

# Redefining journalism narratives, distribution strategies and user involvement based on innovation in digital native media

[ACCEPTED VERSION]

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Digital journalism is seeking to redefine its role in the communicative ecosystem in the network society of the third decade of the 21st century. This has been made through innovation processes that entail renewed narratives and formats, greater user involvement and advanced dissemination strategies. Thousands of digital native media, most of which have come to prominence in last ten years, have undertaken this process of adaptation and reinvention. It has happened during a period of intense media coverage and constant technological changes. Based on the most recent research in the journalistic field, and on an empirical study of the most innovative digital native media within reach from an international perspective (n = 26; 20 digital native media + 6 traditional newspapers), this text reflects on current trends and the likely consequences of the changes underway within journalism, the journalistic profession and research in the journalistic field. The results are structured according to the three assessed areas: mobile narratives, diffusion strategies and user involvement.

**Key words:** Journalism; Digital Journalism; Journalistic narratives; Communicative ecosystem; Content distribution; Hearings.

## 1. Introduction

Journalism's present and future is digital and online (van der Haak, Parks and Castells, 2012). Nonetheless, journalism is also undergoing a process of adaptation and reinvention as part of a wider communicative metamorphosis (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2019). As a result of the new environment and the hybridization of practices (Hamilton, 2016), many doubts and questions about the future of journalism arise due to the risks and opportunities involved (Franklin, 2016; Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2016). On a daily basis, the communication ecosystem provides thousands of examples of pieces of digital journalism that indicate that the future of journalism is in safe hands. This is due to the fact that hardware and software, if used properly, allow for the construction of innovative narratives and formats that combine platforms and channels. Their effective utilization increases interactivity to the informative experience (Deuze, 2017), and adds very diverse products that show examples of quality journalism.

The structuring of a settled, complex and changing communicative ecosystem (Routsalainen and Heinonen, 2015) that feeds platforms that provide continuous services (Alaimo, Kallinkos and Valderrama, 2020) in the network society (Castells, 2006), implies that citizen's lives are shaped by media and digital technologies. In this shift towards mediatization, where all aspects of our social milieu are intimately connected to digital media and its underlying infrastructures (Couldry and Hepp, 2017), the media and their platforms have positioned themselves as

indispensable intermediaries within a growing number of human practices (Casero-Ripollés, 2020). This leads to a platformization of society (van Dick, Poell and de Waal, 2018).

The linear news model of the past has gradually been replaced by a complex information cycle with mediations in the environments before, during and after an event (Chadwick, 2011). Now, news can be distributed and collected by the audiences incidentally (Bergström and Jervelycke-Belfrage, 2018). This has placed journalistic information in a new scenario where algorithms, automation and news are increasingly interrelated through processes that feed new actors (recommenders, personalization machines, artificial intelligence applied to news recommendation, content-based filtering systems, collaborative filtering systems, memory-based and model-based prediction) that influence the selection of information by the user (Thurman et al., 2019).

Advanced technology is increasingly utilized in the processes of searching, participation, preparation, dissemination and management of journalistic information (Author, AAAA). Yet, being omnipresent and occupying a central role in social change, it is digital media that strive to apply their most innovative experiences to newsrooms (García-Avilés et al., 2018), to help journalism recover from the disruptive effect of Covid-19 (Casero-Ripollés, 2020), and in an effort to overcome the new challenges of the post-pandemic era. Digital native media is a flourishing phenomenon that is expanding throughout the world (Salaverría, 2020) that will play a fundamental role in the transformation of society in the third decade of this millennium.

In this research we examine the innovative techniques that digital native media are developing in order to adapt to an increasingly technological consumption scenario where the audience is more and more crucial. It is essential to study this reality to understand how journalism is currently being redefined in terms of new mobile narratives, content dissemination and distribution strategies, and audience involvement. Firstly, we reviewed the literature about the current state of journalism; secondly, the objectives and the methodology used were stated; and finally, the results were presented in three sections according to the innovative practices that are redefining journalism. This study is an exploratory approach to the most innovative practices being developed by some of the main digital native media. Having an understanding of such data will allow us to obtain an overview of the current situation within the journalistic field and the foreseeable future challenges.

## **2. State of the art**

Digital journalism, also referred to as cyber-journalism, is much more than news in digital format (Pavlik, 2020). Journalism faces the challenges of the future after twenty-five years of fine tuning that has earned it the status of an established and still developing scientific discipline (Salaverría, 2019). With regards to the common goal of building better-informed societies at a time when the relationship between the media and the set of actors in the democratic systems is changing, and when considering trends that advise a new regulatory framework (Turner, 2018), the usefulness of digital journalism is widely recognized. Large digital platforms, now implicated in regulatory and policy debates due to the complex power relationships that are at stake (Cammaerts and Mansell, 2020), and algorithmic news recommenders, which contain threats and opportunities (Helberger, 2019), now focus on some of the challenges in the field of regulation in order to improve the functioning of technologically mediated communication in democratic systems.

The process of radical transformation that journalism and the media are experiencing goes hand in hand with global economic and technological uncertainty (Pavlik, 2013). As the transition towards digitalization has taken place over the last decades, an ecosystem populated by a structure and organization of digital media has been formed that does not follow the formal editorial procedures of conventional media (Romero-Rodríguez, Casas-Moreno and Torres-Toukourmidis, 2016). New media have emerged in this environment, providing an alternative to the traditional media ecosystem. These new media platforms are more innovative, use new narrative formats, and have a new relationship with the audience (Cabrera-Méndez, Codina and Salaverría-Aliaga, 2019). Journalistic production in digital media has evolved over the years, shaping how online news is formatted (Thorsen and Jackson, 2018), and sculpting the way that factual news stories are presented.

Another great change in the transition to the digital scene is the remodeling of the relationship between the media and journalists with their audiences (Wahl-Jorgensen, Williams and Hintz, 2018). In the period between 2016 and 2020, media newsrooms have been working on reshaping their productive approach by placing audiences at the center of the process. In the age of audience-centric news (Piccato, 2017), the concept of ‘audience first’ is revolutionizing the newsrooms of digital media in a time when the importance of user-generated content is growing as media consumption is moving online (Kerkhof and Münster, 2019). Prioritizing the interests of the audience around information consumption on all platforms becomes one of the main challenges that both native and traditional media publishers must deal with. Pertaining to this, journalism professionals are required to handle the basic fundamentals around the treatment of information, plus a series of tools and technologies that allow them to improve the final product. This gives added value to the story and also stimulates the interest of the audience, so, for example, user-generated content highlights substantial beneficial effects in society as diversifying political viewpoints, mobilizing the electorate or fostering citizens’ civic engagement (Inguanzo, Zhang and Gil de Zúñiga, 2021). New narratives based on innovative formats (Lawrence, Radcliffe and Schmidt, 2018) that also entail high levels of audience involvement in the construction process become a path worth exploring, especially for new teams of professionals whose mission is tracking the consumer's digital footprint in real time.

Many digital native media are increasingly involving their audiences in co-creation processes, both for the production and for the ideation and commercialization of the products they offer (Author, Author and Author, AAAA). Participatory journalism, despite the risks it entails, is on the rise and arouses interest among researchers (Engelke, 2019). One of the reasons that digital media and journalists are so committed to this principle is that, in the current network society model, the participation of users in the creation of informational products increases the value of the media and the satisfaction of users as co-creators (Author, Author and Toural-Bran, AAAA).

The third great change in digital media and digital journalism occurred alongside advancements in modern technologies and experimentation, bringing updated modalities to the narrative landscape. Journalistic storytelling has travelled down a long, winding creative path. Much new terrain and many fresh debates have been opened up for digital journalism. Snow Fall (The New York Times, 2012) acted as a starting point for the earliest elaborate multimedia projects (Jacobson et al., 2015). Then came the first immersive pieces that used virtual reality to absorb the consumer into the surroundings of the story (Jones, 2017). These techniques have raised

ethical debates (Author, AAAA), some about the actual design of immersive and augmented realities (Steele et al., 2020). It is clear that digital tools can help improve journalistic narratives for online media (Dunham, 2020). Their implementation has opened many doors for future journalists.

In fact, the mobile technologies that have been implemented in recent years have caused a real revolution in communication practices. This journalistic innovation requires new skills and work practices (Salzmann, Guribye and Gynnild, 2021), so also journalism schools are increasing technical skills training within their courses (Bui & Moran, 2020). Its arrival has transformed our daily lives and our habits (Ishii, 2006), disrupting routines and becoming essential instruments in day-to-day life. Since 2004, the mobile phone has occupied a prominent place in digital media and has been treated as a means of communication with considerable social and cultural importance (Kaasinen, 2007). The seventh wing of the mass media (Ahonen, 2008), also known as the fourth screen (Cebrián and Flores Vivar, 2011), offers a number of possibilities that explain its popularity and its rapid expansion. The simplicity regarding its use (Kaasinen, 2005), the ease of adoption, individualized (Soletic, 2008), private (Lorente, 2002), safe (Campbell, 2007) and even local (Vaage, 2015), make it a potentially very powerful platform in regards to media functions. The media are gradually adapting to the undeniable reality that the mobile phone is a technology that enables the production, distribution and consumption or reception of journalistic content (Nel and Westlund, 2012; Westlund, 2011; Author, AAAA). This platform demands renewed narratives (Author, AAAA) with segmented, personalized, geo-located and individualized content. In the digital context, with the emergence and rise of social networks, technological evolution brings about new languages and formats. This is particularly apparent with Twitter, a social media platform that, in 2006, introduced a new way of communicating through the so-called microblogging, combining the immediacy of text messages (SMS) with the ability to reach a large audience (Wilkinson, 2012). Mobile journalism represents nowadays the development of lifestyle journalism norms, such as content driven by the audience, within even traditional journalism (Perreault & Stanfield, 2019).

For years, the impacts of these important changes in the communication ecosystem and in digital journalism have encouraged journalists to reflect on their discipline, and to spend time thinking about how journalism might develop in the digital age (Steensen and Ahva, 2015). Traditional media, transitioning from the analogical to the digital era, coexist with new digital native media and peripheral actors who do journalistic or para-journalistic work that is redefining the journalistic field (Schapals, Maeres and Hanusch, 2019). Digital native media occupy an increasingly important role, and it is clear they are here to stay. The consequences of this crucial transformation in the journalistic field suggest that the best course of action is to expand on the traditional approaches to journalism (Deuze and Witschge, 2020) and to try to better understand the practices and meanings of today's digital media ecosystem (Anderson, 2020). The interdisciplinary field of digital journalism has a solid foundation in sociology and communication (Steensen and Westlund, 2020). Native media outlets, and their contributions journalism as a whole, are a prime focus of research in the field.

### **3. Objectives and Methodology**

According to the literature review, innovation and high technology are increasingly present in journalistic production processes. In accordance with this, journalism must necessarily adapt

to the distribution of mobile news, to the dissemination of content through instant messaging applications and social networks, as well as to the integration of audiences in productive routines and to the benefit of user-generated contents.

At the beginning, a set of the research questions (RQs) justified the idea of making an active effort to find and study the new mobile narratives media are using, their distribution channels and how they engage with their audiences. The answer to such questions would help us better understand the current situation of journalism and get insight into the new practices that may develop in the coming years.

- RQ1: What kind of mobile narratives are digital native media using?
- RQ2: Do they use social networks, mailing or apps as distribution channels?
- RQ3: Are the audiences involved in these innovative practices?

Starting from the hypothesis that some digital native media are implementing new narratives, as well as formats and dissemination strategies that represent a reinvention of journalism, the objectives of this research are as follows:

1. To analyze the new mobile narrative models used by native digital media.
2. To know and examine the multiplatform dissemination strategies used by media.
3. To assess and study the mechanisms and the professionals put forward by native digital media to involve audiences in the creation of content or, failing that, in production and distribution.

The methodology of this study is based on qualitative content analysis techniques. The recommendations made by López for this type of method (2002) –self-awareness, rigorous examination and continuous reflection– have been followed. Qualitative research focused on descriptive aspects allows the analysis of communication processes in a systematic and objective way (Cook and Reichardt, 1986; Cohen and Manion, 1990). This is especially true in terms of the press (Pérez, 1984), since content analysis has long been established as a research technique for the objective and systematic description of the manifested content of communication (Berelson, 1952).

The investigation was divided into two phases. In the first, between January 10 and May 15, 2020, the exploratory task of tracking digital native media was carried out to configure the media map that make up the sample of the *digital native Cybermedia project in Spain: narrative formats and mobile strategy* (RTI2018-093346-B-C33), from the Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities, co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). Based on their relevance to the study, twenty digital native media outlets were selected (see table 1). All are pioneers in the use of narratives and formats that apply to the research objectives.

The main initiatives from different European countries and the United States have been selected, but emphasis has been placed on the Spanish example based on geographical proximity. Interest in the Spanish media was also determined by the financial project in which this research is framed. Among the Spanish media, those considered more innovative were analyzed, even though other media such as *VozPópuli* or regional initiatives like *ElNacional.cat* reach higher web traffic figures than some analyzed media such as *El Independiente*, according to SimilarWeb. Innovation was the determining factor to compose

the media sample included in the funded project. The level of innovation was calculated according to a convenience sample (Yin, 1994) where multiple case studies are presented in the last five years (2015-2020) through previous exploration (Hernández, Fernández and Baptista, 1991) according to criteria of innovation in production, content, dissemination and information visualization. Therefore, the selection criteria were based on the level of innovation rather than web traffic, which also applies to the rest of European countries and the United States. Likewise, to seek greater homogeneity in the sample, only privately owned media were considered.

The exploratory nature of this study should be considered to avoid generalization of the results. It should be noted that it is a sample of intentional character, a non-probabilistic sampling technique that is used in scenarios where the population is variable, so it allows to select characteristic cases of that universe (Otzen & Manterola, 2017).

Following these same criteria, also included in the sample were six newspapers that aren't digital or native, but leading newspapers that still print in paper. In this case, those reputable news sources that are implementing innovative models related to the object of study have been selected in order to perform a comparative analysis (Piovani and Krawczyk, 2016) to determine possible differences between those strategies implemented by native digital media, and those adopted by traditional newspapers.

Table 1. Study Sources

Type of Media	Denomination	Country
<b>Digital Native Media</b>	<i>elDiario.es</i>	Spain
	<i>Público</i>	
	<i>El Confidencial</i>	
	<i>OK Diario</i>	
	<i>El Español</i>	
	<i>NIUS</i>	
	<i>Huffington Post</i>	
	<i>El Independiente</i>	
	<i>Mediapart</i>	France
	<i>Les Jours</i>	
	<i>De Correspondent</i>	The Netherlands
	<i>The Canary</i>	United Kingdom
	<i>Tortoise Media</i>	
	<i>Observador</i>	Portugal
	<i>SAPO</i>	
	<i>Krautreporter</i>	Germany
	<i>Texas Tribune</i>	United States
	<i>Heidi.news</i>	Switzerland
<i>Il Post</i>	Italy	
<i>thejournal.ie</i>	Ireland	
<b>Printed Media</b>	<i>The Guardian</i>	United Kingdom
	<i>The New York Times</i>	United States
	<i>The Washington Post</i>	
	<i>El País</i>	Spain
	<i>La Repubblica</i>	Italy
	<i>Público</i>	Portugal

Source: Own Elaboration.

In the second phase of the investigation, between May 18 and 31, 2020, a content analysis of all the media included in the sample was carried out. For this, an analysis sheet was made. It was broken down into the following sections and items:

1. Regarding mobile narratives:
  - a) The use of SMS/MMS, kiosk or podcasting.
  - b) Newsletters and modalities (free/paid for, periodicity and purpose).
  - c) The use of smart watches and speakers.
  - d) Mobile applications: nature, personalization, contextual information, live broadcasts, user interaction and formats.
  - e) The existence of comprehensive mobile production content.
2. Regarding diffusion strategies:
  - a) Location and identification of social networks, instant messaging services used and email marketing.
  - b) Diffusion strategies: continuous or focused diffusion.
  - c) Typology of content: informative or corporate.
  - d) Use of techniques specific to social media.
  - e) Use and incidence of ephemeral/self-destructive content.
3. Regarding user involvement:
  - a) Professional profiles working with audiences (audience engagement editor, audience growth editor, analysis editor, social media editor, data analyst, audience research / development, audience strategy / marketing strategy, audiences and partner acquisition, audience writer).
  - b) Strategies to connect with the publics: online or offline events, VIP clubs, contests and games, specific sections for dialogue with the audience or thematic communities.
  - c) Formulas aimed at the co-creation of content or, failing that, at the involvement of audiences in news production or distribution.

The data were collected in MS Forms and, in line with the methodological framework, were processed to identify trends and currents using the type of reliability known as reproducibility, that is, appreciable in different circumstances and places (Krippendorff, 1997).

## **4. Results of the investigation**

The results were structured according to the three sections in which content analysis was carried out, that is, mobile narratives, diffusion strategies and user involvement.

### **4.1 Mobile narratives**

- RQ1: What kind of mobile narratives are digital native media using?

In this sub-section we study mobile contents and their customization modalities, the implementation of geolocation and live broadcasts, the development of apps and instant

messaging services and the distribution of mobile content through podcasting, newsletters and smart speakers.

There is a clear trend of digital media of international reference not focusing their strategies on producing fully adapted and specialized content for these platforms. They are mainly limited to having a native application of general information, operative in the two dominant systems on the market (iOS and Android). In some cases, such as *El Confidencial*, *The Guardian* or *The New York Times*, applications with specialized content related mainly to electoral processes or sporting events are also found. Almost all of the analyzed media opt to distribute their content through native applications based on a business model that is geared to registration and subscriptions.

Looking specifically at the contents and their customization options, it is generally observed that all media opt to integrate some functionality that is adapted to the preferences of the users, to a greater or lesser extent. These options are linked to offering personalized subscriptions through informational alerts. Few newspapers have an adaptation of their interface according to the interests of their audiences. Such examples are located in digital native media like *elDiario.es*, *El Confidencial*, *Huffington Post* or *SAPO*. *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* apps also display this feature. Half of the apps analyzed offer the option to choose the font size of the text in order to contribute to greater adaptability and usability, as well as the possibility of adding the site to favorites or bookmarking it. These features allow for the information of greater interest to be saved and therefore available for consultation at any time, even when offline.

Something worth mentioning is that characteristics such as the geolocation of content are not exploited. There are, however, exceptions to this rule, such as *El Confidencial*, which applies this feature to service information related exclusively to weather forecast content.

One of the defining characteristics of mobile narratives has to do with the ability to stream content. The data gathered indicates that both printed and digital native newspapers are not using any specific application to broadcast their content on mobile platforms. Instead, they distribute their live coverage on social networks through Facebook Live and Instagram TV. The move away from Periscope, formerly the most prominent app for transmitting live videos, was clear. In fact, Periscope stopped operating in March 2021.

Related to the apps, in terms of formats, those linked to video news predominate. These follow a very similar structure to that of the information published on the media websites. The analysis does not show any examples of products or contents (reports, documentaries, chronicles or interviews) specifically adapted to mobile platforms.

Although the era of mobile media began in the 2000s as text messages (SMS) and MMS rose to prominence, this content distribution system has now become obsolete. The rise of free and instant messaging services such as WhatsApp and Telegram partially explains the changing dynamics in the dissemination strategies of mobile content. Nonetheless, podcasts and newsletters are growing in importance as distribution strategies. The implementation of such formats is aimed at increasing readers' engagement and loyalty. The Reuters trends and predictions report confirms the trend towards the reevaluation of email marketing strategies, mobile alerts and podcasts in order to establish direct connections with consumers and to counter the growing power of platforms (Newman et al., 2020). All the media outlets studied



except for *OK Diario* and the French *Les Jours* have a podcasting service and specialized newsletters in various subject areas. In relation to the latter format, its daily morning periodicity stands out, and its purpose is preferably informative. Therefore, it is limited to highlighting the hottest topics of the day, following a very simple structure made up of headlines and short paragraphs of content with links that, in most cases, lead to the media websites.

The rise of smart speakers is particularly noteworthy. Almost half of the digital media included in this sample use an application for voice assistants. Such technologies are penetrating the media sector and increasingly reaching massive audiences (Newman et al., 2018). This is mainly the case for printed media providers such as *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *El País* or *Repubblica*. Among digital native media, *elDiario.es* stands out as it has had an application for Amazon's voice assistant since 2019. A similar situation can be seen in regards to smart watches. The use of this piece of technology is also very popular amongst the printed media, although its presence is still residual.

## 4.2. Diffusion strategies

- RQ2: Do digital media use social networks, mailing or apps as distribution channels?

A previous piece of research verified that social networks constitute the main channels for the dissemination of content for native digital media, both for cross-media strategies (different platforms for the same message) and cross-content (promotion of other spaces or contents that belong to the same business group) (Author and Author, AAAA). However, although the presence of native digital media in social networks is commonplace, not all networks are used for the same purpose. Therefore, the existence of two fundamental strategies is noticed: continuous news dissemination and dissemination designed to highlight specific topics.

For the continuous dissemination of news, native digital media rely on Facebook and Twitter. On both networks, news content can be disseminated several times per hour, though more modest media outlets such as French *Les Jours* or English *The Canary* never disseminate more than four pieces of information a day. There is no created content for either of the two networks, so the information that appears on the web is adapted to the language and technical requirements of each social network. Nonetheless, the existence of corporate content is also found in media providers such as *Tortoise Media* or *El Español*, which is generally related to the recruitment of subscribers.

All Facebook pages, except for those of *Mediapart* and *The New York Times*, have top fans, a badge that certifies user loyalty and also recognizes the engagement of followers with content. Generally, textual content predominates over audiovisual content. Though watch or live broadcast sessions are sometimes evident, these represent a small proportion compared to written content, even though in printed media such as *El País*, a strong reliance on such content is noted. A similar situation is observed when we look at ephemeral content such as Facebook stories. These are employed by most of the media providers analyzed (between 5 and 10 stories when they publish), although not necessarily on a frequent basis. This is the case with *El Confidencial*, in *The Guardian* or in *El País*.

Except for *The Canary*, all Twitter accounts are verified by means of a blue check, which gives users added credibility and fosters trust. However, live broadcasting is even more scarce on

this social network than it is on Facebook, and only specific cases are observed in native media providers such as *NIUS*, *Público* or *elDiario.es* and in printed news sources such as *El País*, *The Guardian* or *The Washington Post*.

On Instagram, there is substantial difference between the dissemination strategies followed by native digital and printed media. Thus, while the latter promote the continuous dissemination of news (always with a much lower spread rate than on Facebook and Twitter, that is, always below 10 news stories per day), the native digital media use the publications to feature only specific stories. This strategy is actually more suitable for Instagram, where content is more relevant than frequency. Although most publications are informative, some corporate ones are also evident in *Tortoise Media*, *El Español*, *The Canary*, *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*. As with Twitter and Facebook, the use of long videos -IGTV, in this case- is common, yet not the norm. This format is used by all media outlets analyzed, though their output is limited (less than three videos per day). In relation to self-destructing content, Instagram is clearly preferred over Facebook. Moreover, the widespread use of the swipe up function is apparent, allowing for the implementation of transmedia narratives that require the completion of the story on the corporate websites.

On YouTube, strategies for both continuous dissemination and featured stories are evident due to editorial decisions within the media. For instance, more than 10 videos are posted by the digital native newspaper *Público* on certain days. The content of such videos is always informative and the live broadcasts are rare. *elDiario.es*, *Público* (digital native), *El Confidencial*, *OK Diario*, *El Español*, *NIUS*, *Mediapart*, *The Canary*, *Texas Tribune*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *El País* have enabled user communities on their channels, which is representative not only of their commitment towards encouraging public participation, but of engaging the brand's followers.

A similar situation is observed on LinkedIn where, beyond company policies, there are not enough cues to determine why some media broadcast news continuously whilst others do not. However, LinkedIn is quite a unique network in that it is a professionally oriented platform and the media on this network act like corporations. Therefore, the importance of the information disseminated through this network can be questioned. Although it is an effective space for the publication of corporate content -a strategy followed by *The New York Times*, *Tortoise Media* or *El Confidencial*-, the possibilities are not limited to that.

Three printed media providers -*The Washington Post*, *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*- and a digital native -*Público*- (other presences are verified, but they are not certified) seek to include information on Tik Tok, although none of them are implementing strategies of continuous news dissemination. Aside from social networks, some digital native media such as *Público*, *Ok Diario*, *El Confidencial*, *Huffington Post* and *elDiario.es* and all the printed media analyzed also use the instant messaging service Telegram to broadcast news continuously and daily. Aside from *Público*, all do so through public channels where one piece of news is used per message. The content is always informative, with the exception of a number of corporate publications issued by *The New York Times*.

#### **4.3 Audiences involvement**

- RQ3: Are the audiences involved in innovative practices in digital native media?

In relation to discover the extent to which professionals responsible for monitoring, contact and direct dialogue with the audience are incorporated into the media newsrooms, it should be noted that, from the media sample analyzed, the teams directly involved in the treatment or monitoring of audiences are a majority. Out of the 17 media outlets whose information on these professionals is visible, the terminology used to label such teams is wide and diverse, with a predominance of audience directors / deputy directors, traffic editors, engagement editors, social media editors and web communities' managers. The number of members that make up these teams is also diverse, although for most of the media it is one single person who is in charge of these functions. Such is the case of *elDiario.es*, *El Español*, *Huffington Post*, *Mediapart*, *De Correspondent*, *Les Jours*, *The Canary*, *Krautreporter*, *Tortoise Media* or *Heidi.news*, where one professional is solely responsible for maintaining relationships with subscribers. Among the largest teams, the Observer stands out. They have six people in their Social Media Department, whereas *The Texas Tribune* has a team of three, which includes roles directly linked to audience engagement.

Regardless of whether these professionals are explicitly visible or not, most media analyzed have identified strategies aimed at improving the connection with their audience. Only in the case of *Ok Diario* was there evidence of nothing being done to bolster the relationship between the newspaper and its readers. Following the content analysis methodology applied to exploratory studies, and based on the findings obtained through this research, a decision was made to group these strategies around eight categories: online and offline debates promoted from the media to the public, cafes or meetings with the audience, VIP clubs, contests or games, surveys, direct dialogue strategies, strategies for involving the public in the information production process and other actions.

The most active media with their audience include *El Confidencial*, *El Independiente*, *Mediapart*, *Texas Tribune*, *Heidi.news*, *Tortoise Media*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *El País*, *La Repubblica* and *Público*. All of them maintain a fluid conversation with their audience through strategic actions that encourage public dialogue. This is part of a group of strategies aimed at making the public participate in the information production process by proposing and discussing the topics that will be addressed by journalists at a later stage. Media outlets such as *Mediapart* and *De Correspondent* go one step further and allow for the co-creation of content. This suggests that they view their readers as sources of value.

In this sense, it is worth highlighting the media's concern with creating spaces to promote debates with their audiences, especially through cafes and meetings that mix face-to-face encounters (offline meetings in brick-and-mortar premises) with online sessions (especially through private groups on Facebook, where media outlets such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* stand out the most, with three and four simultaneous groups, respectively). It is surprising how most media have already abandoned the use of surveys as a way to involve the public by gathering their opinions on certain issues (they were only located in *El Confidencial*). The same is true of games or contests (only some examples were identified in media providers such as *El Confidencial*, *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*). In this scenario, news sources such as *Mediapart* and *Heidi.news* make a remarkable effort to increase the visibility of their VIP clubs to their most devoted audiences. This strategy is similar to that promoted by other media providers such as *El Independiente*, *De Correspondent*, *Les Jours*,

*Krautreporter*, *Il Post*, *Tortoise Media*, *The Guardian* or *El País*, that often display contents or sections that are only available to partners or subscribers.

The interaction with users in media apps is mainly selective (Masip and Suau, 2014). It revolves around the option of sharing or viral content, both by email and through social networks or instant messaging apps, whilst other possibilities such as content evaluation or search of contents rank lower.

## 5. Conclusions

Digital journalism seeks to redefine its role in the communicative ecosystem of the network society through innovation processes that provide renewed narratives, formats, user involvement and dissemination strategies. Taking this idea as a starting point, this exploratory analysis allows us to identify the working methods that digital native media implement in order to achieve this objective.

Regarding mobile (objective 1), the service via SMS or MMS, so popular at the dawn of mobile journalism, has only a minimal presence today. The rise of new platforms such as smart watches and speakers is undeniable, whilst bulletins or newsletters are becoming a trend like distribution channels. A free model is the choice for both printed and digital native newspapers analyzed. There is also a clear preference for daily models with an eminently informative purpose.

The media make use of native applications through a business model based on registration and subscription. Customization and / or geolocation features are very limited. Adapting to the interests of the audience is constrained to a type of selective interactivity, like the choice of the font size, adding the site to favorites, or the option of sharing content.

In relation to dissemination strategies (objective 2), both native digital and printed media use general social networks for the distribution of content. LinkedIn is the only specialized social network used by the media. However, the media usage of this professional network is inadequate, since they continue to act as informative speakers instead of corporations or companies. Beyond the use of social networks and the absence of *ad hoc* content (apart from corporate content primarily aimed at attracting partners), the dissemination strategies constitute one of the main findings of this research. Whilst Facebook and Twitter are used in a generic way for the continuous dissemination of news, a lack of consistency in other social networks is observed amongst all media analyzed. Nonetheless, a substantial difference between native digital and printed media is noted on Instagram. All digital native media use Instagram to feature certain topics –an innovative and also appropriate strategy– whereas traditional printed media do exactly the opposite and publish stories in a continuous manner.

Another innovative approach is evidenced in the use of audiovisual content. Although timidly, some newspapers are beginning to feature some news exclusively through Watch, IGTV or livestreams on Twitter or YouTube. The newspaper becomes the television and the analysis of the news is relegated to the comments of the followers. This happens regardless of whether the text or the video are later incorporated into the newsfeed. A firm and determined commitment to ephemeral or self-destructive content is also made apparent, namely on Instagram. Informative stories are only available for viewing for 24 hours, although the swipe up narrative enables readers to pursue further information by visiting the website.

The rearrangement of the information process revolves around placing audiences at the center (objective 3). In relation to this, it is increasingly clear that the media analyzed are committed to putting the audience first, prioritizing their wants and needs. Giving audiences a privileged position within the process leads to the creation of new professional teams aimed at understanding and interacting directly with the public. Moreover, this new order calls for the design of engagement strategies that enhance audience involvement, in two ways in particular. The first is the informative production, and the second, the consumption of exclusive content. In both cases, the main objective is to make the informational product more appealing by throwing in high doses of added value, so that the user is more willing to pay.

Media providers are currently working to transform “civic investment” into “emotional investment”, whereby users exhibit different levels of interaction with digital media. They do so in such a way that the challenge of quantifying their investment reinforces the appeal of these audiences to the media (Nelson and Webster, 2017). The exploratory work in this study also served to verify the growing variety of strategies utilized by the media to improve their direct connection with the audience. It also proves how the media are clearly committed to three large sets of actions: those aimed at getting to know to the public through face-to-face or virtual meetings, those aimed at establishing a direct dialogue with the audience in order to involve them in the process of production or co-creation of information (especially through offline debates or private groups on Facebook), and those that promote distinguished and differentiated treatment of the most devoted users through VIP clubs and restricted access to content or special services.

Finally, and despite this being a qualitative study, the main findings have been summarized in table 2.

Table 2. Innovation in digital native media in each analyzed media outlet

	Typology	Digital native		Non digital native		Total	
		Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
<b>Mobile narratives</b>	SMS	3	17	1	5	4	22
	MMS	0	20	0	6	0	26
	Kiosk	2	18	0	6	2	24
	Podcasting	16	4	6	0	22	4
	Newsletter	16	4	6	0	22	4
	Smart watches	6	14	4	2	10	16
	Smart speakers	3	17	5	1	8	18
	Geolocation of content	2	18	0	6	2	24
	Streaming	5	15	3	3	8	18
	Native apps	17	3	6	0	23	3
	Mobile production content	0	20	0	6	0	26
	Personalized subscriptions through alerts	17	3	6	0	23	3
<b>Diffusion strategies</b>	Email marketing	16	4	6	0	22	4
	Instant messaging services	11	9	5	1	16	10
	Social networks	20	0	6	0	26	0
	Ephemeral/self-destructive content	10	10	6	0	16	10
	Created content networks	0	20	0	6	0	26
	Continuous news dissemination	19	1	6	0	25	1
	Dissemination to highlight specific topics	10	10	1	5	11	15
<b>Audience involvement</b>	Professional profiles	11	9	5	1	16	10
	Online or offline events	2	18	3	3	5	21
	VIP clubs	2	18	0	6	2	24
	Contests and games	0	20	2	4	2	24
	Sections for dialogue	5	15	6	0	11	15
	Thematic communities	3	17	1	5	4	22
	Co-creation	3	17	0	6	3	23
	Interaction in apps	0	20	0	6	0	26

Source: Own Elaboration.

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