1729*, *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, *The Post Internazionale*), an informative television channel (*TGcom24*) and a news agency (*ANSA*). With the exception of the online newspaper, *Fanpage*, all the others in this ranking have a paper version as well. The media ranked with the highest *engagement* for the term COVID-19 is composed of nine general-interest newspapers (*Fanpage, Il Messaggero, Il Giornale, Huffington Post, Secolo d'Italia*, *Napoli Today*, *Blog Sicily*, *Malpensa 24, Repubblica) and* a specialized one called *Green Me*. Seven of these media outlets are entirely digital and three feature a paper version as well.

Table 7 Ranking of ten media outlets with the highest engagement with the terms Coronavirus and COVID-19.

Coronavirus		COVID-19	
Digital Media	Engagement	Digital Media	Engagement
www.tgcom24.mediaset.it	24.494.936	www.fanpage.it	9.735.679
www.repubblica.it	24.311.250	www.ilmessaggero.it	952.195
www.fanpage.it	22.136.316	www.ilgiornale.it	672.957
www.corriere.it	18.954.895	www.huffingtonpost.it	638.971
www.ilmessaggero.it	15.570.768	www.blogsicilia.it	625.860
www.ilfattoquotidiano.it	14.423.038	www.secoloditalia.it	533.152
www.tpi.it	13.695.634	www.repubblica.it	507.712
www.lastampa.it	13.116.398	www.greenme.it	506.314
www.ilmattino.it	11.461.440	www.napolitoday.it	442.117
www.ansa.it	11.144.006	www.malpensa24.it	408.979

In order to approximate the preferential COVID-19 pandemic information consumption of Italian citizens, the ten most important news articles with engagement were extracted from the previous ranking for both the term Coronavirus (Table 8) and COVID-19 (Table 9). It is apparent from the analysis of both rankings that 55% of the total news with the highest engagement were published during March, when the first major spike in the number of infected was recorded and the state of alarm was decreed, followed by April (25%) and February (20%). Directly proportional was the number of publications on the pandemic (Figure 2).

The predominant topics in the news with the greatest engagement are politics (30%) with information relating to the authority's general management of the COVID-19 pandemic, and health and science (30%) with information relating to the spread of the virus, medical research, and scientific progress. Next is news that appeals to human interest and/or deals with collaborative initiatives (25%), such as the publication by Green Me about a dog who provided comfort to doctors and nurses during the emergency. News of people who contracted the virus (15%), economy (15%) and religion (15%) were less relevant. It is also apparent from the analysis that the predominant headline tone was positive (45%), followed by negative (30%) and neutral (25%).

Table 8 Top ten news articles with the highest engagement in the Coronavirus category.

Publication Date	Digital Media	Article Headline	Engagement
2/16/2020	www.tgcom24.mediaset.it	Coronavirus, The American Bioterrorism Expert: "Created in a laboratory, a biological weapon."	549.1K
4/16/2020	www.repubblica.it	Chilean writer, Luis Sepúlveda, Dies After Contracting Coronavirus	851.8K
3/12/2020	www.fanpage.it	Chinese Doctors, Experts in the Fight Against Coronavirus, Arrive in Italy: We Will Help You Fight It	1.2M
3/13/2020	www.corriere.it	Boris Johnson's Speech: "Many families will lose loved ones."	456.7K
4/4/2020	www.ilmessaggero.it	Coronavirus, Salvini: "Let's open the churches for Easter. We need Mary's protection."	474K
2/2/2020	www.ilfattoquotidiano.it	Coronavirus, Here's Who Isolated It: All Women from the South, Among Them a Precarious Young Woman - Il Fatto Quotidiano	308.1K

3/3/2020	www.tpi.it	Coronavirus Fundraising Launched in China to Help Italy	723.6K
4/10/2020	www.lastampa.it	In China, Dogs and Cats Can No Longer Be Eaten: They Are Pets, Not Livestock	411.4K
4/25/2020	www.ilmattino.it	Coronavirus, Starting May 4, It Is Possible to See Friends and Relatives: Masks Only in Clubs	162.4K
3/10/2020	www.ansa.it	Armani Gives 1,250,000 Euros to Hospitals - Lombardy	646.7K

Table 9 Ten news articles with the highest engagement in the COVID-19 category.

Publication Date	Digital Media	Article Headline	Engagement
3/27/2020	www.fanpage.it	The Pope Donates 30 Respirators to Areas Most Affected by COVID-19	127K
4/15/2020	www.ilmessaggero.it	COVID-19, Israeli Scientist: "Each epidemic cycle lasts 70 days, then the virus disappears."	277.8K
2/29/2020	www.ligiornale.it	"The Real Victims of COVID-19 are Small Business Owners."	256.1K
3/12/2020	www.huffingtonpost.it	Roche Donates Arthritis Drug for Trial Against COVID-19	142.5K
3/18/2020	www.blogsicilia.it	Fabrizio, the Youngest Italian Who Died of COVID-19, Passed Away at 32	BlogSicilia - Latest News from Sicily	581.6K

3/21/2020	www.secoloditalia.it	COVID-19, Veterinarian: "It's safer to sleep with a dog than to touch a human."	467.8K
2/26/2020	www.repubblica.it	Coronavirus, Adriano Trevisan's Daughter: "COVID-19 killed him, but he was my father, not just a number."	337.1K
3/26/2020	www.greenme.it	Therapy Dog Gives Comfort to Doctors and Nurses at the Forefront of the COVID-19 Emergency	194.9K
3/11/2020	www.napolitoday.it	COVID-19, The Medicine Tested at Pascale Works: "National protocol at once."	222.6K
3/07/2020	www.malpensa24.it	Fighting COVID-19, A Losing Game if Fought Only in Hospitals	389.5K

The data collected indicates that Facebook was the social network that generated the highest engagement with users who accessed the content published by Italian digital media in relation to the health crisis (Table 10, Table 11). It is followed by Twitter, although with much less engagement. Pinterest and Reddit generated a minor reach. Facebook thus became the preferred social network for news consumption and offered the highest incidental exposure of informational content to its users. This data supports the conclusions of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (Coppola, 2020b).

Table 10 Social networks with the highest engagement of content referring to the crisis using the term Coronavirus.

Digital media	Facebook	Twitter	Pinterest	Reddit	Engagement
www.tgcom24.mediaset.it	24.4M	81.0K	729	7.3K	24.5M
www.repubblica.it	24.1M	223.1K	1.3K	16.8K	24.3M
www.fanpage.it	22.1M	42.0K	92	1.4K	22.1M

www.corriere.it	18.8M	181.4K	1.5K	15.0K	19.0M
www.ilmessaggero.it	15.5M	61.2K	364	6.5K	15.6M
www.ilfattoquotidiano.it	14.3M	133.1K	454	4.7K	14.4M
www.tpi.it	13.7M	26.3K	44	1.0K	13.7M
www.lastampa.it	13.0M	113.4K	179	6.0K	13.1M
www.ilmattino.it	11.4M	24.0K	60	983	11.5M
www.ansa.it	11.0M	148.5K	717	5.5K	11.1M
Total	168.3M	1.03M	5.4K	65.1K	170.3 M

Table 11 Social networks with the highest engagement of content referring to the crisis using the term COVID-19.

Digital media	Facebook	Twitter	Pinterest	Reddit	Engagement
www.fanpage.it	971.3K	2.2K	11	8	973.6K
www.ilmessaggero.it	949.7K	2.5K	21	0	952.2K
www.ligiornale.it	672.4K	539	6	0	673K
www.huffingtonpost.it	635K	3.9K	23	7	639K
www.blogsicilia.it	625.8K	59	0	0	625.9K
www.secoloditalia.it	532.5K	625	0	0	533.2K
www.repubblica.it	506.2K	1.5K	13	3	507.7K
www.greenme.it	505.9K	390	5	0	506.3K
www.napolitoday.it	441.9K	170	0	0	442.1K
www.ansa.it	408.9K	30	4	0	409K
Total	6249.6K	11.9K	83	18	6262K

Discussion and Conclusions

This article is logical when taking into account the context generated on the web following the outbreak of the health crisis in Italy. The phenomenon, which alarmed the world's population and kept millions of people quarantined, caused increased access to information (Singh *et al*., 2020) and turned the news into a prized commodity for handling the situation (Casero-Ripollés, 2020). The fastest growing category was the Internet, in part because consumption of main, digital media skyrocketed (Comscore, 2020). The phenomenon soon caught the attention of academics interested in understanding the media's action in the face of this unprecedented event and its impact on citizen perception of the health crisis (Lyu *et al*., 2020; Zheng *et al*., 2020; Zhou *et al*., 2020). This article makes a significant contribution in this regard as it provides a snapshot of the behavior of Italy's main digital media during the COVID-19 outbreak and citizen interaction with the content they published.

The results of the research reinforce what has been found in previous studies on the prominence of emergencies, such as a pandemic, in various media agendas (O'Neill & Harcup, 2009; Vasterman & Ruigrok, 2013; Ratzan *et al*., 2020). Since the emergence of the first infected person outside of the Asian continent, Italian digital media has shown a constant interest in information regarding the COVID-19 outbreak. In fact, the amount of publications on the pandemic was high over the last two months and showed informational spikes that coincided with the emergence of information most needed to handle the situation. The amount of information proved to be directly related to the capacity of engagement generated with users, suggesting that greater news production expands the chances of impacting citizens.

The term Coronavirus was used more at the informative level to approach the phenomenon of the health crisis because, compared to the term COVID-19, it is more understandable and, therefore, easier for the general user. After all, it is the work of the media to provide information that is easily understood (Villena-Alarcón & Caballero-Galeote, 2020). The main and classical media, with consolidated paper versions that had content adapted to the digital environment, achieved the highest capacity of engagement during the three months studied. This suggests that, in emergency situations such as the pandemic under study, citizens choose to consume information from media whose original editions are traditional. However, the results show that all-digital media is beginning to gain ground in this regard. The results also indicate that, in times of crisis, such as that caused by COVID-19, citizens tend to consume information with positive headlines. This may be because they offer a sense of calm and security.

Facebook has proven to be the social network with the greatest capacity of engagement containing information content concerning the health crisis. Although with much less capacity, Twitter has also proven relevant. Pinterest and Reddit, however, have shown they made a limited contribution in this regard. The

results of this study reinforce what is indicated in previous research concerning the necessary relationship between media and social networks because they offer the possibility to distribute information, increase website traffic and interact with audiences (Hermida *et al.*, 2012; Lee, 2016; Al-Rawi, 2017; Sacco & Bossio, 2017; Thurman, 2018; Duffy & Knight, 2019). The latter becomes relevant as long as the media structure is based on audiences and sources of funding (Tandoc & Maitra, 2018).

This study mainly offers quantitative information, so future research could address the issue from a qualitative approach based on interviews with media managers, focus groups and citizens who experienced the health crisis. It would also be worth investigating why traditional media continues to be a reference in times of emergency and how they adapt their content to the digital environment.

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3.4. The health crisis on Instagram: how the media are building their agenda on the visual social network during the COVID-19 pandemic

Abstract

Over the last decade social networks have become important channels for the media to publish information and communicate with their younger audiences. With Instagram recently becoming the most popular platform for this purpose. This article is an investigation into news production on this social network in the context of the international crisis generated by the Covid-19 pandemic, by means of a content analysis of 552 posts published by the two most widely read Spanish newspapers. The results suggest that despite there being a large quantity of soft content and human-interest stories, as found in previous research, Instagram is also used as a platform to distribute information of public interest about the management of the crisis (such as political decisions and health content).

Keywords

Social networks, Instagram, journalism, Covid-19, agenda

Introduction

The use of social media is currently one of the most popular online activities: with more than 3.8 billion people (42 percent of the global population) engaging with it worldwide (Hootsuite; We Are Social and DataReportal, 2019). Digital platforms have facilitated media communication and interaction with audiences (Al -Rawi, 2017; Duffy and Knight, 2019), becoming a source of information for 52 percent of the global population (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2019). Facebook continues to be the preferred social network for this purpose, but Instagram is emerging as a site to publish informative content (Newman *et al.*, 2019). Created as a visual platform and geared towards private interaction between people (Larsson, 2018), in recent years, Instagram has gained popularity with Generation Z and Generation Y (Newman *et al.*, 2019; Sumida; Walker y Mitchell, 2019), attracting many media outlets seeking to improve their visibility and engage young audiences with their brand.

Social networks have become relevant channels for the media to source ideas in order to generate stories, publish information and increase traffic to their websites (Hermida *et al.*, 2012; Lee, 2016; Sacco and Bossio, 2017; Thurman, 2018). On these digital sites, the news is separated from the media context its presence on a printed, or even digital, page entails. On social networks news becomes detached from the hierarchy applied by the media and begins to compete with other information and content that does not always conform to traditional journalistic criteria (Bazaco; Redondo and Sánchez-García, 2019). Analytical tools working in parallel with this process enable the collection and analysis of the digital traces left by users on the news and provide a series of metrics that

push journalists to make decisions that go beyond their intuition: as the interests of users cannot be ignored and end up becoming news in these digital environments (Justel-Vázquez; Micó-Sanz and Sánchez-Marín, 2016; Tandoc, 2014; Túñez-López; García and Guevara-Castillo, 2011; Ducan, 2010).

This has occasionally resulted in the creation of pseudo-informative content as the result of implementing strategies to survive in the attention economy, such as striking headlines, direct appeals to the reader and content considered superficial or exaggerated (Bazaco; Redondo and Sánchez-García, 2019; Katarzyna, 2013). The result of this practice is a new informational paradigm whose main objective is "to produce journalism that transmits with the ease of a virus" (Salaverría, 2015: 19). In this type of journalism, the interest of the public might prevail over public interest (Justel-Vázquez; Micó-Sanz and Sánchez-Marín, 2016)

Multiple authors maintain that, in many cases, this phenomenon has altered journalism's traditional function of gatekeeping (Bazaco; Redondo and Sánchez-García, 2019; Paulussen; Harder and Johnson, 2018; Bell *et al.*, 2017; Salaverría, 2015; Shoemaker; Vos y Reese, 2009; Tandoc, 2014), understood as "the process of selection, writing, editing, positioning, programming, repetition and, otherwise, massaging information so that it becomes news" (Shoemaker; Vos and Reese, 2009: 73). The logic of the media is gradually replaced by the logic of social networks (Van Dijck and Poell, 2013), and the distribution routines of news content adapt to a media environment where the dynamics of social networks become highly relevant (Welbers and Opgenhaffen, 2019).

News organizations maintain daily activity on the social network Instagram, sharing photos and videos on their feeds, demonstrating a clear tendency to follow the criteria of posting attractive, striking, and innovative content, instead of that which is informative and current (Vázquez-Herrero, 2019). In recent years, the media have focused their efforts on creating ephemeral content intended to be published on Instagram Stories, but which lacks a defined publication strategy, demonstrating that many news organizations are still in a phase of adaptation to the social network (Vázquez-Herrero, Direito-Rebollal and López-García, 2019; Rojas Torrijos and Panal Prior, 2017). On Instagram, content has been shown to be predominantly apolitical and related to soft categories, normally topics such as fashion, travel, food, and beauty (Al Nashmi, 2018). However, research into this matter remains scarce.

The present study, which is framed in the context of an international crisis generated by the coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19), aims to contribute to the corpus of work analyzing the news production and distribution of content by the media on digital social network platforms. The study of the composition of the media agenda on social networks (the channel through which the news content reaches a section of its audience) becomes relevant according to the theory of agenda setting (McCombs, 2014), which states that over time the press agenda becomes the public agenda. It becomes even more relevant when it is taken into

consideration that a large proportion of the world's population inform themselves via these platforms (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2019; Sumida; Walker and Mitchell, 2019).

This article aims to further contribute to studies into the degree to which social networks are used in the production and dissemination of content by the media. It focuses on Instagram because, in recent years, the use of this platform for such purposes has increased (Newman *et al.*, 2019). Before outlining the methodology employed in this research, the research questions and hypotheses developed to guide this investigation are given below:

RQ1: What presence does information related to the Covid-19 pandemic have on the Instagram profiles of the Spanish press?

H1: The Covid-19 pandemic has monopolized the agenda of the Spanish press on social networks such as Instagram.

RQ2: How is content related to the Covid-19 pandemic treated on this platform?

H2: The majority of the content related to the Covid-19 pandemic corresponds to information that lacks a direct link with the public interest, as the media seek to adapt to the content that habitually circulates on social networks such as Instagram.

Methodology

This article examines the publication activity of the two most widely read general-interest newspapers in Spain (AIMC, 2020); *El País* and *La Vanguardia*, on their Instagram profiles during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In order to address the research questions posed by this investigation, content analysis was carried out, measuring relevant variables in a systematic, objective and quantitative way to obtain an accurate representation of the set of contents analyzed (Wimmer and Dominick, 2010). Data collection was carried out taking into account certain characteristics of content analysis applied to digital news (Karlsson y Sjøvaag, 2016; Widholm, 2016).To avoid complications resulting from the dynamic nature of the object of study; social networks and the ephemeral content circulating on them, screenshots and screen recordings were taken of the content published on the Instagram profiles of *El País* and *La Vanguardia*, and these were stored in order to be able to review and replicate the study after the digital material has disappeared or been modified. In accordance with an agreed upon plan, data was collected every day at 10 p.m. between March 14th and April 13th.The start date of sample collection corresponds to the day the Spanish Government declared a state of alarm and ordered a national quarantine due to the advance of the Covid-19 pandemic in the country. The screenshots and recordings collected are a record of the content published on Instagram feed,

Instagram TV and Instagram Stories. Of the total sample of 552 posts, 320 correspond to the profile of *El País* and 232 to that of *La Vanguardia*.

The content was transferred to analysis grids where, in addition to describing the content published on the Instagram profiles of *El País* and *La Vanguardia*, categories of analysis were proposed that seek to answer the research questions posed. Firstly, content was divided into that related to the Covid-19 pandemic and that to totally unrelated topics. Then, after carrying out a preliminary analysis, a series of categories were proposed in which the content related to the pandemic was classified (Table 12). Thirdly, an analysis was carried out into whether content items corresponded to information that could be considered an issue of public interest, utilizing a classification tool employed in previous research (Justel-Vázquez; Micó-Sanz and Sánchez-Marín, 2016) that is based on the traditional concept of public interest. This classification identifies as news of public interest those international, political, economic, health and science issues that affect people's lives regardless of whether they are interested in them or not.

Table 12 Classification of content related to the Covid-19 pandemic according to thematic areas.

Categories	Explanation
Governing authorities' administration and citizen reaction	Content about how the authorities are managing, in general, the Covid-19 pandemic and the complaints from citizens regarding this management.
Economic impact	Content about the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic and the quarantine on the domestic, local, national, and international economy.
Social impact	Content about the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic and the quarantine on the spheres of education, religion, employment, and the family. This also includes content related to social inequality and violations of quarantine.
Impact in the streets and on the environment	Content about the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic and the quarantine on the environment and the streets of different cities of the world.
Health and science	Content about health, medical investigation, scientific advances, the growth of the pandemic, precautions against the virus and the general state of the health system.
Entertainment	Content aimed at helping people cope better with quarantine

Human interest and collaborative initiatives	Content whose objective is to produce an affective or emotional response in the audience, and that related to collaborative initiatives to fight the Covid-19 pandemic.
Personalities with Covid-19	Content about personalities or celebrities who have contracted Covid-19.
Opinion and analysis	Opinion and analysis pieces about the Covid-19 pandemic and the quarantine.
Surveys	Content that refers to public opinion about the Covid-19 pandemic and quarantine.
Humour	Content whose objective is to be humorous about the Covid-19 pandemic and quarantine.
Publicity	Content whose objective is to promote products or services.
Others	Content that does not correspond to any of the previous categories.

Results

With regard to the first research question the results have demonstrated that, as expected, the majority of the publications on the visual platform Instagram between March 14th and April 13th, 2020, by the two most widely read general newspapers in Spain; *El País* and *La Vanguardia*, are related to the Covid-19 global pandemic.

Of the 320 publications posted by the newspaper *El País* on the platform's various channels; feed, stories and IGTV, 313 were related to the pandemic, which represents 97.5 percent of the publications during the period analyzed. Only 7 non-Covid-19 publications were registered, and these referred to interviews with personalities from the field of culture and information about events. These types of publications represent only 2.2 percent of the total (Figure 3). Although to a lesser extent, this predominance of information about the epidemic is also registered on the Instagram profile of *La Vanguardia*. Of the 232 items published on the platform's various channels, 213 were related to the Covid-19 pandemic, which represents 91.8 percent of the total publications in the period analyzed. The percentage of content referring to other topics is, in this case, somewhat higher: at 8.2 percent (Figure 4).

Figure 3 Percentage of content related, or not, to Covid-19 of the total publications on the Instagram profile of El País, between March 14th and April 13th, 2020.

Figure 4 Percentage of content related, or not, to Covid-19 of the total publications on the Instagram profile of La Vanguardia, between March 14th and April 13th, 2020.
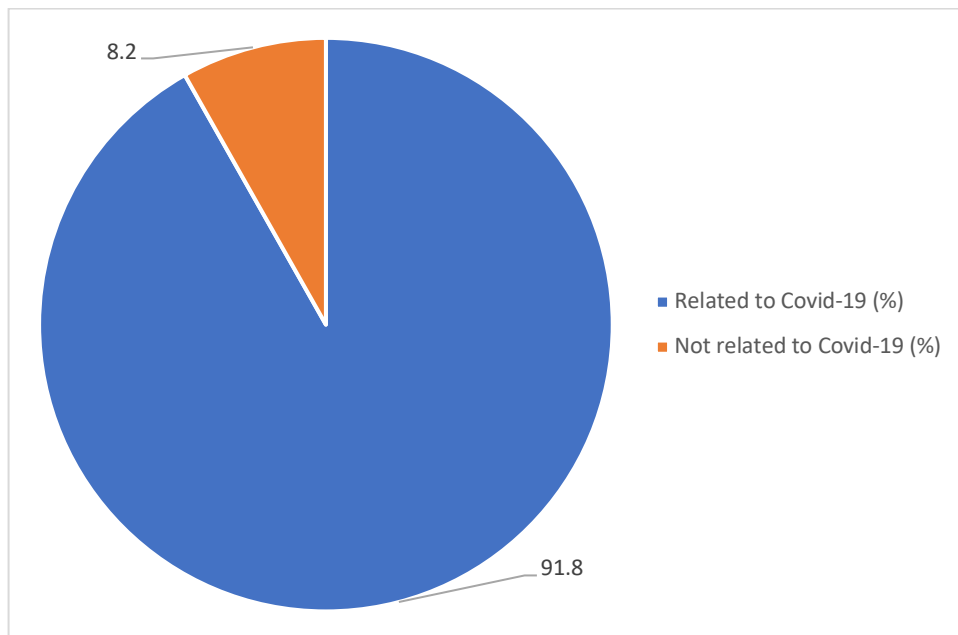
Regarding the second research question and the aim to analyze the different approaches taken by the Spanish press to publishing content related to Covid-19 on their Instagram profiles, some broad differences have been detected. As for the thematic categories of the published content, on the profile of the newspaper *El País*, information relating to the way the authorities (The Spanish Government, The European Union, The Vatican, etc.) have reacted to the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as information about citizens' complaints about this reaction makes up 29.1 percent of the total. Information about health and science, including publications on scientific advances, the growth of the virus, advice on avoiding

getting ill and the state of the health system obtains a similar, if somewhat lower, importance (25.6 percent). In third place of importance is found human interest content, that which appeals to the audience's emotions, and content related to collaborative initiatives to fight against Covid-19 (16.6 percent). The remainder of the themes identified occupy a secondary place. Contrary to expectations, entertainment content aimed at helping people cope better with quarantine occupies only 6.6 percent of the total content published about the pandemic. Information regarding social impact (4.5 percent), economic impact (3.8 percent) and the impact on the streets and the environment (2.8 percent) achieved a lesser presence. The least frequent topics in the *El País* sample analyzed are; humor (2.9 percent), opinion and analysis (1.9 percent), personalities who contracted Covid-19 (1.6 percent), surveys (1.6 percent) and advertising (1.6 percent).

The trend is different on the Instagram profile of *La Vanguardia*, with human interest content and that related to collaborative initiatives standing out. Such content represents 43.7 percent of all publications on the virus, that is, almost half. Content relating to the way the authorities have reacted to the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as information about citizens' complaints about this reaction occupy second place, representing a significant percentage of the total content published (19.2 percent). The same occurs with health and science related publications (17.8 percent). Information about the impact of quarantine on the streets of different cities of the world and on the environment has considerably less presence (8.5 percent), but the least recurrent themes in the coverage of the pandemic are those related to social impact (4.7 percent), the economic impact (1.4 percent), opinion or analysis (0.9 percent) and personalities who contracted Covid-19 (0.5 percent). Unlike that registered on the profile of *El País*, *La Vanguardia*'s media agenda does not contain any advertising, surveys, or humorous items.

Results regarding the degree of public interest in content related to the pandemic vary according to the media analyzed. The coverage published by the newspaper *El País* on its Instagram profile contains a greater amount of information with a direct link to the public interest, with 58.8 percent of its content related to this category. However, a similar quantity of softer content (42.8) is present in the newspaper's media agenda, demonstrating a balance between both types of information. In the profile of the newspaper *La Vanguardia* the scenario is different: content directly linked to the public interest represents 35.2 percent of the total published, compared to 67.6 percent of softer information.

Figure 5 Correspondence of content related to Covid-19 with the public interest on the Instagram profile of *El País* between March 14th and April 13th, 2020.
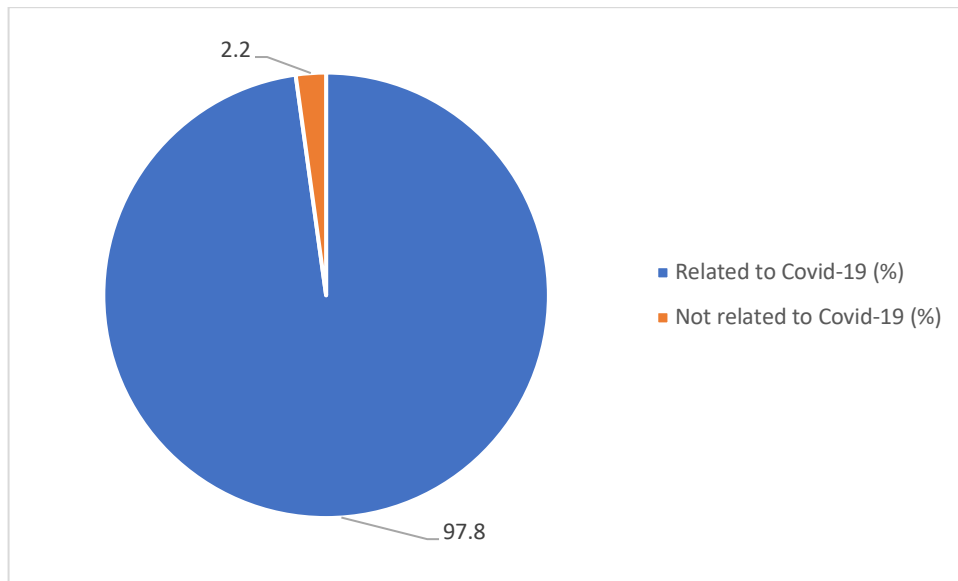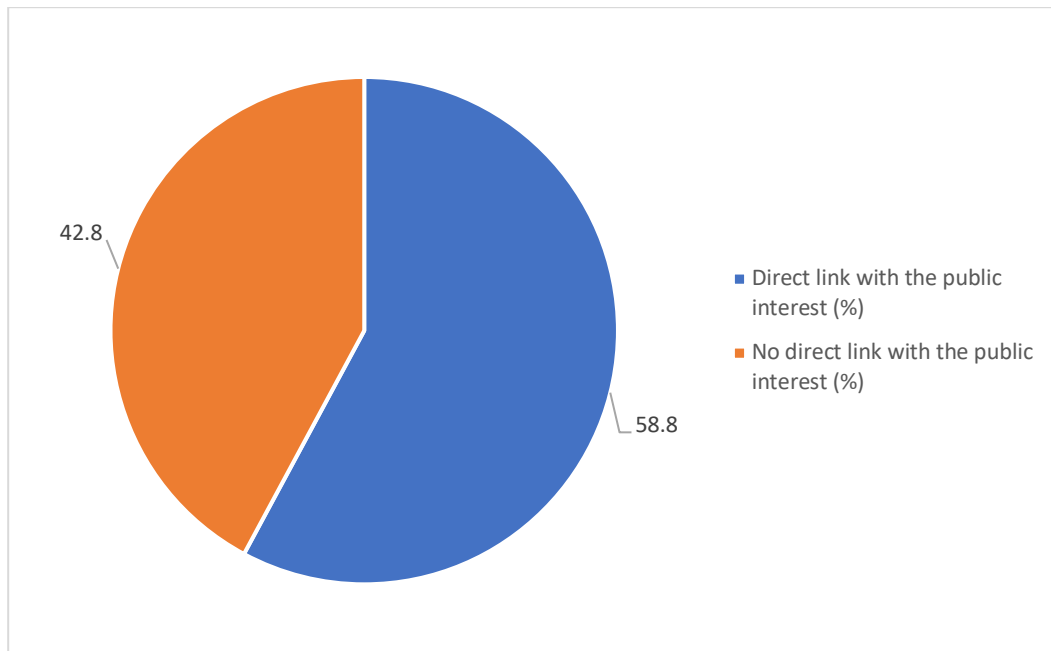

Figure 6 Correspondence of content related to Covid-19 with the public interest on the Instagram profile of La Vanguardia between March 14th and April 13th, 2020.
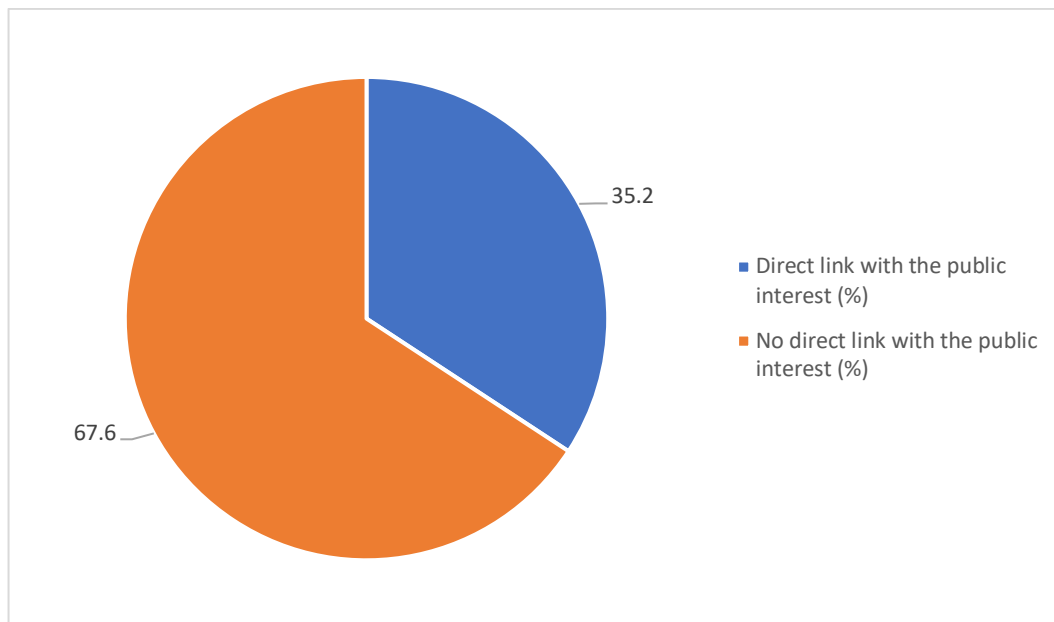
Conclusions

The visual platform Instagram attracts multiple media organizations seeking to increase their visibility and interact with the younger audience. Previous research has shown that the media maintain daily activity on this platform, sharing photos and videos on their feeds (Vázquez-Herrero, 2019) and generating ephemeral content for their stories, tending to follow the criteria of posting attractive, striking and innovative content, instead of that which is informative and current (Vázquez-Herrero; Direito-Rebollal and López-García, 2019). Previous studies have also

concluded that recurring content on the visual platform Instagram is in the main apolitical and related to soft categories, such as fashion, travel, and food (Al Nashmi, 2018). However, global health emergencies such as the Covid-19 pandemic suggest that this dynamic has been altered.

The results of this paper confirm the first hypothesis that pointed to a tendency for content related to the Covid-19 pandemic to monopolize the agenda of the Spanish press on Instagram, evidencing the low importance that content related to other topics acquires in times of a global emergency.

The analysis also leads to a partial validation of the second hypothesis, which predicted a predominance of information about Covid-19 that lacks a direct link to the public interest, based on the assumption that the media seek to adapt to the most common approaches and class of content on the visual platform Instagram.

On the Instagram profile of the newspaper *La Vanguardia*, information of human interest and that related to collaborative initiatives to fight against Covid-19 predominate. However, the results obtained from the analysis of *El País*' profile confirm that information of public interest, such as political decisions, health recommendations or economic measures, are in the majority. This shows that even though the media studied are of a similar nature they have followed different strategies on this visual platform during the crisis generated by Covid-19. It is also noted that on this social network, relevant content has a more significant presence than posts about softer categories or those designed to be attractive.

The differences detected in this research are an indication that further research should be carried out into the activity that news organizations maintain on social networks such as Instagram. Such research should include different types of media (with different business strategies) and media from different countries. Other avenues of research are also open, for example, investigating the format of content according to the channel (stories, feed, IGTV) on which they are broadcast. Although this aspect was beyond the scope of this article, it would be interesting to achieve a more complete understanding of the dynamics with which the media operate on this social network.

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3.5. Cross-Paper Discussion

Studies have shown that media outlets are adapting to changes in the digital landscape by implementing new strategies to generate new sources of revenue (Carvajal, 2020; Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016; Davies, 2017; Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018; Newman, 2021; Newman et al., 2020, 2023; Tracy, 2021). Many media outlets are developing business models based on audience engagement: subscriptions, memberships, or donations. These models aim to reduce dependence on advertising revenues (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016; Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018; Kiesow, 2018; Nelson, 2019; Newman, 2021). Despite existing research, further investigation is needed to explore how media organizations implement these business models, as well as their impact on journalistic practices and the profession's role in society. This research takes a step forward in the investigation of these issues, exploring the role of web analytics and social media in media strategies to achieve these business models. This section sets out a dialogue between the results obtained in this research and the existing literature on the subject. The purpose is to facilitate a discussion on the research advances and analyze their correlation with previous research projects exploring the practices and trends in the media field.

Web Analytics

The results indicate that developing business models based on audience engagement does not mean abandoning web analytics, which is in line with media analysts' recommendations (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2012). All the interviewed journalists in this study recognized the crucial role of web analytics in driving the transition toward these business models. Four interviewees noted that newsrooms currently have high levels of data measurement, as has often been identified in this field (Anderson, 2011; N. S. Cohen, 2019; Cornia et al., 2019; Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018; MacGregor, 2007; Nelson, 2019b; Tandoc, 2014; Vu, 2013). The following statements represent this idea:

- "We do a lot of different analysis regarding data" (D. Lilova, 03/07/ 2022)

- "We collect all data that is needed" (S. Wippel, 20/07/2022)

- "We measure everything, really" (G. Castrillo, 15/09/2022)

- "It is amazing how we measure so much in this industry (...) There are so many metrics. People call it a data lake, but I think it is probably more like a data ocean because it is so vast with all the things we measure" (Mark Rice-Oxley, 01/07/2022).

The results also show that media organizations no longer use web analytics solely for exposure control, a widely adopted approach in the industry to attract advertising revenues (Magazine Publishers of America, 2006; P. Napoli, 2011). Instead, media are approaching more comprehensive monitoring of audience behavior, primarily focusing on engagement. This translates into a commitment

to prioritize qualitative metrics (e.g., time spent on the website or number of interactions) over quantitative metrics (e.g., web traffic or number of clicks) in editorial decision-making. The academic community has acknowledged that this approach increases the perception of brand value, builds user loyalty, and stimulates a greater willingness to pay for content (Muñoz & Elósegui, 2011). Most of the interviewees (20 out of 25) who discussed current practices with web analytics agreed on the importance of prioritizing qualitative metrics over qualitative metrics to achieve business models based on audience engagement. Professionals working on websites highlighted the relevance of page views per user, comments on posts, and number of subscribers. Professionals working in social media highlighted the importance of comments on posts, shares, and clicks on links back to the website. All interviewees recognized that these qualitative metrics provide valuable information for personalizing content and developing strategies to attract new subscribers.

Measuring qualitative factors such as traffic quality, user interactions, and user feelings toward the brand has been widely recommended by the academic community (Saura et al., 2017). Some scholars have considered this approach crucial to the success of business models based on audience engagement (Broersma, 2019; Maldonado, 2015). They have suggested that using qualitative metrics can lead to a more stable source of income and decrease the dependence on advertising as the only source of revenue. A perspective focused on qualitative metrics could be interpreted as a move away from the business-oriented approach, which has compromised the public service function of journalism and the fundamental values of the profession in contemporary democratic systems (Sintes i Olivella, 2010; Starr, 2009).

However, the results also highlight that some media outlets continue to prioritize quantitative metrics in editorial decision-making, mainly because they allow them to increase audience size and generate higher advertising revenues. Three participants stated that they also looked at the number of "likes" received by content previously deemed relevant by journalists. For them, this metric remains an indicator of the success of the journalist's decision. This finding is in line with previous research suggesting that journalistic practices are influenced by the prolonged use of quantitative metrics to support journalists' editorial decisions, assess their performance, evaluate their editorial decisions (Bunce, 2019; Tandoc, 2015), and foster their productivity (Petre, 2015). The following statements show this current journalistic practice:

- "(Likes) are, in some way, what gives you the measure of your success" (A. Romero Vacas, 26/09/2022)

- "It is important for us to have this likes thing because at least it lets us know that people are not just attached to pretty stories or pretty photos. They can also be interested in elaborated content" (G. Coutagne, 24/06/2022)

One interviewee also mentioned that when making editorial decisions, she considers the practices employed by benchmark media outlets, such as *The New York Times*, that have successfully established business models based on audience engagement (Davies, 2017; Newman, 2021; Newman et al., 2020; Tracy, 2021). She emphasized that studying these newspapers' strategies provides valuable insights for making informed editorial decisions.

- "Also, of course, we watch other people's publications. So, when I see (...) that something made by, let's say, *The New York Times* is adding up to a very good performance on social media, I try to learn from the best. So, I wonder if we can do something similar (…) I would say that this is the second most important data, some spying on others and trying to learn from their mistakes and best practices" (C. Severgnini, 05/07/2022)

Using metrics to support decision-making and comparing decisions with those made by other media outlets are indicators of two significant aspects: 1) The influence of an era driven by audience data and 2) The growing intention to adopt a more strategic approach in web analytics. The practices identified align with the first aspect because they suggest journalists lack confidence in their judgment. Previous studies suggest that journalists have lost confidence in their judgment due to the dependence on audience data and the existence of clear guidelines that promote its use (Duncan, 2010; Hanusch & Tandoc, 2017; Tandoc, 2014; Túñez-López et al., 2011). Journalists cannot completely detach themselves from data-oriented decisions, even if they try (Justel-Vázquez et al., 2016). The practices identified also align with the second aspect because they suggest that journalists use quantitative metrics not as a substitute for their judgment but as a tool to complement and support their editorial decisions. The academic community has recommended this approach to web analytics to distance from clickbait content while still taking advantage of this tool's benefits (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2012).

Studies note that to establish a data-driven culture that aligns with editorial and organizational objectives (and, by extension, journalistic judgment), news organizations should prioritize creating content that benefits online subscribers (Lindén et al., 2022). This approach, widely adopted across various digital platforms for news dissemination, may stem from the media's growing acknowledgment that the content driving the highest click rates might not necessarily align with the content users are willing to pay (Jensen, 2021). The media may have observed that clicks on trivial or anecdotal content may not reflect the audience's genuine interest in that content. In line with this perspective, this research provides evidence of increased audience engagement in hard news sections such as politics, economics, and science (at least in the context of global emergencies). Audience behavior analysis towards content published by Italian digital media during the COVID-19 pandemic indicates that topics associated with hard news sections, such as politics (30%) and health and science (30%), are

the most engaging. This shows that users are not only inclined to consume "soft" content but can also generate engagement with "hard" content, especially when this information is essential for the management of community life, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies have shown that the media plays a crucial role in informing emergency situations (Brownstein et al., 2009; Cowper, 2020; Pérez-Soler & Micó-Sanz, 2015; Villena-Alarcón & Caballero-Galeote, 2020).

Although this research identifies a commitment within the media to prioritize qualitative metrics in editorial decision-making, it also presents evidence of the challenges they face in doing so, primarily because of their continued reliance on advertising revenues. Previous research projects have shown that focusing on quantitative metrics has the potential to expand their audience size and, in doing so, capture the advertisers' attention (Rowe, 2011; Vu, 2014; Phillips, 2015; Magazine Publishers of America, 2006; P. Napoli, 2011). This circumstance was underlined by most interviewees in this study (19 out of 28), who emphasized that web traffic generation remains a fundamental component in the media's digital strategies, even in their transition to a business model based on audience engagement. High web traffic continues to be crucial to support the digital news business. Several journalists (7) interviewed in this research expressed this viewpoint, as evidenced by the following statements:

- "(Web traffic) is still a concern because, by the end of this month, we must have page views, and advertising must have been sold. If not, we are on a bad path" (J. Albarrán, 18/07/2022)

- "It is still the 'sinews of war' of the business because it brings in money. Traffic means ads. Traffic remains the big thing, in inverted commas, until we find another stable business model" (R. Courcier, 25/07/2022)

This research also indicates that web traffic remains relevant in contemporary media strategies, as it is linked to subscriber growth. A notable number of participants (11) in this study have conveyed this viewpoint, as demonstrated by the following statements:

- "That is one of the goals we have, actually: To bring our content to many more readers for them to subscribe to our model" (B. Schönhütl, 31/08/2022)

- "Within a subscription model, the only way to keep growing in subscriptions is to keep having more and more readers" (M.L. Peinado,15/09/2022)

Research on Italian media behavior and news consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic indicated a connection between news production and user engagement. According to this study, March 2020, which recorded the highest news production in Italian digital media (Figure 2), also recorded the highest level of engagement with news content, reaching 55%. During April and February 2020, when there was a decrease in news production, a corresponding decline

in engagement was observed, with engagement percentages of 25% and 20%, respectively. Based on the findings, there's a direct link between the number of posts and the level of engagement. This suggests that generating more content could create more opportunities for audience engagement. However, this study has not been able to ascertain that this engagement reflects real user interest in digital publications. Research examining the type of content and contexts beyond a global crisis is required to draw definitive conclusions on this topic.

The results of this research indicate that transitioning towards business models based on audience engagement involves employing web analytics for a dual purpose. On the one hand, media outlets must rely on quantitative metrics to expand their audience and generate advertising revenue. These metrics provide an overview of the reach and exposure of media content (Jensen, 2021; Nelson, 2019b; Phillips, 2015; Rowe, 2011; Tandoc, 2014; Vu, 2013), enhancing the success and economic performance of online businesses (Beri & Singh, 2013; Duncan, 2010; Muñoz & Elósegui, 2011). On the other hand, media outlets must rely on qualitative metrics to produce value-added content that fosters audience trust, encourages their willingness to pay for content, and reduces reliance on advertising revenue. According to the academic community, considering both quantitative and qualitative metrics is an appropriate approach for digital companies seeking to differentiate themselves from their competitors (Muñoz & Elósegui, 2011; P. Napoli, 2011). The following statements exemplify the dual objective pursued by the media when paying attention to both types of metrics in editorial decision-making:

- "Inevitably, we need to maintain two strategies: a strategy that allows us to reach more and more people and a strategy that allows us to retain them and convert them into subscriptions" (M.L. Peinado, 15/09/2022)

- "The model right now is dual. On the one hand, all these qualitative goals have much weight, but we continue to serve a volume traffic model" (E. Mengual, 22/09/2022)

- "We try to remain like an iguana. We try to have our eyes pointing in different directions, basically. We want social stats for us, and then we want these subscriptions and registrations" (R. Courcier, 25/07/2022)

According to this research, journalists perceive the current emphasis on qualitative metrics as advantageous for both their profession and the media industry. Regarding their work, they consider that these new practices decrease the pressure to prioritize readership, allowing them to regain their gradually lost autonomy (Phillips, 2015). Regarding the media industry, they consider that these new practices strengthen the audience's trust in news companies and encourage their willingness to pay for content (Broersma, 2019; Lewis, 2011; Lischka & Messerli, 2016). Journalists refer to an evolution:

- "There has been an evolution. First, many years ago, we looked at page views, then at unique browsers, when we entered a stage of audience growth. Now that we are in a subscription model, we look at subscription-related metrics" (M.L. Peinado, 15/09/2022)

- "We do not do it as it was done, perhaps, five years ago, when we were looking for virality and, perhaps, with a more aggressive style. Now we try to do the same, but better done, that is, (to publish) good content. It is not the pattern of five years ago; we think it is better" (J. Albarrán, 18/07/2022)

Despite recognizing an evolution, most journalists interviewed in this research do not fully perceive the significant impact that web analytics management has had on the quality of media agenda (Lee et al., 2014; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2018; Nelson, 2019; Nguyen, 2013; Tandoc & Thomas, 2015; Túñez-López et al., 2011; Welbers et al., 2016). Most journalists (21 out of 24) who discussed this issue stated that their media outlets did not base their editorial decisions on quantitative metrics. Instead, they perceived audience data as an opportunity to make more informed editorial decisions. According to these journalists, audience data provides information that helps to improve content creation and effectively reach the target audience. Therefore, they believe that web analytics has not posed, nor does it pose, a threat to the quality of media agendas. Instead, they perceive it as a valuable tool for making informed editorial decisions. The following statements exemplify this position:

- "It is important to understand that it is not a dangerous thing to use this data, but it is a way to reach your audience in a better way" (B. Schönhütl, 31/08/2022)

- "(Web analytics) affects, but not always in a bad way. It seems that when we talk about these things, we always talk about the dictatorship of the click or the pressure for audiences" (M.L. Peinado, 15/092022)

Only two interviewees acknowledged the occasional reliance on quantitative metrics in shaping the media agenda, attributing this trend to the commercial pressures in the media industry that previous research projects have also pointed out (Tandoc & Maitra, 2018). The prioritization of quantitative metrics in editorial decisions has raised concerns in the academic community (Bro & Wallberg, 2015; Salaverría, 2014) due to their contribution to the increase of anecdotal or sensationalist content in media agendas (Justel-Vázquez, 2015; Justel-Vázquez et al., 2016). These dynamics threaten the profession's role as a public service (Baker, 2002; Carbonell, 2012; Tandoc & Thomas, 2015) and the health of democratic systems (Beam et al., 2009; Ruis, 2016).

More than half of the journalists interviewed in this study (15) argued that more strategic use of web analytics is needed to reverse this trend. This involves using analytics to balance content that attracts a larger audience with content that enhances audience engagement. To address this issue, these journalists

suggested combining quantitative and qualitative metrics with human judgment, which academics have also recommended (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016; Kormelink & Meijer, 2018; Oremus, 2016). One interviewee stated that a balanced media agenda is significant for the company's reputation, as it informs the reader that they are dealing with a reliable media outlet. In particular, he argued that if this balance is not present, "(...) the reader immediately understands that you are selling them something else. You are selling advertisements, and you are selling applications. You are cheating, and the one thing people want is not to be cheated" (D. Manca, 22/08/2022).

The results of this study indicate that the media strive to maintain a balanced agenda by incorporating vital information for the community. Analysis of the behavior of digital media in Italy and Spain during the COVID-19 pandemic reveals the evident commitment of news organizations to this task. The study shows that, when circumstances require it, the media choose to use language that is accessible and clear to the public (for example, preferring the term "Coronavirus" instead of "COVID-19"). They also adopt a communication style that avoids generating panic, as evidenced by detecting headlines with a positive tone. These strategies appear to contrast with digital marketing tactics aimed at capturing audience attention (Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2019). Moreover, they are recognized by the academic community as crucial for effective communication during emergencies (Cowper, 2020; Villena-Alarcón & Caballero-Galeote, 2020).

Despite the identified efforts to incorporate relevant content into the agenda, this research notes that some media still have work to do to achieve this goal. Ten journalists interviewed in this study emphasized that their respective media have yet to succeed in establishing a balanced media agenda; instead, they are in the process of doing so. As one of them explained, there is a "temptation" (F. Guerrera, 15/07/2022) to share content that generates web traffic due to its potential commercial benefits. However, these journalists have also recognized that this practice can damage the media's reputation. One of the interviewees considered that to achieve such a balance, the media must set it as a goal. "Once you have your North Star set, the only thing to do is try to walk towards that. I think we are on a meaningful path and a great challenge" (D. Casati, 29/07/2022).

Previous research supports this perspective by suggesting that news organizations must establish clear editorial strategies to find a data culture that supports editorial and organizational priorities (Ott & Theunissen, 2015). These studies argue that by developing these strategies, news organizations can transform audience engagement into a valuable currency for the advertising industry, a role hitherto occupied by audience size (Napoli, 2012; Nelson & Webster, 2016). Conversations with journalists show that media outlets face challenges in developing clear strategies. Finding the combination of indicators adjusted to the business objective has always been difficult for companies with an online presence, especially when the objective is user loyalty or company

reputation, as in the media case (Maldonado, 2015; Muñoz & Elósegui, 2011; Royle & Laing, 2014). Previous research projects have found that this leads journalism companies to adopt approaches based on experimentation and trial-and-error (Bernabé-Moreno et al., 2015; Muñoz & Elósegui, 2011), a trend that has also been corroborated in this research. The following statements are a clear example of this dynamics:

- "We do it a bit as we feel it, depending on what you want at any given moment" (R. Courcier, 25/07/2022)

- "(Regarding social media) We cannot say we have a strong and good strategy (...). We have tactics more than a strategy. Strategies are for a long period, and tactics are for a short period. And we are in a tactic mode, not in a strategic mode" (D. Manca, 22/08/2022).

- "We create work dynamics without official titles (...). We detect which news items have more subscribers, and there is a work of the moment in which we say: 'This topic is generating a lot of subscribers; let's keep it on the front page, please' (...) Also: 'This news item is generating a lot of interest, and we have it open, so let's close it'. And that's how we play it" (J. Albarrán, 18/07/2022)

The second statement also shows that traditional journalistic criteria regain significance when journalists lack clear guidance on data use. Previous research projects show that journalists are more likely to use their judgment to make editorial decisions when they lack a clear structure for interpreting audience data or guidance on how to do so (Graves et al., 2010; Usher, 2013).

The results also suggest that within certain media outlets, there exists a perception of having achieved a balanced media agenda. Several journalists interviewed in this research (5) have expressed this viewpoint. Two of them argued that they had moved away from creating and disseminating viral and sensationalist content, which has been prevalent in the digital media landscape for years (Justel-Vázquez, 2015; Justel-Vázquez et al., 2016). They stated that, instead, the media has focused on producing more rigorous and high-quality content, offering added value such as exclusive content, renowned authors, multimedia reports, or newsletters. These contents are often placed behind paywalls to attract potential digital subscribers. As stated by one of the interviewees, the perceived sense of balance attained in the media agenda is a consequence of companies transitioning from being the first to report the news to prioritizing content accuracy and reliability. The following statement illustrates this perspective:

- "(...) we do not sensationalize. We do not do clickbait, which might result in reaching fewer people initially, but because the people we do reach like what they find, it is proper. What we do is substantial, and it is interesting. We are not just trying to get your attention; we find they stay around and

follow for longer. That is a much healthier and sustainable way of building an audience than chasing the highest numbers you can all the time" (D. Knowles, 6/07/2022).

Furthermore, this research shows the media's recent commitment to providing timely and relevant information to its intended audience. The analysis of Italian media behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic found that most news regarding the disease occurred when information consumption was crucial for managing community life (Figure 2). A notable increase in news dissemination was observed before and during the government's implementation of measures to curb the spread of the virus. A relatively moderate amount of information production was observed the rest of the days. These results indicate the growing willingness of the media to provide timely information in the digital environment and to anticipate and analyze relevant situations in citizens' daily lives (Desai et al., 2021). It is crucial to recognize that these results correspond to a global pandemic stage that inherently increases media coverage and public interest in content related to this topic (Casero-Ripollés, 2020; Comscore, 2020; Singh et al., 2020), so further research is indispensable to draw definitive conclusions on this aspect.

The analysis of Italian media behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic also shows that during times of emergency, the media, mainly traditional media, serve as a reference for online users. They are crucial in providing relevant information for managing situations affecting the community (Aleixandre-Benavent et al., 2020; Imai et al., 2020; Ratzan et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2020). This result suggests that despite the reputation and trust crisis that has affected the industry (Beam et al., 2009; Blumer, 2010; Pickard, 2011; Ruis, 2016; Siles & Boczkowski, 2012), media outlets remain relevant institutions within modern societies.

Social Media

The development of business models focused on audience engagement did not diminish the importance of social media in digital media strategies (Hernández-Pérez & Rodríguez Mateos, 2016). The results of this research show that social media are crucial for transitioning to these business models: "Both here in the newsroom and in the company itself, it is evident that social media is a key department in the growth of a newspaper with a subscription model" (A. Romero Vacas, 26/09/2022). However, this research shows that the role of these platforms has slightly changed.

Various current functions of social media in media strategies have been identified. In line with previous research findings, expanding the audience and creating meaningful interactions is one of their main goals (Al-Rawi, 2017; Domingo, 2019; Duffy & Knight, 2019). Most interviewees who discussed the role of these platforms (21 out of 26) in the media's current strategies emphasized their importance in reaching out to audiences who don't visit the newspaper's website voluntarily. In particular, they referred to young audiences, whom they consider

the newspaper industry's future. The media presence on Instagram, the social network designed for private interaction (Larsson, 2018) and popular among generations Z and Y (Newman et al., 2019; Sumida et al., 2019), is a clear example of these intentions.

Researchers have observed that journalists use social media "to enquire what is making the 'buzz' and for what Internet users show an interest in" (Mariau, 2015, p. 31), influencing "journalists' choice of which event to cover and how they talk about it" (Mariau, 2015, p. 31). The distinctive attributes of social media, including incidental exposure to news and algorithm-driven content positioning (Ahmadi & Wohn, 2018; Bazaco et al., 2019; Boczkowski et al., 2018; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; O'Connor, 2013; Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018; Tewksbury et al., 2001; Yadamsuren, 2009), have amplified this journalistic practice. Many media outlets have focused their efforts on publishing clickbait content that often departs from journalistic criteria (Bazaco et al., 2019; Bell et al., 2017; Carlson, 2018; DeVito, 2017; Hernández-Pérez & Rodríguez Mateos, 2016; Paulussen et al., 2018; Salaverría, 2014; Shoemaker et al., 2008; Tandoc, 2014; Tandoc & Maitra, 2018; Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2019). For instance, on Instagram, media outlets have predominantly centered their efforts on sharing photos and videos (Vázquez-Herrero, 2019), as well as ephemeral, attractive, and eye-catching content (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2019). Certain studies have discovered that within this platform, media content has primarily revolved around non-political subjects, concentrating on lighter thematic categories like fashion, travel, and food (Al Nashmi, 2018).

However, the results of this research suggest that the media are changing their approach to social media, recognizing the importance of providing relevant information to users. After analyzing the Instagram activity of Spanish media outlets *El País* and *La Vanguardia* during the health crisis, it was discovered that content related to the health emergency took precedence in the media's agenda (Figure 3, Figure 4). These results align with previous studies examining media behavior during crises (O'Neill & Harcup, 2009; Vasterman & Ruigrok, 2013). This research identifies that media outlets are willing to adapt their traditional agenda on social media to include important information for community life. In particular, this study suggests that media are now receptive to incorporating content associated with "hard" news sections such as health, science, and politics (Table 7). Consequently, less space is given to anecdotal or sensational content, mainly created to increase audience numbers and generate more advertising revenue. An example of this media's responsiveness can be seen in *El País*'s Instagram agenda during the initial months of the pandemic, where a significant surge in the proportion of content related to the health crisis and public interest was observed. "Hard" news sections, such as updates on health authorities' actions and scientific developments, took a prominent role compared to "soft" news sections, like entertainment and humor (Table 13).

Table 13 Identified topics in the agenda of *El País* and *La Vanguardia* on Instagram, between March 14th and April 13th, 2020.

Topics	*El País*	*La Vanguardia*
Governing authorities' administration and citizen reaction	**29,1%**	**19,2%**
Economic impact	3,8%	1,4%
Social impact	4,5%	4,7%
Impact in the streets and on the environment	2,8%	8,5%
Health and science	**25,6%**	**17,8%**
Entertainment	6,6%	0%
Human interest and collaborative initiatives	**16,6%**	**43,7%**
Personalities with Covid-19	1,6%	0,5%
Opinion and analysis	1,9%	0,9%
Surveys	1,6%	0%
Humor	2,9%	0%
Publicity	1,6%	0%
Others	1,4%	3,3%

This practice was not observed in *La Vanguardia*'s profile, as almost three-quarters of its agenda on Instagram was not strictly related to the public interest (Figure 6). In addition, it was observed that sections associated with softer topics, such as human-interest stories, had more space than those related to harder topics (Table 13). These results indicate that, while there may be some similarities in the media outlets' nature, there are divergences in the strategies employed to shape the media agenda: While *El País* seems to recognize the importance of providing "hard" news on social media, *La Vanguardia* continues to prioritize "soft" information. This suggests that the latter is more susceptible to being influenced by user interests. Previous research projects have shown that publication strategies that give precedence to audience preferences are common among news companies striving to expand their audience base to attract advertisers and generate higher economic revenue, often driven by financial pressures (Nelson, 2019; Reinemann et al., 2012; Rowe, 2011; Vu, 2013; Wang, 2018).

Despite this specific scenario, this research identifies that the media strives not to prioritize "soft" and viral content for social media. Instead, they appear to be committed to publishing content relevant to community life, while adjusting their format and language to align with the dynamics and mechanism of these platforms. These findings underscore a departure from solely relying on digital marketing techniques to enhance the popularity of news (Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2019). Analysis of the interviews points out that media are experimenting with new content formats to attract and keep younger audiences engaged, consistent with findings from other studies (Newman, 2021; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022).

Examples raised by interviewees included the use of image sequences with text or videos with subtitles, specifically addressing current affairs and providing answers to relevant questions. Additionally, they mentioned the "explainer" video format, which employs various audio-visual resources to assist users in comprehending complex aspects of information, especially in a context that encourages confusion due to excess or lack of information (Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018). Another example is *The Guardian*'s quiz "Fake or real?" in which a journalist challenges the audience to determine the veracity of certain content. Moreover, they mentioned *Le Monde*'s short reports, which are based on a series of eye-catching slides for Instagram. This shows how the media strives to offer valuable content to their online audience (Lindén et al., 2022) by adjusting their style, language, and content to fit each platform's specific demands (Hermida & Mellado, 2020; Van Dijck & Poell, 2013).

-    "We adapt journalism to the new narratives of social media. We adapt to their algorithms, their trends, and so on. Why do we do this? We seek to reach new audiences, audiences that are not consumers of traditional newspapers. You must be more of a teacher than a journalist" (G. Castrillo, 21/09/2022).

Sharing such content on social media could be interpreted as a strategic decision, given that prior studies have shown how incidental exposure to news allows users to come across useful and valuable information (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018; Yadamsuren, 2009). This, in turn, contributes to their heightened participation, engagement, and emotional connection to current and emerging issues (Greenhow & Reifman, 2009; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015; Yadamsuren & Heinström, 2011). Nonetheless, the absence of encouragement from these platforms for users to explore alternative sources of information has prompted researchers to warn that innovation alone may not be enough to capitalize on social media's potential (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022).

The inherent characteristics of social media increase the distrust news companies hold toward these platforms (Newman, 2021). In this research, seven journalists highlighted the need for greater transparency in the operations of algorithms and the positioning of news content. They emphasized that these

platforms are controlled by large corporations that set the rules for content publication and frequently demand financial investments to enhance visibility.

- "(Social) networks are like a showroom for your content, but it is not your showroom. It is like having a space in someone else's flat" (M. Belam, 15/06/2022).

- "(Social media) show me the carrot, and then they push the carrot away as if with a stick. That is why, in the media, we have to think about how to be stronger ourselves" (P. Rodríguez, 20/06/2022).

This last statement shows that, instead of implementing strategic approaches on social media platforms, some media outlets are considering concentrating on areas where they have more control, such as mobile apps. This result is consistent with previous research identifying the distrust of professionals in social media (Newman, 2021).

- "We are very much concentrated on investing in our platform and our apps because, particularly for us, it is all about trust and loyalty, and it seems the natural environment where you can best foster trust and loyalty is with your products being great" (M. Belam, 15/06/2022).

According to this research, social media are also vital for creating an online identity that sets them apart as a unique journalistic brand, as previous studies have shown (Molyneux et al., 2018). Three-quarters of the journalists interviewed in this research believe that social media play a crucial role in acquiring new subscribers. Social media facilitate the creation of a community that recognizes and distinguishes the journalistic brand within the digital realm. The following statements exemplify this role:

- "It is an important part of the newspaper's structure. It is another front page that you have to feed, that you have to look after. It is also a showcase where many people who do not know you, who do not read you, get to see you. Or (for people) who were there but are no longer there and can return" (A. Romero Vacas, 29/09/2022).

- "Social media is a way of us sharing our reporting, stories, and what we have been working on with the world" (D. Knowles, 06/07/2022).

- "The idea is to make sure that these people understand what we do and why we do it" (G. Coutagne, 24/06/2022).

This research identifies that media outlets consider social media as an investment for the future. Most journalists interviewed in this research (21 out of 28) stated that social media significantly increase brand recognition among young audiences. This connection can impact their decision to subscribe to the newspaper in the future. According to these interviewees, media outlets acknowledge the challenge of acquiring subscribers through social media. This is because, as shown in previous studies, users tend to prefer accessing and

consuming information within social media rather than leaving them (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2018; Newman et al., 2023; Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). The professionals interviewed also recognized the complexity of generating subscriptions with platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat, as they do not allow direct links to be included in each post. They pointed out that that these platforms are not successful in directing users to media websites, despite being used by news companies for this purpose in the past (Hermida et al., 2012; Lee, 2016; Sacco & Bossio, 2017; Thurman, 2018).

- "To the front page (of the website), your faithful users come, but you must be in the digital kiosks that are now everywhere to get new faithful users. Everything is a digital kiosk. Your email can be a digital kiosk, TikTok, or Telegram" (L. González, 23/08/2022).

- "(With social media, we have) a more strategic objective, obviously in the long term, which is to be in contact with this public with this free content. So, when these people are financially independent and willing to subscribe and pay for news items naturally turn to us because they remember that they have confidence in us, that our content has helped them, and that we have accompanied them for a certain period and that there is a relationship of trust that has been created and consolidated over some time. And that, therefore, can also bring us, at a stroke, (…) a subscription" (O. Laffargue, 30/05/2022).

The study of how users interact with Italian digital media highlights the importance of social media in promoting audience engagement. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Facebook proved to have a high level of engagement, and to a lesser extent, Twitter was also useful in this regard (Table 10, Table 11). It needs to be clarified whether this engagement truly reflects the audience's interest in the published content. Nonetheless, these findings emphasize the importance of media outlets' presence on social media. As previous research has shown, such platforms enable them to connect with their audience and establish a strong relationship with them (Al-Rawi, 2017; Domingo, 2019; Duffy & Knight, 2019).

The analysis of the interviews underscores the growing significance of social media in digital media strategies, as they enable the discovery of news that traditional media outlets might have missed. This observation aligns with previous research findings (Hermida et al., 2012; Lee, 2016; Sacco & Bossio, 2017; Thurman, 2018). Although these platforms were previously used for collecting content related to citizens, celebrities, and athletes (Paulussen & Harder, 2014), this research emphasizes that these tools are currently being utilized to gather news of all kinds. Media outlets are willing to collect all types of information from these spaces. In some cases, they also collect hard news section content, as indicated by previous research on Twitter (Justel-Vázquez et al., 2018). According to five interviewees, social media continue to be valid sources of

information for media outlets, as demonstrated in previous research (Engesser & Humprecht, 2015; Heravi & Harrower, 2016; Justel-Vázquez et al., 2018; Pedriza, 2018; Pérez-Soler & Micó-Sanz, 2015; Towner & Muñoz, 2017).

- "They are also news gathering (...) Nothing happens in the world without it being recorded somewhere or just shared on whatever social media channels. So, we will use social media to find stories that nobody else is finding, and we will use it to find evidence for things that we want to talk about" (David Knowles, 06/07/2022).

- "Social media has a key role as an early warning system. It helps us to identify breaking news. Generally, we have other sources that are usually ahead of us. However, there are times when it does serve as an early warning. This also helps us, with the experience we already have, to identify where a trend may continue and, with that, we can plan coverage that responds to what is to come" (E. Mengual, 22/09/2022).

- "They have a job of creation, they have a job of listening, of being able to find trends" (M.L. Peinado, 15/09/2022).

These statements indicate that social media also play an essential role in gathering information about audience preferences. Some interviewees pointed out that sometimes this information is used to guide editorial decision-making. Engaging too much with audience preferences in social media has been considered a detrimental practice for the quality of the news agenda as it tends to increase trivial content and reduce relevant content (Bazaco et al., 2019; Bazaco et al., 2019; Bell et al., 2017; Paulussen et al., 2018; Salaverría, 2014; Shoemaker et al., 2008; Tandoc, 2014). However, the results of this research indicate that this journalistic practice persists in the media routines. The following statements support this notion:

- "We detect things that are there (on social media) and alert the editorial staff. Things that we are skating (on thin ice). (…) 'We are having a campaign that is not being well received, okay?' We stand by everything we say" (J. Albarrán, 18/07/2022).

- "(Social media) are a window to attend to readers (...) the conversation is there, the community is there, and your possible subscribers are there (...) (The networks are a) window, where (users) come to ask for things, to complain, to congratulate you" (A. Romero Vacas, 29/09/2022).

Additionally, although only three journalists mentioned this aspect during the study interviews, the analysis highlights that some media outlets value social network's ability to provide information at no cost. They argued that these platforms contribute to fulfilling the public service function attributed to journalism within the framework of modern democratic societies (Baker, 2002; Carbonell, 2012). The following statement serves as an example of this position:

- "It is also a way of continuing to offer free formats and subjects because when we started to move to what we call a freemium formula, i.e., to have a free part and a paying part, there were many readers who were frustrated because there were fewer and fewer free subjects and many journalists who regretted that we were doing less free stuff than we were doing. So, we thought that it was also a way of continuing to offer free information (...) it is a bit of a way for us to offer a form of public information service" (G. Coutagne, 24/06/2022).

This research underscores that journalists are not fully aware that inappropriate use of social media can damage a company's reputation and erode public trust (Etter et al., 2017; Mishina et al., 2012; Ross Arguedas et al., 2022). Despite existing research on the matter, a substantial number of interviewees (16) in this study did not explicitly recognize that aligning with the logic of social media can wield a considerable influence on the quality of the media agenda. This alignment can amplify the spread of content that prioritizes audience interest over public interest (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Nelson, 2019; O'Connor, 2013; Tewksbury et al., 2001; Yadamsuren, 2009).

Most interviewees who referred to this issue (12 out of 16) expressed that social media did not harm the image or prestige of the media. They indicated that their media outlet gave precedence to communicating the brand's values through its journalistic content on social media right from the beginning. They added that this approach assisted them in upholding a positive image and preserving the media's reputation. Among the interviewees, three individuals held the belief that social media have a positive impact on the media's reputation. An employee at *Le Monde* expressed that social media enhance the public's perception of the newspaper company. He believes that these platforms have demonstrated that newspapers can not only deliver serious and rigorous information but also curate content that aligns with different languages and aesthetics. The following statement is an example of this perspective:

- "I think that we have not degraded the quality of our content by moving to the platforms because, each time, we have been careful to keep the same information ratio (...) I believe that this has enriched the image of the newspaper. It has shown that, in addition to seriousness, rigor, etc., *Le Monde* was also capable of this. It has humanized us a bit, and it has shown the faces or voices of the editorial staff, it has shown that we can be humorous (...). It has also helped to show, especially young people or young readers, that *Le Monde* on Snapchat (for example) is not so boring" (A. Delcambre, 24/05/2022).

The remaining two interviewees, one from *The Telegraph* and the other from *Le Figaro*, shared their convictions on the positive impacts of social media. They reasoned that these platforms helped them preserve their respective media

outlets' distinct voices and tones. This was attributed to their upholding brand consistency and integrity while disseminating content.

Out of all the respondents, only one individual stated that social media positively and negatively affected the image of the media. He noted that these platforms are beneficial because they can reach an audience that may not have access to print or digital versions. He pointed out that being on these platforms contributed to the media's leading position in terms of unique users, according to Comscore data. However, he also acknowledged that the tactics used to grow the audience on these platforms were detrimental to the media's reputation because of the "wild" publishing dynamics. Three additional interviewees agreed with this viewpoint, stating that media companies often use clickbait tactics to drive online traffic, which harms media perception as crucial institutions for society. "There was an obsession with traffic (...) This was a very perverse thing (...) I think it got a bit out of hand" (G. Castrillo, 15/09/2022).

This statement shows a change in the approach toward social media. It compares a past considered "perverse" with a more regulated present. This idea was reinforced by eight interviewees who highlighted the evolution of publishing strategies on these platforms. Two interviewees, who work in social media departments, explained that they engage in these "perverse" practices because of the challenges of working in these environments. They emphasized that social media force journalists to adopt permanent experimentation, as previous research in this area has also shown (Bernabé-Moreno et al., 2015; Muñoz & Elósegui, 2011).

-   "It is very easy to judge from the outside (...) we were all experimenting with this new platform, so I cannot blame the newspapers for not immediately understanding how powerful these tools were and how important it was to take them seriously when investing in them" (C. Severgnini, 5/07/2022).

PART 4. CONCLUSIONS

Media are making efforts to adjust their editorial strategies to establish a business model that allows them to create alternative sources of income and reduce their historical dependence on advertising revenue (Carvajal, 2020; Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016; Davies, 2017; Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018; Newman, 2021; Newman et al., 2020, 2023; Tracy, 2021). In response to the failure of previous business models to sustain the online news business in the long term, many media are now adopting models focused on audience engagement, such as subscriptions, affiliations, or donations (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016; Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018; Kiesow, 2018; Nelson, 2019b; Newman, 2021). The development of these business models is accompanied by a review and re-evaluation of the editorial strategies adopted so far, which implies reconsidering the role of web analytics and social media in the editorial decision-making process. This research examined how media outlets use web analytics and social media to enhance these business models. It aims to shed light on the media's role in current democratic societies. This section presents the general and specific conclusions of this research.

General Objective

Analyze the role of web analytics and social media in the editorial strategies of media outlets seeking to establish a sustainable business model in the digital environment.

General Hypothesis

Web analytics and social media are essential tools in the editorial strategies of media outlets seeking to establish a sustainable business model in the digital environment. Media rely on web analytics and social media as tools to diversify economic revenue sources, achieve greater editorial independence, and facilitate the fulfillment of their public service function.

General Conclusion

The findings of this research confirm the general hypothesis as they note the essential role of web analytics and social media in the current transition of media outlets towards business models based on audience engagement (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016; Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018; Kiesow, 2018; Nelson, 2019a; Newman, 2021), which are seen as potential avenues to strengthen audience revenues while reducing dependence on advertising (Tandoc & Maitra, 2018).

Specifically, this research observes that media are shifting away from exclusively relying on quantitative metrics such as web traffic and number of clicks to inform editorial decisions –something that they have widely used to amplify their audience size and maximize their advertising revenue (P. Napoli, 2011; Reinemann et al., 2012; Rowe, 2011; Wang, 2018). Instead, media are committed to emphasizing qualitative metrics, such as user engagement and time spent on their websites, which are intended to build audience loyalty and encourage users to pay for content. This shift in focus translates into efforts to create quality, personalized and value-added content, marking a move away from the clickbait or entertainment-focused content that has dominated the digital landscape (Boczkowski & Peer, 2011; N. S. Cohen, 2019; Cornia et al., 2019; Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018; Justel-Vázquez, 2015; Justel-Vázquez et al., 2016; Lamot & Van Aelst, 2019; A. M. Lee & Chyi, 2014; Magazine Publishers of America, 2006; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009, 2010; P. Napoli, 2011; Nelson, 2019a; Nguyen, 2013; Túñez-López et al., 2011; Welbers et al., 2016).

Interviews with journalists from major European media outlets have corroborated the media's growing commitment to this approach. Analysis of the content published by two Spanish media on Instagram, a platform initially designed for private user interactions (Larsson, 2018), also allows to observe this commitment. The media no longer use social media solely "to enquire what is making the 'buzz' and for what Internet users show an interest in" (Mariau, 2015, p. 31), which leads the media to share information linked to "soft" sections, such as entertainment and celebrities (Al Nashmi, 2018; Vázquez-Herrero, 2019). On the contrary, they are committed to disseminating content related to "hard" sections, such as

politics, science, or economy, especially during an emergencies like COVID-19 pandemic. This reinforces the results obtained by previous studies, which showed the important role of the media in providing valuable information during unforeseen events or times of emergency (Brownstein et al., 2009; Pérez-Soler & Micó-Sanz, 2015; Villena-Alarcón & Caballero-Galeote, 2020).

Although previous studies suggest that media lack well-defined social media strategies (Rojas-Torrijos and Panal Prior, 2017; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2019), interviews with journalists suggest that newsrooms are making conscious efforts to develop such strategies. In particular, they note that media are not only using these platforms to engage with young audiences, collect information, and monitor user preferences (Hermida et al., 2012; J. Lee, 2016; Newman et al., 2019; Sacco & Bossio, 2017; Sumida et al., 2019; Thurman, 2018). They are also using them to establish a distinct identity and differentiate themselves from the vast amount of content that circulates on these platforms (Molyneux et al., 2018).

Choosing social media to build a journalistic brand seems a wise decision because, although in these platforms user exposure to news is incidental, previous research has shown that they also provide a space where users can find valuable information (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018; Yadamsuren, 2009) that stimulates participation, engagement, and emotional connection (Greenhow & Reifman, 2009; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015; Yadamsuren & Heinström, 2011). The widespread use of these platforms by politicians disseminating information about their proposals (Aparaschivei, 2011; Graham et al., 2014; Sintes-Olivella et al., 2020) and by governmental organizations informing about their ongoing policies and seeking to reassure society in times of emergency (Mariau, 2019) is an indicator that they can be effective in disseminating content related to "hard" sections if used strategically. Another indication of this effectiveness is the high level of engagement that media content, particularly COVID-19 related content, can generate among users of these platforms, as this research has reflected. However, as it remains to be determined whether this engagement reflects users' genuine interest, no definitive conclusions can be drawn in this regard.

Using social media to build a journalistic identity makes even more sense when considering that, as revealed in this research, the media, particularly traditional media, continue to be reliable sources of information for digital audiences. This is especially notable in emergency situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, a trend that has been indicated by other studies focusing on news production and consumption during emergencies (Brownstein et al., 2009; Cowper, 2020; Pérez-Soler & Micó-Sanz, 2015; Villena-Alarcón & Caballero-Galeote, 2020). The continued relevance of media in the digital environment, especially in emergency situations, provides an opportunity for media outlets to build a distinctive identity that can attract subscriptions in the future. For this reason, for some news companies, offering free information in these spaces is seen as an investment in

the future. Journalists consider this is an important aspect of fulfilling the crucial public service role that journalism plays in a democratic society (Carbonell, 2012; Dahl, 2012; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2012; Ruis, 2016; Sartori, 2012).

This research also points out that the commitment to "hard" reporting and the creation of a distinctive journalistic brand requires a certain level of creativity, something that has also been recognized in similar studies (Newman, 2021; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). The interviews suggest that media are experimenting with different publication formats, such as "explainers", to enhance the appeal of quality, value-added content to their audience. This content becomes especially significant when one considers its role in mitigating user confusion stemming from the overwhelming volume or lack of information encountered on these platforms (Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018). In addition, the analysis of Italian media publications highlights an inclination towards using accessible and clear language, a practice that has been recognised as essential for effective communication during emergencies (Cowper, 2020; Villena-Alarcón & Caballero-Galeote, 2020). This approach could signify a departure from digital marketing strategies solely aimed at increasing the popularity of news items (Anderson, 2011; Bazaco et al., 2019; A. M. Lee et al., 2014; MacGregor, 2007; Molek-Kozakowska, 2013; Tandoc, 2014; Welbers et al., 2016; Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2019).

Experts have suggested that this approach stems from the recognition that the most popular content does not always match what users are willing to pay for (Jensen, 2021). The high level of engagement observed with regard to content related to "hard" sections, such as information on the COVID-19 health crisis, demonstrates that social media users are not only interested in content related to "soft" sections. At least, in unexpected moments or emergency situations, when information becomes vital for the management of community life (Brownstein et al., 2009; Pérez-Soler & Micó-Sanz, 2015; Villena-Alarcón & Caballero-Galeote, 2020).

Interviews also point out the challenges and complexity journalists face when trying to innovate on digital platforms (Newman, 2021). In line with the findings of previous studies, in this research professionals indicate that this feeling has its origin in the tensions between traditional journalistic values and the logic of the digital environment (Hermida & Mellado, 2020; Hernández-Pérez & Rodríguez Mateos, 2016; Paulussen & Harder, 2014; Van Dijck & Poell, 2013). In social media, journalists must adapt to a new aesthetic, language, and type of content (Hermida and Mellado, 2020; Van Dijck and Poell, 2013). They also must navigate the presence of algorithms (O'Connor, 2013) and deal with the pressure to publish popular content (Carlson, 2018; DeVito, 2017; Nelson, 2019a; Paulussen & Harder, 2014; Tandoc & Maitra, 2018). In addition, they must work with the consideration that social media platforms are designed to keep users within their ecosystem as long as possible, reducing their inclination to visit

websites to consume news (O'Connor, 2013; Tewksbury et al., 2001; Yadamsuren, 2009; Yadamsuren & Heinström, 2011).

Given the complexities, some researchers warn that innovation alone may not be enough to take full advantage of social media (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). Interviews reveal a growing awareness of this issue. Some journalists indicate that the distinctive characteristics of social media contribute to media distrust of these platforms, a sentiment also noted in previous studies (Newman, 2021). For this reason, some journalists said media are shifting their priorities from social media to areas where they have greater control, such as mobile applications. Future research could explore whether transitioning from one platform to other helps regain editorial autonomy or whether additional measures, such as continuous critical evaluation of adopted practices, are necessary. Indeed, this research suggests that most media do not explicitly acknowledge that their editorial practices on social media could have contributed to an erosion of journalism standards, despite previous research stating it (Etter et al., 2017; A. M. Lee & Chyi, 2014; Mishina et al., 2012; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2018; Nelson, 2019a; Nguyen, 2013; Ross Arguedas et al., 2022; Tandoc & Thomas, 2015; Túñez-López et al., 2011; Welbers et al., 2016). This raises questions about the ability to formulate editorial strategies based on self-assessment of their practices.

This research also points out that many media outlets continue to face challenges when it comes to prioritizing qualitative metrics in editorial decision-making. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that media face difficulties in moving away from their emphasis on audience size due to their historical reliance on advertising revenue (Magazine Publishers of America, 2006; P. Napoli, 2011; Phillips, 2015; Rowe, 2011; Tandoc & Maitra, 2018; Vu, 2013). The importance of web traffic in media strategies, as evidenced by this study, underscores the continued struggle of newsrooms to fully embrace a qualitative metrics approach. This suggests that web traffic remains the common currency in the relationship between media and advertisers (P. M. Napoli, 2012; Nelson & Webster, 2016). Despite efforts, journalists still face challenges when attempting to completely disentangle their decisions from the objective of increasing audience size (Justel-Vázquez et al., 2016). This could be attributed to their long-standing reliance on audience data and the continuous presence of established guidelines that encourage its utilization, as demonstrated in previous studies (Duncan, 2010; Hanusch & Tandoc, 2017; Tandoc, 2014; Túñez-López et al., 2011). However, some journalists are beginning to use quantitative metrics not as a replacement for their judgment but as a supplementary tool to support and reinforce their editorial choices. This approach to data has been recommended to distance from clickbait content while still taking advantage of the benefits of this tool (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2012).

Media outlets currently employ web analytics for a dual purpose. On the one hand, they rely on quantitative metrics to monitor the reach and exposure of media content (Jensen, 2021; Nelson, 2019b; Phillips, 2015; Rowe, 2011; Tandoc, 2014; Vu, 2013). This helps them expand their audience and generate advertising revenue, thereby enhancing their online businesses' success and economic performance (Beri & Singh, 2013; Duncan, 2010; Muñoz & Elósegui, 2011). On the other hand, they use qualitative metrics to produce value-added content that fosters audience trust, encourages their willingness to pay for news products, and reduces reliance on advertising revenue. Paying attention to both types of metrics has been recommended as a practical approach for companies to distinguish themselves from their competitors (Muñoz & Elósegui, 2011; P. Napoli, 2011). The current approach also shows that some media companies still face challenges in developing clear strategies with web analytics. Finding the perfect combination of indicators adjusted to the business objective has always been difficult for media with an online presence, primarily because their goal is related to user loyalty or company reputation (Maldonado, 2015; Muñoz & Elósegui, 2011; Royle & Laing, 2014). Previous research has found that these challenges prompt many media outlets to adopt approaches based on experimentation and trial and error (Bernabé-Moreno et al., 2015; Muñoz & Elósegui, 2011), a trend that has also been detected in this research.

Despite the clear challenges faced by media in implementing viable business models in the digital environment, this research reveals a clear commitment to business models based on audience engagement. These models have been widely recommended by media analysts due to the opportunities they offer for the development of journalism and the success of online businesses (Muñoz & Elósegui, 2011; P. Napoli, 2011; Saura et al., 2017). Most of the journalists interviewed also recognized the benefits of this model by pointing out that it could increase users' interest in acquiring news and reinforce their trust in news content, as noted in previous research (Broersma, 2019; Lewis, 2011; Lischka & Messerli, 2016). They also emphasized that these business models diminish the need to pursue a mass audience and allow to reestablish lost professional autonomy (Phillips, 2015).

Business models based on audience engagement represent an opportunity for the media to generate a sustainable and diverse source of income, reducing the sustained dependence on advertising as the only source of revenue (Broersma, 2019; Maldonado, 2015). They could also help restore media reputation and regain trust in journalism (Blumer, 2010; Curran, 2010; Etter et al., 2017; Mishina et al., 2012; Ross Arguedas et al., 2022; Ruis, 2016), as well as foster editorial independence and uphold the public service function of the profession —the latter two variants being threatened by the sector's growing dependence on advertising revenues (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016; Davies, 2017; Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018; Newman, 2021; Newman et al., 2020, 2023; Ruis, 2016). After all, by moving away from a purely business-oriented approach, which compromises the

public service function of journalism and the fundamental values of democratic systems (Sintes i Olivella, 2010; Starr, 2009), media outlets can enhance the quality of their agenda. This is particularly significant when one considers the agenda-setting theory, which states that the media's daily choices and presentation of topics can shape citizens' perceptions of what is significant (McCombs, 2006). Consequently, a higher quality media agenda holds the potential to promote more informed citizen participation and strengthen the overall health of the democratic system —two aspects that have faced threats in recent years due to financial pressures that have affected the role of the media (Beam et al., 2009; Dahl, 2012; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2012; Ruis, 2016).

Reaching a definitive conclusion on this issue is impossible at this stage. Future research is needed to better understand the impact of these new editorial strategies on the media agenda and the future of journalism. Are current web analytics and social network practices effective in achieving a successful business model in the digital environment? Will they attract enough subscribers to sustain quality journalism and, at the same time, the online business? Will the media's audience engagement represent a valuable currency for the advertising industry? Will this allow the media to regain editorial independence and increase their commitment to public service? Only through continued analysis can the implications of these editorial strategies for the overall health of journalism, the media, public discourse and, consequently, the democratic system be fully understood.

Specific Objective 1

Examine how media outlets utilize web analytics and social media to establish a sustainable business model in the digital environment.

Specific Hypothesis 1

Web analytics and social media are key tools to increase user engagement and willingness to pay for digital content. Media are making efforts to consider the information provided by qualitative metrics in their editorial decision-making processes. Social media are considered important tools for cultivating a distinctive journalistic brand among the abundant content circulating on these platforms.

Specific Conclusion 1

The findings of this research confirm that media outlets use web analytics and social media as part of their efforts to establish a sustainable business model in the digital environment.

Regarding web analytics, this study presents evidence that media outlets are no longer exclusively using data for monitoring exposure, increasing audience size, and generating advertising revenue, which was prevalent in the past (Magazine Publishers of America, 2006; P. Napoli, 2011). Nowadays, web analytics is employed in more comprehensive approaches that encompass various dimensions of audience behavior, with a primary focus on engagement. This translates into a commitment to prioritizing qualitative metrics (e.g., time spent on the website or the number of interactions) over quantitative metrics (e.g., web traffic or the number of clicks) in editorial decision-making. The academic community has recognized the usefulness of this approach to address business models based on audience engagement, as the evaluation of qualitative metrics improves users' brand perception, loyalty, and willingness to pay for content (Muñoz and Elósegui, 2011; Saura et al., 2017). Researchers have argued that prioritizing qualitative metrics in editorial decision-making can lead to a more stable and varied revenue stream, decreasing reliance on advertising as the sole source of revenue (Broersma, 2019; Maldonado, 2015). Using web analytics in this way means a move away from the business-centered approach that has impacted the profession's public service function (Sintes i Olivella, 2010; Starr, 2009).

However, this research also underscores the ongoing importance of quantitative metrics as they continue to wield substantial influence over journalists' decisions. Journalists interviewed in this study emphasized that this can be attributed to deeply ingrained industry practices and habits. These metrics have frequently served as criteria for evaluating professional performance (Bunce, 2019; Tandoc, 2015) and enhancing productivity (Petre, 2015). Also, to monitor the reach and exposure of content (Jensen, 2021; Nelson, 2019b; Phillips, 2015; Rowe, 2011; Tandoc, 2014; Vu, 2013) and increase the success and economic performance

of online business (Beri & Singh, 2013; Duncan, 2010; Muñoz & Elósegui, 2011). As previous studies have evidenced, increasing audience size allows attracting advertisers (Magazine Publishers of America, 2006; P. Napoli, 2011; Phillips, 2015; Rowe, 2011; Vu, 2013), and this continues to be an important source of revenue in media outlets.

The current importance of web traffic underscores the ongoing dependence on quantitative metrics. Interviews reveal that numerous news organizations still pay attention to web traffic because it serves to increase advertising revenues. This suggests that web traffic remains the common currency between media outlets and advertisers (P. M. Napoli, 2012; Nelson & Webster, 2016). Interviews also indicate that web traffic is considered essential to increase the number of subscribers. Media outlets consider that greater production and dissemination of content increases the likelihood that users will subscribe to the newspaper. Analysis of news production and consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic revels that in social media there is a directly proportional relationship between the level of content published and the level of user engagement. As the amount of content published increases, so does audience interaction. This supports the common perception among journalists that more content posting leads to more audience engagement. However, this study has not been able to determine that this engagement reflects users' actual interest in these publications nor their willingness to pay for content. Further research is needed in this regard, as well as in determining whether this commitment can be translated into subscriptions.

It can be concluded, therefore, that web analytics currently serve a dual function within the media. On the one hand, it is used to monitor quantitative metrics, facilitating the creation of content aimed at expanding the audience and attracting advertising revenue. On the other hand, it is used to monitor qualitative metrics, assisting in the development of content aimed at cultivating audience trust and driving subscriptions. This use of web analytics can be deemed advantageous for media, especially considering that the academic community has recognized that paying attention to both quantitative and qualitative metrics is a valuable approach for differentiating a company from its competitors (Muñoz & Elósegui, 2011; P. Napoli, 2011).

Regarding social media, this research shows that they continue to play a significant role in media strategies (Hernández-Pérez & Rodríguez Mateos, 2016), even in the development of business models focused on audience engagement. Several functions are identified. Firstly, it is noted that social media continue to serve as valuable spaces to connect with audiences and foster meaningful interactions (Al-Rawi, 2017; Domingo, 2019; Duffy & Knight, 2019). Journalists interviewed in this research emphasized that these platforms provide opportunities to connect with audiences who may not actively visit the newspaper's website, especially among younger generations who frequent platforms such as Instagram —created for private user interaction (Larsson,

2018) and popular among Z and Y generations (Newman et al., 2019; Sumida et al., 2019).

Secondly, this research highlights that social media remain valuable for gathering information that is not found in other spaces (Hermida et al., 2012; J. Lee, 2016; Sacco & Bossio, 2017; Thurman, 2018). Researchers have warned that the media use these platforms to gather less substantial content, such as news related to ordinary citizens, celebrities, and athletes (Paulussen & Harder, 2014). They have also warned that these spaces are used "to enquire what is making the 'buzz' and for what Internet users show an interest in" (Mariau, 2015, p. 31), which influences "journalists' choice of which event to cover and how they talk about it" (Mariau, 2015, p. 31). However, the research at hand observes a slight change in the way these platforms are used for this purpose, that is, to collect information. While it identifies that they are still used to monitor user opinions and preferences, of utmost importance for media seeking to expand the size of their audience (Jensen, 2021; Nelson, 2019b; Phillips, 2015; Rowe, 2011; Tandoc, 2014; Vu, 2013), it suggests that media are increasingly open to finding information related to "hard" sections, aligning with previous research findings on this topic (Justel-Vázquez et al., 2018). This is a clear indicator that social media continue to serve as valid sources of information (Engesser & Humprecht, 2015; Heravi & Harrower, 2016; Justel-Vázquez et al., 2018; Pedriza, 2018; Pérez-Soler & Micó-Sanz, 2015; Towner & Muñoz, 2017), although it also suggests a difference regarding how they are used for this purpose.

This research also highlights that social media are currently significant spaces for fostering audience engagement with the journalistic brand. Interviews reflect that these platforms are being used to establish an online identity that allows users to distinguish the journalistic brand from the large amount of content that circulates in these spaces, as previous studies on the subject have also pointed out (Molyneux et al., 2018). This opens up opportunities to attract future subscriptions as it is done with the objective that users remember the journalistic brand when they feel the need to stay informed. The interviews also suggest that media are aware of the challenges associated with securing subscriptions through these platforms. They understand that social media users prefer to access and read the news directly on these platforms rather than navigating away from them (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2018; Newman et al., 2023; Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). They are also mindful that several platforms do not permit direct links in each post, which creates challenges for users in accessing their websites conveniently. Therefore, despite being used for this purpose in the past (Hermida et al., 2012; J. Lee, 2016; Sacco & Bossio, 2017; Thurman, 2018), social media are not currently considered useful for directing users to websites. Instead, they are used to connect and establish a strong relationship with users (Al-Rawi, 2017; Domingo, 2019; Duffy & Knight, 2019), with the hope that in the future they decide to subscribe. The commitment to generate subscriptions through these platforms is a long-term strategy.

In addition, although to a lesser extent, interviews allowed us to identify that social media are also used to provide free information. According to one of the interviewees, this allows maintaining the public service function that journalism has been assigned in modern democratic societies (Carbonell, 2012; Dahl, 2012; Ruis, 2016; Sartori, 2012).

Specific Objective 2

Examine whether web analytics and social media influence the shaping of the agenda of media trying to establish a sustainable business model in the digital environment.

Specific Hypothesis 2

The development of business models based on audience engagement, such as subscriptions, memberships, or donations, reduces the influence of web analytics and social media in shaping the media agenda. The development of these business models diminishes the influence of audience preferences in editorial decision-making, while increasing the impact of traditional journalistic criteria. However, audience preferences continue to have some influence on these processes, as most media outlets must respond to them in order to expand their audience base and attract advertising revenue.

Specific Conclusion 2

The findings of this research confirm that the adoption of business models based on audience engagement, such as subscriptions, memberships, or donations, is reducing the impact of web analytics and social media in shaping the media agenda. This research identifies that newsrooms are making efforts to prioritize information provided by qualitative metrics, such as readers sharing content or time spent on the website, and to rely on journalistic judgment when making editorial decisions.

Interviews with journalists show that this could be beneficial for journalistic practices because it reduces the pressure to focus exclusively on audience size and thus allows regaining lost professional autonomy (Phillips, 2015). It may also be beneficial for media in general because it offers opportunities to strengthen audience loyalty and trust, as well as to increase their willingness to pay for digital content (Broersma, 2019; Lewis, 2011; Lischka & Messerli, 2016). This approach to web analytics represents a move away from editorial strategies aimed at generating content that is more likely to be perceived by users (Carlson, 2018; DeVito, 2017; Nelson, 2019b; Paulussen et al., 2018; Reinemann et al., 2012; Tandoc & Maitra, 2018), such as the generation and dissemination of "soft", anecdotal or sensationalist content (Boczkowski & Peer, 2011; N. S. Cohen, 2019; Cornia et al., 2019; Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018; Justel-Vázquez, 2015; Justel-Vázquez et al., 2016; Lamot & Van Aelst, 2019; A. M. Lee & Chyi, 2014; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009, 2010; Nelson, 2019a; Nguyen, 2013; Túñez-López et al., 2011; Welbers et al., 2016).

According to this research, efforts to prioritize qualitative metrics in editorial decision-making are aligned with the objective of increasing the presence of content related to "hard" sections. The interviews and the content analysis show that media outlets are making efforts to disseminate timely and relevant information. Instead of focusing on digital marketing techniques, such as crafting

attention-grabbing headlines (Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2019), they are committed to using simpler and more concise language that is easily understood by the digital user. This practice is evident, especially, during the COVID-19 pandemic, when such information was critical for the management of community life. The commitment to report in simple and clear language during emergency situations has been positively valued by scholars who have simultaneously explored the topic (Cowper, 2020; Villena-Alarcón & Caballero-Galeote, 2020). Interviews also indicate that the current commitment to qualitative metrics in editorial decision-making occurs in parallel with a commitment to producing quality, value-added content, some of which is placed behind paywalls to encourage users to subscribe (Lindén et al., 2022). Previous studies suggest that this approach stems from the recognition that the content that generates the most clicks online, such as viral, sensational, or anecdotal, is not exactly what users are willing to pay for (Jensen, 2021).

This research observes that this commitment also occurs on social media, which have been widely used to disseminate "soft", anecdotal or sensationalist content (Al Nashmi, 2018; Bazaco et al., 2019; Bell et al., 2017; Paulussen et al., 2018; Rojas-Torrijos & Panal Prior, 2017; Salaverría, 2014; Shoemaker et al., 2008; Tandoc, 2014; Vázquez-Herrero, 2019). The analysis of posts made by two Spanish media outlets on Instagram reveals that these platforms are no longer solely used for sharing content related to "soft" sections. They are also being used to disseminate content from "hard" sections, particularly during situations where this content is vital for community management, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Previous studies have confirmed that information related to health emergencies can come to dominate media agendas (O'Neill & Harcup, 2009; Vasterman & Ruigrok, 2013). The present research supports this finding and demonstrates that it occurs both in the digital environment and in social media platforms.

The media's commitment to base editorial decisions on qualitative metrics and journalistic criteria, while promoting content related to "hard" sections, marks a significant departure from the previous emphasis on increasing audience size for attracting advertising revenue (Bazaco et al., 2019; Bell et al., 2017; Paulussen et al., 2018; Salaverría, 2014; Shoemaker et al., 2008; Tandoc, 2014). This shift implies a move away from a purely business-oriented approach, which has the potential to undermine the public service function of journalism and the fundamental values of democratic systems (Sintes i Olivella, 2010; Starr, 2009). This is particularly significant when considering the agenda-setting theory, which posits that the media's daily selection and framing of issues can influence citizens' perception of what is important (McCombs, 2006). A higher-quality media agenda has the potential to promote more informed citizen participation and strengthen the overall health of the democratic system, both of which have been threatened due to financial pressures affecting the media (Beam et al., 2009; Dahl, 2012; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2012; Ruis, 2016).

Furthermore, this research suggests that in order to increase the likelihood that content related to "hard" and value-added sections will be consumed by digital users, the media are betting on innovation. Interviews show that their main commitment is to innovate with formats, as has also been found in parallel projects (Newman, 2021; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). This innovation not only implies adapting to the aesthetics and language of each platform (Hermida & Mellado, 2020; Van Dijck & Poell, 2013), but also adopting a new way of communicating the topics. An example of publications with "innovative" formats are the so-called "explainers", which seek to explain to the user a content related to a "hard" section. In line with other research projects on the subject (Hermida & Mellado, 2020; Lindén et al., 2022; Van Dijck & Poell, 2013), interviews suggest that, with this type of content, the media seek to build loyalty among social media users so that they subscribe to the newspaper when they perceive the need to stay informed. This can be seen a wise bet if we consider that, as previous studies have shown, users can find valuable information on these platforms (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018; Yadamsuren, 2009), in addition to generating participation, engagement and emotional connection with the news (Greenhow & Reifman, 2009; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015; Yadamsuren & Heinström, 2011). The widespread use of these platforms by politicians disseminating information about their proposals (Aparaschivei, 2011; Graham et al., 2014; Sintes-Olivella et al., 2020) and by governmental organizations informing about their ongoing policies (Mariau, 2019) is an indicator that they can be effective in disseminating relevant content and building user loyalty if used strategically. Moreover, as this research demonstrates, social media have a great capacity to generate user engagement with news content. However, it remains to be clarified whether this engagement reflects real audience interest in these contents or simply their popularity, and whether this engagement has the potential to translate into actual subscriptions.

Despite the commitment to innovation in these spaces, which could increase audience loyalty and, consequently, their willingness to pay for content, some media analysts have warned that innovation alone is not enough to increase the number of subscriptions. Mainly because users are not willing to abandon these platforms to consume information (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). The interviews conducted in this research show that media outlets are aware of this aspect and, therefore, the search for subscriptions through these platforms is perceived as a long-term strategy. The research points out that this inherent characteristic of social media, coupled with the lack of transparency in the algorithms that determine the visibility of news content, is generating distrust in these platforms, as previous research has also shown (Newman, 2021). This explains why, as this study reveals, some media companies are beginning to bet on environments in which they have greater control, such as mobile applications.

Despite the media's commitment to "hard" and value-added sections, this research indicates that many are still unable to completely abandon practices

focused on prioritizing content that is more likely to be perceived by users. The analysis of the publications made by two Spanish media outlets on Instagram reflects that, despite the presence of content related to "hard" sections, the media continue to disseminate content related to "soft" sections, especially, human interest content. Meanwhile, the interviews provide evidence that, despite the commitment to using quantitative metrics to make more informed editorial decisions and not to substitute for the journalist's judgment, many media continue to use them for the latter purpose. Evidence of this issue is that some journalists continue to rely on the data provided by metrics to inform their editorial decisions, as also noted by previous researchers (Duncan, 2010; Hanusch & Tandoc, 2017; Tandoc, 2014; Túñez-López et al., 2011). Also, that many media continue to base their editorial decisions on experimentation and trial-and-error (Bernabé-Moreno et al., 2015; Muñoz & Elósegui, 2011). These findings suggest that, despite efforts to move away from these dynamics focused on audience growth, journalists do not completely disengage from them (Justel-Vázquez et al., 2016). According to journalists, this is due to the fact that news companies continue to face commercial pressures, as previous studies has stated (Tandoc & Maitra, 2018).

The interviews also show that many media do not perceive the substantial impact of web analytics on the quality of the news agenda, despite the fact that the phenomenon has been identified by multiple previous studies (A. M. Lee et al., 2014; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2010; Nelson, 2019b; Nguyen, 2013; Tandoc & Thomas, 2015; Túñez-López et al., 2011; Welbers et al., 2016). The impact that the use of social media has had on the erosion of the news agenda and, therefore, on the image and trust in the profession also seems to be ignored (Etter et al., 2017; Mishina et al., 2012; Ross Arguedas et al., 2022). Most of the journalists interviewed did not explicitly warn that the use of these platforms may have contributed to or amplified the dissemination of content that prioritizes audience interest over public interest, despite research corroborating this aspect (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Nelson, 2019b; O'Connor, 2013; Tewksbury et al., 2001; Yadamsuren, 2009). This raises questions about the ability of journalists and, by extension, the media to evaluate their editorial practices and develop strategies based on lessons learned. This aspect becomes relevant if one takes into consideration that, as previous research has pointed out (P. M. Napoli, 2012; Nelson & Webster, 2016), only through a clear strategy with web analytics will news organizations transform audience engagement into a valuable resource for the advertising industry.

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PART 6: APPENDICES

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Appendix 1: Interviews

The transcripts of the 28 interviews conducted have been organized by country and media in the following web link.

Link: https://valelaferrara4.wixsite.com/doctoralthesis

Appendix 2: Publications

- Laferrara, V., Justel-Vázquez, S. J., & Micó-Sanz, J. L. (2023). Repensando el uso de datos: Los intentos de los medios por abandonar el clickbait y avanzar hacia la fidelización de la audiencia *AdComunica*, (26), 153-174. https://doi.org/10.6035/adcomunica.7187

- Justel-Vázquez, S., Laferrara, V., De Blasio, E., & Micó-Sanz, J. L. (2022). Journalism and analytics: The tension between journalistic criteria and data. In *Emerging Practices in the Age of Automated Digital Journalism* (pp. 29-42). Routledge. http://hdl.handle.net/2072/535084

- Sánchez, J. S., Laferrara, V., & Bosch, M. D. (2021). COVID-19 pandemic in Italian digital media: Media behavior and citizen information consumption during the health crisis. *Media & Jornalismo*, 21(38), 261-276. https://doi.org/10.14195/2183-5462_38_13

- Laferrara, V., & Justel-Vázquez, S. (2020). The health crisis on Instagram: how the media are building their agenda on the visual social network during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Trípodos*, 1(47), 123-134. https://doi.org/10.51698/tripodos.2020.47p123-134

1. Rethinking the use of data: Media's attempts to move away from clickbait and towards audience engagement

ARTICLE:

Laferrara, V., Justel-Vázquez, S. J., & Micó-Sanz, J. L. (2023). Repensando el uso de datos: Los intentos de los medios por abandonar el clickbait y avanzar hacia la fidelización de la audiencia *AdComunica*, (26), 153-174. https://doi.org/10.6035/adcomunica.7187

Repensando el uso de datos: Los intentos de los medios por abandonar el clickbait y avanzar hacia la fidelización de la audiencia

Rethinking the use of data: Media's attempts to move away from clickbait and towards audience engagement

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Resumen

Este artículo estudia el uso de los datos de analítica web y de redes sociales en las redacciones periodísticas que apuestan por modelos de negocio basados en la fidelización de la audiencia y el pago por contenidos. Se basa en 28 entrevistas en profundidad con trabajadores de noticias de 11 medios de comunicación situados en cinco países europeos: España, Francia, Italia, Alemania y Reino Unido. Revela que los medios apuestan por priorizar los indicadores de calidad (permanencia en página, comentarios, etc.) frente a los indicadores de cantidad (páginas vistas, usuarios únicos, etc.), aunque aún no pueden soslayar estos últimos por su histórica dependencia de la publicidad como fuentes de ingresos. Las redes sociales cumplen un rol esencial en sus estrategias de fidelización de la audiencia, pero la falta de transparencia de estas plataformas despierta recelos en algunas redacciones. La apuesta por modelos de negocio basados en la fidelización no significa dejar de lado el trabajo con los datos de audiencia, sino cambiar de manera significativa la forma de abordarlos. La decidida apuesta por garantizar el éxito del modelo de negocio ha cambiado significativamente el trabajo con los datos de audiencia y las redes sociales, conduciendo a los medios a abandonar el contenido *clickbait* y priorizar el contenido de calidad.

Abstract

This article studies the use of web analytics and social media in newsrooms that are committed to business models based on audience loyalty and pay-for-content. It is based on 28 in-depth interviews with news workers from 11 media outlets in five European countries: Spain, France, Italy, Germany, and the UK. It reveals that the media are committed to prioritising quality indicators (page views, comments, etc.) over quantity indicators (page views, unique users, etc.), although they still cannot ignore the latter due to their historical dependence on advertising as a source of revenue. Social networks play an essential role in their audience loyalty strategies, but the lack of transparency of these platforms arouses misgivings in some newsrooms. The commitment to loyalty-based business models does not mean abandoning work with audience data, but rather significantly changing the way they are approached. The determined commitment to guaranteeing the success of the business model has significantly changed the work with audience data and social networks, leading the media to abandon clickbait content and prioritise quality content.

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1. Introducción

Las industrias de noticias llevan más de dos décadas transitando lo que los estudiosos definen como una crisis que amenaza la supervivencia de los periódicos (Blumer, 2010; Curran, 2010; Siles y Boczkowski, 2012). Según Siles y Boczkowski (2012), una combinación de factores económicos, tecnológicos y sociales condujo a esta dramática situación. Destaca su histórica dependencia de los ingresos por publicidad, que bajaron con la crisis financiera de 2008 y el estallido de Internet (Picard, 2001; Siles y Boczkowski, 2012). La crisis se manifestó en la reducción de personal, la transformación de contenidos informativos y la disminución en el número de lectores (Siles y Boczkowski, 2012). También bajaron los ingresos por publicidad y las suscripciones a la prensa, provocando el quiebre de muchos periódicos. Otros comenzaron a invertir en Internet (Nelson, 2019a).

La transición hacia el escenario digital inició una batalla por captar la atención de la audiencia, un elemento fundamental en el negocio de las empresas periodísticas (Tandoc y Maitra, 2018). Para tratar de conseguirlo, los medios, como cualquier otra empresa con presencia en Internet, acudieron a la analítica web (Tandoc, 2015; Cherubini y Nielsen, 2016), entendida como el análisis sistemático de los datos cuantitativos, métricas, sobre el comportamiento de la audiencia en línea (Cherubini y Nielsen, 2016). La analítica otorga información relevante respecto de las características, la actuación y los gustos informativos de los usuarios digitales (Corzo y Salaverría, 2019). Entre otras cosas, permite saber el número de visitas que recibe un sitio web, de suma importancia para atraer anunciantes interesados en alcanzar una audiencia lo más amplia posible (Nelson, 2019b). El tamaño de la audiencia se constituyó así en la manera en que los anunciantes evalúan la calidad de un sitio web y, por lo tanto, la moneda común que los medios utilizan para realizar negocios (Napoli, 2012; Nelson y Webster, 2016).

El importante rol de la medición del tamaño de la audiencia en la atracción de ingresos publicitarios condujo a las empresas de noticias a institucionalizar el trabajo con la analítica (MacGregor, 2007; Anderson, 2011; Vu, 2013; Tandoc, 2014). Prestar atención a las preferencias de la audiencia se convirtió en una práctica común en el trabajo cotidiano (Ferrer-Conill y Tandoc, 2018; Cohen, 2019; Nelson, 2019b), impactando directamente en la toma de decisiones editoriales. Los estudiosos que coinciden en que para aumentar el tamaño de las audiencias las empresas de noticias priorizan los indicadores de cantidad, como el tráfico web o los clics, por sobre los indicadores de calidad, como el tiempo de permanencia en el sitio web. Priorizar los indicadores de cantidad impacta directamente en la selección, la ubicación y la duración de las noticias en el sitio web (Lee *et al.*, 2014; Welbers *et al.*, 2016), al tiempo que otorga espacio a contenidos no considerados en los procesos de selección de noticias tradicionales (Túñez-López *et al.*, 2011). Como consecuencia, prevalecen las noticias blandas (Mitchelstein y Boczkowski, 2009; Nguyen, 2013) por sobre las consideradas importantes para el funcionamiento

de una democracia (Nelson, 2019b). Además, en algunos casos, los indicadores de cantidad son utilizados para evaluar el desempeño de los periodistas (Tandoc, 2015; Bunce, 2019) y estimular la productividad (Petre, 2015). Así, las métricas cuantitativas representan una mercancía y la audiencia, un capital económico (Wang, 2018).

Diversos académicos manifiestan preocupación respecto de cómo esto incide en la calidad de las noticias (Nguyen, 2013; Tandoc y Thomas, 2015). Afirman que los datos de audiencia ponen en discusión los valores tradicionales del periodismo (Hanusch y Tandoc, 2017; Suenzo *et al.*, 2020), y que tanto éstos como la intuición profesional han sido desplazados (MacGregor, 2007; Anderson, 2011; Lee *et al.*, 2014; Tandoc, 2014). En este contexto prevalece el impacto social por encima del interés social (Tandoc y Thomas, 2015; Justel Vázquez *et al.*, 2016). Esto se replica en las redes sociales, que permiten alcanzar una mayor audiencia, interactuar con el público en su espacio propio (Domingo, 2019), y aumentar el tráfico web (Hermida *et al.*, 2012; Lee, 2016; Sacco y Bossio, 2017; Thurman, 2018). Empeora la situación el hecho de que en estas plataformas el consumo informativo se produce de manera incidental (Tewksbury *et al.*, 2001; Yadamsuren, 2009; Boczkowski *et al.*, 2018; Fletcher y Nielsen, 2018): El acceso a la información es corto, discontinuo e incompleto, y el consumo de noticias, efímero (Mitchelstein y Boczkowski, 2018). También, porque los algoritmos privilegian la exposición del contenido popular (O'Connor, 2013), presionando a los editores de noticias a publicar contenidos que aumenten las posibilidades de ser percibidos por las audiencias (Nelson, 2019b).

Académicos de campos contiguos al periodismo advierten que involucrarse indiscriminadamente con las preferencias de la audiencia en las redes representa un riesgo para la reputación de las empresas. Es decir, para «la prominencia de una organización en la mente del público» (Etter *et al.*, 2017, p. 3) y las «evaluaciones colectivas sobre sus características de calidad y rendimiento», además de «sus objetivos, preferencias y valores organizativos» (Mishina *et al.*, 2012, p. 460). Si bien algunos estudios muestran que los periodistas confían en las redes para llegar a las audiencias, otros consideran que son perjudiciales para las prácticas periodísticas porque ponen a prueba las normas en las que se basa la confianza y alteran los contextos donde circulan los contenidos periodísticos (Ross Arguedas *et al.*, 2022). Trabajadores de noticias han manifestado descontento con estas plataformas, al advertir que ofrecen datos incompletos sobre el rendimiento de los contenidos y los cambios producidos en los productos, al tiempo que priorizan la cantidad por sobre la calidad (Newman, 2021). Para mitigar esta crisis reputacional y de desconfianza, los estudiosos sugieren abordar estas plataformas de manera más estratégica (Ott y Theunissen, 2015). Algunos recomiendan que las empresas de noticias se enfoquen en «poner su propia casa en orden» (Newman, 2021, p. 22) y otros, en elaborar contenidos con valor para los suscriptores digitales (Lindén *et al.*, 2022).

Uno de los caminos más utilizados por las empresas de noticias para intentar salir de la crisis es apostar por el engagement de la audiencia, lo que dio lugar a nuevos puestos como el de «editor de audiencias», «editor de crecimiento» o «editor de compromiso con la audiencia» (Cherubini y Nielsen, 2016; Ferrer-Conill y Tandoc, 2018). Estudios advierten de la vaguedad que presenta el concepto (Napoli, 2011). Algunas interpretaciones se centran en las herramientas y las plataformas disponibles para aumentar la fidelidad de la audiencia (Cherubini y Nielsen, 2016; Nelson y Webster, 2016). Otras, en las técnicas profesionales para hacer los contenidos más atractivos o participativos (Mersey *et al.*, 2010), y en el rol de las noticias en la participación ciudadana (Konieczna y Robinson, 2014). Lo que está claro es que apostar por el engagement implica prestar mayor atención a los indicadores de rendimiento (calidad) que a los indicadores de impresión (cantidad) (Broersma, 2019). Mientras algunos consideran que el concepto es una clave para valorar el éxito del periodismo (Lawrence *et al.*, 2018), otros indican que es más bien una herramienta manipulable a los objetivos y prioridades de la empresa de noticias (Broersma, 2019). Quienes defienden la apuesta por el engagement de la audiencia sostienen que promueve la fidelidad, la confianza (Lewis *et al.*, 2014; Lischka y Messerli, 2016) y la disposición de los usuarios a comprar productos (Broersma, 2019). Sin embargo, para que ocupe un espacio relevante en la producción de noticias primero debe convertirse en una moneda de cambio para la industria publicitaria (Nelson y Webster, 2016).

Un número creciente de investigadores coincide en que reemplazar o complementar el modelo tradicional del periodismo por un modelo de negocios basado en la fidelidad de la audiencia, impulsados por suscripciones, afiliaciones o donaciones, es la clave para sobrepasar la crisis del sector (Kiesow, 2018; Nelson, 2019a). Estudios recientes apuntaron que los periódicos tratan de prestar más atención a los ingresos por suscripción (Newman, 2021; Justel-Vázquez *et al.*, 2022) aunque sin dejar de lado los ingresos por publicidad, que continúan siendo la principal fuente de financiación de muchas de las empresas periodísticas. Por eso, aún ocupan un espacio relevante las métricas de cantidad, como el volumen del tráfico web, que permite medir el alcance y el número de lectores (Jensen, 2021).

La puesta en marcha de modelos de negocio basados en la audiencia ha mostrado a los medios que los contenidos en los que los usuarios hacen clic no son necesariamente los contenidos por los que están dispuestos a pagar (Jensen, 2021). Esto llevó a muchos medios a ensayar nuevas formas de presentar el contenido periodístico. Newman (2021) muestra que crear una cultura más innovadora es una de las principales preocupaciones de los medios digitales. Las redes suponen un desafío para las empresas de noticias ya que deben adaptarse a la lógica que tiene cada plataforma (van Dijck y Poell, 2013; Hermida y Mellado, 2020), es decir, a su estética, lenguaje y tipo de contenido habitual. Vázquez-Herrero et al. (2022) muestran que los medios están adaptando el formato del contenido informativo

a estas plataformas para atraer y fidelizar a la audiencia más joven. Advierten la necesidad de encontrar fuentes de ingresos que no dependan de los clics o de los contenidos ocultos tras los muros de pago ya que los usuarios de estas plataformas no están dispuestos a abandonarlas para consumir noticias. Para muchos medios gestionar la innovación es un proceso difícil y frustrante (Newman, 2021).

2. Objetivos

La investigación amplía los estudios sobre el trabajo con la analítica y las redes sociales en la estrategia editorial de las empresas de noticias, y pone especial atención en la apuesta por modelos de negocio basados en el pago por contenidos digitales. El estudio intenta responder a las siguientes preguntas.

P1: ¿Cómo trabajan los periodistas con la analítica en el avance hacia un modelo de negocio basado en la fidelización de la audiencia?

H1: Prestan una creciente atención a los indicadores de engagement, aunque aún sienten presión por aumentar el tráfico web porque supone una importante fuente de ingresos económicos para el medio.

P2: ¿Cuál es la percepción de los periodistas respecto del impacto de la analítica en la selección y el tratamiento de los temas?

H2: Perciben que los indicadores cuantitativos tienen un gran peso en la selección y el tratamiento de los temas, y advierten que la popularidad de un contenido favorece su inclusión en la agenda mediática.

P3: ¿Cuál es la percepción de los periodistas respecto del impacto del trabajo con las redes sociales en reputación de la marca periodística?

H3: Reconocen que el trabajo realizado en las redes sociales durante años, dejándose llevar por las dinámicas propias de estas plataformas, impactó negativamente en la imagen del medio, contribuyendo a la crisis reputacional y de confianza que atraviesa el sector.

P4: ¿Cómo trabajan los periodistas con las redes sociales en el avance hacia un modelo de negocio basado en la fidelización de la audiencia?

H4: Han ido produciendo un cambio en las estrategias editoriales para aumentar la fidelización de la audiencia y, así, generar un impacto positivo en el modelo de negocio.

3. Metodología

Los datos primarios proceden de 28 entrevistas en profundidad con profesionales en activo de 11 medios de comunicación generalistas de cinco países europeos: España, Francia, Italia, Alemania y Reino Unido. La selección de medios se basa en

que son periódicos influyentes y reconocidos históricamente, que se encuentran alineados por el tipo de contenido que publican, y en que están entre los medios con mayor número de lectores y de difusión en sus respectivos países (ACPM, 2022; AIMC, 2022; Axel Springer, 2022; Ofcom, 2022; Prima Online, 2022; Sintes-Olivella *et al.*, 2022). Las entrevistas semiestructuradas se realizaron entre mayo y septiembre de 2022. La Tabla 1 (ver Anexos) muestra la información sobre las entrevistas realizadas.

Las entrevistas se condujeron de manera presencial y en remoto. Tras su transcripción, se llevó a cabo un análisis manual que permitió identificar las temáticas abordadas y elaborar categorías de análisis que las reflejaran. Las categorías resultantes se incorporaron a una tabla de análisis que permitió examinar las respuestas de los entrevistados y detectar similitudes y diferencias en las dinámicas adoptadas y las perspectivas expresadas. La información extraoficial no ha sido transcripta, pero sí ha contribuido al análisis. En este artículo, las citas de los entrevistados se atribuyen a las fuentes según los cargos que ocupaban en el momento de realizar la entrevista y la organización para la que trabajaban.

4. Resultados

Las organizaciones de noticias están respondiendo a los grandes cambios de la industria periodística de los últimos años adaptando sus rutinas de trabajo para generar nuevas fuentes de ingresos económicos. En esta sección presentamos los datos empíricos y exploramos las cuatro hipótesis de esta investigación que permiten identificar las estrategias adoptadas por los medios en la apuesta por un modelo de negocio basado en las audiencias.

4.1. Trabajo con la analítica en el avance hacia un modelo de negocio basado en la fidelización de las audiencias (H1)

El total de personas entrevistadas (28) sostuvo que la consulta de los datos de audiencia es una actividad fundamental en las redacciones de los medios. 4 de ellos advirtieron que se trata de un nivel muy alto de medición y análisis de datos: «La gente lo llama lago de datos, pero yo creo que es más bien un océano de datos porque es muy vasto», apuntó Mark Rice-Oxley, editor ejecutivo de ingresos de los lectores de *The Guardian* (1 de julio de 2022).

25 entrevistados hicieron referencia a las dinámicas de trabajo actuales con los datos de audiencia. La mayoría (20) sostuvo que desde la adopción del modelo de negocio basado en el pago por contenidos prestan mayor atención a los indicadores de *engagement*, aquellos que permiten evaluar el grado de compromiso y el nivel de interacción de la audiencia con los contenidos publicados. Estos indica-

dores, argumentan, otorgan información relevante para personalizar el contenido y establecer estrategias en favor de nuevas suscripciones.

Quienes se desempeñan en la web pusieron como ejemplo las páginas vistas por usuario, el tiempo de permanencia en el sitio, los comentarios en publicación y el número de suscriptores. Quienes trabajan en redes sociales, los comentarios, los compartidos y los clics en enlace. 3 entrevistados mencionaron los *likes*, que utilizan para interpretar el interés de la audiencia por aquellos temas que consideran vinculados al interés público. Chiara Severgnini, del departamento de redes sociales de *Corriere della Sera*, también dijo que extrae datos de las publicaciones realizadas por otros medios de comunicación, como *The New York Times*. Se trata de «espiar a los otros» para «aprender sobre sus errores y buenas prácticas» (5 de julio de 2022).

5 entrevistados reconocieron que es una evolución en las prácticas periodísticas. Tiempo atrás, cuando el foco estaba puesto en aumentar las audiencias, se prestaba mayor atención a las métricas cuantitativas. Ahora, que el objetivo es fidelizar a la audiencia, se presta mayor atención a las métricas de *engagement*.

> Ha habido una evolución. (…) Primero, hace muchos años, mirábamos las páginas vistas, después, navegadores únicos —cuando entramos en una etapa de crecimiento de audiencias—. Y ahora que estamos dentro de un modelo de suscripción, miramos métricas que tienen que ver con suscripciones. (Mari Luz Peinado, jefa de estrategia digital de *El País*, 15 de septiembre de 2022)

2 entrevistados reconocieron que todavía se encuentran elaborando estrategias de actuación frente a los indicadores de suscripción para no depender exclusivamente de la intuición del periodista.

> Creamos dinámicas de trabajo sin títulos oficiales (…) vamos detectando qué noticias tienen más suscriptores y hay un trabajo del momento de decir 'este tema está generando muchos suscriptores, mantengámoslo en portada, por favor' (…) También 'esta noticia está generando mucho interés y la tenemos en abierto, pues la cerremos'. Y así lo vamos jugando. (Joel Albarrán, director adjunto de *La Vanguardia*, 18 de julio de 2022).

19 entrevistados manifestaron que generar tráfico web continúa siendo una preocupación para los medios. Sólo 2, ambos de *The Guardian*, indicaron que no les representa una preocupación ya que fueron capaces de crear un fuerte núcleo de lectores. 16 se detuvieron en los motivos por los que el tráfico web es relevante: Por un lado, para la captación de suscriptores (11) ya que, a más usuarios alcanzados por el contenido, más posibilidades de que decidan pagar por él; por otro, para la captación de anunciantes (7), que representan una importante fuente de ingresos económicos. 5 señalaron que el tráfico web no siempre está ligado a un contenido viral. Pues, según indicaron, en muchas oportunidades el tráfico web es generado por los contenidos informativos «más elaborados». Un entrevistado

apreció que es por un cambio en las expectativas que los usuarios tienen del contenido informativo: Antes esperaban entretenimiento y ahora un valor añadido.

4.2. Impacto de la analítica en la selección y el tratamiento de los temas (H2)

De los 28 entrevistados en este estudio, 24 hicieron referencia al impacto que tienen los datos de audiencia en las decisiones editoriales. La mayoría (21) indicó que no inciden de manera directa en la agenda mediática, pero sí otorgan información valiosa para tomar decisiones editoriales con mayor criterio. Para ellos, esto no es peligroso ya que permite elaborar estrategias para llegar mejor al público. «Parece que cuando hablamos de estas cosas hablamos de dictadura del clic o de la presión por las audiencias», pero los datos no siempre afectan «de mala manera» (Mari Luz Peinado, 15 de septiembre de 2022); contar con esta información permite orientar la producción de contenidos. Pese a ello, los entrevistados fueron tajantes al indicar que los datos no determinan la agenda del medio. Algunos de ellos precisaron que la agenda se encuentra guiada por el interés público y otros, que predomina el «instinto» de los periodistas.

Sólo 2 entrevistados reconocieron que muchas veces se seleccionan los temas y se plantea el tratamiento en función de las preferencias de la audiencia. En este sentido, advirtieron que continúan con la inercia de los últimos años, en los que el volumen era lo más importante. Uno argumentó que dar vuelta esta tendencia requiere de mucho trabajo pedagógico. Otro aceptó que el impacto de los datos es muy alto y que suele trabajar en función de cómo responde la audiencia.

Algunos entrevistados (15) consideraron que el reto está en lograr un balance entre de la agenda mediática. Este equilibrio, explican, permite informar al lector de que se encuentra frente a un medio de comunicación de confianza. Sin este equilibrio, «el lector entiende inmediatamente que usted está vendiendo otra cosa: está vendiendo publicidad, está vendiendo aplicaciones, está engañando. Y la gente, una cosa que quiere es no ser engañada», explicó Daniele Manca, director adjunto de *Corriere della Sera* (22 de agosto de 2022). 10 entrevistados apreciaron que el medio en el que se desempeñan se encuentra transitando un camino hacia dicho balance. Según explican, la «tentación» (Francesco Guerrera, subdirector de *La Repubblica*, 15 de julio de 2022) es difundir contenidos que generen tráfico, pero son conscientes que esto les perjudica. El desafío es encontrar un equilibrio que les permita difundir información. «Una vez que tienes tu estrella del norte fijada, lo único que hay que hacer es intentar caminar hacia ella. Creo que estamos en un camino significativo y en un gran reto», apuntó Davide Casati, editor digital en *Corriere della Sera* (29 de julio de 2022).

Pese a lo anterior, 5 entrevistados consideraron que el medio en el que se desempeñan ha conseguido adquirir un balance positivo de la agenda mediática. 2 argumentaron que dejaron de difundir contenido viral o sensacionalista, pues ahora la apuesta es realizar contenidos de rigor y calidad.

> No hacemos sensacionalismo, no hacemos *clickbait* y eso puede hacer que lleguemos a menos gente al principio, pero la gente a la que llegamos le gusta lo que encuentra y es adecuado (…) Esa es una forma mucho más saludable y sostenible de construir una audiencia que perseguir el mayor número posible todo el tiempo. (David Knowles, jefe del departamento de Redes Sociales de *The Telegraph*, 6 de julio de 2022)

Un entrevistado argumentó que ya no trabajan en favor de ser los primeros, pues las noticias de última hora ya no son publicadas ni bien llegan a la redacción, sino que requieren de una verificación.

4.3. Impacto del uso de redes sociales en la reputación de la marca periodística (H3)

l6 entrevistados hicieron relación a cómo impactó el uso de redes sociales en la imagen o el prestigio del medio de comunicación en el que trabajan. La mayoría (12) consideró que el uso de estas plataformas no afectó negativamente la imagen o el prestigio del medio, pues desde un principio trabajaron para reflejar los valores de la marca en los contenidos. Un cuarto de ellos (3) defendió que el impacto de las redes fue más bien positivo para la imagen. Uno de ellos, del periódico *Le Monde*, argumentó que estas plataformas enriquecieron la imagen del periódico porque permitieron demostrar que además de seriedad y rigor, son capaces de hacer contenido para redes. Explicó que además de mostrar las caras y voces de la redacción, las redes sociales permitieron mostrar contenido con humor. En resumen, ayudaron a mostrar a los lectores jóvenes que *Le Monde* «no es tan aburrido» (sic.). Los otros dos, de *The Telegraph* y *Le Figaro*, sostuvieron que estos espacios no degradaron la calidad de sus contenidos porque siempre estuvieron atentos a reflejar la voz y el tono del medio.

Sólo un entrevistado consideró que el uso que se hizo de las redes impactó tanto positiva como negativamente en la imagen del medio. Positivamente en tanto permitieron llegar a un público al que no es posible llegar con las versiones en papel o digital. Reconoció, empero, que los lectores alcanzados no son potenciales suscriptores. «En ese momento, la batalla era la de usuario único mensual y esta estrategia nos permitió ser número l en Comscore», argumentó. Sostuvo que esta estrategia un tanto «salvaje» tuvo un impacto negativo en la imagen del medio.

3 entrevistados reconocieron el impacto negativo de las redes sociales en la imagen de los medios. Coincidieron en que, cuando el objetivo era generar tráfico masivo, muchas empresas periodísticas apostaron por el *clickbait* y afectaron la imagen del conjunto de medios. «Hubo unos años (…) donde había una obsesión por el tráfico…», convino Guacimara Castrillo, jefa del departamento de redes sociales de *El Mundo* (15 de septiembre de 2022). Otros 8 entrevistados hicieron referencia a que hubo una evolución en la manera de trabajar sobre estas plataformas, con argumentos similares a los expresados por los anteriores.

2 entrevistados que se desempeñan en departamentos de redes sociales hicieron referencia a la dificultad que significa trabajar en estos espacios bajo una experimentación permanente. Por ejemplo:

> Es muy fácil juzgar desde afuera (…) todos estábamos experimentando con esta nueva plataforma, así que no puedo culpar a los periódicos por no entender inmediatamente lo poderosas que eran estas herramientas y lo importante de tomárselas en serio a la hora de invertir en ellas. (Chiara Severgnini, periodista del departamento de redes sociales de *Corriere della Sera*, 5 de julio de 2022)

4.4. Trabajo con las redes en el avance hacia un modelo basado en la fidelización de la audiencia (H4)

Los resultados muestran que las redes sociales continúan cumpliendo un rol fundamental en la estrategia digital de los medios, pues hemos identificado cinco objetivos, relacionados entre sí, de la presencia en estas plataformas.

4.4.1. Llegar al público joven.

De los 26 entrevistados que hicieron referencia al rol de redes sociales, 21 indicaron que son plataformas fundamentales para alcanzar audiencias que no se dirigen al sitio web del periódico de manera voluntaria. Refieren, en particular, a las audiencias jóvenes, a las que consideran el futuro de la industria periodística. La manera de hacerlo, indican, no es difundir contenido viral, sino adaptar contenido de interés público a la lógica de estas plataformas. Esto supone experimentar con nuevos formatos. Aparecieron como ejemplo la secuencia de imágenes con texto o los vídeos con subtítulos, en los que se responde a una pregunta concreta sobre un tema noticioso. Destacan los vídeos con formato de *explainers*, donde un conjunto de recursos audiovisuales se proponen explicar un aspecto complejo de un contenido informativo a un usuario confundido por demasiada o muy poca información. O el quiz de noticias «¿Falso o real?», elaborado por el equipo de *The Guardian*, en el que un periodista desafía a la audiencia a indicar la veracidad de una serie de contenidos. También los reportajes breves que elabora *Le Monde* para la red social Instagram mediante una serie de *slides* llamativas. «Tienes que ser más un profesor que un periodista», apreció Castrillo, jefa del departamento de redes sociales de *El Mundo*, respecto de los formatos que suelen trabajar para llegar a las audiencias más jóvenes (15 de septiembre de 2022).

4.4.2. Dar a conocer la marca periodística.

21 entrevistados sostuvieron que son esenciales para presentar el contenido y difundir la marca periodística. Son una portada más del periódico, que, en palabras

de Álvaro Romero Vacas, redactor de redes sociales de *El País*, se debe «alimentar» y «cuidar» (26 de septiembre de 2022). Según explican, estos «quioscos digitales» −sic Lucía González (23 de agosto de 2022) − son necesarios para que los medios pongan su contenido a disposición de las nuevas audiencias. Sostienen que esto les permite generar una comunidad capaz de identificar la marca entre los millones de contenidos que circulan en estas plataformas. «La idea es asegurar que estas personas entienden lo que hacemos y entienden por qué lo hacemos», explicó Gabriel Coutagne, redactor jefe adjunto de *Le Monde* (24 de junio de 2022).

4.4.3. Generar nuevas suscripciones.

21 entrevistados sostuvieron que las redes sociales son espacios fundamentales para identificar y generar nuevos suscriptores. Coinciden en que se trata de una apuesta para el futuro, pues consideran que desde estas plataformas el viaje hacia la suscripción es complejo. Al fin y al cabo, primero, el usuario debe dirigirse al sitio web y, luego, decidir suscribirse. Este viaje adquiere aún más complejidad si se tiene presente que muchas plataformas, como Instagram, Tik Tok y Snapchat, no permiten introducir un enlace en cada publicación. La apuesta, entonces, es fidelizar a los usuarios para que cuando decidan mantenerse informados se suscriban al medio que recuerdan de tiempos anteriores. Se trata de «Estar en contacto con el público para que cuando estas personas se independicen económicamente y quieran pagar por contenidos informativos acudan naturalmente a nosotros», resumió Olivier Laffargue, jefe de servicio de Snapchat/Tik Tok de *Le Monde* (30 de mayo de 2022).

4.4.4. Recolectar contenido informativo y recibir feedback de la audiencia.

5 entrevistados indicaron que las redes también son utilizadas para encontrar informaciones que ningún otro medio ha cubierto; tendencias informativas. También apuntan que son útiles para recolectar información sobre las preferencias de la audiencia joven. Las redes son como «una ventanilla, donde los usuarios vienen a pedir cosas, a quejarse y a felicitarte», explicó Álvaro Romero Vacas, redactor del departamento de Redes Sociales de *El País* (26 de septiembre de 2022). Se trata de una «labor de escucha». En estos espacios gobernados por terceros, donde no hay recetas ni antecedentes, los datos de audiencia aparecen como una guía para tomar decisiones editoriales.

4.4.5. Ofrecer información gratuita

3 entrevistados concibieron a las redes sociales como espacios en los que aún se puede ofrecer información gratuita y, por lo tanto, donde la información aún adquiere carácter de servicio público. Uno entrevistado indicó que las redes están

cambiando los lenguajes y la manera de mantener unida a la sociedad, lo que tiene serias repercusiones en la configuración de la democracia (Daniele Manca, director adjunto de *Corriere della Sera*, 22 de agosto de 2022).

Pese a ello, los resultados también indican que los medios mantienen cierta cautela respecto de elaborar una estrategia periodística dependiente de las redes. 7 entrevistados advirtieron que estas plataformas se encuentran gobernadas por grandes empresas que definen las pautas de publicación y, en muchos casos, exigen inversión para lograr un mayor alcance del contenido. «Las redes son una sala de exposición para tu contenido, pero no es tu sala de exposición. Es como tener un espacio en el departamento de otra persona», apuntó Martin Belam, Snippets & Explainers de *The Guardian* (15 de junio de 2022). Por eso, reconocieron que es más acertado elaborar estrategias mediáticas basadas en plataformas donde tienen mayor control (como el sitio web o las aplicaciones). «Me enseñan la zanahoria y luego me van apartando la zanahoria como con un palo. Por eso, en los medios, tenemos que pensar cómo ser más fuertes nosotros», concluyó Pau Rodríguez, director de Marketing de *La Vanguardia* (20 de junio de 2022).

5. Discusión y conclusiones

El estudio constata que la creciente apuesta por los modelos de negocio basados en la fidelización de la audiencia (Newman, 2021; Justel-Vázquez *et al.*, 2022) no supone dejar de trabajar con los datos de audiencia que, desde hace muchos años, ocupan un espacio relevante en las redacciones periodísticas (Macgregor, 2007; Vu, 2013; Tandoc, 2014; Ferrer-Conill y Tandoc, 2018; Cohen, 2019; Nelson, 2019b). Sin embargo, a la luz de los resultados se constata un cambio radical en la manera de trabajar con los datos de audiencia. Con el objetivo de favorecer el modelo de negocio, los medios ahora prestan especial atención al *engagement* de la audiencia, pese a la vaguedad del concepto (Napoli, 2011; Broersma, 2019), lo que supone priorizar los indicadores de impresión por sobre los indicadores de rendimiento (Broersma, 2019). Para varios periodistas este cambio supone una «evolución» que promoverá cambios en el producto y favorecerá la fidelización, la confianza y la disposición de los lectores para comprar productos informativos, tal como habían sugerido estudios previos (Lewis *et al.*, 2014; Lischka y Messerli, 2016; Broersma, 2019). Esta apuesta no implica dejar de lado las métricas cuantitativas, como el tráfico web, que aún permiten atraer el financiamiento de las industrias publicitarias (Jensen, 2021), sino complementarlos. En *The Guardian* aseguran que el haber avanzado en la consecución de un público fiel en su edición digital les permite liberarse de la presión por aumentar el tamaño de la audiencia. La manera de trabajar con los datos de audiencia podría ser uno de los ingredientes claves para alcanzar esta situación.

Con la presente investigación se evidencian los esfuerzos de los medios por elaborar estrategias de actuación frente al *engagement* de la audiencia. Sin embargo, en muchas redacciones aún se afirma estar aprendiendo a cómo trabajar con los datos de un modo distinto, lo que obliga a los medios a confiar en la «interpretación» o «intuición» de los trabajadores de noticias en la toma de decisiones editoriales. Definir estrategias claras en este sentido sería un primer paso para atraer suscripciones y convertir las métricas de *engagement* en una moneda de cambio para la industria publicitaria (Nelson y Webster, 2016), rol que hasta el momento sólo ha ocupado el tamaño de la audiencia (Napoli, 2012; Nelson y Webster, 2016). Lo anterior es prueba de la apuesta de los medios por superar su crisis estructural a través de la consolidación de un modelo de negocio que combine los ingresos de publicidad con el pago por contenidos, una sugerencia de diversos académicos del ámbito (Kiesow, 2018; Nelson, 2019a). Un pago por contenidos que no sea residual, sino creciente y significativo; algo hasta ahora complejo en el escenario digital, en el que por más de una década pocos medios fueron capaces de generar ingresos relevantes a través de la suscripción. Aún resta por averiguar si es esta combinación lo que permitirá a los medios superar la crisis económica y de confianza que atraviesa el sector.

El presente estudio también revela que la mayoría de los trabajadores de noticias no advierten —al menos, no abiertamente— el alto impacto negativo de la analítica en la toma de decisiones editoriales y la calidad de la agenda mediática, algo que ha sido ampliamente demostrado por literatura académica (Mitchelstein y Boczkowski, 2009; Túñez-López *et al.*, 2011; Nguyen, 2013; Lee *et al.*, 2014; Tandoc y Thomas, 2015; Welbers *et al.*, 2016; Nelson, 2019b). Sostienen que los datos de audiencia otorgan información valiosa para tomar decisiones editoriales con mayor criterio. No consideran que comporte un peligro, sino que es más bien una oportunidad. Pese a lo anterior, la mayoría de los trabajadores de noticias reconocen que aún se enfrentan al reto de «balancear» la agenda mediática, lo que revela que la analítica continúa teniendo un peso relevante en el proceso de selección y tratamiento de temas. Quienes advierten haber logrado dicho balance lo adjudican a la difusión de «contenido de calidad» y al «valor añadido», conceptos que sería interesante clarificar en futuras investigaciones. En paralelo, los medios obvian el impacto negativo que han tenido las redes sociales en la reputación de la empresa (Mishina *et al.*, 2012; Etter *et al.*, 2017) y la confianza de la audiencia (Ross Arguedas *et al.*, 2022). La mayoría de ellas no advierten al menos, de manera explícita— que el uso de estas plataformas puede haber contribuido, o amplificado, la distribución de contenidos virales, estrictamente vinculados al interés del público y no al interés público (Tewksbury *et al.*, 2001; Yadamsuren, 2009; O'Connor, 2013; Boczkowski *et al.*, 2018; Fletcher y Nielsen, 2018; Nelson, 2019b), lo que pone en cuestión los procesos de autoevaluación de las prácticas editoriales.

Síntoma de ello son las dificultades para definir estrategias en favor del aprovechamiento de redes. Pese al claro espacio que ocupan estas plataformas en el modelo de negocio basado en las audiencias, pues permiten alcanzar nuevos usuarios que aumentan la probabilidad de suscripciones y captan la atención de los anunciantes, muchos trabajadores de noticias están en constante experimentación. Coincidiendo con investigaciones previas (Newman, 2021; Vázquez-Herrero *et al.*, 2022), innovar con los formatos de publicación aparece como la vía más explorada por los medios para conseguir pistas sobre cómo aumentar la visibilidad de los contenidos informativos y fidelizar a las audiencias jóvenes. El estudio evidencia que esto aumenta la desconfianza de las empresas de noticias hacia las redes sociales. Pues, de manera similar a otros estudios (Newman, 2021), en esta investigación los periodistas advierten la falta de transparencia en el funcionamiento de algoritmos y el posicionamiento de contenidos informativos. Por eso, para muchos medios abordar estas plataformas de manera más estratégica (Ott y Theunissen, 2015) no parece ser una prioridad y los esfuerzos se centran en mejorar los espacios propios (Newman, 2021) y ofrecer valor añadido a los suscriptores (Lindén *et al.*, 2022).

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Tabla 1. Lista de países, organizaciones de noticias, nombres y cargos de los entrevistados para el presente estudio.

País	Medio	Entrevistado 1	Entrevistado 2	Entrevistado 3
Francia	Le Monde	Alexis Delcambre, director editorial adjunto encargado de la transformación digital.	Olivier Laffargue, jefe del servicio de Snapchat/Tik Tok.	Gabriel Coutagne, redactor jefe adjunto encargado de herramientas editoriales y difusión de innovaciones, responsable de Instagram.
	Le Figaro	Benjamin Ferran, director editorial adjunto del sitio web.	Romain Courcier, jefe de Redes Sociales.	Charlotte Paroielle, directora de creación digital.
Reino Unido	The Guardian	Mark Rice-Oxley, editor ejecutivo para el ingreso de los lectores.	Martin Belam, Snippets & Explainers.	-
	The Telegraph	David Knowles, jefe de Redes Sociales.	-	-
Alemania	Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung	Donika Lilova, jefa del muro de pago.	Stefanie Michels, jefa Redes Sociales.	Sonja Wippel, responsable de marketing digital - paid social.
	Süddeutsche Zeitung	Christoph Heinlein, jefe de la edición digital.	Britta Schönhütl, jefa de Redes Sociales.	-
Italia	La Repubblica	Francesco Guerrera, jefe editorial adjunto encargado de la cobertura financiera, económica y empresarial.	Sara Bertuccioli, jefa de Redes Sociales.	Marco Seghini, jefe de audiencia y SEO.
	Corriere Della Sera	Daniele Manca, jefe editorial adjunto.	Chiara Severgnini, periodista en Redes Sociales.	Davide Casati, editor digital enfocado en captación de audiencia y desarrollo de suscripciones.
España	El País	Mari Luz Peinado, jefa de Estrategia Digital.	Lucía González, jefa de Desarrollo de Audiencias.	Álvaro Romero Vacas, editor de Redes Sociales.
	El Mundo	Guacimara Castrillo, jefa de Redes Sociales.	Elena Mengual, responsable de SEO y desarrollo de audiencias.	-
	La Vanguardia	Joel Albarrán, Subdirector y defensor del lector.	Noelia Ruano, jefa de Redes Sociales.	Pau Rodríguez, director de marketing.

Fuente: Elaboración propia.

2. Journalism and analytics: The tension between journalistic criteria and data

ARTICLE:

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* Pages 205-218, corresponding to this article, have been removed from this version of the thesis. It cannot be published in open access because it is protected by copyright.

3. COVID-19 pandemic in Italian digital media: Media behavior and citizen information consumption during the health crisis

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COVID-19 Pandemic in the Italian Digital Media: Media Behavior and Citizen Information Consumption During the Health Crisis

Pandemia da COVID-19 nos Meios de Comunicação Digitais Italianos: Comportamento dos Meios de Comunicação e Consumo durante a Crise Sanitária

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Abstract

This article studies media behavior and information consumption during the COVID-19 health crisis using quantitative content analysis of the news published by Italian digital media between January 1 and April 27, 2020 (n = 841,786). The data shows a direct relationship between the number of publications and the capacity for *engagement* and a greater reach with classic general media and with Facebook.

Keywords

coronavirus; media; social networks; engagement; Italy

Resumo

Este artigo estuda o comportamento dos meios de comunicação, e o consumo de informação durante a crise sanitária da COVID-19, através da análise quantitativa do conteúdo das notícias publicadas pelos meios de comunicação italianos, entre 1 de janeiro e 27 de abril de 2020 (n = 841.786). Os dados mostram uma relação direta entre o número de publicações e o engagement, e um maior alcance dos meios de comunicação clássicos e gerais e do Facebook.

Palavras-chave

coronavirus; meios de comunicação; redes sociais; engagement; Itália

Context

Coronavirus (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a new strain of COVID-19, SARS-CoV-2, which was announced for the first time on December 31, 2019 in the Chinese city of Wuhan (World Health Organization, 2020a). The first people infected with COVID-19 in Europe were detected in France, on January 25, 2020, and in Germany, on January 27, 2020. However, on February 21, 2020 in the Italian region of Lombardy, the first outbreak was reported within the European Union. The number of infected grew rapidly in the country, which led the government to order a state of alarm and a mandatory quarantine on March 10, 2020. The following day, the World Health Organization (World Health Organization, 2020b) recognized the disease as a pandemic and by August 30, 2020 they had reported a total of 24,822,800 confirmed cases and 838,360 deaths worldwide (World Health Organization, 2020c).

The phenomenon quickly became a central topic on mass media agendas around the world because it coincided with nearly all the newsworthy criteria (O'Neill & Harcup, 2009), which were:

> Unexpectedness (sudden outbreak) as well as consonance with expectations (a new pandemic was long predicted), intensity increase (growing number of patients and fatalities), negativity (chance of a catastrophe), relevance (current risks involved), meaningfulness (fear of epidemic, personal risks), unambiguity (flu is well known), continuity (daily updates) and unpredictability (will it be a severe epidemic?) (Vasterman & Ruigrok, 2013, p. 437).

Reporting on a pandemic like COVID-19 is a challenge for the media because they produce news based on unpredictable information that occurs in the moment (Ratzan *et al*., 2020). During times of emergency, its role when facing the fear of the citizens, the hysteria of the financial sector and the unintentional misunderstandings of science is fundamental and simple, truthful, timely and evidence-based information must be provided (Villena-Alarcón & Caballero-Galeote, 2020). Managing a pandemic requires a balanced approach that conveys what citizens and the health system can do without causing panic (Cowper, 2020).

There are multiple investigations that have studied the impact of media coverage on the perception of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some have indicated that journalistic companies were able to stop the spread of the disease at an early stage (Zhou *et al*., 2020). Others noted that the media had a negative influence because they encouraged racial attacks by using terms such as "Chinese virus" or rating the disease as being a "Chinese virus pandemonium" (Lyu *et al*., 2020; Zheng *et al*., 2020). These studies show that the media is a powerful tool in setting up the public agenda. By selecting the content to transmit and from what perspective, they influence citizens' perceptions. This demonstrates the need to study how the media covers certain topics using theories such as agenda setting and framing, whose point of convergence is the structure and content of information published by the media.

The agenda-setting theory was posed by McCombs & Shaw (1972) as a result of Cohen's thesis (1963), where he argued that the media does not indicate how to think, but what to think about. According to this theory, the media directs the public's

attention and influences their perception of the most important topics with the daily selection and distribution of information. "This ability to influence the relevance of the public repertoire is what has been called agenda setting by the news media" (McCombs, 2006, p. 24). Citizens take these cues and use them to organize their own agenda and decide which issues are most important. Over time, these issues become the most relevant ones to the public. As a result, the media agenda becomes the public agenda (McCombs, 2006; Justel-Vazquez *et al.*, 2016).

The main premise of the framing theory, or the frame, is that a phenomenon can be seen from a variety of perspectives and interpreted from multiple principles or considerations. The term frame first appeared in the field of psychology by Gregory Bateson (Sadaba, 2008) and was later put into the social context by sociologist Erving Goffman (Koziner, 2013). The application of framing in communication research has a solid trajectory that allows one to consider the theory as being key (Vicente-Mariño & López-Rabadán, 2009). From a media point of view, a frame serves to organize everyday realities (Tuchman, 1978) and provide meaning to current events (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Framing involves selecting, emphasizing and structuring information to set a perspective from which to interpret a particular topic (Fenoll & Rodríguez-Ballesteros, 2017). The news is thus considered to be like a window whose frame determines the reality that one has access to and focuses the attention on a specific item while limiting the perception of other realities (Tuchman, 1978). Therefore, framing can be defined as a process in which some aspects of reality are selected in order to define the problem, diagnose its causes, suggest moral judgments and provide behaviors to follow (Entman, 1993).

Some authors argue that framing is the equivalent of the second level of the agenda-setting theory (McCombs *et al.*, 1997) because it uses frames as a characteristic that, because of its complexity, allows us to define a problem, interpret its causes or propose a process (McCombs, 2006).

Concerning health issues, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the media has proven to be a source of relevant information for the majority of the population. Due to the exceptionality and severity of the COVID-19 outbreak, citizens had increased access to information (Singh *et al*., 2020) and the news became a precious and valuable commodity in handling the situation (Casero-Ripollés, 2020). According to Comscore's analysis (2020), the area with the fastest growing consumption of news during confinement was the Internet, whose peak usage coincided with the first steps taken by different governments to curb the spread of the virus. In Italy, the first European country hit hard by the virus, the peak was recorded between the 2nd and 8th of March. On March 2, the Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte divided the country into four zones according to the severity of the epidemic in order to implement measures to restrict activities (*Corriere della Sera*, 2020). On March 8, he extended the measures to all of Lombardy and 14 northern provinces, putting more than a quarter of the Italian population under quarantine (*Repubblica*, 2020).

The most notable change in citizen information consumption habits was identified in digital, general news media, whose traffic in Italy soared between the 17th and 23rd of February, 2020 (Comscore, 2020). This coincided with the knowledge of the first infected people in the Lombardy region. The rise in the number of deaths in Italy, which was recorded between March 6-10, was another key moment in the change in information consumption as 93% of the population claimed to consult news at least

once a day by mainly accessing national government websites (66%) and news companies (55%) (Edelman, 2020).

This shows the importance of new technologies (broadband), new devices (computers, mobile phones, tablets) and new areas of interaction (social networks) in the production, dissemination and consumption of informative content. Using social networks for journalistic writing rose the most as they became important channels for distributing information, extracting ideas and increasing website traffic (Hermida *et al*., 2012; Lee, 2016; Sacco & Bossio, 2017; Thurman, 2018). Not only did they become a valid source of information (Pedriza, 2018; Justel-Vázquez *et al*., 2018), especially in the emergence of unforeseen events (Pérez-Soler & Micó, 2015), but they led the media to adapt information content according to the logic of consumption (Hernández-Pérez & Rodríguez-Mateos, 2016).

On these platforms, the audience's exposure and interaction with the information is particular (Ahmadi & Wohn, 2018) because they encounter news content without intending to do so (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Yadamsuren & Erdelez, 2010). Internet and social network users accidentally discovered news while engaging in other on-line activities, both related to and not related to the information content (Tewksbury *et al*. 2001). This way of accessing information "is brief, interrupted and partial and its consumption is ephemeral", but it is also "both the symptom and the cause of lasting, constant and integral transformation" (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2018, p. 143). Previous research shows that this incidental exposure to news plays an important role in accessing useful, valuable information (Boczkowski *et al*., 2018; Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2017; Yadamsuren, 2009). Due to the possibilities provided by this type of exposure, social media users are becoming less and less likely to search for news, which could limit them in their understanding of current events (Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2017). However, previous research shows that active participation between users and content on social networks may increase their involvement (Greenhow & Reifman, 2009; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015) and emotional relationship (Yadamsuren & Heinstr.m, 2011) to current, emerging issues. This has made social networks a source of information (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016; Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2017) for a growing number of citizens with Facebook being the most widely used social network in Italy according to Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (Coppola, 2020b), which attracts many journalistic pieces that seek to communicate and interact with their audiences (Al-Rawi, 2017; Duffy & Knight, 2019).

Including the audience on social networks is important for the survival of the media (Hernández-Pérez & Rodríguez Mateos, 2016) because it is a part of its structure as well as being a source for funding and advertising (Tandoc & Maitra, 2018). In this context, it is essential to measure the consumption and the involvement of users with the information products that are put into circulation. As such, engagement is used as a measure that quantifies the interaction of users with the brand and its content, which is disseminated in different digital spaces (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Raimondo Anselmino, 2017). This interaction is relevant because it can affect the user's purchase intent (Park *et al*. 2009; García-Medina *et al*. 2018) and build and manage the identity of the brand (Arvidsson & Caliandro 2015).

Objectives and Method

This article analyzes media behavior and citizens' information consumption in the face of a crisis, such as that created by the COVID-19 pandemic. The article aims to

provide a snapshot of the behavior adopted by Italy's main digital media (Coppola, 202 Cazzola, 2020) during the pandemic and user interaction with the content published. To this end, the following specific objectives are proposed:

O1: Discover the presence of content related to the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy's main digital communication media.
O2: Understand the timeframe evolution of the production of information related to the health crisis.
O3: Ranking of the ten media outlets with the highest engagement with the terms Coronavirus and COVID-19.
O4: Discover which social network generated greater engagement with citizens who accessed information pertaining to the pandemic.

To carry out this longitudinal research, the quantitative method was primarily used and the qualitative method was used only to identify the tone of predominant headlines. The sample is made up of informative content pertaining to the pandemic published by 30 of Italy's predominant digital media (.it) between January 1 and April 27, 2020. These dates coincide with the beginning of global media interest in COVID-19 and maximum mortality in the country. For data collection, the *Buzzsumo* application search tool was used and the following filters were applied: timeframe (January to April), geographic (Italy) and semantics (COVID-19 and Coronavirus). The total sample is 841,786 news items.

The information was processed using the quantitative content analysis technique, which allowed for the systematic, objective and calculable study of variables to measure and achieve an accurate representation of the content (Wimmer & Dominick, 2010). The sample was recorded in a spreadsheet where, in addition to quantifying the total news collected, categories were proposed in order to meet the objectives. First, the content was classified according to publication date, number of pieces of information published with the terms most commonly used in reference to the health crisis (Coronavirus and COVID-19) and web analysis to determine their respective engagement. Then, a list of ten different media outlets and their ten major news stories with the most engagement among readers was recorded. Based on this list and previous research, categories of analysis were established to study the subject (López-Rabadán & Casero-Ripollés, 2012; Laferrara & Justel-Vázquez, 2020) and the predominant tone (positive, neutral or negative) of the headlines (Bardin, 1986; García Ferrando *et al*., 1986; López Aranguren, 1989; Piñuel & Gaitán, 1995).

Results:

The data collected for this investigation indicates that the contents relating to the COVID-19 pandemic were a substantial aspect of Italy's media agenda between January 1 and April 27, 2020. During this period, the media analyzed totaled 841,786 pandemic-linked publications, of which 759,316 contained the term Coronavirus and 82,470 had the term COVID-19. Coronavirus thus became the concept most used by Italian digital media to publicize information on the health crisis, which was reflected in the engagement data collected (table 1).

Term	Total Articles	Engagement Total	Engagement Ratio
Coronavirus	759,316	565,679,075	744
COVID-19.	82,470	31,211,433	378

Table 1. Number of publications in Italian digital media using the terms Coronavirus and COVID-19 between January 1 and April 27, 2020, along with their engagement totals and engagement ratio
Sources: Javier Sierra Sánchez, Valentina Laferrara and Míriam Díez Bosch.

According to the data collected, the Italian media began to show interest in COVID-19 on January 21, 2020 (Figure 1). This coincided with the detection of the first person infected outside of Asia, in the United States. There was a slight increase in information production on February 2, 2020, when Italian Minister of Health, Roberto Speranza, reported that COVID-19 had been isolated in a hospital in Rome in order to study it, understand it and attempt to stop its spread. The news came two days after the contagion of two Chinese tourists were detected in that same city. The explosion of information production occurred on February 20, the day before the authorities of ten northern Italian locations ordered the closure of all public places due to the detection of 17 infected people, 2 of whom were from Veneto and 15 were from Lombardy. From that moment on, information activity was high in all of the major Italian media analyzed. The date with the highest production of news about the pandemic was March 9 when Italy became a "protected zone" and all human movement was prohibited. Information activity began to fall on March 17, even though the pandemic continued to have an important place in the media agendas that were analyzed.
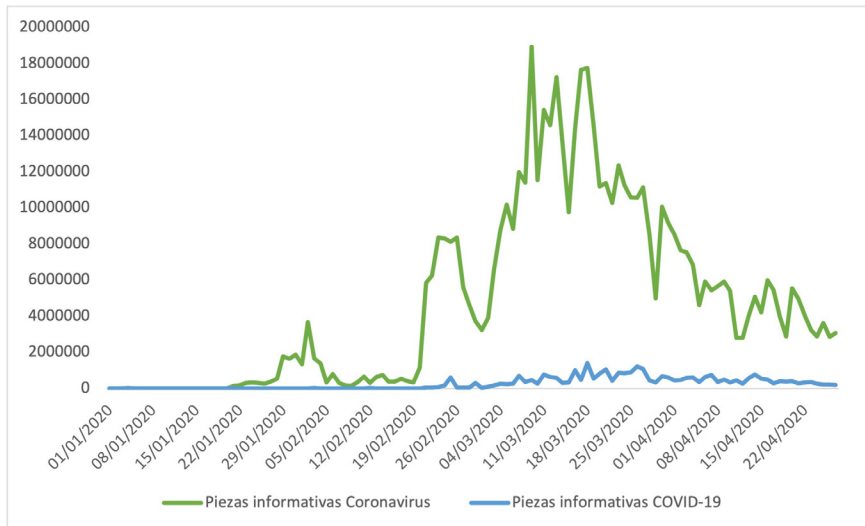

Figure 1. Number of media publications analyzed that used the terms Coronavirus and COVID-19 between January 1 and April 27, 2020
Source: Javier Sierra Sánchez, Valentina Laferrara and Míriam Díez Bosch.

To meet the third objective of this study, the ranking of ten media outlets with the greatest engagement with the two specialized terms of information was developed (Table 2). The ranking for the Coronavirus concept consists of six general-interest newspapers (*Repubblica*, *Fanpage*, *Corriere della Sera*, *Il Messaggero*, *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, *The Post Internazionale*), an informative television channel (*TGcom24*) and a news agency (*ANSA*). With the exception of the online newspaper, *Fanpage*, all the others in this ranking have a paper version as well. The media ranked with the highest *engagement* for the term COVID-19 is composed of nine general-interest newspapers (*Fanpage, Il Messaggero, Il Giornale, Huffington Post, Secolo d'Italia*, *Napoli Today*, *Blog Sicily*, *Malpensa 24, Repubblica)* and a specialized one called *Green Me*. Seven of these media outlets are entirely digital and three feature a paper version as well.

Coronavirus		COVID-19	
Digital Media	Engagement	Digital Media	Engagement
www.tgcom24.mediaset.it	24.494.936	www.fanpage.it	9.735.679
www.repubblica.it	24.311.250	www.ilmessaggero.it	952.195
www.fanpage.it	22.136.316	www.ilgiornale.it	672.957
www.corriere.it	18.954.895	www.huffingtonpost.it	638.971
www.ilmessaggero.it	15.570.768	www.blogsicilia.it	625.860
www.ilfattoquotidiano.it	14.423.038	www.secoloditalia.it	533.152
www.tpi.it	13.695.634	www.repubblica.it	507.712
www.lastampa.it	13.116.398	www.greenme.it	506.314
www.ilmattino.it	11.461.440	www.napolitoday.it	442.117
www.ansa.it	11.144.006	www.malpensa24.it	408.979

Table 2. Ranking of ten media outlets with the highest engagement with the terms Coronavirus and COVID-19 Source: Javier Sierra Sánchez, Valentina Laferrara and Míriam Díez Bosch.

In order to approximate the preferential COVID-19 pandemic information consumption of Italian citizens, the ten most important news articles with engagement were extracted from the previous ranking for both the term Coronavirus (table 3) and COVID-19 (table 4). It is apparent from the analysis of both rankings that 55% of the total news with the highest engagement were published during March, when the first major spike in the number of infected was recorded and the state of alarm was decreed, followed by April (25%) and February (20%). Directly proportional was the number of publications on the pandemic (see Figure 1).

The predominant topics in the news with the greatest engagement are politics (30%) with information relating to the authority's general management of the COVID-19 pandemic, and health and science (30%) with information relating to the spread of the virus, medical research and scientific progress. Next is news that appeals to human interest and/or deals with collaborative initiatives (25%), such as the publication by *Green Me* about a dog who provided comfort to doctors and nurses during the emergency. News of people who contracted the virus (15%), economy (15%) and religion

(15%) were less relevant. It is also apparent from the analysis that the predominant headline tone was positive (45%), followed by negative (30%) and neutral (25%).

Publication Date	Digital Media	Article Headline	Engagement
2/16/2020	www.tgcom24.mediaset.it	Coronavirus, The American Bioterrorism Expert: "Created in a laboratory, a biological weapon."	549.1K
4/16/2020	www.repubblica.it	Chilean writer, Luis Sepúlveda, Dies After Contracting Coronavirus	851.8K
3/12/2020	www.fanpage.it	Chinese Doctors, Experts in the Fight Against Coronavirus, Arrive in Italy: We Will Help You Fight It	1.2M
3/13/2020	www.corriere.it	Boris Johnson's Speech: "Many families will lose loved ones."	456.7K
4/4/2020	www.ilmessaggero.it	Coronavirus, Salvini: "Let's open the churches for Easter. We need Mary's protection."	474K
2/2/2020	www.ilfattoquotidiano.it	Coronavirus, Here's Who Isolated It: All Women from the South, Among Them a Precarious Young Woman - Il Fatto Quotidiano	308.1K
3/3/2020	www.tpi.it	Coronavirus Fundraising Launched in China to Help Italy	723.6K
4/10/2020	www.lastampa.it	In China, Dogs and Cats Can No Longer Be Eaten: They Are Pets, Not Livestock	411.4K
4/25/2020	www.ilmattino.it	Coronavirus, Starting May 4, It Is Possible to See Friends and Relatives: Masks Only in Clubs	162.4K
3/10/2020	www.ansa.it	Armani Gives 1,250,000 Euros to Hospitals - Lombardy	646.7K

Table 3. Top ten news articles with the highest engagement in the Coronavirus category
Source: Javier Sierra Sánchez, Valentina Laferrara and Míriam Díez Bosch.

Publication Date	Digital Media	Article Headline	Engagement
3/27/2020	www.fanpage.it	The Pope Donates 30 Respirators to Areas Most Affected by COVID-19	127K
4/15/2020	www.ilmessaggero.it	COVID-19, Israeli Scientist: "Each epidemic cycle lasts 70 days, then the virus disappears."	277.8K

2/29/2020	www.ligiornale.it	"The Real Victims of COVID-19 are Small Business Owners."	256.1K
3/12/2020	www.huffingtonpost.it	Roche Donates Arthritis Drug for Trial Against COVID-19	142.5K
3/18/2020	www.blogsicilia.it	Fabrizio, the Youngest Italian Who Died of COVID-19, Passed Away at 32	BlogSicilia - Latest News from Sicily	581.6K
3/21/2020	www.secoloditalia.it	COVID-19, Veterinarian: "It's safer to sleep with a dog than to touch a human."	467.8K
2/26/2020	www.repubblica.it	Coronavirus, Adriano Trevisan's Daughter: "COVID-19 killed him, but he was my father, not just a number."	337.1K
3/26/2020	www.greenme.it	Therapy Dog Gives Comfort to Doctors and Nurses at the Forefront of the COVID-19 Emergency	194.9K
3/11/2020	www.napolitoday.it	COVID-19, The Medicine Tested at Pascale Works: "National protocol at once."	222.6K
3/07/2020	www.malpensa24.it	Fighting COVID-19, A Losing Game if Fought Only in Hospitals	389.5K

Table 4. Ten news articles with highest engagement in COVID-19 category. Source: The author
Source: Javier Sierra Sánchez, Valentina Laferrara and Míriam Díez Bosch.

The data collected indicates that Facebook was the social network that generated the highest engagement with users who accessed the content published by Italian digital media in relation to the health crisis (tables 5 and 6). It is followed by Twitter, although with much less engagement. Pinterest and Reddit generated a minor reach. Facebook thus became the preferred social network for news consumption and offered the highest incidental exposure of informational content to its users. This data supports the conclusions of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (Coppola, 2020b).

	Facebook	Twitter	Pinterest	Reddit	Engagement
www.tgcom24.mediaset.it	24.4M	81.0K	729	7.3K	24.5M
www.repubblica.it	24.1M	223.1K	1.3K	16.8K	24.3M
www.fanpage.it	22.1M	42.0K	92	1.4K	22.1M
www.corriere.it	18.8M	181.4K	1.5K	15.0K	19.0M
www.ilmessaggero.it	15.5M	61.2K	364	6.5K	15.6M

www.ilfattoquotidiano.it	14.3M	133.1K	454	4.7K	14.4M
www.tpi.it	13.7M	26.3K	44	1.0K	13.7M
www.lastampa.it	13.0M	113.4K	179	6.0K	13.1M
www.ilmattino.it	11.4M	24.0K	60	983	11.5M
www.ansa.it	11.0M	148.5K	717	5.5K	11.1M
Total	**168.3M**	**1.03M**	**5.4K**	**65.1K**	**170.3M**

Table 5. Social networks with the highest engagement of content referring to the crisis using the term Coronavirus
Source: Javier Sierra Sánchez, Valentina Laferrara and Míriam Díez Bosch.

	Facebook	Twitter	Pinterest	Reddit	Engagement
www.fanpage.it	971.3K	2.2K	11	8	973.6K
www.ilmessaggero.it	949.7K	2.5K	21	0	952.2K
www.ligiornale.it	672.4K	539	6	0	673K
www.huffingtonpost.it	635K	3.9K	23	7	639K
www.blogsicilia.it	625.8K	59	0	0	625.9K
www.secoloditalia.it	532.5K	625	0	0	533.2K
www.repubblica.it	506.2K	1.5K	13	3	507.7K
www.greenme.it	505.9K	390	5	0	506.3K
www.napolitoday.it	441.9K	170	0	0	442.1K
www.ansa.it	408.9K	30	4	0	409K
Total	**6249.6K**	**11.9K**	**83**	**18**	**6262K**

Table 6. Social networks with the highest engagement of content referring to the crisis using the term COVID-19
Source: Javier Sierra Sánchez, Valentina Laferrara and Míriam Díez Bosch.

Discussion and Conclusions

This article is logical when taking into account the context generated on the web following the outbreak of the health crisis in Italy. The phenomenon, which alarmed the world's population and kept millions of people quarantined, caused increased access to information (Singh *et al.*, 2020) and turned the news into a prized commodity for handling the situation (Casero-Ripollés, 2020). The fastest growing category was the Internet, in part because consumption of main, digital media skyrocketed (Comscore, 2020). The phenomenon soon caught the attention of academics interested in understanding the media's action in the face of this unprecedented event and its impact on citizen perception of the health crisis (Lyu *et al.*, 2020; Zheng *et al.*, 2020; Zhou *et*

al., 2020). This article makes a significant contribution in this regard as it provides a snapshot of the behavior of Italy's main digital media during the COVID-19 outbreak and citizen interaction with the content they published.

The results of the research reinforce what has been found in previous studies on the prominence of emergencies, such as a pandemic, in various media agendas (O'Neill & Harcup, 2009; Vasterman & Ruigrok, 2013; Ratzan *et al*., 2020). Since the emergence of the first infected person outside of the Asian continent, Italian digital media has shown a constant interest in information regarding the COVID-19 outbreak. In fact, the amount of publications on the pandemic was high over the last two months and showed informational spikes that coincided with the emergence of information most needed to handle the situation. The amount of information proved to be directly related to the capacity of engagement generated with users, suggesting that greater news production expands the chances of impacting citizens.

The term Coronavirus was used more at the informative level to approach the phenomenon of the health crisis because, compared to the term COVID-19, it is more understandable and, therefore, easier for the general user. After all, it is the work of the media to provide information that is easily understood (Villena-Alarcón & Caballero-Galeote, 2020). The main and classical media, with consolidated paper versions that had content adapted to the digital environment, achieved the highest capacity of engagement during the three months studied. This suggests that, in emergency situations such as the pandemic under study, citizens choose to consume information from media whose original editions are traditional. However, the results show that all-digital media is beginning to gain ground in this regard. The results also indicate that, in times of crisis, such as that caused by COVID-19, citizens tend to consume information with positive headlines. This may be because they offer a sense of calm and security.

Facebook has proven to be the social network with the greatest capacity of engagement containing information content concerning the health crisis. Although with much less capacity, Twitter has also proven relevant. Pinterest and Reddit, however, have shown they made a limited contribution in this regard. The results of this study reinforce what is indicated in previous research concerning the necessary relationship between media and social networks because they offer the possibility to distribute information, increase website traffic and interact with audiences (Hermida *et al*., 2012; Lee, 2016; Al-Rawi, 2017; Sacco & Bossio, 2017; Thurman, 2018; Duffy & Knight, 2019). The latter becomes relevant as long as the media structure is based on audiences and sources of funding (Tandoc & Maitra, 2018).

This study mainly offers quantitative information, so future research could address the issue from a qualitative approach based on interviews with media managers, focus groups and citizens who experienced the health crisis. It would also be worth investigating why traditional media continues to be a reference in times of emergency and how they adapt their content to the digital environment.

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4. The health crisis on Instagram: how the media are building their agenda on the visual social network during the COVID-19 pandemic

ARTICLE:

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The Health Crisis on Instagram: How the Media Are Building Their Agenda on the Visual Social Network During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Over the last decade social networks have become important channels for the media to publish information and communicate with their younger audiences, with Instagram recently becoming the most popular platform for this purpose. This article is an investigation into news production on this social network in the context of the international crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, by means of a content analysis of 552 posts published by the two most widely read Spanish newspapers. The results suggest that despite there being a large quantity of soft content and human-interest stories, as found in previous research, Instagram is also used as a platform to distribute information of public interest about the management of the crisis (such as political decisions and health content).

Keywords: social networks, Instagram, journalism, COVID-19, agenda.

The use of social media is currently one of the most popular online activities: with more than 3.8 billion people (42 percent of the global population) engaging with it worldwide (Hootsuite; We Are Social and DataReportal, 2019). Digital platforms have facilitated media communication and interaction with audiences (Al-Rawi, 2017; Duffy and Knight, 2019), becoming a source of information for 52 percent of the global population (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2019). Facebook continues to be the preferred social network for this purpose, but Instagram is emerging as a site to publish informative content (Newman *et al.*, 2019). Created as a visual platform and geared towards private interaction between people (Larsson, 2018), in recent years, Instagram has gained popularity with Generation Z and Generation Y (Newman *et al.*, 2019;

Sumida, Walker, and Mitchell, 2019), attracting many media outlets seeking to improve their visibility and engage young audiences with their brand.

Social networks have become relevant channels for the media to source ideas in order to generate stories, publish information and increase traffic to their websites (Hermida *et al.*, 2012; Lee, 2016; Sacco and Bossio, 2017; Thurman, 2018). On these digital sites, the news is separated from the media context its presence on a printed, or even digital, page entails. On social networks news becomes detached from the hierarchy applied by the media and begins to compete with other information and content that does not always conform to traditional journalistic criteria (Bazaco, Redondo, and Sánchez-García, 2019). Analytical tools working in parallel with this process enable the collection and analysis of the digital traces left by users on the news and provide a series of metrics that push journalists to make decisions that go beyond their intuition: as the interests of users cannot be ignored and end up becoming news in these digital environments (Justel-Vázquez, Micó-Sanz, and Sánchez-Marín, 2016; Tandoc, 2014; Túñez-López, García, and Guevara-Castillo, 2011; Ducan, 2010).

This has occasionally resulted in the creation of pseudo-informative content as the result of implementing strategies to survive in the attention economy, such as striking headlines, direct appeals to the reader and content considered superficial or exaggerated (Bazaco, Redondo, and Sánchez-García, 2019; Katarzyna, 2013). The result of this practice is a new informational paradigm whose main objective is "to produce journalism that transmits with the ease of a virus" (Salaverría, 2015: 19). In this type of journalism, the interest of the public might prevail over public interest (Justel-Vázquez, Micó-Sanz, and Sánchez-Marín, 2016).

Multiple authors maintain that, in many cases, this phenomenon has altered journalism's traditional function of gatekeeping (Bazaco, Redondo, and Sánchez-García, 2019; Paulussen, Harder, and Johnson, 2018; Bell *et al.*, 2017; Salaverría, 2015; Shoemaker, Vos, and Reese, 2009; Tandoc, 2014), understood as "the process of selection, writing, editing, positioning, programming, repetition and, otherwise, massaging information so that it becomes news" (Shoemaker, Vos, and Reese, 2009: 73). The logic of the media is gradually replaced by the logic of social networks (Dijck and Poell, 2013), and the distribution routines of news content adapt to a media environment where the dynamics of social networks become highly relevant (Welbers and Opgenhaffen, 2019).

News organisations maintain daily activity on the social network Instagram, sharing photos and videos on their feeds, demonstrating a clear tendency to follow the criteria of posting attractive, striking and innovative content, instead of that which is informative and current (Vázquez-Herrero, 2019). In recent years, the media have focused their efforts on creating ephemeral content intended to be published on Instagram Stories, but which lacks a defined publication strategy, demonstrating that many news organisations are still in a phase of adaptation to the social network (Vázquez-Herrero, Direito-Rebollal, and López-García, 2019; Rojas-Torrijos and Panal-Prior, 2017). On Instagram, content has been shown to be predominantly apolitical and related to soft categories, normally topics such as fashion, travel, food and beauty (Al Nashmi, 2018). However, research into this matter remains scarce.

The present study, which is framed in the context of an international crisis generated by the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), aims to contribute to the corpus of work analysing the news production and distribution of content by the media on digital social network platforms. The study of the composition of the media agenda on social networks (the channel through which the news content reaches a section of its audience) becomes relevant according to the theory of agenda setting (McCombs, 2006), which states that over time the press agenda becomes the public agenda. It becomes even more relevant when it is taken into consideration that a large proportion of the world's population inform themselves via these platforms (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2019; Sumida, Walker, and Mitchell, 2019).

This article aims to further contribute to studies into the degree to which social networks are used in the production and dissemination of content by the media. It focuses on Instagram because, in recent years, the use of this platform for such purposes has increased (Newman *et al.*, 2019). Before outlining the methodology employed in this research, the research questions and hypotheses developed to guide this investigation are given below:

- RQ1: What presence does information related to the COVID-19 pandemic have on the Instagram profiles of the Spanish press?
- H1: The COVID-19 pandemic has monopolized the agenda of the Spanish press on social networks such as Instagram.
- RQ2: How is content related to the COVID-19 pandemic treated on this platform?
- H2: The majority of the content related to the COVID-19 pandemic corresponds to information that lacks a direct link with the public interest, as the media seek to adapt to the content that habitually circulates on social networks such as Instagram.

METHODOLOGY

This article examines the publication activity of the two most widely read general-interest newspapers in Spain (AIMC, 2020): *El País* and *La Vanguardia*, on their Instagram profiles during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In order to address the research questions posed by this investigation, content analysis was carried out, measuring relevant variables in a systematic, objective and quantitative way to obtain an accurate representation of the set of contents analysed (Wimmer and Dominick, 2010). Data collection was carried out taking into account certain characteristics of content analysis applied to digital news (Karlsson and Sjøvaag, 2016; Widholm, 2016). To avoid complications resulting from the dynamic nature of the object of study; social networks and the ephemeral content circulating on them, screenshots and screen recordings were taken of the content published on the Instagram profiles of *El País* and *La Vanguardia*, and these were stored in order to be able to review and replicate the study after the digital material has disappeared or been modified. In accordance with an

agreed upon plan, data was collected every day at 10 p.m. between March 14th and April 13th. The start date of sample collection corresponds to the day the Spanish Government declared a state of alarm and ordered a national quarantine due to the advance of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country. The screenshots and recordings collected are a record of the content published on Instagram feed, Instagram TV and Instagram Stories. Of the total sample of 552 posts, 320 correspond to the profile of *El País* and 232 to that of *La Vanguardia*.

The content was transferred to analysis grids where, in addition to describing the content published on the Instagram profiles of *El País* and *La Vanguardia*, categories of analysis were proposed that seek to answer the research questions posed. Firstly, content was divided into that related to the COVID-19 pandemic and that to totally unrelated topics. Then, after carrying out a preliminary analysis, a series of categories was proposed in which the content related to the pandemic was classified (Table 1). Thirdly, an analysis was carried out into whether content items corresponded to information that could be considered an issue of public interest, utilising a classification tool employed in previous research (Justel-Vázquez, Micó-Sanz, and Sánchez-Marín, 2016) that is based on the traditional concept of public interest. This classification identifies as news of public interest those international, political, economic, health and science issues that affect people's lives regardless of whether they are interested in them or not.

Table 1. Classification of content related to the COVID-19 pandemic according to thematic areas

Categories	Explanation
Governing authorities' administration and citizen reaction	Content about how the authorities are managing, in general, the COVID-19 pandemic and the complaints from citizens regarding this management.
Economic impact	Content about the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and the quarantine on the domestic, local, national and international economy.
Social impact	Content about the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and the quarantine on the spheres of education, religion, employment and the family. This also includes content related to social inequality and violations of quarantine.
Impact in the streets and on the environment	Content about the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and the quarantine on the environment and the streets of different cities of the world.
Health and science	Content about health, medical investigation, scientific advances, the growth of the pandemic, precautions against the virus and the general state of the health system.
Entertainment	Content aimed at helping people cope better with quarantine.
Human interest and collaborative initiatives	Content whose objective is to produce an affective or emotional response in the audience, and that related to collaborative initiatives to fight the COVID-19 pandemic.
Personalities with COVID-19	Content about personalities or celebrities who have contracted COVID-19.

| Categories	Explanation
Opinion and analysis	Opinion and analysis pieces about the COVID-19 pandemic and the quarantine.
Surveys	Content that refers to public opinion about the COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine.
Humour	Content whose objective is to be humorous about the COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine.
Publicity	Content whose objective is to promote products or services.
Others	Content that does not correspond to any of the previous categories.

Source: Authors.

RESULTS

With regard to the first research question the results have demonstrated that, as expected, the majority of the publications on the visual platform Instagram between March 14th and April 13th, 2020 by the two most widely read general newspapers in Spain; *El País* and *La Vanguardia*, are related to the COVID-19 global pandemic.

Of the 320 publications posted by the newspaper *El País* on the platform's various channels; feed, stories and IGTV, 313 were related to the pandemic, which represents 97.5 percent of the publications during the period analysed. Only 7 non-COVID-19 publications were registered, and these referred to interviews with personalities from the field of culture and information about events. These types of publications represent only 2.2 percent of the total (Figure 1). Although to a lesser extent, this predominance of information about the epidemic is also registered on the Instagram profile of *La Vanguardia*. Of the 232 items published on the platform's various channels, 213 were related to the COVID-19 pandemic, which represents 91.8 percent of the total publications in the period analysed. The percentage of content referring to other topics is, in this case, somewhat higher: at 8.2 percent (Figure 2).

Figure 1. Percentage of content related, or not, to COVID-19 of the total publications on the Instagram profile of *El País*, between March14th and April 13th, 2020.
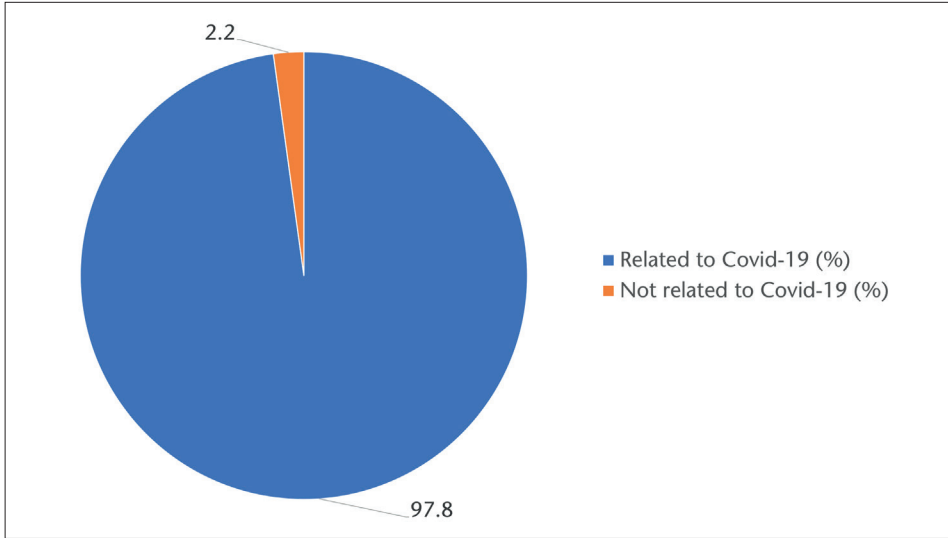
Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 2. Percentage of content related, or not, to COVID-19 of the total publications on the Instagram profile of *La Vanguardia*, between March14th and April 13th, 2020.
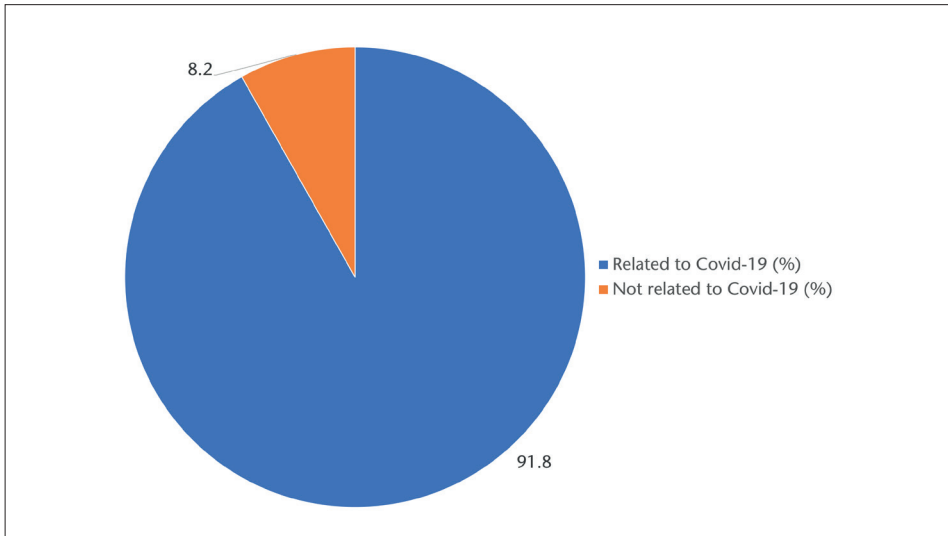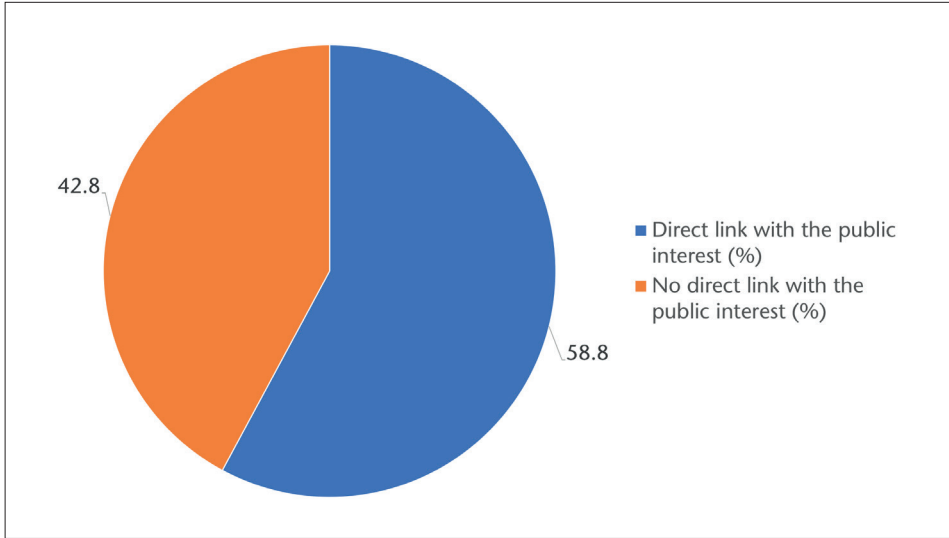

Source: Own elaboration.

Regarding the second research question and the aim to analyse the different approaches taken by the Spanish press to publishing content related to COVID-19 on their Instagram profiles, some broad differences have been detected. As for the thematic categories of the published content, on the profile of the newspaper *El País*, information relating to the way the authorities (The Spanish Government, The European Union, The Vatican, etc.) have reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as information about citizens' complaints about this reaction makes up 29.1 percent of the total. Information about health and science, including publications on scientific advances, the growth of the virus, advice on avoiding getting ill and the state of the health system obtains a similar, if somewhat lower, importance (25.6 percent). In third place of importance is found human interest content, that which appeals to the audience's emotions, and content related to collaborative initiatives to fight against COVID-19 (16.6 percent). The remainder of the themes identified occupies a secondary place. Contrary to expectations, entertainment content aimed at helping people cope better with quarantine occupies only 6.6 percent of the total content published about the pandemic. Information regarding social impact (4.5 percent), economic impact (3.8 percent) and the impact on the streets and the environment (2.8 percent) achieved a lesser presence. The least frequent topics in the *El País* sample analysed are; humour (2.9 percent), opinion and analysis (1.9 percent), personalities who contracted COVID-19 (1.6 percent), surveys (1.6 percent) and advertising (1.6 percent).

The trend is different on the Instagram profile of *La Vanguardia*, with human interest content and that related to collaborative initiatives standing out. Such content represents 43.7 percent of all publications on the virus, that is, almost half. Content relating to the way the authorities have reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as information about citizens' complaints about this reaction occupy second place, representing a significant percentage of the total content published (19.2 percent). The same occurs with health and science related publications (17.8 percent). Information about the impact of quarantine on the streets of different cities of the world and on the environment has considerably less presence (8.5 percent), but the least recurrent themes in the coverage of the pandemic are those related to social impact (4.7 percent), the economic impact (1.4 percent), opinion or analysis (0.9 percent) and personalities who contracted COVID-19 (0.5 percent). Unlike that registered on the profile of *El País*, *La Vanguardia*'s media agenda does not contain any advertising, surveys or humorous items.

Results regarding the degree of public interest in content related to the pandemic vary according to the media analysed. The coverage published by the newspaper *El País* on its Instagram profile contains a greater amount of information with a direct link to the public interest, with 58.8 percent of its content related to this category. However, a similar quantity of softer content (42.8) is present in the newspaper's media agenda, demonstrating a balance between both types of information. In the profile of the newspaper *La Vanguardia* the scenario is different: content directly linked to the public interest represents 35.2 percent of the total published, compared to 67.6 percent of softer information.

Figure 3. Correspondence of content related to COVID-19 with the public interest on the Instagram profile of *El País*, between March14th and April 13th, 2020.

Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 4. Correspondence of content related to COVID-19 with the public interest on the Instagram profile of La Vanguardia, between March14th and April 13th, 2020.
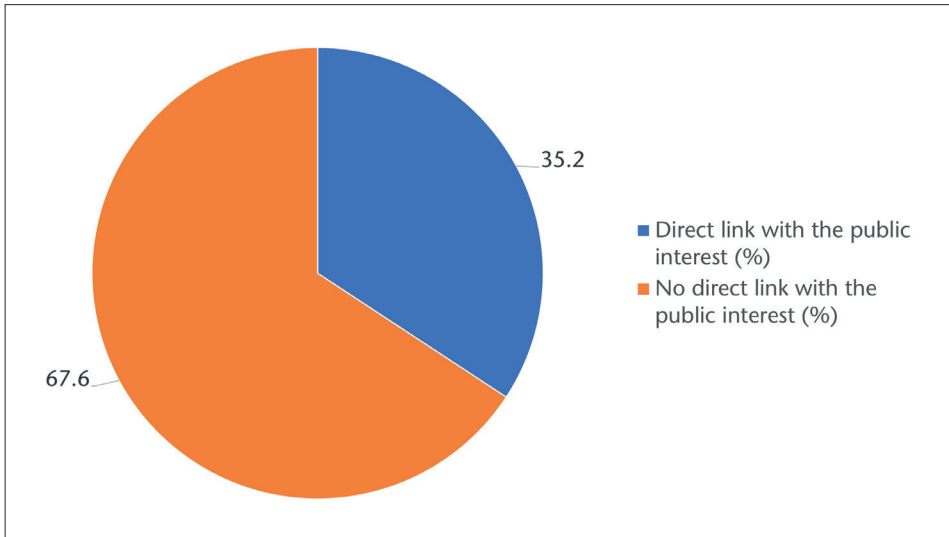
Source: Own elaboration.

CONCLUSIONS

The visual platform Instagram attracts multiple media organisations seeking to increase their visibility and interact with the younger audience. Previous research has shown that the media maintain daily activity on this platform, sharing photos and videos on their feeds (Vázquez-Herrero, 2019) and generating ephemeral content for their stories, tending to follow the criteria of posting attractive, striking and innovative content, instead of that which is informative and current (Vázquez-Herrero, Direito-Rebollal, and López-García, 2019). Previous studies have also concluded that recurring content on the visual platform Instagram is in the main apolitical and related to soft categories, such as fashion, travel and food (Al Nashmi, 2018). However, global health emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic suggest that this dynamic has been altered.

The results of this paper confirm the first hypothesis that pointed to a tendency for content related to the COVID-19 pandemic to monopolise the agenda of the Spanish press on Instagram, evidencing the low importance that content related to other topics acquires in times of a global emergency.

The analysis also leads to a partial validation of the second hypothesis, which predicted a predominance of information about COVID-19 that lacks a direct link to the public interest, based on the assumption that the media seek to adapt to the most common approaches and class of content on the visual platform Instagram.

On the Instagram profile of the newspaper *La Vanguardia*, information of human interest and that related to collaborative initiatives to fight against COVID-19 predominate. However, the results obtained from the analysis of *El País*' profile confirm that information of public interest, such as political decisions, health recommendations or economic measures, are in the majority. This shows that even though the media studied are of a similar nature they have followed different strategies on this visual platform during the crisis generated by COVID-19. It is also noted that on this social network, relevant content has a more significant presence than posts about softer categories or those designed to be attractive.

The differences detected in this research are an indication that further research should be carried out into the activity that news organisations maintain on social networks such as Instagram. Such research should include different types of media (with different business strategies) and media from different countries. Other avenues of research are also open, for example, investigating the format of content according to the channel (stories, feed, IGTV) on which they are broadcast. Although this aspect was beyond the scope of this article, it would be interesting to achieve a more complete understanding of the dynamics with which the media operate on this social network.

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